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I Want A New Drug

It was not a Chinese laundry. Basil's underwear was no fortune cookie. Nevertheless, a message had come back from the corner laundry. A note had been poked through the fly of Basil's bikini briefs.

Homer sat down on the pile of clean clothes and read the note again to be certain.

"Oh dear, how pathetic," he cooed. "It's just like Damon Runyon."

Finding a note--and what a note! -- in the laundry bag made the old man pat his tummy in delight. Why, he asked, had Hollywood in its golden age failed to imagine a movie about a laundry in Manhattan's East Village? One run by a blowzy, loud and tattooed woman who on the sly sent out notes about herself hidden deep in the clothes.

If that movie ever existed he would surely show it at least a dozen times at the Minerva Classic Film Theater.

Homer thought of the note as a form of billet doux from a laundress; and assuredly that was harmless. Yet in New York City, caution is a virtue. To appease the Gods, he went immediately to hide the bedraggled scrap of ruled notebook paper. It would be his very own treasure.

Izzy's first note tumbled to light on a bare mattress, the mattress on the floor. It fell from the clean sheets, warm from the sheets.

'What's this shit for!' Izzy nudged the pages suspiciously with her naked big toe. As a rule, she did not care for the picaresque.

The note was folded into a discreet square. It smelled of soap.

One peek at its contents and Izzy squeezed the paper in a fist,

made a dead flower of it, dropped it on the floor for Belle Star to paw, chase and meow over.

Of course, eventually, she retrieved the wad, plucked off the loose cat hair, unfurled it and read.

As Izzy read, safe in clean sheets that were no longer warm, the bitter smile came to play across her beautiful lips. Isabelle Thorn figured that the end must indeed be near -- the white folks were getting crazier and crazier all the time.

And over in Brooklyn, Samson destroyed the regularity of a dismal Saturday morning by reaching into the pocket of his old corduroys. He pulled out the note in amazement, no less perplexed than if it had been a rabbit. For some time he simply held the note, gingerly and between thumb and forefinger, working to recall if he himself had written it, forgotten it, lost it in the front pocket of his weekend trousers.

This could not be his handwriting! These words never came from him!

Samson mumbled fiercely into his mustache. Directly, he double-checked the locks on the apartment door. Had a literary intruder left this memento as a wicked joke? At the moment he knew of nothing missing in the apartment -nothing gone but what was always absent from his life.

And these were clean corduroys. They'd not been touched since arriving from the laundry. The lady of the laundry?

Blinking under a lonely light, Samson read the note, shocked by it in vertigo turns.

He read as a man seduced, not as the editor he was, prodder of syntax and grammar. He read and an image of the laundress came to him -- frazzled, steamy, epic. She arose from the pages as a marvel of strong, wet arms.

Although Samson discussed the phenomenon with himself, outloud, for several days, when he next returned for his laundry he found it impossible to utter a single word. He feared that to even glance at this peculiar woman might mean the end of the magic.

Yet he possessed the note by memory, by heart. He could have faithfully recited all her lines back to her, if only he'd dared.

"Take it and run, honey." She dismissed him with easy grandeur.

Bag in tow, Samson scurried away from the plate glass windows of the laundry. One block away on 9th Street, he could wait no longer. He stopped in a New York panic to jerk loose the drawstrings, in broad daylight, jostled by the angry strangers.

He dug wildly through the clothes, private pieces spilling to the pavement.

"Please let there be a note!"

There was. Another note in the laundry. Samson O'Flaherty felt as if he'd been discovered, marooned for so long on his desert island.

Next time Izzy Thorn pushed her small pile of dirty clothes across the counter, she gave the laundress her mean-nigger grin. It went well with her most disdainful, sassy and contemptuous glare.

The laundress, however, behaved as always -- her cheerful 'get fucked' attitude. No flicker of recognition, not a hint of anything. She even blew smoke in Izzy's face for good measure.

But the second note lay cradled in the folded bath towels.

"Hey cat, what you make of that?" Izzy inquired of Belle Star. "Say that slob's got the hots for mama?"

"Meow," said the cat.

Izzy taped the note on the wall, over the kitchen table. She guessed there would be more of them to come. She had faith in that.

The notes were a last inkling of hope for Izzy, though she'd not yet come round to admitting so. They also became a sort of talisman against the evil of the males watching her, encircling her, tracking her down on the street, the males stalking her from beyond the apartment walls.

Homer's second note made him weep. The old man read it while walking Basil's dogs on Stuyvesant Street, their leashes dragging him through the gutter. Because of the tears he couldn't even look up to scout for any nice asses or crotches.

The note momentarily dispelled the stretch of grotesque days. Reading the note was like staring into the recesses of his own darkening life.

The dogs were anxiously sniffing one another when Homer became the first of the chosen three to understand: The woman was fast

becoming something more than just a laundress.

She's Got Balls

Magda tossed the clothes on the work table and sauntered, flat-footed, wench-like, hands dripping, around the office door. She came parting the green sea, the bad air of the laundry.

She said, loud to be heard above the clash of washers and dryers, "Don't tell me. You're the paisley bag, right?"

Because her voice hadn't a trace of music, she let it lumber along low and gangly, letting the language shape itself, keeping as much of Kansas in it as possible, a drawl fifteen hundred miles long, a lifeline to shore.

This small head before her bobbed, black hair cut nun-fashion, hacked back desperately from vague features -- pale and unimportant (although not nearly as pale as Magda, the pale lady of the laundry). Magda mourned most for the eyes -- thimble shaped and with the horror jackknifed behind them.

New York faces. How many of them had she seen at the corner of Tenth Street and Second Avenue? Not enough, since they still made her sad.

As usual, Magda's L.O.V.E. tattoo -- a letter for each knuckle of the hand -- caught the kid's eye. Heart's desire burned into Magda's flesh, testament to her early years in the East Village. Then placed in mockery of the word and everything it stood for. Now cherished.

"They been waiting good for three days -- still want 'em? Another week and you could pay rent."

The kid lost her breath. Hiatus of sickly fumes, hastening the end and therefore a blessing.

"You want to know about the periods, don't ya. Honey, those ain't for grammar, those are bullet holes. Still smokin' too."

The paisley bag sat segregated, to one side of the mountain of bags. Magda referred to the spot as the ward.

No note in the bag, which made it very dull. She'd not once been tempted with this poor creature -- with Russell, Thorn and O'Flaherty, yes

(she knew them only by their last names as scrawled on the pink slips).

Magda's long, hand written notes went out to the needy, but never to the weak and dying.

This passage of notes through the laundry bags her heart alive, she said so secretly and gave her mocking grin. No other future she could think of in doing laundry in the city, no other hope -- clean clothes didn't bring you closer to God, she said, not in New York City.

The paisley bag hung from the scales, turnip shaped and frail. It didn't seem fair to charge for it.

The hand lettered sign above her head, dangling down to the top of the scales, read 'King Solomon's Stables'. She'd written that too. Another kind of note -- a very short one. It swung in front of her a hundred times per day. Everytime the boss came down from the Bronx he poked a hairy finger at it, ripe with garlic and disgust.

But it was all deadly. The dryers buzzed and she did one thing. The washers slosed to a halt and she did another. She moved to the ringing of phones, the tolling of cash registers, the tinkling of bells on the laundry door. It meant nothing when they handed over the pink slips, when she pushed the button and the motorized rack ran like a merry-go-round and plastic shrouds glared like icecubes as they trundled by.

She felt numb when she weighed the bags -- as she did now -- or when she took the bills and splashed down the coins and tried to smile while her toneless voice dropped deeper and sadder saying "have a good one, honey," which thing she would be doing next.

It was deadly.

The front door slammed back against the jamb. Glass stung the air. Magda didn't need to look up to know that it was Jungle pawing the threshold with a dilapidated boot. Massive legs set too far apart gave a good slice of Second Avenue pavement to stare at between them.

She knew what he'd do -- what he was doing now -- grunt like taking a dump and stagger back to his usual spot among the machines.

A male among the clothes; the monster of the laundry.

Jungle himself wore only dirty clothes. And no matter if it was January, he had his T-shirt on -- no shirt ever. Just the stained T-shirt drawn up tight on his gut and the night-black and pubic-thick hair showing

around the neck like a collar.

The sick kid stood entranced -- he was more potent than the L.O.V.E. on Magda's knuckles.

Magda whispered a warning, all day long it seemed she gave out warnings. She said something like "see ya next year," but the sound carried the resonance of prophecy -girl, get your shit together or some man's gonna crucify you.

An inch of ash plopped on the counter top. Magda smelled of tobacco, she'd been told so once. "Better'n soap, honey," she said.

Smoke trailed into her eyes -- wild bird eyes, sharp and watchful. The heavy face twisted to fight it. Dirty blonde hair. Big hipped; big tummied.

Slumped for good and beyond 30.

She sagged against the cash register, tits threatening the keys, earth thick fingers on the till. She watched the kid safely out the door, saw her get lost in the thicket of strangers, the laundry bag a paisley fireball on a winter's day.

"Oh yea, you make things clean . . ." The thought left her blue in the green heat of the laundry. The curtain of chopped hair fell.

"Fuck no, I ain't trying to do all your work," for relief she turned to Jungle. Her consort in pain. He was refusing to talk to her. Sometimes he didn't for days. Maybe it made him nasty when she did too much of his work while he was up getting fixed at the Reno Bar.

"Not trying to make you feel bad or like I was suffering over you. Not like I was your mama, or even your boss. No sir, you ain't taking too long swillin' down the pain killer."

Slap, slap. Jungle flung sopping clothes -- sounded to her like fresh Kansas mud.

"I just got started and couldn't think of anything better to do. You know how a dumb broad is." She'd learned to put just the right measure of bitterness in, too much and Jungle would stick dirty nails in his ears and yap out 'bitch!'

Today she got him to show his lima-bean teeth.

Peace in the Second Avenue Laundry. Enough. Tomorrow she might get war, another killing on the corner, another robbery, another sick dog

to run in crazed and piss on the clean clothes.

Each of her days had to be reckoned with.

The reckoning of separate days -- for that she wrote her notes and hid them in the bags, sent them out folded up into tiny squares and poked down into clean and very private places -- down into the toes of socks or into the pouches of jockey shorts.

"Miss Queenie does it, right enough she does it!" Jungle threw sacks of clothes around in a ferocious effort -achieving nothing.

Magda slumped and shifted and stared now for relief at the street.

In that ever-moving picture of plate glass window, holy to her of city life, the poor devils moved. Energy trapped beyond the glass, held at bay on the other side of the Second Avenue Laundry; on the other side. She sang it out like in Mennonite meeting.

In Kansas, the preacher swore that they were doomed, that it was ending, the last days coming down upon them in a rush. That had been so many years ago. Seemed like things had ended over and over again.

High on the wall of the laundry hung the clock, a large round Godhead. It always told her that time was running out -- would have made the preacher feel good, she supposed.

At home right about now, Joshua should be back from school, should be climbing the stairs, long tenement flights for his short legs. He was the only good thing she had left. Soon it would be time, the too-short evening time together, for pulling him back closer, for making certain nothing had happened since the morning to take him away.

Her child came back to her such a played-out and half empty thing. Then she had but a few hours to resurrect him, blow life back into him before sending him out again.

Joshua she kept having to inflate so that he could go soaring, in memory of his daddy, if only for a few moments, in the high dark skies of the city.

Hacking and waving a pair of panties at her, Jungle retrieved her love and attention.

"She done it again." he announced.

Not long now and the tide of customers would begin coming in, the homeward bound workers. They who flocked together like sparrows at her

feet, to do the same things in the same way at the same time. They who came in too quickly, were too glum and look-alike, were as suddenly gone -- all of them disappearing into the city along their solitary paths.

Didn't they know that by doing it that way she couldn't possibly remember who they were.

In the years at the laundry, she'd managed to sort out only three faces. Russell, Thorn, O'Flaherty. Only those three to draw closer, to mean something more to her than a pile of clothes.

L.O.V.E., the letters made the motions of sorting socks. Warning buzzers in the distance. The rumble of heavy washers. Jungle picking his nose over the sorting table, over the washed but unredeemed.

Closing in on her -- the afternoon, the machines, the sadness. And for sadness in particular there had never been a funeral.

The walls of the Second Avenue Laundry were lemon green. The floor ran in red tiles and she shuffled in her tennis shoes over a beach of spilled soap. Fluorescent tubing glowered mad-dog yellow. When she stared at the lights too long the lemongreen walls suddenly popped in a magenta sunburst -- way back when she'd dropped too much acid and walked barefoot through the dog shit in Tompkins Square Park.

Winter darkness took fast outside. She kept a knowing eye on the street scene. People passing were unclear, fading away into the cold.

At this time, everyday, her day changed. The altar light waned behind the plate glass.

The creatures out there no longer rushed back and forth for her enlightenment -- it was now she who stood illuminated for them, lit up for whatever audience might need to stop and kill some time, for whatever mischief might pause in the race to contemplate her.

Magda knew for certain that someday something on the street would come for her. It made sense, steeling yourself for being hunted down. The city taught that kind of probability.

At least Joshua was safe. Held be sitting now on Rudy's couch watching television. Only four blocks away and with the door locked and the police lock bar in place and the telephone at hand -- Rudy's telephone by which they all lived and were kept sane.

Last week she'd hung an enormous crucifix on him. One she'd

bought from the Botanica on Avenue A. A bright bauble to ward off the evil eye.

Yellow daisies floated by outside. Their puny heads suffered in passage. They showed too weakly, too incongruously through the bold strokes of the dark North.

A fat woman carried them. They came wrapped in a cone from the flower stall down by the Ukrainian diner. The fat woman crushed the daisies to her chest and drew down the shade of night as she went by. Fearful colors washed away by the darkness.

Magda did not want this fat one to look in. Not this one. Ah, but she did. Too strong to scare away, swivelling the folds of flesh at the neck, casting a slavish glance in at Magda, at the divinity of the laundry.

Jungle lurched forward to claim his place on the cardboard box in the window. Everyday at 5:00 he came to the front to squat shapeless and malignant right where everyone entering the laundry had to encounter him, her sorcerer's apprentice. He said this prevented robbery. Actually, he did nothing but stare -- at her.

In Kansas, the dusk did a big production number, coming down ablaze, arriving with the glory of grandmother's flowers dropped in the lap.

Nighttime here meant oily pavements and broken glass underfoot and the blinding spotlight of passing cars (as if she were a wild animal too near the road). It brought the hissing she heard coming from the doorways of the tenements on 10th Street as she walked home. No place darker than New York at night.

The rain began: Gunfire on the window. Winter rain. January rain. Something had gone wrong; it ought to be snowing.

A note today for Russell. To fetch it she had to wiggle and dig in the back pocket of her jeans.

Pulled out to the light it didn't look like much. They never did. Ruled paper from a child's notebook with a jagged script in pencil, in long crooked lines.

Bending over the laundry bag, her buttocks a spread feast for Jungle -- jealous Jungle who hated how she loved her customers -- she carefully opened the neck and performed her duty as was traditional.

Russell would find the note rolled up in the tan and white argyle socks.

With the strength of three years' experience, she jerked the bag up into midair and strangled it in drawstrings.

Behind her the bell on the door called forth its foul weather warning. Waves beat high against the front of the Second Avenue Laundry.

When she looked up a line of customers waited, dripping survivors. Reproachful mouths everywhere. Umbrellas pissing on the tiles. Caking the soap into white turds.

She ambled, her tough slut walk, around to the till. An unlit cigarette poked in her mouth.

A Note in Homer Russell's Laundry

The last time I went to the Cloud County Fair and the last thing I saw there was the Wildman. His cage was at the end of the freak show. It was an iron cage with real bars. It had a door at the side with a padlock.

The sign on the cage read "Wildman of Tasmania. Please do not put your hands between the bars or stand too close. This warning is for your own safety." Below that, the sign told how the Wildman had been raised by apes. It told how he couldn't speak or do anything human except that he was vicious and ate raw meat.

The Wildman was the first black man I'd seen. And actually in the flesh so to speak since he was naked except for a jock strap. He was interesting to a 17-year-old girl. Sinfully black and lots of muscles. His hair hung to his shoulders. It was a huge Afro, though no one knew that then. He had lots of hair down his back and stomach too. His beard grew in strange places like around his eyes and out of his ears.

It was his face, though, that was really wild. It was flat and he didn't have much of a forehead. His nose spread over his face and when he growled or snarled, which was most of the time, you could see how sharp and pointed his teeth were.

My girl friend June and me got a kick out of him. We stood giggling over the jock strap and other fool things girls can think of.

The freak show was in a tent. It was crowded with townspeople and farmers. Lots of upright Kansas Christians in there.

We were just getting ready to leave, still standing by the Wildman though, when June smelled smoke. I never had a very good nose, but that June picked it up right away, before anyone even yelled 'fire.'

June was a stupid kid and without telling me what was wrong, just ran off with a worried look on her face. So I was left alone by the cage trying to figure out if her Kotex had slipped or what when all of a sudden the crowd starts shifting on its feet and making lots of noise. Let me tell you, that wiped the shit-eating grin off my face.

By then the smoke showed in the air. Turned out that the fire was nothing more than a cigarette dropped in a trash can out back. Some farmer's brat was sneaking one behind the tent. But there sure was a lot of agitation -- damned if I couldn't write a book on fires.

People began coughing and running. Some old lady screamed. Little kids were pushed aside. The usual kind of panic.

I wasn't thinking too clearly myself, just kept turning in circles up close to that cage. This fat farmer came blubbering along. Without stopping he knocked me out of his way. He pushed me right up against the bars.

Before I knew it, a big hand was holding me by the blouse. Now I mean a big hand. It was a hairy black paw with mean looking nails about an inch long, none too clean, and cut into wicked points. One look and I was peeing in my panties.

We'd had an altar call at Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting just the week before, I'd gone down to the front with June and got saved. She was so stupid that she went down almost every week. I'd been saved once before and would be again before I gave it up for good.

Getting saved, if you'll pardon the expression, is like getting fucked. That powerful. The Wildman's hand was just that strong too.

Since my mouth hung all the way loose I couldn't do any yelling. Not that folks would have cared anyway.

Unlike everybody else in that tent I wasn't moving. I sure didn't have the guts to look up. Without needing to imagine it, I knew for a fact how that huge nigger face squeezed against the bars drooling and how

those yellow fangs snapped for blood.

Such a thing as rape didn't occur to me at the time. I figured he wanted my liver whole and without onions.

Anyway, and this is what I've been trying to get to, over all the hubbub that damn crowd made, and I mean noise I heard this real sweet voice at my ear. It was a gentle and loving voice.

The voice said, "Don't forget the Wildman. Please let the Wildman out."

Homer Russell

Basil slept in complete isolation, childishly naive about what transpired in sleep, of how wicked the dreams grew.

The man lay on his back. He held his arms tightly crossed at the chest, legs straight, head thrown back so that the cavernous nostrils flared, the brown neck flexed and the distended cords showed passionately. At the open mouth a rivulet of saliva streaked one corner of the heavy lips.

And halfway down the full length of this long and well made colored man, a body that did not show its fifty years, but had yet the suppleness of youth, rose the fist shaped contour of his erect member -- erect only in sleep, always in sleep, raised up under the sheets like a ghost.

The old white man tiptoeing by the open door did not pause to look in. For him the scene made a painting, one that had hung there for years, so long that if it had been removed the bare wall behind would have been pale from lack of exposure.

Instead, he passed without a glance, his glass ringing in hand with the slippery notes of icecubes.

After his stroke, Basil took the privilege of sleeping till noon -- Homer that of living so much longer without his vacant eyes and mumbled love.

on the first floor and too hemmed in for light, the apartment glimmered in its dullness. This morning the windows were large rectangles of winter -- Dutch Renaissance depression streaked with sleet.

From the refrigerator Homer could have turned and admired the

tuffs of withered trees in the park by the church, wintry limbs framing a country spire. Church and trees in the drizzle beyond the black bars of the window.

If he should care to, he could tiptoe over to the window and by squeezing his heavy and placid face into one special corner, eye almost half of the front of the Second Avenue Laundry, which sat across the avenue from the church. He wondered how a laundress that near could remain so untouchable.

Homer poured another double jigger of vodka -- he preferred measuring his drinks carefully to peering about at too-familiar scenes.

He had bought the apartment because of the size and proportion of its rooms -- everything in his life came in proportion, from movies to cities, from cocks to rooms -and justice in proportion, good taste, sensitive construction, the artist's eye at play, these attributes he valued most.

He had also taken the apartment because of the fine old street it opened onto. Renfrew Triangle expressed a superior sense of proportion, with its rows of townhouses, only a trifle shabby now, and its whimsical stretch of identical stoops linked each to each by iron railings.

Most of all, he'd gladly opted for respectability those three decades past in honor of having the church so near. And St. Marks in the Bouwerie was above all a blessing being a stroke of proportional genius in a city such as his -- so high and cubist, so massively erect and butch -- with its molded spire and delicate porch; it was an island of graves and trees.

Of course, as in most things in Homer's life, and this directly attributable to living in New York, one daren't scrutinize this church too closely. Just as one ought not admire Basil's iron frame too carefully (for blemishes did show through afterall, the coarsening was shameful), or Basil's movietheater refreshment bar with its rot stink and the rat droppings hidden in amongst the candy, or, for that matter, the old movies themselves with their ignorance of the fundamental deceits of art and life.

With the church it was the bums. They congregated at its gates and threw down their empty bottles. They lay on the steps, puked on the park benches. Around them and the church spread a glittering field of

broken glass. Urchins had wiggled through a hole in the protective fence and made it to the church walls, those blank and virgin slates. One scrawled missive there read "Church sucks" in crimson acrylic.

It turned Homer on everytime he noticed it.

Chronic tiptoeing went back some years with him, elemental to his post-suicidal self.

One night late, after closing up the Minerva, after walking home through a St. Marks Place so deprived of innocence that he'd felt destitute, he'd walked in on Basil and his companion for the night. With the memory of The Wizard of Oz and of Judy singing "Somewhere over the Rainbow, bluebirds fly" (he had just finished screening The Wizard for the 64th time at the Minerva Classics Theater), he had taken off his clothes in the living room so as not to disturb the ceremony in the bedroom, that mecca of cruel hospitality, and tiptoed -- just as he did now for example -- into the bathroom where he had tried for the final time to kill himself.

By drowning that particular instance, holding his head convulsed in laughter under the water in the tub, the water sounding like the noise children make blowing into their cups.

Because suicide made him laugh rather than die (he must lose weight before trying it again, fat corpses lack all dignity), and with Basil having a loud orgasm in the other room, and St. Marks Place being too insignificant a street to die for (should Park Avenue come to look like that he promised he would indeed punish the city with his own death), he had decided to stop showing The Wizard of Oz (and it did not appear again at his theater despite pleas from devotees) and regain balance at least temporarily -- balance after all being essential to proportion -- by going to the baths every morning instead, by drinking vodka and growing old.

He worked mostly on drinking vodka. The rest of the transformation had been effortless. Like a fairy princess, he'd awakened one day to find himself a fat old man with a Mrs. Potato face, with Liza-like long white hair and cool blue eyes -- a man of more than 65 years who dressed monotonously in tight blue jeans that pooched out a balloon tummy, and a billowing white shirt that when he cruises the streets of the East Village mimicked the antics of his fluffy mane.

To resume his favorite chair in the living room, he shooed away one of Basil's dogs. He sat down indifferent to the film of dog hair on the upholstery and the malignant looking bone that lay wedged between the cushion and the back of the chair.

The three animals lived in harmony with the hulking black man. They ignored Homer, who fed them and walked them (minimally, true -- around the Triangle and now and again to the church to shit there). None of them dared snap at him, however, not under Basil's harsh rule, not even the brazen old bitch with the gray hair flecking her muzzle.

They were strays picked up by Basil in the gutted doorways of the abandoned buildings he knew so well. Places dedicated to the man's spirit, where he wandered to bless the bums with handouts or share a bottle with them, talking equally to the bum dogs who lived there in confusion, as if still believing such ruins were human habitations and that they were the respectable guardians of the hearth.

The dogs curled at the other end of the room, holding forth against Homer in their own pecking order, the hierarchy of the canine estate: The old bitch in her accustomed place near one of the inlaid Persian coffee tables; the small black terrier with the mislaid eye under the chesterfield -- raising a hind leg to lick its balls; the timid spaniel-type -- definitely not King Charles -- growling at him from behind the bookcase and following his every swallow with pricked and listening ears.

The dogs were a constant reminder of Basil. They moved too, just as Homer did himself, caught in the sacrificial hush of the apartment, another tribute to the man sleeping in the bedroom.

But Homer cultivated his dispassionate eye. He could now sit contemplating the artifacts of his life without a single murmur of the heart -- although perhaps he sat quietly as much to save himself from awakening old persuasions as in dread of Basil.

This dreary winter's morning he'd been thinking too much of himself, breaking another rule. To correct this he shifted in the chair and stared as intently as he could out the window. He focussed with difficulty -- was it age or demon rum dimming the world? VD in its latter stages or the advent of cataracts?

Today it was the rain, blurring and mystifying the surfaces he tried

not to see.

Oh, but it was an awful morning. He couldn't locate proportion anywhere, not in Basil, not in his rooms, not in the awkward and antipathetical curs, not in his untouched books or dusty records, certainly not in the din of the East Village that assailed even the thick old walls of Renfrew Triangle.

Instead, and a truly desperate action it was for him, he turned where he sat and opened the small and scarred escritoire

This had been mother's writing desk. This was where he hid the notes that came in the laundry.

Homer's life demarcated into Before Mother's Death and After Mother's Death.

After Mother's Death, A.M.D., he had brought back from Boston trunk loads of her belongings. To this day, one bedroom closet remained devoted to her clothes. Stray pieces of her were everywhere in the apartment, under the beds and behind the sofa.

This meant that he quite often stumbled horrified onto a remnant of mother -- a small rendering of a funeral gondola, a pair of huge panties, a St. Moritz postcard, a copy of Portrait of a Lady inscribed with her baronial writ

Such discoveries gave him, her only child, moments of mental peak, a lament in the bowels. Mother had been civilization itself -- not love certainly.

But love was not culture. She'd told him so.

To touch the desk provoked memories of her epistles, which were also stored there. To the Romans (those he'd received at Harvard), and to the Church of New York (beginning in '47 when he took his apartment on Bleecker Street).

"Dearest Booooooy" -- Homer heard and reverently lowered his shaggy head.

To still the voice of the escritoire he closed the lid with a show of defiance, having extracted the nobly scented note paper and silver desk pen.

The dogs moved, cautious animal sounds. The bitch sneezed -- allergic to Mother, reasoned Homer.

In the background he also heard his lover stirring. The prisoner of love floundering back to sentience. Homer had lingered this morning and ran the risk of seeing Basil naked -- a sight to be avoided in these days of ruins and armed brigands.

The man's nakedness became both an invitation and a heartache, a thing too young for its age, too frank for its true condition. It was something dangerous, a powerful thought half erased.

He must hurry now to be out the door, no time for another drink. Homer could accept only the nakedness of strangers in these days.

Mother's stationery carried the marks of old high-water living, from days of the flood. As he wrote, the escritoire wobbled unsympathetic to the effort of his hand.

But Homer wrote to the Lady of the Laundry and that made the difference. That was the power of the scene.

My Dear Lady,

Thank you for all the marvelous notes. I'm ashamed to admit that I don't even know your name. You certainly seem to know a good deal about me, which is hardly fair.

My invitation is for you to visit me at my theater, the Minerva Classics Film Theater on St. Marks Place. Surely you know it. You would be welcome any evening.

If you like, come for the last show. Admission will of course be a small present from me. We could talk afterwards, if that seems appropriate.

I shall be watching for you. With the conviction of an old man I add: Please do come soon. Homer Russell

Your Cheating Heart

Magda trotted back from the john zipping up her jeans. She knew something was happening soon as she saw the envelope ripped open, lying on the cash register. While she'd been dreaming on the can, someone had come in and left a letter for her with Jungle.

In his excitement, Jungle stood humping the counter. He shook the

paper at her. Sometime soon she'd have to get the details on why he'd done stir at Rikers Island.

"You think Jungle's so stupid? Yea, you do. But I know what's goin' on!"

She tried to go easy. "OK, hand it over and cut the bull."

"Creeps and perverts! You turnin' into a creep too? I won't work for no creep. You wanna send letters? Send 'em to me. I need letters too. I'm somebody too! You trouble with them people . . . Big trouble!"

As she edged closer, he retreated a step to the scales.

His anger surprised her. Some days he loped about thick and moody, coming back mute from the Reno. But mostly he grinned and aped, doing nothing else. Those days she caught him reverencing her ass.

Today, until this letter came, Jungle had played happily in the back, crouched craggy and unshaven by the washers, his tuberous nose pressed in a comic book.

"I been seein' it, Queenie!"

She moved close enough to grab for the letter. It was Jungle, however, who reached suddenly for her.

He dropped the stationery and spread ten dirty fingers over her breasts. He stared in a daze at what he touched, the tip of his tongue exposed. Boston Bull eyed.

Magda did as before, the one other occasion when Jungle lost control, she boxed him hard on the side of the head. L.O.V.E. almost knocked him down.

"Fuck off, buster! I mean move it! Anymore and I'm gonna kick your ass

Jungle's lower lip trembled, liver-stained eyes darting, his cheeks went to cold ashes -- on the spot he looked like any other derelict, holding to the last thing left in life.

As he scrambled off, arm tight to the ear where she'd belted him, he began to sniffle.

Magda waited, keeping watch over him. After a few minutes he seemed to forget all about it, back to hauling one dripping mess after another from machine to machine.

Still, she gave it another minute for good measure, watching him

warily, allowing herself time to calm down. Her guts were in a turmoil for the first time in a long while.

The letter she smoothed flat on the counter top, safe under a broad, warm palm.

Hard to figure, whether the letter or Jungle were scaring her silly.

She'd never considered what it would feel like getting a reply. Her notes didn't really need answering, and she wasn't sure she even wanted any. Enough just that she had something to write; these three people to write to.

Russell, Thorn and O'Flaherty. Which one was the first to write back? She tried to think. She'd picked them purposely from all the others because they seemed such sure bets. They were the kind of New Yorkers you could pull down your pants to, point your bare tush at, and they wouldn't even blink.

It was Russell. She'd guessed it might be the old queer.

Magda read the letter, ashamed for her pounding heart. The letter touched her right in the spot where she thought nothing remained to feel.

Her elbows on the counter, hair tickling her ears, Jungle in the corner of her eye, machine clatter taking over -nothing out of the ordinary, just the usual shit. But that was when she made the decision. It sent her high too, good as grass, like a 60's flash.

Hell yes! She sure would go to the movies! And she'd take along the others too! She'd match up these far-out, separate people. She would fit them into place -Russell, Thorn, O'Flaherty -- and Ott too, not to forget herself, herself most of all.

The thought of it made her rumble a drum roll on the counter with her fists. She toed a little tap dance through the soap on the floor.

Perhaps, if they measured up, if they were strong enough, she might even allow them to meet Joshua and Rudy. If they were good, if she didn't scare them away, she'd let them come that close. The secretive smile twisted the corner of her wide mouth -- she couldn't even imagine what Rudy would have to say about it.

"Don't go to no movie, Queenie . . ."

Jungle interrupted her. Leaning in agony, paunch quivering under the T-shirt, he sagged half submerged into a heap of dirty clothes. He

sobbed to her louder than the washers.

"OK mack!" She tossed chopped hair at him forgivingly. "Think you got the second sight? Then who was that come crawlin' on my fire escape last night. Tell me that! He smelled about as bad as you do."

Magda cocked a big hip at him and stuck out her stomach. Her Beethoven sweatshirt mushroomed, the green button pinned to it bobbed (her "I'm Alive and Living Near Tompkins Square" button).

Damn right, she was enough to make a man laugh or duck for cover.

Hard Headed Woman

Magda started the day smelling of a lot of patchouli oil. Ended it in a chemical haze of cheap detergent, mixed in with tobacco smoke.

Magda knew exactly what she looked like—Mrs. Potato with dishwater blonde hair. She had a wide German face, most often pleasant, that crumpled like an old potato when she got pissed off. Magda had discerned she was pure peasant when she was 12, seeing her block head and unremarkable features for what they were. Her dimpled chin jutted so strong that people who liked her teased that she could have been a stand in for Kirk Douglas in the Vikings.

All in all she knew she looked like she'd just stepped off the boat from the Ukraine, a sack of winter wheat seeds in hand, hiding in a Mennonite bonnet black as a helmet.

The chin she prodded often at folks she didn't like, thinking of it as a ploughshare cutting through the shit of life.

Eyes were nice. They were large and hazel, maybe a bit cowish. So that depending on mood and light they shifted from brown to green. That was cool. She just wished they'd make up their mind and stay green, which was her best.

If Magda might try she could look not so bad. but who had time for trying? Even if she wanted to she knew what would happen, It would get her nowhere except into trouble.

In the morning her walk to the laundry at 6:30 was OK, even pleasant in the spring when what flowers were surviving in Tompkins Square bloomed.

No matter the weather, be it hot or cold, sunshine or rain, Magda wore an old leather Harley jacket to work. A used one she'd found on St. Marks.

Magda's worst part of the day was walking home. She counted on leaving the laundry at 7:00. Making hers a 12 hour day. Except for time changes in spring and Autumn it was a walk in the dusk or dark. Then it was dangerous.

Early on arriving in town another epoch gone by her decision had been to look mean and uninteresting. No makeup ever, the shaggy hair cut short, no jewelry except for a clipped off bicycle chain, no tattoos except for L.O.V.E., done on her by a Puerto Rican creep in a slimy hole on 1st Avenue who had kept trying to put his knee between her legs the whole time she sat in front of him.

For her commute as she called it she always wore a black shirt, jeans, which along with the Harley jacket meant that when she went fast-- she always did-- she became a dark blur like a mouse racing for cover.

Magda also carried a knife, bought from her dealer. Stubby and sharp like most dicks on the Lower East Side. Illegal blade length. Ready and willing to be pulled out of her Harley pocket.

She smoked one Camel going to work, another on her way home.

Her way of walking she'd learned in New York. Even tempo. Fast going. No fear. No panic. It went with the knife, an illegal accessory to match everything she wore. Hers was a soft step like slipping through spilled soap. Walking, she'd acquired a habit of always keeping her head front and center. Letting her peripheral vision do the glancing from side to side looking for threats.

Never turning to look back unless she heard someone coming up fast. When that happened Magda would swiftly step into the middle of the street. She didn't carry a purse, didn't have one, the very image of her carrying one made her smile, although she'd gone through late

childhood and early teens with one of grandma's crocheted purses in her hand.

So far this had worked.

Until a few days before Valentine's Day, just last week, on her homeward bound. Streets were a wet black and the all-around was a wet black too. She had reached the Park and heard what she dreaded, fast steps of fate coming on her from behind.

She moved to the middle of the street and stopped to look. No one on the sidewalk. Nothing. Except maybe something there in the corner of the park? Close to the Temperance Fountain. Was that a silhouette, shadow, a shrubbery, a something or other? Or a nothing.

Moving back to the sidewalk she picked up her speed.

Soon she heard the steps again, closing on her. She made the same maneuver as before. No one to be seen.

But now she stayed in the street, no car traffic to bother with in any case. Only a few lived on the Lower East Side now, and they were too poor and too strung out to have cars.

The steps continued. Except, Magda heard them on the other side of the street from Tomkins Square. Soon, at the corner of Avenue B, she'd be turning right to make the short walk past the towering stygian hulk of Cristodora House, 16 direct floors to make her shrink into a helpless agitation.

Then it would be left and across 9th Street, running now past the Lutheran priest's house to gain her own door.

As usual nothing moved on either side of 9th street. No traffic here ever, no walkers. 9th Street died three doors down to the right. Torched. On the left no habitation remained at all, only a march of stark naked ruins. Stalingrad after the Wehrmacht.

Nothing left to destroy. Magda running even a short distance. Broke one of her rules.

The knife turned heavy. A glum thing in her hand, tight inside her grip. L. O. V. E. Already she had her front door key ready.

Nothing to hear then but fading footsteps. He'd given up. The stalked prey, in relief she'd felt like puking. Instead swallowed it and

hurried on to reach Joshua. Climbing the six flights of the tenement two steps at a time.

Heart going, breathing heavy, Magda pondered the scare she'd just had. Random? Some disgruntled customer out to bully her with fright? Had it been big city badness out to get her for no reason at all. She tried reasoning with herself, trying to accept the benign. But she couldn't.

Tired, frightened, Magda burst into tears as she climbed onwards. "God damn mother fucker." Her legs went weak. Her woman's intuition told her to beware. Something wanted her.

Worst. She'd led him to her door, him or whatever. It knew where she lived.

Isabelle Thorn

Alberto over the loudspeaker: "Come on, we don't got all day. Whatsa matter wit you guys'. It's alive! It's hot! It's naked'. Center stage now!"

Unable to see it -- the enclosed stage being a red bubble around her -- Izzy could only imagine the effect of his voice on the men in the arcade. The tremor would run like a leash pulled taut from Bull up front in the change booth, down the 8mm film aisle, all the way back to the cubicles that walled her in. The men were moving into the dark and cum-stinking closets -- only one to a cubicle (Ronnie paid a bouncer for that). Already they fumbled with the latch on the door behind them, already groping for the first quarter and the slot on the wall.

When the metal window curtains began to whirl and ascend, the red glow would catch them in the eye; men, the creatures trapped alone in the dark beyond the wall and the glass and the metal curtains. For them the raised stage began at eye level. They could only look up dazzled, transfixed, into their heaven of flesh.

Of the two dozen shutters ringing her in a semi-circle, six were open when she walked on. One opening now, a sleepy eye, the metal curtain drawing up to reveal the charcoaled glass, the obscene

opaqueness that hid from her the fingerprints and palimpsest faces of a thousand nomadic males

Two of these curtains were gliding down. Another cracked its warning shot announcing that a quarter had been dropped into the slot and that its turn to rise had come.

Peggy skipped along on her left, boobs bouncing whimsomely, pale skin on fire in the stage light; they were all trapped in red.

Izzy slowly tucked both thumbs under the bands of the G-string and pulled. Ronnie said when he interviewed her for the job, "Now understand, one girl's gotta be doing something all the time. You gotta keep playing for the quarters. You don't want to do too much at once neither -- you get the hang of it. Just keep moving and teasing. Show tits front and center. Swing ass. Once every hour, it's a house rule, you gotta show pink -- you know, spread it wide."

Ronnie was precocious beefcake from Staten Island. He smelled of the Ferry. He had gangster connections -- like the owners for instance.

She saw how he thought he knew how to handle women, any woman would do. She knew she wasn't for sex but for money, with him at least. When he said, "Now strip, I gotta check you out," she hadn't hesitated. No worse than being a horse.

"Babe, it doesn't take much brains to figure the system. Keep an eye on the window. When you got the most windows showing then do something. Make it sorta game like, you know. You tell by the bing-bing of the silver that they're hot. Then let'em have it. My performers gotta have a specialty. Something you do by yourself that looks good. Think it over."

Izzy had. She still did, even as the G-string slid down off her outstanding, black-silk thighs. She ground her hips and swung her shoulders.

Like new each time, the essential meaning of the place hit her hard -- the cubicles like stalls in a toilet, and for the same needs -- shitting, pissing, climax. This was the citadel of male orgasm, ejaculation like a constant hum in the air, blood surging into flaccid organs, heads erecting, the pulse of loins.

Sissy would take over the duty of the loudspeaker when Alberto came on. The crossword puzzle lay folded in her lap, the pencil behind an

ear. When Sissy spoke for the loudspeaker she looked very serious, as if announcing some spectacle of universal import.

During Peggy's monthly, when the loudspeaker was hers, she chewed gum and the jaws popping over the system sounded like tiny bombs going off behind her sweet and idiotic voice.

Izzy looked forward to her own period. Then she could sit the day out with her clothes on, reading a book -something that astonished Peggy and caused Sissy to inquire, "Wha ya readin' kid?" And always look uneasy when told -- Lenin, Mao, Marx, Engels, Quivera, Trotsky, Baldwin, Huey Newton, Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Doris Lessing.

Sissy on the loudspeaker for the world to hear: "If you want to see what I'm dreaming of this very minute come and take a look."

Peggy throbbed on the floor with the G-string around her head, legs spread front and center and her hands rubbing up and down her stomach. Her butt levitated off the floor and she turned her head from side to side licking air and looking distressed.

For Izzy this meant straddling the bucking lass, long black legs planted on either side of her hips, and still standing bend over to pull on those pretty boobs.

Isabelle Thorn her mother called her. She didn't know what her dad had called her, having fulfilled his duty as an American Negro male in the early 50s and then deserted them for the allure of Thunderbird and parking lots.

As a child Izzy had often wondered if she even had a daddy. The thought of having sprung from her mother miraculously and without the usual help had thrilled her.

For the act Alberto wore loose blue jeans and a sweatshirt with COLUMBIA on the chest. He swaggered on.

For Izzy who faced backstage and could study his entrance, this choice of costume seemed unkind as Alberto looked barely literate, with his eyes too close together and his head misshapen (Izzy knew that his mother hadn't known enough to turn the bambino in its crib).

At this point, Peggy, supposed to be aroused out of her senses, was called to lunge up and perform something extravagant to Izzy's labia.

Isabelle Thorn came from Prattville, Alabama. Just as she had lost any genuine accent, so she had also lost track of that southern town and its cotton gin and colored town where their dandy little house stood up on blocks and with a tulip tree in front and an azalea in the back by the outhouse.

"Isabelle, God gave you a perfect body and I surely hope you do something with it." Her mother said that to her when she was 13. It had implied two things -- that mother was as ambitious as she was fat, and that meant more than 200 lbs. of hope, and also that this rotund madonna at last admitted that Izzy's other parent had indeed not been earth bound.

During her three semesters in college, Izzy would still say just before tests or when she walked alone down one of the tree shaded walks threading her way among the throng of white, middle class, saved-blessed-pampered coeds -"Your daddy's a mean son-of-a-bitch black God. He drilled mama when she wasn't looking, caught her unawares picking greens along the dirt road outside Autagaville."

That was at Bryn Mawr, where she took her first lover, another scholarship girl, a pretty little china doll from Houston by the name of Helen Twano. Helen knew too who her old man was and what he was -- "An asshole." As Helen put it.

Izzy had told her one night after they'd kissed and held each other that she wasn't going to stay in college, that she had many hard things to do in life, that she couldn't carry anyone else along through it.

"There's something lower in this country than a woman," she'd whispered to calm the girl down, "and that's a nigger. And there's really one thing even lower than that, and that's being a Commie lesbian. I'm the lowest of the lot, the trail end of the whole crazy list of odds and ends."

The odds and ends now included the Idyllic Love Theater, 45th Street off Broadway. In particular, at the moment, they included miming a ludicrous excitement scripted to occur when the two playful and lovelorn young ladies discover the approaching swain.

The windows ran up and down like berzerk eyelids.

Sometimes as the passion of the mechanical shades builds, Izzy

believes she actually hears the thump-thumping of hydraulic hands beyond the glass, that the air is violent with lust.

Izzy's face she knows was once beautiful. She has a memory of it in its purity, of high arching eyebrows and cheekbones, lustrous eyes, a delicate flower of a mouth.

Someone at Bryn Mawr said she was the African Queen, even brought her a photo of a brass from the Court of Ife, from the IX Century, to show her her own ancient reflection. This well-wisher had also wanted the usual, to smother her in kisses and run an owner's fingers across her skin. It made her mouth twist to remember.

Her memory of her own beautiful face is tinted in the hues of Alabama. It's an eccentric and faded picture, an old fashioned frame, a black beauty spoiling in the sunshine.

Now she needed no one to tell how things were for her. Twenty-nine years old and her face was that of the ghost mask, the one she'd seen in the Museum of Primitive Art on 54th Street -- eyes puffed on too much knowledge, jaw strained and twisted by unspoken blasphemies, lines cut too sharp by a bitter knife.

