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**THE
COMFORTS
OF THE
DAMNED**

THE COMFORTS OF THE DAMNED

by WINGATE FROSCHER

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**FOR
HAZEL**

**THE
COMFORTS
OF THE
DAMNED**

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If he had loved me, he would have subjected me; and had I been able to subject myself to a man I would have been saved, for freedom gnaws at me and slays me.

GEORGE SAND

1.

THE FRONT DOOR SLAMMED AND THE YOUNG MAN WAS GONE. Three people remained in silence, their eyes on the door as if they expected it to open again.

Zoe resumed her place on the couch. She rolled George Sand, the Siamese cat, over on her back and began, affectionately, to ruffle her fur. The crackle of static electricity reminded her she was feeling anything but affectionate, that she was in no mood for purring indolence or the wary please-treat-the-matter-gently anxiety in the eyes of her son and daughter. The hidden malice of the evening broke through and she snapped her fingers sharply against George's nose. George, startled and offended, snarled and batted out with bared claws, then wriggled off the couch and bounded out of reach to settle high on the back of the largest of the shabby armchairs, the one known as Zoe's throne, where she began bathing herself.

Zoe hissed at her, got a self-pitying meow in response, and turned to her son. "Miles, was that fellow a friend of yours?"

"Never even saw him before." Miles rocked forward, letting the front legs of his chair strike the floor heavily.

The snort came from Helen. "You know better than that, Zoe. He's too old for Miles."

"Might be one of his younger professors. Why not?"

Except that I gather he isn't. Anyway, he's an odd thing for you to bring home. He sounds like he may even have an imagination."

"Thanks so much." Helen pouted and slumped on the hassock.

Miles grinned. "Hey Ma, he was pretty quick with the lip, wasn't he?"

"Don't 'Ma' me. Helen, if I thought you could ever land a guy like that — or did you coach him before he came?"

"Coach him? My God, who could ever prepare anybody for what's likely to happen around here? He's just smart enough to know a cue when he hears one. I'm so glad you enjoyed him."

"I didn't say I enjoyed him." Zoe shrugged. "It's just show, I suppose — all that imposing exterior, that marble front. Not a pretty boy, but quite worth a second glance."

"Or a third glance."

"Oh, look at you. You're so dazzled, it's nauseating. Just a marble front. Rather thin marble, too, probably concealing a great deal of sawdust and compressed air."

Miles rocked his chair back on its hind legs again. "Hey, compressed air can be dangerous."

Helen groaned. "Do you both have to start lint-picking right away?"

Yes, Zoe told herself. Right away, before this latest intruder managed to wedge his foot in the door, before he began upsetting this cozy disorder, this tangled, excessively lived-in mess. Not what she'd ever wanted really, but she had it and that was all there was: this untidy suitcase of a house, stuffed with the remnants of her life, now that it had ceased to soar like confetti, but had drifted down, snagging on gargoyles and pinnacles along the way, not quite to the gutter, somehow . . . Time had sat on the suitcase and locked it, carelessly though; a

variety of tag ends still showed, still reached out to snare the unwary . . .

"You know who Marblefront reminds me of?" she said, abruptly conscious of a new current of desperation in herself. "Your father, Miles. That authentic beast with the civilized graces. Don't sneer, Helen. You just don't remember enough about your dear stepfather. I do. He could be as beguiling as this one, when he was after something."

"And?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that here we are again, faced with the same obscene spectacle."

Miles began an elaborate imitation of retching, cut it short when no one smiled.

Helen merely stared at the floor, lost, Zoe supposed, in woolgathering where the streets were paved with men and the gold was in the wedding rings they offered.

The young man who had just departed had hovered on the fringes for about seven months. Until tonight, Zoe had not even heard of his existence and he had only barely heard of hers. During Helen's dates with him that winter and spring, she had let him know little more about herself than that she lived in the Borough of Queens with her mother and half-brother, that she had left college in her junior year and now worked in a bookstore.

Then unexpectedly, in this single evening of mildly intimate talk over long beers and bar-and-grill smoke, she had told him enough to make him want to meet her family immediately.

But her confidential mood remained behind them in Manhattan. By the time he had driven her across the river and was contending with the beams of a thousand headlights on the parkway, he discovered she was no longer receptive to his questions.

Her head lolled against his shoulder and she sighed audibly, making him suspect that a familiar frown of discontent had returned to her face. Now and again this evening that frown had undermined the liveliness of her blue eyes and the pleasant effect of her dimples and suggested she was leaving a good deal unsaid.

"I would expect your mother to live in Manhattan," he said, as they left the parkway and drove through the massive tree shadows and night quiet of residential streets. "She sounds too sophisticated for this provincial, super-middle-class whatever-it-is."

"Queens isn't even a city, is it? Not a suburb, either."

"We could call it an urbiform."

"Zoe calls it the mattress of Manhattan," she said solemnly. "And where she sleeps, the springs are broken. I guess only the prosperous urbiworm sleeps on an urbifoam mattress."

He laughed, nudging her with his elbow, but sorry this nonsense had sidetracked his curiosity again.

Once more, quips and easy laughter had helped cloud the emotional visibility between them. And yet, for some time now, he had felt that behind her mask of giddiness she must be a fairly tough and sober girl — not hard, but resilient — who might be taking some sort of secret beating, the marks of which never showed while she traveled around a dance floor or infected him with her giggling or fused eyes with him while a juke box thumped unheard. Little girl's eyes, morning-sky clear, often unexpectedly ready to brim over. They never did though, except when she was laughing too hard or tossing her dusty blonde hair in an abrupt glance of wisdom. Occasionally he wondered if, at twenty-three, she was too young for him, and more often, why she had never invited him in when he took her home.

"Miles'll be up," she said, with a new tightness in her

voice, "but I hope Zoe hasn't gone to bed. Sometimes she goes to bed right after dinner."

"Isn't she well?"

"Oh, she's fine. It's just that she gets so tired. She throws herself into everything as if it were the most important job in the world."

"I won't stay long, but I do want to meet her."

Nothing more was said until a little while later when he thought he heard a shaky whisper that sounded like, "Zoe, this is Kirk Houseman. Please . . ."

"Did you say something?"

She laughed. "I'm sorry. I guess I was sort of rehearsing your introduction."

"Hell, I expect a fanfare with trumpets."

"Maybe you'll get that, too." Her voice seemed to go breathless as the car slowed to a stop near the corner and light spilled toward them across the bathmat-sized lawn.

When they were standing on the sidewalk under the maples and he was holding her arm and could feel her trembling, she said, "Kirk, I hope you don't mind the house being an awful mess. And George Sand . . . Cats may be clean, but they sometimes give a house a special smell, don't you think?"

He grinned and bent to kiss her lightly on the nose. "I'll remember to sniff around."

She laughed uneasily, then hurried up the walk ahead of him.

In the long living-dining room, Miles and George Sand were the only ones present for introductions. The latter didn't rise, but remained seated on the couch, arrogantly sharpening her claws in the shabby upholstery while she condescendingly—it appeared to Kirk—studied him with her flat blue eyes. She seemed to grow

from the shadows, a richness of tans with chocolate trimmings, an aristocrat saying, "Keep your distance." Fittingly, the earthy cat's home smell was not noticeable amid the clutter of books and tropical fish.

Miles was the handsome, well-nourished, well-exercised college boy Kirk had expected — crew cut and mahogany tan included. His handshake was somewhat excessively firm, but that was an item Kirk had ceased to pay much attention to in forming first impressions. His smile came easier than Helen's and he was evidently less shy, judging from the relaxed manner in which he assumed the hostly duties of hanging Kirk's jacket over a desk chair and clearing the assorted reading matter out of one of the sagging armchairs.

"It's safer than it looks," he said with a cordial grin. "The springs are gone, but I've stuffed about a year of *New Yorkers* under the seat."

"Do try it," Helen said, "there's nothing like the *New Yorker* to give a tired old chair a wonderful lift."

Kirk settled his big frame cautiously into the chair. "Seems to hold me up. Only I think I detect some *New Republics* or something else not so frothy mixed in with these *New Yorkers*."

"Right!" Miles rocked back on the hind legs of a creaking chair, let it smack against a big library table that was evidently also used for dining. "Hey, what a sensitive seat."

Kirk used a frown to retreat a little way into his dignity and tried to switch to more conventional small talk. The banter, he sensed, was no funnier to Helen and Miles than to him; they were working too hard to keep its nervous jog under way. By the time Helen had returned from a quick trip to the kitchen to start the coffee, he had begun to feel decidedly uncomfortable.

"I suppose Zoe's asleep," she said tensely, with a worried glance at Miles.

"I'm not in very good voice tonight," Kirk said, clearing his throat, sorry the atmosphere had become quite so cheerless, "but if somebody'll give me an A, I can set up a howl."

Miles uttered a loud guffaw.

Helen didn't join him. "Did she seem awfully tired, Miles? Do you think I ought to wake her?"

"Forget it, Helen," Kirk said as he filled his pipe. "I'll keep."

"She'll come out if we sound good," Miles said.

"Drop it," Helen said softly, "but don't break it." And abruptly she perched herself on the arm of Kirk's chair and added to his bewilderment by saying, "Did you find it cold in our old home town?"

"What? Oh, in San Francisco? No, it was swell. Perfect June weather," he said, although his recent business trip appeared to have no connection with anything at the moment.

The front door had opened and a rather gray-complexioned middle-aged man was coming in — the unnoticeable type to be met any day on any street. His pale eyes flickered furtively and he appeared about as unhappy to be intruding as Miles and Helen were to have him. He climbed the stairs with a careworn droop.

"Were the sea lions performing off Golden Gate Park?" Helen asked.

"Too late for them," Miles said, as the man disappeared. "They've gone back north by now."

Kirk shook his head. "Please . . . I'm in a Golden Gate fog."

"I told you about the tenants." Helen jerked a thumb upward. "That was Tom," she whispered, "and Louella's what he comes home to."

"What was that about breaking something?"

"That was my signal to scramble the conversation. I should have warned you. You see, they're very nosy, so

we try to throw them off. That's why they have special names, too. Mr. and Mrs. Drearihead." She leaned forward for a conspiratorial glance up the dark stairway.

"Platitude and Hecate," Miles added, as Kirk nodded dubiously.

"Zoe likes them for some strange reason, but they're really awful bores. I get so tired of Hecate saying she takes everybody as they come when she obviously thinks I'm a hateful snob. I am, of course," Helen admitted, in response to the glint in Kirk's eye, "but I haven't been able to insult either one of them. Hecate's the worst. She's about as sensitive as a dried-out sponge."

Miles snickered. "For a sponge, she seems to have a pretty lubricous air about her."

Helen smiled knowingly at Kirk. "Is that why you're always making eyes at her? I'm afraid the joke's wasted."

Miles stretched sensually, rubbing his belly under his T-shirt and winking at Kirk. "No joke, kiddo. Some night when Platitude's on the road, I might stumble upstairs and do a little prob — I mean exploring."

"Doesn't sound very exciting," Kirk said soberly, feeling less and less responsive to their private jokes.

The self-consciously male gleec in Miles's lean, square-cut face had faded, and he was now preoccupied with a cigarette. Helen, like any needling older sister, again smiled knowingly at Kirk, as if grateful for his deflating remark. He supposed Miles now considered him either a stuffy prude or at least one of those arrogant adults who seemed to live on dampening the spirits of youth. For the moment, the ten or eleven years difference in their ages seemed more like twenty.

"Oh God, the coffee's boiling over!" Helen rushed off to the kitchen.

Miles yawned.

Kirk yawned, too — just mildly, to indicate the slight hostility was mutual. Then Helen was back on the arm

of his chair, interrupting his second yawn, and he felt he had to say, "I guess I'm still groggy from my Coast trip."

"If you're groggy then I guess it's safe for me." The new voice was in the room before Kirk realized that a woman had emerged from the shadowy foyer that opened beyond the foot of the stairs and was moving toward him.

He struggled from the chair to his feet, gulping at the handsome sight. This could only be Zoe, and she was thoroughly awake and fully dressed. Her eyes pierced warmly, insistently into him, making him feel, as the clutter of the room dissolved away from her, like a member of an audience suddenly pushed onstage. He was tongue-tied before Queen Mab, and she was ready for mischief, with the handclasp of a wrestler, a somehow gracious, subtly composed wrestler.

And in the blinding light of her presence, he slipped into a boner and addressed her by Helen's surname. "How do you do, Mrs. Johnston."

The glowing eyes caught fire. The delighted smile froze into a paralyzing sneer. "Helen," she said simply, as if ordering her to clean the cat's vomit from the rug.

Helen seemed to crumple with dismay. "Now Zoe, please."

Kirk tried again, with one of the other names he'd heard Helen mention. Even as he spoke, he wished he'd kept quiet. "I beg your pardon. I guess I should have said Mrs. Margraf."

Her voice rose husky and imperious above Miles's hilarious roaring and heel thumping. "My, how you resist me. Helen should have warned you that it's not good manners to bring up my ex-husbands. It's not Johnston. not Margraf and not Mrs. In fact, it never has been — even when they *were* my husbands."

If Miles's continued enjoyment was any indication,

Kirk realized he could only save himself now by putting on an equally phony act. And behind Zoe's indignation there was a flicker of something that told him he wasn't expected to wilt. But he was still fumbling. "My deepest apologies, Miss — er — er . . ."

"Lakes, thank you. Zoe Lakes," she said calmly. Even though he towered over her, her tolerant smirk seemed to be directed down at him. "Unless you've gone out of your way to interest yourself in my past, I don't see why there should be any problem. Helen has been Helen Lakes since she started in kindergarten."

He wasn't ready to argue; though, so far as he knew, Helen was Helen Johnston to her friends. He pulled his heels together and, with a slight bow, said, "Again, let me say how sorry I am, *Miss Lakes*." He caught a sly twinkle from Miles, but didn't risk a glance at Helen.

In a diversionary swing, Zoe turned to Miles, who had kicked off one of his loafers in the excitement. "You filthy beachcomber," she said archly, "look at the way this snappy young man is dressed — even if he isn't wearing a jacket."

"I can put my jacket on," Kirk said with annoyance.

Helen pulled him back toward his chair. "Quit acting up, Kirk," she whispered. "You're as bad as Zoe."

He let himself sink back into the armchair while Zoe settled herself on the couch, arranging the pillows about herself. His pipe had gone out and he stuck it angrily in his shirt pocket. Or maybe he wasn't angry, just confused, wondering how far the joke was supposed to go and wishing he'd stayed on his feet. Here in the depths of the chair, he felt at a new disadvantage.

On the couch, Zoe was ignoring him. Gracefully, she crossed her finely-wrought legs before her and began stroking George Sand and muttering to her in French. George stretched blissfully, waved her dark paws in the air, and filled the room with her cozy purr. Zoe's re-

marks to her included something about the deplorable sight of the gentleman's socks flopping about his ankles. Kirk wasn't wearing garters, but he was certain the elastic hadn't yet died in this pair of socks. He was considering a few French remarks of his own when Zoe looked up, sniffing the air daintily. "Coffee, Helen? Is that all you can offer the gentleman?"

Helen sprang up and dashed into the kitchen. A lot of the coffee, she found, had boiled away. It must taste like pig iron by now. She emptied out the grounds, diluted what was left and set it on a low flame to heat. When she got back to the living room, Kirk was on his feet again, lighting a cigarette for Zoe.

And Zoe, in her icily gratuitous way, was saying, "Thanks awfully. I'm glad to see you carry a lighter even if you don't smoke cigarettes or drink or swear. That must mean you don't altogether disapprove of the rest of us."

"Now Zoe," Helen began, unable to hold back, "you know darn well —"

"Good Lord, what have I done now? Oh," she sighed, "I suppose I really must try to behave. I must remember to be a good, good little mother and stay out in the kitchen with a shawl over my head and speak only when I'm spoken to. That's what Helen wants, I'm sure. Young man, do you also have a problem parent?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Is it possible to have any other kind?"

"Thanks. That makes me feel so much better."

"You're satisfied to be one of the mob?" Miles asked.

"Not exactly." She gazed unblinkingly at Kirk. "Anyway, I'm much more of a problem than the general run. Aren't I, young man?"

Helen broke in. "Zoe, do you want some coffee?"

"See what I mean? The buzzing never stops. But note how tactful she is. What she really means is that I should

have stayed in my room. Oh, the tragedy of being nothing but a frightful embarrassment to your children. I'll bet your sweet old mother knows her place."

Kirk found he was able to return her searching looks more boldly. "And how, Miss Lakes. I spank her regularly, extra on Mother's Day. We have a Monster Mother's Day where I come from." He kept a straight face, feeling unusually unfunny, but at a loss of any other way to spar with her.

Miles roared extravagantly, of course, Helen more moderately.

Zoe's face remained stony. "I see. Then you're not the one with the big wholesome family."

"The one?" Kirk returned to his chair.

"Don't worry, young man. At the moment, you seem to be the only one around. Your heat, or something, seems to have melted the competition." She flourished her cigarette in its long silver holder like an artist's paintbrush. "If you think you're something," she drawled huskily, "you should have seen the others."

"I liked the one with two heads," Miles said. "He was the most observant."

Zoe's eyes sharpened. "But with the least on his mind. He was an engineer, I believe. Tell me, are you hip, beat, or angry?"

"I'm a square. Born either too late or too soon."

"I should have guessed. Let me see . . . Ajax was Beat. Helen called that one John, I think. And Albert was the Unsilent Generation — garrulous. And Max was in furs — I guess that was the Wholesale Generation. And Clarence was — Oh, I'm afraid he never told me. Helen, why don't you bring home an Angry Young Man?"

"I'm getting there," Kirk said.

"But I seem to have heard of you. I know: you're the one in agriculture."

"Sorry, guess again. No, since we haven't got all night,

I'll tell you. I'm just a white-collar worker—a talent scout for the youngest, brightest, and most overpaid—the fresh green chemists and physicists we want for our quote diversified, far-flung, far-seeing, industrial empire unquote. If Du Pont doesn't get them first."

"Thank you. I wonder how I got agriculture out of that."

"I don't know, Miss Lakes, unless you're denser than you're pretending to be."

"Hmn . . . So long as you'll concede I'm only pretending." She smiled frostily under the attentive eyes of Miles and Helen. "Perhaps you can tell me something I've always wanted to know. Tell me, why do they always have such obtuse, insignificant people in personnel offices? So often, they're practically sexless."

"There's a good reason for that, Miss Lakes. Being practically sexless gives us a great deal of objectivity about people like you."

There was a stillness in the room, and then whatever she said was lost in the thumping outburst from Helen and Miles. The stony mask now slipped from her face, and she smiled so warmly that Kirk felt the voltage overloading his spine.

Then he was being dragged from his chair by Miles and Helen, and they were shaking both his hands and slapping him on the back and congratulating him for having the last word, and the *grande dame* herself was standing before him and offering her hand again. Her eyes sparkled, but whether in friendliness or not, he couldn't be sure. He took a deep breath as the ridiculous, unreasonably pleasant clamor settled around him, let her slim, graceful fingers grasp his, and experienced a handshake of delightful mildness.

He knew he must escape before he lost ground. "I've got to go," he said, with the customary glance at his wristwatch, grabbed his jacket from the desk chair and

headed for the door, shedding the protests of Helen and Miles as he went.

There was no protest from Zoe, he realized as he paused in the open doorway, only a chilling blackness from her eyes that impelled him to slam the door and get away before anything further could be said.

2.

THE NEW BEAST WAITED ONLY TWENTY-FOUR HOURS BEFORE he intruded again, and Zoe caught the call on her bedroom extension.

"Hello, Zoe, how are you?" He sounded as if he had already worked himself into a certain amount of awe.

"Kirk? It must be Kirk because he seems to be the only one hanging around this month. I'm sure he's fine, so I won't ask him how he is."

"Apparently, you're in great shape," he said, sounding more sure of himself.

"Shape? Maybe, but not pretty. I'm in my Second Empire pajamas trying to wash blankets in the bathtub. And please don't tell me where I can get an automatic washing machine because I don't believe in them."

"I don't believe them either. That's why I never ask them questions."

"Now, now . . . I guess we don't have a very good connection. Anyway, I'm washing blankets and George Sand is frightfully disturbed because she's afraid I'm going to fall in with them. She's sitting on the toilet roaring cautions at me. Awr-awr-rrrump, and so on. When are you coming over?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"As you will. I won't twist your arm."

"Good. Then I may come."

"Don't plan to move in or anything, but how about next Sunday for a drive in the country?"

"O.K. . . . Oh, wait. My car's going to be in the garage this weekend."

Zoe smiled at the earnest boom of his voice — rich and dark as brandied plum pudding. He must have spent years cultivating it. "Who cares about your fancy old car? I hope it drops an axle. We still have Rowena. Miss Chevrolet of 1941. You haven't ridden until you've ridden in Rowena. You'll get more air because none of the windows work."

"Fine. I'll wear my grease monkey outfit so I can push."

"Do you sing?"

"Huh? Say that again?"

"You sound like Boris Godunov on the phone."

"Thanks. But I'm tone deaf and can't carry a tune."

"That's wonderful news. Come about ten. Helen says she's dying for a picnic. Come about ten and we'll plan to get off at eleven and maybe actually manage it by noon. How's that?"

"Shall we play Insults again?"

She laughed, made her voice go husky. "Oh, let's find something new. I'm cutting you off now. The blankets call. See you then."

"O.K. So long."

He sounded rather pleasant, she thought as she put the phone back in its cradle. But how idiotic to get that involved with him. Helen would have him underfoot every spare moment for a while anyway.

"Helen," she called over the roar of water running into the bathtub. She had to call twice more before she got an answer.

"What's the matter?" Helen stood in the bedroom door, her hair asnarl and her hands dripping.

"Darling, can you finish the blankets by yourself? I'm

so terribly worn out tonight." Zoe let herself collapse on the edge of the bed and sighed as she kicked off her slippers. "I suppose I might as well have my grog now."

Helen shrugged. "Who called anyway?"

"Is Miles still around? Get him to help you put them out on the line."

"He went off somewhere. Who called?"

"Kirk Houseman."

"Kirk?" Helen blinked, then stared at the phone as if it had betrayed her. "Oh . . . He only wanted to talk to you?"

Zoe finished arranging her cigarettes, holder, and matches beside the ashtray on the night table before she replied. "I don't know, really. It was the oddest thing. He didn't say he wanted to talk to anyone. He simply talked. Evidently, he wanted to invite himself over and that's what he did. He's coming out Sunday for a picnic."

The tightness seemed to flow out of Helen's face. She even smiled. "He must have been in an awful hurry. Funny thing, I was just thinking we ought to get out on the road this weekend."

Zoe eased herself under the covers. "He didn't sound as though he were on the run, but maybe he was." She sank gratefully against her pile of pillows as Helen turned to leave. "Please don't forget my grog," she called after her.

After a moment or two lost in contemplating the opposite wall without seeing it, Zoe reached for the thick, disorderly folder of papers she'd brought home from the office: drafts, notes, memos, clippings, schedules, photographs . . . The waste products of public relations, she reflected. Nothing to nourish the mind; just more to wear it out.

And George Sand reclining in the midst of it all .

Helen returned, carrying a pint bottle of whisky that was half empty and a tumbler with about two fingers of

water in it. She set them down on the night table with a grimace of distaste and left the room.

Zoe poured herself a drink and took a sip. Not bad — although she wasn't sure the stuff in the bottle hadn't been watered before it was brought in. Not worth a battle tonight, though. She had too much to do. She poured a little more into the tumbler. The next sip was more satisfying.

She ought to get up and sit at the desk to finish this release. She could think so much better on the typewriter. By the time she had scribbled all this out in longhand and had Jenny, her secretary, type out a readable draft in the morning, it would seem so thin and bloodless. Then she would practically have to rewrite the piece. Finally, Halling would creak back in his chair, insist on inserting a few platitudes "because the trustees expect them" and begin ranting impersonally about perfectionism. On his own, meanwhile, he would be chewing on the thesaurus to produce some almost incomprehensible verbiage meant "to sound impressive" and moaning because even the facts sometimes buried in it seldom got into the papers without her help. But she prided herself on clarity and she never had been superficial or sloppy, even back when she was only covering a police precinct, and she did know how to make valuable contacts and use them. It was difficult enough to sell anything an austere, ponderously settled educational foundation had to tell about itself, since it wasn't giving away millions, but it was impossible if the job depended on Halling's seat-cushion strategy. At least he had good contacts at some of the universities and at educational conventions; and having him out of town occasionally saved her from utter frustration. No wonder he acted hurt, though, when editors and reporters phoned her on releases or offered her feature space. But then he hadn't worked for damn

near every one of them at some time or other the way she had . . .

She could hear water still rushing furiously into the tub. How stubborn of Helen not to let the blankets soak overnight. Miles could so easily help her hang them out in the morning.

Another few sips of grog. Definitely, the stuff had been diluted.

She was fishing through the office junk for a sharper pencil when she ran across that clipping again, the one that shouldn't be there. If she could only burn it and forget she'd ever seen it. If she could only be certain Miles hadn't come across it, too, or Helen.

MARGRAF BACK IN U.S.

San Francisco, May 21 — Bruno Margraf, the noted American architect, was among the passengers aboard the liner *President Hoover* which arrived here today from the Orient.

Mr. Margraf, acknowledged as one of the pioneers of modern architecture, has lived in various parts of the Far East since World War II. Virtually silent since his widely publicized attacks in the 1920's and '30's on public refusal to accept an "American" rather than an "international" style of functional design, Mr. Margraf said today that he is returning to live at his ranch in Santa Cruz County.

When reminded that he had once been reported as saying he would never live in the United States again, Mr. Margraf replied, "I'm quite used to being misquoted," and added, "I went to the Far East to work and to get a fresh look at the world. I've never considered myself an expatriate from any place and I've not come back here just for a last wallow in my old roots. I've always carried my roots with me."

Zoe tucked the clipping back among her office scraps, where neither Miles nor Helen would be apt to explore,

and meowed at George. "You wouldn't dream of wallowing in old roots. Would you, darling?"

George meowed sweetly, and Zoe poured herself another drink.

What a jagged eccentric Bruno must have become by now. Oh, why worry? It was quite possible he had no interest whatsoever in Miles at the moment and might not even think of writing him. Producing that son had been the most important project in the world once. And then he'd doted on the child for a while, too — until he'd vanished into silence as though he didn't care whether the boy even existed.

Why not worry? Years to prepare for this, and yet there might as well have been only five minutes. She should have warned Miles about Bruno's return over a week ago. Sooner or later now, Bruno was bound, if only out of curiosity, to try to get reacquainted with him. But it wouldn't stop at curiosity. Bruno would have one of his schemes, something quite innocent on the surface, insidious enough though to end by ruining Miles's life. Bruno might easily talk him into quitting college to go out and help him work on that freakish house of his. Then Miles would be isolated, without his education, without any aims but his father's. The boy simply wasn't ready for such an encounter. He was nearly twenty, nearly a man, but still so childish in many ways, so gullible and dreamy — stewing for years now about following in Bruno's footsteps and mooning over the legend of the "great" father and his overpublicized career. No, the poor kid just wasn't strong enough yet to challenge Bruno; he would be giving up the chance to develop his own identity.

And even a hard-shelled female couldn't help getting a little maudlin over the fact of having borne such a wallower of a son, especially if she hadn't wanted him in the first place and now couldn't imagine the world

without him. Even as it had with Helen, the helplessness of the new thing appalled her: "How do you pick it up? Won't it break? You'd better hold it, Nurse . . ." Still, with help she had managed to do a few things for it, and eventually she was doing less and less for it because it had so definitely become him—a personality. In twenty years though, the personality had jumped the fence; he was so far away she didn't even know what was happening to him, even if he did live under the same roof.

Of course, if she really had valued her own freedom above all—as Bruno tried to claim—she would have defied the world like George Sand . . .

"Not you, kitty-cat. Your freedom's never been challenged by any snarly old tomcat."

. . . and left the children with their bonehead of a father. But the world no longer needed defying in just that manner and Bruno was no bonehead. He would simply have submerged the children in his own design, and she loved them too much to allow that. To watch Miles bent over his drawing board, to glimpse Helen striding briskly up the front walk . . . There were moments still when her eyes watered just as they used to in the days of their toddling-stage cuteness . . .

Somewhere among these thoughts, Zoe realized later, she must have dozed off, because here she was, coming to with a stray pencil jabbing her in the side and the light in her eyes. There were papers under her, too, and others trailing off the edge of the bed to the floor. And her cigarette had gone out, after toppling off the edge of the ashtray and charring a spot in the surface of the night table.

At least, there was a drink left. She sat up and gratefully gulped it down. Nearly midnight and not even a lead written. She gathered up the disorder and hid it in its folder again. Tomorrow . . .

She pulled on her robe and ventured out into the living room. The radio was softly delivering something that sounded like Calypso in an echo chamber and Miles and Helen were buried in their books, he at his desk, she in one of the armchairs.

"Last night," Zoe said, accustomed, as they all were, to resuming past conversations without preamble, "didn't I hear Marblefront say he's from the Coast?"

"You heard wrong," Helen said, glancing up from her book. "It's upstate. That was a business trip he was talking about."

Miles turned in his chair. "Hey, I meant to ask: Does he have a big wholesome-type family?"

"He did have, I guess. But he was drafted when he was seventeen and hasn't lived at home since."

"What college?" Zoe lighted a cigarette.

"California — at Berkeley. He really only told you about part of his job. He's an — oh, I forget the exact title — something to do with industrial relations."

"Hmn . . ." Zoe muttered, recalling with pleasure how easy it had been to confuse him on the phone. He hadn't even had a chance to ask for Helen. Of course, that didn't prove anything about how tricky he might be to deal with.

"I think we ought to have a party," Miles said, butting into her thoughts.

"With Marblefront as guest of honor, I suppose." Zoe flicked ashes into the nearest overflowing ashtray and perched herself on the arm of her throne. "Helen, when are you going to empty these things? They stink."

"Hey, Helen, how about inviting Peggy and some of your crowd? And I could get some people from college."

"How about it, Zoe?" Helen chimed in. "You haven't thrown a good party in years."

"So you've been reminding me for years. Let's forget it."

Miles wiggled in his chair. "You know, the way you were sparring with Kirk last night — well, it reminded me how fed up I am with that clique of females from your office. That's all you ever see any more."

"If you'd just keep up with the old gang, instead of slipping into this."

Zoe turned on Helen, bristling. "Slipping into what? This domestic drudgery originally designed to get you kids through school and on your feet?"

"Well, if you'd only keep up with some of the old gang, even — even just for your own morale."

"Oh, Helen, stop living in the past. It's my past anyway. The old gang's gone. They're dead, or broke, or else they've soared out of sight in Hollywood or Madison Avenue or — I'm out of touch. I'm not interested." Zoe put a hand over her eyes. A sudden thrust of weariness left her tired, uneasy, empty. That nap hadn't revived her, after all.

"If things were a little livelier around here . . ."
Miles began one of his pet refrains.

"If you'd only let yourself relax . . ."

Zoe rose. "I'm too tired. I have to work too hard. Anyway, people bore me. I see enough of them all day, every day. Stop giving me advice." She looked away, filled to the throat with the sympathy in their eyes. Sympathy for what? For themselves, because they had to put up with her? Or sympathy for her because she practically had to beg for her dinner or anything else she got around here? That was the arrangement, of course. And maybe it was worth it when she got away from the ten thousand pinpricks of the day to find her home life running on some sort of order. Order . . . or the thin edge of sorrow. Sorrow that never drowns; it swims too well . . . "What I need," she said firmly, "is a drink."

"Christ's sake!" Miles spat the words viciously, as if he'd worked himself up to them by anticipating her re-

quest. He left his desk, tossed the couch pillows to the floor, and, seething with manly anger, stripped the cover back to the sheets. Then he kicked off his loafers and, with a masterly display of anticlimax, sat down. "You've had all you're supposed to have tonight."

"I need it. I can't get back to sleep without it."

Helen began tugging at a lock of hair. "But I gave you the full half-pint hours ago. It's midnight. If you take any more now you won't be able to get up in the morning."

"Stop exaggerating. Oh please, please give me what I need. Just one little drink to get me back to sleep." God, if she could only ask for it without that wheedling squeak in her voice. That ruined everything.

Miles flung his socks to the floor. "For just two cents I'd — Oh nuts!"

"Please, if you don't give me something immediately I'll have to get dressed and go out to a bar."

Fortunately, she didn't have to say any more. They were too tired or something to fight it out tonight. Not that she would go out to any bar alone anyway and risk making a public spectacle of herself. They knew that. But the threat told them how desperate she was, how ready she was to hammer at the wall until she got the drink. She caught their exchange of glances now, Miles nodding his head in the direction of the kitchen and Helen blinking — the conspirators, self-righteously humiliating her and reveling in their petty decisions as they ran her life. The air was suddenly washed clean of argument. Miles was winding his wristwatch, spreading the contents of his pockets on his desk. Helen was picking up things, pointlessly straightening piles of magazines and emptying ashtrays. All this meant their decision was made.

"All right," Helen said finally, "you get into bed and I'll bring you one last drink."

“Just don’t water it, please.” Zoe started for her room, with George Sand following.

“Don’t worry. I know what to do.”

To sink to this. To be tormented by your own brats.
To be treated like an idiot child . . .

3.

HELEN WAS UP BY EIGHT ON SUNDAY, MAKING SANDWICHES and twirling the radio dial impatiently to find a weather report. It was a gray, damp day, but the Weather Bureau expected it would clear by noon. So she dressed optimistically, stopping in the middle of egg salad mixing to put on the yellow sports dress and the red shoes Kirk had said he liked. Another good thing about him, she noted: he was so easy to dress for and didn't like lipstick and nail polish on her any more than she did.

The crisis of the morning came after Zoe had finished her mutterings through the *Times* and began to inspect the aquariums.

She turned on all the lights in them and pulled up all the window blinds. The brightness, however, didn't disturb Miles. He remained buried in his tangle of sheets on the couch.

"Those mollies don't look any livelier," Helen said at the top of her voice, hoping to wake him.

"Looks like trouble. That pregnant guppy may have to be isolated any moment now." Zoe's voice, which evidently traveled upstairs so well and, on occasion, through the walls into the Weintraubs' next door, made no impression either. Miles didn't even stir. "Please, do watch her. I don't think she should be allowed to eat more than half her children."

"Why not? We can save on fish food."

Zoe turned back to the tank with a grimace. "If the mollies don't show more life by tomorrow, you'd better isolate them too."

"What about that lump? I wish we had a screen to put around him."

"He'll come to when the traffic starts. Who was the heavy date last night? That Irish girl he won't talk about?"

"I wonder if she even exists." Helen went back into the kitchen to finish wrapping the sandwiches.

Miles and the girls he mentioned but gave no details about and never brought home . . . Helen suspected they were just talk to cover up what he was doing with that slut upstairs, something Zoe evidently still didn't know about. It was revolting. And all his feeble jokes about her — to make you think it wasn't possible. What a cockeyed romance: the shiny young knight and his lumbering lady.

"Helen! My God, Helen! Look!"

Helen should have known better, but she started as if Zoe had discovered the drapes aflame and rushed back to the living room.

"Look! A dead molly!" Zoe stood gnawing at her fingers in extravagant alarm.

"Oh . . ." Helen glanced at Miles. The uproar seemed only to have made him bury himself deeper among the sheets. She wished for the nerve to dump an aquarium on his bare back.

"Don't just stand there!" Zoe roared. "Let's get to work." She plunged her arm into the tank, grasped the dead fish and hurried to flush it down the toilet.

There wasn't much time and there was no use wasting it in argument. Helen got an empty tank out of the cluttered depths of the big closet and washed it and filled it with fresh water. Then she and Zoe began sorting out the surviving fish, netting the lively ones for the fresh

tank and the sluggish ones for an "observation" tank.

When the doorbell rang Helen couldn't go because she was still elbow-deep in a scummy tank. Zoe stopped admiring the underwater garden she was creating in the fresh tank and went to let Kirk in.

He looked cool and unencumbered in polo shirt and slacks, as casual in his greetings as if this were the twentieth visit instead of the second.

"Sit down and be useless," Zoe said. "We're having an emergency."

"My overalls are at the cleaners, or I might offer to help." He gave Helen a steady, confident look instead of a wink and stood with pipe in hand, watching her work. "Something evidently died," he muttered.

She nodded, rubbed her nose with the back of her dirty hand and tried to push a few damp strands of hair off her face. "Go have some coffee, or something. I'll be through in a minute."

Zoe set an extra cup and saucer on the dining table. "You see us at our worst. Death and pestilence and ghosts shrieking and squealing about the streets."

" 'When beggars die there are no comets seen,' " Kirk quoted. " 'The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.' It must have been a very poor fish indeed that died."

Zoe laughed. "Right you are. What a shame Calpurnia has such a small part when she has such beautiful lines. It just isn't fair." She poured coffee for both of them and sat down.

With a sympathetic glance in Helen's direction, he took a seat. "Lines enough for Caesar's wife."

"I disagree. I played the part and got very bored after Caesar died. I was sure I could do Brutus, but they wouldn't let me."

"An all-female cast?"

"In college. Don't sneer. We did beautifully. The girls

revealed new meanings in the male roles. What I'd like to see is a bang-up production with males in the down-trodden weepy wives' parts. The world might be a far better place if Caesar and Antony and Brutus and Cassius had been women fighting for power. They could have used their power a lot more wisely."

He stirred the cream into his coffee. "The world would never have survived to see the power politics of Lucrezia Borgia. Shakespeare would have been writing soap-opera dialogue before its time. Instead of '*Et tu, Brute?*', Caesar would have to say, 'Oh Brutina, how could you?'"

Zoe guffawed and banged the table with her fist. "This was the most unkindest cut of all."

Helen joined in their laughter occasionally, but stayed with her job. Just so they got along — that was the important thing to her at the moment. And so far they were doing better than expected, enthusiastically agreeing and amicably disagreeing on plays and actors they had seen. Kirk was holding his own, obviously getting a kick out of Zoe, but not as a mere captive audience. Inevitably though, she must, by the second cup of coffee, lead him back into old jobs, old marriages:

"... That was when I was down on that Birmingham paper. They didn't believe I could possibly be an authentic New York-born New Yorker because I didn't say desc-dem-n-dose. What really annoyed the hell out of them was the idea of a woman around the place. The managing editor just couldn't believe I'd been sent down originally to cover a lynching case. I was too dainty, he said. So he tried to hobble me with the woman's page to keep me off the streets..."

She was still dainty, Kirk was discovering as he took the opportunity to observe her closely, particularly in the lively tilt of her head, in the brisk motion of her hands. Her femininity was by no means lost in the overall impression of relentless forthrightness, but was some-

how intensified by the animation that suggested more beauty than there actually was. She seemed older and more strained than she had the other night, and those fine, dark wrinkles around her black eyes might mean dissipation. All that was quickly forgotten, however; magnetic north was always in her eyes.

“ . . . I met Helen’s father down there, by the way. And what a poisonous remnant of the lost cause he turned out to be. Hope you don’t mind my anti-Southern prejudices.”

“Just don’t try to convert me.” He felt very much on stage, with Helen, and probably Miles, in the audience.

“I’m sorry I’m such an extreme case. It comes mostly from living with an extreme case of professional Southerner, one who doesn’t know the Civil War is over. His relatives were practically caricatures, too, something like that family with the little ‘no-neck monsters’ in Tennessee Williams’ play. But I didn’t meet them until it was too late . . . Anyway, in the end he admitted he’d married me only because he thought he could tame me. Don’t ask me why I married him. It’s done me a lot of good to forget, and I’ve forgotten.”

There was a creaking from the top of the stairs and Helen said, “Drop it, but don’t break it.”

“It’s already cracked wide open . . . Louella,” Zoe cried out as a pair of slippered feet came hesitantly into view on the stairs. “Come down as you are and meet Helen’s latest.”

Louella ventured down a few steps further and stuck her head over the bannister. “Oh, I didn’t know you had company,” she said with a nervous smile, while she gave him the once over twice. He got an impression of buxom sloppiness in a ruffly pink housecoat, set off by dabs of fresh makeup and a freshly combed bun of reddish hair—a picture that clashed with the framed reproduction

on the wall behind her of Delacroix's portrait of George Sand in a top hat. With only slight encouragement from Zoe she was soon down being introduced and assuring her she'd come only to borrow a couple of eggs because of some slip-up in her Saturday shopping.

"Have some coffee anyway." Zoe brought the eggs out of the kitchen.

"Thanks. I guess I will, if you don't mind. Tom's still pounding his car like this one," she said, jerking a thumb at Miles, "and I can't get a thing done." She sat down at the table, placing the eggs beside her cup and saucer.

He caught Helen's supercilious shrug as she went on with her tanks.

Zoe resumed her monologue. He couldn't imagine Louella as a crony of hers, except as a good listener. She seemed eager to laugh, glad to pay flattering attention to stories she must have heard many times before. She wasn't really sloppy, he decided. It was just the hastily primped-up look of a woman who wasn't sure of how to hide the effects of continuous motherhood and drudgery. Or it must be drudgery alone, since Helen had told him she had no children but was an excellent housekeeper and cook, efficient enough to have time for TV a large part of the day and do more than her share of church work.

" . . . and what an arrogant little bastard of a Southerner he was. He had absolutely no respect for the maid's feelings, or mine either. Just because she was colored it was perfectly all right to use vile language and make obscene conjectures about her sex life right before her. And he wouldn't have a white woman because he couldn't stand for white people doing 'nigger' work."

Kirk squirmed, embarrassed for Helen. There was a smothered anger apparent in the slow, deliberate way she cleaned the tank that added to his discomfort. He won-

dered whether she was afraid to object to such attacks on her father — true or not — or too accustomed to them to bother.

"Well, you gave *him* the gate," Louella said brightly.

"Anyway, he took the hint. He should have gone to jail for the way he beat Helen. The child wasn't two years old and there she was being slapped around by this so-called grown man just because she whimpered while he was pampering himself by taking a nap. Enormous inferiority complex and frightfully jealous of whatever success I had . . . Good God, Helen, when are we getting on the road? I think Kirk might like to go driving by daylight. I certainly would."

"Then why did you start this?" Helen sounded as though she were about to go under.

"I didn't start anything. The fish died and there you are."

Kirk stood up. "Look, why don't you let me help?"

"No, Kirk, you don't need to. I've done all I have to do now. I'll get my shower and we'll go."

"Wouldn't you know it — a shower!" Zoe settled back with a groan as Helen left the room. "Have some more coffee, everybody, and we'll try for a moonlight drive. Helen is always just about to take a shower . . . Oh, Louella, speaking of showers, you remember that imbecile she took up with last summer — the basketball player?"

"Wasn't he beautiful?" Louella rolled her eyes. "If you know what I mean," she said, turning to Kirk. "Beautiful ain't a word you can say for a man maybe . . ." She frowned, as if tired by the effort of explaining herself. "But no kidding aside, he was like a Greek god or something."

"And he had a Roman nose," Zoe twinkled.

"Same difference."

"Unfortunately, his ears stuck out like butterfly wings."

"Yeah, but who's perfect?"

"He did approach perfection in his imbecility. Statistics, he used to tell me, was in his blood. He'd made that discovery when he studied sports records. If you didn't keep talking he'd sit here and give himself a quiz — everything from Ty Cobb's batting averages to how much Fifinella won in the Derby in 1916. He talked about it so much I even remember Fifinella. Anyway, he was majoring in statistics at N.Y.U. and making his basketball scholarship pay extra dividends, as he called it. He was already submitting applications to a slew of insurance companies and whatnots and deciding which he would turn down. He also told me he came by his industriousness naturally because his father was a self-made man and his mother was the salt of the earth."

"No kidding aside," Louella said, "he was a real go-getter."

"He did tell me he'd read one book," Zoe continued. "*Gone With the Wind*. He said he'd liked that because he'd learned so much in it about the Civil War without knowing he was learning. Even so, he was disappointed because he had to go elsewhere for the statistics. Of course, the stuff they made him read in college, he told me, was all Greek to him. But he didn't worry because he could always remember facts and dates perfectly and that satisfied his instructors. After all, the university was absolutely dependent on his 'pivot play' and his 'dribbling' and whatnot."

"But you know," Louella said to Kirk, as his laughter subsided, "he had such a kind face."

"Ah, you should have seen his body."

Louella blushed and giggled into the ruffle on her sleeve. "Oh yeah, you told me."

"The first time I'd ever heard of a gentleman caller who not only ate up all your food but used up all your hot water taking baths."

"That's right, he was helping you with something around the house. Wasn't that it?"

Zoe nodded. "Miles is worthless as a handyman, and I'd been trying for months to get him to fix a broken shelf in the kitchen. Well, Albert insisted on doing it for me and did a beautiful job — give him credit for that. Then sometime afterwards I had occasion to go to the john. I heard the shower running, but I went on in because I didn't think it could be anyone but Helen, since I'd just seen Miles elsewhere."

"So you went in?" Louella's eyes glinted expectantly.

"I did. And with the water running, he evidently didn't hear a thing behind the shower curtain. I sat down on the john and picked up a magazine and there I was. Then the shower went off, the curtain flew back with a flourish, and there he was."

Louella was blushing and mangling her handkerchief and snorting with enjoyment. Kirk managed some congenial laughter while he bore up under Zoe's ominous stare.

"What happened?" Louella choked out.

"He turned absolutely white. Of course, the nearest towel was on the other side of me and I certainly wasn't giving it to him. I simply stood up, letting my skirt drop, and said, 'How dare you expose yourself in my house?' By now he was running through the whole spectrum of colors and didn't even have a statistic to offer. You know what I did? I gave in to an impulse I hadn't had for years and yanked his billy."

"Oh, Miss Lakes!" Louella herself turned various colors as she shook and gasped with the wickedness of it all.

Kirk let himself go, bellowing until he had to blow his nose and wipe his eyes. What he enjoyed most was the misplaced look of outraged dignity in Zoe's piercing eyes. He was aware, too, of how much he was laughing

to hide his own discomfort, of how much Zoe was overplaying her hostility.

"And that was the end of Albert," Miles's husky voice cut across the gathering.

"Yes, to our abiding relief," Zoe said forcefully.

"Hi, Miles," Kirk waved. "I'm still here."

The laughter was more general this time, with Zoe leading.

Miles stretched his bare arms and shoulders above the sheet and yawned. "I'm glad to see somebody has the guts."

"Never mind the exaggerations, old boy. I've never scared away any but the imbeciles and zombies."

"I didn't know there were any other kind."

"Mind your manners," Zoe said with a flash of irritation. "For God's sake, isn't Helen ready yet?" She rose. "I guess I'll have to light a fire some place. Excuse me."

"If she's in the bathroom," Miles called after her, "light two fires. I can't hold out much longer."

Kirk stood up with Louella. She made smiling excuses and started upstairs. "I guess Tom'll be awake now. If he ain't, I'll just have to go to church by myself."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Miles muttered with a grin at Kirk as she disappeared, then emerged naked from the bedclothes. "Wow, what a gas jam that was."

"You might have scared them away if you'd hopped out sooner."

