

WONDER

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I hadn't made any friends at Swindoll, Cosgrove and Kite during the few weeks that I'd been there, so when I returned to work after being absent for a day, I did not expect to have been missed. It surprised me when Robert Gast brushed past my desk and asked if I'd been sick.

"I left Nicole," I said.

He studied my face for a moment, and said, "You'll need something good to read."

He handed me a slim black and white volume, Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet*. It gave me a peculiar feeling to know that he was ready with it at his side, to feel that he'd been thinking of me. I thanked him, and he left me to my business. Inside the front cover, in the shaky, slow hand of a person earnestly attempting to be neat, was written, "Robert Gast".

I embarked upon the letters in my solitary and quiet evenings. The little book was a far cry from the Norton anthologies and epistolary novels I'd had to read to get a four-year degree. While I had invested myself optimistically – at least at first – in the English curriculum, I had found no soulmates in Beowulf or Pamela. I felt a kinship, though, with Rilke's Mr. Kappus. I took great comfort in the wisdom of the letters, and came naturally, I think, to associate the dispensing of that wisdom with Robert Gast.



Like Kappus' new profession, my job at Swindoll, Cosgrove and Kite was a disappointment. This was all the worse for it proving my father, who was an acquaintance of Swindoll's, right. They'd met on several occasions across a courtroom, and my father had never been impressed. When I described the position I'd taken, he grunted, leaned back in his office chair, and peered at me across the rim of his glasses. "And by what criteria," he said, "did you narrow your job search down to this?"

The office was nothing like Nicole's, which occupied high, bright rooms in old town Annapolis, with a spectacular view of streets and rooftops and, beyond them all, the Severn River. Swindoll, Cosgrove and Kite was situated in the basement of one of the older buildings on Franklin Street, with nothing to advertise it but a sign in one of the street-level windows. We were bothered all day by passing feet and ambulance sirens, as the hospital was only a block away. The place was bleak, with hard, gray carpeting, metal filing cabinets, and gigantic metal desks in an open common room. Improvements had been attempted. We had an umbrella stand, and Kite had brought in a fern in a white plastic pot, whose hanger was too wide for the hook in the ceiling.

My disappointment in the atmosphere, though, was made up for by the casual supervision under which we worked. I could get away with reading in a free moment, and no one got terribly upset when Swindoll Junior and Pinzey, the other two clerks in the office, ran over their lunch hours flicking a paper football back and forth across Pinzey's desk. And I had been encouraged by Gast's gesture of friendship, though it wasn't until several weeks afterwards that he approached me with any sort of conversation again.

That morning began like any other, with Kite striding in at ten minutes before nine to say, "Put the book away, Gast." Normally he passed through after this ritual command, and in ten minutes or so, Gast would finish his chapter and tuck the book into

his satchel. But on this morning, instead of continuing by, Kite stopped in front of Gast's desk.

"Is there any particular reason," he began, causing Gast to look up from his page, "that I have to tell you every morning to put that book away?"

It seemed the prudent thing for me to do, then, to drop my own book in my lap, out of sight, and I managed to do so without calling any attention to myself.

"If I came in here every morning and just did my job like everyone else, what would that make me?" Gast responded, dropping his gaze back down to the book.

"It would make you a clerk, which is what you are! Put it away!" Kite snapped. "And I don't want to repeat this incident tomorrow!"

When he was gone, Gast began to read again.

"Jesus, Gast!" Swindoll Junior said. "Kite said to cut it out!"

Gast set his book down and stood up from behind his desk. He took his cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and smacked the bottom of the pack with his palm so that one slim stick slid obediently out. He strolled over to the window and pushed it open about an inch, enough for us to feel the chill.

"Kite admires my reading habits," he said. "Ask him another time. He'll tell you."

"This isn't the proper forum for doing your homework," Pinzey said from across the room.

"It's not the proper forum for *Hustler* either," Gast told him.

"Gast is getting his Master's Degree at night," Pinzey said, turning to me.

"Really?" I asked Gast. "In what?"

Before he could answer, Pinzey said, "He'd be happy to tell you all about the curriculum, and the philosophy behind it. But if you're going to encourage him, I beg you to wait until I'm out of earshot. I'm about sick to death of hearing about books."

"What do you study?" I asked Gast.

"Great books," Pinzey interrupted again. "That's all they offer there. And you take Greek, don't you, Gast? Which, as anyone knows, is the first thing a big law firm looks for when it thinks about hiring you – whether or not you can translate Homer out of the Greek."

"Pinzey here, as you can see, is going to be a credit to his profession," Gast said. "He values the study of what it means to be human so much."

Pinzey snorted. "Gast is a master at taking any conversation and turning it into a platform," he said to me. "Be warned."

Pinzey turned his attention back to his desk. Gast lit his cigarette, and every few moments, blew his smoke out the window. I picked my book out of my lap.

Gast saw me and demanded, "What is that?"

"*A Room With a View.*" I'd overheard Gast mention it to someone on the phone, and following the success with Rilke, I'd bought myself a copy. I didn't understand why he'd praised it so much, actually. Unlike Rilke, it didn't have the power to either confirm or disturb, and I told him so.

"Do you want to be disturbed all the time?" he said.

"I guess not."

"Gast," Kite said crisply from his doorway, and Gast turned towards him, letting his cigarette fall discreetly out the window. "Swindoll had lunch with Cosgrove yesterday and they've come up with those forms for you. Please fill them out if you're at all interested. Stop in for them before the end of the day. And if you're going to smoke, for God's sake step outside."

"I haven't met Cosgrove yet," I said, when Kite was gone and Gast had planted himself on the corner of my desk.

"It's just as well. It's because of Cosgrove that there's no smoking in the office. Apparently, he has delicate, pink lungs."

"You don't like him?"

"Whenever anything unpleasant happens around here, it's always by order of Cosgrove. Just wait till they take away your parking space. It'll be because Cosgrove wants to put in a duck pond."

I laughed, and Gast lit himself a fresh cigarette. "You know, a book doesn't have to bother you, or help you, to be worth reading. Nor, God forbid, does it have to further your career. It's an argument I have with Pinzey all the time. He reads the law review and textbooks, and the occasional courtroom drama. He thinks it's a waste of time to learn anything that's not directly applicable to his field. If you want to be a lawyer," Gast said, raising his voice and turning towards Pinzey, "then your field is humanity. You'd be better off reading Melville or Dostoevsky than those hand-me-down alumni magazines that Swindoll keeps in the bathroom!" Pinzey ignored him. Gast turned back to me and said, "Pinzey and Junior think novels are purely recreational."

"And you?"

"I think a literary education ought to be fundamental. A better literary education than we get now. *A Separate Peace* and *The Great Gatsby* are not the beginning and end of the western world. I think the Western great books ought to be taught in schools from the beginning on up, with all the other incidental things you need to know to live that are ignored also, like how to sew a button, or fry an egg, or tip a waiter. Really good novels tell you things about life. And besides, reading does wonderful things for the imagination. You learn to imagine real things too."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Gast suddenly stood up straight and began to pace a little and gesticulate with his cigarette as he talked.

"Haven't you found that there are characters and fictional places that stay in your mind with more clarity than an honest memory? And yet, how do I put it? Here's an example. We were just talking about Cosgrove. You said you haven't met him."

Cosgrove had stopped practicing law to become a silent partner in the offices about six months before. "I've never met him."

"But you've heard of him?"

"Of course."

"Well then. Describe him to me."

"He's big – tall, I mean. He's not a conventional dresser. From what I understand, he doesn't exactly inspire trust," I said. "He didn't go over very well with juries. I think that's why Swindoll and Kite took over his last cases."

"Yes! And you say you've never seen him."

"Never."

"Good! Now, give me a description of, let's say . . ." He paused with his chin in the air for a moment, and dragged on his cigarette. "You read *A Room With a View*," he said. "Tell me about George Emerson."

I'd grown fond of George Emerson over the past few days. He reminded me of myself – quiet, but with a great passion seething within him. He had rare moments of release from his self-consciousness in which he became beautiful. I could see him in my mind, clinging to a tree in the Italian countryside, shouting "Courage!" and "Love!" It was something I might be inclined to do, spontaneously, if there were no witnesses. In fact, I knew just how George felt, like a spirit with a boundary instead of like a body, and detached from the way that others perceived him, his real self only bouncing about inside his shell. I described George Emerson to Gast with pleasure.

Gast leaned toward me, conspiratorially close, and whispered, "Which one is real?" As he did so, he dropped his hand loosely on my shoulder; a few ashes from the end of his Camel went tumbling down into the folds of my shirt.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, which one is real?! I defy you to prove you have any more concept of Charles Cosgrove than you do of George

Emerson! You probably know George Emerson better, and yet you're supposed to believe that there's a man named Charles Cosgrove wandering around out there! How is it you can't believe the same thing about George Emerson?"

And with that, Gast left me.

I was still holding *A Room With A View*, and I looked down at it. The book seemed to have acquired a new and unfamiliar weight in my hands. As I tucked it into my backpack – and with it, for the time being, my tenuous connection with Gast – I was aware of a peculiar and unexpected emptiness inside me.



I began to be included in the general conversation at the office, a development for which, once I realized the full implications, I was not always thankful. For some reason or another, Pinzey took me into his confidence. He was not interested in the *Letters*, or in literature at all, and so while I was grateful, initially, for his attentions, I am ashamed to say he bored me.

One afternoon as I was filling up my coffee, he approached me and put his hand on my arm.

"Lundquist. I have to tell you something," he said. I let him lead me into a corner. He glanced over his shoulder and then looked at me for a minute, nodding slightly, the edges of his mouth turned upwards in an anticipatory smile. "I had a date last night, and it took half the night, but . . . she took it in the ass."

This was clearly intended to be good news.

"Why?" was all I could think to say.

"Why? Why!" Pinzey stared at me. "This is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me! What do you mean, why!"

Junior came out of the bathroom. Pinzey grabbed him as he walked past and told him, "Rachel took it in the ass!"

While Junior encouraged him for details, I slipped back to my desk. Gast watched me walk across the room. He lit a cigarette and said, just loud enough for me to hear, "How can you stand them?"

I was saved the embarrassment of answering. The door rattled, and Swindoll Senior burst in.

"Well I've done it! He's off! I got him off! Which means that I have single-handedly bailed this firm out of the remaining mess of the heap of messes that was the legacy of our – thank God – gagged and silent partner Cosgrove! Close the place down! Everyone, we're going out for drinks! No excuses! Put down that pen! There'll be no more work today. Gast! Pinzey! One of you call up Franklin's Pub and tell them we'll be in, all of us. Tell him to chill the champagne. I said to put that down! Are you new? Stupid? Gast! Call Franklin's Pub!"

I dropped the papers I was holding onto the desk before me, and went hunting instead for my sweater.

"Thank God he won," Gast said. "We'd be in hell now if he hadn't."

"They weren't out twenty minutes!" Swindoll shouted. He was stout, red-faced, and quivering with excitement. "If Cosgrove had done it, they'd have been out for three days, adding up the spoils of their own lawsuits. How can a man piss off so many people? But then I step up to the plate, and our client's in Chick and Ruth's deli right this minute, eating a pastrami sandwich and offending his waitress! Because of me! Come on, let's go get those drinks!"

We piled ourselves into jackets and set off down the sidewalk towards Franklin's Pub. Before we even got inside, Swindoll began calling, "Champagne all around!"

When we'd finally all pushed through the door, Junior claimed a table for us and said to the waitress, "I'll have a margarita."

Swindoll thumped down next to his son. "The hell you will, boy! This is my party. You'll have champagne. Gast, Gast, sit here, young man! What's this I hear about you not wanting to go to law school?" Swindoll pulled Gast down next to him. There was a fire burning in the fireplace behind them, and I stood against the warm stones. A waitress brought me a glass of champagne, and began to set the other glasses around the table.

"No, thank you," Gast said to her, ignoring Swindoll.

Swindoll leaned close to Gast and roared, "I want to talk to you! I understand that you don't really want to go to law school."

"What are you talking about?" Gast said.

"You men think that just because our office doors are closed, you can talk privately. I heard you yesterday, wandering around the office, moody and muttering, and telling everyone that the law was not the noble profession it's cracked up to be. No, don't deny it. That's a direct quote. If there's something bothering you Gast, I'm your man. Come and see me. We'll talk. I'd hate for you to throw away a perfectly good future with the law over something that we could fix. And, no pressure, but I do pay you well as an investment in my future, and the future of this firm. Oh yes!"

The waitress appeared with a bottle of champagne in each hand. "Fill me up," Swindoll said, "and leave the bottle, sweetheart." He handed her a twenty-dollar tip.

"I never said I'd go to law school," Gast said. "Though I have to admit that the idea of Junior being my clerk in three years is amusing."