She sang the old courtly poem to herself -- "Slowly the muddy pool becomes a river -- slowly my mother's disease becomes death. When wood breaks, it can be repaired. But ivory breaks forever . . ."

Izzy looks cuddly and begins kissing Alberto's ear. The youngster shows mock fear and pushes her away (Albert was 40 if he was a day). Peggy curls around one of his legs and worms her hands up inside his cuffs.

"Ronnie say play it fast. He got a line up." Alberto spat in her ear -- pathetic self importance -- dulcet tones of the South Bronx.

Isabelle's mother was dead, broken ivory in the last moment. The big body wasted away until they could carry her out of Mount Olivet Baptist without shedding a drop of sweat on an Alabama August day. They called it brown lung. It meant that the cotton gin had gotten her at last, that the fields where she'd started as a picaninny, stooped all day to gather in the cotton, had led to the mills and the machines spewing dust, to the air too thick with fiber to breathe, had led -- King Cotton -- to death's door.

Izzy never wore anything made of cotton.

Pounding in the cubicles. Sometimes in their dark cubicles with their eyes bulging, panicking over what they were watching, the men forgot themselves and, as now, began pounding on the glass and bellowing.

The way the script ran, they were to have Alberto down to his socks, ersatz innocent squirming at their boldness. Alberto's body thus far revealed was not Olympian. Izzy had bared her teeth at its first showing, seeing how skinny he was and no ass.

She should now be kneeling behind Alberto pretending to ream him out. She lingered one more moment over his shoulder, slowing the act down, mocking them by nibbling at his ear.

"Don't fuck around!" When Alberto hissed Izzy thought of the world ending and of some New York hick booing as the curtain rang down.

Her one bit of compassion left was for the cause of speeding that process of Revelations, of helping in her own way to get the pain over with.

Izzy paused another cat's breath of time, just long enough to add a little to the confusion around her. Then she got down dutifully on her knees, to the castanet clicking of the mechanical eyes and silvery drip of the quarters. She got down with as much dignity as she had seen mama step off the curb to let a white man pass.

At times like this, she didn't feel like a brass from the Court of Ife, or like a poor colored girl who had won and thrown away a scholarship to a fancy northern girls' school, or like a once beautiful woman. Instead she felt the reassuring power of whoredom, as if she had indeed submerged herself in the proletariat of the painted and perfumed.

At this juncture the script demanded that Alberto lower himself slowly onto Peggy. That while they were sandwiched missionary-style Izzy should keep his legs spread and work him over from the back, one hand pulling at his cheeks and the other fondling his scrotum.

Izzy had remarked of this to Ronnie, "What you think we are, you turkeys writing this crap, some kind of damn gymnasts!" Organize, organize -- a waning dream.

None of this actually occurred. They remained pure with one another . . . Izzy no longer remembered anything pure to name in simile,

nothing to be as pure as: As pure as Izzy Thorn at the age of 11? But she had never been pure. Pure as Communism? That left her cold these days. Pure as Bitterness. That was plausible.

And she could see bitterness wherever she looked. It had been etched into people's skins.

Looking at Alberto's through the strands of artificial hair dripping from her wig, in the blast of atomic-bomb red showering down around them, she could follow the lines of bitterness that were mapped out on the melodramatically humping haunches stretch marks, pimples, old scars, wisps of unlovely hair, the molding of the vessel as it strained to its limit, shattered by muscle, pulled like cotton cloth over the infra-structure of bone and blood and tissue.

Izzy Thorn bobbed about in her imitation of love.

To the left a sudden wail and flutter of air told her that as happened occasionally at the Idyllic, a customer had gotten part of himself caught in the shade as it descended.

Izzy got slowly to her feet and turned questioningly to Sissy. The girl remained oblivious, mouthing her words with rosebud lips. Alberto and Peggy did grind to a halt, but it was a very slow reaction, dulled as they were and out of the habit of thinking.

Sissy became aware of the crisis. Her moment of recognition produced a squeal, a disturbance in her lap like birth, and a quick hop to center stage. *The Post* tumbled to the floor.

Peggy rolled on her back, trying to get up and keening "Oh!" half a dozen times. Alberto scampered to the back and the arcade door shouting for Ronnie -- one hand down to cover his expensive parts, in case anyone might want a free peek.

In an angelic voice Sissy intoned her battlestation bulletin of warning and instructions: "Be careful gentlemen, a man has been caught in the mechanical blind . . ." The speech riddled with the muffled oaths and pounding coming from the cubicles; the audience demanded its show.

Izzy ended up in her accustomed position -- against the doorway to the dressing room, elbow on jamb, hand shielding forehead like a visor against the sun.

She remained alone there. Motionless as black stone.

Peggy adjusted her G-string. Alberto returned to scratch at an armpit. Sissy shooed away a cockroach.

The window now lay on the stage floor. Ronnie pried at the sliding tracks with a screwdriver. In the distance the cursing of the trapped man.

Her mind searching for relief, a vision of the laundress took shape before Izzy.

Another message in her laundry today. When she picked up the bag she'd guessed there would be. The laundry woman gave it away with a sly glance, the pale woman who came on too strong, who growled 'honey' at you like a dog, who left you weak in the knees.

It looked to be an invitation to go to the movies. She'd have to read it again to be sure. If so, it would be her first date with a laundress. Izzy thought her life might be turning under a slapstick star.

Ronnie was saying, "Sure, sue us. Then find out who owns this place."

A quarter dropped and another window popped open to stare.

Samson O'Flaherty

Evidently, the old black woman had no intention of going to the movies. She moved not with the train, but in all her strength against its motion.

Staggering closer, levelling mad eyes on Samson, she dropped her bundles in the seat.

Her mouth worked in the rebellion. Not a real tooth there. Her skin wrinkled in tight folds of effort, thousands of creases as if she had been picked up in a giant paw at one time in her history and squeezed, wadded up and tossed away.

She scrutinized each of them, trying to recall who they were. Wisps of gray glowed against the blue of her scalp.

Samson knew how every corner of the city held its bewildered men and women. They called for him to join them, screeching late in the night down in the street. The city had become a lunatic ward, or actually the grounds for an asylum where the inmates roamed free assaulting one

another and howling their sorrows.

His great fear was that some day, some desperately lonely night most likely, he would join them -- trail down to them in his pajamas grinning with embarrassment, definitely in pajamas as he was almost never naked, never looked at himself when he was.

Samson crossed his legs in irritation and snarled a warning. The old woman stood too close, wavering on bird legs, her swollen belly protruding from a rag of a coat.

Contorting with mysterious intent, she forced a leaflet into his hand. Against the machine jerks of the train she plunged back uphill, towards the others. A leaflet was tucked into each Chinese lap. The Jew took his without flinching, impassive and obdurate. She placed a copy on the black male's thigh -- he brushed it away and rolled his yellow stained eyes.

"Donna-wan-non-o-tha-sheet!"

The others dropped theirs one by one. Only Samson held to his, mustache frowning, watching the empty beer bottle on the floor -- Heineken, they drink what they can't afford -- as it bumped to the choreography of the train. After especially intricate jerks, the car bucking as if running over scores of bodies, carcasses of WPA making, they who gave their bodies for ties, the bottle spun round and round.

The march to the movies continued. It was the boredom of stopping and starting, of speeding crazily on, of studying without arriving at a conclusion the faces of the other travelers -- guessing their denomination, personal tragedies, mental and physical habits. To Samson it was the essential of his condition.

A bellowing came from the chops of the black brute. Samson heard the primitive rolling of that drum-like girth over the plastic seat -- greens alternating with yellows and once made to be encouragingly bright. He surmised that while the old woman, the young and sickly Jew, the two Chinese girls, and he himself had been bred to be victims, offerings from the great creeds of the world, that the black born of a misery more hopeless than barbarism, was meant to wreak great wrong.

They had their own executioner riding lazily along among them.

"Motha-fucka-she-craz-ass!" The black man stretched back at full

length, legs spread, rubbing his crotch.

Samson the chronic mumbler, words mangled in his mustache and lost in space, as surely as he himself was, mumbled now to his WBAI bookbag. "Consciousness has made the species crazy . . ."

He sat profoundly puzzled and the pug nose wiggled. Samson O'Flaherty rode solitary and virgin. He was indeed on his way to meet the lady of the laundry.

His wing tips almost touched. His back straight enough to be uncomfortable in the molded plastic that was obviously designed for people without the strength of backbones, a nation of men who were devolving bit by bit into invertebrates.

Samson glanced quickly, slyly, at the large black creature -- there lay proof; the lounging shape could slither as well as walk, would prefer having swifter means of destruction at its disposal such as venom or tentacles or poisonous prickles.

In a frenzy of porcelain syllables, so old and full of incomprehensible poetry that he felt the breath of the mad wind down his back, the Chinese girls erupted into conversation. They revealed their toothiness. They held hands and that fact after a moment brought him to realize that only one of them might be female. He searched their chests and between their legs for a sign.

Samson silenced the Chinese by staring at them. In turn, he found them studying his own 42 years of isolation and confusion.

The black lunged closer, without having to move an inch.

The old woman refused to steady herself by grabbing for one of the metal straps cocked overhead -- meathooks for bodies thought Samson, wondering about the Jew, seeing in him the horror of knowledge, the real knowledge New York Jews must have when riding a the subway, the subdued panic particularly at rush hour when the cars are packed and trains rumble on heartlessly in their cattle car way, the slaughter as imminent as the next stop.

Now she raved, keeping herself up by spreading her feet wide as if her uterus hung down loose, whipping around her legs like a fallen power line.

Samson stared politely, in mumbled confusion, immobilized except

for the reflexive motion of nudging his bookbag with one shining wing tip.

The Blood laughed and threw out both hands towards Samson; splitting purple lips and pink-meat tongue, lolling limbs and nodding head.

"Motha-fucka-honky -- he-craz-ass-too!"

"I'm filled with the electronic power of the Lord!" The old woman stumbled over her words and almost fell into the arms of the Chinese. They would have transfigured her in the blinking of an eye, Samson was quite sure of that.

"Got the current in my toes. Got it in my legs. I got the hot juice of Glory running in my fingertips."

The old woman roared at them, as loud as the train. "In the name of Gawd!" She staggered to and fro in the aisle aiming her root-like forefinger at them.

"In the name of Gawd Jesus Lawd the most higha and mightee!"

This made the lout twitch; Samson could not ascertain whether in anger or fear. The Jew looked like an anthropologist on safari -- mist dropping over analytical eyes. The chinks were indifferent, arrogant he thought in their more ancient knowledge of antidotes for the jerkings of foreign devils.

"Ten dollars a touch!" The old one screamed. "I touch you here." Finger jab to flopping breast.

"I touch you here." The finger jerked to a thigh. "I touch you here." The finger wiggled aggressively in the middle of her forehead.

The RR rolled and snapped and sparked, reaching a thunderous crescendo of rage and commotion.

In terror she whirled, rags in a storm, looking wildly over her shoulder.

"Shoo Devil! Shoo away!"

Samson's dilemma centered on the amount of cash in his suit pocket. There was money for the movie, and then perhaps enough leftover for one touch. Alas, for one touch only.

He would need to think very carefully in choosing the right spot -- 'down there' or on his head or at his heart.

Something was wrong everywhere.

gonna get big

American Pie

The white spot of light streamed like creation itself through the universe of the Minerva Theatre. It spread in living, beautiful imagery on the screen. Homer leaned forward and cocked his head to one side of the machine. He peered through the little window, projecting his own passions with all his might into that force of light and motion.

He was showing them *The Night of the Hunter*. By his counting and he kept careful records, this was the 10th time he had seen the movie. He had seen other movies more times, and this was not one of his favorites. It ran solely in tribute to the laundress, in honor of the L.O.V.E. on her knuckles.

Still, he mouthed the lines letting his long hair fall unattended over his ears, excited as the camera moved to a new angle. He tingled for Robert Mitchum, waiting for that shadow to again become reality, for evil to have a face.

Homer did not hide from this truth. Other than movies, he had nothing else in life of any consequence, nothing to love now that Basil had retreated into a foggy distance, lost behind the glass and candle light of the refreshment counter. Homer had slowly given himself up to the daily function of projectionist.

Tonight, for the three unusual and special strangers who walked into his life from the street (laundry notes in hand), he performed the full rite, not missing a line or shot, not a single facial twitch. The soundtrack played in his head, ominous music for the city, another kind of city sound, irrefutable although relegated to the darkness of a movie theater.

Even tonight he could concentrate with all his power on that screen. Though the night was most troubled, most unsettling.

The excitement of the evening was real. As real as any movie. It had disturbed the backwater reality of the Minerva, and that after so many years was miraculous.

Waiting for them to arrive he'd been able to pretend that the white walls of the lobby shone, no longer damp and distasteful. In his fantasia, the pathetic ferns gracing the corners had been born again on their rusted stalks. The gallery of posters, the Dead Star Alcove, all that

imagery of long gone beauty and intensity no longer oppressed, but seemed, as intended, to be glorious statements on film art.

Basil's refreshment counter had enthralled him with its dreaminess. The candles flared amorously, flickered with a votive spirit over the goodies under glass. Basil himself looked very much like a genie, blackly glistening and glacial but with eyes as hot as a jack-o-lantern's.

For the first time in a decade, Homer had been able to forget that his theater knew rats and occupied the basement of a foul old townhouse on the East Village.

To Homer's delight, the evening made of the theater a movie set unto itself. And the actors who came were magnificent as well.

Magda had taken the lobby by storm, like a mob at a sneak preview. One sight of her slouching towards him, with that raw laundry light in her eye, frumpy and too strong for the imagination, and held almost run away to hide in his office. He'd held his ground to bestow a shy little kiss on her cheek -- like bussing Jean Harlow and hugging Marjorie Main at the same time. She'd been indelibly fresh, swept in clean air, sweeping in her clean air, pale as the snow in her hair.

And he'd not forget seeing Izzy for the first time -- that jaded beauty. She'd stood sneering at a poster for *Gone With the Wind* (Gable in a passionate embrace). He fixed her immediately -- Billie Holiday as played by Leontyne Price.

Her opening line had been delivered at the refreshment counter, propped casually against the glass (he'd seen how Basil went stiff with indignation). She'd drawled, "Looks like we both got the same little surprises in the laundry."

The boy at the ticket booth alerted him to Samson's entrance. Notice came via a particularly nasty move on the lad's part -- Homer could look straight back from the projectionist's cell through the office and into the ticket booth, and no matter how engrossing the work at hand, or the image on screen, he did find it necessary once and again to turn and briefly admire this pretty Puerto Rican boy (and lament again with the sinking feeling of the doomed, how they grew so ripe and were so stupidly cruel, so sexually charming and unavailable). The obnoxious toss of dark curls meant that the youth dealt with someone he could bully -- Homer's

eyes were a thousand years old for such things.

He had guessed that this would be Magda's straggling guest. Curiosity drug him from the machinery to peep through a crack in the glass door that opened onto the lobby, a crack that existed for such purposes. He spied long enough to sum up Samson.

The man struggled wildly with his overcoat and the snow falling off his shoes, a flustered, red-faced middle-aged fellow dressed in a mismatch of pinstripe suit and plaid shirt -- a blue suit and pink tie that made Homer wince. This man was sleeked down like an actor out of the 30's. The man pleading through his mustache for help from the family Gods.

After years of spying on men, toting up their secrets of soul as well as of body, Homer could place a man fairly quickly -- Samson he thought was a rare one, the middle aged man with a young man's body and a boy's emotions, a keen minded fellow with the ambitions of an old man.

The self-hatred showed too clearly and was appalling. Obviously, the lonely kind of man who talks to himself outloud and reads too much poetry.

All in all he was the kind of man Homer could be passionate to know, sexually, mentally -- but not love; never love the convoluted, it brings one always to the last days of Rome, to the fall of Byzantium.

Homer's weakness was for the primitive, the long-dicked. He found them anew each day in the St. Marks Baths, the slum boys coming down to prowl through the soft old man's pockets. And through it all, though he warned himself again and again, steeled himself for the worst, he fell and fell again for the savagery of the naive, the barbarisms of the ignorant, those uncut tribes that had wandered since the end of the ancient world doing nothing but giving pain.

So the mystery of this man came alive in the theater, his theater. And the mystery of woman was there too, a terrifying fantasy in itself. The mysteries settled just beyond the wall, on the other side of the dark and the beam of life giving light. It impressed him deeply to be serving them -- a desperate but perfect performance; as flawless as the colored woman's face and bearing; as carefully drawn as the Irishman's existence; as vivid and focussed as Magda.

In the back of Homer's mind was the growing sensation of awe, a

feeling he had missed in some time (not fair to count that of the baths, habitual and therefore like a fix -- that vaped world of posturing naked men being a supreme and surreal landscape that titillated the mind as much as it did the body).

It seemed that these people, this congregation led by Magda, had been brought to his door for a purpose. The idea of believing in fate after a lifetime of ridiculing the concept gave him goosebumps. If true, and he began to hope it were so, he would make his first law -- that film art, and absolutely not laundry, brought them together.

Such thoughts lent all the more intensity to what was guiding his spirit on the screen. He leaned as close as he could to the projector, straining on short legs to get as much from the little window as possible. The glowing points of light highlighted the folds of flesh around his chin and cheeks, blackened the bags under the eyes -- his heavy and Felliniesque face.

And it was all for Magda Ott. The Lady of the Laundry. She sat midway down in the auditorium -- slumped and thick and golden in his thoughts, a bedecked idol.

On screen they were to the moment when it appears that the preacher has at last cornered the children -bearing down upon them malevolently, in two-fisted dualism.

"What do you think of that, Magda Ott!" whispered Homer.

But the moment he identified the other sensation, he turned to face it. His heart carried the fear it learned from the screen. Homer flinched and cast a glance over his shoulder.

Basil stood slightly to the left of the office door, more in the dark than in the light. His identity more a matter of shape and essence than of detail.

Homer didn't need to see him to know about those haunted eyes. He also knew immediately that the fear he felt -- he who had never, ever, not for once been afraid of Basil -- was merely the unfortunate combination of scary cinema and an old man's yearning for radical change. Remorse swept fear away.

"You alright lover? I didn't know . . . I only invited her, not the others. Sorry I didn't tell you. She's from the laundry. She's the one who

sends the notes."

He spoke in his cartoon voice. A hushed and soothing song, and he sang it only to Basil.

Because Homer had not spoken to him as much in weeks, he ought to have added -- again in the name of guilt, although he'd not yet come to admitting it -- "I love you." But he left his mouth closed on the words. The phrase in other times passed between them several times each day, a kind of lullaby they crooned one to another. Homer had not said it for too long. He knew how his voice would have faltered over the very sound.

Basil remained stolidly in place, a slow transformation -- in the gloom it was as if the shape were suddenly liquid and erratic, ink in water. It was an arm waving through air, reaching out. An arm with a hand open and caressing the light, hovering around the edges of Homer where he still stood pressed to the projector. The hand roved aimlessly, for a bare second it tightened, like a fish taking a hook, and then collapsed, the blackness coalescing again into something else.

It groaned "I OU YOU . . ." And that was a low cry. The shape then crowded away, out of the door, hopeless and hurt.

Stay On The Sunnyside

That possessed and most high-Catholic, Irish pug face; those most innocent and confused eyes; Samson was not assured of himself, never presumptuous about self-knowledge.

But he did have his clothes. Those of the English gentleman, with important touches let it be clearly known of exuberant color, vivid plaids small tokens of and tribute to his Irish gambler's heart.

Soul was the most important of Samson's parts. He said so often, determined to make it true. Soul came from Brooklyn; a New York kind of soul. That was easy to understand. Yet it was also Irish and O'Flaherty, racial and familial.

To say it was family and from Brooklyn meant that it fell from the ether into a creaky bed in a flat near the corner of Church Street and Atlantic Avenue, a winter's night 42 years gone. Samson himself knew

how it had happened. He allowed his mind, with its considerable abilities, to visualize the startling event.

Mike O'Flaherty, sire, revelled in a final barrel-chested, angry pound, pound, pound of hips, milky and almost hairless, and chucked his load of rancor, his thousand years of Celtic mischief.

Betsy Hoolihan, outraged by his pounding, but silently curious about the spilled seed that she could feel creating its own mischief inside her (she knew already the clammy reality, the wasted effluvia seeping back down to spread like jam around her anus) received. Dame.

Betsy hung from Mike's still plunging chest, a mite of a thing under the bull, and said her prayers and thought with apprehension of her own mother who had been a truer saint and dutifully worn the family's traditional begetting gown. That white body-length, shroud-like affair had holes for the head, the arms and one for the vagina, tucked in just the right place and with the carefully handstitched truth around its edge "God Wants It."

Samson could not rate the degree of pleasure his beginning stirred -- perhaps a fleeting tremor or the tickling that is in its flesh like a lightbulb exploding? But he did know the moment to have been his only one of freedom. That earliest shout of colliding atoms and delirious nerve endings had been the first and last of what he now called freedom -- a thing untouched by the mind and soul shaping Lords of all.

After gathering his self from Mike's loins and Betsy's dream of the begetting shroud, Samson waged an early life of vague memories. Basically, he recalled the weekly trips, the regimen which his parents followed religiously, of escaping from the city every weekend.

Weekend after weekend, the hundreds of trips bore striking similarities. Events to be dreaded, to hide from deep in the darkness of the closet, crouched down under a pile of clothes.

To the point of poetic repetition, the trips centered around breaking down -- a family metaphor. The car stalled on Hutchinson, Taconic, Merrick Expressway; his solitary child's face pressed to the back window of the Studebaker as other cars raced by; lucky people, responsible people, well-ordered creatures who did not break down or go flat with no spare, who remembered to check the gas gauge, people

blessed with their heaven of organization and maps, with their unbroken afternoon rides. They also whirled by utterly indifferent. The grim lesson of indifference learned early.

Being lonely was a theme of his life. No brothers or sisters to begin with -- the doctors said no, and the priests, he'd learned later, forgave.

His few friends either died or disappeared. Each and every one of them. One drowned at Jones Beach. One cracked up in a fireball on the Cross Queens. One dropped dead in training camp. The others simply vanished without a trace -- no phone number or address -- swallowed up the great antagonist.

Because women would not tolerate his confusion or his uncertainty of the flesh -- and how could it be otherwise when he'd been taught so much about foulness, disease and death -- they sidestepped the pain in his eyes and walked away.

He had been held up in subway cars for hours, silent while the others chatted. Trapped once during a blackout for half the night in a darkened car with a load of weeping, furious passengers -- how much better he took such sorrows than they! He'd been stopped alone between floors in elevators three times; locked out of his apartment at least a dozen times with no one to call for help; mugged nine times -- retained motionless and anonymous with a knife at his back.

The army meant another sentence; held incognito for two years' in a Georgia swamp his one and only venture outside the city.

The six years of college at Fordham were more of the same, life in small rooms, making his bed every morning, keeping his clothes on hangers, his books in rows -- yet the tidiness more like a bareness, and anarchy undenied, loneliness unrefuted.

At that time, disillusionment showered down around him. Class after class of Father this and Father that and the pervading, crippling gasses of old truths and ideas, of dead philosophies and sciences and arts, none of which involved him. His uneasiness growing at the premonition that no matter how well he understood such things they would still not involve him.

Samson had held a dozen jobs in 16 years -- fired, laid off, burned out, locked out (but mainly fired). So many look-alike jobs scribbling on

the same kind of copy over identical typewriters in the same kind of bullpen offices, that there seemed to have been no change at all. It was as if he were doing now what he had always done, would always be doing.

To compensate for job after job, until recently he had kept the same \$160-a-month apartment. That meant 15 years of sickroom-green walls, dead-skinned cracked and peeling, in a tenement on Manhattan's East Village, at the corner of Avenue C and 12th Street. A tiny well-locked space with a single bed and the bathtub standing naked in the kitchen so that for all those years he had eased himself down into tepid water just to sit peering at his dishes soaking opposite in their own animal grease.

He moved back to Brooklyn only when his building was the last one not burned out on the block, when the view from the window gave nothing but a burden of blight and destruction.

The new address he'd taken -- ended up with rather, in desperation -- was no more than three blocks from where that famous fucking had occurred, no further than an easy walk from where the spirits of the air had let down his eternal soul via parachute into the slapping laps of his parents.

Mike and Betsy themselves had long ago run off to Florida to be old. He didn't particularly miss them, although for years of his adult life they were the only people he could phone up or go see, the only people to talk to and look at. Despite that small comfort, he could never forget that it had been up to them to have his circumcised and baptised and sent on with such a name as only the anguished and ironic can bear. In all to make of him a medieval Catholic, a grotesque Irishman, a lonesome Brooklynier.

They had separated him from his tribe, at least he perceived it as so, amazed by it yet, and set him up -Samson O'Flaherty -- for great mischief, like going out in a pogrom.

In recent years he'd gone far to undo much of what Mike and Betsy had done; although not all. He might have become a halfhearted agnostic and he might have socialist tendencies and he might have matured too straight and rigid and without anyone to appreciate whether his penis carried its monk's cowl or not, but he had kept his soul well tended. Held

believed in the spirit and not the flesh; used his soul to ward off the darkness, the beasts that lay in wait in the dark.

The world confused Samson, it gave him difficulty with his hands and feet, with focussing on and mastering the homely details of simple living. To survive he'd had to reduce existence down to bare essentials -- the job, the apartment, his three good suits, which he wore mismatched with odd shirt and bowtie colors to an extent that more than one cruel acquaintance (no friends to be had) would casually ask if he were color blind.

Not at all. He liked the combinations, his signature, and what kept him from blending into nothing on the crowded streets.

The apartment looked like a monk's cell minus religion. Bare white walls. Some books, but not too many -- he relied on libraries. Boxes rather than bureaus or a desk. An empty refrigerator. Empty wastepaper baskets. His clothes the only color and texture to be found.

At home he listened to the radio, left it on even when he slept, tuned to WBAI in hope of a talk show. In the morning for the same reason, he talked to himself or read aloud. These conversations were animated and his face worked passionately and his hands gestured.

In the evenings he forced himself to stare and think with his mind honed to a specific, impersonal problem -- the city around him. As a result, his monk's cell acquired a further medieval touch, stacks of carefully wrought summations which he'd culled from the isolation, illuminated by stitching together in his own way, accompanied by his own exegesis. The work became a magnum opus on life and culture in contemporary New York. He named it *Ambulance Drivers Of The Spanish Civil War*. The manuscript contained chapters on almost everything, from reading lips to reservoirs. No sex, however. He avoided that leviathan.

The job, the other half of his life, had nothing to save it. Not a thing. It meant going and coming from Union Square, to and from a shabby building where a floor belonged to the Viceroy Publishing Co.

The Viceroy being a vanity press -- an unabashed whore of one too -- Samson knew that with it he touched bottom despite all his efforts at treading water as a small-time editor; pushed down in the water as he had been repeatedly, job after job, from the meanest of trade publications.

His fellow workers would have nothing to do with him. They did not like his wandering and too-wide eyes. They hated his intelligence -- the kind that finished their sentences for them, knowing before they spoke all that could be said, that summoned up from some subversive memory bank the details they'd lost, the concepts they could not fathom.

Essentially, the Viceroy employees did not care for Samson because he showed them that he possessed a soul; by feature, word and deed that he was far more than just another aging hack.

Samson loved the sound of laughter. When, as happens even in gloomy and desperate places, a trickle of laughter leaked in the Viceroy, he would reflexively brighten and move nearer the source. He'd shuffle like an old man toward the laughter, coming up to the knot of workers (only in packs did they have the courage to laugh) to stand grinning at them, nodding his head in pleasure although he hadn't an inkling of what it tokened.

When they spotted him on these occasions, invisible as he'd become to them, they would clam up, go tight and hard and unseeing. The laughter died. The group huddled silent and cool, as if he were a spy.

Not surprising then, that Samson, who once revered laughter, should come to believe that he was the butt of it. That laughter, in all parts of the city, arose at his expense.

The laughter of men he now heard sharp and wicked. But the laughter of women drove him wild with pain, guessing as he did that it bubbled in contempt for his penis, reflected how rarely erect he was, that it erupted in unholy amusement over his virginity.

Yet despite all of this, most uniquely and heroically true of Samson: He was not angry. Neither was he bitter.

Samson accepted confusion and forgave the treachery of being alone because he refused to take such offenses personally. He said of himself that he had not been singled out for betrayal, that his lonely story was not freakish, that to look around showed how life in its intricacies was rarely pleasant and never kind.

Reciprocity and table manners were perhaps the grandest designs of Civilization, he believed; Civilization, however, had been out of whack for some time (as amply illustrated in his Ambulance Drivers and

forebearance was therefore in order).

Backdoor Man

"Now don't lose us," said Magda.

Dutifully, Samson patted his breast pocket, guarding his list of their names and telephone numbers.

"This a course at the New School or what?" growled Izzy.

When Samson made motions to help her on with her coat, she started away from him in a fury.

"Don't give me that shit!" she snapped at him, wig bristling.

"Think of it as an Andy Hardy movie. I think that's just perfect." Homer giggled to them, nodding goodbye for the third time.

" . . . it's more like Vacation Bible School if you ask me." Magda swaggered out the door with a laugh. She'd brought them one of Joshua's school tablets and a box of his crayons so that they'd have something to do. She'd also supplied the bottle of bourbon.

Samson followed, thinking himself about Bloomsbury.

Izzy came out last, at a sullen distance.

They left the old man alone in the Minerva, almost two hours now since the movie ended.

Snow continued falling but it was not pretty. St. Marks Place needed more than snow to be pretty. Late of a February night it became a dimly lit corridor tunneling away into eternity.

They had the street to themselves. All shops closed. Past midnight. No more than a few tracks disturbed the fresh snow -- virgin snow.

Another kind of smell hung in the air from what had been there earlier. Native Samson, who knew the city well, quizzed this unidentified stink.

He wiggled his nose, his mustache, his glasses. It was most troubling.

This being Monday night, the weekend wound remained fresh in Samson. Even after exchanging a few words with these new found people,

he had the mouth of the lonely. That musty taste of a mouth too long closed.

If he had tried to recount how and when he had spoken to someone in the past week it would have surprised even him. Once to the familiar face at the deli on Flatbush Avenue, that a halting and pained exchange about salami -- once to the automaton subway-token-booth person at Union Square station -- two 'good mornings' from a typesetter and an editor at work -- the usual punch-like below from Sy (the publisher) as he stalked them -- and more recently, the nasty encounter with the boy at the ticket window on his way into the Minerva.

He stared dumbly at the women. Magda and Izzy -- first names were as unusual to him as holding someone else's underwear. Did he disgust them too? Held mumbled to them his terror-filled, awkward little pleasantries -- impotent as usual in meeting people, knowing from the first that they wouldn't like him.

But they did not turn away. They didn't freeze him now with ice-making glares. They did not laugh. He couldn't hope for too much, yet it did seem that they understood, both of them, that with him the world was utterly different -- that with Samson O'Flaherty one needed the wisdom of an anthropologist.

He shivered and rubbed his arms -- kid gloves against the Austrian officer's coat. Snow clotted around the soles of his shoes. Big, disturbing flakes dangled on the rims of his glasses.

On the other side of the theater door -- a scrap of white hair, a jolly gut -- the strange old man waved goodbye to them again. Another moment and the marquee lights flicked off. St. Mark's dropped darker and deader than before.

The women made it clear they did not want him walking along.

Magda patted him on the sleeve, a tender dismissal, and said, "Give me a call."

Izzy, loveliest of all in the snow, turned to him her stone face -- not one word of farewell, not even a feeble smile. That was harsh, but not hopeless -- he could see that she too suffered from the inimical and difficult.

The women walked off together to the corner, leaving him alone

with their dainty tracks.

Their's was the wrong direction for him, and he could think of no excuse at that late hour.

But he waited to watch them, with the yearning too clear in his eyes. He stole the opportunity of carefully noting the different ways of their walking. How their legs were shaped. How their bodies gathered snow. How they swung their feminine selves through air.

Once Magda turned and waved. That thrilled him. He saw Izzy go on without a sign.

The women paused at the corner for a parting exchanged of their own. Samson strained forward a degree wanting to see them better.

The corner held the one bright spot to be seen from where he stood. He was glad they stopped there, giving him another chance to study them. They were near the pinball machines that sat out on the sidewalk in front of the all-night green grocery and flower stall.

His heart quickened that they should be standing so close to that flower stall. It was the meanest flower stall in the city and the men who ran it were thugs to flowers -- in the snow they dropped flowers on the sidewalk and ground them flat.

Samson could hear the typical thin line of traffic on First Avenue, mingling with the ping-ling of the pinball machines. He tried, but failed to catch a single note from the women.

Magda and Izzy stepped on dead flowers. Snow swirled around them. They were dazzling, heart wrenchingly lovely to him.

But the apprehension would not leave him. He floundered in it, allowing it to confuse him. What were his exact instructions? Should he insist on walking them at least part way home? Should he stealthily pursue them, darting from shadow to shadow?

Too late. They moved on. Magda crossed the avenue. Izzy turned the corner.

Immediately, the scene lost its glow. The street dimmed in an evil and peculiar way.

His own direction was towards Astor Place and the RR Line. Long, cold and dreary blocks to walk. He felt another chill, a whiff of that unpleasant odor -- the staleness of the city's armpit, of its semen. Again

the gnawing dread. Highly unusual for Samson, intrepid Samson. Samson who knew no fear for the body. For the soul yes. The soul.

He stepped forth and the snow was soft as skin under his heels. Women were coming into his life, stirring his blood awake, provoking a flight of sensual fancy.

And what could he do to honor these women? He could read aloud to them his chapter on love from Ambulance Drivers of the Spanish Civil War. The chapter detailing how the city's walls were designed on purpose to be high and inhuman, to run maze-like and impossible in order to keep love at bay. How the city's architecture forced men and women to search for one another like rats in a laboratory experiment. His chapter on modern day love and how insignificant it became, how empty their days without its guiding light.

It was the best he could offer them, besides his virginity. And what would they bring to him in return? Would they extend their life-giving touches?

Wind rippled the curtain of snow across the ugly stones of the buildings. He walked through the dark with the stinking and degenerate street rising around him, rewriting his chapter on love as he went.

He went forward alone and breaking his strictest disciplines -- shun the dark and stick to the light; look as normal as possible (the most difficult part for him); walkfast and quietly; and always guess what is pursuing you, what lurking ahead.

The steps behind him came up in a lope -- the crunching of snow and the crackling of broken glass underneath the snow. The steps should have made him turn. He would have too except for the fun of stepping in snow.

He'd made it half way down the block in his fast, rocking walk, going with head bent to see where he stepped. He played a game of making fresh tracks in the snow.

The blow came from behind, a treacherous chop to the middle back. Save for the arm that suddenly wrapped around his throat, the blow would have knocked him down.

As his body buckled the arm picked him up and hauled him sideways.

Samson didn't have time to shout. Not even a shocked "Oh God!", the flustered mind and its favorite anthem.

He was dragged into the doorway of the nearest shop. A hand covered his mouth. Too much power to resist. The knife pricked through the thick coat and the point gouged his side directly under the rib cage.

An immense weight stuck him down. He couldn't bellow. His WBAI bookbag fell somewhere -- lost.

The shop window suddenly reeled in the darkness of the stepdown entranceway, reflecting a desolate street scene in motion. He was tossed head first towards it. He managed to close his eyes and duck. His glasses tore loose and smashed into the bars of the gate.

No hand over his mouth now. Just the knife at his side telling him to be silent. Hard breathing dampened the back of his neck.

It felt as if he were being squashed flat. His face ground down into a corner of the bottom step. The half dried trickle of bum's urine smeared his chin. Gravel and a strip of raw metal tore his forehead. A sliver from his glasses bit into his cheek.

The arm wrapped tightly around his middle constricted another inch, forcing the air out of his lungs. The nightmare fumbling of fingers commenced -- first at his belt, then at the snap on the trousers, then at the zipper. Frantic jerking and tussling with the fine English weave.

More fumbling with his underwear. The clumsy fingers returned and the knife too. A low growl broke directly in his ear.

Sweat stung him, blinded him, ran through his teeth. He tasted blood. A cigarette butt lodged halfway into one nostril and he could barely breathe.

In a flash of frustration the knife sliced through his underwear, going flat across his buttocks so that the point merely nicked his flesh.

He couldn't call out -- no 'don't' or 'stop' -- nothing simple came to mind. Too many things to say, to do; too many prayers and murderous acts. His brain could not cope.

The fumbling came at his back now, adding another dimension to its violence. He picked out the change of tempo. He quickened to it.

The first tearing pain was followed by that obscene brunt pressed deep into his body. And it was then that he gagged rather than cry for

pity.

Pride was of no help, however, for the devil's dick just dug in deeper.

A Note in Izzy Thorn's Laundry

My mom just lost it over a good Kansas storm. I think she liked them about as much as anything in her life, maybe more than the men. And she sure did like men.

My dad on the other hand couldn't abide a storm. They were messy and dangerous. They didn't belong in that clean German world he liked so much. My people are German on both sides, Mennonites. We took to being Methodist at one time, but it didn't change the fact we were Germans and Mennonites one bit.

As the air changed so did mom. She'd suddenly get real active, fussing about the house and thinking up excuses for going out on the front porch or walking down towards the barn. She'd be acting nonchalant like pretty women do who've grown up knowing how other people watch them all the time.

Dad would go around the house checking the doors and windows. When it looked bad he'd take to the basement. He'd sit down there on the bottom step with the radio in his arms. He waited all by himself since none of us would go.

When the storm came more likely than not it would swoop in all of a sudden and take your breath away. One minute it was weird light and quiet, mom humming to herself at the open door, and the next it was rampaging wind and rain.

Then it was that mom went a little crazy. She was having fun and couldn't help it. If it looked like a tornado might be coming, she'd stand on the porch and watch for it.

Once when a tornado roared over us like a freight train, she grabbed me up in her arms and ran out front. We were in the middle of the lawn, which was crabgrass and bare patches of dirt. She was the one who called it lawn instead of plain 'yard,' just like pink was her favorite

color.

Mom held me so tight it hurt. She whispered for me to look up. All I remember seeing was a dark sky. I can recall her face at that moment a hell of a lot better. From the way she looked you'd have thought God was up there.

People are funny about such things. You know since I've been in New York and not having real storms anymore, just the human kind that you hear at night coming from the streets or see during the day raging in people's faces, I've got so that I conjure one up.

Sometimes in the middle of another dull afternoon at the laundry or when I'm feeling blue, like when I feel that nothing more is going to happen to me again, to any of us, except what's already gone by, then it is that I make up a storm. I mean it's a big, bad storm.

If you have trees doubled over all around you and a funnel cloud passing overhead and green light in your eye, you can suddenly feel clean inside and out. That's a damn sight cleaner than clean clothes.

Sometimes I wish that I could be a tornado all by myself. Think about having wind blowing out around you as you walk up First Avenue. Sure would get the trash out from under your feet!

Home On The Range

"A man needs two things in his pockets or he ain't worth a damn -- neither of 'em is his hands. One thing is a pocket knife, got to be sharp and with a strong blade. The other is a pair of pliers. A man's got use for pliers."

That clearly Magda heard her father drawling over the barbwire, herself on the other side, talking to her as if she were a boy. He never did tell her what a woman ought to carry in her pockets to make her a real woman.

Neither of these males joined in her laughter. They were used to her mysteries. Rudy did his nails and the robe hung open to his underwear, long legs exposed, hairy from haunch to ankle. Joshua watched the TV; sharp bird eyes, like hers except for the dots of gold in them reflecting from the light of the screen.

Joshua said, "Shut up mom. Please!"

Good thing he added 'please'; a baby bird chirping for its dinner.

They were watching reruns of Gunsmoke. At least Magda believed that that was what flapped about in front of her -- she wasn't sure. She wouldn't ask. Sometimes she did, saying that they watched reruns of this show or that. They never were, however. Now, if she should venture "But this is an old Gunsmoke and I know what's coming better than you two," Joshua would shriek small and irritated, "What's Gunsmoke!" And Rudy would languidly look up at her with a smirk that read, "Christ, Maggie, you're not for real."

Still, she appreciated how comforting it was having only reruns on TV. It helped the ritual of the evening watch down in Rudy's apartment, helped make each day a rerun of the last -- and Magda wanted her days all to be reruns. When they weren't was when someone died or you gave birth screaming, or when someone hurt your feelings, cutting into a soft place, or worse when you lost a job or got robbed or were suddenly all alone and with no phone and Con Edison turning off the lights for back bills.

That was what happened when there were no more reruns. Magda knew.

When her long-dead dad pulled out his pliers and looked them over, inspecting for rust, weighing them carefully in his hand, he'd say something like "Fine pair of pliers there, yes sir. That's ten years there and they don't let you down."

Sitting at the kitchen table her dad once pulled his own aching tooth with a pair of pliers. He drank a great gulp of whiskey when he was done and spattered the end of the pliers red. The tooth had rattled like a Brazil nut on the metal table top.

Magda drank whiskey too. Straight from the bottle. Like a man. It too was for pain. She drank some now.

A hundred such evenings of sitting on Rudy's make-shift couch, springs so bad they punched her hard in the ass when she moved, with Joshua at her side, between her and Rudy, and the whiskey bottle on the floor. Cigarettes lay in her lap, the pencil and the tablet were tucked up under one thigh so that the pencil wouldn't roll down behind the couch,

which happened whenever Rudy got up to answer the phone.

The phone rang often in Rudy's apartment.

It was, in fact, like a fourth person among them. For most of the five years she had been hearing it speak, it did so to Rudy. That had been fine with her too. A phone call in those days would have been like interrupting the rerun of days. It would have meant bad news, and all her news then had been bad.

The phone in other times rang as many as a dozen times in a single evening -- all for Rudy. And he would look coyly at them as he answered and lower his voice pretending that they couldn't hear. Calls from his bevy of bar friends. Calls from old-men lovers out in New Jersey, codgers trying to whisper about boy love so that their wives of 30 years would not hear.

In the light of the TV she'd sit eavesdropping -- playing her secretive smile, brushing back the hair from her eyes. All those telephone conversations, and Magda living two flights up without a phone to her name.

That period of their life had ended. Partly, she supposed, because Rudy had caught the fear. The disease going round. She guessed that it was the city that had done it and not someone or something, nothing more concrete than the bad tasting air and rush of strangers. It was easy enough to catch the fear -- she knew.

Now, on a good night he might have two or three calls, enough to fill the void of the evening, nothing special or fun. And what calls there were became reruns anyway, Magda had been reassured of that. Rudy did not like reruns.

Also, now there were calls for Magda. Unheard of. Rudy stirred passionate about the change. His anger showed in the way he flounced through the apartment, for the first time flouting in her face how he mimicked her own sex. His gentle face tensed when the phone rang -- with jealousy. The old demon had come to visit them.

Sometimes she patted Rudy on the cheek and clucked at him. "No one else but you, honey. I swear it." He'd laugh then. It would pass.

Izzy called her now and then. Samson called her at least once a week. Homer called her almost every evening from the Minerva.

They were crowding in.

Before it had been just her and Rudy and Joshua. And on workday evenings they gathered in Rudy's for dinner, which Magda cooked -- shared the refrigerator and split the grocery bills -- and then they washed the dishes and then they sat down, the three of them cuddled up on Rudy's couch to watch TV.

At 10:00 the set was turned off. She and Joshua went upstairs to their own apartment; Rudy finished his toilette and then paraded down into the street for his night in the Village. They did not see each other on weekends. They didn't talk to each other during the day. They never kissed except for a sleepy peck on the cheek, the ceremony following the click of the TV knob.

Rudy was Russian Jew from New Jersey, with the tight black curls and long dark lashes. He was tall and skinny and his baritone voice twanged pleasantly.

His parents were rich. They had sent him off to private school Upstate, then to Penn to college, then around the world -- maybe even to Texas, yes she knew certainly to Texas to play soldier and learn how to dress up like a man.

For the last two years of his life he had been manager of the Blimpies on First Avenue, and although he said he was waiting for the right part to come his way, Magda saw that he was actually waiting for something else -- for the right man, for his parents to die so that he could move to Christopher Street, for the world to end and put him out of his misery.

