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The Last of The Southern Winds

Try for Elegance

The Last of The Southern Winds

THE LAST OF THE SOUTHERN WINDS

by David Loovis



CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS, *NEW YORK*

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To Lawrence Carr

The Last of The Southern Winds

"For over a century Key West has been an active naval base, which brings to it the operatic gaiety of an oceanic metropolis. This, with the known facts about Key West history: its early affinity with Spain, the culture of the settlers from Cuba, St. Augustine, Virginia, old New York, and the New England States, might explain the sophisticated air of the Key Westers despite their insular position. But it is only in a poetic and mystic mood that one may divine truths buried under the few known facts. And it is under the spell of the island, listening to the legends, understanding the traditions, that one may find the true keys to the mystery of the cosmopolitanism and gay abandon of this 'last frontier' . . ."

—FROM AN OLD KEY WEST GUIDEBOOK

Thursday, February 20

CARL SOLON did not believe in demons. But at that moment he could easily have been persuaded. With an elbow propped out the window of his white Ford, Carl drove along the Overseas Highway, which connects the mainland of Florida with the island of Key West. He was navigating straight into the afternoon sun, and no matter how, or how often, he adjusted the visors, he could not fix them to shield his eyes. The visors kept slipping and it wouldn't have been hard to credit a demonic hand.

Then there was this highway, or, more precisely, causeway. Fantastic. Only a hellish imagination, however brilliant, could have conceived it. It had run a hundred-odd miles so far, jumping from island to island in the chain of islands between the mainland and Key West, and it was only two lanes wide. Trucks passing each other had to inch by sometimes. Black skid marks were frequent. Yet traffic proceeded at a pace of sixty or better. Then to distract the driver further, there was the view.

The causeway's elevation was about twenty-five feet. One seemed constantly to hover over water, as in a low-flying plane, for it was *water*—shallow, green-blue sea—that the causeway mostly traversed. Oh, it touched now and again on a coral island—sometimes several miles long, sometimes just a protruding rock—but mostly the view was endless sea stretching away. And sky: the clouds overhead resembled dozens of atomic explosions . . . the puffed, billowing formations.

It was beautiful, of course, and Carl appreciated that. But it was also demonic in that it took one's mind off driving, and a mishap could occur so readily here.

He had understood from a note on his map that the causeway was constructed originally as a railroad trestle, but that the hurricane of '35 had washed off most of the track, not to mention the train. When the time came to rebuild, it had seemed wiser, the note had said, to make it an auto road. The wisdom of it, in Carl's estimation, at least, was then being seriously questioned.

Nor was he a person unused to driving. He had recently finished a job which required him to travel great distances by car.

Nevertheless, when this rightly-named Overseas Highway ended, when the pavement ahead of him curved sharply and opened into a four-lane, palm-fringed boulevard on the island of Key West, Carl was relieved. Also, conscious for the first time of just how tense he had become: the muscles in his neck and shoulders ached. So much so, in fact, that although he couldn't be but a few minutes from where he wanted to go, he decided to stop and stretch. He glanced in the rearview mirror; there was nothing behind. He drove off the pavement onto the edge of a gravel parking area, an area in front of an old roadhouse, which he happened to notice was called Vera's Place. He stepped out.

Carl Solon was twenty-five, towheaded; and the squint lines from the sun in his eyes had resulted in emphasizing a pleasant, habitual expression of alertness. He walked around the car once, swinging his arms to unlimber. He was of sturdy build; instead of sports clothes, he wore a blue oxford cloth shirt and khakis. He gave the impression of a graduate of one of the better Eastern colleges and a member in good standing of that Anglo-Saxon collegiate royalty so prominent in the social affairs of America. That this latter impression did not quite tally with the facts will be dealt with in due course. Since Vera's Place was right on the water, and since he'd actually parked under a vast palm tree, it was cool and he leaned against the front fender and smoked.

Curious, he thought, about this demon business. For not only had he been unusually agitated by the drive, but he was feeling (had felt all the way down) threatened somehow . . . as if he were venturing too far out—Key West was the end of the line—much farther out than he was prepared to extend himself, although he certainly could not have said what kind of extension might be called for. His meditation on the possibility that a tendril from the nether world had embraced him was interrupted, however, by a loud voice from a passing police car telling him to move on. Although he could not conceive the reason for being so ordered—

his car was well off the pavement; the area was a parking space—Carl finished his cigarette and continued along.

The boulevard swept around the edge of the island. On the water, a soft yellow glaze, even if it wasn't nearly sundown, and anchored sailboats, masts bobbing, even if it wasn't rough. A breeze had come up, though, stiffened in fact, and Carl presumed it to be the trade winds—comparable, he'd been told, to the sirocco which blew over the Isle of Capri; winds that sometimes soothed, sometimes irritated. It came through the car windows, warm and wet and richly fragrant of earth and sea. The palm trees leaned into it as if linking arms with a friend.

The boulevard ran by a yacht basin of size now and, at separate docks, there were cruisers for hire for any kind of fishing expedition one might wish. And, on the land side, the boulevard passed used car lots and supermarkets. Then it ran under an impressive four-socketed traffic light and away from the water.

Signs indicating the center of town led Carl through a district thickly sown with tourist cabins and finally to a cross street called Duval, which was apparently the main thoroughfare of Key West. As Carl turned the corner into it, he pulled over and asked directions of a sailor. In reply, the sailor said to keep going along here until he reached the tall yellow building much in evidence ahead and that, just a few blocks beyond it, Carl would see on his right the sign of the place he wanted.

Duval Street is busy at five o'clock, but nobody rushed especially. Carl maintained his place in a bumper-to-bumper procession of vehicles. Two things were slowing traffic: a high school band, shinily decked out in bottle green, which played loudly at one of the intersections for the purpose of collecting money for new uniforms, and a truck—made to look like a steam locomotive and pulling a long line of observation cars—which maneuvered in and out. This truck-train was evidently a favorite tourist diversion, for every seat in the little awninged cars was taken by people manacled with cameras.

The street itself was lined with low buildings, stores; and the fronts of them had been much gussied up. New palm trees had been planted in pots along the curb. Strung across from one side of the street to the other—paper pennants and canvas no-

tices of coming events: Air Show! Flower Show! What with the band playing and the flags, it was rather festive, Carl thought. He had not anticipated such a thriving town. He noted all the usual businesses, with perhaps a few too many souvenir shops, and even a cowboy store, which displayed highly-ornamented shirts, fancy boots, and a glittering, fan-shaped collection of knives.

And it was a Navy town without question. Sailors hung around on almost every corner; they jammed the large, open penny arcade, the several shoeshine shops, and, of course, streamed in and out of the bars. The bars followed almost one right after the other: the Jumble Bar, the Preview Lounge, Cecil's, the Bamboo Room, the Havana Bar, the Boat Bar, to name some Carl caught a glimpse of as he drove slowly by. He was halted finally for a red light at the corner abreast the tall (six stories) yellow building, the Hotel La Concha, and when the light changed and he started up, the street ran gently downhill and the business district seemed to end.

And then—old homes, Victorian, gray from the weather, with jungle-shrubberied yards; a white stucco, pinnacled church with its doors and windows flung open; the green lawn and stone fountain of the Woman's Club; a red arrow pointing up an alley to indicate the whereabouts of the local legitimate theater (why is the local theater always tucked away behind something? he wondered) ; a big building with the Elks Club deer standing tall and brave in front; and lastly an immense old tree hanging over the entire width of the pavement.

Opposite that tree, Carl saw the sign.

It was mounted on a raised lawn, and it was in the shape of an heraldic crest. It said in plain and dignified script: The Southern Winds, Restaurant, and Lounge.

Nothing about the sign was unusual, apart from its tastefulness. But again, irresistibly, Carl experienced a presentiment of threat and overextension. The only thing he could attribute it to was a mention of "trouble" on the part of the man whose letter had been ultimately the reason for his trip (as melodramatic as Carl had considered that mention when he'd read it). But he could not convince himself that that entirely explained it either.

Drawing closer, Carl noticed a narrow driveway just ahead of

the sign which he thought might lead to a side entrance and parking space. He was correct and, carefully, he turned in. But before pulling up all the way, he stopped and got a side and partial front view of the place.

The Southern Winds occupied a raised, corner plot, and it stood back about ten yards from the street. Essentially, it was a large-scale colonial mansion. Painted startling white. Seven slim pillars braced the front. Porches followed around two floors except for the side Carl was on. There, a jutting addition had been built, which, judging by the sound of running water and pots being banged about, housed the kitchen. The building had a slanted, maroon-shingled roof with a captain's walk. The upper story was mostly shielded from observation by several lofty and ancient palms. White wooden trellises had been leaned against the porch of the lower story; vines had climbed there and all but enclosed it. It was a gracious, ample, apparently well-kept old property and it seemed too bad to Carl that it had been surrendered from private hands.

Carl continued on up the drive to the parking space and pulled in near a loading platform, where a woman of about thirty, dressed in the white blouse and black pleated skirt of a waitress, stood, hands on her hips, scowling.

"Hello," Carl said. "I'm looking for Jake Romano."

"Won't be back tonight," the woman said with brusqueness. "Gone to Miami. Can't leave the car there."

It occurred to Carl, facetiously, that people seemed to have something against his car—first the policeman, now this worthy.

"My name is Carl Solon," he said, hoping that would mean something.

Since the woman had got off with the censorious remark for which she'd primed herself, her face relaxed.

"Oh yes," she said, still brusquely (or had he mistaken an habitually husky voice for an unkind one?). "He mentioned your coming, but I don't think he expected you till tomorrow or the next day. Well . . . park for a couple of minutes and bring your stuff in. There's a room upstairs for you if you want it."

While Carl maneuvered his car next to another—a twenty-year-old Plymouth coupé entirely up on jacks—in the small park-

ing space, he considered the room there "if he wanted it." His first idea was that he did not want it; the idea of living on top of a restaurant and a night club did not appeal. A room somewhere could not be hard to find nor absurdly expensive. Still, and still, it was late: he wanted a shower and rest pretty quick. Well, why not? He could try it for a couple of nights; if it was too much, he'd move.

Carl obtained his suitcases from the trunk and joined the woman on the loading platform.

"Name's Jenny," she said, and offered her hand like a man. "I'm sort of unofficial captain of the dining room." She looked to Carl rather hard, but she was extremely neat and fairly pretty, with freckles. She pointed to a dark flight of outside stairs. "You go up here, then inside the house, and up another flight to the third floor, the attic. You'll see the room, the door's open, and there's a john right next to it in the hall." Carl could not help but be amused; she was right off Broadway, or the lustier parts of Greenwich Village, and she was trying to speak in a masculine way to give, he thought, the impression of some sort of underworld tinge about herself. "I know where there are some linens," she said. "I'll bring 'em up to you in a minute. Come down to the dining room and eat any time before ten-thirty. . . . Oh, and you'll have to move your car; there isn't room but for two cars and only the chef and the kitchen chef are allowed to keep their cars there."

Jenny shook hands with him again, her silver arm bangles jingling, and went through a screen door into the kitchen. She had the gruff, shady manner of a gun moll combined with a hearty frankness. She was anything, Carl thought, but the sibilant Southern belle, who, in the movies at least, greeted people as they arrived at such a mansion.

Carl found the room—third floor rear, under one eave, with one window and space enough to stand upright only on the left side. He switched on an overhead naked light bulb. Two wicker chairs and a bed propped up on bricks. Nothing more. Sawdust anthills, or termite hills—he didn't know which—dotted the floor boards. It was not an enthusiastic welcome. But the bathroom, just outside, was spotless. A broom had been left conspicuously in the

hall. All right, he was there and he would remain there. He made good and quick use of the broom.

Fifteen minutes later, he opened his luggage on the floor, took out fresh clothes and went for a shower. He merely wrapped a towel around himself to go into the hall; there didn't seem to be anyone else around. Re-entering his room, he found a mattress cover, sheets, a pillow and a pillowcase laid across the bed. Jenny apparently was someone who kept her word, unconcerned with him though she had appeared to be. Carl put on clean khaki trousers and a white polo shirt. Although he'd worn similar clothes the last two days on his trip, it still seemed a novelty to be dressing like that. He went downstairs again to move his car.

Luckily, he found a parking spot quite nearby.

Returning to the Southern Winds, and approaching from the front this time, Carl mounted the steps to the porch. The porch was not wide, but it was secluded and fragrant because of the trellises and the strange, flowering vines. Wicker chairs, in somewhat better condition than the two in his room, were arranged upon it. And here, as in his room, the ants or termites, or whatever, were at work between the floor planks, which creaked and thumped as he crossed.

Just outside the front door was a plaque which read:

THE BONNIE LEE HOUSE

Built 1860

Key West was occupied by the Northern Army during the War Between the States. Bonnie Lee waved the Confederate flag from the balcony of this house as the Yankee troops marched by. When the house was searched, the flag could not be found. Bonnie wore hoops, but in those days war was fought by gentlemen, and even if the hiding place had occurred to one of the soldiers, no man dared violate the personal sanctity of that fiery Southern beauty.

THE KEY WEST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Just inside the door was another door, covered with straw matting and marked Fantasea Room. It was evidently the bar. Carl glanced through the little diamond-shaped window. Blackness.

He continued on through the main hall, passing under the staircase, the head of which faced the rear. Although the fact that he was settled, at least for the night, had somewhat recalled him to himself, he fully intended to go to bed and knock off an hour or two. He paused, however, at the head of the stairs and ran his hand over the satisfyingly smooth-worn and classic newel post. It would only take a minute he thought to glance at the restaurant. The entrance was just here—he did so.

It was attached to the back of the house, a shedlike structure with a concrete floor, and bordered on three sides with bushes and flowers. So thoroughly, indeed, that surprisingly little light got in. The floor, Carl noticed, had recently been scrubbed; it was wet in places. Chairs and tables were stacked in haphazard piles—a miscellany of old wooden pieces, bruised and rickety. To one side of the street entrance to the pavilion, there was a charcoal-broil pit.

Carl was about to turn back when two cats plunged by him into the dining room. They stopped dead-still in the center of the floor. As far as he could see in the dimness, they were inordinately large, furry animals: one a tiger cat, the other white and buff-colored. They stayed close to each other, sniffing, waiting.

They did not wait long. From the upper regions of the house a voice, outraged and demanding, called: "Babe, Tig, come here this minute! Now come, do you hear me?"

The cats remained where they were.

Carl heard the slap of a woman's soft slipper descending the stairs at great rate and, simultaneously, a shrill, finger-aided whistle. He stood where he was, thinking that a stranger emerging from the darkness might startle the distraught woman. She appeared: heavy, fortyish, in a negligee which she did not trouble to keep closed. Her hair was parted in the middle, madonna-style, and it fell around her shoulders. She glanced at Carl and went right by. Her face had not been made up and her features were muzzy with fat, but he thought it was still a rather hauntingly attractive face.

"Babe, Tig!" she called, her eyes evidently ineffective in the light, for the cats remained where they'd been, in full sight, which,

Carl thought, was provocative of them. But now they were spied. "Bad cats!" she said. "Don't make me chase you. C-o-m-e h-e-r-e."

But as if on signal, now that she was close, the cats flew. Together still, they nestled under the bushes at one side. Carl could see them, beyond easy reach but not inaccessible, looking out with solemn eyes.

This southernmost agitated Blanche Dubois with an Ohio accent rounded on them. "Darlings, your dinner is ready and I've got to have mine. Bad cats," she said plaintively.

Carl began to offer his services, but she had taken little notice of him and less now; she bent over and collared Babe and Tig. And they, in what to Carl seemed like studied docility, gave up at that point without a sound. It was as if the cats had played a familiar and deliberately mischievous game. With one animal under each arm, the woman turned to him.

"I'm sorry if you've been talking to me," she said in the urgent tone of a big, timid girl making a recitation. "But I'm deaf, and I don't have my hearing aid on and I've got to get my cats fed and myself dressed and fed and the restaurant opens at six. . . . If you want to see somebody here, you'll probably find someone in the kitchen. I'm going there now."

She disappeared into a covered ramp which led out the back. The place was silent.

Carl went upstairs to his room, made the bed, set his alarm clock for seven-thirty and lay down. He could hear tinny jukebox music very far off and the gentle noise of a great palm frond brushing the house near his window. And suddenly, quite clearly over both those sounds, he heard an elaborate and mellow church carillon start up. It played charmingly, "Somewhere a Voice Is Calling," and then one lively old hymn he couldn't remember the name of, and another he knew quite well: "The Old Rugged Cross." He listened to it intently, even as the notes mingled with the other sounds, even as the notes mingled with his dreams.

The room was dark when he woke, except for a neon light reflecting on the slanted ceiling from a sign in the street. For some reason, his alarm had not gone off; it read five after nine. Carl got up quickly, hoping it was not too late for dinner. He switched

on the unshaded overhead bulb. Something would certainly have to be done about *that.* He dressed as he had before, and, proceeding cautiously through the halls and down the stairs, both totally unilluminated, he went toward the light, the music and the voices.

On the main floor, Carl stood again at the entrance to the dining pavilion. The room was crowded. Tables had been arranged (mostly fours, with twos along the sides) and covered with plain white cloths. A small candle flickered on each. Uniformed waiters and waitresses rushed about, and they were helped by several bus boys.

In front, on the near side, the lady of the cats, much made-up, sat at a cash register. On the far side in front—the focal point of the room—the charcoal broil, spotlit by three crisscrossing beams, was operated by a tall man, resplendent in white, with an old-fashioned chef's hat set on his head at a rakish angle.

The chef worked alone there and he had a great many orders on the fire. Carl watched the waiters go over to him: nothing was shouted and nothing was written down—attestation enough to the chef's competence. Great clouds of smoke poured into the exhaust chimney as he stoked the glowing lumps of charcoal under the grates. Crackles of broiling meat penetrated pleasantly even through the noise of the room. And, needless to say, the steaks smelled delicious.

There was, Carl thought, about the entire scene a marvelous air of improvisation; all the elements of the pavilion had been thrown together casually and hastily, it seemed, but with a happy result. The room was amber-lit from concealed lights around the edge of the shed roof and from concealed lights placed in the shrubbery around the sides.

Carl saw Jenny then and she waved to him to come ahead. She escorted him to a side table already occupied by a blond young man of thirty perhaps; he was sunburned and he was handsome, but he had a very obvious affliction.

"This is Art Troy," Jenny said. "He's our pianist. You can share a table, all right? We're pretty busy." Jenny left them, saying she'd be right back to take his order.

Art Troy stood up, Carl introduced himself, and Troy shook

Carl's hand genially, if nervously, and they sat down. It was not a polite thing to notice, Carl knew, but in Troy's case it was impossible to overlook—Troy suffered from a desperate psychological facial tic, blinked continually, not with just his eyes, but with his whole face, like a spasm. It was damnably difficult for anyone, Carl thought, but it must have been an especial burden for this fellow, since it no doubt damaged his public appearance and, therefore, his career. Troy was just starting his main course.

To save Jenny time, Carl looked around on the other tables for a menu. He didn't see one.

"Menu?" Troy said.

"Yes."

"There."

Troy pointed over the heads of the well-dressed crowd to a stanchion, against which had been nailed an ordinary blackboard. The menu was chalked on it in a bold hand.

Conch Chowder	*65¢*	*Shrimp Cocktail*	*85¢*
Onion Soup	*50¢*	*Crabmeat "*	*85¢*

FILET MIGNON	$ 8.50
SIRLOIN STEAK FOR ONE	6.50
SIRLOIN STEAK FOR TWO	12.00
SLICED STEAK	5.50
PORK CHOPS	4.50
LAMB CHOPS	4.50
SWORDFISH STEAK	4.00
TURTLE STEAK	3.50
FRIED SHRIMP	3.50

All orders served with one vegetable, potato, and mixed salad. Choice of dressing.

Ice cream 40¢	*Southern Winds Key Lime Pie with Graham-cracker Crust 85¢*

No choice on Carl's part was necessary, however, for Jenny came back with the news that the chef said he might have a sirloin steak if he wished it. Carl accepted. Jenny hurried off.

"Lots of rumors flying around about you," Troy said, giving Carl as concentrated an expression as he could manage.

"What do they say?"

"That you're here and will work as a waiter, but that you're rich and you've come to look us over and save the old homestead with the mortgage money." Whereupon Troy raised his arm and made a rah-rah gesture and giggled. Curious, Carl thought, that a man already handicapped should conduct himself with quite so much the mien of a fool.

"I will start as a waiter tomorrow," Carl said. "And my uncle may lend Mr. Romano a certain sum, but not enough, I shouldn't think, to make or break a business as big as this one."

"Think not?" Troy said, making a hard effort to control his face. "The Southern Winds, let me tell you, runs from day to day." Troy leaned over the table. "If Jake can keep it going through this season, it'll probably be in the clear next season; but if it collapses now, he loses everything. And it could collapse any time. He needs whatever extra money he can get his hands on. He owes *me* three weeks' back salary." Troy had maintained a steady face through the minute it had taken for him to make those remarks, but now he gave himself up to the blinks he'd withheld. "He's a great guy, but he doesn't know anything about running a business. Know where he is now?"

"I think Jenny said Miami."

"Right. The minute they heard you were definitely coming they took off for the Fontainebleau Hotel for a vacation. Figure now that they've got money behind them, they don't have to worry. I mean Jake and Melanie. It must cost fifty dollars a night to go there, and they owe me all that back salary which Jake never thinks about."

"I understood," Carl said, surprised to be so naturally discussing these details with a stranger, "that they were pressed."

"They are pressed," Troy said. "But Jake, like as not, will leave everything in his partners' hands and just go off. Maybe this trip was Melanie's idea, but Jake *went*."

"His wife?"

"Yes, watch yourself with her. Doesn't give a damn about anyone."

Troy fell silent, had dessert, smoked a cigarette. Carl considered his statements. An abused feeling ran through most of what he had to say, which probably stemmed from a deeper and more personal cause than not getting paid, although that was a pretty good reason. However, Troy seemed to Carl, a fellow on whose words it was better not to rely too much.

Jenny brought his steak, still sizzling on a china platter.

"Hot plate," she said, handling it with a napkin.

The steak was all Carl hoped it would be. Surely, no paper work stood between the customer and the food at the Southern Winds to denude it of its flavor. The steak was tender, it was juicy, it was precisely seasoned. With fare as good as this and with such a pleasant setting, Carl could not see why the business shouldn't continue successfully.

Troy spoke then about the beach. He said it was practically a ritual for everyone to put in a daily appearance there—South Beach at the foot of Duval Street, that is. It was the only thing about Key West which amused him.

"If you're unhappy and unpaid," Carl said, "why don't you leave, Art, or threaten to leave at least, since it wouldn't make much difference to you?"

"Can't because of the Union," Troy said. "I have a contract. Besides, Jake's tied up all my money. I work to live. And I don't want to tell the Union on Jake. He keeps promising that things are going to be all right, as soon as your uncle comes through, or his other schemes materialize, and I keep believing him."

Jenny brought coffee, which Carl did not drink at dinner, and —when he was ready—a piece of Key lime pie, which had such special billing on the menu. The cream of the meringue rose four inches from the custard. It was a marvelous combination, not too sweet, not too tart, of the richness of the eggs and cream, the biting flavor of the limes, and the good taste of the graham-cracker crust. Carl thought he had not ever had a piece of pie he enjoyed as much.

"May makes it," Troy said. "Like it's made no place else on the Keys. She works in the kitchen, does the fish dishes, vegetables, shrimp cocktails, and so forth." Troy gestured in the direction of

the rear of the room and the covered ramp. "The Southern Winds has its assets."

"And the Southern Winds has its problems," Carl said, thinking mostly of Romano's letter to his uncle.

Troy folded his napkin carefully. "You don't know the half of it," he said, making an effort to resist a spasm. "If I were you, I'd make my arrangements with Jake without asking too many questions. There are things going on around here that Jake is not responsible for and that it's wise not to know too much about—that's the way I figure it."

With that, Troy excused himself, saying he'd see Carl later, that he had to get back to the bar for his next performance, which was late already.

A young man to reckon with, Carl thought—somewhat light-minded, as he had heard that pop pianists were inclined to be.

The crowd in the dining room had lessened now. Carl was himself ready to leave, but he wanted to thank Jenny before he went. He caught her attention; she had a spare moment; she came over.

"Everything was delicious," he said. "Thank you."

"Even Troy?" she said, slightly smiling.

"Is he always so cryptic?"

"It was mean of me to sic him on you," he said. "But I had nowhere else for you to sit. That boy lives all by himself with his music and his fears and . . ." Jenny injected an imaginary hypodermic needle into her arm. "*That* keeps him going."

Carl wondered if it were true that Troy took drugs, or whether this wasn't again Jenny's interpretation of Troy as seen through the special underworld tinge she apparently liked to give everything.

"He said he hasn't been paid in three weeks."

"Probably so."

"That doesn't speak very well for Romano."

"Jake is the greatest," Jenny said abruptly. "Don't you believe anything else from anybody."

She said it with such emphasis, vehemence indeed, that Carl thought he'd better change the subject.

"Jenny, what is Vera's Place?"

"Whore house," Jenny said simply, and was off to take care of a party of her customers who had signaled.

Carl wondered if the police had been discouraging Vera's Place or protecting it.

He left the table, the dining room, and, as he made his way through the house, he stopped in front of the bar door and glanced in through the diamond-shaped window. The Fantasea Room was crowded; he'd save it for another time. Gaining the porch, Carl was momentarily blinded by the glare of a dozen or so spotlights placed on the lawn and brilliantly illuminating the house. Also, strings of colored bulbs went from the house to the telegraph poles along the street. The corner on which the Southern Winds stood was well marked.

Carl checked his car first—it was wedged between two others; space along the curb was at a premium—then he walked slowly on down Duval Street into a night of honky tonk neon signs: fire-red, gas-blue, ghost-green.

This was the district of sailor bars, even more so than the business section he'd passed through earlier that day. Carl noted the names—Gallery, Duffey's, Sloppy Joe's, Duval Club, 116, The White Cap, Rudy's, Top Hat, Downtowner. There was no great jam in any one of them, however. In the doorways, one man, sometimes two, stood with flashlights and checked identification cards before entry was allowed. Every bar had its own raucous jukebox and some of the bars had their own small bands. Carl paused a moment outside of one which featured a fairly good rock-n-roll Negro quartet. At least it sounded good from the sidewalk. In some of the bars, sailors danced disconsolately—it seemed to Carl that their attitude was disconsolate—with girls who looked very much at home where they were, who wore shorts or tight leotards, and who, even while they danced, did not let go of their drinks. These places were clearly different in kind from the Southern Winds.

And yet the street itself was not noisy. The warmth of the tropical night, the heavy palm trees here and there along the way, the air, kneadable as dough in its richness and softness, absorbed noise or localized it. Carl walked to the very end of Duval Street, where a twenty-foot-high blazing sign said "HAVANA MADRID"

and another sign, painted on the wall, announced: "TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' ROSE TATTOO WAS PHOTOGRAPHED HERE." Pictures of swollen-busted women were also mounted on that wall.

Two sailors, quite drunk, staggered out of the place. They clutched each other for support. But they straightened up fast and ducked around a corner when they caught sight, as did Carl, of two Shore Patrolmen approaching down the street, wearing the white belts and spats of guard duty, and swinging white clubs.

There was nothing in that scene, or in the brief glimpse Carl got of a naked girl peering through sleezy curtains of a second-story window, to alarm anyone, but the sense of foreboding, the sense of need for undue extension of himself again occurred to Carl. In fact, it caused him to shiver. He started back toward the Southern Winds.

Friday, February 21

SOUTH BEACH in Key West is a tiny beach, a strip of land perhaps three hundred feet long and a hundred feet deep. On the left is a motel and on the right a great cupolaed structure known as the Southernmost House (in the continental U.S.A.). There is a volleyball court, which is usually busy on a bright afternoon, and a small, enclosed bathhouse-soft drink stand. On the beach, several permanent wooden umbrellas tilt slightly, as do the canvas ones, which are for rent from the stand-concessionaire. But most people bring their own umbrellas and their own aluminum beach chairs. There is a concrete pier jutting out from the beach quite far, where, on really hot days, it is always possible to catch some breeze. And, as small as South Beach is, one side of it, or roughly half, is unusable for swimming, since there are coral rocks—from which many storms have washed the sand. On this whole Florida peninsula of glorious and spacious beaches, South Beach isn't much, and the city fathers don't do anything to make it better: it's as if they would prefer to have visitors use the newer public beaches or the facilities of the several private beach clubs. Still, unless you are a dull tourist, or an officer in the Navy, or one of the local society ladies who devotes her life to Scrabble, you eschew those places and come to the beach at the foot of Duval Street: it is the "fun" place.

Carl parked his car and, fairly self-consciously in his new blue bathing suit, walked across the beach and spread his towel. Quite plainly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jenny and Art Troy and a lot of other people on the end of the pier, but this first day, at least, until he got some sunburn, swam and relaxed a bit, he felt he would rather not join them. Indeed, he hadn't been asked. He would wait until he was introduced around at the Southern Winds.

After an assiduous application of sunburn lotion, which he had thought to bring, Carl lay on his stomach and watched the volleyball game.

The players were various—several very old gentlemen, several women (one overflowingly busty young woman with no compunction about running vigorously after the ball), a boy of twelve, a clown who wore an engineer's cap and a tiger's tooth amulet, half a dozen young men (all athletic), and one man especially who was blessed with an extraordinary physique. This particular fellow seemed so at home in the open air and so exactly equal to his body. . . . When he hit the ball, the ball was hit well and proper. He crouched alertly; his movements were quick, deft and effortless. As Carl watched him, he reached across the net during a heated volley and accidentally cuffed a player on the opposite team who had also tried for the ball.

The injured player backed off and the game halted. The first man stood by and then Carl saw and heard him, even from a distance, say, "I'm sorry," once and firmly. Anyone observing—and there were others now—could hardly help but feel he meant it. But the injured player continued to rub his face, his eye. The first man leant, then, up against the pole which supported the net, and there was patience in his attitude but also the least suggestion that the other player was making a bit too much of it. The rest of the players stood around with rather bored expressions. Still, the first man waited, and then finally the injured player resumed his stance and the game continued.

The fellow's apology, however, since it was meant, resulted in action. He played less vociferously, less without consciousness of his own strength and the need for consideration of the other participants in the game. The fact that it *was* a game had been recalled to him, and he abided by it.

Carl regarded him as very much a gentleman. Carl turned over on his back and closed his eyes, recalling the recent loss of his own feeling for himself as a gentleman, recalling the events of the last week which had precipitated his trip to Key West. As the sun warmed him and as he dug his fingers into the sand, this is what he remembered:

The office was on the thirty-fourth floor, a corner office, looking west over Manhattan. It had begun to snow but one could still see the Hudson River and the cliffs of Jersey beyond. And ordinarily anyone sitting in the office appreciated the view. But Carl

did not see it. The glaring gray light coming in merely caused him to squint, adding to his quickly-mounting perturbation.

Carl wore a blue flannel suit, a blue-and-maroon-striped tie, and a French-cuffed shirt that showed half an inch of linen beneath the sleeves of his jacket and cuff links that were plain, round and gold. He sat stiffly on the edge of a leather armchair, facing the sales manager. He was being fired from a job he had held for four years.

Mr. Ruby sat with his back to the view, his elbows on the desk and his hands bridged together in front of him. He was gray at the temples, he wore a gray flannel suit instead of a blue one, and his tie was Paisley instead of striped.

"We watched your progress up through New England," Mr. Ruby said. "You started out all right the first year but you seemed to slack off."

"The figures of every man in the department slacked off for last year," Carl said.

"Not as much as yours."

"You said when I started that the New England territory had always been difficult and you'd tried several men on it before me who didn't do as well."

"That's correct. And we're going to try one more, a man who's traveled the territory for fifteen years and who's coming in with us through our absorption of the High School Text department of Tech Books."

"And I'm just out, after four years of plugging?"

"I'm afraid so. The terms of our merger with Tech include taking over their two senior salesmen. One goes out West, one to New England where you've been. I'm sorry, but as I said we'll have to ask you to make other plans."

"I'm going to protest and hard," Carl said, bearing down on the words.

Mr. Ruby unfolded his hands, sat back in his chair.

"I know that you came here," Mr. Ruby said, clearing his throat, "because your uncle, the Reverend Ben Hoyt, whom I've had the honor of hearing preach, is a Princeton schoolmate of the president of this firm. But I tell you that you will not do yourself, your uncle or the president any good by protesting."

"It's worth a try," Carl said, bridling. "Fired so casually, no

offer of a place in another department. Four years of service totally lost. I never once reminded anyone here of how I happened to come into this firm. I did the job and I did it well and you know it. I think I'm getting a rotten deal and I've worked too long to take it without a fight."

Carl did not ever speak in his own behalf easily. The last words choked in his throat.

"I liked you as a person," Mr. Ruby said quietly, "when you came here, and I thought you might make a good salesman or I wouldn't have taken you on no matter who recommended you from upstairs. It was more or less in my hands at the beginning. Carl, I still like you, but I want to tell you something—something aside from the obvious facts of the matter over which I have really not much control. It is true, I have not made any great effort to keep you, to set you up in another department. As far as selling is concerned, it is my personal opinion . . . that you're in the wrong business. You're . . ." he hesitated a moment and looked out at the snow, "the only word I can think of—and an unusual one, unusual for me—it's 'querulous.' Yes, you're a querulous guy, and if you don't know what it means, like I didn't till the other day, it means kind of 'fault-finding,' even to the point of quarrelsome. I don't read much poetry but I do recall one written by Edgar Guest, at least I think it was him"—Edgar Guest, Carl thought, prophet, soothsayer—"and he meant your kind of fellow when he wrote something called *There's a Race of Men that Don't Fit In.* Now don't roll your eyes—it's that kind of behavior that's lost you this job and will lose you others if I'm not mistaken—and the point of the poem is there are certain men who are just out of step. Oh, they're marching all right, but always off beat. That, my friend, is you. My word for it is querulous. In fact, if you'll forgive a speech from an old sales manager about a word he's just discovered, it's my word for all you young fault-finders, mutterers of complaints. You're not alone, Carl, if that's any consolation. I've never met an angry young man, but I've met a lot of querulous ones, like you . . . the Age of the Querulous Young Man." Mr. Ruby smiled at his own phrasemaking.

"It is no consolation—" Carl said, meaning to go on, but Mr. Ruby cut in.

"You're uncomfortable in the world without ever trying to find out what the hell it is that's really bothering you . . . just a big, vague uncomfortableness, like the guy who resists the clothes he wears—he's wearing 'em but he's fighting 'em. Makes everybody else uncomfortable. That's your problem, and if you're gonna keep a job you'd better look into it."

"I dont know what you're talking about," Carl said abruptly.

"I'm talking about the fact that you don't get on with me especially—not that I expect absolute agreement from any man—or the other salesmen when they're in town at conference time. And I've had reports from the teachers at the schools you've visited that you're not as helpful or even cordial as you might be. Oh, I don't doubt that you made a lot of friends in the territory, but not when it came to selling books. Seems they always overlooked your presentation and, consequently, McBain texts, when it came time to putting their book orders in. You may have pulled every legitimate trick as far as selling is concerned, but you just didn't make a connection. Something lacking. Something important to salesmen. Some have it, some don't. I don't think you do. If you protest to President McBain, I shall simply have to tell him my opinion. Who do ya think he's gonna listen to—you or me?"

Carl could hardly trust himself to talk without being downright rude. And then he could contain it no longer.

"I didn't A.K. enough for you, Mr. Ruby, I think."

Mr. Ruby laughed.

"I don't like your language, but the years have dulled me, I guess, and I expected you to feel that way. In any event," he said, sounding slightly bored now, "that's my decision."

Mr. Ruby stood up.

Carl did not.

"You're entitled to two weeks' severance pay and this year's vacation pay. You can get that in a few minutes downstairs in the cashier's office. I wish you good luck, and don't worry about any recommendation from me. I'll be glad to, anytime."

It was one of the few times in Carl's life that he could remember when he actually shook with rage. He stood up, also.

"Wanna put it there?" Mr. Ruby said, extending his hand.

"No, I don't," Carl said. "Four years lost for me."

"Not lost."

"Think not?"

"Good luck." In response to an unseen button, Mr. Ruby's secretary came in and there was nothing for Carl to do but leave. He made his way out and down the corridor.

A swell guy, Carl thought, really great: how calm and well-intentioned to the end, even as the ax fell—a superb performance, smooth, reasonable, studied and slightly bored. A perfect touch, that bored tone, calculated to end the interview by making it humiliating for him to say more. And, of course, this technique had succeeded, as it had before no doubt with others, in severing an employee-employer relationship between himself and McBain Publications. No warning, just a telegram in Hartford—"Appear at once at the home office"—and now no job. Querulous. No ass kisser is what he meant. Edgar Guest. Goddamned bastard. And Carl Solon was a young man who did not ordinarily use profanity.

He stopped remembering.

It was time to go in the water. Carl rose and, still rather self-conscious on the beach, walked to the water's edge. He put both feet in. The temperature was just cold enough. There were no waves. He waded out. When he came abreast of the Southern Winds gang on the end of the pier, they noticed him and Jenny waved. He waved back and kept on going.

There is that delicious moment when one first ducks down all the way in the sea, and Carl went under and splashed vigorously. The truth of the matter was that he could swim very little, a few back strokes. Many times Carl had tried to learn, but somehow the water did not seem to buoy him up as it did other people. But he propelled himself around, thrashing his arms and legs. And he let himself laugh out loud. It always happened when he went for a dip; a childlish delight overcame him. He remained in for only a few minutes. When he came out, he swung his arms around in circles and would have liked to run up and down the beach but there was no distance to run. Regaining his towel, he lay flat to let the sun dry him off. And continued to remember. . . .

Of course he did not carry his threat through and protest to President McBain, but he did call his uncle and tell him what had happened. Ben had said to come right over.

Now the Reverend Benjamin T. Hoyt, Rector of St. Matthew's Protestant Episcopal Church on Irvington Park, was Carl's uncle only indirectly—his mother's half brother—but he was the one person, the single person Carl could call family. After his parents' death in an auto accident when he was twelve, his uncle, a widower, had taken him in. Carl had had his own room in the Parish House, not the Rector's apartment, and he had eaten his meals in the Parish Dining Hall. His uncle had given him that special brand of Christian love which cares for the whole individual, it is true, but does very little for a boy of twelve and thereafter who has lost the two people most important to him. From the very beginning the tie was respectful, but not close.

At college, at the start, Carl's tuition was paid for him. During his sophomore, junior and senior terms, however, with scholarships and by waiting on table in the student dining room, he paid his own way. Since a slight heart murmur kept him out of service (he never thought about it and it never bothered him really, except once in a while an annoying fatigue overcame him), he was able to complete his college career without interruption. He majored in English and minored in philosophy and psychology. His grades were good, but not exemplary, and he received scholarships on the basis of merit. After graduation, as a gift, his uncle gave him a summer trip to Europe.

And, after that, the Rector recommended him to the president of the huge textbook publisher, McBain, by which company he had been employed for four years. He had moved out of the Parish House at the time, and although he wasn't in town much, he maintained his own small apartment on the East Side. He had seen his uncle on a dozen occasions, perhaps, in those last four years.

In any event, Carl owed Ben an explanation.

Ben Hoyt, or just Ben, as he was known to his national television audiences, and before that to his national radio audiences, was a professional understander of the human heart. He operated out of the book-lined study of his duplex apartment atop St. Mat-

thew's ten-story Parish House in Irvington Park (a parish house designed by him and partly financed by him and constructed in the early years of his thirty-odd-year rectorship).

Which is not necessarily to imply that personal wealth invalidated Ben's touch, that he was not an understander of the human heart of first rank. He was. No one who had ever sat across from him on the couch in his study and had poured out to him a tale of sadness could fail to trust the compassion in those keen blue eyes, could fail to be comforted or perceptively advised by that resonant voice, could fail to feel—helped. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, had left emotional burdens behind in that study. Ben's touch, whether one saw him in person or read his books, or heard him in the lecture hall or in a discussion and prayer group or via the various entertainment media, always showed—always—that magic of stimulating a spiritual rejuvenation. It was a very real gift, and the man used it unsparingly and well. If, on the other hand, the uplift Ben facilitated did not last too long, that could only be ascribed to the vigor of the antilife forces.

This, then, was the manner of man who awaited a report from Carl on why he had lost his job.

Carl stepped from the elevator into the hallway, through the apartment door which had been left ajar for him, through the foyer of Ben's apartment, and into the study. It was a cozy room, warm with books—their cases extending from floor to ceiling on three sides—Persian-carpeted, furnished with Ben's great, cluttered desk, his swivel chair, and the famous broad and deep gray couch. A window looked out on elegant Irvington Park. It was still snowing.

As Carl came through the door, Ben got up from his chair with a quick motion:

"My dear fella," Ben said, drawing out the words, "it's good to see you, it really is," and smiled in such a way that his nose crinkled, a way well known to his various audiences.

Ben was about Carl's own height, thick-shouldered and thick-necked, with rather sharply defined features—a strong jaw and wide-apart light blue eyes. He was dressed in a dark worsted business suit, and he wore a tie with the insignia on it of a fine American club.

"It's good to see you again, Ben," Carl said.

With his shoulders encircled by Ben's arm, he was ushered to the couch; and it occurred to Carl suddenly that his relationship with Ben was not so different from one of the many who had confessed there, that his relationship with Ben was really a paradox: neither nephew quite, nor son, nor brother, nor psychoanalysant, nor parishioner in trouble, but all somewhat—none wholly. And Carl thought (as Ben sat him down) that there was so much of this sort of thing in his life—amorphousness, inbetweenness. In the matter of his heritage for instance: his coloring was light and his bearing erect, to confirm the Anglo-Saxon impression; but his hairline was too low and his eyes too close together, to contradict it. Always that partial contradiction. In line with the forbears whom one might automatically ascribe to him, his mother had, indeed, been of Scottish descent, and Episcopalian, a member of her own half brother Ben's church. But Carl's father had been a Jew—nonpracticing but quite Semitic in appearance, so Carl had a deep root in that classic ground of mortal discontent. Oh, it went all right most of the time, but in this relationship with Ben for example, if he reached down and tried to identify his position, it was endless bottom. In their human relationships, other people seemed always to be able to say, I am this or that, and stand steadily upon it. Carl couldn't. It was another of the certainties with which others seemed well and truly endowed, and he was not. And, occasionally, he wished for it.

As Carl got comfortable on the couch, Ben went to his swivel chair, swung around to face him, and, brows knitted, said sharply, clearly, briskly:

"It must be five months since you've been in this room. How time goes. Why, I haven't done half the things I wanted to do this winter. Sins of omission, what!" Ben winked. "Sins of omission are far worse than the sins of commission. It's the things we don't do for God and other people that get us into trouble . . . speaking on that very thing Sunday."

Ben adjusted his trouser legs, another gesture familiar to his various audiences, and continued, "Now what happened? Thought it was goin' pretty good."

Carl explained the merger and mentioned that the sales manager had thought him querulous.

"Querulous?" Ben said.

"That's what he made a point of," Carl said.

Ben hesitated for five beats, or as long as it would take, Carl could not help thinking, for a television camera to move in for a close-up.

"Querulous," Ben repeated wonderingly. "You know, old boy, I'm on your side one hundred per cent, but I'll bet I know what he meant."

Carl waited for what he knew would amount to a critical remark, glibly worded.

"He's a reader of men or he wouldn't be where he is, we've got to grant that. I'll bet any money he was thinking about your overcontrol." Ben made a fist. "Overcontrol like this, I mean. Tightness. You ride herd on yourself, and that happens to anyone who worries about whether or not his life is his own. You've got to loosen up, trust God—your life is in his hands anyway. He'll guide you, never fail you. But you gotta 'let go and let God'! Don't you think? All right, how long were you with McBain?"

"Four years," Carl said. 'Let go and let God,' chapter and verse for the day.

"That counts for something," Ben said quickly, concernedly. "They can't just throw that aside." Ben's hand moved from the arm of his chair to his desk and the phone. He spoke now with his voice low and with devastating power and authority, as he did often at the conclusion of his broadcasts. "Want me to call McBain, speak to him about you? Known him for thirty years. They won't argue with him, take you back in a minute, another department maybe."

"No, Ben," Carl said clearly. "I don't think I want it done that way."