At this, Junior stood up in a huff, and joined Pinzey, who had stopped to speak to some friends of his at the bar.

"Oh thank God!" Swindoll said when he was gone. "That boy always conspires to ruin my parties. Margarita, my ass! I can't believe he's even my son. You, Gast, should have been my son."

You're a bright young man! What else is there besides the law, where you can make a difference in the world?"

"I'm a philosopher," Gast said tentatively. I strained to hear.

"You want to be one?" Swindoll bellowed back at him.

"One either is or isn't," Gast said.

"Well, what exactly do you hope to get out of that? Philosophers never get to celebrate great court victories! They're poor, and usually drunkards too. Philosophy! You can't eat philosophy, Gast."

I tried to ease past the table just then, to make an unnecessary trip to the restroom, when Swindoll grabbed my arm and pulled me down into the seat that Junior had left empty.

"Lundquist! Tell me your philosophy," he said, stressing the word philosophy, "on drinking alone. Gast here is thumbing his nose at my champagne, and yet he tells me he's a philosopher. You know what, Gast? I think even Socrates drank at parties."

"I don't really have a philosophy about that," I said.

"Closet drinkers!" Swindoll sneered. He called to the waitress, "Sweetheart! Another bottle over here! These men's glasses are dry." He turned to Gast. "Please have some champagne with me to celebrate my victory. Would you rather have something else?" He turned to the waitress again. "Sweetheart, bring Gast a nice, dark, manly beer." When the girl was gone, he asked me again, "What do you think of closet drinkers?"

"I think they're less likely to make fools of themselves in public," I said – rather carefully, I thought.

Gast smirked. "I'm not sure one can actually be a fool in private," he said. "I think there has to be a witness."

"I'm not stupid, Gast," Swindoll said, though he didn't seem to be offended. "You young men think you're very smart, don't you? You think you're practicing philosophy, but what you're really doing is crafting legal arguments on the point of reasonable doubt.

You can be all kinds of things and still be a lawyer, Gast. Philosopher, writer, poet, crusader, teacher, prophet, take your pick. But think about it, because Kite and I have been talking to Cosgrove about that scholarship. You are candidate number one." Swindoll looked at me. "Didn't you say you want to go to law school?"

"Yes."

"Don't talk too much to Gast, then. He's liable to change your mind. Which, incidentally, is another reason why he'd make a fantastic lawyer. I love him like a son." He called to the waitress again. "Sweetheart! Did you hear about my victory?" He rose, his champagne flute wobbling, to follow the waitress.

"What do you think of the boss?" Gast said.

"He's a little intense."

"Look! There's his lover."

The man who had just entered the bar was tall and heavy, and he announced his presence to Swindoll by smacking him heartily on the shoulder. Swindoll turned abruptly towards him and their right hands found one another in an exuberant handshake. They were easy with one another.

"But Swindoll has a son!" I said, watching the men settle in closely at the bar. "He doesn't greet him like a lover."

"They can't exactly kiss here."

"Are you sure they're lovers?"

"Everyone says so," Gast said. "Everyone knows. Does it bother you?"

"Why would it?"

"I don't know. Do you really want to be a lawyer?"

"I guess so," I told him. "My father is."

"That's the worst reason of all."

"What is it to you if I go to law school or not? I hardly know you."

"You just told Swindoll that you don't have a philosophy about closet drinkers," Gast said. "What do you have a philosophy about?"

"Well, nothing, actually," I said, surprised by the question. "I was trying to be nice."

"I don't believe that. There's something about you," Gast said, leaning in closer to me. "It's in the way you hold your head, just a little bit down, like you want to be ignored, like you're afraid someone will ask you a question, like I did the other day. But when you thought about that question... God, Lundquist! Your face lit up! Your eyes looked attentive and I'd never seen them really attentive before. You have too much potential to squander it in a career."

"Potential for what?"

"Potential for anything!" he said. "Are you sure you're not a philosopher?"

I thought of how my father had counseled me about what major to declare in college, of how Nicole had informed me that if I could find a job that paid at least forty thousand dollars a year, we could buy a house with our combined salaries. When I had accepted a much lower salary at Swindoll, Cosgrove and Kite, she had been displeased. I was imagining what it would be like to tell Nicole that I wanted to be a philosopher, when I remembered that I didn't have to tell her anything anymore.

"I really don't think I am," I answered Gast, finally. He seemed disappointed.

"Well at least you took a moment even to think about the question," he said. "Exactly the way you did in the office, the other day. You may not consider yourself a philosopher, but I recognize that look on your face. You'd waste all that on the law."

"But surely the innocent people..." I said, thinking of my father's favorite dinnertime subject.

"Don't be one of those, Lundquist, the innocence crusaders, please! You'll disappoint me. Very few people who get arrested are

innocent. We have a splendid criminal justice system, almost foolproof. There's a statistic. If I could remember it, I'd tell you."

"If you spent a little more time thinking about your work and the law, you probably could tell me. Don't you think it's worth it, if you can free that one innocent person?"

"No," Gast said.

"How can you say that?" I asked in surprise, but Gast wasn't listening to me. He was looking at his watch.

"I have to go." Gast stood up and pulled his coat and satchel off the back of his chair. "I have a class at five-fifteen."

"All right," I said. I was certain that I had shown myself to be too conservative, too conventional, to be of interest to him. But he paused for a moment after slipping on his coat.

"About this business of being a philosopher," he said. "Maybe you just haven't been exposed to the right book. The right book at the right time is everything. I was thinking that you might want to read Plato's *Symposium*. I think you'd like it. And we could talk about it over beers some time. Would you like to talk about it over beers some time?"

"Sure," I said.

With a smile that looked curiously like relief, he was gone.



I went that very evening to get the book. In the Classics aisle, I picked up *The Dialogues of Plato* and gazed at the cover. The bearded men, the robes, the marble steps and arches of Raphael's "The School of Athens" seemed – in a way that Rilke had not – remote. I thumbed through the pages. The name of Socrates was, of course, familiar to me. The other Greek names I did not read, but only took in by sight, uncertain how to pronounce them.

I put the book down and picked up a Penguin Classics *Symposium*, the cover of which – as the small print on the back of the book informed me – showed Aristotle and Plato “seated round Philosophy.”

I was sliding *Symposium* back into its place on the shelf when another book caught my eye. It was a massive book with a plain paper cover, colored somewhere between gray and army green, simply titled *Plato*. Its bulk and its plainness appealed to me. Feeling suddenly excited, I carried it to the register.

The book was timelessness itself – fat, heavy, full of the thinnest possible pages. Though I went through the first several dialogues quickly, the experience of it was solemn, leisurely, profound. As Socrates discussed and proved, with elegant argument, ideas that I recognized from my own life as the doctrine of turning the other cheek, of heaven, hell, and purgatory, I felt that something huge and important had happened to me. The emptiness that Gast had revealed inside me began – miraculously – to fill.



Nicole and I had fought almost continuously since we’d graduated, once our relationship lost the context and distraction of college. In the weeks preceding our breakup, though, we’d begun to settle into a pattern of quiet and uneventful domesticity, and this made it all the more unexpected to her, I think, when she found the yellow legal pad on which I’d been listing my belongings. She thought I was planning to leave her, but looking back, I think that it was more of an attempt to define myself through what was around me. What finally ended our relationship was that nothing of hers made it on the list.

The day I missed work – the day before Gast introduced me to Rilke – I’d been looking for a place to live. It had been easy enough to leave. I’d circled a few likely prospects in the classifieds,

made a few phone calls, and found myself, in a matter of hours, at Hilda Noon's door. Her house was a split-level with vinyl siding. The front yard sloped. The back yard, which I could see through the chain link fence, was overgrown along the edges, and marginally covered with pale brown shags of grass. Her advertisement had suggested a fairly large bedroom and run of the house. The place was nothing like that neatly polished, furnished, and trimmed cottage of Nicole's, but then, I didn't imagine that Hilda would expect much from me because of it. So without any real misgivings, I went ahead and rang the bell.

Hilda gave me a cheerful, casual tour. "I'm not much of a housekeeper," she apologized, as she led me back downstairs. "Once a month, I overhaul the whole thing – you know, drag out the vacuum and all. Never saw the point of making a bed. I always had trouble with laundry, always washing my checkbook and dyeing my underwear blue."

Hilda had two dogs, a great big hairy one named Ralph, and a stocky black and brown pit bull mix named Midget. While they sniffed my outstretched hand and fearlessly wagged their tails in approval, I filled Hilda in on my situation. I was twenty-three. I was on my own, for the first time, without a mate or family. I was clerking in a law firm and saving for law school. This was not a passion. It was a conscious and responsible decision. I did not know where my passions lay. At this point in our interview, Hilda pursed her lips, nudged Ralph off of me with a fluffy pink house shoe, and asked if I could afford to pay the rent. I said I could, and the bargain was sealed.

Hilda and I fell quickly into a routine. We often shared a pot of coffee, sometimes sitting together in the kitchen on weekend mornings, browsing through the paper. One morning about a week after I got settled in, she waved a section of the paper at me as I walked into the kitchen, and read aloud, "Free golden retriever

with papers. Moving. Must find loving adoption home. What do you think about that?"

She handed me the paper and I glanced down at the page. It was the classified section, pets, and she'd circled about half a dozen advertisements.

"So?" I said, sitting down at the table across from her.

"You're not an entrepreneur, are you? I'll go get the dog, keep it for a week or two, and then sell it with its papers for a few hundred. Easy money. You like dogs, don't you?"

Ralph sniffed around my calves, looked up at me, and wagged his tail.

"Sure I like dogs. But they're not exactly merchandise."

"I know! Just think how we could help them."

"I don't know." I was skeptical. I tossed the paper on the counter on top of three more papers, a week's worth of mail, and an empty box of coffee filters. I poured myself a second cup of coffee. "I think it's a little shady."

"Well if it wasn't for the shade, we'd burn up from the Goddamn exposure," Hilda said.

I couldn't argue with that.

And so Hilda began to come home, at intervals, with dogs. They came with leashes, and ceramic bowls, and rawhide bones of various sizes, and I was always tripping over one of them on my way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. The male dogs peed on the potted plants lined up alongside the sliding glass door, and one of the females did other, more offensive business repeatedly in the corner of the living room behind Hilda's arm chair. I began to spend more and more time alone in my room, driven to moments of wistfulness when I recalled that Nicole wouldn't so much as set a glass down without a coaster. I couldn't remember why it used to annoy me so much when, in moments of compulsive cleaning, she'd push at my toes with the vacuum cleaner.

I didn't think things could get more inconvenient. But after we'd turned over a poodle, a basset hound, and a Chesapeake Bay retriever, I met Carlos.

At six o'clock one Saturday morning, a three-year-old boy negotiated my doorknob and asked me to make him a waffle. From the pocket of his pajamas, he offered me a damp fifty-dollar bill.

I took him downstairs and hoisted him up on the counter to watch while I made him breakfast. Since it was cold in the kitchen, I opened up the oven for heat and gave the boy one of Hilda's sweaters, which I found in the microwave. I let all the dogs out. Besides Ralph and Midget, our current refugees included a tall, impatient Saluki with amorous intentions toward Ralph, and a disgruntled Chow with hair so matted that she needed to be shaved. It was snowing lightly, and as I leaned against the counter, sipping my coffee while my companion tore apart his waffle and dropped the pieces onto the floor, I felt curiously domestic and peaceful. We'd probably been up for about an hour when we were interrupted by a roar from upstairs.

"Andrew!" A man thumped down the steps and advanced upon the kitchen wearing only a pair of delicate gray briefs. "Where's the rest of Daddy's money?"

"Here." Andrew handed his father the wadded fifty, which I'd politely declined. The man was a good deal younger than Hilda. He was even younger than I. He plucked the child off the counter and flipped him upside down. Andrew giggled. Hilda came shuffling down the stairs just then, wrapping her robe around her waist and securing the belt with uncommon modesty.

"This is Carlos," she said, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"We've met," Carlos told Hilda, depositing the boy on the floor. To me he said, "Don't think I don't know what's going on."

Another morning, not long after, Carlos came uninvited into my room and sat down next to me on the sofa bed. It was a

Saturday, and fifteen minutes before, I'd heard Hilda slam the front door and rev up her truck.

"Are you fucking her?" Carlos said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. I know she's screwing around on me. I want to know if it's with you."

"Hilda's not screwing around," I said, fairly certain that she wasn't.

"You know she's the mother of my kid. Some mother. She's also forty-one years old. It's time she stopped this horseshit and took care of her family."

"I really don't know anything about Hilda's personal life."

"I *am* Hilda's personal life!"

"Hilda doesn't confide in me," I insisted.

"I just want your word that you'll keep your eye on her."

"I can't do that. I mean, I never see her," I said. "I rarely see her. We don't talk much."