That in Magda's estimation was about as far as you could get from Kansas and Methodism. Far even from the Second Avenue Laundry.

Blackman was the nexus. Between her and Joshua, between her and Rudy, her and this backwater tenement on 9th Street just off Tompkins Square Park. Blackman was their ghost.

Even in the old days, Rudy had treated her with what she'd called dignity. Blackman's friends and often Blackman himself had usually handled her a little roughly -- like a subset of groupie, a white chick with a black stud hangup, that too common story in the 60s in the East Village.

Blackman had introduced her to Rudy in his half guttural, motioning her over to him as if she was a plate of cornbread. They had just arrived

at the club -- a basement dive that wouldn't outgrow the 50s, which you didn't need to look at close to know that things crawled on the walls.

Blackman had stood with his clarinet case under his arm, how he looked best, lids drawn down like shades to cut the world, very shiney and big, a black cadillac of a man. During the day or in bright light he looked like a drugged African chief, his bigness an opiate in itself.

On stage he looked too furrowed, too veined, standing swayed back, belly up to some bad wind. Playing, he was a creature under torture, about-to confess, on the edge of damnation.

But in the darkness of clubs, before, between or after the set, or when walking down dark New York streets, or most strikingly in bed, in that kind of night, then her Blackman had possessed the physical power and charm of some lost species, something supreme that was being suppressed by the mediocre.

The phone rang now. Joshua stirred leaf-like at her hip as if the ringing were tickling him. Joshua who in the flesh was their clearest memory of Blackman.

Rudy always answered the phone. He gathered up his bathrobe so that his bare legs were hidden and jogged to the kitchen. The pencil rolled down behind the couch.

She tried to relax, surprised at how her hands scrambled nervously. The phone brought her a spasm of expectation, sometimes dread.

Rudy in the kitchen, receiver to his ear. A fretful silence.

For a week now they had been getting calls from someone who never spoke. They caused Magda to move slowly and with her sad Buddha face.

"You asshole spook!" Rudy slammed down the receiver.

He came back to flick on the overhead light, which was not part of the evening. Joshua blinked up in amazement, eyes focusing like a swimmer's on the surface of the room. Magda looked about her for the spare bottle, taking advantage of the light.

"There's a number to call when you got spooks on your back. Supposed to be something you can do. You aren't supposed to be helpless. Not here." He thumbed savagely through the phone book.

She'd never seen him upset like this. It made her anxious, watching

him squat on the floor with the phone book open between his feet, tearing the pages as he turned them.

He wasn't playing a part anymore. She'd learned to tell the difference.

Honey, they won't do nothing. They won't do it for you in Kansas, and they sure as hell won't do it here. Have a drink. Smoke another cigarette."

He tilted slightly and his back rode up tight inside the bathrobe so that she saw his vertebrae.

"I can't see, move Rudy." Joshua's voice already becoming man-like, less the androgenous piping. The little boy uncurled and wiggled a small leg into mid-air from the couch. The very tip of a sock poked at Rudy's back.

"I wouldn't do that to Uncle Rudy if I were you. He isn't in a very good mood." She smoothed out the catch in her voice, touched by how these males warred lovingly for her attention, needed her to keep peace.

Rudy fingered a torn page, stood up with a jerk, kicked the book into a corner. He slumped down on the couch again, defeated but grinning. He sat with his back against the far wall and his legs up at the knees, feet spread in front on the blanket.

Rudy shook his head morosely, dark curls shining in the TV light. "Gets to me. Like they had finally found me and were coming after me." His sad Jewish face fell even sadder.

"How come they don't talk? They scared? Bet mommy could make them scared!" Joshua was a serious child, somber at anytime; in the evenings when he was tired he drew up stiffer, as if already aware of what the world was going to do to him.

Rudy belted out a laugh and grabbed the child. "Yea, your mom's a tough one alright, damn tough!"

She couldn't laugh with them. She felt the breath of doom in the apartment. Magda never could get used to how pretentious a two-room New York apartment could be.

But there sat Joshua at her side, whom she felt every breath from. When she looked at him she tried to see Blackman in him, in his features and walk, in the way he talked and slept.

Joshua, honey-colored and lovely, how pretty he was, every inch of him. He had a sweet disposition and she worried for him because of it. Nothing sweet, she'd learned, stayed fresh for long.

But he made her proud, as nothing else before. Seeing in him how the white and black melted together, bitterness and estrangement reduced like tigers after little black Sambo, down into a pool of soft, sweet butter.

She held him up to the world. It would not love him. She knew that. It might crucify him, white and black together in their separate sicknesses.

And there also sat Rudy.

From her angle turning to look, Magda had a full view of him where the robe fell open. The clean body she knew fairly well, holding its shape well for a man in his mid-thirties. He was vain about his flat stomach. But it was the underwear that caught her eye -- tight nylon briefs and the rest. She saw that plainly, plainest of all.

Magda realized too that he knew she looked, and how she looked -- not like a mother. He snatched the robe closed and in the same gesture stretched up and flicked off the light. They were in gloom again. They were watching reruns again.

Rudy and Joshua -- but there were now the others too. All of them wanted a place beside her on the couch. Her lap broad enough to bounce them all. Homer and

Izzy and Samson; more collectibles rescued from the streets of New York.

Blackman had taught her something without meaning to -would have scared him to think he'd taught her anything. Living two years with him, she'd taken it all to learn that he was a man, that he was weak, that he wasn't a nigger -learning that deep down inside. Two years to learn her lessons, and then when achieved, she ceased longing for him. The irony had not been lost.

She'd become a woman who knew that her way of looking at things was deceiving, and although she had no other way, no longer trusted what she saw at first glance. It made all the difference. It meant that she now refused to allow anyone into her small rooms of life unless they were

strong enough to be looked at naked, in raw light, to be tortured a little in the name of her honesty.

Sex went because it interfered in how she was honest. It made the people she looked at too desirable or too disgusting. Her sexuality was no longer violent, maybe that explained why so much of it had slipped away. She'd seen enough of male sexuality to catch on to its meanness, its crazy competitiveness.

Magda gave up sex to live in the city. It was expiation for Blackman baked in the fires, for heavenly music going up in smoke like a burnt offering, for years of her past flaming into ashes while she got drunk in a rented room in Atlantic City (without an ocean view).

It vaguely amused her, that she could find the erotic pulse of existence in this tenement apartment on East 9th Street, between Avenue B and C, watching television with her kid and a queer.

"Yea, I'm God damn tough!" She crowed it aloud in her truck stop voice, gravelling bottom as she pulled at the bourbon. Liquor she turned to because it was the strongest light she'd yet found to blind the world with.

"You ain't a dyke neither. It's easy being tough in here." Rudy goaded her, his revenge for having to share her with the others.

But what she said and did made the men beside her shiver in their legs.

"Shut up mommy." She felt a small, leaf-light hand come and fidget with her mouth, trying to close it.

"Say please." She nibbled gently on the fingers. A tinkle of delight.

The notebook paper lay blank in her lap. Tonight she'd done nothing. The notes were becoming harder and harder to write. The other ones, those chosen ones, were crowding in on her. They were too close now to write to, too intimate to be confessional with. She supposed she'd eventually have to give up passing notes in the laundry. She knew she'd miss that more than anything she had ever lost – though not quite -- not quite as much as the dead.

The dead together had been her loving nature. With them, piece by piece her heart had been shredded and dropped into coffins, shoved deep into the earth. With no more love except for what was written on her

knuckles she'd been free to ease back, to relax and put her story down in small notes as if it were over.

Joshua yawned, turning up his chin so that he snuggled close with his mouth open and poked up towards her. She could see straight down into his nostrils, into the very core of him.

The telephone. It rang clown merry at them.

They turned together and looked. Squat and black, it pitched malignant from the counter in the kitchen.

"Sure I know who it is," spluttered Rudy, pretending there was no such thing as a ringing telephone. "I've had my share of psychos. Been collecting them for years."

Smoke scorched her. Alcohol put out the flames. Over and over despite all she did and said, living was like being out on a dirt road somewhere in Cloud County getting screwed. Just like it. With the car windows open and the radio playing Johnny Cash and the farm boy digging in.

Rudy at last went up-in a panic. The pencil did its trick. He cursed. Magda cursed. Joshua laughed.

Ringing. Ringing. The calling to accounts.

Seeing how Rudy had the look on him of farm people at pig-killing time, Magda heaved into motion.

"My turn. I growl better than you anyway . . ." She waddled into the kitchen, her laundry walk, the one used to scare customers.

When she pulled back her plaits of hair she could smell the Second Avenue Laundry, a hint of Jungle.

" Yea, this is Rudy's . . ." She'd pounced on the phone to quiet it.

Silence. The silence of someone waiting on the other end. The long and silent wait of an animal.

She heard it, knew it was meant for her. Knew as soon as she answered that it was all for Magda Ott.

It had her name on it.

I'm Not In Love

Magda had done it this way:

One night late after a club date, after making love, she rose to check the baby -- struggling cries drew her to the crib and out of bed. She picked up the baby and it puzzled her, as babies will, creatures from another dimension. She felt its bottom, fingering its small parts through the soggy diaper, its own little man down there.

She herself was wet, between the legs too, with Blackman. The child in her arms seemed to be holding her passionately in the dark, although its tiny arms were too short and its tiny hands too weak. But the child clung to her just as wildly as had the man a few minutes before, a bond she could not break, did not have the power to say no to or pull free from or imagine differently. The bond between her and Joshua being inescapable no matter how painful or destructive.

Standing there with her child to her breast and her man behind her in the darkness -- himself as the night and a mountain in the sheets, helpless himself, utterly useless until she got him back on that stage once more, put the clarinet in his hands again -- she came to a simple parting of the ways.

Clear enough that she couldn't do both, support a man and a child, do that and still grow into the kind of being she needed to become.

It was a matter of survival and not love. It was also the first consciously selfish decision of her life. She made it in raw darkness in about five minutes, naked in her steps.

In less than an hour she put Joshua and herself in a cab. The money from the club in her purse, enough to get them somewhere else.

They went to Port Authority and took a bus down to Atlantic City. Atlantic City being a place no one had ever been to. A place to run to as strange as the place they were coming from. They certainly couldn't go to Kansas. Never again to Kansas.

A week later, after sitting up for two nights smoking and drinking by herself in the rented room five blocks from the boardwalk, she knew she ought to call. She went out into the hall and stood penitently on bare feet, letting the cold numb her as she dialed. No answer.

For three nights straight, she phoned from the hall with a glass in one hand, the change in the other. No answer.

She got a job as a waitress at a diner two blocks up and found a

lady to look after Joshua during her shift.

Weeks passed and besides working, she just lay in bed with Joshua and the bottle.

One night she'd found Rudy's number through information. When he answered she heard a voice she'd never heard before -- it was Rudy but it sounded like hell.

"Rudy, this is Magda . . . Magda Ott." She could remember the pauses years later. Years into the future she'd be able to read out her lines word for word.

"Yea?" Rudy took a long time to answer her, so long she feared he'd hung up.

"You know what I did?"

"Yea." He wouldn't let it be easy.

"How's Blackman . . . You know that's why I called. You know!"

"You been drinking. That's OK, but I'll call you back tomorrow morning. What time you go to work? I'll call you before you leave." His voice floated to her over the line, a groan, only the practical things it said to save it.

He wanted her telephone number at home and at the diner. He wanted her address.

"Go back to the kid and sleep. Be good for you to sleep. I'll talk to you tomorrow. The phone's in the hall right, so I'll let it ring plenty. You'll hear, don't worry."

She did as he said, hung up the phone like a little girl and crept back to her room to crawl in along side Joshua.

In the morning the phone hung silent. Knocking on the door instead. Of course, it was Rudy. He'd taken the night bus down and waited for hours at the station.

Sleep in her eyes, hair matted, the bed a mess. Behind her the dirty window shone dully where the ocean should have been. Broken linoleum under foot.

She sputtered once and hugged her nightgown close and brushed at her face and let him see her wild bird eyes. Joshua gurgled hungrily from the warm middle of the sheets.

Rudy handed over the newspaper clipping. Not a word. He stood in

the doorway, sallow as the paint on the hallway walls.

It read short and brutal, from the back pages of the "Amsterdam News." Three days old. Jazz clarinetist Arnold 'Blackman' Grant had died in a fire in his apartment. Cause of blaze undetermined. Firemen suspected smoking in bed.

"Get your things. I'll carry them." He didn't give her time to say 'no.' He just stared out the dirty window and kept firing questions at her point blank -- "How much

money you got?" "You don't know anyone else but me in the city, do you?" "You got something black to wear?"

It wasn't until they were on the bus that she could make her throat work the right way. Then she began melting, shaking down, watching the turnpike slip away from her.

To Rudy holding Joshua, she said "But he never even smoked. Nothing but pot and no one ever burned up smoking pot in bed."

"I know. He didn't." That was the last they said on it.

They buried Blackman on the Greyhound between Atlantic City and Port Authority.

Standing In The Shadow

No letters in the mailbox. A phone bill and two pamphlets asking for money. Izzy did give money to the phone company every month. That being countered by her offering to the Communist Party, her check to the Women's Gay Caucus, the tithe she sent to the Relieve Cuba Foundation and the Angela Davis Freedom Society.

On the front steps she looked up as usual to see if the FBI had taken position in the dead windows across the street. The sensation of being watched lingered. But not a soul to be seen, not one ghost.

Every day Izzy searched the buildings around her for signs of life -- a curtain or blind moving, a radio playing, anything loud and active to cheer the morning. Everyday it seemed, the pulse grew weaker.

A few cars parked on the street, lining up on one side with the garbage cans beside them. Empty cars, all of them enormous, garish and considerably used; garbage cans full to the top and brimming over, more

refuse propped around them like barricades -- These were the only evidence that civilization had not ended over night. That and the aimless trails of smashed beer cans and broken bottles of booze.

Lottie's Store being at the Avenue A end of the block, to get to it Izzy had to walk past the men who stood amid the cars, always on the street in the mornings like totems, camouflaged in the garbage. White men with pinched faces and paunchy bodies. Black men with pinched faces and paunchy bodies. The men gave disheartened cat calls as she went by.

Sure enough, Belle Star lifted her head to look, sneaking a peek over the collar of the jacket where she rode almost hidden.

"You're nothing but a lady, you cat."

"Meow," answered Belle and slipped back into hiding.

For four years Izzy had lived on this street. Nothing much happened there except that she waited stoically for another of the living buildings to join the ranks of the dead, the row upon row of abandoned buildings marching to the river. In her own the landlord already gave telltale signs of surrender -- no one cleaned the graffiti off the hall walls, the steps were no longer swept, the heat and hot water were fitful.

She had a contingency plan. She'd written a plot to follow, just like at the Idyllic, and when the day came this meant organizing a building strike, then confiscating the building in the name of the people and flying red banners from the rooftop. It called for singing the "International" as they poured Greek fire onto the heads of social workers.

The heart of garbage, the source of the beer can trails -Lottie's Store delighted her as little else in her day could. Like the coffee, beer and cigarettes for sale there, it was one small high for the poor to share.

Sometimes it was difficult thinking up an excuse to go. On occasion she'd even bought things she didn't need or want -- actually those were her favorite trips of all, since then she could just drop the sack of useless things in the street on her return trip, pitch it down with the rest of the crud that buried the age in its tracks.

Among other things, the dumpy little store told her that the monsters of the old days, feudalism and capitalism, were creeping their last.

Manifest. At first sight the place was nothing more than a single dark and oppressive room crowded to the ceiling -thin passageways between the aisles diminishing a little more each day, strangled by the piles on all sides, the Babel of packaged goods that loomed taller and taller and more obscure and obsolete with time.

She couldn't have named all this product-graveyard held; she'd not gone once without discovering something. Most of it rose lost into the murky atmosphere, and the lower regions while visible were shelves jumbled high with odds and ends. To make sense out of it, one had to step through to the back.

"Hiya Cat Lady. How's the princess today? Guess what. We ain't been robbed now for two years to the day. That is true." Lottie bobbed vigorously in her chair. Her thin hair lay plastered to her scalp like a gray yarmulke.

Beyond the counter, guarded by a ceiling high wire mesh fence, the old woman sat the day out with her face pointed towards the door. A naked hand gun lay in her lap. The

German Shepherd bitch, thick with age, slept on the floor behind her chair.

The old woman craned her neck and shook her wattles, peering constantly about into the recesses of the dark aisles, nervously at the front door, at the overhead mirrors, at every movement around her, real or imagined.

She'd been relating her life story for some time now, telling a little more each trip Izzy made. Trips to the store becoming like chapters in a life.

"Did I tell you that when my papa died we had boxes and boxes of his papers to put down in front of 308? Mrs. Levine said 'Lottie don't be a fool. Don't throw out your papa's papers. How should you know. Maybe they're worth a lot of money. Maybe that he was a genius. Take them up to the professors at Columbia. Show them to Dr. Einstein.'"

Izzy creaked as she moved -- the old woman jerking to the sound -- leather boots and plastic jewelry. Her perfume filled the store, a sudden bloom of Woolworth orchids. In the dim light her own darkness took cathedral tones, her huntress eye glistening, as keen as the cat's.

Belle Star rode like a baby with her small head resting on Izzy's shoulder.

They were not the only customers. A man -- she knew by the small stomach pang of danger and unease -- stood at the far end of the store. He remained no more than a shadow, featureless, alien. The figure held as rigidly still as one of the packaged goods. It seemed to belong in the dark. Didn't appear to want a face.

But he did have eyes. She could feel his eyes, tangible and intelligent. The eyes on her had been the only reason she'd glanced up. One quick, cool glance in their direction was enough. You didn't want to look at some things.

The old woman cackled. "He's alright. He's human . . ." A darting scrutiny of all her defenses.

"Stamps and tokens is back here. You know that. Milk's in the cooler behind the frozen beans. Sardines, let's see, try looking down on that shelf there, behind the baby oil. Beer's with the artificial logs. Bread's with the magazines; look sharp."

Izzy moved cautiously before the hag and her gun. She stepped into an inscrutable aisle, careful to avoid the one from which the man watched.

Wherever she laid a hand, something miraculous to buy. She groped blindly and, for all she knew, could have been stepping off into thin air. All in all, she thought this probably the nearest she could come on the tower East Side to an amusement park.

Searching for sardines she came up with a tube of Craig Martin toothpaste, once with an ancient bottle of Chocolate Soldier -- museum pieces from the history of Madison Avenue.

"Papa wrote every night, so late that he fell asleep at the kitchen table. Mama had to go in and shake him and bring him to bed. He used an old Parker pen and so much ink you could smell it. Papa always used beautiful paper. Mama said it was the nicest thing we had, that rag bond of his."

The while, Lottie sat in her aquamarine armchair. She played the free hand aimlessly over the sidetable, fingering a pile of wadded tissues, toying with the hairbrush that held most of her hair.

The other customer hid in the shadows.

"That's right, enjoy yourself. My mama said, 'Don't worry about others, Lottie, take care of your own things first. Just treat others like they was all customers in your store, like everybody in the world was a customer.' Now wasn't that good advice?"

When Izzy stepped back behind the ceiling high stack of dented tins to the refrigerator -- the old Dodge model that opened with a smack like a can itself and casting a sallow spotlight -- she heard the chair move and knew that the old woman leaned around to not once let her out of sight.

Then the stranger shifted too, a rustle as of moving cans. He also would not let her out of sight. Men were like that, making you feel as real as a TV screen.

Rummaging through the refrigerator was part of the ritual of Lottie's store. Every morning it held something different or had been rearranged from the day before. Tentacles of ice reached further and further down each day -- reaching for the packaged goods. The motor roared like a bomber.

Belle Star stirred, squirmed. Her tail whisked across Izzy's stomach.

"What else you need! I got the stamps up here!" Lottie's cranky way of saying 'stop fooling around back there.'

Standing at the fence, old woman and young woman stared at each other. An unspoken bond that was important to Izzy. Looking into the command center, she had the usual feeling, that this was a last victim on display. Izzy thought about how mad the Capitalists had driven everybody, of how hard it was for old women after a lifetime trying to coexist with them.

Izzy flashed her whore's grin and dug for coins in her purse.

Lottie hobbled to the fence, pulling one dead leg along. She'd been shot some years back -- told her customers all about it.

"Got shot there. Bullet went clean through!" She wore the bullet on a chain.

"Kind of pretty." The bullet shone dully, the same color as the wire mesh fence.

"My mama always said, 'Protect yourself, Lottie, there are animals out there in the dark. Course I got news for her, now they're worse than

animals and what they care if it's night or day!"

She wiggled her fingers toward the back of the store -fingers warped and shaped for pulling triggers. She waved to the figure in the shadows.

"For Mrs. Levine, mama always did have the last word. Mama said, 'But Mrs. Levine, Bernie wrote all this to say that Dr. Einstein was wrong!'"

"Meow!" replied Belle Star. The little tabby put her head against Izzy's, sniffing the air for danger.

"He with the FBI?" asked Izzy, turning to look behind her.

The old woman hadn't heard her.

"Guess what? Mrs. Levine helped us carry down the boxes."

Lottie pushed the sack across the counter top, slowly, as if she hated to let it go. "My papa was a gentleman. He didn't believe in monsters, not in relativity neither. God be good to you today!"

Izzy rehearsed the phrase, turning it in her thoughts like a player -- for those of the earth who are watched, a charm against the cunning of those that watch.

"God be good to me today . . ."

Let Me Down Slowly

Basil waited for him beyond that door. As certain as the down-beat vitality of St. Marks Place at noon, as sure as the thrill of a March wind on his St.-Marks-Baths skin. The spirit of his existence lurked large and brooding on the other side of the theater door. He didn't need to look at the windows in the door to prove the point.

Basil pinned him to the spot, devouring him as he stood, as helpless as a small cornered creature. The pain of being sucked up alive into Basil made him panic.

Homer stood billowing in the sunshine -- long white hair blowing, white shirt flapping, blue jeans swaddling his girth. He made a distorted image, a twisted ripple across the backdrop of the street, the face of used clothing, used bodies, used up and faltering shops. But even as he stood, just an odd old man inspecting from the safety of the sidewalk the

truth of his own building, Basil was enfolding him in herculean arms, pulling him into a warm and naked embrace, to a dark corner of passion that made all the senses squirm, that stirred the mind to a terrific fear.

Homer blamed himself, however, for the tingling revival of fear, the uneasiness disrupting his pattern of days. This morning, for example, even the seedy beauty of the baths had been fretful.

At the moment, spiritually, he felt himself struggling up half heartedly to be free, kicking at his heavy self as if the aging flesh were an iron shackle. He looked up squinting into the sunshine.

The Minerva, however, offered no hope. It dated from the mid-1800s. It sagged like a slice of rotten cake. So disreputable and grim, it made him snort. How could he, Homer Russell, own such a building?

In the rooms above, on the second floor, rested a dowager Ukrainian and the old Jewish lady. Further up, on either side respectively, lived the old lady from Indiana who painted pictures of home for her living and the Estonian, who unlike the others did not collect cats, the retired whore among them with a solitary canary.

Homer's harem of old women -- when he bought the building they had been so elderly that he couldn't imagine how they could still be alive in the crusty rooms. They refused to die so that he could raise the rent and bring in young black men from the Islands, youngsters he could visit when he needed something pretty.

As it was, Homer refused to set foot in the apartments. Well enough that from a distance he could smell how old and female his building had become.

Basil visited these old women each month, collecting their rent, calling the electrician or plumber, counting the cats. They hated Basil. They adored Homer.

Sometimes when they spied him from their perches above they tapped on the windows and beckoned to him -- and then he would see through the ancient glass, from the sidewalk looking up, that fatal glint in their vision, the hope of him warming their old-lady bones, talking to their pets, drinking their quixotic teas.

Currently, the historic whore was rattling a limb on the pane in his direction. He made out the glimmer wavering behind the glass, dancing

the crazed old Third Avenue trot.

He raised a gloved hand and wiggled a few fingers in the direction of the blur. The dear pimped now for her canary.

In turn, Basil made a counter move. No evasion possible. Homer caught the movement at the base of his skull, like a wave rushing in and pulling back sharply, as natural and hypnotic as the pulse of his own blood.

Basil served to obliterate all other motion, all other feeling, a ravenous and possessive flicker beyond the door. Homer could also hear the familiar, alluring song of stale popcorn and gloom -- the enticements of old movies and an empty theater, the world shut out except for Basil and Homer. Homer and Basil.

In the sunshine of a strapping March morning, the Minerva, this monument to his compulsion, made him cringe. Not long before, in the life of a 66-year old man, he'd been drawn helpless to the theater everyday, gone with a stammering heart each morning to the baths, retreated with assurance to the nest of Renfrew Triangle.

These had lost their power. He admitted so. Just as he and Basil were also dimming. The places had become shrines he pilgrimaged to, sites he visited as an old tourist would, an elder haunting scenes of past idyls, digs where the eyes had once popped open as the soul flushed to its limits. Places that must become unfashionable, and dangerous -- the Gods never vacation twice in the same spot.

Homer did nothing but pay the taxes on the Minerva. He would do no more until he could shelter his lovely young men up there -- he a once noble Roman preserving a few remains, flashes of naked haunches and heroic thighs and balls the size of peanuts slapped down on the sides of vases.

Flower pots on the fire escape held strangled stalks, traces of a golden age. The fire escape should have been painted ten years ago. The trim on the cornice dangled loose by a shred of its own skin, a hangnail three flights up. The building bled at such tears. There were too many broken windows through which to catch the telltale signs of old women.

"The roof leaks." Such was the sum of Basil's monthly report.

Now on the second floor, another movement at a window. This a

gray slick mottling the view, rubbing its arthritic back against cool glass. Despair encroaching upon the sunshine.

Homer's rebellion failed, of course. He felt himself falling, pulled from his reverie by long dark arms. It was useless to struggle. He surrendered peaceably. He would give up and go in and let the spell of love have its way.

Homer looked down, a lingering sigh of the damned. He exchanged the sight of his stricken property for that of Basil. Imponderable and anguished eyes consumed him from the far side of the front door windows.

A dress rehearsal for death, thought Homer bowing his head to enter.

All I Really Want To Do

"What now . . . oh yes . . ."

The sound of his voice made her flesh crawl. Magda barely managed to hand him the bag without flinching.

"There's something in there for ya." She patted the bag.

Samson's wide open, helpless mouth reminded her of a kid's, a hungry mouth begging for the tit. No doubt, though, his anguish, the unpronounceable trouble, belonged to a man.

He jerked up, trying to give her money, the slip, take the bag, all in the same losing battle -- mind in one place, hands in another.

Magda figured he was trying to tell her something, perhaps warning her, communicating it without uttering a word.

"Wind it up, honey. Get it in gear." She must whisper. Jungle was listening, big flap ears sharp enough to catch any sound not made by a machine.

"What's wrong with you!" She found it almost impossible to whisper and still sound cheerful. "How come you ain't been callin' me? You call me tonight, OK? You know I care."

Samson's ravaged face, the features drawn with fatigue, attenuated by too many sad thoughts, turned the color of a wilted rose.

In parting he touched her, fleetingly, shyly. His touch fell on her

hand and on the L.O.V.E. The quick imprint of his fingers, light as air, jolted her down to her toes. Lightning fierce.

Samson and the laundry bag were out the door by the time she identified her own sudden hopelessness.

Then Magda felt the urge to run out into Second Avenue, to fetch him back with a yelp, hold him tight.

"That's what you need, for sure! Don't we all."

She said it to herself and closed the cash register.

Out front, a mob of strangers marched by the window -all in their uniforms, all out of step.

Turning fast, she caught Jungle creeping up from behind. He leaned in the office doorway, spying on her without a word. Another misshapen creature coming near, needing to huddle close for warmth. And Jungle too, she knew, craved her for his deep, deadly hurt.

"No ma'am!" she thought. "No more room in this ark."

She took up the pile of receipts instead.

Catting Around

When Isabelle Thorn stood as a little girl in the front room of the house on Pine Street, she looked out for hours sometimes at the street scene, dust and weedy lawns and old colored folks shambling along on foot. Looking at the bright world through the screen door, a screen that made a pattern across the face of it, that held it comfortably framed and as a unity, a good map.

Then she would on impulse fling wide the screen door and let it bang against the unpainted wood of the house and see the world utterly changed. It wasn't like a newspaper photograph anymore with those thousands of tiny intersecting lines building up a portrait of life, it was revealed in nakedness and rawness. It was a faster, more vibrant thing.

It also looked meaner. Then she noticed such things as the whites driving by in cars and without looking.

And then her mother called out from the kitchen at the back, a coughing admonition, "Close it Isabelle. I say close it. Don't want no flies in here. We gotta live with flies all our days. I got enough of 'em. We got

screens now."

Mama's voice was something that changed again how she saw what she looked at. A sound that made her react, like a chemical agent, and the colors were again different and the smells were alien of a sudden, and the light failed.

Izzy had spent a lot of time trying out different ways of looking at facts. At college they said it all came out of books. At Party meetings it was said that the books helped but that truth was in history and the economic imperative and didn't need to be written or read to be understood.

At Mount Olivet the preacher said the truth was God. Which ought to have meant that it was also Love -- which she'd found out directly just wasn't so.

At Wall Street offices of Horton and Struthers where she had temped for a few weeks, the old boss with the poet's gentility had once roared out for the entire office to hear that truth was power (fist smashing down to desk) and how it was used.

She herself had once said that in New York it was truth that made you known. Truth being faces and bodies, not only money and notoriety -- a city full of people clawing hard to be true.

The Izzy of the moment had hatched. The result being a masterpiece of evolution, at least so she thought. It meant a creature that had rediscovered the intellect and discarded the soul, as well as religion, politics, etc.; a new creature who was calmly anarchistic, unaesthetic and asexual.

Not that the new Izzy no longer stirred for beautiful things, or prayed, or had orgasms. But she was learning to read through her anger and pray with a bitter twist of the lip and have orgasms by herself to demonstrate, she said, that history was hell, that no future could be worthwhile, nothing more ever, forever and ever more, than more history.

She could not be a Communist without history.

So Izzy had taken her life apart like a jigsaw puzzle, piece by piece, holding each small fragment up to the light. And when all the pieces were separate and alone, she'd scrambled them up in a heap and in place of the old unity put down her pilings in the Idyllic and on the ruined block and

with Belle Star.

She told herself she was doing post graduate work on misery and dissolution and that the end result would surely be either insanity or murder.

The self-indulgence pleased her, as did the ugliness of the room where she lay on a mattress, a mattress thrown down on a slat floor. It made in itself for another way of looking, as did reading the Bible. She who was lacerating the human spirit for its milleniums of yearnings, for its ignorance and animal needs also had taken to reading the Bible. Cruelty and degradation were being exorcised in her.

Belle Star did not like it when she read the Bible. The cat usually bided its own time when she read at the kitchen table, indifferent to the rivalry of Cesare Pavese or Trotski. But when Izzy took to the bed -- as she always did to read the Bible -- then

Belle felt impelled to claim her.

The Bible was a threat and the cat took its revenge by walking over the pages and sticking its wet nose into Izzy's face. Belle would try to move the book with her paws, sometimes going to the extreme of curling up on its uncomfortable surface as if to say 'see how I suffer for thee -- come back to me.'

Belle distracted her with a reproachful meow. Golden eyes fixed on Izzy's, approaching cautiously, coming up slowly, silently, the length of the mattress. She padded softly.

"You had a mouse, cat, didn't you. You fearless devil. You'd be a monster for sure if you were human, right cat? Glad you aren't?" Her voice signalled to the cat to do as it always did, as regular in its habits as the sun. The Bible lay ignored.

Belle wiggled forward on her stomach with a low wail until she could bury her face in Izzy's hair where it curled from the nape. Then licking and nipping softly, as if the spot were the seat of all tits, the cat sucked and pulled at the hair, kneading the skin of Izzy's neck and shoulder with gentle paws, the talons held back and not part of the love.

"That's for sure," purred Izzy. She held the cat tight. "You and me, right cat! You and me."

Incessant ringing in a small tenement apartment. Raw light quivered

over naked floors, littered with clothes and dirty dishes and open books, with flakes from the cat box and balls of fur -- in such a starkly doomed place the ringing of a telephone can be torture.

Izzy felt the tug at her neck, right around the throat. Her face, that classic and immobile creation, cracked in the ecstasy of pain.

In precaution against just such ringing, ringing that was like a fire alarm, or warning of missiles in the air above, reminiscent of late night calls -- "Get out now, they're coming for you" -- She'd put a sliding gate of iron bars across the windows, no blinds or curtains. The left window opened onto the fire escape where there were more bars on the balustrade around the landing -- bars upon bars there, all of them stripes in her thinking, lashes across the face of the city.

To confound the ringing, she stared at the skinny window. Belle Star ran bewildered between the telephone in the kitchen and the window. Each time the little cat bounded by she hopped on the radiator and swished her tail across the ribs.

Besides the ringing there was a tirade from the ugly birds on the fire escape. The birds pipped and warbled in disharmony -- black, large, iridescent birds with brutal heads.

Back when the landlord had cared about such things, he had tied white styrofoam coffee cups on long strings to the fire escape in an effort to drive off the birds -- their droppings splattered onto the sidewalk below. The cups still waved in the wind, garbage on a leash. The birds paid no heed.

Belle Star ran between telephone and window. Meow, meow. Izzy lay quite still and expectant.

She eyed the mystery of broken styrofoam cups on strings, the inscrutable designs of winged creatures, the second cloud of ash settling over the tops of the dead buildings across the street.

The final ring echoed through the room, high pitched and irritating like a metallic scream. The last ring vibrated in her inner ear. But good enough -- she had survived another round.

"Don't look at me like that, cat. How long does it take 'for you get the routine. Not a forgiving beast are you? Think that callin' is for you? Think it's yours?"

To further fill the void left by the ringing, Izzy picked the Bible up from where it lay. Where she had dropped it when the first ring sounded.

Her taste in scripture ran to Jeremiah. She read aloud. "Cry aloud to the Lord! O Daughter of Zion! Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!"

That was good. It held second place, however, to:

"Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon has devoured me, he has rinsed me out. The violence to me and my kinsmen be upon Babylon."

"Meow," replied Belle Star. The, cat minced reproachfully across the sheets -- sheets were not to her liking and she stalked them warily, with the cat knowledge of the intransience of things and how any surface, any object, any person can suddenly betray.

"Oh, go back to your birds and leave me alone!"

Izzy crawled up from the Mattress and stretched. Time to go to work. Time to write her little ole letter to Samson O'Flaherty. She'd already painted on her Idyllic Love Theater face. To her it was a vaudeville drawing of depravity -- a pair of Eighth Avenue lips, caverns of eye shadow, glued on lashes, a truly cheap shoulder-length wig. A Bertolt Brecht angel.

To avoid more ringing she'd have to move fast. Answering the telephone never did her any good. Magda didn't call often enough. Homer called too often.

And the one time she'd found Samson stumbling on the other end with his desperate strophes, that heart wrenching chaos and confusion, that pitiful male hurt, she'd gotten herself into a ridiculous situation. Out of pity -- he'd caught her at a moment of weakness -- she'd accepted a date. A date with a man. With Samson O'Flaherty! A date for this very evening in fact.

It made her choke in silent laughter.

Of course the real reason she would not answer the telephone had to do with those other phone calls. The ones from someone who would not say a word no matter what obscenities she poured into the phone. She sensed that this caller was also a 'him.' She dubbed him the Monster of the Black Lagoon.

For a week or more, whenever the phone rang she'd turn to Belle

and ask, "What you say? That the Monster of the Black Lagoon? Speak up, cat."

And Belle always heard the great fear in her voice and came running.

Nothing for it now but to write her excuses to Samson. They were cornered by absurdities, it seemed, and she alone had the strength to get them out.

For writing, she sat at the kitchen table, careful to keep her elbows out of the pools of souring milk. She went fast in hope of finishing before the ringing began again.

Black linoleum reflected from the kitchen floor, the feeling of being alone, a bad dream gloss of polished tiles. The front room walls were worse. Glistening white, Nazi clinical. Black and white surrounded her on all sides in a gruesome *Commedia del' Arte*.

Her mouth once so lovely stretched out of shape. She brushed a fist at it. At the eyes too, saying huskily, "Straighten up you!"

She wrote Samson the following.

I I'm not going to a Y concert with you, not tonight or ever. I don't believe in it or need it. And brother, you sure don't need me. You better turn around and go back to wherever it is you come from. If you're curious about me or if this note makes you angry, then take a handful of quarters from the man at the booth and step back to the live stage cubicles. Maybe that's the best kind of date we could have anyway.
Isabelle Thorn

A Note in Samson's Laundry

Purr was my grandma's best friend, even after they put the Shunning on us she still came to visit, until they put her away in a nursing home in Topeka. When I went to visit her, the Home, as they called it, looked more like a prison. I think it was meant to kill the old timers with boredom, all red bricks, its plan probably option D among the Kansas State institutional architecture drawings. The trees around it had died and been cut down.

Purr stayed on the fourth floor, which was the last place she was supposed to see on earth. The floors corresponded to how close you were to croaking. Fourth floor was for the senile and bedridden biddies.

It gave me the creeps walking down the corridor. Old ladies moaned and cried. One saw me pass and started screaming for help. Like that, you know. It was real grim.

Purr, short for Priscilla, had a room to herself. They'd left her in there in a wheelchair. The food trays were stacked on the floor. You could smell the rank cafeteria food. It sure was a dark, sad room. No one wants to visit long in a place like that. About 15 minutes is enough. Then you get in a rush to leave, to go off and forget about it. You're also pretending to yourself how you'll never end up in the same kind of joint.

I do remember Purr's head, more like an old onion, poked up weak and watery from the quilt. She had the quilt around her shoulders.

The old lady didn't have much to say. She knew who I was though. Her eyes said so real clear.

To make conversation, I asked her where the quilt came from. It was just like her, faded and old.

Purr said, "It come here before I was born. My ma bore her first in it, half way past Illinois. She wrapped the baby in it. When they come to the river, that was the Kaw, they went to cross and then got hit by a tree in the water. Tree knocked the wagon over. They saved some seed, the plow and the bible. This here quilt my ma pulled back empty.

Baby was gone. My ma kept it to wrap the rest of us in, one by one. I'm wearing it all the time now. I'm the last."

Before I left Purr also told me to give her love to a whole list of folks back home. I just didn't have the heart to tell her they'd all been dead for years.

Invitatiion To The Blues

He couldn't hold the receiver and it slipped through his fingers, landed with a resounding whack on top of "Poems in Repose" (sent in by Melissa Ward of Muleshoe, Texas).

The dumbfounding fear left him weak with shame. It was a plague --

the tremor in his hands, the icing of cold sweat on his skin.

But this time he'd not only been able to dial the number, there had been five rings.

Izzy Thorn is black. Izzy Thorn is beautiful. Izzy Thorn is cold and cruel.

He supposed that Izzy Thorn was totally indifferent, had even forgotten completely about the whole thing. He'd been forgotten before.

Not a head turned to him. They who did not see, feel or wonder. He'd not raised a ripple in the frozen surface of the Viceroy -- they were dead to his mumbling.

He slipped his face into his hands, the sweat of his palms and that of his forehead and cheeks blended into a deadlier poison. Stung him to the quick of his being.

This was hiding. He wanted to go on like this, never to look up again at the brutal scenery, which he had stared at too intently during the past month, as if trying to find something of value to save from it. Instead, the scene made him feel wicked. It made him aware of his own violence.

Samson's desk held a chosen location. Surrounding the Viceroy were banks of high wide windows looking out over Union Square. His desk, like those of his fellow editors, faced directly onto the ledge so that from where he sat the picture before him held a large scrap of city sky, the upper reaches of mismatched office buildings, and at the bottom a fringe of tree tops indicating the park. In winter, when he stood at the window, he could look down and see George Washington in command, at the head of the park.

In the despair of the moment he couldn't stand, his legs were treacherous these days, not even for a reassuring look at George Washington, not even to witness whatever at the moment transpired down there in a fanfare of NYPD sirens.

A stern March landscape, Turbulent sky, mottled stones, lifeless branches. And inspite of closed windows, the sounds of the ongoing party came up to him from the square below. He couldn't evade that dim babble and rattle as of men's voices in chains. It was the sound listless men make, a gathering of radios and dope and booze. That party he'd not yet yearned to join.

He could summon up their gaunt faces, their lean and shabby bodies, their sharp and menacing gestures. To him they were poor sailors doomed by the Sirens. They were also his brothers.

Behind him, but unbeknownst to her, she who could barely read, Eileen was setting another chapter of *Ambulance Drivers of the Spanish Civil War*. She gave birth to his manuscript in a thunderous rat-rat-rat.

Eileen led the gang of four, as the typesetters were called, those persecutors of the editor's life. She could be a fierce leader, had been known to deck one of her assistants, knocking the churlish girl to the floor during an outburst.

He waited purposely for Eileen to be free so that he could slip her more chapters. She'd been receiving his chapter on sex hidden in among Fanny May's "Poems in Repose."

Eileen's face twitched unaccountably -- though never a pause for her fingers. The wide jaw opened, cavernous. Eileen yawned, shook savagely. She was the last of the Parkchester Irish.

She made him think of frogs -- and of flies. Eileen could certainly have been a frog. She sat all day unflexed and untroubled, a plump squatter on her typing chair. The green pant suit from the bargain store on 14th Street stretched to its limits, the flesh of her back and sides ballooned.

Without music at the Viceroy -- Sy forbade it -- the heavens filled instead with a low shuffle of feet and papers, and now and then a pencil sharpener in the background. At all times like a heartbeat or a drumbeat, as if the office were being rowed into battle, typists and typesetters gave forth the drone of their labor.

Some deadpan glances might be exchanged. Some tedious words raised. On some rare days there might be a laugh, from a younger secretary or artist.

A dictionary slammed shut with the resonance of the stone across the tomb. Samson started up in a panic -- at knife point. Not as calm as he had once been.

Yawns came from all corners of the office. It made a chorus of yawns, only half smothered. On most mornings yawns flew through the air of the Viceroy like Furies.

One came now, loud and uncontrolled from the other side of the plastic partition that separated his desk from the next. Poor Huey laboring for the third week now over Birdwatcher of Logan County, a blithering autobiography of more than 1,000 pages.

Such a lengthy effort was unusual at Viceroy where Sy had a simple rule -- take everything that isn't libelous or subversive, take it all, ravings and unimportant visions and sad tediums of flat lives, take lies, delusions and vicious betrayals, take pornography and lunatic murder stories, but do them as fast as possible; send out the bill. The bill was the vital thing -- the suckers paid dearly for their pound of pages, to see themselves in print.

Eileen boomed away, siege guns, and Samson crouched down before her. The pauses, the style of her typing, such said "She'll catch on. She'll turn you in to Sy. She'll hold your pages up to ridicule in front of the whole office. You'll have to crawl to keep your job, to keep her from reading out loud what you've been able to sneak through."

His scheme had been laid in the ruins of his sleepless nights and hatched during the unendurable commutes back and forth from Brooklyn; a month of being rubbed too close by strangers and his own flesh still clamoring for revenge, for death to all swaying, jostling, too close bodies.

He planned to sneak his chapters one by one to the typesetter along with other manuscripts, to then through time horde up the galleys as they were returned until the moment came when he could push them through to the printer, masqueraded as the scribblings of another fool from the outback.

Samson had already chosen an author's photograph for the dust cover, one of his mother taken when she was pregnant with him. This he felt would not be suspicious at Viceroy since more often than not the loonies sent in photos of themselves so old and damaged that the book morgue -- ceiling high stacks behind the watercooler -- held a museum of American family photography.

His pen name was to be Alice Kay Ackerman. They did all have double first names. He had composed the jacket copy. Sitting in the office toilet he had already made out a print run.

The address for delivery would be a box number Upstate, one he

would take out himself under "A.K.A."

The books would be shipped to that as-yet-to-be selected site in lots of 500 each. He would take a large locker in the local depot and make forays up periodically, as the books came in, and cache them away until the glorious day arrived when he'd be able to fetch them back to the city in a rented van.