Ben's hand returned to the arm of the chair. "You know, Carl," he continued (beginning at a high octave with a long and leisurely lowering of tone), "I must admit, not to disparage your time there, that I never thought that job was for you. You were meant to cut ice in the world, to really do something."

"I liked the job," Carl said too fast; "the teachers were inter-

esting; New England was beautiful in the fall; I enjoy driving." And now he was sorry that he'd spoken—Ben was not meaning to hurt or criticize, only to help, but the phrase "let go and let God" rankled him. As Ben continued to make the point, Carl thought about the phrase. . . .

Let go and let God! Indeed. Whenever he let go, things got out of hand absolutely. After all, the sins in his life, if sins they were, had been indeed those of omission: to deliberately let go was to encourage an already redoubtable tendency. And that was a prime reason he'd found it difficult to believe in God. God seemed never to take care of anything for him. Or, to put it another way, nothing ever seemed to go, as it did for other people, of its own accord. Others were always speaking of "things working out," as if life arranged itself for them, by which it seemed that they meant that the physical, financial or emotional wherewithal simply appeared miraculously. Situations, for others, if left alone, resolved themselves. Life for others seemed as automatic and granted a thing as a commissioned rank in the armed forces. It had never been that way for Carl. If he didn't consciously take thought, no thought would be taken; if he didn't arrange, no arrangement would be made. If he didn't daily exert utmost control over himself and his circumstances, his whole process of living would collapse. Indeed, had collapsed! Since he'd just lost his job. He could attribute this only to not, somewhere along the line, having exerted sufficient prescience. And he could see only that in the future redoubled effort in that direction was necessary. And he felt, of course, that this was wrong, and at last the whole idea chagrined him.

But Ben was speaking still about his cutting ice in the world.

"I don't have to tell you, to come back to an old bone between us, that, this parish, with myself as rector, would dig away down in its pocket if just once you so much as intimated you'd go to Seminary."

"I know, Ben."

"It's not just because you are who you are, Carl. Being my nephew has nothing to do with it. But when I think of those days when you used to live in this house, and you used to help me conduct those young folks' prayer and discussion groups, and how

those kids turned to you, looked up to you, relied on you, I remember saying to myself, now there really is a candidate for the ministry. I decided then I would try to persuade you without pressuring you, but my conviction was too great to hide altogether. Have I ever pressured you, Carl?"

"No, Ben."

"But if ever God impelled me to speak, I feel He wants me to speak now. You've had a good solid experience in the business world: that never hurt any minister I know. But still, four years after college you are uncommitted. I don't mean to be hard on you, but you've chosen nothing to do that you're thinking of as a life work. Yet you continue to avoid a path open to you that is as right as rain for you, or—snow." Ben swiveled around and faced the window. The snow was beginning to really come down. "I'd help you, Carl. You'd have no trouble. I know a thing or two about how this old world is run." (Dying pause.)

It was a speech Carl had heard before, that he expected to hear this time, but that he'd never heard delivered in quite such an impassioned way. Ben stared out of the window disconsolately, looking for an heir.

"You make me feel like the man in *The Hound of Heaven!*" Carl said.

"I cannot help but believe God wants you to do this. Very strongly I believe it. And if you do not make a decision for Christ now, I shall ask you again later, for I am God's agent . . . and God is the greatest force."

Despite the theatricality of it, Carl could not help being moved by Ben's warmth, power, devotion, magic. And he wanted very much, had always wanted really, to believe in God as the greatest force, but he had no evidence. On the other hand, the other force was quite apparent, the force that bore him down, that resulted, if he let it, in his lying in bed, not asleep, but enervated, thinking of nothing-things. That force was hardly ever absent. It was whatever shattered him, caused life not to work out for him, made his efforts unreal. Nor was it a joke; his life was a constant battle against this force pressing in. It was there. It was in him; it was outside him. He dreaded it when it got going, when he was in the full grip of it. That force he was conscious of. The other force, the

one Ben spoke of so familiarly and frequently, he could not remember ever having touched. Where was it? How did one hook on?

Carl wanted to say something true and appropriate.

"I have thought again, lately, of the ministry," he said.

Ben waited, it seemed to Carl, for the first time since his arrival, to hear what he had to say.

"But," he continued, "if I come to it, I want to come to it on my own. I want to feel I can do it and not lose my . . . self. I don't like these people around here who mimic you and do what they want to do and say it's guidance, or who have no minds of their own and turn to God for word on how to . . . draw a bath." He wanted to be crude then, but it would not do.

"No need to, in that sense. Never necessary," Ben said, speaking quickly, closing in on his advantage. "We heed God's will, listen for it, depend on it, but He works through us, depends on us to use our heads, to work out our salvation 'with fear and trembling.' You've got a good point about some of the folks in this house—will-less, selfish, living life on a 'get' basis and saying it's all guidance." Ben paused. "How long do you think you might need to decide one way or the other? You could keep your apartment. Commute to Union or General. Know 'em both. Both good."

"I'm not sure, Ben. I hate to keep saying I don't know, but that's how I feel. I'm just not sure. It seems a great thing to do . . . but shouldn't there be some strong call?"

"No," Ben said thoughtfully, "not always."

Ben tilted back in his chair, stuck out his lower lip, held onto the arms with both hands. Ordinarily this was Ben's signal that an interview was over, but not this time.

Carl felt that the subject—indeed, that all aspects of this human situation—as Ben would call it—were now being analyzed by a faculty as expert and precise at this sort of thing, and in its way as methodical so far as devising a solution was concerned, as an IBM machine after all the data was in. Or, he thought foolishly, it was like waiting in front of one of those fortunetelling booths for one's fortune to pop out of the slot on a little card.

The room was illuminated by an old lamp with a sizable parch-

ment shade: a restful light. It was getting dark now, and the snow was coming down in quantity. Ben was lost in thought, or more precisely meditation, for Carl knew that Ben was praying privately for guidance. And it was not an uninspiring sight to see this dynamic man thus engaged; to see him yielding to the strength and wisdom of a superior agent. Ben, Ben, galvanizer of souls, elderly female souls often, and souls of people of means most often, but changer of the destinies of people nevertheless . . . certainly, a galvanizer . . . Ben recalled to one the fact of rebirth. A few minutes in his presence and possibilities in life that one had lost sight of cropped up again. New alternatives. Doors opening. Guidance. "God is like a light socket," was one of Ben's sentences, "but you have to plug in." And, with Ben, one achieved the connection. He did not also mention, however, that he was the generator and, once out of range of that, the power failed. Still, it was better to have had some light, and a look around, which was always fear-lessening no matter how short-lived, than to have had no light at all. Why was Ben the generator? Carl wondered. Because he'd had a fortunate life, lived effectively, thanks to the ministrations of a doting and wealthy father? Ben would be the first to tell you that, and incidentally that his image of the Holy Father depended strongly on his image of his real father. Ben was the generator because he'd never been shattered by frustration or loss, had never waited long or done without if anything were really needed. And, to give Ben his due, he appreciated those factors as having contributed to his undisturbed hopefulness and faith. But still, no matter the reason, a few minutes in the presence of this man and one caught his outlook. It was quite refreshing. Beneficial. Like a good cold glass of water. But almost, in Carl's opinion, as evanescent in its effect.

Carl doubted Ben the catch-phrase minister was grateful to and bemused by Ben the man and the gentleman.

Ben suddenly sat up, swiveled around to his desk, and, among the many papers there, ferreted out a letter. This letter he handed without comment to Carl, and as Carl took it, he thought it might be his fortune indeed. It was written on a plain piece of typewriter paper, dated two days previous at Key West, Florida.

Dear Ben,

All's well with me, but the Southern Winds needs an assist. Made it through two seasons, but must go one more before profit will show. Beside the regular business, I have two schemes to carry through this year. One of them is a contract with a movie company to feed the lot of technicians, actors, etc., for five weeks while on location nearby. The other I'm working on and will let you know about. But in addition to that, I must have $20,000. Or I'm in real trouble. This is almost three times the greatest amount you have ever loaned me, I know. Could you possibly come down yourself for a weekend—only five hours by plane. Little sun do you good, and you could see what you're investing in, and see me, after all these years. . . .

Yours,
Jake

"Sounds urgent, a little melodramatic," Carl said, handing the letter back. "Who is he?"

"Ah," Ben said, smiling. "Who is he, indeed." And then Ben began to speak in a mood of reverie, with his arms folded across his chest, a movement which immediately (again for his various audiences) signaled them to sit back, relax, prepare for a reminiscence.

"I met Jake Romano in my sophomore year at Princeton. He was famous nationally—pictures, interviews—as a football hero. He was good-looking, one of the handsomest young men I've ever seen."

Ben unfolded his arms, adjusted his gold tie clip, folded them again.

"I'm afraid that I was a difficult, snobbish young man in college and a lonely one, I might add, and I couldn't conceive of a greater bore than the type of man Jake Romano seemed to be. Until one day he was accepted into my club and he sat next to me at lunch. He was not terribly tall, but he was heavily built, and when he looked at you—his eyes were set deep in an angular, swarthy face—it was the look of a man who was not stupid. I couldn't imagine that a football hero, a popular idol, could also be a gentleman and a gracious human being, but I was confronted

by that phenomenon in Jake Romano. We became friends. Through him, thereafter, my faith in the judgment of my fellows immeasurably improved.

"Jake knew everybody and introduced me all around. For the first time I belonged. Jake had a hand in everything, but most especially in dramatics. If I recall rightly, indeed, he was majoring in theater. Every play he had anything to do with, either acting or directing, or both, turned to gold. He could project a role as well as do it, and he could make you care.

"One summer he invited me to spend a week at his home on Long Island. It was a tremendous house, vulgar in the way that homes on the Island were vulgar at the time—my era, you know—and his family was unabashedly Semitic, Italian Jews actually, and of course they couldn't have been more wise or more kind. This in itself was an eye opener to me. Only his father—and I saw him just once when he greeted us—seemed withdrawn, always busy, apparently, on the phone, a man of unending purpose and drive. But his mother, his sisters, an aunt or two—everyone was amazing. They loved to eat; they fed us banquet after banquet. Of course, Jake had to watch his weight, but he had a very hard time. In the afternoons, we all went out on their eighty-foot schooner.

"And the following summer we traveled to Europe together and we courted together over great distance and at great expense, mind you, a Silesian princess who jilted us finally for a Russian hussar."

Ben jumped forward, remembering, laughing, but he looked toward the floor.

"In our senior year—it was 1922—one bright, cold afternoon, we all went to the Yale-Princeton football game. Jake stashed with us in the stands the only girl he had ever really taken a shine to. I disliked her intensely, thought she was a flirt and rather course. Jake seemed to like that type. But that was forgotten. We were happy. We wrapped ourselves in blankets, passed the flask around and rooted for our team.

"It happened so quickly, it was over even before the referee's whistle sounded. It wasn't even a heavy scrimmage. But Jake got a cleat across the right side of his face. They took him to the

hospital and a few minutes later his injury was compounded by a stroke. He was unconscious for nine days. When he woke up, he discovered himself almost blind in his right eye, his nose broken, his face mangled, and, because of the stroke, so distorted that he could only speak out of the left side of his mouth. Also, his left arm and leg were partially paralyzed. He refused to see any of us. He was taken home, and he lived on Long Island for about ten years without leaving the grounds.

"But he did write from time to time. In the market crash, his family lost everything. It was the terrible, often-repeated pattern: all property sold to pay debts. Jake went to New England somewhere with one sister and they started a restaurant. I loaned him some money to do that and he repaid it promptly and with interest. Since then, his sister died and he's traveled around a lot and got himself involved in other restaurants and his old love, little theaters. I've loaned him money, relatively small amounts, for one or the other, and he's always returned it, about six times. But I haven't laid eyes on him since that game at Princeton, over three and a half decades ago. About a year back I had a letter saying he's built up a nice restaurant business in Key West and that the Southern Winds had already won a national reputation—Duncan Hines and all that. And now this letter. . . ."

Ben finished, stood up, put his hands in his pockets and went to the window. It was quite dark and it was snowing heavily still. Flakes of snow curled around the window frame and occasionally the wind carried them against it with a noisy gust. The lights of the tall buildings across the park shone fuzzily.

"Will you lend him the money?"

Ben continued to face the window. "He's never asked for so much—there are many others here who want—it's not as easy as it once was for me to lay hands on that much cash. A great deal of money passes through my hands, but I'm pressed this time to look for it." Ben shrugged and turned round. "However, I am inclined to do so if I could believe there was a reasonable chance of getting it back." Ben sat down in the swivel chair, tilted it, and looked at Carl directly. "I can't possibly go to Key West, but how would you like to go there for me and see just what's what? You could drive down, stay close by the place, maybe even work

there . . . say, a waiter's job—that would be the best way to observe if it's a going business. I'll tell him you're coming in my stead so that there will be no secret as to what you're up to. Take a couple of weeks and let me give you a hundred a week plus expenses for doing it. That would give you a breather and a chance to get some sun, also a sort of retreat to do some thinking about your life, and a real job for me. What do you say, old boy?"

So that was it, Carl thought. Superb blending of needs and fulfillments. A vacation, a time to think over the ministry and a job. Perhaps two jobs. One for Ben, and another—probably waiting on tables, since it was a restaurant, but what did it matter, he'd done that at college.

"It's an idea, Ben, and a generous offer," Carl said.

"Then you'll go."

It seemed to Carl ridiculous to refuse; it was only for a couple of weeks; he had little else to do; he would certainly enjoy the trip and Ben would be pleased. Whether or not he could come up with what Ben would call a 'real decision' was another matter.

"Yes, Ben."

"Great stuff. Get off tomorrow maybe. My secretary will send the money and information to you in tonight's mail. Just see that things are really moving down there . . . and if you can, get a line on the financial setup, nothing too involved. Maybe see what kind of trouble Jake's in, if he meant that seriously. And Carl, if Jake has even a spark of the old thing left in him, he may help you as much as you're in a position to help him. But the main thing is, you'll be thinking about seminary."

Ben clamped his lips together, nodded his head.

The interview was over. Carl got up. Ben was right with him, clapped an arm around his shoulder, took it off, stood back.

"You know, Carl, what amazes me constantly is how God is guiding, is 'in' absolutely all situations if one but knows how to look for Him. Now yesterday I had no idea how to handle Jake's letter, and when you called this afternoon I didn't know how to enter into your situation." Ben held up one finger and smiled craftily. "But hasn't God brought us one step closer to a solution of both problems in the most astounding way? Did you ever —what, what?"

Ben's most famous coast-to-coast smile then broke across his face, teeth fully exposed, eyebrows up, eyes alight, head back, and now—"Bless you, 'by"—both arms extended straight out.

Carl ate his lunch at the beach; the proprietor and proprietress of the soft drink stand were vivacious Italian people from Brooklyn who operated the stand as a winter vacation lark (the twelve-year-old boy playing volleyball was their son), who lost money daily on the concession which the city agreed to make up; and they cooked extraordinary things to eat—extraordinary for a soft drink stand—like squab, veal scallopine, small tender steaks.

After lunch (squab), Carl stretched out again, and swam again, and about three o'clock gathered himself and his things together to start back. The car wheel, as he slid behind it, was almost too hot to touch, and it took several minutes of driving before he could really grasp it.

He found a place to park around the corner from the Southern Winds.

Carl passed through the front door of the house and along the main hallway. It was cool and dark and, structurally, very high. Although he intended to go upstairs and shower, he paused there for a moment: he tried to imagine what it must have been like to live in such a house. And really, he wondered, could the warm, quiet afternoons of almost a century ago have been much different in that hallway than the warm, quiet afternoon he observed there now? Despite the distorted use the old place had been put to, Carl felt a serenity and patience there, and a mood of "intent listening."

He wondered which sounds, of all the sounds that had been heard or might be heard in that hallway, the listeners were waiting for.

The pathetic fallacy, of course, Carl thought, reading a mortal meaning into something wholly inanimate. And yet, unexpectedly, all of Key West seemed to lend itself to that—not a landscape of gloomy peaks and fierce shore line surely, but rather of infinite perspectives and suggestive depths. And then the bland winds, the multidimensional sky, the clear air, the blue-black night . . . it would be easy, he thought, not only to read meaning in . . . but for a mind, perhaps especially a Northern mind, to

become unstable; for the particles of such a mind to arrange themselves into new patterns, perhaps even fresh patterns.

He also thought that he'd probably remained in the sun too long this first day: he felt slightly dizzy, and even then his face smarted. Still, he was exercised from the swimming and he was aware that it would not take long for him to be in pretty good shape. He was also feeling a mild repugnance at having to wait on tables that night and he wished he had not made it part of the bargain. It was unnecessary—he could have observed the amount of business from the sidelines—and his agreeing to do it struck him as rather foolish.

Carl put his hand on the stair newel post and was about to start up when he heard a deep, breathy voice call his first name. The call came from the direction of the empty and even darker dining room. Carl turned about, went down the few steps. Again the contrast between the brightness of the street entryway to the pavilion and the shade all around. It took him a moment to adjust.

"Here," the voice said heavily, as if speaking loudly were an effort.

At the left of the stairs, a figure sat at a table, and on the table were spread many slips of paper.

"Sit down, I'm Jake Romano."

"Carl Solon," he said, and they shook hands, and Carl sat as he had been asked to do.

The man was silent—went on dealing slips of paper from the wad in his hand, placing them on top of the other slips already down. It was as if he were playing solitaire. And then Jake Romano, across from Carl, gradually came into focus:

He was a gargoyle: unruly, black, kinky hair; a low forehead under bushy brows; eyes set close together deeply and dully in his skull; a large, beaked nose; and a mouth which was so contorted by injury and stroke that words were formed by the lips only out of the left side of the mouth. This man sat heaped in a chair, head forced down by a hump on his back, his stomach spread between his legs. He wore a short-sleeved shirt which revealed soft, white arms of anthropoid length. That this person could have been the Princeton schoolmate of whom Ben had spoken seemed incredible.

"I don't like myself the way I am either," Romano said, continuing with his arrangements of the bits of paper.

It was an uncomfortably close reading of his thoughts, and Carl was too surprised to reply.

"You can imagine," Romano continued, insisting on many phrases he might well have omitted, getting his tongue caught and speaking with what appeared to be concentrated physical effort, "the shock, I mean for people like Ben who knew me in the old days."

"Ben said he'd be glad to see you," Carl said.

"Oh, of course," Romano said, his shoulders quaking with silent laughter. "How is he? Still the stately, divine-college boy officiating over a world of clean sinners?"

However much Carl was inclined to be amused, it seemed best to play it straight for the moment. He said: "He's well, and concerned about your business here."

"Going to be all right. Needs one more season like last year. Just got to keep things going. Movie people are coming, and I've got one other scheme. . . ."

"I saw the crowd last night," he said.

"Almost every night," Romano said. "Food's good. I buy the best. Give 'em better than they'd get at home. We think we've got something special here."

"Special?"

"Good food, pleasant place. A lot depends on where one eats or drinks as well as what. And who serves you. I picked the people who work myself."

Another gnomelike chuckle.

"I see," Carl said. "Ben thought he'd like me to poke around and, of course, talk to you. He said money is not as easy for him to come by as it used to be and that he'd have to look sharp to get the amount you wanted."

"Stay ten days till the movie company comes . . . Sunday, March 2. Work as a waiter. You'll see 'em piling in every night, and make a few bucks beside. That's all you need to know."

Romano had spoken effortfully as before; he kept on sorting the slips and he seemed a trifle agitated. It occurred to Carl that this man had no intention of sharing with him any of the specific

financial aspects or prospects of the business and that if he arrived at any sort of conclusion, it would be wholly on the basis of observation and/or hearsay. Romano had yet to look him straight in the eye.

"Yes, I will work as a waiter," Carl said a trifle defiantly.

"Start tonight," Romano said, and his pace of talking changed —it slowed considerably, became more interested and patient now that, for the moment at least, Carl was not prying. "You'll need a pair of black trousers and a black tie. It's easy. The menu is written on that blackboard; all the meat dishes are served from the broil; all the fish dishes May does in the kitchen. Every plate comes with vegetables and potatoes. No worry there. Just a choice of salad dressing. Take your time; write everything down. Not many are in a hurry; there's only one theater to get to, not like New York, and it only holds one hundred people. People want to enjoy their meal; they come to Key West mostly to take it easy. If they wanted action, they'd have stayed in Miami. On the other hand, they want hot food. And, of course, cold drinks. Get the drinks from the bar. It's a long distance between the dining room and the bar and someday we'll have a bar out in this part, but no money yet. You come in and eat at five with the rest of the waiters, help the bus boys with the setups before dinner, work, and you'll be finished by ten-thirty or thereabouts. That's not hard. And you'll see what you came to see."

It was a long speech and Romano seemed to droop at the end of it, not of weakness but out of a wish to avoid the end of it, to avoid the question that Carl felt he must ask.

"Do you want to give me a look at the accounts any time, Mr. Romano?"

"Jake," he said. "Call me Jake." Romano did not hesitate now. "Right in front of you. What I've spent, what I've paid, what we've earned. From day to day. Beyond that, nothing written down. It's easier."

Carl saw that each of the pieces of paper had words and figures scribbled on them. He poked one so that he could read it, but the marks were indecipherable. Romano gathered together the slips then, like a pack of cards, snapped a heavy rubber band around them and, leaning forward, stuck the wad in his back pocket.

There would be no accounts to examine at all, apparently. It struck Carl that he should be—was, indeed—disturbed by this kind of brush-off.

"Wouldn't you say I'd have to tell Ben that there are no accounts?"

Romano shrugged his shoulders and, for the first time, glanced up. The full view of his face was appalling: it was the dull stare of a tough old dog—no eyes to enthrall, no strong jaw, the structure all awry. And yet—and yet—an intensity, a focus there, a great power contained, and not an unkind one. Carl perceived in this grotesque man several scoundrelly wills, and pomposity, and—deep down—fear. But the power there communicated itself truly, and the least effect of it was to cause Carl to suspend his opinion for the moment.

"Carl," Romano said. "Take care of yourself in Key West. It's a strange place. And don't get too much sun."

Romano had dodged completely, but there was little Carl could do about it.

"I'm looking forward to seeing it," he said. "Oh yes—Ben wanted to know about the trouble."

"What trouble?"

"Your letter said that you might be in trouble."

Romano's face contorted and Carl realized again the man was smiling.

"Just an expression," Romano said. He glanced down; the smile disappeared.

If the man disclaimed what the letter said, Carl thought, that was that. But somehow he got the impression that, despite the disclaimer, there was some sort of trouble. That, besides the obvious fact that the financial end was shaky, the man was in other difficulties. It was without substantiation, he knew, except for Troy's wild comments, but he could not deny the impression.

Romano got up.

"Got to stock the bar; see you tonight," and, limping heavily, the man made his way up the porch stairs into the house. Carl went out that way, too, since he was going to his room. As Carl started up the stairs, he heard Romano clump the full length of the first-floor hallway and stop, apparently at the door opposite

the bar door. Jangling of keys. Carl supposed that that was the room where Romano stored whatever small stock of liquor he kept on hand. Carl heard the door lock automatically after Romano had stepped through.

Continuing upstairs, Carl wondered what Romano had in mind when he said Key West was strange. If he meant that there was some sort of threat in the air, Carl agreed with him, he'd already sensed it, although he could not quite gather its nature: the face of the fantasy was still obscured. Or maybe it was a remark on Romano's part calculated to intimidate, in order to send him back North without discovering anything down here very much: Romano was used to borrowing money from Ben without question.

Most people find the truth difficult to apprehend because it is tiring, simply, to push through and think about it, parse it out, shred for examination all the elements of a situation that, together, compose the truth. The truth then is complex and it must be "sweated," as the Navy expression goes, and this is the age of "playing it cool," "no sweat." Carl knew it would take a while to know about Romano and the Southern Winds. What Carl had not reckoned on was that now he was provoked.

His room, when he got there, under the eave of the house, was surprisingly . . . breezy.

* * * * *

Carl went out directly and purchased the outfit Romano had indicated for his waiter work. He bought the black trousers, black tie and cummerbund at a popular and cluttered haberdashery store up near the gate entrance to the Naval base. They quickly and obligingly stitched up a cuff on the trousers for him, and, twenty minutes after entering, he left the store fully equipped, as it were, for his job at the Southern Winds. He walked leisurely down Duval Street.

Duval Street at four-thirty in the afternoon is busy; school is out and kids roam the main drag; the Navy day is over for some and the sailors pile up on the street corners—just hanging around —or they begin at the bars; the movie matinees let out about that

time—the San Carlos, the Monroe and the Strand; and people are shopping for supplies for their evening meal. A mildly frenetic scene. Still, in the air, more than not, that old child's cry, "I've got nothing to do," and a consequent petulance. A petulant business everywhere, a defense against tropical inertia, with its constant threat of strangulation of every faculty. A deliberate, even forced busyness.

Carl stepped off the sidewalk to let a woman with a baby carriage pass. The carriage sported two fluttering American flags. The girl strode along. Navy wife, probably. Some officer's family. Carl thought of life on this island. As little as he'd seen of it, the emotional connection between life on this island and life on the rest of the continent seemed as slim and fantastic as the overseas highway-bridge he'd driven down. Activity here, he thought, seemed somehow an imitation of activity elsewhere rather than a continuation. Yes, the usual things went on, but somewhere beneath the surface Carl sensed other concerns, more primary, governing existence in Key West that played not quite such a part in the governing of existence elsewhere. Carl could not articulate it more than that, but he felt that what he saw before him as he went along Duval Street was a mask, and that the real face of the island, the true purposes, were yet to be revealed.

In his room, Carl showered and rested for half an hour. Then he put on his waiter's costume. It amused him. The trousers fit surprisingly well; the shirt, his own, was white and soft; the cummerbund smoothed his figure; and he primped forward the black tie. As he stepped out of his room into the hall, he did not feel especially conspicuous, as he thought he might. It was five o'clock.

The second-floor porch in the back afforded a good view of Key West, as Carl had noticed before. He stopped there before going down the rear stairs. In the sunset, the tops of the houses were tawny-rose color, and the trees—it was amazing how many there were—the poinciana trees, great red bouquets, swayed gently in response to the trade winds. Curious about the poincianas. He'd always considered them wax flowers, false somehow, and unnatural at Christmas up north. Here, they were beautiful.

Then Carl became uncomfortably conscious about his clothes. The waiter . . . in dreams a well-known death symbol . . . a quote

from an old psychology course. Twenty-five years old, he thought, a waiter at a resort restaurant, unbuoyed, sinking fast, on a nebulous mission, no strong aims, a question involving his whole future unanswered and unanswerable—playing a role dictated to him by a man he hardly knew. Yet he would go on with it, perhaps even be good at it, perhaps even enjoy it. A baffled twenty-five-year-old . . . rather available . . . the changes in his life during the last week had been something. The Key West carillon began to play. Carl went downstairs.

In the dining room half a dozen of the waiters and waitresses sat around eating dinner, but, unfortunately, neither Jenny nor Art Troy was there. Carl stood in the entrance, about to introduce himself, but it wasn't necessary. A young man jumped up and came over to him and extended his hand.

He was about Carl's height and age. He had a most superb set of white teeth, his brown hair was bleached on top from the sun, and he spoke in a high, clear, nicely-enunciated voice that was mostly capable of innuendo.

"My name is Robin," he said.

Carl said both his names.

"Aloha, Carl Solon. Come and say hello to everybody. You will never remember all these names, my dear, so I will introduce people only by their first names. This is a world of first names anyway. Let us go around. We'll get back to me later, because I'm the most interesting."

It was said with amusing frankness.

"Now this young lady sitting here is Jenny's roommate—you've met Jenny—and her name is Nothing-Betty because she doesn't put out."

An exasperated chuckle all around. Robin indicated a long-legged, quite pretty girl, rather vague-eyed, who was eating her dinner with a book propped in front of her plate. She nodded to Carl with a bored expression.

"I mean," said Robin, "she doesn't put out easily."

Nothing-Betty pursed her lips and went back to her book.

"Now these two over here," Robin said, prodding him toward a table at which a smiling, middle-aged couple sat—the woman

attractive but older than she appeared, Carl thought, the man obscure-looking, bumptious perhaps, the kind who might play practical jokes—"are our only husband and wife team—let me present Naomi and Happy; this is Carl—unless, of course, you want to call Jenny and Nothing-Betty and . . . no, we won't go into that—I mean, not yet." A snicker from the group—joined now by Jenny, who nodded to him and set down her dinner tray.

"Or," Jenny contributed in her deepest contralto, "unless you want to call you and Kent. . . ."

"To go on," Robin said quickly, his voice climbing, "we come now to the star of our show. . . ."

"Murcee," interrupted the man in front of them. His age was indeterminate; he had long, silver-gray hair; he wore an ascot and blue linen jacket with white buttons; and he sat on the edge of his chair as alert as a sparrow.

"As I said, the star of our show," Robin continued. "Mercy-Kent."

A final burst of laughter all around.

"Murcee," Kent said, drawing out the word to illustrate why he had been so nicknamed. "Yes, yes, indeed. But before you sit down, young man, let Robin take you inside to the kitchen and show you where to get your dinner. Then come right back, sit here and eat, and tell me all about what you're going to do for the old Southern Winds. Murcee, yes, my dear."

Carl thought that Robin must have taken his clue for behavior from this man, for they were not far apart: arch, Midwestern voices, both. Robin did as he was bidden; he escorted Carl out through the covered ramp at the back of the dining room.

The kitchen of the Southern Winds was an addition of later times to the house—a long, high room in the center of which there was a heavy wooden table. Dividing the table into two sides there was a rack of pots and pans. In one corner of the room, an old colored man leaned over two great sinks and hand-washed different-colored plastic plates. Along the side were the cooking ranges, and on them many pots boiled mysteriously. The room was hot, and a great standing electric fan grinding away noisily didn't do much to relieve it.

Robin pointed out the icebox where the shrimp and crabmeat

cocktails and butter pats were kept, and the freezer out of which one drew the ice cream, and the coffee urn with its pile of plastic cups and saucers nearby.

The room was not busy. Only, on the stove side, a rotund, short, industrious little woman caromed around. Robin introduced Carl to May, the head kitchen chef.

"What do ya mean, head kitchen chef?" she said impishly and loudly. "Only kitchen chef, unless you call that nigger dishwasher-and-potato-peeler my assistant."

Carl glanced toward the old colored man.

"Drunk as a jay bird is old Daddy-O," May said, following his glance. "Pays no mind to nuthin'. Beside him, I got my old husband. You'll see him probably raking up the leaves Bats," she said, knocking her head. "Been bats for years. No help at all. Do everything around here myself."

"Yes, my dear," Robin said. "We've all heard your story. What's for dinner?"

"Pork chops, potatoes, peas: come right around and help yourselves and then get out."

Carl thought her unnecessarily caustic, but no doubt she had her problems, and the temperature in the kitchen must have been over a hundred. Robin showed him where the plates were, and the utensils; they served themselvs from the oven and the pots on the stove; and Robin put their plates on two trays.

"Don't pay too much attention to her," Robin said. "She's really our mother."

"Honey," May said sweetly, "you never had a mother, or a father," and grinned into her double chin, quite pleased.

"Back to the stove, sweetheart," Robin said, picking up his tray and starting out.

But May, in her own estimation, at least, had scored, and her pleasure resulted in a pleasant smile for Carl; she screwed up her chubby face and beamed.

"Anything you want," she said to him, "just ask for it. And don't pay no attention to that little son of a bitch, and watch out he don't steal your tips."

"You make the Key lime pie, is that right?" Carl said.

"Sure is. Dozen eggs to the pie, graham-cracker crust."

"It's a great pie," he said.

"Honey, for that nice compliment, take along a shrimp cocktail." May reached into a refrigerator. "And one for your friend, I suppose. We don't ordinarily give 'em to the help, and if Jake comes in, duck it—but it's because I like you."

Carrying his tray, Carl went down the ramp and caught up with Robin in the dining room. He gave him the shrimp cocktail.

Robin said: "Her husband is really quite crazy. Auto accident. Goes around muttering to himself."

As they rejoined the rest at the tables, Kent said: "Murcee, look at the dinner May gave 'em. Shrimp cocktails. My dear, somebody rates."

"You probably had two tonight," Robin said.

"No, no, Murcee, not me," Kent said. "Now Carl, put down your tray right here, and Robin, you go off and sit somewhere else because I want to talk to him privately, yes, yes."

Robin went off, but before Carl could sit down, two more people came into the dining room, said hello to everyone and looked at Carl. Kent made the introductions for him this time, first to a tall, spindly boy, not more than fifteen, with a great mop of hair. "Carl, this is Conch, so called because he's a native Key Wester, very special, my dear, and he only runs the supplies from the kitchen to the chef at the broil there."

Conch shook hands shyly and took off to get his dinner.

"And this, my dear, is Bert, another young man who buses for us beside Robin. You got to treat the bus boys good; in a rush their help can make or break you and they get ten per cent of your tips."

Carl thought that Kent took waiting rather seriously.

Carl shook hands then with a fellow about his own age, very red-haired and pink-complected, whose nylon shirt was already saturated and sticking to his skin. The fellow muttered something, shook hands and started also into the kitchen for his dinner.

"Bert," Kent said with malicious dryness, "is our representative from the world of the theater. Bert specializes in what he calls method acting. Writes poetry, too. The only thing you have to do with Bert is listen closely, because he's got a bad case of mumbles.

That's what they do, you know, get up there on stage and just mumble. Oh yes, it's the new thing."

Carl sat down and began to eat.

"Now, you go right on and eat," Kent continued, "while I ask questions." Kent reached in his pocket and drew out a long cigar. "You don't mind this, do you?" Carl nodded no. Actually, he did mind, but it was impossible to object. "I just love a good Havana cigar. Made right in Key West, you know." Kent lit the cigar and proceeded to smoke it with ceremony. Everyone was watching him. "Now," Kent said loudly, "you don't have to answer," everyone laughed, "but what in hell are you doin' down here in Key West? Everyone wants to know. You've never heard such rumors in your life as there are goin' round about you. No, no, I don't mean anythin' like that. . . ." Again, everyone laughed, but the joke went over Carl's head. "I just mean what are you doin' at the Southern Winds? Art Troy says you came down here all the way from New York to save it, but I never believe anything he tells me."

Carl explained his purpose briefly.

"I see," Kent said, drawing meditatively on the cigar. "Well, I can tell you right now that last year with Jake running it, the Southern Winds did a gross volume business of almost one hundred thousand dollars. I can't tell you how I know, but that's the truth."

Carl glanced at him. It was the first bit of information, no matter how true or untrue, that he'd heard.

"Oh yes, a hundred thousand easy," Kent said, puffing. "Doin' a fine gross business. Everybody comes here, you know. Society townspeople, Navy brass, sailors and their wives, celebrities in town, and, of course, the better tourists."

Kent was speaking to him without an audience now, the others attending to their meals or talking amongst themselves. Carl felt a moderate confidence in Kent.

"A-course," Kent went on, "I can't say how much of that gross business is profit—I don't think very much—and what there is has to be shared a lotta ways, some bigger'n others. Some goes to parties that would cause Jake a lot of trouble if they weren't paid promptly, and I do mean a bunch of Miami thugs who put up

an original stake. And then there are the partners here who get a slice—Charlotte, the cashier, and Jim, who runs the bar. Then there are the people who aren't really partners but get their cut right away at the 'divvy' each night after the restaurant closes. That's Henri, the chef, and Jake's wife, Melanie. If ever there was a leak in Jake's pocket, it's her."

"What sort of man is Romano?" Carl said, risking an abrupt answer from Kent, who seemed to speak from an unpredictable base of integrity.

"You've traveled, have you?" Kent asked, by way of an answer.

"Yes, in Europe, and now along most of the eastern half of America."

"Well," Kent said, blowing a cloud of smoke, "in my forty-eight years—you didn't know I was that old, did you—I've covered most of the world, including India and Africa, and I've never known a man like him. I don't have any reservation about it: Jake Romano is the kindest man I've ever met—you wait and see. And most of the people in this room will back me up. And as far as running this business is concerned, he's a genius. Oh, he's a bungler and unsystematic and petty sometimes, flighty, too, I guess—that's the way most of these resort operations here in the South are conducted—but to keep this place up and going, considering what he started with, which was nothing and no credit, the man's a genius."

Kent's emphasis, or overstatement, depending on which way one wanted to look at it, was nevertheless compelling.

"I said that most of the people in this room would back me up: I meant there isn't one of 'em, except possibly Conch, that Jake hasn't done a favor for, helped, in one way or another: and when I say that, I mean money for rent, money for clothes, money to get lovers out of jail with—oh yes, my dear, money for anythin' extra you can think of. And I'll tell you one more thing, then I have to go and dress. Just to be in the neighborhood where Jake is, is a privilege. Now you just think about what I said. By the way, I'm giving a party tonight, after work. Why don't you drop over? Ask one of the gang to bring you."

Kent got up and went out. It was quite a testimonial, Carl

thought. And wondered if he would eventually feel the same way about Romano. He did not feel that way yet.

After the setting up of the tables was done, Carl stood at the back of the dining pavilion with the rest, waiting for the restaurant to open. He was not happy; he found himself in a frame of mind he had obviously brought upon himself, and it threatened to rob him of what little equanimity he had left after the events of the last week. He did not want to wait on tables. On the other hand, he did not want to back out of his agreement, affirmed with Ben, reaffirmed with Romano. He was chagrined at having to learn the various routines of the job, disgusted at having to truck with food and dirty dishes. Still, except for sitting around, which did not appeal to him much either, he did not see by what other means he could find out about how the restaurant was really doing, night by night. Also, he did not like to admit that he could use the money he would earn here; he realized he had not gotten used to the fact that he no longer worked for McBain Publications and that he was living, or would shortly be living (when he returned to New York), on his savings, which would last him, if he kept his apartment and proceeded on the level that he had, about four months. Why was it, he asked himself, that for him life constantly resolved itself into the purely naturalistic details of how to survive? Where was joy, where was excitement, or love, which for himself he had only once almost seriously considered?

Waiting on tables had been good enough when he was in college, but it was hard lines, he thought, after dealing for four years, as he had, with civilized people—his job going to the schools and selling textbooks. Of course it was only for ten days, and here was something else he often did, and which angered him at himself: he lost sight of the end while involving himself in the means. He knew he should just relax, do what he was there to do, and forget it, but Carl was not insensitive toward his immediate surroundings or the ramifications of his immediate human relationships; he had placed himself in a waiter's job, but he knew that when the first person he came in contact with treated him as a waiter, he would resent it.

At one minute of six the rope across the front had still not been

lifted, Romano chatted with the people lined up outside, and the waiters waited. The reason for this delay was not apparent. Everything seemed ready, music came through the loud-speakers, the foliage around the sides was softly and indirectly illuminated.

Suddenly, three crisscrossing spotlights clicked on over the charcoal-broil pit. Everyone noticed and conversation ceased for a moment: it was very like the curtain going up on a theatrical production. There was a heavy and steady clump of feet out of sight, coming down the main staircase of the house, and then the chef appeared in view atop the few steps leading into the dining room. He was an imposing figure in his tall white chef's hat, his white shirt open at the neck, and his white apron, and the way he came down the stairs and cut through the tables, it was easy to see he took himself very seriously. He went directly to the broil without a glance at anybody. He knew that things attended until he got there. Carl's watch read six exactly. At the broil, the chef began (at least, so it seemed to Carl) to bang things angrily about. Finally, in a movement hardly perceptible, he nodded to Romano. Romano unhooked the rope and the Southern Winds was open for the evening's business.

Romano led the way in and tried to seat everyone at once, smiling, waving his arms in gestures of welcome and direction, and saying, heavily and unclearly, "The menu is on the blackboard; take your choice." Still, somehow, Romano's particular method of hosting, perhaps because of its very ineptitude, seemed sincere, and people laughed and took the tables they wished. Consequently, each evening after that, Carl looked forward to that little moment at six when Romano was almost tripped over and most certainly ignored by the people he was supposedly ushering in.

Carl went about his job slowly that night; he was contending with his own reluctance and with the process of getting himself organized as a waiter. His first experience was with a party of two —an extremely dignified and intelligent-looking young man of thirty, perhaps, and a pretty, middle-aged woman who walked in with a cane, who wore a huge straw hat, and who almost fell off her chair when she sat down. Carl thought at first she suffered some sort of indisposition, but when she tried to speak and focus,

he knew she was quite drunk. They asked for Manhattan cocktails and they gave him their food order.

Now it was a simple matter to write down what was requested, but the trick of working at the Southern Winds was the synchronization of the various elements and courses of the meal, since the first course of shrimp cocktail or conch chowder came from the kitchen, since the main course came from the broil (or, if it was fish, again from the kitchen), since the dessert course came from the kitchen, and since drinks requested during any of these courses had to come from the bar, which meant that the waiters had to go up the porch stairs, through the main hallway, into the bar, and back. Also, there was the matter of assisting the bus boys, seeing to it that the proper utensils (from the rear of the room) were on the table, as well as sauces (also from the rear), and ample bread and butter and salad and water.

Although the woman was drunk and the young man was taciturn, they did not seem to notice that Carl was new, and he did not slip on any detail. In the kitchen, Jenny told him he was waiting on Alan Houlton, a very famous young writer, and his mother, and that Houlton often came in the Southern Winds bar late at night.

His next experiences were with a party of four, and then another "deuce," as the waiters called a party of two. He approached both tables with trepidation, but after a bit he got used to the various details of the job and found himself immersed in them, however unwillingly, so that he did not worry about how well he was doing but simply did what was necessary, step by step.

Three hours later, he had served about eighteen people and he had twenty-one dollars in his pocket to show for it. Most of the rest of the waiters, from what he overheard, had done significantly better. Jenny had earned something more than twice that amount, and Carl was given to understand that that was not unusual.

So far as the business was concerned, the room had been full or almost full all evening; the Southern Winds, judging by the two evenings he'd seen it, was certainly a success. Still, he'd give it the ten days.

Carl had also learned for certain what he had surmised: the chef was a genius at his work and was no doubt responsible for

a large share of the success. His ability to handle without fuss and with perfect accuracy the many different orders on the broil and have everything come out properly done and together—and all by memory—was phenomenal. He was a tall, spare, light-complexioned man in his late thirties, and he affected a handle-bar mustache, neatly curled.

Carl had trouble only once—and not with a customer. Concentrating on his service, he had turned about hastily and jostled Kent, who was passing by with a tray. He apologized. The tray did not go over, due to Kent's experienced manipulation, but the coffee did spill and Kent had had to go back and get more. He gave Carl a very hard look but said nothing. It was curious, Carl thought, after his friendliness earlier in the evening. Still, business made competitors of people—he had learned at least that at McBain—and the floor of the Southern Winds was apparently no exception to this rule.

Melanie Romano arrived in the dining room at ten o'clock with a party of six guests. While she said good evening to the cashier lady of the cats, who strained forward to listen, and the chef, who conversed with her over the broil with obvious reluctance, her guests seated themselves at one of Jenny's tables.

Jenny was furious: a party of seven, soon to be joined by Romano himself—in short, a party of eight half an hour before closing time. She would be stuck until eleven-thirty or so and she would receive no tip for her labors, or a very small one if one of the guests felt generous, which was not likely. Carl stood with her in the back while she cooled down. She told him that this happened every night to one or the other of the waiters, that she was disgusted with Melanie for doing it. And, needless to say, all of those dinners for Melanie's guests were on the house. That, Jenny said, is one of the places that the profits leak out, if he wanted to know. Not to mention Melanie Romano's most extravagant habit of finding fault with some dish served to her or one of her guests—not properly done or unappetizing looking—and, with a flourish, prerogative of the owner's wife, sending it back to the chef or to May in the kitchen, causing trouble beyond words with those

worthies. That little performance was indeed, Jenny said, the thing Melanie did best, and most often.

Carl observed Melanie Romano. She was a petite woman, blonde, with bright, small-lidded eyes much made up, a thin-lipped mouth downturned in a perpetual pout. She wore long pendant earrings, a jeweled bracelet—and she smoked with a cigarette holder. She was dressed in a pink blouse and a pink pleated skirt, and when she moved she turned abruptly this way and that so as to make the skirt flair very prettily. She was very girlish, but she was vintage nineteen-twenties.

Having asserted herself as lady of the manor, she joined her table and said something to her guests; and there was great round of repartee. If Carl had not heard so many stories of her peccadilloes, he might very well have liked her.

Romano himself limped over to the table, his job about done of circulating among the tables asking, "Is everything all right?" And Jenny started to take the order.