Finally he stood up and started out of my room. I ought to have left well enough alone at that point, but I couldn't help asking him what he was going to do.

"I'll slap the bitch upside the head if I have to," he said, and slammed my door behind him.

The months that I lived with Hilda Noon were an odyssey of verbal abuse, broken bottles, threats, petty theft, and child neglect. But there were interludes of peace. One Sunday they took Andrew to a hockey game and invited me along. I actually enjoyed being with Hilda and Carlos on a rare occasion of warmth and intimacy. They almost seemed like a family.

The next day, I went home after work with a warmhearted feeling. It didn't last. Carlos had drunk an entire six-pack of my beer. He and Hilda were already arguing, and I was afraid to go back downstairs to make my dinner. I sat upstairs and tried to read instead.

"You asshole! You bastard! You son of a bitch!" Hilda screamed. I heard Andrew start to whimper and call to his mother. Things crashed, Carlos cursed and yelled, and eventually, as I discovered in the morning, put a hole in the wall with his powerful fist.



As I settled into my new home, my routine changed a little. Hilda's house was in Arnold, a suburb of Annapolis, and my old car, which already spluttered and rattled and labored in general, under the pressure of its 200,000 miles, now had the added stress of a half-hour roundtrip commute. The money required to keep gas in its tank came out of the money that I would have otherwise spent on food. I started buying noodles and rice in bulk. I went straight to bed with *Plato* in the early evenings, and often fell asleep with the light still on.

I now arrived at work sometimes a full hour earlier than I had done before. Previously, I'd stomped in out of the slush and cold to find Gast at his desk, sipping coffee and translating things out of Greek. Now, more often than not, I found Gast with Pinzey at the window, smoking. It surprised me a little, since I hadn't known them to be friends. I didn't ask what they were doing. I did come to understand, though, after a while, that it had something to do with Swindoll. They always slid back to their desks whenever he arrived. Once, they failed to see his car drive past the front of our building, and when Swindoll came waddling through the door and demanded to know what they were doing, Pinzey sloshed coffee on his crisp white shirt. At last, on a morning when Junior wasn't in the office, I discovered the reason for their daily stakeouts.

"Gast!" Pinzey called.

It was ten of nine, and Gast had already abandoned the window. I'd asked him an idle question about his homework and had launched him into a lecture describing the many and various applications of the word "logos."

Pinzey crumpled up a piece of paper and threw it at him. "Gast! They're here!"

Mid-sentence, Gast sprang from his chair and took up a spot beside Pinzey at the window. I joined them. Across the street, partially obscured by the foggy billowing of its own exhaust, rumbled a long, dark car.

"It's the lover," Gast said.

"It's definitely a man with Swindoll in that driver's seat," Pinzey said. "Definitely a man!"

"It's a man," Gast confirmed. I struggled to make out Swindoll's round pink face through the distance, the fog, the salt, and the ice obscuring the car windows.

"Do you suppose he'll kiss him?" Pinzey said. "I can't believe it's true. They go around together in public! I'll bet Junior's bus hadn't even pulled away last night and they were already together!"

"What's wrong with that?" Gast said.

"Fags are supposed to keep that stuff to themselves!" Pinzey said.

I stared at him. I wanted to refute what he said, if only so that Pinzey wouldn't think that I agreed. But there wasn't time to assemble anything. Gast, who was never at a loss for words, had already turned on Pinzey.

"You're right. I should be harsh and cruel and alone. It's not my business to love fearlessly and without self-consciousness. I shouldn't be genuine. I'm sorry." He turned abruptly and returned to his desk.

"I don't know what he's talking about," Pinzey said. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

I glanced out the window. The car was gone. "Swindoll's on his way in," I said to Pinzey. I suppose Pinzey couldn't face him just then, because he hurried off to the bathroom, muttering. I sat back down at my desk.

"What was that all about?" I asked Gast finally.

"Did you like it? Did I convince you?"

"Convince me of what?"

"It's from a play I've been thinking of writing. It's going to be the climax. It sort of puts the whole question in a kind of context, don't you think?"

I wanted to ask, "What question?" Instead I said, "You're writing a play?"

"I wasn't officially writing one until this very moment, when I had an opportunity to quote myself. Now I think I'll go ahead and write one," he said.

Swindoll blustered into the room, stamping his feet and honking his nose into pink and white napkins. He was followed almost immediately by his client, and a few minutes later, Kite joined them. Pinzey returned from the bathroom and made a great show of ignoring Gast. Gast's speech had the opposite effect on me. Speaking with him at all, in fact, affected me like the first surging chords of an anthem. Before the day was over, I asked Gast if I could take him out for a drink one evening. He looked up from his work with an odd, vague expression of surprise and indecision before he grinned and accepted enthusiastically.

"I know just the place, just the place I'd like to take you," he said, as if it had been I who'd accepted his invitation. He gave me directions to the sushi bar on Main Street, and late Friday evening, having cashed a birthday check from my parents that I'd been saving for a month, I met him there.

"He's here," Gast said to the waitress attending to him. "You can bring it now." She returned in a moment with a carafe of sake, and set two tiny cups in front of us.

"Have you ever had sake?"

"No."

Gast poured me a little, and I took a hesitant sniff. It was warm. When I tasted it, the flavor was a disconcerting combination of vodka and rubbing alcohol. Gast poured himself another cup.

"I ordered two miso soups and a California roll to start. I love this place. I used to come here with a friend. He loved it because he loves all things in moderation. He was quite annoying that way." Gast leaned over the table to me. "I was thinking we ought to meet regularly like this, for conversation. We could come here every Friday. What do you think?"

I wanted to be Gast's friend, and I agreed. But when the waitress brought the soups, I ordered a glass of wine.

I admired the restaurant's red walls. Cruets of soy sauce and slender tube vases of Gerbera daisies adorned the sleek, spare tables. The room was dim and filled with the tinkle of laughter, glassware and ice.

"I was engaged to be married, you know," Gast said. "When I started school."

I looked up at him in surprise. "How would I know that?"

"I thought someone might have mentioned it. Maybe around the office."

"No," I said. "What happened?"

"I called it off. We were planning a wedding and everything. It's not a very original story, actually. I started out normal enough. Then one day I looked at my great job, my great paycheck, my great girl, and I realized that I didn't want any of it. It all came over me at the same time, too. You must realize how strange and sudden the whole thing was. I threw everything away. It's like when you decide you're not the person you want to be, and so you throw away all of your clothes and start again. I changed all the exterior things. I've only now been considering the interior. But the exterior things are important too, don't you think? All of it together. And look at me now! I live in a tiny cramped apartment

that's always cold in the winter and hot in the summer, with a great debt looming up at me, and a job I hate almost as much as the last one yet doesn't pay as well. I went back to school, you see. I'm getting my Master's at St. John's."

"Why?"

"I want to be educated."

"I mean, what will you be when you get it?"

"I'll be educated."

"You're being obtuse."

"I am not," he said. "I mean it. I'm poor. I try to enjoy that. It has its moments. It's rather romantic, but sometimes a man gets tired of being upstanding and moral. I mean, if it's such a tremendous effort to do the right thing, can it be the right thing? I don't know. Is there a point when a man decides what to do with his life? Everything bothers me. I only told you about the engagement, though, because I wanted to talk about love."

My heart fluttered. Words slipped out of me as though shaken loose. "The god of love has found no man bold enough to sing his praises as they should be sung," I quoted.¹

Gast smiled at me. He seemed relieved, as though my answer had bridged some gap between us.

"You've started reading *Symposium*," he said. "I'm so glad."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't make it through Agathon's dinner," I told him. "I don't know what love is. I was in it with Nicole, at least I thought I was. And I don't have anything good to say about it."

"Do you believe in it? Do you think it's possible? That there is something transcendent, something greater than us that's not a God, not an entity, but something else entirely?"

"Why do you ask?" I said, when I suppose what I really meant was, "Why do you ask me?"

¹ Plato. *Symposium*. Trans. Michael Joyce. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961. Reprinted by permission.

"Well, that was the other thing about my aborted marriage. I wasn't entirely honest. She called it off too. My reasons were what I said, but hers were that I wouldn't tell her that I loved her."

"But she agreed to marry you anyway? Without you ever having told her?"

"I didn't want to say it. I was afraid it would ruin things, that it would make us normal. She wanted to be normal. She believes in love. She wanted to get married and have a lot of children, and dogs and cats and goldfish, uncles and aunts and cousins, everything. But you know, I'm not so sure about children. Sometimes I look at them and they're wonderful, vulnerable, fresh and inspiring. But sometimes they're revolting. They're no less ugly, vicious or pathetic than the adults who bore them."

His words brought Andrew and Carlos to mind, and I shook the uncomfortable image off. "So you told her that?"

"I never lie. She thought it was an awful thing to say. Intimating that our children would be awful because we were. She said I was a horrible man."

"It is harsh."

"I'm not sure I would have been a good husband anyway."

The waitress came by then, and Gast ordered another carafe of sake and two spicy tuna rolls. I ordered more wine. He lit himself a cigarette and offered one to me. Not wishing to seem insipid, I accepted, and allowed him to light it for me. I had never smoked before, and I didn't find it intrinsically pleasurable now, but there was a comfort in it, in the peaceful silence, in the sharing of a meditation, in this spiritual and platonic coupling, and I enjoyed that immensely. I was, however, glad when my wine arrived and I could supplement the new experience with a more comfortable vice.

Gast began to speak again. "I was too young to marry. I think perhaps one is never old enough to marry. It seems to me that we don't outgrow our faults, they only deepen over time, so

how can waiting make marriage a better prospect? Nothing is sustainable.”

“Not even friendships?”

“Perhaps, but not necessarily, and not at one intensity. Things change, Lundquist, everything changes. The world is in a constant state of flux.”

His observations saddened me, not because I couldn't argue with them, but because I had a vague longing for him to add *but you, but you* to everything, and he did not.

“I don't believe in love,” Gast said. “I think it's a baser strain of the creative impulse that shows itself sooner or later in all men. It's that impulse that makes people stage great romantic scenes. It's nothing more than another artistic medium. Love. It's ridiculous. I believe in companionship, trust, loyalty, affection, sex, and maybe even fidelity, but I don't believe that love exists.”

“It must exist as much as any other work of art.”

“You've hit upon the point. I knew you would. See how I'm stuck?”

“Didn't you tell me that George Emerson was as real as Cosgrove because he was in my mind?”

“Of course I did! That's what I'm saying! My whole philosophy crumbles. It's horrible.”

We left soon after that. We walked through the cold, dark, cobblestone streets, glancing into lighted windows where people sat in front of televisions, or tended to little children, or lingered in their armchairs with glasses of wine. It felt wonderful to be with Gast, to want to go somewhere and to walk there, to actually be a part of the town.

“I've been thinking about abandoning the law entirely and teaching,” Gast said. “The law is too much of a business. There's no inherent sense of right and wrong. You know, money makes us all equals. Only some of us are slaves to what we have, and some of us are slaves to what we want. I would like to do and be

something that doesn't depend upon or revolve around money. I don't know how I'd do it, but I've often thought of founding a school. I suppose I could just found one, have classes meet in my room. I could give degrees, but in the commercial world, they'd be worthless. So my students would really have to want to learn for learning's sake."

He draped his arm so casually and naturally across my shoulders then, that it was a moment before I was taken aback by it.

"No one could afford to come," I said.

"It wouldn't be expensive. I said that."

"I mean no one could afford the time to do something that wouldn't get them any farther through life."

"I thought you were different," he said.

I stepped a little to the side, and his arm fell off my shoulders. We were almost to his apartment.

"For God's sake, Lundquist, women hug each other all the time. What's the matter? It's all right for them."

I thought I'd offended him, and I was surprised when he invited me up for a cup of tea. He lived in a long, deep, third-floor apartment, dimly lit, with hardwood floors and packed bookcases. There was no entrance hallway or sitting room. The front door opened immediately into the kitchen. There were two bedrooms – one closed door, which he acknowledged as his roommate's, and another at the front of the building, opening into the room where we settled.

"You're lucky to have so much quiet and privacy," I told him.

"Don't you?"

"My landlady and her boyfriend tend to have loud fights. And when I left there tonight, we had six dogs in the house – four of them are only passing through. God only knows how many will be there when I get home."

Gast raised his eyebrows in surprise, and asked, "How on earth can you read with all that going on?"

"I manage. Anyway, I'm not going to stay there forever," I said, looking around Gast's room. There were three long blank windows spanning the height of it that looked out over the cobblestone street where we had just been. There were buildings across the street whose balconies looked like ship decks. Rising above them like a beacon in the night, so close that it was blue, gleamed the dome of the State House.