He'd peddle the books after work and on weekends to small bookstores in all five boroughs. He'd send review copies to Bookseller -- the trade magazines -- to Vortex -- the British philosophical journal -- to the Times Book Review, the Christian Science Monitor, the New Statesman, Le Monde, NYRB and to every small press he could think of.

Already he could see the notices that Ambulance Drivers would earn -- the book would become a collectors' item and A.K.A. would be a mysterious and obscure soul whose name lives on at the campground meetings of American intellectuals.

And the story did not end there -- for at some time in the future, the plan also called for confronting Sy Moscovitz, perhaps in five years or in ten, it would not matter, and telling him face to face that Samson O'Flaherty had swindled him out of a book, that for once the great man himself played the dunce.

Eileen typed too furiously, dispelling his reverie. All the typesetters pounded in a sudden rage. Not a yawn rose.

It was also true, and he stole a peek at the window to prove the point, that the midmorning light had of a sudden faded another degree. Some mass brooding over the city at that moment dimmed Union Square, drained what energy had played there.

Samson took warning and cleared his throat. Without changing positions he slyly lifted an elbow and turned the page of Melissa of Muleshoe's manuscript.

"Coming along, Sam?" Sy emulated the giants of capitalism, those to whom he prayed and even dedicated his own books -- two treatises on playing the stock market, published by Moderno Press, the next vanity press up the scale from Viceroy. The books were enshrined in Sy's office along with the Better Business plaque and his photo, as taken in Boca Raton in 1975.

Sy blew thick currents of air down Samson's neck. He carried about him the 'I know you're brilliant, kid, but we all gotta eat' aura. Samson for some time had thought that Sy possessed tones of speech, phrases of thought that he could pull at will as the situation demanded, just as he did his all-purpose promotion letters, from the black-leather pouch of his soul.

"This manuscript is god damn important. It's not the first from her. Won't be the last either -- better not be!" Sy rubbed Samson's shoulder, the motions of a trainer easing down the muscles of one of his best fighters.

"You know she pays in full, in advance . . . they say she has 10,000 acres."

Samson continued to demand one thing of himself in his relationship with a boss, that he maintain the courage to look the creature in the face.

He did so.

Sy stood a bare six inches from him, an odious infringement of air space in such a crowded city. The peculiar and fleshy face roused daydreams in the fanciful -- most of the workers at Viceroy were such beings, the odd ends of doomed pursuits, strays and misfits. Their sort could idolize the unusual face, cast it in bizarre scenes, give it animal or demi-god character, tinker neurotically with the set of the jaw, the cast of eye, the modeling of the nose, the cut of the jib as it parted them with authority.

In all, Sy carried the look about him, that slightly bleary and hesitant demeanor, of the man accustomed to not seeming real.

He was real enough to Samson.

"Ah yes . . ." Another long silence; Samson portrayed the sleeper climbing grudgingly towards consciousness.

Sy showed immediately how much he despised this. He the kind of man who shirks any revelation of personality, having been so taught by a hard-kneed and unloving tradition.

The ponderous hand, however, continued its work, massaging the shoulder, kneading it, fumbling intimately, sensually, with the cloth of Samson's suit.

"Back to it then. Got to keep our ass covered. Show me what you've done at 2:00." Sy spoke like this, as if sending a telegram and

counting every word.

He suddenly whipped erect, enormous. The kind of American boss who slouches democratically, bear shoulders pushed forward and gut sagging, yet who can harden on command, stiff as a male member, aroused into ducal aggressiveness.

Sy's minute-man eye leveled on the scene of Viceroy, traveled its partitions, counting the heads of his minions as they worked his will. Sy's countenance set into the blandness of the idol's, the unknown that presumes all.

With the hands gone, Samson wiped his face and swallowed convulsively to bury the taste. He'd have puked on Fanny May if those hands had not ceased their fumbling.

Rat-rat. Typesetting eased from all sets of hands. The gang of four, those galley slaves chained to the pace of Eileen's fingers, whispered among themselves.

Were they gossiping about Samson's own measures, beaten out of what agony? Were they? How many victims each day did they sink their teeth into?

He couldn't hate them though. With them he shared a fate -altogether a captive people, assuming the same postures, tones of voice, and clothing -- a uniform of the latter day lower-middle class professional.

Excepting Sy they were in one large room. Twenty-two employees of the Viceroy Publishing Co. bound close without sympathy, behind jerrybuilt glass partitions and gun-metal colored desks. Their chairs followed them on squibbing rollers. Constantly a squawk of rollers. The holes in the linoleum marked where their feet were to be placed day in and day out. They filled the identical war department trash cans, all within easy reach of the gun-colored desks. They typed on look-alike typewriters. They sat on tobacco-stained office chairs, which swivelled and tilted and could be raised and lowered (none of which was permitted), and which had all been bought used.

Because of their indenture, during his first week at Viceroy the others had come to him on the sly, wheedling him each day.

"You'll be back tomorrow? You'll be back from lunch, right? Haha, you won't disappear on us, hoho?" All given out in a hearty and half joking

comraderie.

The translation: Are you going to desert, will you have the power we don't, to free yourself before it's too late? Are you that strong and clever and different, unlike us imprisoned here in the tar baby's arms?

At Viceroy they would come in and be hired on the spot, many of them eager and young (the old ones never did get away) and then they would sit for awhile and begin to see the true nature of work and life and love at the corner of Union Square and 14th Street -- they would see, those capable of it, and if strong enough, they would flee.

Sometimes they didn't bother to return from lunch on the very first day, not even lured back for a check (the very few bucks owed them). Sometimes they put in a day and called the next morning about 10:00 to say they'd thought it over. No one was fooled when a chair remained empty by 9:30. Goldie had already pulled their tax and social security file by then and wearily plopped it into her OUT bin -- grumbling perhaps as she did so about her own 30 years of service to the company.

Rat-rat-rat. The voice of the Viceroy. It called him.

For a moment he struggled against it, pricking his ears in hope of something more, another kind of enchantment.

All he heard, beyond the racket of setting lies, his own as well as others, was the dim yelling of the damned, the faint ruckus arising from the pit of Union Square park. But Samson pretended just the same that he also listened to the voice of a woman, that woman who called for him to come out and be saved.

Again, he reached with a trembling hand for the telephone.

Take A Walk On The Wild Side

The voice box cracked. As usual the front sounded like a revolution in progress -- sputter of gunfire over the intercom, a battle of voices. Bull's own voice forced through with a moronic pitch, thick from brain damage.

"Dat you chick? I love you . . . hold on . . . He went dead for a

moment then burst back at her. "Got what he needed. Kids in today. Must be a convention. Green pricks out front. Lots of juice on the floor."

Bull gave out change in the booth at the front door, sitting behind bulletproof glass and surrounded by high racks of skin magazines -- to the left women and women, at center women and men, to the right men and men. Under-the-counter was the kiddie porn and the fist fucks and the psychotic stuff -- what thrived best in dark places -- the nightshade of the Idyllic.

Bull was Bull because he'd been a sanitation worker for the city for years. Fell on his head one too many times. He couldn't read the magazines that surrounded him.

"Man oh man. Just sold \$30 worth to a kink. Gotta be a murderer. You can tell." All day long there were lines in front of Bull, men buying magazines and dildos, mining quarters for the cubicles. His eyes silvered in the glare of too many quarters. After his shift he mopped down the cubicle floors and saw what those quarters ran to. He used so much air freshener that the odor clung to him, a Madison Avenue idea of sawmill freshness.

"Ronnie give me your letter, chick. You gonna go out wit me sometime? Bull knows the trick." The box firing off incredible sound.

"This guy is coming for me tonight, Bull.

Give him the note when he asks for me. You understand? Give the dude the note Ronnie just gave you."

"Yea, yea." said Bull.

She said, "You won't understand what he's saying at first. He'll look like he stepped out of a box -- glasses, mustache, hair parted in the middle. Just give him the note, you don't have to say anything about me . . . And Bull, be nice to him. O.K.?"

Sissy, almost through on the floor, concurrently squirmed to the music, tongue protruding, and kept both hands busy with her pussy. Sissy carried it off well though unimaginatively, a trifle mechanically, about which Ronnie had warned, but good enough to get the quarters to dropping.

Izzy did her own work and that helped, going around the stage in a circle clapping her hands and wiggling, a few dance steps, her long legs

kicking.

She had made a deal with Peggy -- who commanded the intercom -- that if a message came in for her from the front it was to be relayed in a whisper whenever she got close enough, or if it were her turn on the floor to give it to Sissy who would pass it on.

Sissy gave the last shudder of simulated orgasm.

Time for Izzy's turn on the floor -- for Sissy to scramble up as gracefully as she could, which was not very, and begin her own satellite tour.

Izzy guessed that he'd come now, when she least wanted him. Yes, he would come. And he would undoubtedly step back for a peek.

Anyway, it was true that she wanted someone to see the depth of what she was, the core of Izzy Thorn. It was not for her to treat the man as a child -- let Magda do it. Women did that for men all their lives. But not her. It wasn't for her to hide what she was from him; it was something she too was trying to see, scrutinize and not turn her eyes away from.

Where was Samson? Had he tricked her? Samson must come -- his Delilah waited.

He'd be outside on 45th Street trying to find the courage to come in, stuck on the spot with the hawkers and hookers and mean no-gooders eyeing him up and down and asking themselves if this was for real, this walking candy store. They'd be whistling and asking him over, dreaming about dark corners.

But he'd come. She knew it. And he would stand out front looking lost, in the three piece suit. He'd be middle-aged and Irish.

As predicted, the voice box crackled. It sent a small tremor down her spine. But no message yet came. She couldn't stop to ask. She felt awesomely naked.

Izzy thrust that bit of self pity away with her G-string. Dangled it, swang it in a circle around her head.

He would be looking confused. Half turned towards the door, Bull rough cut and huge behind him. Her note in one hand and the quarters in the other, Samson would stare blankly down the long crowded 8mm aisle. His mustache would twitch -- as limp as a lost dog's tail.

She imagined him actually turning in circles in indecision, weighing

the note in one hand against the quarters in the other. She knew that the quarters would win out.

He'd come hesitantly, wondering at the place, trying to figure out how it worked and what it meant. He'd make a final, gold-rush dive to the live-act cubicles, escaping with relief from the mob of shifty-eyed men.

He'd bumble over the lock on the door. He'd bumble with the quarters. He'd curse the coin slot.

When the metal curtain began its slow ascent, the red glare of the stage would burn like hell in the lens of his glasses. And he'd no longer actually be alone, Homer and Magda would be with him too. She could just hear his mumbled recital to them of her body, how her fingers worked, how her face flushed with an old time beauty.

Sissy waddled clumsily about. At last she got close enough to Peggy for the two of them to exchange whispers -- Sissy went into a holding pattern for this, standing in place with arms outstretched, shaking her torso. The boobs didn't have much bounce but Sissy liked the routine no matter what Ronnie said about it.

Peggy did the talking. Sissy listened.

Izzy had the floor. That was all. She squatted low rubbing hands over her breasts and thighs. Shutters up all around -- a packed house. The smoked screens were blank eyes to her, and forbidden to stare into, avoided at all costs.

Now Sissy moved, making her way in a radical trajectory, a hop there, a skip here, a pause to lick the air, squeal and wiggle. Sure enough, she took her own sweet time, a little torture for past fights.

Izzy rolled over so that one shoulder supported her, a shoulder and a hand, while her ass stuck up in the air. She spread her knees wide on the floor.

The free hand snaked under her belly and up inside her crotch. For this part she kept her eyes closed, lips parted.

Sissy came close enough. At last.

"Hey . ." She didn't sound stupid when she whispered. "Your friend's here. He's in a booth now . . ." Sissy did her shaking number over Izzy; trying to steal the show -- the bitch.

Izzy had spiked heels at eye level, the clacking of the heels in her

ears like an earthquake under the stage.

"Where!" To speak, she moved her mouth against the linoleum, taking in a powerful whiff of baby powder and vaseline. She had a mind to snap at that skinny white ankle.

"Ten . . . right behind you sweetie!" Sissy giggled and a shower of her sweat sizzled on the floor an inch or so from Izzy's face.

Well, not only had he come at the right time -her bare ass thrust up front and center, spread wide for the world to see while her cunt-rubbing fingers did their duty -- but he'd also got the best view in the house. Luck of the Irish. To keep from laughing her blue-jay laugh she ground her chin into the floor.

Nothing for it but to go on.

Never before had anyone she knew come to see her. Peggy's mother had shown up once. Hard faced mechanic's wife from West Virginia, come to town to see her kid who was a Broadway star. The woman lasted about ten minutes in the place, freezing up in the back room over a cup of coffee, left by yanking Peggy to one side and punching her a hard jab, square in the face.

For Izzy, this moment seemed like something she'd been waiting for, just like that mean rap to the eyeball. Maybe this was what she'd been working for these years, fulfillment of self searching and the days alone.

Too bad Belle Star couldn't have come down to watch too.

As she worked herself over sprawled in her improbable stance, she kept count of the shutters going up and down, felt keenly that she'd taken these men by the balls, had them at the height of their nature.

She had their leashes in hand.

In particular, she kept Samson's window in the corner of her eye. As she went along she hummed to it over and over, "Ah lover, not yet, don't close up now, hold on. I'm almost there. Don't leave me yet. I'm coming . . ."

And that mechanical eye hardly blinked the whole time, churning up and down on cue without a seconds hesitation.

It flashed in Izzy's head as the electric trills ran through her arms and legs -- clapping hands for the Lord, clap and away in the joy of Jesus.

Black hands strike lighter palms and the heavy ladies yelp in passion as they bend and stir and raise their arms in the air, the men transfigured in their store-bought suits. Strange grins and burning eyes, the heat of the sanctuary pearling on their chins, streaming from their scalps with the warmth of blood -- Blood of the Lamb, Rock of Ages. They bellowed it into Izzy's head. The choir swang high on their own notes, over the heads of the congregation. Their eyes lifted along with their hands, their eyes rolling on the ceiling watching for the first sign.

"Hold on," she whimpered. "Stay put! I'm coming home, don't blink . . ."

And it was like that. He stayed to the end, until she had convulsed and jerked her last spasm. Only then did the window stay down long enough for her to know that he had gone on without her.

"Jesus!" The intercom flashed violent; Bull was charging at them. "Who's hot tonight? Had a run on quarters like I ain't seen in years. Dudes was fighting to get in. Should of taped it. Johns was running out with their pants wet. Izzy's friend, the honky, he watch the whole show. Then he go racin' by. Left her a note. I sent it back with Ronnie."

Sissy heehawed and patted her on the fanny.

"I do say you was for real, sweetie. My, my. For real! You!"

Izzy shoved the hand away and spat on the floor, sparks of saliva. Peggy knew enough to stay away. She saw Izzy's tiger claws. Alberto shrugged. He stood naked, still beguiling them with his turkey neck and sack.

Ronnie waited for her out back, grinning of course.

She couldn't handle any of it, being numb and fragile. Couldn't be anything else but vicious, since they would destroy her if they could, as weak as she now was.

Ronnie didn't waste time. His patience as long as his imagination. Maybe the dismal lights and mile-deep hole of the harbor kept him running. He turned up the grin as he handed over the note from Samson. Since she wouldn't take it, he dropped it on the table.

She lit her own cigarette, blew the smoke in his face. He sniggered and gave her the finger in return.

"You're good, Izzy. You know it." He backed out the door. "But I

wouldn't let that bad ass trick get to be a habit. Sweeten up. I got friends who'll stake you. Your own apartment on the East Side. Just say please and it's worth a thousand."

Samson's note ran in broken, half intelligible lines. It looked to her like it had been submerged in water.

William Butler Yeats wrote this and I give it to you:

A woman can be proud and stiff
 When on love intent;
 But love has pitched his mansion in
 The place of excrement;
 For nothing can be sole or whole
 That has not been rent.

Izzy sat very still, not looking up, missing the ashtray when she flicked ashes. The note withered in her hand.

Unchained Melody

Izzy walked to Grand Central and took the Lex down. The ride demanded less this evening because she was too tired to be critical. No time for analysis. Those other worn out folks on the platform and in the train were uninspiring -- sorry children rocked on a merry-go-round that had lost its appeal.

From Astor Place she crossed Cooper Square diagonally to 7th Street, avoiding St. Marks Place since it and the Minerva Theater twitched her in the wrong place.

She bought the Voice at the corner of Third Avenue. Sometimes she'd buy something for Belle Star on her way home, a red rubber ball with a bell inside or a tiny rubber mouse that squeaked when pinched. Something like that. Nothing tonight.

The dreary streets were longer, endless tonight on purpose, as if stretched by the evil wizard for her sole discomfort. She dragged herself home unsure of why so much sadness gripped her, why her load weighed heavier tonight.

She didn't want to give Samson too much credit. Not that freak with his bookbag full of pretension and looking like a turtle under the

wheels of a truck.

Her heart was too full. She'd have to sweep it clean, trash the clutter, dump it in the garbage.

The phone calls, those invasions of her self, that rape by telephone. That had a place at the top of the list. It was a good enough excuse for anything.

What had Lottie said to her this morning? What had Homer prattled in her ear yesterday? Those were guiltless beings, though, half ruined things. Let them be. She said to let them die in peace.

Peace and violence, old themes rearing their heads. And reading too much Bible. And having an orgasm at the Idyllic. And Ronnie had added his own. Wasn't that genuine enough, all of it, to make a strong woman weak?

She'd been straining not to fall in love with Magda Ott. That was it. Fuck it all! She could fall in love and not be crushed. She wasn't a giddy little girl anymore, never had been.

The air yellowed even in the gloom and the traffic ended where she stood. She'd come to the corner of her own street. Across the way, the bums lay in the darkened doorway. She heard the clink of bottles and stepped cautiously over the smear on the sidewalk. Everywhere she walked -- broken.

"Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!" Hadn't they hit her again when her defenses were down, when she was most certifiably dead and buried from orgasm and grief and exhaustion? Then they'd come creeping up with their second helping of poetry.

"For nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent!"

Poetry was to blame. Prophets, poetic Irishmen, Magda and her god-damn notes in the laundry bag. Izzy's suspicions were confirmed. Down with all non-party literati -- that should be said without a smile. Poetry caused great confusion. It blighted the body with yearnings for soul. Dead people should sink their teeth into poetry.

She looked up eagerly for her building. Every evening she did this, a result of the fires that had flared around her leaving the burnt out wrecks that lined the block from+ where she stood down to Lottie's store. At night coming home she paused just long enough to look up and hope for

the best, no smouldering ruin, no charred bones or naked rafters.

And each night, seeing that all was as it should be, she felt a little stronger for it.

But tonight her lights were on.

Izzy sucked air. Fear made her step back a pace.

Up above, a streak of electric light blurted out into the darkness. From where she stood she could see a piece of the ceiling and the skeleton of the fire escape too, like looking at the sun through bones.

She ran, rummaging in her bag as she went. By the time she got to the entranceway she had the keys in one hand, the handgun in the other.

Four flights of stairs and she took them two at a time. The apartment door stood wide open. Where she halted at the threshold it appeared that every light in the apartment burned.

It occurred to her that if she banged back the door and rolled towards the kitchen table in a belly bust, just like in the movies, she'd be able to fire at anything in the living room or behind the door.

Instead, Izzy stepped calmly into the kitchen. Her Alabama moon sense told her no one waited for her.

In the living room everything remained as she had left it, except that in the window by the fire escape, that stage for the ugly birds, hung Belle Star.

Yes, oh yes, Sister Thorn. Belle Star hung from the rope until dead.

The phone rang now. Rang and rang, not joyously, not with beauty, not in friendship either.

She tilted the .38 a degree in her grip. She pulled the trigger. The phone exploded, black plastic flying into space.

She hadn't needed to answer to know who was calling.

A Note in Homer's Laundry

The only thing special about Great Uncle Gottlieb was his penis. I saw it in one piece too, when I was eight years old. He showed it to me in grandma's garage. Maybe he was in his 50's at the time.

He was putting up fruit jars in the racks over the rafters. I was fooling around on the floor playing at something or other. He got to talking to me about the marvels of nature, and hell I didn't even know what the word meant. So he told me to look up, and I did. Sure enough, there he was grinning down at me from the rafters. I could see what he was holding. It wasn't a fruit jar.

Later on, Great Uncle Gottlieb worked at the J&J Pool Hall on Main Street, cleaning up after hours, hanging around drinking beer and telling his mean hearted stories. He got to be a wicked old man.

One night after midnight, it was a Saturday night and the town was just calming down after some hell raising, Great Uncle Gottlieb came running into the Sheriff's office screaming for help. He had a bloody bandana held down over his open fly. Caused quite a commotion, you can be sure.

The old man kept saying, "Get me to the Doc quick!" They did too, running him to the doctor's with the sirens going and the whole town wondering what was going on.

The cops found out then that the end of Great Uncle Gottlieb's penis was missing, almost an inch of it.

He told the Sheriff that some six or seven young Indians had ganged up on him, real drunk and crazy. They'd held him down and pulled a knife and started whittling away. This happened after closing time. Great Uncle Gottlieb claimed he'd foiled a holdup attempt at the J&J and lost part of his pecker in the ordeal.

He also said they were some of those no-good Indians who came up every weekend from Oklahoma. He'd be able to recognize them again, sure thing. One of them had a scar down his left cheek, that for certain.

Now it just so happened that this fiesty young Indian from Ponca City did come up our way to do a little drinking and see a girl friend or two. He also had a scar down his left cheek.

But Great Uncle Gottlieb hadn't taken everything into account. In little towns you got to know all there is to know about people to keep up with how things fit together. He'd forgotten something important, maybe in the excitement, or maybe because he spent too much time telling his mean lies.

Whatever, he neglected the fact that the Sheriff's mother was a Cherokee. She lived down in Stillwater. She'd taught school on the reservation for years. The Sheriff had big twisted up feet from trying to wear mail-order shoes after going barefoot as a kid. He was sensitive about all that.

It was also an election year.

So, when the Sheriff burned rubber getting out of the Doc's parking lot, he and the Deputy were going direct to the J&J -- never mind putting out an allpoints on that Indian. No one knows what old Gottlieb had against the kid.

The cops found the door to the J&J wide open and the light on in the back over the pool table. The cleaning had already been done, plain enough to see when a barroom's been swept up. The balls had been racked and the cue sticks hung up. They found blood drying in spots on the felt of the pool table, just as Great Uncle Gottlieb said.

Also on that pool table, they found a small electric vacuum cleaner, the kind you can hold in your hand and which was used for sweeping off the felt. The vacuum cleaner was still switched on, buzzing away where it had been dropped.

By divine inspiration or something, the Sheriff had his deputy turn that machine off, open it up and dump out the contents.

Sure enough, in there with the lint and loose threads and cigarette butts was the tip of Great Uncle Gottlieb's penis.

The Sheriff wrapped up the evidence in a paper napkin and took it back to the Doc's, sirens going full tilt again.

They had the old man shouting at them and carrying on like the devil. He kept demanding why they were bringing back something that wasn't of any use to him anymore and not out chasing Indians. The cops let him rage and then the Sheriff asked real quietly, "How'd you do it Gottlieb?"

The old man broke down and cried. He told them how he'd just been farting around and decided to try what it was like to stick it up a vacuum cleaner. Held heard tell it was nice.

Well it had been, too, until he got carried away and poked in too far. He'd snagged himself, panicked, and pulled back in a hurry.

The deputy told me later that Great Uncle Gottlieb cried like a broken hearted little kid. He told them, "I just wanted some company."

634 - 5789

In one direction of turning she beheld Rudy and Joshua together on the couch, the man sprawled sensually, legs apart, the little boy dangling near the source. The two of them flickered in the spill of the TV, alone with her memory -- the full ashtray, the half-empty bottle of bourbon, the sag in the couch that was the imprint of her butt.

She could not see the TV -- no matter, since its voice boomed in the apartment, overcame their small, sealed world. A sudden flare of music made her pull tight on the cord. It was the soundtrack of doom, a tuneless, rhythmic percussion, summoning up the national panic. Her mouth screwed around the cigarette. Hair swept back under wet palm.

Magda looked up quickly to see that the door stood bolted, latch drawn, police lock bar in place.

"Speak to me!" She whispered into the phone. "Whistle, pray, scream. Please." She'd thought to say such things to the dead as well -- always too late. It wasn't easy saying anything, not now with the whiskey left behind, too far away for help.

Death's silence on the phone. Reminiscent to her of standing alongside the dead, confounded by their silence.

The silence held her helpless, a part of her nervous system. She knew the dizzy sense of falling into it. The silence ate at her guts. Was it also eating up her store of memories? Would it feed on her, larger and longer and louder, chewing up the rest? Nothing but bloody silence for evermore.

Turning for help, in the other direction she surveyed pee-yellow light on white tiles -- a magazine atmosphere from the bathroom. The open door chilling her with the sight of their lost pieces -- stains and loose hair around the base of the toilet bowl.

She heard herself again, coming back in a hoarse mutter. She echoed out of the receiver, soft and low. It sounded exactly like the

funeral whispers at home.

"Will the circle be unbroken," she heard herself asking. "By and by, Lord . . . by and by . . ."

She cracked, hit bottom, disappeared herself into the silence.

Click. The dial tone stung her; God hanging up on you.

Magda swang on the line. In the other room, she could see, they were groping about, as if looking for her. She felt a pang of isolation.

She slumped, resting her ass on the edge of the kitchen table. The table seemed like food itself, rough and scarred and still damp from the after-dinner sponging.

A family must have once locked hands around this table, the mashed potatoes steaming their faces. She felt their presence like a knot around her waist; a family praying to the unseen to leave them in peace, leave them alone just a little longer, peacefully locked together.

They too should have prayed tonight. Joined hands around that old table -- Rudy and Joshua and herself -- bowing low over the sauerkraut and sending up their own awkward entreaties. Too late now. She knew without doubt they had missed their chance.

To hang up, she lay the receiver down as secretively, as placatingly as possible. She would not be the one to provoke that ominous silence.

"Which one was that? The queer, the nigger or the mick?" Rudy teasing her, pulling on his mating-call pants, stationed so that only his buttocks were turned to her. Slices of skin, baby smooth. He abstained from underwear for his nightly tour of duty.

"You're gonna meet them all tomorrow night. And you sure as hell better show up!" Coming back to the living room she was no paler than usual. The calm surface of her as untroubled as before.

She plucked the bottle from the floor without a tremor. The men did not guess how tensed she stood, guarding them strong and thick.

"You better not run out on me! They're coming just so you can meet them." She talked rough to him, and plenty loud -all to break the silence of the telephone.

In an effort to hold Rudy in place, she plunked down on the couch with a bang, springs popping underneath in small explosions. It seemed essential to slow down the evening, keep it from ending. Tonight she

needed his company.

He turned and gave her a glimpse of blue veins disappearing on his abdomen, behind the sailor pants. The jersey top hung open showing his chest.

"Ah, all those people. You don't really need me anymore . . ."

To pull on his boots he leaned forward, giving her the small white of his lower back, the place where the hair fuzzed as soft as on an adolescent's cheek -- he was all ages of man to her. He was also telling her, without having to speak, in the way he moved, about how free he was and that he wouldn't be sitting beside her this evening holding hands.

"But you know I'll come. I dig a circus . . ."

Joshua nodded, half asleep, and rolled against her thigh. The little boy stirred, uncomprehendingly.

Rudy jerked to his feet kicking out the creases in the pants. "What we going to do about the phone calls?" He turned to the TV and the screen blipped and went blank.

She shrugged, fighting back the need to touch him.

In one of his choreographed steps that took her by surprise, left her thinking sometimes that after all they were living out nothing more serious than a musical comedy, he swirled on his heels and came to rest in a squat in front of her with his head in her lap.

It was a nest of lustrous dark curls. Before she could stop herself, she began stroking his head and running her fingers through the curls.

"No, now, little mother, don't fret. I'll be good to them. They'll love me. It'll be a great party." Taking the bottle from the floor he stood up, standing straight up and just as close so that it was suddenly she who was the child.

"And don't drink anymore tonight, OK?"

Magda swallowed and wanted to bite her lip or make a fist. But she sat sagging, strangely uncertain, looking old that way.

When she did heave up it seemed all she could manage. That used up. She hauled Joshua, complaining at being disturbed, up into her arms -- feeling how her strength ebbed at the effort, thinking of the day coming when she'd no longer be able to pick him up at all.

Joshua's socks hung down around his ankles. The scuffed bargain

basement shoes he wore to play in clacked like bones against her loins.

Moving over, she gave Rudy his good night kiss. The three of them together again. Just like at table, like on the couch -- important times.

Rudy swatted her on the rump to make her move. As usual, he left the living room light on -- she knew he was afraid of the dark.

They moved to the landing, blinking in its rude glare, feeling exposed in the impersonal chill of the hallway. Behind them, the locked and silent apartment was a broken shell. Only the telephone remained at home, alive and waiting.

Joshua drooped doll-like on her. Rudy beamed, playfully wiggled one of the child's limp feet.

"I ought to take your picture every night, kid and you together, right here. You look goddamn good!"

She thought maybe he would kiss her again, or more fantastic, suddenly change his mind and pull her back into the warmth and safety of the apartment.

But already he darted away. They fell apart, wedges driven between them.

"Yea, yea. Tomorrow night, I won't forget." He galloped with a wave down the stairs, very young looking this evening, younger than he'd looked in months.

Since Joshua lay so passively, she paused for a moment waiting for conclusion of their evening -- the boom of the front door closing far below.

The tenement around her had lost its battle. It had been invaded. It took too much from the street. She felt in her bones how the tenement no longer rode the night like a large rolling ship, one lit up in the darkness of the city.

Magda knew how thin its walls were, that the forces of New York were too close and too interested. She held tight to the child.

"There's a better home awaiting, in the sky Lord, in the sky."

It came. Boom. Rudy lost in the night. The front door closing sent a shiver through the bright and curling spine of the tenement -- six flights of sway-backed slate steps, each landing a pool of light identical, and the long black wrought-iron bannister like a brittle coil. Windows in the

stairwell stared back at her, black and nude and with only an ugly airshaft to their credit.

She had two flights to go herself. Up to her own apartment. She would carry Joshua, no more than hauling laundry and the least she could do to drive the devils away.

In slow steps she ascended. Her sneakers slapped in a cadence of struggle.

Along with her went the old story about how the women walked to Kansas and how their feet bled and their skin cracked in the sun and how they died young from too many children and poor food and no medicine. How they died screaming or praying.

"You got it, bad? No ma'am, you ain't! Not by a mile. You're soft Magda Ott. You're too soft!"

Following her up the stairs, like an alarm from the tomb, came the ringing of Rudy's telephone.

Like A River Flows

Magda

Joshua's small bed bulged in the middle. The terry-cloth cover showed its poverty in the light from the nightstand lamp, all the places where he had methodically plucked the threads.

She made him stand while she cleared off a book and a stuffed lion from the bed. She pulled back the covers, checking through the sheets for the black beetles.

The black beetles were the last vestiges of the Bag Lady's tenure. Magda had finally cleared out the rats; for months though after moving in they would hear the traps clapping in the late evening, applause at the execution of another small enemy. At the worst of it the apartment stunk of dead rats.

Sick rats crawled forth from the hole under the sink to lie panting by the window to the airshaft, so weak she could pick them up by their tails and fling them out the air shaft window.

She managed to control the roaches with boric acid and constant

mopping. Since there was so little food in the kitchen -- mainly a few cans and a carton of milk -- the roaches weren't interested anyway.

But the beetles would not leave. They roamed as common now as when she'd moved in. Their round primitive bodies so tough that when she stepped on them they weren't hurt. They were everywhere, in clothes, in the beds, under the carpets, in the bath tub. She remembered ticks and leeches when looking at them. They made her shudder, she who had spent a good deal of her early life on farms.

The beetles plagued Magda. Although she sometimes laughed about them to Rudy, saying that if she were a Mormon she'd be praying for sea gulls.

Only one in Joshua's bed tonight. Magda picked it off the sheet and popped it between thumb and forefinger. Doing so and feeling a touch of guilt, hearing her grandmother saying in the dim past that each and every one of God's creatures deserved a place, and useless killing was the greatest sin.

In her heart, Magda understood that the animosity she bore the beetles, which after all she'd discovered to be harmless, not biting or sucking or disturbing her or the child, connected somehow to a change in her character. It meant something important that she should be preoccupied with these tiny creatures, white faced and grim about them.

Rudy recounted how he had passed the Bag Lady several times on the stairs, coming back in the early morning with her bags full. He said she'd been like an old rat herself all evening long standing out on the landing hoary and furry and rustling through her boxes, piling up her empty cans. She'd sorted in the hallway because the apartment stood full. She had crammed it tight, floor to ceiling, every foot of it, saving for herself only a sliver by the door to sleep on.

After they drug her off raving, the landlord began cleaning out the apartment. It took two Puerto Rican boys three days to haul the crud down to the street. They had worn face masks and hip boots and rubber gloves. Mice leapt from the boxes and lice swarmed in the rags.

The boys had dutifully piled everything from the old woman's apartment in rows along the curb. Word spread and in half an hour after they'd finished a mob gathered. People ran from blocks away to fight over

the garbage, strewing it in a rage.

Magda undressed Joshua and thought about him instead. Each day she tried concentrating on him for at least a few minutes, trying to gather all her mental energy into contemplating him, touching him. This usually took place as she undressed him, pulling off his clothes, the shabby play clothes she made him put on as soon as he came home from school, hanging them up ceremoniously beside the beautiful clothing she managed to buy him.

Joshua's good clothes she made certain were not at all to her as the mountain of dirty clothes she dealt in each day -- just as he himself was unique and separate from the others she might handle.

Joshua's clothes were too special to go in a bag to the Second Avenue Laundry. They weren't to be sniffed at by Jungle. Instead, they went to the dry cleaners on Fourth Avenue, the gnomish old man there who fluted his European accent at her like love, stroking the clothing she brought him, held by him like a piece of a woman's body.

Joshua was what she touched. Joshua was what she could kiss and hold close and look at without a moment's hesitation, without the veiled eye or cautious gesture or rough word to hide the feelings.

She made him sleep by himself -- actually she made herself sleep alone although the child took the active and she the passive.

"Teach him how to be lonely," she instructed herself. "Teach him a few useful things like that before he goes away."

She meant that she herself was still learning to be alone.

Sometimes, as now, when she moved quickly in a daily chore, Magda imagined she caught a glimmer of the Bag Lady out of a corner of one eye -- a fleeting presence no more real than soot in the sky, a plume of smoke willowing by the closet door. That was all right. It put the strange smile on Magda's lips. After all, it was fitting that she should be living here, in place of a bag lady. A perfect hole for her to have crawled off to.

Tonight she put Joshua in bright blue satin pajamas, to make him look like the Prince of America -- which was what she called him. Exactly that, with a good German bloodline, a dash of Indian back somewhere, and a splendid rush of hearty African manhood.

In the golden light of his bedroom, a room so tiny it barely held her and the bed at the same time, she put him up to the light to say goodnight, gloating again over the dark skin and the straight black hair and the large flat eyes that were indeed blue spilled violently over gray -- her eyes.

She hadn't taught him to pray. The huge crucifix hung on his chest but the rest didn't seem important to her anymore. She figured that it was for adults to learn about anyway, to find out the hard way why people needed to pray so badly, why they could cry themselves to sleep with the name of Jesus on their lips. She had many a night.

"Good night, balloon boy. Fly up high tonight -- way up yonder."

When she turned out his light and moved soundlessly through the darkened apartment it was as if she were feeling her way through her own dark life.

In the darkness she groped for the bottle, clasped it, turned free the stopper.

"And don't drink anymore tonight, OK."

One more swig to cross. And one more cigarette too would be a glad sight.

"What right, Rudy? What right do you have, honey . . ."

No one to help her take her own clothes off, tired as she was. She stripped down and then stepped into the long white nightgown -- jeans and T-shirt draped over the chair.

She shuffled her flat-footed walk to the iron bed. It smelled of rust and not of bag ladies. With both hands she brushed at the sheets -- black beetles beware.

When she lay down the bed chorused an old song and she sighed on cue. The bed cool and too narrow no room for a dream lover.

A cushion of wobbly air supported her. A burden of city air held her down. This was sleep time and the time she dreaded most. No matter how drained, no matter how many loads of wash she'd done that day, the death-like stupor of the bed intimidated her, made her think savagely.

Magda lay suspended. Shrinking away from sleep, she tried instead to catch the faint pulse of Joshua's breath from the back room.

Each night she fought sleep. Each night it came quickly, took her

roughly and so that she couldn't even cry out for help.

Like A River Flows Samson

Samson, miles away, in his own narrow bed, thrashed in a sargasso sea, sheets and pajamas roped sopping to his body. Enough to make most men scream.

Samson merely bit his mustache awake and began trying to calm himself down.

Already the sweat cooled, becoming a damp chill thickening his blood. He had just been attacked in his dream -thrown for the 30th time or so into a stinking St. Marks Place doorway.

He disentangled a hand and used it to wipe his face. He lay stunned. The high flooding, drowning anxiety would not let loose of him. It clung like seaweed.

As a remedy he focused attention on the sirens. In the past this had proven helpful. Easy too, since on any night they ruled the air -- fire trucks, ambulances, police cars, burglar alarms.

He knew the meaning of each siren and had studied their implications. Aptly, his concluding chapter in *Ambulance Drivers* contained all his conclusions on the nature of emergency sirens. The chapter was entitled "Songs of the Dying City."

Samson expected the sirens to come for him some night. It would not surprise him if all the sirens in Brooklyn converged at his door.

Would they be coming tonight?

He made the gesture of a doomed man. Sleep was for crystal clear nightmares. Waking belonged to his host of fog bound worries, images and hopes.

Samson wormed a hand through the clammy sheets and to the fly of his wet pajamas. There he hesitated, long enough to convince himself of the necessity of trying one more time. This effort would be dedicated to Magda Ott and Izzy Thorn.

The yanking of limp skin commenced. He closed his eyes so as not to be a witness -- he'd done it that way as a boy, saying later, "I touched,

Father, but did not look . . . "

A couple of minutes of work, and then, for no more than a second, he did isolate a solitary tingle of desire. Coaxing it along, he did imagine something happening. Passion might yet come to him.

In that second Samson caught a swift vision of a life-giving, outpouring force.

But as soon as it smoked, cold nightmare sweat put out his fire.

Shame overwhelmed him, some self pity too. Still learning to masturbate at the age of 42; failing to masturbate at the age of 42? He couldn't decide which was more miserable.

He tucked the useless thing away, careful to button it up again.

Samson shrank back, sinking under what approximated the wail of a siren. It was his most jaded mumble. "Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes." The ancient words came naturally -- requiem for his manhood; funeral for himself.

Like A River Flows

Izzy

Tonight no ugly birds squawked on Izzy's fire escape. The styrofoam cups swung in the breeze, tapping sporadically.

On the street below, the same wind rolled garbage can lids like hub caps, scattered tin cans, made the noises of bears, or other monsters, rummaging in the trash.

Sometimes Izzy listened to lonesome footsteps, coming along from First Avenue. To her they were the steps of fear, of the frightened. Each time they approached she waited also to hear a cry for help.

Now a blaring interlude of salsa, now a rumble of used tires, now the alarm clock ticking in her ear. On and on it went without respite.

Izzy lay in darkness and listened to the deception of calm and quiet. She lay on the mattress face up so to see the streetlight halo in the window.

The shades were pulled up. The gates hung open. The hall door too she'd left unlatched.

Whoever cared could come to visit -- demon killer or demon lover.

She wasn't going to draw the line at either.

The streetlight in her eyes were dull points that never flickered, never waxed or waned. When she lit a cigarette, as she did every few minutes, that other, age-old kind of light, the small warming flame, seemed to have become insipid and for tobacco only.

Circles under her eyes, fatigue throbbing in her veins -she really did yearn for sleep. She imagined a world of sleepers, all nations in bed, nothing but snoring over the airwaves.

No sleep came. Instead, Izzy listened and waited, feeling deep down in her naked self like a sacrificial offering -the nanny goat tethered to its stake, the leopard snarling in the distance.

On top of the sheets, in the hollow made between her legs, lay the Bible. She was conscious of that pressure. She'd put it there on purpose. That was the place where a little cat used to sleep, Belle Star's own special place between her knees.

Izzy shut her eyes very tightly, trying to squeeze out the alert and unsleeping world. She commanded Orpheus. Sleep. Sleep.

She was trying hard to fool herself, but the Bible was ultimately of no comfort -- a piss poor replacement it was for the weight and volume and warmth of a living thing.

Like A River Flows
Homer

"Lights out, babe? You must be really tired, running about as you do." Homer burrowed deeper, trying to claim his own side of the bed. In sleep, the large body beside him would move closer and closer, chasing him to the very edge of the mattress. The movement took him away from the ponderous presence propped up on the neighboring pillow.

Basil slept naked, as he had done every night since their first night together. The finely muscled torso rose dusky, vital, from the white sheets. On other occasions this sight still struck Homer with awe -- King Neptune in a wave of bedclothes.

Home slept in his underwear. Clean underwear, clean sheets -- too much starch caused the old man to muse on Magda Ott; it was somehow

like having a laundress in bed with them.

"A woman who wants to make the world clean . . ." thought Homer.

Low growling from the doorway. The bitch curled there, across the threshold like a Cerberus. She warned off the other dogs, and whatever else, visible or not, that might seek entrance to the bedroom.

"It was sweet of you to walk the dogs for me tonight. The dogs must think so too . . . they adore you so." Homer's bedtime comments were dulled by the vodka and the sleeping pill. Generally, the old man was no longer certain of whether he spoke out loud or was thinking in silence.

Yet bedtime had become their most lucid and companionable moment. Something groggily Puritan that seemed absurd to Homer -- a bad joke in memory of love making.

Tonight, for the first time since the stroke, Basil held a book. Big, dark fingers were leaving delicate prints in the dust on the cover.

Homer told people how he himself had not read a book since seeing the Seventh Seal for the seventh time. This was apocryphal, although the walls of books did rise around them wasting away unread, like an Alexandrian library -- the mind of the ages reduced to decorative effect.

Basil rolled nearer, rustle of pages, whiff of flesh. He was like a warm air mass blown in direct from the Gulf Stream.

"See, it's Gwendolyn Brooks," the laborious voice broke in sorrowful, cello measures. The sound enticed Homer, as it had been doing for a thousand and one New York nights.

"Why don't you read me some of it?" The old man remained turned away, on his side. Not looking at Basil made it easier to talk to him. "You know how much I like that. You haven't read me anything in such a long time." Homer heard himself and winced. The tone of his voice shamed him into silence.

Sometimes, searching in the wreck of his speech, through damaged words and thoughts, Basil summoned up a few shining moments of coherence.

He read now in pained intensity, and with a child's dedication.

Two who are Mostly Good.

Two who have lived their day,

But keep on putting on their clothes

And putting things away.

Homer gurgled and prayed for silence. The pain left him weak, the jabbing pain of anger and frustration and pity.

Having Basil read was like being betrayed by time, as if the broken parts could ever be put together again. The distorted voice took Homer back to moments, in this very bed, when the two of them had enthusiastically played the heart's song, not read it.

Treacherous stirrings followed, something alive in the sheets, an animal awake in the old man's skin. He recognized it in dismay. He repulsed it viciously. Such tokens of passion, the fragments he'd saved from the ruins, must be kept to entertain the boys at the baths.

"Oh yes, how nice . . ." Homer stifled a groan.

"It's us." Basil exuded integrity even when putting down a book on a nightstand.

At eye level to Homer, the top of the nightstand made a contemporary still-life. Light warped in starry globs on the capsules in the medicine bottles. The long-unread book of poetry surmounted the digital, time flashing, life monitoring, radio clock. His morning shot of vodka awaited him -- jiggers at bedside like a faithful nurse.

He blinked drowsily at the scene, dreaming that it had all disappeared.