"I doubt it. You're the novelty, not me." Miles yawned, pulling on a pair of chino slacks, zipping them up. He peered into the coffee pot, picked it up, and walked barefoot with it toward the kitchen. "Yeah, Zoe can be a riot if you're on the right side of her — and you seem to be. But what do you think of Hecate?" he called back.

"Hecate? You mean Mrs. Drearihead. Well, not exactly a goddess. Hecate was a goddess, wasn't she?" Kirk

hesitated, wondering what sort of opinion Miles expected of him.

"She's really a hell of a good gal." Miles sounded slightly defensive as he returned. "I don't think anybody could have a better friend."

"Your mother — you mean your mother couldn't have a better friend?" Kirk gazed at the disorder on the dining table. It included the two eggs Hecate had come down for and evidently forgotten.

"All of us. She's been a swell friend to all of us." Miles's earnest frown was unexpected. "Helen claims she hates her, but that's just a pose. Hey, I hear a racket. Sounds like your party's ready."

Kirk stepped aside as George Sand scampered past him, followed by Helen in a fresh green dress, the effect marred by the corners of her mouth being turned down in a pout. Zoe came next, cheerfully proclaiming that the sun was out. It was noon. They were starting on time, after all.

Zoe wasn't in the mood for anything strenuous, she announced, so Helen had to drive. And Kirk couldn't sit in front with her because Rowena's missing upholstery had never been replaced and was too lumpy for any human. It wasn't even fit for George Sand. But George wouldn't stay up front anyway because, as Zoe explained, Helen's driving gave her indigestion.

Alone at the wheel, Helen mostly listened while Kirk and Zoe discovered their mutual liking for Sherwood Anderson in general and *Winesburg, Ohio* in particular. From that, they drifted onto Kirk's family and his father's unsuccessful attempts to be a big man in a small town. Helen prickled at their exclusiveness, but kept reminding herself it was probably worth while if Kirk was to succeed where others had failed. And Zoe was even encouraging him to tell about himself. He wasn't talking

too much though, just managing an air of well-bred reticence while dropping odd bits about his home town on Lake Ontario and the match factories and the big grain elevator and the smell of vinegar generators permeating the town. She even drew him out about some of the summer jobs he'd had while going to college on the GI Bill, like "managing" a traveling dance band and collecting garbage in the suburbs of Pittsburgh.

"You mean trotting along beside the truck while it grinds up its breakfast?"

"Roughly. You get plenty of exercise heaving up the full cans and tossing back the empties with the hope they'll get so battered they can't be filled again."

"Albert should have tried that. I think dribbling ash-cans would be marvelous practice for basketball, don't you?"

"It never seemed so to me."

"Oh God, not another one! I just naturally supposed you were a football player."

"I tried that too, but my bones were too brittle."

"Nice to know you're more vulnerable than you look," she said, her voice dropping to an intimate undertone that unexpectedly embarrassed him. "Last summer," her voice rose again, "Albert was one of those indecently handsome young men guarding lives at Jones Beach. Miles was too, by the way . . . Anyway, I was dying to find Albert so he could rescue me, but Helen wouldn't cooperate and tell me where he was stationed. Can't you just see him, straining his beautiful muscles to pull me out of the surf while I clung to him like an octopus or bounced around like a porpoise—I never quite decided which. I was going to tickle him, too, and I suppose he would have socked me. He was always bragging about how he socked people he was rescuing . . . Helen, whatever happened to Albert finally?"

"I don't know. He sort of disappeared." Helen was

too busy with the Sunday drivers to say more. Kirk had evidently already heard that idiotic bathroom story which, according to Miles, Zoe completely revised every time she told it. Originally, she'd claimed only to have found poor Albert in the shower and backed right out again. Helen suspected that actually he'd been scared away by talk, not by action.

At one red light, she heard Kirk and Zoe agreeing on the deplorable uniformity of the various split-level home developments they had passed. Next he was interviewing her on her interview with Roosevelt in '36, and by the time the traffic thinned out again she was reviewing her brief meeting with Hitler. After that there was somehow time for side intrigues on the Lindbergh kidnapping case, Mary Garden, Neville Chamberlain, Robert Sherwood, and the Weintraubs next door. It was all quite familiar, but Helen got so absorbed in trying to listen that Zoe interrupted herself several times to bellow alarms about stop signs and red lights.

The feeble sun had vanished and the sky remained damp and wan, the landscape as lightless and dull as if seen through gauze. No one was getting a chance to remark on the beauties of nature or the boats in the inlets anyway, Helen noted, because they were always so far behind before Zoe allowed herself a pause. Kirk still seemed to be enjoying himself; Helen hoped this wasn't their last date.

When they finally reached Zoe's favorite picnic spot on a dead-end road that overlooked the Sound, the atmosphere seemed more like twilight than three p.m. At first they were going to sit in the car and eat, then after they'd got out to scatter into the woods in search of "unbuilt comfort stations," Kirk began collecting driftwood from the beach below and built a fire on the edge of the cliff. So they huddled in blankets and gazed out over the milky stillness of the water.

There was a brash young breeze, beginning to cut rawly and blow white with fog. Even as Helen passed around the sandwiches and poured coffee from the Thermos jug, the fog blurred out the edges of the dunes up and down the beach and obliterated the horizon.

"I've always liked this spot," Zoe said almost wistfully. "It's like the lonely beaches Bruno used to take me to in California. Fortunately, we never had a chaperone."

Kirk grinned, edged closer to Helen, and put his arm around her.

"All right, don't rub it in. You shouldn't have invited me." Zoe pointedly looked the other way.

Kirk laughed. "Move closer. I've got another arm."

"Thanks, but one arm isn't enough."

"Too bad Albert isn't along," Helen said.

Zoe meowed loudly, patted George Sand, and began muttering in French to her about the cruelty of daughters and their boy friends.

"What part of California were you talking about?" Kirk asked.

"Ah, I'm back in the party . . . Those wild beaches in the north, with the big rocks and the hills coming right down into the surf. Dark, lonely places, just right for pagan lovers and all that. Days of blinding light and frightful surf, too. Together with Bruno's house, back in the hills, it was a pleasant drug, a fine way to forget the world."

"Are you sorry you ever left it?"

"I had to — mainly for the sake of the children. They couldn't go to school there. I needed my work, too, and I needed other people. The house was about ninety miles from San Francisco, surrounded by redwoods and fruit trees, but nothing human for miles. It was one of Bruno's architectural experiments. Every door was different, and every window. No bedrooms, just a

huge common room like Grand Central Station. No plumbing, just modernistic privies. No electricity. All in all, it was one of Bruno's ways of celebrating himself. He yawps like Whitman — or he used to."

"Is he still there?"

"Last I heard from him was ten or eleven years ago, and he was then leaving for the Far East."

Kirk pulled his blanket closer and finished chewing a cold limp sandwich. "Are you by any chance talking about Bruno Margraf?"

"Yes. Why? Do you know him?"

"Helen, you've been holding out on me. Do I know him? It's like asking me if I know Katharine Cornell or Stravinsky or some other legendary character. Then Margraf is Miles's father?"

Zoe laughed, held out her hand. "You may touch me. I did, as the saying is, sleep with this legendary character . . . " And as she spoke she recaptured a passing glimpse of themselves naked in the firelight, of Bruno flat on the beach while she rode him and watched the black hills swallow up the full moon . . . "But frankly, I can think of others who might have impressed me more."

"Like?"

Zoe drew herself upright, squawlike in her blanket. "Sir Walter Raleigh perhaps. Really, I haven't given it much thought . . . Oh, Henry VIII. I'm sure I could have fixed his trolley."

Their laughter subsided and the groan of the fog-horn filled the silence, beginning far away and closing in around them with the intimacy of the fog.

"Helen, you never told me this part of the story."

"I guess I was afraid you might think I was trying to impress you."

"Bruno was always so publicity minded," Zoe said, "we got rather sick of it."

"He had quite a fight to put himself across, didn't he?"

"I suppose you can't blame him, really. It was a stinking shame the way he had to waste the best years of his life trying to sell the builders and the public something they weren't ready for. Eventually, of course, he was getting across—but third hand—through the American imitators of his foreign imitators. Since the war, I imagine, he's more outraged than ever at the way they've retreated into mass-production development houses and this epidemic of transparent boxes like the UN Building."

"He preached functionalism, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he wasn't afraid of ornament. He believed style should reflect the individual designer rather than the current fashion in standardization. He wanted space and line to mean something . . . My God, I sound like one of his disciples."

"Were you?"

She smiled haughtily. "I respected him."

"Didn't I read something about him recently?" Kirk's brow furrowed as he sipped his coffee. "Something about his coming back from the Far East?"

"Possibly. I suppose by now he's dripping with Vedanta or something. He always did a lot of gushing over things Oriental with an occasional damn for things Western. He's probably insufferable now that he's lived out there."

And so it went, Zoe doing most of the talking, dissecting Bruno, but less critically than usual. Helen had less and less to say. For a while she was busy cleaning up the picnic debris, tossing bread crusts down to the beach for the sandpipers that danced along the waterline. The crusts vanished on the wind, so she let George Sand sample the rest of the scraps. But George wasn't showing her ordinarily tigerish enthusiasm. She let the

wind ruffle her fur for a moment or two, then found shelter under Helen's blanket.

Zoe's concentration on Bruno still meant nothing, Helen told herself. He'd always been one of her favorite topics. And if what Kirk had read in the paper was news to her, she wouldn't admit it no matter how worried she might be about the chances of Bruno getting in touch with Miles. Or maybe she was trying to hide her worry . . .

"I was one of the lucky ones," she was telling Kirk, "who got off the ground even though there was a depression. So I didn't know how scared to be. I was too drunk with youth and wild ideas to understand why my father and so many others were wilting under it. I suppose I got a sort of lift from my father's decline and fall. He'd always been my enemy, anyway. I enjoyed seeing my decrepit mother, who'd always been his doormat, take over and run his life for him."

"Sounds like a heady way to start."

"It was. And I misread the signs. The world was lean and hungry and disillusioned. There wasn't much left to lose, so we struck out in all directions and had fun with our new wisdom, and we were sure we weren't lost like the 'lost generation' before us. I cut myself breaking idols, but I healed quickly. Now I try to avoid cutting myself. I no longer heal."

"Or does yesterday always look better?"

"When you've slipped . . . But it's more than that. The world—at least the world we're trying to hang on to—is fat and rich and satisfied now. So it's keeping the lid on and there's no place for heretics, no room for you if you're not happy making yourself sick with whipped cream."

Helen watched Kirk, his cheeks ruddy with cold above the shaved darkness of his jaws, his body hunched forward with his arms around his knees as he listened intently to Zoe. Somehow, he must belong to Zoe, too,

like Bruno, like Harry. But he was no childhood crush, she reminded herself. He was a man she'd found on her own. Odd though, or perhaps not so odd, that Zoe's taste in men was so similar to hers. She hadn't really cared for Albert herself, for instance. She'd simply got a kick out of him because he was so beautiful and so fascinatingly innocent about most of the subjects he presumed to discuss. Anyway, she wouldn't have married him for anything. Too bad Zoe didn't appreciate that . . .

"Helen, you look tired. Why don't I do the rest of the driving? You can finish that story over my shoulder. Can't you, Zoe?"

Zoe shook her head. "No thanks, Kirk. Rowena's too tricky. She doesn't react well to strangers. Even Russ, our garage man, wouldn't dare drive her. Anyway, how can you drive if you're going to finish that story I sidetracked about how your father lost out to big business. Let's go, Helen. It's getting foggier by the minute."

So Helen didn't get a chance for a word with Kirk until they'd reached home. It was after he'd excused himself from coming in and had said good night to Zoe and she'd gone into the house alone.

"Say, this has been tremendous fun. Why didn't I know your mother sooner?"

Helen smiled and looked away at the mist among the trees. "Oh, I guess it just didn't happen to work out that way."

"She's very stimulating. I — well, she is." He grinned, lowering his head as if slightly embarrassed.

"I think she really likes you," Helen said, wondering why he didn't pop out with, "Your mother is a bitch!" But maybe he wasn't so sensitive after all, maybe he hadn't realized what Zoe was up to or what a fool she'd made of her or how frightened she was of Zoe.

"Helen," Zoe was calling from the doorway. "Helen, things are getting awfully obstetrical. Kirk, you come too. You can walk the floor." She was brandishing a small fish net.

Helen turned back to him. "The guppies, I suppose."

"No, thanks," he called. "I really can't. I've got to go." Zoe vanished and he looked down at Helen. "Is that good — I mean, if she likes me?"

Helen laughed. "Of course. Why not?"

He took both her hands. "I'd like to see a little more of *you* next time."

She loved him for saying that, yet the apology for Zoe was out before she could stop it. "I guess Zoe had to get acquainted with you this time."

"Helen! My God, Helen, we've lost count. Hurry up!" Zoe vanished again.

"You'd better go." He held her firmly for a moment, kissed her lightly on the lips, then let her go. "I'll call you."

"Good night, Kirk." She watched him stride off into the darkness under the trees, then walked slowly into the house.

"Were we too much for him?" Zoe called gaily, aiming a flashlight into a dim corner of one of the fish tanks.

Miles grinned with a touch of malice, shook both dripping hands in her direction. "Your boy have a pretty big day?"

"Yes, He got the full treatment." Helen froze the apathy in her face and headed for her room.

"We've had a sensational delivery," Zoe called after her. "Anyway, Miles helped me save the dear little guppies from their nasty mother. I don't think she ate a single one, did she?"

Helen restrained herself and closed the door softly.

4.

"ANY MORE OF THAT DRIED-UP CAKE?"

"Huh?" Helen glanced up from her book.

Miles was still at the dinner table, standing now, stacking his dishes with a clatter that brought George Sand down from the top of the bookcase.

Helen had returned to her book, catching, along with the print, the thread of the Brahms violin concerto filtering through from the radio. But the story wasn't getting past the distractions. It was a solid, serious historical novel of fourteenth-century Italy which she had to read to keep a few steps ahead of the customers at the shop, and it probably would have held her except for the fact of Kirk's silence since the picnic. She poked at the little pillows and tried to get more comfortable in the armchair, only to find new lumps in the upholstery. Three days shouldn't mean anything. It hadn't before. But that was before he'd met Zoe . . .

"Any more of that lousy, dried-up cake?"

"Huh? I told you there's only enough for Zoe."

Miles leaned in the kitchen doorway. He cracked his knuckles and grinned knowingly, as if he'd caught Helen at something he could make fun of, but was weighing whether or not to let her off easy.

"I thought you were in such a hurry you couldn't wait to eat with us," she said.

"I was. I am."

"If Zoe doesn't know about this new letter, what's your rush to get away? She doesn't even seem to know about the first one yet."

"How do I know she doesn't know about the first one?"

"She doesn't act like it."

"Why should she if she's plotting something?"

Helen smiled. "So tonight she smells the second letter and springs the plot."

He shrugged. "Maybe I just want to go out someplace where I can think in peace."

"Who's stopping you?"

Abruptly, he reached up and began chinning himself on the door frame, keeping his knees bent so his feet wouldn't touch the floor.

She lost count, watching him, her mind on Kirk again. She wished she could call him and ask him what he really thought of Zoe. Maybe he'd been laughing at Zoe instead of with her. No, it was all too obvious that he'd been enthralled.

Miles stopped chinning himself and collapsed on the couch, mopping his flushed face with a handkerchief. "Poor Kirk," he said, and grinned as if he'd been reading her thoughts.

"Poor Kirk nothing! What do you know about it?"

"When you start gnawing your lower lip I don't have to know much. Zoe must think he's dangerous. She must be afraid he'll kidnap you and leave us pining for your company."

"Don't be asinine. She likes him, that's all."

"Yeah? Well, she still hates men, especially one that might take something away from her."

"What's the matter, little boy? Your psych courses gone to your head?"

He ignored her and flopped down in Zoe's throne,

hanging one leg over the arm, then found himself a small blank spot on the wall to stare at. A blank spot was so rare around here, he told himself. At least, the ceiling was blank, except for a shading of old dust along the molding and a cloud-shaped stain from one of the radiators upstairs. He wished the letters in his pocket were blank. Then he wouldn't have to think. Then everything could go on as before in this stupifying old rut.

Helen seemed to have lost herself in her book again. He pulled the latest letter out of his pocket and began to read it for about the fourth time:

Dear Miles:

Now that I've reminded you that you have a father, however remote and forgotten, I've decided I'd better get to the point. Forgive me if I stumble in the effort. At any rate, let me say that it pleases the vanity of an old man to recall that he took part in originating the young man you must now be. Voltaire put my state of mind this way: "A man can have only a certain number of teeth, hair, and ideas; there comes a time when he necessarily loses his teeth, hair, and ideas." Frankly, I want to see you before all is lost.

All my life has been devoted to building something — often ostensibly for others, but always for myself. I've never designed anything I didn't believe in. Collectively, it might be called shelter. For me, it has been a sort of platform from which to view the world. Now that I'm launched on my sixties, I feel I need to do more than stand glued to the sum of my accomplishments and look around and ask questions. I'd like to help someone now better equipped than I to be a doer, someone who can carry on. In my youth, so I've read since, I made unseemly noise with my version of the ancient idea that the design of a building should be as functional as nature's design for any biological creation. Don't build a department store to resemble the Tomb of Hadrian, etc. I've never expected anyone to live in a machine, however, despite all the slanders to that effect, and now that I'm through wan-

dering, I'm back here in the mountains working on my own house, which definitely is not a machine! Since in time I hope it will be your house, I'd like to see your hand in its construction. And if you're still as interested in architecture as you were at the age of six, I should certainly help you complete your education.

I have such pleasant recollections of you in this isolation that it seems like the ideal place for us to resume our acquaintance . . .

Miles glanced up at the relatively blank ceiling again. Suppose his father had started off: *Dear Miles. Let's get acquainted. Come on out for a visit if you want to . . .* It wouldn't be as disturbing. It wouldn't make you feel so remote, so conscious of how little you knew him. How could you answer this letter? *Yes, Dad, or Father, I have teeth and hair, but no ideas worth mentioning. Or, being who and what you are, I'm afraid you'd find my ideas pretty childish . . .*

And suppose he did go visit him? Zoe would probably get wildly drunk in her outrage and Helen would have to send for him to come home. Then his father would look at his strange embarrassment and think him an even more childish fool for having put up with Zoe's tyranny all these years, for having to rush back to pacify her. Besides, this wasn't just an invitation for a brief visit. There was something more binding involved:

. . . My recollections include your mother, of course, and Helen. Now that I'm back I see more clearly why I had to leave eleven years ago. Without all of you here, the place was no longer what I had wanted. It isn't now. But I'm not trying to recapture anything. Your mother must be quite different now, as I would be to her. I still admire and love what I knew — her energy and imagination, her common sense and daring, not to mention the more obvious reasons for her attractiveness. And I'd like to go on remembering her that way. I can't blame her if her common sense was something

she could seldom apply to herself. None of us ever makes the most of what he has. Why should we? Life isn't a business proposition . . . I go into this because I feel I must make it clear why my approach at this time is to you alone. I realize how hard your mother must have worked to educate you and Helen while I've been away, and in time I hope to make some sort of amends to her. In the meantime, I'd like to help with the rest of your education and in whatever other ways I can . . .

"Does he want you to go to California right away?" Helen broke in.

Miles bounded to his feet, stood glaring down at her. "Quit angling, will you? Whatever I do about this is strictly on my own. Get it?"

"You don't have to be such a snerd," she called after him as he headed for the bathroom. Then she pulled herself up out of the depths of the chair, disgusted at her own tone of voice, and went into the kitchen.

Miles came through in a hurry. "Zoe's on her way up the street. If she asks about me, tell her I'll be late." He was gone then, letting the back door slam behind him.

Helen lighted the gas under the skillet to brown the leftover mashed-potato cakes and got the salad and Spam out of the refrigerator. She could hear the front door squeaking open and George skittering across the uncarpeted part of the floor with her claws out, then Zoe greeting her in French.

Helen came out of the kitchen, tying on her apron. "I didn't know you were going to be so late. Why didn't you phone?"

Zoe dropped her red straw sailor on the floor for George's benefit and snapped on some of the aquarium lights. "The mollys look quite cheered up," she said. "Don't they?"

"They look the same as ever to me," Helen's voice came wearily. "Why didn't you phone?"

"I'm not very late." Zoe peered closely into one of the tanks, regretting that the rare elation that had carried her home this evening was being so senselessly dissipated. "You know very well I'm too busy to phone. There should be something to eat no matter when I get here. My God, let's be flexible." She hurried away to wash and change. Apparently she would have to go on enjoying her good news alone.

Suddenly, her clothes were unbearable and she was in such a hurry to get them off that she didn't even bother turning on the light in her room before she started peeling. She was scarcely aware of her girdle all day. The moment she got home, though, it seemed about to squeeze her to death.

Oh, what a relief to wrench the damned thing off and fling it into space. Why did she need such a thing anyway? She stood naked, reveling in the darkness and the breeze from the open window, running her hands as the breeze ran, over her breasts and down her sides . . . Flesh still remarkably taut and smooth, even if she did hate exercise. Good posture and no particular interest in food, plus a long line of lean ancestors. A fine way to be, especially for one who might be about to stand on top of the world again . . . Helen and her silly exaggerations about the liquor, saying she was beginning to look bloated — nonsense!

She slipped into pajamas and dressing gown, returned to the living room by way of the bathroom. Mme. Sand preceded her, gamboling in circles as if she at least sensed there was good news in the air.

" 'George Sand in Italy,' by Zoe Lakes," the magazine would probably say on its cover. And most likely there would be a note inside saying this was part of a forthcoming biography which had been in preparation over ten years — for those who wondered, "Whatever became of Zoe Lakes?"

"Please hurry," she called out. "I'm starving. If I have to slave all day . . ." she began, as if Helen were right before her, then left the thought unfinished while she puckered her lips to hold a cigarette. It made her eyes smart, but she went on puffing fitfully until she found her holder in the disorder of the library table. Somehow, she was having fun burying her elation under this routine irritation.

"Come on," Helen called. "It's ready."

Zoe sat down at the table and deplored to Mme. Sand the abominable complexion of the Spam and potato cakes and the very fatigued coleslaw.

"Miles ate, but I waited."

"Did he have a date?" Zoe stirred angrily at the stuff on her plate.

"How would I know?" Helen sat down opposite. "Did you see the mail? It's just the regular bills and junk."

"Anything for Miles?"

"I didn't notice."

Zoe's eyes came up, met Helen's. "Would you have noticed if he'd got something from Bruno?"

Helen blinked. "From Bruno?" she said. At least, she must look surprised, even if she was surprised for the wrong reason. How could Zoe know about today's letter unless he'd left it around some place? And how could that be when he'd obviously been guarding it with his life? "Why should he hear from him all of a sudden?"

"I see you're no brighter than usual. It so happens that Bruno's back in the country. Don't you read the paper? Doesn't Miles? Your boy friend evidently read about it."

"I don't snoop in other people's mail," Helen blurted in confusion.

Zoe's eyes narrowed. "I didn't ask you if you'd

snooped in his mail. I'm merely saying that Bruno's been back in the country for weeks and—well, you know what a crackpot he is. It just isn't like him not to try to get in touch with Miles with some scheme to remake his life." With an air of having made the definitive pronouncement on Bruno, Zoe turned her attention to her food.

Helen wished she could recall Bruno more clearly on her own, that her view of him wasn't so mixed up with Zoe's. She did have a fleeting impression of him as being unusually warm and protective, even though practically a stranger. There had been a time when she dreamed about him a great deal and pretended he was her own father instead of Miles's, a time when it gave her goose pimples to know ahead of time that he was coming to stay with them at Zoe's apartment in San Francisco, to know that Zoe would be away in New York or Cairo or some odd place, to imagine that Miles wasn't going to be left in Bruno's charge, too. The last part never came true, but even with Miles being a little nuisance, Bruno always seemed to have so much time to listen to both of them and read to them and take them to the zoo or the park or on ferry rides across the bay—all exciting ways to get away from whatever old woman they were currently supposed to call Nanny . . .

"I hadn't intended to say anything about this," Zoe interrupted, "but Miles has been acting rather strange. I'm sure Bruno's up to something."

Helen shrugged. "I guess I've got enough of my own problems without worrying about Miles."

"Really? I think it may pay you to worry about Miles. Bruno's very likely to lure him into quitting college and then before you know it he'll end up drafted."

"Maybe Bruno just wants to correspond."

"You don't know Bruno." Zoe sighed, tried by

Helen's gullibility. At least you could talk to her, though. Miles was equally gullible, but less reachable. He seemed so sure of himself, so much in command. If you tried to warn him about Bruno, he was apt to explode in outrage. He might even rush off immediately. "Don't forget, I had to fight with him to let Miles go to any kind of school in the first place. He thought he could start making an architect out of him at the age of six . . . Is there any more of this atrocious coleslaw?"

Helen left for the kitchen. "I think I was really quite fond of Bruno."

"Why not?" Zoe said, accepting the challenge, now that her elation was practically dead and thoroughly buried. "I was his victim, not you — except indirectly. He made a perfect stepfather, didn't he? An entertaining one, I'd say. Oh, what a supreme ego! A tremendous personality, really. Carloads of vitality hidden under all that heavy dignity. Some day I've got to write a play about him. Of all the men I've ever known he was really the only one I might have been able to stand for life."

"What about Harry?" Helen returned with the coleslaw and sat down.

Zoe felt her mouth tighten. She let her fork clatter to the plate. "What are you trying to do? Drive me to drink?"

Helen seemed to shrink into her chair. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"I'm talking about Bruno. You know, in some ways, I wouldn't mind seeing him now myself. I think I'd — well, yes, I think I'd like to show him what I've managed to do with you and Miles."

Helen, having retrieved her composure, snorted.

"I *have* raised and educated both of you — and all without a shred of moral or financial support from him . . . God, I can't eat another bite of this rubbish. Throw it out."

"If you'd tell me what you wanted . . ."

"I've told you — time and again. If you weren't always mooning over some — oh, what's the use? That damn office is driving me insane. Halling's insisting that I write the anniversary speech for the old top fuddydud, and you know it'll end up sounding just like last year's speech when they get through with it." She grabbed her cigarettes and holder and pushed herself away from the table.

"Now's the time to look for another job."

"I have. As I've said before, it's not easy for a woman like me. If I go into my experience, they think I want a fabulous salary and will try to run the place. My old battles mess up the record and I have to waste a lot of time explaining things that are nobody's business. Anyway, I want to forget the past." She rose from her chair.

"Why forget it? It's a good past."

"That's what I mean. It's such a drawback to have fallen." Or perhaps not completely, she reminded herself. "George Sand in Italy" could reverse the process.

"If you fixed yourself up and stopped drinking and got a permanent and wore something interesting, you wouldn't have to worry about what's gone."

"Something interesting costs more than I can afford."

"That sixty or seventy a month you spend on so-called nightcaps —"

"My petty vices are my own business, thank you. Christ, I've got to have something or I wouldn't sleep. And never mind telling me to take sleeping pills. They're too dangerous."

Helen laughed as she stacked the dirty dishes. "I suppose nobody ever died of liquor." She headed for the kitchen. "Of course I haven't mentioned what it costs when you really slip off the wagon."

Zoe turned, glowering. "What's got into you, any-

way? I haven't slipped off — as you call it — in months. And then it was your fault. That moon-faced baboon you dragged in, that Neanderthal engineer who wanted to run my life. Take a vacation. Take calomel. Let my uncle get you a fur coat — he's in the business. That specimen was even denser than Albert."

"At least, you like Kirk."

"I don't know whether I do or not."

"He certainly appreciates you."

"He laughs at my jokes. What of it? Both my husbands did, too." She followed Helen as far as the kitchen doorway. "Let's stick to the subject. What's Miles up to? Is he off with that mysterious Irish girl again?"

Helen went on scraping the dishes and piling them in the sink. "Probably."

"I still haven't met her. What's the matter? Is he ashamed of her?"

"Obviously it's his home he's ashamed of. If he brought her here, you'd either make a fool of her or, on the other hand, you might be rolling in your cups."

"Now stop it! Good God, you seem to be obsessed with the subject."

"Maybe I am. I can't help it. It's getting so I don't dare bring anybody home unexpectedly — not even Peggy. And I'm scared to plan anything because that's when you're sure to go haywire. I finally took a chance and brought Kirk home on the spur of the moment because I couldn't stall him off any longer." Helen slammed the dishes around in the soapy water.

Zoe's eyes twinkled. She pushed the hair back from her forehead with a lofty gesture and leaned against the doorjamb staring coolly. "That is an amusing angle," she said, "when you consider that Kirk spent the whole day with us — *as planned*. Tell me, does he like the way you distort things?"

"As planned — hell!" Helen deliberately broke a

cracked plate in two and let the pieces clatter on the drainboard. "I notice *your* plans aren't the ones that get sabotaged. Let me know when *I'm* supposed to invite Kirk."

"Ah, to think that we have come to this, to think that little daughter is jealous of her poor old mama. Heavens to Betsy, I didn't know I had it in me."

"Don't flatter yourself. I didn't say it was making him fall for you."

"I suppose he's reassured you on that."

Helen dried her hands on the dishtowel and flung it aside. There was no use saying any more. She'd better leave the dishes before she broke them all. So she just left everything as it was and headed for her room, grabbing her book on the way.

But behind the closed door, she couldn't read. She couldn't do anything but think of Kirk and wish he would suddenly turn up and take her out somewhere.

She dared herself to look out the window. His car wasn't there, of course. Oh, stop acting like a child and call him. Later . . . Yes, later, after Zoe went to sleep . . . Go out and call him in certain privacy from the corner drugstore. Right now, she might as well go back and finish the dishes.

In the living room, she found Zoe sitting on her throne leafing through *The Reporter* while George batted at the pages from her vantage point on the chair arm.

"I heard from Joyce Dewey today."

Helen paused in the middle of the room. "Oh, did you? That's right, she's still your agent. What's doing?"

Zoe let the magazine slide from her lap and, with an unmistakable air of triumph, waved her cigarette and holder slowly to the side until her elbow was resting on the chair arm behind George, the cigarette glow pointing ceilingward. "Joyce has made a deal," she said.

"The check's in the mail. 'George Sand in Italy' is coming out in *Harper's*."

"Really? My God, isn't that wonderful! Oh, Zoe . . . " Helen's hands flew up. "Gosh, finally . . . Why didn't you tell me when you came in?" She ran to her, grabbed her free hand, and perched herself on the chair arm, facing her.

"I don't know. The mood just wasn't right, I guess . . . " Zoe squeezed her hand. "I was dying to, but somehow I couldn't."

"If you'd just given me an inkling. But never mind. Tell me all about it. What happened?"

"Not much to say, really. I may have to do a little more cutting on it—or they will. That's it. Joyce wangled an acceptance, somehow."

"Oh, I can't get over it—what we've been hoping for for years. And you'll be able to work on the book again. It'll help the book's chances, won't it?" Helen patted George as she crossed Zoe's lap toward her.

"Joyce seems to think so. I had lunch with her."

"But you're so calm."

"Yes . . . It doesn't thrill me the way I would have expected it to. Joyce worked so hard on this, and before that you worked so hard to make me get it in shape for her. It's really you two who deserve the credit."

"Oh, Zoe, Zoe . . . " Helen threw herself against her, hugging her so violently that George was squeezed and cried out and had to leap to one of the bookcases to save herself.

"Now please, let's not get sloppy."

Helen settled back on her perch, wiping her eyes.

"Juice! Juice! Please hurry!" A groggy, gloggy stare at the clock told Zoe she'd overslept again. She rubbed about a carload of gravel out of her eyes and struggled to the edge of the bed, where she could sit and catch

her breath and bend over for the stocking struggle, then the shoe struggle, delaying the girdle struggle as long as possible. At the same time, she tried to keep a cigarette lighted. It kept falling out of the ashtray, and she kept retrieving it before it charred another spot into the top of the night table. Helen evidently kept count of those damned spots.

"Pineapple or tomato?" Helen yelled from the living room. Apparently, that mysterious schedule of hers at the bookstore had changed again and she was doing the late shift today.

"I don't care . . . Tomato. But hurry."

A poor life, but mine own, she reflected, as she jammed foot into shoe. Last night had its moments. This morning is pure hell.

She'd managed to jam herself into practically everything else in sight and was sitting there puffing from the exertion, when Helen materialized in her sloppy blue bathrobe carrying a tall glass of pineapple juice, fizzing with carbonated water, and a cup of coffee.

"I forgot to put tomato in the refrigerator."

"Naturally. Please see if you can pull that back zipper up all the way. The least you can do is wake me up on time . . . That's enough. Zip the dress, please, not me."

Helen left and Zoe quickly poured the juice and the coffee into her supreme dryness and called for more of both.

And eventually, she was able to jam on her red sailor, glance at the mirror for a passing check on her hemline, and get going.

In the living room, Miles was awake, but still in bed.

"I thought you had another exam today."

"Not till one." Bare chest above the covers, he turned on his side.

This was every morning's world-can-sink-or-swim

coldness. It was in his voice whether he smiled or not. Bruno again. Bruno, the magpie theorist with the icy silences when you ached for a word or two. And Miles looked so much like Bruno, too: the squarish head with the close ears, the heavy eyebrows contrasting with the large whites of the eyes, and the broad, taut-cheeked face. A young man marked "Do not touch." Nobody's child any more.

But he was smiling now, saying, "Congratulations on the good news."

"Thank you. It seems very remote in the grim light of dawn."

"Sorry I wasn't here to help celebrate."

"We didn't celebrate. Not yet. What time did you come in?" she asked, thinking of how she'd lain awake listening and worrying, building up whole scenes of the police arriving to tell her one of his friends' hot rod cars had been wrecked and he wouldn't be alive to hear the news.

"About midnight."

"I must have dozed off earlier than I thought I had. I wanted to talk to you about something, but I can't stop now. I'll see you tonight." She opened the front door, wishing she could go over and kiss him, that it could be done casually—an everyday habit that wouldn't surprise him. But it would. Instead, she turned and threw a kiss to George Sand, who was staring at her from the center of the library table.

"No use postponing it," Miles said quietly.

"Postponing what?"

"The talk."

"But I've got to catch my bus, I'll see you tonight."

"How do you know I'll be here tonight?"

She gripped the doorknob, fuming because she'd been fool enough to start this discussion. He must see she was in her usual desperate hurry. "I don't know what

you're talking about. What would I know about your plans anyway?"

"But you want to know about them, don't you?" his voice came slyly. "I guess Helen's told you about some of my recent mail."

"She hasn't. Please, I haven't got time to talk about anything now. I'm late."

"There isn't really anything to talk about. You might as well know the score, though."

"There evidently is something to talk about. Let's save it." If only she didn't have to stand in the doorway haggling.

"Anyway, I've been thinking."

"And?"

"Well," he held one arm vertically, as though balancing it against the air, "for the moment I think I'll just sit tight and see what happens."

She breathed more easily. "All right. That sounds sensible. We can discuss it tonight then."

"There's nothing to discuss. It's settled. It's settled until the first time you fall off the wagon."

"How dare you!" She swung the door open so hard it cracked into a chair and almost toppled it against the aquariums. She caught the chair just in time and stalked out, suppressing an impulse to slam the door. A crackling rage sent her swiftly down the front steps and along the walk. She wasn't shaking, however.

In fact, by the time she'd crossed the street, walked the block to the bus stop and bought her paper she felt quite calm and even tolerant.

The poor kids, both of them. They shouldn't really be blamed for what they were doing. After all, they were only fronts for the actual conspirators pulling the strings. Too bad that Bruno and Kirk couldn't get together on this and see that their mouthpieces did a better job.

And as she boarded her bus, the thought struck her

that possibly Bruno and Kirk were working together. Kirk and his surprise at the mention of Bruno — what a fraud that could be. Kirk and his recent business trip to San Francisco — what business? A wild thought, and yet not so wild. It was not unlike Bruno to interest a friend in stirring up a diversionary rebellion . . .

No, Zoe, you're wide awake imagining things again. Poor Helen — she would get mixed up with a man like Kirk. A man who carried his maleness so lightly, his self-assurance so casually slung over his shoulder. The worst kind of man. The kind that didn't seem to be threatened by women, the kind that were such a challenge you couldn't leave them alone — like Bruno, like Harry . . .

Kirk and his big sleepy bear look. Then he could bury the twinkle and seem so forbidding and overlordish. That was probably what he was paid for, when he wasn't recruiting envious college boys: to sit in on labor-management negotiations and fiddle with his dark-rimmed glasses and appear all dollar signs and impregnable, a portrait of management unimpressed by the plight of poor working women and beaten-down wage slaves supporting a wife and five kids on nothing a week . . .

She ought to hate him.

5.

HELEN SNUGGLED IN THE CROOK OF KIRK'S ARM AND GAZED out through the windshield at the water. An unbroken path of silver crossed from below the full moon and stippled itself away into the darkness behind the silhouettes of the trees at the edge of the dead-end road.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"You . . . And you?"

"You."

"Four times 'you' divided by two equals 'we.' But where is it getting us?" He rubbed her nose with his, then kissed her lightly.

They sat in silence again.

The couple in the only other car parked here tonight, Helen noted, were evidently already past the stage of thinking . . . or speaking . . . or making decisions . . . or adding and dividing pronouns. They must be 'one' by now. Luckily for them, they were both fairly small. Ever since they'd moved to the back seat they'd been practically invisible. That wouldn't be possible with Kirk.

She touched him to see if he was envying them, too.

He was. "I thought this was no-frenzy night," he whispered.

"I know." She kept her hands to herself.

He brought his arm down away from her shoulder and

lighted a cigarette. "Thus far and no further is a very maddening doctrine," he muttered.

"I know." She watched the skein of smoke float out the car window and into the moonlight and vanish on its way to the stars and reminded herself that if she were going to stick to her doctrine she must be fair about it.

They sat in silence with only their arms and thighs and legs touching. She let her head rest against his shoulder, the best of all possible shoulders, she reflected. So comfortable, and yet leaning against it was like leaning against a building that unaccountably wore a broadcloth shirt.

She hadn't meant to suggest this destination tonight, but somehow the more she'd told him about Miles having heard from his father and Zoe's worry about that and her own worry about how it might upset Zoe's writing plans, the more she wanted to be alone with him. And not really to talk, either. She closed her eyes . . . Oh, damn the whole universe! She did want him so badly. She longed for his worries in place of her own. She wanted to hear with his ears, see with his eyes, touch with his fingers. She wanted to hear the same music, read the same words, eat the same food, sleep the same sleep . . .

When she'd first known him, he'd seemed older than thirty-one — too stable and unromantic, if not downright antiromantic, for her taste. "I was born old," he'd said once, and every so often that idea — meaningless as it might be — had made her feel she would never quite know him. At some point along the way she'd begun to value his not wearing his feelings on his face, as Albert had. It hadn't taken any time at all to know Albert inside out, which had quickly given her an unexpected confidence in herself that frightened away doubt as soon as a decision had to be made about marriage or any other step. But Kirk — she had more confidence in him than she'd ever had in herself. He would always know what

to do. Today, for instance, he'd taken the initiative and invited Zoe out to lunch. He'd been near her office and dropped in on impulse. Fine impulse. If he got along that well with Zoe now, he should do beautifully as her son-in-law . . .

"I'm sorry I talk so much about domestic troubles," Helen said.

"I don't mind. I just wish I understood them better." He took her hand. "For instance, why shouldn't Miles go visit his father if he wants to?"

"He has two more years of college. Do you think he should quit now?"

"Does his father want him to quit?"

"I don't know, really. Miles won't say."

"Then why worry about it?"

She straightened up, impatient because she couldn't tell the whole story. "Oh, because Zoe's so worried. She's probably right about Bruno, too. He wasn't good for Miles before and he's not likely to be now. He pushed him too much. Zoe believed in treating us somewhat like grown-ups, too, but Bruno overdid it. Miles was pretty mixed up when he got to school."

"How?"

"Oh, in some ways he was so far ahead of the other kids that he didn't fit in. I guess it's only in college that he hasn't felt out of place."

"Sounds like typical Margraf. Down with the mob. Down with the mediocre. I should think it would be the chance of a lifetime for Miles to get reacquainted with him now."

"I don't know. All my life I've been hearing about what a genius Bruno is, and at the same time what a stinker. Miles has been worshipping him ever since he could read architectural magazines."

"It's no wonder. I would think it was time he went and saw him and talked to him and learned all he could

and got this worship under control. I don't see why he has to quit college. He can go out for the summer."

Helen kept still. She couldn't begin to explain, without going into the liquor problem, why Zoe was so afraid of losing Miles, why his departure might mean disaster. She was certain that if she tried to explain, she would only betray Zoe and kill the respect Kirk already seemed to have for her. He had probably never had any first-hand experience with an alcoholic, would not be able to understand how Zoe had to fight to keep what control she had over the disease. To tell him how Zoe had been trapped into her responsibilities, to describe the exciting professional opportunities she had been forced to pass up would seem like an appeal for pity. And Zoe deserved respect, not pity . . .

"What fascinates me is what your mother and father — or stepfather — represent. They've both struck off some real fireworks. They must have been marvelous together."

"Yes, but the fireworks got out of control. Oh, Kirk, it's a shame you didn't know Zoe when she was in top form."

"Why 'was'? This George Sand business sounds as though she's still in pretty top form. I meant to tell you, I just read that first play of hers in one of the annual collections. You didn't tell me it had been such a hit."

"Oh . . . How'd you like it?"

"Very much — partly because it sounded so much like her. It must have been something to see. I was surprised she hadn't mentioned it."

"She frets too much about the one that flopped and the ones that didn't get written."

"I did some more research and found three of her articles in anthologies. That one about the lynching she was telling about. But that one about FDR's first hundred days is really a knockout. I've never read such a clear, entertaining account of the bank holiday and how he took hold of the crisis."

"Did you tell her about your research?"

"A little. She didn't seem too interested in my reactions, though. I guess it's just old stuff to her now. And lunch wasn't a good time for it. People from the foundation kept stopping at our table. Some of it was business, but most of them just wanted to trade quips and office gripes."

"Did you meet Jenny Zajac?"

"The secretary. Yes, I met her before we went out and she talked to me while Zoe was getting ready. Jenny seems to worship her." The picture came back to him of the scrawny, restlessly busy little woman buried in reference books and publications . . . and behind her, the female executive with the fearful black-rimmed glasses, tied up in a forbidding preoccupation with the disorder on her desk, the ties so quickly loosened by her smile of greeting, her one-of-the-boys handshake, her easy banter graciously including the secretary and the nearby file clerks . . . "I envy the smooth, casual way Zoe has with her staff."

"I guess it's only the people over her that she has trouble with."

"The thing that confuses me . . . Well, she seems like such a natural-born leader you expect her to be running a place like that."

"Oh, some of the men running that foundation are pretty old-fashioned about women."

The defensiveness in Helen's voice stalled his questions. Maybe the answers were in Zoe's play — the tragedy of an ambitious woman, widely respected for her political and humanitarian influence, who had to fight every man-made weapon, including chivalry, in her struggle to stay on top. Only it wasn't really tragic. The flaw in the woman that prevented her triumph, as Kirk read the play, was the fact that she had not been born male. In spite of the stature she attained, she was defeated and driven out of public life, not so much by the corruption of the political machine she was trying to overturn as by the men's

inability to treat her as anything but a woman. A lot of it seemed dated now. It must have been the wit and irony of the dialogue that put it over then, the neat satiric jabs at a man's world . . .

He shivered at the coolness of Helen's fingers, suddenly reaching him between the buttons of his shirt. He gasped, snorting and trying not to giggle. The more he struggled, without using real force, the more her fingers traveled around, up across his chest, down his ribs to his belly. He doubled over, bleating with pleasure. And then after tears and gasps and a roar that burst from him before he could catch it, he caught his breath and regained control, but paralyzed his funny bone against the steering wheel as he turned to grab her under the arms. She squirmed, giggling and crupting with breathless little screams until finally she fell against him, helpless. They just remained in a hug then, senseless and relaxed in the amazing stillness . . .

He caught sight of the other couple emerging from the back of their car and disappearing, close together, into the bushes.

"I guess we disturbed them."

"They're better off in the bushes . . ." She trembled, her lips against his neck.

"What about us?" His hand had worked its way comfortably inside the opening of her blouse.

"Some day . . ."

"I don't have any roommate."

"Some night then . . ."

"I can't wait . . . I can't wait . . ."

But she was pulling away from him, gently at first, then more definitely. "We're supposed to rush away and eat hamburgers. Remember?"

He took a deep breath and held it and turned his head to concentrate on the stars above the tree tops. Finally, he said, "I'm turning over a new leaf."

"Because I'm so bitchy for starting these things?"

He placed both hands firmly on the steering wheel and nodded.

"I'm sorry."

He took her hand. "The new leaf was also about another subject — my dangerous tendency to try to run other people's lives. Haven't you noticed?"

"No."

"Well, it starts with curiosity. After that, I get into trouble — lose girl friends and just friends and everybody because I get too mixed up with their family problems. If I show any more signs of trying to run your life — I mean, before marriage — you'd better slap me down."

She laughed. "As if I could."

"You have your ways."

"About marriage, was that a proposal?"

"Not a formal one. Just something to think about. I didn't want to spring it on you and find you unprepared."

"Did you ever meet a female who wasn't prepared?"

He grinned. "Then why am I still a bachelor?"

"It's a mystery to me. You seem so independent, but then you tell me you get tangled up in other people's problems. Still, you must be pretty independent, or you wouldn't have run away from your family."

The car squeaked and rocked in upheaval while he shifted about. Finally he was lying with his head in her lap, down in the dark where he could gaze up at the moon blueness on her face. His feet hung out the driver's window, quite comfortable for the moment.

"Everybody should run away from their family."

"That means me."

"When you're ready to. In the meantime, you should slap me down for that kind of statement."

"Right." She patted his face. "But we're talking about your family."

"Yes . . . Well, when I got out of the Army I was

twenty and I'd seen a hunk of the world — war and post-war — and decided I'd outgrown them. So when I got back from Germany I kept going — west and south and north and west again and had fun and misery and homesickness and survived even more ordinary ordinariness than my family could ever provide . . ." He paused, caught his breath. "Now I'm old and tolerant and I've rediscovered my family. In the meantime, they've outgrown me, so we get along beautifully."

"Do you see much of them?"

"Once or twice a year. Sometimes I want to see them. Sometimes it's just a duty. They get too something or other for me after a few days."

"When can I meet them?"

"No hurry. After the honeymoon — just something to think about, don't forget — I'll probably get a touch of homesickness and have to show you the service station where I had my first job and the porch where my father rocked his way into a depression in the middle of the war boom."

"Big family-type family, I suppose."

"That's right. Quarreling, backbiting, sentimental — a real cageful of individualists. They would have spit on 'togetherness' if they'd ever heard of it. Lucy's the only one who's still at home, the one who was too decent to fight back. She's the old maid plugged in like an all-purpose appliance — takes care of the garden, the illnesses, the cooking, the cleaning, the tribal gatherings."

"I don't know that I can wait until after the honeymoon."

"You'd better. I don't want to risk losing you."