Carl distinctly saw Mrs. Romano address Jenny and gesture in his—Carl's direction. Jenny glanced his way, and when she had finished taking the order, she came directly over to him.

"You are summoned to the throne," she said. "Melanie wants to meet you. Please go over."

Although Carl's own work was more or less done (he had presented checks to his last two parties), he was bothered. He did not like to meet Mrs. Romano in this manner, having to stand in front of her table wearing this waiter's costume, answering her questions. Not that she meant anything to him, but he had a hunch that she would make the best of his situation.

Nevertheless, he went. She started by making him wait for a moment or two while she finished what she was saying to her guests. She finally threw her head back and gazed at him languorously.

"I understand you are the nephew of Jake's old friend, Ben Hoyt."

Her voice was high, clipped and nasal. It could nag very easily, or bitch. It could also be cosy, Carl thought. It was cosy then.

"Yes, I am," he said.

"Dear old Ben," she said. As if she knew him.

She introduced him all around, identifying each person very carefully. In her party was Mrs. Mamie Slocum, president of the local woman's club, who could hardly stop talking long enough to nod to Carl; Mr. Paul Avery, a lawyer, who fidgeted through Mrs. Slocum's onslaught; Mrs. Vera Houck, a broad-shouldered woman wearing a velvet Turkish jacket who shook hands with him vigorously (she ran the Little Theater Group) ; her husband, whom she prodded out of a drunken haze to say hello; another man, whose name Carl did not catch, but who was shrewd-looking and pleasant-voiced and stood up to shake hands (he owned the local bookshop); and a Mr. Stanley Cooper, another lawyer, whom Melanie said was retired, who also stood up to shake hands, and who gave Carl an oddly sad-voiced greeting. In short, Carl gathered that he was supposed to understand that these were the society people of the town and that Melanie Romano had the run of them; that she was not merely the wife of Jake Romano of the Southern Winds. And having established her own identity, she proceeded to demolish his.

"We're glad to have you here," she said. "And we hope our little business interests and amuses you because, of course, we want a favorable report." And with beguiling frankness and logic, Mrs. Romano explained to her guests that he had come down to inspect the operation on behalf of his uncle, who they hoped would then be persuaded to invest in the business in the form of a cash loan. It was all said simply, and yet she managed to get enough implication of patronage into it as to cause his cheeks to burn. "Anything we can do for you," she continued, "you'll let us know. And you won't take a long time to make up your mind, will you, Carl?"

"I expect to stay about ten days," he said.

"Fine. Are you picking up much from the tables?"

It effectively made the others glance down.

"I'm told it's going about average."

"Good," she said. "No use wasting all your time down here when you can earn a few dollars."

He did not answer.

"Stop in the bar tonight or tomorrow," she said. "We'll try to introduce you to some young people."

"Yes," he said.

"See you later," she said, dismissing him.

He nodded good-by to the others and retreated.

Of course it was pretty nearly what he'd expected, indeed had warned himself would be the case. He did not think, however, that she would take such advantage. Whatever did Romano see in her? She seemed an impossible woman. But, despite his vexation over the meeting, Carl guessed that from a certain standpoint, this was not an unattractive woman. With her low-cut blouse, her bright eyes and girlish manner, she was probably Romano's most treasured possession. All of that, plus her lost-lady role. In fact, she and her husband were both, in a sense, curios in this place—strange fish in strange waters.

And as Carl began to help the bus boy's "breakdown," or gather up the place settings left on the tables, he wondered what in the world he would eventually tell Ben about the Southern Winds. Also, and not least, Carl reminded himself of the decision he was to make in his own life and that he was a great distance in that matter from any solution.

Before Carl left the dining room to dress for Kent's party, he went to the cashier's desk to convert the small change he'd received into bills.

The lady of the cats was arranging her money, preparatory, no doubt, to ascertaining the evening's total. Ah, and she was a beauty tonight: she wore a bright orange dress on which swam white fantail fishes. The straps of the dress held it up but hardly contained her swelling maturity. Her hair no longer trailed over her shoulders but had been parted neatly and tightly in the middle, and it was gathered in the back in a bun like the jutting spare tire on an old-fashioned convertible. On the side of her head, a great red paper flower hung, and it effectively hid her hearing aid except for the wire which ran down behind it into the bodice of her dress. Even as he approached, she gave him that little-girl-delighted smile and reached into her bodice and, with a twirling motion, touched what he presumed to be the control of the hearing aid. Turning it up, perhaps, so that she could hear him better if he spoke.

"Would you give me bills for this change?" he said.

"My name is Charlotte Tully," she said. "I saw you last night in the dining room when my bad cats ran away."

"Yes," he said. "You caught them."

"They like to play games," she said. "I'm supposed to chase them."

Carl laughed then because she laughed. He did not care for what may have been complete egotism on his part, but he couldn't rid himself of the impression that, staring at him as she did and laughing—chortling was more the word—she was expressing pure pleasure at the sight of him. She had round, watery, brown eyes and big buck teeth. And all he could think of was "the better to eat you with, my dear." Charlotte reminded him, as ungracious as the comparison was, of a crocodile turned friendly, but only just, and ever watchful for a good opportunity to clamp closed those great jaws on an overconfident keeper's playful hand. She observed him observing the flower over her ear.

"Deaf," she said matter-of-factly. "One hundred per cent in the right ear, eighty per cent in the left. Need an operation. Doctor in town says I might hear again in both ears if the operation were successful. I'd have to try it on the ear which completely is gone, and if they can do something with that one, maybe they can save the good one. No harm trying. But it's an expensive operation and I'd have to go to New York and I can't afford to right now. Maybe someday."

It was impossible not to feel the frustration of the woman's infirmity and to admire the spirit with which she accepted it and evidently triumphed over it.

"You should try to have it done soon," Carl said.

"How did it happen? Happened on a horse, off a horse, I mean. I jumped but he didn't. Hit my head. Twenty years ago. I rode a lot. You do in Ohio. That's where I come from. Tiny little town."

"No," Carl said, speaking louder. "I said you should try to have that operation done soon."

"Soon," she said, smiling sadly, and he realized he'd said the wrong thing. How many times he'd berated himself for trying to adjudicate the affairs of another. She knew damn well she ought

to have it done soon; she was probably up against a great many problems. He regretted his stupid remark. "When this place gets going a while longer, Jake will give me back the little bit of money I invested and loan me some and I'll have it done. I'm a partner in the Southern Winds, you know."

She handed him bills for the change he gave her.

"Thank you," he said.

"Goin' to the party tonight at Kent's? It will be very crazy. . . ."

He nodded. "Yes, he invited me."

"Goody, goody," she said, actually clapping her hands and hopping once up and down—all of that poundage of woman! "You don't know where his house is, do you?" He shook his head. "Let me take you. . . ." She looked at him sidewise, flirtatiously, but, he knew, without the least bit of guile.

"I would be honored," he said.

"What?" she said, looking doubtful.

"I said," he said, turning up his own volume, "that I would like that."

"Fine," she said. "Meet me on the porch in front at eleven o'clock. That will give you time to dress and me to finish up."

"All right," he said.

"See you then," she almost whispered, and lowered her eyes, and busied herself with arranging and counting the evening's revenue.

Carl went to his room. Charlotte Tully impressed him as a woman with many fey attitudes but of very great sweetness.

At eleven o'clock Carl was downstairs on the porch waiting for her. It was Saturday night and the sidewalk in front of the Southern Winds was a fairly constant stream of strollers—mostly sailors, of course. Some of them, out of uniform as allowed, but still easily identifiable by their black shoes and white socks, came up the path of the Southern Winds, up the stairs to the porch, and into the Fantasea Room. It was a perfect evening, the air was motionless and cool enough and clear, and it was a far remove from the weather on most February evenings in New York. Carl sat on one of the wicker chairs. There was no light on this part of the porch, save that which filtered through the overgrown trellis from the

floods that illuminated the building. Carl's corner was shielded; he could see and not be seen. Also, he could hear Art Troy at the piano and a woman's voice singing and the noise of the people at the bar, despite the fact that the room was sealed for the sake of the air conditioning.

At eleven-twenty Charlotte arrived on the porch and he went up to her. She had scented herself with some quite lovely perfume, and she hooked her arm is his, and together they went down the path into the street. She carried an immense wicker bag—her lobster trap as she said—and she wore the same orange dress she had on at dinner. Her arm was extraordinarily ample compared to his own.

"Now," she said, adopting this time the tone of an instructress, "I have to tell you a few things, so that you will enjoy the party."

"All right," he said, falling into her bouncy step and something of her general tone of voice. "What do I have to know?"

"First, you must not make fun of me, because I know you can," she said. She referred to his mimicking.

"I'm not making fun of you, darling," he said, and he discovered it was perfectly natural to talk to her in that affectionate way. "I am in your power." He also spoke loud and clear, determined not to have to repeat or to make her ask him to.

"I don't think you know this, but beside working at the Southern Winds, I work on the local newspaper. I have a gossip column called 'Conkversations.' "

Carl glanced at her. There was not so far the least hint of maliciousness in Charlotte. He wondered how she could conduct a gossip column. She anticipated his puzzlement.

"Oh, it's not that kind of column. Nothing mean. Mostly comings and goings and weddings and parties. I love parties."

She gave her crocodile smile.

"I'm not too good at parties," he perversely replied. "I stand in the corner."

"I'll bet you don't," she said, passing over that quickly. "Anyway, I told you that so you would know I know what I'm talking about. There isn't anyone in Key West I haven't at least heard of, and plenty I could tell but wouldn't. I'm gonna do a history on this town someday."

"This is your little kingdom," he said. "Tell me something you could but wouldn't."

She laughed mischievously as only a big woman can.

"You're interrupting me because I want to prepare you for this party tonight, but I'll get back to that. See this big house?"

They had walked up Bonnie Street a block or so from the Southern Winds along a street of huge mansions set one right after the other. Charlotte pointed now to a ghostly house, much balconied and porticoed, where one light shone from a second-story window. That window was shuttered.

"Yes," he said.

"The woman who lives there hasn't been out of that room where you see the light for ten years. Once, a long time ago, I spied her walking in the garden. She wore a huge floppy hat. I said hello through the fence, she turned around, and I saw her face. The skin was mottled gray with white spots and she had hardly any nose."

"What was it?"

"Most people think it's leprosy, but no one is sure."

"Can't they find out?"

"These people are so rich and influential that so far no one has been able to get in."

It was a very weird story and not helped in its effect a little by the dark and foliaged street they were walking on . . . the soft knock of Navy shoes: the quick step behind . . . the shadowy forms of oncoming pedestrians who could hardly be seen until they were close. Again, sailors mostly, with tenseness in their strides which Carl supposed they hoped to undo with drinks and girls.

"Tell me another," Carl said.

"Well, that house," Charlotte said, indicating this time another mansion, brilliantly lit. Garlands of flowers decorated the veranda. A broad driveway was packed with cars. "That belongs to a woman who was in the Southern Winds tonight, Mrs. Slocum. You may have met her—she was in Melanie's party, gabbing away." Carl recalled her—a small, gray-haired woman with an extremely authoritative manner. "She's supposedly the queen of society here, though many don't accept her. She's too long-winded.

This time, it's the husband. She's having a huge party tonight where Melanie and Jake will be, I suspect, but her husband will not appear. There's nothing wrong with the husband except he hates her. Hasn't spoken to her in years, lives in a separate part of the house. She entertains her guests in a great garden behind the house, which she calls her garden of love. But there's no love in it, never was—in fact, he's knocked her down in that garden at least twice in front of all her guests. And just by the way, her daughter's up in New York, a lovely girl, beautifully educated, gone completely beatnik."

Carl laughed. He pictured the beatnik daughter, the gray-haired lady bruised in her garden of love.

"How about that house?" he asked. "Anything about *it*?" Carl indicated another great mansion, taller than all the others, but without a single light on.

"Not a light in it, right?"

"Not so far as I can see," he said.

"Yet three people live there," she said. "A ninety-year-old woman and her two daughters. The girls, Lulu and Cynthia, never married. Two old maids and their mother who never receive and always shutter the house completely every night. Delivery boys do get in occasionally, however, and there was a rumor once about a telescope mounted way up there in the captain's walk and trained on the front of the Southern Winds. Don't you think that's funny—those old maids sneaking a look at the high life on Duval Street?"

"Yes, it's funny. And sad. I see what you mean about the stuff you can't ever use."

"Boy, someday I'd like to write the story about how all these big houses came to be on this street. They were all originally built by a few rich families in Key West who made their money out of 'wracking'. You know what that is?"

Carl said he did not.

"Means the same as wrecking; when a ship went aground on the reefs off Key West, the captain, or wrecking master, as they called him, who got there to save it—first—also got a large percentage of the cargo. A form of polite piracy, that's what it was. In one year during the eighteen-forties, over five hundred ships

went aground: the wreckers took in over $1,600,000—and remember the value of money in those days—and Key West was the richest city per capita in the South."

"But how could that be?"

"Misleading lights!"

"You mean they deliberately led the ships. . . ."

"Sure. False beacons. Biggest scandal in the South. I can quote you what the *New York Times* said exactly on July 7, 1845."

"What?"

" 'As to the trade of Key West,' " Charlotte proudly quoted, " 'there is but one of much importance. It is true the manufactory of salt, cigars, gathering of sponges, turtling, and fishing are each carried on to a considerable extent, but in a peculiar sense wrecking is the business of Key West.' How do you like that?"

"It's wild."

"You bet it is. And wracking is not discussed to this day in some of these homes."

"I can see why," Carl said.

"And before the wrecking, there was real piracy all through these waters. And during prohibition, it was rumrunning, and don't you think for a moment there aren't dope runners around here still."

"A heritage of piracy of all kinds . . . with a carry-over in the air of a sort of emotional piracy . . . maybe that's why I felt threatened."

"Right. Emotional piracy . . . predatory people, pillagers, even murderers. Take me all night to tell you what I know. Anyway," she said, tightening her arm in his and continuing, "I want to give you a little background on the party tonight so you'll understand what's going on. The theme of the party is based on something that happened in Key West about ten years ago and that was reported nationally. In fact, I wrote the stories that went out over the AP wires. Got twenty-five dollars for it. It was called the Von Cosle case."

"Von Cosle?"

"Count Von Cosle was a man who lived in town, and he was very mysterious." She glanced at Carl slyly. "He used to wear a black cape and a black Homburg and carry a thick cane. He was

from Germany. He stood six feet three and he looked like Dracula. But he was quiet and polite and people thought he was just eccentric. He worked at the Naval Hospital as an X-ray technician. One day he fell in love with a young town girl named Elena, but a year after he'd met her she died of tuberculosis. After that, he quit his job, his hair turned white, he kept more and more to himself, and finally, years later, his terrible secret was discovered. Now the theme of this party is based around Von Cosle. That's all you have to know."

"You mean you're gonna leave the story there?"

"You'll see in a minute," she said.

They had come five blocks, and now they turned off the dark side street on which they'd been walking into an even darker driveway. It was a driveway, however, that no car had traveled in years; it was overgrown so much they could hardly walk abreast, and there were rocks and ruts. It led around the back of a fairly small and evidently old and unused house. Up ahead, Carl heard the subdued hubbub of many people in polite conversation and he saw flickering candlelight.

"This is one of the oldest houses in Key West," Charlotte whispered.

They stepped through a thick bank of foliage into an enclosed garden where perhaps thirty well-dressed men and women chatted discreetly, drinks in hand. There was a hushed quality about the scene, however, which distinguished it from a real party atmosphere. And then Carl saw why.

The sad-voiced lawyer who had been one of Melanie Romano's dinner guests now sat hunched in a chair on a raised platform with his hands pressed to his temples.

"That's Stanley Cooper," Charlotte whispered. "He used to be the biggest lawyer in town. Retired. Owns this property and lots more. He's the star performer tonight. Or costar."

The raised platform was at one end of the garden, and on either side of it burned great funeral tapers mounted in ornate gold candelabra. All around the platform and in front of it were bouquets and wreaths of real and artificial flowers. In the center of the platform there was an open coffin. Out of the coffin dangled

one arm, white-gloved to the elbow, holding a half-full martini glass.

The crowd quieted and Charlotte and Carl made their way through and up to the coffin to pay their respects. Stanley let out two or three loud wails: "Ohhh, ohhh, I'm Count Von Cosle," Stanley said to Carl, "and I want you to meet my dear departed love, Elena."

Carl looked into the coffin. The corpse lay with its eyes closed and a smirk on its face. It was dressed in white taffeta, it had on a headdress of tiny Christmas lights, and there was a telephone under its left high-heeled foot. All of a sudden the corpse sat up.

"Murcee, yes, yes, darling, how are you?" Charlotte bent over and received a kiss, and Kent extended his hand to Carl. "How do you like my gown? Have you got a drink yet? Somebody get Charlotte and Carl a drink and one for me, too. I can't get up or I'll be electrocuted. Darlings, stand back now for the next arrivals. Come and see me later, darlings, I'm just dead tonight."

Carl and Charlotte rejoined the laughing guests as someone else stepped through the bank of foliage and made his way up to the platform to be received. The scene was, in fact, repeated several times. Drinks were thrust into their hands.

Carl glanced around: of course he now realized that the hushed quality of the guests was out of observance for the solemnity of the occasion. The garden itself could not have been a more perfect setting. Lit by the tapers, villainously overgrown around the sides so that it was absolutely secluded, and bordered behind Elena's coffin by two huge mangrove trees—the roots of which gnarled hideously along the ground and upwards to form, altogether, a central tree trunk—it was a frightening place to be. In the crowd Carl glimpsed several of the people from the Southern Winds and, sitting in the low boughs of misshapen trees, a man and woman, well deported, as well as several pairs of sailors and girls. In one such natural aperture seat, two older women, both gray-haired and slender, held hands.

"We'll begin now," Stanley said, rising to his feet—a tall man with a shock of white hair, stooped for the occasion and speaking with a wistful tone that was accentuated for his role but not wholly assumed. Almost everyone sat down on the grass. Charlotte

moved around a lot before she got comfortable, and then she was sitting quite close to Carl. Carl had begun now to accustom himself to this elaborate and strange form of fun. He wondered about it, briefly: this celebration of the downward urge. The tapers burned high, the assemblage was silent.

Stanley spoke in his tired, halting voice: "My name is Dr. Von Cosle. I first came to Key West in the late thirties from a trip around the world. I was born in Germany. My real name is Karl Tanzel. I picked up the other name and the Count part of it because, oh, I dunno, it sounded better. I worked as an X-ray technician at the Naval Hospital and I had an income from Germany."

Propped up on one elbow and taking a swig of martini, the corpse said: "Wasn't much money; we couldn't live on it."

Stanley went on without noticing.

"Around town I wore black alpaca suits and around my estate, which was a renovated garage building out on Flagler Avenue, I wore Bermuda shorts and white suits. I was a tall man with a shock of white hair, much as you see me now. I was a well-known figure around town, thought eccentric but smart. I knew music and played the pipe organ. I owned a good camera and took photographs that were considered professional."

"I posed for a few," the corpse said. "Got a dime each in Cuba."

With elaborate slowness, Stanley drew out and lit a corncob pipe.

"I smoked such a pipe," he continued. "In 1939 I was sixty-two years old. In that year I met my beloved Elena, a girl of nineteen. She was the town beauty, had been married and separated, and had even lost a child. I fell in love with her at once. She was the ideal of whom I'd had visions since boyhood. And not only visions but visitations, for I saw her quite clearly and spoke with her half a century before I met her. But though I met her and it was predestined, she refused my attentions."

"Murcee," the corpse said. "I couldn't stand the old goat."

Stanley hung his head.

"Elena was slowly dying of tuberculosis. I tried to help her. I invented an elaborate electric machine to treat her with, and she came to my house and we tried, but it didn't do her any good—she got worse."

"My dears," the corpse said, "he mixed a very good dry martini—I'll give him that—but the silly contraptions I had to put up with!"

"Elena went into the Navy Hospital and several months later she died there. I went to her family, who did not approve of me much, but who were kind and understanding, and asked if I could not build her with my own hands a tomb in the Key West cemetery suitable for her beauty."

"My beauty," the corpse said, sitting up.

"They said all right. I built it. It was roomy and elaborate. I brought food, newspapers, a table and chairs over to the tomb and spent many pleasant afternoons there. I had a telephone installed at the tomb so that I could call Elena when the weather was stormy."

"Here I am," sang the corpse, "with no sun up in the sky—stormy weather. Me and my man ain't together. Murcee no, I'm dead. Can I have another martini, some one of you darlings down there? Yes, yes."

"But then I got an idea. I asked Elena's family for her bed. They took pity and gave it to me. Then the question became 'how to get Elena into that bed.' I thought about it for a week and did the logical thing. I bought the fuselage of an old wreck of an amphibious airplane. I equipped it with wheels and had it towed one day to the grave. It was difficult getting it along the narrow roads in the cemetery but the driver, whom I tipped generously, did it and left it there overnight. I told people it was just for one night, that I wanted Elena to see the plane I'd bought for us to fly away in to another world. That night I went into the tomb, opened the coffin, took Elena out, and put her in the plane. The next day the man came and towed the thing down the main street of Key West to my house on Flagler Avenue. It was put into my back yard. After dark, I went to the fuselage, took Elena out, and at last to my bedroom. I bathed my bride. I reconstructed with wax the parts of her that had decomposed, using my knowledge of mummifying techniques, which I'd learned in Egypt. I dressed her in a bridal gown."

Tears came into Stanley's eyes and the crowd around Carl was listening to him with more than merely amused attention. Some

of the pathos of the crazy Count Von Cosle was coming through. Charlotte held his arm in expectation.

"I kept Elena for nine years. I invented machines to revive her and injected her with magic serums but to no avail. I failed. But I had my darling and no one knew my secret. Until someone defiled the tomb. And discovered that Elena was gone. And mentioned to the police that I might be responsible, whereupon they came and searched my home and found her. The person who defiled the tomb and reported me was someone quite near to me whom I had been helping until, after the war started, my income from Germany stopped.

"Elena was taken from me. She was photographed and exhibited shamelessly. I was taken to jail, but no charge was proffered. When the newspapers published my story, letters came from all over the world asking that I be released, saying that I had loved her so faithfully for so long that I should be able to keep her. Teams of psychiatrists examined me and found me upset but rational and harmless. I was released, but they had buried Elena somewhere else—no one knows where to this day—and I couldn't go to her. I was also exiled from this town. But, as I told the reporters, I had made arrangements to be remembered here. Four hours after I left Key West, a gigantic explosion ripped apart the tomb of my beloved Elena so that no prying eyes could look upon her last known resting place, the rendezvous of our last days. And, as I also told the reporters, I have made arrangements to be with Elena in death, where we cannot be separated."

Stanley, playing his part to perfection, sat down and peered gloomily at the coffin. No one spoke. Even the corpse, in its sitting position, peering back at the crowd, was momentarily without a retort. Then there was immense applause. For the first time, Stanley smiled. Carl joined in with the rest but, once again, he could not deny the slight chill that went through him. Necrophilia: order of the night.

"Somebody help me out of this rig," the corpse said. "Murcee, I'm wired for sound." The lights in Kent's crown were flashing wildly on and off. "Must be a loose connection. First thing you know I'll be electrocuted and we'll really be using this coffin. Murcee, what a nice cocktail table it will make. . . . Built espe-

cially for tonight, by the way. Just fits me. And, my dears, it's lined —might even be comfortable for sex. Let's see, you there, you with the white socks, you, young man, come up here."

The young man did as he was asked to do—bounded up and stood by the coffin.

"Now, darling, just climb in with me and see if two can fit."

The fellow hesitated understandably, but Kent grabbed a gladiola stalk from a nearby wreath and began pummeling him with it.

Good-naturedly, the young man climbed up and got in.

"Now, don't be afraid," Kent said. "I'm just going to lower this lid and see. . . ." And the lid went down slowly. " 'By, 'by, everybody."

The lid closed.

Saturday, February 22

DESPITE the fact that he'd been out rather late—and to the zaniest party he'd ever attended—Carl was up and breakfasted by ten o'clock. Fortunately, something about the air in Key West is good for hang-overs; it clears one's head quickly. Coming back from the diner where he'd had his buttery eggs and crisp toast, Carl was well enough to luxuriate in the day: fresh, cool even, with just a slight breeze and an absolutely cloudless sky. Key West mornings—crystal and pearls. It was also Saturday, and even this early there were many people on the streets, shopping; and, curiously, the barbershops were full. For some reason, the day seemed to hold special promise of good times and strange promise of the night to come. The beach would be ideal, and later he wanted to swim. First he'd clean up his car.

It was parked a block away. He went and got it—very muddy from the trip down—and drove it into the space beside the Southern Winds' loading platform, where he'd noticed a coiled hose.

Carl was an earnest caretaker of his car; he had had to be—traveling as much as he had been required to do for McBain—for safety's sake. But it was more than that. He respected his car as a piece of machinery, he considered its flowing lines pleasing, and he enjoyed the feeling of power he got behind the wheel.

Indeed, his car was very much a part of him. He cared for it as he did not care for much else that he owned. His apartment in New York, for instance, which he'd managed to find in a rent-controlled older building on the East Side, and which cost little, was virtually furnitureless. It consisted of three rooms, to be sure, including a full kitchen and tiled bath, but, partly since he was usually on the road and partly because he simply had not had much interest, it had remained bare. There was a bed, a desk, a couple of chairs and a large bookcase. Otherwise, plain white walls and polished wooden floors. Clean: spotless. But empty. Those few friends that he had—mostly from college—took exception to this—indeed, rather vehemently, inasmuch as, when in town, he

customarily went to their houses to be entertained—told him that by not entertaining—even as rarely as he found himself in town—he was denying himself one of the real enjoyments of life. He said he preferred to take friends out to dinner and drinks—and frequently did. Carl gave them for a further answer a statement to the effect that, until he could afford the furniture that he wanted, he preferred none. And that was the truth in part. The other part was that although he saw the necessity for maintaining an apartment for his return to his home city and home office, he did not really want to be burdened with household effects. He did not want to be committed to New York.

Carl had a clear perception of this, and the fact that he didn't, in general, like to commit himself on anything.

Also, he knew that his furnitureless apartment somehow exemplified the mood of spareness in which he conducted his life altogether. It did seem to him on occasion that he was like a ship moving through rough seas, the hatches all battened down. He proceeded with only two thoughts in mind: to survive and to reach his destination. He knew that other people obtained another dimension in their lives which in his life, or his consciousness of it, seemed to be of necessity neglected—simple moment-to-moment enjoyment. He had had very little of that. Each day was a battle to do what it was necessary to do; most recently, cover the assigned ground in his salesman's tour around New England; before that, work in order to financially remain at college from week to week, and study in order to amass enough credits to graduate. Somehow the other dimension was always being superseded, except when it came to the matter of his car. *That* Carl took time to behold, to attend to, to care for, and not without awareness that somehow more areas of his life should merit such attention and treatment.

The space beside the loading platform where Carl parked was shaded by a full date palm tree, so the sun didn't worry him.

Carl dusted the car and then hosed it down. After which he washed it with soap and hosed it down again thoroughly. He used plain Simonize to polish it—which he had found gave the finest shine and protected the paint, although considerable elbow work was required. After an hour's steady labor, Carl felt, for the first

time since his arrival, relaxed and effective. As small a matter as it might be considered, rubbing up a car is cutting ice.

It was with some apprehension then that Carl watched an old sedan turn in off the street, mount the driveway with a series of jerks, and come to a halt. It was Romano. The car was filled with provisions and, of course, he wanted to get as near to the platform as possible.

"I'll move my car," Carl said; "just a minute."

"No," Romano grunted. "I can get in." And proceeded to maneuver slowly past.

While Carl estimated the possible damage, Romano hauled the old car through very expertly and as close up to the platform as it could have gotten in any event. Romano climbed out.

"Good job," Carl said.

"Been driving for years," Romano said. "Since before you were born."

It sounded pompous, but Carl laughed; it was airy and amusingly grandoise the way Romano intoned it.

"I guess you have," Carl said.

"That your car?"

"Yes."

"Neat," Romano said, and turned to his business at hand, the business of getting in the supplies.

"I'll help you," Carl said.

Carl finished up the spot where he'd already applied the Simonize and closed the polish tin.

Romano had begun: leaning over through the back door of the old car, he grabbed a huge bag of groceries and, balancing it between one arm and his stomach, he hauled himself—the other hand gripping the ramp rail—laboriously along.

Carl carried in a box. Romano took in another. Carl went back for his third and Romano was coming up.

Romano was a picture of a man operating by sheer will power out of infinite physical disability and weariness. He was not a pretty sight: he perspired greatly, his shirt front was dusted and spotted from the packages. His brown gabardine trousers were falling down, and the great excess of material in the seat and legs was impeding his step. He progressed up the ramp by holding the

rail with one hand, tremblingly loosening it, gripping it further up, and pulling himself on. His face was contorted more than usual and when he breathed he whistled.

It occurred to Carl that Romano more rightly belonged in a hospital or at least on a quiet porch. But in that moment Carl glimpsed the imperative nature of Romano's drive toward life—despite all physical disability, there was great hunger here for participation, an immense need for effectiveness: the man would go on, probably, until he dropped.

Carl carried in another box. On the kitchen table, the stuff began to pile up—sacks of potatoes, loaves of bread, sides of meat, buckets of sugar, gallon containers of ice cream. They passed again on the ramp.

"Why don't you have them deliver all this?" Carl said.

Romano stopped.

"I buy every morning in a lot of different places and I couldn't depend on their delivery boys getting here at all, much less early. May and the chef have to start preparations around eleven A. M."

"You mean you buy retail, and every day!"

"Yes, I do this every morning. Usually when I get here there's nobody around. It takes me a half hour to get the stuff in. This is still a narrow-margin operation, Carl. I have . . . no credit. I buy retail and haggle a little and get a break on some things. And I'll do it every day until I get ahead. Ben's money and two more good months, Carl, is all we need. It will be easier then. But now I've got to keep going."

The man continued to haul himself along by the ramp rail.

It was a wretched situation and, Carl thought, an admirably defiant statement. Still, it was not bravery. It was survival to Romano.

Carl made two more trips, then stopped beside the old car for a rest. Romano joined him.

"Is running the Southern Winds difficult?" Carl said.

"No," Romano said. "Just a matter of getting people to do their jobs. When a little thing goes wrong around here, everybody gets excited. They start hopping around and they blame me. But I don't mind that if they'd just take it easy."

"But you don't take your own advice—I mean about taking it easy," Carl said.

"Can't. My job is to make arrangements. Did you ever think about making arrangements? The world is run on arrangements. And I must make more arrangements per day than any man alive. If only some of them would stick more than a day . . ."

Romano hoisted another bag of groceries unto himself and went slowly up the ramp. Carl followed, and thought about Romano, and making arrangements, and the whole rotten business of constantly having to keep going—no letup—if one wished to survive. Oh, the alternative, Carl supposed, for Romano, or anybody, was to lie down and die, in the figurative sense, and in the literal sense to give up, to have a nervous breakdown perhaps. But Romano had not taken that way—Romano for whom the excuses would be so numerous. Despite his circumstances, his appetites were powerful. He preferred to haggle with suppliers, to pull himself along up the ramp, run the restaurant, wet-nurse the help, and smooze the backers, no doubt. In short, Romano still cared about his life and its purposes and enjoyments regardless of his protests. Regardless of a vicious fortune. His adequacy remained. Obese, foolish, kind, pretentious, battered man, still struggling. It was not inadmirable.

"Thank you," Romano said when all the provisions were in and he had climbed in his car and was sitting a minute. "Carl," he said. "I forgot one thing: the candles for the tables. Will you stop in the five-and-dime and pick up three packages, red, white and blue ones. I'll give you the change tonight; I don't have but a dollar."

"Yes, Jake," Carl said.

"Good boy. Well," another deep breath, "now for some more errands. . . ."

The old car wheezed and jolted, but it started up, and, in reverse with deftness, Romano maneuvered past Carl's car and backed down the driveway into the street—forward, and noisily off.

The peace of the spot eddied in again. Carl glanced at his car. It was almost finished. He would not do much more. He wanted to go for a swim. And, also, somehow his pleasure had gone out

of his work. He continued polishing for another fifteen minutes, then went upstairs, washed, slipped his bathing suit on, dressed, and shortly drove off.

* * * * *

South Beach is jammed on Saturdays; well, not jammed according to the standards of metropolitan New York beaches, but with people lying about every twenty feet or so, nevertheless. Some Navy, some tourists, some of the all-winter, older vacationists who, probably because they find the private beaches too clubby, come here—and they sit with a great amount of beach equipment strewn around them. The volleyball game goes on all day, with several change-overs of players, of course, and the game is taken very seriously. The atmosphere is gala, and this particular day was perfect.

Carl saw that the Southern Winds crowd had settled in the center of the little strip of sand. He also saw both Kent and Robin wave to him. Robin lay propped up on what looked like an old lion's skin. As Carl drew closer, it became apparent that that is exactly what it was—head, mane, paws and tail complete. Now Carl did not want to join them particularly—he had heard plenty of their kind of thing for the moment—but he did not conceive any civil way to avoid the invitation. The rest were present: Happy and Naomi; Jenny and Nothing-Betty; Bert, looking pinker than ever; several people Carl did not know; and, lastly, Kent astride his aluminum beach chair like a king on a throne.

Carl did not relish sitting at Kent's feet, and so he spread his towel on the periphery of the circle—receiving a nod or hello from everyone—and, as quickly as he could, undressed, applied sunburn lotion, and lay back. But he couldn't help listening.

Robin seemed to be the general topic of discussion. Precisely, Robin and his beach addiction.

"My day," Robin said in his high, wry voice, "would not be complete without the beach. If I went to New York and got a job, how could I keep my tan? And what would you want me to do in New York? Work in a department store, start a piddling

life of cocktail parties, small apartments, minor love affairs? Why should I do any of that when I can come here to all of this?"

"Murcee, yes," Kent said. "All right if you're taking care of yourself, but you're living on your old man and me. Go out and get a regular job if you want to stay. You don't make enough at the restaurant to live like you want to live. And I'm sure your father is as tired as I am trying to make up the deficit."

"The rich," Robin said expansively, "should give to the poor."

"I work for my living," Kent said with vehemence. "And your father is a dying man."

In the following few moments, Kent, who was apparently the intimate of both Robin and Robin's father, made the facts clear to Carl—to everyone, indeed, within earshot. To wit:

Robin's father, dying of cancer and arthritis, had come, bag and baggage, down from Ilinois to Key West to attempt to reclaim his only son from a profligate existence. The father did not command unlimited funds and, besides paying for medical care in Miami for himself, had had to meet Robin's bills—Robin maintained an apartment in the garage house of the Hemingway property which, Carl had heard, was nicely furnished and the scene of many parties—not to mention supporting a Cadillac, the trailer in which he lived and a cabin cruiser. This situation—Robin's sponging, his father's needling—had gone on for almost a year.

Carl propped himself up on one elbow and glanced at Robin. Carl was curious to see how Robin would respond.

Robin cleared his throat, arched his brows, and explained to the general company that he *was* willing to work, to do, indeed, what he could do—and he explained to them about the cabin cruiser.

Water skiing was one of Robin's natural accomplishments, it seemed (natural to a professional beach boy at any rate), and Robin had asked his father for the boat so that he might conduct a water-skiing school for tourists. The boat was duly bought, but Robin was permitted its use only rarely. Still, Robin had customers. In particular, one avid, middle-aged lady who finally fell and broke her wrist and had to be compensated. Thereafter, the boat became the possession and plaything solely of the father. Robin said at this point that his father was a son of a bitch—accidents

do happen!—but Carl thought that Robin had probably decided this a considerable time before, though perhaps with some justification.

However, this ideal day for sailing, Robin informed everyone that he expected his father to pull up in the boat momentarily to take him water skiing (which act of consideration Carl thought oddly indulgent), and that everyone was invited to go along for the ride. They might even, Robin said, go out a way and see the reef. "You, too, Carl," Robin said, lying back then on his lion's skin.

The mood of the group on a beach can easily be shattered, and it was shattered then. But, after a bit, it is just as easily mended. Only Kent seemed perturbed, but he had done with expressing it, and he was silent. The rest applied lotion, watched the volleyball game, visited friends, or were visited.

Then Kent said to Carl: "See that man? Know who he is?"

Carl watched a man proceed from a Thunderbird parked at the curb to the beach. He was short; he held himself rigidly erect; he headed for the bathhouse.

"No."

"My boy, you are looking at the master. Emmette Colliers, playwright, Key West's star attraction. You watch now; he'll go into the bathhouse and undress, then he'll come out and join that big group by the wall. Lots of writers and theater people and such. You'll probably see them all tonight. They come in, if not for dinner, to the bar late."

Colliers went into the bathhouse and came out shortly with a chair, a bathing cap and towel, lotion, and a book. He made his way across the beach to the group by the wall. Kent greeted him with a wave but Colliers, picking his way impassively, did not notice. He was much heralded by the people he joined, and Carl saw among them the young man upon whom he had waited the night before and whom Jenny had said was Alan Houlton, the novelist.

It was a very self-conscious group—sycophants, Carl supposed—and postures of most of the people in it seemed to be studied. They laughed a good deal, however, and when somebody went over, the person was carefully introduced all around but nobody

stood. Or they stood only once: when a pale woman whom Carl thought familiar went over, holding hands tightly with a sunburned escort on either side of her. The whole crowd stood up promptly. Practically everybody on the beach was watching.

"Sabre Lockhart," Kent said, smiling, in answer to Carl's frown.

And very distantly Carl caught the sound of that famous, deep, breathy voice: "Sit down, dahlings," she said. It was unmistakable and rather funny to hear in the flesh. They all sat down.

It was Robin who redirected the attention of the Southern Winds' crowd: "There's my father now," he said.

A blue-and-white cabin cruiser careened by too closely to the bathers in the water and pulled up smartly beside the pier. Robin repeated his invitation to Carl; the others insisted; and Carl went.

He took a seat in the very stern. There were no introductions. Robin's father operated the craft from a forward deck, and he merely nodded to Robin's guests, although apparently he did not object to their being there. He was a wizened, sunburned little man with Robin's sharp, regular features. The others placed themselves strategically, with handholds, and, abruptly, they zoomed away.

If the old man was dying, he did not show it. He drove the boat like the proverbial bat out of hell . . . unless his veering, skidding course was a kind of dancing on the grave. Robin had donned water skiis and he jumped back and forth across the wake. The boat leaped over the tops of waves, spewing showers of white foam as it went. It was very exciting and it was also absolutely necessary to hang on.

The old man continued to swerve this way and that until at last Robin went down. The boat was then spun around violently and headed back for the pickup. Father, at least somewhat, had bested son. Robin was helped in, and he joined his father at the helm. The old man put one bony arm around the boy's shoulders, and Carl saw them laugh together. And heard them speak. The conversation, carried on in loud tones over the motor noise, was solicitous, almost tender, on both sides. Quite different from what Carl had been led to expect, judging by the remarks made on the beach.

Then the motor was gunned, the boat shot away again, and in a short while they arrived at a spot a few hundred yards offshore, where they were told to peer down into the water. Their speed diminished, and Carl saw, suddenly, a reef within a few feet of the surface. The boat moved along slowly. The reef was covered with a yellow-green moss, odd and lacy sea fans, and convoluted palaces of colored coral.

"Look," Robin's father cried, and Carl sighted down in the direction the old man was pointing in time to see a very large, dark form, somewhat in the shape of a slant-winged plane, glide by swiftly. "Ray," the old man said. "Harmless. Not very large." And then some of the others began to sight them—apparently they were quite numerous just here. Carl thought them ominous and frightening.

But Robin said, "I've been brushed by them in the water. They go in the opposite direction." In such matters, at least, Robin was not without his measure of authority.

Father glanced at son after this remark, and Carl could not help thinking that the old man's expression, far from disapproving, was one of abject admiration. And Carl wondered how much of Robin's prolonged ineffectiveness (except in the area of physical health) was due to the subtle and perhaps slightly sadistic encouragement of his father. Wasn't Robin's, after all, the prized state, the treasured and envied state, to this old and sick man? Did Robin's father really want him to leave the beach, to become anything other than the athletic, delightful and useless young person that he was—but, in a way, so free, so sparklingly alive? What vicarious existence could the old man know then? Who would there be any longer for him to best?

They started back. Bracing himself, Carl leaned over the side. They were skimming along again, and spray shot up from under the keel in a marvelously symmetrical pattern. Despite the exhilarating nature of the day and this activity, a slight sense of dismay came over Carl, as it had several times since he'd arrived. The fact that he was capable of such thoughts as he had had about Robin and his father bothered him. And yet he was very certain that his observation about their particular connection and mutual usefulness was correct, in contradiction to all protestations from either

side or any intimate. In fact, he had never perceived a personal connection he was so sure of before. What a curious knowledge.

A short while later, in his car, and on his way back down Duval Street toward the Southern Winds, his perception translated itself, or perhaps enlarged itself, into something else not wholly unrelated. Although it was only four o'clock in the afternoon—very broad daylight indeed—the town had undergone a change in aspect from the town he had passed through in the earlier daylight hours. He felt, simply, that the night spirit here had begun to take over. It was there among the sailors crowding the penny arcade; there in the bars, busy (he could see in the windows) already; there among the many aimless wanderers along the sidewalk. The night spirit—a disturbing force, perhaps even a dangerous force. But the presence of it did not lack a certain excitement, a certain fascination.

* * * * *

The only safe place for people such as Carl, who are susceptible against their wills to the overtures of the nameless and shameless demons of revelry and abandonment, is in the very storm eye of the whirlwind: the bar, the café, the cocktail lounge, where liquor balms, music lulls, and others who are susceptible crowd in. The unsafe places are the lonely places: the silent rooms, the darkened streets, the deserted roads. In those places is danger; there the demons may possess without mercy, and sometimes—cause violence.

Carl arrived in the bar of the Southern Winds at eleven-thirty. He found a stool in the corner and relaxed. He had not imagined that the restaurant could have been so busy. People had waited on line right up until ten-thirty, and Romano had had to refuse to serve a great many. It had been a furious scene with the waiters and waitresses dashing about, with the crowd of well-dressed and healthy people enjoying their food, with Henri in his high cap stoking the flames under the charcoal broil; it had been a scene of fierce vitality and Carl was drained—but in acute possession of his faculties, a creative aftermath of the excited activity, and, oddly, here in the bar, at great ease.

The bar of the Southern Winds was air-conditioned, and it was small. Except for the bar side which was blue-mirrored, the walls were covered with what looked to Carl like straw matting, but it was hard to tell—it was so dark. But that was all right with him. The bar itself was semi-circular, broad, a thick roll of leather around the edge to lean on. Behind it, a platform held an old upright piano and a set of drums and cymbals and a chair for Art Troy. His sheet music was illuminated by a little blue light over the piano stand. He was just seating himself up there now. He ran through some chords—the light, sweet chords of a night-club piano—and Carl felt certain that Troy would accompany himself, or the girl whom Carl understood to entertain also, with the sort of playing that was quite inobtrusively expert and that one would enjoy listening to for itself. This was exactly the case.
to for itself. This was exactly the case.

Troy broke into a Nat King Cole (names of our times!) song, "Lush Life," which he apparently used as a theme; he played it while introducing himself:

> Romance is mush, stifling those who strive,
> I'll live the lush life in some small dive,
> And there I'll be, while I rot with the rest,
> Of those whose lives are lonely, too. . . .

As the spotlight, just one, a yellow one, shone down on Troy's blond head, it occurred to Carl that Troy, while he played, was not at all a victim of that nervous blink. Troy went on to do two more songs, "The End of a Love Affair" and "Little Girl Blue," which, despite their obvious titles, nevertheless, in their curious combination of words and music, express quite vividly a couple of the conundrums of love.

There were perhaps a dozen people at the bar, and half that number sitting on the stools ranged against the rear and side walls. Carl sensed in the room an axis on the wheel of life all its own.

The bartender, whom Carl did not know, finally came over. He was a tall, full-chested man with a chiseled profile and curly brown hair, and, as Carl now discerned, he had a warm and friendly

voice, fairly Southern. He reminded Carl of the popular conception of a romantic tenor.

"Name's Jim," the bartender said, extending his hand. "Saw you working inside and Jake told me about what you're doin' down here. I'm partners with Jake in this business, with Charlotte, I mean, and I take care of the bar, see to the entertainment, arrange it, I mean, not pay 'em. Jake does all the paying. Glad to have you aboard."