Basil draped an arm over Homer. The hand slipped gently to its accustomed place, down low, at the base of the old man's tummy. Basil solemnly, ceremoniously, drew Homer closer, locked their bodies airtight, merged into one being. Homer's back pressed into that naked black chest, his buttocks mated to those huge thighs, his legs entangled among those other legs, feet touching, toes meshed into intimate positions.

Basil cuddled him as if he were a doll of an old man, a Raggedy Andy of an old man. As if her were something to cheer the dreary night.

Nothing in this was awkward or ugly. They had practised it so often. For Homer it was merely an old fashioned, but pointless embrace.

Basil held very still, the big chest barely moving. Sweet and simple, as always since the stroke, he fell immediately into sleep.

Homer sighed, rather longingly, and stretched up to turn off the lamp.

"This love shit is for the birds," murmured the old man, as he dropped into his death-like slumber, his rest of booze and sleeping pills. He lurched off into deep, American, atomic age sleep.

In reply to the sudden darkness, a canine whimper broke from the doorway. Only the bitch guarding the threshold had heard him murmuring -- ears pricked sharp, eyes wary, alert to those things that come in the dark.

I Am He As You Are He As You Are Me

"Big noise, mama! Wake up!" Joshua pulled on her. It was not part of the dream. She thought so at first, flopping with a curse towards the wall.

But in the dim half-awake she heard it too.

It made her kick back the covers and sit bolt upright. The child clung to her arm shivering.

In the distance and therefore as if coming slowly through many rooms, a man called out.

What did she hear? She didn't believe it. Whose voice? She said it was unknown.

"Hush, let mother listen . . ." She lifted him up off the floor and laid him down in the warm place she had left, throwing the covers back over him.

The calling turned suddenly -- screamed in a flash of lightning.

"Close your eyes," she commanded. "I'll be right back." Magda normally didn't do much thinking in the early moments of the morning, but this seemed a clear enough decision.

It surprised her how awake she was, being the kind who stumbles drugged from bed, unable to say a word.

But the cries were a warning, more urgent than any alarm clock. She had never heard such a sound. Never.

The clock showed 3:00 -- an uneasy hour in the city.

She pulled on her robe, moving as quickly as she could. She tried to think calmly about the screaming, asking if it came from the Spanish

couple downstairs, saying it was one of their tooth and nail fights.

Yet as she jerked at the locks she had not a doubt that it was more than love.

No one on the landing. The black medical student who lived across the hall spent his nights with his white girlfriend. The two back apartments had been burned out years ago and were empty.

The screaming faded. Stopped still in the air and then disappeared. Not a sound now in the building.

Magda touched the bannister cautiously and leaned over. The stairwell, all six floors of it, wound down below her. No running steps. No slamming doors.

"What in hell's goin' on down there! Hey you, hey!" She bellowed into the stairwell cupping her mouth, the building as deep as a well.

Three floors down a hand moved along the bannister. Nothing to be glimpsed except that solitary hand. Its motion slow, profound, descending.

"Damn it, what-the-fuck's happenin'! Somebody talk!" She guessed that at least a dozen tenants were cowering behind their metal doors listening to her.

The hand proceeded at the same pace, nothing alarming.

Was it a gloved hand? Was it black? She couldn't tell from three floors above.

Her thoughts went immediately to the single girl who lived in the apartment below hers, a frisky thing who kept late hours and dressed too well to be living on East 9th Street. Hadn't it been a woman screaming -that high and intense? Yes, it must be a woman.

Magda decided to return to bed. No more screaming. No banging or crashing. Whoever she yelled at wouldn't run or try to hide. From a distance, that hand looked as calm and honorable as a judge's.

For sure, if Rudy were home he'd be out in the hall too. He wouldn't be trembling behind a locked door like the rest of these fine New Yorkers. Not one door in the building had opened other than hers. No other voice raised. Fear it was. Fear that strong in ropes around the tenement.

Magda shivered. Bare feet plus the sensation of being surrounded by so much fear.

Her timing bogged down in slow motion, the way she turned hearing the tinkling laughter. Joshua scampered past her too quick to be stopped. His own bare feet slapped the slate of the stairs even as she lunged for him.

"Joshua!" Magda hissed at him.

By the time she got her hands on his shoulders he had already hopped down several steps.

When she stooped to lift him -- he struggled only feebly, knowing from her voice, from the way she snatched him, that this was not a game -- the perspective of the stairwell changed radically. She could see inside the layers of landings.

On the third floor, on the gray slate, at the corner where the hallway began, something moved; a slowly widening blotch.

She scrambled back to the apartment half dragging the child.

"What's the matter mom? I want to go. Let's run and see."

"No, no play. It's too late for that. I'll let you sleep in my bed, OK?"

Magda barely followed what she was doing. Already Joshua lay pinned under the sheets.

"Mother will be gone for a minute. You stay put. Stay!"

He blinked obediently at her, large sad eyes.

She went back turning on every light in the apartment. At the kitchen tap she stopped long enough to hold her wrists under the cold water.

The heaviest, meanest looking thing in the place being the police lock bar, she pulled it loose. Her hands dripped.

Magda locked the door behind her and stuffed the keys into her robe pocket.

At the sound of her steps on the stairs she panicked. She waited, listening for other feet, frozen in place. The noise of her own fear came roaring in her ears. She looked over her shoulder. Nothing. Nothing to do but go on.

At each landing before stepping down from the last step she peered around to make sure no one lurked in the hallway.

She gripped the police lock bar in both hands and held it up in front of her chest. That way the L.O.V.E. letters stood out on the whitened

knuckles almost at eye level.

It took a very long time to reach the third floor. Too long. By the time she balanced on the last step she'd used up all her store of energy. The bar shook in her hands. Her arms, wiry from all the years of work, barely able to keep it high.

Up close the stain reddened as it ran. A deep crude red. The spill ran wider and thicker even as she looked. Already it aged, curdling as it crept through the dust on the slate.

Not a whisper to be heard. Silence under the glare of the hall lights, in an old tenement chilled by the hour.

One lung-blasting breath. Arms flexed again. Bar up. Eyes blazing.

To avoid the blood it was necessary to step wide. When she whirled round, she blinked once.

She pressed the bar against her face sharply, closed her eyes tightly.

Magda could not scream, not in Rudy's face. He lay staring up, naked, dead in his own blood.

From the bottom of her heart came the heavy closing of the front door.

Killing Me Softly

The detectives stayed almost all night. Not that Magda would have slept anyway. She did manage to keep Joshua asleep through it all -- hushing the son of a bitches who sat in her kitchen drinking her coffee, who looked around with stupid curiosity.

They asked her over and over what she had heard, what seen, what she thought had happened. She made vague sense out of it; as if banging doors, screams and blood could ever be-sensible.

They asked if Rudy were a homosexual -- nodding knowingly as if they had already filed the case unsolved. She'd tell it to one of them, then another would pop up in his fake fur collar -- each of them in car coats as if dreading the embarrassment of a trench coat -- and she'd have to repeat the story. How much they wanted to solve a murder by merely exhausting the survivors.

She hated them. They could see it, were used to it. They despised her too. Magda understood how they looked at her. They wanted to fuck. Violence made them horny, perpetually rutting through the gutters of New York. They thought she was a floozy, a stray bitch run in off the street with an advertisement on her knuckles.

Again and again they asked who the father of her child was, where she worked, how long she'd been in the city, how long she'd known the victim, what her relation to the victim had been -- Rudy officially became the victim.

To change her clothes she went into the bathroom. She heard them scraping their chairs about in the kitchen behind her back. She washed her feet. The tub ran red.

She said no, they couldn't wake up Joshua.

The detectives asked why no one else in the building had heard anything. They asked why she should be the one to go out on the landing and look. Over and over they asked her about the hand sliding along the bannister -- made her remember over and over how that hand inched along with calm deliberateness.

They asked and poised their pencils in midair like missiles on target.

She didn't have to tell them what it had been like stumbling up the stairs leaving bloody tracks behind. They weren't interested in her grief or fear. They never asked what she had told Joshua when she came running back -- "Mama, mama, what's wrong?"

But someone in the building had called the cops, because they'd arrived at her door in 15 minutes. They'd come sniffing along the trail of bloody tracks.

Rudy was certifiably dead the moment they showed. They made it real. Badges, bad breath and lumpy crotches.

As long as the men slumped unwanted in her kitchen she didn't dare have a drink -- wouldn't show them how much she needed one. Those invading, insensitive soldiers. She did indeed hate them. It kept her from thinking.

At dawn they gave up and slouched off professionally exhausted, dulled to the marrow of their bones. She was too tired for sleep herself, acid flashes at 6:00 in the morning and too much coffee in the system,

too many cigarettes and not enough booze.

No more cigarettes. She crumpled the empty Camel pack in a fist. They had even smoked her cigarettes. Bastards.

Cold coffee in front of her. It seemed too late or too early for a drink, she couldn't decide which. The slob cops had left their dirty cups for her to clean. One of them had dropped a lit cigarette on her kitchen floor and ground it out under a heel. The dead butt lay curled near her chair.

Past sunup she sat at the table, fishing hungrily now and then for something to smoke in the ashes in the mayonnaise jar lid. She stared dumbly, cow-like, curling up over her stomach and rocking gently to herself.

The familiar feeling. Every time someone died on her it was the same. Death sapped a little more of her own vigor, left her a little less alive.

Gray light of morning came in through the kitchen window, broke like a threat from the brick prison of the airshaft. Morning drifted in a cloud over her folded hands. It came as a somber, too lucid, too quiet city hour.

The barely palpable breath of a child sleeping in the next room -- the warmth of it sweet and fragile -- that alone saved the time from utter desolation.

Essential that she go to work. It became an obsession, the thought that by the strength of her own hands she might be capable of cleansing the city of its filth. She turned repeatedly to the little clock over the sink, urging time on, telling it to give her another chance.

Perhaps if she worked long enough and hard enough she could somehow raise Rudy from the dead. She'd call him back as gently and lovingly as she did in waking Joshua.

"Are you sick, mama?" Joshua blinked sparrowlike at her. She carried him into the kitchen. Old enough now not to forget the confusion between dreams and reality. He reflected how terrible she looked -- showed it to her in his troubled, half-awake mood.

It was so good to have him with her. For a moment she was thankful.

"Uncle Rudy's gone away," she made it through the first part of her prepared speech without a tremor.

"He and daddy went to the same place." Bringing in Blackman made it easier; she did have ranks of the dead to marshal forth.

"I told you once where they are. They're in the ground. It's where we go when we die, together again. We go into the earth and then later we help make other things grow that come along after us." Such a nice story, she almost believed it herself.

"Eat your breakfast now. All of it. I want you to change your underwear too . . . It's about to go off too." She made her best effort at sounding normal, even as her nails dug into her palms.

"Uncle Rudy is dead? Like the people on TV? Did he get shot?" Joshua had a way of tilting his head to one side, letting it fall lower and lower when he fought to keep from crying, as if his eyes were already misting over and he were trying to see below.

"No, honey . . . He didn't get shot . . ." There Magda stopped short. She burst into tears and laid her head down on the table knocking over a coffee cup and landing one cheek in the ashes.

"Ma! You're spilling my cereal. It's in your hair. Ma!" Joshua wailed at her holding his bowl up from the table in both hands to save it. Great pearl-shaped tears plopped in the milk.

He Never Said A Mumbling Word

When they went down, Rudy still lay on the floor. So that Joshua wouldn't see, she covered his head in her coat.

She sidestepped the body. It lay covered in a sheet. Rudy lost forever somewhere below.

Two cops lounged at the angle of the landing. They didn't budge when she passed, though she had to inch by them and carrying Joshua was not easy. But she'd much rather touch Rudy than these repulsive cops -- much.

Joshua whined under the coat, knowing full well that this was not fun.

The cops chewed gum -- remnants of their breakfast, raw flesh, she

didn't care to guess. One laughed, a guffaw perpetual in her memory, as dismal as a candle lit for the dead. The laughing one gave her a merry-eyed once over. Both cops had asses bigger than hers.

These cops were in a war too. She knew it, but couldn't forgive them. All of them together in the same war; the oldest one too -- old as the first cave.

To Rudy she whispered, "Love ya, Honey. Take care."

She turned back once more, to give the cops her "fuck you!" look. It was quite potent. Not a word was needed.

You Like Potato and I Like Potahto

Homer came in and called out, as usual, a ridiculous greeting, like people will when they've been living together for a quarter of a century. Nothing in reply. Basil hid from him this afternoon.

Mice-like behavior, and far off the scratch of heels, a sneeze, something being drug through the grit of the basement floor. Homer shivered now that his parka lay draped on the stool at the ticket window, foreboding in the air, an alien atmosphere from the hothouse of steam baths and close naked flesh.

Initially, a basement had struck him as the perfect place for a movie theater. With its desperate climate, its black-hole of New York spectacle -- undergroundness, furtiveness, servility -- it seemed a brilliant counterpoint to the pretensions of the motion picture.

Homer poured his precise jiggers of vodka and took the glass and the bottle with him into the projection booth. Through the window he peered into the vacant theater, no brighter in midday than at night, only more decadent when empty.

He caught a piece of Basil disappearing up the far stairs and into the area behind the refreshment counter. The phantom of the Minerva.

Today being the anniversary of their love, 25 years to the day, Homer marked it with a special private showing, a screening of one of his favorites -- Cleopatra by DeMille with Claudette Colbert. He watched it every anniversary date.

As usual, Basil had already threaded the film. Dear Basil. He could

see those giant fingers struggling to be gentle with the old strips of celluloid. A one-time chief from Americus, Georgia reduced by the white man's magic.

In the distance the popcorn machine brewed unto its ancient self.

When Basil died he would be laid out on the refreshment counter, stretched out on the glass with the little candles ablaze and the popcorn machine flowing, making its manna, and Slow Pokes and soft drinks for all the mourners -- the weeping bums and howling bum dogs.

Basil had once been more than alive. He'd brought home blue-eyed wonders and slept with them in loud ways. He'd lifted weights naked in the living room. He'd written poetry and read it out loud at their parties. He'd filled boxes with his photography -- pictures of socialist criticism, horrified whores pinned against brick walls, beaten children with half their faces eaten up in shadows, and of course the old black winos, who were his heavy lidded stars.

All of that, dear Basil. And it lingered even when the lines were consuming his face, hard as bars, even when the sadness came on him and he couldn't speak for grief.

The eyes in the poetry, in the photographs, weren't they Basil's own? Homer had had such eyes riveted on him for the past 25 years.

"Too sensitive!" Homer roared, straining to make the phantom hear. And too strong for when the long unhappy days began to come, the city performing before Basil with such abandon, as if out of eight million he should be the only one to notice.

"You died for our sins!" whimpered Homer and blushed for having said so. Too true. He raised his glass in a salute.

He assumed Basil listened, at the other end of the building, over the prattling of merrily bouncing popcorn. They were always listening to each other.

"You read too many newspapers! You watched all that God damn news on television! You wouldn't leave off with the radio . . . I warned you. Didn't I? Yes I did. It was me!" Homer called loudly in his stuffed animal voice. Actually shouted, and angrily so.

He rapped the vodka bottle against the back of the projector. A coffin rattle answered from the depths of the theater. The present and its

deadening calm.

Their anniversaries were good only for sorting out memories, the moments of passion that were a trail into the far reaches of their history together. They followed that path, Homer supposed, in hopes of stumbling on something to solve the mystery of who had ruined whom.

Certainly Basil had always been more serious than he, being political and religious and social, a man of rigid belief. And wasn't this Homer in comparison a pudgy ball of equivocations and indifference? Wasn't he!

But Basil had not believed in Beauty, not really. That had been an important difference. Basil had never taken time to understand the subtleties, the characters of things and people. He'd been a man of surfaces, reflective of the times, angry and forceful and loving.

Homer experienced a great deal of difficulty being any of that.

"God, but you knew who you were!"

That especially attractive, the fact of Basil knowing himself, living naturally and complete. So it was in the beginning and for a good 20 years thereafter. Mighty in his innocence -- black strong, male strong, American strong. Such a magnificent companion to Homer's vistas.

In their primes they had indeed been lordly -- masters of their genres. Good storytellers, drinkers and lovers.

Homer flicked on the projector and the screen split with a dazzling light. Sound followed. The creation all over again. The moment of essential awe. Any beginning seemed marvelous to Homer; only the endings were bitter.

Springtime after mother's death, beyond cold footfalls on frozen Boston walks, he'd picked up Basil. Meaning other kinds of footfall, a different concept in sidewalks, and the ping-ling of the pinball careening through its maze of fortune.

Basil had been found near Times Square, in a squalid den whose sole purpose was to pander youth to old sidewalk queens, a truly ancient-world sort of place. Basil lean and whip-like then, robust in his luminous darkness -- Homer in his palor of those days, as pale as Magda, and not one inch of blubber around his waist.

Homer and his vodka wandered into the auditorium. Took a seat halfway down in the middle. Alone, this was how he most wished to watch

movies.

Too many movies. Life expanding into a long and rather pointless movie.

When mother died in Boston, that held place as one important moment. Another time as well -- that strange, strange Homer-moment upon returning to the apartment wondering where Basil could be, he'd not appeared at the theater that terrible afternoon.

Coming back to Renfrew Triangle to find Basil crumpled in the living room over a lapful of religious tracts. Basil suddenly damaged, his spirit shrunken and slack in a way that was difficult to comprehend at first, that hit you slowly, day by day.

"You cared too much!" He whispered to Basil, not to thwart the splendid Colbert approaching on screen.

This movie itself was a half dead memory of something better. He watched it casually, yet with laughter bubbling inside -- unpleasant laughter -- at the conspiracy of alcoholics and queers to recreate the glory of Egypt.

Homer knew what the real pagan was. It ruled in the clammy flesh just two blocks away, in the baths, in the steam.

A rat scurried along the aisle further down. Once, long ago, one had actually run up the inside of a customer's trouser leg. "A fag rat in my theater!" mused Homer.

Another time, when the lights went up, in the back row, Basil had discovered a dead bum. After Camille, and Homer proclaimed that the customer had expired during the death scene on screen (the other feature being Queen Christina, with nothing in it other than the sight of Garbo in pants to lend itself to the death of a bum). The theater had become at times fashionable for suicides (wrists, plastic bags over heads, sleeping pills, purposefull or accidental overdoses).

Once, during a showing of Frankenstein, a beautiful young man dashed back to tell them that a woman was delivering in the front row.

Two men had brawled during Bringing Up Baby.

For a time an elderly exhibitionist frequented the Minerva every Saturday matinee. They got rid of him by showing Separate Tables.

Basil he heard now, fighting his lonely battle in the distance. The

flesh cowered before the reality of such tragedy.

During a typical afternoon Basil kept busy lumbering here and there, mysterious at this and that -- Homer perplexed by it all. It seemed torturous to him. Then he sat dazed and ignorant in his office with his bottle (procured by Basil) and the radio on (Basil tuned it in) and the boy magazines (again Basil) open on top of the desk.

Cleopatra confronted the Lords of Rome. Basil shambled down the aisle.

Basil came to stand beside him, huge and intimidating. Basil handed him a bag of popcorn and a Baby Ruth. He sat down with a grunt.

They sat in peace, not shouting, eyes to the screen, knees touching.

In a sweeter age, Homer had isolated the primal odor of the Minerva. Besides being redolent of Coca Cola, that syrup river flowing to the great screen, it had smelled of Basil and himself, aromatic of their communal skin.

Besides being very romantic, that had seemed truly American to Homer; an all-American stink.

A forceful but ineffectual movement at his thigh. Basil struggled to reach him. The hand raised. It moved forward.

Was the slow life next door stirring towards an awakening? And what did this portend? Homer's old heart fluttered, despite all his efforts to keep it still.

The hand burrowed down to rustle in the popcorn

To Love Somebody

Early on, the bums congregated across the avenue, around the bench in the tiny park in front of St. Marks in the Bouwerie. The morning glittered on the field of empty bottles and cans stubbling the steps to the high iron gates.

Even the bums had somewhere to go and something to do, at least in the morning first thing. They paraded by the laundry window, those shaggy buffalo hunters, on their way to the liquor store two doors up.

Later on the office workers began coming. This made for a little run of business as they dashed in with egg on their breath and half crazed with time-fear, hurrying her along as they nervously pushed their small piles of clothing into her hands for safekeeping. Magda figured she was no more important to most of them than taking a shit -- just part of the physical routine that kept them regular, clean and reasonably brave for the day.

The workers rushed in packs towards Union Square Station. The bums stood on glass, in the mercy of St. Marks, and watched them go.

After that out came the old people and the students, then the night people -- mole faces and tousled hair still matted from the pillow. Ravaged faces passed now -- whores, actors-turned-waiters, dancers-turned bar flies, cabbies-turned artists, artists-turned addicts, the doped, the unemployed, the crippled, the psychotic.

The bum-audiences watched. Tired now, sitting on the bench or lying in heaps on the church steps.

Magda kept watch too. But it was no solace. She couldn't find the heart in it -- no soul out there in the beautiful light. Nothing but that milling crowd, those with something to do and those trying so damn hard to act like they had something to do. Each and everyone of them fetched and carried -- liquor bottles, newspapers, sacks from the deli, briefcases, books, purses, sound satchels, laundry bags.

No soul. Just a nightmare Colossus of clothes getting dirtier and dirtier by the passing moment.

Her mind couldn't gather it up. This morning it wasn't as real as TV. Not nearly as real as watching television last night.

"No, now, little mother . . ."

She sorted yellow slips and filed pink slips. Nothing of any purpose except to keep busy. Slumping from one mindless task to another she asked only that they never end, that there always be something else for her to do.

Jungle moved in a funeral pace. She'd told him to load the washers. The dryers sat mostly silent. More than half of them broken today. This made the machine hum come lopsided from the back, from one bank only. Broken machines, like death, were a broken circle.

"I can't help, not this morning. Can't touch them!" She gave him no chance for argument, waving him peremptorily towards the piles of dirty clothes.

Jungle himself went lopsided this morning, lumbering about favoring one leg and keeping an arm curled up close to his side. He made her think of an injured dog.

She leaned against the counter to steady herself. For the first time in years she wanted to hide and cry by herself. Evil so powerful surrounded her.

Jungle kicked through the soap, morosely quiet. The customers too were leery of her today, seeing her dead-pale and clenched.

They edged away from the counter. She fascinated them, shaking as she lifted up the bags to be weighed. Her wild glances confused them, made them curious. But they kept their distance -- not one of them asking her for an explanation. For them, this was like when someone fell down on the pavement with a heart attack and they circled in to peer once at the fallen one's face, a searching but passing scrutiny.

It was true that the city came to her with its murderous shame, coming in to be cleansed. Many of the people out there she knew better than their lovers. They allowed a stranger to know more about them than those they pretended to love.

She let them gape at her, indifferent. She didn't give a damn.

Forgiveness wasn't in her this morning. Their filthiness wore her down. It filled her pores so she could barely breathe -- greedy, sick population, violent in its decline.

Perhaps at that very moment they were washing the murderer's stains. Maybe Rudy's blood sloshed in the gut of the nearest machine.

No hope but for her and Jungle to struggle on in the greenish steam and ungodly clatter. Like ants they labored, and it was an enormous carcass.

The phone rang. Magda placed her dry hot lips to it.

It was a cop, of course.

"Magda Ott . . ." Her name came out of the black receiver and it rumbled with the call to judgment. "Detective . . ." His name she let go by. "Ninth Precinct . . ."

She almost pitied his voice, deep male-weariness at the world of psychology, sociology, behaviorism.

"Murder weapon turned up in Tompkins Square Park. The park crew found it. A knife wrapped in a laundry bag . . ." The voice droned on, technical, the human drained from it. "Shoe size prints in the snow means it's a man. Perp came back too. Climbed up to the roof of the abandoned building next door to you. Jumped the buildings. Tried to force your roof door with a crow bar. Didn't you hear him? Must have! Guess he left something at the scene, or maybe he thought you could finger him. My advice, better keep your door locked."

Voice no longer interested her. Voice could click off without a goodbye, which it did, and she wouldn't mind at all.

This left her leaning up against the wall with her head to the phone. There were penciled-numbers on the wall -- she studied them. She looked over the notes and notices taped to the back of the office door.

Stuck to the phone with nothing to do. Nothing more important now but to hold on for dear life to that line of communication.

A knife in a laundry bag. That taunted her. Were such things feasible even in a grotesque world?

It suddenly dawned on her that she had no way of calling Joshua when he got home from school.

What had she been doing, sleeping? What had she told the child? Had she directed him never, ever again to go back to Rudy's? What happened to the soul of a child in such an evil place?

Perhaps the police would still be there, like hoods hanging out on the landing. Perhaps the body too? They might not even move it, letting it grow older and colder as evidence, waiting for the rats to perform an autopsy.

If the boy showed at Rudy's the cops would suspect him. Why not? They had suspected her. Yes they had. She'd detected it in their sneaky scraping of chair legs as soon as her back was turned.

"You had relations with the deceased? You slept with him? You were down in his apartment this evening? The child is his? Show us your knives. Where is the missing knife? Why did you go down, a woman alone with a small child? Was the deceased giving you money? Was the

deceased dealing drugs? What about the cocaine? You didn't tell us you were arrested in Tompkins Square Park in 1967. What does L.O.V.E. stand for?"

The lights in the laundry became like the lights in the kitchen at home, sharpening the edges of their inquisitor's faces. The lemon green walls closed in to hold her tight, unable to escape, stuck fast to their surfaces. Red tiles were blood red.

And all day she'd had nothing to study but the hands of her customers. Watch out for those hands passing in the street! Beware all hands that are huge on purpose, that glide silently along bannisters. Look for a hand.

Why were the cops coming up with knives and bloody laundry bags when what she wanted was that hand!

But they were hard headed men. Thinking they had right to the truth, as if anybody did. Weren't they fanatics for truth. At least they claimed to be, sitting in their rumpled suits in her kitchen, sucking on their pencils, scribbling down her pathetic story like reporters.

She half expected for them to torture her, to pull out their portable chambers of persuasion, those that promised to make the age safe.

Instead they left her dangling stupidly. They were leaving her with nothing but the mechanics of murder.

In the meantime, what had been done for Rudy? Didn't they allow a woman to come and wash the body, clean its wounds, annoint it with her care. Weren't the naked parts to be dressed and the departed spirit honored? Who was honoring Rudy?

No good. Not a bit of it any damn good. At last it made her frantic with anger, enough to bang down her palms on the counter and turn with a curse.

The clock on the wall told her she'd have to be going if she meant to intercept Joshua. Just enough time to stop on the way home for a carton of cigarettes and a fresh bottle.

She gave her back to the customer standing at the cash register, the kind of bull-faced white man it made her feel good to ignore, like cock teasing in the old days. She gave him her butt and a shake of stringy hair.

"Same to you fella . . ." She whirled and shot the bird to the man at

the counter.

It helped to fight. Don't look at their faces, don't feel a thing. Just get down on all fours, snap and snarl.

For Jungle she had the keys and a list of instructions on how to close up and what to do with the receipts (don't drink them). She saw how distressed he was, burying himself inside a broken dryer rather than look at her.

"Guess you're it . . . you'll have to put down the pliers and crawl out of there." Her voice tumbled down, barely able to work, quivering where before it had been hard rock.

"Means you won't be able to run up to the Reno. Think you can handle that?"

Jungle spoke to her without pulling his head out of the machine. The words came muffled, a cavernous reply stifled by metal.

"Queenie go home. I'll take it. Don't worry."

A hand moved. A hand helplessly brushed thin air. It sought blindly to find her.

Child In Time

Great Grandma Ott would have had a rifle slung across her lap instead of a police lock bar, but Magda counted that as the major difference.

It had been said that they physically resembled one another -by her own Grandmother many years gone by. At the time Grandmother had still been trying to make a Christian out of her, a pioneer too. Hoping to achieve this by telling her the frontier stories, sitting the little girl down at the cherry red metal table in the kitchen and talking to her for hours about the old days.

Grandmother had brought forth the tiny oval-framed photograph, dim as a yellow shade in the bright afternoon, proffering that old and suspicious proof of kinship with a flourish of her dish towel: A grim lipped homely woman stared forth with black-beetle eyes and sitting so straight that she must have had a metal spine.

"Look at that, child. See for yourself if you don't believe me. You're

the spittin' image."

But none of the frontier women in her family would have sat out the afternoon with a bottle of bourbon on the hip and a pack of unfiltered Camels on the floor. They wouldn't have slumped down in tight jeans and a man's shirt either. They certainly would not have had L.O.V.E. tattooed on their knuckles.

However, the line had thrown her mother as well, who'd run hotter and looser than Magda had ever aspired to. And it had bred herself, something as maverick as anything out of Kansas.

No, it was a mere matter of details -- a police lock bar rather than a rifle, the booze instead of a Beecher Bible, jeans in a tenement and not the billowing, wind catching sail of a skirt lapping the Great Plains sky.

Magda eased forward another inch, enough to see straight down to the bottom of the stairwell. The tubular steel kitchen chair had been an Avenue B bargain too many years ago and didn't take kindly to her weight. It contributed to the suspense.

Gray slate coiled uninterrupted. Not a soul descending. Not one climbing. The landings seemed hushed and expectant. For a weekday afternoon, she knew from the few she'd spent at home, the tenement stood fearfully, shamefully subdued.

The slate ran a northern deep-water color, damp from being washed. In those places where hollows had been worn by a century of immigrant shoes, the water gathered into glistening pools of ink.

For the first time since she'd moved in the stairs had been washed. Baptised in memorium of Rudy. Rudy's blood swept away in a flood.

And flood it had been. She'd seen the last of the operation as she came in from work -- a mighty metal bucket was tipped at the top of a landing and the brackish water flushed in a wave over the slate, foaming in the layers of grime, gurgling and hissing as the monstrous mophead plowed it left to right, right to left, in a slap-dash swipe.

The landlord had monstrous muscles too. A brute of a man he was, with a brute of a mop. He had not been able to look her in the eye when she sloshed by.

The body had disappeared. The third landing shone in its bath water.

It bothered her almost as much to have the body gone as to worry about it lying there unattended, unwept for. Rudy had been taken from her on the sly, like the garbage from the front stoop -- she wondered vaguely if in fact that was how it happened in New York.

The police lock bar rode heavy across her lap. The booze burned. Smoke hung in a cloud around her head and caused her to squint -- just like a dog looking at sunlight. She didn't need a mirror.

When Joshua came in down below, first sight of his dark crown and she would shout at him to run up, run to her as fast as he could, to run and not look back. Run, don't think. Run, don't ask why. Run on strong little-man legs up to mama.

Then they'd retreat back into the apartment, going backwards step by step so that no creep could creep up on them from behind. They'd hold the door tight with their shoulders until she'd hitched the bar back in its place. They'd bolt all the bolts, lock all the locks.

They'd go together to turn on every light in the apartment, blind the enemy with the light of their living. They'd be safe, holding tight, not letting go.

Looking down, the view made her smile. People evidently thought they could wash away their sins. Poor landlord struggling with his mop. Poor laundress struggling with her wash. King Solomon's stables.

She knew better and smiled. Nothing had been washed away. There was not and never had been any soap strong enough for blood, any bleach of forgetfulness, any chance to be clean again.

Magda guarded the stairs. She watched as patiently as any of the women in her family had, as sternly and metal-backed too.

Buttered Popcorn

Homer despaired for the end of the movie. Not only because it meant they would turn to each other, look and be forced to talk -- recurring failures that showed how old they were, how bleak without the scripts of actors and the darkness to shield them -- but also because he feared the climactic moment of Cleopatra mourning the finiteness of love. That passion, no matter how ridiculous, he couldn't afford knee to knee.

They had come hopelessly apart. They who had been so close, fixed together in their oriental puzzle. It wouldn't do to grind their faces in it, not now as late as it was. He oughtn't to show such films anymore. Some things were best left in the can. Age taught that. For those so sore afraid, all passion became evil, and evil was a pitiful heart.

But Homer would not stand up and call for it to stop. He wouldn't trot back breathlessly to the projection room and pull the reel, even though he of so few had that power, a power he had always relished, being master of the living screen, a high priest of pagan voyeurs.

No he could not do but sit passively in his philosopher's chair and let the frames click onward toward their inexorable conclusion. Would it have been possible, he wanted to know, to have stood at Drama and cried in piping voice for the tragedy to halt, for the actors to drop their masks, for Gods to become men, for the slaughter off stage to cease its lyrics? No, it would not. And of all men, Homer respected the sacred vassalage of the audience to what they were being shown.

Even as a kid sneaking into the film palaces in downtown Boston -- Proletarian heavens as his mother said -- he had recognized that this was the greatest authority of his time; time and space conquered by the silent rows of people watching together, moving in the sweep of American sexuality, a communal feast of fools, that orgie of stillness, that enormous unfolding of entwined spirits.

How magnificent this was, continuing as it had for 50 years, an entire nation of pagan voyeurs -- even though they would not admit so and shape their conscious lives to its pattern as he had.

He became Cleopatra. A tingling in the paps as they swelled, a sensation of old paint down the cheeks, the scratch of embroidery on the imperial crotch, the bowels twisting with the enthusiasm of vipers.

And Basil was his fortune. He'd known so since the night Magda, Samson and Izzy had come to the theater. He had seen through their eyes and identified his man -- by the audience the tragedy is revealed. This Basil who loomed over him, a broken totem, the slow moth-like fluttering, the mouth dropping broken lines -- "Ou, I ou uo." Helpless cries.

Cleopatra released her frightened maids. Noble aristocrat. The throne room hushed. Beyond, the bellowing of soldiers. The sacred

symbols of ancient Egypt caught the eye and the flesh crawled, unconcerned by the passage of two millenia. The queen raises the basket to her mild white breast. Hissing is rampant.

Christians and homosexuals and closet commies and baronial capitalists and New York hoods and these ancient Egyptians -cultures bleeding indistinguishable.

This could not be turned off with the flick of the wrist -how Homer loathed the democracy of television.

The movie ended. Homer felt relief and sadness. Basil laid a hand on his thigh.

They could say nothing to each other. Homer had given up -the black man's walls reared too thick and high.

Basil looked at him. He could feel the eyes traveling over his profile, scrutinizing, begging him to turn. He couldn't shout at Basil from this range. It would have been comic. Homer cringed from the comic in their relationship. Sometimes he heard snickering from beyond the curtain, someplace like that which you didn't want to investigate. The laughter made him angry -- almost angry at least.

Homer at last committed the inevitable. He turned and patted Basil's hand. He looked the man as squarely as possible in the darkness of the theater, the now uncomfortably empty theater.

The projector clicked off. The screen went blank.

Their eyes at last touched.

Homer's, blue and squinting, heavy lidded by encroaching flesh, skin no longer knowing its place -- and Basil's, brown iris and yellow, old ironies deep in old ivory, and the beseeching movement that tormented.

"That was nice of you to bring the popcorn. Is that my anniversary present? You still make the best popcorn in New York . . ." Stale comments for stale popcorn, lost in the enormity of the theater, lies swallowed up and forgotten.

"Tenty-five years . . ." Basil said, and his jaws crushed the words. "Half!"

Homer patted his upper thigh. "I'll turn off the lights. We'll go home and eat cake. I know you bought a cake. Chocolate and ice cream? You wouldn't forget that." He stroked the leg, thoroughly aware of the man's

body, knowing it so well.

It left Homer weak thinking of chastity for such a man, the kind of unpleasant weakness that follows an hysterical outburst of laughter.

Basil moved, suddenly yet with dignity. He placed his own hand open against Homer's cheek. In the next, he rose and shambled up the aisle, a rough gestured thing.

Homer sat for another minute. The popcorn he dumped on the floor.

Coming On Strong

The flaming matchhead played its goblin fantasy on the living room walls, searching for the monsters that hide in corners. Samson swivelled and held the match on high to search for what might lurk behind him. He'd not allow it to sneak up on him twice. He wouldn't again be grabbed when his back was turned, to be thrown down and abused like any other senseless, soulless piece of meat.

In the light of the match, a different Samson loomed from the one usually offered to the world. He shimmered as if in a mirror, dark visaged, ruthless, wounded -- looking like a man with a hard and dangerous turn of mind. Twin flames leapt in his glasses.

Kitchen matches do not flare forever. The scorching of fingers is prelude to a return to darkness. With an exasperated groan, Samson dropped the match. Darkness once more held dominion.

Somehow, the sequence of events, the logical progression of experienced nomads, eluded Samson, which explained why he sat on a box in the dark. Con Edison had shut off the power.

He'd not the solace of WBAI to ease the time as he waited. His radio lay somewhere in a box, lost in the jumble of boxes that blocked the hall door like a toppled barricade. New York Telephone had already been to disconnect him. His bed lay in pieces against the far wall and that meant he would be spending his last night in Brooklyn sleeping on the floor.

To dress for Magda's party it had been necessary to open the blinds in the bedroom and dress hurriedly by the waning light of the late

afternoon sun, hopping into his trousers with a curse, assured that the eyes of Flatbush were upon him -- ferreting out an almost nude Samson, that bone white and secretive being, the violated flesh that he himself could not bear to look at.

He'd not been able to shave or brush his teeth either. The bathroom box no longer seemed to exist, although he had packed it quite recently, yesterday in fact, he believed.

Without a razor or toothbrush he'd been able to do no more than splash like a bird in cold water, part his hair with his pocket comb, let the water dry slowly on his face because the towels too were already packed, consumed by the chaos on the floor. Toilet paper had vanished as well, and he'd been forced to adopt Arab customs-- no amount of cold water there could appease him.

For Magda's party he donned his best three piece suit. And, if light had existed, his wing tips would have glowed. Thank God he'd polished them the night before when he could still find his shoe kit. He wore his favorite red bowtie, to give luster to the too peaceful blue of the suit.

All in all, held managed fairly well putting himself up in the dark, under siege conditions. He sat quite still, giving himself an occasional match only, a now-and-then twist to the mustache. He sat inert in hopes of keeping himself intact -- a perhaps pitiful effort, he'd admit so himself, at holding his shattered pieces together.

In the morning, Samson was moving to Queens. To a building not much different than the one he now occupied, an apartment actually identical to this one.

The move had nothing to do with his being the last white man left in the neighborhood. That could make no difference in his way of life, one way or another. For the past year he'd come and gone as unique as a dinosaur to his black neighbors. They shook their heads over this fool white man, not knowing how Samson had made his way through life for all concerned much like some plodding behemoth out of its time and element. Their reaction didn't phase him.

Real misery for him had been those final days on Avenue C in Manhattan, when he became the last human on the block, the seemingly sole survivor of some terrible catastrophe. Sometimes then, after having

watched the others run from crime and arson, perched above the smoking ruins in his small and dismal room, he'd suspected it to be a plot to isolate him, fate at last revealing its designs as concerned Samson O'Flaherty.

The building he was moving to, in Sunnyside, in Queens -- he'd picked the area for its name -- held a multitude of illegal aliens. This seemed appropriate to him. Illegal aliens were another kind of Samson. They too came home to hide behind their blinds, in the dark.

Principally, the move indicated his renewed interest in salvation: Moving as well as publishing *Ambulance Drivers*. He'd been thinking more and more about salvation recently. He needed a new life very badly. He wanted a new set of walls to stare at. Most of all, and most difficult for him to think about, he'd like to have the chance of picking up the remnants of his once pure soul.

It occurred to him ephemeral as an ice cube lost on a kitchen counter in August that women, some woman, might also change him, define him, console him, save him. A hard cruel thought desperate like his Catholic faith, a stale icecube of belief left forever in the freezing compartment. Why must his life begin melting peripherally, where he didn't want it to, and remain frozen hard where he need it to puddle?

Magda gave the only real light to his life. She was the sole earthly reason, for example, other than another knife point at his side, to ever make him attend a party. In Samson's experience, parties were crucifixions.

But Magda's party would most likely smell of soap. It would be a giant kitchen match unto itself, a beacon for the doomed. And then too, the laundress's dark double would be there, the Izzy Thorn of his life.

Izzy Thorn is black. Izzy Thorn is beautiful. Izzy Thorn is cruel and naked in his thoughts, glistening soot in the flare of a kitchen match.

He'd not seen her since the night at the *Idyllic Love Theater*. Inconsequential, because she glimmered undiminished in his thoughts, day in and day out, suffused in a ruby glow of stage lights, a uniquely dark and desirable landscape.

Long legs and handsome breasts and the elegant hands and the spread vagina winking at him -- a ribald flower-pink.

When he tried phoning her, the recording said the line had been cut.

He'd written her a letter but lost the strength to mail it. On several occasions he'd tried returning to see her. That had indeed been like searching for salvation, as intangible and absurd as any pilgrimage.

The train conspired against him. On the Broadway line at Times Square the doors closed again and again before he could once set foot to the platform. Twice he ended up on the A express, looking for Izzy but racing instead into Harlem. He supposed there to be a ghetto tug around the woman, a rip tide washing away the poor white man who strayed too close.

Or perhaps, he admitted, some sensible guardian of his own had kept him away. Destiny sidetracking him from that black box of a cubicle, the shutters rising, the lips cracking in ecstasy; from the shameful pleasure of observing that torture, sitting ringside at a reenactment of his own martyrdom.

Party time at last, he guessed. With the store of kitchen matches exhausted, he groped blindly through time.

Time also for opening his mail, the bulky package that had come for him today. One look at it and he'd smelled the bad breath of fate, enough to make him lay the thing aside and delay opening it until the last minute.

Undoubtedly a Viceroy sort of package, its union Square realism undisturbed by a Watertown postmark and the forwarding note of a harrassed mailman. It was addressed to Miss A.K. Ackerman, with the postman adding c/o S.O. Flaherty.

He'd have to take the package out to the landing, to the light, for opening. He heaved up in a sudden dither.

This meant navigating through the darkened apartment. At each step kicking, brushing against or almost falling over a box. The floor had been made treacherous. His mustache twisted in the agony of it.

For Ambulance Drivers he'd written a chapter on moving. It outlines how to live half a lifetime out of boxes, how never to unpack after a move in order to outwit the next, how to hang nothing on one's walls, fill nary a drawer, do nothing more than slip a chair and lamp into a corner, plate and service into the kitchen, and your clothes on hangers. Blinds should be hung first thing, however. Blinds being as essential as the clothes or that solitary knife and fork.

This recipe for living out of boxes was intended to fool the enemy into assuming that you were ever on the verge of an anabasis. Impermanence as self defense. Should someone come to visit, if that might occur (to Samson, of course, never), then one could simply point to the monk's simplicity and the array of unpacked boxes and say, "See, I'm moving after all. I'm not stuck like you. Won't catch me off guard."

Such tricks also did much to subdue one's possessions, prevent them from possessing you. He had discovered the soul-destructive force emanating from all things heavy, inert and practical. Keep existence free of clutter, he'd written.

At the moment, stumbling through the door, his feet tangled in stray boxes, he did not appreciate the irony of it all. He emerged red faced and flustered, and damning those boxes to hell. The light hit him like a comet falling into his eye. He shuddered, a survivor of a death camp, thin, hunched over, blinking dazed and in pain at the sudden victory of light after so much darkness.

Concurrently, a roaring of radios bore in upon him. A howling, banging, battering dictatorship of the airwaves that harrowed him into a tight and defensive posture, package in hand, propped against the wall for support.

Despite his panic, he did notice that a box had wedged between his feet. He'd somehow caught the edge of it and drug it along, spilling out into the hall. Toilet paper rolled in all directions.

One roll he followed with a horrified eye as it ran like a friend up to the girls standing at the elevator doors.

The girls cradled their radios against fresh grown tits. They were a trio of magnificent, deep night shinings. The cute tits, braless, suckled the radios. The three turned in disdain from the toilet paper. They stared at him with hilarious mirth. Lecherous grins.

They laughed in unison, sultry giggles and on banned frequencies; the kind of sexy laughter to drown out even the loudest of radios.

Firm fleshed and ready as they were, the laughter was their true sting. It struggled for supremacy.

They taunted him over their shoulders. Full buttocks poised and pointed at him. Nothing more than the contemptuous and beckoning

smiles, the dangerous and raised asses.