"That's not fair. I've risked you on my family. In fact, I almost lost you to Zoe."

He chuckled. "Not exactly. In a way, Zoe's made me want you all the more."

"Why?" She bent down and kissed the end of his nose.

"I don't know," he fumbled. "It just helps that I like her, I guess . . ." "Like" wasn't the word, but a sort of guilt kept him from saying how much she charmed him, how much he looked forward to conversations with her, how much he enjoyed simply watching her in action. The novelty of the situation disturbed him. Prospective parents-in-law had so often seemed like people to be tolerated, humored, even escaped from — if you could do it gracefully — somewhat like most of the parents of your friends when you were a child. The older generation was dull and inhibiting enough at home.

"Our unknown friends are creeping back into their car," Helen said.

Kirk heard the carefree slamming of the doors, then the coughing and sputtering of the motor, followed by an abrupt and ostentatious roar as the car prepared to turn around.

"He sounds happy."

"She's the one that's driving," Helen said.

"Then he must be happy."

Kirk heard Helen sigh as the car roared again and jounced away up the road out of ear range.

He drew his legs in out of the window and sat up. "I'm cut in two. What do you say we do something?"

"Still feeling dangerous?"

"Hell, I could start nibbling any place and have you consumed before midnight. Let me start here."

She laughed, squirming away. "Let's go get those hamburgers."

He sighed. "If that's the way it has to be . . . Can I see you Thursday?" He stretched, reveling in the torture of his longing, thudding against the ceiling of the car with both fists.

"Thursday? No, I'm afraid not . . ." She seemed to hesitate, then added, "I think Miles is doing something that night."

"What difference does that make?"

"Well . . ." Finally, she said, "It's just that if he's not there, I'll have to get Zoe's dinner because she'll come home so dead-tired."

"Can't she eat out on such occasions?"

Helen put her finger against his lips. "Remember your new leaf?"

"O.K. Let's make it Friday. I don't care." The last three words were a lie. He was suddenly bored with Zoe and her imperial ways.

"Friday'll be fine; I'll be on the early shift at the store. But I'll have to let you know if it turns out Miles has changed his plans or something."

"Maybe I should just make a habit of dropping in unexpectedly."

"Maybe. At least, Zoe's always likely to be home."

"Hell, I'm not coming to see her. I want to see you—all of you. Damn it, this is it! I want you. I love you. I *am* proposing herewith."

"Darling . . ." She was back in his arms again, their lips together, his tongue finding hers . . . until they pulled apart to catch their breath. After a moment or two, she said, "But darling, we'll have to think about it."

"All right," he said, exasperated, "suppose Miles not only goes out Friday night, but goes all the way to California to visit his father. Then what? Nothing but parlor dates?"

"Of course not. Anyway, he won't go to his father."

"Why not?"

"I just don't think so. It wouldn't make sense . . . Oh, why worry? Everything'll turn out better than I expect it to. It always does."

He suppressed the temptation to argue with her feelings. They sounded so empty he couldn't imagine she really believed in them. What a sad, beaten-down form of hope she must live by, with expectations so low they

couldn't help but be safe. Or did she really live that way? Another question to go with those collecting in his head.

Not tonight though. He was slipping into too destructive a mood. He just wanted one last not too frenzied kiss so he could go home to solitary, feeling no more churned up, cheated, and edgy than he already was.

In solitary, at least, he had Helen's photograph to himself.

6.

FRIDAY NIGHT, MILES, MINUS SHOES, SOCKS, AND SHIRT, paused on the way to bed to read the letters again for possibly the seventh time. On his bed, in the circle of light that dropped from the floor lamp and left the rest of the room almost black, he felt alone with them, secure from interruption by Zoe, who was asleep, or by Helen, who was out.

He was nearly through the second letter when a creaking of the stairs made him start and shove the letter under his pillow. He peered up over his shoulder then, into the darkness beyond the stair rail. It was Lou, of course — no reason for alarm.

"Hi," he whispered, welcoming this interruption. "What's up?"

"Not a thing. What's with you?" She tiptoed down the rest of the way and around Zoe's throne into the circle of light, her wrapper modestly fastened over her nightgown.

"Nothing special," he said, completing their silly ritual.

"Looks like you got a guilty conscience."

"No more than usual." He stiffened his arms against the edge of the couch.

"Don't worry." She sat down beside him. "Tom's pounding his ear like he took dope. Just beer, you know . . . That one of the letters?"

He nodded as he pulled it out from under the pillow and folded it along the well-worn creases, then put it back in his wallet and shoved that under the pillow.

"I didn't mean to be nosy."

"You're not. I just don't feel like looking at the damn thing any more myself." He wished she would get that martyred tone out of her apologies. She apologized too much about everything anyway.

She touched his shoulder, let her fingers run part way down his arm. "Get plenty of sun today?"

"Yeah. Bet you can't find a white spot on me now."

She giggled softly. "Too bad I couldn't examine you when you came down from the roof. Gee, you're getting so black I won't be able to see you in the dark."

He grinned. "May come in handy sometime."

"But I want to see you."

"Maybe somebody else shouldn't."

"Yeah, sure. I get you. Like I was saying, I would have talked to you this afternoon, only I was expecting Tom home any minute. And Helen was home, too. She don't know about us, does she?"

He leaned back on his elbows. "She doesn't act like it. Anyway, I can always be fixing your screens or something."

She put her hand on his thigh. "It's better when Tom's on the road."

He edged away from her. "Better not stir anything up now."

She pulled her hand back. "Sure," she murmured, watching him stretch, marveling at the hard darkness of him . . . like a panther she'd seen once in the zoo. "You going to the gym every day again?"

"No, only about twice a week lately."

"Gee, what a pair of shoulders you're getting. They seem to be growing all the time. You know, I was looking at one of them beefcake magazines the other day. It was on the seat next to me in the subway . . ."

"And . . ."

"Well, you stack up swell against most of those models in there — the ones that ain't too exaggerated."

"And . . ."

"Nothing. I just like what you got, that's all." She caught the big whiteness of his eyes as he sat forward, his elbows on his knees. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I heard a car — thought it might be Helen and Kirk."

"Too early for them, ain't it?"

He shrugged, staring at his socks and T-shirt on the floor.

"He's really keeping her busy, ain't he? Seems like every time me and Tom settle down for a little pinochle, the horn's blowing. Nice guy, ain't he?"

He grunted, barely listening, but catching each "ain't he?" whether he wanted to or not while he thought of the letter again. *And if you're still as interested in architecture as you were . . .* The words rocked him with their understatement. Even if he had made up his mind not to go . . . Hell, it could turn out to be the undreamed-of opportunity, the proverbial chance of a lifetime. He could probably learn more from his father than he could in any school of architecture in the world . . .

"Think they'll get married?"

"They'll probably try, anyway." He looked away from her and held his breath for a moment with the tightness that ran all through him. He *did* want to build something. He did want to create his own universe — like his father had, like his mother had tried to do . . .

"Your mother sure seems to like him. A couple of times I've heard him yakking with her like they was old pals. I wasn't trying to listen or anything . . . She was telling him about something that happened to her when she was in school and this and that about the Dodgers and Eisenhower and those Russians. She hates the Dodgers, don't she?"

"I don't care much for professional underdogs, either."

"Tom says they stink. That's this year. Last year he liked them."

"Underdogs, or the Dodgers?"

"The Dodgers. He never did like any kind of dogs."

Miles chuckled, rubbing his chest.

"I said something stupid, didn't I?" She tittered. "See — I always know when I'm going to do it, but I can't help doing it anyway."

"Why not? It's fun." She saw he was grinning as if she'd said something else stupid. She was sure she hadn't though.

"How do you know Tom won't wake up and start snooping around?"

"Listen, one thing that guy's good for is sleep — especially with a little beer in him. Two cans and he's out."

"Must save money that way." He was staring at the floor again.

"I'd like to see the money it saves." She nudged him. "Hey, what's bothering you? You ain't talking to me. You're talking to your big bare feet. Still thinking about those letters?"

"Yeah." He wiggled his bony toes against the rug.

"I thought you made up your mind about your old man."

He rose, jammed his hands deep into his hip pockets. "I don't know. I guess I'm not sure. The whole thing sort of scares me. I think I remember what he looks like and then I look at a picture of him from a magazine and he isn't the guy I remember. Hell, I don't know what he is. In some ways, I think I hate his guts."

"Now you can't say that about your own father."

"That's the way I feel. You might as well tell me the Emperor of Japan is my father. It would be just about as easy for me to believe."

"But you lived with your father."

"Sure, I remember the way some man used to play with me and explain the stars in the sky to me and the way it used to make Helen jealous . . ." He kicked out at the couch, folded his arms across his chest. "So what? Then this man disappeared into a long silence. And he's the one who's supposed to be writing to me now. Christ, it must be odd to really know your own father. You know, a guy who lives under the same roof, a guy you can talk to about any old thing, any old time. All I see is my friends' fathers and my friends complaining about them. For years I've been wishing to hell I only had one to complain about." He turned away from her.

"Like I said, you can't really hate him."

A shiver passed through him, left him rubbing his arms. "I don't know what I'm talking about, I guess. I've never hated anybody. I can't even get excited about going to the moon."

"Look, I ain't trying to get rid of you or anything, but why don't you go see him? At least, you could get out in the wide open spaces for the summer."

"I could go for the wide open spaces. But if I get a summer job, I can add some more to my savings. The trouble is, he doesn't talk as if he just wants me for a visit."

"Oh, if you only had the money she's thrown away on drink. I always take people as they come, but you know, some nights when she gets to yelling at you and Helen, I feel like — well, honest, I feel like grabbing the butcher knife and coming down here to finish the whole business myself. Honest, she gets me so crazy mad with that drunken yelling. You know, I still can't hardly believe it's really her. She's like two people."

"I know. At least she hasn't gone haywire for a couple of months now. She's really trying, I think."

"But it don't last." She shifted about, rubbing her nose. "Jeez, I shouldn't be talking this way. She's been so good

to me and Tom. Some ways, I think I never had a better friend in my life, always giving us things and having us down for meals and taking us out for drives. She's such a good sport, too. I wish I could ever get her to go to church with me."

"Not a chance."

"Not for the sermons and that stuff. I don't go for that myself, except when I'm worried or something. It's the bazaars and the suppers and all the other activities. It gives you something to think about instead of not knowing what to do with yourself."

"She's got enough to think about with that lousy job of hers."

"Yeah. Well, I guess it's different with everybody. But I just hate to see what she does to herself. Even if she'd just leave the bottle alone for a single evening and look at TV instead . . . I swear, if she ever busts out again like she did that last time — oh, I don't know — anyway, the Moylans and the Weintraubs are getting pretty fed up, too. They can hear it plenty loud through the walls."

"I don't think the Moylans'll complain to the police again."

"Yeah, wasn't that a riot. I still say it's a shame the way you and Helen covered up for her when the police came. What good did that do? Funny, I saw her talking to the Moylans on the street the other day and she was buttering the ears off them just like it never happened."

"Helen and I can control things."

"Sure, but some day you're going to have to get tough. I know it ain't none of my business, but what you should have done that time the cops came was to get them to bring an ambulance and send her off to the hospital. Then she might have learned something."

"No, she wouldn't. She'd just be sure everybody was against her. They treat them like criminals in those alcoholic wards. What good would it do to have those

bullies yanking her around like some bum from Skid Row? It's not going to help to break her spirit completely. Helen agrees with me on that."

Lou shrugged dubiously, remained silent.

He began circling away from her, his hands locked behind him.

"Look, if you need some extra dough for the trip . . ." She left the couch and came toward him.

He turned to face her. "You've done enough for me, Lou." He put his hands on her waist, feeling as if he were about to choke on tenderness and gratitude. It was stupid and sentimental, he knew, but at least she wouldn't think so. She wouldn't feel he was being childish. She wouldn't make him ashamed of himself no matter how sloppy and foolish he acted. "Someday — well, this whole thing with you is something I'll never forget. I'll never forget you, Lou." He gulped and almost threw himself against her. "Hell, I don't want to leave you now . . ." She was so warm and yielding he just wanted to sink into her and disappear.

"It's wonderful to hear you say that, honey. It's all I could ever want."

He shuddered, dizzy with arousal as her fingers wandered down his back.

"Honey, you've got to go. You've got to make the trip. It's for your own good." She was drawing away from him, and she had to be the one to do it because he couldn't get himself to move and it was too dangerous down here. "Now stop worrying. Maybe when you wake up in the morning your mind'll be all made up and you'll really feel like going to California."

He stood there, sniffing, rubbing away the baby tears in the hair on his forearm. He hadn't really cried. Even so, he felt better.

"Hurry up," she whispered, "so I can tuck you in."

In a warm daze, he watched her pick his shirt and socks

off the floor and drape them tenderly over his desk chair. Then she was fluffing up his pillow and smoothing his sheets, but he just stared, thinking of what an odd, homely little dame she was and how he wished sometimes he was married to her and how other times he hated her so much he wished she would disappear. If only she looked like Maureen or one of the girls at Barnard . . . Or if one of them could be what Lou was instead of simple or bored or over-beautiful or sexless or arty or over — just over-everything like his hamburgers-and-beer partner, Lois Jolliffe, that busy, busy missionary who was always trying to load him down with pamphlets and clippings and names of Congressmen he should wire about one cosmically significant issue after another . . . No, Lou was the only one who knew how to listen, either mentally or physically.

A triangle of light shot across the room from the foyer and grew wider over the floor and the furniture, and there was Zoe's shadow leaping the length of it.

Lou scurried into the darkness of the kitchen. He grabbed a book and sprawled on his bed with his back against the wall as if reading.

Zoe emerged, in her night clothes. "You can't read in that light, Miles. You'll ruin your eyes."

"Huh . . . Same light I always use."

She moved to the switch near the front door and flooded the room with overhead light. Then Lou snapped on the kitchen light.

"That you, Helen?"

Lou came out of the kitchen. "No, it's only me. Hi, Miss Lakes. I was just bringing back the tea balls I borrowed off you. Uhh — I thought you might need them for breakfast."

"None of us drinks tea for breakfast."

Miles slammed his book shut, swung his legs off the bed. "Thanks for bringing them anyway, Louella."

"Miles, why don't you put on a shirt? That's no way to appear."

"Oh, don't mind me." Louella headed for the stairs. "I'm used to that — I mean, Tom is always going around like that."

"Men are such vain creatures, aren't they?"

Louella gave a weak giggle, muttered something inaudible.

Zoe, having found some of her smoking accessories in the chaos of the library table, stood beside it as if it were a grand piano and she were about to sing, as if her evening "quota" had loosened her up just enough for some sort of performance. "You know why they're so vain, don't you?" she said, holding her cigarette holder vertically but not as high as the Statue of Liberty's torch.

"To tell the truth, Miss Lakes, I ain't given it much thought."

"It doesn't need much. It's obviously because of their basic fear of us — their overwhelming inferiority complex. To make up for that, they try to cow us by displaying their muscles, or their money, or their Cadillacs, or whatever they have. Vanity! That's really all they have, the poor things."

Louella clutched at her wrapper and stared at the newel post.

"It's getting worse, too. Have you noticed the way some of the teenage boys go in for glamor with their sideburns and their ducktail haircuts and their brightly colored shorts, while the girls let themselves go like slobs?"

Louella nodded. "I don't think they look so hot. I like crew cuts."

"And what we seem to be getting is a generation of drab little hens clucking about while the cocks strut."

Miles snorted. "I can think of some pretty well-known females who aren't exactly drab, and they do plenty about

setting the pace for those who aren't so well known. They don't have to depend on sweaters. Some of them wear sacks and still do the mammary bounce." He winked at Louella, letting his mind wander smugly under that sloppy wrapper to the great globular fruit that were almost too much for each of his hands to hold. She blushed.

"The exhibitionists," Zoe said, apparently busy trying to keep her cigarette lighted, "are always with us."

"Yeah, but now they're organized."

"You know, you have something there . . ." Zoe turned, fixing him with her eyes. "The slogan of the advertising age: Sex is still a sin, but sex appeal is for everybody. There's an article to be written."

"Yeah, go ahead and write it."

"If I only had the time and energy . . ."

Miles emitted a large, noisy yawn, the sort he would have expected to hear in a jungle, and settled back on his bed with the book. Zoe was only doing what he was doing — covering something with words. Possibly she was disappointed not to find Helen here to pick on, or else she was being dramatic to avoid facing what she must suspect about him and Lou. For the moment, he wished she would come right out with her suspicion and clear the air.

"Good night, all," Louella was saying as she hurried upstairs.

"Good night, Louella." Zoe turned to Miles. "If you're so sleepy, why aren't you in bed?"

"Because you're making speeches." He pushed the book aside and yawned in a more civilized manner. "What's the occasion, anyway?"

"I'm in a mood. I just lie there thinking and the more I think, the more I feel like tearing a few scalps off a few heads. I heard voices and came out because I thought Helen must have come in with Kirk and I wanted to break it up."

"Why?"

"Why not? She needs her rest." Zoe sat down on the edge of her throne. "She's been out late three nights this week," she said, aware that she was tapping the floor with the heel of her slipper.

"And what about it?"

"It worries me."

"Kirk, you mean. What's wrong with him?"

"I — oh, I hate to see Helen on her way to the same downfall I had. If she could only learn a little from my experience. I'm not against marriage per se. I just think she ought to give herself a chance to grow up first. She needs a stab at making her own way for a while. It would be suicide for her to sink into a man's shadow before she even knows what she wants for herself."

"A career, I suppose. She isn't the type. All she wants is a husband and kids. She's been mooning about that ever since I can remember."

"That's my point. That's all she's ever done — moon. She's so unrealistic about marriage, she'd probably ruin it first off. It's a shame. That guy's fed her a line and she's swallowed it."

Miles grinned. "Looks to me like he's swallowed something, too."

"She's gotten steadily worse this past year or so." Luckily, Zoe reminded herself, Miles didn't seem to be as susceptible to the sex fever. Or did he? No, you couldn't tell. Through most of high school he'd been almost a recluse, stuck to his drawing board as if it were a part of him. And now, in college, he'd come out, begun this athletic phase, developed this social life he was so secretive about. It was impossible to tell how girls affected him, except that he did seem awfully sophisticated about sex . . . "Too bad about Helen. I can remember when she was fairly level-headed about boys."

"The girl grew up."

"It's not a joke. And it's not going to simplify the situation around here if she runs off. Don't forget, you have a stake in this, too."

"Yeah, don't I?" He rose to his feet on the bed, then stepped off to the floor.

She ignored the hairy-torsoed masculine swagger as he went over to turn off the overhead light. Bruno's narcissism again. It was uncanny the way Miles carried it on.

"If she could just wait awhile . . ."

"Sure, she could have a nice frustrated career with the bookstore and she might even have a chance as a part-time wife. She could easily start having kids by the time she's forty-five."

"And would it be so bad if she stuck with the bookstore? She's got a good business head. She could take up business administration and work her way to the top of the chain."

"Chain is right. Look, the speeches are made. How about letting me go to bed?"

She snubbed out her cigarette. "Oh, if I could only be sure of getting to sleep again. Do you suppose there's an extra drop of that stuff around somewhere?"

He said his piece automatically. "You had your quota."

"It tasted awfully weak. Helen must have thrown some out and watered the rest." She stood with her fists clenched. "I'm afraid I'll toss and turn all night if I don't have something. Just half a jigger, darling, please."

He felt his patience draining out of him. "I don't know where she put the rest."

"You *must* know. You're the one who's always finding new places to hide it. Good Lord, a bare sniff is all I ask. Please, darling . . ."

"Look, the three of us made the agreement and if there are any changes the three of us have to make them."

"But I'm not trying to make any changes. Oh, damn your old agreement!" Her eyes darted with anger. She

began stalking, as if caged. "I'm fed up with having things forced on me by this mythical 'three of us.' I will not be dictated to by my own children. Understand? Have you no respect for me? After all, I *am* your mother and I *have* slaved for you all these years. Just stop and think where you'd be if I hadn't saved you from your father's crazy ideas. I sent you to good schools and clothed you and fed you and —"

"And now you're afraid I'm going to leave." He couldn't resist getting to the point of all this. "So you've been trying to catch me off guard by bellyaching about Helen."

Her eyes narrowed, her voice went lower. "Listen, I must have that drink. As for your threats, let me tell you this: If you go to your father, I'll kill myself."

"What the hell do you care about where I go, or what I do, or what Helen does?" He suddenly found himself bursting with heat and shouting the way he did when she was drunk and screaming at him. "Just so somebody's around to feed you and keep you sober when you have to be and help you keep up this phony front. Christ, now you've got a chance with your writing again and you don't even care about that."

Her voice came dry and tense. "It would all be so much simpler if I killed myself."

He turned with a snarl. "You wouldn't kill yourself if it gave you a job running God's life. You hate this world too much. You want to be here to torment it . . ." For the moment, he was ready for a showdown about Lou, about everything. "Why don't you care? Why don't you open your eyes and really see what's going on?"

She stood as if frozen, and he could hear his bellows echoing through the house.

"I see," she said softly. "I see how the distant puppet master pulls the strings."

He trembled, feeling the sweat run down his sides, watching her gather up her dignity like an imperial man-

tle and move slowly from the room. His eyes burned and he rubbed them in the half-dark stillness.

So he'd won this skirmish. And not a word about Lou — just when he'd been ready for it. It could mean his threat was working. Or it could mean she had sneaked in her own liquor supply tonight and this was the beginning of a crisis. He ought to go in and search her room. She never gave in this easily without a very good reason. Oh, to hell with reasons. Just try to hang on to whatever shred of peace remained . . .

He snapped off the light, kicked off his slacks, and stretched out under the sheet.

No, possibly she didn't know about him and Lou. Too busy with her own worries, too selfish to care. Whatever "crazy ideas" of his father's she had saved him from he couldn't imagine. But maybe she had. He wished she'd been able to save herself from something, too. Why had she got this way? Why couldn't his father or anyone have been alert at the time when the slide downhill had begun and done something about it? Why couldn't they still live the way they had in the old days, when they could talk things over without trying to peel off one another's skins?

He lay awake a long time, lifting his head from the pillow every now and then because he thought he heard a sound from the other room and a sound might mean that trouble was being poured from a bottle. But each spell of breath-locked listening told him nothing, except that probably he hadn't heard anything but his own anxiety.

There wasn't even a soft creak on the stairs that meant that Lou was coming down again . . . just to hold him tight for a moment and make him stop shivering and sweating on a hot night in June . . . so he wouldn't have to imagine that Zoe might be drinking something in there to kill a little more of herself . . .

He felt under his pillow for his wallet with the letters in it. More to make him feel like a murderer.

"Looks like threats *do* work."

Helen began stacking the dirty breakfast dishes. "It probably wasn't that at all."

"She gave in on my argument last night and she evidently didn't have a secret supply. That looks pretty promising to me."

"For the moment, anyway. It's a perfect day and I'm certainly glad I don't have to stay home and nurse anybody." Helen took some of the stacked dishes and went into the kitchen.

Miles remained at the table, basking in the sun from the open window, and realizing how much happier he was this morning than he'd expected to be.

"Did she volunteer to do all the weekend shopping?" he asked, as Helen returned from the kitchen.

"Why not? When she's in form she gets a kick out of banging around in a supermarket." Helen cleared away everything but his coffee cup.

"I guess there's usually a pretty good audience."

"The manager at the A&P is crazy about her. He's always disappointed when I turn up. Let's get this meal over with. The house is a mess."

"Yeah . . ." But he was in no hurry to move out of the sun warmth.

Not much left for Zoe but the manager at the A&P. At least, she didn't moan about the good old days. She seemed to have fun recalling them sometimes, but they were absolutely gone and she didn't waste time mourning. It seemed as if everything had gone at once. It hadn't, he knew. It had taken years, an unnoticed slipping away of years, and it was only during the past few that he'd begun to realize how badly he and Helen had let the

drinking get out of control and how bitter Zoe had grown underneath the fun. There were still good times, though — when she was jousting with somebody like Kirk, when she got steamed up over politics or a book or a play. But she seemed to have less and less time for those things . . .

“How about it? I could have the cleaning done by the time she gets back, if you’d help me.”

“O.K.” He hauled himself wearily out of the chair and stretched till it hurt, then contemplated washing the kitchen floor. “You bringing Kirk back here tonight?”

“I didn’t expect to unless you were going to be out, but then Zoe suggested it. That was before you woke up.”

“What about you? Thought you didn’t care for the competition.”

Helen started around the edge of the living room rug with the dry mop. “I don’t have to do the rug, do I? No. The competition problem seems to be working itself out. Kirk and Zoe are getting more used to one another now, and she doesn’t take all his attention any more.”

“That I’ve got to see.”

“I didn’t even have to tell him it was bothering me. He sensed it.”

Miles grinned and began sweeping the kitchen. “Two hearts that beat as one?”

She ignored the gentle sarcasm. “Why not?”

“By the way, am I elected bodyguard this afternoon?”

She paused in the kitchen doorway. “If your threat’s working so well, why worry?”

“Who knows how well it’s working until afterwards?”

“If you’d been awake for breakfast,” she said, grabbing George Sand up out of his way, “you’d have heard what’s going on. Zoe’s spending the afternoon on the final draft of a speech her royal top boss is giving Tuesday night. And that takes care of Tuesday night, too. She has to sit through the speech, so we’ll both be free as air. Maybe

that's what kept her on the straight and narrow last night."

"Tuesday." He squatted to sweep the dirt into the dustpan. "Maybe that's the night to try for a foursome."

She'd been hoping for weeks for the suggestion, but now that he'd surprised her with it, she wasn't ready. "Your little Irish number?" she said, without thinking how patronizing it would sound.

"Doesn't happen to be a number," he muttered as he rose and turned to dump the dustpan in the garbage can. "The name's Maureen. She's probably tied up that night anyway."

Now that she'd killed it, she decided, angry at herself for acting like a third-rate Zoe, she might as well bury it. "You mean somebody else might be tying bows in that ribbon?"

He blushed — if you could detect a change of color under that strong-tea tan. At any rate, he didn't look comfortable as he occupied himself getting out the bucket and sponge mop.

"As a matter of fact, Tuesday's no good for me, either," she said, cuddling George Sand on one arm. "I've got that engagement shower for Connie and then I'll probably spend the night at Peggy's."

He grunted and put the bucket in the sink.

"Why don't we make it a beach foursome with Maureen some Saturday or Sunday?" she went on, mostly because she didn't like the silence. "I *would* like to meet her."

But he evidently didn't hear her over the water roaring into the bucket, or else he didn't want to hear her because she hadn't left bad enough alone.

She went off to the bedrooms, carrying cat and mop and duster, wishing she could think quickly enough to suppress these flip impulses with Miles. Being the older sister wasn't the same any more. He was no longer merely the little brat brother, the unfair competition to be controlled only by force. Her force was gone because his was here

to stay, and they were both a lot more civilized and had a lot more in common. Even so, he was still as secretive as ever.

So Maureen would probably remain a myth, while he continued his double life with that slut upstairs until he got tired of her or until her stupid husband caught on and took her flying out of here in a blaze of scandal. Whatever the end, it wouldn't be pleasant.

Helen finished polishing the bathroom fixtures and went back to the living room, wondering how she would feel about Miles if he were her brother instead of her half-brother, if they weren't tangled up in this business of working as a team to keep Zoe on her feet.

He was emerging from the closet with his old catcher's mitt. Through the kitchen door she could see the floor gleaming under a new coat of wax, and the sight made her want to say something in admiration or gratitude, but the words somehow didn't get out.

He spoke first: "I'll be out in the street with Vic."

"Can I call if I need some help?"

"Yeah, but not too often."

The front door flew open and the shouted fanfare of Zoe's entrance turned them with a start.

"Hold everything. I had a brainstorm in the A&P." Her hat glanced off the floor lamp in its flight and dropped to the floor, where George Sand pounced on it.

"Now what?" Miles pounded the hollow of the catcher's mitt with his fist.

"Helen, what are you and Kirk up to today?"

"Nothing special. We hadn't decided."

"Ask him if he wants to go to the beach for a weenie roast. The water'll be wonderful today. I called Jenny and Marge from the drugstore and told them to bring their boy friends or whatever they have around loose, and I'm going to ask the Dreariheads. Anybody you'd like to bring, Miles?"

Helen half hoped he would say Maureen, but all he said was, "I'll see if Vic wants to go."

"All right. I think I bought too much, so invite anybody you can think of. And please unload Rowena as soon as you can. She's about to collapse into the gutter."

"O.K." He went out, still punching the mitt.

"What about the work you were going to do this afternoon?"

"I can squeeze it in tomorrow . . . Louella," she called up the stairs, then turned back to Helen. "This weather's just too perfect to waste. I think we all need some sun and salt water. Maybe you should call Peggy and see if she'd like to join us."

"Swell. And I'd better call Kirk and get him to come earlier."

"Louella," Zoe called again.

It really was a perfect day. In her enthusiasm, Helen dialed Kirk's number wrong and had to start over again. What a chance to get Zoe away from work and away from brooding. With all that crowd she'd surely be in top form. Life could be so damn good when Zoe stayed in balance this way, not drinking so much that she went overboard, but drinking just enough to keep from feeling deprived and jittery and suspicious of what Halling or Bruno or someone might be plotting against her.

7.

ZOE LET HERSELF IN A LITTLE AFTER SEVEN THIRTY P.M., Tuesday. It had been unexpectedly rainy and raw most of the afternoon and even the house was chilly. No comfort after the drafty office she'd just left. At least, George Sand was ready to make a soft electric warmth about her ankles.

No, she hadn't gone to the banquet after all. She simply couldn't have taken it, not after the mess Halling had made revising her speech. Shovelful of decomposing platitudes. No dinner would have stayed down after that. And she'd hurried so to get away from the scene of his crime that she'd forgotten to stop for a snack. No use even looking in the kitchen for a bite. Helen was seldom prepared for emergencies.

They hadn't expected her before midnight, of course. So they'd both made dates, plotting among themselves no doubt on the split second one or the other must get home to take control. Well, this would give them a turn. Too bad to disillusion them. They would be appalled to find that she could take care of herself for an evening. Imagine when they found her asleep without their silly old quota of grog . . . oh yes, only Miles would find her, since Helen was staying over at Peggy's.

How pleasant to be alone. George Sand was so easy to chat with. No adolescent pretensions to ruffle, no smolder-

ing misunderstanding. Once in a while you simply had to have an interlude of absolute privacy, without a radio playing stale records, without Miles or Helen or Louella or Halling or Jenny.

How pleasant to undress slowly and wearily in silence . . . except for that faucet dripping in the bathroom . . . and slip gently into bed.

The proverbial rat race. It never paused, but these moments when you looked around you and realized you were in it made you wonder if it could end. Somewhere else, if not here. Or perhaps there were no better rewards for ending it than for going on.

Where would she be in two years? In five? Would she be floundering alone, without Miles and Helen? Or would she even exist? Who would lie in this room next and brood? How fruitless . . . when she ought to be at the typewriter tearing off reams about George Sand. George and Chopin in Majorca — that ought to be the next project, except that it didn't really make sense to get too far into it without visiting Majorca. Too bad she'd missed that when she was able to traipse . . . Another book about that over-biographed female? Why bother? If she hadn't diddled so long Maurois wouldn't have beaten her to it. No, people were still interested or the article wouldn't have sold . . .

Here she was, staring at the light bulb again. Good thing it was frosted, or she'd be blind by now.

Sad the weenie roast had been such a fizzle. Not a disaster, just dull. It had once been nothing to get an improbable assortment of people mixing together beautifully. Or maybe most of the crowd, Saturday, had forgotten how to talk outside their own familiar circle. Jenny's and Marge's boy friends seeming left out, until they got to arguing with Tom about professional hockey teams. Helen and the equally snobbish Peggy monopolizing Kirk. Kirk trying to mix after a while, but eventually getting stranded

with Louella while she relived old bridge games. Miles off down the beach with his crony Vic most of the afternoon — Vic, a rather sullen gawk with nothing to say when he was in evidence. No wonder she and Jenny and Marge had drifted into shop talk. Some moments of entertainment: they'd all howled over her imitations of Halling dictating a memo and kowtowing to his wife by phone, Kirk's story about the two violinists and the deaf tiger. No liquor, of course. The secret of the old days was that it took an improbable assortment of drinks to mix an improbable assortment of people.

. . . But Helen says the trouble is that I don't see the people who really interest me any more. Well, I don't want to . . .

The words came alive in her mind and she could hear them almost saying themselves:

. . . I'll regret it. I'll be ill, deathly ill. Whoever gets home first won't be able to manage me because I'll have such a head start. All Helen's and Miles's exaggerations, of course. Exaggeration number one: I'll scream so loudly Louella or some outsider will have to come and rescue me and send me to a city hospital. Exaggeration number two: In the hospital, they'll knock me around and practically kill me with their stomach pumps. Exaggerations. Helen's and Miles's exaggerations about my alleged screaming. Utter foolishness — so they can frighten me, so they can keep me under control. They enjoy their power so much . . .

She pushed back the covers and sat up to hunt under the edge of the bed for her slippers. Poor feet, poor tired feet walking around under a poor tired head. At her desk then, she turned on the lamp, opened the phone book, and put on her glasses.

. . . I'll regret it. I'll be ill. I'll be sorry. And there it is: Murphy, Daniel. I must get something to warm me. I'm so chilled after those piercing little drafts from the air conditioning all day . . .

She began to dial the number.

. . . It's such a rotten thing to do. I can't afford to let expenses or anything else get out of hand. Rowena needs new tires. And I want to go to the beach with the kids this Saturday alone, without any outside assortment. I've been so well behaved this year, considering what I might have done. Anyway, two or three drinks to warm me up and put me to sleep —

"Yes. Hello, Mr. Murphy. This is Zoe Lakes . . ." Too late to turn back now. "Do you have any pints? No, it wouldn't be worth your while to deliver a pint, would it? Make it a fifth then. The brand doesn't matter. Just something that isn't too expensive . . ." Very much too late now. "You have the address? That's right. Good." She put the phone down.

. . . It's done. I'm so relieved. I can relax, even before I've had a sip, because I know I'm certainly going to have a sip. Just a little will do such wonders. I don't give a hoot about the rest of the bottle. Let the little conspirators take charge of that. They can hide it and guard it and scheme over doling it out. They seem to need that responsibility. Won't they be surprised to have nearly a whole fifth on their hands . . .

She returned to bed and lay quite serene among the pillows, slapping now and then at the mattress while she waited.

. . . Such a delicious aura of anticipation. A drink . . . That first caress of the whole being, that springboard of insight. When all life down to the lowest cigarette butt is so packed with meaning. When the going was good. When I left home and landed my first job, when I saw my first page one by-line, when I married Steve, when Helen was born, when I found Bruno staring at me from the dark corner of the bar in someone's cellar and he proceeded to talk me to a draw about what? Politics? Women's attitudes about men? The British in Palestine? Russia? Something of mine he'd read?

Danny Murphy himself might bring the stuff. She ought to fix herself up. She didn't care to have a delivery boy or anyone else see her this way, like the touseled, baggy-eyed Queen of Saggy Weary. No need to be one of these suburban slatterns who came to the door with their hair in curlers and their housecoats dirty and their slippers flip-flopping. How about those black satin lounging pajamas with the red silk blouse and the black bolero jacket? Why keep it around if you weren't going to wear it? Almost as good as a drink to look your best once in a while. And there were the plain gold slippers and her hair combed and some lipstick.

"My God," said the Queen of Up-n-at-Em, catching herself in the full-length mirror, "you look ten years younger already."

The illusion, at least, the illusion Bruno had always demanded, especially in the last years, the illusion that she could remain young if she didn't take too many drinks at a party.

Dirty trick on the kids, of course, coming home early and having a few and spoiling their game.

. . . Nonsense! It's getting so I believe their exaggerations myself. I don't. There's no reason at all why I shouldn't have a few drinks and relax and go to sleep and feel loads better in the morning for it . . .

The doorbell rang. She took her time and went, calm and stately, amused to find she was carrying her cigarette holder like a scepter.

It was not curly-headed young Dan Murphy with his extrovert twinkle. It was only the pimply, long-jawed boy who worked for him. So the effect was all wasted. The cretin merely stared at her golden feet and mumbled the price of the liquor down his shirt front.

Not that it mattered, really. She'd never had more than a few words with Dan Murphy in the store, or when he'd made deliveries before. He'd always acted too busy, and

was probably only interested in horse betting, anyway. Still, he might have appreciated her getup as something he wasn't likely to see in these other woman traps.

In the kitchen, she cut the seal on the bottle cap and found herself a glass.

. . . Danny Murphy would bore me to the point of — well, I'd probably have to drink this whole bottle at one sitting . . .

The bottle and the glass looked so reassuring on the night table.

. . . That's the sight Bruno loathed so, but not the first time. Not the night he came home with me from someone's cellar bar and we talked the rest of the night. Such good talk that less than a month later I walked out on my job, packed up Helen, and went to the Coast with him to his crazy house, his Eden. I really thought I needed him then. But all he wanted was a son — a chance to play God and make a little man in his own image. Still, it was all better than any binge I've been on since. He hooked me off the merry-go-round, and I was still dizzy from spinning and didn't realize how cleverly he was getting me down, placing his foot on my neck, making me his prize — as if Steve hadn't done enough damage already. I even enjoyed it with Bruno, until Miles was on the way and we made it legal. Then he got so smug. This was one job I couldn't walk out cold on and dash off to Austria or Finland or wherever, if it interested me, if I thought there was something there I wanted to write about. No, I was serving a life sentence — in Eden, but nevertheless a life sentence. And Eden wasn't big enough for both of us. At least, I made good use of it for a while and wrote the play and that turned out to be my passport to freedom . . . The things that never happen twice: the play's first night, the first railroad ticket for a long journey on your own . . . Yes, any old caress of the whole being: water, just before it goes over the dam; the innocents, just before

they are confounded. Any time when I was at my best whether working or dreaming. "Last night," as Bruno liked to say, "when you let yourself be a woman . . ." Not to mention all the other things that never happen twice except when the second slug of whisky follows the first . . .

The doorbell rang.

On the blanket at the foot of the bed, George Sand uncoiled herself and stretched. Zoe sat up.

Damn it! It must be Miles, back early and ringing because of the lights. She hadn't even had a chance to finish the second little drink. Nothing to do but scramble out and let him in.

She hid the bottle behind her desk — a very inadequate place, but it would do for the moment — and headed for the kitchen with her glass, after she swallowed the last sip and popped a mint in her mouth.

The bell rang again just before she reached the front door.

It was Kirk. She felt lost, even a little panicky, staring at his self-assured grin, exchanging hellos and absent-mindedly ushering him in while wondering vaguely why Helen wasn't with him. They were standing in the middle of the living room and he was making uncatlike noises at George Sand when she remembered that Helen had been going to somebody's shower tonight.

"Sit down, won't you? Didn't Helen tell you she was going to a hen party?" Zoe was annoyed at his presence, somehow particularly irritated by the neatness of his bow tie and fresh white shirt. Clean-shaven, but not as clear-eyed as usual; he must be tired.

He settled lankily in her throne and began fiddling with his pipe. "Tonight? Yes, I guess I didn't take it in too well. There was an evening meeting I was supposed to go to, so it didn't make much difference. Then the afternoon

meeting dragged on till nearly seven and that was enough for me."

"I'm also ducking an evening meeting."

He sat forward. "I didn't mean to barge in. I should have called."

She smiled. "Keep your seat. I didn't say I didn't feel like company."

He relaxed gratefully, relieved not to have to drive back to Manhattan immediately. Now that he was here, he might as well find out a few things. Helen's evasiveness about home seemed to have been increasing lately. Zoe by herself, it had occurred to him more than once during the past few days, might be more revealing. He had believed he felt quite at ease with her; tonight, the sleek, colorful costume indicated there might be more for him to get used to. It seemed like a needless affectation, and a disappointment.

"How about a drink?" she asked.

"Fine." He rose and followed her into the kitchen.

She turned abruptly, her voice lower. "Suppose you get out some ice, if you want it, and a couple of glasses. There's plenty of both, I think . . . Yes, there are the glasses on that middle shelf. And bring them to my room. We don't keep the liquor out here because we suspect Mr. Drearihead of smelling it out. He's a nice harmless goon, you know, but there was one famous occasion when he found our stock and there was hell to pay."

"He drank it all?"

"When he's desperate — when she's trying to taper him off — not even hair tonic is safe. No ice for me, by the way."

"Right." He took an ice tray from the refrigerator, picked out two glasses, and began struggling with ice cubes for his own.

Too bad he'd forgotten he couldn't have a snack with

Helen and passed up dinner with the office gang. Apparently, he wasn't going to be offered anything here. But a drink might help him unwind after the day, and then he could go out and really enjoy a good meal.

Zoe's room, he found, was a den, with a massive flat-topped desk and no bed. She evidently slept on one of the two couches, as Miles did in the living room. Only Helen slept in a real bed in a bedroom. A large, clean-lined battery of drawers which must be a seaman's chest added to the practical unfeminine look of Zoe's den. The contradiction was in the many sofa pillows, of various colors and shapes, scattered over the chairs and couches. They gave the effect of a room a woman had designed for a man.

While she poured the drinks she told him about acquiring the seaman's chest on a trip to England and how conveniently it broke up into closed boxlike sections for traveling. "There's a secret drawer, too. But that's worthless around here. Nothing stays secret in this family."

"The easiest way."

"The easiest way is such a bore. There." She handed him his drink. "Hope you don't mind plain whisky."

"Thanks. Nothing better for serious drinking."

"I was afraid you might be more fashionable and expect vodka. I find it too deceptive." Meaning, she reminded herself, it's too easy for the kids to dilute without me catching on.

He nodded politely and took a sip. Something annoyingly complacent and domesticated about him, she decided. Pipe-and-slippers type. A good thing she'd had a chance to make her bed and tidy up a few things before he came in with the glasses. Otherwise, he might have been shocked by the disorder. He didn't appear really comfortable now, the way he juggled his drink and his pipe. She was tempted to suggest he put one of them down for a while. It was probably a mistake to have brought

him in here, but she didn't care to have the Dreariheads pass through and see them drinking together. No telling what Hecate would make of that when she gossiped with the neighbors.

At least, Kirk was a talkative beast, the kind who made her talk. And he had a pleasantly clumsy way of telling amusing stories about himself, about his ordinarily staid family continuing to brew beer even after Prohibition ended and their embarrassment over cases of the stuff exploding in the cellar, about his unfulfilled boyhood ambition to swim across Lake Ontario . . .

His eyes were in shadow under the heavy brows, and it occurred to her that in a photograph the complacent, domesticated look might disappear. He would seem quite tough, as he had in her first impression, the kind of man she wouldn't mind being. But she'd be an explorer or a roving correspondent, not a white-collar worker. Reaching for the unreachable again. It took a bored female or a hyperenergetic one to be a true romantic — a George Sand abandoning her family to strike out and take young lovers and write books and wear trousers and smoke cigars. Submitting to lovers had once seemed to negate the rest, but since her first year with Bruno, she could see it. She could see it with Kirk, too, if she were really that bored, if he weren't too young for her, if it wouldn't be hurting Helen . . .

Enough of that! Definitely, this was neither the man nor the place.

Anyway, why had he come here tonight when he admitted Helen had told him she wouldn't be home? Definitely, an occasion for hardheadedness.

"You never told me," she said, after she'd replenished their drinks, "why you left the itinerant jazz band."

"I was scared, I guess. The fast living was beyond my depth and I was afraid I would just scatter my life away and never get on with college."

"The fast living?"

"The drinking and the dope and the wilder side of pleasure some of the guys went in for. Maybe I was too green to appreciate the seven deadly sins. I thought I'd been enjoying them when I was in the Army, but in that band crowd I was just an amateur. I don't know why, but I had an awful yen to be a solid citizen."

"The seamy side must have been hard on an idealist."

"I don't remember being an idealist. There were enough of those at home. Phony ones. I escaped from them to look for the seamy side. I wanted to wallow in it." He took a stiff gulp of his drink.

"And out of the wallowing came a solid citizen, a graduate man of good will."

He laughed. "Or maybe just the same small-town hick I was in the beginning."

"But no longer interested in going to the dogs."

He said nothing, shrugged, then apparently became lost in contemplating the remainder of his drink.

She sipped her own, wondering how much Helen really appreciated him. Or was this just another one of her infatuations? Too bad it was impossible to communicate with Helen about such things any more. The little girl who'd confided in her about her first menstruation now acted as if all confidences were over her mother's head. Somewhere along the way through the adolescent jungle, Helen had lost herself in the anti-adult underbrush of her boy and girl friends and she didn't seem to have got disentangled yet. Did this character appreciate Helen? Or was he just taking advantage of her immaturity?

"Not happy with your drink?" he was saying.

"Not sad." She took another sip. "God, did I need it. I've been walking a wire all day. Wouldn't you like to shed your jacket? You look too damn formal."

"Thanks. It's getting warm in here, too." He set his drink on the floor and rose. With the jacket draped over

the back of her desk chair, he settled back in comfort. Oh, what sublime comfort . . . And what had happened to time? If he was reading that clock, on the seaman's chest correctly, over two hours had somehow escaped during which he'd lost count of how many drinks he'd consumed. And each time she'd poured another round he'd been too absorbed in their talk to notice how much he was getting. He reminded himself to get a good look at the bottle before she stuck it behind that row of books on the top of the chest, and to ask her why she was hiding it there . . .

"If you weren't an idealist," Zoe's voice came cool and matter-of-fact into his incipient numbness, "then why did you go into a profession where you specialize in maneuvering people?"

His incipient numbness abruptly clicked away. "I don't specialize," he said firmly, "in maneuvering people."

"Idealists live by pushing other people around."

"That's an extreme way of looking at it."

"I like extremes. They keep the world spinning." There was a new belligerence in her positiveness.

"Idealists live by pushing other people around," he echoed. "That's a fair half-truth."

"What comfort from ideals unless you can spread them? Don't you enjoy what you call finding the right job for the right person, or keeping most of your employees reasonably happy so you can get the maximum amount of work out of them?"

"If I succeeded in all that, it would have its rewards."

"And now that you're a solid citizen and a potential pillar of society I suppose you want to be an ideal family man, too."

He grinned. "You make it all sound like a crime, and I plead 'Not guilty.' But how about that foundation you're so busy making the public appreciate? It must be full of idealists."

"I only work there."

"You could keep just as busy publicizing a rattrap manufacturers association."

She laughed. "All right — just as busy, but not as happy."

"And you *do* believe in your product."

"Yes, I want people to take more interest in their school financing and building problems, to find ways to pay their teachers better, to interest themselves in the varieties of educational methods, to pay as much attention to the gifted as to the retarded . . . Shall I go on and give you the speech I stayed away from tonight?"

"No, thanks. I'm only a *potential* pillar of society. It would be over my head."

She smiled, all gentleness and warmth, enough to make him listen to such a speech and not hear a word. He waited for her to say more. She didn't, though, and he found himself gazing at this latest pair of ice cubes in his glass and feeling sorry for them because they were melting away in their loneliness and could never hope to be pillars of society. The light from the lamp at the end of her couch seemed dimmer than he'd thought it was, and all in all he felt amazingly at ease.