When the teapot whistled, Gast disappeared for a moment, and came back with two mugs of tea. He handed one to me. There was only one chair in the room, and I sat in it. Gast sat down on the corner of his desk. He pulled out his cigarettes and I asked him for one. I leaned forward to receive a light.

"Well, why have I brought you up here? You must find it odd."

I shook my head.

"I only wanted to talk to you. Privately, actually. I want to tell you a story. Is that all right?"

I nodded, and he began.

"I had a roommate who hung himself in college, masturbating. Have you heard of that?" I said I had. "It's really quite common. More common than you might think. After they found him and cut him down, and sent him home to be buried, a lot of things came out about him, one of them being that he was gay. Imagine my surprise, to find out that for three years I'd had a gay roommate. I suppose most people would think about all the times they walked around naked in front of him, or hugged him, or maybe that one rambunctious and emotion-charged moment when they kissed him on the cheek. But all I could think of was how absolutely rotten it was that I never knew."

Gast picked up his cup of tea with long, slender fingers, and lifted it to his lips. "I cared for him," he said simply, when he set

the cup back down again. "That's the awful part. That he never knew that I would have masturbated him. We might have both been . . . not so lonely," were the words he finally chose. "It has a lot to do, really, with why I eventually broke off my engagement. I made up my mind to be more honest about who I was."

"Who you are . . ." I repeated.

He nodded. "I'm being honest with you," Gast said. "I try to be honest with everyone."

"Are you, though? I mean, Pinzey and Swindoll don't know."

"Pinzey and Swindoll don't deserve to know. Why would I tell them? I wouldn't tell them about my sex life if I was straight."

"So you do . . . have a sex life?"

Gast gazed at me, still, unperturbed. "Sam. You do understand the story, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You do understand the significance of my confessions?"

"I think I do," I said.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"You're still here then?"

"Yes."

"Would you go out with me again?"

"Yes," I said.

He leaned down and kissed me. It was a light kiss, dry, innocent, like a kiss between children. It's a moment I remember vividly – the room, the tall windows, the piles of books, the looming ache of potential. Joy and anticipation began at that moment to fluctuate with fear and sorrow. That was the defining characteristic of what I would remember as being the best time of my life.



That night, we got snow. I sat downstairs in Hilda's family room at six the next morning, wrapped in a blanket, sipping my coffee, worrying about Gast. Outside, our current batch of dogs – Ralph and Midget, two golden retrievers, a bloodhound, and the chow – dug in the snow. The bloodhound made his heavy and awkward way back to the sliding glass doors and leaned against them, bellowing to be let back inside.

Eventually, Hilda came halfway down the stairs in her underwear. When she saw me sitting there, watching the dog, she said, "Why don't you let the Goddamn dog in?" and went back upstairs. But I didn't let him in, because he was too big for the house. Every time he turned around, he knocked something over. He slobbered incessantly. Hilda had a gigantic cage for him, big enough for a small giraffe, where she kept him during the day while she waited for a phone call from someone willing to pay five hundred dollars for a two-year-old, overgrown bloodhound that didn't even know his own name, could not sit on command, and who was as likely as not just to cock his leg and let loose a rush of urine to rival a garden hose in volume and force. I couldn't stand to see the great beast in the crate anymore than I could stand him lumbering about the house. So I left him sitting in the snow, where his bellow finally lessened to a whine.

What bothered me about Gast was that I had no way of knowing what to do when I next saw him. Always, for the crucial things, I was so unprepared. My first girl-kiss had caught me similarly off guard. I'd been sitting in the front row of a movie theatre, looking up at *Tarzan, Lord of the Apes*, with the smell of popcorn in the air and the crunch of it underfoot, wrestling with something sticky on the floor that may or may not have been a flattened Junior Mint. I was thirteen. I'd turned to whisper something to my date and I suppose she mistook me. I think it was the tongue that astonished me more than anything, tongue on

my first kiss, warm, squishy, wet foreign matter in my mouth tasting of popcorn and cool from soda.

Still, it wasn't the tongue that marked the memory for me, as much as it was the panic – after all, there was no going back. The kiss shaped everything that came after it. Holding hands was no longer an end in itself, it was now a prelude to a kiss. Kisses would become preludes to other things, and other things would lead to next things...there was no end to the desensitization of pleasures, to the receding significance of every step.

Gast had kissed me. How could we be friends now? My 13-year-old date and I hadn't stayed friends after that girl-kiss, had we? In the days following, I'd found myself met at my locker, receiving notes skidded across the floor in Algebra, intruded upon again by a tongue in the courtyard after school. It was an exaggeration of course, of this thing with Gast. It wasn't the kiss in and of itself that troubled me. It wasn't even the idea of being physical with him, in fact I'm not sure that really troubled me at all. It was the idea of a relationship, of what place Gast would occupy in my life, or at my parents' dinner table. The thing I wondered was, could I, if I had to, in an extreme circumstance, claim him?

I had arrived at no conclusions when Gast called and asked me to go to dinner.

"I'm going to my parents' house," he said. "Why don't you come along?"

"To your parents'?"

"They live in Baltimore. It's an hour's drive, tops. Someone gave my father some tickets to see *Othello*. It's the third time someone's given him tickets, and it's the third time that he's offered them to me. I don't think he remembers that I've already gone twice."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "It's an amazing production. You'll love it."

Mr. and Mrs. Gast seemed like perfectly nice and respectable people, the way that other people's parents almost always do. Their house was large and spacious and clean, and though Gast told me he'd grown up there, I couldn't imagine children in it. There were glass curio cabinets full of Venetian glass and china, Japanese swords on the walls, a piece of driftwood with a scene sculpted on it out of what Gast told me was bone. There were brass rubbings off old Scottish tombstones in the den, and throughout the house there were Flaccotti and sheepskin and real Oriental rugs on the floors. There were silk screens, and pieces of dark, heavy, German furniture, and expensively framed photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Gast looking radiantly happy in exotic places. The back yard, which I only glimpsed by porch light, was not really a yard at all, but a small, manicured, carefully planned and tended garden, with a goldfish pond in the middle of it. Everything inside and out was neatly arranged, stylishly spaced, elegantly appointed. It was, as Gast so aptly put it on our way into the dining room, a place where a child would have to learn to love to read.

After my tour of the house, I had expected something complicated for dinner, but we sat down to a table laden with steaks and roasted red potatoes, salads and cheese. While ice cubes cracked and melted in our tea, and the fan snapped and whirred above us, I minded my manners, laughed at his father's good-natured jokes, and wondered if Gast was going to kiss me again. The idea that *I* might kiss *him*, that I might initiate anything at all, never entered my mind. I couldn't tell what his parents thought or knew, whether they weighed me as a friend or as a lover, with ambivalence or apprehension. They were nice, they behaved as might be expected towards a guest of their son's, and that was all.

Dinner brought out the quintessential aspects of both of us. It consisted pretty much of me trying to think of ways to fit in and

giving Mr. Gast hedging and ill-informed opinions about Bosnia and Kosovo while Gast told his mother that Anthony Burgess hated *A Clockwork Orange*, that Nietzsche was right – not about anything in particular, but just right in a general sense – and that Rousseau had said in his *Confessions* that he always got so excited before a date that he'd have to masturbate before he got there, and never was able to really perform. Because Gast's mother had never read *A Clockwork Orange*, Gast spoke for twenty minutes about how the language after a while began to seep into you and make sense, and how you didn't have to spend much time at all, really, flipping back and forth to the glossary. And Nietzsche wasn't exactly right about everything, he sort of started out right, became partly right, and then skewed off into insanity, dragging the reader with him, because he seemed to make so much sense. Gast assured his mother that he was worth the read, anyway, if you could withstand the ride, and Mr. Gast, who owned every book Tom Clancy had ever written, said that Nietzsche was a Goddamn Nazi, which, of course, was ridiculous. Nonetheless, Gast remained firm on one point – Rousseau was a chronic and hopeless masturbator.

I tried to find a balance between an appreciation of my friend and an appreciation of the opinions of my hosts. As in the office and in every other place in my life, I did not inspire or entertain, encourage or inform. Still, when Gast smiled at me with a mouth full of blueberry pie, and kicked me under the table when his mother stuttered out an inquiry as to whether or not Nietzsche was a Christian, I felt as if there must be something about me, some slight sound, some weak signal emitting from me, that made me worth his effort to pursue.

When we were safely buckled back into my car, I turned to Gast and asked him the question I'd wanted to ask all evening. "Do they know?"

"Yes. I think the next time I see them, I'm going to tell them that Shakespeare was gay," Gast said. "I'm memorizing all of the obviously homosexual sonnets. You know they had a

Shakespearean sonnet read at their wedding? My father will be furious. Every time he heard Clinton say, 'Don't ask, don't tell,' he said, 'Don't fuck anyone up the ass, don't go to jail.'"

"It must have made you feel awful," I said, feeling suddenly a little awful myself.

"No. The thing is, I don't get the prejudice. I mean, you heard Pinzey in the office the other day, bragging. What occurs to me is, how is her asshole any different from mine?"

I considered this. "You don't like your parents very much, do you?" I asked.

"They're stupid," he said. "But I like them well enough. These days, I kind of like everything. All experiences. Even vulgar ones. I used to let my father upset me terribly, but even when I was miserable and sobbing, there was still an analytical part of my mind that couldn't just *feel*. I always saw myself objectively, there was always the thought that I was faking the misery, that I enjoyed being miserable. It used to bother me, but you know what? It's true. I do love it. The squalid, the horrible, the painful, the tragic, every bit as much as I love the marvelous. I love life, that's the thing. Every bit of life. So you see how little it matters to me if you make me unhappy."

It was seven-thirty, and we parked the car a few blocks away from the theater. It wasn't in the best of neighborhoods. It was an industrial-looking area, with alleyways and overpasses where traffic rumbled over us. Stoplights changed colors for no one on deserted streets. In one particular patch of darkness, Gast pulled me into a wall and kissed me again, his fingertips fumbling at my zipper, the bony rounds of his hip bones making, I discovered later, small greenish bruises on mine.

We didn't get settled in our seats until the lights were going down.

Gast took my hand. "This is a stunning production. It's marvelous," he said, and it was. I'd never seen a homosexual

production of anything before. There were few props, and nothing dominated the stage except in the final scene, which was played out in and around a beautiful four-post bed.

When Desdemona rose from this bed, he was nude, soft and muted behind sheer fabric that draped the frame in arcs and swoops, and cascaded down around him on all four sides. The actor *was* Desdemona – raised from the imagination flawless, indistinct, ideal. Gast beside me was rapt and still. I never turned to look at him, or him at me, but something transpired between us during the murder. When the play was over, the curtain calls done, and most of the audience drained out the door, Gast and I still sat motionless in our seats, stunned into silence by the power, the beauty, the immensity of Art. I understood then that he hadn't brought me here to witness the tragedy of intemperate jealousy, but to see this man, this dream, this phenomenon, treated with ignorance and cruelty. He'd brought me here to witness how the beautiful, the natural, can be mistrusted and misunderstood, and ultimately oppressed right out of existence.



When I saw Gast back at work on Monday, he greeted me with all the reserve and underlying good humor he'd always had, and nothing more. I hadn't expected him to behave any differently in the office, but I was disappointed. He said nothing about our having gone to the play together, and I did my best to behave as if it hadn't happened. Still, I couldn't help wondering if he, too, felt fluttery and nervous. When he sat at his desk that afternoon during lunchtime and made no more progress with his sandwich than to unwrap it, I suspected that he did. I believed that his failure to look over at me was an indication that we shared something – something that might be damaged if it was examined too soon.

At the end of the day, which was a hectic one, Pinzey, predictably, began to talk about beer. We were orbiting the office, shuffling papers and turning out lights, and seeing that things were in a general sort of order.

"Let's go to the Ramshead," Pinzey said. "They have Chinese beer."

"Forget it, Pinzey," Junior said. "Too sweet."

"It's not the only thing they serve, you know. You could have anything you wanted."

"You made it sound as if we all ought to have Chinese beer."

"I did not!"

"Didn't he, Gast?"

"Oh, hell!" Pinzey shoved an arm through his coat sleeve and started for the door. "Go where you want."

"I'm coming," Junior said. "I'm coming."

"Lundquist?" Pinzey said to me. I shook my head. They'd been asking me for the past several weeks to go with them, but since Pinzey had told me about what he'd done with his girlfriend, I'd been declining, in hopes of discouraging further revelations from him. Besides, I was hoping for a chance to speak to Gast alone.

"Gast?" Pinzey stopped so suddenly in the doorway that Junior bounced off him.

Gast waved his hand in assent. "I'll see you there," he said, and they left. He turned to me then, frowning. "Why aren't you coming?" he asked.

"I don't really feel like being in a group," I told him.

"Don't you have any friends?" he said. "I can't figure you out."