Carl acknowledged his greeting and asked for a Scotch and water. When it was brought, Jim refused to let him pay for it.

"No," Jim said. "We're good for a drink or two, at least your first two."

They chatted intermittently as Jim waited on the other customers. In answer to Jim's question, Carl said that he'd met everyone now, he presumed, except the girl entertainer, and that he liked Key West, and that he intended to stay only through Sunday of the following week.

Idly Carl watched Jim work: he was rather inept at the job, he overestimated liquor quantities and spilled a great deal. And despite the man's size—which acted, no doubt, to intimidate any potentially boisterous customers—there seemed a timidity about him, a desire to be liked inordinately, a state of emotion with which Carl was not totally unfamiliar. It was amusing to find it in so physically large a man.

Jim was suddenly joined behind the bar by Jenny, who evidently doubled here as bartenderess. How she had the energy to do it after the night she had put in, in the dining room, Carl could not conceive. She rolled up her white blouse sleeves, however, and went about uncapping foamy beers with a vengeance. She looked pert and unruffled, and her bracelets jangled. She made some remark in her brusque voice to Jim, and Jim chaffed her pleasantly. They evidently got on well together, which, when it happened among employees in a place, invariably created a congenial atmosphere for the customers. And the mood in the bar of the Southern Winds, as Carl estimated it just then, couldn't have been more congenial. If there were demons abroad in the dark streets, along the deserted roads, they failed of entry here.

Troy stopped playing; he peered around the room. He reached

behind the piano, found his glass, and tilted it way back and finished it. He handed the glass down to Jim, who quickly handed him back another. Troy blinked several times severely and resumed his set with a sad ballad called, "Down in the Depths on the Ninetieth Floor":

> What's the use of swank and cash in the bank galore?
> Why, even the janitor's wife has a perfectly good sex life,
> And here am I, eating my heart out,
> Down in the depths on the ninetieth floor.

Sad songs, Carl thought, all sad songs for Troy. Carl wondered who it was that Troy peered around for each time he took a swig, and it occurred to him that it must be Romano. Still, wouldn't Romano have been foolish to deny Troy what was evidently as important a part of his equipment as the piano?

Carl asked for another drink, and this time he paid for it. He glanced around. Charlotte had come in with Stanley Cooper, the white-haired lawyer and articulate ghost of Count Von Cosle, and while Charlotte settled herself on a stool in the back Stanley came forward to order: in the bar light, his expression was one of undisguised condescension. When Stanley returned to Charlotte with their drinks, they plunged into an intimate and animated discussion; Carl could not imagine what they talked about and he wondered which raconteur could keep the other down for long. Of course, Charlotte had her hearing aid, which operated, he imagined, in such a contest as a head start. She could tune Stanley out, protesting too much noise, and go right on talking, and if he wanted to be heard, he had to shout. The flower at the side of Charlotte's head bobbed up and down. Carl had the impression that she wore a bright red gown—he could not be certain because of the light—but it was not the gown she had had on during her job at dinner. He wondered if there was some romantic connection between herself and Stanley.

Now Romano came in. He walked the length of the room. He nodded to Carl. Even in the dull eyes and on the inexpressive face, a kind of light, the hint of a knowing smile, and, in his lumbering walk, the least bit of strutting pride, as if to say, ah, it is I

who have done it, built this place, created the circumstances in which you may indulge your sweet play of loving and being loved. Or so Carl imagined Romano's reactions.

Romano was accompanied by two extremely thickset men. The three of them drew up stools together near the door and fell almost immediately into a converation as *sotto voce* as Charlotte's was animated. Jim went from behind the bar, requested their order, and served them where they sat. As little as Carl could see, the expressions on the faces of Romano's guests were intense, as if they were playing chess or perhaps poker. Both of them wore flower-spattered sports shirts, and they blew smoke from cigar stumps in Romano's face. They were a trio of discordant notes in that room.

When Jim came back from serving them, his face was troubled.

"Who are they?" Carl said.

"Oh, just some business friends of Jake's." Jim turned away with a positively furtive gesture.

Carl persisted.

"From Miami," Jim said. "They hold some kind of mortgage on the place. That's all I know. I'm a partner here, but Jake never tells me anything. I know one thing—I don't like 'em."

Two stools away from Carl a young lady seated herself. She waved to Troy on the stand, and he acknowledged her with a nod and a blink, and she leaned across the bar and kissed Jim on the mouth. Carl thought her lovely. She had short, feathery, bobbed hair; creamy skin; a long neck; and she was dressed in a lime-green dress and wearing two strands of white beads. Jim spoke with her for several moments and then glanced his way and introduced him.

"This is Renee," Jim said. "She sings here."

"I'm very glad to meet you," Carl said. And he thought: for two reasons. First, because you are lovely; second, because I believe that you are the last employee of the Southern Winds I have not met, which means that now I have met them all and the problem is to remember names and he was about to start up with Renee when Jim broke in.

"I want to warn you, old man," Jim said to him, "every man in

this place is carrying a torch for this one, including me. If you want to get in line, you're welcome."

Renee turned to him. She had clear hazel eyes, round and willing.

"My heart belongs to daddy," she said. "But I may go out for a game of golf."

"Yes," Carl said, and no more. His reaction was quick and to himself unexpected: she was cheap and brittle. He had hoped for no obvious reason for a little softness in the girl, but he doubted, having heard her speak even so briefly, that there could be any. And why should there be—what right had he to expect it? She sang in a night club in Key West; she could hardly resemble a Bennington belle. Still, she did look so lovely. She seemed to sense his disappointment and turned away from him, continuing with Jim the brand of light banter that she was good at. Oh, she could have been so graceful and mysterious and deep. And now he doubted that they could even be friends. He knew he would regret that, damn his own attitude!

Renee even moved over two seats when May, the kitchen chef, and Eddie, her husband, came in.

The bar was certainly not unpatronized by the employees, Carl thought. He reluctantly turned to acknowledge a greeting from May.

This fat, little, round-faced, caustic woman was much changed. At least outwardly. It was the first time Carl had seen her in anything else but the apron she wore at night in the kitchen. She was quite nicely dressed and rouged. Her hair was tied with a silver ribbon.

Her husband, on the other hand, had not changed at all. He was dressed in overalls. He was unshaved and his eyebrows were bushy, like Walter Huston's used to be. And he had some of the same weird glint in his eye. When May introduced him, he extended to Carl a calloused, dirty hand.

May ordered double shots for them all. It was funny, Carl thought, that she and her husband were roisterers with all the rest.

"We like to have a bit of a one before we go to bed," she said. "Usually in our room. On weekends, down here." She leaned over close to him. "Ed's a mess, ain't he? My husband, I mean. Dirty old

man. Crazy, too; out of his head. He'll go off and kill me one of these days. Except I'd break his neck if he tried." She had let her voice rise to its normal pitch and her husband could certainly hear her now. "I make money by working in that kitchen all day and he just stands around outside with a broom in his hand. Been like that for years. It's me that's supported us." As suddenly as it had come, her vindictive tone fell away. Her eyes went blank. "It was a terrible accident that made him like he is. Four people in the car killed, himself the only one who survived. And he's mumbled the same thing to himself over and over that he mumbled the day he climbed out of the wreck. Have you 'eard him?"

"No," Carl said.

"Now watch," May said. And she spoke to her husband loudly. "The accident isn't serious."

At that remark, Ed's face pinched and, as if on cue with his lines, he looked at his wife and Carl and said, "That's right, Mother. No damage; accident's not serious, not at all. They're just knocked out. Be out of the hospital in no time. Hit us from behind, bastards. . . ."

It occurred to Carl that Eddie's statement seemed premeditated, not merely from repetition, but as if he knew what May expected him to say; and he said it to please her, rather than because he wanted to.

Ed continued to mumble to himself. May sat and drank quietly while Troy went through two songs. Then she leaned close to Carl again and said, "See what I've had to put up with for six years? You call that broken thing a man? And I'm a woman who knows what a man is and needs a man."

They finished their drinks. And then with abruptness, but lightly, May touched her husband's arm and said in a tone of unexpected tenderness: "C'mon, old man, it's time for bed."

She slid off her stool and waited for him. He took a moment to drain his glass. Then, holding her husband's arm, May walked erect, as if no other place in life could make her a more proud woman. A path through the crowd opened for them and they left the room.

Carl watched them go. As he turned back he caught Renee's eye and she smiled. "Characters," she said, and was about to say more

when a pugnacious young man pushed between them to one of the vacated stools. Carl was disconcerted but Renee gave the fellow a look of no displeasure. In fact, a moment or two later she was in conversation with him.

This did not escape Carl's notice, or Jim's, and shortly after that Renee actually left with this same young man without a good-by to anyone and a full drink untouched. Carl thought that if, indeed, it was what it seemed, it must have been the fastest pickup on record. Jim came over.

"Little bitch," Jim said. "She free-loads on me and cruises at the same time."

"I thought she sang here."

"She does," Jim said, looking at his watch. "She's on in thirty minutes. But she only lives around the corner. She'll take him home and come back. No money—just for love. She's a nympho, my boy, and she's a bitch, but she's fabulous."

That seemed to call for another drink. Carl asked for it, and Jim had one, too.

"She don't have to work, you know."

Carl said he didn't know.

"God, no, her old man owns half the oil in Texas—big oil man. Hell, she's got her own sports car, her own apartment—rents a beautiful place, the tree house of Mrs. Slocum's mansion over on Bonnie Street—got more clothes than any girl I ever knew. Doesn't earn beans singing, although she could—she's good, yet she stays right here in Key West."

"I wonder why," Carl said.

"Why not?" Jim said. "I guess she's got everything she wants. Twenty thousand boys, at least, to choose from, and as much booze as she can hold with no one to stop her."

Carl got the point. Jim went off to wait on a customer.

The effect of liquor on Carl followed the line of the paradox of his life; it seemed to make him drunk, but it did not, really. No matter how much he drank—and for the sake of experiment, he had consumed on occasion a good deal—he never lost the capacity to cope with the naturalistic world in a naturalistic way, unfortunately.

At first, he had thought that everyone was like himself, and that

when they were drunk they were only fooling, and that when they said that they could not remember incidents which occurred during their time of being drunk, it was a small but deliberate lie. Evidence to the contrary, however, had disabused him of that idea. People did do and say things when drunk that they would not ordinarily, and they did forget. But not Carl. He never lost control. Others pointed an accusing and often amused finger at him and said he was drunk, judging no doubt from a misstep or a blurred eye, but if it had been a matter of their life or his, they would have been surprised.

On the other hand, it did have some effect. Carl leaned backward on his stool. He looked up at the ceiling. It was covered with bamboo matting the same as the walls. Unseen and different-colored lights from positions in each corner reflected softly on the matting. Melanie had named the bar the Fantasea Room. Well done. It *did* cause one to feel submerged and slightly fantastic, but not smothered. Somehow here one found a new dimension. Perhaps that word, dimension, best described the effect of liquor on him. It helped him discover a new dimension in his life. Releasing him from the clamps of purposeful activity, of pressing aims and goals, of anxious effort, but without disengaging reason, liquor recalled him to himself, to the fact of his being, to the miracle of his conscious self-existence. In short, drunk, it was not necessary to do anything. Simply be. Enjoy. At the core of him at such a time was certainty. It was a feeling to experience gratefully and not too directly. Best, when it happened, and satisfying to conjure the elements of his world. In memory, to reproduce in no sequence the different forms that appeared in it, and the distortions. Still gazing then at the ceiling of the bar, it afforded enjoyment to Carl to recall a certain coat of his mother's, a coat which had black and white fur around a collar which extended to the waist, and around the cuffs, which were full. It was a funny, old-fashioned, jazz-age coat, and he could visualize it quite clearly. (This memory was Troy's doing; he had broken into a virtuoso rendition of "Tiger Rag.") It occurred to Carl that the coat must have been bought long before he was born. In happier days for his parents, he guessed, for they had been married for ten years previous to his birth and, although they agreed about little else,

they both spoke wistfully of those times. An old car of his father's drifted into the focus of Carl's bright inner screen. It had buttons on the back as a sort of ornament. His father had used it to travel in order to sell. And Carl remembered that his father had been as poor a salesman as he himself had turned out to be. And a bad driver. The car had rolled over four times. There was little left of it, or them. Gone. Lost. Lamented in afternoons of endless tears. Anywhere, quite suddenly, those tears . . . and unconsolable. Carl recalled these things in the bar of the Southern Winds, but not unhappily, merely as some of the elements and shapes of his world. He felt he could reach back any time.

He could even reach back to the time he was twelve, to the years before the accident—and out of that half of his life a most curious dimension emerged. It was as if he had remembered feeling for what it was to be a complete human being. It was as if during those years at least the form of a personality had been established, if not the substance fulfilled. Those were the years when the embryo of a self had had a chance to grow truly. After that, it had been opposed. No wonder his somewhat, but not wholly, inclinations—his somewhat, but not wholly, appearances. He had had partly the experience necessary for the evolution of a personal identity, but not all of it: the rest of his earliest life had been not conducive. Still, he had that memory of the shape of wholeness, of unity, and perhaps if he tried he could re-establish it and ultimately fulfill it. How much better off he was than those people whose lives were chaos and whose memories held nothing but the unending memory of the shape of chaos. Who, in short, had no chance. To become. Real.

Troy played a song then that had been a favorite of Ann's; Carl did not resist the shapes along that indicated path of reminiscence. Ann was a tiny girl, hardly a hundred pounds of her. She lived in Boston with her family, and he'd met her at a party in Boston during the first months of his four-year employment with McBain. He went to her home for dinner after seeing quite a bit of her in town; and her family—charming Polish people who owned a large old house—invited him to come and stay with them as a paying guest and use a room there, rather than a hotel room, as the base for his New England operations. Indeed, he could drive to

most of the towns he had to visit and back the same day. And so, briefly, under that arrangement, Ann and he played husband and wife. Perhaps the family had hoped for a marriage. Carl had contemplated it. But she was in college, and he was so far from being established, it would have been unfair. Nevertheless, they spent a lot of time together. Her two most rapturous moments, however, were when, in the morning, he went with his brief case under his arm out to his little car and drove off, and when, in the evening, he returned, tired, and with the brief case, (full of information for reports) again under his arm. At those times, the light in her eyes simply glowed: she did so want to have a husband who came and went in just that fashion. It signified for her exactly the status she preferred. There was something else, too, by which she gave him a clue to the role she wished to have him play—the way she called him "a big ape" when she wanted him to take her. Of course, he was not big by any stretch of the imagination and his attempt to behave like an ape would have been too absurd. He supposed that that sort of thing had done most to separate them. He tended to sense quickly the roles that people cut out for him, and as quickly he resented them. It occurred to him that if Ann somehow found out that he had recently lost his job with McBain, even now she would probably be saddened. It was funny, and he laughed out loud. He glanced at the seat next to him and discovered that Alan Houlton, the young novelist whom he'd waited on the night previous and whom he'd seen that day on the beach, occupied it and had mistaken his smile for a greeting.

"How do you like your new job?" Houlton said. His voice was calculated, pitched low. He had unusual eyes, somehow tragic eyes.

Carl at once became alert, and as available and vivid as the forms and shapes of his inner and past world had been, so was this present and outer world available to him and vivid. Usually he greeted strangers with strangeness because he expected strangeness. Not so this time. Perhaps it was just that he had been, a moment before, in quite close communication with himself; he was able, now, to extend this communication to Houlton. Everything about Houlton—his striped T shirt, his aloof manner despite the fact that, seated, his feet did not touch the floor—seemed

immensely immediate and intense. Carl found his voice. "It's coming out all right," he said.

"I was talking to Charlotte," Houlton said. "She's an old friend of mine. She told me about your 'mission.' "

He emphasized the word "mission" as if to suggest the plot of an old movie thriller.

Carl tried to recall what he'd read of Houlton's. It came back to him. Two books, both describing psychological crises of young people of the times. Actually, Houlton had written a number of books. Quite a productive person. Carl remembered little about them except that he'd thought the emotional insights in the books rather applicable to himself. He hadn't read the later ones because he'd heard Houlton had become rather symbolic. That was probably wrong, but it had been enough to put him off. He was sorry now.

"My name is Carl Solon," he said.

"Alan Houlton."

They shook hands. For Carl it was a great relief and very pleasant to have had his position at the Southern Winds clearly defined for Houlton. It would have sounded awful to explain.

"I wouldn't have believed it," Houlton said.

"What?" Carl said.

"Clairvoyance is one of my specialties. You were thinking that it was a good thing Charlotte told me about you so that now you did not have to tell me yourself. And you're right. I'd have thought, had I heard it from you, another wild tale of intrigue by some guy who's drifted down to Key West like so many others and ended up working as a waiter. But you have a very real tale of intrigue."

The man spoke in a constant tone of satire.

"How so?" Carl said.

"Beware of the walls," Houlton said. "This is a wild place, a chamber of horrors. Greed, avarice, lasciviousness—the works. You'd be wise to write your report and head out. If the evil *genus loci* finds out what you're about, he will revenge himself on you. Slip away quickly after it is done, if, indeed, you intend to tell the inside story."

It was a speech that Houlton seemed satisfied at having made.

"I'm not sure," Carl said, "that my story will need to be as scandalous as that. The business seems to be going well, which is all I really want to know."

"It is, yes. You can write your report with a clear conscience, my boy. It's about the best place to eat in town, although it's staffed by the stupidest bunch. I don't envy you working here. If I had to, I'd been in a fight with the bastards in short order. I can sense the narrow prides and prejudices even from a distance. Kent especially. He's almost dangerous. 'Way out."

Carl did not necessarily concur with Houlton's opinion of Kent, but he told Houlton briefly about the party he'd attended the night before.

"Yes," Houlton said, his jaw muscles seeming to work with an emotion—anger? distaste? dislike?—that Carl could not exactly identify. "He gave a party on Christmas eve that I did not attend but was promptly told about. Seems Kent was digging around in back of that old house he lives in—Cooper's property, I believe, and a historic house—and he discovered a small but perfectly formed fetus that probably some whore had buried out there. He put that thing on his Christmas tree in place of the star, and he hung fresh-cut turkey necks on the branches."

It was so bizarre that Carl had to laugh. And indeed, he thought, it was characteristic of Kent, as much as he knew of Kent. Houlton was about to say more but Renee had returned and was mounting the platform to start her performance.

"That," Houlton said, nodding darkly in Renee's direction, "heralds my retreat." He unstraddled the stool and stood up. "I can't stand her. I come here only because of Jenny."

"Jenny?"

"I like to upset the upsetters. I have not had—Jenny. There are a lot of them in Key West. Tough, thirtyish, Lesbians, who go to bed with a man for the express sadistic purpose of inverting the usual role of a woman with a man. But I fool them. Only that victory," Houlton said, raising one finger, slipping away, "stimulates. . . ."

Houlton left so fast, he seemed to disappear.

A most curious person, Carl thought, and realized, for all his wish to communicate, that he had most certainly failed. He had

been offered what he supposed was an elaborate façade, which Houlton probably threw up before most people, but which, Carl thought, Houlton's eyes and voice certainly repudiated. He wondered if what Houlton had said about his sexual preferences was true, and if he'd run into Houlton again.

Troy introduced Renee to the crowd, and she started to sing.

Renee's voice was unexpected. The smart-aleck delivery Carl had objected to, which, indeed, had repelled him, gave it a hectic, defiant tone, especially appropriate to the song she sang, which was called, "Remind Me":

> I've got my heart well in hand and I'm so certain
> That I can take you or leave you alone,
> Then you begin that beguine again
> And boom, I give in again.
> I have a will made of steel, my friend,
> But when it feels about to bend,
> Remind me not to tell you that I love you. . . .

She stood to one side of Troy with her head up and her hands on her hips and her feet stanchly grounded, à la Dietrich. She was very provocative, or was it the song? No, it wasn't the song, for he'd heard it before and it had never had that effect. And what was the effect? Simply, that one . . . that he, indeed . . . was worthy of just plain romantic love, wonderful old-fashioned physical love. That, for him, for anyone, the possibility still existed. It was an apt reminder for Carl, for he acknowledged then, somehow, that he had forgotten that that was true, and now he remembered it, and it was exhilarating, and it caused him to straighten up on the seat. It was also unsettling. Oh, to kiss a girl again, passionately, and to be met passionately with a kiss, and the mischievous realization flooding over him that it could happen again. . . . But was it merely Renee and the song which produced this effect, or was it not something in the whole awesome atmosphere of this town, which was focused in this room at the Southern Winds, the Fantasea Room? He tried to recall how long it had been since he was tempted, or since he had his heart well in hand and was certain. And he knew it had been a very long time. At least four years. In some curious way, most of the four

years he'd spent traveling for McBain, four years of business life, had crushed most such notions out of his mind. This reminder stirred in him possibilities he had not conjured in that long a time. Disrupting, such thoughts. To feel worthy of romantic love again, and the somehow implicit promise Key West held for fulfillment, seemed to be the point here. But for long-established people, how dangerous! All of the influences playing upon this moment, as Renee sang, aroused in Carl the predator—capable of commandeering satisfaction—indeed, awakening in him a sensitivity to Key West's particular kind of heritage, evoking from out of him his piratical emotional inclinations. The intimation from all of it was that one should go into the night and one would be received with eagerness. Carl wondered if some sort of vicarious participation in that very feeling wasn't a part of the tourist attraction to the island.

In the bar of the Southern Winds then, the curious mantle of seriousness of purpose and responsibility that Carl had worn for at least his four years of employment at McBain, four years of his young life, began to drop away. He felt lovable and hopeful of love with a simplicity of those emotions. And he was convinced that somehow this was attributable to the place, to Jake Romano's specific intent for the place. He was also aware of the danger. To contemplate his responses did not hurt, though. With some presence of mind, Carl maintained his seat and ordered another drink. He listened to Renee attentively through her entire set.

Half an hour later, the bar had begun to crowd up. Two parties of tourists had come in and ranged themselves on the stools against the back wall. One of the groups was of elderly people, two men and two women, tall, dignified. The other group was a noisy party of young people, five or six. Jenny hurried out from behind the bar to serve them. Several more young men had come in. And girls to filter, like glitter dust, through the darkness.

Troy played background music, but he had stopped momentarily to receive a drink up at the piano from Jim. Troy glanced in Romano's direction, and, apparently satisfied that Romano was engaged, drank half the glassful at a swig.

Carl looked over in Romano's direction, also. There were peo-

ple passing in and out and the light was not helpful, but he caught a clear glimpse of him by the door with his two brightly-attired companions. Carl wondered what they were discussing. And then Carl could hardly believe his eyes. It happened in two seconds. Nobody but himself could have seen it. Romano had been speaking when all of a sudden one of the men reached over and cuffed him with a fist in the eye. Romano fell back against the wall, but did not fall from his stool, and held his hand to the side of his face. Carl began to get up when he felt a strong hand on his shoulder. He turned about and Jim was reaching way across the bar and holding on to his shoulder.

"Let Jake handle it," was all Jim said, but it was said with quiet authority. Carl glanced back at the threesome. Jake's head was down and one of the other men was speaking. It was no joke: these people here meant business. Troy started playing again but background music merely. Jim's eyes were on the three, but apparently the incident was not going to erupt further. Romano just sat there and took it, with his head down. Now, of course, Carl could no longer ignore his intuition about Romano's trouble. It would be absolutely necessary to try and find out what was going on. Ben would want to know, and, Carl thought, if there was any way, to help. Romano had evidently gotten into something this time considerably over his head.

But Carl's attention was diverted again, as was everyone's.

A young couple was having a row. Jim was already in front of them trying to quiet it down, but they were speaking in loud tones. Carl could not make sense of it at first. Then the girl started to tear through the crowd toward the door and her escort leaped from his seat, grabbed her arm, and, heedless of people all around them, proceeded to have it out. Carl thought them not at all the type to do this sort of thing.

"Stay here and discuss it," the boy said, tight-lipped.

"Why should I?" the girl said bitterly. "You're not going to change anything."

The crowd drew back, as happens in small bars, and listened, becoming, indeed, a part of the problem, much as an audience in a theater-in-the-round might. And Carl thought, along with the rest, no doubt, that the young couple were not really fighting, that

they were very much in love, but that they faced a situation for which they had despaired of finding a solution. The Fantasea Room of the Southern Winds was certainly a clearinghouse of emotion.

Jim prevailed upon them to come back and sit down. They did so, with Jim standing over them. The young girl folded her arms, put her head down, and cried with great, choked sobs. The young man was very dejected and embarrassed. And the crowd was embarrassed and not a little concerned for them both. They did not seem drunk, although they had been there when Carl arrived. The crowd was still quiet a moment later (Troy kept playing) when Jim went round the bar, and everyone was listening as he asked, "What's the matter with you two?"

"Four hundred dollars is the matter," the young man said resentfully, but not resentfully toward Jim, resentfully toward what he obviously considered the injustices of life. "We could get married but for that. Her mother won't let us marry unless we can rent a house. We have money for everything but the house."

"You're Navy, aren't you?" Jim asked.

The young man nodded.

"Can't you borrow it?"

"We've raised every cent we can. Including her mother's fare down here for the wedding. We've got an apartment, but we can't find the money for six months' rent on a house."

"Got a house in mind?"

"Over on Simonton Street."

"Who rents it?"

"Someone by the name of Stanley Cooper."

Carl saw Stanley look up and exchange a glance and a nod with Jim.

"Hell, Stanley don't care. He won't hound you. Take a while to raise it."

"We couldn't expect that—we're Navy."

"Navy's most important thing in this town," Jim said. "Say, is that your cap?" Jim indicated a visored fishing cap.

"Yes."

"Give it here," Jim said. The young man hesitantly handed it across the bar. Jim made a small production of reaching in his

pocket—more so that everyone got the idea, rather than because he was showing off—and fished up a twenty and put it in the hat. "Here's twenty to start with," Jim said loudly. "Let's hand this around the bar and all come up with something for this young couple. Hell, we've all been in a spot like this." The hat was duly handed round. People put in nothing but bills. Carl put in a five. The hat made its way toward the back.

"C'mon, Jake," Jim called out. "You've needed help on occasion."

It was more than a well-timed remark, Carl thought. Romano and each of the two men he was with made a contribution. It went on to the elderly group of tourists. Carl saw one of them put in a twenty. It was done ostentatiously, but it was done. Even the noisy kids gave something. As the hat came to Stanley, that man stood up. He took the hat and held it. He left Charlotte and walked to the bar, placing himself in front of the young couple.

"My name is Stanley Cooper," he said in that funny, half-sad, half-mocking voice. "I own that barn on Simonton Street. I'll tell you what—we'll let Charlotte count the money in this hat and I'll keep it. You see, I like this hat, and you can have the house and pay me the rest any time. Take a year, two years, who cares?" He handed the hat back to Charlotte who proceeded to remove the money and to count it.

It was nicely done, not a magnanimous gesture but a decent one all the same. The young man could hardly believe his ears; the girl looked delighted; then they both fell to thanking Stanley. And several in the crowd around slapped him on the back.

"Hell," Stanley said, "don't thank me. I got a hat out of it, didn't I?" He put the hat on and rejoined Charlotte, who smiled delightedly. She expressed in her childishly happy eyes everyone's feeling. The young couple also thanked Jim. Jim said loudly, "Who said rich tourists don't still come to Key West? The next hat will be for the house," Jim said. "Right, Jake?"

Carl followed Jim's eyes to the corner, but Romano and the men were gone.

Instead, Carl saw that the celebrity crowd had arrived. Emmette Colliers was safely in a corner with his back to the wall. He

wore a blue suit with a white shirt, a white silk tie—and he smoked with a cigarette holder stuck at a jaunty angle between his teeth. Sabre Lockhart perched on a stool next to him, leaning her elbow on her knee and also smoking in her characteristic, nervous fashion. They were surrounded by friends, including Melanie, who seemed quite at ease with them, and Troy, who had come down off the bandstand and, Carl hoped, was trying to persuade Lockhart to sing. This was evidently the case for, with a sweep backward of her pretty, full head of hair and a deep ha-ha-ha, she allowed Troy to escort her through the crowd. It took the people only a second to come to attention as she mounted the tiny platform behind the bar, and she was given a delighted ovation.

She wore a white silk blouse and black slacks. She had on a necklace of pearls and an immense diamond ring. Her eyes were bright and much made up.

There is something special about a professional entertainer singing for the amusement of it—out of sheer high spirits—that compels a witty audience to ecstacy.

The people in the audience that night had the wit to perceive that they were receiving something quite special and the grace to respond to it. That this should be so in Key West surprised Carl; it was certainly so there in the bar of the Southern Winds.

And now, half winding around the microphone, she sang, " 'Bye, 'Bye, Blackbird," that plaintive ballad of the twenties. Her throaty yet trilling voice gouged through the song in an awkward but spellbinding way.

The crowd cheered as she stepped down and made her way back to her seat. Then people surged around her and Carl could not see her any more. But now and again her voice or her laugh came through.

Carl leaned with both arms on the bar and looked around the room. It was certainly a popular place. Now Carl had been to many large night clubs, and there had been about them a certain frantic gaiety, a mood bolstered constantly with the best entertainment, the best drinks and food—people in them bound and determined to get their money's worth and have a good time. It was a world, essentially, of planned fun. But here at the Southern Winds it

was quite different. Everything was impromptu, thrown together, accidental, improvised; and it came off, as such things can, with the quality of happy accidentalness which is so satisfactory, which is for each person his own discovery. And it *was* as if everyone participated somehow in the evening. Troy played requests from the audience. Renee sang requests. If there were guests in the crowd who sang competently, they had probably only to make themselves known to be received. And now and again a marvelous surprise, such as the performance of Lockhart, enlivened the evening. No wonder, Carl thought, that people came. But, of course, it had taken some showman, some personality behind the scenes to choose people to facilitate this atmosphere, to choose a place where this could happen, and, lastly, to keep the place and the people who ran it inspirited so it could continue to happen.

It was, Carl realized—sitting in that now-packed, tiny, blue-mirrored room—very much the creation of Jake Romano. Old showman, old gourmet, old gentleman, and possibly old fraud that he was, the Southern Winds had been shaped by him into something rather special. Shaped, indeed, by his hand alone. He, who enjoyed eating so much, communicated his joy through the food he served his customers, the unobtrusive surroundings in which he served it, and the people who—in fact—served it. Carl wondered what Romano had meant when he said he'd chosen them specially. And Carl had a feeling that it had something to do with having people around who valued love, however they misinterpreted the term or however ineffective they might be at it. Of course, that remained to be proved. In any event, the man who enjoyed life had also created the bar, and "sympatico" was the best word Carl could think of to describe it.

It was true that Romano's gift was entirely a conciliatory one, but certainly, Carl thought, that was important. The man himself could not participate: it was no small thing that he had created an atmosphere for those who could. It occurred to Carl that behind the scenes of any great night club or restaurant there always must be such a man. A man who cared. In the case of the Southern Winds, though, there was something even a little more than that, more than the mood of feeling cared for. In that cool, dark bar, Carl felt inexplicably understood and forgiven. Curious that it

should happen here and never in the parish house of his church. And now Jake Romano was in trouble.

But what Carl had witnessed in the bar between Romano and his two companions only an hour or so previously had a haziness about it now. Did it happen—did it happen as it seemed to have happened? Could it be that he had misinterpreted some gesture altogether? No, Carl had seen Romano cuffed, if not socked. Jim had seen it, too, or, at least, Jim had seen the same thing and interpreted it similarly. Otherwise, why had Jim stopped him, why had Jim told him to let Romano handle it his own way? Gangsters, Carl thought. Were there such people any more—gun toters, underworld muscle-men figures? How the hell had Romano got in with them, if indeed he had?

Carl knew that the liquor, of which he had consumed a good deal now, had affected his thinking. Still, he perceived this anyway with clarity: that the nature of the reality of any given situation was a difficult, sometimes never-known thing. That there were so many strands interweaving into a human involvement to make it what it was that the inquirer could never know—could never quite be certain that this or this had resulted in that or that final effect. It was maddening.

Carl wondered what he ought to do about it. About Romano. Was it, indeed, his business to try to find out about him? Or should he do what he started to do, which was observe merely and carry home the report of his observations to his uncle? Still, it seemed to Carl that Romano's well-being was the whole of the Southern Winds. That without Romano there would not be much. If Romano fell, the place would collapse. Ben would lose, all the partners would lose (the loss of the employees was real, of course, but negligible), and the greatest losers—would be the customers. Wrong. Well, partly right. Carl considered, tried to formulate it: if the Southern Winds went down, something that was given and that was valuable would no longer exist. And that, the mere loss of the gift, would be the saddest loss. Without pushing, Carl thought, I must discover the facts as much as I can. Carl thought, also, that he was wandering far afield, and it was with pleasure that he welcomed Charlotte as she squeezed in next to him, as he gave her his seat, which she quickly took. Charlotte

must know something of Romano's true situation. He would work around to it slowly, maybe tonight if the opportunity came up, tomorrow or the next day—without pushing it.

"Stanley had to go home," she said. "I thought I'd come and sit with you, and there's too much noise over there by the loudspeaker."

She carried a small Chinese fan and used it demurely.

He was about to reply but, if there was anything that Charlotte didn't particularly need, it was a reply. She began to talk about the incident of the young couple and Stanley's action, which she said had come as as much of a surprise to her as to everyone else. Stanley, she said, was known for his penuriousness. Charlotte was coifed with her usual flower to hide the hearing aid, and the marvelous low-cut gown was red, as he had thought. She certainly was not afraid of color, and he had to admit she was, sitting erect on the stool, despite her infirmity, a handsome woman.

But a monologist:

Carl thought he had fallen lately rather often into the hands of monologuists. Charlotte rattled on. Still, that had been the eventuality through most of his life. He was a good listener. Too good. People seemed in his company to tell their stories with as much elucidation as Henry James. It was sometimes interesting, but it was more often enervating. He had watched other people cope with monologuists and tried to take a lesson; they fidgeted, thought of errands and phone calls, spoke to friends passing by, swigged drinks lustily, or simply cut in and overrode. Carl had attempted some of these dodges, but they came off badly, impolitely, not as excusable compulsive actions. And so he had used the time he listened for something else. While listening to the monologuists, he added to his store of knowledge of what he considered bad examples. He listened to people largely to test their senses of reality and to exercise his knowledge of the universal mechanisms of unreality. He listened in order to see if all people were afflicted with more or less the same sorts of distortions in emotional perception—sometimes physical perception. And in order to see if he shared, as he usually did, the same sorts of distortions. Listening then became less boring. The reward of it, of course, was that occasionally he met a person whom he considered

unbefouled by language, who used words to indicate what he meant, and whose life base was sympathetic. There were some of those people, and he encountered them in the oddest circumstances. The hours with all the others, then, were well lost. And now with Charlotte, listening to her rattle on with her too great concern for her cats, her insufficient concern with her weight, it began to dawn upon him, but from nothing yet she had said, that she—as far as he was concerned—was one of the rare ones.

She was talking to him about the bar: "It's nice here," she said, smacking her lips and cozening down in tone. Why in the world, he wondered, did she affect that little-girl ridiculousness sometimes? Only sometimes, because he knew she was capable of arresting forthrightness when she wanted to be. Her delivery on occasion, however, almost gave the impression of some kind of mental deficiency. Unless you took it as amusing, which, of course, he did. It was very funny, indeed, come to think of it. Dear Charlotte, you are funny, a funny lady. I have known very few funny ladies. All the ladies of my life have been burdened creatures. Long-suffering. Mother: a broken marriage in every way except legally. Aunt: married a shilly-shallyer attached to his mother. Grandmother: married to a drunk. Ladies unloved and very strong. The women of my family were strong women, Carl thought, and their humor, when it came, was ominous. They all enjoyed violent movies and went frequently. But they were not funny as you are funny, dear Charlotte. It's nice to know a funny lady, and I am getting very drunk.

"Yes. I like the bar," he said. "There is a relative absence of demons." And that remark, he thought, could only have been inspired by Alan Houlton. I am now Alan Houlton, he thought.

"The rest of the bars on Duval are awful," Charlotte said. "Too many sailors. Oh, if twenty sailors all arrived here at once, Jake wouldn't kick 'em out, but if a sailor in uniform comes in alone, he soons feels pretty uncomfortable. But it's a crazy kind of place, all right. See that woman there?"

Charlotte sighted, over a pointed finger, an elderly woman seemingly in a state of alcoholic stupor and ready, indeed, to topple off her bar stool.

"Yes," he said. "I have her focused."

"She's bad. Bad lady. She's playin' little games. She'll sit like that until some kind gentleman offers to escort her home. It's usually a young sailor." Charlotte grinned. "Or take those two." Charlotte sighted again—this time a young man and a young woman, both attractive, both talking casually and, it appeared, slightly formally. "I'll betcha her husband has the duty and his wife is away on vacation . . . bang, they get together tonight . . . very predatory, like animals." Then Charlotte's throaty laugh, the kind that must emit from certain types of voyeurs as they peek at illicit performances, Carl thought. "But, at least, nobody leaves here alone." This last comment with rising inflection, suggesting reluctant approval. "And it's very respectable. But busy. Wow, have I got on the red shawl tonight."

"Which is what?"

"What?"

"I said, what is the meaning of the red shawl remark?"

Didn't anybody tell you about the red shawls of Key West?" Charlotte hitched around on her seat to face him incredulously. She was wonderful.

"Nobody did," he shouted in her ear. But that didn't do any real good; she heard through the receiver which was pinned underneath the bodice of her dress on the right. He repeated that "nobody did" a little closer to the microphone, at which point she reached in and began twirling whatever it was that she twirled there to adjust the sound.

"Damn thing," she said. "Weather affects it. Goes loud and soft. And all this noise gets in, too. This machine cost six hundred dollars and they still haven't figured a way to tune out the background interference. Try me now."

"I said," Carl said, attempting to project sonorously sharp rather than hollowly loud, "that I don't know what you mean about the red shawls."

"Oh," Charlotte said. "The red shawls that the women used to wear when they went to conch town to gossip. Is that what you mean?"

"That's what you were talking about," he said patiently.

"Gossip has a special place in the hearts of Key West women," Charlotte said, sounding, Carl surmised, like her column. "It was,

and is, revered. I come from a small Ohio town and I know what the gossip there is, but it isn't anything compared to what you hear around here." Charlotte held her head with both hands and swayed it. Some people down the bar glanced at her. "Here it was, and is, a sort of planned activity, and no holds barred, and when I say no holds barred, I mean it. They'll talk about anything. Like Mr. Gavin at the high school who taught English and directed the school play. He left school with no notice or anything. A week later he came back and formally resigned. You should have seen him. Bandages all over his face. Some student beat him. He made a pass. The principal told him to stay. But he couldn't face it. Everyone's still talking about him. Although that sort of thing happens here a lot. Once in a while they're not so lucky. In fact . . ." Charlotte rummaged in her vast purse, "here's a picture of what happened to the last one. Kid named Villate did this yesterday. He used to come in here. Beat up his best friend—what am I saying?—he murdered him."

Even though it was dark in the bar, by tilting the photograph Charlotte handed him in a certain way to catch the light, Carl saw enough to almost cause him nausea. It was an unretouched, direct newspaper shot of a battered human head and shoulders lying on a bed. There was blood everywhere. "Those lumps on the pillow are bits of brains," Charlotte contributed. And the image of Charlotte the funny lady disappeared for Carl. Instead, as he watched her re-examine the photograph before putting it away, he saw something a trifle sinister. Perhaps it was well that it had happened. She suddenly lost her aspect as a caricature and became a real person with rather severe anxieties—anxieties that he should not attempt to conjecture about and that could easily, he knew, communicate themselves to him.

"Look!" Charlotte said, twisting around. "There's Melanie with her doggy."

Grateful for the interruption, Carl turned, also.

Carl had seen Melanie in conversation with Lockhart and Colliers, but now she sat in the corner with a tiny, fluffy dog on her lap, which Carl had not previously noticed. Charlotte waved to her, and Melanie suddenly slipped off her seat and made her

way over to them. The dog was a blob of brown fur with two shiny brown eyes. It was a very composed dog.

"I see you've found the best company in Key West," Melanie said, smiling very pleasantly at Carl. "First thing you know, she'll be cooking for you. Look out for this one. And especially when she begins mentioning your name a lot in her column."

Charlotte gave Melanie her best bright, interested look, and, after Melanie's remark, her demure blink, her fat gurgle.

"Always need a good cook," Carl said.

Melanie rested her hand on Carl's shoulder. She spoke, it seemed to Carl, with sincerity and consideration: "Jake and I want you to come to our place for dinner early next week. We both were talking about it yesterday. We really do want to know you better. Are you having a good time?"

"Key West is quite a place," Carl said.

"Quite a place, indeed," Melanie said. "But you've got someone right with you who can tell you." Charlotte acknowledged the remark with a nod. "I'll speak to Jake and we surely will arrange an evening," Melanie said, beginning to edge away. Carl said he'd look forward to it. Melanie waved and went out.

As embarrassed as Carl had been by her performance in the dining room the night before, he could not but wonder if he had interpreted her wrongly; perhaps he had been oversensitive about his position and read hostile intent into her remarks where there was none. She had been friendly enough, just then, surely. Carl conceived a way—through conversation with Charlotte about Melanie—to lead around to Romano.

"She's cool, I'll say that," Carl said.

"Melanie? Very," Charlotte said.

"But on the theatrical side."

"Melanie is theatrical. Literally. She directs our Barn Theater Productions, and she's had acting experience in New England with Jake and even in New York. Some relative of hers is an old-time star, and he helped her get into a few shows. Melanie's not bad either. She's hard to work with, insists on her own way, but her shows down here came out wonderfully. Biggest successes the Barn ever had. Made lots of money."

"That helps. How about Jake?"

But Charlotte was not listening. She was rummaging in her vast pocketbook again.

"Can't find any change," she said. "Talking about money reminded me I have to cash a check tomorrow."

Charlotte evidently wanted another drink. "Won't they give you credit here?"

"Nobody buys here on credit. Except Melanie. She charges the dinners of all her guests to the Southern Winds—which makes me mad, plain mad. Eight dinners she charged tonight. Good will, she says: they'll tell everybody. Everybody knows! None of the three partners do it. Oh, Jake does it once in a while, but it's mostly Melanie who has to impress the local society. I pay cash." Charlotte rummaged fruitlessly.

"Let me get you a drink," he said.

"O.K.," she said. "I'll pay you back later. I got liquor upstairs, but I like to sit here and see everybody. Good for the column. You can come up to my apartment later and I'll give you a nightcap instead of the money."

She said it with a curious combination of feyness and forthrightness. He wasn't sure what she had on her mind.

"Don't worry about it," he said, and caught Jim's eye and got two more drinks for them. Then he said, "Does Romano act, too?"

"You should see him. He's marvelous on the stage. He steals all their scenes . . . with that face and that tummy and that voice coming out of the side of his mouth. He can be hilarious or sad. I've seen audiences roll in the aisles and cry like babies, I mean it. Oh, my God! Look!"

In the doorway to the side entrance of the bar stood a woman in full Indian regalia. It looked authentic and the headdress swept to the ground. Only a loincloth covered her breasts and her thighs, however. Everyone turned round and applauded and Troy struck up the trilling chords of "Indian Love Call." She ducked out.

"Who's that?"

"That's my part-time assistant at the newspaper. Looking for her husband, I'll bet. Must've come from Edna Iiams dress-up party. I was supposed to go, but I was too tired. I can't cover all the affairs and work, too. . . ."

"Are there that many?"

"Many? I could go out every night, not one place, but three. Key West parties go on constantly during the season, and for the last few years in the summer, too. My assistant goes to the ones I don't. I guess she'll take over my job when I can't hear any more. Walked out years ago on her old mother and father and little sisters; came down to Key West and does as she damn well pleases. Hard as nails on top, butter underneath."

Whereupon Charlotte spoke of her life on the newspaper. "I'm boss of the department and I have a hell of a time getting the photographers to show up on assignments. Take that time Harry Truman came down. . . ." And Charlotte told of her fatigue working at the restaurant. "You think that's an easy job, keeping all that money straight as people come up and throw it at you . . .?" And then, with a morose fondness, of her disability. "I have three hearings aids now. Used to have only one; it was heavy and I wore it strapped to my knee. Dancing with an English sailor once, and he leaned over and whispered, 'I say, do you pack a gat?' " And something of her cats. "Babe and Tig are watchcats. They come up on my bed if I'm disconnected and there's a real emergency, like when that firebug was in the neighborhood for a week burning down everything in sight. They'd wake me each time there was an alarm, although I didn't hear the engines go by." And, lastly, after she had ordered them another drink, for which Carl paid—that young man having sunk into submissive silence—she told of her husbands, four of them, no less, and, finally, of the lover for whom she currently carried a torch. "What do you think of Jim?"