Her eyes, seen through the islands of smoke that hovered in the room, seemed larger, darker . . . and they were pulling him suddenly, yet holding him where he was. A shiver ran through him, and he realized vaguely that his hands must be trembling because he could hear the ice cubes rattling. It was as if she were sitting beside him and their knees were touching and then their calves and their thighs . . . He swallowed hard and suppressed the impulse to stretch while his eyes remained held, pulling out of his head as if they must reach hers . . .

"How about a refill?" The now-familiar question drifted over as softly as the smoke.

He swallowed again and caught his breath. "No . . . No, thanks."

She rose in slow motion from the couch. It seemed to him that her walk to the desk was unnecessarily deliberate, each step a grand and important contribution to unassailable dignity — dignity clothed in flashing highlights of red and black and gold.

He couldn't be this far gone. But how far gone was this? Of course, he hadn't tried to stand up for the last half hour or so and the drink had tasted like triple-strength, if not stronger. He noted now that the bottle looked definitely tired when she left it behind the books again and went to get some water for her drink.

He sat forward under the impression that he was leaving immediately, then his eye caught the framed photographs nearby on her desk. Mostly Miles and Helen at various stages. Helen had certainly improved since the pigtail period. There was also a handsome man of about thirty-five who didn't resemble either of them.

"Which ex-husband is that?" he asked when Zoe returned.

"Neither." She settled herself on the couch again, drawing her feet up, making a sort of nest for herself among the pillows. "That was Harry," she said. "I think he believed he loved me, but I never had a chance to make sure. He killed himself."

Kirk nodded, left tongue-tied. And yet why shouldn't she say it calmly if it were all in the past?

"It was after he'd gambled away my money and his money and other people's money to the tune of — well, it might be said that I killed him, I suppose, because all the money had gone into my second play, which was a monumental flop. If we shared a passion, it was for ignoring everybody's better judgment."

"What was — what seemed to be wrong with the play?"

"I was carried away, I guess. The play was about Shelley and Mary Godwin, and I made it too ponderously realistic and earnest. Polemical, too. Supposed to be too anti-Christian and too anti-sacred cows generally — especially for wartime. Not good for morale and whatnot."

Kirk felt a woozy sympathy. "He must have loved you very much indeed."

"Possibly. But so much of the time I thought he was a fool."

"Why?" he asked recklessly.

"It was all so — so excessive."

"Love should be."

Her eyes shifted. "I hate the loss of control. It turns a perfectly reasonable man into an ass." She sipped her drink, then added, "One way or another they all gave me up as a bad job — Steve, Bruno, and the rest. Harry was the most decisive about it; he jumped out the window. I was drunk for a week afterwards, and I haven't been able to get thoroughly drunk since. Sometimes I wish I could."

"Was it so good — being drunk for a week?"

"I don't know. It was awfully hard on the kids. For me, it was a sort of anesthetic during the changeover. I came out of it quite poor, if not quite subdued. The big plans were gone, the crazy ambitions . . ." Her features seemed as stiff as a mask.

"Were you in love with him?"

"No. I've never been what's called being in love. There was a time when I thought I was, but it was just an illusion."

"Anything that doesn't last is just an illusion?"

She didn't answer.

To cover his embarrassment, he got up and fixed himself another drink, a weak one this time. On his feet, he felt remarkably steady and clear-headed, quite sure of himself again. He must have imagined that look in her

eyes. The rattling ice cubes had turned to water in his glass, but he didn't bother to get more from the kitchen, just further diluted the drink at the bathroom tap and returned to his chair.

"Has Miles decided anything yet about going to see his father?" he ventured, to change the subject.

"I've no idea. Frankly, I hope he will go. It would be a good eye-opener for him."

"You think he'd be disillusioned."

"I don't know. I've no idea what illusions he has to lose."

"The glamor of the great man?"

"That might be disillusioning — to see how much of it's done with mirrors. It might do him good to see Bruno's jealousy of others, his pompous right-mindedness, his hunger for publicity. He takes himself so seriously, you can't help laughing at him."

"Do people generally laugh at him?"

She ignored that. "At one point, he put us into the Hindu trinity. He was Brahma, the Creator. I was Shiva, the Destroyer. And Miles, who was about to be produced, was to be Vishnu, the Preserver. He seriously wanted to name the poor child Vishnu . . . And a more destructive brat than Miles you never saw. The house was just a wasteland of broken toys. Helen was never that way."

"And which is the creative one now?"

"Miles, obviously. You're sounding like Bruno. Creativeness is the other side of destructiveness and so forth. And you have to learn how to tear things apart before you can put new ones together."

"Sounds reasonable. Were you a destructive brat?"

"As a matter of fact, I was. I never heard the end of it." She laughed abruptly. "Imagine me as Shiva. Half male, half female. Two pairs of arms and four faces."

He tried to look away from the wild discord in her eyes. Easy to imagine her as Shiva. If he wasn't careful

she would soon sprout the required number of arms and faces, and maybe some extra legs, too. He wasn't amused, though. He realized he should be getting to that cautious stage in his drinking, the stage where, at a party, he began to reform — to worry about the neighbors being disturbed, to wonder if he could get home in one piece, to fret about how every one else would get safely where they belonged. But when it wasn't a well-populated party and there wasn't a crowd to witness his impending disgrace, Caution had been known to go home without him . . .

Her eyes again, or as never before . . . drawing on his in the stillness. The touch of her, although neither of them had moved, the touch of her that spread through him toward an oncoming explosion . . . If he were touching her, he would push that annoying little jacket from the glow of her shoulders . . . If he'd never known Helen . . . He clenched his fists and leaned forward to pretend to pick up something from the floor, so he could stretch a little and hold his breath until the trembling quieted . . .

"How well do you know Bruno?"

The question dropped like cold water, and it was such an effective antidote to his thoughts that he laughed with relief. "How well does anyone know somebody he occasionally reads about?"

"I suppose . . ." Her words faded into silence, as if she were retreating into some confusion of her own.

"You must be tired," he said finally, having cleared his throat and glanced at his watch without catching what it said. "I ought to get out of here." Nothing happened though. He just sat there, longing to be blasted out of his chair, out of this room.

"Do me a favor, will you?" She held her empty glass toward him through the islands of smoke. "Why not get yourself a refill, too?"

He took hold of himself with great care and, pretend-

ing there was a block and tackle guiding him from above, stood straight up. The pitching of the room suggested seasickness, but he headed himself right and had no trouble at all taking the glass from her outstretched hand.

"Good sailing weather, isn't it?" she said.

"Are you trying to rug me — er, drink me under the rug?"

Her eyes seemed to grow or something in a way that made him even dizzier. There was a blackness in them that made him want to scratch the unreachable middle of his back. He didn't dare try.

"I thought you tall men could hold your liquor so well."

"Depends on where we put it," he joshed senselessly, and let the ropes above steer him like a puppet to the desk, guide his pouring elbow, then lead him to the bathroom tap. It was amazing: he spilled neither liquor nor water and moved through the doorways without a single misstep.

She sat with one ankle under her other knee, her head high — like the Queen of the Nile on her barge. Her eyes seemed luminous now, not pulling his eyes — pulling all of him. As he stood before her with the drink, she reached up for it and something fell off her other shoulder. It was one of the loose straps of the low-cut red thing, he realized, and the black jacket was gone. Only the fullness of her breast kept the red thing from falling further.

"I'm not interested," he muttered, and closed his eyes.

But as he leaned forward with the drink, it came to him that the block and tackle was no longer working. The operators had gone home with Caution, and he opened his eyes to see that he was about to topple.

"You can put it there . . ." Her hand floated lazily in the direction of the end table.

He tried to change the direction of his leaning and toppled.

No telling what happened to the drink, except that he didn't feel all wet with it and he was now sinking into something of the utmost cloudiness.

Gentle female laughter filtered through. The ship was no longer rocking. The drink was being held toward the ceiling and it still appeared to be all in the glass.

"I caught it — right out of your hand. Have a snort."

He tried to shake his head, but gave up and closed his eyes. That way his head wouldn't float away. His tie was choking him and he tried to reach it. Then it was gone and he felt one thousand per cent better.

His hand was touching something of an electric smoothness. He wondered how his hand had got there, as well as where the smoothness was. The unreachable sensation in the middle of his back was rushing all through him now, setting off progressively larger explosions as it went. There was something traveling up his thigh, too; that must be the main fuse . . .

He found himself among the downy yet disturbing ranges of seasick dimness. Strange to see no waves tumbling their foam across the tilting deck, no ship's rail falling past the horizon. No horizon. She — and as in so many of his private night songs of sleep, the identity of "she" did not concern him — was almost weightless against him, and he didn't care where he was going.

"The eternal beast again . . . " Thus the voice of "she" drifted in on a blur of faint laughter, sounding as if scorn were biting the finger tips of desire. "That famous old reptile they try to keep hidden, the snake in the Garden of Eden . . . "

The sense broke over him that he was flat on his back, that he was more naked than not, that "she" was chilling him with teardrops, with tiny spots of wetness that made tiny spots of his skin recoil.

"Christ, why does this ridiculous business have to be? Why? Why?"

Why does "she" cry? he wondered. There's been nothing to cry about yet.

"You'll be the one to suffer . . ." Abruptly, "she" became Zoe, unmistakably Zoe, Zoe unadorned. "You'll be the one to burn — not I . . . Hell, it'll be worse than being pregnant . . ."

He heard himself groan, felt his head wobble as the night song continued to break apart . . .

"What's bothering you, Marblefront? I thought you were ready."

But even if he was ready, he was departing. The inside of his head was so clear now it clanged like an enormous bell. He set himself in total motion, rolling and tumbling until he struck the floor.

The clangor rose, in one side of his head and out the other. He crawled to his knees as the floor swung, then to his feet as it stood almost on end. He tripped in his fallen clothes, crashed past a chair, clung to the slippery skin of the wall for a moment, and slid to the floor again. Now, thrashing among the dust puffs, he regained control of his shirt and trousers, then hauled himself up the back of the nearest armchair. Somehow, it wasn't swinging like the floor and he was able to hold on while he fastened his clothes with one hand.

The nude, no longer either tearful or laughing, remained on the couch, and the couch was rocking like a boat in high seas, rocking the seasickness right out of the dimness into an overwhelming fullness in his throat. The nude cursed him and brandished an ashtray. And with unlikely gentleness, it left her hand and flew, strewing ashes and butts in a slowmotion spray until it thudded to the floor just beyond him.

He forced himself to laugh as she muttered something about having to order another bottle now that he'd drunk everything, then found new strength to stuff his shirttails in and lurch to the desk chair for his jacket.

His passage through the living room was halting and chaotically indirect. Eventually, he discovered the front door where he least expected it. Once safe in the knifelike coolness of the night, he leaned against a tree and was pleased to vomit.

8.

WHENEVER HELEN WAS AWAY OVERNIGHT, MILES TOOK charge of breakfast.

At seven A.M. that Wednesday he carried juice and coffee for Zoe to her room, knocked on the closed door, listened for a moment, then pushed the door open and walked in.

She lay on her back, cradled among the sofa pillows, her mouth open, her face puffed and slack. The red and black pajamas, which he'd never known her to sleep in before, were twisted and wrinkled, like the couch cover under her. One of her knees was up, rocking slowly back and forth, about to fall at any moment. She was snoring softly.

If he needed further evidence, there was the reek of spilled whisky, the trail of spilled ashes across the rug, the freshly charred spots left on both the end table and the floor by the cigarettes that had burnt themselves out where they had fallen. The empty cigarette holder was poking out of one of her golden slippers.

In his revulsion he wanted to send the tray crashing against the wall and walk out. Instead, with painstaking quietness, he pushed aside the empty liquor glass and the one half full of stale water and the overflowing ashtray to make space for the juice and coffee.

A futile gesture, it struck him, since she was beyond drinking anything for a while.

He glanced about the room. The "dead soldier," as she called the empty bottle, was lying in the seat of the arm-chair. He picked it up and lowered it silently into the wastebasket, thinking again of futility. Back on her couch, he spotted her purse, sticking out under the disorder of pillows. He ought to take all the money now and prevent further waste. That would be futile, too. She might have more money hidden elsewhere and could phone and get the stuff anyway, and then there would be another one of those screaming fights over her money being stolen.

When he was back in the kitchen bolting down his breakfast, he heard Lou's door open upstairs and George Sand came padding down. So Lou had probably known about this new binge before he'd gotten home last night. The cat always went up there when the going got rough in Zoe's room. But what could Lou have done except stay up to nab him when he came in and warn him? No, it wasn't her job.

Too bad he'd slept so heavily. This was a night when there was nothing to worry about, though. He and Helen had planned so carefully.

And this morning he had an appointment for a job interview. He had to get out of the house before Zoe woke up. He tiptoed around, getting ready, rummaging silently in his desk for his fountain pen and the papers he needed, almost holding his breath against the tense dread that at any moment she might begin to scream.

He knew he ought to stay home and get this under control, but it was too late to call off a nine o'clock appointment. Anyway he had to go to college today and clean his stuff out of the art lab and the gym locker; this was the last day for that. And he couldn't call Helen and ask her to miss today at the bookstore; it was one of her

extra days, when she was pinch-hitting for someone on vacation.

The wrong day for everything. Still, if he didn't at least try to get things under control the weekend would be hell and probably next week, too. And if by any chance he got the job, neither he nor Helen would be home during the day next week. He had to make a start now.

He tiptoed back into Zoe's room.

She was still asleep. He slipped the purse easily from among the pillows, removed the cash and set the purse on the floor so it would look as though it had fallen off the couch. Then, as stealthily as he could, he felt among the pillows for another bottle. Nothing there. He also searched the desk and the seaman's chest, pausing to watch for her reaction every time he inadvertently made a sound. No results until he got to the second couch. There, among the pillows, he found another fifth, about half of it gone.

He stood in the middle of the room, holding the bottle before him, wondering if he'd overlooked anything.

Zoe stirred and there was a faint moan, but her eyes didn't open. Maybe it would be best if she did wake up now. He might be able to bribe her with a drink to take some juice and paraldehyde, and then she might sleep for hours, possibly even until he got home. It wouldn't pay to wake her for that though. The ensuing wrangle would surely make him miss the appointment.

How different she looked, years older than yesterday at this time. The color of life had gone out of her face. It was bloated and pasty, almost corpse-like, with that thick whiteness she always got on the edges of her eyelids.

He hurried silently from the room, wrapped the bottle in some newspaper, then took it down to the cellar and hid it among the piles of stored manuscripts, old magazines, and luggage.

It was eight thirty when he left the house, ten minutes later than he should have.

He missed the bus. It pulled away from the corner when he still had half a block to run. Well, he might make up for that if the next bus didn't bog down in traffic.

Murphy's liquor store, he noticed, was already open.

He strode into the store, tightening up his courage with a blind survey of the armies of labeled bottles. No other customers, luckily. He stopped before the short, curly-headed young man behind the counter.

"Murphy?" Miles could feel a frightened pulse in his throat, but he could tell his voice sounded strong.

The man raised his eyes, though not his head, from the *Daily Mirror*. "That's me, Dan Murphy."

Miles cleared his throat. "I'd appreciate it if you'd ignore all orders from Zoe Lakes."

Murphy slowly raised his head. There was a sly gleam in his blue eyes that threatened to become a contemptuous grin. Instead, he lowered his head again. "I'm in business. If anybody pays for the stuff, they can have it."

"She's not paying for any more. She's not able to. If you're afraid of losing a customer, there's no better way to do it than by helping her drink herself to death."

He was out on the sidewalk then, without waiting for an answer, certain that Murphy was back there laughing at him. What a fool he'd been — to go looking for nothing but his own embarrassment. If, through some shadow of a scruple, Murphy didn't deliver the liquor, some other neighborhood store would. They all knew her well enough to accept her checks.

It was going to be one hell of a weekend. It was also going to be the last one, he decided, as the bus pulled up to the curb. He probably wouldn't land this lousy job anyway, even if he did get there on time. He was too shaky this morning. But if he did land it, a week's pay, along with whatever he had left in his savings account,

would help him get to California. Two weeks' pay would be better. Even with that, he would have to hitchhike part of the way. All right, two weeks. And if he and Helen could start work on this crisis tonight, it might be all over with by next weekend.

Unless something went wrong during the day. Suppose he got home and found Zoe worse . . . or even dead. He gritted his teeth as the bus jounced along. Christ, why did he have to invent disasters? It seemed as though ever since he'd been aware of Zoe's drinking, he'd been torturing himself with such worries, imagining what would happen and the details of how it would happen, moping about what Helen and he would have to go through and about how wrong and stupid and futile the world would seem without Zoe . . .

By midafternoon, Kirk considered his hangover practically cured. Luckily, he'd been able to spend most of the day in relative privacy revising a long report. He passed up the usual lunch with his office friends and forced a sandwich and milk on himself at his desk. There was a relapse then — insides churning and head jangling on a pike — but fresh air, coffee, and a poached egg at three P.M. drove away all but the final agony.

Why such a whopper of a hangover? His guilt? It must be that. No evening's drinking had ever done that much damage. Of course, he might have avoided a lot of it if he'd eaten dinner last night instead of rushing off to blunder into trouble. And now all this wreckage to survey. What about that date tomorrow night with Helen? The idea seemed as remote as last night's nightmare, as remote as the spectacle he would make of himself trying to prove to Helen that he was innocent. So since he couldn't prove he was innocent and would never be expected to prove it anyway, he must be considered guilty.

But he wasn't. He knew as well as he knew anything

about himself that Zoe hadn't succeeded in getting what she was after. His sense now of what had gone on during the crucial moments was remarkably clear. In line with the classic female pattern, she could now be expected to destroy him for having scorned her; she could charge rape.

Potiphar's wife and young Joseph, he reminded himself, somehow entertained. The rape of the male was not impossible, but it remained improbable.

No doubt some high priest of the psyche could tell him that unconsciously he had wanted Zoe, had got himself alone with her so that it would happen, then chickened out on his libido. Maybe so. But to hell with his unconscious; let it stay in the back seat. His conscious wanted Helen and his conscious was still at the wheel.

His whole arm shook as he picked up the second cup of coffee. He rattled it against the saucer as he put it back, then mopped the cold sweat from his face. What a good laugh he'd enjoyed on hearing about his predecessor, Albert. He ought to find Albert and compare notes. It must have been worse for poor Albert than she'd said. And imagine what her husbands had gone through.

He called the office and said he wouldn't be back for the day.

The trip home was a fresh-air detour around jostling, arbitrarily obstructing crowds and the abrupt menace of things on four wheels. The world was no different, he decided, only he.

At home, he pulled off his jacket and tie and shoes and stretched out on the bed, thankful to be motionless.

Zoe . . . Zoe, regal among her pillows . . . Zoe, handing him a drink . . . Zoe, laughing at his repartee . . . Zoe, her eyes burning a path through the smoke to him . . . Zoe . . .

The next thing he knew was reaching out in the blackness, groping for a way to silence the indignant

telephone. Then he found himself with the phone in his hand, his head back against the pillow and Helen's voice in his ear and his ear stinging as though he'd hit himself with the phone . . .

"Were you asleep?"

"Huh?" He tried to clear his throat. "Maybe I was."

"Oh, I'm sorry." And she sounded as if she really were.

"I had to call you tonight because I was afraid I might not be able to before you leave for work in the morning."

He grunted, wondering if he actually were awake, because she sounded as warm and pleasant as ever.

"Kirk, are you really awake?"

"I — I guess so."

"Well, if you're not talking in your sleep, can you take a message for yourself?" He wasn't positive, but she seemed to be laughing.

"Yes. Sure."

"I wanted to get hold of you as soon as possible because — well, Mother's ill and I can't see you tomorrow night."

"Oh . . ." It must be significant that she'd said "Mother" instead of "Zoe," but she didn't sound as though she would now mention having found his necktie or his pipe or any other evidence. "Is something — what's wrong?"

"We think it may be ptomaine. You see, she ate out last night because we weren't home and then she was terribly ill all night and all day today. We don't know how long it's going to take her to get over it."

"That's a shame," he said, certain he didn't sound convincing. Ptomaine? Zoe's hangover must be worse than his — bad enough, he hoped, to have messed up her plans to make a monkey out of him. He should feel relieved. Maybe it would help Helen to tell her what he knew about last night. It might pay to beat Zoe to the punch. No, he'd better hold off until his head was clearer, until he could be more sure of what he was doing. "Is there anything I can do?" he added lamely.

"No, thanks. I'm sorry, Kirk — about tomorrow. You understand, don't you?"

"Sure. I hope she'll get better fast. Shall I call you?"

There was a muffled blast of sound somewhere beyond her end of the line, as though someone had turned on a radio that shrieked out of control, then had rushed to cut it off.

In the silence that followed, her voice was barely a whisper. "Kirk, I guess we'd better wait until I can call you."

"O.K., Helen. Good night."

"Good night, Kirk."

He fumbled the phone back on its cradle and remained lying in the dark. "Miss Lakes' 'ptomaine' might be just my meat," he said aloud and chuckled.

But in a day or so he would probably receive a short, bitter note from Helen telling him that he should be relieved to know that Zoe now felt well enough to reconstruct the painful events of the other night and that it was all over between them because evidently he was more interested in Zoe than he was in her, or some such nonsense.

And what had Zoe been up to last night anyway? Was she that hungry for a man? If so, there was nothing to stop her from hunting in a more civilized way. Didn't she care enough for her own daughter's feelings? Or was she simply out to ruin the chances of any man who got interested in her daughter? No, Zoe seemed too clear-headed and intelligent and imaginative and resourceful to stoop to such methods. Yet what about that remark last night about his being sure to burn? And what was that about being pregnant — that it would be worse for him than being pregnant? Until last night he'd been so sure her feud with the male was ninety per cent pose. Possibly, only alcohol could be blamed for making it ninety per cent serious.

Zoe . . . The picture always blurred, whether he was

remembering her or remembering what he'd read about her — like that stuff he'd dug out of newspapers and magazines from the 1930's. Her aim then had evidently been to create a legend for herself as a career female who was as skillful as any male in being a good sport and looking out for herself. During her early teens, she'd told one interviewer, while other girls steeped themselves in cheap romances, she'd concentrated on H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, Joan of Arc, and the Elizabethans. In her late teens, she'd run away from college to get a job on a newspaper in Washington. Later, she'd earned her way through the rest of college, got herself to Europe on a cattle boat, and brazened her way into various spectacular newspaper assignments, all the while collecting the anecdotes about her outrageous self that now looked so sprightly in print. During her first year abroad she'd smoked hashish, interviewed Mussolini, taught herself how to use a gun, smoked a cigar with Sibelius, had tea with Bernard Shaw, and learned from a Hungarian circus gypsy how to throw a knife — but admitted she'd never had the nerve to try throwing one at a human target . . .

Nothing so sprightly as last night . . .

At two A.M., Friday, Helen awoke to the sounds of a skating party — the sounds of Zoe scuffling groggily about in her slippers, she realized, when they were followed by a thud and a light crash.

Helen got feverishly into her slippers and bathrobe and found Zoe on the bathroom floor, rocking drowsily against the overturned laundry hamper.

One hand fluttered up in recognition, then dropped back. Her head wobbled as if connected only by a thread, and spittle trailed down across her pajamas to the floor. Helen tried to help her up, but she was a dead weight, as yielding and uncontrollable as a mass of jelly. For a moment, she would seem to be trying to help herself and would get one foot against the floor, under herself,

then at the final effort, she would slip sideways or backwards and sit once again like a blob on the cold tiles. The heels of her slippers kept her from getting her feet in a position that would support her, but when Helen tried to take off the slippers she would begin to scream.

It was Miles's turn to sleep through the uproar. He came anyway though, wrapped in his robe and ready for work.

He got behind Zoe and tried lifting her, and somehow, despite all her resistance, there came a moment when Helen was able to persuade her to reach up and grasp the towel rack on the wall and do part of the job herself. They pushed and nudged her up along the wall then, and kept her from toppling until she stood propped against it, swaying precariously, her eyes glazed and sightless.

Helen found that the sheets on her bed would have to be changed for the second time. Because it would be such a struggle to get her out of a chair if she sat down, Miles supported her upright against the bathroom wall while Helen stripped and remade the bed. Then Helen got clean pajamas on her and between them they walked her back into the bedroom.

It didn't seem possible that she'd been able to have more liquor delivered during the hour on Thursday when Miles, alone with her because Helen was at work, had gone out to cash a check and buy some groceries. She was certainly worse now, though, than she'd been last evening. While she moaned quietly in bed, they searched her room and the bathroom. In the tangle of dirty clothes spilling from the overturned laundry hamper, Miles found an empty fifth.

He cursed under his breath at the way he'd been duped, at the way he'd worked: keeping her from drinking with doses of paraldehyde and cajoling her into taking vitamin pills and raw eggs in orange juice — all for more screaming, slobbering idiocy.

Helen gave him an understanding nod, turned off the light in Zoe's room and softly closed the door.

"You see," he whispered, "she probably didn't touch a drop of the stuff as long as we were awake. Just went on with the treatment, kidding us along. My God, you can't stop to search every time you turn around. She was sound asleep when I left the house yesterday. And when I got back, too."

"I know. All day long at the shop I kept worrying about something going wrong, wishing she could be watched every minute of the day, wishing we could afford a nurse."

"Sssh!" Miles cocked his head, listening, afraid he'd heard Zoe again.

They moved quickly, turning off all the lights, slipping into their beds, hoping silence would suggest silence.

Helen lay absolutely still, both ears off the pillow so she wouldn't hear her own heartbeat and confuse it with other sounds. A car passed in the street, sending its light beams across the ceiling and down one wall. Then there was darkness and silence again.

Wednesday night had been worse, of course: the evening of tiptoeing, of avoiding floor boards that creaked, of wondering if your fork made too much noise against your plate, of whispering. And afterwards, in the dark, the aimless ravings about her money being stolen, about how hard she worked for her children and how they tortured her, about old friends she hadn't seen in years and how they'd cut her off, about men she'd worked with in various jobs and how they'd tried to destroy her . . . on and on, mostly about the past, in a meandering, wobbling lament, now muttered, now spoken with startling clarity, now twisted into curses shrieked for the whole neighborhood to hear . . . And then the arguments over another drink, in which, heavy-eyed from lack of sleep, you stood under the blazing lights and found yourself trying to shout

her down. One of you lied to her that she'd drunk every drop in the house, while the other stealthily set the clock forward to back up your claim that the liquor stores were closed, or if that didn't work, pretended to phone one which refused to deliver. And when there were no means of stalling left and she couldn't be persuaded to let the paraldehyde put her to sleep, a small drink, miraculously discovered in a nearly empty bottle in one of the closets and diluted to the limit, would bring quiet. She would be so grateful she seemed unaware that, by producing the precious drink, you were exposing your own lies. Or else she was aware, but also aware temporarily that her life depended on your controlling the liquor. Anyway, you could turn off the lights and creep into bed, amazingly elated with the suddenly gained security that the quiet should last an hour, or possibly even the rest of the night . . .

And Friday morning, the quiet did last until after daylight.

The alarm jolted Helen out of bed at seven. She dressed for work and sat down to breakfast with Miles at seven thirty. The silence from Zoe was promising. They even risked listening to the news on the radio.

At eight Helen tiptoed in to look at her.

She lay as if dead, like a clay image that had been beaten recklessly with clubs, then hastily knocked back into a general resemblance of its original form. But she was not dead; her breath came in heavy, reverberating snores that seemed almost to shake the room. The tip of her tongue stuck darkly through her swollen gray lips and her bloated, white-rimmed eyelids allowed only the slit of an opening. There was no reaction when Helen nudged her and then pinched her.

Under the sheet, she found another empty bottle, one which hadn't been accounted for at two A.M.

She went to the phone on the desk and dialed Dr. Mangione's number.

"Emergency," she insisted, when she got him on the line.

He agreed to come right away, and she turned from the phone to find Miles standing beside the bed. He was swaying a little and looked so washed out she was afraid he was going to faint. She took his arm and led him out of the room, away from this hideous thing that was supposedly still Zoe.

"What damn fools we are," he kept saying, as he tried to steady himself with another cup of coffee.

Helen nodded, hoping she wouldn't have to look into that room again before the doctor came. This was what came from their own carelessness, their own selfishness. Why hadn't they called the doctor days ago? Because they'd been trying to do this the cheap way. Other times they'd managed to get her over it by themselves, but somehow they hadn't been so nearsighted about the progress they were making, about the risks they were taking . . .

Dr. Mangione arrived in twenty minutes, as irksome as ever with his sly, rabbity smile. He dropped his hat on the living room table, took off his glasses and began exhaling on them and cleaning them with his handkerchief. "Same old trouble?"

"I suppose so, but I'm afraid there must be something else wrong, too." Helen wished she'd called another doctor, anyone, just somebody out of the phone book. Zoe hated this little comedian.

"We'll see." He drew back from his glasses to squint at them a moment, gently blew the lint from his handkerchief off them, put them on again, then led the way to Zoe's room in his usual carefree manner. "Funny, I was wondering to myself only the other day how she could be getting along so beautifully all this time. I haven't been here in months, have I?"

During the examination, Helen called the shop on the living room phone and gave Peggy, with whom she was working this week, her excuses. Peggy, who'd been told

the "ptomaine" story, was quite solicitous and insisted she have the doctor make sure it wasn't appendicitis. Helen assured her she would and stalled off further questions by saying the doctor needed her.

Mangione was still busy in Zoe's room. Miles was hanging over the back of an arm chair, reading part of an old newspaper which was spread out in its seat. At least, he didn't upset her more by pacing.

The door opened and Mangione came out, closing it softly behind him and pausing to snap his fingers at the unreceptive George Sand who sat complacently washing her paws on the end of the couch.

"Well, there's nothing else wrong. It's just the usual, only she's really done it this time. You know that, don't you?"

They nodded.

"Want to send her to King's County so she can get hell knocked out of her, which might do her some good? Or do you want a nurse?" He turned from Helen to Miles.

"We'll have a nurse here," Miles said firmly.

"O.K. It's what they call an alcoholic coma. Cerebral edema. I'll work on her until Miss Mahrisch gets here. I know she's finished with her last case, so it won't take her long. This is the way you want to do it, right?"

She didn't have to look at Miles. "Yes, it's got to be this way."

Mangione smiled. "She'll be very sick for a week or so. Anyway, the hypnotics'll keep the noise down." He turned, his hand on the doorknob. "Maybe one of you can stick around in case I need something." He opened the door and it closed soundlessly behind him.

Helen collapsed on the couch. "Oh God," she sighed, "I think I could fall in love with that little rabbit."

Miles was hanging over the back of the chair again, reading the paper down in the seat. "I hope he knows what he's doing."

9.

SATURDAY. AND STILL NO BRUSH-OFF NOTE FROM HELEN.

Kirk's self-confidence had revived to the point where he was hovering around the phone, finding excuses not to leave the apartment for fear he might miss her call. Or suppose she was too busy to call. Suppose she needed help. He began picking up the phone tentatively and even got the number half dialed once, but stopped and just listened to the dead line because he didn't want to get further out on a limb.

Ten minutes later the phone did ring. He gulped and picked it up. Sue Cameron inviting him to Darien for the weekend. He relaxed and became fairly glib with thanks and talk of other plans, though it struck him that he was passing up the perfect out — a lively houseful of political conversationalists, Left and Right — but not dinosaur Right — whom Ed Cameron knew how to spur on with his liquor supply.

When he'd hung up he thought of what a stimulating addition Zoe would make to one of those weekends at the Camerons'. Or maybe not. She might try to monopolize every conversation — unlike Helen, who'd made such a good foil for several entertaining talkers there last month.

Silence . . . Possibly to give him time to realize what a fool he'd been to let himself be trapped in his prospective mother-in-law's bedroom.

"I love you, Helen," he could hear himself saying in an imaginary scene. "I love you. It was the liquor and the talk and that costume she was wearing. I didn't realize how strong that first drink was. Yes, I got stinking drunk and I was tempted. Who wouldn't be? I'm so god-damn starved for it after months of being with you and not being able to make love to you the way I want to. I love you, Helen. I don't want anyone else. I can't believe I ever will. Helen, I want you . . ."

The hell with it! He couldn't beg like that. He hadn't done anything wrong anyway. Why should he beg to be forgiven? That was Zoe's problem.

He stuffed a tasteless can of spaghetti into himself for lunch and decided on boldness. If the showdown was on the way, why not meet it head-on?

He wouldn't wait any longer and he wouldn't phone. He would go out and see Helen now. Never mind any prepared speech. And he would start immediately, before he thought of any alternatives.

Twice, he almost stopped the car to phone. Once, in his daze, he spurted through a red light and got whistled at. Then he cursed softly for a while and debated whether to turn around and go home or take a long drive by himself or go north on the Whitestone Bridge and turn up at the Camerons' after all.

Before he wanted to be, he was there.

He steeled himself for the worst, got out of the car, and rang the doorbell.

Helen herself opened the door.

"Hello," he managed, through dry lips, "am I in the doghouse or something?"

She smiled, her face unusually wan and gentle. "Doghouse? Of course not." She came out, pulling the door to behind her, and fell into his arms.

He staggered back, unprepared, almost losing his footing on the three steps behind him. Then, recovering, he

hugged her close and kissed her. The sound of wolf whistles behind him brought him out of it.

"Just some kids." Helen laughed.

He didn't look around. "Gosh, it feels like years."

"Doesn't it?" She patted his face and pecked him again. "Let's — let's sit in the car, shall we? Zoe's taking a nap and I'm afraid we might disturb her."

He followed Helen to the car. "Is she — is she any better?" He didn't know what he wanted to say.

"Yes, much better," she said, as he got in beside her. "She's really on the way out of it now. The nurse has done wonders. She's quite fussy about visitors, though. That's another reason I didn't invite you in."

"Sounds like more than ptomaine."

"Actually, it was. At one point, the doctor decided it was appendicitis. Then there was a change and he decided not to operate because it was acute gastroenteritis. I'm beginning to think it was started by some sort of allergy."

"Sounds tricky," he said. Very likely this was his last chance to tell her gracefully about having spent Tuesday evening with Zoe. Still, how could he explain why he'd been holding back? And if he didn't tell the sordid part, he still faced the threat of Zoe's side of the story.

"What's the trouble?"

"Nothing. I just wish I could be some help."

She touched his arm affectionately. "Oh, don't worry. Things are well under control now."

"How about you? You look pretty tired."

She snuggled against him. "I got a full night's sleep last night. That's progress. I feel fine. I was going to call you this morning, but the chores got in the way."

"I couldn't wait any longer. I almost phoned you a couple of times, but I was afraid you were too busy." Her cheerfulness was contagious. Why spoil it with the ghost of a hidden mistake? Since Zoe evidently hadn't given him away, why give her away? Particularly when

she was so ill. She might not even recall what she'd done that night. And if she did, maybe she'd prefer to forget all about it. "Anyway," he said, squeezing Helen's hand, "it's been a long time."

"Well, now it's over, and maybe I won't brood so much."

"About what?"

She sat back, one leg crossed under her, the way Zoe had Tuesday night. "Oh, wishing we could plan, really plan."

"That's what I've been wishing all along."

"Kirk, sometimes I don't know how I can go on without you." She buried her face against his shoulder and he put his arm around her.

The leaves hanging from the nearest tree caught his eye as they stirred gently in the afternoon breeze. "Why do we wait?"

"Yes, why do we?" Her voice seemed to skid out of control, and he was afraid she was going to cry. "Oh, Kirk, it would be wonderful. I'd love to get married now, right away, right this minute. But it's impossible."

"Next week wouldn't be impossible," he said, feeling as reckless as if he were laughing in Zoe's face. "Or why don't we go get our blood tests today? And then as soon as we can we'll go down to City Hall and get the license and presto. Next Saturday could be Presto Day. I think I might be able to get a week off then if I start arranging for it Monday." He tingled with a sudden elation. To hell with Zoe! If she wanted to fight him, this would be her opportunity. If she had any regard for Helen, she would keep quiet.

Helen was shaking her head.

"I hope you're not holding out for a fancy church wedding," he said.

"No. I haven't cared about that since I was sixteen."

"We can certainly stir up an unrehearsed celebration. We can get the Camerons and Peggy and —"

"No, Kirk. Zoe won't be well enough."

"All right, we'll postpone it a week."

"No, Kirk, you don't understand."

"I do understand. She disapproves. She'll disapprove a year from now, too. Ten years from now."

"This just isn't the time. On top of being sick, Zoe's still terribly upset about Miles. Whatever he wants to do, he can't do it now, any more than I can. She's so weak and shaken up, you wouldn't know her . . . Please, let's not be drastic right now."

He gripped the steering wheel with both hands. "When?"

"Kirk, how can I say? How can anyone say? She's sick! That's what matters right now. I just meant that maybe we could talk about planning our next step, so we could get somewhere on this thing when she's on her feet again."

He groaned. The thin skin around his anger wasn't going to last long this way. She might as well quit sniffing and get to the point. Still, what was the point? Why had she been stalling him off practically ever since he'd met her?

"I'm sorry," she was saying.

"Why be sorry? I guess we can go on talking about plans, without planning. We can talk for years. We might try one of those fifteen- or twenty-year Irish engagements I've heard about."

She shivered at the sarcasm in his voice. For the first time, he sounded cruel, intentionally cruel. "Is that all that matters?" she said. "How fast we can get married and enjoy ourselves? Isn't anyone else to be considered?"

He started the motor. "Honey, that's just about it — if you want to survive. Love, as somebody said, is the selfishness of two people. Evidently, you're not as selfish about this thing as I am. Well, think it over, but don't take years." He shifted into first.

She stared at him, stunned. A crushing tightness seemed

to grow around her. Something had gone completely askew. This wasn't Kirk. He was always so easygoing, so calming, so willing to understand . . . She pushed open the door and got out of the car. She turned, wanting to reach in and touch him again. But she couldn't. The hardness she'd always thought was only a surface look was really him. It glittered from his eyes. She felt excluded, cut down, shoved out of the way . . .

Inexplicably, he grinned.

She almost wrenched her shoulder slamming the car door.

"See you," she heard him say, and then the car was rolling away under the trees.

She moved up the walk and into the house, numb and choked. Miles and the nurse were in the kitchen, but she didn't give them a chance to say anything. She tiptoed into her own room and closed the door.

She lay on the bed and watched the breeze stir the curtains.

So everything must be on his terms. Another typical male, out for conquest and the glorification of his sacred ego . . .

She closed her eyes and thought of him driving along the parkway into the afternoon sun. She could see his long bony hands on the wheel, the yellow glare splashing his gravity face through the windshield. She could smell the mild, sweet pungency of his breath — pipe tobacco and spearmint, she supposed — though she'd never seen him chew gum. Maybe he only did it when he was alone, which was fine.

She wished she could cry now. It hurt worse this choked-up way. All she could do though was turn over and bury her head in the pillow and mourn for all she'd lost . . . because she'd never darned his socks, or cooked a full meal for him, or listened to him worry about his job, or

slept all knotted up with him, or poked him when he snored . . .

Miles felt good on Sunday, relaxed and ready to be cheerful. He woke up in the best mood he'd known in weeks. No reason for it — except the continuing progress of Zoe's return from Hell. That alone could do a lot for the atmosphere. It was as if a bomb, which had hung suspended over the house for days, threatening to drop at any moment, had now been safely removed.

The nurse, Miss Mahrish, had turned out to be Mangione's greatest contribution to date. She had the necessary brawn and lightness on her feet, but she never used strong-arm methods. With her first entrance, she'd brought to the house an easy, somehow festive feeling that even turned George Sand from gloomy prowling to gamboling and long naps. Still, Miss Mahrish was firm when she needed to be, and Zoe, lost in her attention, was making a dignified return to consciousness.

Miss Mahrish had gone beyond the call of duty, too, in insisting on helping with the cooking and the cleaning of Zoe's room and the bathroom. At meals, she entertained Miles and Helen with stories about her family in Prague "before the Russians came," and about some of the eccentric "rich types" she had nursed on both sides of the ocean. Her cheerfulness made them almost forget there was illness in the house.

The reminder would come when she would silence their rollicking laughter with a sudden finger to her lips. Then you realized she'd heard Zoe's plaintive call for assistance and was rushing off to duty while you enjoyed finishing your meal in peace.

But Helen's moping was spoiling this breakfast. Ever since Kirk's mysterious visit with her yesterday, which she wouldn't talk about and which she was obviously thinking

about constantly, Miles had begun to wish she would leave him and Miss Mahrish alone with the patient.

"What's the trouble anyway?"

"Not a thing." Helen seemed to be forcing a smile. "In fact, it's making me feel extra good just to hear that little dame scurry around."

"Why don't you make the most of it? Seems like a good chance for you to get away for the day, if you want to."

"I guess we have too many nurses now. Well, I'll be out of your way tomorrow."

"You're not going out at all today?" He picked up a piece of the *Sunday Times*.

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing," he said, wondering why she was making him feel sheepish.

"I suppose now that your threat's been called," she said, "you'll be packing up any moment. Does Bruno know you're coming?"

Miles rubbed his jaw, trying to decide whether or not he needed a shave. "I don't know."

"You don't know which?"

"I don't know how fast I'm packing up. I'm sort of curious about that job I got interviewed for Wednesday."

"That was the big architectural firm." She finished her milk and crumpled up the paper napkin.

"Even a summer job in a place like that might do me some good."

"When are you going to hear about it?"

"I don't know."

She rose. "I wish somebody knew something about something."

"For instance, was Kirk giving you an ultimatum yesterday?"

"No," she said curtly, and left the room before he could get a good look at the expression on her face. "Yes," would have been the right answer, he supposed.

He ought to call her back and tell her to go ahead, get out, get married. He certainly wasn't ready to go yet. A few years more, while he finished college and got some experience in summer jobs, would solve a lot of problems. The draft might get him by then and Zoe would have to face reality. That would give Helen plenty of time to get well set up with Kirk—if that was what she wanted. She must, or she wouldn't be in such a stew over him.

He took his old camp blanket from the closet and part of the paper and started upstairs for the roof. He tiptoed, hoping to get through Lou's short hall without her stopping him, but he didn't.

"Hi," she called from the kitchen.

He paused in the doorway, nodding.

She was sitting at the white enamel table, the tidiness of the dishes and the pots and the stove and the refrigerator sparkling around her in the sun as if she'd just finished polishing it all for his benefit. "I guess you been kind of busy."

"Yeah . . ." The gleaming, scrubbed look wasn't for him, though, and she knew how he disliked it anyway. It was the usual look up here, from the windowpanes to the ashtrays—as frilly and neat and unlived in as a furniture display in a department store window. He supposed he resented the picture because it reflected on the mess downstairs.

"Take a load off your feet and have some coffee."

"Thanks." He took the chair opposite her. He didn't want to, but if he refused he was afraid that slight pout she was wearing might develop into something more troublesome. Tom had been away most of the week and he hadn't been up once. She probably expected an excuse.

"How's your girl friend?" The words tumbled out with a revealing breathlessness as she poured coffee for both of them.

"What girl friend?"

"Oh, some girl friend Helen mentioned, I guess, that you had a date with. She just mentioned it in passing, you know. That's all."

He grinned, or tried to. "Sure, I date a few girls. You agreed a long time ago there was no use in us going out publicly."

She tipped her head resignedly and flicked a speck of lint off the shoulder ruffle of her housecoat. "You remember that record you borrowed off your friend that time and played for me, the one with the colored woman singing?"

"Bessie Smith?"

She smiled ruefully. "Maybe that's what I got — the empty bed blues."

He kept his eyes on the delicate swirls of steam rising into the sunlight from his coffee. And the question was: How to get out of this rut without a big noise, especially if you were going to continue living in the same house with her? The good prebreakfast mood was gone. Lucky thing he was playing tennis with Maureen this afternoon. He could build up an awful hatred for the world if he had to hang around here all day with this black, bitter taste in his mouth.

"Remember how I used to cry to myself over Tom? I told you about it. I was crying because, you know — I figured it was because of what you and me was doing to him."

He licked the hard dryness of his lips.

"You know, that poor guy really has the right to kill the both of us. But he don't know. And I ain't ever going to tell him. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is I don't cry about him any more. You know why?" Her breathlessness returned, as if she must hurry with what she wanted to say. "Because now I guess you and me are worse off than him."

He pushed back his chair and stood up. "You used to have a million reasons for not feeling guilty."

"I suppose it catches up with you. You ain't hardly touched your coffee."

"No thanks. I guess I had too much for breakfast . . ."

She thought he was going to say something else, but he just stood there in the doorway, his thumbs hooked in the waistband of his slacks, staring at the floor, or maybe nothing . . .

There'd be no trouble at all now, she reminded herself, if he'd taken her advice and gone to visit his father. Then she wouldn't have to see him around and wonder what he was doing with girls when he wasn't coming up to her any more. Even the other day, when her bathroom screen needed a new fastener, he'd waited till she was out to come up and fix it. If only she didn't have to hear his young voice in the house, if she didn't have to look at where he slept when she went down the stairs, if she didn't have to see his chest and shoulders straining that thin T-shirt . . .

"If you're going to sleep on the roof," she said, "coffee wouldn't be any use."

"No." He grinned, still not facing her. "Might keep me awake." He picked up his blanket roll and newspaper, and she followed him out into the hall.

That iron ladder up the wall . . . Monkey — that's what she used to call him sometimes, and it made him laugh then. And he'd called her the ape-woman when she'd climbed the ladder herself to stand in the open hatchway and see how brown he was getting out there on his private roof . . .

"I guess I'll go on up," he said, grasping the ladder with one hand.

"Oh, did I tell you who I saw on the bus the other day when I was going to the dentist?"

He turned, one foot on the ladder. "No."

"You'll never guess."

"No, I guess I won't."

She smiled in triumph. "It was you."

"Oh . . . Why didn't you say something?"

"No, it wasn't really you. I mean it was an awful cute little boy about eight years old, I guess, and he looked just like you must have looked when you was about eight. Honest, he was so cute I just could have eaten him right up."

He gulped, tightened his grip on the ladder. "Who was it?" he said, for something to say.

"Gee, I don't know. I never saw him before. He was sitting there with his mother, talking so nice to her, and I said to myself, 'That's just — ' Oh, aren't you going up to the roof?"

"No, not this morning. I just remembered, I've got some things I ought to do, some letters I ought to write . . ." He had to get away from her, away from the house if necessary.

"Going to write to your father?"

"Maybe. I don't know." He hurried down the stairs.

It was a relief to find that Helen and Miss Mahrish were both out of the living room. He didn't want to have to talk to anyone. He threw the blanket back into the closet and settled down on the couch with the newspaper.

He *could* write to his father.

Time for another attempt, for more scratched-up, torn-up false starts, with pauses for wondering about his father's possible reactions. How to be unself-conscious before your father when you didn't even know him? How to talk to a legend that had come to life?