"I only ever seem to have one," I told him, carefully. "It was that way for me when Nicole and I were friends...They take so much energy. I tend to drift toward intimacy if I spend time with

anyone, and I'm not sure if I can be intimate with more than one person at a time."

"Why not?"

"Well, can a person? Be intimate with more than one person at a time? It's complicated, being intimate with a person."

"We're not intimate. Yet you get along with me well enough. And surely I'm not the only person that you know."

"I thought we were intimate. I've been intimate with you," I said.

"Well of course, Sam, I only meant..."

"And I've written you a poem," I told him. "Over the weekend."

"Have you really?" A look flashed across his face – gratitude, embarrassment, and, again, it seemed so strange – relief. Encouraged, I reached into the front pocket of my backpack for the carefully folded paper, and handed it to him. He took it from me, looking down at it dumbly. The silence was unbearable.

"Poetry," Gast said, finally, "is an imposter. It's misery reaching out for company. It's only the pretense of an emotion. If it were a real emotion, it would prompt real action, it would prompt something besides scribbling, *Oh God*, Sam, do I have to read it?"

"Of course not." I took the paper back from him. I felt the same warm, nauseous sensation I had experienced when once, in a moment of lightheartedness in our kitchen, I'd grabbed Nicole and tickled her, and she'd pushed me, roughly, on the shoulder, and told me to go away. I'd taken him off guard, was all, I thought to myself; I'd touched some nerve, pressed some button, that I didn't know was there.

"It'd be different if you just burst into a recital spontaneously, if we were in the middle of something that moved you, and you spoke poetically because of it. Or if you'd mailed me the written poem in a letter, or slipped it under my door. But you don't walk up to someone and *hand* them a poem, Sam! You're

hopeless as a lover. I have no idea why I'm even bothering with you."

I picked up my bag and turned to go. His reception of the poem had confirmed my suspicion that I was not a talent, that it was only loneliness that had made me – as it had countless common, vulgar and complacent men before me – believe myself to be a poet.

"Look, I'm sorry," Gast said before I reached the door. "I don't know what comes over me. Why don't you come have a beer with me?"

"With Pinzey and Junior, you mean?"

"Just me."

I agreed, and we walked to Franklin's Pub. We claimed an empty table in front of the fireplace, and ordered two beers.

"I'm so glad you got *Symposium*," Gast said, after a moment.

I wasn't accustomed to quarrelling, and then to picking up former conversations as though nothing had happened. I wasn't sure what he meant by it. But I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Why?" I asked him.

"It gives me a chance to have good, solid, meaningful conversation. It's all I have in my life, you know. None of those men in the office would have a good talk with me. Haven't you ever read something wonderful, and then been frustrated because there wasn't anyone you could talk to about it? You know how sometimes you want someone to have the same experience? It's like sharing a memory when you've read the same book as someone else."

"Don't you talk about books in school?" I asked him. "I thought that was all you did. Great books."

"It is. It's really the most wonderful program. There's no other college like it. There are no lectures, and no professors, only

tutors who sit around a table with us. We're encouraged to actually think there, not just to memorize and regurgitate. You would love it, Sam. It would bring out the latent philosopher in you," he said, teasing me.

"Did you read *Symposium* in school?"

"No. I actually found it myself. I thought you might want to read it because you don't seem to mind something that's going to make you think. There's nothing worse than people who don't contribute, who don't espouse, who don't contradict, or conflict, who aren't passionate about anything – God! Sam! They're everywhere! They make up the world. People like you, though, are like glints of sunlight on a dull flat stone. You make the stone look glittering when it's not. People like you give the human race a decent name."

"You're making fun of me."

"I am not. You're the artist as a young man."

"I don't have a single artistic skill," I said, thinking of my failure with the poem.

"You must. Anyway, it isn't the talent, it's the soul that matters. You're discerning. Art is the only thing that people have, you know, the only thing that's their own."

"I thought all you had in your life was conversation," I said, but he ignored me.

"Just accept what I say for discussion's sake."

"Well then, for discussion's sake, I'll say that love is all people have."

"No! That's one of the very things I mean when I say that people think they have things, but in truth they don't really exist! People have a lot of feelings, but none of them can be gathered up and described singly. Love is a completely arbitrary combination of any number of varied and spontaneous emotions. It's always a different mixture, and almost every pleasant combination, and a few unpleasant ones, are labeled love! Hatred is easier to prove than love is. Just like it's easier proving the devil than God."

"But it makes the fundamental difference in life, letting another person be close to you. Other people make things better. And I don't care if love is one emotion or a great mess of them, if I feel good, who cares?"

"But *do* you feel good, Sam? Do you really? Or are you nervous and insecure? Are you worrying about what people might say?"

He fixed me with his black eyes and held me like a specimen in front of him.

"I'm just saying that one thing human beings have in their lives is each other. And maybe that's all that they have."

"But it's too complicated, having friends and lovers. You said so yourself. You don't have any friends."

"I said I only ever have one."

"You're a complication, Sam, do you know that? Here you are, thinking I'm the complication, but really it's you. Just accepting someone into your life is to accept complication. It's not whether or not to be in pain, but when. Do you cut someone out of your life at the onset, and bleed that way, or do you wait until someone cuts you out, and takes a piece of you with them? Or you could leave it up to destiny or fate. A Mack truck with bad brakes. A slippery bathtub."

"It's too bad it's not that easy," I snapped. "You never see things actually starting with someone, even if you see them impending, and God knows you know when you're in them, but when did they begin? Was there a point where you might have changed your mind, and it slipped past unnoticed? And endings! Things end long before anyone notices and makes a thing of it. Human emotions die off quietly. It's only when you recognize that they're gone that they hurt and become violent. It isn't their falling away that hurts. It's the frantic thrashing about to get them back!"

I was thinking of how awful it had been to fight with Nicole, of how ugly we could be to one another, of how every time we

argued, at some point in the middle of it, I'd want to take it all back. I'd want to return to a time when there was only potential between us.

Gast said, "Look. I'm sorry. I don't know how it is that I stop saying the right thing and start saying the wrong thing. I can't help it. I can't curb what I would say, and still be true to myself."

"I don't care if you're true to yourself," I said, irritably. "Maybe it'd be better if you lied."

"Why don't you come up to my apartment? We'll relax. I'll make you a cup of tea."

"I'd rather stay right here and have a good drink."

"We'll drink, then. I have a few things. Come up. Would you like to read a novel? I always find that when I need to relax, reading a novel is the thing to do."

"But I came here to relax. And I *was* relaxed, until you started in."

"Oh give it a rest," Gast said. "Come up. Come on."

"Which novel?"

"It doesn't matter. Something off my bookshelf. You pick it out."

"Oh, all right."

We paid our bill and I followed him out into the street.

Gast's apartment was cold. He poured me a generous goblet of wine and a not-so-generous one for himself. He sat on his mattress and leaned back against the wall. I sat down on the floor near his feet.

"Come up here," he said. "You'll be more comfortable."

"I'm comfortable."

"But you have to be able to see the words, so you can read along while I'm reading to you."

"I don't. I can hear you just fine. What's the good of someone reading aloud to me if I have to read along with them? I might as well read to myself."

"But you'll have to take a turn."

"So hand me the book," I said. But I stood up all the same, and joined him on the mattress. He picked up a book that he had obviously already been reading, which lay open on the floor, and began to read right from the open page. He read without stuttering or tiring, without confusing consonants, or mispronouncing a single word, as I was certain I would have done. It was Gast at his best, at his most natural, and I soon forgot that I was myself, and he himself, that we sat so close, and that it ought to feel odd, but didn't. We slid into an intimacy that had been unimaginable to me before. He read for maybe an hour. When he reached the end of the chapter, he closed the book and sat up, leaving me uncomfortable without his shoulder as a cushion. I reached for him and let my hand rest on his back. After a moment he stood up.

"I'm tired now. I feel strange," he said. "You should go."

I stood up. I felt strange myself. I wanted to stay, to protect something that had been in the room only moments before. Excitement, uncertainty, and a sense of abandon had been rising steadily in me for weeks. I'd encouraged them, allowed them all room. I'd torn down my past and my value system like I was stripping old wallpaper. Now I tried to suppress the feelings with a force equal to the one that had stirred them up. It was ridiculous. It was too late. I'd given up security and comfort for unfamiliar ways, and now I wanted to limit my feelings so that I might have security and comfort. I could neither accept, nor leave well enough alone.

When I got home, Hilda was standing in the kitchen. She had a faded old pink towel wrapped around her body. It was a fairly small towel, tight across her long, plump breasts, and straining, in fact, to maintain its tuck. I grabbed myself a beer and started upstairs, but she stood in my way.

"What's the matter with you?" she said.

"I'm just lonely, I guess."

"Of course you are! You're always by yourself! I don't understand people like you, looking for meaningful things, instead of looking for the meaning in things. Poor boy." She took my upper arm and stroked it gently. "It's too bad Carlos is always busting in here unannounced," she said.

I disentangled myself, and managed to slip between her and the wall to go to my room. It wasn't until I got up in the middle of the night and finally pushed my sofa in front of my bedroom door that I was able to fall asleep.



The next morning at work, Gast drank his coffee and smoked his Camels, and hovered about the window like a sinner waiting to see the Pope. When the black Town Car pulled up across the street from the office, Swindoll hopped out of it and hustled down the street away from us.

"He must be getting cigarettes," Gast said.

Pinzey looked up. "Who?"

"Swindoll," Gast said, strolling casually back to his desk.

"His lover's dropped him off again," Pinzey said grimly.

Kite stepped out of his office then. "Who's got a lover? Certainly not you, Pinzey boy, or else I'm getting older than I think." He sat on the corner of Gast's desk. "Can you type these up for me? Don't be jealous, Pinzey, here's a pile for you."

"You know, Mr. Kite, there's some strange things going on around here. I wonder if it wouldn't be the right thing to do to let you know. It's about Swindoll." Pinzey waited to be encouraged, but Kite only gazed at him blankly. Pinzey went on. "We employees are becoming a little concerned with the familiarity with which he's been speaking to us lately. He's been taking liberties, really, assuming that we care what his plans are for the evening. Do you know that when that black car pulled up last night, he

actually told me to finish up without him, that he was going to get laid?"

"Did he?" Kite said blandly.

Gast had abandoned any pretense of trying to work during this conversation, and I, too, looked up from my typing.

"It would be one thing if there were a woman coming in here to pick him up every night. But when that man is picking him up, and only stopping at the curb that way too, not even bothering to come to the door, it just looks rather funny, that's all."

Kite looked around. "Where's Junior?" he asked

"Running an errand. I think he went to the courthouse."

"Does Junior talk about his father?"

"About the goings-on, you mean? No. I don't think he knows."

"How could he not know?" Kite asked.

"I don't know. Everybody knows," Pinzey said. "But Junior acts like everything is on the up-and-up."

"He calls him Uncle Mike," Gast said, and I felt a little sick. It didn't seem right that they should sit around discussing a matter that was none of their business, particularly when the Swindolls weren't around.

"I mean, alternative lifestyles are fine, but I think it's unprofessional for him not to keep his life to himself," Pinzey said.

I broke in, finally. "You try to make your homophobia sound like a public service. Good grief, Pinzey! No one asks me to keep my life to myself!"

Gast snapped at me. "That's hardly the same thing, Lundquist. Your life is boring."

I looked at him in stunned silence.

Finally, I said, "If you'd rather hear about Swindoll's private life than mine, then why are you asking Kite to keep him quiet?"

"I thought you said it didn't bother you," Gast said.

"It doesn't bother me! Nothing bothers me!"

"Then why don't you want to talk about it?" Gast insisted.

"Why should I want to talk about it? Why should you? It's none of your business!"

"But when it's disrupting our work, he should keep it to himself," Pinzey interrupted.

Kite stood up from Gast's desk, his pant legs sorting themselves out in an instant and dropping back down to hang over his gleaming shoes. "I appreciate you gentlemen keeping me abreast of your feelings, of course. If I should happen to overhear anything improper myself, I'll speak to him about it. Otherwise."

He sequestered himself in his office then, and I turned on Gast and Pinzey. "You've made fools of us all," I said.

"He believed it," Pinzey said.

"He thinks we're liars and gossips."

"He does not," Gast said. "He was interested. If he had been disgusted or angry, he would have simply gone away. As you should have, Lundquist, if you're so offended."

"I don't understand why you're doing this," I said to Pinzey. "I thought Junior was your friend."

"Of course I'm friendly with Junior. His father could make or break my career. And he's a sensitive boy. What would he say if he thought his father was a fairy?"

"Junior's a grown man!"