"Jim, the bartender there?" She nodded. "He seems like an easygoing guy."

In point of fact, at that very moment, the easygoing Jim was dashing up and down the bar trying desperately to keep pace with the drink orders.

"You'd never guess we went together for almost three years," she said. Her eyes teared at the memory of it.

"No, I wouldn't," he said.

"Well, we did," she said, averting her face, her voice quavering. "I thought you and Stanley. . . ."

Charlotte recovered as quickly as she had gone down.

"Stanley, poof! I've known him for ten years. Bastard. He owns half this town. Do you think he was generous tonight with that Navy couple? Hell, it cost him nothing, just a couple of extra months' waiting for his money instead of getting it right away. Chicken feed—he doesn't care. If it was a case of costing him cash, that would be a different story. Not that it wasn't a nice thing to do—it was. He's nice up to a point. You know, really, he's not so far from being that Von Cosle character as you may think. I don't mean grave stuff. I mean he's loved a young girl for two years now —not here; up on the Cape somewhere, where he has property. He thinks I don't know about her, but I know *all* about her. Gossip in this town reaches me first. And fully. You know he once had the nerve to offer to let me live with him while he was in town for the season—and then, in the summer, when he went off to the girl and to Europe, he proposed that I take charge of his rooming houses. He wanted a mistress for the season and a maid. But he's crazy if he thinks I'll sweat it out all summer while he goes off, and then be here waiting for him when he gets good and ready to come back."

Charlotte was wound up now and Carl was unwound. His desire to know more about Romano had not abated, but it would have to wait for satisfaction until a better time. Charlotte drove on with a relentless barrage of reminiscence and anecdote which, alas, he found interesting. He had neither the heart, nor the strength, nor the reason now to interrupt her. While one light in the house of his self-awareness never went out no matter how groggy he got, the rest of the house was pretty dark this night. Romano, and the immediacy of all that, faded. It occurred to him to excuse himself and go up to bed. But the mood that he was still in (as if he had but to try and all problems would be solved) and the strong current of Charlotte's knacky conversation kept him drifting along, not unpleasantly. However, he was wholly in her hands. In Charlotte's hands. And somehow, although he'd presumed he'd escaped by staying in the bar—the eye of the storm center *should* have been a safe place—he had come into the mysterious ambiance of Key West. Not, certainly, into the heart of

the ambiance, but near enough, nearer than in the street that afternoon, too close to escape unscathed.

Charlotte was saying, "Stanley's all right, though. I shouldn't say mean things. He comes and cleans my house; he drives me to the dull parties I have to go to . . . wait'll you see his old Cadillac . . . and sometimes he comes in as my date. But Jim. . . ." Charlotte's eyes were tearing again. Her eyes got rounder when she cried, and she could make or allow tears to roll down her cheeks without a wink. Although Carl's impression was that this woman in her forties had a lot of "go" left in her, Charlotte, it seemed to him, was attempting just then to project an image of herself as helpless and forlorn. God help any man who tried to take her over, he thought. Crushed to a pulp under the cleated tank tracks. In another sense, seemingly without . . . something necessary to herself as a complete woman. "But Jim," Charlotte continued, drinking her drink, spilling a little, "we were an item here up until about three months ago. I get very weepy when I talk about him." She made a positively valiant effort not to break down. She snuffled, blew hard; her head fell to one side. Her eyes flashed. "But how would you like it if someone said to you in the middle of sex—someone that you cared for with all you've got—said to you in the middle of sex, 'I'm really thinking of somebody else.'? How would you feel?"

Carl made a sympathetic sound.

"Of course you would," she said. "That's exactly how I felt."

Carl observed Jim, of whom all this was being said. He and Jenny were running around wildly, trying to fill the drink orders. Jim had no idea that he was breaking a heart, Charlotte's heart, in retrospect, hardly five feet from where he worked. He seemed an ordinary man but just the kind of man who might indeed like to rattle the affections of an old girl now and then, especially if there was a dinner or two at home to be got, or perhaps something a little more ambitious.

"So what did you do when he said that?"

Somehow he hardly expected her to answer, expected in fact one of those twists in the conversation which he had come to enjoy.

"I got out from under him, went to the kitchen, got a bread knife, and came back to stab him. But he'd locked the bedroom

door on me. So I went round by the porch, put the knife between my teeth, broke through the screen, and stuck the knife in his shoulder before he had time to think."

"Charlotte!"

Defiantly, and crossing her arms, "I did it and I'm not sorry to this day."

A mental picture of Charlotte, very vivid, flashed through his mind: nude, knife clenched between her teeth, pushing through the window. He saw the downward flash of the blade, the blood. There was life in the old girl yet. But he felt afraid for her, and chilly there in the bar, afraid for himself, too—of growing old and still wanting.

"Was he hurt?"

"Sure he was hurt. He ran outside with the knife still in him. But he wasn't hurt so bad he didn't head straight for the doctor's house up the street. Had sense enough to say it was an accident. Told a good story. Forgot he was stark nude. We forgave each other, but that was the end. He took his clothes and got out."

"He was staying with you. . . ."

"Yes. I still love him. There he is. . . ."

Jim, perhaps sensing himself under discussion, had come over to them.

"Hiya, baby," he said. "You know, Carl, this is the greatest gal in all of Key West. Take care of her." And went away.

The thought that Charlotte needed taking care of, and that he had been nominated to do it, amused him. But it did not surprise him. He seemed to have been singled out by the general company as a most likely candidate for the office. And perhaps he was. What would be the expression on Ben's face if he walked into the Parish House with his suitcase in one hand and Charlotte in the other! He sighed.

"I'm tired, too," she said. "Got to feed my cats. C'mon, I'll give you a nightcap to pay off my debt."

"Please don't worry about that, Charlotte." But she would not let him off that easy.

"C'mon, c'mon," she said, plucking his sleeve almost hard enough to rip the material. "Nice nightcap. You haven't seen my apartment anyway."

He could not, with the least semblance of politeness, ignore her. They left the bar just as Renee and Troy climbed back on the stand for their last show. Carl preceded Charlotte's heavy step along the hallway and up the dark stair. It was hot away from the air conditioning and it crossed his mind that a breath or two of fresh air might help him sleep; but for no tangible reason at all the thought of the shadowy streets dissuaded him.

"It's just there at the top of the stairs on the left," she said. He waited while she came up, puffing considerably. "Know anything about this house?" she said between puffs.

"I read the plaque outside the door—the Bonnie Lee House, right?"

"Right," she said, pausing halfway up. "A rebel house with a history of defiance. Art gallery once, during the thirties, when the big WPA artists' project was here, when they painted murals on bar walls instead of hanging silly ads." She started up the rest of the way. "This house has always maintained its individuality. During the war, it did war service—home for the officers' wives. And then, instead of being just a house, it stood empty for six years. And now it's the Southern Winds. Couldn't be a better house for this." Charlotte reached the top.

"I think," Carl said, waiting for her to regain her breath, "that I got something of what you mean. . . . Defiance, rebelliousness. . . Especially when Renee sang."

But Charlotte passed over his remark.

"The chef's apartment is there," she said, gesturing toward a door on the other side of the hall, "and I live here." She scrounged around in that absurd purse. Keys jingled. She retrieved them, unlocked the door, and let it swing open. "Go ahead," she said..

Carl went in. Her apartment was like an interior designer's dream in total reverse. It consisted of a series of small rooms, half the second floor of the building, filled with miscellaneous junk, every horizontal surface cluttered with books, silver knicknacks, and dust, lamp shades and pictures askew, smell of cats, not strong but pervasive, and a nest for them in one corner of the living-room couch. Dear Charlotte.

"I've been so busy I haven't had time to clean up this mess,"

she said, removing a pile of newspapers from the seat of a wicker chair. "Sit down."

Charlotte bustled around a bit more and then, fortunately, opened a window.

In the corner of the living room, viewable from the two wicker chairs, one of which he sat in, was a huge, polished console-model television set. Carl thought he had never seen one quite as large and imposing.

"It's a peach, isn't it? I bought it with some extra money I had. I'm growing old," Charlotte said, pausing, "and I may be spending lots of time at home, so I thought I'd better get a good one while I could."

Charlotte disappeared into the kitchen, and Carl could not be sure, but he had a pretty good idea that her self-pity had gained the upper hand once more—but if so, she did not let him know. Gaily: "What can I fix you to drink?"

"Just a Scotch, if you have it, Charlotte."

"O.K. Nice Scotch. Be with you in a minute."

Whereupon followed slamming of dish-closet doors, refrigerator doors . . . glass clinking, ice clinking . . . thumping footsteps (but then everyone's footsteps thumped in the building)—still, when Charlotte did something, even, as in this case, fixing a drink, it became a major undertaking, a public phenomenon. She had a talent for dramatization, or was it simply, Carl thought, that he'd never quite known, or been with, in close circumstances, a large and active middle-aged woman. Perhaps this extra stir on her part was usual. It seemed to him the product of nervousness and super-self-consciousness. And yet, if indeed he read the signs truly, he felt he could depend upon her to act as a gentlewoman. Carl was also aware that the usual positions, so far as roles were concerned, were reversed at that moment in his relationship with Charlotte, and that his reconnoitering of the situation was from the point of view of the vulnerable if not the submissive party.

"It's a handsome machine," he called out.

"Would you rather have coffee?" Charlotte said. "I can fix it in a minute."

"No, no, Scotch is just what I want."

"Be patient now."

He was not in the least impatient. Funny gal, he thought. Funny place, Key West. Fantastic. Demonic. Who would believe it? How in the world could he present it to Ben? What, in all fairness to all concerned, could he say? The Southern Winds. He had seen no records of the business, and yet he believed, truly, that this was not important. In order to explain why, it would be necessary to tell Ben about Romano. On the other hand, Ben knew about Romano. But, of course, this was the sort of thing Ben meant when he said Romano was unusual. Ben would probably grasp the situation quite well. That the chief asset of the Southern Winds was Romano, that Romano's chief asset was the strongest, most precious commodity in the world (dare he say it? was it true?) . . . love. That the place survived, did well, on the basis of it. But, in terms of a cold-cash investment, Ben must also be told that Romano functioned one jump ahead of disaster. Carl could not imagine what would happen to the Southern Winds without Romano's maneuvering.

"There," Charlotte said, handing him a dripping glass.

"Thanks," he said.

She sat down, but sat erect in the other wicker chair, and wrinkled her nose. "Whew, old funny cats."

"Where are they?"

"Out on the porch. They go out the window and sit on the railing and watch the people come and go from the bar. They like that. Oh gosh. . . ."

"What?" But Carl surmised "what" from Charlotte's frantic twirling gesture at the wheel of the little machine in her bodice. Her eyes teared once more.

"I'm tuning out," she said loudly. "My battery has just gone dead and I don't have a new one. Can't get one either until tomorrow."

It gave Carl a strange sensation in the back of his legs. Charlotte was very upset.

"I'm sorry," he shouted, leaning forward.

"Can't hear you," she shouted back, making gestures and expressions of futility. "I guess I'll have to go to bed now." Her voice dropped to a tiny whisper. "And I did so want to talk to you some more."

"Tomorrow," he shouted again, getting up. But she hunched her shoulders to indicate that she couldn't understand. Her head, with its pretty flower, hung down. Suddenly it bobbed back up.

"You can stay if you want to and watch my television; it's a good set, and even if I can't hear, I can see the picture."

Carl smiled and shook his head no. He was tired.

As he started to go, she got up to show him out, and as they walked toward the door, in lieu of speech, he put his arm around her shoulders. She was slightly shorter than he and she looked up at him, baffled. Baffled, sad, funny, anxious lady, he thought, but not exactly helpless, with a baffled young man. They stopped together at the door; his arm was already around her shoulders, and it was no more trouble to put the other one there, too. He kissed her. It was very natural.

Sunday, February 23

STANLEY COOPER was an old conch. This is a term people in Key West use to describe a native islander. It is stated in a special tone of voice—at once affectionate and with proper regard for the variousness of the conch character, which can be, in quick succession, gracious and witty and then arbitrary and withdrawing. In fact, the kernel and secret of the conch character is precisely this intriguing ambiguity. Native islanders are called conchs because the meat of the queen conch shell used to be one of their staple foods; it was made into chowder, fritters, salad and stew. Also, they used the conch shell for communication on land or sea, as did the primitive Key Indians. And, finally, the conch shell was an early symbol or sign on flags and bunting of the island.

Stanley owned a lot of property in Key West, which he'd mostly inherited. He was the last of his line—the last remaining Cooper in town, at any rate—whereas there had been a great many. So Stanley's business and properties were considerable. Everybody took a crack at estimating Stanley's wealth. Everybody said—even Charlotte said—that he was a millionaire easily. Not the richest citizen around by a long shot, but, certainly, not in the financial straits that Stanley himself went to great conversational lengths to have you believe. For Stanley had a "poor" mouth. He owned, among other things, some rooming houses, and he'd tell you by the hour how hard he worked; it was his particular fetish (again, among others) to do all his own maid service, painting and repair work. He claimed he operated these houses at a loss and that he kept them going only to accommodate his friends, many of whom were down on their luck and, consequently, behind in their rent. The fact that there were those who owed him money for which he did not press was true, and the fact that Stanley enjoyed helping people was also true, if it didn't really cost him much. But it was equally true that in the case of the rooming houses the rent he charged was exorbitant and that despite Stanley's good intentions and personal ministrations, his roomers got very

little service. In support of his own version of his condition, Stanley drove a battered, wire-strung-together Cadillac.

Now Stanley had been delighted to provide the place for Kent's party (he ran around with mostly young people since his retirement from law, and socially in Key West he'd fallen) as long as Kent had supplied the liquor, and he'd even helped Kent steal the wreaths from the local graveyard: "Old wreaths," Stanley had said, "lying round for months. 'Bout time somebody cleaned 'em up." If Stanley came to a bottle party, he brought exactly two cans of beer. The least expensive brand.

And Stanley dressed in a style that you might expect, a style not without charm or elegance. He wore gray trousers and cashmere sweaters, blue blazers (with the crest of his college: Harvard) and white flannels, navy-blue double-breasted suits and silver ties—but everything exquisitely frayed, though scrupulously clean, tailored in the fashion of thirty years ago and made mostly in London and Paris, bought during his trips there.

In one of the historic houses which Stanley owned and which he used mostly as a warehouse could be seen the debris of his life and the lives of his forebears. There were relics in glass cases (wrist watches, fans, rings, and bracelets), great cabinets containing personal records, and rooms of heavy furniture piled ceiling-high. There was one room which had nothing in it but great trunks and suitcases plastered with labels of places all over the world. And another room, locked, where silver services and other valuable heirlooms were kept. The condition of this particular house was a source of continuing irritation to the members of the Key West Historical Society, who wanted Stanley to clean up the building and arrange the items in it so that visitors might enjoy it as a museum; but Stanley managed not to—managed, like so much else in his careless care, to let it be there, to let it gently run down. . . .

As to Stanley's love affair with Charlotte—they'd had spells of seeing one another and then spells when they'd break off. Either the "on" or the "off" period could last for a season, and it was an "off" period for two seasons after Stanley had the gall to ask Charlotte to live with him during the winter and then, when he went away to Europe, to manage his rooming houses for room and

board merely. Charlotte would be damned if she'd do that—watch him go merrily off while she sweltered in Key West through the July and August heat. "Broils the brains," she'd said. The really sad part about their relationship was that Stanley could so easily have helped Charlotte, specifically helped her pay for her several hearing aids, or, better, helped her, loaned her the money, over a long period and without urgency, to have the fenestration operation performed on her ears to save her fast-fading hearing. Every day Charlotte's hearing got a little worse and the chances of success for the operation became less. But Charlotte, of course, was too independent to ask Stanley, and Stanley never volunteered. Perhaps Stanley thought that if Charlotte wanted it badly enough, she would have taken her three thousand dollars and had the operation instead of putting it into the Southern Winds. But, after all, that money was Charlotte's only nest egg, and she hoped for enough return from it to last her a long time.

Yet, to see Charlotte and Stanley together in the bar, talking avidly, or at the social gatherings to which Stanley escorted her (for the purpose of gathering material for her column), you'd think there was nothing each would not do for the other. They bickered like long-married people. They laughed together maliciously. They seemed to need one another very much. No matter that Charlotte refused Stanley's physical attentions or, worse, accepted them mechanically, performed her function as a woman as a favor to an old man—no matter that Stanley held back money that could facilitate his friend's existence—they still met daily. Charlotte chattered away, and Stanley, in his tired, persistent, humorous voice, answered her.

As it developed, Stanley owned a two-masted, fifty-foot yawl. Most of the time it remained tied up at a dock. He rented it usually to a Navy family. In Florida people live in anything: the house trailers are the most grotesque in the world. The yawl, which was modestly named *The Good Stanley,* was not in the best shape, and there were no sails, but the thing floated, and a motor of ancient vintage kicked it along slowly. It seemed that this yawl was then between occupants, and the Southern Winds crowd prevailed upon Stanley to take it out on Sunday and make it a day for everybody. He agreed easily—since everybody chipped in for

fuel and brought their own drinks—and Carl was invited. It was something to do.

The plan that Sunday, then, was to leave from South Beach. At one o'clock Stanley moored the yawl offshore and, with a borrowed motorboat, ferried people out.

Carl drove up to South Beach with Charlotte at one-thirty. Although he'd intended to discuss with Charlotte what he had seen happen to Romano the night before in the bar, somehow he could not bring himself to do it. It seemed better to wait at least a couple of days—not to approach the thing too directly or put anybody on a spot.

They saw *The Good Stanley* standing offshore about three hundred feet. It looked well enough from that distance—a light-blue hull and light-gray topsides, one tall mast forward and one short mast far aft. There was a cabin with six portholes that ran most of the length of it. It appeared to be roomy. The yawl rolled slightly at its anchorage and there were small whitecaps, but it was a great day, brilliantly clear, as if issued especially to those children of the beach.

Stanley was just then waiting at the pier, holding the motorboat, beckoning to Carl and Charlotte to come ahead; he was wearing a white captain's hat for the occasion, and he looked properly yachtsmanlike.

Carl gathered together all of Charlotte's paraphernalia out of the car plus his own towel and a fifth of rye. They headed toward the pier. Charlotte, for the outing, wore a playsuit; it was orchid-colored and the material creased easily. The flower in her hair matched the color of the suit. She was worried about getting her hearing aid wet, and on their way up the pier she tried wrapping a towel around her neck and chest to protect the audiphone from spray.

Walking just ahead of them, Renee . . . so she was going along, too. Carl could not help but reflect that she was lovely in a bathing suit, as slim as Charlotte was voluptuous, as uncomplicated as Charlotte was encumbered. He also knew that to compare the two women thus was dreadfully unfair. The age difference alone made it unfair. Still, he did it, and, physically, he could not find Renee wanting. If only Renee had not that snide tongue, the

bitch's manner. Her hair was cut very short, a feather cut, he believed it was called, and she walked easily, effortlessly, while Charlotte bounced along with almost a schoolgirl skip, everything unappetizingly jiggling. But, as if to belie his impression of the previous night, Renee suddenly turned around and, very carefully and very graciously, greeted them both; and all together they arrived at the boat.

Renee helped hand Charlotte down into it. They got arranged, the boat rocking precariously now, and Stanley shoved off.

It was somewhat rougher than it had seemed to be. With cries of dismay, amusement and delight, the occupants of the boat accepted the showers of spray to which they were subjected. Stanley stood tall and drenched at the helm. Charlotte's mascara ran exceedingly, and Carl thought it must be a terrible thing for her to face the fact that practically every experience after she finished with herself in the morning was a kind of falling apart. While, for Renee, the waterdrops on her brown, rich skin, her hand gripping the gunwale, her shoulder hunched forward made her exactly the sort of healthy beach girl one sees in magazine advertisements. Her eyes were bright and alight; she laughed gaily; and Carl had to admit she was not at all the person he had thought she was the previous evening. On the other hand, Carl remembered Jim's comments: Renee—lush, nympho. And he had heard himself the sort of repartee Renee was good at. Well, either his impression had been far off or she had sensed the difficulty and was playing a new game. He thought it would not be beyond her capabilities to do that either. Charlotte, in some mysterious way, caught Carl's revised opinion of Renee, and by the time they made the three-hundred-foot distance between the pier and the yawl, Renee was victorious and Charlotte was quiet (ah, getting her out of the small boat up to the deck of the big one was a production worthy of De Mille).

Since the more people aboard, the greater the kitty, Stanley had invited a number. Surely as many as the yawl could safely take. Carl saw the younger Southern Winds' crowd—Kent, Happy and Naomi, Jenny and Nothing-Betty, and a dozen others, presumably their friends, people whom Carl did not know, clambering around the cabin, handing around beers.

Charlotte was lowered into the stern cockpit next to the wheel. She was the first to sit there, but Charlotte was popular, and in a moment, she was surrounded by young male admirers. She was screaming and twirling her hearing aid; several others were shouting merrily, helping Stanley get the engine going.

One young man, Bert, the red-haired bus boy, was swimming around out there in the water, calling that he'd decided not to go, and someone else called back, "Look out for sharks!" And the yawl pitched and tossed.

Carl grabbed hold of the rigging and tried to estimate where he wanted to sit—where, indeed, to get out of the way of all these people turned busily and vociferously nautical. Suddenly the engine sputtered with a none too enthusiastically strong response and *The Good Stanley* got going—it cannot be said of the boat that the sails were set, for there were no sails. Someone mentioned that merely because a boat floats at a dock does not mean that it's seaworthy, and someone else advised the company that the life jackets were under the rear cockpit seats and not to wear any rings or anything in the water because that's what sharks went for. Bert, meanwhile, who had been simply left in the water, could be seen swimming slowly back toward shore. The engine of *The Good Stanley* pulled it along slowly, quite nicely, quite fast enough.

But instead of seating himself, Carl saw where the drinks were coming from—self-service, evidently—and he took a short journey of exploration below. "Below" was crowded with people opening beers, attempting to mix drinks, organize glasses, liquor, ice, and water.

Renee, of all people, was kind enough to hand him a drink, the finished product, and he proceeded with his investigation.

There was a galley, a fully-equipped john, and two spacious cabins fore and aft. Carl was delighted with the compactness of everything, by the handsome mahogany paneling, by the polished brass fittings of the clock, barometer, portholes, and cabinet hinges. Someone said she was a very old craft, built in Nova Scotia forty years ago. Carl entered the forward cabin, and, indeed, there was a picture of the boat in full sail, with a mountainous island in the background. Also a tool chest and storage bins. It must

have made decent living quarters, indeed. In fact, Carl could picture himself installed on such a boat. The congeniality and curious remoteness of such quarters appealed to him immensely. He could envision himself sailing in such a boat on long and intricate journeys through the green islands of the South Seas.

"It's cute, isn't it?" Renee said, coming through behind him.

"Everything fits in so nicely," he said.

They turned to go; he could see over the top of her head, and her shoulders were narrow beside his own. She glanced around at him and smiled and led the way out through the group thronging around in the back cabin trying to mix drinks. He wondered, as they climbed the ladder, how long her quiescent mood would last, how long before that disparaging pseudowitty mood would overtake her and put his back up.

Regaining the deck, Carl noticed that *The Good Stanley* was now, comparatively, barreling along, keeping (mercifully) fairly close to shore. The object of the trip was a complete turn about the island. It could not be too long a voyage since the Southern Winds' crowd, at least, had to be back by five o'clock in order to wash up, have dinner and get to work that night. Charlotte was still surrounded by admirers.

What healthy-looking people, Carl thought, old and young alike. How fortunate anyone was to live in Key West, in Florida, for long. One's body rounded out and became firm or slimmed off naturally; in any event, pleasing contours replaced unhealthy overdevelopment, oils were stimulated by the sun, and skin became lustrous once more . . . the lure of Florida. Youth. Long life.

As Carl clung to the rigging and balanced on the slanting deck of the yawl, observing the day and the people around him, it occurred to him that, because of his heart, it really might be life-prolonging to live in Florida. He ought to consider it. Also, that, again because of his heart, he was, in a very definite sense, much older than the people he was with—that, indeed, he was perhaps as much as halfway through his existence, even though he was only twenty-five. Truly this kind of realization did not trouble him, but he was aware of it that day in the center of so much beauty and vitality.

And he wondered that people up north didn't catch on that

their lives in small offices and small apartments were being wasted, and stampede, en masse, to the south . . . to the south!

Charlotte was then shouting to the group about her that she was afraid of getting her hearing aid wet, and that she had to keep a towel wrapped around the audiphone, and therefore everybody had to really shout back at her in order to be heard. The alternative to that—and Carl could see the panic in her eyes as she mentioned it—was to be tuned out from the fun the whole afternoon. The group obliged her, at least for the moment. But soon, Carl knew, the effort at conversation, difficult enough when her machine worked well, would tire everyone. Of course, he should go and sit beside Charlotte and keep her company if no one else did, but she was as yet far from alone, and he did not feel, just then, willing to cope with Charlotte's difficulties.

Renee joined him. "The place on this boat I like best is the bow," she said. "Just to sit with my legs dangling over."

"I'm game," Carl said.

They made their way forward. Renee proceeded with poise and assuredness, while Carl held on to every rail, handle, or helping hand in sight. Most of Stanley's guests had perched themselves on top of the cabin and were drinking, singing and moving closer to the girls. But the space Renee had mentioned—at the very bow—was not taken. There was room in front of the anchor winch to sit straddling the bowsprit, or, since there were two of them, for each of them to sit with one leg up and one dangling.

They sat down. Carl put his arm around the top of the winch in order to hold on. Renee did, also, and their arms touched. As the first big blue-green wave hove *The Good Stanley* high in the air, however, Renee fell close to him—her arm slipped down behind him—and his arm slipped off the winch and around her shoulders. She did not move away. She glanced at him and said nothing. This was a much different girl than he had met the night previous in the bar. Or had the rigidity of his expectation-apparatus slackened?

A terrible thing, that apparatus. He'd had experience with it before. It consisted of preconceived notions about the nature of people and situations, and if those preconceptions were not met, or were, indeed, in Renee's case, positively opposed, that much

of reality was lost to him. As often as possible he attempted to be conscious of that apparatus in him and to dispense with it but, more often than not, it had its way. And to think, he might have lost this. . . . For, as the boat plunged through the water and they were annointed with spray—turning rainbow colors before it touched them—it was a perfect moment. In any event, Renee was not the flippant girl she had been; she was sharing with him—caught, indeed, as was he, in the light and freedom and charm of gliding along on the bow of a boat in tropic waters. Moving-picture situation, he thought. When it happened in actuality, it could easily be spoiled because of the stereotype it had become. But it was not spoiled for them. It was there and they possessed it. Carl thought that if the spirit of Key West—demon or no—operated in full sunshine as well as on the shadowy streets, it must be rejoicing then. Renee faced him, looked up at him—he leaned forward toward her—Renee closed her eyes and met his lips with a full kiss. After that, there was no more to think about. Carl, out of fear and out of joy, became each wave, each gull in the air, each boat that passed them. He was the shore line with its old fortress, the sharply-lined battlements of the naval base as they skirted it, and the long, deserted beaches of the north side. He wanted to remain just there, and Renee seemed to feel that way, too. There was laughter behind them, and every few minutes someone came up to ask them what was going on or to hand them another drink. What *was* going on? A flow of mutual feeling was going on, rarer in life than one imagined. She was sharing something with him, the fact of being alive, young, and in beautiful circumstances. Carl did not dare change his position, lest he cause the situation to change. This was what life could be like on occasion, and he accepted it, motionless. He had the impression that if he tried to reach out in any way, it would vanish.

"Are you all right?" Carl said.

"I'm all right," she said.

"Arm tired?"

"No."

"Good, I like it there."

She settled back, and the ocean danced before them as they knifed through it. Carl forgot the point of his visit to Key West,

both his mission for his uncle and the decision that he had been called upon to make in his own life. It was a weight off his shoulders. He was merely the rise and fall of that prow and a trembling response to Renee beside him.

But it occurred to Carl that Charlotte was still in the stern and that by now she might have been left by her companions. Surely at least Stanley was there, steering the boat, to keep her company. Curious that he should be so concerned for Charlotte. She had, after all, managed without him through four husbands, innumerable liaisons sans legality, and forty-one years of physical existence. She would probably survive without his ministrations this day. Still, he did not want to hurt her feelings gratuitously. With effort and holding on, Carl unwillingly disengaged himself from Renee and, at some risk, stood up. He could see over the cabin, and there were a great many people with Charlotte. He was free. Renee received him into their previous position. They kissed, long and well.

With her head leaning against his shoulder now, Carl wondered if he could have risen to this moment if he had not known his few days at the Southern Winds. It was a moment of truth of sorts, this experience with Renee, and the challenge consisted in feeling worthy of affection. The Southern Winds had made him feel that; so now the usual principle of asceticism lurking within him, to whose authority he ever paid unquestioning respect, had been, like Charlotte's hearing aid on occasion, short-circuited. He might pay for it with conscience the next day, but he would have this . . . it was his. And the years of renouncing, at least so it seemed to him then, seemed sad; to renounce—was that all that youth and longing were meant for?

Once more, he took Renee in both his arms, the boat fell deep in a trough, and then, to match their emotions, soared skyward and down again, drenching them with fragrant and cooling spray. They broke apart then, solemnly, but Carl knew that the pledge, unspoken, was made.

The spoken pledge was made a few minutes later. Of course, they wouldn't arrive back in time for him to do much else but get to his room at the Southern Winds, dress, and get down to

work, all of which meant that a further meeting between them would probably have to wait . . . how long?

"When can I see you?" he said.

She hesitated. No, he would not be satisfied with seeing her between sets tonight, or after she finished at four A. M., he thought. It would not be done that way, and she would not treat him that way, he knew.

"How about tomorrow?" she said.

"Time and place?"

"One o'clock, lunch, in my tree house. . . ."

"I will be there," he said.

"We will be there," she said.

Carl wondered, though, how much of this was a matter of the day and the yawl, and if the consummation could be successful if deferred.

"Do you think . . ." he said, but Renee cut in.

"Why haven't we given anybody else on this boat two minutes. . . ."

"Should we?"

"Why bother?" she said, and her lips touched his and he kissed her neck and shoulders.

It was about then that the pleasant rhythmical throb of the engine became less rhythmical, rather rheumatic, indeed, and finally, with a spurt-lurch or two, stopped dead. *The Good Stanley* had run out of gas. They were halfway round the island. Stanley called out to drop anchor, and Carl and Renee, being nearest the winch, let the anchor down. Stanley's folly, Stanley's penuriousness. He'd probably bought exactly as much gasoline as they'd all chipped in for, but the old engine had drunk it up beyond anybody's estimation. Or perhaps this was Stanley's unsubtle way of limiting the voyage.

"Don't worry about a thing," Stanley called, and made ready to go ashore in the small motorboat which they had towed behind. "Back in twenty minutes. Have a swim." Stanley swung off in the small boat toward land.

Renee joined the others in a swim around the boat, and Carl went and sat with Charlotte. Her hearing aid had persevered and she was half reclining in the seat, chatting, getting a sunburn and

holding a drink. She did not appear to have missed him, especially, or to have observed his relationship with Renee. Still, he felt a curious twinge of guilt. Guilt which faded away as Renee, dripping wet and clear-eyed, climbed up the ladder and stepped on deck. She unsnapped her rubber bathing cap, and her short, unmanageable hair was more tousled and funny than ever. They returned to the bow of the boat; he helped her dry off; he put his arms around her; they kissed.

As the tide changed, the boat drifted about until they fully faced the west and a long reflection (skittering lights) fell across the water between themselves and the sun; and, in that position, they waited. Stanley returned an hour later holding up for all to see a small can of gasoline, paid for by himself, which proved just enough to get *The Good Stanley* back to the pier at South Beach.

When Carl returned to his room at the Southern Winds, it was earlier than he expected and, after his shower, he stretched out. The moment he touched the bed, he completely let down; he had had no idea how exhausted he was. It was as if someone had knocked him out. Down for the count, he thought. Your round, Key West. But he did not sleep.

A hard, white light came through the unshaded rectangle of window at the far end. It was the same sort of light he'd seen come through the windows of many an anonymous hotel room when he was traveling up through New England for McBain. Except that that sort of light suggested terrible cold outside, not the humid warmth which was the case here. He twisted on the bed. He was weary and full of tension. How much better it would have been to have culminated his relationship with Renee that day. Or would it have made any difference? He had a suspicion that it would not. He would see her tomorrow. What he experienced then had something to do with this place he was in. This beautiful and somehow terrible island. Beautiful and terrible. Those words applied to a great many things about Key West. Take the carillon bells which rang at six, so lovely to listen to. Origin: days of the pirates. Purpose: to drown out their cries as they were hanged in the Public Square. But no.

He considered for a moment that the difficulty might be the barren room he occupied. It was ridiculous to stay, really; he could go right up the street and rent a room at the La Concha. But the thought of moving did not please him. Despite its barrenness, the small anthills between the boards, the low eave which made it impossible to stand upright except in the middle, the bed up on bricks, he derived a curious pleasure out of living in the Southern Winds, a closeness to the scene here in Key West and the mood of this particular house that he might lose if he were to leave it. And Carl had a hunch that the insight he obtained therefore might be the most important factor in the report he would give to Ben. Besides, sad rooms had sheltered him many times before. Sad rooms in lonely towns had ceased to depress him.

Of course, it was partly because of Romano—that was certain. Yet he had been concerned for Romano since he arrived. The incident in the bar, as shocking as it had been, had confirmed, simply, something that had been clear to him after the first meeting. And what was he to do about that? *Jake, why did that guy sock you last night?* Absurd. It would have to be handled another way. But who the hell was he to interfere?

It crossed his mind that perhaps the strain of the trip down, especially those final hours driving down that slotlike highway over the keys, was at last catching up to him. Well, perhaps that was part of it, too.

Carl pulled the sheet up around his neck. A sudden chill prickled his skin. Too much sun, maybe; hot and cold sweats. But he wasn't sweating, he wasn't cold. And it finally occurred to him that despite the tropical climate here, which amounted to perpetual summer, the fact that it was February, almost March, was just then the main thing that was affecting him adversely. The toughest time of the winter for him, usually. He always tensed up the latter part of February, beginning of March. Found himself sitting forward on the edge of taxi seats looking out on a gray and dreary Central Park. That was the feeling, at least. And here it was, with him as usual even in Key West. But, of course, he was responding to winter automatically; his body, conditioned to a cycle of response for twenty-five years, had simply kept going, notwithstanding the fact that this year he was in a warm place.

February is not, but I am February, and February is me, he thought. And he felt a sudden impulse to scribble that down.

Now Carl had brought with him to Key West one of those schoolboy notebooks with a marbleized cardboard cover. He went to his luggage and rooted it out and also found his pen. He returned to the bed and, lying on his side, opened the book. It cracked slightly and the sound revived an instant's agreeable memory of his public-school days and his true family.

He had brought the book with him for two reasons. First, to keep notes on the situation at the Southern Winds so that his report to Ben would be accurate (passion for accuracy and note-taking developed on his selling job when he wrote reports). Except that now that he was here and had looked into matters, there was very little to be accurate about. The second purpose had to do with the matter of the spiritual decision he had been enjoined to make, which he had enjoined himself to make, and to which, so far, he had devoted little time. He had wished, simply, to log his progress in the matter. Ben called it praying on paper. But that, too, now that he was right up to it, seemed unreal. If a decision was going to happen, it would happen in his head, not because he wrote it down on paper.

Still, there were the blank pages, and, having jotted down his thought about the omniscience of February regardless of the place one found oneself, he had a desire to say something more.

Alan Houlton, the young novelist—Alan Houlton, Carl thought—Houlton had made some extremely curious remarks the night previous in the bar, and Carl now had an inclination to record them, though he certainly had not intended to record them at the time. Carl did not resist his inclination. Perhaps, one day, he would look back over the notes and be amused. For no other reason then, Carl wrote:

> Houlton said he didn't know how I could stand working at the Southern Winds with "those" people even for a brief time. Said he could sense their narrow prejudices and prides even from a distance. Said if he had to talk to them only for a few moments, he'd be in a fight.
>
> He was weirdly frank about his sexual requirements. He

> evidently prefers a curious type of tough girl—Lesbian—who nevertheless allow themselves to become involved with men, for the express sadistic purpose of inverting the usual role of a man with a girl. (Sadistic, because the man, made submissive, is thus apparently degraded.) Houlton says he likes to upset their purpose, upset the upsetters. Only this type of rather vindictive victory, he says, excites him.

* * * * *

Besides Robin (who was in a class by himself), there were two other bus boys at the Southern Winds: Conch, over whom the trouble started, and Bert.

Bert was the one who earlier that day had swum all the way out from the beach to Stanley's yawl and then decided at the last minute that he did not want to go and, breasting a nervous, if not rough, sea, not to mention sharks, swam all the way back to the beach. A very individual-minded young man.

Bert was about twenty-six, red-haired, and wet-pinkish in his entire aspect, especially when he perspired beneath his sticky and transparent nylon shirt. Bert wrote poetry and told people round about that he aspired to act in a play at the local theater. His eyes were poppish and blue and red-rimmed. When Bert set tables, he placed the knives and forks so far apart as to be almost at the corners of the tables. And if someone complained that this was not usual, Bert went into a tirade about how bourgeois mentalities rejected any trace of individuality in any performance.

Bert was from Wisconsin originally. He had come to Key West after several years in Greenwich Village; and in Key West Bert lived in a shack on the outskirts of colored town. Romano had offered him a room in the house, but he'd refused. The shack which Bert inhabited had a small back yard attached to it, and Bert could build a fire there undisturbed and eat meat cooked as he preferred it: just singed. He also subsisted on nuts and fruit and uncooked vegetables. He wrote his poems during most of his free time and occasionally got to the beach. But he was never sunburned.

Not that Bert was a recluse or unfriendly—he certainly was not.

His conversation was garrulous. Bert was simply a man who liked to figure things out, and do things, for himself.

His attitude toward Romano was one of affectionate joshing, for he, too, was not immune to the charm of the man.

"Look at that fat belly," Bert would say. "Why, the old fellow can hardly sit up 'at table' any more." (Occasionally Bert's expressions and intonations became very British.) "We shall have to build some sort of raised platform for him to put his plate on."

And once Carl overheard Bert discussing with Romano his theory of suppressed individuality. "I understand," Romano had said. "I feel like that myself sometimes." Bert had beamed.

Bert was quite different than Robin, and poles apart from Conch.

Now Conch was not exactly a bus boy, as were the other two. He did not actually service the dining room during dinner. Conch's specific duties, as they had evidently evolved, consisted in mopping the dining room during the day, and at night making himself useful to Henri, the chef, at the charcoal broil. Conch ran, from the kitchen to the broil, hot pots of vegetables and gravies, china platters for the steaks, and did anything else Henri needed during the course of an evening. In fact, his post was beside Henri at the broil. If Henri was happy, Conch was happy, and if Henri was upset, which was rare, Conch did everything to soothe matters. Conch was a fairly important young man behind the scene, so to speak.

Very little was known about Conch. Certainly no one knew his real name. The only thing that everybody knew was he shared with Stanley Cooper the distinction of having been born on the island. And they called him Conch because he was what everyone expected a local boy to be: tall, dark, wiry, hawk-faced, taciturn, hard-working, and, once pledged, infinitely loyal, indeed, devoted, in this case, to the chef. It was not easy to engage the respect of a conch, and certainly this Conch treated them all with lordly disdain, except Henri, whom it was easy to see that Conch adored. Someone said that Conch himself had once said he wanted to be a cook and that was the reason for his attachment. Most of the rest thought that Conch was not a little influenced by Henri's power there, his real effectiveness and his showmanship. Henri

made Conch "step," and, despite his rather hard-bitten appearance, Conch shared with other simple-minded boys of his age a desire to please. In any event, Conch did the menial tasks of the Southern Winds with ardor, and he was accorded respect and a wide berth by the whole crew.

The waiters reacted with dismay bordering on horror, then, that evening when Romano shuffled into the dining room while they were eating their dinners and chatting about their trip on the yawl and, opening his arms wide, said: "I had to fire Conch today."

Up until that moment it had been a relaxed time. Carl had sat to one side at a table alone, and he had been much aware that the mood of Sunday in Key West is special. Even here in the dining pavilion one could sense a reverence in the air, a deep calm. The tenseness he had felt earlier in his room had dispelled. He was enjoying his meal, he was prepared for the evening's work, and he had been wondering whether he ought to go and introduce himself to the local Episcopal minister, just for the sake of getting acquainted, and perhaps see the church. His eyes had wandered to the shrubbery along the side, where every leaf and flower was a bas-relief of etched stillness.

Then Romano had come in, had made his announcement. And now, limping formidably, proceeded among the tables to where Carl sat, and, pushing a chair back noisily, sat with him.

Romano addressed Carl, but loudly, and, of course, everyone was listening. "Went against my orders," Romano said thickly. "Can't get the job done by the boy."

Much moving of feet in the background. It occurred to Carl that somehow Romano was acting foolishly and that he was about to witness at last one of the instances of irresponsibility for which Romano was so famous. Without even knowing the circumstances, the statement that Romano had just made was funny and pathetic —everyone sensed it, and Carl agreed. Romano, in his role of leader and disposer of men, was doomed. His power certainly lay elsewhere. And the fact that Conch was gone was unfortunate. Henri had more than liked him; he'd depended upon him. Conch did menial work, which nobody wanted to do, and did it willingly and did more than his share. For which he received recompense

primarily in terms of his relationship with Henri. It dawned on Carl that if Conch had indeed disobeyed Romano's orders, they were probably Henri's orders he was following. Now Romano leaned across the table to speak; the words came painfully, out of the side of his mouth, as always, and with a maximum amount of spittle to be wiped away. "I need someone to help out in Conch's place tonight," Romano continued. "And maybe tomorrow, until I can get a replacement. I know it's dirty work, but it's only a night or two, and I'm stuck. Will you help out?"

Carl managed to stammer out a surprised, "Why . . . yes. . . ."

Romano made a broad gesture. "Give the dining room a mop tomorrow. You don't have to lift all the chairs, move 'em aside. And tomorrow ice the water barrels just before we serve and then help Henri with the hot pots from the kitchen. You still ought to be able to take a few tables of your own. If you get in trouble, we'll have Bert run hot pots with you."

But that was too much. It would take the whole day. Well, he'd asked for a job, and now he had one for sure. He started to object. . . .

"Just for a day or two," Romano grunted, getting up rather fast and lightly. "And you'll collect the money Conch got, in addition to your regular salary. Oh yes," he said, addressing everyone now, "I'm expecting Melanie here shortly. Tell her I'm upstairs with Henri."

In his role of harassed manager, Romano shuffled hurriedly out. Carl found all the others were staring at him.

"You're not going to do it?" Kent said. "No . . . no."

Carl didn't answer.

"If you do it," Kent went on, "he'll never get anyone to replace Conch; he'll just push off half the work on you and half on Bert, and we waiters will have lost a bus boy. Consequently good service and therefore good tips."

They all seemed to agree to that.

"He's a scoundrel, you'll see," Kent said, his voice trailing upscale.

Here was a turnabout on the part of someone who had spoken highly of Romano.

"I thought you liked him," Carl said.

"That don't mean he can't be a son of a bitch now and then."

On Sundays in Key West the carillon plays at five, five-thirty and six. It began its five-thirty set, and the bell sounds rolled wistfully over the town and into the strained atmosphere of the dining room. Pirates hung in the square, Carl thought. Music to drown out their cries. Only this time, it was he who had been hanged. His voluntary offer to work in Key West was really going to result in a job. Never volunteer, he thought. Never be helpful. Anti-Christian sentiments seemingly, but not really. There is a complicated hidden pride involved in offering to help when it is not strictly necessary.

"What would you suggest?" Carl said.

"Refuse!" Kent said indignantly, pointing up what seemed to him his lack of pure common sense.