Those two letters from his father . . . Somehow, they had destroyed the dreams that had survived childhood and left nothing in their place. He could dig into his memory and see the father who'd grabbed him back

from a window when he was leaning too far out spitting cough drops down at the people on the sidewalk, the one who'd strolled among the redwoods with him on the lookout for friendly deer to feed . . . But the man he was supposed to write to now was a stranger, an important — possibly, even a great — artist whom he knew only as a public personality. How could you write to such a man without revealing your own inadequacy? And wouldn't such a man be disappointed to find you didn't live up to the expectations he'd built up for you as his son?

Hell, here he was fooling himself again, finding excuses, not writing a letter simply because it was easier to bury himself in the help wanted ads, or mess around with half-baked designs on the drawing board, or sit still and watch the world go by and wait for it to scoop him up and carry him along with it . . .

By noon, when he looked in on Zoe, she was visibly better.

She was still too shaky to sit up, but her dignity was back, together with a clean, pale sobriety. Her eyes still lost focus at moments and her words, though restrained, were not always clear. She seemed unnaturally subdued, as if secretly relieved to be intimidated by the authority of Miss Mahrisch.

"Darling," she said softly, her hand reaching shakily out to him, "I've been so ill, and you've all been so awfully good to me."

He was aware of himself standing stiffly and coldly, although he didn't want to. "You look a lot better," he said, trying to feel more solicitude, "even since breakfast."

"Do I? I don't feel any better."

"Well, you must be improving. You're eating more and you've got a little color now."

"Have I?" Her hand fell away from his. The dizziness

returned and she let her head sink back, deeper into the pillows. No, she realized, neither he nor Helen could be much comfort at this stage. They tried to appear sympathetic, of course, but always with that you've-made-your-bed-now-lie-in-it manner that indicated how satisfied they were to see the nurse running her life for her, and always with that underlay of reproach for what she had done to them. She closed her eyes.

And they were right to be reproachful. They were right because she deserved all the suffering she got out of this . . . this long night with its sickly dawn . . .

"Miss Dewey called."

Zoe opened her eyes, surprised to find that Miles was still in the room. "Oh . . . What did she want?"

"She wanted to know when she could make an appointment for you with that editor to go over the cuts in the article."

"Uhhmm . . ."

"I told her you'd call back in a few days. Could anything be done about it now? Should I ask her to have it sent to you so you can look it over and think about the cuts?"

"No . . . No," she said with difficulty. "I don't care what they do with it. They'll probably lose interest anyway."

"Why should they lose interest? It's good stuff and they've already paid for it."

"Paid for it . . . Yes, paid for it. So what?"

"Please, let me help you with it."

"There's no way to help . . . No way," she muttered, letting her head roll to the side.

There was a descending slope of time in which she sensed that a variety of shapeless clouds were closing in, carrying her once more into the comfort of her own darkness. Something that might have been Miles' footsteps seemed to be fading away . . .

Why she deserved all this suffering she wasn't sure, especially this time. She certainly wouldn't have sunk into this long night if it hadn't been for Kirk. But she couldn't tell them that. They'd never believe it. She scarcely could herself. It had happened so unexpectedly. Yet he must have been planning something beforehand, before arriving unannounced and admitting Helen had told him she wouldn't be home — all that on top of his appearance on the scene at a time like this . . .

She opened her eyes again. How lopsided the ceiling had become. Or was it really narrowing into the shape of a diamond?

Showered and shaved, Kirk sat in his bathrobe Monday morning, listening to a radio news roundup that brought in London, Bonn, Washington, and Bogotá, while he ate his toast and coffee.

The program was nearly over when the downstairs doorbell rang. He rose and pressed the buzzer and waited, wondering why, if it was a telegram, it wasn't being phoned to him, and also, which of his scattered relatives now needed a loan.

There was a gentle knock then, and he opened the door and it was Helen. For a matter of seconds there was that familiar sadness glistening in her eyes, but immediately he couldn't see any more because he'd pulled her hard against him and slammed the door behind her.

He gave her ear a nip and held her at arm's length. "I'd given you up."

She seemed breathless, either from the stairs or excitement or both — wearing a hurried get-up, too: a pink sports dress and no hat, a purse clutched under her arm.

"Does this mean you've changed your mind?"

She dabbed at her eyes, still evidently trying to compose herself. "You twisted my arm," she said, as her dimples reappeared, "and I liked it."

He bent to kiss her on the tip of the nose, to hold her chin in the tips of his fingers for a moment, to kiss her again on the lips. Then he sat her down at the table and poured coffee for her. "Tell me the worst," he said. As he put the coffee pot back on the stove, he realized he must mean Zoe's expected accusation and his new impatience to clear it up. "And tell me the best, too."

Helen ignored the coffee. "The worst. The best. Anyway, I'm here. You kicked me out of your car and I'm back for more. But please don't kick me down those stairs. I'm still breathless from them."

He sat down, grinning. "Please, honey, don't give me a chance. Anyway, what happened? Did you get a chance to talk it all over with Miles or Zoe?"

"Oh . . ." she sighed, shaking her head. "Gosh, I rushed so desperately to catch you before you left for the office. I really wanted to catch you before you woke up, but of course I didn't have a key."

"I'll give you the extra one."

"I've been wondering about how you look when you're asleep. Do you snore? Do you smile in your sleep? Do you talk?"

He laughed, catching her hand on the table. "There may be girls who can tell you, but I've forgotten their names."

"What do you wear?"

"Nothing. I can't picture you in anything, either." He let go her hand and hitched himself closer to the table. "Now before I get carried away and start acting as if this were one of my usual dreams — the one where I tear your clothes off — you'd better tell me what brings you here."

She giggled. "You're twisting my arm again."

"For keeps," he said, so sternly that her giggling faded.

"Well, yes . . . Well, I did talk it all over with somebody — not with Zoe or Miles, though. You see, you made me think about it, and then somehow I got into a wonder-

ful talk with Miss Mahrish, the nurse we've had. I don't know how it happened. I was alone with her yesterday afternoon, and she seemed to sense the mood I was in and a lot of things came out. It was amazing. And it wasn't that she told me what to do, or at least it didn't seem that way. But it was easy for me to talk because she knows all about us — about Zoe and Miles and me — and yet she wasn't disapproving . . .” He watched a sort of radiance bloom as she spoke, a glow that seemed to spread upward from the hollow just visible in the V-neck of her dress and burst with fresh warmth from her eyes. “I've always been afraid to talk to people about myself because — well, I get that feeling they must be secretly thinking I'm an awful fool . . . Kirk,” her voice slowed down, “that's the feeling you gave me on Saturday.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Maybe I am an awful fool, but when you take everything into account, I don't think I've had much choice in the matter. Miss Mahrish has seen a lot and she's pretty shrewd, and I think she understands all of us better than we do ourselves. Anyway, what I think now is that I'd better wait — I mean, we'd better wait.”

“We'd better wait! Christ . . .” Kirk felt a wild heat surge up through him. “All that build-up for this?”

“Now please calm down. I mean, just wait until Zoe is up and about and able to talk things over with me.”

“What good is more talk? My God, you've been through all that. You're still not getting to the point of all this.” He rubbed his jaw in a frenzied gesture.

“But Zoe's terribly ill. It wouldn't be fair to —”

“Fair — hell! With her, everything's fair.” He rose, kicking aside his chair, then moved away from it and kept moving, until he ended standing at the window, beside his unmade bed.

Now he found himself staring at the brownstone fronts across the street, but seeing them only through the

double clouds of his anger. Behind him, Helen was going on with something about not being able to judge people until you knew all there was to know . . . How true, he reminded himself. And evidently, there was a good deal Helen herself still didn't know.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" her voice came weakly.

"Eventually, I guess."

"Would — would it be better if I left?"

"Whatever you want to do."

But she didn't want to leave, even though his broad back remained like a wall between her and the window, cutting off some of the light, chilling her with the reality of his anger. She was in her bare feet — having kicked off her shoes while they sat at the table — and she felt impelled to move silently toward him so she could touch his shoulder once again and then go, if she had to.

He turned before she could touch him. The seamy hardness of his face alarmed her, made her see him for a moment as a cruel father who was about to strike her. "Darling," she murmured, sensing something catlike about the boldness of her desperation. Then she slipped her fingers inside the belt of his skimpy seersucker bathrobe and brought herself up as close as she could to him by placing each of her feet across his — also bare, in their Japanese sandals.

Abruptly, he hugged her to him with such violence that she cried out. She shuddered, helpless as his fingers dug into her shoulders, into her back . . . as if he were saying goodbye and never expected to see her again. Then, almost as abruptly, he seemed to relax, to let her breathe again, and he was lifting her gently off his feet and setting her down on the floor on her own.

He was smiling, his eyes gentle and moist. "This isn't the time for a lot of things," he said huskily, "but when it comes to knowing all there is to know . . ."

"What do you think you have to know?" Her mind stampeded into the idea that he must suspect what she couldn't explain.

He was leading her away from the window, to the couch. "I don't seem to get anywhere trying to find that out," he said with a tinge of sarcasm. "For the moment, I'll just try to tell you something you may not know."

They sat close together on the edge of the couch, facing one another as well as they could, their knees touching and their hands in one another's, and without preamble, he was telling her about last Tuesday night . . .

It was beyond belief. Yet moments later she was sick with the conviction in his voice and with trying to keep his every word in her head. And she was realizing, too, that he wouldn't be telling her all this if he didn't have to and that none of it was beyond belief. It was all so plausible — his casually dropping in to see her that evening and finding Zoe alone, and the conversation and the drinking. What harm in a drink or two with your potential mother-in-law? And then his discovery that both the liquor and the inhibitions were getting out of control . . . "I felt myself being drawn into something, but I kept thinking of you and reminding myself that this wasn't like the other times I'd got drunk with a woman, that those times were over." And then he had run away and been sick and further entangled himself in the anxiety and shadowboxing that followed . . . "I know I didn't go all the way with her. I know because I didn't black out. I remember every miserable detail so clearly I — oh, hell, you believe me, don't you?"

She nodded, too dry and numb to speak.

He said no more. She stroked the back of his hand and listened to the clock ticking over on the bedside table, reminding her that it was past time for him to leave for work.

This was a moment she'd never known, and she was

at a place she'd never been. And yet that wasn't so at all. What was so was that she now knew Zoe better than she'd ever known her before, that she felt more pity for her, more sadness for all she'd lost in a lifetime of losing . . .

She raised her head, grateful that the smile welling up in her was what she wanted for him. She pulled his head down against her breast, and in thinking of Zoe, she found herself remembering Harry, remembering how Zoe had suffered over his death. In those moments of clarity between stupor and delirium, Zoe had so often spilled out her guilt over Harry, over never having let him come into her bed, over having held him at bay to prove they could be "human and not just confused animals," because "sex had ruined everything with the others." And now sex had evidently been going to ruin Kirk . . .

She patted his shoulder and lifted his chin. "Feel better?" she whispered.

He nodded, his eyes soft as they reached into hers.

She kissed him, kept his cheek against hers. "Oh Kirk, we must do it. I've forgotten all my excuses. They don't mean anything now. Let's hurry and get married right away . . . Now. Today."

10.

AT MISS MAHRISCH'S SUGGESTION, MILES SET UP THE CARD table in Zoe's room that evening and they all ate dinner with her.

By now she had graduated to a bland diet and to sitting up in bed when she felt strong enough to. Her eyes were again in normal focus, but she could barely lift a cup of broth without assistance and her face still seemed drained of all color. She could smile though, somewhat penitently, while Miss Mahrish told anecdotes of her childhood. Occasionally, she could counter with a story of her own, and appeared almost to have forgotten her weakness as she spun out the details. Then, while they all laughed at the punch line, she would sink back in exhaustion.

Helen saw and heard all this as through a screen. Most of her kept slipping back to this morning, to the moments with Kirk that had changed her life. Gently and solicitously he'd talked plans with her over coffee, and they'd reached the further decision to get their blood test procedure started right away. He called the office to let them know he wouldn't be in, and she began doing the breakfast dishes while he gathered his clothes together to go into the bathroom to dress. It was then that either her impatience or her full realization of what Zoe had tried to do blew their calm reasonableness apart.

She wanted to laugh aloud over it now. Relief, revenge, victory . . . Whatever it was, it had made her practically shred Kirk's bathrobe to get at him. Now, tonight, she couldn't get used to her new self, to the self that had spent most of the morning getting so thoroughly acquainted with Kirk. Oh, God, she wanted him again right now. She wanted to blurt out to Zoe what she'd done. Instead, she tried to listen, to appear to be here, but she had to keep pinching herself surreptitiously to get back to what had become a hallucination of the old family circle . . .

"I wish I could remember what it was I ate that gruesome night," Zoe was saying, and not for the first time, "so I can stay away from it in the future. Or maybe it was the restaurant, not the food."

Miss Mahrisch chuckled. "I really believe to myself now that it was an ocean liner with rusty paint." She hadn't bothered trying to get Zoe to admit how drunk she'd been, but she'd refused to discuss the ptomaine rationalization seriously. Even so, she was getting a great deal more cooperation out of Zoe than either Helen or Miles could ever hope to. If only Zoe would be frank about herself with her. The nurse understood her so well. She could help her so much. And she was going to need so much help now that these wedding plans were under way.

Helen closed her eyes and saw Kirk again. Oh, why must such wonder be so unmentionable? Then tears came to her eyes, and she realized they were for Zoe. No wonder Zoe had wanted him, too. She must still need someone to replace Harry, the way Harry had replaced Bruno. But she'd never been able to give herself to Harry. Surely, she could give herself so gloriously. It was such a brutal joke: the morning after, and nothing but bottles — "dead soldiers" — in her bed . . .

"Helen!"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry . . ." She wiped her eyes, glanced around at them — Miss Mahrish, Zoe, Miles — all strangers for the moment. "I guess my eyes are tired. I've had an awful lot to read lately."

"We just wondered if you were still with us," Zoe said.

Miles grinned. "I was getting ready to catch you if you fell out of the chair."

Helen caught Miss Mahrish's understanding wink and concentrated on eating her dinner. The others were nearly finished. "Oh, I meant to ask you," she said, turning to Zoe, relieved to have something to contribute. "How's the article going?"

"I can't tell, really. It's always painful to cut. I'm afraid all they have space for is a bare sketch of the de Musset affair. Maybe you can go over it with me, if you have a chance."

"Yes, I'd love to."

"Oh, yes," Miss Mahrish chimed in. "That will be so nice after supper maybe a little bit, but you must not think too much. Early to bed."

"Do it tomorrow," Miles suggested, as if they must all vote on the issue.

"But I feel so much better," Zoe insisted. "Helen, did I tell you Platitude stopped in today to see if I needed cheering up? Wasn't it sweet of him?"

Miss Mahrish nodded earnestly. "To me it is a surprise that all the men of the block have not been in."

"Every man on the block doesn't understand me the way Plati does."

"Well, you act as if you are used to have men at your feet as if you are a queen."

Zoe stared off at a corner of the ceiling. "In the good old days . . . Yes, you might say that some of them treated me like a queen then. But I never cared for the way they

persisted in their manly squawks after they'd flopped at my feet. A man seems most proud of himself when he's become a woman's most prized disappointment. Don't you think so?"

Miss Mahrish chortled. "Ohhh — well, maybe so. But you see, I am not one who expects much."

"How fortunate . . . it's always a little sad when the sawdust starts trickling out. I like Plati because he has no pretensions, no designs on me."

Miles yawned. "The meek shall inherit the earth."

"Hardly. It's just easier for the rest of us to tolerate them."

"But," Miss Mahrish said to Zoe, "it is that you make this little man — this Plati — feel good. He goes from you so happy. You are the one who flatters him. You are like one of the boys" — she fell back on gestures — "telling him he is regular Joe, but also he feels like woman in you speaks to man in him."

Zoe roared with laughter, then caught herself, realizing she didn't feel that strong. She lay still among the propped-up pillows and sighed. "No, my dear, I'm afraid it's you who are doing the flattering. It's been years since the woman in me has responded to any man."

The sun streamed through both windows, one on each side of the bed.

With his face against the soft swirls of Helen's hair, Kirk stared up at the familiar ceiling and its dust-catcher bas-relief of flower garlands in plaster. Familiar, but startlingly fresh to the eye this morning. He closed his eyes again, enjoying the continued entanglement of their bodies, enjoying the realization that he felt as peaceful and rested and happy as he ever had in his life . . . the aftermath of a wild encounter that had begun when he awoke, presumably alone in his apartment, to find her in bed with him.

He rolled away from her, stretching to the tips of his toes in delight, and whistled softly. "Boy, what a way to wake up."

She smiled. "I thought I was dreaming when I tiptoed in. You seemed to be all ready for me even if you were asleep."

"I didn't even hear you unlock the door." He leaned up on one elbow and kissed her, gazed at the length of her for a moment, then fell back with a sigh.

They lay awhile in silence then, drowsing between smiles, their hands still together, her knee across his.

At some disconnected moment, she heard part of her mind whispering: "It's such a lovely way to overpower a man. You know it is, Zoe. Give yourself instead of just trying to take. After all, it's the only way you really can possess him . . ."

How peaceful he looked in his nakedness, how spent and utterly vulnerable.

A wild, unreasonable excitement over it all suddenly shot through her. "Get up!" she demanded.

"Uh?" The sleeping hulk stirred as if a breeze had touched it, settled back in repose.

She tried a sharp poke, a squeeze, a gentle slap, another squeeze. His resistance broke when she pinched him a few times. One tired eye propped itself open, fell shut again.

"Get thee hence, sluggard . . . Up! Let's go!"

She yanked at one heavy arm, accomplished nothing, and let it drop. Then she bounced from the bed, got an arm around one of his legs, pushed with her bottom against the side of the bed, and almost flopped him out on the floor before he staggered to his feet and groggily allowed her to lead him into the bathroom. "To work!" she cried, stifling her laughter. "Support me. No, to City Hall. Get us a license." Having pushed and poked and tickled, she soon had him swaying upright in the bath-

tub. "Get to the doctor and find out what foul disease you've given me."

His eyes and mouth opened just before the full force of the shower struck, brought him roaring to life, choking with laughter and water till she had to slap him on the back.

Then she left him with the soap while she hurried out to the refrigerator, found some bacon for the skillet, started the coffee and partially set the table. By now he was shaving. She went back for a quick shower, with her hair in the shower cap she'd thought to bring, then got out of his way to dress and comb her hair.

"Hurry up, sluggard. Here's your orange juice," she called to the glimpse of him needlessly brushing his crew cut before the bathroom mirror. "Good thing I don't take up much space or we'd need two bathrooms."

He emerged, clear-eyed and stalwart once more, in the ragged remains of his bathrobe. "You may sound like the tyrant around here," he said gruffly, "but be reminded by this rag that you'll have to learn to sew and make me a new bathrobe."

"Never. The holes may come in handy when I have to do some more prodding."

"You're a lousy actress, one of the lousiest." He kept a sickly, disgusted grin focussed on her fierce scowl until it dissolved into a smile. Then he wrapped his arms around her and they rocked back and forth in a dreamy embrace . . . until she noticed that the toaster was smoking and had to break away to rescue the toast.

"That's something somebody can give us for a wedding present," he said, taking his place at the table. "I don't like my morning hug interrupted this way."

She sat down, opposite him. "We probably won't even eat. What am I buttering this for, anyway?"

He took it from her and began eating. "Because I'm the tyrant around here and I expect you to."

She laughed and tried to whistle "Love is Sweeping the Country," but had to give up out of sheer happiness.

They clinked orange juice glasses, gulped the juice down, then sat in silence, conversing with their eyes, their knees touching under the table.

"Stop," she said, getting up for the coffee pot, "or you'll have me in bed again."

"Oh, yes, we were going to be pretty busy this morning. I heard the orders before I woke up."

"Right." She poured the coffee. "Then Saturday is Presto Day."

"I guess if it's too short notice for Ed Cameron to be best man — well, Miles would be good."

She almost choked on her coffee, and he had to get up and slap her on the back. "Oh, no! We've got to — I mean we can't say a word to Miles or Zoe until afterwards. We might tell them Sunday or — well, don't you think that's the best way?"

He squirmed. "Well, I suppose you know how they'll take it better than I do . . . By the way, when are you going to get around to discussing my Zoe episode with Zoe?"

"My God, let's not muddle things now." She stood at the stove, frying the eggs. "Last evening things were so pleasant. We were figuring out ways to cut her article, and she was surprisingly relaxed. I was, too. It was like old times."

"Then I'm no longer a problem. Makes me sort of jealous."

"Be patient. You're only underground until the wind changes. . . . You like them staring at you?"

"The eggs? Yeah."

"You know," she turned, gesturing with the spatula, "if I didn't know Zoe — and you, too — I would think you were too damn clever for your own good, the way you landed me."

"You mean I'm not clever?"

"Here's your bacon . . . Now, what I'm trying to say is: if you made up that story about Zoe to panic me into bed — which worked — I'd believe you're too damn clever for your own good."

He grunted, keeping most of his attention on his food.

She sat down again. "Well, you are clever, but not that clever. And that's what's so wonderful. I know that it really happened and that she didn't have a chance. The result is that I love her all the more and I'm practically insane about you."

"Christ, you women are possessive!"

"We have to be. We really have so little ourselves."

"Tell that to Zoe, you traitor."

"I'm afraid she knows it better than I do."

Fat chance, he thought, settling back for a cigarette to go with his second cup of coffee. He kept silent as he watched her relish her breakfast. Something had come undone here; something was shaking loose the rusty bolts and screws that had held it so clumsily together. He found it quite heartening. The tough little girl who had been taking a secret beating was no longer taking it. And definitely, she was not too young for him. On the other hand, whatever came apart was going to need putting together again . . .

"My second morning here and I still don't really know what the place looks like."

"It won't take more than a glance."

She rose, strode out into the big room. "Almost as cluttered as home," she said, noting the overloaded bookshelves, the scattered magazines and newspapers, and the sixteenth-century maps crowding the wall in one corner. There was also a framed print of Marc's *Blue Horses*, which she paused to straighten.

"Think it'll do for a starter?"

"Darling, with you I could be happy in a chicken coop."

"You mean a split-level, colonial-type ranch with sunken lanai, two-car garage, wall-to-wall plush-type carpeting, fully automatic washer and dryer ('It thinks for you'), linger-tip controls on everything but the kids."

"Don't be so vulgar," she said, circling back from the nineteenth-century bathroom to the pullman kitchen. "Anyway, you forgot the built-in dishwasher. Now, let's go. I'll do the bed and the dishes while you dress and call the office and tell them you can be reached at City Hall."

He brought some of the dishes from the table. "And shall I expect my dreams to come true again tomorrow morning?"

"Thursday and Friday . . . It may look suspicious. I think we'd better wait till Saturday."

He bent to kiss her again as she tied on his overlarge chef's apron. "How about right after that champagne breakfast?"

"Swell. Now scram. You're very appealing in that rag. I don't think I'll even try to mend it."

He found a pair of socks and started digging for underwear in the chaotic drawers of the dresser. "That reminds me, I've got about a carload of things in here that need mending. When can you start?"

She turned away and began to sing over the clatter of the dishes.

"I hope we live till Saturday," he shouted as he began to dress.

Her singing came louder, more reckless.

After Miss Mahrish left for the night and the dishes were done, Helen shut herself in her room to plan what she would wear Saturday and what she would pack for the honeymoon weekend.

And she must ready the stuff to be picked up Sunday. But there were so many things she'd not got around to discussing with Kirk this morning. At least, they had

settled on what he was to arrange — hotel reservations for the weekend at some mountain place, getting hold of the Camerons and Bill Prater and the other friends of his he wanted to involve, buying the ring. All she had to do was call Peggy, which she'd already done this afternoon, and Peggy had almost passed out with excitement and envy because, as she was always saying, she'd only passed Kirk on to Helen when she found she couldn't land him herself.

The timing on this Saturday business — it was still hard to think of it as getting married — seemed right, Helen decided. By Sunday afternoon or evening when she and Kirk dropped in to pick up the rest of her belongings and announce how thoroughly married they were, Zoe would be well enough to take it. And what could she say anyway if she had any objections? After all, she'd triggered this herself.

Helen found her closet choked with distractions. There were so many piles of old theater programs and dress patterns and college papers and even remnants of dolls and a collection of Zoe's manuscripts that she had to keep stopping to sort out stuff that had nothing to do with getting married or moving out.

Manuscripts of Zoe's . . . If only she could really pull herself out of the rut now, while she was still convalescing, before she had to go back to the office. There must be stuff here that after revision Joyce Dewey would be willing to try sending out again, what with the *Harper's* article sure to arouse new interest in Zoe. Then in a few months she ought to be able to drop that miserable foundation the way it deserved to be dropped.

Helen read the first page of one story and half the second, then couldn't resist taking it into the living room where Miles was hunched over his drawing board.

"Listen to the first line: 'Ethel was never so clever as when she had eaten a whole carrot.' "

He raised his head, scowling. "Puts a pretty low value on brains."

"I remember this thing now. It's a satire about a rabbit named Ethel during the depression, and she has a husband who believes in waiting for prosperity to come around the corner. Anyway, Ethel doesn't wait; she goes out and gets all the carrots they need by persuading FDR to send a lot of surplus food to Japan as a peace offering and Japan gets out of China and carrots become the national vegetable of Japan."

"Clouded crystal ball department." He rose, stretching, and punched playfully at George Sand, who sat erect and as firmly as a piece of sculpture high on the back of Zoe's throne. She merely blinked her blue eyes at him, rippled her fur with annoyance, and anchored her claws in the upholstery.

"It's dated, of course, but I'm sure there are other things in there that aren't so dated. She ought to be able to make TV plays out of them or shorts for the slicks . . . Damn it, she has so much to offer."

"So we're on this again. Sure, you might get her started writing, waiting on her hand and foot and kidding her along every step of the way — the way you did on the article for a while — but then she's too tired to keep it up. The cat and the tropical fish came in on a couple of those reform waves. Remember? She was supposed to have hobbies, so she could relax. And who takes care of the fish and the cat?"

Helen perched herself on one arm of the throne. "What do you suggest?"

"Hell, I'm stumped. It was a real horror story this time. I can't even imagine next time."

"Something drastic has to happen . . ." She wished she could tell him what it was going to be, but he was sure to say it was too drastic and see himself being left in the lurch and try to talk her out of it. No, he wasn't really ready for

something decisive. He might spoil everything by being very resentful that she had rushed things to escape before he could. Which was what she had done. But she was getting married, and that certainly deserved more consideration and was a more constructive step than running off on a wild goose chase to see his father. Miles still had plenty of time to make his break. By the time he had finished college, Zoe would be accustomed to taking more responsibility for herself. Besides, she would probably be a grandmother by then and that should certainly help her accept some of these changes more easily . . .

"Is Maureen your date tomorrow night?" she asked, mainly because she couldn't manage the subject at hand.

He nodded, standing with his hands in his hip pockets. "That doesn't mess up your plans, does it?"

"No. I was only thinking about the weekend. Kirk and I are invited up to the Camerons. You know, I told you about their place on the Sound. They're the ones with the three Irish setters."

"That ought to be fun." He leaned against the library table, almost sitting on the edge of it. "How is Kirk these days?"

"Fine. I had lunch with him today," she added glibly, thinking of the hours before breakfast.

"I guess he still doesn't know about our horror story."

"God, no. I couldn't bear to hurt Zoe by talking about that. I really don't know how he'd take it, but I don't want to risk — well, they get along so well. I'd hate to see him lose his respect for her." How hollow that sounded, but then Miles couldn't know why. And it struck her that she had no idea now of what Kirk actually thought of Zoe.

"On we go, hiding it so thoroughly from everybody else that we help her hide it from herself. She can't admit it's a problem, so there's no need for Alcoholics Anonymous or a psychiatrist or anything else. Remember what they

told us when we went to A.A. If she wanted it, it was up to her to come and get it. At this rate, she's never going to want it."

"You aren't going around telling your friends about her, are you?"

"Why should I? The people in her office don't know — although they may suspect, but I wouldn't tell them. It gets me, though. Sometimes I wonder if it would hurt to tell everybody. The Dreariheads know, along with practically everybody on the block. That doesn't seem to hurt her self-respect."

"Well, that's different. She can ignore what the Dreariheads think, the way she can ignore Murphy and the people on the block. They're not her friends really, not her social or professional equals. And she doesn't care about the doctor and the nurse. They're just doing their jobs."

"Yeah, and we're just doing our jobs, too."

She fiddled with the manuscript, slipping the paper clip on and off. It came to her how much she was going to miss Miles, and Zoe, too, of course, but Miles in a very special way . . . "Say, have you heard anything about that architectural job yet?"

"No. I guess I didn't get it. But Dr. Irons — my pal in the Art Department — gave me a few more leads."

"You ought to get something interesting then."

"You know, he said to me — he asked me if I happened to be related to Bruno Margraf."

"Really? What did you say?"

He grinned. "I said I didn't know."

"Wouldn't it have helped if you'd said yes?"

He shrugged. "I just didn't feel like having him pry around. Anyway, if I'm going to get anywhere, I'll have to do it on my own. Maybe I should change my name. Oh, well . . ." He stretched, stood rubbing his crossed arms up

under his rolled sleeves as if he must hold his brawny self together.

She got off the arm of the chair, still fiddling with the manuscript. She found herself wishing for Bruno's presence, for his warmth to melt this personality glaze they'd cultivated with one another for so long. As never before she missed what Zoe had derided as his "hopped-up heart" — "Imagine that patriarchal mustache slurping over your emotions as if they were soup . . ." But she was on her own and must say what she wanted to say to Miles without making it sound like a speech, and she must say it now because after Sunday he would be too angry to believe her.

"Miles," she said, realizing what a stranger he seemed to her, "you were wonderful last week. I guess I haven't understood what's been going on — how you've been growing up these last few years. I think I would have gone crazy that night we kept finding all the bottles if you hadn't been here with me. I know I've been a bitch sometimes with my cracks about your girl friends, and I've been so critical over nothing sometimes . . . Well — but I guess the older-sister stage is over now. You're just as grown up as I am — more so, I guess . . ."

"Thank you, Helen." His voice rumbled soft and husky and he was blushing, his head down.

She didn't risk a further glance at him as she hurried out of the room because she was going to cry.

11.

"WHAT'S THE TROUBLE, MAUREEN?"

"It's not good, Miles. I mean, I wish you wouldn't dance so close to me."

"That's because the music's so slow and schmaltzy," he murmured against her ear, then held her off for a moment. She was so small and supple and light, moving with him like the watch on his wrist. He pulled her close again, suddenly almost sick with wanting her, with the feeling that he was about to burst . . .

"Miles!"

Their dance stopped dead. She jerked away from him, while the other couples continued to flow past into the darkness. Her face loomed white and ghostly in the light from the park lamps and the moon. Then she looked away from him, and her long dark hair made her seem like a little girl again.

"I'm sorry," he said, wishing his face wasn't so naked as it must be in this light. "That's the way you affect me."

"Miles! What a terrible thing to say. Oh, I'm so ashamed . . ." She lowered her head.

"Why? That's a compliment." He took her arm gently and wove a path among the dancers to an empty bench at the edge of the pavement. He expected her to refuse to sit down with him, but she didn't.

"I know it's different with some girls," her voice qua-

vered, "but, well, my mother's always been very strict with me."

There was a smugness in that last line that riled him. "In other words, if your mother wasn't strict with you, you'd like it."

"No, I didn't mean that. It's still a sin."

"What is?"

"What you were doing . . ." Her voice was barely audible.

"It's even a sin to name it?"

"Yes."

"You don't mind kissing, though."

"That's different. I mean, when you don't go too far."

"Christ, I've heard everything."

"Miles, I wish you wouldn't talk that way. Those words really bother me. Honest, I'm not just putting on about these things."

"O.K. Let's kiss and make up."

She glanced about at the shadows of the trees and bushes, then at the dancers, who were standing around clapping, now that the music had stopped.

"Not tomorrow," he added.

She really didn't want him to kiss her. Still, she did. With any other fellow who acted this crazy, she'd tell him to get going and say good riddance. She still burned from that dancing. It was as if he'd branded her. He'd been pretty forward sometimes, but he'd never tried that before. He seemed so level-headed most of the time, and not given to bragging or trying to impress anybody . . . and when she thought about him and looked at the strength of his face, it really made her heart flip . . .

"How about it?"

The band had started a rock 'n' roll number and the dancers were throwing themselves into it, so probably no one would notice. "All right then."

It took her breath away, and his hands were so strong they seemed to be tearing her apart. She found herself struggling, bearing at his shoulders with her fists. Then suddenly, he let go.

She caught her breath. "Oh . . . I didn't expect that."

"Neither did I. You interest me." She caught his grin in the dimness, along with his mock seriousness. "How long have I known you?"

She couldn't help laughing. "Miles, what a thing to say. It's so — it sounds so egotistical. That's not like you at all."

He sat there nodding soberly, his arms stretched out along the back of the bench. "Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're usually so —"

"Wishy-washy. Hamlet, without Hamlet's guts."

"I was going to say modest."

"You're polite. Wishy-washy's the word. I'm beginning to think it's time I lashed out like a maniac or something so I can be myself."

"You mean this way you've been getting tonight — sort of wild? Is that being yourself?"

"Let's take a walk. It's getting too noisy around here."

They rose and started down the gently winding paved walk that led away from the band shell and across the park. Her hand was soft and cool in his.

"Jiminy, isn't it a beautiful night?"

"You talking to me?"

"What do you mean, Miles? Of course I am."

"Then who's Jiminy?"

"Oh, Miles, that's just an expression. I use it all the time."

"That's right, you're euphing again. O.K., euph all you want, but please don't euph about me when I'm gone."

"Euph?"

"Yes. To euph. Didn't you ever read *Sonnets from the Euphemistic*? They begin, '*Euphare humanum est . . .*' Oh, Euph, I can't remember the rest."

She pulled her hand away from his. "Miles, are you making fun of me?"

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way." He turned and took her hand again. "I was just kidding. You know," he added, to stave off silence, "I really got a kick out of your mother the other night. For one reason, because she reminds me of somebody who's not the least bit like her — that is, mostly."

"Oh . . . *Your* mother, maybe?"

"Hell, no! I mean, anything but. No, it's this gal who lives upstairs in our house. Lou Hoffman. She's very different from your mother, but even so she's soft and gentle like her, isn't trying to run the whole show, isn't pretending to be something she's not. At least, she used to be that way."

"Is your mother very different?"

"Not exactly. Well, she's fun in another way. She's been around more. It's not that Lou hasn't been around, too, but she still seems to have something she must have had before she got out in the world — if you follow me."

"I think I know what you mean. You mean maybe your mother lost something."

"I guess so. She got hard-boiled. Why not? She saw a lot of the seamy side of life. Even landed in jail once."

"Oh, Miles!" What shocked her was that he should even mention such a thing, especially when he'd told her so little about his family. And if he'd been hiding something from her, as she'd often suspected, this was an odd way to start revealing it.

"Nothing serious. Nothing to be ashamed of." His voice seemed to be laughing at her shock. "She was only arrested for panhandling and resisting arrest. Then she refused to pay the fine and found out what the cooler was

like. She had fun — just one of those stunts reporters are always trying.”

“Cheese ’n’ crackers!”

“What? Oh, you mean Jesus Christ.”

“Now Miles . . . ”

He groaned, feeling cut off. No, there was no use trying to tell her about anything. It was all too foreign to her, even more so than it had been to Lou. “Maybe we’d better talk about your family.”

“Do you really want to know more about me, Miles?” she said softly.

“Of course.”

“Well, there’s only my mother at home and you’ve met her. Maybe you should come over some Sunday when my two older sisters are over from Jersey with the kids and all.”

“Maybe.” That didn’t appeal to him in the least. It would probably mean a house rocking with snotty-nosed brats jumping off chairs to swing on the drapes; pale, tight-skinned matrons vibrating with saintliness and talk of novenas; and bourgeois, duty-ridden husbands squirming in their Sunday best and reeking of whisky and the dirty stories they muttered in a dark corner when the girls weren’t shrieking at them to behave. The Moylans next door had shown him enough of that kind of a Sunday.

There was an empty bench ahead, alone on a rise of ground and in full moonlight. He led her toward it, and they sat down in silence.

The soft, fitful breeze suggested open country. Far beyond the slopes of the park and the vague spread of row houses and apartment buildings outside it, the familiar skyline of mid-Manhattan stood luminous and clear, as if suspended above the earth.

“Well, tell me about your family,” he said.

“There’s not much to tell about us, Miles. We’re just ordinary people.”

"If you were ordinary, I wouldn't be interested in you."

"Are you interested in me?" The plea in her voice touched him, made his eyes water.

He squeezed her hand. "Don't I show it?"

"I suppose so. But that's different from saying it."

He gazed at the brightness of the night, far off over Manhattan. "I guess I don't know how to say it. I don't know how to say anything . . ." A disquieting shudder ran through him. He couldn't tell her he loved her. He didn't know. It had been a long time before he'd been able to tell Lou in the conventional words that he loved her, but she'd evidently not expected him to — until recently, when her possessiveness had come out into the open . . .

"How about a soda?" he said abruptly. There didn't seem to be any other way to change the subject.

"All right." She stood up quickly.

They walked on toward the edge of the park, their hands no longer touching.

He thought of apologizing for the way he'd acted tonight, of trying to say something to make her feel better. But the more he thought the less he felt there was anything to apologize for.

In the drugstore, sitting opposite him in a booth, she seemed relaxed again, deploring the divorce of some movie star which she'd spotted headlines about on the newsstand, telling him about her summer job at Macy's and about how her brother, stationed in Japan with the Army, had no use for the Japanese . . .

He hadn't noticed this smugness in her mother. Quiet, clean, genteel — that aura about her humble gray head of a strong Irish will. That was his chief impression after an introduction and a wary exchange about the weather and what he was studying and what she was growing in her backyard garden. He'd felt remarkably at home with her, sitting there in the immaculate kitchen, drinking mugs of strong tea with milk, eating slabs of Irish soda bread with

black currant jam. And the small talk had flowed smoothly and nonintellectually and cheerfully, without the conversational booby traps he was so tired of with Helen and Zoe.

"Does your mother always wait up for you?" he asked as he drove Maureen home.

"Mostly. She'll probably be sitting there with her rosary all ready for prayers. Would you like to come in and say hello?"

"Oh, it's too late. I wouldn't want to disturb her." He thought of saying. "And how many candles has she burned for your chastity?" But he didn't really feel that way. It was just the old cynicism, the old snobbery kicking up again.

After he'd been allowed one pure good night kiss on the front stoop, he stopped on the way home and phoned Lou. If Platitude answered, he was ready to put on an accent and pretend he had the wrong number. Lou answered and assured him she was alone. Her eagerness irked him, but as she said, "It's been quite a while."

After he'd let himself into the house as silently as possible, he stripped in the dark and stuffed his clothes and shoes in the closet, then took his bathrobe and tiptoed up at the outside edge of the stairs, where the boards didn't creak.

"The only cure for euphers," he told himself in the dark, "is euphanasia."

Saturday morning Zoe made it to the breakfast table. She sighed weakly as Miles pushed her chair into place for her, but after an egg and bacon and toast and coffee, she called for cigarettes and invited George Sand up on her lap.

"If the weather's this good tomorrow, I think we ought to go to the beach. By the way, thanks for restuffing Rowena's front seat. I like the new seat covers, too."

"Just secondhand," Miles said. "They won't last long."

"I guess the girl friend objected to the holes," Helen said, sipping black coffee against the clammy anxiety she'd awakened with. "I hope I meet her some day. I want to thank her for doing what no one else could do."

Miles grunted, pretending to ignore her sarcasm.

"As I was saying," Zoe continued, "a drive to the beach would do me good. I might invite Jenny and Marge, too, so they can bring me up to date on the office dirt."

"You won't be strong enough," Helen said.

"I don't plan to swim a hundred yards. I need the sun. It'll do Jenny a lot of good, too. Halling's always a perfect bastard to her when I'm away."

"Didn't I tell you I was going to Connecticut for the weekend?"

"Possibly. Apparently, I didn't take it in."

Helen kept silent. Her homesickness was so thoroughly gone by now she couldn't imagine it ever returning. As of the moment, she was through with this house and everyone in it. She belonged to Kirk.

"Is Marblefront involved in this weekend? Or is that all over?"

Helen returned Zoe's smile. "Why should that be all over?"

Zoe languidly dropped her eyelids. "Oh, somewhere I got the impression you were rather dubious about him."

"Really? When was that?"

"Hard to say. I seem to have lost track of time."

"He's taking me up to the Camerons'. Maybe if we get back early enough tomorrow we can meet you at the beach."

"We'd all be enthralled, I'm sure. Jenny keeps saying how fortunate it is that he isn't really handsome because he's devastating enough as he is. That rough, unpolished male look seems to fascinate her."

Miles grinned. "Watch out, Helen. I think she's talking about herself, not Jenny."

Zoe smiled coyly. "How flattering of you — as if I still had the hormones for that sort of rot."

"With or without the hormones," Miles said, hoping to keep the banter alive, "you've got him practically hooked."

"Please, Ma, I saw him first," Helen quaked in mock panic.

"Well, I certainly don't want him. He makes me want to retch."

Miles blinked. "Why?"

"He's just too — too — well, just more than I can stomach." Zoe felt the sweat break out on her forehead and wished she hadn't gotten into this. But she was finding out how false Kirk was playing Helen. Too bad there wasn't the strength to dig further into the matter now. On the other hand it was just as well; the messiness would be too much for all concerned.

"She protests too much, Helen. You'd better hide him."

"Please do." Zoe pushed George Sand off her lap and tried to make herself more comfortable. If Miles was going to persist with this asinine joke, she'd have to keep up with him, raise a little dust somehow. "I hope," she said, pleased with her glibness, "I never again come upon such a scene as I was forced to witness — I guess it was about two weeks ago. Before I got sick, anyway. That was the scene that *really* turned my stomach."

"Rats!" Helen sneered, breaking toast forcefully.

Zoe sat back and tilted her cigarette and holder ceilingward. "Miles, this you missed. I came in, desperate for my dinner, and there was My Lord Marblefront lying flat on your couch, while this one knelt on the floor and rested her head on his chest and gazed into his eyes — diagonally, like this. I don't know why it didn't make them both cross-eyed."

Miles boisterously stamped the floor.

"I said something about a body lying in state too long and beginning to smell, but there was absolutely no re-

action. I was able to go in and change my clothes and wash my face and tell George all about my day at the office before they could uncoil themselves and communicate with me."

Helen glared at Miles, fed up with his attempts to humor Zoe. "Anyway," she said coolly, forsaking her good intentions toward him, "Kirk seems to be able to take it. I still don't see you bringing Maureen home to see if she can take it."

Zoe tossed her head, obviously annoyed. "I trust she knows how to conduct herself when she's a guest in someone's house."

"I guess so," Miles said quietly. "She's sort of reserved."

"Sounds frigid," Helen said, wondering why she let herself be goaded into this silly bickering when she would be free of it forever in a matter of minutes. Still, one last "normal" breakfast conversation might help throw them off the scent.

"Maybe she's a lady — poor thing. Another promising victim for the predatory male, I suppose."

"Oh, Miles, I didn't know you were engaged."

"Cut it out." He scowled. "I didn't even say I was interested in her."

"One moon-sick calf around here is enough, thank you." Zoe sighed and grimaced over the last dreggy bitterness of her coffee. Really, she ought to stop letting poor Helen go on being deceived by that character. She ought to set off the bomb right now and help her get rid of him before things got too serious. She might tear in with, "Has he told you that he tried to seduce me?" No. A little more build-up would sound more convincing. How about: "I suppose you think I went on this bat by myself. Well, I'm sorry to say it isn't so. In fact, I was behaving myself beautifully when My Lord Marblefront dropped in. Hasn't he told you a word about this? How terrible. Well, he was quite pleas-

ant at first, though he'd evidently had a few already. Things got out of hand very rapidly. Yes, he was really fixing those drinks and of course I didn't realize what was happening. He certainly took advantage . . . What happened? But darling, you know how deathly ill I've been. I didn't have the strength to tell you before. It's too horrible, really. I've never run into such a brute, and he's so overpoweringly strong. Oh, I'll never get over this. Of course, I couldn't talk about it. I knew how terribly it would hurt you. I thought of calling the police, but then it would have got into the papers and I didn't think you could bear that . . . What really happened? Well, what it amounted to was this: he got me drunk and then seduced me. Or, I suppose it was rape, since I didn't know what I was doing." No, she decided, that wasn't it. Helen would be too resistant to such a fancy story. She would make a case of it then and start examining details and motives to try to make you look stupid. And the liquor issue: she would have a chance to reinforce all her exaggerations and you'd never hear the end of that. No . . . If she were really in deep with the guy, it might be time for action with some useful part of the truth, but since she didn't seem to be more than ordinarily dewy-eyed over him, why fan up a crisis? Why admit you'd made a fool of yourself? Anyway, it was only an accident and nothing really happened — except that an attractive young man sparked a flame or two in one's romantic old sawdust bin and then lost himself in the equivocations of lechery and liquor. Yes, he really scared himself away . . .

"Well, I've got to get out of here." Helen pushed her chair back.

"Have fun," Miles said cheerfully.

"By the way," Zoe said, "has he started trying to blind you with promises of the world with a fence around it?"

"Are you asking me if he's proposed?"

"Has he?"

Helen looked from one to the other, boldly. "Yes."

"And?" Miles sat back expectantly.

"I'm thinking about it."

"Have a good deep think," Zoe said, swallowing her dismay. Even so, the bomb must wait. Patience. And a clear eye, with a deep think all around. For the lack of something better, she went on with her temporary smoke screen. "It won't take you long to find out that the only world a man can really offer is legalized slavery. The tiresome history of civilization — slavery for the women, while the men go free."

Helen stood up. "Tiresome the way you quote yourself. It gives me the same feeling I get out of a TV commercial — apathy."

Zoe laughed. "I'm flattered that you recognize the quote. Just a few words from one of the truest things I ever wrote. Your father hated me for it. And he wasn't alone. Such a magnificent storm of protest. Letters to the *Times*, ministers ranting, politicians frothing. It was old hat. It wasn't supposed to be true any more, and yet they screamed as though it really hurt. I was accused of undermining the sanctity of the home and whatnot."

"And you certainly got results," Helen said.

"Oh, you darling little reactionary, why do you bait me this way?"

Helen's eyes seemed to darken. "I'm not baiting you. I'm serious."

Zoe fixed her with her own eyes. "Has My Lord Marble-front stolen away your sense of humor already?" Helen turned away with a disdainful shrug. "Miles, look. She's serious. Shall we weep? Oh, Helen, if you could only understand what it means to be a woman before it's too late. To be a woman and be free! They laughed at my mother's generation because some of the gals fought for

their rights and got places. But then in my time it just slipped away. Really, 'I am ashamed that women are so simple,' and not for the reasons Shakespeare gave. Look at you and your generation. It's all forgotten. You've simply sunk back into the slime with all the other poor sappy females who've taken it on the neck so complacently all these thousands of years."

"Yeah," Miles said, "she seems fairly normal."

"And who said men aren't cats? Listen to that. They're worse cats and gossips than women ever thought of being."

Miles grinned. "Women never had to give it a thought."