The argument veered off into an angry silence, and while I don't suppose it was forgotten by any of us, it was not acknowledged again until Junior returned from his errand, a little after four, and announced that he'd seen his Uncle Mike at the courthouse. His father was going home with Uncle Mike for the day, and would not be back to the office. Junior took it as permission to head home himself, and, with Kite's approval, Pinzey went with him.

When we were alone, Gast said, "Pinzey shouldn't get away with it."

"Pinzey! What about you?!"

"What about me? Pinzey was the one saying Swindoll ought to keep his private life to himself!"

"But you're as bad as he is, slobbering at the window every morning. What is Swindoll's private life to you? I didn't think you even liked him."

"What does liking him have to do with anything?"

"I don't even know what we're talking about!" I yelled at him, in exasperation. "And whatever it is, I don't know why you want to talk about it with me. I'm boring."

"I only meant that you don't have secrets, that you don't have to be one thing at work, and something else when you're not at work."

"That's not true. That's even more insulting than telling me I'm boring."

I turned away from him, and tried to get started on my morning's work. Gast watched me as I sorted through papers, made my "to do" list, and threw my "to do" list from yesterday in the trash. I pushed my chair away from my desk, stood up, and headed for the copier. I took great pains not to look directly at him.

"Let's start again," Gast pleaded, standing up himself, and following me across the room. "Don't let me ruin everything, Sam, please. I have this awful way of ruining everything."

"I'm angry with you," I told him. "If you have to talk, talk about something else."

"All right. Let's talk about *Symposium*."

I turned to him in exasperation. "What is it with you and that book?"

"I want to know how you feel about the ideas in it. I knew a fellow once who disagreed with everything that Plato said. I couldn't stand him. I couldn't respect a man who didn't respect Plato," Gast said.

"I think the whole thing about heavenly and common love is a bunch of crap," I said, more to irritate him than anything. He looked hurt and disappointed. "All right," I said, trying to think of something intelligent to say to console him. "If we consummate a heavenly love, does it turn into a common love?"

"What do you mean?" He looked suddenly stricken.

"I mean does consummation necessitate that the love becomes merely common? *Can* you consummate heavenly love?"

"Look. You're making me uncomfortable," Gast said.

"How?"

"Bringing up consummation, here in the office. I was comfortable, and now I'm not."

"Why?"

"You always want to talk about the Greeks."

"That's not true," I said. "You brought it up."

"But if I hadn't, you would have."

"But it's what I love about talking to you."

"The Greeks!"

"No! An intelligent conversation. Most people don't talk about things. They talk about each other. It's horrible."

"Then go the hell to school and leave me alone," Gast said.

"I can't stand this!" I told him, raising my voice. "I don't understand it! This is worse than any stupid argument I ever had with Nicole! You asked me to read the book! You started all this! You said you wanted to talk about this book with me! Why would you give me a book about love between men being the best and the purest kind of love, and say you want to talk about the book, if it's not love between men that you really want to talk about?!" I glared at him, and I thought, for one horrible moment, that he was going to cry.

"I'm not happy here," he said finally. "I don't like this job. It curbs my natural philosophical impulses."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're being silly. Anyway, what else would you do?"

"Swindoll's been hinting at making me an offer about law school," Gast said. "He wants to mould me."

"I thought you didn't want to go to law school."

"I don't. Look. It's five. Let's close up."

"You close up. I'm going."

"I'll walk you out."

I put on my coat, and we walked to the back of the lot where I parked my car. When Gast turned to face me, I was rather moved at the sight of him, at the confusion and dejection that pulled at his features. He bent toward me and brushed my lips with his. Then he murmured good night again, and hurried back into the office.



That night, Carlos called Hilda a whore. He ripped the phone off the kitchen wall and went out into the rain, slamming the door behind him.

I was sitting up late at my desk, reading. Once the wheeze and grumble of Carlos' Camaro had subsided, there came a tapping on my door. Hoping that Hilda was only having some difficulty with the deadbolt, or that she wanted me to run out for milk, I called softly for her to come in. She stepped into my room, her towel barely covering the heavy downward swell of her breasts. She shut the door behind her, which I thought odd, and stepped a little further into the room, stopping at my bookshelf to finger a tattered, old volume.

"Sam," she said. "I've made a decision."

"What decision is that?"

"I'm going to break my rule for you. Now don't think it makes me a weak woman," she said, as if I'd jumped forward to defend her honor. "It's like I told Carlos. There's just some things a

person feels a need to do.” She sat down on my bed and let the towel fall away from her.

The bizarre reality of what she was proposing stunned me, and all I could think of to say was, “You told Carlos?”

When I didn’t move, she stood up and came to where I sat, and leaned over as if to kiss me.

I pushed my chair away and stood up. “Really, Hilda. Thank you. But it’s not necessary for you to compromise yourself.”

“Honey. It’s a favor. Between friends.”

“Thank you, but no.”

“But Sam, it’s what’s needed. For your troubles.”

“What’s troubling me doesn’t have anything to do with sex.”

I picked up her towel and handed it to her.

She wrapped herself again, and frowned. “Of course it does. Everything is sexual. That’s what we are. I came to help you. I hate to see you suffer.”

She left then, and I sat down on the bed, thought of how she’d sat there a moment before, and moved to the floor. I felt warm and nauseous and tired. In those few moments, she had managed to rape my room of its sanctity, its ability to comfort and validate me. I felt utterly alone.



We had another storm, and it took me two-and-a-half hours to chip my car out of the snow and ice. By the time I got back inside the house, sweating even though it was below zero outside, Hilda had taken three messages from Swindoll and let the machine pick up two more.

“I can’t believe you’re going out in this,” Hilda said as she watched me pick my steaming mittens out of the oven with tentative fingers. “Doesn’t he know this is a blizzard? Even the malls are closed. He won’t do any business.”

"It's a law office. There's always work to do. It's not like people walk in off the street. Anyway, I think he hates to be at home."

"He's an asshole," she said, stuffing her hands down into the pockets of her robe, and shuffling out of the kitchen.

When I got to work, Gast was smoking, and Swindoll was rubbing his fat pink hands together while he watched the coffee brew.

"For Christ's sake, Lundquist! Gast was here on time, and he's lazier than all of us!"

"Gast lives a few blocks away. He can walk. I've spent the last three hours chipping my car out of an iceberg. Where's Junior?"

"Home with a cold."

I took a cup of coffee to my desk and sat down in a huff. Gast smirked at me, and I ignored him.

The office floor was wet and muddy from everyone tracking the weather across it, and after about half an hour, snow began fluttering down outside again. My socks were damp, and coming in from the cold had given me a sniffle. Gast and Swindoll settled down together in front of the window to watch it snow. After an hour or so, Swindoll remembered a cherry Danish he'd saved from lunch the day before, and went to retrieve it. Gast turned to me when he'd gone.

"It's Friday," he said. "Are we having a drink after work?"

"I suppose." I felt something like relief, that we had had a string of arguments, and yet things were not over, as I had feared they were.

"The sushi bar will probably be closed. You may have to come up to the apartment."

"All right," I said.

Swindoll came back chewing, and rejoined Gast at the window.

"The streets won't be plowed today," Swindoll said.

"They've been plowing the streets constantly," I corrected him.

"Still. They won't be clean. It hasn't stopped snowing long enough," Swindoll insisted, taking a bit of his Danish. "Look at that!" he said, spraying crumbs out before him. "Why do you suppose she's walking in the middle of the street?"

Gast gazed out at someone I couldn't see and pursed his lips.

"Maybe she's going to the hospital," Gast said. "Come here, Lundquist, and take a look. She's just fallen right on her ass! With that cape splayed all over the white snow, she looks like a bird that's been shot out of the sky!"

"I hate capes," I muttered. "They're pretentious."

"I think they're rather dashing," Gast answered, lighting another cigarette.

"Nicole wore a cape, and there wasn't anything dashing about her. She just didn't want to wrinkle her sleeves."

"She's up!" Swindoll squealed.

Gast laughed, and leaned his chair back on its rear legs. Swindoll turned away from the window and cleared his throat. "I don't think my ten o' clock is coming," he said.

"It's noon," I said. "He probably thinks we're closed. Everybody else is."

"You could hardly expect me to stay home, could you, and listen to Junior cough!"

"You're an ass," I muttered, but Gast's shout prevented Swindoll from hearing me.

"She's coming here!"

"She can't have any coffee! We're not running a shelter!" Swindoll hurried into his office and shut the door.

When Nicole opened the front door and said, "Is Sam here?" I almost stopped breathing. Gast looked at me with curiosity.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her. It seemed impossible that she and Gast might be in the same room together.

She succeeded at last in slipping through the heavy door without any assistance from either of us gentlemen, and was taking off her cape.

"I was wondering if we could talk."

"About what?"

"We said we'd be friends. Can't we just talk?"

I was overcome, then, by the force of memory. I imagined us together again in the old house, drinking homemade sangrias and goofing off, playing a 78 of *My Blue Heaven* over and over on her grandmother's antique Victrola. But *My Blue Heaven* and the Victrola didn't have the charm, for me, of an apartment full of books. The prospect of an eventual marriage didn't attract me the way I was attracted by the prospect that things might continue to *happen* to me – things like getting to know Gast. For the first time since I had loaded my car with my belongings and driven away from Nicole's cottage, I felt like I was over her.

I led her into Kite's office, something I would not normally do, so we could speak in private.

"I want you to come back," Nicole said, after I'd hung up her cape. She said this matter-of-factly, much as she'd said, "I think it would be better if you moved out," the night before I did.

"I can't."

She gazed at me, silently, for a moment. "Why?" She said, finally. "Is there somebody else?"

I thought immediately of Gast, but I shook my head.

"There must be," she said. "You'd never make a decision of your own."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that it's so much easier for you to be acted upon. Acting means taking responsibility, and you hate that."

"That's not true."

"It's exactly true," she said. "You're probably doing it to someone right now."

"I don't understand why you're here," I said.

She stood before me, breathing slowly and deeply for a moment, an activity I recognized as her making a strenuous attempt to control her temper. Then she grabbed her cape and flung Kite's office door open. "Nice meeting you," she said to Gast with barely contained fury.

I came out of Kite's office and stood beside Gast at the window, watching her make her cumbersome way back up the street.

"She'll probably get frostbite. Or the flu. Or trip and suffocate in the snow beneath the weight of that ridiculous cape," Gast muttered.

"It's just the sort of thing she would do."

"What did she come here for?"

"She wants to get back together," I told him, sitting down beside him in the chair that Swindoll had left at the window.

We gazed out into the snowy street together for a few minutes, in what seemed to me to be a perfect, quiet camaraderie. I was surprised when Gast stood up and announced, "I'm going home."

"Why?" I asked, looking up at him.

"Maybe I'm getting a cold or something. You'd better not come by after all," he said, rushing into his coat, and slamming the door behind him.



It was late afternoon and almost dark when I left the office and walked down to the coffee shop near the dock. Pinzey was seated alone at a little table in the corner, and he called to me when I came in.

"Hello, Pinzey. I thought you couldn't get out in the snow."

"Couldn't get to work, anyway. I'm just sobering up." A young girl in an apron appeared at the table.

"What'll you have?" Pinzey said. I ordered a cappuccino.

"And another double espresso," he told her.

The waitress brought the coffees, and Pinzey gulped his down.

"Where's Junior?" I asked him.

"I don't know. Emulating someone else, I guess."

"I thought you were friends."

"We're friends like you and I are friends. Does working together make you friends?"

"Sometimes."

"Are you and Gast friends?"

"I don't know."

"Ha! From what I understand, no one ever does." He sighed and sat back. "Hell. Junior's all right. He's loyal. It's just difficult to confide your problems to someone who has no aspirations, you know? I mean, he wouldn't think it was such a tragedy. I didn't get in."

"To law school?"

"It's the eighth rejection I've gotten. I don't know what to do now."

"Apply again?"

"It's not fair that Junior's such an idiot, but his father's bought his way in twice. He's so stupid he can't handle it. And that bastard Gast has been accepted all over the country. Every time he gets frustrated with himself, he applies to law school. He always gets in, it boosts his ego, and then he goes back to being a bum. Oh, excuse me. Philosopher."

"Really?"

"I've watched him do it for two years."

"I didn't realize you took your work so seriously."

"Sure I do. I don't like working for a fag, but he's pretty good in court, believe it or not."

"How do you know Swindoll's gay?" I asked.

"If you start arguing with me about this again, I'll be sorry I asked you to sit with me. He just is, all right? Everybody knows he's a queer, even Junior."

"Junior knows?"

"Of course he does. Now."

"How does he know?"

"I told him."

"Jesus, Pinzey. You're an asshole."

"And a clerk. I'll be a clerk for the rest of my life. I might as well be a waiter." He stood up. "Hey, it's a good thing you came by. I don't have my wallet. Pick this up for me, will you?"

He slapped me on the shoulder and swayed out into the dark.