Wrong, Carl thought. First, to have refused bluntly would have been entirely against his nature. Second, he had been asked a favor by the man here with whom he had the most important relationship: he could hardly say no immediately. If it proved that, indeed, Romano was using him unfairly, then some other course could be decided upon. As much as he disliked the idea, it seemed necessary to follow through temporarily with the arrangement as Romano would have it. Carl was amused at the minuscule issue which had raised a moral question of right conduct. To mop or not to mop: that was the question. . . .

As it happened, however, the answer was not arrived at by Carl, but provided by circumstances.

Kent was about to fire another salvo of criticism when they heard noises in the hall, and shortly thereafter Romano clumped down the stairs into the dining room followed by Henri, half dressed, and his mustache uncurled, and Conch, with his hands in his pockets and a look of rebellion on his face worthy of a Castro demonstrator. Whereupon Conch sprawled in a creaking chair off side and Romano and Henri squared off with one another in front of everybody.

"Ask Jenny, ask Kent," Henri said in a wheedling mountain voice. "They'll tell you. He's a good worker. You cain't do it, Jake. And I cain't work without him, and you cain't expect Carl there to run pots and wait, too."

Now Romano responded with unexpected power, and baldly, standing in back of a chair. "Who's running this outfit, you or me? I tell the boy to mop early and you tell him to mop late. It ends up he does it your way and I go to hell, is that it?"

"You're runnin' it, Jake; you always run it."

Henri's tone was the most insincere Carl had heard in a long time. He was buttering Romano and Carl suspected that Romano wanted to be buttered. In fact, it was then apparent to Carl that he was watching two men far more interested in results than in method, and, if a way could be found for them both to come out unscarred in front of the waiters, it would be found, and, more likely than not, Conch would be allowed to keep his job. Thank God.

"Then you tell that boy here and now to do as I say."

"Conch," Henri said curtly, turning to him, "you gotta pay Jake mind."

Conch stood up and said with fist-clenched defiance, "I work for you, but not for him."

"No, now come on, Conch, you apologize to your boss here."

"You're m'boss, Henri," Conch said, now embarrassed almost to tears. "I do my job. I don't apologize to no one."

"Jake," Henri said, turning away from Conch, "you gotta understand this boy. He works good. He needs the job. Let him stay."

"I wanna stay all right," Conch volunteered.

That, Carl thought, would be good enough for Romano. Now to see the old ham at work. It was as good as he hoped it would be: Romano threw up his hands in a gesture of utter futility and dismissal. And on his way out, mumbling and ranting, stopping and partly turning back, he said, "If you want him, Henri, he's all yours, but keep him out of my way. I'll pay him, Henri, and I'll feed him, but I won't recognize him—don't want anything to do with him." Romano exited up the ramp to the kitchen.

It was almost a moment for applause.

Carl had seen Romano now at what might be considered disadvantage. Still, Carl thought, the end of the situation was that Conch had his job, and in some strange way Carl felt a curious benevolence on Romano's part. Also, for not much more reason than he had concocted *that* thought, Carl considered the circum-

stances of people who had to earn their living on this island: they seemed almost to have to do handstands to get it. Surely anyone whose existence depended on seasonal business had a very tenuous hold on matters. And for a moment it annoyed him that the pace of almost everyone he had met here in Key West seemed zany and erratic; and yet, he supposed, considering the sun and heat, that was the way people had to go if, indeed, they were to go at all. Romano, especially, in order to meet the exigencies of a most mercurial organization.

"Now, go have your supper, son, and for God's sake, keep out of his way," Henri said.

Conch left the room. Henri turned to the rest, but now there was real anger in his eyes. And just as he began to speak, Melanie Romano, wearing white tennis sneakers, a playsuit, and clutching her fluffy dog, arrived in the entrance from the street.

"That's the best kid Jake's ever had in this place, and the damned fool wants to fire him," Henri said. It was not possible to signal him that Melanie was listening. "Jake don't know how to run this business, never has, never will. . . ."

Henri stopped. Fortunately, a reticence as natural to him and almost as great as Conch's, returned to him. He faced about and, without seeing Melanie, went out the house entrance and upstairs.

Melanie came forward slowly and, with no unusual expression on her face, asked the whereabouts of her husband. Everyone told her that Romano was last seen going up the ramp toward the kitchen. She went herself in that direction. Carl wondered if she would tell Romano about Henri's last remarks. Or did she have the grace to realize that people do grumble at their jobs sometimes and to allow a little leeway?

It was getting on six o'clock then, and soon the dining room would be open. Carl brought his dinner dishes to the kitchen and returned to await, with the rest, Henri's nightly, spotlit arrival on the scene. Standing there, Carl thought: what a small miracle, the assembling for the day's business procedures of the people who composed the human element of any commercial enterprise.

Monday, February 24

RENEE lived a block from the Southern Winds. She rented from Mrs. Slocum an apartment on the top floor (the tree house, as Renee had called it) of that august matron's great mansion on Bonnie Street. It was reached, as Carl presently discovered, by a driveway, which wound round in back of the house, and by way of an outside staircase four full stories high. Renee had said to be there at one for lunch, and he was on time and he was hungry. He was also winded by the climb.

Carl walked across a spacious sun deck, which was or could be an extension of the living room, depending on whether or not the glass doors, which separated the two areas, were open or closed. The doors to the living room were swung open at the moment, but Renee was nowhere in sight.

Carl paused a moment on the deck in order to get his breath. He wore a short-sleeved polo shirt, and the sun made the skin tingle on his face, his neck, his arms. He looked over the railing. Below was Mrs. Slocum's famous garden, somewhat obscured by leaves and branches of trees that reached even to this height and beyond, but available enough to view to reveal lush clusters of tropical plants, a trickling fountain, red marble paths, white iron chairs and tables. It looked quite a tempting and lovely garden, as a matter of fact, and if poor Mrs. Slocum hit the ground there, courtesy of her husband's fist, at least, Carl thought, she couldn't ask for a more pleasant setting in which to wake up and find herself. It was also, no doubt, for that very reason (the pleasantness), the scene, according to Charlotte, of Mrs. Slocum's lion or celebrity hunts. Charlotte had said that Alan Houlton was Mrs. Slocum's chief luminary and that there were even pictures of that young man in the hallway leading to the guest bathroom.

Still, Mrs. Slocum's garden of love was beautiful; the afternoon was altogether splendid—no clouds; a wonderful, long, brisk breeze rustled the leaves; and Carl thought that the tree house was well named. But no Renee.

Carl went into the living room. It was handsomely and colorfully furnished. Renee only rented it, so the things were Mrs. Slocum's, but it must have been rather expensive even to rent. If Renee had enough money, which Jim had said was the case—and Carl saw no reason to doubt it—why did the girl sing at the Southern Winds and remain in Key West? She could do very well, really, anywhere. And then it occurred to Carl that Jim was right: considering the things she liked to do, she was probably doing very well right here, and no fuss made about it.

Carl called out: no answer. And glanced through a door.

Renee was very much there. She lay on her side and she was naked. The bedclothes were mussed extremely; there was a bottle of Scotch and two partially filled glasses on a side table.

Carl knew that he should cut out right then, but he did not. A firm young body, only slightly sun-tanned, her face turned into the pillow making a sculptured line of her throat. . . . She was very beautiful, and in the moment he spared himself to look at her, she woke up. She came to very slowly. She pushed back her hair—her facial expression was one of utter confusion. He did not move for fear of alarming her. When her eyes finally focused on him, she did not seem to remember him at all, much less the circumstances of his being there. The loveliness of the day before vanished. Bitch, he thought. Little bitch. Damn you to hell—and who the hell are you anyway? Despite his anger, he stood his ground, waited, would not be so unfair as to walk out now.

Finally: "Oh, Carl, I'm so sorry." And she did sound genuinely sorry.

She maneuvered to her feet and headed for the closet and a kimono (should he simply have embraced her? she might have been amused: one right after the other—not even a respite for breakfast) and then to the bathroom. A small voice in him told him he'd missed his chance. Who besides himself would let a thing like that go right by? What had happened to the predatory spirit of several days before? Or the ardor of yesterday? Should have taken off his clothes and got in bed, that's all. The hell with the fact that somebody had just left. The hell with it all: he was getting anxious in Key West, and that kind of anxiety could be dangerous. It would have been easy. She would have welcomed it.

But no. The very existence of his reason at a time like this ruined it. Reasonableness. He would pay for it within a matter of hours with the opposite reaction, he knew, but then there would be no satisfaction at hand. And with no one to victimize, there could be only one victim. Carl went out and sat on the terrace. The wind sang through the wires of the Navy radio towers visible from here.

Sound of running water from the bathroom. Carl thought about the girl who lived in Mrs. Slocum's tree house, with its own side entrance; the girl who performed at the Southern Winds, and drank; and, as often as she wished it, or as it happened, brought home those healthy, eager young men for a pleasant and brief interlude. The only problem in all of it that might really become troublesome was her drinking. Otherwise: a setup. With certain reversals in the situation, he almost envied her. Surely the circumstances were not sordid; nor did she profit materially. She simply did what it must have seemed to her exciting and fulfilling to do. Oh, Ben, you should see this and other things around here; you might doubt the yearning for God, the spiritual awareness in every human soul that you say "irritates out" eventually—you might doubt that theory! Sadie Thompson doesn't suffer, old boy. She goes on.

Renee came out on the porch. Her hair was wet and she still had on the kimono.

"You remember you said lunch," he said, grinning.

"I know now I did," she said, not terribly contrite. "I'm sorry. But how about going in the kitchen and fixing us a highball? You'll find everything there . . . while I dress." Renee crossed to the bedroom and closed the door. Just like that. Her tone, vacant; the sweetness of the girl on the yawl, gone.

In the kitchen, everything was a mess. The sailor must have been very drunk. Empty beer cans tossed around. Liquor bottles left open. A broken glass in the sink. He would fix them both a drink and then be on his way.

She rejoined him in a few moments. She wore, of all colors, white—white toreador pants with a red sash. He did not care for the outfit at all. She still looked drowsy. It would not be too difficult to leave. She sat with him on a cushioned, wicker settee and

they sipped their drinks and looked through the railing down into Mrs. Slocum's garden of love . . . as unlucky for her as for me, Carl thought. They sat in silence and it was very awkward. More to dispel the silence and the awkwardness than anything else, she turned toward him and he kissed her. Lovely skin, eyes still sleepy and perhaps desirous, but for Carl the moment had passed. He was absurdly hungry and thought he would go and eat an immense sea-food lunch somewhere.

"I think I'll go," he said. "Let me come back when you're better."

"I'm all right now," she said. But her eyelids flickered and the ice in her glass clinked as her hand moved. He got the impression that she was resisting a hang-over valiantly . . . for his benefit. She might even allow him to make love to her. But, as odd as it sounded, he didn't have the strength. Whether it had been sapped because of the reaction he had had or whether he simply required nourishment didn't matter. He could not, in any event, come through very well with what he would expect of himself. So retire gracefully. It would be, if they went to bed, an effort to please on both their parts—that much was evident. Carl stood up.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll see you tonight. Go back to bed."

"I could fix some sandwiches . . ." she said.

"Invite me again," he said. "And I will come back."

It satisfied him that he detected the least bit of chagrin in her manner. He was wholly detached from her now. She saw him to the top of the stairs, where he finished off the drink and handed her the glass. She waited expectantly. He brushed her lips. He started down and took the steps slowly, deliberately. At the bottom, he turned to look up—she was still there (in case he'd changed his mind?)—and he waved. She waved hesitantly. He went down the driveway and into the street. He had his car keys with him; he went round the corner to where he had parked and decided to go out Truman Avenue or somewhere to one of those big places for lunch and a drink. Of course, he hadn't the grace to allow her to do what she had tried to do—turn an unfortunate situation into a good one—and, in that sense, it was his failure. But he could honestly say to himself that, at the end, he had not desired her.

Carl drove out to Dedecks and had a full-sized lobster; then round to South Beach for a quick swim and then back to the Southern Winds for a rest. But he couldn't sleep, so he wrote in his notebook about Houlton, whom he had run into again the night before.

> When I went into the bar last night, Houlton was sitting on a stool against the wall. He nodded to me and indicated a vacant seat next to him. I went to the bar and got a drink and joined him. I especially noticed his eyes, the vivid color, hazel, quick eyes, almost frightened eyes. His face was wreathed in a kind of remoteness. Indeed, he said it was one of his schizoid nights, that the balloon was "way up and that the string barely reaches the earth." His hair shone; it was too tightly plastered against his head, too carefully combed and brushed. He looked like a cameo miniature of a young man of the eighteen-nineties. He wore a suit, having just come from a party. I asked him what he meant by saying it was one of his schizoid nights. Two personalities, he replied, one truthful, the other a deceiver. He said he thought it was necessary to be somewhat schizoid in order to survive in the world. "Who can tell or live the whole truth and get along? Learn to lie, if you want to have your heart's desire," he said, and I gathered he was paraphrasing an old Crosby song, "Learn to Croon." He said it is necessary to learn to lie a bit to others, to oneself even. His tone of voice was one of acute disappointment, as if the world had failed him somehow.
>
> Later on we went for a walk up deserted, bright Duval Street. He asked me about my background and I told him about the question I am trying to decide regarding my possible ministerial career. Whereupon he began a positive tirade against clerics.
>
> He railed against the religionists who waste time trying to prove the existence of God. His point, of course, was that God *is,* and no proof is necessary or possible. Houlton spoke his mind on the matter very clearly, but it was my impression that he made it up as he went along. I think his positiveness of manner is the result of the novelist's touch, a

definiteness of statement when there is hardly a wisp of thought. Still, people expect a novelist to speak authoritatively, and in that sense Houlton is only being himself. Houlton went on and enlarged his line of reasoning. He said that his was the usual artist's approach, which is to recognize, very closely, The Way Things Are. I cap it because he did in his speech. For that reason, he says he is a strict status quo man, it disturbs him to see things change.

We returned down Duval Street and Houlton suggested a drink at Luigi's, which is an outdoor bar across from the Southern Winds and good for talking. When we got seated, he launched into a discussion about The Way Things Are in regard to the human personality, with especial reference to the sexual setup. He has some very curious theories which he says sophisticated people have held to for ages but which I'm not sure I understand. But I shall try to record them.

If I gather what he said correctly (and in all fairness, what I am going to say is a summary of the remarks he made during the course of several hours), he maintains that everyone is ambivalent sexually, whether they repress it or not, and depending on time and place. He claims that men and women are (1) both heterosexual and homosexual, but predominantly one or the other, and (2) that there is another ambivalence: within each of those orientations, one may play a dominating or submissive role, but again predominantly one or the other.

Houlton said the secret truth about Key West is that it brings out whichever whole side of the ambivalent conflict a man or woman has been repressing, or, if not that much, at least whichever role has been repressed in each particular side. He attributed this shake-up to the supercharged atmosphere of sensuality and tension on the island. In short, a submissive Lesbian develops a desire to dominate a man, and a tried-and-true, dominating heterosexual suddenly finds himself submitting to a sailor, etc. Or a henpecked husband finds himself overriding his wife, whereas a mere slip of a thing may suddenly begin "with the whips" on her spouse, etc. The factors which precipitate this upheaval, Houlton

said, are the essential elements of the madness one feels in the air.

He also claims that if one can "grasp" both sides of the conflict and release the repressions (and guilts), the result is longer life and a youthful appearance. So Ponce de León and his quest in Florida may not have been so wide of the mark after all! He added that Key West has a special though dangerous and mysterious method of expiating guilt.

Now, this next remark is a fairly direct quote and I remember it because it came out of him with such amazing aptness. He said that failure to accept these "facts" (my quotes) about the human mechanism leads individuals to unhappiness because of mysterious disruptions and broken expectations (of absolute manliness or absolute femininity), leads the social organization to disaster because it is founded upon illusion, and leads the country to ruin because, unlike older civilizations, it is naïve in its idealism and the policies propagated on the basis of it!

I took a long swig of my drink after some of those statements came out of him, and most of it seemed to me an inane sort of classifying and oversimplification, to say the least. But I was amused. And not unaware that that is part of the effect Houlton was trying to get. Houlton spoke all the while, though, in seemingly dead earnest. I honestly do not know if he was pulling my leg or not.

He went on to say that, along with arguments for or against the existence of God, all arguments for or against the particular sexual outlet or role that one plays are useless and resolve or change nothing. The great thing, in his estimation, is to accept, to consciously dare to embrace larger and larger areas of possible expression, and, indeed, to experiment and, again, to accept.

This struck me as a justification of the first water for his own odd predilections, what I know of them. I said so. He didn't like that.

> And if he was provocative on that subject, I found him rather uninformed about religious matters. He began on a line of discussion, intending to present all messiahs as death symbols, which I consider the deepest misconception; and I'm afraid I cut into his verbalizing rather abruptly. He may even have been annoyed. He stood up, we called for the check, which I paid, and when we got to the sidewalk, he said he'd see me sometime and wandered off down the street.

* * * * *

When Carl went down for dinner, he discovered that most of the rest of the waiters and waitresses had already arrived and were eating. Only Jenny's friend Nothing-Betty had not as yet shown up. Someone asked Jenny where Nothing-Betty was, and Jenny said that she was shopping on Duval Street and would probably be late.

Nothing-Betty arrived just as Carl was finishing his meal. If she intended to have hers before the restaurant opened, Carl thought, she had to be quick about it. But Nothing-Betty was an obstinate girl; she was in no hurry.

Carl had noticed two things about Nothing-Betty—she read a lot but, unlike so-called intellectual girls, she took great pride in her appearance—and, concomitantly, she severely criticized Jenny whenever she got a chance. In fact, their little tiffs were not unusual in public, as Carl had observed, right in the middle of the dinner hour. They seemed, indeed, to enjoy torturing one another with vociferous expressions of opinion. Neither expressed an opinion without its being vociferous, although Nothing-Betty was the softer-spoken of the two. It was as if they could not believe in their bond, which was evident, unless they ceaselessly dug one another and argued. When Nothing-Betty began to open a cardboard dress box, then, to exhibit the contents to Jenny and the others, Carl prepared for the worst. And his expectation was not unwarranted.

"How do you like it?" Nothing-Betty asked the company at large.

It was a one-piece, full-skirted bathing suit with large flower

designs. Nothing-Betty had broad hips and Carl thought he understood the reason for the suit's fullness. Everyone voiced his approval. But Jenny was silent. Worse than silent. She made believe she was preoccupied with eating. Her face was frozen in a grimace of distaste. Carl was not the only one to hunch up and wish to be invisible.

"What do you think?" Nothing-Betty said, fully aware (how could she not be?) that she was baiting her antagonist.

"I think it stinks," said Jenny in her best underworld voice.

It was a needless display of pugnacity, and Carl could not but wonder again at the complicated secret reasons for this kind of behavior between two women who needed each other extremely.

"How dare you?" Nothing-Betty said, thrusting the suit back into the box, slamming the cover over it, and not caring that the tissue paper was sticking out.

"Crappy," Jenny said. "I think it's crappy, that's all. You asked me, and now I've told you."

"That will be just about enough from you," Nothing-Betty said loudly, "*Mr.* Jenny." And, with her half-closed parcel, Nothing-Betty swept out, probably not to be seen again that evening. Which would work hardship on them all—but, of course, especially Jenny, who, having been dealt what Carl presumed was the ultimate insult, was sitting with her head hung down.

The evening in the restaurant had begun badly.

And up until eight o'clock it did not much improve: Carl had not had a single customer to serve and the other waiters and waitresses had had very few. The dining room was not more than a quarter full. For the few customers who arrived, Charlotte played hostess by simply inclining her head toward the tables and allowing them to take whichever one they chose. Romano, seemingly sensing the state of business that night, had not as yet showed up. Carl was informed that that was not unusual. He might have even gone to Miami on another lark.

At nearly nine, a well-dressed elderly couple came in and seated themselves at one of the tables along the side which belonged to Carl. The woman was white-haired and short, the man was shinily bald and also short. They wore light summer clothing with the casualness of people accustomed to it, and, considering their age,

they looked well and happy. When Carl took their order, they made little pleasant jokes, and they had two cocktails before they started their dinner. Carl could not escape the impression that they also looked familiar, and the woman kept glancing at him covertly whenever he went near. Carl could not place the accent of their speech, but it was decidedly not Southern. After dinner, they ordered a liqueur, and when Carl brought it to them, the woman glanced up shyly.

"Do you have a moment?" she said.

"Of course," he said.

"We may be making an impolite mistake," she said. "And I hope you will forgive us if it is true, but aren't you Ben Hoyt's nephew—Ben Hoyt of St. Matthew's Church in New York?"

Carl was very surprised.

"Yes, I am," he said. "How nice of you to recognize me."

"We thought so," the woman said. He told them his name, and the woman introduced herself and her husband, who stood up and extended his hand. "You can't remember us," the woman went on, "but we were parishioners of your uncle's when you first came to stay at the Parish House about twelve years ago. We had been his parishioners for another ten before that."

She spoke, Carl thought, with charm and pride. Her eyes were wide and clear blue.

"I thought," Carl said, "that you both looked familiar, but I'm sorry to say I did not place you."

They both remonstrated.

"How could you?" the woman said. "You were very young, and you had had a great loss. We never knew your father but we had the pleasure of knowing your mother, and I served with her on many of the church committees. She was a lovely person."

Ordinarily, the sweetness of the old couple would only moderately have affected him, but Carl was moved greatly now. In fact, it brought back so much that he found himself without anything to say. The woman sensed this.

"We just wanted you to know that we recognized you, and we hoped you would remember us to Reverend Hoyt. He changed our lives once, when we neither of us could find a way out of a certain situation, and we shall both be everlastingly grateful to

him. I think he will recall us, although we left New York to live in Miami almost ten years ago. As a matter of fact, we shouldn't mention it, but we're very proud: we gave the tiny blue stained-glass window at St. Matthew's, high up on the right as you go down the nave. I think there is a little plaque. . . ."

The old man handed Carl a calling card, which Carl put in his pocket.

"I shall be very glad to tell Ben about meeting you," Carl said. "And I'm certain he will remember."

"If you're in Miami, please give us a call and come and stay, and there is one more thing," she said. "Please do not be offended, but we see that you are working here, and we can only think that you want to earn money."

Carl did not want to go into the complete explanation and so he nodded.

"We would like," the woman said, "to leave a little something extra with your tip. Have a drink on us and know that it is our pleasure to do this, more than it is yours to accept."

Carl began to object . . . but unless he wished to explain everything, it was fruitless. He smiled with a sudden realization.

"I am working here," he said. "And it is a pleasure to meet you. You've reminded me of something of myself that almost slipped my mind."

"We think we know what you mean," the woman said with what Carl thought was amazing perception. Civilized, calm, good people, he thought; how I have missed you.

When they left, in addition to his tip, beside the plate, there was a twenty-dollar bill.

* * * * *

After dinner, Carl merely loosened his black tie and threw himself into a wicker chair in the unlighted corner section of the porch of the Southern Winds, which was shielded from the street by the vine-tangled trellis. Light did reflect some from an overhead bulb around the corner on the porch, where Jim sat alone going over food checks, unaware of Carl's presence. Romano had not shown up at all.

It had been bad the entire night in the restaurant. The waiters and waitresses had mostly stood around and bemoaned the lack of business. Carl had seen the patronage of the Southern Winds for four nights and, indeed, this had been the poorest. Whether it was just one, isolated bad one, or it was going to be like that from now on, he did not know; but it was precisely to discover the situation that he remained in Key West. Carl told himself this as he slumped in the chair.

He was tired and he was despondent. The anxiety he anticipated was upon him. The incident that afternoon with Renee now appeared to him as a disaster. He wished he'd handled it differently. His reasonableness had deserted him. He wanted her, and yet all evening he had avoided her, and now he wouldn't go into the bar because she was there and he couldn't face her. It was a hot evening. Motionless air. He did not know what to do to relieve the tension in his leg muscles. Walk, probably. In a minute. Or go for a fast drive around the island? His mind was without focus. Once, in a doctor's office, he'd been given an injection, for the purpose of a heart examination, which caused his heart to slow up, to pound steadily but at a greatly retarded rate; the sweat had poured out of him; he'd almost panicked. The effect now was the same—an urge to go, an urge to stay, a pull against interference, forces just balancing one another, catatonia of the will, anxiety, soaked in perspiration.

It was with relief, then, for something to distract him that Carl watched an elaborate Key West police car come down Duval Street, turn the corner, and park. Two gold-braided policemen got out and made their way up the path. They would come up on the porch of the Southern Winds around the corner where Jim was sitting. Their footfalls on the wooden steps were authoritative. Jim greeted them loudly; there was a pause; they asked for Romano. Jim said he hadn't been around, but that he could probably be reached at home; they said they'd reach him, but that they also wanted to talk to Jim. He invited them to sit. Carl wondered if one of them would come around the corner in search of a chair and discover him, but there were evidently several chairs where they were, and he was not disturbed. There was a scuffling sound of pulling up chairs. Cigarettes were lit.

"How about a drink, Chief?" Jim said cordially.

"Not tonight," the Chief said. His voice was gruff and, Carl thought, rather weary.

"Say, I read about that Villate case," Jim said. "Pretty terrible for that kid, battering his best friend like that. I guess you're ass-deep in it."

"We are," said the chief.

"I knew Villate. He used to come in here," Jim said. "He was a nice kid."

A pause. One very heavy moving of feet.

"Yeah, nice kid," the chief said. "We all knew him. Model boy. Usual pitch. Lot of pent-up anger in him. You don't hook somebody twenty-two times with a steel rod without being mad at something."

"Yet, from all I heard, they palled around a lot, fishing, swimming. Real close friends."

"Real close," the chief said.

Carl wondered if the other policeman would speak.

"Jim," the chief said, "where's Romano?"

"Honest, Chief, I don't know. H'ain't been here all night."

"We've looked at his house. He's been gone all day. So we can't fool with it no longer. So I'll say what I have to say to you, and you can tell him as soon as you see him, and I'll tell him when I get a chance."

"Sounds like trouble, Chief. We ain't had no trouble now. Somebody putting pressure on you boys about the noise? We'll quiet 'em down as they leave."

"No pressure," the chief said. "But partly the Villate case. He's not the first kid who spent a lot of time here and then went out and got violent. Mostly it's Navy, but that's not our problem. A town kid is."

"Now, Chief, Villate wasn't here that much. Maybe twice a week. Friday and Saturday."

"I don't give a damn how often he was here," the chief said, and his voice was ugly. "He was here. And you know, Jim, and Frank here knows, and I know, this goddamned place mixes 'em up. Maybe somebody says somethin', maybe somebody does somethin', I don't know. But they go outta here and crash over guard-

rails or start swingin' at the first guy they see—or they batter their friends, like Villate."

"Sorry, Chief," Jim said low, "I won't buy it. You're saying he got led astray here, and there's no proof of that." Jim's tone suddenly changed—a hurt-little-boy tone now—and Carl pictured Jim's six-foot frame. "We run a clean business here, Chief. You don't have trouble here like you have down the street. O'right, maybe a loud drunk once in a while, but no fights, no trouble in months. Now, Chief, nobody does nothin' in this place that I don't see, and I give you my word of honor, which is still pretty good in this town, that no funny business goes on here. And we pay our taxes."

"You pay your taxes because we'd close you tight if you didn't," the chief said, fierce now. "But why the hell can't you run this dump without all the freaks? Freaks in the dining room, freaks in the bar."

"Chief, what the boys and girls who work here do during their spare time I don't care about. They do their jobs, or they don't do their jobs—that's my concern. But I'll tell you one thing, and I don't give a damn who knows it: there ain't one of 'em I wouldn't trust with all the money in the joint. They're friends of mine, and I'm proud of it. They're a sight better than the pimps and whores anywhere else on Duval Street."

"Run 'em out, Jim. If you don't, I will. And I'll finish off this dump while I'm at it. Make it a level parking space."

"If any trouble starts," Jim said patiently, his voice slightly quavering, "I'd be the first on your side, Chief. Show me trouble and I'll throw out the troublemaker with my bare hands. And I got bare hands, Chief. Big ones. Nobody's got a right to cause trouble. But you can't say to a guy, 'Get out, buddy; I don't like the way some people tell me they think you live.' I won't do it, Chief."

"Ernesto Villate's trouble started here," the chief said.

"His trouble started years ago."

"I think it started here."

"Ah, for Christ's sake. . . ."

Four sailors came up the walk and went into the bar.

"Ged rid of 'em, Jim." The chief's voice was tight almost to choking.

"No disrespect to you," Jim said, "but I'll tell you straight out: I won't even try. They're my friends. They stay as long as they do their jobs. Hell, Chief, the freaks, like you call 'em, they make the place."

Pushing back of chairs, scuffling of feet. The second policeman had not said a word.

"Tell Romano what I said," the chief said. "Tell him that this is the last place. Tell him we're gonna finish this kind of place forever in Key West."

"Respectable motel owners on your back, eh, Chief?" Jim said. "Well, I understand that. But you kill the Southern Winds and you kill the reason people come to Key West—and then they won't have any business."

"Tell Romano," the chief said.

"O.K., you know I will, but I'm sure Jake feels about it like I do. Hell, trouble—kick out the troublemaker. No trouble—they got jobs. Like I said, they make the place. You can't argue with that. Whatsa' matter, Chief, are we cuttin' into Vera's bar business?"

"I can argue with it and I will," the chief said. "See you, Jim."

The two policemen strode down the path; Jim went inside.

Carl became conscious of Luigi's ten-foot-high red electric sign across the street. And, from inside the bar, the opening chords of Renee's song, "Remind Me." And car doors slamming in the tropical night. Of course, there was truth on both sides.

Sun and sand, Carl thought, fun and fear: people came to Key West for some sort of terrible vicarious thrill. A thrill that revitalized. Also unsettled—deeply. Was Houlton right? What, exactly, was it?

Carl admired Jim: with very little equivocation, he'd held his ground. It was a flimsy charge the chief made. But a boy had murdered—and there had been other violence, no doubt. Still, could the connections be as surely traced as the chief thought, except through the passageways of ignorance and superstition? It was almost a witch hunt, and Carl suddenly grasped the lines of such thinking. Still, there were the possessed and the unpossessed, and who is to say that the former do not taint the latter? Possessed by what, though, indeed? Demons? Don't make me laugh.

Possessed, perhaps, he thought, by the force which now made

him move out from the darkness of the porch into the light of the neon sign briefly and down into the street.

There were a great many sailors walking; some large ship must have arrived. Carl headed up toward the center of town. And the force or spirit was everywhere: it had to do with marauding, stalking, a strange kind of piracy. Instead of on the high seas, though, it happened under the low-hanging trees on dark streets. Perhaps the tension in the air had something to do with the rarely expressed but ever-present friction among the many groups in town —the shrimpers, the tourists, the townspeople and tradespeople, the Cubans, the Negroes, and the servicemen, including Navy, Marines, and foreign sailors. But it was more than that, Carl thought.

In the center of town, the sidewalks, especially at the crossings, were almost impassable because of the crowd. Sailors—with a predilection for tattoos and quite light, sky-blue-colored trousers —lined up in front of the shopwindows and hooted at a passing car, if there was a girl in it. But there were plenty of girls passing right by them on the sidewalk—pretty high school girls in groups, and a lonely whore or two, whom they never saw.

About the whores: Carl had been told that it was only necessary to whisper one's wish to a taxi driver to be driven immediately to the spot for five dollars—for a dog. But the whores could not release all the straining, tensile anxiety of twenty thousand sailors. Or even Carls. Concerning whores—the wave of his need and the wave of his repugnance collided as do the incoming and outgoing surf waves on a beach.

He kept walking until he reached the end of the lights of the town, and he turned back to walk through it again. You are carping and truculent tonight, he thought, like the young men in the street. You are looking for something to happen, anything, a small car accident, a fight, a caricaturist doing portraits in the window of the used car dealer. Well, there's the car and a fast drive around the island. No. Stay out of the car. Have sense enough. He had sense enough.

At times like this, Carl wondered, what happened to memory? Why was it that nothing in any direction he looked reminded him of anything familiar? He existed then (seemingly with those

all around him), pressed right up to the glass of actuality. It was as if memory, which gave significance and meaning to what was seen, had been temporarily disconnected. That frame of reference which gave the dimension of depth to experience was gone. He faced all of it blankly—the shopwindows, the electric signs, the traffic coursing slowly downstreet. But, it must be admitted, if these things were seen detachedly, the vision was also totally clear. Every object and person emanated a quality of intense stress and strain neatly self-contained.

Only Carl's own feeling was not contained. Anxiety. The man who experiences anxiety (he recalled having read in a book called *The Courage to Be*) has proof of his existence; and, too, the trick is not to avoid anxiety or expend it wantonly—it is the fire that heats the boiler which drives the engine. The thing to do is face it directly, embrace as much of it as one can without shattering. Then, one is alive. Maybe so.

Carl stopped outside a bar that was full of foreign sailors—German sailors, indeed—and Carl remembered having read in the local paper that they would be in town, having come to Key West aboard a newly-commissioned battleship of that divided land. Through the doorway, Carl could see that one of their number had replaced the regular guitarist on the bandstand and was playing very well with a borrowed instrument—familiar, sentimental bar-house songs. Every single boy in the place joined in the choruses. Their unanimity, their obvious pride, and the inglorious past which was their heritage made the sight of them singing there, arms linked and swaying back and forth, a touching spectacle.

And while Carl watched with others on the sidewalk, a man came out of the bar smiling broadly, hand extended toward Carl. It was Alan Houlton.

Tuesday, February 25

CARL did not get out for breakfast until ten-thirty; he had remained the night previous listening to Houlton until four A. M. The morning was glorious, as had been each of the four other mornings he'd seen in Key West, and he thought (as he went downstairs into it) that it would take a great many such mornings to ever bore him. The promise of such days! He had at least five more to look forward to.

Since the paper in town didn't come out until afternoon, Carl took a magazine to breakfast with him. He read leisurely as he ate the eggs and grits, the toast with fresh marmalade, and the tart coffee. And as concerned as he had been the night before with so many things, he was relaxed and fulfilled this morning. The sun washed clean somehow. Carl decided the day had come to at least jot down some of the things he wanted to say to Ben describing the situation here, so he returned from breakfast at Shorty's diner to the Southern Winds intending to go to his room.

Because it was a little quicker, he cut along the driveway, up the ramp to the loading platform, and started by the kitchen to the back stairs. Even that early, fat May was there, beginning to prepare the conch chowder, the onion soup, the shrimp, the potatoes, and the vegetables for the evening meal.

"Hi," she said in her guttural cordiality. "How 'bout a cup of coffee? Good and black." Carl did not like black coffee, but May smiled pleasantly through the screen door and he was inclined to talk to someone this fine day, so he went in.

The kitchen in the morning was not bad. Not hot, in any event. It was a high room and it had been built on to the house particularly for its purpose. Which meant that the wood was new and that the floor was solid. He glanced around. Everything was spotless; he was very glad to see it. A great deal of sunlight came through the windows even though the windows were small. May went to the urn to draw coffee for him but he signaled her no. He sat down on top of the freezer.

May went round the great central wooden butcher's table and, seeing that he was not going to dash away, picked a potato out of a pot and began peeling it meditatively. A red silk bandanna held the hair in place around her fat face, and she wore a white apron which entirely covered her ample front. Her glasses balanced on the end of her nose, and she kept her wedding ring on her stubby red hand.

"If I was your uncle," May said, gesturing at him with the potato peeler and peering at him from under the overhead racks, which held the cooking implements, "I'd put the money he's thinking of givin' Jake right back in his pocket. Unless, of course, he can jest afford to chuck it in the street. I've known Jake all the years he's plowed around Massachusetts and Maine and New Hampshire opening and closing little places. He never lasts anywhere long. Two seasons, that's the most. Would you like some shrimp?"

She motioned toward a pile of big, unshelled shrimp lying on the table. Carl declined.

"Two seasons," she went on. "At the most. Now, don't get me wrong—Jake's great, we've been friends for years. I've done his inside cookin' lots of places. Wouldn't want to see him take on a big debt, though. Too many fingers in the pie as it is. He owes people now who'll cut his throat if he don't pay 'em soon." Carl thought of the men in the bar. "He won't never pay off any more debts. That's my opinion. Jake sets a good table for his customers—the best; few can beat it for the price. But Jake ain't no businessman. He buys everything here retail." May laughed, giggled low at the thought of this. And Carl thought he picked the wrong person to talk to in the morning.

"I know that," Carl said.

"Do you know he runs out of food practically every night? That's a big loss-a money right there. Not to mention running out of things like dishes. Ain't even got enough plastic plates. That old nigger Daddy-O, who's late this morning, goes crazy tryin' to keep up with washin' those dishes by hand, sometimes without hot water when the cheap heater goes on the blink. And this kitchen. It's me that sees it's clean. But hot. Can't do nuthin'

'bout the heat, and he won't go out and git us another fan. Just one old one over there."

May pointed to an immense, wire-protected, standing fan.

"Noisy," Carl said.

"You can hear it clear up Duval Street to the beach," May said. "I work in this damn kitchen twelve hours a day and he won't get me a decent fan. I'm sick, too. He don't care. I would never have come down from the Cape with my old man in that heap out there"—Carl looked through the window to their old coupé up on jacks—"if Jake hadn'a begged me. Said I had to help him keep this joint goin' one more season. Promised an apartment for us to live in and a bonus at the end of the season. Fine apartment, across the hall from you. Big room, yes, private bathroom, yes, but nothin' else. Hell, I put up them pictures pasted on the walls. But that's one bonus I'll bet I never see. And for no salary at all he's got Eddie sweepin' the sidewalk and raking the lawns. Old malarkey Jake. Same old line, and I fall for it each time. But I'm through after this time. Who d'ya think he could ever get to work like I do for him? Nobody. Well, maybe *three* people. But I do it every day, and for practically nothin' and no decent fan. Honey, you sure you wouldn't like a couple juicy shrimp? And do I ever see the sunlight, much less get to the beach?"

"Thanks," Carl said. "But it's a little early for me for shrimp. I just had breakfast. Would you like to go to the beach?" Carl had in mind that he might drive her out one day.

"Bad for the skin, all that sun," May said. "Give you cancer. Read it in a magazine. Read lots of those—*True Confession, Confidential*—lots of 'em. They tell you the facts. No good, sun. Beside, when I grew up it was considered cheap for a girl to be sunburned. Clear skin they wanted—clear skin I have to this very day."

Carl glanced at it. Clear, yes, and pale. But May's eyes twinkled as she kept on giving him an amazing number of contradictory leads and impressions. He had a hunch that confusion was a forte of this lady. She was every inch an outspoken and amusingly malicious New England fishwife.

"I must admit," she said. "I like to stay indoors, and I am, have been, and I guess always will be a workin' woman. I like to keep

busy. And I've had to keep busy so that no-good crazy husband of mine kin eat—'The damage isn't serious.' " May mimicked her husband's tone cruelly. "But I don't want you tellin' Jake that, or he'll pile twice as much work on me."

"I won't say a word," Carl said.

"Oh, Jake ain't so bad. It's Melanie, that damned wife of his. She's the one." May almost licked her lips in contemplation of what there was to be said about Melanie. "You know her?"

"Just met her once or twice. Not really to talk to."

"Talk to her. Christ, what a lady she fancies herself! But I'll tell you somethin' most of 'em don't know. She can't even read and write. That's how much of a lady she is. With all those airs, her little finger pointin' when she drinks, that damned little dog she carries. Walks around like Queen Mary. I'll get her someday, though, if she ever sends anything more back to the kitchen. She does that. Lets the food get cold while she's gabbin', then sends it back and says it's my fault. Once more, and I'll cover it with pepper. She's the one who spends his money, you know. Went up to Miami, stayed at the Fontainebleau, and came back here and moved into a new apartment a week ago—in fact, the minute they found out you were comin'. Oh, she's a smart one, she thinks. Damn her! And damn to your uncle's money, I say! Don't give it to 'em. They don't deserve it. Don't care myself if this joint collapses tomorra. Me and the old man'll climb in that jalopy and steam back to Boston, where I got a house and a job any time I want it."

Such was the comment of May, the kitchen cook, on the situation at the Southern Winds.

* * * * *

Carl leaned across the driver's seat and unlatched the passenger door of his car. It swung open and Charlotte stepped in. The car tilted perceptibly. Carl glanced at her: Charlotte had on a low-cut, yellow sleeveless blouse, pink slacks, and sandals. Her flower today was white with the petals just tinged with crimson. Over her regular glasses she had clipped a pair of green pince-nez sunglasses. Her lips were brightly outlined and her cheeks were

rouged. She used a flowery perfume. She was apparently in good spirits, for she plumped up and down on the springy seat, grinning at him. With effort (because her arm and her bosom collided in the motion) she rolled down her window.

"Air show," she said in her little-girl fashion and as if she were directing a chauffeur. He had stopped to stare at her, which he discontinued abruptly, and was half about to apologize but judged that to be wrong, too. Charlotte was conscious of what he had been doing and no doubt uncertain of his opinion. But no more uncertain than himself.

Carl pulled away from the curb in front of the Southern Winds and they drove gaily out of Key West. First, around the corner to Simonton, up Simonton to Truman, along Truman Avenue past the famous Margaret-Truman launderette, which just happened to be on the corner of Margaret and Truman streets and which just happened to appear prominently in the background of a picture taken of President Eisenhower arriving in town.

Charlotte chatted about affairs at the newspaper. It was apparently an office of shouting and bickering in which, Carl thought, despite her handicap, Charlotte rarely lost an argument. Still, she told him she had come home the night before close to collapse. One of the photographers, who had a habit of whistling while he spoke, had argued with her after she had complained that he never arrived at an assignment on time or took the right pictures. He had been adamant on the one point and abusive on the other. Whereupon she'd burst into tears and told him to stop whistling, she was no dog, and that it hurt her audiphone.

"But I'm all right today," she said. "No more tears. Afternoon off. Oh, look at the cars. Everybody's going."

And, indeed, the road out along the fringe of the island was noticeably crowded. This was the road by which Carl had entered Key West five days before. It seemed he'd been here so much longer. They passed the fishing-yacht basin, the supermarkets, and the used car lots. They passed the small palm trees, which lined the drive at intervals. Charlotte said that they could not maintain palm trees along this road because people kept smashing into them and knocking them down. And, indeed, the trees on the curves were especially puny. The day had changed somewhat; the

spotless blue morning, so characteristic, had yielded to overcast, but the clouds were high and it was well that the direct sunlight had been blotted out—it would be possible to see the planes as they performed. Carl could not help but marvel again at all this openness, air, and warmth.

Charlotte explained to him about the Blue Angels. The Navy had developed a six-man team to do fancy-formation flying in swept-wing jets, all painted bright blue, as a public-relations and recruiting stunt for fairs and carnivals all across the country. But the stunt went further. The six Blue Angels dressed alike, went everywhere together, got in trouble together; their *esprit de corps* was as famous as their capability in the air. Except that now, as Charlotte went on to say, there were only four Blue Angels. A year ago, two of them, for a never-explained reason, left the main diamond formation and, one following the other, suddenly executed a spiral curve up, around, and, at six hundred miles an hour, straight down into the sea. Hardly any wreckage had been found. They had not been replaced; four planes would be seen today.

Carl turned into the Boca Chica Naval Air Station entry. As they drove slowly through the gate, a snappy Marine waved them in. It was visitors' day and the cars were not stopped. Inside, every building they passed, every lawn, every hedge was as neat and snappy as that Marine. They drove in a line of cars that was expertly guided and which quickly dispersed itself into an ample parking space between two hangars. Charlotte's eyes were shining. When they got out, their faces were cooled by a fairly stiff breeze rolling across those several miles of concrete which composed the field. They made their way to the roped-off area around the central control tower. They were too late for seats in the banked grandstands. With perhaps a thousand people who had come for the show, they milled around here, in front of the tower, within too clear earshot of the loud-speaker.

It was a lighthearted, brightly dressed and excitedly expectant crowd. Carl wondered if it was also a bloodthirsty crowd. Or if he, indeed, in his heart, would not have throbbed to see an accident. Not a major one—just a skid at landing. When he was a child, one of his favorite pastimes had been to look for an auto

accident picture in the papers and, with small toys, to play crash-cars in the vacant lots of the neighborhood. They had built roads, whole towns, in the dirt in order to conceive these accidents. But the people in his toy cars always escaped injuries, and it spoiled his fun if the real people in the real accidents pictured in the paper had been hurt. It was the machines that he wanted to be bent and torn; in the case of his toys, only then could he love them. He recalled that he'd habitually saved the pieces of the little lead cars he'd hammered apart. And, before that, he remembered, it had been the happiest moment of play when the earthquake came, or the explosion, and the house of blocks disintegrated. Charlotte, who held his arm, tugged at it.