Helen was laughing with him then and Zoe realized suddenly how tired she was, how much she'd overexerted. She must calm down if she were going to get back on her feet in a hurry.

"I've got to go," Helen said, turning away from the table. "How about it, Miles? Will you take care of the dishes?"

He made a face. "O.K. But just wait till the male gets emancipated."

Helen didn't wait for Zoe's comment. She got to her room in a hurry. But her hands shook while she tried to jam the last few things in her overnight bag, and she wasted time wondering what she was going to do with those old remnants of her favorite dolls and the dusty, yellowing Louisa M. Alcott books and all the other stuff she hadn't noticed in years. She went to the bathroom again for about the third time and then stood in her window closing her eyes and opening them and breathing deeply and shaking her head in disbelief and reminding herself that in a remarkably short time she would have a man of her own, and for good . . .

She took her bag into the living room.

"What are you in such a flap about?" Miles said from the table.

Zoe turned. "Heavens to Betsy, you look as though you were trying to make up your mind which murder to commit first."

"Which murder?" Helen muttered, hoping she'd packed her new underwear and her new toothbrush.

"I presume you have several planned."

She opened the front door. "Oh, I'm in a hurry. That's all. I didn't realize it was almost nine. So long. I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

"Have fun," they called as she closed the door.

Miles carried a stack of the dishes into the kitchen and came back for the rest. Zoe motioned to him and he pulled her chair out so she could get to her feet.

"Oh," she groaned, "every once in a while the most horrible wave of something comes over me, and then . . ."

"And then?"

Her eyes sparkled as they hadn't in weeks and she smiled. "Suddenly it's gone."

"Swell." He gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder and took the rest of the dishes into the kitchen.

She followed him. "I feel as though I'd been away and it's good to be back and find everything going so well, even the guppies. You were all so wonderful. I know I shouldn't heckle Helen that way."

He grunted at the dish water, certain that her cheerfulness was about to default to suspicion. It did.

"Do you suppose she's spending the weekend alone with that man?"

"Why invent things?"

"Don't forget, he's quite a bit older and more experienced than she is."

"She's over twenty-one."

"That doesn't bring maturity automatically."

"Enough to get along on anyway." If they were getting away with something, Miles decided, fine. Helen deserved whatever she wanted after these last two weeks.

"It's odd to me, if they were going to Connecticut, that he didn't drive out this way and pick her up here. Why did she have to go into Manhattan?"

The discrepancy hadn't struck him, but he had a quick lie for it. "He has to work a couple of hours this morning. She's meeting him at his office and they're going from there."

"Peggy was supposed to be involved in this weekend, wasn't she? I wonder if I should call, at least to see if she *is* involved."

"Do you want a real fight on your hands?" He let a couple of soapy dishes clatter into the drainer. "Let's have some peace for a change. Peggy wouldn't tell you anything anyway."

"I suppose not." Zoe took a dish towel and began to dry the silver.

"I thought you were going back to bed."

"I feel so much stronger, now that I've eaten, that I think I'll wait awhile. Are you going out tonight?"

"No plans."

"You may as well go out, if you want to. Don't worry about me. I've been thinking a lot about what went wrong and I have a new lease on life."

"I've heard that song before."

"Just the same, it's a good song. And it's going to click this time. Things are different. I feel different. This whole business had a very different basis. I can't tell you what it was now, but maybe I can sometime. Anyway, it wasn't what you think it was." There was a crafty squint in her eyes, as though she were nursing a secret that would really drop him to the floor.

He kept his amusement under cover. "What do I think it was?"

"I suppose you think it was liquor."

"Right."

"Well, as I say, it wasn't. Liquor did complicate it in

a rather odd way, but it's by no means the heart of the story."

"It never is."

"I don't think we'd better talk about this any more now." She hung the dish towel on its rack and left the kitchen.

He went on cleaning up, wishing Zoe would stop trying to fool herself. This new-lease-on-life stage was always the worst. It should be the time to get started on some sort of cure, but she was always so impressed with having survived the horrors that she felt already cured. In another few weeks she would be back on her nightly quota, unable to admit it was doing her any harm, and her new lease on life would be dead and forgotten.

At least, she didn't try to call Peggy, not while he was in the house anyway. When he came back from grocery shopping, the Dreariheads were sitting in her room with her, and she was apparently talking politics with them. Miles stayed in the kitchen to put away the groceries.

It was nearly time for lunch before they went upstairs and Zoe came out to the kitchen.

"Poor Plati, he *does* try so hard to understand the editorials he reads in the tabloids."

Miles grinned as he lighted the gas under the soup Helen had made last night. "So you translate the *Times* into basic English for him."

She sat down at the kitchen table while he set out spoons, knives, paper napkins, crackers, and peanut butter. "I assume full responsibility for my editorial views. At the moment, he can't seem to understand why Eisenhower shouldn't cut off the Russians without a nickel."

"He still thinks the Russians are getting foreign aid?"

"Somehow, the idea persists. They're milking us dry so we'll have a depression and fall into their clutches.

I guess some of the clutching takes place during the milking. Anyway, it's all a blur."

"Why do you waste time with him?"

"I don't know. Oh, maybe it's because we're all so damned articulate down here and it's refreshing to find my level. After all, I'm not really all I pretend to be and it does a lot for my ego to get away from the competition."

"The competition?" He turned back to stirring the soup.

"Oh, I know. I'm the cleverest thing there ever was and there *is* no competition — at least since your father's departure. But obviously it's less and less true. I'm just something left over, something going sour in the refrigerator. It's your turn to tweak the nose of the world."

He ladled the soup into bowls, set one of them before her. "Well, if it's going to be my turn, I wish it would hurry up. Anyway, it isn't. Wait till that article comes out. You'll be on top again."

"There's no such thing as being on top again. You're either on the way up, or you're on the way down."

"I know you believe in yourself or you wouldn't have been able to write the article." He sat down before his soup.

"I go on trying because of you and Helen. If I were alone in the world it wouldn't be worth it. But you and Helen have places to go and things to do. That's why I want you to stay in school and make the most of what it offers and develop all you have. You can accomplish as much as your father has — or more — if you'll hold on to your independence, if you'll be yourself."

He said nothing, as though his soup were enough for his attention.

"I know you're impatient," she went on, eating slowly. "I always wished for the next step, too, and then it came and then it went and there I was, still wishing for the next one

...” Oh, hell, she was so cosmically tired she didn’t see how she could stand the job more than another year or two, and sooner or later, Helen would be lost to one of these slobs she was always pursuing. Not Kirk, of course. He was already on the skids. But there would surely be others, after him. And Miles really didn’t seem to have much more spine than Helen. Bruno could so easily capture him. Too bad, when she’d tried so hard to keep the kids from clinging. Still, imagine how helpless they would be now if she had been the proverbial American Mom and cuddled them as babies and slurped all over them with love and spoiled them and made them dependent on her. No, if someone didn’t succeed in dazzling them into submission, they were quite capable of standing on their own. “By the way,” she said, because the silence was becoming a burden, “have you heard any more from your father lately?”

Miles frowned, finished chewing a cracker. “There couldn’t be much correspondence,” he said finally, “since I’ve never answered him.”

That was quite true, judging from Bruno’s latest plea to Miles, intercepted and destroyed earlier in the week. How fortunate that she’d been home when the mail came. Miss Mahrisch had been so good about bringing everything directly to her. You couldn’t get much cooperation out of Her Royal Officiousness, but she would do that much.

12.

HELEN AND KIRK ATE BREAKFAST ON THE PORCH IN SPOTS of sunlight that filtered down on them between the leaves of a massive trumpet vine. Beyond the end of the porch, the air sparkled clean and warm all the way to the blue-green hills.

"It no longer hurts when I swallow," Kirk said, as he finished his omelet.

"I thought that was a symptom of love. You mean to say it's cured?"

"It was a symptom of love just out of reach."

Her eyes met his, and she felt herself melting into them again . . . and daring to wonder if it were true that she was somewhere in Connecticut with her husband, though nowhere near the Camerons . . .

During Kirk's second omelet they decided on a walk through the woods.

It was a lightly traveled, sun-dappled path that led away from the rear of the hotel through a natural colonnade of old maples and oaks. There were completely shaded spots along the way, soft and green with moss and ferns that tangled with the underbrush. They strolled as if the walk would last forever, and for once she had no trouble keeping up with him.

"The Camerons and Peggy and Bill," she said fondly. "Yesterday seems so far away now."

He patted her bottom. "Where shall we have lunch?"

"But Kirk, you ate enough breakfast for four."

"I've got to rebuild myself for tonight."

She giggled, surprised to find herself blushing.

"Look, you've got me off the track again. I was only opening a debate on lunch on the road versus lunch here."

"Let's eat here. It's so beautiful, I hate to leave." Her eyes caught a fern, quaking alone in the stillness.

"Do you think we'll have time to go to the house this afternoon and pick up your stuff and make our announcement gracefully if we leave here after lunch?"

She turned, grasping both his wrists. "Kirk, I've been brooding again."

He felt his mouth tighten. Yesterday morning he'd sensed something was going wrong, especially when she'd been late. Then he'd decided he'd been mistaken when she threw herself into the day with such uninhibited enjoyment. Now it was too late for anything to go wrong. "People on their honeymoon," he tried to say lightly, "aren't supposed to brood."

"I guess I should have done more brooding beforehand, but I just didn't want to."

"Do you want to now?"

"Of course not. But, honey, I just dread going back there now, this afternoon — even if they're not home and we leave a note. Zoe's really not well enough to take this right now."

"But the damage is done." And it came back to him, after twenty-four hours of escape, exactly how much damage was done. Having got this far and risked this much, though, he felt readier than ever to meet Zoe head-on. Early yesterday morning, before he'd left his bachelor bed for the last time, he'd convinced himself that if Zoe wanted to make something out of that buried incident now, he could talk twice as fast. Either that, or Zoe wouldn't have the cruelty or the brass to mention the

incident at all. "What do you think we can do about it?"

"Well, first of all, I think the whole thing might go more smoothly if we held off on the announcement for a few days. Then I'd have time to prepare her for it."

"What do you think she'll do about it if we tell her today?"

She took his hand as they continued their stroll. "It's not that she can do anything about it. Kirk. I just don't want to make it so hard for her. It would be downright cruel to burst in with the news this way. She's been so terribly sick. I can't bear to hurt her, especially when it isn't absolutely necessary. Kirk, I know it would be just too much of a shock for her right now . . ." Beyond her words, he could hear a woodpecker drilling violently into the hardness of a nearby tree. He envied the bird's certainty about what he was doing. ". . . There's Miles to think of, too. This is an awful time for him. He's had about all he can stand of nursing and illness and now he's had this weekend of cooking and chores besides. You know how much I hate doing it this way — don't you, Kirk? I'd rather stay right here in the woods with you the rest of my life than go back."

"When can we tell them?"

"Let's see. Well, suppose we see how things go this week. Zoe starts back to work tomorrow and that'll get her in a better mood anyway. Then I can begin preparing them for the news. And if the opportunity suddenly comes up, I may be able to break it to them right on the spot."

"What about this afternoon?"

"Let's go on enjoying life this afternoon and stay here tonight."

"And tomorrow — back to single blessedness." He couldn't resist a touch of sarcasm.

"We can go on having our dates and we can have next weekend together."

"You think they'll believe you're going to the Camerons' every weekend?"

"This won't go on long enough for that. Anyway, I've often stayed in town at Peggy's overnight, so it won't be just weekends at that. I won't have any trouble finding reasons not to go home for the night."

He shuddered, suddenly struggling against the urge to explode. So much seemed to have drained away in the last five minutes. He itched to turn and take Helen by the shoulders and shake her: What in hell is it that Zoe holds over you? Maybe you've been brainwashed for twenty-three years, but haven't the past few days done anything for it?

"I know it's going to be tricky," she was saying. "That's why we won't be able to go on this way for long."

"Damn right, we won't." And what is it, he asked himself, that makes me stop there? Why can't I say: Listen, Helen, this is the choice: either you live with me now that we're married, or we get an annulment or a divorce or whatever's necessary and kill this thing right — right now. But twenty-three years of brainwashing wouldn't be overcome that simply. To rub it into Helen that she was still being duped would only needle her pride, bring Zoe between them again. Let Helen go back to Zoe on the defensive — and he was certain there was some power in Zoe that would draw her back, at least temporarily — and he would only have succeeded in weakening his own conspiracy.

Helen squeezed his hand. "Darling, tell me what's bothering you."

He sighed. "O.K.," he said, "we'll try it," meaning: Too bad you can't tell me what's really on your mind. At least, our bodies can understand each other. Maybe the rest will come later. I guess I've begun to enjoy operating in Zoe's own devious way. Or if not enjoying myself, I'm at least learning how to survive . . .

The smile of relief and gratitude in Helen's face sickened him; he felt he was quite an actor to be able to swallow this questionable medicine without showing his revulsion.

" . . . when I was in Port Said once, some twenty-odd years ago. They called it mazra there, what we call hashish. There was a rather pleasantly informative British character who took me into a native den. It was against all the silly British rules for ladies, of course, but I got away with it by dressing as a man for the occasion. 'You realize how Orientals feel about women,' he kept saying, with an infuriating smirk. I was quite militant then, and he had one of those terrible, nauseatingly sweet, dumb, simpering women for a wife. The fragile-flower-quivering-on-a-stem type with sand in her head. I couldn't stand her, which he thought was a great joke. 'You're a bit frightening,' says he. 'You make a man feel somewhat, somewhat . . . ' 'Impotent?' says I, laughing right in his big red face." So saying, Zoe kicked the hassock into place and settled herself on her throne.

Kirk grinned, with a wink in Helen's direction. "And from then on," he said, "I guess the character knew his place." Undeniably, Zoe was in form again, and he was relieved to find how smoothly this first encounter since their incident was going.

"Not for long. The poor fool felt he must prove himself, and I sent him home to his wife with a black eye."

Kirk roared at her starkly matter-of-fact delivery of the line, reminded by her solemn stare of how she'd sent him home that unforgettable Tuesday night — two weeks ago yesterday, as it happened.

She was gazing ceilingward. "You know, I've often regretted being such a threat to men. But I guess I couldn't help it; I started by being threatened by them. I was the crown princess until my younger brother came along. And

then it turned out that he could do no wrong. My father was an arrogant, loud-mouthed brute who succeeded in trampling my mother into ghosthood."

"Did you ever forgive your younger brother?" Kirk asked.

"He died before he was old enough to be forgiven."

"Oh . . ."

"I've often regretted that I can recall so little about him except the annoyances. He was always off somewhere, playing with his gang and escaping all the household chores. When I hung around to listen to the men talk — I always hated woman talk and those gatherings of middle-aged flowers my mother presided over — anyway, Allen could sit and listen to the men, but I was always shooed away to play with my dolls."

Kirk nodded, surprised at the sympathy he felt for her, impressed because nothing in her tone of voice asked for it.

"That's why I've tried to bring up Miles and Helen to be equal."

"Sure," Helen said, sneering, "we both do the chores. Miles just loves doing chores."

"That's why Clarence made such a hit with me. He loved chores. Remember him, Helen?" Zoe turned to Kirk. "The only one of Helen's boy friends worth a damn. Clarence, that budding ceramics designer. He really was a charming nub of a boy. On the swish side, but not offensively decadent."

Helen groaned. "Oh, that thing! One chat with Zoe and he wouldn't even talk to me. He worshiped her, waited on her hand and foot. Once he listened to her talk for six hours without interrupting."

"What happened to him?"

"After a while he bored me," Zoe said blandly. "His sensitive soul began to stink, and I shoved him in front of a subway train."

Helen interrupted his laughter. "I guess we ought to go out for our drive if we're going."

"I'm ready." He stood up.

"Oh, wait. I'm not really ready." Helen scrambled off the couch and hurried out of the room.

Now, he thought, in the unfortunately timed silence that found him standing uselessly in the middle of the floor, Zoe could give some less veiled hint of her reaction to the secret incident. She was simply relaxing on her throne, though, her head back as she gazed into space. There wouldn't be time before Helen got back for frankness or for the sort of quip about their drinking party that she might appreciate. Since he couldn't pretend to be overwhelmed by shame, any more than she could, it might be fun to kick the story around and see if she remembered as much as he did. But that would be supposing she hadn't been trying to "shove him in front of a subway train" that night.

To fill the silence, he said, "I guess you're back in the swing of things at the office."

She turned, and the light from the floor lamp suddenly caught the beauty of her eyes, set deep and clear in the darkness that surrounded them. "The swing is right. The hangman's swing. Monday I found that my horror of a boss, P. Thompson Halling, had produced exactly two molehills in my absence. Today, after I'd talked myself hoarse, he grudgingly admitted that both of them will have to be torn down and rebuilt, or whatever it is such birdbrains do with molehills."

"Were they worth making into two mountains?"

Her eyes twinkled. "I don't expect you to believe I'm indispensable, but whenever I've been out of the office for a week or two I'm struck with the possibility that I may well be."

"Is that comforting?"

"Momentarily. Then you're reminded that there's noth-

ing worse than working for a man who knows you know he's a fraud."

"At least, you're not working for a fool."

"He's a fool to put up with it."

Hands deep in his pockets, he rocked forward on his toes. "The poor guy's trapped. All around him he sees the women taking over — the money, the property, so many of the big jobs . . ."

"Ha! Go ahead and bait me. You men and your fear propaganda. You've even got most of the women so fooled they don't see what they're up against."

"I guess it's so, then," he said, beginning to enjoy himself. "Men even have the edge on God."

"Some of them think so, anyway."

"Look at it this way. Men often play God, don't they? God as the Supreme Authority, the Father of us all. But women don't aspire that high. They don't want to be God. They just want to be men."

She smiled. "'He for God, she for God in him.' And so much for Milton. But what about the men who claim to envy women?"

"You don't believe it, though. They really mean they'd like to enjoy some of the pitiful advantages women have. You see, it's just not worth it to be a woman."

She broke into a hearty laugh. "Oh, pull my leg some more. I love it."

"Why do you suppose we invented God?"

"Because you were scared of women, and you looked so foolish worshiping one another."

He nodded. "Still, there are always *things* to worship."

"And that's just what you worship now that you've pushed God aside. All God gets these days is a great blab of lip service. I suppose it helps you fearful little apes confuse one another while you get back to worshiping your own maleness. Old Priapus again: the jet plane, the

missile, the long fat automobile. After all these centuries of fumbling you boys really have developed your thrust. No wonder the theologians are losing out to the sexologists."

"But so many of you girls have joined our 'thrust' team — you've got to share the blame. Or are you pretending to collaborate with us so you can tame Priapus in the name of that new tyranny you invented called Togetherness?"

Her fingers did a graceful, midair waltz in the circle of light. "What lazy, uncreative slobs you'd be if there were no Togetherness to struggle against." Her eyes widened suddenly as her smile shifted from the sardonic to the sympathetic. "Say, speaking of sex, don't you need this pipe?"

He gulped, caught off guard. She was taking his pipe out of the pocket of her smoking jacket. "Yes," he managed, with a frog in his throat, "I guess I do."

"I found it under the seat cushion in one of the chairs in my room." She flourished it in the light for a moment, then tossed it to him.

He reached out, caught it and buried it quickly in his pocket. "Thanks," he said, wondering how flustered he looked as he turned at the sound of Helen's approaching footsteps.

Zoe wore a glow of triumph as Helen entered the room.

He kept his face in his handkerchief, pretending to blow his nose. "Ready, Helen?"

"My God, you ought to be," Zoe said to her. "We've had time for a full round. Did you take a bath?"

"Of course not. I had to mend something. Let's go, Kirk."

"One more point on that argument," he said, feeling remarkably at ease again.

"Now never mind telling me about penis envy. I've always had it, and it isn't fatal."

He grinned, holding the front door open for Helen. "I guess that answers everything."

Zoe laughed, rising from her throne. "You bastard! Hell, there must be a better name. Say, if it's not too late when you get back," she said above Helen's laughter, "stop in and we'll go another round."

"Fine." He joined in the general merriment, certain that it would be too late for another round. He must remember to compliment her for her timing on the pipe — close enough to Helen's entrance to sound like a threat. It might be fun to see how she used his necktie. She must have found that too by now.

13.

THAT SATURDAY KIRK WAS TO TAKE HELEN AND ZOE TO the beach.

He approached the day with a vague sense of apprehension. There would be more hostile sparring, possibly more laughs. But it wasn't getting them anywhere; it wasn't cutting Helen loose. This was her strategy, however, and she was pleased with it: throw him and Zoe together often enough and they would eventually be able to forget their unfortunate episode and live it down. Then it would be safe to announce this secret marriage.

At ten A.M. he found the front door open and walked in. Helen, still in pajamas, was cleaning the house. She ducked his kiss and raced off with the carpet sweeper.

"We seem to be alone."

"Yes, but I'm in a hurry. I wanted to get this done before you got here."

"Can I help?"

"Get away from me. I stink."

"You should smell me when I chop wood." He managed a fleeting kiss on the tip of her ear before she escaped again.

"Sit down and keep cool. You look too fresh and clean."

He filled his pipe. "Thanks, but I don't feel cool. I just feel fresh."

"Take a deep breath or something. This isn't the time or the place."

He sighed loudly and settled heavily on the couch with *The Nation*. He flipped the pages, without bothering to put on his glasses, and sucked at his pipe. He was more interested in the way she swooped down on stray reading matter, on ashtrays, on cigarette packs, old newspapers and everything else in her path and slapped chaos into reasonable order. "You'd make a good housewife."

"Thanks."

"If this was our own place, I'll bet I couldn't sit here and watch."

"Maybe I won't smell then."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll take a bath before and after and douse myself with a barrel of perfume."

He didn't smile. "Is this what we're always going to have? A long battle to keep up illusions?"

"This is no time to get cryptic." She began dusting lamp shades.

"I'm not cryptic. I'm just tired of living like a monk when the law says I don't have to. Where's Zoe, if she's going to the beach with us?"

"She had to go to the office. I'm just as glad, too," she added, as if his relief had been obvious in his face. "I guess you had enough of her the other night."

"I had fun," he said, telling only half a lie, as he leaned forward to stroke the inquisitive George Sand, then indicated by an impolite flick on the rump that she should move on. She did. In a moment, she was back, caressing his ankles.

"Kirk, you're in. You see, I told George about us and she approves."

He grinned. "A start anyway. I hope she'll put in a good word for me at headquarters." He picked up the wad of paper George had dropped before him, and her eyes

followed his hand as if it contained a fish. He tossed the wad across the room.

George streaked off after it, crouched before the paper, picked it up, then streaked back, dropped it at his feet, and gazed up at him expectantly.

"Hey, George, you're doggy. Maybe we *can* get along." He crumpled the wad more tightly, tried a curve on it which landed it somewhere in the kitchen. George wasn't fooled.

"I really wish Zoe hadn't gone to the office. She should be relaxing."

"Does she go in on Saturdays because they need her so badly? Or is it something else?" He tossed the paper for George again.

"Oh, she gets involved in things and there she is — stuck with other people's dirty work as well as her own. No wonder she's a nervous wreck." Helen put the carpet sweeper in the broom closet just inside the kitchen.

"She makes a grand, imposing wreck."

Helen scowled. "You don't know enough about it to talk that way."

"That's the trouble. I'm in the dark about too many things around here."

"I'm sorry, Kirk. I guess it's pretty hard for anyone who doesn't live with Zoe to understand her — why she works so hard. It's almost a sort of escape with her . . . Look, if I don't get my shower, we'll never get started."

"O.K. Hurry up. Where's Miles?"

"I don't know."

"We'd have privacy in your room, wouldn't we?"

"Oh, Kirk, not now. I don't know when Zoe or Miles or anybody else might pop in. Just keep cool for a while. Get yourself an icepack." She hurried into the bathroom and closed the door.

He rose and waved George away. "Go on, you're probably a spy." He began pacing, and George followed

him, the first few times around. After that, she leaped up into Zoe's throne and merely followed him with her eyes. "I'll give you something to report," he said, and walked into the foyer toward the bathroom door. "Helen," he called, "mind if I join you?"

She opened the door a few inches, pointed upstairs with her thumb, put one finger to her lips, then closed the door again.

He resumed pacing, cursing under his breath and feeling somehow like a disciplined child. There was barely time to sneer at the complacent George before he heard footsteps on the stairs and found that the Dreariheads were on their way down. No doubt they'd been listening to everything and probably *were* spies for Zoe. Just like her to disarm him by being absent this morning. Damn her! He hoped the Dreariheads would be satisfied with an exchange of nods and tried to lose himself in surveying the titles in one of the bookcases.

"Hot enough for you?" Platitude Drearihead speaking, his delivery slightly blurred by his chiclet cud.

Kirk turned to receive a warm twinkle from Hecate, who strained against her flowered dress like the buds in a spring garden. "Oh, Tom, why do you always have to say that?"

Platitude grumbled down his shirt front. "O.K. I'll just say it's hot, ain't it?"

Kirk nodded, forcing the corners of his mouth back for a smile.

"Yes, it's awful, *isn't* it?" she said, craning slightly in the direction of the small mirror near the door as she poked gently at the flowers on her hat. "Anyway, Mr. Houseman, you look very comfortable."

"I'm not, though. I was just thinking of getting myself an icepack."

"Oh."

"On second thought, maybe I should drink the ice-pack."

She laughed, catching on now that it was some kind of a joke. "That's a good one." And then there was one of those icky silences, except for Tom running the zipper up and down on his jacket and the shower going strong in the bathroom, and she wondered if she should dare try out her theory on the fellow and see what he would say. "No kidding aside," she said, just to keep the ball rolling, "I guess the icepack would cool you off all right."

"They'll be jamming the roads to the beaches today," Tom said, sort of sniffing the air.

"That's where we're headed," Kirk said.

"See, Tom, that's what we ought to do sometime. Look at the tan the man has. Bet he never had a day of sickness in his life. Anyway, we could go to Rockaway . . ." Then she said it: "By the way, Mr. Houseman, congratulations on your engagement."

"Engagement?" He blushed, then frowned. "Oh . . . Well, thanks a lot. We haven't announced it yet, actually, but thanks a lot just the same." He stuck his hands into his hip pockets and wiggled one foot at the cat.

Well, now she knew, but she was sorry she'd embarrassed him. "Oh, I thought it must be old news by now. I guess I just got the idea someplace, I don't know. Maybe it was from something somebody said. Not that somebody said anything right out, you know."

"Come on, Lou. Don't be poking in other people's business."

"O.K., O.K." She waved him on toward the front door.

"Did you think we might want your apartment?"

She giggled. "Oh. Upstairs? I never thought of that."

He smiled. "Well, no thanks, anyway. We're thinking of looking for something further out."

"You are? Gee, that'll be swell. I bet Helen'll be glad

to get out of here. I mean — there's nothing like being in your own little place."

"Jeez," Platitude groaned, from the open doorway, "I been gone a week."

"O.K., Tom, O.K. So long, Mr. Houseman."

"So long." He made sure the door was locked after them and resumed pacing. The shower was still running.

Why the hell go on with all this secrecy? If "somebody" had told her about a so-called engagement and the roof hadn't blown off, why couldn't he and Helen go a step further? This was something they'd better straighten out right away. He headed for the bathroom.

He turned around before he got there.

The lock in the front door was clicking. The door opened then and Hecate stood there with her finger on her lips. She smiled, her head cocked, as if she were listening. While he tried to think of something to say, she closed the door gently behind her, beckoned him to follow and tiptoed across the living room into the kitchen. He followed her.

"I had to tell Tom I forgot something, but I think I ought to talk to you, if you don't mind."

"If it's something Helen should —"

"Sssh. The shower just stopped. She'll be dressing in her room. We better go out in the yard."

"Well — but why me?"

"You're the man of this family. Anyway, you're going to be. That's why I had to make sure. I knew I was talking bold when you ain't made any announcement. Understand, nobody said a thing about it. I had to make that up in front of Tom."

In the back yard with her, he glanced uneasily at the house and tried to appear casually interested in the tomato plants along the fence in case Helen should come out to the kitchen or into Zoe's room and see them through the window. "I can hardly be the man of the

family," he said, without concealing his annoyance, "when I don't even know what's going on around here."

"That's why I want to talk to you." Hecate's furtive air of confidence, he was certain, must indicate to anyone in sight or hearing that she was giving him the low-down on something shady. He wished he could stop her from shifting her eyes and breathing so heavily. "It's about Miles," she muttered shakily.

"Miles? I don't have anything to do with Miles."

"Well, it's like this. You see, there's talk about him getting himself into some kind of trouble. Everybody thought he was going to California to see his father, you know, but now the trouble seems to be that he's got himself mixed up with some girl."

"Only girl I've heard about is Maureen."

"That must be the one." She nodded. "It seems there's talk about the girl, about her coming from a bad family and all, and getting him in with a bad gang. That's one of the troubles."

"A gang? I can't see Miles getting mixed up with a gang."

She licked her lips. "I don't mean juvenile delinquents, or anything like that. Just bad companions. You know."

He folded his arms across his chest and found himself staring at her. "I don't know what I have to do with it. Sounds like silly gossip to me."

"I don't know the girl personally myself, but I know some people that know her and —"

"Maybe you should tell Miles about the gossip."

"Well, don't you think a young fellow like that would be better off with his father? I mean, it ain't natural the way he lives. Just women around him. He don't even have a room of his own and he has to cook and clean house and look after her just like Helen does. After Helen goes, it'll be worse for him."

"I don't follow you. Why will it be worse for him if Helen goes?"

She wet her lips again. "Now I'm not one to be talking out of turn and I won't gossip for anybody. I think the world of Miss Lakes and the whole family or I wouldn't be here bothering you at all . . ." She broke off, coughing. "That's what — that's why I'm asking you can you help Miles. Honestly, I don't think the poor kid knows what he's getting mixed up with."

"But I still don't see what this is all about. Do you think it's only the girl who's keeping him from going to his father? I thought his mother objected, too?"

"I wouldn't say — I wouldn't say a thing against Miss Lakes. She's a wonderful woman. She'd give you the shirt off her back. But you know as well as I know that when she's raving drunk, like in one of her regular spells, it takes two of them to handle her. And when Helen goes, poor Miles is —"

She caught herself. The grin was wiped off his face, and he looked so surprised she could have cut her tongue out. He was white! As if he didn't know . . . But Helen must have told him something. He was practically part of the family.

"Look," he was saying softly, and she could see his hands were shaking a little as they fell to his sides, "I'd better go back in. I'll try to talk to Miles about the girl, about going to his father. Maybe you'd better go down the alley, so Helen won't see you."

"Sure, sure . . ." She was halfway out the gate already. "Now please don't say anything to a soul. I don't want anybody to think I was butting in or anything."

"Don't worry." He tried to smile reassuringly, then turned and walked back into the house.

Helen still hadn't emerged. He sat down in the living room to wait, his mind full of pieces that were now falling into place.

George Sand came with her wad of paper and he was occupied again.

During the drive to the beach they talked about some of the characters in Kirk's office and about a fellow he'd run into on the street the other day whom he hadn't seen since a deer hunting episode years ago — anything but the subject of their own situation. Helen gave no indication that she'd seen or heard him talking to Hecate, so he didn't have to think up an explanation. He wished he could figure out what Hecate's intentions had been when she left Platitude on the street to come back and entice him out into the back yard; they certainly hadn't concerned what she finally let slip.

There were so many other cars going their way they avoided Jones Beach and went to a wild, unpatrolled stretch of shore known as Beercan Beach. They parked at the end of a muddy broken road that wound among the sand dunes and changed into their swim suits in the car.

The beach was always littered with empty beer cans and other picnic relics, and there were no lifeguards. It appealed to Kirk as the last unregimented beach within reach of the city. If you were repelled by the dogs, brought here because they were not permitted at the more hygienically organized beaches, or if you were nauseated by the Bohemian crowd lying around in and out of the dunes, with suits rolled down to the limit and torsos frying greasily in the sun, you just didn't come to this beach. There were surfcasters who didn't mind the atmosphere, as well as families with children, who probably preferred keeping tabs on them in this wasteland to losing them among the acres of well-regulated humanity at Jones Beach.

"Interesting the way people keep disappearing into the dunes," Kirk said, as they stood knee deep, ready for the first plunge.

"No bright ideas, please. I'm sold on good solid beds, without sand in them." She splashed in and swam away toward the incoming swell.

He watched the progress of her green bathing cap as she rose with the crest, then dived into the wave just before it broke. He followed, enjoying an exhilarating battering in the furious whiteness before he could shake the salt out of his eyes and swim after her. When he reached her and touched bottom, the water came up to his Adam's apple. It was too deep for her; so she hung on to his shoulder.

"We could go the Bohemians one better," she said, "and slip out of our suits right here."

He immediately began fumbling with her bra top.

"Hey, stop it." She splashed wildly and pushed herself away from him. "Why do you take everything so seriously today?"

He made his hands behave as she climbed aboard again. "I'm starved. Who ever heard of a honeymoon on the installment plan?"

"Oh, be patient. We'll get there."

"Honey, I'm afraid I'll never see enough of you. We'd better go to a nudist colony."

"That wouldn't do for you. I understand nudists are quite — if you'll pardon the expression — strait-laced."

He laughed and licked some drops of salt water off her cheek. "What do you know about it?"

"Miles got mixed up with some nudists once."

"Miles? He gets around, doesn't he?"

"A few years back. The grand event of his adolescence, I guess. Some Communist acquaintances of Zoe's took him hiking with them."

"Pink as well as raw?"

"Deep pink. Even fully dressed they were pink. Miles went camping with them quite a few times and got thoroughly initiated. He was fascinated. Still is, I guess, judg-

ing from the hours he spends baking himself up on the roof."

"What did Zoe make of the initiation?" He floated up off the bottom with her as a particularly heavy swell passed them on its way toward the beach.

She kept her arm around his neck. "Well, Zoe didn't mind the pink angle too much. She's always felt we could take care of ourselves when it came to politics or religion."

"How did she feel about the raw part?"

"She never even knew about that. I never knew about it until a little over a year ago. He didn't tell us at the time because he liked the people and was afraid she'd make fun of them. Since then, they've moved out West and we've lost touch. Say, I'm getting cold. Let's swim."

"I'm ready."

She let go of him and set off at a crawl in a wide circle. He kept pace with her until she told him she was tired, then headed for the beach while she hung on to the waistband of his trunks.

"Great family for secrets," he said, as they stood drying in the sun and wind.

"I guess so. It really hadn't struck me." She got behind him to plaster some suntan lotion on his back and shoulders.

"One member is a secret nudist, another is a secret wife, and — well, it's a hell of a lot more interesting than my family ever was. We never had any secrets. Of course, nobody in town had any secrets."

"Is that good?" she said a touch defensively as he took the lotion and began to rub some on her shoulders.

"I don't know. I suppose there's something to be said for both ways. I certainly would have envied your way if I'd known it existed. But with seven or eight of us at home most of the time, your way wouldn't have been easy."

She flopped down on the blanket. "That's what I've always wanted — a big meddling, squabbling, wholesome family. Still, I've enjoyed having secrets. Do I have to turn over a new leaf now? No more secrets?"

He sat down beside her, his forearms on his upraised knees, and squinted out at the pale blue of the sky rising like a wall from the horizon. "I guess that wouldn't be much fun. When I met you, I entered a strange country, and I guess part of the charm of any strange country is that it has secrets. I never realized before how much I enjoy prying, or exploring — if that sounds better."

"I'll be awfully busy inventing more secrets, won't I?"

"Don't you have a good supply in reserve?"

"For instance?" She closed her eyes against the sun.

But he wasn't ready to display his new knowledge. Having destroyed his ignorance, Hecate had opened his eyes to the real dangers of this strange country and shown him how ill-prepared he was for the expedition. "Well," he began lamely, feeling impelled to start whacking at the underbrush somewhere, "what about Miles's mysterious girl friend, Maureen? What do you know about her?"

Helen smiled, her eyes still closed. "Only that she sounds boringly simple and unsophisticated and even pure, and I can't imagine what Miles sees in her."

Kirk laughed and began at the beginning with Hecate's revelations.

Helen was up on her elbows by the time he got to the engagement congratulations. "You see, she listens all the time. She must lie on the floor with her ear glued to it. I suppose she heard me admit to Zoe and Miles that you'd proposed. That was when I was trying to get them prepared for an announcement."

"You never told me how they reacted."

"Oh, didn't I? They took a dim view of it, of course. They both like you, but they feel the timing is all wrong."

He went on about Hecate, in detail.

Helen edged closer, becoming so absorbed in his description of Hecate's jittery confidences that the beach and all its sounds and movements faded away. Those remarks of his about secrets kept slamming around in her mind; she was sure he was leading up to telling her that Hecate had given away Zoe's drinking secret. Helen shuddered, wishing she had the courage right now to stop him and get it over with . . . Then abruptly, he seemed to have come to the end of his story, and it was only about Maureen, after all.

She squeaked out a breath of laughter in sheer relief. "All right," she said, grabbing his arm, "I'll tell you a real secret."

"Fine. This is what I've been waiting for."

She sighed and took a deep breath. "I think the trouble with Hecate is that Miles has given her the brush-off. You see, they've been having an affair."

"Wow! Miles putting horns on old Plati. Say, your kid brother's quite resourceful. But if it's a secret, how do you know?"

She went on, describing the evidence. "Anyway," she said finally, "I think he's lost interest in her lately. Not so much sunbathing on the roof any more, and he's usually been in his own bed when I've remembered to check on the nights Plati's away."

Kirk laughed. "Well, maybe his taste is developing. Hell, if she were beautiful, if she had a spark of mystery or excitement, if she were someone . . ."

"Someone what?"

He frowned. "Someone beautiful like your mother."

"I don't get it either. For a long time, I couldn't even believe the evidence."

"Does Zoe know about this?"

"Hard to tell. There are times, though, when I'm sure she knows all about it, but is trying to look the other way.

I think she either can't face it or else is afraid of what Miles might do if she started an uproar."

"My God, how do you know what to know? How does any of you keep up with the other two? How do you keep from tripping yourselves every time you open your mouths?"

"It isn't exactly a matter of lying to one another."

"No. It's more a matter of what you might call selective omission. Miles hasn't told anyone he wasn't having an affair with Hecate; so he hasn't lied. You haven't told anyone you're not married to me; so *you* haven't lied."

But she had — almost. About Zoe's problem. This was the moment to tell him what she'd been omitting, to explain the real reason they couldn't make the break right now. She was sure he would understand, where he might not have earlier. He wouldn't pass judgment on Zoe. He hadn't on Miles. Still, why betray Zoe? Why make a point of showing up her worst weakness? No matter how understanding Kirk tried to be, Zoe would sense his inevitable resentment of the way things had got out of control. That wouldn't help. It would only undermine her self-respect and handicap her in working her way out of the mess. She was trying so hard now. Not a drop this past week. The coma had really given her the scare of her life. She wouldn't admit that, of course, but it was obvious from the way she was handling herself. Why not give her a chance? If things kept on this way, Kirk need never know . . .

"What are we going to do about this unsavory Maureen character?" he was asking.

"Well, I'm dying to meet her now, although I'm sure she'll be what Miles says she is — quaint as a saint. Shall I start a campaign to get him to bring her to the house?"

"I think it's about time. And don't forget me. Make it a party and invite the Dreariheads, too."

"Don't be cruel." She lay back, her eyes closed against the sun once more, as if all this talk of secrets had been disposed of, at least to her satisfaction.

He sat here, staring at the clean, unfathomable line of the horizon, prickling with annoyance at himself for having got nowhere with the ammunition Hecate had given him. On impulse, he turned for another whack at the underbrush. "I suppose some of the things that bother me may not even be secrets. They may just never have been explained. For instance, you were saying back at the house that Zoe seemed to be seeking escape in her work. What's she trying to escape?"

The moments stretched themselves flat under the hot glare-dome of the sky. Then Helen sighed, her eyes still closed. "I'll have to think about that one."

He leaned back on his elbow and took her hand. "I can't help butting in, honey. I'm too involved."

"I know, darling."

He kissed her shoulder and let his fingers wander down over her bare midriff. She stifled a giggle and hunched over on her side away from him. He eased himself down on his side, closer to her, one bent arm cradling his head, the other across her body, his face against the clean softness of her hair. So they baked quietly in the sun and he heard the intermittent roll and crack of the surf and far away the squawks of seabirds and the barking of dogs and the mingling murmur of voices . . . There was peace here and he felt remarkably at ease, but he wished for an end to prying. Still, having shown such questionable judgment as to have married into this questionable family without knowing what seemed to be important, he must go on looking under the rugs, at least under the corners of the rugs. He closed his eyes and edged over a little, so he could feel most of her against him . . .

Sometime later, her voice emerged from the cries of the birds and the sea. "About Zoe's escape," she was saying,

“ — or attempt to escape — I guess it’s just things in general: Miles and me and all the other burdens she’s had.”

The staleness of her words made his neck prickle. “And all she ever wanted,” he said, hoping he sounded callous, “was a career.”

Helen pulled away, then rolled over on her other side to face him.

“Not *all*. She’s tried to do her best by us, but she’s tired now.”

“And wishes she hadn’t hated men so much.”

“Don’t be nasty, Kirk. That won’t help anything.”

“I wonder what will help.”

She lowered her eyelids. “I thought you liked Zoe.”

“Sure, I get a tremendous bang out of her. But I also find myself feeling sorry for her, for the way she’s boxed herself in.”

Helen raised herself higher on one elbow. “She doesn’t need pity. She’s done all right for herself. She’s raised us and done a hell of a lot of good writing and had some of the best newspaper jobs in New York.”

“‘Had’ is right.”

“She’s *not* a has-been!” Helen flared. She sprang to a sitting position. Her eyes crackled — like Zoe’s. “It’s just that she’s been trapped by responsibilities. She’s had to give in more and more to the responsibilities my father and Miles’s father so neatly saddled her with. She’s had to pass up some wonderful assignments and jobs and all sorts of opportunities — mainly for us. It’s not a question of pity . . .” Her voice trailed off and she merely sat there, staring down the beach, her lip trembling.

He stretched out, flat on his back, his arms locked under his head. “Sure, we can all do better without pity, but being pitied is still better than being misunderstood by people who aren’t given a chance to try to understand you.”

She brushed the sand off her fingers. "I'm sorry, Kirk. I didn't mean to fly off like that."

"Did I ever tell you about my late Uncle Paul being a dope addict?"

"Oh, Kirk, what a shame."

He grinned. "There you are, ready with pity."

"Naturally. It must have been a horrible experience. I'm surprised you even bring it up."

"I seldom do. Anyway, it's all over now and it's nothing that'll affect us. But if it were going to affect us, I'd think we ought to talk about it. That's in line with what I've been trying to say about Zoe."

"What makes you think *she's* that kind of a problem?"

He sat up, crossed his legs, and tried to go on more cautiously. "I didn't say *she's* that kind of a problem. I just mean it's time we explored every angle and worked a little harder at easing you out of this situation. To put it selfishly, I'd rather see you cooking my dinner and cleaning my apartment than slaving for Zoe."

"I'm not slaving for her. She does her share, and it's certainly no disgrace to be helpful. My God, that is — that really *is* selfish. As long as Miles and I are living mostly on her income, we *want* to do our share."

"Quite a tight little system."

"What is?"

"You and Zoe and Miles. Practically a fortress. When a siege doesn't work, I guess it's time to start blasting the foundations."

"But Kirk, you agreed to this arrangement until we could work out something better."

"But the idea was to make some progress. I can't see that we're getting anywhere. Things are just getting tighter."

She smiled with that appealing fullness in her eyes, and patted his knee. "They'll work out."

He slapped his thighs. "While the years roll on . . . I suppose if you have to go on defending your mother, I'll just have to get used to being an understanding son-in-law."

"Now Kirk, I'm not trying to defend her. In the first place, she hasn't done anything that needs defending — except maybe that crazy episode with you. But that's all over. I'll admit she's a problem to us right now. All right. And she *is* temperamental. She almost drives Miles and me crazy sometimes. But you've got to respect her for what she's accomplished and the way she's had to struggle for us at the same time. What's behind all this anyway? Has Miles been giving you some of his complaints?"

"No. I'm afraid he's just about as defensive as you are — judging from the few times I've talked with him alone. He did try to explain how he felt about his father, but that didn't clarify much."

"Were you impressed with his view of Bruno as God Almighty? Oh, I wish he'd show up one of these days so Miles could see for himself what a piddling, selfish character Bruno is."

"I seem to remember your saying some pretty nice things about Bruno."

"Yes, he's fine on the surface. I'm talking about the way he's treated Zoe, and us, too, about what he is under that glittering charm."

"Why shouldn't Miles have somebody of his own to defend? Don't you ever feel like defending your father?"

"I certainly do not. I hate him!" She seemed to stiffen upright for a moment, her eyes burning, her mouth crooked, and then she fell against him, sobbing. "I hate him. I can't help hating him."

He held her close and felt her tears, like sudden rain trickling coldly down his chest. "Are you sure you hate your father?" he said softly.

“Oh, I don’t know what I hate,” she mumbled, finally.
“Please, Kirk . . . Please just hold me awhile . . .”

He cradled her in his lap like a child and hugged her until her sobs quieted. Then they lay close, as close as they could, under the sea sounds, while the minutes fell one after the other into their accustomed places . . .

14.

TUESDAY EVENING KIRK PHONED HIS WIFE.

"Zoe Lakes speaking."

He put himself on guard. "Hello, Zoe. How are things in the Borough of Queens?"

"Things are as commonplace as ever. The shopgirls and clerks are still scurrying back and forth to Manhattan and spawning when they get a chance and losing their figures and paying taxes and scratching at their graves."

"Heavy traffic on the mattress of Manhattan."

"Thanks for quoting me. Yes, the traffic is heavy, but routine. There hasn't been any excitement since one of the upstate boys tried to seduce one of the dear, sweet little old ladies on the block."

He gulped, kept silent.

"At least he doesn't have to worry about the old lady being *enceinte*. Do you follow me?"

He nodded, feeling stupid, then remembered he was on the phone and said, "Not completely."

"I'm referring to that unlovely tryst we had, that rather crude business of getting me drunk so you — well, I really don't know what you thought you could gain." Her voice seemed as unemotional as a knife. "I suggest that next time you pick up something on Eighth Avenue."

He rose from his seat on the edge of the bed and stood with his knees stiffened. "I've been waiting to get your

interpretation, Zoe. Your coyness on the subject the last time I saw you indicated you'd rather enjoyed the unlovely tryst."

"I was merely being tactful. I know how fragile a thing the male ego can be. I didn't want to embarrass you before Helen. Surely, no man wants his inadequacy discussed before a girl he's trying to impress."

"I'm sorry you were disappointed in me, Zoe."

The line hummed without words, but he was sure she hadn't hung up.

"Is Helen there?" he asked.

"No. Shall I tell her you called?" Zoe's voice still sounded unperturbed.

"Yes, please. While we're at it, Zoe, do you have any other complaints about me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Go ahead."

"Kirk, I'm sorry to be so nasty," she said, feeling her mood tighten like a coil around her, knowing it was a time to be casual, to make him talk; but she couldn't help straining against the coil. "I respect you for taking this so well. You must have a remarkable disposition, even though liquor has such a terrible effect on you."