These girls knew he was the only white man in the building. The only white man on the block. The last white man in their part of the New World. They knew and let him see how pearly their teeth were, how desiring their flesh.

He sniffed. They perfumed the air.

Izzy Thorn, had she been possessed with a devil like that at 16? Had she played with the same suppleness? Had she ruined the fathers around her with an enticing eye, a child-like, woman-like seduction?

He turned away and mumbled to the wall, "And thereupon my heart is driven wild/She stands before me as a living child."

When he looked down, his trembling hands, those hands that showed his true age more clearly than any other part of him, held all the original pages of *Ambulance Drivers of the Spanish Civil War*.

The letter on top read:

Dear Miss Ackerman,

Regretfully, we return your manuscript of *Ambulance Drivers of The Spanish Civil War*. Although in places your work shows talent, it is not for us. This decision was made in consultation with our editorial and legal staffs. Our concern is for the political nature of certain passages. You understand that we cannot be responsible for such a work.

Other than legal and ethical questions, we wonder about the status of your account. We find no record of any check being received from you, nor of any other correspondence concerning payments. Please clear this up with our accounting office at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely yours,

A.S. Moscovitz

Publisher

Go Now

They had at last sold her magazines. Izzy had them in hand as proof. Bright, slick, reflective in a useless way, rolled into a bat-like swatter which would have been put to good use in the summer in

Alabama. She looked incredulously at the magazines and envisioned dead flies.

To get out of the apartment she put down the suitcase, the magazines and her purse, trying to juggle and still find the note she'd written in advance, already with its tongue of tape affixed to the center of the top. The tape kept sticking to her fingers, to the magazines. In her hurry she managed to tear off a piece of advertisement, from some male model's face -- gleaming slice of four color grin -- health and vigor in ragged shred of bared teeth under the flap of tape.

But the note, grin and all, was finally on the door. She pushed the door back so that it stood wide open. The apartment was nothing she had ever possessed. In fact, peering at it from under the half-hearted hallway light the apartment looked like nothing more than another dark corner of the earth.

The note read: "Enter, take, this is my body given for thee."

Izzy had opened the windows too, so that the ugly birds could partake as well.

She left everything there, mama's photograph included -that dimensionless black woman in her Baptist best looking herself like an ad for respectable colored ladies.

In the suitcase were her selection of clothes, just the ones best suited for walking the streets, for going to Blimpies in.

Ugly birds and ugly men could hop and chirp and shit over the world of her one-time possessions. She gave it to the poor in heart. She chuckled once in a brittle key, as much as saying "get lost."

The magazines came from a newstand in Times Square, near the corner of 45th Street and Broadway. She'd bought them that afternoon, pressed by the crowd to participate.

That was how she put it, remembering how they prodded on all sides, forcing you up the chute, making you scamper up into the airless car with a pitiful moo.

They made you behave.

From now on she'd be good. She'd go along sleeping in Holiday Inns and eating at Howard Johnsons and drinking lots of gin in dim bars on plastic furniture. At all times she would have magazines with her, a

trademark.

The Bible remained inside the apartment, near her carefully stacked books. Those too going to the nomads of the streets. If they could read they would have the complete works of Marx and Engels, the writings of Mao and Ho and Lenin and Trotski -- she'd been thoughtfully non-sectarian in her early days before settling down to the work of learning the Bible and selling the Daily Worker in Tompkins Square Park.

But now they had killed her cat and made her become a whore and driven her from her home and tempted her to buy magazines. Now she couldn't care less about distinctions.

They would have Ghandi, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, Kant, Hegel, Freud, James. They would want her radio and the mattress, the electric skillet, the pencil sharpener, the shades, the three chairs and kitchen table, the typewriter and the ashtrays -- particularly the one with Che's face in it. They would take her Angela Davis poster and her drawing of Allende, done as for all martyrs in a luminous wash with a flush of divinity behind his fulsome head. She offered them books and they wanted her pots and posters.

For the moment the city bided its time. Holding its breath waiting for her to leave, the hordes hiding until her footsteps died away, impatient to rush forth in their cockroach intensity.

Perhaps the birds would consume her once-cherished collection of Bertolt Brecht?

This all because she had refused to move to Harlem when first disgorged from the Port Authority -- she might not have wasted so much time that way. By refusing to ever live again in another ghetto she had merely prolonged the process -- willy nilly, it ended in buying magazines and leaving her Communists for the birds to chew on.

For going to Magda's party she wore her whore's jeans that showed how skinny she'd become, dwindling down to bare facts. She wore the white see-through Indian top and all the turquoise jewelry she had. For a flag, she had an orange scarf tied round her wig.

Her heels clattered down the stairs and that in itself was like falling.

Down South white folks kept pushing, pushing you; Klan or not, it didn't matter except in degree. But they also kept you from falling with a

free hand pushing you meanly with one, holding you up with the other. Down there this was called nobility.

Izzy didn't. She called it class bigotry and racist exploitation.

Up North folks just pushed -- white or black. And if you fell down no one minded it at all. This was called Capitalism and sometimes survival of the fittest.

For sure, she knew, both places were too primitive to accept Communism as their Lord and master. "They don't want to be Commies because they're afraid they'll all be alike, all poor together. Shit, what are they now!"

And now she bought magazines. It hadn't taken long for them to get her.

Before closing the street door, Izzy threw her building keys into the hallway. That way she'd have no option left. She couldn't go back.

Her week's pay in her pocketbook. Her clothes and alarm clock in the suitcase. The magazines up under her arm. She had it all together.

Izzy looked at the street and thought how clearly it said that things were without hope. No way, it said, for white people and black people to live together in this place, no way for the poor to have a choice, no possibility for the powerful to stop playing their tricks, no one to do much for the starving and the sick, for dying babies all over the world.

The only nice white people she'd ever met could be numbered on her fingers. Except for Peggy at work, dumb and sweet natured, there was Magda, Homer and Samson. The others were a couple of comrades, an NYU radical feminist or two she'd slept with, and of course a couple of professors at Bryn Mawr. The rest either wanted to fuck you or else keep you cleaning up after them, or sometimes both of those at the same time. Basically, they didn't want to drink out of the same glass.

The night air pulled on her nerves. A somber emulsion, a petulant sky, an aroma of rich garbage and wet exhaust. Underneath lay the hazy, summertime hint of burnt food. The whole city at some time in its recent past had been barbecued.

The old black man in the doorway of the next building moaned to himself. Two urchins howled over a scooter in the gutter.

An obese black woman rolled painfully on a folding chair. Middle

aged white men leaned on cars, drank beer, belched. The men hooted as she passed, like little boys wanting to look at each others' dicks.

The moment was simple to translate, nothing original, no poetry of the people there, no local glory in rags. No hope for Communism when people couldn't care less about each other. No thread of feeling, except for the bad air and decay; no community you could see or call to.

Izzy walked through it just as uncaring as they, those people stuck in their tracks. She was lonelier for it. That was all. She knew it for worse up in the Bronx or over in Bed Stuy. People rotting under a load of souring needs. People puffy on quick food and too quick pleasures -- the doses unvarying, the pleasures unsatisfactory -- addicts to pleasure, needle marks all over their faces.

"City just goes up higher and higher, trying to escape from itself." That was how she thought this evening. The mighty New York night was a Decameron of ugly stories.

A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall

"Cat's dead." Izzy's tongue became magazine slick. "Murdered.

"That's too bad." Old fingers clutching as seen through wire mesh fence. "I mean it. Ain't a good time, is it. A guy done it. No woman's gonna shoot a cat. Woman would poison."

"Got hung."

Lottie to say to that. Lottie stroking her ruined knee, Lottie changing positions in aquamarine armchair, Lottie coughing again, licking her lips, reaching for a tissue. Hard bright eyes missed nothing.

"I'm going to a party. What you suppose to take to parties these days?" Izzy stared incredulously at the walls of goods, that complexity of needs, a ratio of promises and inducements far out of proportion to anything human. It was utter, august power.

"Don't ask me, I ain't a party girl anymore. Use to go dancing at Roseland almost every week though, you believe."

It seemed that Belle Star lay warm against her stomach, would be poking her small head out at any moment to scan the murky stacks of treasure with sisterly incomprehension.

There were seven brands of potato chips to select from. Eight kinds of beer confronted her, some on the floor, some in the freezer. The decision seemed impossible. To understand she read the labels several times, looking for loopholes and the damning lies. But it all seemed true. She fondled each product. It wasn't easy for a beginner.

"Never seen a slower shopper. If you was a man I'd have this gun up front and center by now." The old woman tried vainly to rouse the dog from the floor. When she kicked it with her good leg, it growled feebly, eyes closed tight. Head on paws.

"That dog! Never was much of a growler."

In order to keep an eye on Izzy, Lottie pulled her head back and forth, bobbed and craned -- looked like armchair tennis.

"How come your cat got murdered . . . How come that happened?"

Izzy had everything on the counter. The things dazzled her.

How peculiar, these disposable cans of beer, disposable bags of potato chips, disposable packs of cigarettes, and the magazines too, that most disposable kind of literature. Good thing she had just bestowed all her durables on the people of the street. You had to travel light these days, if you wanted a disposable life in a disposable city.

"You goin' away, right? I can tell. Suburbs? Nice there. People go to Florida too." Lottie nudged the chest forward, toeing it with tough determination. She was a strong old lady.

"Hold steady . . . you got a present coming."

She hovered protectively over the chest, making a great show of how well locked it was.

"I never seen a hung cat before. Saw Mr. Goldberg hanging from the ceiling down at 308." To maneuver the chest she had to give in and lay the gun down.

In the chest was an electric Hanukkah candle partially wrapped in white tissue, three calendars from the funeral home on 7th Street, two boxes of cartridges, a police whistle, a can of mace and a first aid kit. Underneath these lay the slim stack of shopping bags.

"Here, I give you a bag. You'll need it."

It was a commodious brown bag with sturdy handles and a reinforced bottom. After the beer and potato chips were packed it still

looked empty.

"There now," said Lottie. "You're fixed up!"

Get Down

Chocolate cake. It matched the color of Basil's skin in the single pool of light over the kitchen table. He had given Homer a very large piece, taken but a sliver for himself -- the kind of self sacrifice that irritated Homer, crucifixion in this latter day.

They sat facing each other. The apartment dark now except for the pool around them -- quiet except for the muffled sniffing of dogs.

They stared at the cake. Basil tried to smile, the seam of his wide mouth moving in two directions, neither of which made a smile.

Homer braced himself for what would come next, the refrain haunting them these days.

"I ou uo . . ." It made the cake taste like chalk.

Like the other dogs, the old bitch was afraid to come into the kitchen. She stood alert and on guard at the doorway, stretching her neck at them like a dangerous but shy child.

Homer struggled to be pleased with the cake. He wanted to enjoy it. He didn't wish to feel guilty about cake. The vodka beckoned. He took another swig to force the issue.

Though Basil's piece was not large he took some time in chewing it up. His neck muscles gave a powerful performance.

Homer thought how everything this man did seemed to come from the heart, a matter of feeling and hearty blood. Only since the stroke had the wires been crossed -- Homer described it so, thinking of how the former grandeur of the man still showed, the difference being in sequence, in audio and video, as if a clumsy electrician had been diddling in his works.

Basil shifted. He fingered items on the table, the salt shaker, a knife, the empty flower vase.

"I looked in the medicine cabinet, you aren't taking your medicine. There's no sense in not taking it. I think it does some good." Homer rarely

mentioned the sickness. They'd once agreed it should not be a topic.

Basil didn't look up. His jaws kept moving.

The bitch sighed and plopped down with her snout on the floor, her eyes trained adoringly on Basil.

"Can you walk the dogs tonight?" Homer clucked nervously, having come to the part he'd been avoiding.

No giggling. "I have a party to go to. Not a special party or anything unusual. Just a little one. There won't even be anyone pretty there, no boys at least . . . I won't be late . . . Have another piece of cake?"

It did not help that in years gone by this sort of baby talk would have made them roar with laughter.

The mood in the apartment troubled him. A tropical storm-watch tension, the same as when Basil brought home the bums to feed in the living room (bums like dogs were never permitted in the kitchen).

On anniversary nights it was always bad. For one, such times were coming at them faster and faster -- birthdays, New Years, mother's deathday -- a calendar of observances as cluttered it seemed as the old church's. A vulgar thing, the years grinding down on them. Aging made Homer petulant.

Looking across the cake he could recall in place of the Basil who sat there a young black man alive with inner fires, desirable above all others.

He saw how Basil had progressed through the years from one political movement to another, from to book, music to music, painting to painting, yet always waiting for his approval, for the Homeric imprimatur. Basil had picked up the entire western world in a mere passage of years -- learning too much too quickly, watching too keenly how Homer did things, thought things, and then mimicking him, taunting him in mischievous competition, roaming back further and further -- ultimately to the Rome of Homer's mind.

The movies especially had been between them as an altar -- to the past for Homer, and to the way he wished to live, like a tribute to himself and the things he knew; to the future for Basil, to the world the man was coming into, a place prophesied as divine.

Then came black power and gay power and behaviorism; Freud and

Jung and Est and Primal Scream and T-Groups; magic and astrology and Rastafarianism and Islam. Then back at last to Communism, and then further back, again, to Jesus.

Poor Basil, he hadn't had a chance. Nothing else possible for him but to end drooling in a drizzle of atomic age fallout -- tracts scattered over the floor, twenty or more of them, all different, all loud, from Jehovah Witnesses to the Church of Satan in God.

If Homer had left him to play pinball would he have become a bum and sat with the others in the little park in front of St. Marks in the Bouverie? That kind of alienation, being as strange to the world as a Messiah, might have solved all the mystery he mourned so far to answer.

What made Homer so drearily sad on any evening, but particularly on this one, was his knowledge that in his heart of hearts he despised Basil for trying so hard. He found all those years of searching and effort in poor taste. After all, Basil's great failure blighted the clockwork beauty of Homer's self-made world, the little world he'd carved out of New York City.

"Don't pout! You can come too. I never said you weren't welcome. You'd like them very much, I'm sure. They would like you to come. I would like you to come. It's only the woman at the laundry."

Basil turned in his chair to study the bitch in the doorway. No sign that he heard a word.

The bitch trembled under his gaze.

"I've told you about her. She passed me notes in the laundry . . . That black girl and the Irishman will be there too. So what! She chose them too. I can't help that! Like disciples, you know."

He gestured with the fork and that meant chocolate cake dropped on his clean white shirt. Anniversary cake smeared on his shirt of innocence.

"Why should I be like this . . . You're the one who roams without telling me where it is you go! She came to the theater, remember? You gave her popcorn."

Homer couldn't help but end his speech with a short, cartoon character laugh. Such intensity embarrassed him. It made him giddy.

Basil and the bitch communed.

Homer felt left out. To break free of the tension he padded over to the counter -- sure enough, framed in the window, the spire of St. Marks shone like a lighthouse in the storm of the city.

"And I'm taking this to the party . . . He held up the almost full bottle of vodka.

When he turned around, Basil had disappeared from the chair. The bitch too was gone. The cake sat forlornly in its ruins.

Homer found them again in the gloom of the living room. They grouped together -- Basil and the three dogs -- in the middle of the room.

The phone began to ring.

Basil stood intently silent, as if deep in thought, as if reviewing the music of telephones. The dogs agitated, whining softly and prancing.

"If you won't come then don't be angry with me . . . I'll be home early." Ringing filled the apartment. Homer made his way across the room.

"Oh do answer that! You know it's insufferable."

The words acted as a signal. Basil ignited. His arms stirred the air, thrust up and churning like the blades of a ceiling fan. The dogs also began twisting and snapping.

Basil growled, baring his teeth. His mouth split open. His eyes stoked. Nostrils flared enormous. His arms went rigid in the air.

The little terrier jumped viciously, landing on all fours and yapping its hunting call.

"The neighbors . . . the telephone . . . behave yourself."

Homer hadn't time to be frightened, between the ringing and the dogs. It happened too quickly. He felt shame for himself and pity for Basil -- that was all. He'd known so few uncivilized moments in his life.

When he tried to continue on towards the front door, the dogs attacked.

Basil howled once himself, looming in the background waving his arms and shooting hot glances into the corners of the living room, into all parts of the room except for where Homer and the dogs contended.

The ringing seemed to encourage the dogs. The mock spaniel caught the cuff of one jean leg in its teeth and shook it, pulling back with incredible force for such a meek creature.

Making a furious leap, the terrier snagged his left shoulder and tore

loose a strip of white shirt half a foot long. The tearing sound ripped the air.

The bitch gnawed on his calf. He felt her teeth sinking through the material and into his flesh.

"Basil, help me! Stop them! They're horrible!"

The phone too would not give up. It too was attacking him.

The terrier lunged and hooked another slice of his shirt sleeve, puncturing the upper arm. Blood flecked the shirt. Blood trickled thin and warm down his ankles.

He tried to kick loose the spaniel. The bitch clamped down tighter on the other leg.

Ringin, ringin. And Basil had turned away.

"Stop! Make them stop!" Turning this way and that way, he fought to escape them -- he was the old bear stunned by the pit and the jaws of butcher dogs.

It's My Party

They talked, but not loudly. The radio played, tuned to Columbia's WKCR, but not loudly. The room floated in smoke and Miles Davis. Butts and long gray ashes lay at the heart of the matter, in the mayonnaise jar lid. An ice cube floated in the midst of the ashes.

The smoke hung in layers over their heads, clouds of it in the living room. The front windows were closed, locked and the shades pulled down -- although the gates hung open. The single window cracked to the night air was Joshua's, at the back; the smoke trailed lazily towards it, to disappear into the abyss of airshaft.

An odd Saturday night, the building rose muted and aloof, as if stunned. A slamming of doors disturbed them only once, a sporadic retort of Spanish. Nothing more. Silent too Ninth Street, all the way to Tompkins Square. No traffic followed its graceless path. Now and then when an adolescent passed by on foot -- known by his sound satchel turned up to a roar -- the youthful clamor swiftly dissipated, engulfed in vacancy.

Magda would not move. Unsure, anymore, that she could. She lay on the bed with her back to the cool plaster of the wall. The wall pressed

her hair into a tangled crown. She was drunk, although the sole sign of it glittered in her eyes.

The bed had not been made. Bare sheets pillowed her thighs.

The others would not have guessed that she sat pinching a black beetle to death between thumb and forefinger.

Izzy in the director's chair beside the bed -- on the other side of the milk crate-turned-end table -- was close enough to have touched those heroic thighs of Magda's.

Izzy sipped occasionally from her paper cup. Sometimes it held beer and sometimes whiskey. She'd been chain smoking, distracted, now and then with two cigarettes going at the same time, like now with one in her hand and one smoldering on the pile of butts in the ashtray.

The desire of the moment to sink teeth into those dear thighs on the bed irritated her. She wanted that white meat. Being turned on made Izzy cranky.

"It's rain. She's listening to the rain . . ." Izzy made the discovery a quiet one and stared Samson full in the face for the first time since he'd come into the room. It was her streetwalker glare.

Samson in turn found no refuge from her. He considered with a gut twisting need how angular and gaudy she was tonight, angry in her sculptured skin, like a stray tropical bird blown in to him on a hurricane wind.

He could not keep his eyes off her. And this was not subtle -- leaning towards her half off the kitchen chair he'd been ordered to take. The chair's color hardly fitted his mood; a mythic, gay yellow that matched the wrappings on the bags of pretzels.

In mourning for Ambulance Drivers he'd already consumed too much beer.

His teeth were meshed with pretzel mush.

God, but he loathed that merry-month-of-May yellow. Tonight he ought to smash all yellow, beat it to death and then bring back red.

Red lights on black skin.

Sometimes for whole minutes none of them paid any attention to Homer, and this he did not appreciate at all. He'd been given a green plastic chair to sit on and that suited him fine -- glad that Samson had the

yellow one since it made such a lovely setting for his crotch.

But they were not paying him heed. Unfair, since he deserved it with his shirt hanging in dramatic tatters and the blood and chocolate mixing deftly on the front and his jeans rolled up to the knees to show his bruised and punctured calves.

Now and then he sniffled. He had cried for a good 15 minutes until Izzy gave up patting him and Samson ceased looking amazed. Magda just sat holding court on the unmade bed, and that hurt his feelings most of all.

It had been a sad party.

Joshua lay on the bed beside his mother. He slept and his eyelids twitched, the long lashes rustling. The crucifix hung down man-sized to his belt. He lay fully dressed, his arms curled around his head, his feet in socks tucked up under one of his mother's thighs for warmth.

Izzy stirred, made motions to get up, frowned and settled back. At various times each of them had given such signs of trying to leave. Homer yawned once and then whimpered, saying sleepily that he was exhausted from being bitten, from running, that he was too old.

Because none of them had left, no one really expected anyone to go. They weren't certain, but each of them guessed that no one in the room had anywhere else to be.

Long periods passed when nothing much happened except that more smoke poured up to hang over their heads. They raised their drinks in defense and listened without relief to the radio.

The exact moment the rain began eluded Homer, Izzy and Samson. But Magda knew precisely, the very first drops. She turned up her face and closed her eyes and drew it in deep, oblivious.

The others watched her, admiringly, wondering what she really heard.

Samson could think of nothing to say about rain, although he had a chapter on it in *Ambulance Drivers* -- composed in honor of Union Square rain-sodden and with the black umbrellas disposed broken on its pavements. A long chapter of thoughts on the meaning of rain and how that changed, how people also forget they lived in a seaport and with the ocean lapping at them day after day; oceans and rains and winds coming

down from the Adirondacks, a one-time glory of salty main and Indian names.

Homer caressed his bandages, soothing out the ache which when all was said was a relief and even a pleasure -- had he missed out on pain in his life, was that what had gone wrong? No pain and no suffering other than that which he wanted.

"It must be a winter rain,," he said. "Like ice on your skin, like darkness. Rain is best in April, makes the city less important, and happier too, like people were glad something was changing."

"Alabama rain is warm as piss." Izzy raised her glass and kept her eyes on Samson. "Northern rain makes people frigid. I know for a fact.

Samson still could not think of anything to say. Ruins now where Ambulance Drivers had once been. But somewhere there he'd written 50 pages or so on the subject. Rain on Athens, on Rome, on Dublin, on New York. Rain on the Irish, on the Blacks, on Jews and Chinese and Rockefellers. Rain on umbrellas, on plastic rain hats, on hair, on bald spots. He carried long lists in his head.

Magda would not open her eyes. Bad enough just listening to them. Hearing how they groped, awkward with each other, so unhappy and alone and trying to be tough enough to survive.

She accepted it as her fault that they were sitting in her apartment, staring at her unwashed face. A very bad joke. She didn't have the strength to tell them to go away. She'd forgotten about the party until it was too late. Nothing to do then but let it happen, like a wake for Rudy.

Beside her Joshua stirred in his sleep. The others moved too, startled by him. They seemed to rarely notice him, and yet he was the surprise of the party. Like all surprises this one caused some uneasiness. They regarded his small body as if it were a strange exhibit on display there, nesting against Magda's side.

Magda languidly patted her son's foot. This evening she slowed down at everything.

The boy's existence angered Izzy, it being too normal, too womanish for her. A male child, a mulato, such things disturbed her philosophies, implying some juncture of love, some union that she believed intensely ought to be rooted out of the common imagination.

She had said something to that effect to Magda on first seeing the child. Magda had not even flashed at her, merely groaned with weariness and taken another drink.

This happened when Izzy arrived, being the first, coming up the stairs by herself after ringing the bell below for a good ten minutes without response. In fact, she had got into the building by ringing someone else's bell and waiting for them to come down and let her in -- a thick Puerto Rican sucking in his gut and puffing himself up as she passed to leer rooster-like at her.

Izzy shouldered him out of the way and breezed in without explaining. Upstairs she'd had to bang again, on Magda's door, to get any response there either.

And she wouldn't forget how Magda did at last open up, the cream-white woman in the light of the kitchen -- bare bulb giving no evasion. An uncombed woman with a large face and the eyes only partially drunk, the swollen wilderness eyes of Magda. In her tight jeans and baggy sweatshirt, she'd stood a blank, no welcome, no gesture, a bottle in one hand and the child beside her like a pet.

Izzy had looked down at Joshua and though the child smiled back, and with a need, she had only barked out in her bright tone that so many despised her by, "Yea, but I want Communism . . ."

Again the child stirred. Izzy looked up in her anger. "For Christ's sake, put a blanket on him!"

Magda ignored her. Instead she proffered her empty glass. Only Samson moved to take it.

Samson in turn had been let in by Izzy -- the perfect darkness opening to him, a door into Arabian Nights, and with barely a flicker of recognition. She'd merely said, "Magda's into the bottle tonight. Something's wrong. Come up, you got an invite too I guess." That was all, the rest remained a mystery, as if he didn't matter one way or the other.

Normally, children were as important to Samson as dogs or cats. But this one gave him a pain.

It showed him how left out he was, how no one, not even the spirit of the laundry, had room to take him in completely.

Homer moved his aching legs and looked tenderly at the bed -- such

a handsome Madonna she made. A Kansas icon. And while he had never been to any such place (glad of it too), he sensed the strength she drew from there. The vigor made him gentle since he thought of how simple it was, how easily lost and never regained.

For some time he'd not even noticed the boy, having been almost dragged in by Samson, coming in with considerable commotion, sweat pouring down his cheeks, strained, bloodied, transfigured.

Homer remained somewhat resentful of Magda. She'd not enfolded him as she ought. In fact, he distinctly remembered her saying such things as "No more of that shit! No more god damn blood! Get it out! I won't have it!"

She'd even shoved him away with her open and moist palms.

Izzy had been the one to coo to him. "City got ya? City's got teeth don't it? Makes a believer out of you!"

Izzy touched him possessively with her boney hands, not gently. And she'd been the one to wash the wounds, tugging off his socks and hanging them up on the radiator to dry.

In the background, Samson had gawked, endearing himself the more he bungled and gulped. Homer's heart always went out to the man no one chose to notice, who spent his entire life being ignored.

But through it all, then as now, Magda, Magda alone, held the center.

"It is raining . . . I hear it too!" Homer said it merely to be agreeable. Rain was the life of the party.

Make The World Go Away

Joshua blinked awake. Now they leaned closer to him, as if to understand. Samson, Izzy and Homer showed in their faces how curious they were to be looking closely at a child -- a still young thing allowing them near enough to touch without quivering or yelling or darting off in fear.

In a knee-jerk reaction, Izzy reached out a slim dark hand and rubbed the boy's leg, a motion of protection. Would he purr? Belle?

She sang to him in her unmusical voice. "Joshua fit the battle of

Jericho, Jericho, Jericho! Joshua fit the battle of Jericho as the walls came tumblin' down."

She said, "You's a nigger chile . . . you know how to speak like one?"

The boy's eyes were fast on hers, a sleepy child amazed, watching something lovely, seeing it for the first time.

"Oh Jesus, Magda, he's gonna be too pretty to let out of the house. Like that he's gonna make the girls crawl."

"And the boys, the boys too!" Homer broke in with a whimper that meant to be a laugh. He mused over his left calf, the teeth marks there. He thought also of how he would be dead when this child blossomed into manhood -- a thought that filled him with regret, something he had not felt in years.

Izzy sat like steel in her chair, ready to lunge at them as soon as the wind changed. It held the men, even Joshua, spellbound before her, aware down to their roots of how dangerous she could be, that she was the black woman of ancient times come back to haunt them.

To make noise, Homer said, "You know what it is, we feel safe together."

The other two looked away from him, uneasy with the truth.

The tides turned again. Izzy relaxed, handed her empty cup to Samson. "You're cup bearer this evening, thank you kindly."

Magda looked only for the rain, straining inside her closed lids for a glimpse of the cleansing rain -- the rain to wash their dirty clothes. She kept meaning to order them to open wide the windows, to run up on the roof and dance beneath the eye of the storm. But she couldn't. Such things were too far gone.

With Samson sent to the kitchen, Izzy turned to Homer. His turn.

"Samson's half spooked with me because I poked my bare ass in his face a couple of weeks ago. Thinks he's important enough for me to hate him, which isn't true. I hate men who have balls, be they white or be they black."

When Samson came back into the room, his face and neck were crimson -- Homer wondered if all of him were that color, the most endearing parts of him blushing for the sins of the world.

The cup passed back to Izzy empty. Samson sat down and twisted his mustache. The high gloss of wingtips flashed in his glasses -- ripples of Sy Moscovitz's signature.

"Guess I should be going home . . . I'm moving in the morning. To Sunnyside." He made them strain to understand him. The mumble sounded like someone choking.

"I'm the only white man in Africa where I live. That's enough hatred. I don't want anymore . . ."

Homer pursed his lips. He fixed on Izzy, weary eyes that were merry, despite dog bites and the misery of his years. He spoke to Samson over his shoulder.

"Dear, oh dear, we are being naughty. I myself have always loved black men, men of any kind of course, but black men most of all. Perhaps Izzy wants you to love her too, that's why she acts like a black man. That's why she's a Communist. It makes her think she has a dick."

Izzy sat like granite, the steel behind her now. All stone.

"I'm the African Queen, white boys!" Cat-like spitting.

They were falling apart. The woman glared, being a black woman supremely for one moment, no longer an Izzy, no more of the vulnerable intelligence, the quick and lithe spirit, no more mockery or athletic bitterness.

She laid her hands in her lap, empty and loose and the men knew she held there that invisible god of racial and sexual destruction, ugly and old. She held chaos in her lap. Izzy became the totem grotesque, spear pointed, poisonous tipped, the jungle swaying about her hips.

"Women ultimately want to hold men's fates in their laps, one way or the other. My mother told me so . . ." In aborted laughter Homer sounded bitter himself, an unusual tone for him.

Izzy jeered in his face, giving her cawing whore's laugh -which she must practice for the competition of Third Avenue. In the last shrill note of her laugh, hanging in the air for them all to hear and understand, she caught the derisive refrain of Homer's words. She bit her lip and studied the wood grain of the floor.

Even though his tote bag lay ready at his feet, and his coat on the kitchen table in easy reach, no more than three feet away, despite the

unguarded door, Samson remained. No one told him to stay, no one motioned to him kindly. Magda sat in her trance of rain and Joshua, flattening out the bed invitingly but speaking no wisdom. He couldn't go yet, not until she spoke.

He too followed the wood pattern of the floor, thinking of the exile's feet tramping in despair over its hard surface, as temporal and fleeting as stones skipped across water.

Unwillingly, the projectory of Izzy's glance and of Samson's locked on the floor, met and would not yield.

Joshua sleepily scrambled to his feet -- causing a great stir among the adults. He darted shyly to the corner, to play there with his small cars.

His mother listened to the rain, squeezed another black beetle.

Immense clouds were sweeping clear the sky of her mind, coming from the West through the highest sky in the world; and the low land bows before it, the young wheat undulates in a wave as long as the State. The smell of rain soon to come. Soft full breeze. Hushed larks and cicadas. Lilacs scent the late afternoon. Grandmother walks to the back porch to look out at the elms budding new green, looking at the town 's grain elevator and one church steeple. Grandmother watches for the rain coming. Grandmother wipes her hands on her apron, peering out over the garden, over the heads of the magnificent flowers, staring out beyond the trash burner and the clothesline and the storm cellar and the garage with the old black buggy parked beside it at an angle. Grandmother stands lost in the horizon and the incredible sky.

Big city rain comes heavy now spattering on the front windows, thundering on the firescape. Turning into machine gunfire as they listen. The smoke hung still. The radio made a thin music.

Magda heard none of the tension in the room. She listened only for the sounds of Joshua playing, making car noises with his lips.

Something tightened in her, however, a cord pulled. Something out there that did not belong in the radio, was not part of the rain or of Joshua, or of the people in the room she so successfully ignored.

No one else heard it. When she opened her eyes she caught Samson screwing his heels into her floor, Homer eyeing him with a bemused smile,

Izzy engrossed in her own bleak thoughts.

But someone else had come.

The knowledge broke via small stings at the back of the neck. Someone in the hall. Someone uninvited.

Someone's Knocking At The Door

"Hush!" Magda jabbed a forefinger to her upperlip.

Samson lifted sunny eyes, dreaming behind his spectacles. He showed only pleasure that at last she had spoken.

Izzy shrugged and leaned back.

Unperturbed, Homer remained at ease. His naked toes curled.

"He came! It's Rudy!"

Before Magda could snatch him, Joshua wriggled away. He wormed through the chairs and past Homer, who caught an armful of air. The little boy's stocking feet pattered on the tiles of the kitchen floor.

Magda trying to move knocked over Izzy's cup and careened into Samson's chair.

"Oh Jesus! Stop him!" This was a rerun of the night before, with the slippery child racing to meet the Beast.

The others moved too, pushing back their chairs, waving their arms, hopelessly ineffectual.

She grabbed Joshua just as he stood on tiptoe to turn back the lock.

"Rudy?" He croaked the name now. In her arms he kicked feebly.

She clucked to him and held tight, bracing the door with her back. That little voice within her, the malicious whisper she'd heard before, told her to 'look down, look down.'

She did.

From the crack under the door spread a glossy red pool. It rolled like jam towards her heels. It was shockingly gaudy. Brazenly crimson.

Magda opened her mouth but nothing came of it -- that little voice within her died and went away. She looked wildly into the faces of the others. They had come up close behind her. They stood stupidly innocent.

The horror in her eyes froze the others in place.

"It's paint, isn't it. Who would pour paint under a door?" queried Homer. The odor of fresh paint made him sneeze.

"Bless you," drawled Izzy.

With a curse, Magda pushed Joshua into Homer's arms and slammed off into the bathroom.

Samson removed his glasses and pressed an eye to the peephole in the door.

"They painted over it," Without his glasses he looked more surprised than he was.

"You must have been a scout." Izzy blew smoke in his ear.

They stood stiffly, a tight knot of embarrassed people in the small space where the bathroom, the hall door and the boy's room met at the side of the kitchen. The paint riveted them, improbable and evil.

On impulse they quieted down. Baffled, but straining in unison to catch the least sound from the hallway.

Izzy grimaced at the helpless males. Of course they couldn't hear a thing with that damn cracker music -two strides to the table and two back, the radio fell silent.

The small body in Homer's arms trembled. The old man winced and held on to it. An awkward gesture. The little head bobbed rebelliously, not knowing what to make of this strange creature with the long white hair and the flabby tits.

What they heard was a low, laborious breathing. It belonged to none of them. It did not come from Magda, shut up in the bathroom. The breathing came from beyond the door. It was soft and furtive, like a lover's in heat.

"Scat cat! We called the fuzz!" Izzy growled it out.

"He knows I don't have a phone. I know he knows that." A spectral voice emanated from the bathroom, half smothered as of someone puking words. "He knows my chickenshit neighbors are hiding under their beds. No one's home next door. The other apartments are burned out. He knows . . ."

Steps in the hallway, departing. They lumbered off, no longer concerned for secrecy. Steps flaunting their power.

Suddenly, and for the first time, the steps made them all afraid.

They tingled collectively, tiny needles of suspense, the same painful thrill children feel when someone comes too close to their hiding place.

Homer continued to hold Joshua, standing in the doorway to the bedroom, the little boy too polite to struggle, the old man doing his best to be motherly. He rocked the lad on his shoulder and patted the small head, thinking all the while how no other evening of his life, not one, had been so dramatic as this one. It saved him from thinking of home and the dreadful sadness of love.

Primarily, Izzy yearned to close herself in with the woman in the bathroom, to shut out the males and their ridiculous needs. She herself didn't blanch over paint oozing under the door. Any Baptist could guess that such betokened the end, revelations dispatched in red paint.

Samson returned to the living room in defeat. The others heard him dragging his chair across bare floorboards, heard the hollow crunch of a beer can collapsing in his fist.

"Mama!" Joshua sounded as if he needed rescuing.

Magda stirred to the sound of his voice. After a moment of indecision she came back to them. She stood in the bathroom doorway, silhouetted by naked tiles. Hair made luminous by the tiles. She did look sick, like at the end of a long illness.

With barely enough strength to stand, she felt that dead-soul indifference to anything that wasn't loud, that didn't make you jerk and scream. Someone had pulled her plug.

Homer hugged the boy even closer, tucked up under his double chins. What do you say to a first grader? Homer tried. He'd already asked about teacher and school. What else was there? You couldn't discourse on the waning and heroic lights of the ancient world. You oughtn't tell stories about packs of killer dogs or of how mean you'd been to your lover of 25 years.

By himself in the livingroom, Samson waxed philosophic, depressed at how troubled they were. He himself didn't feel particularly nervous, steeled by a lifetime of threats. But it was all a loss and that seemed inexorably sad. If such as they were confounded, tied up in circles, doomed, then what could be hoped for the rest?

And if nothing could now be held dear or placed out of reach on

high, then surely the black holes of the universe would indeed melt their ice cube souls and they would become a long agony dripping into extinction.

As if in answer to his quandary, they heard another round of steps. Again in the hallway. Thunderbolt steps this time. Jehovah descending on them in his vengeance, making them squirm and duck.

Homer cradled Joshua. Izzy took a long drag off her cigarette and blew a puff of it at the door. Samson pondered the history of door knocks in the middle of the night, of running feet and what that implied -- Jews in the Berlin night and the pummeling on doors; loud crude striking, hairy fists and thick wrists and the brutality of fierce knocking on the doors of the innocent.

Magda blindly slipped the police lock into place. She would not look again at that mean red paint.

But no knocking came. Instead, the doorknob rolled in a vicious twist, like a wrist breaking.

A shoulder rammed the door. Panting beyond. Frustrated gruntings.

They looked to the hinges, for any signs of betrayal there.

Another blow to the door. The apartment shuddered and the cups rattled in the sink.

A pause. The nerve slashing echo of rolling cans. The door knob merely turned now, agonizing in its calm.

Magda put both hands against the door. The pandemonium of the knob bewildered her. She fought back the urge to shoot back the lock and flip up the bar, to open the door and start swinging.

It was Izzy who called out. "Not by the hair of our chinny-chin chins!" No one smiled.

Steps again. Fading away once more. Vanishing towards the stairs.

Magda slumped at the refrigerator. Her beligerant eye caught each of them in turn. Soggy hair dripped over her forehead and she ignored it. On each cheek a spot of color blazed as bold as a fire against her palor.

"Fuck that son-of-a-bitch!" She rasped at them. Now she swivelled her neck and rolled her heavy shoulders.

"OK . . ." Fists clenched, head thrown back, she filled the apartment

with her anger. Whatever might come of it, she'd been taught from the cradle never to back up from a fight.

"Homer, find Joshua's play clothes in the closet. There's a small suitcase there too. You help him, Joshua. You hear me!

"Izzy, fetch that picnic hamper from under the sink. Put in anything to eat that you can find, knives and forks and a can opener too. Don't forget my whiskey whatever you do!

"Samson . . . where'd he go to?" The flicker of distress in her voice easing the anger down.

"He's mourning for our sins in the living room." Izzy placed all ten fingers over her face, spread to make a mask.

"Be our strong man tonight, honey. We need you bad. Samson!"

"Yes, yes, I'm here." A petulant mumble from very far away.

"Gather the blankets from the beds, all of them, and roll 'em up. There's rope in the drawer there."

A moment of calm as they stared at her, trying to make sense out of her, their lady of the laundry.

"Hop to it, I say. We gotta git." She charged at them and they scattered.

In a panic, Homer stuffed clothes into the suitcase. Joshua too felt the fear. He shifted from one foot to another, a toy car in each hand for comfort. His voice rose in shrill and unanswerable questions.

Izzy dropped cans into the hamper as fast as a checker at the Pioneer. She cleared out cupboards and the refrigerator -- all in all a meager supply.

"You ain't gonna feed the multitude on this crap." She waved her hand over the two cans of tuna, the beanie-weanies, the single Dr. Pepper, the brick of Monterrey Jack with the dot of mold in its belly. She guessed that Lottie would sneer at such a small store.

"Put in my vodka. Don't forget me. Just because I'm the nanny. Any of you see that atrocious movie with Bette Davis . . ."

"We gonna camp out?" asked the child. "That what we gonna do Homer?"

They gathered in the living room. All of them burdened down. Samson in his three piece suit and trenchcoat with the shapeless heap of

blankets on his back and the flashlight in hand looked like a refugee boy detective. Izzy held the hamper under one arm and the monstrous brown bag at her side, she stood as suddenly serious as a little girl at Sunday School.

In the rear sagged Homer, plump and gray, shaggy in his bloody wraps, with Joshua's suitcase and Joshua.

"OK, got your Bibles and rifles?" Magda herself had filled a suitcase -- another pair of jeans, a hairbrush, makeup, a box of Kotex.

The flashlight she'd passed to Samson, since that was something she knew would make him proud.

"We go down the fire escape. Leave the lights on." Magda told them. "Turn the radio back on. Make it loud. The fire escape will be slippery so hold on tight and don't drop nothing -- no acid flashes or seizures!"

She didn't dare stop to think. She forced herself to march across to the window.

At her command the radio suddenly blared. A mind blotting burst, yet not before she had heard something else.

That sly scrape of a bootheel on the fire escape.

As the music rose up around her like a securing wall, Magda trusted implicitly to what she'd caught in a last flicker of silence.

Without a word of explanation, she backed sharply and swept in a fast turn towards the kitchen, beckoning the others to follow.

"Run for it on the stairs!" She yanked the police bar out of its slot. "Izzy, take off those heels!"

Already she had the door open, peering cautiously at an empty and very prosaic looking hallway -- no shadows or sinister shapes.

"Watch out for the paint!" She hissed, motioning them on.

Over the shriek of the radio they heard the front window snap like a toothpick, a blast of wood and glass. It sounded as if the living room were falling down into the street.

Magda battled the keys. They hitched on a bolt end, dangled precariously. With a frantic yelp she managed to free them and insert the key. The lock caught just as the door shuddered at the force pulling it from the other side.

"Haul ass!" She shoved them towards the stairs.

Walking After Midnight

The rain barely grazed them, no more than a mist of tiny needles. Ninth Street lay black and empty. The street light had been shot out long ago. On either side towered the darkened buildings.

"Can anyone see what's coming down . . . look at the fire escape!" Magda twisted her neck letting the sharp drops from the sky chip away at her face.

"No? Speak up, God damn it! I can't see for shit."

Izzy hesitated. Homer refused to look. Joshua whined something obscure.

Samson made it 'no' for certain.

The east Ninth Street of Manhattan, up and down, was a dismal expanse. Magda turned and the group turned. She sighed at the sight, they sighed.

Behind them, half a block away, rose the brackish branches of the trees in Tompkins Square Park. The sky hung inky there and the trees were beasts rearing up violently.

"Run for it!" She dashed in the opposite direction, assured that they would follow. They who stood appalled by the vision of the park.

Magda fled in her flat-footed way -- more a waddle than anything else. Not once did she turn to look back at the lights of the apartment, nor at those faces following her with such devotion. She held onto her suitcase and carried Joshua -- that was enough.

Izzy came directly after her. Eyes on Magda's haunches. She guessed how well such a body did in the field, how it possessed the wisdom of peasant labor. Izzy herself did quite well, although the pavement was as slick as oil under her naked feet. She lugged along magazines, cans, plastic sacks, booze, mayonnaise and Wonder Bread, thinking of herself as a walking corner store.

As she went she shrugged, a gesture for her own benefit since no one else bothered with her. To herself she said, "What in hell are you doing with these crazy white folks!" and shrugged. She said "Just

observe, that's all . . . just say you're a U.N. observer," shrug. "But I don't have to be doin' this shit," shrug. One thing for sure -- they were sending out distress signals to the universe.

Homer limped and wheezed. Once his cartoon-character voice puffed in agony. "Where are you taking us . . . Magda Ott . . . I demand to know . . . before it's too late. Speak to me!"

That she ignored him made him all the more frightened. His single comfort had been Joshua; it was not fair that she should take Joshua away from him.

He was indeed frightened. Evil all around him, palpable, tangible. He heard the greedy shiver of the black trees in Tompkins Square Park, the Third Man echo of their running feet. Then he wanted to scream for deliverance.

At the rear of the group came Samson, hopping along on the balls of his feet, his young-man lope. The flashlight he'd managed to keep in one hand, that and the police lock bar which Magda had bestowed on him, his staff of office.