Gast talked to me very little that week. I was conscious of having hurt his feelings somehow. But as he'd hurt mine, and then resumed our friendship as though nothing had happened, I was afraid it would be making too big a deal of it if I brought it up. We talked only about work – much as we had on the Monday after we'd gone to see Othello together.

On Friday night, I drove to the sushi bar at eight to meet him. He didn't show, so I had a quiet dinner with only *Gorgias* for company. After dinner, unwilling to go home, I picked my way up and down the icy, cobblestone streets. When I found myself on E Street, I looked up at Gast's apartment. His bedroom windows were wide bands of bright yellow light.

Disappointed, I made my way finally to the coffee house. The rich smell of freshly ground beans, the whoosh and hiss of the frothing milk, the clink of spoons being stirred in fat, deep cups

was comforting and, after my last visit, a little familiar to me. I chose a wobbly little round table in the middle of the room and sat down by myself.

I looked around. Most of the men and women in the room were students. There was a general atmosphere of confidence, of anticipation – their poetry, their music, their controversial views would change the world by their very existence. I thought of Gast telling me that the St. John's education was different, implying that its students were too. I looked about with curiosity, trying to discern the difference between these students and the student I had been. I would tell Gast about it on Monday, I thought to myself, how I had "forgotten" our engagement, how I'd spent my evening here.

After a woman with red hair read a few poems, a tall and awkward young man took up the corner with a cello. The instrument transformed him. It either made him into something he was not, or brought to the surface all he truly was. As Nicole had been unkind enough to remind me, it was not like me to act spontaneously, and yet I did. I stood up when he stepped down off the platform, and asked him if he would join me.

"I'm Sam Lundquist." I extended my hand, and he accepted it with a grin.

"Jack Canby."

"You were wonderful. Your playing, it's . . ."

"Thanks, but I suspect it's Bach you really love. It's only a hobby."

"But you're a musician!"

"No, I just practice a lot. When I am moved to compose, it's usually a pretty poor showing."

"Sometimes I'm moved to compose something," I said, thinking of the poem I'd written for Gast. "But nothing decent ever comes."

"Are you a student?" he asked.

"Not anymore. But I'm wondering if I ought to go to St. John's for a Master's degree. I've met a student from St. John's this month, and after hearing so much about the Great Books, I'm beginning to think I missed something by going to a regular college. I've had some of the most interesting conversations with him."

"Really. Who do you know?"

"Robert Gast."

"Really. Gast and I had a class together last fall."

"He's told me a lot about the school. He's quite an advocate of it. He said it won't prepare him for any career, but that when he finishes there, he'll at least be educated."

Canby laughed from his belly, and put his hand on my shoulder.

"What?" I asked him.

"If Gast told you that, then he's a damn liar," he said, chuckling some more. "No, I take it back. He's not a liar. That is, he doesn't mean to be. I've no doubt he believes that four semesters at St. John's will make him 'educated'. He's a romantic and a purist. He can't bear to be in the process of anything, he'd rather not start a thing at all, or else he has to finish it up so quickly that it's of poor quality, and hardly worth doing in the first place. He can't even stand to be in the process of *being* – that's the funny thing. As if being weren't a process, but only a series of ends, and one ought to hop from one to the next with the greatest care not to touch anything in between."

"You don't feel educated?" I asked him, somewhat despondently. "After having been to St. John's?"

"I graduated a semester ago, and I don't feel like I came away from it all with anything so concrete as an 'education'. If I gained anything, it's only my own capacity for unending wonder."

I thought about this for a moment – how I hadn't had to go to St. John's for my own capacities to expand – how without fully

realizing it, I'd merely said *what if*, and that a single *what if* had already changed my life.

"Do you think that's a good thing?" I asked him. "Wonder?"

"It's the best thing," he said. "Are you and Gast close?"

"Oh, I don't know. We work together. We're a little close, I guess."

"He's an interesting fellow. I can see how he might have intrigued you."

"He's certainly made me want to live downtown, visiting at his apartment...the atmosphere, I've never lived anywhere like it."

"Yes! It's so important to have a sense of place, to live somewhere, and not just anywhere. Where do you live now?"

I told him about Hilda Noon, Carlos, and Andrew. He laughed when I described the unending parade of dogs.

"It sounds wretched," he said.

"It kind of is. The only thing that's not wretched about it is that it's my home right now. I mean, I keep pretty much to my room, and when I'm in my room, I try to forget about the wretched part, and just be pleased that I'm on my own, out in the world. I'll have to move, though, eventually. I never meant my stay there to be anything but transitional."

"I see," Canby said. "Look, I was just heading home. Would you like to come by for a little while, and sit out on the porch with me?"

"All right," I said.

"Shall we walk over?" Canby said. "I can leave the cello here."

Canby lived in one of the huge old houses a few blocks off Main Street, close to the hospital, and not far from the office. It was a superb matron of a house, with a wide porch that seemed to hold the structure in place like a girdle. After a tour, Canby invited me onto the porch to smoke. There was an old sofa there, facing the street, and we sat down.

"Your house is wonderful," I told him, thinking of the cookie-cutter housing developments that Nicole had been dragging me to before we broke up.

"Thank you."

"It has character. I couldn't bear to live in a place that didn't have character. I suppose that's one of the reasons I haven't left Hilda's yet. You can't say her place doesn't have character."

Canby stretched out his legs, crossed his ankles casually on the railing, and gazed out into the street. "I'm very intrigued about your friendship with Gast," he said, after a moment. "You know, Gast and I don't get along."

Before I could construct an answer, Canby's housemate, Elaine, arrived. She walked across the lawn toward us and sat on the railing in front of me, offering me her hand.

"Did you come to see the room?" she asked.

"What room?" I said.

"He did," Canby told her, "but I didn't tell him about it yet. You see, I need another housemate," he said, turning back to me. "Elaine is moving. You seem like a decent fellow, and I was curious to know what you thought of the house. You can tell so much about a person by what they see when they look at an old house. Would you mind moonlight cello playing?"

His invitation took me aback and I responded in the only way I could, making a pretense of having heard him incorrectly. "Excuse me?"

"I know it seems a little sudden, but you want a place, and I want a housemate, and it's no more sudden than showing the place to someone answering a newspaper ad."

"Are you a student?" Elaine asked me.

"No. But I'm thinking of going back to school."

"He knows Gast," Canby said.

"Gast almost moved in here with Canby and me," Elaine told me. "He used to come around a lot and smoke with us after

class, when everyone else was out drinking. We thought he'd make a splendid housemate."

"We used to have a lot of parties," Canby added. "But now only sometimes people come over, and we sit on the porch and talk. It's all I have in my life. That and the cello."

"What happened with Gast?" I said.

"Oh, I don't know. Some silly argument," Elaine said. Canby said nothing. "Are you two close?" she asked me.

"A little close. He's been very meaningful in my life."

"I see," Canby said. "Yes, everybody has those, don't they?"

I felt inclined to defend Gast, though I didn't know from what. Not a word had been said against him. I imagined that his disagreement with Canby was probably not worth being troubled about. They seemed to me to be so much alike, so much products of the same environment, an environment I was becoming more and more inclined to want to inhabit.

"If I moved in here, would you mind my asking Gast to visit?" I asked Canby.

"I wouldn't have asked you if I did," he said.

I told him I'd think about it, and said good night to them both. But what I thought about, as I started walking back to the sushi place and my car, was what it had felt like, sitting on a tattered sofa in the darkness, with an interesting person that I had met of my own accord. I felt as though I had arrived somewhere, that what I had once assumed to be Gast's world was no longer his alone, it was *the* world – and there was a place in it for me.



"Gast!"

Swindoll burst through the door. The blustery wind and blast of cold that accompanied him were like a special effect.

Behind him, coughing and stomping his great black boots, was Kite, and behind him, which was odd enough for even Gast to look up, was Cosgrove. He didn't wipe his boots, as the other two did, but came directly in, leaving a trail of damp soiled carpet behind him. He looked over Gast's shoulder to see what he was filing, took it from his hands, flipped through it, and handed it back to him.

The phone rang, and I answered it. "Swindoll, Cosgrove and Kite."

Cosgrove turned from Gast and came over to where I was sitting. When I hung up the phone, Cosgrove shook my hand with vigor.

"We've made a decision this morning, you, your name?"

"Sam Lundquist."

"Sam Lundquist! Glad to have you in the firm! Recent graduate?"

"I'm a clerk."

"Well, fine! A fine place to begin. You're going to law school, I understand? I hear you're the future of this operation."

"Charles!" Swindoll hissed, and came waddling quickly up behind him. "It's not that boy." He tilted his head in Gast's direction, and Cosgrove stood, shook my hand again, and said, "Yes, well, even the clerks are important, aren't they, gentlemen? From now on, though, we'll be answering the phone by giving the partners' names in alphabetical order: Cosgrove, Kite, and Swindoll, eh? Have you got that?"

"I think I can manage it."

Cosgrove strode off into Swindoll's office.

Swindoll leaned over my desk and said in a low voice, "Just for today, while he's here, then go back to the old way. Swindoll, Cosgrove and Kite."

He turned away from me and followed Kite into his office, pausing to call back, "Gast! Didn't you hear me call you the first time? Come into the office, boy. We're going to talk about that

scholarship." Gast raised his eyebrows in a gesture intended only for myself, and followed Swindoll and Kite into the other room.

They'd been gone a few minutes when the front door opened to admit a courier. I motioned for him to put his package on Pinzey's desk. I was preparing to sign for it when Gast came back out of Swindoll's office.

He crossed the room to shake the courier's hand.

"Gast, you bastard, what the hell are you still doing here?" the courier asked.

"I'm still going to school," Gast said.

I was a little put-out that Gast didn't introduce me. I backed away from them and returned to my work. In a few moments, the pitch of the conversation changed. Gast turned directly toward me and said, "You should ask this one here."

I looked up. His friend's attention was focused directly on me, waiting politely for detail.

"Ask me what?" I asked them.

"Ask you if you're interested in renting a room downtown. Baker here just told me that he's looking for a roommate." Gast turned back towards the courier. "Right now he lives with some obnoxious woman and her boyfriend. Don't you Lundquist? It seems that there's also – what is it today, half a dozen? – dogs."

"Actually, I've found a place," I said, turning red.

"Oh. I didn't know," Gast said. For a brief moment he looked hurt, and then he turned back to the courier. I wondered if his having once claimed that we weren't intimate had been a pretense, a test designed to determine what intimacy meant to me. I had the uncomfortable feeling, once again, that I'd misinterpreted Gast's moodiness, that I'd failed to see through his defenses. Had it been an act of intimacy on my part, to him, that I'd told him about Hilda and the dogs? Had he expected that he would be the first to know, after that, if I managed to change my living circumstances? I tried to concentrate on my work, but I was

distracted. I felt violated to have had the news drawn out of me so suddenly, and I was irritated at myself for being bothered by it at all.

When Gast asked me to come over for a beer after work, suggesting his apartment immediately, and not an intervening bar, I accepted, hoping for an opportunity to clear the situation up between us.

We went up to his apartment, and sat together in his kitchen with a few beers. It was the first time I had ever been there when his roommate, Stubing, was home. We could hear Stubing typing in the next room, the monotony of the clicking keys syncopated with sighs and long periods of silence. I expected Gast to start right in asking me questions, but he didn't.

"It finally happened today," he said instead. "They finally made up their minds to sink their money into a scholarship, and they've decided to offer it to me."

"That's great! You're practically guaranteed a career."

He frowned. "I thought you, of all people, would understand. You know, Pinzey can't stand that they didn't offer it to him."

"Are you going to take it?"

"I don't know. If I really wanted to be in law school, I could have been there right now, anywhere I wanted."

"The law's a respectable career," I told him. I immediately regretted it, when I remembered that my father had once said something similar to me.

"But I don't want to be a lawyer."

"Then you ought to find something that you want to do."

"Maybe I'll just bum around until my father gets killed in the line of duty, and then I'll inherit."

"Don't be such an ass. I'm trying to help you."

"Let me get you another beer. Anyway, that's enough about me, law, and scholarships, and all that. You have news. You've found a place to live."

"Yes. Just night before last."

"That long ago?" He sounded a little disappointed. "With whom?"

"Jack Canby."

He didn't answer me immediately. Finally, he said, "Did you tell him you know me?"

I blushed slightly, but I managed to say, "No."

"Did he mention me to you?"

"No. Why would he?"

"We don't get along." He paused slightly again, then touched my hand and said hurriedly, "I'm sure he'll be fine. Of course he will. You like him, then?"

"We seemed to get along all right."

"Well. Canby. Boy, has this been a banner day for me. He's moving in with Canby!"

Stubing, who entered the room just then, snorted and laughed. It was a poor attempt at reparation when he calmed down at last enough to ask, "Are you? Where did you meet him?"