"Thanks. I'm relieved to know it wasn't me — just the liquor."

"My main beef has to do with the way you've stirred up Helen and Miles over this Bruno business. This talk of theirs of quitting school and job and the various impractical suggestions they make about what I should do with my life all have your unmistakable trademark on them."

"I'm flattered to be told I'm so influential."

She breathed deeply, wishing she could catch herself before that smug resonance of his goaded her too far. "Oh, a Don Juan can often make seemingly spectacular headway," she said, in a try for lightness. "Of course, it sel-

dom does him any good because eventually sex throws him off the track."

"What track?"

If only she didn't need a drink so desperately, if this dryness wouldn't gnaw at her . . . "I know you're only doing your job."

"Doing my job? I guess I don't follow you."

"You wouldn't." And before she knew it, an old fragment of a suspicion made superlative sense, and the coil of mood suddenly burst apart. "I don't expect you to admit anything, but I do know you're working for Bruno. It must be very exciting."

"Bruno? My God, I'm really lost now."

"Anyway, I think it's wonderfully clever and devious of both of you. Of course, I'm not in the least surprised at Bruno. I always thought he would have done beautifully in the Secret Service or the F.B.I."

"But I've never even met Bruno." At least, some of the assurance had gone out of his voice now.

"I suppose it means nothing that —" and she cut herself off with a cough before saying, "— you were in San Francisco the week after he got there." Why start a ridiculous argument? "Excuse me," she said simply.

"Well, what are we after? Or what's Bruno after? I know I'm only after Helen."

"Yes, that's what's so clever about the scheme, your apparent interest in Helen and your attempted seduction of me. And what Bruno's really after is Miles. Of course, if he succeeds with your help in completely breaking up my life, he can easily get control of Miles. I don't suppose he'll be pleased at your getting drunk on the job and muf-fing it."

"Christ, I didn't know I was having so much fun."

"Too bad I can't afford to pay you off," she said in her coldest executive manner. God, what a preposterous conversation. "Anyway, that wouldn't stop Bruno."

"You're right. It wouldn't take him long to think up another approach. And my price is terrific."

And she still needed a drink, and this wild talk was suddenly making her head throb frightfully. "Shall I tell Helen you called?"

"Yes, please do."

"All right. Good night."

"Good night, Zoe." At his end of the line, Kirk waited a moment, listened to her hang up, then sat down again still holding the phone. She hadn't sounded drunk, yet she must be.

He slipped the phone into its cradle and lay back on the bed to stare at the shadows on the ceiling, found himself trying to connect with the music coming from the radio. Berlioz' *Harold in Italy*—something he particularly liked. But inertia kept him from getting up to turn the volume higher so the music could flood away his confusion.

He should call Zoe back and tell her that so far as Bruno's assignment was concerned sex had already thrown him off the track, that he was already her son-in-law. Her reaction to that might clarify a few things, or possibly sober her up in a hurry. But he'd better talk to Helen first. No use making things harder for her. So he was just a hireling of the great Margraf's. What a feeble attempt to depersonalize him. How quickly Zoe was destroying his awe of her . . .

The telephone jarred him back into focus.

It was Helen, returning his call. Nothing seemed any different. He might have dreamed his conversation with Zoe. In fact, Helen sounded unusually calm.

"Miles thinks Maureen would love a get-together. He hasn't had a chance to ask her yet, though. How do you feel about a weenie roast at the beach Saturday evening? Early enough for a swim, of course."

"Sounds fine."

"It'll be a good chance for Zoe to meet Maureen, too; so she's included."

"Good. I didn't get congratulated when I talked to her a little while ago. I guess that means you haven't been able to make the announcement yet."

"No, I haven't." Her voice dropped, as if she were afraid of being overheard.

"Maybe a weenie roast is just the occasion for such an announcement. Let's take plenty of paper cups. I think I'll bring a bottle, so we can celebrate around the bonfire."

"Oh."

"Anything wrong?"

"No. Well, let's think about that. Anyway, I'll let you know how the plans develop."

"Everything else O.K.?"

"Yes, fine," Helen said, clutching the phone more tightly and wondering what he meant. But with Zoe back in the room, it wouldn't be safe to say much. "I'll talk to you soon."

When she'd hung up, she turned and found Zoe standing against the back of her throne, both hands jammed into the pockets of her smoking jacket, a teeth-on-edge tenseness about her face.

"You look as though you were about to drool," she said coldly. "The voice didn't sound that vibrant when I was listening to it."

"Why should it?"

"I would suppose that if he were as magnetic as you seem to think he is, others would be susceptible, too."

"Well, I'm glad they're not." But instead of looking glad, Helen just continued to stand there biting her lip like a bewildered adolescent.

Zoe turned away, tightening her fists in her pockets. Never mind Helen's problems. Time to be working on that damn report Halling had let slide while he was mak-

ing his molehills. Hell, being without a drop this long was worse than being drunk — unless you were peculiar enough to enjoy having your skin stripped off down to the raw, quivering tissue . . .

She found herself in her room again, glaring at the grand disorder on her desk.

And for the lack of a few drops she'd made a fool of herself on the phone. Or maybe she hadn't. Maybe she'd sounded cool and poised enough to give My Lord Marble-front at least a touch of confusion. A way to remind him how guilty he was, anyway. And he was probably still trying to figure out what she'd been up to. What an inflated ape.

She closed her door and got the bottle out of her purse. Remarkable what that baby suitcase would carry. Even a miserable pint.

On Wednesday Miles told Helen that Maureen had accepted his invitation to go to the beach with them Saturday afternoon.

Friday night about nine Zoe gave up struggling with the report on her desk and came out to the living room to announce that she would have to go to the office in the morning, after all.

"I thought I had the right data with me," she said, particularly to Miles, who was sitting at his drawing board with a woebegone frown, "but something's wrong somewhere and this thing has to be done by tomorrow noon if it's going to get to Washington Monday. I'm sorry about tomorrow's plans. It'll probably be three before I can get home."

Helen turned her book over beside her on the couch. "Oh Miles, it's not fatal. Let's just not try to have supper at the beach. We can come back here and Zoe'll have it all fixed." She looked to Zoe. "Would that be all right?"

"If it's something simple. If the cleaning and the shopping are all done and I don't have to do anything extra. I'll be a wreck."

"Maybe it will be better," Miles said. "Maureen's kind of shy and it might be too much for her to get all of us at once."

"Good Lord," Zoe yelped, whirling the cord of her dressing gown before her like a propeller, "do you think I'll scare her into fits or something?"

Helen laughed. "Isn't she housebroken?"

He scowled, blushing. "Oh, for God's sake, I just mean she probably isn't used to meeting a lot of people at once. At least, sometimes she seems that way."

"Helen, don't let me forget to tell her how I tripped over my panties when I was interviewing the Aga Khan."

Miles grinned sheepishly. "Just go easy on that sort of stuff."

Zoe shrugged, walked on into the kitchen.

"Helen," she called, when she'd snapped on the light, "where's what I brought home?"

Helen's shoulders sagged in hopelessness and she exchanged disgusted looks with Miles. "Are you going to bed already?"

"I haven't slept right in three nights. Please get the stuff ready now."

Helen straightened up and got herself languidly off the couch. She felt like bawling all over the place. Less than a week of "normal" life and the inevitable was starting all over again.

Miles groaned. "Christ, this makes me so goddamn sick."

Zoe came out of the kitchen as Helen went in. "I'm sorry. I told you — I can't sleep, I can't work, I can't think. Now what possible harm is there in a quarter of a pint? I'm not asking any more. You have complete control of the bottle. Let's stop being silly about this."

"And then a quarter of a pint won't be enough, and it'll start creeping up again and we'll end up with — "

"I've had enough of this ridiculous argument."

"Yeah, so have I." Miles bounded to his feet, stalked past her and into the kitchen. "The hell with this." He slammed the back door so hard the cups in the cabinet swung on their hooks.

"Where's he going?"

Helen went on clearing the dry dinner dishes out of the drainer and stacking them up on the shelves above the sink. "For a walk, I suppose."

"Well, I hope it calms him down. It seems to me he's acting absolutely idiotic about this girl."

"It's not the girl. It's you."

Zoe laughed. "I guess this is where I came in."

Helen turned from the sink. "But can't you see? This is the time to do something constructive. Look, we still have the number of that woman at A.A. If — "

"Are you crazy?" Zoe stood in the doorway, her eyes blazing, her fists clenched. "When I get religion, you'll hear about it. What are you trying to do? Make me drink?"

"You've got to try something. It's now or never."

"Why? Has Marblefront given you an ultimatum? I suppose he's been consulted on the subject and knows all the answers."

"He doesn't even know about your drinking. But I'm tired of hiding it. I'm going to tell him. I'm going to get hold of everybody who knows you and tell them all about it. I'm going to broadcast it to the world, including your boss and your secretary and . . . " Helen could feel herself weakening inside. "Yes, I'll write to Bruno, too. I'll phone him and tell him it's time he got Miles out of this damn mess." She squeezed past Zoe and ran and threw herself on the living room couch.

Zoe laughed. "Oh, my dear, what a noble performance.

What Marblefront has done to you." Her voice hardened. "I suppose it would make such excellent sense to disgrace yourself by gossiping about your family, to cause me to lose my job. There are a few things I could tell, too. Don't think I haven't investigated Marblefront while he's been investigating us. And what a strange character he is."

Helen sat up, drying her eyes, blowing her nose into her hankie. "I don't care what you've imagined. I'm fed up."

"For once I've been able to give my imagination a good rest. This will really curl your hair."

"I can hardly wait." Helen rose. "I could curl your hair, too."

She went back into the kitchen, wishing she had the guts to phone Kirk and tell him to come and get her, that she was about to tell Zoe they were married and why it had happened when it did. But a quarter of a pint would be only the beginning then.

"Are you giving me that stuff? If we stand around like this much longer, I'll need more than a quarter of a pint to get to sleep."

"I know. I was waiting for that. Please, just go to bed and I'll bring it to you. Damn it, don't think I'm not working on this problem."

Zoe turned, ignoring the last feeble protest. No use upsetting herself any further by listening to empty threats, she told herself. Helen had got these reform spells out of her system before. She would again if she weren't prodded too much.

In her room, Zoe got into bed and immediately found herself staring at the light bulb.

. . . Helen wouldn't burst out like that if someone weren't pulling the strings. Kirk must be making progress. I'm a fool not to use my ammunition. The longer I hold off, the more I risk. It's going to hurt anyway. Helen'll despise me as much as she will him. And I'll look like such

an ass. Really, it could be funny if it weren't about us . . . But if telling her will keep her from destroying herself . . . Tomorrow night at dinner, possibly. Too bad she's such a fragile little thing. Apt to be hysterical. That fragile little thing I produced somehow. To prove to Steve I could do it, I guess. An unsanitary bundle of squalls, so easy to make mistakes with, so easy to hurt if you didn't handle it the right way. Why, it was dangerous even to look at an infant as far as I was concerned. And Miles was the same thing. I had to have nurses and governesses, no matter how Bruno raved about the joys of motherhood — as if he knew. Bruno and his pronouncements: "I have met the modern woman. She meets life fiercely, independently, and resourcefully, but she's scared to death of motherhood." Bruno and his nasty cracks. What a laugh he'd have now to find I still haven't finished the Sand biography. But if he showed up, I might be tempted to forget, if not forgive, a lot. Of course, it could never be the same again. We probably couldn't recapture whatever it was that sparked those all-night talks, the mutual needling that sent me back to the typewriter knowing I could accomplish even more than seemed crowded into my head. What a tonic he was . . .

"Helen. Helen," she yelled louder, "where's that stuff?"

"I'm getting it ready," came the pale, petulant tone.

. . . Delaying action. Doesn't think I'll go to sleep this early. Afraid I'll ask for more if I don't. Or else she's hoping I'll fall asleep without it . . .

"Hurry up, will you?"

"All right . . ." Helen's words trailed off into an unintelligible mutter.

. . . Imagine, a builder who loathes cities. I suppose he still does. I ought to meet him head-on about this Miles thing. I can't go on indefinitely, intercepting letters. I could phone him, but he might just laugh at me. Besides, it would give him ideas. Then he'd try phoning Miles and

poor Miles would be no match for him at all. No, Bruno never weakened like Steve. He simply became a tyrant's tyrant, complaining because I acted like myself and didn't devote most of my energy to being seductive and beautiful for him. Of course, if I had, I might have remained more important to him. But who wants to be important to a tyrant? I guess that's why it was so good with Harry: I never went to bed with him and broke down the barriers. Yes, I held off. I drove him wild, he said. Men magnify sex so. At least, my tactics kept us together, kept him from taking me for granted, saved him from becoming a tyrant's tyrant. Or what have you saved when the man kills himself?

Helen came in with two tumblers, one half full of whisky, the other with about half an inch of water in it. "Here."

Zoe sat up. "That doesn't look like a quarter of a pint to me."

"Well, it is." Helen set the glasses down on the night table with a sullen abruptness and walked out.

"Good night," Zoe called after her, then poured some of the liquor into the glass with the water. She took a sip and found it disappointingly insipid. So she poured in a little more of the liquor and tried again to relax among the pillows.

. . . I know: I believe I will phone Bruno. Collect. He won't refuse the call because he'll know it's about Miles. Then he'll sound me out a little, and I'll say Miles is in the merchant marine and that at the moment, so far as we know, he's in South Africa. Yes, I'll assure him that all his letters have been forwarded and we don't know when Miles is coming back. "Bruno, I'm sure I don't know why he doesn't answer your letters . . ." I'll need more than a quarter of a pint to make that call. The bastard is tricky. Anyway, I'm not up to such a stunt tonight, and I must be

alone in the house when I do it. Really a wonderful idea . . .

"Helen."

"What?"

"Helen, will you come here a minute?"

She stood in the doorway. "What is it now?"

"You watered this before you even brought it to me, didn't you?"

Helen held one side of her face and closed her eyes as if in despair.

"You did, didn't you?"

"Don't you expect me to say no? You wouldn't believe me anyway, would you?"

"No, I guess I wouldn't. By the way, what was it that was going to curl my hair?"

Helen laughed. "I don't suppose you think anything could."

"I don't think you know what you're talking about. Your idea of broadcasting my so-called wickedness to the world and getting Bruno in on the act too is simply wonderful. Very appropriate, as a matter of fact. After all, he's to blame for most of our troubles."

"Like what?"

"Oh, his idea of the Bohemian life, the parties and the irresponsibility . . . I probably wouldn't even have got interested in liquor if —"

"My God, I thought Harry was to blame, and Harry's crowd and the depression and the war boom and the show-business crowd and the luck that went sour and all that baloney. Oh well . . ."

"I guess you'll never understand. You don't want to understand."

"I know. No one understands. No one will ever be allowed to understand. The mystery's too good the way it is. Not to mention all the other mysteries Miles and I were

raised on and all the energy you've spent poisoning us against our fathers."

"They did their own poisoning, thank you. I suppose this is the voice of Marblefront again. Has he suggested a Southern pilgrimage yet so you can renew that charming old acquaintance?"

"Thanks for the suggestion. You're the first to make it. As a matter of fact that might be an interesting pilgrimage to make some day."

"Oh, I'm sure Marblefront wouldn't want you to put it off." Zoe took a sip of her drink and settled back.

"Maybe I have a few ideas of my own. I did before I met him."

"If it isn't one sappy man it's another."

"And I'm just a poor, helpless lump of putty."

"I wouldn't be so proud of it if I were you."

"And I suppose . . ." But Helen stopped herself before she went on with, "Kirk might have become your lump of putty. I suppose that's why you had to try to sample him — to see if you could get even *him* under your thumb. He's turned into pretty good competition, hasn't he?" No, she couldn't drag Kirk any further into this now.

"You suppose what?"

No, not now. It would probably end by Zoe trapping her into admitting she was already married, and then there would be no controlling the liquor and everything would fly apart. "I suppose Miles is just a poor, helpless lump of putty, too," she blurted.

"He would be if Bruno ever got hold of him."

Helen pulled the door to behind her. "Well, wouldn't Bruno be an improvement over that bitch upstairs?"

"Upstairs?" Zoe's eyebrows drew closer together in a baffled frown.

"Oh, come on. Don't pretend you don't know as well as I do that he's been sleeping with her for months."

"Louella?" Zoe's hand shook as she reached for her

drink. Then she drew back without touching the glass. Something jolted deep within her, then turned its razor edge into the apparently meaningless circumstances of finding them alone in the living room late at night, of the hours Miles spent upstairs, supposedly sunbathing on the roof or repairing things for her, of his uneasy coldness toward Tom. An endless amount of evidence when she thought of it, but obviously she hadn't let herself think about it . . .

"What are you trying to do to me?" she murmured.

"Don't give me that. You knew all along." Helen's voice was still firm, but something in her seemed to be crumpling.

"I certainly did not know." Zoe sat up, away from her pillows, her eyes fixed on the opposite wall. Out of the shadows, the framed photographs on her desk blurred into focus: the sweet little boy face of Miles at ten . . . "How could that bitch do such a thing?"

Helen remained with her back against the closed door, trembling.

Zoe turned, her arm raised as if she were about to reach for her, then it dropped. "What are we going to do?"

"You honestly didn't know?"

"Of course not. How could I know when you're all so secretive about yourselves? Please . . . I guess you'd better get out of here now."

Helen opened the door and backed out. Zoe caught the bewilderment in her eyes twisting into tears as the door closed.

15.

IN THE MORNING WHEN HELEN CAME OUT TO BREAKFAST IN her pajamas and bathrobe, Zoe and Miles were already dressed and eating.

"If you're really going to write," he was saying, "you'll certainly have to keep your weekends free. Why should you have to work on Saturdays when the rest of the office doesn't? With no pay for overtime, it's just not worth it."

Zoe flicked a speck of cigarette ash from the sleeve of her green linen suit. "It may very well be worth it. My chances of survival in the Think Pit, as Halling has so cutely named it now, will be much better if I can make up some of the time I've lost on sickness."

Helen got her orange juice and sat down with them, relieved to find Zoe up and sober after last night's crisis. Possibly, it had scared her into getting a grip on herself.

"But you've got some backlog with the money from the article," Miles went on. "It should be invested in more writing — another article or something."

"I tell you the job's too shaky. I don't dare take any more time off."

"Whose fault is that?" Helen asked, and got a kick in the shins from Miles and a thundercloud from Zoe.

Miles rushed in with, "How much more research do you have to do before you can go on with the Sand book?"

"Tons, I'm afraid. I haven't looked at the stuff in ages.

I'd still have to go to Europe for some of it, and God knows when I'll be able to afford that."

"Fly now, pay later."

"It would take too long to get what I need."

"You drink the wrong stuff," Helen said, with her shins drawn back out of Miles's range. There were glares, but breakfast continued. Why go on trying to pamper Zoe, anyway? In view of what she'd tried to do with Kirk, her shock last night had been really well deserved. And Miles, turning himself inside out to keep her in good spirits because of his sacred plans of the day, seemed equally tiresome. If one shock was so telling, two should get real results. All that moaning about the quarter of a pint last night. Yet after the shock, she hadn't asked for another drop. After this marriage announcement tonight, she ought to throw the bottle out the window. "Try milk," Helen continued. "Madame Sand drank milk, as you'll recall from your article. Her miserable lover, de Musset, drank a bottle of brandy and took all day to produce ten lines, while George drank a bottle of milk and wrote half a volume."

"It wasn't because she drank milk," Zoe said, not unexpectedly. "It was because she was a woman."

Helen snorted. "Well, milk's cheaper, and you're a woman."

"How much vacation are you getting?" Miles said to Zoe, obviously intent on ignoring Helen.

"That hasn't been worked out yet. It may be safer not to take any. Jobs can disappear when you're not around."

Miles scowled. "Is this Saturday business likely to go on all summer? Hell, you need a rest."

"Darling, stop worrying about tonight. I'll be home by three at the latest — maybe even by two. Just have a good time at the beach and I'll have dinner ready when you get home." This little party tonight might be an opportunity, Zoe decided, pleased with the scheme in her

head, and she was going to make the most of it. One thing she'd decided during last night's sleeplessness: if she were going to help Miles get this disgusting liaison out of his system, it wouldn't be done by raising hell about it and driving him into a position where he felt he had to defend that slut upstairs. For now at least, Maureen might be the answer. She would be a healthier influence, anyway.

"If you got home by one or two, you could still get to the beach," he said, piling jam on his toast.

"I thought you liked this plan better — so I wouldn't frighten the young lady."

"Well, I've changed my mind."

"If I get pressed for time, maybe Hecate can help me."

"Oh, my God," Helen wailed, "don't get her mixed up in this."

"That's enough, Miss Snob." Zoe avoided letting her catch her eye. Helen wouldn't, of course, understand the value of a little contrast for Miles' benefit. "Don't worry, Hecate wouldn't stay for much of the party. I can manage her quite tactfully, you know. Poor thing," she continued, feeling rather proud of her acting ability this morning, "she'd probably get quite a kick out of life if it wasn't for Plati. She can't even get him out to a movie. Well, that's what happens to women."

"I can just see her as a chrome-plated Madison Avenue lady exec," Helen said, noting how practiced Miles appeared in his imperturbability through all this banter about one so close to him.

Zoe smiled with a lofty twinkle. "Hardly. But she must have had some enterprise in her once. She didn't *have* to be just a common housewife."

"I wonder who made Plati just a common working husband," Miles said. "But then I guess he has his fun on the road."

Zoe stirred her coffee with unusual spirit. "I doubt that. Or — who knows? He may be just the type, in his

mild, unassuming way, to bring her back a good strong dose of V.D."

Miles' head stayed down. He seemed immoderately interested in the position of his knife and fork on his empty plate. He rallied, however. "Oh, she'd know what to do," he said with a grin. "She never misses an issue of the *Reader's Digest*."

Even Zoe laughed, then glowered at her wrist watch. "Damn it, look at the time." She kicked back her chair as she got up from the table. "I've got to go."

"Then everything's all set for tonight?" Miles called after her.

"Yes, of course. If you do the shopping and Helen gets the house clean." She disappeared into the bathroom.

Helen settled back in her chair, holding her cup of coffee in midair. "What fun. And maybe I'll have time to bathe George Sand and feed the fish and clean out a few tanks. I wonder if one of those Siamese fighting fish is about to give birth."

Miles looked absurdly grim. "What time are you and Kirk going to be ready to go to the beach?"

She wiggled her little finger at him as she put the cup down. "Who knows?" she said, as Zoe came back into the room and started adjusting her hat before the mirror near the front door. "He's a tyrant, you know. All men are tyrants. And maybe he won't even feel like going. Or maybe if we do go, he'll feel like staying for a shore dinner."

"But Helen, you helped plan all this." He rose from the table.

"Pay no attention," Zoe said, having found a sufficiently rakish tilt for her tired red sailor hat. "She's just trying to get your goat."

"I know." He scuffed about, kicking at the air as if he were surrounded by invisible obstacles. "Christ, it's silly the way I get anxious about nothing."

"What started all this, anyway?" Zoe turned, her hand on the knob of the front door. "All this fanfare over some girl we don't even know does seem rather hard to take."

He groaned, still kicking at nothing.

"Do you think you're in love with her? Is she chasing you, or what?"

"I don't know. She seems sort of curious about us, so I guess I want to make a good impression. Hell, maybe *I am* interested in her. I'm not sure yet."

The softness in his eyes must be a plea to treat the girl gently, Zoe supposed. Well, it might be very much worth while to do so — as an experiment, anyway. "I suppose she comes from a big wholesome family," she said, more gently, "and wants to know about your absent father."

"I've told her practically nothing. She doesn't know anything about my father except that he's gone — like hers. Hers is dead."

"Not that you're going to marry her or anything, but is she a Catholic?"

"I guess so."

"You guess so!" Helen bounced up out of her chair. "You know damn well."

Zoe shook the doorknob in her hand. "And what of it? Must you always stink up things with your lousy father's prejudices?"

Helen smirked derisively. "Just get whatever you want out of my voice. You must have the prejudice yourself to look so hard for it."

"Too bad so much of that skunk rubbed off on you," Zoe muttered.

"That's a good one. I so clearly recall that last year he was around. I wasn't quite two, but we had such fun trading prejudices. I'm sure he hasn't been able to stand the sight of a teething ring since."

"For Christ's sake, Helen, shut up!" Miles's roar almost

set her back in her chair. "I'm sorry," he added quickly, with a forbearing nod. "I just don't want to get side-tracked. I'm trying to get straight on the plans."

She completed her withering look and began stacking the dirty dishes. "You'd better be sorry."

Zoe was tapping her foot in the open doorway. "Well, what about the plans?"

He rubbed his forehead distractedly. "Nothing else, I guess. I guess everything's all set. So long. We'll see you later."

"So long," she said, and then she was out of the house and walking smartly toward the corner, feeling — for all this unpleasantness — remarkably clear-headed and confident of a productive day ahead.

. . . Or maybe it's just such a relief to get out of that menagerie. It's a shame I have to distract myself all morning with plans for this domestic production, too. A big show to ease the kid away from that bitch. But a heavy interest in this unknown Irish quantity may only create other problems. A risk. Can't tell what he'll do, the way so many crazy kids are rushing into marriage. And if that happens, he'll certainly be lost, not to mention tremendous pressure to involve him, and very likely all of us, with Bruno. Nothing like a good little Catholic girl to push for a big happy family. God, how gruesome. Oh, it couldn't last. The boy can't possibly have much in common with her. Of course, he didn't appear to have much in common with Hecate either, but there you are. Bold thought: maybe Bruno for the summer would be less of a risk — if I could get some guarantee out of him that he'd let Miles come back and finish college. That would give him time to get over the girl. Call Bruno this afternoon and sound him out. Oh, if I hadn't been so busy and so tired that I couldn't even keep track of what was happening right before me . . . Poor stupid Hecate. She can't take all the blame. Miles is too sophisticated for

his own good, always has been, ever since Bruno tried to make an infant prodigy of him. Really, he's never seemed like a child. A dangerously immature adult, but never a child. If I could only trust Bruno not to make things worse now . . .

Miles got home with the groceries and found Kirk pacing the living room and fiddling with his pipe. The shower was running, so Helen had evidently finished the cleaning.

Kirk sauntered into the kitchen while he put the stuff away. "Porterhouse for five?" He whistled, massaging his stomach. "Say, how about making this cooperative?"

"No. Thanks, but no."

"No harm in splitting the bill then."

"Forget it. The party's all arranged — on the house."

"Anyway, I'm supplying the liquor."

Miles kept quiet. Sure, that would fix things. He couldn't say no and start an argument; he could just hope Kirk would forget or that Helen would steer him away from the impulse.

Miles slammed the crowded refrigerator shut, picked up all the paper bags but the one George Sand was crawling in and out of, wedged them out of the way between the refrigerator and the broom closet, and followed Kirk into the living room.

"Maybe we should just have that stuff for lunch and get it over with." Miles sprawled among the pillows on the couch and stretched.

"My appetite's ready right now, but it'll be even better when I've had all day to dream about the steak." Kirk folded his length into Zoe's throne. "Good to know I won't have to cook it, or eat it in some lousy restaurant."

"Why don't you get yourself a roommate?"

Kirk grinned as he filled his pipe. "I'm working on that."

"Well, if you and Helen don't get back for the steak . . ."

"Why? Where are *we* going?"

"She didn't say."

"If she's changed her mind, I haven't heard about it."

He drew deeply on the lighted pipe and settled back.

"I guess she didn't change her mind. She was probably only pulling my leg. It's just me. I guess I don't really want this damn so-called party to come off anyway. I haven't wanted it since I woke up this morning."

"You make it sound like such a major event."

Miles sat up, slid forward to the edge of the couch, and sat there with his elbows against his knees. "This may sound asinine, Kirk, but it *is* a major event. Don't ask me why."

"O.K. I won't. You sound like a junior exec who's invited the boss to dinner and then discovered his bride can't boil a potato." Kirk picked up a magazine, began to flip through it.

Miles tried to smile, but found himself only staring blankly at the floor, remembering things, remembering those other occasions when preparations had been made for special guests — then the last-minute breakdown. Old friends of Zoe's, like Lillian Landson the actress, who — though she was still on top and had just opened in a new hit — had apparently made a special effort last fall to locate Zoe and make a date with her. But there had been a last-minute cancellation dictated by the bottle, and Zoe had made no attempt afterwards to reach her or even to go see her play. How idiotic! She seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper into some sort of antisocial pit of her own digging, as if, through some intense hunger for darkness, she could tolerate only the dull, spiritless people she saw every day in the office or around here. Those who had eased into her acquaintance in recent years seemed to be acceptable, evidently because they hadn't known her when. But advance build-up about any-

one was dangerous. He should have brought Maureen home casually one evening, as Helen had brought Kirk in, without all this fanfare that put everyone on edge.

And he knew now that he loved her, that no matter how wrong or unsuitable their circumstances might seem to other people, he would find a way to marry her. They would make their own circumstances, their own life; she could get away from her family and he from his. It might be the most fantastic idea anyone had ever heard of, and even though he wasn't sure of what she thought about it yet, his hunch about it working was almost unbearable. The wildness and the lust were gone; this sweet, aching tenderness that brought him gulping to the verge of tears, the blind yearning that kept him alive when he wasn't with her . . . He forgot Kirk, forgot where he was, reliving once again that moment of two nights ago when he had taken her home after a movie. They had been standing on the stoop, alone in a long block of ugly concrete stoops. But it had seemed to both of them that they were dolls standing on the keys of a giant piano deserted in the night, that they loved the night as they loved each other, that they must dare the street lamps to show them they were wrong . . .

"Miles . . ." Kirk's voice intruded softly. "Miles, are you worried about how we're all going to hit it off with Maureen?"

"Hell, I don't care about that." And he really didn't, he assured himself, not in the long run. They weren't wrong, he was convinced; there was some unknown ingredient in their oneness that would send them soaring over any obstacle. "I just have one of those lousy feelings that everything's going wrong today. Has gone wrong; not just going. It means the worst is sure to happen and there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

"Do you get that feeling often?"

"Just — oh, I don't know. I guess not."

Kirk swallowed hard and decided to go on. "Is it when you're afraid your mother's about to let you down?"

Miles kept his head down, while the redness rushed up through his face. "I don't get you," he said huskily.

"Well, it wouldn't be much of a surprise to find she's not happy about facing the four of us at dinner. I can see this party sort of putting her on the spot."

Miles' head rose. He seemed to bristle. "Why?"

Kirk put the magazine down. "Here I am, threatening to take Helen away, and Maureen may represent the same threat where you're concerned."

"Now you're making a major event out of nothing. Is this something Helen's been carrying on about?"

"No. That's the sad part of it, I'm afraid. Helen hasn't told me enough. You haven't either — about Zoe."

"Hell, you know Zoe."

"Slightly. But apparently it's what I'm not supposed to know that's important." Kirk straightened up in his seat, bracing himself for further steps into the interior.

"For Christ's sake, come clean yourself. What are you beating around about?"

"This lousy feeling of yours." Kirk moistened his lips. "Maybe you're afraid we'll get back from the beach and find your mother drunk."

Miles' head sank toward his knees. The only sound came from George Sand rustling her paper bag in the kitchen. It would not have surprised Kirk to see Miles topple over on the floor.

"News from upstairs, I suppose."

Kirk turned, startled by Helen's voice. She was standing there in her bathrobe, a comb and brush in her hand.

He got to his feet. "That's right. You see, I've been practicing selective omission, too."

Miles struck the edge of the couch with his fist. "All right, Zoe drinks like a fool. What of it?"

"That's what I'd like to know. What of it? Why have

you made such a terrific secret out of it? Helen, if you'd told me a few weeks ago it would have made things a lot clearer, a lot easier."

She came running to him. "Oh Kirk, I just couldn't talk about it then. I was afraid it would ruin everything before we had a chance. Miles and I — we've lived on such a thin edge, on such a delicate balance. One wrong move and everything can fall apart. I was waiting to —"

"To see if the problem would blow away. How do I know you're not hiding something really serious?"

"Sorry," Miles said, "that's the best we can do."

The statement made Kirk want to tone himself down. He was suddenly irritated by the sensation of his own voice bouncing pompously from the walls, by its reminding him that he'd been diverted from what he'd planned for this morning: a quiet, reasonable talk with Helen about all their secrets and what they might do to fight Zoe's undermining tactics. "I can understand how tough it's been," he said more gently. "It must have been tough for your father too, Miles."

Miles shrugged. "I don't remember." His apparent resignation to his captivity made Kirk think of the myth of the Amazons who broke the arms and legs of their infant sons so they wouldn't be able to travel or go to war.

"Considerate of Bruno, wasn't it?" Helen sputtered. "Run off and leave the problem to a couple of helpless kids."

"Well, you're not helpless kids now. Or are you?"

"Christ!" Miles bellowed, "do you think we haven't tried to do something? Do you think we enjoy this? Who are you? Some bright new doctor with a mission, just called in on the case?" He rose, his chest heaving with anger. "O.K. You take over. See if you can get her to come clean with a doctor or a psychiatrist or Alcoholics Anonymous or anybody else. We've tried them all. The

trouble is — she doesn't even want to stop drinking."

"Don't say that, Miles. She tries to stop. You know that. She realizes how much it's cut down our freedom. Ever since she was left with the whole responsibility for us, she's — she's just been up against it. That's all."

"Pretty neat exchange, anyway," Kirk said, staring at the jaded belligerence in Miles's eyes. "She keeps the money coming in. You keep her on her feet."

"Oh, Doctor," Miles groaned sardonically.

"That's a hell of a way to buy your life. And you're both so damn smug about it. That's what gets me. Like feeling secure with a slingshot when your life depends on having a gun. Is that why you don't even dare talk to your father, Miles? Because you enjoy this 'delicate balance' so much and can't admit how phony it is and how you've been duped into perpetuating it? Because you'd rather keep on taking your chances in this uneasy little rut than get out where you can take some real chances?" He couldn't resist adding, "A man's chances?"

He'd gone too far, of course. Miles' face was dead white. Kirk half expected those trembling fists to come flying at him, but they didn't. In silence, Miles turned and walked slowly through the kitchen and out of the house. The back door closed silently after him.

"I don't see why you had to hurt him."

Kirk sighed. "I didn't intend to, but maybe that's what he needed."

"He's been hurt enough."

"I can see that. I can see his mother's done a terrific job. If she hadn't, I think he might have socked me then instead of walking out."

"I was talking about his father. He's worshiped his father since he could walk, and look what his father has done to him."

"Gave him a shaky religion for his years in captivity, anyway."

"A myth. That's all the poor kid's had for a father — a myth. Is it any wonder he's messed up?"

"What about you and your father?"

"That's different. I hardly knew him, and I've never needed him like Miles needed his father."

Damn her blindness! He wanted to slash out with, "Then you don't need me, either." Instead, he tried to satisfy himself with, "You'd both be better off if Zoe were more of a myth."

"A lot you know about it. I love Zoe, and I respect her. And Miles feels the same way."

He rubbed his chin. "I always said she was refreshing. She's such a welcome change from the old-fashioned, vitamin-enriched American mom with a heart like a hotel."

"Oh, why do you have to be so damn superior and hateful?"

"We're behaving like a real married couple now, aren't we? You're getting to know me better, too. Now you can see what I am — a snooping, interfering bastard. I warned you about that, didn't I?"

Her eyes narrowed, reminding him of Zoe's. "You didn't warn me about your pride in being a bastard."

He grinned. "It's nice knowing about you, too."

"You self-righteous prig . . . Maybe it takes more guts than you know about to stay with a person who needs you, a person who needs your help, a person who's taken a beating. You *are* as selfish as Bruno. If you had a shred of compassion, you'd —"

"I'd help you dig yourself in deeper. Can't you see, for God's sake? All you've got is a shred of compassion that's been turned on you like a whip."

"All right, go ahead," she yelled. "Go ahead and be the big he-male who can do no wrong. Why do you bother with me anyway? Why don't you just quit now if we won't run our lives to suit you? Or do you want to wait

until you can make a better job of it and abandon a couple of helpless kids, too?"

He was looking down at her now, his jaw hard, his eyes uglier than she'd believed possible. "I'm afraid there isn't much chance of kids as long as your loyalty is still over a barrel."

She raised her hand, but let it drop. There was no use breaking it against a stone wall.

Then he filled the doorway and was gone.

16.

THE SKY HAD LOST ITS BEST LIGHT BY MIDAFTERNOON. THE sun had vanished into a lowering haze, and the sea and the clouds were now taking on a smooth metallic darkness. But very few of the crowd on the beach acted as though they believed it would rain.

On his way back from the water to the blanket where Maureen was waiting, Miles paused again to look around over the reclining bodies. An uncountable number of bodies, in uncountable positions in the sand, in chairs, on blankets, under umbrellas or just standing around.

No sign of Kirk and Helen. And there was no reason why there should be, after everything had gone so wrong this morning. There had been no understanding about meeting here, except that he knew this was the section of Jones Beach Helen preferred. She and Kirk had already left the house by the time he returned from his cooling-off walk, so there hadn't been a chance to find out if Kirk really meant to sabotage the party.

"Guess we got our signals mixed," he said to Maureen as he collapsed beside her on the blanket.

"Gee, that's a shame. How's the water now? Is it getting colder?"

"It takes weeks."

"Oh, that's right. It's only the air that changes so fast.

It makes the water look colder anyway. I guess I won't go in again."

He leaned back on his elbows. Now that the sun had gone, she'd dropped the towel from her shoulders and he could see more of her. He liked tans, but there was nothing to compare with Maureen's creamy skin against her black swim suit and black hair. And she filled the suit so perfectly — the slim waist that seemed to ask for hands to encircle it, the gently rounded hips and thighs, the firm young boldness of her breasts. She seemed unconscious of herself as a work of art — as if every male who passed within eye range came out of his way to pass within five feet only because he couldn't walk straight.

"Do you think maybe they went to Beercan Beach?" she asked.

"They knew we weren't going there."

"I hope nothing happened — I mean, like an accident or something. You're not worried, are you?"

"Of course not," he said, still furtively examining his anxiety.

"Well, I'm glad we didn't go to Beercan Beach. Once was enough. I just couldn't enjoy myself there."

"How about one last dip?"

She shivered. "It looks colder by the minute. I think it's going to rain."

He sat up and put his arm around her. "Does that help?"

"Maybe . . ." It did warm her, she admitted to herself, even though there were still drops of water on him and his body seemed so cold and hard. His hand came down around the front of her waist and she knew she ought to push it away. She didn't really want to, though, and since he'd got over that crude business and she knew she loved him and he loved her . . . His thigh was pressing against hers, but the pressure was so gentle.

He kissed her on the neck, and she had to giggle. "Hey, stop. It's too public."

"Who has time to look at us?"

"Well . . ." She had to turn her eyes away. There was still something too upsetting about him, especially in those tight, low-cut trunks. Good thing her mother wasn't here to see him. It would be just too embarrassing.

"We have a blanket," he said softly against her hair. "There's a couple over there making good use of their blanket."

"That's their funeral."

He laughed. "Hell, nobody ever died of necking."

She edged away, turned to face him. "Did you forget you were going to tell me about your new job?"

He ran the fingers of one hand deep into the sand, drew them out again. "Oh, it's nothing special. One of those magazines that carries a lot of new designs — architecture. I'll be a sort of office boy to start, then maybe some drafting and layout later."

"What about when school starts again?"

"I don't know. If the job turns into anything, I might try to keep it part-time — if I don't have to give up the swimming team for it."

"You'll lose your tan in an office. I was surprised you didn't take the lifeguard job again."

"You can get awfully bored sitting up on one of those towers all day. Anyway, this job might lead to something." He knew he was going to miss the beach; but, as he'd found last summer, the long hours and the long trip to and from work didn't mix well with his share of the housework and supervising Zoe's drinking.

"All summer long without the beach girls."

"The interesting ones never come near the tower. The other ones hang around all day telling you their troubles."

She smiled coyly. "And the Barnard girls?"

"I can live without them, too." He sifted sand through his fingers, feeling slightly annoyed at the way she seemed to be quizzing him, sensing she might be making a try for exclusive possession — like Lou again.

He lay back on the blanket, filled with the tightness of being alone, of being, at the same time, crowded and boxed in. Above him, the last of the clouds that had any discernable shape were moving past into the grayness, into nothingness. He closed his eyes. "I wish . . ." he murmured, and hoped she hadn't heard him. Then he was wishing he could lose himself in her the way he used to in Lou. Christ, all he could dream of or wish for was Maureen — when he was away from her. And yet here he was, alone with her, and loving her seemed suddenly like some insanity being imposed on him . . .

"What do you wish, Miles?"

He opened his eyes. She was sitting there looking down at him, and he reached out and took her hand. "I don't know," he lied.

She smiled and slapped gently at his knee with her other hand as if she wanted to be playful, but didn't quite know how. "Funny not to know what you wish."

He let go her hand and covered his eyes with his arm. What he wished now was that his premonition about Zoe had not grown suddenly strong enough to make him dread moving from this spot. Somehow, he must warn Maureen in case things really had gone wrong at home. He sat up, forcing a smile. "Oh, sometimes I get an awful feeling something horrible is going to happen."

"What kind of a thing?" She put her hand on his forearm, gently, as if she regretted having cut him off before.

But it was too late now. He couldn't even summon a nervous laugh, or reach for her hand again.

"If I knew I wouldn't wonder," he said tightly. "We'd better get going."

So they gathered up their towels and the blanket and began trudging across the sand, weaving between the groups of reclining bodies while he listened to her pointless chatter and tried to think of a way to tell her the party was called off and they might as well go to a movie.

But if he did that he would probably only get back to the house afterward to find Kirk and Helen and Zoe all wondering why he'd made such a fuss over Maureen for nothing.

She said she was thirsty, and they stopped for cokes. Anything for a delay, he thought gratefully, planning an extra long shower in the bathhouse.

It was almost dark when they got to the house. The clouds had lowered and there was a steady rain, falling straight in a muggy premature twilight. The thunder was distant and muffled, barely audible above the gentle drumming of the rain.

There were no lights in the windows. After a run from the car, Miles stood under the front-door overhang with Maureen shivering beside him and took a deep breath. Then he stuck his key in the lock, turned it, pushed the door open and led her into the darkness.

He switched on the nearest lamps, noted that the living room still looked unusually clean and tidy, but that the dinner table was not set. Desertion. Complete desertion. Even George Sand wasn't in sight. If there was a party planned for tonight, it must be in some other house.

"It's nice." Maureen's voice rang in the silence. "Gosh, what a lot to read."

There ought to be some tactful way to ask her to keep her voice down, at least until he found out what had happened. "Maybe I misunderstood about the time," he said softly.

"Gee," she went on in her normal voice, "this is aw-

fully interesting — I mean, the books and all. And it looks so comfortable.”

He realized she was still standing, still wearing her jacket. “Here, sit down. Yes, you might say this looks lived in,” he tried to joke as he hung her jacket in the closet. “It looks like a hangout for a gang of bookish pigs.”

“Now Miles, I wouldn’t say that.” She sat down on the couch.

He grinned uneasily, unable to stop furtively surveying the place. For what? Obviously, his worst fears were about to be realized, and yet he felt calmer now, almost relieved. He didn’t want to be taken by surprise though. He tried to think of what to do next, but his mind blurred.

“May I look at the tropical fish?”

“Huh? Oh, sure.” He snapped on the lights in the tanks.

She left the couch and stood peering in at the fish. At that moment, he was sure he’d heard a sound from Zoe’s room.

“Cheese ’n’ crackers!”

“What?” His heart bounced in his chest. “Oh, that again.”

“Gosh, those little things are really beautiful, aren’t they? You know, I never realized they came in so many colors.” She turned away from the tanks as if she’d done her duty by them and sat down in Zoc’s throne. “Is there anything wrong, Miles?”

He found himself standing in the middle of the floor, listening. He shrugged and sat down on the edge of the couch. “I was just wondering. Funny my mother didn’t leave the table set or start the cooking. I don’t see how she could be expecting us much later than this.”

“Maybe she had to go out unexpectedly.”

He started at another sound. “Damn it!”

Maureen sat forward. “Can’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

He rose. "Look, Maureen, maybe you wouldn't mind looking at a book or something while I check around and see if my mother left a note or anything."

"Surely. Maybe she's just taking a nap and overslept."

"Yeah, that's why I think I'd better look around," he said. She watched him move slowly, almost tiptoeing into the foyer beyond the bottom of the stairs. Then he startled her by turning back suddenly to switch on a radio that was on top of one of the bookcases. "Maybe there's some music on," he said quietly, standing there with his hand on the controls while the radio warmed up. Then he left it with some music playing softly and moved into the foyer again.

She picked up a magazine. There wasn't any light where he'd gone and one of the big chairs hid the view anyway. She couldn't hear anything but the murmur of the rain and the radio. If he'd opened a door somewhere in the foyer, he must have a very stealthy way of doing it. She shivered without meaning to. He must have opened some door because a large tan cat with dark ears and feet and its tail flickering straight up was now coming out towards her.

The huge eyes blinked at her for a second, then just stayed open, growing more huge and more luminous. She clutched her purse, thinking she would have to call Miles. But at that moment, the cat blinked again and turned away. "Thank God," she whispered, crossing herself, as the cat padded swiftly up the stairs. She could hear it meowing up there and then a door creaked open and banged shut again.

It passed through her mind that Miles might have brought her here for something evil, that he had known no one would be home. Even at the beach he'd acted nervous, as if he might be planning something. She held her breath, trying to listen. There was a soft moaning

sound and then a voice, but mixed with the sounds of the radio and the rain, so she couldn't be sure what she was hearing.

At least, there was somebody home upstairs — whoever had let the cat in and was walking around up there. Must be that woman Miles was always talking about. Why didn't he go up and ask her what had happened? What was he doing in the other rooms so long? If he'd brought her here to get fresh, she ought to leave right now. She had her eye on the closet and she was wondering if she could get her jacket out of there and open the front door without making a noise and run all the way home without ruining everything in the rain when her heart popped into her mouth.

Miles was standing before her again. She caught her breath and gripped the arms of the chair.

"As I suspected," he whispered, "nobody home."

"Oh . . ." It was such a relief to see him again. "Oh, I didn't hear you come back."

"Apparently, my mother had to leave unexpectedly. A friend of hers is sick."

"Gee, that's a shame." Maureen let herself relax a little. Now that he was back she didn't feel so suspicious. "Can we do something to help?"

"I guess not." He was no longer whispering, but his voice was still unusually soft. "The note doesn't say what hospital or where. She couldn't get hold of us naturally and it happened very suddenly — I guess."

"Gee, that's a shame. Honestly, I wish I didn't feel so useless."

He stuck his hands into his pockets. "Well, there's no use hanging around this tomb. What do you say we go out for dinner and try to make up for this false alarm?"

"What about your sister and her date? Do you think maybe they came by already and saw the note?"

"Could be," he muttered, wishing she would make some

move to get up. But she just sat there, apparently still looking the place over.

"Jiminy, that cat frightened me when it came out. But I'm all right now."

"Where did the cat go?"

"Upstairs. I'm awful scary that way. It's silly, I know. But anyway I am." She let herself shiver a little.