Samson glared at the night. A surge of power through his body. The world fell away behind him step by step, the scenes of daily suffering waned, the failure diminished. Into the night they drifted. The fabulous night of mind and spirit.

The street glowed like a damp, black skin. Steam seethed from a nearby manhole, a hint of underground turmoil. In the distance, a lone street lamp yellowed the eye with concentration-camp intensity.

The group went forward and no one and nothing challenged them, not a shout or flash or explosion. Stillness abounded, denying the far away city sounds they all knew and ignored.

The rain was real. And the smoke -- in the air from a burning building some block close. And the East River -- a stench arising from the river that rolled by no more than three long blocks away.

The river was most vivid to Samson, being a coiling brew that stood out clearly in his imagination. Native New Yorkers knew it. He himself had witnessed a mushroom colored body floating in it, pieces of a being wrapped in plastic. Was that where they were headed? Was she taking them to the river? American life-giving stream, a baptism, a death. Fish

large and carnivorous from a diet of flesh, hid in those poisonous depths. Bottled messages floated there, all of them cries for help. The ghost of children swam naked in the caldron -- for crosses thrown away by clergymen, for coins, condoms, tons of shit.

Of course they could smell it. The river, the glorious river of the East, ejaculating three blocks hence.

When he lived on Avenue C, and that was just around the corner from where they were now, he'd listened to the boats at night on the river and the lonely calling to and fro. Then he had heard how similar lives could be each to each, his as well as others; an old story no one believed in anymore, corrupted along with the river.

Twice Samson turned to look back. The lights of the apartment still blazed, rippling through a watery atmosphere. No one stood on the fire escape. No head visible at the windows. So far they were safe.

Only a laundress would lead them to a river. He didn't care, as long as she continued to dispel the misery of days.

But Magda halted them in the middle of the street. They huddled close.

"Here!" She pointed with the suitcase at the school.

A chirp of dismay from Homer. Izzy shrugged. Samson did a little dance with the police lock bar.

It squated a huge, heavy old building, four stories high and as wide as three tenements. It sat back from the street over its own courtyard -- behind rusting ironwork. From their angle it reared up as an imposing brick wall broken by wide windows.

Dutch Renaissance, pleasantly authoritarian, strict in its elegance, classically straight and ponderous, cornices and scroll work and mansard roof.

The school stood even darker than the street and long ago all of its window panes had been broken and thrown into the courtyard.

"Educate the masses . . ." Izzy put down the hamper in the middle of a puddle.

"We ought to take a taxi uptown . . . I haven't been there in years but I've heard it's still safe there. Perhaps it really is." Homer tried as hard as he had ever tried at anything to think of people in a reasonable way.

"We could beg asylum in some corporate headquarters . . . People do that, don't they." He worked at trying to sort through the ruins of thoughts for a suitable script.

"P.S. 13. Built in 1892." Samson informed them. "Attended by numerous dead and almost dead authors, poets, politicians, and capitalists. Closed three years ago by order of the Board of Education. I can give you the names of the authors, poets and politicians . . ."

"We can't make it back to the laundry," Magda broke in. "I sure as hell ain't callin' the cops! We're too slow to run. This is the best place I know of."

She tried speaking to them gently, gasping herself for breath, doing the best she could with her arm aching from carrying Joshua -- yes he was growing, while she held him he grew. The little boy had been very good, not saying a word, hugging tight to her neck.

"It's school," he piped. They heard the note of relief and relaxed too, pretending as he did that this was a reasonable place, that it was a recognizable and benign destination.

Magda moved on quicker than before. She felt it coming down again on them, a tightening in her chest saying that the enemy was at hand.

She disappeared across the courtyard and into a midnight obscurity where the building formed a corner.

"Go easy . . . put your shoes on, Izzy. There's glass." Her voice trailed back to them. "Step high and don't kick the beer bottles."

They stumbled along.

She brought them to a grating in the pavement. The grate being a row of bars, like a four-by-four prison window, laid flat into the flagstone of the yard. What they couldn't see they could smell.

"We go in through here. I've seen kids doing it, guess it must be OK."

They crowded close, in touching distance and that comforted Homer. Samson handed the flashlight to Magda.

In the thin beam the graffiti leapt out at them, covering the base of the walls, a magnitude of unintelligible scrawls and primitive sketches. A drift of refuse several feet thick swelled against the brick. Scurrying from inside its guts. Muck streaked the flagstones near the building.

Magda deposited Joshua and the suitcase together. "Hold on to Homer. You don't mind, do you? Orange boy, balloon boy of mine." She didn't wait to hear his answer, already she squated down to fumble at the grate.

The spot of light lit up the slime on the grate. The hole with oozing walls, bottomed out in what looked like old porridge. Wiring and rotted tape dripped from the walls of the pit. A cordon of Pipes ran as thick as a child's waist. To one side hung an industrial wheel, beside it was the crawl space.

"If you don't follow, just hand me Joshua and the goodies. I'd like company, but no hard feelings if you cut."

Not even a murmur behind her. They stood as a weary audience watching the light skipping about as she moved. To each other they seemed hardly real.

"Watch out behind -- look sharp!" With a grunt Magda heaved up the grating. She let herself down easy. Her feet sank into the slop at the bottom of the pit. The faint slurping from the hole told the others that she lifted her feet trying to free them.

She pushed back the iron door that hung dead on its hinges. That made a single metallic pop. Those above cringed away from the pit as if it had spoken to them.

The flashlight showed the crawl space to be big enough to walk in hunched over.

"Listen . . . follow me or run for it!" She reached with her free arm and grabbed Joshua from Homer.

"Hold tight," she told him. When she let him go, he swung from her neck like a small ape.

Izzy thought so, even in the darkness, madonna ape and child ape aping the bliss of beatitude.

"I'm coming too." She handed down the hamper.

Magda leaned over Joshua and hugged him close. "Don't cry . . . you'll have to be a man and walk." She gave him a quick kiss and set him down in the filth. Again the soft sucking, mouthing noise as of something enormous at its dinner.

She turned and waved blindly to the others, not sure that they

could see her do it, but wanting to give them a last blessing.

"Hold the flashlight for momma and keep the light pointed in front of my feet." She picked up the suitcase and the hamper.

Then she was gone, swallowed up into the crawl space. Joshua and the light followed her dutifully.

The others were left in darkness -- a swift shock, that fear of the dark.

With all her might, with the power of a prayer, Izzy wished that the men would not follow. She dreamed of an Amazon's world down under.

It was a short-lived dream, a futile prayer amid the ruins of the East Village; she heard Homer puffing his lament close behind her.

"Don't want to . . . be doing this . . . I don't. It's pre-enlightenment." But he lowered himself down, as if into hell he said to himself, a voluntary Don Juan.

Of course Samson came too. No other option for him. When all was said and done he didn't really want to move to Sunnyside.

He was the last to stand in the pit, wing tips up to the laces in crud, head and shoulders barely clearing the floor of the courtyard. He had to stretch up to reach the bundle of blankets and the police lock bar.

Doing so he caught first sight of the figure at the opposite corner of the building, beside the fence.

The discovery left him blank and rigid, for him a moment of pure existence.

The figure did not move either. It seemed to him to lean in an odd position, an angle of inquiry and curiosity.

Despite the deep darkness, Samson did not doubt the reality of the figure. He thought it could have been in the act of pissing, or of shooting up, of committing suicide or performing a murder in mime. The details eluded him.

But not the reality. The figure was far more certain to him than the stability of his desk at Viceroy or the weight of the latest manuscript waiting for him there.

Bar and bundle in hand he turned and crouched. Slurp. His head tucked into the black hole of the crawl space -- the black hole of space itself with matter seeping underfoot. Devolution. Melt down.

Afraid Of The Dark

For all its awesomeness, the tunnel ran for no more than ten feet, leading into what had been the school's boiler room.

Magda waited with flashlight beamed to the floor at the other end. As they came along one by one, she let them creep blindly rather than give away the light. Joshua stood tight against her legs.

"Anything moving out there?" By whispering she set the tone. They would be whispering, all of them, from now on. She wielded that power, with the light in hand.

"Someone is in the courtyard." Samson said simply, relishing the fact that he had at last said something of that nature out loud to someone else.

Immediately the light went out.

"Hold the bar over the tunnel mouth. If anything comes through brain it. Izzy, take Joshua. Hold out your hand so he can find you. Homer, stand on the other side of the opening. I'm in front of Izzy. No talking. We'll just wait and see."

It was a long slow stillness.

Engine workings of lungs and hearts thumped like superannuated machinery in the room, too loud and crude. Cotton mouths. Breath once expended came back too quickly, the essence of liquor and cigarettes and pretzel mush.

The boiler room held forth anonymous, undefinable in its grossness -- what could have been the decay of ancient linen wrapped bodies, the decomposing carcasses of rats, the droppings of sick bums. On and on it ran into myriad possibilities, thoughts as wretched and ill-conceived as any ever summoned up by the terrorized imagination.

The boiler room no longer had any purpose. It was a cool joke. A hot meal serve cold. Sweat streaked in its own humidity.

None of them considered or missed the heat which the room once supplied in abundance, but they were aware as hunted animals can be of how pregnant the dark became, how powerful a stimulant.

Instinctively, Izzy sensed that the most frightened of them was the child; the mongrel pressed too close against her, too sweet smelling and harmless.

Joshua nuzzled her, coltish. The darkness comforted, blotting out vision and the world that would not change except to grow older and harder, just as she did herself.

She placed both hands firmly on his shoulders.

Nothing stirred in the tunnel. Beyond they heard the dry rattle of a can rolling over stone. They waited, commanded by Magda, enthralled by fear, still as the dead.

They could not tell whether the rain had begun again or not, or if the streets were already drying. They shared no sense of time or of weather.

They listened for grunting. They eavesdropped for the first footfall in the tunnel. Instead, they caught their own thoughts loudest, and then the movements of their own bodies. They listened to each other's breathing, that close.

Homer waited for death to come. He sorted several ideas about what it would be, all of them cinematic. He ruled out the sudden blow and the cow-staggering dumbness. No, his schemes were larger, battles for life with a galactic blare of trumpets and sound-mixed neighing.

At the moment the five of them were Christians dreading the ring of centurion armor in the catacombs -- Victor Mature lips set to strike their like flint to tar.

A sign at last. The low moan came at them garbled by its passage through the tunnel. The voice of a soul. It made them shudder. A body drops down into the pit --- the slurp of feet sinking in muck. Faintly someone is crying at the other end of the tunnel.

Waiting. They bent to their own angles, faces gnarled in Goya grimaces, in their own pains.

The pit slurped, A bootheel scratched like a matchhead against the tunnel.

The banging commenced. The tunnel filled with it, multiplying dissonance and belching it out in their faces. Someone beating a length of pipe against the metal sides.

Magda put out her hands to steady the men -- one on each of them, tasking them to be patient and obey.

The blast of sound overbore them. They recoiled from it.

Samson's hands dripped sweat. His arms cramped from gripping the bar, his system in overdrive ached to rap down a fatal blow upon the intruding skull.

The banging intensified, too loud to think against. As if all the radios in the city were turned up to their highest pitch. It was a New York kind of sound. Absolutely big city. Samson identified it beyond doubt. Heard it clearly saying who it came for, what it wanted, what atrocities it meant to drum down.

The primitive called him to be renewed in its clarity. To be in the primitive rather than its oldest victim. The beckoning persisted.

It made him weak in the knees to submit.

He wanted to shout to it. He would hammer out his answer on the tunnel with the police lock bar.

Only Magda's touch restrained him.

Magda who had been drinking since mid-afternoon and no sleep the night before, knew from the old days about the strung-out heat in the veins and the symptoms of exhaustion. She touched the men as much to steady herself as them.

The men reached a crisis of endurance. She detected it through her finger tips, an electric charge in their skins. They reverberated with memories of an older clamor, a basic violence. It made her feel desperately afraid for them. She couldn't save their murderous hearts.

Another minute and she'd not be able to hold them back.

They strained to see in the dark. Stared to where they knew the tunnel mouth lay. Trying to give shape to what was coming.

The banging ceased. A footfall in the tunnel. Heavy movements now -- a large chested, wary animal.

Another low moan, as before, heartwacking, demonic.

Samson shook so violently that the bar nicked the edge of the opening. A somber clang like the single toll of a bell. It was enough.

They caught. Collectively bated. Hooked to the spot and so sharply alive that they were in pain, suffering for their vividness.

The low grunting receded. The half cry fell away,
The body raised itself out of the pit. Shoes rustled in the damp detritus. Another can clattered in punctuation, followed by the crunch of broken glass -- vicious debris spilled out of vicious existences.

With a note of finality, the grate fell into place. The pit had been closed.

Subterranean Homesick Blues

"Hang a blanket over the tunnel. Do it! Keep quiet, all of you!"
Magda went knife sharp. Her whisper was the cutting edge.

They felt the thrill of resentment, each of them, angered by her authority.

But they obeyed.

Samson jerked at the bundle, enraged by the knot that would not give. In the end he tore at it with his claws. Something ripped.

With a last burst of energy he draped the blanket over the tunnel mouth.

"In place . . . ?" Silence for yes. Only then did Magda flick on the flashlight, keeping it carefully trained on the ceiling.

Barely formed by light, they eyed the puny stream with dismay. They remembered it as heartier, more fearless and solar. It actually did little more than illuminate small slices of twisting pipe.

The pale spot traveled over the ceiling of the boiler koom, a stately pace, unbelievable. After a pint of Black Jack Magda still showed the steadiest hand among them.

The light found the top of the doorway. Slipped down to the middle of the firedoor. It found the door half open and traced the corridor walls beyond.

They made for the firedoor, the beam going ahead straight and to the source of another piece of treacherous reality.

The Course led them down a hallway and to the foot of a staircase. Even there they could have heard the grate being moved outside and the feet stomping through the tunnel. Nothing at all.

"Guess we go up. Anyone else got an idea?" Magda turned on each

of them in turn, her half serious, mocking smile lost in the dark.

"Yea, prayer in the schools." Izzy nudged her with the picnic hamper.

Samson kept silence.

"I don't hear footsteps going away. They're out there. We're caught. What other choice is there but to go up?" Homer ended on a despairing croak.

The place had once been grand, of that a few remains -heavy balustrades in floral patterns, marble steps, carefully laid mouldings on the walls and ceilings.

Magda fixed the flashlight on high beam -- more graffiti on the walls, and now large stains, glowering overhead and underfoot, deep gashes in the plaster.

"It's been stripped." Samson touched the lock bar to the walls, to a wound where the last shreds of pipe and copper hung in fragments.

"Disemboweled, I'd call it." The old man sounded angry.

"Shhhh! Listen!" Magda poised them at the foot of the stairs.

"Relax, it's a rat. You ain't been poor long enough if you don't know how a rat goes." Izzy gave them her chip-on-the shoulder, mean black-woman voice.

Magda ignored it. "Watch the stairs, the slabs may be missing."

She was right. As they went up they found that much of the marble had been looted. After a few steps of that Magda hoisted Joshua into her arms.

Their attempts at silence were clumsy and futile. Samson stumbled. Izzy's brown bag clinked like a restaurant kitchen. Homer by himself, snorted and bubbled from the mere effort of moving.

To calm herself, and she almost lost it at the thought of the old man having a stroke in the dark on the stairs, Magda gave Joshua a kiss. The tide of light wavered and jerked -- a kiss troubling its course.

"We'll find a nice safe room here. We'll play like we're at school. Just like Homer says, won't we. And you know what school is like. You can show us how to play in case we've forgotten." The little boy held tight, out of dread or shyness she couldn't tell.

At the first landing they paused, grouping close at the top of the

stairs. They peered into the corridor that ran the length of the floor. The light danced down one direction, then another. Their heads enslaved to it followed in unison.

The scene appalled them. Smashed desks and wet paper in the halls. Rubbish so thick that not a clearing remained to walk through. Acoustic tiles hung from the ceiling. The light fixtures were long gone.

"Looks like the moon." It was Samson speaking, softly, amazed.

They were at a juncture of the main hall and through corridor. Down a short flight of steps, the monumental front portals stood boarded and in chains.

"No one can come in there . . ." Magda swung the light to show them that one hope of security.

"We should stay as close as we can to the tunnel, if that's the only way out. They'll see the light if we go into a room on the front." Sister Thorn once saw the light -- yes she had.

Already Magda picked her way a step or two into the rubble. "OK, this floor . . . which room?"

She let Joshua do his own walking now. The child stood stiffly, as if grown old. He stooped into the light to pick up a piece of the wall.

It made Homer's heart flutter to watch him, concentrating on him carefully to ward off the fear. To Homer it looked as if the child were searching for a toy, something to give cheer and escape to the gloom, a bauble to cherish.

The crucifix dangled down, too large and severe for the small chest.

"If thoroughness were a barbarian virtue none of the past would ever be saved," Homer stared off into the darkness around them. His shaggy head turning one way, then another, sentinel to the force of the darkness, to what might be circling in upon the child. His sharp old eyes saw clearest of all the full scope of the destruction.

"Things don't want saving, people do." Izzy at her most doctrinaire.

Samson tried to ignore how much her voice excited him. He moved closer to Magda. "I think we should take the first room to the right, that's close enough to the stairs to hear if someone comes up." Being so practical made him very proud.

Magda led them on. They inched forward, cautious at every step,

aware that the trap had been set, that they were the mice. The air thickened, stale and heavy as it was, with the dust raised by their passage.

From the classroom door the light swept in an arc back and forth over the stillness and emptiness within. Unlike the corridor, its floor remained relatively clear. One blackboard hung in place. No furniture, but a map rack remained, one map rolled down in tatters. Near the windows, made high and wide for sunlight and encouragement, lay the jagged slivers of glass. The flashlight picked them up like knife points. The windows were boarded up.

"How come there are boards on the windows? A school doesn't have boards on the windows!" Joshua's questions were too loud. They listened for the alarms of discovery.

"Shhhh!" Magda pulled him close. Hissing. They must hiss. "You lived around here long enough to know better!"

"To keep hell out . . ." mumbled Samson.

"To keep hell in . . ." Izzy blazed at him, aloof.

"Shhh!"

They crept into the classroom. Monstrous children, embarrassed by their size and weight. They concentrated in unison on learning to be quiet and to listen.

What was happening? They were losing touch. Their lives had been left someplace else.

Velvet Underground

"I got to piss. Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me." Izzy hid her paper cup, a mere gurgle of whisky, and clicked her high heels out into the deep darkness of the corridor.

The sounds of her picking through the rubble outside oppressed them, they who remained so quietly in the classroom. In another moment -- or perhaps longer as time had been stripped from the building alone with everything else -- they heard a tinkling splash.

"I gotta go too!" The edge in Joshua's voice meant only a tired child -- in an adult it would have been nervous breakdown.

"Go to Izzy. She'll stay with you." As Magda waved him into the mystery of the gloom it was too strange for her, sending a boy out into such distress, away from the circle. She grit her teeth to keep from calling him back. It was part of birth to let him go, the ongoing process of birth. She understood so. She took another pull from the bottle. It made her stay put on the floor, sitting cross-legged in the dust.

Despite the darkness, they in the classroom knew exactly where to find each other. Hidden as they were they continued turning politely to each other when they spoke.

The interplay of disembodied voices reminded Homer of an old fashioned radio mystery play, one in which the characters are hoarse with suspense. He started to say something himself, turning to the patch of darkness that he knew to hold Magda. But her woman's strength was too much for him. He held his tongue.

He'd been at the point of telling her about Basil. The true story, a play of sorts in itself, of how much he loved the man. And about how he'd betrayed Basil in the end; ditching him in a maze of Homer's construction.

Instead, they heard Samson suddenly tussling with himself, kicking his legs up in the air and at the same time slam a fist full force into his own thigh.

His audience turned away, both of them, from where the outburst emanated -- embarrassed as if they'd actually seen it.

Magda shuddered and bit her lip and dove for the bottle for another swig. She would not move over to him. She would not! No, she would learn to be less of the mother.

Homer barely comprehended what the blow meant. Self hatred did not appeal to him. He'd thought at first that something must be crawling over the man. Alarmed, he checked himself for the telltale scurry of small feet.

The incident left him vaguely troubled, nothing as definable as the dread of the dogs or of what haunted them. His mind hardly functioned beyond the ancient world. On the outskirts of Hollywood and classical Manhattan it needed a new passport altogether.

"I started to tell you something about my life, but it seems that Samson is telling us something about his." Hopelessness in Homer showed

as a Minnie Mouse titter.

There was nothing more to be said to that.

Out in the corridor, it seemed less dark than before.

Izzy could make out the chaos on the floor and even some of the details of the building's interior. Enough of a glimpse to suit her -- in the end, the collapse of the white man's world gave her no joy.

It left her feeling dark herself, and ruined too, as if her own lights were out.

My Ding-A-Ling

Shifting for a better balance as she squatted, her high heels slipped in the trash. That put Izzy on guard again, watching and listening. She'd pulled down her jeans just outside the doorway of the classroom, not too far from the others, and a spot to honor the passage of many a past and present intellectual.

Izzy peered with all her might into the gloom, trying to learn as much as she could about New York Baroque. The scenery made her feel guilty, as if the destruction were of her doing.

When Joshua came up behind her she almost fell over, although she guessed it to be him from the soft and searching footfalls -- the way a child has of coming through the dark.

"I got to go pee. Mom said to come with you." He put out his hand to touch her, trusting her shoulder, not one thought for the see-through blouse.

It angered her to think of how Magda used her, the others too in their own way. They were going to use her up if she didn't take care. She rejected them all by jerking up short and fastening her jeans.

But the little hand snaked about until it found hers and then held fast. The feel of his flesh sent a message up her arm.

"OK then, so pee." She tried to think of what ought to be done to fulfill the role. Was she supposed to unzip him and hold his little thing for him. Was he too old for that already? How in hell was she to know! The boy seemed to hesitate. She felt him trembling.

"Well, go on." She tried to be gentle. "You need me to help you?"

"No!" It was the sudden, mad male in him. He turned away, yet hovering as close to her as he could. Her patience, that small store, gave out before she at last heard the splatter of his urine.

An Alabama witch, like that once and future Izzy, would save the babe's urine for a love salve. She'd keep it in a jar in her spring house and drown young bullfrogs in it.

The roar of the bullfrogs clamored from out of her memory. As of a southern night, taking the evening air, walking down by the Alabama river looking for paupaus -then that amazing male chorus shrieked at young girls in the seductive shining.

"Hurry up. We been gone too long . . ."

But something else stirred her too. Down the corridor, a movement, and as subtle as a wave breaking in a midnight ocean. It was something more tangible to escape from than the recollection of Alabama yearnings.

There could be no doubt. A shadow slowly shifted towards them

Golden Slumbers

"Magda!" Izzy's voice fell to them husky and drawn, a warning unto itself.

Magda jerked, electrified, heartsick. Instinctively, she heaved up, forgetting exhaustion. She maneuvered away from the door. Joshua she moved to Homer's side -- the old man gathered the lad into his arms.

"Get it together . . ." She backed up stealthily.

"Samson? You'll manage the police lock bar, Samson! Can You!"

She held the flashlight ready. It and the police lock bar were their only defense.

To catch her words they swallowed and leaned forward.

"Who's a good snorer? Tap lightly. Homer?"

All right, wait five and then snore. Make it real."

She bent down to kiss Joshua and stroke his hair. "No laughing when Homer snores. Understand. This isn't a game."

As a precaution, she tucked the crucifix into his shirt.

Snoring erupted from Homer. Heavy slurps of air that were quite realistic. The classroom filled with it. The swells of it gaining on the

silence, a grand buffo gesture that was also elegantly farcical.

Magda had no idea how long the snoring should last. It was all improvisation for her. Had she thought to tell Izzy and Samson to crouch down low? She looked for them. She could do no more than make out dim outlines. Yes, they were down, crumpled like squashed things. Would Joshua stay quiet? Could the little boy sit close to the clown world and not laugh -- how long since she'd heard him laugh?

All the while the painful scrutiny of doorway continued, by ear, by glimpse, between other thoughts, other searchings. Half her mind, the more alert, pinned itself to the doorway; the other roamed free in a desperate and incongruous moment.

That doorway became a gate for ghosts. A faint memory to her of a springtime classroom long ago, not too different from this one. A dead classroom where a dead young girl sat reading and indifferent because her body answered instead to the springtime and the loud rock and roll and the eloquent boys. Dead sexual pulsations -- a dead rural spring. City life helped her forget. It had been good for that.

Grandma, where was she? What did she say? Magda tried to fetch her forth. Over the stillness of the doorway, which was a roar in her ear, and the hilarious snortsnoiting of the old bull at the base of the blackboard, what was it she heard?

"Old queer, a half breed, a nigger dyke, a New York spook -- some collection you got there." No, that came from her. It was her own sort of thing to say.

"But the dead aren't any better" -- that was what Grandma said. "Don't blame the living for the dead. Don't deceive yourself, Magda Ott! You've gotten better than you deserve -- a low-down slut from the country run to the bad in the big city."

Another story. So many to tell. No time left for the telling. No way to write them down. -- Blizzards sweeping across the Plains. Feet not inches of snow. Men lost forever between the house and the barn. And in her own family back then, people on a farm freezing to death. The father and the mother and the two little girls crawling into bed together to keep warm -- wearing every last piece of clothing they owned, so the story went, and with all their blankets piled high too. Still they died. They'd

turned to icecubes in each other's arms, not even the warmth of one another could stay death.

The snoring continued, olympic.

As did happen at times, Samson's thoughts now turned to women. In this dire moment perhaps a parting lesson on love.

The chaos of women in New York disturbed him, enough to blight any man's imagination. The blank faced type of eastern European -- the char women riding the late night subway with him -- the Puerto Rican dames, the oriental beauties, the dashing blacks, the sultry Jewesses, the pinup-perfect Wasps. Millions of foreign women in the city. A city of women. A multitude of ethnic cunts.

Profoundest of them all was the one he worshipped. Like a technicolor postcard she flashed before him. He picked up the field of Izzy Thorn's heat, composed of glowing energy and a nuclear respiration. A furtive beat was her natural heart. Izzy Thorn.

This was the most tempestuous darkness he'd ever known. Yet its companionship soothed him, dulled the cantankerous self criticism. His fury gave way to a gentle excitement. Salvation seemed eminent.

Samson had an erection. In the dark he could put his hand on it. He did too -- an adolescent hard on.

"Honk! . . . sphew . . . Honk! . . . sphew . . ."

The snorer entertained them. Especially Joshua, who loved the silliness of it, not sure of what his mother had invented.

But not once did he laugh. Too tired, and it was too serious. He cuddled at the side of the plump old man and buried his head in the soft stomach. For some time he listened to the snoring, which went up and then suddenly popped and fell back to start again. He grew sleepier and sleepier. With the snoring his head moved as well, Homer's stomach a gently swelling pillow.

Before long the little boy slept. The old man patted his head.

Homer listened for the advent of evil. Certain it would come in the shape of dogs -- a pack of ravening, yellow-eyed dogs.

"Honk! . . . sphew . . ."

Perhaps he'd not be able to continue snoring indefinitely. Already his throat constricted. His effort became like a laugh record, a la Spike

Jones, where snoring goes on and on filling the heavens with absurdity.

It filled the crumbling school. This was evil in itself to him and he saw it tonight for the first time. He felt as foolish as Rip Van Winkle, having slept away a lifetime it seemed and only now rubbing his eyes in disbelief -- the city dying around him, the brave city of the future falling down upon itself.

Barking in the distance? He placed both hands protectively on the drowsing Joshua.

Tonight he was discovering the great need to impart learning, to share his love of beauty, to pass on what treasures he could, not to let the best falter by the way, lost in the rubble, mauled by dogs.

The glory of Rome, he reasoned, had been that the sacred twins were suckled, not devoured. If he learned to play the wise old She Wolf, maybe he could yet nurse the world, lend it ceremony and tradition and sincerity. He looked around him, searching for any vestige of honor in the destruction, seeking in the dark for something that had been respected enough to have been saved.

Why hadn't he been warned? What had Hollywood been dreaming of for the past 40 years? He floundered, dismayed by the betrayal. He saw how the movies themselves had escaped into their own fancies, building arabesque upon arabesque, fleeing the responsibility of the ages.

Homer would snore forever if it promised to keep the dogs at bay. He thought he had already snored for hours, rather than a mere passage of minutes. He would be hoarse. Would he have enough voice left to whisper to the child all the secrets he most wished to pass on, the ideas and beliefs that must not vanish from the city?

"Honk! . . . sphew . . ."

In his own ears now, the sound of his snoring rebounded like the barking of dogs.

Again she is a little girl in the Prattville movie theater where she sat in nigger heaven with Fatima Gray, who was her best friend before she gave up having friends. They sat on top at the back of the balcony at a movie that was an indoctrination session; the masses huddled to see the beautiful rich committing murder and tracking each other down through artfully constructed rooms; beautiful rich women with no character except

for sexuality and beautiful rich men with no character except for sexuality. And all around those beautiful rich people a frightening burden of things to be acquired, big cars and big houses and with every table laden and every moment taken up; the air thick with sex and things and witty statement and murder. All of it white. For whites only.

That afternoon in the theater, the lights went out in a power failure. Each and every one of them -- aisle and exit lights too. An eternal night, like now, dropped upon them.

In nigger heaven people started up and began pushing to get out, ramming their knees and elbows into their neighbors, shouting for release from the hold of that white man's slave trading ship.

Suddenly, and this was why the memory held, a white man's voice boomed up to them from the main floor, the white man's ground. It was an overseer's voice. The raging voice of any shack bully in Alabama.

"You niggers calm down up there or else we comin' up and make you behave. You ain't real in the dark anyway!" Laughter from below.

Above, and it still made her cringe, up in nigger heaven the quick flooding shame swept over them, children and mothers and old men together, a blast of bad white man's breath right in the face. And of a sudden they were peering about in the dark to see if indeed they were real.

Were they? Was she?

Venus In Furs

Dawn crept in. It curled around them like smoke. It did little more than outline the figure in the doorway.

The flashlight clicked like an empty gun.

They stirred then, relieved. Samson brushed a fist at the bulge in his suit pants -- he who couldn't remember what being middle-aged meant. Izzy crackled with canned goods and plastic wraps. On the floor, Homer sagged, spent by snoring. He shielded Joshua's eyes with his hand. Magda held the flashlight as assuredly as if it had indeed been a rifle, and herself as straight backed as Great Granny Ott.

But it was an old woman.

She stood quite still, merely batting hairless eyelids to adjust to the blinding light. The filth of her face cast the maze of wrinkles in theatrical lines. She dripped. She stood drenched in the run off from her hair line. Sweat beaded on her cheeks and plopped from her yam-shaped nose. The slate colored hair tangled in eel-like convolutions. Her eye glinted bright and small and cold.

The flashlight fluttered and they saw what the rest of her looked like. She wore a mid calf fur coat matted solid. The likely reason for her monsoon of perspiration.

Coat hung open. The old one wore blue, everything a rotten, stained blue, even to her tennis shoes. Even the foul and puddling socks sagging around her ankles were a dim, Virgin Mary blue.

Her legs were the worst, mottled purple where they showed below the dripping hem of her blue skirt, being swollen like soggy crusts, superating sores on each shin.

As if pulled loose by great weights, her fur clad arms hung down misshapen. The hands were splotched, scabbed and empty. At either sides of her feet sat the bags.

The shopping bags, stuffed into hearty shapes, looked dry and well tended. One read Saks in six-inch high, blood-red print. The other bag came from Macy's and bore golden angels trailing crenelated script from their wings.

"Gahm, gahm, gahm." A toothless hag. "Yup, this is it all right."

"School's over." It was Magda speaking, keeping her back to them as she faced the door. "Time to go."

Samson stood directly behind her with the police lock bar raised on high and aimed at the bag lady's head.

They could now see vague blueprints of each other.

"The Inquisition meets here, don't tell me it don't!" The old woman's ice blue eyes would not relent. "I know better than that. The Armada has not sailed yet, neither. But it will. It will!"

"Bye now, nice you came by." Magda eased back a step.

"The informers told us all about you, those with their tongues still in place. Too bad you didn't pop out their eyeballs!"

"Samson, you can lower the bar. Izzy, gather up the things on the

floor . . . Is Joshua awake?" Magda let it out slowly, telling them to move fast but calmly.

Homer struggled to his feet, with the chagrin of a man ashamed of his weight. The dog bites were alive.

Joshua sat rubbing his eyes petulantly.

Izzy took three small steps forward carrying the bags.

"Ah, a sister!" The bag lady shrieked in Izzy's direction. "Caution! Unbelievers lead you astray, to the heart of the Inquisition I'm sure. Their disguises are quite good, aren't they."

"See you later." Magda motioned for them to line up behind her.

The bag lady continued holding the doorway.

Izzy looked at the bags at the woman's feet, and they were objects of desire to her. She understood what had been mysterious before -- these weather beaten crones roaming the city in their rags toting along their bits and pieces, bent from ransacking thousands of garbage cans, from toiling to salvage the stray scraps of glorious materialism.

"No dearie, they're mine, all mine! But you have yours already -- a fine looking collection it is too. Don't mind mine, thank you."

Samson divided his glances between the hypnotic glare of the old woman and the seductive sway of Magda's buttocks. His world evolved more and more, swept with raging, ravishing visions. He was erect, just like Brecht's soldier charging into battle. Eternally aroused. He'd fallen into a delirium of sensation, as if just born, as if first expressing the gift of feeling. Women were doing this to him.

The bag lady cackled. Joshua buried his face in Homer's thigh.

"No, you aren't to leave! We have reports.

We know who you are! The spies talked before their sinews snapped."

Magda screwed up her courage to push the old woman aside, a pestilence of black beetles in the back of her mind.

"You aren't permitted to stop any of it! Not you! Try it and see!"

But the old one retreated from the doorway. The bag lady and the bags tottering off into the debris.

She screamed at them now. "We must have the dawn of Mercantilism! Trade! Steam! Industrial Revolution!"

Rant faded down the corridor. "We must have Things!" A puff of dust marked where the hag disappeared into the gloom.

They stumbled after her, in the direction of the stairs. Their own scramble raised more pollution from the garbage on the floor.

A bullet hued atmosphere cloaked them, falling from the high windows on the landing of the main stairwell. Window shades hung there in shreds like the sails of a wreck.

What had been hidden in darkness before, could be vaguely seen now. Knee deep piles of damp refuse with iron rods twisting up like skeletons. To the height of a man, every surface of wall had either been gouged open or slashed with indecipherable obscenities. Water trickled from the ceiling.

They wheeled as fast as they could around the corner into the central landing.

"Keep close. We go back the way we came. Be ready to run!" As she went Magda kicked junk out of their path.

Their old woman joined with another. The two stood against the far wall. The bag ladies blended into the ruin, inseparable from it.

The hissing warned them. Samson noticed it first, since Magda was too engrossed in the path before them.

He looked up and saw the women perched on the stairs above them, bags in tow, replicas of the one they'd been following.

"More overhead . . . one by the principal's door . . . three behind us."

And then all their heads followed his directions. The bag ladies surrounded them, immobile, dimly alive, glaring furiously.

In the beginning the hissing made no more than a faint snake song. As they neared the top of the stairs it became shrill.

"Don't run yet." Magda kept a sure pace.

The bag ladies roared at them now. A strangled screech, from their own bag lady, broke over the top in contrapuntal frenzy, "Don't let them pass! Agents of the Inquisition . . ."

The first stone smashed a few inches ahead of Magda's toes. Another hurtled past Homer's ear. He grabbed up the child in his arms. Samson fell out of line to back up behind them, swinging the bar like a

bat.

A full sized brick plummeted from above as Magda took the first step on the stairs. She tugged Homer and Joshua along too, holding up a suitcase as a shield.

Stones rained from the sides and from above. Missiles smashed left and right. A mushroom cloud of dust rose in the stairwell.

Izzy groaned as one grazed her in the arm. She kept going, dogged now like the others.

A stone brushed Samson's left cheek, too close to his glasses. At that he yelled like an Indian, not even feeling it, rattling his spear-bar at the old women, dancing over the rubble in a challenge.

The others headed down and still he pranced.

"God damn it! Don't play! Run!" It was mother Magda calling to him. He ran down the stairs laughing.

Pieces of glass, more brick, broken boards, all manner of fragments flew at their backs as they descended. Piece by piece the building was being thrown at them.

It remained night below. A velvet, black-fur kind of darkness awaited them in the basement. The uproar continued upstairs.

Joshua wept, his tears flecking Homer's hand. "It's alright," Homer murmured to him over and over, "All right."

Izzy shuffled along, too dazed to say anything, do anything else.

Magda used the flashlight only once, to locate the tunnel mouth. The blanket had vanished. A bare hole gaped at her.

Although the bag ladies did not follow them into the darkness, their screaming and the crashing of stones did -echoing down to them like an agony in heaven.

No one lurked in the tunnel. The flashlight said so. Magda didn't pause for more instructions. She ducked and pushed into the opening. Homer put Joshua down and gently shoved him in.

Confused by the excitement and the dark -- the flashlight had gone with Magda -- Samson crowded ahead of Izzy. In the turbulence of his thoughts he rushed to get out, to meet what might be waiting for them there.

Halfway through the tunnel he heard Izzy's low cry. A soft scream

of surprise, not fear.

He cursed loudly, stuck as he was in the tunnel with the bar and unable to turn, too wild to back up.

The others heard her too.

Magda already stood in the courtyard. She was pulling Joshua up after her, having made certain that they were alone out there.

At the sound of Izzy's scream, Homer went wild, helpless in the pit, gurgling and turning in supplication to the feet of Magda.

The early morning breeze smelled of the river. It burrowed through the smashed windows high above them. The school whined in it and the yard rang eerie with dawn. No sunlight greeted them. Instead, the sky pressed down hard.

As Izzy had stepped toward the tunnel, going lightly and thinking of having once more to stuff her face into a male posterior -- pouting that Samson had dodged ahead of her -- hands shot out of the dark. She'd been grabbed by both arms.

The hands jerked her back. No word from the darkness, just the all powerful hands.

Izzy did what she found natural, even with the bags hemming her in. She twisted around. She whipped back and gouged blindly with her knee.

All she had went into that rising knee.

It went home. She knew so immediately. Right to the miserable source of violence, bullseye into the balls of evil itself. With a growl the hands slid down.

In the same breath, she darted into the tunnel poking a hand into Samson's ass to make him move.

"Run man! I ain't alone!"

They tumbled to the pit together. He jumped up and pulled her along, limp now as a doll. The bar went zinging across the paving stones of the yard, stubbing to a stop against one of Homer's poor trembling feet.

Drop that grate!" Magda's authority ringing again.

Like a Bridge Over Troubled Waters

The dawn did not improve. Leaden fingers of cloud slunk dawn from on high, imperiling the rooftops of the derelict buildings.

It sprinkled lightly, menacingly, as if taunting the city.

They paused at the corner of the school. They stopped as if bewildered, waiting for something, for someone. They were a small, lost caravan, laden with bags and suitcases. In Magda's hand the flashlight still shot its puny ray, as if in memory of the sun.

Staring one to another, they blinked in surprise -- they had been trapped in darkness for an age.

Not a car along this stretch of Ninth Street.

Not another sign of life. What at night rose around them as bland as high cliffs, in the first of a rainy morning became the beady-eyed wreck of a metropolis.

The street had died some time ago.

Before a single word could be exchanged, the air above them cracked and cold bursts of rain plummeted like falling debris. The rain belted their bodies, wrung them hard, made them howl in dismay.

Homer, for a change, gave them a lead and got them moving again. He tugged at Magda and made his best imitation of a run.

Not a particularly effective stampede, as Homer was too old and fat, Magda hauled Joshua plus the bags, Izzy sagged as if she might collapse at any moment. Samson shook the police lock bar at the sky, blinded by the rain on his glasses, his best shirt hanging out of his pants and flapping like a storm warning (he'd not yet realized that half of his clothing -- the bowtie, vest and suitcoat -- lay forgotten on the floor of the classroom).

As best they could, they aimed for the doorway of the nearest tenement. This meant crossing a wasteland of garbage strewn lots -- one-time buildings reduced to a field of broken bricks.

To fight the rain they leaned forward, half twisting to evade the full blast of it. The downpour slashed at their faces, flooded down their backs and into their shoes. They were slopped tight to their clothes.

The journey was agonizing. They had to pick with care through the bricks -- the storm above as hard as the stone underfoot.

The tenement confronted them, blank and uninviting. It seemed to

soar into the storm.

Boards barred the entrance. Above and on either side, rain thundered on the tin sheets tacked over the windows. Rainwater streamed in a waterfall over the steps, coursing around and over and swamping their feet.

But they had no other hope.

Secretly, each of them wanted no more than a dry place to die in. They didn't give a damn, at the moment, for what might be pursuing them.

Homer did what the others might not have, with their more profound experience of the faltering city. He simply put a hand to the boards and leaned. The barrier collapsed at his feet.

With a bleat of thanksgiving they tumbled into the foyer.

For a moment they merely dripped, trying to keep away from each other, their hearts still racing. They were too miserable to move or to touch or to say a word even in lamentation. Dumbly they looked down, shuddering, as if ashamed at the sight of themselves melting into a lake on the mosaic floor of the entranceway.

It was a typical, dumpy tenement, with a pretentious name. Cytherian Arms, declared the mosaic -- Homer moved his feet so that they could read it, thinking as he did no that surely it was the ugliest mosaic ever found in any ruin of the western world.

Obviously, the place had once been put to the torch. The conflagration was evident as far as the eye could travel into the gloom. The record of a hungry fire did nothing to ease their shivers or quiet Izzy's chattering teeth.

"Let's not stand here dying!" Izzy managed to spit at them, telling them clearly that it was all their faults.

"She'll survive," Magda studied Joshua with more concern, rubbing his hands to warm them.

"Are there any old ladies here too?" Not one of them had the courage to answer him. He took their silence for 'maybe' and held tight to his mother.

As far back as the stairs, the first floor was bare blackened bones. Magda inched forward through the ashes expecting at any moment for

the whole pile to come crashing down upon them. Once she turned sharply, alarmed, to check the unguarded doorway behind them. It was nothing now but a cindered eye on the flooding world.

"We go up? . . . Oh Lord!" To test the stairs, Magda pulled on the banister with both hands. Nothing gave. She raised a suppurating tennis shoe and placed it gingerly on the first step. To move she hiked up her jeans as far as her thighs would permit -- thighs that sounded like sponges.

She plodded up and they followed along, wearily attacking the stairs.

"He got hands as strong as steel . . ." Izzy paused to remove her high heels. She trembled so violently that drops flecked from her neck and wig onto the others.

"Big man. A giant." Through the rain water in her eyes she tried focusing on the stairs. "Hands just came up . . . out of nowhere . . ."

"Bends steel with his bare hands?" Samson himself began to feel the weight of the police lock bar. His crowing became a chirp, what with his balls drawn like dice in the frigid underwear.

"When things are bad . . . although I'll admit things . . . have never been this bad . . . Oh I must stop!" Homer heaved and held tight to the banister. He'd not climbed stairs like these in years, not since the last time Basil disappeared at rent time and the ladies above the Minerva went silly at the sound of his huffing on their landings.

"If things are bad . . . I pretend it's all in a movie . . . an old movie."

They moved on. Joshua, however, lent his support. "How much further now, mama? Is it all the way to the top like at home? I'm hungry. I gotta go!"

"Shush! You about to lose all the points you've been scoring!" The susurrant mother -- she'd make them whisper again.

Pounding rain above them. The building sounded like a mountain peak. Rain broke through open windows and marbled on the floors. Rain showered down the walls from holes in the roof.

Silence below them.

Floor by floor, they ascended through repetitious and dismal scenes. Doorless rooms blighted in the haggard light, no chance of being

anything else. The stripper's hand had touched here too -- wiring, plumbing, every simple comfort or embellishment looted. Whatever the fire spared fell to grave robbers.