"At the coffee house. He was playing the cello."

"He's a pompous ass," Gast said. "You don't know the half of it. We once had an argument about music in which he told me that he didn't like the second movement of Beethoven's *Für Elise*, and so he had rewritten it. Rewritten it! It's like my saying that Alyosha shouldn't be such a virtuous man, that Dostoevsky should have rounded him out more. It's like taking it upon myself to rewrite all Alyosha's chapters by adding a few colorful vices. It's blasphemy! Whatever made you speak to him?" Gast had stood up by now, and was pacing.

"He's not so bad. He'll be fine for a housemate," Stubing said, glancing in my direction.

"Better, I suppose, than that crazy woman you live with now. But my God! Canby! Rewriting Beethoven! There is no greater reason to hate a man. His theory is that art is

impermanent, malleable, transient, that it exists to be improved upon. Not everything can be improved upon. We'd probably be shocked by what has happened by accident!

"And as if that wasn't enough, there's Canby's distorted opinions! My God, I can't stand him! Do you remember when I told you of the man who didn't like Plato, the one I couldn't respect? It was him! Canby! I'll never come to see you."

"It figures you like Socrates, Gast," I snapped. "He's such a constrained figure, so upright and moral, so Goddamned bound."

"What does that mean?"

"That you're just the same, bound and constrained, fear masquerading as a moral. Well, not me!" I hurled a passage from *Gorgias* at him: "Anyone who is to live aright should suffer his appetites to grow to the greatest extent and not check them, and through courage and intelligence should be competent to minister to them at their greatest and to satisfy every appetite with what it craves."²

He sat back, stunned. "You've been reading on your own!" The crack in his voice, the look in his eyes that told me he felt betrayed, angered me even more.

"I'm not your project, Gast! I'm not your creation!"

"Look. You made him feel bad." Stubing said.

I laughed. "I'm fine," I said. "I don't care what he thinks."

"I'm sorry," Gast said. "I'm sure living with Canby will be perfectly fine for you."

Gast's final pandering, this last attempt to discredit with dispassion everything he'd said so vehemently before, made me angrier, and I rose to collect my things.

"Shall I walk you out?" Gast said, but I refused, and he did not press the offer.



² Plato. *Gorgias*. Trans. W.D. Woodhead. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961. Reprinted by permission.

The next morning I arrived at work early, fully expecting Gast to be there. I didn't see him immediately, however, and before I could inquire into his well being, Swindoll bullied me into his office and made me take a seat.

"Goddamn Gast. You're not leaving too, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I counted on that boy. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What?"

"Don't be stupid, Lundquist, why didn't you just intimate?"

"About Gast? What do you mean?"

"He didn't tell you, either? You're the only friend he has."

Swindoll stood up then, and began to pace back and forth behind his desk.

"Do you think so?" I asked him. "About Gast and me?"

"You're always together, aren't you?"

"Well, no, not always."

"Goddamn you, Lundquist. I can't believe he didn't tell you. Are you leaving me too?"

"He's leaving?"

"Why don't you go pick him up, to make sure he gets here. He said he'd give me two weeks, after I bullied him. I made that boy an offer, Goddamn it! I wish someone had made me an offer when I was a clerk getting ready for law school. But he up and quits. Goddamn."



I found Gast in his apartment, sitting at his table by the window, reading. I didn't knock, but came straight in with a familiarity that I had no right to claim.

"Gast! What's going on!"

"I'm reading."

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Nothing. All right, something is: this! I hate it that people feel the need to title poems. And not only that, but then they trivialize the task by extracting the poem's first line and titling it that. Look at this. A perfectly decent poem, ruined for want of a decent title, or for not having to be titled at all."

"You used to be interesting," I said. "All you do lately is complain."

"And you mope a lot, and follow me around with your eyes like a dog."

"I've just been to the office," I said evenly, after a moment.

"I can hear Swindoll now, 'Goddamn Gast!' he's saying. I told you I didn't like the job. I wasn't comfortable."

"You can't just turn away from something because you're uncomfortable," I said, thinking of all the discomfort I'd put up with from Gast.

"You want to hear something funny? That other man isn't Swindoll's lover at all. He's just an old friend, from when they were two or something." He sat silently for a moment, and I frowned at him, not understanding. Gast laughed. "How did it get started? Who said it first? Probably that homophobic bastard Pinzey. And I believed it."

"I don't understand what that has to do with you leaving."

"It doesn't have anything to do with it. What do I care whether or not Swindoll is gay? I just thought you'd want to know. In case it mattered to you."

"When is your last day?"

"I'll be there another two weeks. I owe him two weeks, I guess, though I'm sorry I let him talk me into it. I suspected that a clean break might be best, though it's too late now. One can hardly agree to go back on one's word and then go back on the agreement to go back on it. One must keep one's word some time. Do you suppose it's nobler to keep your word the first time, or the second? I think some women find the breaking of a man's word the

first time a sign of sensitivity, provided it's broken in their favor. But who cares? There are no women involved in this, are there, Sam?"

"But, Gast . . ."

"Jesus, couldn't you ever, just once, have called me Robert?"

"I didn't know you wanted me to."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd give the Rilke back."

"Fine. But what about me?"

"You have Canby now, don't you?"

"But..."

"You've already admitted that you only ever have one friend. It doesn't take much to see where that leaves me. You needn't look so stricken over it. We'll still see each other. This isn't a very big town."

I didn't know what to say.

"Some people will be in your life for a long time, and some only push you along to other places. You can't choose," Gast said.

"What do you mean!" I cried out, finally. I felt that something momentous, something significant had happened, and that I had made it happen, but I didn't for the life of me know what it was.

"Oh for Christ's sake, Lundquist. How many books are you going to have to read before you learn something? You came to drag me to work, right? Shall we go?"

"Whenever."

I gazed out his windows, at the houses across the street. I was feeling indescribably sad when Gast spoke again, more softly.

"I'm confused and unhappy. I'm miserable company," he said. "I'm sorry."

Gast wrapped a tie haphazardly about his neck, picked up a sweater and his bag, and we trekked down the stairs and out into the cold.



I didn't give Hilda any notice. She came and went from my doorway while I packed up my clothes and my books. She wore her towel and drank Natural Light out of a can. Ralph stretched out on my sofa and stared at me gloomily, while Midget trotted around with her tail swinging, inspecting every box. It was unseasonably warm for February, and the Chow lay huffing at Hilda's feet. Her panting was a familiar sound, like the idle of a diesel engine, annoying and impossibly loud, and every few minutes, Hilda kicked her. When I took a break to get a beer myself, Hilda followed me downstairs and said, "Do you think you can be out of here before Carlos comes at eight?"

Living with Canby was like being on retreat. He was a man of rich and eclectic appetites, but he was easily satiated, or else he only wanted a taste of everything to tease himself, and believed that abstinence would make him stronger. My gourmand nature was in beautiful juxtaposition to his espresso, his Galliano, and his silk cuts. I moved in with my instant coffee, my jug of cheap wine, and my Marlboros purchased specifically for the porch. I cultivated none of these vices, at the time, for pleasure; I did so that I might always have something definite to do.

Outside my bedroom window, trees prematurely sprouted delicate and tiny green leaves. Beyond them, smaller and whiter than it had appeared from Gast's windows, was the dome of the State House. Canby invited me to go with him to lectures at the college, and to shows at the gallery. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of Gast across the lawn of the campus, and it was like looking at a photograph of someone I used to know. February became March, and the good weather stayed. Canby practiced the cello constantly. His music was solemn and ubiquitous. It was a reminder that something new had taken up permanent residence

inside me. I read voraciously books that Canby recommended, and I applied to start the Master's program at St. John's in the fall.

Home was good, but work no longer had charm without Gast. His replacement was a sharp young man, recently finished at UMBC in English, who had heard a rumor that the partners might consider offering a scholarship to an earnest and deserving student with a passion for the law. His name was Ross Marshall, and he was tall, brisk, neat, and superior to all of us. Marshall's presence in the office relegated me to the status of Junior and Pinzey, and the three of us began to go to lunch together. We developed an amicable relationship, though we were bound by nothing so much as by having survived Gast.

As for the partners, Kite was ecstatic. He praised Marshall's flawless typing, his quick dictation, and his keen intuitive understanding of all legal matters. Marshall, Kite said, was fantastic in the library, and could track down the exact piece of information needed for any situation. He'd been with us barely a month before Kite was talking scholarship, and letting Ross Marshall dust his law books and empty his trash.

Swindoll was not doing as well. He moped and gave his input into Marshall's training in the form of a running commentary on the things Gast used to do. He was hurt, and Junior told us that he'd become impossible around the house. Gast had already been gone a month when Swindoll called me into his office one afternoon. Blowing his big purple nose on a soiled handkerchief, he motioned for me to sit across from him.

"How's Gast?" he boomed at me.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him."

"Goddamn it, Lundquist, we all know you two had some sort of falling out – that is, that there was something between you to fall out from."

"No sir. There wasn't."

"Philosophy, my ass. He's going to sit up there in that apartment all day doing yoga and repeating riddles to himself. There's no good in that. Don't you have any influence over him?"

"No."

"Well, hell. It was like this the last time he quit. If it isn't one thing, it's another. I wanted to just ride it out, but then Kite had to drag in that Marshall character. He's thinking of giving the scholarship to him. I suppose I'll have to go along with it. I mean, Gast can come and go, he's always got a place here. But as far as grooming someone for a partnership goes, there's the matter of credibility. I'd keep the scholarship available to him, but Kite won't have it. Kite is genuinely pissed."



Gast had made two appointments with me that he had not kept. I never called him to sit on the porch with me and smoke. Instead, I smoked with Canby, late in the evening, as the weather got warmer. Canby loved to smoke and talk even more than he loved the cello. For the first few weeks I lived with him, our front porch conversations were innocuous ones about books we'd read, people we'd known. I didn't bring Gast up, and he didn't either. Then one night, without turning his head, Canby crushed his cigarette into the ashtray and asked me, "Did your affair with Gast end badly?"

I turned to see his face, but he was still staring straight ahead. I turned back to the moon.

"We didn't have an affair."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Your crush, then. Did he hurt you very much?"

"No."

"It's all right if he did. I mean, you needn't be ashamed of it. Everyone falls for him, you know, whether they're inclined to or

not. He has this way about him, this sort of innocence and purity. With Gast, it doesn't seem like a sin."

I couldn't move. I felt trapped, caught up in a string of circumstances. I had a peculiar sensation of objectivity, in which I suddenly understood Nicole's evaluation of me.

"What doesn't seem like a sin?"

"Homosexuality, I suppose. But I prefer 'sexual fluidity'. It doesn't make me feel quite so condemned," he said after a few minutes. "He makes it seem natural, and beautiful, don't you think so?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. It's all right, everyone knows. Gast has had a lot of lovers."

"We weren't lovers."

"Well, we were."

A car drove slowly by and I looked at it, grateful to have something to look at besides Canby. I watched it until I couldn't even see its taillights in the darkness anymore.

"Did he take you to the sushi bar?" Canby asked.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Did you have an argument?"

"We had lots of arguments! But it wasn't that. He just changed his mind. Gast is so . . ."

"Fickle?" Canby offered. The suggestion barely began to express what I wanted to say. "What did Gast say when you told him you were moving in here?"

"He didn't say anything," I said.

"He had to have had some reaction."

"What would you expect him to do? Buy me a toaster? He didn't say anything."

"He must have."

"He hates you."

"Ah."

And that was that. Canby rose, poured the remainder of his wine into the flowerbed, and went up to his room.



It was a little over a week later that I was sitting in the front room late one night, drinking a bottle of burgundy and watching public television. Canby was just inside the alcove in the next room, messing around with his stereo, when the screen door swung open and in walked Gast, carrying a case of beer. He walked straight through the front room where I sat staring incredulously, and set his burden proudly down. He straightened up and said to Canby, "There! Look what I have!"

"Excellent! I've found the song. I'll play it for you."

Gast joined Canby at the stereo. They were easy with one another. Gast took Canby's hand, winding his fingers into it, pulling him closer and drawing him, at last, into a kiss. When it was over, Gast came back for the beer. He saw me sitting amongst empty wine bottles, empty cigarette packages, and piles of books that had been read and cast aside.

"How are you?" I said.

"I'm loving without self-consciousness. And I've started my play. Jack might write a score. He's quite a talented musician," Gast said.

They took their beers and retired to the back porch, leaving me to determine what I had wanted and what I had willed, what I had discovered latent in myself and what I had created there, what I could possibly have been besides an obstacle moved about between Gast and Canby. I found no answers. Gast had simply crashed across the empty basin of my life like a great wave and made of it a vessel – he seeped away from it so painfully slowly, that even to this day, I am not dry.



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