He just stood there, scowling a little, his arms crossed, the light from the lamps cutting down across his rumpled slacks.

"It certainly is a shame about your mother's friend," she said, smoothing her skirt.

"Yeah. You said that before."

"I'm sorry, Miles. I mean, I'm sorry I repeated myself." She smiled. "Anyway, here I am. I practically invited myself, and here I am."

"Too bad it worked out this way. I wish . . ."

"What were you going to say, Miles?"

"Nothing." He turned his head as if listening.

"Miles, this afternoon, remember, when you said you had an awful feeling something horrible was going to happen . . . Well, is that what's bothering you now? I mean —"

"Shut up!"

She rose, stunned at the desperation in his eyes.

He stepped closer, his hand reaching out toward her. "Maureen, I'm awfully sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

She drew away from him. "But what's the trouble, Miles? What do you keep listening for?"

"I'm not listening for anything. Look, why don't we go out and eat and find a movie."

"All right, if that's what you want to do."

"You don't sound very interested." He turned toward the closet, wishing to hell she'd suggest he take her home, so he could and then rush back here and get into action in the other room.

"Can you blame me? Everything falls through and then you snap at me as if it was all my fault."

"I can't do any more than apologize."

"Why are you whispering again? Am I talking too loud?"

"No, it's not you." He opened the closet. "I'm just afraid Lou might hear us and come down and butt in."

"Gee, I didn't know she was that nosy."

"She gets lonely when her husband's on the road." He was talking louder as he helped her slip in to her jacket, hoping to drown out the rising sound from Zoe's room. "She gets awfully bored up there, I guess, and likes to come down and chew the rag with whoever's around."

There was a slapping noise against the other side of the wall, and he knew Zoe was hitting the wall with her slipper and it couldn't be drowned out.

"What's that?"

The slapping stopped.

"Let's go," he said, grabbing his sports jacket.

"But I'm sure I heard something."

Then there was a long wail that seemed to take minutes, as it wobbled through the wall, to build up to a shriek.

Maureen stared at Miles. She couldn't move.

"Damn it, let's get out of here."

This time the wailing broke into words: "Why? Why? Answer me! What do you mean by coming in here and searching my room? Why? Why? Why? If I have to . . ." The words trailed away, and Maureen couldn't be sure what she'd heard.

"I lied to you," he said. "That's my mother."

"Your mother? But what's the trouble? Can't you help her?"

A door flew open, and light spilled out across the foyer into the room. The woman stood there, bobbing jerkily against the doorjamb, her bathrobe half open over her

pajamas, her hair in a snarl, her eyes blinking with a mechanical heaviness.

Then her eyes were wide open and she was yelling: "What's the meaning of this? What's the meaning of this?" Maureen backed off because the woman seemed to be yelling at her. "What's the meaning of this? Helen, you get that son of a bitch out of here. Get him out of here . . ." The beginning of a laugh broke into a moment of silence as she lurched across the floor and grabbed at the end of the stair bannister and hung on to it. "You don't know about him, do you? You don't know what he did to me . . ."

"Cut it out!" Miles's voice thundered over hers as if he'd finally got his bearings. "Helen's not even here. Get back in your room."

"You!" The woman reared back, still clutching the bannister. "You slime!" Her head swayed as if it might roll off, but then it was upright and she seemed to be trying to focus on Maureen again. Her mouth fell open and a trail of spit dropped away from it, streaking down across her pajamas. She closed her eyes and began to giggle. "Lou-ella . . . Ha . . . You filthy bitch. Don't think I don't know what's been —"

"Shut up, will you? Shut up! It's not Lou!"

"Ha . . . Why don't you pick on somebody your own age, you goddamn whore?"

"Please, for God's sake, stop it! Can't you see it's not Lou?"

The woman turned, almost losing her balance, but somehow holding on. "You! You filthy swine!" The words came like spit. "How dare you stand there denying what you've done with that whore. You ungrateful little animal. After the years I've slaved for you and your stupid sister . . ."

Maureen had edged to within a few feet of the front door. She didn't dare move faster for fear the crazy woman

would turn on her again. Surely, she must be insane. And Miles just stood there with the fury and sweat all over his face as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"I tried to talk to your silly father. I phoned him . . . " And she was laughing again, until she cut herself off in an explosion of coughing.

"What? What are you talking about?" Miles was moving toward her now. "What are you talking about?" he kept saying.

"Stop! Don't come near me!" For a startling moment, she seemed no longer drunk. A sudden bellow of anger appeared to bolster her stiffly erect. Then she simply opened her mouth and screamed . . . And Miles could barely hear his own futile voice as her wailing pierced up and died away and she staggered forward and fell, grappling with the pillows, across the end of the couch.

"Shut up! For God's sake, shut up!" Miles's throat rasped with the rage in his voice, but he couldn't stop yelling even though he knew he was only sinking into a mire of meaningless noise. He wondered where Maureen was, yet didn't really care . . .

Zoe was only moaning now, while she lost her hold on one pillow after another and slipped toward the edge of the couch. Then somehow she had struggled to a sitting position. "You low bastard," she sobbed. "I fixed you, anyway. I fixed him, too, with his scheming letters . . . The ones you never even saw . . . " And she was laughing again, until her voice wobbled off toward another shriek, like a record that must be smashed.

Miles grasped her by the shoulders. "What letters? What do you mean, you fixed me? God damn it, tell me!"

She merely babbled though, her head lolling back as if it would drop off, her eyes staring through him as if he weren't even there.

"Tell me! Why did you phone him?"

"You!" She stiffened and the spitting viciousness came

back into her voice. "You! You!" Her laughter broke again, scalding wildly through him, telling him she had always hated him just as she hated his father. "Yes, I fixed you good. I told him . . . Ha . . . I told him . . ."

Then he knew his fingers were tightening like steel hooks about her neck and there was no sound but his own heart, his own panting frenzy to stop her . . . for a long time, for years . . . while voices sang up and scattered away . . . and feet pounded closer . . .

They . . . There were hands pulling him away from something, and he was down on the floor on his knees and he was burning for breath and his fingers still tingled with killing.

The room flooded with overhead light.

"Miss Lakes . . . Miss Lakes." It was Lou's voice. "Are you all right, Miss Lakes?"

Miles gazed, as from a distance. Zoe, he saw, lay sprawled against the foot of the couch like a cat that had been tossed aside by a car's bumper. That sound, which turned out to be his own breathing, was fading away, and he was closer, here in the crushing silence of the room again.

Yes, she was alive. And as he stared, her fingers seemed to twitch, then rose suddenly to fumble at her throat, while the thick whiteness of her eyelids fluttered open.

"Here," Lou was saying, "give me a hand."

Miles struggled to his feet, sobbing with relief.

"Not you. Get back. Get out of the way."

He backed away while Lou and Maureen worked to haul Zoe up off the floor and get her stretched out on the couch.

He felt Lou's accusing eyes. "Jeez, what a racket. Where's Helen?"

"I don't know." He found himself watching Maureen retrieve one of Zoe's strayed slippers and place it gingerly before the couch.

"What was all the yelling about? What was she yelling about me for?" Lou turned to Zoe. "You and your big filthy mouth. For Christ's sake, you ain't worth dumping in the river."

Zoe's voice came, remarkably even and quiet. "Please call the police and have him arrested." She felt of her throat again. "Please have my son arrested."

Lou snorted. "You bet." She went to the phone and began dialing. "You bet I'll call the police. I'll be only too glad to. See — I'm going to fix this thing good."

Miles shivered at the wild slamming of his heart, at the cold air coming through the open window and the drumming rain beyond it. Everywhere in the room he saw the dumb horror in Maureen's eyes . . .

Lou, on the phone: "Yeah, get me the police. O.K. Well, listen, I got somebody to send to the hospital, the nut ward. Where they put the drunks. Yeah, sure I know I have to have the police. I want the lush wagon. Sure, for my landlady . . ."

17.

ABOUT NOON ON SUNDAY, LOUELLA LISTENED AGAIN WITH her door open a crack and finding all quiet below, decided to go down and see if the cat was hungry again.

It was: crying around her ankles in the sad emptiness of the place, as if she hadn't been down twice already to give it milk.

"Here. Here's a can of salmon for you, you big fat queen. George! What a queer name for a tabby. One of these days I'm going to let you out in the alley so you can see what you're missing."

Reduced to talking to a stupid cat . . . It was a shame Tom was away on the road. What an earful she could give him about the cops coming and the city ambulance and the neighbors all poking their heads out and yelling questions and answers back and forth across the street. And at that, none of them knew the real stuff—about Miles nearly murdering his mother. Not even Miss Lakes herself said a word about that to the cops. By that time she was just moaning and weeping about something she'd eaten making her sick and the cops and the internes were kidding her along and taking no nonsense. Miles was so quiet and serious you'd think he was going to cut his throat the first chance he got. Then he rode off in the ambulance with his mother like a truly devoted son, the picture of strength and responsibility . . .

which left Louella alone in the house, wondering if his sneaky, scary little girl friend had disappeared before the cops came or afterwards.

The back door flew open. It was Miles, slamming in out of the sun with the sweat shining on his face and arms. "Christ," he said, not giving her a chance to say hello, "haven't you done enough damage down here?"

She dropped the empty salmon can in the sink strainer. "All I done was what you and Helen ain't had the guts to do."

The scowl of black hate on his face must be left over from last night. "I wouldn't put my worst enemy in that hole. Call that a hospital. Hell, they've got them in boxes. If the sides were a little higher, they'd make good coffins."

"Well, how's she doing? I mean, is she better?"

"More like a jail — metal doors, barred windows . . . I get sick when I think of those old witches wandering around, babbling at you, scribbling on the walls . . . and the others, just lying in the boxes." He wiped his face on his rolled-up shirtsleeve.

"What do you expect?"

"Aw, what the hell do you care?"

She tried to laugh. "I see you ain't woke up yet, huh?" She followed him as he stalked into the living room. "Listen, I did you a favor. I did her a favor. The poor woman, I bet she'll see I was only trying to help her."

"Sure, a stomach pump is so soothing, and the way they bat you around makes you feel so good. It's great." He stopped fumbling with the cigarette he had and smashed it into the floor.

She straightened the front of her housecoat. "You and Helen — the pair of you make me sick. You're so smart and you got so much education and all you do is yak and yak because you ain't got the guts to do anything for yourselves."

"We've only been talking for your benefit. We knew you wouldn't miss a word."

She snorted. "I got better things to do than listen to you. You think you're pretty hot stuff, don't you? Giving me and Tom names nobody ever heard of, so you could talk about us behind our backs. Listen, bozo, we been on to you for years."

He just stood there with an ugly sneer on his face, as if he was going to spit on her.

"By the way," she said, keeping herself cool, "when are you heading West?"

"What's it to you?"

"Take my advice, bozo. Eat up them steaks in the kitchen before you start. You need the blood."

He reddened. "Anyway, it would be great to get away from you and your kind."

She stepped toward him, shaking her fist. "Listen, you snotty little jerk, if it wasn't for me, you'd be sitting in the corner playing with yourself."

"Yeah?" He laughed with a snarl. "Hell, I'd be better off."

"I tried, damn it. I tried to make — to help you make a man out of yourself."

He stamped, roaring with laughter. "You tried! Wow! What do you do, run a finishing school? I suppose you've laid all the kids on the block and given them diplomas. Too bad I wasn't a virgin so you could start me off right."

"You're awful proud of that, ain't you? You think that makes you a real he-man. Well, it don't. You're still just a baby looking for a nice big fat tit to suck."

His jaw twitched as if he were trying to laugh, trying to shrug it off, but his hands were trembling and his face was white.

She caught her breath. "Don't forget, I saw you come awful close to killing your own mother."

"Shut your filthy mouth and get out of here."

"Yeah, that's the thanks I get for saving you from the chair. You know what they'd be saying on the front of the *News* if it wasn't for me? 'MODEL SON STRANGLES MOM.'" She laughed. "Hey, that's pretty good."

"Get out of here, you stinking slut!"

She edged back, staring at the way his fingers opened and closed. Then she tripped on the corner of the rug and had to catch herself as she scrambled for the stairs. "Now Miles, please . . . For God's sake . . ."

"Get going. Get out of here."

She didn't waste a second on the stairs, or in locking her door when she got inside her own place.

Miles brooded through the afternoon about leaving. Eventually, he got a suitcase out and cleaned it off and stared at it awhile and then stood staring at his clothes and the other junk in the depths of the closet — his skis and his old catcher's mitt, the broken ship models and the tennis rackets, the camping equipment and the rolls of drawings . . .

He had accomplished nothing when Kirk arrived, looking for Helen.

"She's at the hospital."

"Mind if I wait here?"

"Don't ask me."

Kirk sat down with part of the Sunday paper. "Pardon my existence."

"I'm sorry, Kirk. It's just that I'm worried as hell about Zoe."

"I thought she was over the worst of it by now."

"Not with their so-called treatment. I never saw anybody look so nearly dead as she did today."

Kirk nodded sympathetically, gestured toward the suitcase. "Getting ready for a trip?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Been in touch with your father?"

"No. I never even answered his first letters. I understand he wrote quite a few more, but they were intercepted. Zoe admitted that last night. Apparently she phoned him yesterday afternoon."

"The lady upstairs seemed to think that had something to do with everything going haywire — or so she told me when she located me."

"A hell of a lot she knows about anything."

"She knew enough to locate me when she couldn't find Helen. Of course, if I hadn't got nasty yesterday morning, Helen would have been here instead of at Peggy's."

Miles shrugged. "You and Helen on speaking terms again?"

"Hell, yes!" Kirk laughed. "I don't think an earthquake could pull us apart now."

Miles grunted and seemed to be staring at the floor.

"How about you?" Kirk said. "When are you leaving?"

"The trouble is — I should have gone sooner if I was going. If I go now, I'll just be running away."

"Why call it running away? Sometimes you just have to move on. And maybe you can't move on until something forces you to."

A grimace of pain seemed to have settled permanently in Miles's face. "I guess you don't realize how close I came to murder."

"Nuts! You lost your temper. It takes more than that to commit murder."

"Lost my temper? God, no. It wasn't that simple. I've lost my temper before and it wasn't like this. Any way you look at it, I was out of control — temporary insanity. If it hadn't been for . . . " He pointed ceilingward with his thumb.

"What's the use of knocking yourself out with guilt over something that didn't happen and that you couldn't help anyway?"

"I *could* help it." Miles stood grinding his heel into one spot on the floor. "From the moment I woke up yesterday morning I could see things were going wrong. I could see I was putting her on the spot. You sensed it, too. You said so."

"If you saw trouble so clearly, why didn't you try to head it off?"

"I've been thinking about that. I've been pacing the floor and sitting here jabbing myself with a lot of needles to see which one of them would fit."

Kirk grinned at the aptness of the statement. "Sounds like a painful business."

"It sure is. But one of the needles did fit, and I can see now what was happening. The closer last night came, the less I wanted to head the trouble off. For years I've been aching for something to happen to this way I buy my life — as you put it. But I didn't have the guts myself to force the issue. Then somehow things got going and yesterday I had a chance to put her on the spot, to get back at her, without half trying. Damn it," he said more softly, "I wanted to put her on the spot. I wanted to kill her."

Kirk was ready with a reassuring scoff, but the agony in Miles' features stopped him. There was certainly no point in kidding him along. For once, someone in this house was trying to tell the truth, trying to undeceive himself. Why not help him do a good job of it?

"If you don't believe me, you should talk to the two witnesses. I went around to Maureen's this morning to apologize for what happened. Her mother, who came to the door for her, wouldn't even let me in. Maureen, she told me, was still having the horrors, and had barely been able to drag herself to Mass. As far as they're concerned, I *am* a murderer. I had the thought or something and that's as much of a sin as actually committing murder.

I'm a Grade A Sinner. I've practically blasted the commandments to Hell or something. I should be in some church repenting my crime. If I don't scram, she'll call a cop. Since I couldn't get a word in edgewise I scrambled."

"Very likely she never had to look a commandment in the eye. Well, if last night was drastic enough to blast you out of this deception, this special brand of domestic damnation we've all been stuck in, more power to you." Kirk rose to his feet, wondering how Helen was managing to mix sympathy with ruthlessness at the hospital. "Anyway, Miles, you're ahead of Helen at this point. It looks as though you've got to leave first — before you find yourself doing more than your share of repenting."

"Why?"

"Because unless you make a clean break before the pattern hardens again, Zoe's going to make the most of your guilt and blackmail you for life."

"It's not going to do anything for my guilt to run away . . ."

But at that moment Helen arrived, fretting about the heat and the hospital, and Miles couldn't finish what he wanted to say.

While she made coffee, got out the strawberry shortcake intended for last night and told them how rapidly Zoe was improving in spite of the rough treatment, he kept fairly quiet and more or less convinced himself to take Kirk's advice.

In fact, he would be ready to leave tomorrow. Helen could get along without his help when Zoe came home from the hospital. He could say goodbye to her there, without argument and recrimination, and then start hitchhiking. Later, when he came back for a visit, they would be on a better footing and could discuss things more calmly. It would be strictly a visit, though. Even if he didn't stay with his father, he would never come back

here to live. Yes, he was as guilty as Lou had said he was, and he was glad to admit it.

"What's that suitcase out for?" Helen said, as they sat down at the table.

"I'm packing."

"Packing? What's going on?"

"I'm leaving," Miles said. Kirk looked as pleased as he felt.

"You can't do that now. It'll be days before she gets out of that hell-hole and then she'll be a wreck for weeks. Good God, give her time."

"I have."

"Yes, you and your famous threats. Maybe your threats are what brought this on. Oh, it's idiotic. Somebody's going to have to be here while she's convalescing, before she goes back to work. She'll be awfully down in the dumps."

"With one less bodyguard she can probably pull herself together quicker."

Helen threw her fork down. "But Miles, how can you have the nerve to — well, what about your job?"

"Maybe I can find a better job. That isn't what you were going to say."

She stopped biting her lip and looked up. "How can you have the nerve to run out like this after what you did to her?"

"Helen," Kirk's voice rumbled between them, "let's clear this up. You've got to tell Miles why you won't be here. Not that it'll make much —"

"*You* won't be here!" Miles roared, almost diving across the table at her.

She just sat there, staring at her hands as she fiddled with them in her lap. "Zoe'll never forgive you if you leave her at a time like this. You've at least — well, you can't leave her flat when she's all torn up. You've got to do something to ease her mind about last night. If it

hadn't been for all this uproar about you and your father, she probably wouldn't have even started drinking yesterday."

"But it's O.K. for you to walk out any time."

"I'm not walking out," she said firmly, sitting back and fixing him with her eyes. "For the record, I walked out two weeks ago, when Kirk and I got married. This just makes it final. I don't live here any more."

Miles shifted his stare from Helen to Kirk.

"We couldn't go on living this way," Helen continued, her attention on her hands again, while Kirk sat like the big manager, quietly gratified that he'd done such a good job of coaching his protégé. "I was just sticking around until I was sure Zoe'd completely recovered from the last horror story, but it didn't do any good."

"Congratulations. I'm sorry they're late."

"We wanted to let you in on this sooner . . ." She glanced at Kirk.

Kirk seemed unexpectedly inarticulate.

"Why the sudden switch, Mastermind?" Miles said angrily. "Why've you been working so hard to get me out on a limb? Just for the fun of seeing it break under me because you've already sawed it through?"

Kirk groaned. "Miles . . . Look, I've tried to say from the beginning that I can't see why you both don't leave. Zoe'll never stand on her own feet until she's forced to. If it did her any good to have you two bodyguards that would be one thing, but it doesn't. She just seems to get worse."

Miles speared a last double bite of cake with his fork. "Oh, Doctor, you really have it coming to you."

"Yes, I've gotten in here over my depth, but Christ, somebody has to change things."

"You bet!" Miles laughed, kicking back his chair as he rose.

"Oh Kirk, you don't understand. We can't leave Zoe

alone, especially when she first gets out of that place. You just don't know what she'll do to herself."

Miles gulped down the last of his coffee, set the empty cup down with a clatter. "This I like to hear. You both have such a talent for making it sound so simple. Well, I couldn't think of better hands for the problem if you paid me. Thanks for the hints on morale, dear brother-in-law. Too bad I won't be around to give you a few when you need them. It's going to be tough. And Helen's going to be hell to work with. She's been dreaming of this escape project of hers for years—long before you came along. You just happen to be the first sucker who fell in the trap. Thanks for taking my place."

Helen was standing when he walked out of the house. She took a step toward the closed door, then sat down again with a hopeless shrug.

"Every time I come out here," Kirk tried to say lightly, "either you're taking a shower or he's taking a walk."

Her lips tightened, and she rose to clear the table.

"I guess we can wash these up and go home," he said, getting up to help. "Hecate'll take care of the cat and the fish, won't she?"

"Yes. Let's hurry."

Balancing three dirty cups stacked on three saucers, he followed her into the kitchen. The idea of his taking Miles' place as assistant nurse would amuse him for some time to come.

"I told her," Helen said breathlessly, throwing herself into his arms after the long climb up the stairs Wednesday night.

"Fine. What happened?"

She spun out of his arms toward the couch, then perched there, kicking off her shoes and wiggling her tired toes at him as he sat down beside her. "Oh, it's so wonderful coming home to one and a half rooms to find nobody but

you with your shirt unbuttoned, looking as though you owned the place."

"All right, tell me about it. You made the announcement. Right? The republic still stands. How come?"

"Oh, I guess it's just not the same republic. Yes, well, I thought — just as you were saying last night — let's get it over with before she gets home and starts slipping back into the old routine. Then I almost lost my nerve because she was just staring off into space and being very quiet . . . Oh Kirk, that's what scares me. How can she face it? Life'll be so empty for her. That silent hurt look she has . . ." She was holding on to him now, and he could feel the warmth of tears through his shirt. He reached behind him for the box of Kleenex on the end table. She grabbed some and blew her nose and sniffled a little, then settled back against him. He stroked her arm and waited for her to go on. Finally she did: "I agree with you that Miles and I haven't done any good by staying with her. As bodyguards, we've been absolute failures. I'm sure she'll be better off without us. But Kirk, I'm so frightened. I can't help loving her and worrying about her, and I'll be waking up in the middle of the night wondering if something terrible's happened." She dried her eyes again.

"I know, honey, but we've got to try this, at least. It may not turn out so badly. After all, we'll see her fairly often and Miles'll come back for visits. I'm sure she can get interested in all kinds of things and people if she has to."

"It's just that look she has. I've never seen her that way before — as though she weren't even hearing me, as though she were preoccupied with something so horrible she couldn't quite grasp it. It was the way she was with Miles yesterday when he told her he was leaving."

"Well, it's a pretty public place for such goodbys."

"She's been able to talk about other very personal

things there. She's seemed quite rational and surprisingly like her old self. And then while Miles was talking, she just seemed to gaze off into space. He took her hand and kissed her and said something about maybe they'd be able to talk things over better when he came back for a visit, but after he got through explaining his plans all she said was, 'Where are you going?' Oh, it was unearthly."

"I suppose she's still trying to hide an awful lot from herself, even if she is beginning to resign herself to the changes."

"I'm afraid she isn't resigned to anything. At the last minute, when he actually left, she sort of reached after him and whimpered, 'Please . . . ' and then fell back."

Histrionics, Kirk told himself. After weeks of that from Zoe, he was no longer moved by it. "Tell me, how did she react to your announcement?"

Helen turned so she was facing him, her back against the couch instead of against him. "Well, she kissed me and said she hoped we'd be happy and sent you her congratulations. But she was so subdued and listless about it, as if she were only going through the motions. Or maybe she was still too upset by the Miles business and didn't really take in what I was saying."

"Can't expect her to jump for joy. That place would depress anyone. Don't you think she'll get to like having me in her permanent audience? She must realize how much I appreciate her when she's in good form."

"I suppose I'm worrying too much about nothing. Gosh, the thought of a normal life with you makes me want to go dancing over the rooftops." She threw herself against him and burrowed among the pillows to get her arms around his waist.

He filled the palm of his hand with her hair. "Don't get too giddy. It may be just as hard for you in some ways as it is for her."

"But darling, I have you and she has no one. And she's older."

"Which means she has enough behind her to make her able to accept a lot you're not ready for. I don't imagine she'll ever be able to stand completely on her own feet. After all, who ever does? Everybody has some sort of crutch, even if it's the certainty that he has none. Maybe that's her tragedy — that she still can't believe she needs a crutch, even after you and Miles and the liquor have served so faithfully."

"Something she said about Miles today got me — about it being a good idea for Bruno to see what he'd done to him, pushing him beyond his depth too fast when he was little and forcing him to try to grow up before he was ready to. And then she admitted she hadn't done enough to counteract Bruno's so-called damage."

"That's quite an admission. By the way, did Miles say where he was going?"

"No. He was his usual cagey self. The only thing he really made clear was that he wanted to get out on his own."

"Sounds encouraging. I'll bet my last dollar he doesn't go near Bruno."

"Why?"

"Why should he want to kill the myth? The illustrious unseen father may be his crutch. And why — if he really values his independence — should he take a chance on being submerged again? Bruno's probably twice as overpowering as Zoe."

She nodded. "And if Miles doesn't go near him, he can be free to go on dreaming." He caught the vague frown he knew so well shadowing her face, the discontent which at least wasn't as pervasive as it once had been. Her eyes rose then, brimming over into a smile. "I'm afraid I didn't have time to shop for dinner."

"That forces the tyrant to take you to a restaurant." He

got to his feet and began buttoning his shirt. "Is Zoe still going home tomorrow?"

"She has to. They won't let her stay any longer."

"So this is our last night together, until Saturday."

She tiptoed toward the dresser, still in her stocking feet. "Please don't make it sound like years. The plans are all set. The practical nurse will arrive Saturday morning and she'll stay as long as Zoe needs her."

"Fine."

She turned to the mirror and began combing her hair and fluffing it out. "By Saturday night, when you come to get me, Zoe and the nurse will probably already know all there is to know about one another and be getting along famously. I wish I could have gotten Miss Mahrisch, but anyway Dr. Mangione says this woman is quite a bit like her."

"Then there's nothing to stop us. Let's start a baby."

She let the comb drop and moved away from the dresser. "Tonight?" she said, but immediately he wasn't certain it had been a question.

"Yes," he said, "right after dinner."

She put her arms around him. Then she was quiet with her face hidden against him, quiet enough to make him wonder why. "Yes, that's what I want," she said finally, raising her eyes to his, "but not now."

"Not now?" He held her off, staring into her eyes.

"I'm not ready."

"I am."

She smiled, warming him momentarily with a view of her profile, then faced him again with that gentle liveliness in her eyes and lips that made him want to shout his love. "Darling," she said, "my world has grown so fast lately. It gives me so much to get used to, and now that we're getting somewhere — well, why rush? Before we start a family, I want to be sure the aftermath has begun to simmer down. I don't want anything to get in the way."

She sighed, letting go of him. "I feel very ruthless." She reached up and patted his face. "See how practical you've made me? Come on, let's go. I'm starving."

He followed her, unable to decide which question he wanted to ask.

18.

SATURDAY, KIRK REACHED ZOE'S HOUSE IN BRIGHT SUNSHINE, at about six P.M. Helen greeted him at the door with a kiss.

"Well, if it isn't Hercules," Zoe shouted from beyond. "Have you come to murder the Queen of the Amazons?"

He laughed. "That wasn't Hercules' intention, I'm told. He only came to steal her girdle or something."

"And the Queen defended herself." She laughed cordially, rising from her throne as he approached. She was wearing the red and black pajamas and the golden slippers, as on the night of the episode. Intentionally, he supposed, as he took her extended hand and she pulled him close in a light embrace. "My, what a monolith of a son-in-law."

"Hoping to remain that way." He grinned at Helen's enjoyment of the moment.

There was a card table set up beside the throne, and it held a typewriter, a stack of copy paper, a jar holding well-sharpened pencils, a manuscript, and an assortment of notes on cards and sheets.

"Glad to see you feel like writing." He lighted a cigarette for her.

"I don't really. I was just hoping I could fan something up, so I'm ready."

"Joyce Dewey called her," Helen announced with pride

from the kitchen doorway, "and wants her to outline a play about George Sand and de Musset."

"Fine." Kirk gave Zoe a little salute, cigarette between fingers. "That sounds swell."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm not sure the situation would be dramatic enough for the stage without raising hell with the facts, and I don't intend to do that. George is too real to me the way she is."

He sat down on the edge of the nearest armchair. "Sounds like it could have some wonderful acting roles."

"Zoe, I just thought of something. Remember when Lillian Landson wrote you last fall she said she'd love to play George. Too bad you never got to talk to her that time. I see she's got a new play this fall. Maybe you can see her then."

Zoe sighed, a frown of weariness seeming to come between her and the stuff on the card table. "If it pans out."

"Lillian could really put George across. You've seen her, haven't you, Kirk?" Helen's enthusiasm shone too brightly, Kirk thought, nodding.

Zoe raised her golden feet slowly to the hassock and settled back on the throne as if the effort were scarcely worthwhile. "I'll miss Helen, though. She's always been such a help when I'm writing — good to talk to when I hit a snag."

"We're not moving to the moon," Kirk said lightly.

"We'll see."

"How do you feel?" He watched the feline George Sand pass in a stately progress toward the kitchen.

"As if I'd been through a meat grinder — if you can imagine what they did to me in that place." Something positive seemed to have returned to Zoe.

"I'm afraid I can," he said, feeling as unperturbed as George looked. "It must have been hell."

"You can't know, really. It was beyond imagining. Still, it was a terrific experience, I suppose, if I can write

about it. I'm going to see if the *World-Tele* would be interested in it as an exposé. It would be a really thorough piece on a city hospital from the patient's viewpoint — especially interesting since the patient was committed under false pretenses and was able to observe quite clearly what went on. George Sand often wore trousers."

"What? Oh."

The Dreariheads were coming through the front doorway and it dawned on Kirk that this was merely the latest signal. Hecate was winking at Platitude as they skirted the suspended conversation echoing through the room and headed for the stairs. Kirk was offering a polite nod when Helen called him.

"I need a little help." She thrust a jar of olives at him as he entered the kitchen.

"Where's the nurse?" he whispered as he pried the lid off the jar with an old knife.

"They had a battle and she left at noon."

"What now?"

Helen ran the water full force and rattled some pots and pans in the sink. "She insists she doesn't want anybody, that she doesn't need anybody."

He nodded, doubtful, and sauntered back into the living room.

Zoe pointed a thumb ceilingward. "My God," she said, groaning, "I wish they'd find a place to go and get out of here. Are they looking?" she shouted in the direction of the kitchen.

Helen turned off the water. "They claim to be."

"Probably making no effort whatever," Zoe said more quietly, "even though the woman knows I can't stand the sight of her."

"She's doing her best to keep out of your way," Helen said from the doorway. "She hasn't said anything about the hospital incident, has she?"

"There hasn't been a word between us since I got back.

Kirk, it's too bad you and Helen aren't apartment hunting. I could evict them."

Helen bridled. "I told you I couldn't stand the place. And I want to live in town — at least for a while. I'm all set for the Village."

Zoe squinted at Kirk. "And what does the tyrant say?"

He grinned. "The tyrant says Amen."

Something clattered to the floor in the kitchen. Zoe started. "Oh! What was that?"

"Nothing special," Helen called.

"I'm sorry I'm so excitable."

Kirk muttered something he hoped sounded sympathetic.

Zoe closed her eyes, shuddering, then settled back in the depths of her throne with the martyred weariness of a reluctant convalescent. She didn't seem like the Zoe he knew. "I simply can't get over this feeling of being on edge. That hospital business — you can't imagine what a horror it was. The gall of that little rat of an interne telling me I had d.t.'s when it was perfectly obvious I was just shaken up" — her voice dropped to a conspiratorial intimacy — "over this business with Hecate."

Kirk nodded, as noncommittally as he could. The story was falling into place — Zoe's own story: something of which no other participant had much of a notion.

"I really ought to prefer charges, but I'll be satisfied if she'll just get out of the house and leave us alone. It's too late to bring the police in now. If only I hadn't been so muddled when things were actually happening. You heard about her part in this mess, didn't you?"

He squirmed under her probing eye, dreading the way she might react to any questions he could offer. He held himself to an innocuous, "Oh."

"I was trying to get things ready for that ill-fated party

last Saturday when she came down. That's what started this chain of calamity, as I see it now."

"The potatoes are on," Helen said, emerging from the kitchen.

"Plain boiled again, I suppose."

Helen nodded and began setting the table.

"More of that tiresome hospital routine. And here I am, simply dying for some French fries."

"I thought your stomach was still too upset."

"It is. It's terribly fluttery. That vile-tasting stuff they gave me in the hospital was what did it. I feel as though I still reek of it."

"Paraldehyde. Same thing we've given you for years, right here."

"Oh no, my dear. Mangione never prescribed anything like what those brutes forced on me. That gruesome smell — I don't think I'll ever be able to forget it. I'd love to see Hecate gagging over it."

"Stop inventing things."

"Inventing things? Don't be silly, Helen. I don't see why you should defend that slut. Ever since she moved in here she's been developing into a neighborhood problem. If I hadn't been so busy I suppose I could have kept better tabs on her and then maybe things wouldn't have got out of hand. I didn't begin to realize how much time she spent spying on us and spreading filthy gossip up and down the block."

Helen snorted and went back into the kitchen.

"This hospital thing — apparently, she'd been working up to it for months. She knew I was aware of what she was doing with some of the young men on the block and she was out to get me."

Kirk tried to play along. "Did she bring them through here or something?" he asked hesitantly.

Zoe leaned forward. The cunning shone from her lim-

pid eyes. "Well, give her credit for more brains than that. What she was doing was having the boys come over the roofs and down the fire escape hatch directly into her apartment. Really a very clever idea for a whorehouse, don't you think?"

He nodded, smiling with her at the uncommon solution of the problem. "She must have a remarkable imagination. How did you find out what she was up to?"

"Didn't you hear about her enticing Miles up there?"

"Oh . . ."

"That's why I called Bruno that afternoon. I thought he could do a more effective job of getting Miles to visit him. At least, the poor, confused kid would be better off away from here for the summer. But Bruno wasn't really any help." The call had started off well enough on two stiff drinks, she reflected, and a quiet, empty house. Bruno was very much his most obnoxious self however, questioning her motives and trying to pin her down on why Miles hadn't answered letters that required answers. No, it hadn't worked because he kept twisting things and accusing her of turning Miles and Helen against him and even trying to trip her into admitting that she'd had a few or wouldn't be calling him. That egomaniac, so handy with gratuitous advice and pinpricks — enough to make anybody drink an oceanful . . .

"Wasn't he agreeable to having Miles visit him?"

"What? Well, that's the trouble. It was an utterly frustrating call. While I was in the middle of it, I realized that woman was down here, eavesdropping, and I couldn't really concentrate. It was maddening."

"Anyway, Miles went."

"What? Oh yes. Well, of course that slut couldn't influence him no matter how she tried . . ." Zoe sighed. Damn this character, egging her on this way, no doubt hoping she would make a fool of herself the way she had over the phone that time. She couldn't stop now. Illusion

had already begun breathing down the neck of reality and it wasn't going to take many more breaths to make everything even more preposterous than it was already. Just so she could keep her balance . . .

"Too bad about the phone call."

"Not altogether. It brought on a much-needed showdown."

"With Bruno?"

Oh, deliver her from this poker-faced hulk. Patience, Zoe. Well, give him a run for it. One more slug trickling into her eager dryness and she ought to be able to get him fairly well tangled up before the pounce . . . "The showdown," she said firmly, "was with Hecate."

"I see."

"That's what you and Helen missed by not coming to the party. She upset me so while I was on the phone that I turned on her. Bad timing, of course, with the party hanging over me. But I couldn't help it and I simply confronted her with the evidence — what I'd discovered myself, plus what I'd gotten from other sources. She was stunned at first and then she threatened me. I went to the phone and called the police. Then, of course, she was all milk and honey, promising to leave Miles alone and whatnot. Pretty shrewd and disarming. She even talked me into having a drink with her, for old time's sake. God knows I needed a drink. But I should have known better, having been victimized before by —"

Kirk blinked at the intense blackness of her stare.

"— people who encouraged me to drink with them. Well, by the time the police arrived — they took their time — I was just no match for her. Is it any wonder she was able to pack me off to that bedlam?"

He found himself gazing blankly at his pipe. It had gone cold in his hand and there was nothing to do but stick it out of sight in the pocket of his jacket. He did so with a feeling of numbness.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" She was placing her gold-slipped feet on the floor and rising with what seemed like unusual care. The awesome brightness had left her eyes. He was shocked by her pallor.

"Certainly." He got out of his chair with the thought that she might need assistance.

"Please don't get up." She moved slowly, with that special unassailable dignity that he seemed to recall from some previous occasion, and disappeared into her room.

He stepped over to the kitchen doorway.

"Did you hear that stuff?"

Helen went on stirring something in a double boiler on the stove. She nodded and shrugged hopelessly.

"What's she trying to do?"

"Bait you, I suppose. God, I wish we didn't have to go through with this dinner business. I'm going crazy."

"So am I. And I'm tired of being baited." He heard the soft shuffle of Zoe's slippers and turned from the kitchen to face her.

Her smile was warm and guileless. There was color in her face again, a renewed intensity in her eyes. The certainty that she had bolstered herself with a drink tore through him like fire. He could almost feel in his hands the urge Miles must have felt.

If she was trying to bait him, he decided, as he lighted another cigarette for her, she was in for a disappointment. That ammunition she'd been hoarding so long had lost its kick. He almost laughed in her face, thinking how much he was going to enjoy rising to the bait.

"Helen," she called, as she settled down on her throne and hassock again, "are all those packed bags in your room something Miles forgot?"

Helen emerged from the kitchen, scowling. "You know damn well they're mine."

"Do I? Don't you have more drawer space than ever in there?"

"Please, let's cut out this silly pretense. You know I'm leaving with Kirk."

Zoe's smile lighted up charmingly. "Oh of course, my dear son-in-law. Yes. After all, what are we here for?"

Kirk felt the heat spreading through him. "Zoe, let's say something we mean for once. What do you expect to gain now? Christ, you drag enough deceit around with you to fill a freight train. Can't you see the rest of us are fed up with trying to help you drag it? Quit deceiving yourself. Quit scheming. It's too late."

Zoe's smile remained maddeningly unperturbed. "Listen to that. Spoken like a true-blue Boy Scout. But you'd better watch him, Helen. He obviously wasn't born in captivity, and nothing in his experience seems really to have tamed him."

Helen winked at Kirk. "That's what I like about him."

"Come on, Zoe, you've worn out the gag."

She ignored him. "So long as there's plenty to go around. He seems to be the barnyard type of polygamist at heart. That's why I thought the apartment would appeal to him. Will you miss me, Kirk?"

Helen laughed. "Oh Zoe, you're too late. I know all about your terrible — your lurid intrigue."

Zoe's eyes moved to Kirk. "Well, you great ugly brute, did you marry my little daughter just so you could be near me?"

He offered a mock leer. "You're too much for me, Zoe. Don't forget, I'm just a simple country hick with ideals."

She whistled. "Well, from now on, nothing but simple country hicks for me. If you'll pardon my being clinical, Helen — especially in mixed company — it was undoubtedly the most rapturous experience I've ever known. And as you know, I don't rapture easily."

"Very unfunny," Kirk said in disgust.

"Zoe, please . . ." Helen stood trembling, her hands working aimlessly at her apron. "Zoe, you'd better not

say things like that when you don't mean them. This isn't something to joke about. Kirk's my husband. I can't take this."

"I was sure he hadn't told you everything." Zoe's eyes widened, and their sudden darkness seemed to match the new gravity of her voice. "I'm not joking. I'm sure you know me well enough to realize that I wouldn't joke about such a thing. Perhaps if you had confided in me instead of letting him talk you into a sneak marriage, you might have found out what torment I was going through with this secret. I didn't even know how you actually felt about him."

"Helen, let's get out of here." His hands reached out for hers, but she made no move toward him. He knew then how guilty he must look, how suddenly and thoroughly Zoe's self-confidence had paralyzed the innocence he'd been so sure of in himself. If he had been guilty, he told himself, he would have come prepared to brazen it out with Zoe and he wouldn't have been so thrown by the way Helen's eyes now brimmed over with betrayal . . .

"I thought," Zoe was saying, "that when he wore out his welcome and you began to see through him — as you always have — you would get rid of him yourself and I'd never have to mention this incident at all. Instead, you've let him drag you into this impossible position where you can't help but be hurt. Of course, he *would* try to beat me to it with a good cover-up story . . ."

Helen blinked and shook her head. All she saw in Kirk's face was guilt — and a pale helplessness she'd never imagined possible.

" . . . Looking back, I can see how definite his intentions were. Even though I explained where you were the minute he appeared and he admitted you'd told him about your plans for the night, he proceeded to make himself quite at home . . . "

The words seemed to spatter all over the hateful

clutter of the room, and Kirk still just stood there, his eyes glazed as if he'd gone blind. Helen found herself watching a pulse beat in his throat, wondering why she couldn't hear it. This must be only a mock-up of the man, the pulse something mechanical Zoe was controlling by pressing buttons.

" . . . I certainly saw no harm in a drink and a little casual conversation. Anyway, at that point you hadn't even mentioned the thought of marrying him. Snap out of it, Kirk. You recognize these pajamas, don't you? Do I have to remind you how you tore them in your wild, drunken lust?"

"Shut up, Zoe!" Somehow, Helen had fought her way to the surface. "I can't — I'm not taking this."

"Let's go, then." Kirk seemed to have recovered his voice.

She caught her breath, waved him away. "Something's wrong, Kirk. You *do* look guilty. I know Zoe's a fraud, but what do I really know about you? There's — too much poison in what she's saying. It hurts."

"But Helen, you know my side of it."

She burst into tears and ran from the room.

He followed her as far as the closed door. "Helen, let me talk to you." The door was locked. He rattled the knob fruitlessly, then began pounding, pounding until he could feel the door panel strain under his fist. "Helen, how can you listen to this stuff?"

There was no response, though. In his panic, he supposed she might even be climbing out the window to get away. He could be sure only that Zoe was listening, and laughing at him, along with those eavesdroppers upstairs.

He came out of the foyer, back to the center of the living room, making his eyes avoid Zoe's.

"Thanks," she said, with a sober thickness that drew the silence more closely around them.

"Thanks for what?"

"Thanks for helping me get rid of both my children. It's such a relief finally to be out from under that burden. Man giveth. Man taketh away. Just like God." She flourished her empty cigarette holder with unusual restraint. "Why don't you grow a beard and look the part?" She smiled suddenly, dredging up some unexpected residue of charm that broke through his resistance even now. "Ah, that infamous night . . . Too bad about your solid-citizen inhibitions."

He found he had calmed down enough to smile — sardonically, he hoped, to mask his pity for her.

"I really wanted you that night . . ." Zoe's words went on purring around him, while her eyes tried to insinuate themselves into his. "I've wanted you ever since, too. That's my torment, that I've had to run away from you, that I've always had to run away from what I wanted most . . ." Abruptly, her voice turned shrewish: "Go ahead. Call me ninety kinds of bitch."

"Why bother?"

"Thanks. You know, I've always enjoyed being a female, really. It's just that I've hated being a woman." She rose shakily from her throne.

Helen's door flew open and she was back in the room, carrying a suitcase. Her face was pinched and white, more ruthlessly determined than he'd ever seen it, her eyes dry and clear as she let the suitcase thud to the floor.

"Helen, let me say something."

"Say it. But what's the use? I've had enough talk."

"But Helen, you can't believe what she says. You know what —"

"What does it matter what she says? I've stopped depending on what people say. My own senses are a hell of a lot more reliable. Poor Kirk . . . I guess you can't help looking guilty, feeling guilty. Now maybe you can understand why I've always been in such a muddle, why I've

tried to survive on lies, half-lies, and even unspoken lies." She laughed, her eyes sparkling through their old sadness again. "Come on, Vulnerable. Take me home so I can straighten you out."

Zoe recoiled as they swept past her, luggage and all. Trembling and momentarily confused, she dropped her cigarette holder.

Kirk's ugly face wavered close, broke open in a crude, arrogant laugh. "So long, Mom."

Then, as if she'd raised a knife to him, his enormity hurtled itself out of the house after Helen.

Minutes . . . It took several for the house to settle back on its foundations. A gale, it seemed, had roared through and cleaned the place out.

Zoe stood firm, listening to herself in the emptiness:

. . . Poor Helen. My Lord Marblefront has now made the grade. The marble has been scratched and he can settle down to being her most prized disappointment. George Sand said, "Last night I had *Merimée*; there is not much to him."

With her own George Sand caressing her ankles, Zoe strolled into her bedroom and opened the closet. From behind the dusty disorder of her shoes, she picked up the bottle and leaned back for a swig.

. . . Bruno sounded good the other day, just as smooth and articulate as ever. Called me a virgin, too — apparently just for the sake of arguing long-distance. "It's your greed, Zoe. Whether you've had one man or a thousand, you're still a virgin — a female with the woman locked in. The key goes into the lock, but you never let it turn, you never let the tumblers click, you never let the door open. Damn it, you've got the fire, but you'll smother in your own smoke. Or there'll be an explosion." Well, old boy, we've had a few explosions . . .

After a second swig she put the bottle back in its place and returned, in a stately promenade, to the living room.

There was the dinner table, set for three. And there were those beautiful steaks, more than enough for five healthy appetities, still languishing in the refrigerator. They must be deliciously ripe by now.

"Louella . . ." She relished the clear ring of her voice floating up the stairwell. But she had to sing out again before the door at the top opened.

"Was that you calling, Miss Lakes?"

Zoe smiled up at Louella's sweet, beruffled hominess. "It was. My dear, I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Oh no, I wasn't doing any —"

"Well, my dear, I was wondering if you and Tom would care to have dinner with me. My guests had to leave suddenly, and I'm in utter misery because these wonderful steaks may go to waste."

Louella's door opened wider and her face, unusually skeptical, blossomed forth. "Dinner?"

"Of course, my dear. I certainly hope you don't think I have any quarrel with you because of the way my children have behaved. After all, it was you who saved my life." . . . Yes, after all, who else has ever cared enough for me to do that?

The open doorway remained open for a matter of seconds, and then Louella came into view again. "Tom says O.K. We'll be down as soon as we wash up."

"Good. I know you can handle the steaks so much better than I can."

"Sure, I'll do them. You like them rare, don't you?"

"Bloody, my dear. But it really doesn't matter."

"Oh, we like them any old way, Miss Lakes. Be down in a jiffy."

. . . How shrewd of Louella to be so uncomplicated about all this. At least it won't be my own children killing me. Louella — someone to laugh with me, someone who's at least afraid of what I know about her, even if she's no longer much dazzled otherwise . . .

Zoe paused before the mirror, touched at her hair, stared intently to detect the sparkle returning to her eyes, detected it, then returned slowly to her throne. Before she could sit down however, she had to get George Sand to retrieve her cigarette holder from under the library table. George was surprisingly dense about the idea and had to be led to the spot and coaxed a little, but eventually she came through.