The loud-speaker, blaring in their ears, bade them good afternoon and to watch now for the two planes that would approach in opposite directions, cross the field at an altitude of fifty feet, only fifty feet apart, and flying upside down. And there they came, from the left and right—bright-blue needles arching down from both directions (Carl chose to watch the one on his left)—down, down, almost there. With a shattering noise, each flipped suddenly upside down and roared across the field, passing in a split second the other plane wing tip to wing tip. Then, in the distance, each flipped upright again and proceeded high aloft.

It was enough—the noise, the speed, the spectacle—to knock one to the ground almost. Charlotte jumped, literally, for joy.

"Now," the loudspeaker said, "YOU WILL SEE ALL THE FOUR PLANES COME IN OVER THE FIELD AND CHANGE PLACES IN THE FORMATION WHILE MAKING A COMPLETE LOOP."

The four jets, in tight arrangement and seemingly inches apart, devastating in their onslaught, bore down on the field, and then silently, because of their altitude, up, up, in sharp curves, and—interchanging places as they went, blue dots now, so fast did they rise—silently, steadily, inexorably up, up and over, and then sharply, but slowly, it seemed, down and around. The noise of the engines followed the planes' second sweep over the field and drowned out the surely unheard but tumultuous applause from the spectators. The loud-speaker announced the next maneuver.

Carl felt himself slipping somehow. "Great toys" was all he could think. Great and lethal toys. Machines of incredible power

and accuracy. Two of them now came over the field from opposite directions executing precise quarter-turn barrel rolls as they went. Carl had had no idea that jets could be controlled with such precision; he'd thought they needed miles and miles of sky to bank, to turn, long curves into the horizon—and perhaps they did. Madness. If a nation possessed these things, sooner or later these things would be used. Oversimple reasoning, he supposed, yet what else could happen? What magnificent, far-ranging dogfights such planes could have. And, lastly, compared to the lives of the pilots of those things, the lives of the individuals on the ground seemed so insignificant, so impotent. Here were men, doing big, important, manly things. Leading, Carl thought, of course, to death.

Charlotte was screaming at him, but the loud-speaker was going on, too. Carl slipped a little further. One of the planes began an outside loop: it started upside down, went up, around, and, at the top, was finally flying in the usual and proper fashion.

"THAT PASS," said the loud-speaker, "IS ONE THAT CAUSES THE GREATEST STRAIN ON THE MAN AND THE PLANE."

Carl watched it fly away—nothing broken, no explosion, one moment's silver sparkle on the fuselage as it curved around. Carl's eyes wandered; the sky was getting blacker.

Several more maneuvers were announced and executed. And then the speaker said: "THREE OF THE ANGELS WILL CONCLUDE THIS EXHIBITION WITH A LOOP AND ALMOST PERPENDICULAR, STRAIGHT-UPWARD, PARALLEL FLIGHT. WATCH THE TWO PLANES ON THE OUTSIDE. THEY WILL SPIRAL AWAY FROM THE CENTER ONE TO FORM A PERFECT FLEUR-DE-LIS PATTERN."

This was done: the three planes seemed to rise straight up, the two outside ones curved off—to the left, to the right—and colored smoke, blue and red, was released from the wing tips to form the leaves of the design.

Charlotte had been talking, and she continued to talk as the planes came in for a landing, one close upon the next. They taxied back toward the control tower, their motors deafening, lined up, and faced the crowd. Charlotte went on making remarks to him which he couldn't hear, talking out of that world of hers, not glancing at him for a reply. Which of course he could not have

made. Why the hell didn't they turn off those motors and climb out? Crews of four men in immaculate white mechanic's overalls waited in a diamond formation in front of each plane. Damned theatrical, Carl thought. His nerves tensed, his head ached.

"IN JUST A MOMENT," the loud-speaker said, "YOUR FOUR FLIERS, THE BLUE ANGELS, WILL CUT THEIR ENGINES, DISMOUNT THE PLANES AND SIGN AUTOGRAPHS."

Carl craned his head around for the point of origin of the omnipotent mechanical voice, but in the maze of windows and walks of the control tower he couldn't find it—it was just there, around the tower somewhere, over the heads of the crowd. Big Brother is watching you, and, in this case, talking. Charlotte got through to him her wonder at why they didn't stop the planes and get out. And she said probably they were dizzy and needed a few minutes of readjustment, and Carl thought she might not be wrong. And, suddenly, the air show, for Carl, became Charlotte, and he realized that the only way to deal with all of what had happened to him in Key West was to do what he had done today—submit. I shall submit, he thought, accept it, embrace it. The four plane engines went off abruptly. The crowd sighed and pushed forward to the ropes. Carl felt himself relax. Charlotte was urging him along with the rest, and he went. A line of verse occurred to him: "Because of you, I gladly go." Lightly, he went, his arm in Charlotte's, or hers in his—he could not know which, except that she was leading. The planes were stationary and silent now, but the illusion of violent movement still hung in the air about them. The white-overalled crews stood at attention still, and suddenly, simultaneously, the four cockpit covers slid slowly back. Again, what theatrics! And the four fliers, suited from head to toe in brilliant orange, climbed down the same side of each of the craft. Carl went willingly with Charlotte to the very front of the crowd. He wanted to see, as she did, as everyone did, what manner of men it took to do such things. Not one of the four walked unsteadily, and not one seemed any more disturbed than if he had climbed off a Madison Avenue bus. In fact, Carl thought, he'd seen people emerge from such buses considerably more frazzled. Of course, the four men looked somewhat more healthy than ordinary, but not in an obviously overdeveloped way. It would appear that they

were wiry rather than brawny; they walked erectly but they were not tall; they looked to Carl, as he considered them at that moment, above all else, like men who led "equitable" lives, whose watchword was "equanimity." Except, of course, in flight. Then they were artists, no doubt. The split-second maneuvers, the control required could only be bred of a passionate dedication. So were they artists, Carl thought—as much instruments of their medium as musicians, as artifactitious as a violinist, as far from the purely human as any other artist. But, in this case, part of a creation, the sole purpose of which was destruction. . . .

Charlotte said that they should be getting back. It was very overcast now. People were making pretty readily for their cars.

Charlotte walked across the flat pavement toward the hangar, still seeming happy, absurdly content, taking long strides, bouncing, really, and peeking at him every once in a while now from behind her green, clipped-on, pince-nez sunglasses. She looked upward and enjoined him to do likewise.

"Rain, see? Rain," she said.

Her tone verged on the wistful-idiot-infantile, and yet, knowing what he knew about her, it finally dawned on him that this sort of thing was her defense for his benefit, for everyone's benefit, of a worldliness about her that existed, that was somehow inappropriate, that she evidently felt might offend. She's been married four times, he thought. Each time a failure and no money to show for it. And now Romano had completely hooked up the little she had left in the Southern Winds and, if she lost there, she lost everything. Of course, the same was true of Romano.

Curiously, the rain held off. They got in the car, and he followed the car in front of him slowly. The route they had used to enter the base was not being as well expedited in the process of speeding the visitors out, and Charlotte said that if he left the line and drove around "that hangar over there," she knew a short cut out onto the highway. Carl did as she directed. They drove around a hangar, along a runway, and discovered that they were not the only ones who knew of the short cut. Still, the cars were lined up and stopped here. There was some activity going on up ahead. An emergency repair car tore past them. Several military police cars followed. Finally an officer on foot came up the line

and explained that a crippled twin-jet Army transport en route elsewhere had just called in to the field and requested emergency landing facilities. An ambulance sped up the line, as did another emergency truck with fire-fighting equipment and Marines hanging on, wearing helmets. Carl and Charlotte were informed by the officer that they would be safe here and could wait, or they could leave the line, turn around, and exit from the base the usual way.

Neither he nor Charlotte could deny the excitement of seeing the crippled plane land or crash, and they were honest about it with each other; certainly it was no fault of theirs—and nothing to be done by them. But it might be hours. Carl turned the car around again and they made snail's progress to the front gate.

From the highway, they saw the plane. A twin-engine jet flying with remarkable slowness only a few hundred feet about the field, circling around, deliberately releasing white billowing clouds of fuel from wing tanks. At the same time, as they drove along, Carl saw a deluge of rain coming down on the road pavement about a mile away. To the right, black clouds met the water on the horizon and the water had turned a milky green. It was humid, it was darkening, it was calm—it was ominous.

Charlotte felt it, too. She was quite still as she kept an eye on the crippled plane. It made one more pass over them, over the field, and then, in a glance backward, Carl saw the plane going down slowly with no landing gear extended. The rain on the road met them then and they drove quietly—except for the spatter on the roof and wet whir of the tires—the speedometer needle wavering at ten, unable to see more than a few feet ahead, lost in it.

* * * * *

What everybody knew about the Southern Winds waiters, Happy and Naomi Fitz:—they were from Provincetown, Massachusetts, where they owned a house and ran an antique shop (more on the curio side for tourists who came over from Boston for the day and wanted a small souvenir). They had both been married before, and Naomi had a son and daughter of college age.

Naomi was about forty-five, but she looked much younger: slender figure, clean-cut features and simple bobbed hairdo, and

a voice right off a Westchester telephone line. She adored her husband; there is no other way to put it. She deferred to his every remark and observed him when he spoke with rapt attention, as if she didn't want to miss a word, as if she were indebted to him in some way. And, indeed, she would tell anyone who cared that she *was* indebted to her husband: after years of pretense and pretending, she had finally learned to be herself—her husband had taught her how.

Happy Fitz was a trifle shorter than his wife; he wore heavy horn-rimmed glasses; he had an immobile face set in a perpetual blank, peering expression. His features, however, were rather sensual. And he was fifty. Not much out of the ordinary in appearance, to be sure; but Happy had a rather special quality, a kind of courageousness.

Previous to their residence and business in Provincetown, the Fitzes had lived in Westchester. They'd owned a ten-room house in a wooded section set fairly close to other ten-room houses, but all of which were almost out of sight of one another. Happy had held down the headship of the advertising department of a rather large liquor concern. Naomi belonged to garden clubs. The children went to the local high schools which, after all, were pretty good.

Then they decided to chuck it. There were many reasons; neither Happy nor Naomi could have said which was the most cogent, but their life became just too much for them. All of it. The suburban rituals. Without one gram of foreknowledge or experience, they moved to the Cape (where they'd spent, in truth, one summer five years before) and established themselves and the shop.

They bought, in order to sell, oddments of merchandise that amused them. It worked out profitably—very well indeed. They even sold clothes for resort wear, patchwork trousers, red linen jackets, rope sandals—that sort of thing. Worked well except for the children. Naomi's son and daughter were horrified and ashamed of their parents. But they were off at college by that time, and it didn't much matter to Happy or Naomi what the children thought.

The middle-aged couple had found each other again. It was a

second honeymoon in a very true sense. They discovered leisure and landscapes, and they both dabbled in water colors. They gave lots of casual get-togethers, and they were entertained all over the Cape, and, of course, they made many new and good friends. They made friends with the kind of people they'd always wanted to know and had not found in Westchester—the kind of people who understood without question when Happy, in the middle of a party and hardly drunk at all, would take off all his clothes. Every stich. Positively nude. The kind of people who not only tolerated Happy's little fetish but made it a high point of the evening, whether they were being entertained by the Fitzes or whether the Fitzes were their guests. And strangers present be damned! That was friendship, and those were friends. Such parties, by the way (after Happy had made his entrance), went their way not terribly wilder.

In Key West, at the Southern Winds, Happy and Naomi were pleasant and efficient at their jobs. Happy was, as might be surmised, endowed with a straight-man's sense of humor—customers of wit enjoyed him, and there were many—and Naomi was sweet and unobtrusive.

They rented a large house with a secluded garden out in the elegant Casa Marina section. (Their pattern of behavior, except for their jobs, did not alter much.) The Fitzes gave many parties and they went to many parties given by the Southern Winds' crowd or someone who knew the crowd. In fact, an incident after one such party they'd attended provided Charlotte with one of her daily gossip columns, "Conkversations":

> "Oh, a policeman's lot is not an 'appy one" goes a Cockney ditty. Here is a Key West case in point:
>
> Last Friday night, a member of the local police force noticed a shadowy form scrounging around in a clump of bushes in a private parking lot on Truman Avenue. The officer beamed his light on the figure and called out, "What are you doing there?"
>
> The bushwhacker replied: "Just pulling the lion's claws."

The intrepid patrolman advanced. "What lion?" he challenged, flashing his torch around and up and down. He brought it to bear full force on the "prowler."

The light revealed a professional-looking man with horn-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. He wore an open-throat sports shirt . . . and a pair of lively-hued pants in a crazy-quilt patch pattern. He was holding a moth-eaten furry pelt of some sort.

The cop stared. "What are you going to do with the claws?"

"I'm going to sell them. I sell whales' teeth. . . ."

The patrolman studied the gentleman in the patchwork pants. He asked: "What kind of costume is that you have on?"

"Oh, no costume, sir; these are my regular pants. I mean I have other clothes, but they're at the cleaner's. This is . . . uh . . . my beachcomber's outfit."

"Oh, a beachcomber, eh?" The officer stepped closer and sniffed, probably as if here scenting not only a skulker in the bushes but a catcher in the rye. Or a skin—with gin.

"Let's have your I.D.," the policeman demanded politely but firmly.

Still grasping the dilapidated hide, which had four legs and paws but no head or tail, the man pulled out his wallet and said, "I'm a visitor from Provincetown, Mass. I was a guest at a party, and the head of this lion was chopped off. I was told I could have the claws. . . ."

The policeman paused in perusal of the papers in the wallet.

"A lion's head was chopped . . . say, where is this party?"

"Right across the street. It was a party given last night for Emmette Colliers—only he didn't come. It's all over now.

They put on a skit and they used this pelt, only they didn't need the head, so they chopped it off. The head and the pelt were then discarded in this lot. The owner said I could have the claws if I could find the skin. I came here this evening to search for it."

Identity checked, name and occupation established, Happy Fitz—the lion hunter, whales'-tooth salesman, and Southern Winds waiter—told the policeman: "I don't blame you for wondering what all this is about. You see, my wife Naomi and I sell unique souvenirs in a gift shop we own in Provincetown. I thought the claws would make a real novelty for sale."

Wearily, the officer told Happy he could go. Happy thanked him for his courtesy.

As Happy swung away, the officer saw something long and furry dangling from the back of Happy's trousers.

"What's that?" the policeman said.

"Oh, I couldn't hold the pelt with one hand, and I wanted the tail, so I put it there. Good night, officer."

And, in fact, after work at the Southern Winds that evening, Happy and Naomi Fitz invited everyone to a patio party at their house.

The storm which had deluged the island in the afternoon, and which had caught Charlotte and Carl on the road back from the air base, had passed as rapidly as it had arisen. The night sky was powdered with stars. Carl again drove with Charlotte beside him. (She said she'd heard that the crippled jet plane had made a safe bellylanding.) It only took them a few minutes to get to the Fitzes', and they couldn't mistake the place. The house was festooned with porch lights of pink and purple.

Everyone from the Southern Winds was present in force. And many people Carl did not know. Kent came dressed as a hula-hula dancer—Robin in a spangled bathing suit. Stanley (after glancing at Charlotte) held forth on one of his spellbinding but

interminable monologues to a sizable group: a story about a young cousin of his who liked to play in the graveyard and was finally killed when an old iron cross, upon which crossbar he'd climbed, fell over. Nothing-Betty and Jenny were glaring at each other as an aftermath or prelude to one of their classic arguments. Jake and Melanie stopped by with four other people (and they, too, seemed about to have an argument and didn't stay but a minute).

Happy, of course, sashayed around in the state he liked best, except this night he had an hibiscus pinned to his penis—pinned, indeed, through a little hole in the foreskin underneath. And Naomi, dear Naomi, how she danced! For Naomi did dance. That was her little contribution to the festivities. She danced and danced. Mostly around and around her husband—making wooing gestures with her arms. She wore for this activity a red sarong. She kept moving, moving, it seemed, for hours—certainly the better part of the time it took Carl to get quite drunk. He had gotten in this state mainly because of Charlotte's behavior. Shortly after arriving, Charlotte had just upped and gone off with Stanley —and, to him, not even a by-your-leave. Carl was profoundly and unreasonably annoyed by this. She'd come with him; she should have stayed with him. Happy got him another drink, and one for Naomi. Then another and another.

Now Naomi writhed and swayed and weaved. You could talk to her, though—she'd listen and even answer; but, unlike Happy, she had to be constantly plied with liquor in order to freely express herself. But, once she began to dance, Carl learned, she didn't stop until she dropped. It was considered by all as rather admirable.

Except for fixing her drinks, Happy, on the other hand, took little notice of his wife during her dance, and, if he did so, frankly, it was with some brusqueness. When Naomi fell asleep at last under a bush, only then did he treat her tenderly: he picked her up, put her to bed, and stuffed two antacid pills down her throat with one more hooker of rye, claiming she would sleep well and awaken like a daisy. After which Happy got dressed and left the party. Someone said to Carl that that was usual. But where Happy went, no one knew. He was never seen with a B-girl or with a

sailor. They conjectured that he just wandered along the street, and perhaps someone snatched him into a doorway.

Carl left shortly afterwards and headed the Ford somewhat unsteadily in the direction of the Southern Winds.

Carl pushed into the bar. The air conditioning relieved him a bit. The liquor he'd consumed at the Fitzes' had weighed him down—a stuporous drunkenness. He knew that he should go to his room and to bed, but he simply had to see what was going on in the bar. You are now, Carl thought, a victim of the bar-compulsion. There were quite a few people, but it was not a noisy crowd. Troy was between sets, apparently, and he sat in the back and drank instead of sneaking drinks behind the piano: he gazed off into the middle distance, punctuating his fixed sight with the secret, unfathomable code of his blinks. What a pleasant place this bar is, Carl thought. Cool. And he looked about for Renee. Oh, she was there all right. There she was: *thar she blows!* She stood next to a tall blond sailor in uniform. She was speaking to the sailor. Carl managed a stool next to the wall almost directly in back of them but too far away to hear the conversation. Still, it wasn't difficult to imagine. Carl wondered how long it would take her. Their drinks on the bar were half full. They'd probably finish the round. And start another round . . . in the tree house. Wait and see. Life went along here in Key West. No one mooned over lost opportunity for long. No one young, in any event. Not certainly Renee. As far as she was concerned, the yawl was as far away as Sunday, Carl thought, and Sunday was a good way back. I, too, could, should, leave it, back, forget it. Just . . . another girl. I didn't even like her when I met her. Flippant. Drunk. Sex kitten. Now, from here, I can smell her perfume. But she has a big one on the line, bigger than me. And if he knew the game—Renee liked big ones. Getting vulgar, Solon. In your old age, after many drinks. After a sad loss. I'm sorry! Inadvertencies. The misunderstanding of the day before in the tree house was due to the fact that she had forgotten and that he was hungry and pride-fallen. All the angles of the interlocking pieces of the situation had been wrong; the jagged pieces of the puzzle had been met by other jagged pieces, not, as it should have been, by convolutional coun-

terparts. Inadvertent. This is a night when everything I touch will turn against me. I should go to bed. But I shall wait and see if Renee runs true to form. Their drinks were now only one quarter full. They brushed legs momentarily as the sailor shifted position. Renee glanced at the sailor, and Carl could see through the finely-spun fluff of hair on top of her head because of the lighting behind the bar. How come no one had said to the sailor that uniforms were not allowed? Jim's job. Jim was talking to someone across the bar, a heart conversation, the good bartender, strictly an act. But a nice one. Goodheartedness, good form, required a few lies. Learn to live with lies. A few illusions thrown in. A smile and a handshake and a forthright voice hid killers. But a good face on it made it easier . . . all around. Carl thought of Ben. The Princeton Club. Ben and Romano. Gentlemen. Charitable. But not necessarily fooled. Thank God for bartenders willing to pass the time of day. Who knew how many lives they saved! There; Renee had drained her glass, the sailor drained his, and they were leaving. To follow or not to follow. . . . Carl followed. They had already made the sidewalk and were proceeding, her skirt swinging—a girl in her summer dress—toward her pad. Pad . . . beat. That beat parlance. Ridiculous. Those posturing, chapped-lipped children of Greenwich Village. Knee-deep in poetry. With a beat. But only knee-deep. A single beat. Monotone. Meaningless, but consistent in that particular tone. . . . "I can't tell you what a beat poem is, but I can tell you if it's beat or not when I hear it." All those "man's" and "like" and "swinging." (But "bread" was a good word for money.) Take those beat kids up for lunch to the Inn at Colgate or Dartmouth in the fall. Let 'em see the wood of the overhead beams in the dining room. Or, better, the library—on a night before exams—every separate stall taken by a silent student, whose hair was cut. Renee and her friend passed under the street lights and into the street darknesses, and once they stopped and kissed, and Carl stopped and waited. "In the dark street shineth the everlasting light." The one thing that was dependable about Renee was that she would need the same thing tomorrow as she needed today as she needed yesterday. A resurgence of whatever she needed could be expected to recur. One might, Carl thought, found a whole philosophy of

personality, not on what one wished to be and tried to become, but on what one was and is and had to be. The problem then was to discover it. Hot out tonight. Humid. No breeze. Not many figures in the night, except those up ahead, and they turned now into the driveway which led around Mrs. Slocum's mansion. Carl stopped. He knew Renee and the sailor would ascend the outside staircase, reach the deck overlooking the garden of love; and the sailor could begin to handle her, kissing and touching—and then, in Freud's own charming picturesque phrase, to the business of "bringing together of the genitals of one with the genitals of the other." Ah, that was the sad time. When a girl of Renee's age and beauty discovered that she could forage for herself and that capitulation meant not death but expiation without a sock in the face. Gentle young girls all thought they would be killed by rough sailors—though they might dream of them—if they got alone with such young men. When they discovered that this did not happen, that was the sad time. It was certainly the time that Carl felt that, in general, he lost his chances in a purely hypothetical sense. Why bother with himself at five feet eight, one hundred and fifty-five pounds, and uncertain, when six feet two, one hundred and ninety pounds, and fierce was available? Competition here is something, Carl thought, making his way unsteadily back along the way he'd come. Bad place for love affairs. No one wanted to stay put. Renee . . . good night, Renee . . . and good-by. Carl started back. He passed his car parked at the curb. In fact, he had just passed his car when a girl appeared under the street light up ahead and out of it again—but approaching. Approaching in this direction, loping along slowly, swinging a handbag. B-girl on the prowl. But B-girls were found in bars. She was abreast of him. Do it.

"Are you . . ." he said. "Could you tell me which way is the Southern Winds?" Childish, but the deed was done!

"Sure," she said, her eyes shining. This one was not afraid. How easy it was. "It's just up the block . . . that way." She thumbed the direction for him.

"I'm going for a drink there," he said. "Want one?"

Questions. He always ended up asking questions. The girl had paused now and she had half turned around. Make affirmative

statements, Carl thought. Do not call upon her for a decision that you should make.

"It's kind of a fancy place for me," she said. "I don't go there much."

"Someplace else?"

"Yeah, I go to a sailor bar down Duval quite a lot. I mean, I hang around and sort of entertain. But it's too early to go in. I don't think I want to go anywhere . . . just get some air."

Carl could not see her clearly. She wore slacks. She was hippy. She spoke in a vague, cheap tone of voice. Uncaring. Uncaring was its primary characteristic. She couldn't care less. He would not be surprised to hear her say, "Don't mind if I do."

"My car," Carl heard himself saying, "is right here. . . ."

"This yours?"

"Yes; do you drive?"

"Sometimes. . . ."

"I need some air, too," he said. "You drive; I don't know the streets. Let's go for a little ride."

Carl found the keys in his pocket and handed them to her. Madam, the gun is now in your possession. Will you do it for me, please? She took the keys, they got in the car, he showed her how to start it, and they were off. She said her name was Denise. She drove very carefully and slowly, out toward the beach. Carl slumped down in the seat.

"Denise, where are you from and what are you doing in Key West?"

"Chi," she said. "Chicago. I was born and raised there. Ma and two sisters. I was gonna be a fashion model, but I met Phil. He was in the Navy. We went together about six months in Chi. He got shipped out, down here to Key West. I had a kid, or I almost did. It died. Would have been a boy. He wrote if I came here he'd marry me. So I hitched down with another girl. It took us two weeks. When I got here he was gone. He left me a note. It was all off."

"I'm sorry," Carl said.

"So I had nothing to go back for—so I'm stayin' here till I can raise the fare to New York. I wanna get out, I really do."

"Got a job?"

"I had one—waitress. No money in it. Ain't many places you can make money waiting on tables in Key West."

"Key West is not so bad."

"I don't like it. No money. All I ever do is hang around the bars. Seen all the sailors I ever wanta see. Guy who runs the place I go gives me a few free drinks; the sailors buy some, I get a meal once in a while. But I hate it, living like that. I wanna get out, I really do."

"How long have you been stuck here?"

"Well," she said hesitantly, "I been here two years, but that don't mean I ain't been tryin' to get out."

"Of course," Carl said, and he couldn't help but laugh. Denise said nothing. Carl glanced ahead and saw something that would allow a change of subject.

They were driving up Whitehead Street and they were about halfway to the beach. They passed a two-story house with wrought-iron balconies, brightly lit, but set far back from the street—indeed, buried in shrubbery and surrounded by a head-high wall.

"He doesn't live there any more," Carl said, "but I'm told that's the Hemingway place. He built the wall with his own hands."

"Who's he?" Denise said.

She was not fooling.

"An old teller of stories . . ." Carl said.

"Don't read stories any more," Denise said. "And if I do, I never bother with who wrote 'em."

It doesn't take long to get anywhere in Key West, especially at night when traffic moves at a rapid pace and seemingly on mysterious errands. (All the cars owned by Navy men seem to have no mufflers and souped-up engines, and at red-lights-turned-green these cars are forever making fast getaways.) Then there are the gray Navy patrol wagons, the town police cars and paddy wagons cruising around, and an occasional townscouple returning from a party. But mostly it's deserted, and you get where you want to pretty fast.

Denise had been at the wheel only five minutes and they were already on the broad, deserted beach road. Autos were parked under palm trees here and there—for the usual reason, Carl presumed. Denise drove at a pleasant speed and the sea air felt good.

They could see lights from the further islands and out at sea. The moon, full the night of Carl's arrival, had quartered and was tossed among spasmodic, bluish clouds.

"You sound like a college man, readin' a lot," Denise said.

"I have been to college," he said.

"I wanted to go to college," she said. "Fashion-model school. But I spent the money on Phil. I was working when I met him."

"Too bad you couldn't have gone . . ." he said.

"I suppose you think I couldn't of done it," she said.

"I'm sure you could have," he said.

"Well, don't use that tone with me," she said.

"I wasn't using any tone."

"Hell, I don't have to stay in this town, you know."

"Now, you love it here," he said, trying to jolly her. "All those sailors. . . ."

"Sure, I've had a lot of sailors. Every night. More than one, too. Sometimes five. And I drink a lot. But I'm as good as anybody. There isn't a man who knows me knows I wont ante up a five-spot if he needs it."

She was getting a little heated and she'd sped up to forty-five miles an hour. In the oncoming headlights of a passing car he'd got a good look at her: she might have been pretty once, her profile was fine, but she was about twenty-five and had very bad teeth and dry-looking hair.

"I must come down to that bar of yours," he said.

"You wouldn't like it," she said. "Not your sort."

"I'm in Key West, aren't I? What difference does it make."

"They might not like nosin' around," she said. For some reason she seemed bound on misunderstanding him. Or maybe she understood him well enough.

"I'll wear white socks and black shoes," he said. "They'll never be able to tell."

"Don't make fun of our boys," she said. "They're doin' their job and they're a damn sight more manly than some of the jerks in this town."

Denise was becoming difficult and Carl felt tired. Another failure without even a creditable attempt, he thought. It was getting worse and worse.

"Let's go back," he said.

"Sure, we'll go back," she said. She jammed on the brakes, did a skidding U turn without looking either way for traffic, and, driving now at almost sixty, started back along the outer drive. He wondered if he should take the wheel away from her.

"What are you so mad at, all of a sudden?" he said.

"I suppose you don't think I know why you asked me in your car," she said.

"I'm glad you know, because I don't think I do," he said.

"I've met your kind before," she said with utter contempt.

"Well, my kind thinks you're a very charming girl, but your kind doesn't seem amused." Carl knew, as soon as he'd finished, that all the parody and sarcasms of that would only irritate her further.

Carl was aware, also, that she was driving far too fast, and, somehow, that the conversation had gone far too fast, had gotten away from him. He sat up. He had no intention of letting the car do the same.

"I think you'd better slow down," he said.

"Scared?" she said. "The end of this road's up ahead. Then I'll slow down." And, indeed, they would be upon it in a few moments; the palm trees flew by. "That's the trouble with you. Scared. I could tell you a lot about yourself. Much more than you think you could tell me about myself."

That might be, but the issue of the moment was the curve at the end of the drive. She was coming on it too fast.

"Slow down," he said sternly.

But, of course, it was too late. The deliberateness of what she was doing amazed him fleetingly. As Denise started to turn, the car began to skid on sand that had drifted over the road from the beach. She spun the wheel, but Carl lost track of which was the right direction to do that, so he had no advice. It was a funny sensation—as if they were standing still and the world, illuminated by the headlights, was spinning. And it seemed that the spinning went on for so long. The tires kept screaming. And finally they hit, lightly though, against the road posts, bounced—more skidding and spinning—and bounced against road posts on the other side, where, after lurching heavily, the car came to rest in

a ditch, slightly tilted. The motor had gone off. The headlights were still on but the beams were askew, which, Carl reasoned, meant that the fenders were bent. A great deal of dust was settling. Carl just sat there. The girl still had both hands on the wheel.

"I saved us," she said.

"Yeah," he said. There was no point in saying anything to that. He was very fatalistic about accidents. He'd seen a great many on the road, been involved in a few minor ones, regretted what had happened to his car—but there was insurance and they were both alive. They climbed out. The doors opened noisily. What had happened was simple: they'd hit the road posts one one side, done a complete turn around, and hit the posts on the other side. One front fender and both sides of the car were bashed in—rippled—but the wheels and the tires remained intact.

"Are you all right?" he said as they stood there.

"Yeah," she said, "but don't get ideas about blamin' me."

Carl allowed himself one remark.

"You were going too fast," he said. "But I'm not going to blame you."

"I know you," she said. "You'll go right to the cops. I don't have to fool around here." She backed off into the darkness. "And, as a matter of fact," she shouted cockily, "I'm not sorry for what happened. You're too fucking smart for your own good!" And she began laughing wildly, frenzied from nerves, he supposed, and she ran down the road toward the town lights.

A car was coming. It would help nothing to complicate matters further. He was sober now. Carl climbed back in, pressed the starter button; the motor gurgled a time or two and hesitantly turned over. He pulled out of the ditch. It ran all right, but it would never be the same. He headed for home.

Wednesday, February 26

THERE is quite a difference between the prose of Elizabeth Bowen and the prose of Katherine Mansfield, although their early stories are similar and Miss Bowen would undoubtedly acknowledge her debt to Miss Mansfield. Miss Bowen, of course, has gone on (having outlived Miss Mansfield by almost forty years, for one good reason)—and, because a writer, like other people, just naturally goes on—developing and, it is hoped, maturing. Still, compare the two today, witness the outgrowth of one from the other, and see that Miss Bowen, except for a couple of things, misses the point. For she does just that: all of Miss Mansfield's sensitive and perceptive apparatus is there, but Katherine Mansfield is real and Elizabeth Bowen is not. In a figurative sense, you couldn't in a million years catch sight of Miss Bowen wearing soiled white gloves, but Katie, in not so figurative a sense, often displayed her prowess in the matter of throwing ash trays across rooms. In short, Miss Bowen seems never to remove her mask, while Miss Mansfield always appeared as herself.

Carl had brought with him to Key West a volume of the short stories of Katherine Mansfield. He found it in his luggage and prepared to take it to breakfast with him since he liked to read then. He had read a few of the stories and found them enjoyable and oddly inspiring. The stories inspired him to further open his eyes to the miracle of the wonder and delight of the external world. He enjoyed them because the people in her stories were convincing in their curious, humorous, sometimes brave, sometimes trapped, responses.

He had been told Miss Bowen's work would affect him similarly, but he had been disappointed; he had made the comparison previously stated.

It was not a good morning in Key West at all. It was chilly and it was gray. There was a whipping wind: it would be a day of blown sand at the beach. It was more like a morning up north in October. He had thought to bring a sweater with him, and he

wore it and it felt good. Still, that kind of weather caused in him a kind of keenness, the keenness of a fall morning at his college; it was in sharp contrast to the weather he'd been experiencing here, and he welcomed it. And, as he came down the stairs of the front porch, because of the temperature, everything looked different. It was in much sharper focus. This sort of weather brought out the New England in Key West. There was even May's husband, Eddie, intent over a rake in the front yard, with a pile of leaves to show for his efforts.

"Good morning," Eddie said as Carl passed.

It so startled Carl that he stopped. Eddie's tone of voice had been perfectly clear.

"Good morning to you, Eddie," Carl said.

"Funny day," Eddie said, looking up and around. "Makes me think of home. Come from Boston, you know. Home, maybe around October."

"Yes," Carl said. "I thought the same thing exactly."

"Yup," Eddie said, leaning on his rake meditatively. His wandering eyes came to rest on Carl's book. "What's 'at you're readin'?"

Ordinarily, not much interested Carl before he had his breakfast. He even intended to postpone a look at his damaged car. But here was this almost incoherent man, whom Carl had seen around for six days without ever once speaking to, carrying on a rational conversation. Carl paid heed.

He told Eddie the full name of the book and the full name of the authoress, partly in acknowledgment of Eddie's rationality and civility this day and partly because he enjoyed saying the names.

"Katherine Mansfield," Eddie said, letting his voice trail off and his eyes gaze away, imitating, as it were, the mien of a pensive man. Carl was amused. "Wasn't she old John Murry's wife?"

Carl was no longer amused. In point of fact, Katherine Mansfield had been John Middleton Murry's wife . . . John Middleton Murry . . . English literary critic and editor . . . dead only a short while. Here was not only coherence in Eddie but knowledge of a subtle and sensitive lady of long ago. That this unshaven and unkempt old madman should be aware!

"Yes, indeed," Carl said. "How do you know?"

"Oh, we're not so dumb, you know, my family. Came from London, we did, I did, a long time ago." Eddie spoke these words with a kind of breathlessness, seemingly at his bravery of mastering several thoughts consecutively and of talking about himself. "Some relative of mine—can't remember who, I was kinda young, over forty years ago it was—used to be something on a newspaper with John Murry, and he took me to a party to meet John Murry and his wife. She was so pretty; I always remembered her special. Katherine Mansfield, you know. Big, soft brown eyes, but defiantlike, sitting on the floor near the fire with a Paisley shawl around her neck—her shoulders I mean—leaning forward, gripping her knees."

It was a close and astounding picture and Carl was pleased and moved. That that life so far away should have once included this old man. And that of all people here this old man should communicate with him. Eddie watched him closely and Carl regretted slightly that he could not better hide his surprised pleasure.

Eddie let a distorted grin come over his face, revealing broken teeth. He turned toward the house; the grin went off his face. He raised his fist toward the house, toward the kitchen.

"Not so dumb, you know," he said brokenly. "But the years with that fat woman . . . I've lost everything. . . ."

His fist came down shaking, tears were in his eyes, and he cast them down so that Carl should not see. He grabbed the rake, which he'd let drop, firmly in both hands and began to use it vigorously. He turned away from Carl, but the heaving of his back in sobs he could not hide. Carl waited. In a minute, Eddie stopped raking, straightened up, and, gaining control of himself, began to rake slowly and steadily. He faced Carl again, but all memories of Carl, London, the lady author, seemed to have left him. Carl continued on to breakfast.

The car was a mess. The simple, flowing lines flowed no more. Both sides (scraped by the road posts from bumper to bumper) were knocked in. Both doors were sprung. The left front fender was the worst: its headlight tilted skyward. Strangely enough, the

wheels had not been touched. Carl drove first to the police station and reported the accident—filled out papers to the effect that his car had skidded on sand as he turned the corner of the beach drive. It was an expedient deception, but what other way was possible? What was the point of implicating Denise? Denise who? Then he went to the Ford service station for an estimate; to replace the left front fender, bang out the sides, put back the chromium strips, and repaint, they wanted almost four hundred dollars. Also, it would take at least five days. Carl could not spare the time; he would have it done in New York. But he did have the headlight fixed. He returned to his room at the Southern Winds and wrote a letter to his insurance company explaining the accident and asking them what they wanted him to do. Expedient deception number two of the day.

When he finished that, it was still somewhat early to go to the beach, and it occurred to Carl that he might well record, before he forgot, some of the remarks made by Alan Houlton when they'd met in the street two nights before. And so he lay on his bed and wrote in his notebook:

> Met Houlton on Duval Street, where I was wandering along. He came out of a bar and approached me smiling and with outstretched hand, and although I am amused in his company, his moods are treacherous. He'd evidently gotten over his annoyance of the other night. He invited me to go for a drink (saying I was the only one in Key West he'd found whom he could talk to) and I did not refuse. We passed up the Southern Winds in favor of the Gallery Bar, which is catercorner across from it, and took wicker chairs at an ample and comfortable table in the window. But Houlton had no sooner sat down than he found the air conditioning too much, "awfully cold," so we left there, recrossed the street, and established ourselves at Luigi's in the open-air garden. They serve drinks and food quite late. Houlton said that he was "Horizon's Unlimited" (the elegant men's shop here) from head to toe: a thin-striped, blue-and-white T shirt and blue silk trousers. White shoes. He looked, well—very tropical—in those clothes, and he held himself, even in a sitting position, with great self-conscious-

ness: tummy drawn in, chest out, back straight, head up. He said he weighed 165, and that his waist was 29. I think he's underestimating both figures.

He ordered, with great precision—since he told the waitress frankly that he did not want to be overcharged or, more accurately, charged for things he did not want—a plate of six fried shrimp. He said he wanted six shrimp only and a glass of water, but no bread, no butter, no salad—nothing but the shrimp and the water. And he said he did not expect to pay for anything but the shrimp and the water. The waitress laughed, thank God, and Houlton said as soon as she was gone that he felt very strongly on the point and had, huffily, many times walked out of places when they brought him what he did not ask for.

Having eaten, albeit lightly, he became slowly expansive, said that (as a contingent matter to making waiters take him at his word) people in general did not easily accept his authority because of his age and youthful appearance; "works against you," he said. Yet I thought he spoke with particular authority. Conversationally, he turned then to people whose authoritative influence far exceeded their capabilities—the psychiatrists, "like children who know how to play hopscotch and who feel very put-out when there are only adults around who do not care to play." Further remarks: "Oh, analysis is all right as therapy for people who've led sheltered lives and carried around with them secrets about their sex desires which they consider awful. They can benefit, the same way one benefits talking things over with a friend. Now, for myself, I know my desires and all the variations and I know the pattern my relationships follow, the compulsive mistakes I make, which makes them end all pretty much the same way, given certain circumstances. I know all about that . . . my overcontrol, my lack of control . . . I know myself. I don't need a psychiatrist to tell me." I asked him if he did not think by analysis he might change the pattern, perhaps even broaden his writing powers therefore. He glared at me and said he thought not. His tone was imperious. And then, realizing I did not mean this as criticism, which I didn't, he stopped glaring and said, "The

only thing which has me a bit worried is my increasing detachment both toward real people and the people in my work. I feel more and more bound up in the world of books, culture and myself." He went on to say that the danger of his particular type of difficulty, so far as he could see, was not the threat of, nor, indeed, the outright danger of, going insane, but something much worse: ultimate and complete estrangement. Loneliness.

We sat in Luigi's garden chatting of this and that until it closed at four A.M. He invited me to breakfast with him at the La Concha Hotel dining room Thursday morning.

* * * * *

Expedient deception number three of the day occurred in connection with Henri Watteau, the chef, whom Carl encountered as he crossed the landing of the second floor of the Southern Winds, where Henri's apartment was situated—just across from Charlotte's. Carl was on his way to lunch but, passing Henri's apartment, he noticed the door was open, he glanced in, and Henri waved to him. The man wore a natty sports shirt and Bermuda shorts. "Sorry to hear you smashed up last night," Henri said. "Anyone hurt?" The chef spoke with a decided drawl.

Carl thought that word had gotten around fast.

"No," Carl said, standing in the entrance.

"Car done in?"

"About four hundred dollars' worth," Carl said.

"No kidding," Henri said. "Whyn't you come in and tell me about it? I've been meaning to invite you down for a drink anyway. Like to have the pleasure of your company for a few minutes."

Carl went in. The apartment was a surprise. As makeshift as Charlotte's apartment was, Henri's was modern and well decorated. All the furniture was new, of Danish influence—there was a bardinette with shelves of glasses; cheerful, flowered draperies covered the windows; some interesting sporting prints framed in mahogany hung on the walls; and a bookcase extended all across the lower half of one side. There was an air-conditioning ma-

chine, but it was off, since the day was so cool. And Henri said because they were directly above the bar, he had had the place soundproofed, too, as much as possible.

"What can I fix ya to drink?" Henri said, moving behind the bar-dinette. Carl saw that the chef's mustache was perfectly curled, but that the man's skin was white and dank-looking, his eyes were red-rimmed, and, as he leaned over for ice, his posture emphasized a tired stoop.

"It's a little early for me," Carl said, watching Henri's face drop, "but I'll have a Scotch rocks. . . . You have a very pleasant place here."

"Yeah," Henri said. "It's a credit to Flora."

And said no more. It was not, Carl felt, the moment to ask who was Flora. Henri seemed the sort of person who would volunteer anything he wanted known. Carl sat quietly as Henri handed him the drink.

"Now what happened to your car?" Henri said.

Carl tersely repeated the lie.

"Too bad," Henri said. "Once a car gits in a wreck like that she never runs right. We got a Caddy convertible. It sure does look funny sitting out there next to May and Eddie's flivver up on jacks. But I forgot, it ain't been here since you come. We both love the car. Hell, when I'm not cookin', I'm drivin', so I know how bad you must feel."

Carl was about to remonstrate, but no. "You're probably right; it won't be the same."

"Yeah," Henri said, catching his loss of interest. "You know, I'm right glad you're here now; like I said, I been wantin' to get acquainted. Although I'm not an official partner, 'cept I get my cut each night along with them, I think I do a pretty important job here, and I want you to like the Southern Winds as much as I do so's we can have a loan of your uncle's money and keep goin'. It's your uncle, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Hell, when Jake came up with that scheme for gittin' the twenty thousand, I thought to m'self, hell, he's got no friends like that—all that Princeton stuff, hooey. But old Jake sure came through—I mean, at least you're down here." Henri stopped.

"Jake's told you 'bout the movie company and the contract to have the whole crew eat here for maybe four or five weeks, hasn't he?"

"I know about that."

"Well, with your uncle's twenty thousand, and the regular amount of business, and that movie crew, we're O.K.; we can make it till next season, when the place will be in the clear."

"I don't see much reason why not," Carl said.

"Hey, that's good news," Henri said, smiling.

"You know," Carl said, "you and Romano and some of the rest mustn't get me wrong. I'm not down here to judge this place—just to see what's going on and whether it looks like an active business, purely to give a description. Ben Hoyt is a good and old friend of Romano's and has high regard for the man, and I think —I don't know, but I think—he's more or less disposed to lend the money."

"Great day," Henri said. "That's good news, I'll say."

Carl shared of a sudden Henri's happy feeling that the Southern Winds would persist. Carl finished his drink, meaning to get on to lunch, but Henri was up and grabbed the empty glass.

"Have one more," Henri said strongly. There was little chance to refuse. "We got a swell thing here," Henri said, "despite a lot of bitchin' on my part and everybody else's, if we can only keep it going." Henri handed him the drink. It was four fifths Scotch. "I'll tell you frankly, like I said the other day to the gang, I think Jake does a lousy job with the help, won't let 'em alone, wantin' to fire Conch that way, and he's a bad buyer of supplies, but I guess maybe since he's the only guy willin' to do it, we gotta take it the way it's done. For now, I mean. Maybe later, when things are easier, we can work out a better way than buyin' retail every day. . . ."