The stairs creaked ominously underfoot. When they crossed landings a frantic flapping of wings made them flinch in consternation. Pigeons had taken refuge in the upper reaches of the building and at the tread of their invading feet took to hysterical flight in the adjoining rooms.

Fewer traces of ravaging were to be found as they approached the top. Strippers are lazy six flights up, and there hadn't been much to steal in the first place from this East Village nest, this place for stopping while the Cronus wolfed you down.

As they rose toward the top floor, the atmosphere brightened. A large skylight in the center and directly above the stairwell weighed leadlike on them. It permitted a dirty glow that rendered them one dimensional in each other's eyes.

At the top they regrouped, still dripping. Samson stood at the banister, surveying the stairs winding down below. The view dismissed all laws of perspective, seemed unreasonable, a nightmare for a human being.

He also noticed a trail of water behind them, tracking from the bottom all the way up. Anyone who cared could easily follow that. He noted as much, but turned away from the sight without a word.

Izzy withdrew to a contemplation of her own feet -- violence erupting out of the dark, bag ladies screaming. Enough.

Homer and Joshua looked up together at the skylight. Rain hammered it. As they watched, a thousand drops broke and bubbled on the wiremesh glass.

Wings beat tattoos in the rooms around them.

"Lead on Mamu. We need help!" Izzy sounding lost.

"Easy, honey. We're almost home." Magda couldn't be more specific, not yet. To rest from the climb she leaned against the door to the roof.

What she really wanted was to keep on climbing, to struggle up above the clouds where there were no holes to get trapped in, no

decisions that she alone seemed capable of making. ROOF mocked the sign in large letters directly above her head.

No more stairs now, not unless God let down another ladder.

Instead more dark corners for her to choose from -- four unpleasant little holes for them to crawl off into.

It could have been worse. In fact, it was quite good, considering her luck. Of the four apartments, the one to the east and rear of the floor showed excellent potential. No birds, no apparent leaks, a ceiling in one piece, windows tinned, a door boasting most of its parts.

She waved them in. The two small, connecting rooms were utterly bare. The rooms held nothing but dust and cobwebs.

"See, God is good." She bit her lip to keep from weeping over it.

Homer seemed pleased too. Between puffs he said, "It's better . . . no doubt . . . than being an agent . . . for the Inquisition."

Magda hoped in vain for a lock on the hall door; it was gone. But the police lock catch remained, as did the notch for the bar in the floor. Regretfully, Samson surrendered his magical toy. The bar slid into place.

The door, mercifully, stood shut and braced.

You Can Leave Your Hat On

Magda's hands so accustomed to the feel of cloth did their duty, hanging up the wet outer blanket. She handed out a mostly-dry blanket to everyone.

Izzy didn't wait for the men to retreat to the back room, but started peeling off her jeans as fast as she could. She was too miserable to catch the irony of how courtly they were with one another -- the men separating themselves to the back to strip -- the old, polite and shy ways emerging in the face of all their troubles.

For a second, Izzy stood naked in the center of the room. The time invested with her beauty, the dreariness transfigured. Rubbing herself inside the blanket, feeling the blood running again, she felt much better. She grimaced at Joshua who was now naked himself, his mother laboring in the background over his jeans and underwear.

Joshua stared at Izzy in awe.

"That ought to have cost you a quarter . . ." She managed a rueful smile. In turn, seeing how completely ingenuous he was, color rose to the top of her skin.

The boy grinned too, answering immediately to her loveliness, ignorant of the bitterness. He liked it when she pulled the sopping wig off her head and the short bob of her own hair made her look immeasurably less difficult.

The wig lay like the corpse of a small animal, water trickling from it.

She hadn't seen a naked boy-child in the flesh in some 20 years; how perfect he looked. Small and finely shaped -making the memory of Alberto a blasphemy. His skin glowed darker than she had guessed it would, a gem-like aura in the miserable room.

Magda stood ignored, but with eyes for everything. For example, she noticed the purple finger marks embedded on Izzy's upper arms.

"No bag lady did that." She gestured and whispered, still whispering, thinking and moving in whispers.

To Izzy, she seemed to have aged. Perhaps the shabby room did it, or the wet hair, perhaps the night to blame. Involuntarily, she raised a hand to check her own face for damage.

"He killed Belle." Her voice trembled and she turned away -- to be reassured by the sight of old Homer's naked backside, his fallen buttocks, framed dimly by the doorway to the back room.

"A murdering son-of-a-bitch!" To hide the hatred in her voice, Magda unsnapped her bra.

As Izzy predicted, when naked, Magda became one of Ingres' meaty ladies -- the pale, pale face hard set in consideration and the grand white thighs and the shapely breasts and a soft pillow of a belly. A body fashioned for great love as well as hard work.

"Hey you! Joshua! What the hell you doing standing around without a blanket on? You gonna catch cold!" Magda wrapped him up and pulled him close. In their blankets now, cuddling together, stroking each other.

Feeling lost in the face of that, Izzy withdrew to her sacks. "I'll fix us a shot of whiskey. What you want to bet the cigarettes are wet?" She rummaged fiercely through her stores, as if glory land might be packaged and waiting at the bottom of the big brown bag.

In the back room, the men hesitated for a moment, awkward in trying to get out of their clothes. Homer saw that he would have to lead or they'd be standing around until doomsday in dripping shirts.

Samson shifted uneasily as the old man unzipped.

In Homer's years of experience, he'd never thought to count the number of times he'd been naked with men. Even for him, however, this was an odd occasion, like a flashback to adolescence.

Samson proceeded in pained slow motion, hanging up each item with unctious care, deliberating over wrinkles in his suit pants, draping the shirt over a nail he'd discovered on the wall, pausing at the thought of his undershirt as if it were a mathematical equation. When he at last pulled it over his head he managed nothing more than to hold it helplessly in hand, regarding it with befuddled eyes.

"You know, I seem to be missing half of my clothes . . ." Such doleful confusion wasted the last of Homer's politeness. The old man grabbed the undershirt away and hung it on the window sill.

The underwear was the root of the dilemma. In fact, Samson seemed to have gotten stuck, arms folded over his chest and looking as if he weren't going to shed his shorts.

"Come along dear, you'll get sick if you don't. I'll tell Magda on you and she'll hold inspection." Homer clucked at him, delighted to be coaxing a grown man out of his underwear. "Put them on top of the suit pants, since you value them so . . . Oh really! Old as I am you shouldn't care!"

So the underwear finally came down and Samson stood naked before another human being for the first time in more than a decade, a person with sincere interest perhaps for the first time ever.

Nowhere to hide. He forgot why he was naked. Forgot that anyone else in the history of man had ever known the same experience. It made him blush from head to toe, going a raw and fleshy red. It seemed that Betsy and Mike were telling him 'no!' The nuns covered their eyes

His blanket lay at the other side of the room. An old queer blocked the way, studying him from no more than four feet away. In the other room the women talked, that close. Women that near!

"Very well indeed," Homer crooned to him. "Small but statuesque. You shouldn't keep it all to yourself." Because such talk spread Samson's

blush like a fire, Homer couldn't resist a husky giggle. It was a salacious mirth, Pan bored with the pipes and interest in blowing on something else.

Then, as quickly, Samson came to revel in the shock of his own flesh. This was being animal, this was being truly close to someone else, stripped down to one sort of core, nuclear, down to a brotherhood of the body.

All considered, he actually didn't mind Homer eyeing him up and down. It made him feel wholesome, almost pure again in an unspectacular way. He rather strutted across the room to fetch his blanket. The body might have something to say after all.

"Want to see my dog bites?" A sudden lust of the baths about the old man.

But the perfume of burning tobacco, the sweet smell of whisky, a delicate remembrance of women waiting in the next room, these things summoned Samson to find his missing half. Homer too but in a search of a mother.

Heard It Through The Gravpevine

"This reminds me of my army days," sighed Homer. "There were places that looked like this in Germany. What was left of Germany. We had blankets too and whisky and Lucky Strikes. You can't imagine what beauty a Lucky could buy. It is absolutely more fun learning to keep warm when you're 23 than when you're 66."

They wanted to talk. They sat clutching their blankets in place, like children after a bath. They sat close on the floor, on the bedrolls Magda had laid down in the front room. Magda passed round the whisky. She poured a Dr. Pepper for Joshua.

"Everybody's scared in this country, one way or another, that's why we're crazy." Samson pontificated, content to be pompous. "Even the Vikings were terrified, must have been. Columbus too. And the Puritans. And everyone since too. All those wagon trains filled with terror."

"Shit." Izzy's bitter laugh broke through. "Real horror was in the holds of slave ships. White people know nothing."

Izzy's long legs wound under her. She lay very much like a naiad

come up on land to dry off.

She said, "A lot of niggers live worse than this in Alabama. I know. And they live scared too, of things in the dark. Mean white faces coming for us. Ugly. But fear's kinda cute on people, makes 'em look like dogs in the pound."

"Anybody hungry? We could eat. Then I'm crashing." Deep circles under Magda's eyes told the truth, dramatic shadows against the ashen cheeks. She reminded Homer of Piaf in the last days or of Judy Garland bloating up to meet her maker. He loved it when tough women hit the skids.

Magda opened a can of tuna and laid out the Wonder Bread, the remains of the pretzels, the cheese and potato chips. She gave Joshua an animal cracker.

They fixed sandwiches and drank, sticking their fingers into the chips and pretzel packages so that the cackle of cellophane filled the room.

Whatever they did, whatever they thought, they remembered now to listen. They pinned an ear prayerfully to the sounds of the hallway, to the noise of the building.

The rain plipped a desultory tune on the tin of the windows. In the distance it rumbled, almost comfortably so, on the skylight over the landing.

Magda and Homer poured themselves another drink. Izzy smoked. Samson ate his third sandwich and finished the pretzels. A full Joshua fell asleep on his mother's lap.

They made peace with particular habits.

The madonna's face softened as it looked down on the child. She soothed his damp hair.

"Don't know why," she said quietly, "but I'm thinking of my grandma."

"How marvelous! Are we going to get another note in our laundry?" Homer's swift vision was of a woman his own age now -- that in itself awesome, to have arrived at what had once seemed the pinnacle of human experience. A grandmother with a small nose, a pince nez, wearing dark silks and discoursing loudly on Mary Baker Eddy. That was all that

remained of grandmother. Not much.

But then mother had considered herself enough. Poor mother who'd not been in his thoughts in some time. He had left her to her fate with Basil and the murderous dogs. Were they peeing on her escritoire legs?

Izzy's granny was suddenly so close she could have touched her -- dried up, coal black, half blind. She recalled the shack with the chickens roaming through it and the stink of the privy rife in the air. A creature who sat out on the front porch with a chew stuck under her lip, juice on her chin, and the Redman loose in her lap. An old, old creature who they believed had been born a slave. Her own people brought her presents, offerings to that old queen of Autagaville, sitting there stupid in the sun.

Samson tried hard to summon forth Grandma O'Flaherty.

His mother's mother was of no importance since she had committed suicide long before his birth -- sticking her head instead of the roast into the oven one Sunday while the others were still at Mass.

But Grandma O'Flaherty remained something of a reality, still living too. For a quarter century she'd been up in an asylum near Saratoga, kept out of reach down a long white corridor and behind wire. Secreted in a temple of glass and white steel. He thought of her as the beating heart of age, helpless and deranged. Something that made his father weep every time they went for a visit.

Magda's cigarette burned at the nub. With one hand she gently raised Joshua, then dropped the cigarette on the floor and squashed it out with her heel. The cops too had done that, in her very own kitchen. Was she becoming a cop?

The others watched spellbound as she jabbed at the living sparks with her naked foot.

"Grandma sure was a tough old lady, with a cool way of handling kids that said real loud how rough life was and that you sure as hell better get with it. We spent a lot of time with her 'cause my dad took us there whenever my mom ran off, and that was often enough.

"Grandma got us up at 5:00 in the morning to open windows and strip down the beds -- no matter how cold it was; cold air was good for you, hard work and clean sheets and enough religion to keep you decent was especially good for you. She was real old time German-Ukrainian-

Mennonite Kansas. Can't beat that combination."

Magda began to rock gently, back and forth. She turned her face up towards the ceiling, as if her recitation were written there.

"Folks at home probably remember her best for the flowers. Not that she was ever the garden club type, or anything like it. She just grew flowers in the backyard and minded her own business. Bet you never seen anything like them. Her flowers were something else."

Nothing in Magda's voice to disturb the child. He seemed to sleep doubled up inside of the story, a womb of a story for a tired little boy. It also seemed that she told her story specifically to the child, and that the others were incidental.

"The summer I'm thinking of, she was dying fast at the age of 83. Not paying no doctor a cent for doing it either. She went right ahead taking care of the flowers and vegetables in the garden, put up preserves too. Preserves she knew damn well she'd never eat. But she got so she couldn't walk much and that was real bad for a woman like her.

"One day she said to come over and take her for a drive. Must have been the last time she went out. She told me where to go, about ten miles out of town it was and to a place I'd never been to, at least that I remembered. Never mind how many backroads I know by night in that county, sure been a lot of dust in my panties!"

"Tell it sister!" Izzy couldn't refrain from giving out her Mount Olivet praise.

In the background, the rain continued, telling its own story.

"She had me stop by a stretch of barbwire and a ruined farmhouse. You see that everywhere, nothing special there about a farmer going bust or giving up. That's where she wanted to go though. I had to carry her up from the road, and it wasn't easy getting her past the barbwire, let me tell you!

"Nothing was left of that house except the stone walls. We didn't fool with it. She told me to put her down and then went off on her own. Crawled would be one way of putting it. Piss and vinegar runs in our family all the way; she might've been dying the hard way but she sure wouldn't give in to it.

"She was poking around out back so I went over to see what she'd

come up with. Sure enough, she'd found what she wanted. Hidden way down under the wild grass, which had grown up waist high, were the flowers. God damn but they were big, beautiful flowers! Not a bit dainty. There they were holding their own with the prairie. It left you feeling weak just to look at them!

"Grandma said, 'I was born here, upstairs at the back. When I was a girl I slept up there with my sister Hattie. We helped mother take care of the flowers. She brought them West herself. She brought them all the way out here and then planted them first

thing. These flowers were here when there wasn't a tree anywhere in miles and miles."

A catch in Magda's voice caught their full attention. A tear glimmered from the corner of one eye.

"Grandma told me how when she married grandpa and moved to town and none of the family lived out there anymore, they'd come by once to talk to the folks who did. Sure enough, the people let them take cuttings and dig up some bulbs. That was how she got the flowers she had at home in the backyard.

"Grandma said, 'I brung you out here to make sure you knew about them. Make sure you don't forget 'em! I never seen their likes anywhere else. This is their special place. They come back here year after year. We've got to be as strong, that's all there is to it.'"

Try Me

The city ebbed away even in memory, as if they'd camped at the edge of a mighty wilderness. A place unexplored by the human spirit. It was a lullaby of silence.

The music of sleeping humans pervaded the room. Homer snored -- a flickering memory of nightmare that troubled them all for a moment until they sailed on further into calmer waters.

Sounds of sleep became more and more persuasive. Their bodies were life rafts rocking on the waves. The abiding silence of the tenement and of Ninth Street below lulled them, a silence not to be ignored. No radios, no stereos, no yelling, calling, whooping, no cry of anger or of

pain, no lusty bawlings.

In its own small corner of the room, where the refrigerator had once stood, a spider inched across the threads of its web. A small spot of arachnid life, so old and worn and indifferent to what lay beyond the confines of its own designs.

Unperturbed by the downpour on the roof, a tiny mouse poked its head up from a hole where sink pipes had formerly run. It wiggled its snout, pricked its ears, scampered for a crumb of bread lying near one of Izzy's sacks.

The mouse ate the bread, turning about for more. It nibbled at a corner of the sack. Nothing inside but too many bottles and cans, nothing rich and fanciful to a mouse.

Here and there, the small thing darted, keeping safely clear of the big sleepers, holding up small front paws, stopping to listen and watch, bright eyed. A young and very timid mouse. In the end it ran for cover back to its hole.

The spider waited, however, lingering in the certainty of other company, other pleasures, patient.

Now and then one of the sleepers sighed or snorted. Once Homer gave a monstrous yawn -- the mouse ran in circles.

Arms and legs pushed in and out of the blankets. Backs rolled, mouths sputtered, respiration flushing the atmosphere.

In the course of time, one of the more momentous events in the room occurred when Magda started wide awake. She lay so utterly disoriented that she couldn't recall who else slept in the room. It didn't make sense, lying on a blanket on the floor of such a dismal and blighted place.

To break the spell, she moved, as stealthily as possible, to grope for a cigarette and match.

But she did know these people. Perhaps too well. How often in life, she pondered, did one get to know anyone as well as she knew them. She even knew how they looked drifting off to sleep.

It gave her a pang to think of how obediently they went to her bidding. She'd put them to sleep in two groups. Herself, Joshua and Homer lay together on one blanket, and six feet away, Izzy and Samson

were together on another. To separate them like that seemed a good idea -- Mama don't want no hanky panky goin' on in here.

It hurt a little, sweetly so, recalling how Samson had rolled sleepily yet in comic awkwardness into his small slice of blanket. Written large on his eloquent face, how amazed he was to be given a place beside a woman, to be sent off to bed with Izzy Thorn.

Magda had watched in the way a woman can, unobtrusively and yet omnisciently, as he struggled to find a comfortable position -- consternation making him more than clumsy, on his back one minute and his stomach the next. And all the while, the poor man not once daring to glance over at Izzy, at the lady lying there no more than three inches away.

She'd seen too how languidly and disdainfully the black woman turned away from the man, turning away from all of them. Sealed herself off in a cool distance of her own. A cold purity emanated from the other blanket.

But all the while her own enfolded humid with contentment. Joshua and Homer warmed her in their pleasure at being near. Homer had chortled, simpered, sought vainly to suck in his gut to make as much room for them as possible. He'd arranged the blanket as primly as an old lady, warned Joshua not to kick him in his dog bites.

The little boy slept snug in his cradle, cocooned between their herculean bodies.

Magda herself held no illusions of how she went to sleep. Just like a worn out old bitch, half dead from hunting all day long, out sniffing in the brush but far too old to catch anything. Like a bitch who hadn't been in heat in years.

Rain became a tiresome, imprisoning repetition. It framed Magda's thoughts. Seemed that hope and companionship were going.

With a sigh she stubbed out the butt and got to her feet. The peace of a sleeping campground reassured her. She padded into the backroom, so designated their toilet.

The men slept through her rising. They missed the chance to admire her, walking ample and open among them.

Izzy stirred, however, at the first creaking of floorboards underfoot.

Groggily, she thrust an arm up and across Samson's chest -- he had already flopped over on his back, deep in sleep.

The arm movement thoroughly awakened her. That and a dim flash of white skin as Magda disappeared into the back room. Without moving she managed to keep one eye cracked for spying. Ironies upon ironies, and she was floundering in them, that Izzy Thorn should be stuck in bed with an arm flung over a man's chest, trapped in that absurd position, while a handsome and passionate woman walked before her bare to the skin.

A vision of Magda hung in the air, tantalizing her. But it would mean waking Samson to get to her, which could not be permitted. She'd prevent that at all cost. Her arm held motionless, as stiff and suspicious as if a snake slept beneath it.

Magda returned, a sauntering tiptoe, a buxom nude parading by with stripes of stormy light across her chest and buttocks. The nude squatted, making sure of the flashlight, turning again to certify from a distance that indeed the door held fast, the police lock bar in place.

Soft thud of Magda's landing -- commotion of flesh and blankets tangling.

Izzy watched and listened, too dry mouthed, too sexually stung to swallow. She felt that she'd just missed the opportunity of a lifetime, like seeing your fortune go by and unable to touch it once.

When regular breathing recommenced in trio from the other bedroll, Izzy knew that she alone kept watch. In a very cautious maneuver, she slipped her free hand down between her legs. That was one comfort of solitary confinement. A mischievous game too, soothing herself while keeping rigidly in place against a sleeping man.

She'd not really lain with a man in her life -- no fair counting that impotent Bolshevik of her long dead past -- not slept near a male in years. Neither could she count this as an experience, nor Samson as a male; she'd tortured sexuality out of him at the Idyllic Love theater.

To her, this man lay as harmless as the little boy -- his cloudy eyes, his shyness, the way he played with the objects of the world as if it were all strange and new to him, mysteries he could not penetrate and had no patience to learn about.

The near darkness of the room did not threaten her. It meant that she need not look to Samson's mouth and mustache, on alert for any signs of consciousness. She could see as much as was necessary in the gloom. She could do and be whatever was fitting -- think clearly what was most important to think. Such resourcefulness made her proud.

People who prepare themselves all along for living alone have such pride. As a child she recalled the preparation -lying in the small house on a spring night for example, when the queerly colored air, the gay and early bugs, combined in halos over the sensual landscape. Lights to guide her through, with perhaps a firefly beaming to her from a starry patch of melons in the yard next door. Beyond, the lyrics of colored town isolated her in a still-life of memory -- drunken voices, husky with longing or anger, a woman yelling, a piano-sad tune that wouldn't leave you lonely. Alone but not lonely.

Other scenes of her preparation came back -- the biblical and racial, the grand stories the old blacks told: Bre'r Rabbit and Bre'r Coon, the little devil and the fat preacher, the one about the possums talking in the trees, about the Okra, the Kudzoo, the Mockingbirds, and how they each got their own share of the Lord.

As a little girl lying there in the night, she'd been able to say to herself, "When the white folks come to pick us up and put us away in concentration camps and torture us, when they do to us what they did to the Jews, then I'll be ready. I'll be a survivor. I will, I will, I will."

Lay Down Your Weary Tune

What was that? Might it be a spider or a mouse? A spider slipping in its web? A mouse taking a pratfall?

She stopped thinking to listen, aware that her thinking had perhaps created the sound. Sounds did exist in innocence in the imagination. That would explain why she, who had never done so before, should now be wondering about the sounds of a spider. The sound she heard, pretended not to hear, must have something in common with that of a spider. Most people, she knew, didn't have to work much to imagine how a spider makes its approach. Its eight legs are dextrous as evil fingers. Its eight

eyes are unblinkingly fixed. Such things are locked up in the ancient mind.

But this was like a step on the stairs. Far off, hesitant, yet as carefully plotted as a spider's.

The stairs crept with feet. How many? She could barely pick it up, almost angry at her ears. If possible, she'd have turned up the volume.

A step now on the landing. Another. No, not a spider that. A single pair of feet, human feet, that much for certain.

In the room the sounds of sleep continued unabated. Homer snored as loudly as ever. She wished to God he'd stop. She prayed for at least one of them to awaken. They'd gone to sleep and left her to face these steps alone.

An entire series of secretive steps -- a fast tiptoeing. They came down the hall. Lithe as a hunter's. A mean spirited step.

She couldn't move or call out, stuck as she was in her aloneness. Her mind raced to beat those steps, to get where they were going first.

The step came now from the neighboring apartment. Someone searched through those rooms. Looking for what?

She was a fly struggling in strands of silk, enmeshed hopelessly, without hope of release. The venom dulled her brain, thickened her blood to wax even as her heart drummed the alert.

The sly sounds approached. Another step, this one falling directly at their door. Now came the vague shuffling and the careful shifting of weight.

Please don't let it come any closer. Please make it leave us in peace. Please!

The sounds belonged to a man, a big man. Small bodies don't take away the breath of the world just by tiptoeing.

And then it came, what she dreaded most. She heard the doorknob turn.

Click. In one revolution. Click. An echoing, sympathetic click answered in the heart, as of small bones breaking.

Through the mist of the room she scrutinized the movements of the knob, how it circled in one direction, then in another. She could see in the murk, but not shout for help.

In another moment, however, she promised she would scream and

raise up the sleeping people. Go away or I'll scream. Go away!

Softly now, so cunningly executed, those viselike hands pushed delicately against the door. They pressed inexorably, a flow of ever increasing power. They pressed until the wood jammed up against the police lock bar.

This came to her in the muted shivering of metal against wood, metal against metal, mechanical functions warping to the awesome pressure from beyond, that obscene strength at the door straining for admittance. To her it was listening to breakdown and fissure.

The door opened just wide enough for fingers to slip through up to the knuckles, rain slick they would be, stubs wriggling thick as dicks, groping obsessively up and down, insistently probing for an angle of entry.

But no fingers yet appeared. She held back.

"Scat boogeyman! Scat!" An incantation she could barely whisper.

Now she heard his breathing. Stertorous and coming up from fiery lungs, sulphurous hiss of air tunneling through an enormous throat, eased past huge lips, a titanic mouth peeled back in a teethgritting, hair-raising battle with the door.

Sweat tickled between her breasts, felt like her heart were pumping blood through her skin. She ducked -- the axe of fate raised on high, the blade already sparkling in some lurid city light, the axe hovering above her in midair.

The handgun. Frantic thinking. In dismay she tried to remember where it was. In the purse? In the big brown bag? Across the room?

The .38 lay hidden on the other side of a lost continent.

Instead, involuntarily, a knee-jerk reaction, Izzy grabbed hold of the body beside her. She wrapped her arms and legs tightly around that flesh, clutched it close as if for eternity.

She buried her head against that other head, just like Belle Star in the morning, crying to be reassured that companionship had survived the long night. Like that cat she hid her face in the man's neck.

As if in awe of the event, the door silently shut. The steps fell back, softly, mystified. They went with the same tenderness as those of a mother's from her sleeping child.

Izzy lay drugged in the silence left behind. Ruins of silence. It only came slowly to her that indeed she had somehow gotten hold of a man.

A flicker of movement in the blanket under her leg, the hair on the chest tickling her underarm, the feel of tensed muscle and the stubble stinging her cheek. Sexual signs and symbols were like nothing at all now, as insignificant as the fluff of a dandelion. The sounds of the doorknob turning had been enough to turn her inside out.

And this was first and foremost a gentle body beside her. It too trembled, and in another kind of fear, she guessed. It shared nothing in common with that frantic, bullish energy that pawed at her door.

The difference -- all the difference in the world -- caused her to pull even closer to the man beside her.

A sound? Again? No, not now. Nothing now but the love call breaking through the stillness of doom.

Get It On

Listening, Homer had his moments of sorrow. Lying there suspended in the echo of sleep, hearing in the dreamy distance the myth of creation, that story which had haunted him for years, he wasn't angry with fortune, merely self pitying.

His isolation owed as much to choice as to nature -- it meant freedom too and he was wise enough to take the rough parts with the smooth.

But he did rather envy Izzy, especially when the thrashing around brought forcibly to mind the power of manhood, that essence for which Homer searched.

And it was not to be found at the baths, he could swear to that. Not there, not even in his teams of young bloods.

Yet when essence seemed as close as the next bedroll, that near, history forbade him reaching out to capture it, history and breeding and all the memories of conduct befitting.

All in all, Homer could say that the event opened another grand vista. It would be recorded in his book of great moments. He wished he had it on film.

Joshua curled up oblivious beside him, and that was another moment -- a great comfort. The child connected the act he witnessed to reality.

Homer had discovered the taste, smell and feel of evil during the past hours, making up for a lifetime of avoiding it. Now he participated as a silent partner in the magic act of pushing evil away. The screeching of bag ladies seemed very far gone, as immemorial as Rome itself.

The lovemaking awakened Magda too, bringing her a tremendous anxiety until she understood what the sounds were and who made them.

Temptation made her turn, as discreetly as possible, so that she might see as well as hear -- she identified Samson, an outline of him, when her eyes adjusted. And she could guess where Izzy was, how she was.

The temptation spread like a tiny flame through Magda and truthfully left a little resentment in its wake -- sharing something like that in front of other people was like eating before starving children. In fact, it made Magda hungry, made her crave a smoke, a drink, a man.

Magda wept quietly. Tears wetted the bedroll underneath her head. They flowed freely.

A parade of lovers came to her, from the rangy high school boy who screwed her as if she'd been a heifer, to the genius of Blackman in bed.

And even though she'd learned from that string of bad men and too tough men that love wasn't always the same thing as good, she could still sing by memory the country love songs from the Wichita radio. Which explained in part why she'd put L.O.V.E. on her knuckles, to remind her of how to punch through life; keep hitting, but try to love much all the same.

After a while, however, listening hadn't made her feel so lonely or horny. It came to her that this was an incredible thing happening, her Samson and her Izzy making it in the gutter of the city.

And it was something she had caused to happen. Her homely notes had done it, written down as they were on scraps of Joshua's school tablet, backed up by the months of desperation at the Second Avenue Laundry, by the long exile from home and being loved.

Those little notes had been love notes if she'd be honest about them. They'd been her last dregs of loving going out to these people. And

at last it flowered, even if they were suffering for it; it had happened -- between the most improbable of lovers, Izzy and Samson, and between her and Homer and Joshua -- between them all, a bond as heavy as any family's. Only Rudy had missed the boat.

Most important, the tears she shed and the sweet lovemaking filling her heart, were washing away the blood from her feet.

For a time they all remained as they were. Magda listened. Homer listened.

Because Magda knew that Homer was also listening and because Homer knew that Magda was listening, at about the same moment they groped respective hands through the blanket and over the sleeping Joshua -- hands joining in the space above the child, squeezing, reassuring, blessing hands.

Cause You Make Me feel

And more than blankets were falling away. The unknown shifted. Floodwaters rising. The drowning reached out.

The waters parted in Samson's mind. He became clearer. Too clear, for once in his life, to think. Whatsoever, howsoever, this Samson and this Izzy were doing something in unison that was sorely needed.

To be more than 40 years old and holding your first woman! It made an explorer of an O'Flaherty. Brooklyn yearnings got a big answer -- feverish, red hot and from under something like an Arizona Highways, flamingo-colored sky.

The most surprising and poetic moment of Samson's life. He braced for it, body swimming forwards, hips, at a crawl. He sank up to the hilt in Izzy Thorn. He sank baptised up to the limit in the most beautiful of women. He sank still further and further.

He sank again and again, faster and faster, until he sank from sight. Disappeared in the depths. Swallowed up. No more Samson. Amen.

Surely no Jesuit had ever preached a fierier sermon.

But in the end, she also lifted him up to resurrection. She shared with him what he'd never even imagined. She offered him the low singing, sweet humming, that was an Easter hymn in his ear about herself.

When they came, soul knew no bounds.

Don't know much about History

Hear, O Israel: The Lord Our God
is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord
your God with all your heart, and with
all your soul, and with all your might.

Thus read the little scroll rolled up inside the Mezuzah, which remained intact on the doorpost between the two rooms of the apartment. No one could guess how many times this Mezuzah had been revered or ignored or painted over by the succession of residents. Long dead Jewish immigrants had fastened it there, and lived perhaps righteously according to its law: Immigrants trooping up and down the flights of stairs, sharing the single toilet with four other families, hanging out the fire escape or sleeping up on the roof on hot New York summer nights; freezing in the winter with the wind blasting down the street from the river, and working like drays, saving every penny, making tens of thousands of hopefully glowing hearth fires to light the East Village.

In times gone by the tenement burgeoned with life, as many as ten souls to an apartment. Life intense and purposeful and hardy. Life poured unrestrained down to the street, bubbled at the windows, ran lightly up to the roof. Life singing, weeping, yowling and laughing -- and whispering too, although only after the kids were in bed.

The tenement had been festooned with laundry -- white sails of sheets whipping in the breeze, long johns and nightshirts and work clothes like flags from fire escape rails, from lines criss-crossing the airshafts. On a windy day the building had looked like it might truly fly with all the fluttering and flapping.

The communal toilet had stunk. More often than not, the people had stunk. The hallways at suppertime and on feast days choked with a glutton's perfume -- savory and saucy and with a bracing tonic of spice.

The men prayed out loud. The women chattered their gossip,

scolded, muttered their soft love sayings. Children darted about shouting in play, and every corner, each room, all six landings were not only a close and securing reality, but were invested with the magic of young imaginations, became a thousand-and-one complicated and exotic stories.

Would it be possible to calculate the number of beings who had passed through on the stairs? What statistics were there to number the small jobs and heartaches of such a place? How many births? How many deaths? How many women and men joining their flesh? In such a place who could know the extent of love -- of God or man or of woman.

Magda Ott did not know what a Mezuzah was, or that one still blessed this dead place. If she had, she would have risen now and placed a hand on it for luck. For more than luck, actually.

She lay wide awake, quietly studying the pattern of light that stretched in bars around the edges of the tin at the windows.

Sunlight teased her, coming in spastic and feeble bursts. The color of it dilated, intensified, even as she watched, from yellow to pearl.

Outside there might be a divine, pellucid Sunday afternoon. Outside there was April. Inside was the fear.

Fear like love is another kind of enchantment -- it held the tenement in its spell. Magda believed in fear now. It made you different, she'd discovered. She'd not say again that it was only for the weak minded -- that fear, psychiatry and religion were the same kind of hocus pocus.

The urge to flee came upon her, so strongly that it made her desperate -- far more intense than that vestigial spirit in her of the Plains where the horizon draws out the imagination and makes all but the most timid into nomads.

Her body seemed locked in place. The bonds of silence that had held them safe became chains to her. It seemed too that the odd light now coming, at close of a rainy day, was something to be dreaded, coming slowly as it did like water leaking.

A flash of it caught in her eye, made her squint and turn away her head. The sharp point of light flared on her pale cheeks, tangled in the hair, shot the hair full of gold and silver. The heavy face flexed, went rigid, relaxed again.

This was vicious light. Day's end turning at bay, ferocious.

They had slept too long. Something needed to happen. Someone should come to rouse them, herself as well, some saviour of a Prince Charming to wake them with a kiss.

No kiss was forthcoming. Instead she used her voice to hammer at them, that loud, that harsh, to break their glass of sleep. She was impatient for a conclusion. Whatever waited for her, for them, time now to meet it.

"OK, shake a leg! Up, up, up!" To prove how serious she was, and as a front to confound the advancing light, Magda threw back the blanket and reared up naked, not one flicker of an effort to cover herself.

"Come on children, we can't play dead forever."

Paint It Black

Of course, Homer thought vaguely of Venus arising -- and from his angle looking up at her from the floor, this would have made him an attendant sea nymph, a role he had often considered if eternity were a possibility.

The mother's broad back, a back for carrying the world, comforted him -- a daughter to honor him. Homer felt more and more patriarchal and less and less like a bathfly.

Joshua sparkled beside him, flower fresh. He too jumped up, did a small frog hop, croaked "Ribbit, Ribbit."

He adored the long lashes on Joshua's eyes. Thinking that he and Basil might have made children with the same kind of beauty.

Homer blinked as hard as he could and hoped it was not a lecherous sight.

Joshua squealed.

"Glunk, glunk went the little green frog one day," sang Homer in his cartoon voice. "Glunk, glunk went the little green frog and his eyes went ***** , ***** , *****."

"Oh God, they're playing frog." Izzy's voice rose spectrally, crushed from under the blanket. She lay hidden, head to foot, under Samson's blanket.

"You sound hung over, dear." Homer made it so sweet that a chagrined laugh trailed out from Samson's side of the blanket.

"Great floor show, but we gotta git. And now, before my fair ass looks like the moon." Because she wasn't sure of how much they had changed, Magda went lightly, too lightly. She detected the hurt silence from the blanket.

"We're blunt where I come from." The tougher tone went better, She was at home in it.

They were all moving now. It seemed like a crowd of strangers for a moment.

Izzy pushed back the blanket shyly. There were circles under her eyes and a heavier shape to her face. Homer stared, blaming the weird light for the damage, not wanting to think of how accurately we mirror the turmoil of our hearts.

The men were humble in their nakedness, not glancing squarely at anything, not stretching, as Joshua did. They were very quick to disappear into the back room.

Joshua looked with keen interest at the rooms full of naked adults, at the men and the women, at the black woman especially and the funny white man with the mustache. But as children will, he took nakedness as a friendly gesture.

They dressed quickly, except for Joshua who pranced about mildly rebellious. He liked the nakedness, went back and forth between the rooms, between the worlds of sexuality, watching as the bodies became lost again into clothing.

Magda called sharply to him, drew him back to her on the invisible wires that still bound him to her.

It was strange for all of them. In fact, they were embarrassed, hurrying with their clothes, turning immediately to gathering up their odds and ends, trying to lose themselves in the things around them. It had become unreal, as if a foolish story had made them grotesque.

They wanted, each of them, to be outside in the open air, to go back to familiar pursuits, to see New York crowds, to hear the radios pitched on high and smell the burning dope, to sidestep the spittle on the sidewalks.

It was time to sink back, hidden in the swarm.

Samson found everything altered. It happened to him at last. What he couldn't shake. Innocence had been offered up. In the aftermath he saw all around him the evidence of the ruined garden, a world of biblical allusions. He even heard the wrathful angel swishing through the air over their heads.

He wanted to run away with Izzy and drop from sight into a long debauch. He wanted no more conflict, no more warring -- the good and bad sparring for dominion. His soul had worn out.

Homer desired a dark theater some place in the city, any would do. He needed to see a movie. God did he want it, almost as badly as a drink.

He and Magda eyed the bottle covetously. Only one swig of vodka left -- the whisky long gone -- and they were too fond of each other to claim it.

Izzy didn't know what to do, besides getting dressed and sorting out her magazines. Her plans were vague. The day would never be bright enough for her. It ought to be sterile bright and decisive. Perhaps a blast of atomic light would put her back on course, any course.

"You too old girl, to be having an identity crisis," Izzy said to herself. "Too old and too full of shit."

Magda whispered, "Love isn't enough, it isn't. That's what's wrong. It holds people together for a few minutes, that's all. It's going down in flames. We're losing."

Only Joshua heard her, inattentive as she helped him into his shoes.

Homer spoke to them from the doorway between the rooms, already dressed, the long white hair tangled in wild loops.

"See, it never rains for 40 days."

Although they heard distinctly what he said, no one said 'yes' and no one said 'no.' They just hurried.

"Why do the bag ladies think it's the end?" That was the last of his comments. He pulled the now dressed Joshua into a corner and crouched over him protectively.

As lively as the child was, he allowed the old man to have his way. He stood quiet and let Homer hover like a large old wizard.

Clothed and bundled, they were ready to go. Not quite the typical

New Yorkers preparing for a Sunday outing, but more ordinary than they had looked for some time.

Magda nodded and Samson gave a free hand to removing the police lock bar.

He paused, casting an eager look at Izzy. She would not let him close. Her frowns and stares were for the soggy wig on the floor.

She gave him her Court of Ife mask, that worm-eaten ancient. Her heart, however, flip-flopped helplessly.

In the moment, Samson seemed to shrink in his clothes, wizened into bachelorhood on the spot. His one-time sartorial splendor wasted, wrinkled like a bum's. The old indecision crept back into his manner, his fingers fumbled at the bar unable to immediately free it.

To herself Izzy said, "Samson, Samson, the Philistines are upon thee!"

Out loud she screamed, "Oh God, Samson. Don't open the . . ."

Sympathy For The Devil

The door blasted back in a shriek of splitting hinges, spitting screws and slivers of wood. Through the mists of dust a fist smashed into Samson's face, knocked him across the room and hard to the wall. He crumpled to the floor, blank as the wall, blood running from his nose. His glasses lay crushed on the floor.

"Go away you!" Homer whimpered. He raised a hand in warning. He cradled Joshua's head in his stomach so that the child could not see the red-eyed giant in the doorway.

Magda struggled to free the police lock bar from where it jammed behind the door. She cursed and tugged at it with childish determination, a sudden female hopelessness.

Without pausing to consider, with the directness of a paid assassin, Basil reached for her and gripped both hands around her neck and drug her out from behind the door. He threw her flat to the floor. He gave her no chance to scream.

She kicked him, tried to jab her knee up into his groin. To fight his

hands she lodged her arms inside his and strained to push them apart. None of it made any difference.

Basil half crouched over her, a lover's stance except that the cords on his neck bloated and his hands constricted with a killer's passion. His half closed lids were those of a lover, but his eyes shone deadly, focused on one desire.

For a moment they rocked together -- a parody of ecstasy -the man low grunting, the woman arched up towards him, her fingers locked in his hair, pulling his head back. L.O.V.E. showed vivid against the wire of Basil's hair.

As he tightened his hold, screwing fingers deeper and deeper into her flesh, her face lost its famous pallor. Magda flushed, tongue lolling, eyes bulging, just as if she'd been racing down some High Plains wind.

"Mama!" yapped Joshua, twisting to escape from Homer.

The old man held him close, groaning and babbling.

"No, no, no . . ."

Samson floundered vainly in an effort to rise. He flayed his arms and blew blood through his mouth.

Basil filled the room. The thick odor of an angry male. More primitive than murder, he swept them into a riptide, pulled them down head first, sucked up, overwhelmed.

It wasn't to be breathed, that poisonous ether older than the first atmosphere. Far older than their own nature. They were a paltry squirm in its whole -- a quiver in its magnitude of energy.

He glistened magnificently, his shirt wet to his back, to the beauty of carved muscle. His head lowered, drowning in its own power. The face set as hard as hate, a big and handsome black marble. Drops of sweat fell from his nose and cheeks. The drops plopped into Magda's face and rolled down her chin and back into his own hands.

She let go of his hair. Her fingers clutched emptiness. Hesitatingly, unsure, as if only half convinced, her arms collapsed to the floor. Her wild bird eyes glazed and rolled back. The jaw fell slack.

The first bullet hit Basil in the right shoulder. They all jerked at that, dancing along with him. A new current intruded on their circuitry. A star blew up in their midst? exploding into huge fragments, the nuclear jolting

them down.

Basil charged up raging. Refused to let go. He held her even closer, treasuring her, so that her hair brushed languidly across his chest.

Izzy stood with her back to the light, the bags safe at her feet. She stared dumbly at the pistol. A black and sculptured thing. A masterpiece of modern art. The ultimate machine of death as it is more personal than a bomb and therefore more meaningful.

She'd bought the gun years ago, for a ghetto uprising, for the dawning of the Great Matriarchy, for training and firing on her own oppressive heart -- destinies she had been preparing for.

She jerked roughly as if pulled to heel by the invisible. The gun took aim. Nothing would stop it. Not a thing.

The second bullet passed into his middle back. It shoved him forward. He stumbled a step, caught himself at the knees, straightened again.

Now he did the slow pirouette, gracefully sweeping his shoulders, swaying as he turned. He threw his head back, nostrils deep caves, eyes startled and far seeing, mouth laugh-shaped. Tall and proud he swung round to face the gun.

Magda flopped to the floor. She lay large and lumpy and still. Her face hidden in hair, Basil's blood smeared in the fingerprints on her throat.

Homer sagged against the wall. His ponderous head turned from side to side in bewildered disapproval.

To reach her, Samson scuttled forward on all fours.

"Mama?" Joshua broke free and ran to kneel beside her.

Coming down at last to ride the final ridge of tenement roofs, the sun suddenly slashed through ripped tin. It cut directly into the apartment in long vibrant gashes.

As if in praise, wings beat furiously in nearby apartments, like an angelic host in the far beyond.

Although sunset blazed in the ruin, nothing in it changed. The kind of place too dead to be revived in light. The light not enough to raise it.

The light shocked them. They saw it run up the walls with the speed and daring of spiders. Flaming sunlight converged on Basil.

Again the retort of a gun, and the barren room shuddered as if shot

itself.

Basil lost his footing. He pitched sideways. Popcorn spewed from his pockets. Popcorn bounced delicately on the floor. Very silently. Floor slowly spreading popcorn white on blood red.

Going down he looked to Homer.

The old man whispered farewell: "Baby, don't go down. I'm so bad . . ."

Their eyes met, touched, held. And their eyes, long accustomed to communion, told the truth, keeping it simple but eloquent.

"Gotta git! Gotta go now!" screamed Izzy. "Gotta go somewhere! Somebody help! Samson!"

Magda said nothing. She lay in defeat, just trying to breathe. All she could manage was to place a hand on Joshua.

Big city magic sealed her to the spot and for once she would not fight the sounds of the East Village -- A hymn of prerecorded church bells -- the lowing of traffic -- the crack-up of garbage can cymbals.

Twilight came to the East Village, accompanied by the far-off shouting of some lost soul, begging to be loved.