"I hope so," Carl said.

"But for now we gotta put up with it."

"You do an amazing job of remembering those orders," Carl said.

"Don't bother me none. If the waiters say what they want once, straight out and clearly, I remember. It's when they whisper it and have to repeat thet mixes things up. You're doin' all right

now. You used to repeat. That mixes me, like I say. That and Melanie comin' along, snoopin' around. Christ, there's a character."

"You don't like her?"

"Ump. Can't stand her guts. Don't know rightly what Jake sees in her. She's always interfering or wantin' something special or play-acting around the place like it was some sort of stage for her to perform on."

"You don't do so badly on that score with those six o'clock entrances."

Henri smiled guiltily.

"Well, hell, I'm workin' here, and it don't hurt none to jazz it up a little, and I kin play it up with the best of 'em, though I must say Jake suggested I turn on those spotlights as I came down. A-course, Melanie hates me as much as I hate her, I gotta admit, but not so much on accounta me as on accounta Flora. She really 'grabs' Melanie."

So finally Carl said: "Who's Flora?"

"Yes," said Henri, fixing himself another drink. "Who's Flora? Or, better, where's Flora?"

Silence. Well, he'd asked, and that was all he'd do. Carl twisted around; he could see the titles of some of the books in the case and was surprised to find, besides a good many modern novels, books on psychology—indeed, a whole half shelf.

"You read a lot," Carl said, hastening his drink.

"Yeah, I read 'em," Henri said hesitantly, "but they belong to her. Some are mine. How can you live well without reading? And we both like to live well." Carl wondered about their definition of living well. "Flora's my roommate, like I suppose you've guessed by now. But she's flown the coop agin'—flown the coop. See," and Henri leaned over and picked up a picture post card from the cocktail table and handed it to him, "she's in New Orleans. Says she don't know her plans. Never does. Took off in the Caddy one day just before you come here. You got her job waitin' on tables."

"Funny no one ever mentioned her," Carl said, realizing as soon as he said it that it was wrong.

"Naw," Henri said. "No one missed her much. She didn't make

no friends here. They all thought she got special favors from me at the broil, and"—Henri laughed—"they were right. They didn't like it. They wouldn't talk *to* her and not much *about* her. She bitched 'em all. But she's got her reasons. Yeah, she just took off in the Caddy. Didn't have no money except the few hundred dollars we keep locked in the glove compartment for toll expenses. She pried that open, first thing, I'll bet. When it gives out, she'll wire me for money to come home." Henri was wistful; Carl tried to drain his drink, but it wasn't quite finished. "And I'll send it to her. Like I always do."

"Why is that?" Carl said politely, but it sounded like a social worker in an interview.

Henri glanced down: " 'Cause I miss her, I guess."

Carl could not help but be conscious of the emotion packed into Henri's brief statement. And he tried to prevent himself from reading into it anything more than what was there.

"And she don't give a damn about me," Henri said, going to the bar.

Ah, the unexpected again, Carl thought. How shall I respond? Henri, so self-possessed at his job, so undone by this relationship. Why, in Key West, did matters seem to follow such a wild pattern, always the farthest one could go in commitment? Or did he, Carl, somehow bring this out of people? No, the situation—each time—was here.

"Flora's blonde," Henri said with no previous lead-in to this remark. "Wanna see a picture?"

Now begins deception number three of the day, Carl thought.

Henri handed him a small photograph of a short-cropped blonde girl with a rather shrewd expression . . . and not more than twelve years old. I am now being imposed upon, Carl thought. I could get up and leave, but I probably shall not; Henri shall be fooled, as he wishes to be, into believing that I am sympathetic to his problems. For a few minutes. What should I do? Say at the top of my lungs, I don't understand what you're talking about, you raper of children. I would be lying, and about something human, and *that* deception I would consider serious. Carl handed the picture back.

"Tennessee girl, shiftless, mean," Henri said. "Can't move her

if she don't wanna go. But when she's on her way, no one can stop her. Takes off from me 'bout every two months. Met her here on South Beach two years ago when that picture was taken. She'd wandered down—don't ask me how—down here to the end of the line, like so many kids do . . . mostly boys. The highway's full of 'em; police try to turn 'em around back to Miami before they get to town, but a few slip through. I drove down to South Beach that day and just parked my car and sat there. Don't like the beach much. She was dressed in pants, straddlin' that little beach wall there. Thought at first it was a boy—a tall, skinny kid with that funny hair—and was about to say thanks but no thanks when she started to talk. Told me her story right there. Family all killed in a car accident."

Carl experienced an involuntary wrench forward.

"Yeah, everybody—mother, father, two sisters and a brother—all dead. She come home from school one day back to the old farm they rented and there wasn't anybody home, never would be. So she took off for down here. After she told me her story, I brought her home and she suddenly broke down. Screamed loud for two days and nights. Lucky I had the place soundproofed. Had a doctor come finally; gave her a shot to calm her down. Said she was my niece. It was good she finally got it out of her system. I helped her some, I guess. She lived here and we didn't care who knew it. There weren't no one to care anyway, except that bitch Melanie. I think Melanie was plain jealous of Flora's prettiness. Jake didn't care. Hell, I told Jake 'bout Flora right away; he even saw me bringin' up food to her—didn't say a word. After that, Flora calmed down. She fixed up this place like you see it, and she worked downstairs waitin'. She was too young to serve liquor, but she looked old for her age and we took a chance. Tall as you are. Anyway, after she finished work at night she'd come up here and read all them books you see there that she made me buy for her. Stayed up all hours. Said maybe they'd help her understand herself, but even if she was bright as a penny, she couldn't have understood them books. I tried and couldn't. Anyway, they didn't help her, and I didn't help her after all, 'cause Flora's still runnin' away. She took off about six times like she took off last week. And someday she'll crack up in that Caddy and die, just like her fam-

ily did. And there's no way to help . . . nothing I can do to stop her."

Carl had listened. He wondered if he should tell Henri about his own father and mother. What was the use? "How long do these . . . trips . . . of Flora's last?" he said instead.

"Should be hearin' from her any day now. Like I say, she'll be runnin' out of money. Hell, I'd head out from this place in a minute to go and fetch her back . . . if I knew where she was. Maybe I ought to go lookin'—just to show Melanie, anyway, how far this place could get along without me."

"I'm sure Romano knows it," Carl said.

"Yes, maybe him, but not her. Gonna have trouble with her someday, mark me. Say, do you know I kin get a job like that"—he snapped his fingers—"anywhere on these Keys? I was offered a contract on Marathon just the other day. Guy comes up to me at the broil and offers me two seasons and a thousand bonus each season."

Henri's tone had altered. It was a snide bravissimo; it was not pleasant. Carl got up slowly, put his glass on the cocktail table.

"Off to lunch now," he said.

Henri stood up. "Well, thanks for droppin' by and listenin' to me grumble, but everybody does a little grumblin' . . . what the hell . . . don't pay too much attention . . . I love this old Southern Winds as much as Jake does . . . and I hope you do . . . it would take a bulldozer to drive me out."

"I'm sure it would," Carl said.

Henri saw him to the door. Carl went down the main staircase and out through the entrance hall. It had begun to drizzle.

* * * * *

In a community that is geared, as Key West is, to resort living, gray and chill squallish weather prolonged for even so short a time as a number of hours, not to mention a whole day, puts a kabosh on everybody's spirits. People become crabbed and petulant. One experiences a curling of emotions that have been so satisfactorily and extravagantly extended. There is a general apathy. Unless, of course, one's house is equipped, as many are

in town, with a fireplace and blinds that can be drawn completely. Then coziness can be achieved. Then all the charm of being in the far north can be captured: Key West is momentarily a different place. One witnesses then the curious spectacle of deeply suntanned visages (glittering whites of eyes) atop figures muffled in sweaters and coats and all huddled round a fire toasting marshmallows or drinking hard liquor in close physical quarters and delighting in it—on an island whose latitude situates it three hundred and fifty miles further south than Cairo, Egypt.

Fortunately, the patio dining room of the Southern Winds possessed the necessary accouterments for this kind of temporary conversion: great canvas curtains, adorned with satyric figures outlined in white, unfurled from where they were hung and dropped down to enclose the room on all three open sides (albeit with effort, since the canvas was cracked and dried out). And the charcoal broil, near which there were never any tables for fifteen feet, suddenly became a desirable thing to be sitting in proximity to—the center of warmth as well as, previously, the center of attention. In short, the patio dining room achieved the required atmosphere on this dismal evening—managed the "convertibility" requisite to the persistence of so much in Key West. People did come. Not many, to be sure, but a few parties for each waiter. Flames leapt up from the broil where Henri bent over his work; Charlotte sat in her cashier's box with a great Mexican shawl comforting her; the waiters made their way about; the canvas curtains could not fail to amuse with their wicked drawings; candles on each table flickered gaily; music came in softly from the speakers; the hot, sizzling steaks were served; the weather was forgotten.

Melanie and Jake Romano arrived about eight-thirty. Melanie flounced in out of the rain and Romano lumbered in after her. Melanie threw off a raincoat and stashed it in the cashier's box with Charlotte, with whom she chatted a moment. Romano made his way over for a spot check on business with Henri, who was not busy.

They joined together again after a moment and surveyed the room.

For some reason unknown to Carl, who observed them (per-

haps merely to buoy their spirits, he conjectured), Jake and Melanie had dressed for dinner. Oh, not dinner clothes, but as formally as people do dress for dinner in Key West. Romano wore a beige silk suit, which, considering his bulk, gave him an amazingly trim shape (and fit well except for the collar, which hung off), a white shirt, and a black and yellow tie. His shoes were black and thin-soled. It was the closest in attire that Carl had seen Romano come to an old Princeton graduate.

And Melanie wore a remarkably attractive flare-skirted, light-silk dress of Paisley design of subtlest light-blue variations; even from a distance one could see it emphasized her eyes. And Melanie was much and prettily made up. On her wrists she had gold bangles, and her slippers were gold, too. She was a little flashing doll, and as they stood there reconnoitering where to sit, Romano glanced at her and it was easy to see he adored her.

And, indeed, from that distance, they were an interesting and charming couple withal. Carl saw Melanie lead her husband toward one of his tables along the side. Carl arrived at the table just as they did but a moment later had cause to regret all that he had thought.

Romano pulled out the chair for Melanie to sit down, but she did not sit down; she glanced at the seat and up at Carl with a hard look. "Clean that seat off, can't you?" she said. "I can't sit there with all that dust. It should have been done before I came in."

The remoteness in her voice was the most apparent thing. Carl was shocked. "Go to hell" sprang to his lips, but he did not utter it. In a moment as fleeting as the idea, he considered simply walking away. But he remained. How dare she! And yet, the dusting should have been done (not that it was his job to do it necessarily). But, as far as making a smart or stinging remark was concerned, the years he had spent in the rectory of his uncle and the years at college, where he had tried to learn to be a gentleman, interposed themselves irresistibly. Carl took a napkin from the table and cleaned off the seat, Melanie sat down, and Romano pushed the chair in.

Carl's face had got very red, but Melanie was not finished.

"I don't care who you are or where you're from," she said. "If

you're going to work here, you might as well learn to do it right. Get us two daiquiris."

It had been some time since Carl had been thus addressed—not since he was a small child, certainly. Not ever, anywhere else, had he been subject to ignominious treatment. It scalded him like hot water. But the best thing to do (had it become a principle?) seemed to be the expedient thing: until he could get his bearings, continue on. What hero in what movie would be allowed to behave as he had behaved under such stress? And the answer was: none. Heading toward the bar, Carl thought that a performer who had knuckled under as he had, seemingly, would lose the viewers' favor instantly. A ringing reply, a sardonic gesture, a belligerent bellow was called for and would be given by such a person. But that could not be the case here. Melanie was neurotic, pure and simple, and if he comported himself in this situation in the traditional manner of characters in movies, he would be as sick mentally as she evidently was. He had no intention of battling with her, but he did then sorely regret putting himself in the position he was in, regretted his own decision to wait on tables. The thing to do was to finish the job, to dispatch this personal association with her tonight (how could he turn his table over to anyone else?) as quickly as possible, and understand, for the purpose of his report to Ben, that this woman was one of the things that Romano had to contend with, one of the factors in the setup of business of the Southern Winds.

As he ordered the drinks from Jim, Robin came into the bar and said: "You're getting the full treatment, old boy."

Carl gritted his teeth and said nothing. Robin nodded in understanding.

Jenny also came in: "If she'd said that to me, I'd have told her to go shit in her hat."

But Carl wondered, had it been Jenny, whether she really would have said such a thing.

Carl took the drinks out to the table, and since they were his only customers, he did what he would have done with any other customers: he walked away, but not far.

"Drink your drink," Melanie said to her husband.

"No, no," he said. "I don't want it."

"You mean to say you're going to sit there and let me drink alone? Why did you let me order it?" Her voice rose to a rasping pitch.

"You ordered it before I could stop you. Drink it when you've finished that one."

"When I want another daiquiri I'll order a fresh one," she said. "Not one that you've let stand." Melanie adjusted a shoulder strap. "I may not want a second drink tonight. I don't feel well, not that you give a damn."

"Now you know I give a damn," Romano said softly.

"You were late picking me up; you didn't walk the dog; you didn't arrange for the maid to come. I had to do everything and then wait while you took your good time getting home. I'm sick of it."

Carl glanced at Romano; the man leaned over crossed arms on the table and spoke crooningly to Melanie. "Then leave me, baby, it's easy."

"Someday . . ." she said. A group of four Navy boys came in and seated themselves. "I suppose," Melanie said loudly, "we'd better order our dinners if we want anything to eat. Things seem to be disorganized around here tonight. No telling how long it will take us to get served."

She did not lift her head but she knew Carl was standing near, and the remark, of course, was meant for him. Lots of rejoinders went through his mind, but he would not engage with her at that level. It was surprising that she would take advantage of what was surely an almost nonexistent situation (the necessity of his being there and working as a waiter) in the way that she did, so as to forgo anything more than the most formal relationship between them. Judging from her remarks Sunday in the bar, he had got the notion that she rather liked him. How could he have been so misguided, so unintuitive?

Romano beckoned him and Carl went over. They both ordered sirloin steak, medium rare.

"You can put the order in," Melanie said, "but I want another drink. A fresh one. Take this one away."

Carl gathered up both glasses and went inside again.

When he got back, Melanie had left her husband sitting alone

while she stood chatting with a large group of people who had just come in. She—indeed—personally escorted them to a table and was loudly enjoined to sit with them. Carl brought the drink she had ordered to her own table and Romano said to leave it. The large party, of which Melanie was now an active part, was served by Kent. Carl then made his way to the charcoal broil and ordered the Romanos' steaks, medium rare, and returned to his position. He could see Melanie very clearly: she laughed deliciously at the jokes of the new people; she was witty and chirping with delight; she was sirupy-sweet to a woman who wore a gown similar to her own.

While Melanie was making a hit, Romano sat alone. Carl glanced at him and, at that moment, Romano beckoned to Carl. He went over.

"Don't take Melanie too seriously . . ." Romano said, and was about to go on, but Carl shook his head. "Anyway, she said to me the other night that you're coming up to our place to have drinks and dinner before you go. She means it, and I would like it, too."

"Thank you," Carl said, and it crossed his mind that as seemingly kind as Melanie's invitation to him had been in the bar on Saturday, and as kind as this invitation was from Romano himself, it was one drink and dinner date that would not come off.

Melanie returned. She did not seem to notice Carl. She remained standing and addressed Romano in a commanding sotto voce tone: "You have been asked to George's table. Will you come with me this minute?"

Reluctantly, Romano pushed back his chair. Melanie turned to Carl: "Tell Henri we're having another drink and to keep our steaks warm. I don't mind if they're a little on the medium side."

Carl did as he was bidden immediately; Henri moved the steaks on to a cooler area of the broil, in order to cook them slower, and he also stoked the rest of the coals vigorously, but he said nothing.

At the table they had joined, the Romanos were enthusiastically welcomed, and Kent, whose table it was, served them all another round. This time Romano did drink with his wife. It was easy to see Melanie was in her glory: hostess in her own restaurant, drinks on the house! Romano, too, was caught up, and, with that odd humpbacked quaking, participated in the laughter. Everyone was having a good time: Melanie and even poor Romano shone.

They were really very gracious in their roles, Carl thought—put people at ease and obviously knitted together a diversity of individuals. Melanie did this directly by her company, and Romano did it indirectly by his arrangements. In any event, regardless of what Carl thought of her, she complemented Romano's plan and implemented his influence, and, probably, when she was with relative strangers, behaved with sufficient sincerity to convince herself as well as them. So, despite her treatment of himself, Carl could not, from the point of view of the Southern Winds, consider her entirely a fraud and a liability. She was a bitch, but she had all the jagged, provocative charm of a bitch, too. She played her part in the destiny of the restaurant, and it was not wholly without validity.

Ten minutes later Melanie and Romano were back at their own table. They summoned Carl. Romano said they would eat now.

"No," Melanie said. "Since I've gotten started, I'll have just one more daiquiri."

"The food is ready," Romano said gruffly.

"You mean you forbid me to have another drink?" rising inflection, every danger signal flashing.

"I do not forbid you. Have it with your dinner."

Melanie looked up at Carl and narrowed her eyes.

"You tell Henri to hold those steaks just one more minute and you run in and get me a last drink."

Romano stared at his plate.

Carl turned to go.

"And Carl," Melanie said, "not sweet this time."

Carl went by way of the broil. "Melanie says to hold the steaks one more minute; she's having a last drink."

Henri's face closed. He speared the steaks, put them on china plates, and put the plates in the warmer.

"When they're ready to eat 'em," Henri said, "the steaks are here."

Melanie had that one last drink, and as Carl put it down and stood aside, again he caught the gist of her conversation with her husband. Her mood had switched back: she upbraided him for embarrassing her by not jumping up with her to meet her friends; why hadn't he joined them of his own volition—why hadn't he moved faster? She got the dirty end of the stick every time in their

relationship, she said; fate was never kind; if she wanted anything done, she had to do it herself, and, worse, people went out of their way to inconvenience her, even sabotage her. She used the word sabotage often.

Suddenly a party of four came in, and it was necessary that Carl busy himself with them. He glanced over at the Romanos, but they saw him and did not beckon, so he went about his business of taking orders. A cha-cha record came on the loud-speaker. More people came in, shaking the rain off, and Henri was getting active at the broil. Despite the tension of dealing with Melanie, Carl thought that the particular rainy quality of the evening and the coziness of the room, which abided, was a pleasant change. Carl put the main order in for his party and went back to the Romanos.

Now Romano was talking slowly and steadily and Melanie sat up straight in her chair. Carl could not see her face, but her hands on the tablecloth were quiet and the cords in her neck stood out: she seemed to be paying startled attention.

Suddenly: "I will not curb my tongue, and I don't care who's listening!" she said loudly. She began to rise, but Romano put his hand forcibly on her hand and held her in place. People glanced at them and away embarrassedly. Carl thought that they were as capable of emptying the Southern Winds as they were of filling it. But then, in creative people, there was a great deal of destructiveness, and it could be brought to bear—that destructiveness—with as much ingenuity as the other. Romano nodded to Carl; Carl attended.

"Bring the steaks," Romano said.

Melanie was sobbing; her chin trembled.

Carl went to the broil. "They're ready," he said.

Henri salted and buttered the meat, garnished it, added the vegetables, and slid the plates across the counter. "Hot," Henri said.

Carl picked up the plates, using a napkin, put them on his tray and delivered them. He had no sooner put Melanie's plate in front of her than she took up her utensils, cut into the meat and took a bite.

"Too well done," she said. "And dried out from being in the warmer. I can't eat that. How dare Henri! Jake, I don't see how

we can let him get away with serving us something like that." Romano was still in the process of tasting his. Melanie looked up at Carl again as if he were a strange waiter in a strange restaurant and spoke as if Henri Watteau, the chef, were not half a dozen yards away. "You take this back to the chef with my compliments, and tell him it's absolutely rotten, and if he wants to drive the customers away and ruin the business, serving a steak like that is a good way to do it."

Henri couldn't possibly have not heard. Romano froze. Carl merely waited: he had exhausted his reactions. Then Romano took a fork and poked it into the steak on his wife's plate—a futile gesture. He spoke with great weariness: "Carl, just take these steaks into the kitchen and tell May to grind 'em up for our dog, and tell Henri to cook us two more, medium rare."

Carl went to the broil. As Carl spoke, Henri maintained a truly extraordinary calm. Only Henri's eyes reddened slightly and he wielded the silver blade, with which he was cutting slices of meat, with greater deftness and flourish. At his job, he was a patient man and utterly responsible.

When Melanie and Romano were finally ready to eat, and when their order was ready, Henri once more handed Carl the plates and said, "Hot." But this time he added: "If she ever pulls this again, she'll cook it herself, because I won't be here." And Carl felt he meant exactly what he said.

Thursday, February 27

CARL pulled his Ford to the curb in front of the Southern Winds to wait for Charlotte, as he had done once before. Only this time they were going to witness an exhibition somewhat less acrobatic than the air show had been—a flower show; in fact, The Key West Flower Show, out at East Martello Tower, she had said. She had also said to be there at one sharp; he was there—and no Charlotte. He cut the motor off. The weather had cleared entirely; it was another fine, blue day. And then he heard Charlotte calling—she had a worthy pair of lungs—from the second-story porch. Carl slid across the seat and rolled down the window.

"Are you ready?" Charlotte shouted irrelevantly. "Be down in five minutes. Gotta feed my cats."

She ducked in through the open window on the porch without waiting for him to answer.

All right, Carl thought . . . a pause for Charlotte Tully. And while he waited there, ready for her, Carl reviewed all the things he had found out in the past week about his friend:

She was born in a small Ohio town, a coal-mining town, where her father had been a general practitioner, and, contrary to the rule, a rather financially successful one. Charlotte had several sisters and two brothers, but she was the oldest and she proved the brightest. Perhaps she applied herself harder than the others because of the secret fear she harbored about the deafness she knew was getting worse—the result of a fall from her spirited horse, a horse she would not discontinue riding. She won honors in all her courses in the town public high school; her father sent her to college and she did equally as well. Except that she was required to switch colleges several times before she received her doctorate in English because, as the school authorities always seemed to feel, she had advanced and rebellious notions: she believed in the New Deal and in the use of contraceptives, to name two controversial issues which occupied the age. In short, she had ideas of her own

about how life should be lived; she was a person of private integrity.

When she returned to the Ohio home after finally receiving her college degree, she was proposed to by her childhood sweetheart, the son of a miner, and they became engaged. A year later, over the protests of both families, they were married. There was nothing for them to do but leave town. They made their way to warm country, to Florida. Near Tampa, to be exact—wild country as well as warm—where her young and strong husband found farmwork and they lived in a romantic but primitive shack by a lake. Charlotte intended to use her spare time to write free-lance magazine articles, but she did not reckon on the rigors of life in a shack; there were chores and more chores to do. Her hands grew red, she wrenched her back muscles, and her eyes became infected from reading by candlelight. Also, she could not gather wood, cook a meal, wash dishes, and then calmly sit down and concentrate. Besides which, her neighbors were Florida cracker aboriginals and rather demanding of her time. One day she arrived home and her doorsill was blocked by a leg-thick rattlesnake. She disposed of it herself. And after a year of this, after a year of devotion to someone she had always loved, they brought his body home in a wheelbarrow . . . dead—simply that—no explanation. Who would take more trouble about a farmworker—white trash?

Her family had disowned her. Charlotte wanted nothing from them anyway, so she made her way to Miami. She got a job on a newspaper; she met one of its photographers—a very young man with aspirations for a larger success in his field than photographing arriving celebrities, horses with wreaths around their necks, and new hotels on the beach. She married him; they organized a book about Miami together—he made the pictures, she wrote the text—they interested the publisher of their paper in it; he gave them the money to print it privately; and the evening of this event her young husband pocketed the cash and left for parts unknown.

Charlotte got a divorce and another job, but with a larger newspaper this time—and with the position of night-club editor, which, in Miami, is a fair beat. At one of the night clubs she met the Colonel. He was down from Saratoga for the races; he dressed

with dash; he was a tall, distinguished-looking man who always had with him a packet of new bills of large denominations.

Despite her previous hard luck, toward the end of the season, when he asked her, she married him. He came to live at her flat, and it was shortly afterward that she discovered he'd lost his last nickel at the starting gates. She didn't mind; she supported him for a good while; he dressed in the best and always escorted her everywhere she had to go on her assignments. But the day came when he began to gamble again—and money for that she would not give him. He went to work as a garage mechanic . . . straightway met a very elderly, wealthy woman (who had brought in her limousine for repairs). He talked it over with Charlotte and, of course, she granted him a divorce. He remarried immediately and lives to this very day in one of those opulent villas on the upper beach.

Charlotte had loved the man dearly, her cup was bitter, she was no longer young, and she was so deaf as to need a hearing aid. She could not remain on the scene of so much pain, as bright as the surface of the golden shores of Miami may be, and she drifted south, as so many of the disappointed do, to settle in Key West, the classic jumping-off-place.

At first, she taught history and English at the local high school; the children of the conch families had a charm and integrity to match her own. She adored the island and studied it assiduously, meaning someday to publish a history, and was grateful for the companionship of her fellow teachers, especially elderly Doctor Johnson, the crochety and indomitable upholder of culture at the school, whose subject was Shakespeare.

The good doctor had himself been married twice. They spent many evenings together enjoying the Bard, and then just enjoying each other, and then more than that. They were married in January, and on June 15 of that year Charlotte buried him in the Key West cemetery; they had had one season of bliss.

Four husbands. Charlotte was finished. But though she resolved to abandon marriage, she was hardly old—thirty-two is far from old—and she decided to remain in Key West but to live a somewhat broader existence.

She applied for a job on the daily newspaper, and they gave her

a position—society editor. Now that may sound quite tame, but in Key West that is nothing to laugh at; the town is remarkably active socially—fancies itself considerable, indeed.

Shortly thereafter, no party was given without Charlotte, because her company was always bright, she was charmingly gregarious, and she never misspelled names or forgot any. She did not earn much, but she was able to immerse herself in her job.

Which is about the time she met Jim. She knew in advance that he was a ladies' man, pure and simple; that he'd had every available girl and woman in Key West. Charlotte offered him home-cooked meals and some stability, which he needed at the time, since he was just getting over a relationship with one of the strippers down at the Havana-Madrid. (Seems the stripper never mentioned her Cuban husband, who'd arrived unexpectedly one night. Jim was badly beaten up.) Jim needed Charlotte; Charlotte needed Jim; they got together. But, unfortunately, in order to satisfy her, he had to get drunk, and one night when he was very drunk he told her exactly how he reached a climax—he imagined he was with the stripper—it was then she'd gone for the knife.

Jim had, however, done her one rather important favor: he'd introduced her to Jake and Melanie Romano. Although it was obvious to Charlotte that the Romanos had arrived in Key West with little else but their voices, she also saw that Jake had a good scheme in the Southern Winds. She'd invested.

After the four of them were into it, it occurred to Charlotte that there might be some romantic attachment between Jim and Melanie, but now it was none of her business. She had learned to forgive and forget her previous relationship with Jim: they worked together passably well, pretended to be good fellows about it.

And, lastly, there was Stanley.

Stanley she had known since the days of the good Doctor Johnson. In fact, they had known one another, these two men, and, indeed, had spent some hours in each other's company. Stanley would bring his can or two of beer and make it last an evening. He often made passes at Charlotte. Jokingly at first—flatteringly. Then, after the death of her husband, with greater and greater frequency. In the ten-odd years she'd been in Key West, she's suc-

cumbed to Stanley no more than a dozen times. She did not especially enjoy him in bed, or need him, in reality, although he was kind about escorting her and doing for her whatever did not cost him money, or much money. She was, indeed, quite sorry for Stanley.

Thus the romantic history of Charlotte Tully. Over forty now, she relied entirely upon her hearing aids, she had grown fairly matronly but firm, she still had the old trouble with her back, she wore glasses, and she had developed (perhaps a hang-over from her teaching days, perhaps as a recoil from sadness) the manner of a big, timid girl, a rather overbearing big, timid girl, but *that* nevertheless. She did not consider herself old; nor did she consider herself beyond love someday; but she no longer sought it via the marriage band. If a newly-widowed judge in the town was lonely, however, she didn't mind going out with him and, in fact, hated to come home early. And she had a number of other friends who were nice people, but generally down on their luck, who drifted around the Keys . . . to whom she occasionally gave shelter and love. She was even generous about receiving friends of those friends. She was certainly not frustrated; nor was she, in a real sense, fulfilled. She derived a great deal of satisfaction out of her job on the paper and out of her performances in the amateur theatricals of the Key West Players, which she found time to appear in (directed on several occasions by Melanie) despite her evening cashier's job.

In the last two years, through her association with the Southern Winds, she'd spent many amused hours in the bar with the so-called night-club crowd; and, after her years in Miami and her experiences there, nothing much here surprised her, and certainly nothing at all dismayed her. She was a good sport and she could keep everybody in stitches recounting her adventure in Havana when she attended an "exhibition" with other spectators—sat around a bed in a brothel and watched first a duet, then a trio, then a quartet, and finally an orgy develop in front of her eyes.

Let us say then that only Charlotte's beloved cats, who would never tell, knew how often—in a world of silence after she'd taken off her "ear"—she sobbed herself to sleep.

In view of that, all of that, yes, yes, indeed, a pause for Charlotte Tully.

But, Carl thought, there she was now:

Charlotte came out of the front door of the Southern Winds and trundled down the path toward his car. When she got to it, she flung open the door, launched herself in, threw down her reporter's clip board on the seat between them, crossed her arms, blinked her mascaraed eyelids, and said devilishly: "Boy, you sure smashed up your car. Now let's go to the flower show. I'm late."

With one finger poised to touch the starter button, Carl stared at her (as he had done once before from the same position). She was not beautiful, but her face was kind, her eyes were deeply responsive, and her skin was clear and soft. She had no money to speak of, yet she dressed with color and variety. She supported herself, and she was always willing to help another. She was not aesthetic, but she was noble. And Carl thought that there were many who did not understand that to ennoble was the object of culture and that mere culture-pride is valueless. (And yet she was not without culture, certainly.) She had no knowledge of Paris or London, but she could not go two steps in Key West but what someone hailed her; the island was her little kingdom. In short, in the car there and staring absurdly, Carl saw Charlotte Tully of Key West in a further dimension than he had known her—and he knew, as per her question, that he was, indeed, ready for her, in a very deep way.

He pressed the starter button, revved the motor and drove off.

"What have you been up to?" Charlotte said.

"I had breakfast with Alan Houlton," he said.

"I think he's handsome. I've known him for a long time. He comes in with his mother and she's always drunk. As a matter of fact, he asked about you when you first got here, and I told him."

"Yes, I know," Carl said, but nothing more. He would save his estimate of his breakfast with the young novelist for his notebook.

On their way to the flower show Charlotte told him about the old fortress they were about to visit and about the difficulty the Navy experienced getting a station organized on the island in the early eighteen-hundreds. The Navy, she said, had been called in originally to rid the waters around Key West of pirates. They remained to establish a strategic base, or the Gibraltar of the Gulf, as it came to be known. (Indeed, native conchs still refer to the

island as the Rock.) But far worse than the death and injury rate from skirmishes with the pirates was the death and illness rate caused by yellow fever. It took a good many years for a certain Commodore Porter to convince the Secretary of the Navy of the value of the base and the possibility of getting rid of swamp disease by artificial means. But, eventually, the swamps were conquered, a base was established, and in 1861 the tower fortresses, East and West Martello, were built.

The fortresses (and Key West in general as a base) proved their value. Especially during the first and second World Wars, when submarine offensives were conducted from the island.

But her fund of information about the town and environs was not Charlotte's only area of sympathy, although it was a very large one. Carl felt about her that her sympathy for him had prompted her to take him as her escort on these assignments, in addition to the fact that he drove her where she wanted to go. She had an insight into his need for people and his ineptness about meeting them, although she never stated this or asked him to acknowledge it. Carl knew it was true and was grateful. Indeed, Carl shared with Charlotte a mysterious and unspoken faith in contacts made by simple proximity to new people. As with the launching of rockets, the thing Carl experienced difficulty with was the original thrust. Charlotte provided this. When they got to the flower show, she introduced him to everybody in sight.

Now The Key West Flower Show is an annual event held in the old fortress, and that structure turned out to be a red-brick pile—literally crumbling, reinforced, delightfully picturesque, of course, with several courtyards and rooms inside that had been reconstructed, and the whole edifice on a slightly elevated and jutting point of land which commanded the shore line. This was the first afternoon of the show—the official opening would take place that evening—and, fortunately, the people in sight were not as numerous as they might have been. Carl shook hands with busy little Mrs. Slocum, with the tall commanding woman who was president of the Key West Players, with a naval captain (retired) and his shy, deep-eyed, Southern wife. Carl also nodded as he was presented to several matronly women. Carl wondered if, by appearing with Charlotte this way, he was at all compromising her.

It seemed the entire Florida Keys' population took great pride in the flower show. One year it had been photographed by *Life,* and many individuals contributed not only flowers but still-life arrangements on a theme. These were shown in a separate hall of the old fortress, a darkened hall with recessed niches, glass-enclosed and self-illuminated. One of the exhibits consisted of a black-velvet background and a silver tray propped up, with the stems of several tight-budded yellow roses curved around in front of the tray to match its contours; and by reflection of color, the silver was turned into gold—a neat feat of alchemy. Another exhibit depicted a cask of treasure, sunk in the sand beside the rotted timbers of an old pier, and a mask of death riding in the water nearby. The exhibits were charming, macabre.

While Charlotte dashed off to get some names, Carl wandered on through an archway of the old building into a small semi-enclosed yard and discovered himself in the hall of orchids. It was an incredible sight: hundreds of orchids, each carefully tagged and attached to its bit of board or earth or planted in a pot, arranged in a bower built to resemble the side of a hill, with a stream that trickled down through the center. It was not so beautiful a sight as it was an astounding one. The many shapes and colors! The infinite care that these must have required. Carl knew nothing of raising orchids, but it was not difficult to imagine the devotion required to produce such blossoms. And the fact that he knew nothing of the process, knew not one from the other, reminded him again of the unfastidious life he had led. This sort of taste fell for him into the same lost categories of connoisseurship as wines, antiques, and classical music. Being at the show began to depress him, but, as he turned to leave, Charlotte joined him.

"Look at all these orchids," Charlotte said.

"There are so many," Carl said jokingly, "that I was just about to pick some for you." And he made as if to reach up. . . .

Charlotte cried out and brought his hand down.

"They'd have you in jail for a crime worse than murder," she said. "People spend months raising these things."

"I suppose they do," he said.

Charlotte stepped over the rope and onto the artificial grass sod so that she could read some of the names. An orchid among

the orchids, he thought. And he saw Charlotte strangely. He saw and appreciated her lushness against that background. Orchids are not prim-pretty flowers, Carl thought; orchids are like this woman, opulent, rainbow-flamboyant—in all, a trifle vulgar, but in their unique splendor unmistakable and unmatchable. Having left clear footprints in the sod, Charlotte hauled herself back, declaring that she had enough information on orchids.

They went, then, arm in arm, around the outside exhibitions. Rock gardens, tree arrangements, many forms of cacti, and, lastly, under a pretty arch, a small bower of poisonous blooms and roots. One had only to touch, to inhale, or to brush against a leaf that had brushed against a leaf, and the rash occurred, and the coughing began, and the swelling of the eyes, or the nose membranes, or the tongue. Charlotte said that she had scars on her body from a bout with one of those horrors. The shack by the lake—her first marriage. One was exhorted by a sign not to stand too close to the exhibit, and Charlotte abided by it and pulled him away shortly.

Charlotte said she had all the names she needed and she had seen as much as she could possibly describe. The photographer on the paper would supplement her account with shots of the main exhibits, and she was a trifle angry that he had not turned up then, when she was there to direct him; he would come when he felt like it, apparently, and there was no telling how long that would be.

As they left by the main gate of the old fortress, they joined a small crowd who had gathered to give a send-off to the drivers of six small sports cars, which were bedecked with flowers and which, Charlotte explained, would parade through the town to announce the show's official opening that evening. The drivers were women; they wore clothes the color of the flower they represented and they had flowers in their hair. They drove off in a noisy pageant of vermilion, beige, white, and other shades, and Carl picked up one of the blossoms that had been spun from the spokes of one of the car wheels. He attached it to the frontispiece of his Ford and it made a merry ornament as he drove with Charlotte back to town.

Nor was Carl unaware that he'd spent an extremely contented afternoon with her.

She asked him how he liked the show.

"I liked it," he said. "But it made me feel so uninformed, specially the orchids, kind of crude about the finer things . . . you know what I mean."

"I know," she said. "But you've had a lot in your life to think about and take care of." She laughed loudly and abruptly: "I personally don't give two hoots for orchids, and I can't see growin' 'em, and I think people who do must have damned little interest in life; besides, they grow naturally on a lot of trees around here. Now horses—that's something else. I can see people devoting their lives to horses—but orchids. . . ."

She was delightfully emphatic.

Carl took Charlotte back to the newspaper office so she could write her story, drove to the beach for a late swim—God, that was a wonderful thing to be able to do—and returned to the Southern Winds for a nap. Some equanimity of mind was returning to him, and Charlotte was for some reason very much in his thoughts.

As he was entering the building, Jim was coming out, looking disgruntled, which was unusual for this man. They stopped on the front walk.

"Damnation," Jim said. "Can't find Jake anywhere. You seen him?"

Carl said no.

"You'd think," Jim said testily, "with the interest Jake has here, he'd spend more time here. He ain't been around since he dropped off the groceries this morning; he ain't at home; and I been telephonin' all around to see if I could locate him, but he ain't nowhere."

"Can I give him a message?" Carl asked.

"You kin if he shows up," Jim said. "Tell him the bar needs at least six bottles of Scotch and six ryes. Can't open tonight without 'em. You know he keeps all the damned liquor in that private storeroom of his—don't even give me a key to it."

"Yes, I've seen Jake look both ways before he went in . . . or does he do that in front of every door?"

"Oh, Jake made an agreement with the owners when he leased this place that he'd store all the antiques from the upstairs rooms

in that room and that he wouldn't let nobody else have a key to it. Takes up the whole half side of the house. Ain't nothin' but a lot of junk, I'll bet, piled to the ceiling. But you'd think it was Fort Knox the way only Jake goes in there. A-course, he keeps the liquor supply, a couple of cases, in there, too, and it's a good idea to keep that private, but Jesus . . . I should have a key, and we're in a spot with the dinner crowd if we don't have that stuff soon after we open."

"I'll tell him if I see him."

"Yeah, keep your ears open. You'll hear him clumpin' around downstairs."

"Yes," Carl said, and Jim continued on down the path.

Carl went to his room, showered and stretched out. Slightly before five, he heard noises downstairs—Romano's voice raised in its perpetual, back-and-forth, melancholy argument with Melanie. Half asleep, Carl went into the hall and leaned over the railing and called down. They did not hear him or they ignored him. They walked through the hallway and Carl heard a jingling of keys and a door slam, and it was evident that Romano and Melanie had gone into the storeroom together. The only other doors on the main floor were the bar doors and the john doors, and both of those swung. Romano had probably gotten Jim's message and was doing what was necessary. But suppose Romano had not gotten Jim's message and, if he brought up some liquor, did not bring up enough or the right kind? Carl reasoned he could save a lot of trouble for Jim, and possibly an extra trip for Romano, if he conveyed the message. Carl went back into his room, put on a pair of trousers and a shirt, slipped into his loafers, and proceeded downstairs.

The hallway was empty; the waiters would not show up for another half hour yet. Carl went to the storeroom door and knocked. No answer. But a curious thing happened. Carl remembered distinctly having heard the door slam; but evidently, for once, Romano had been careless; the lock had not caught and Carl's knock pushed the door open a trifle. Carl called softly: it was very dark inside; he did not want to alarm them or to intrude. But he stepped in and closed the door. He stood in some sort of anteroom piled high with furniture and, a short way along, with cases of

liquor. There was a dim light coming from a room beyond, and Carl made for it. He noticed that the floor was heavily carpeted, and he realized then that the material he had felt on the back of the door, as he pushed it closed, was leather. The storeroom had been airproofed in some manner, perhaps. Or soundproofed. He felt rather foolish, but he heard Jake now. Talking? No—singing, it seemed. Carl continued on along and stopped in front of the door which revealed the room.

It was, of course, about the size of the barroom (minus the anteroom), and Romano and Melanie were there all right. They were illuminated from one green-shaded lamp, suspended from the high ceiling, which cast its light directly down, leaving most of the rest of the place in shadows. They were leaning against the edge of a table with their backs to the door but facing each other, their eyes seemingly unmoving from each other, and Romano had his hand cupped under Melanie's chin. Her head was upturned toward him in what appeared to Carl an amazingly sincere expression of devotion, and Romano, in his low, lisping voice, was singing the verse of the song Carl had heard lately in the bar, " 'Bye, 'Bye, Blackbird": "No one here can love or understand me; oh, what hard luck stories they all hand me. . . ."The green-shaded lamp cast its light directly down on the table they leaned against, a table covered by green felt, marked by white lines and red, white and black numbers. In the center, its ebony finish glittering ominously, was a huge roulette wheel. Carl looked slowly around. There were other tables—for dice, for twenty-one —and in the very rear, along the wall, Carl discerned the outlines of several slot machines. Everything seemed new and unused, however. And, of course, there was no one else there but Jake and Melanie. He had taken her in his arms now, her arms had gone around his great girth, and they kissed passionately. Carl stepped back, moved quickly backwards through the anteroom, opened the door, and went out, pulling the door closed. The brightness of the hall stung his eyes momentarily. He went back upstairs.

So that was Romano's other scheme for the Southern Winds; that was the scheme that would bring prosperity to the place. Carl thought it was madness. The mere existence of such a room, much less its use, even to the most discreet customers, put the

whole enterprise in jeopardy. Still, Romano must know something of what he was doing. Carl had heard that there was no more gambling in Key West, but who could say for certain? Perhaps Romano had adequate protection; but in a town where gambling was distinctly against the law, what a chance he was taking! Surely he could not operate without protection, and *that* could come from only the most undesirable elements, and there might even be conflict among those elements, with Romano caught in the cross fire. Foolish man. And, indeed, what a desperate man Romano must be, Carl thought. How great the pressures under which he was continuing.

For a moment Carl envisioned the discovery of the gambling room and the inevitable padlocking of the Southern Winds, and he felt rather sorry—more so than the mere loss of such a place should warrant.

How could Romano risk tossing it all away? Was there no other method for him to recoup, to keep going, to make a reasonable profit? Or did he want to make a fortune overnight, bank all on what amounted to a single spin of the wheel? Absurd man. And certainly Romano could not expect him to withhold this knowledge from Ben. It would not be fair to let Ben make the loan. As May had said, it would be money thrown in the street. But who knew about the room? Did May? Did the waiters? Did Jim, really, despite protestations? Is this what Troy had meant by his cryptic remarks that first night? Were they all in a conspiracy not to have him find out, lest he tell Ben? Did Charlotte know? Dare he ask her? But no. There was only one way to handle the thing. Go to Romano directly and face him down. If Romano intended to use the room, Carl's job was done: he would go back to New York and give Ben an accurate account. Carl did not think Ben would grant any loan. If, on the other hand, he had misunderstood the significance of what he'd seen, he would remain through Sunday, as planned. Romano had only to explain that the room would be dismantled, that it all had been a mistake, that it was not what it appeared to be, that this was not the scheme he had mentioned having in mind to float the Southern Winds into calm financial waters.

Not that Romano owed him or anybody else an explanation—

but, simply for the purposes of his whole trip, Carl wanted to know, conceived it as fair and pertinent that he should know.

Prostrate across his bed, and more concerned by this incident than by any other he had experienced in Key West, Carl thought: Jake, Jake, who can understand how much you love Melanie?

* * * * *

Hot that evening. Extremely. Not a breath of air moved the candle flames on the tables. The kitchen was unbearable; Carl could not imagine how May and the old colored dishwasher, Daddy-O, stood it. Luckily for Carl, he did not need to be in the kitchen very much.

Business was poor-to-moderate up until eight o'clock. The waiters had had about the same number of customers—not more than four parties apiece. Kent wasn't happy, and Jenny had a word or two to say about it. They made their living here; Carl could understand their concern. They all had hoped that the flower show people would crowd them up a bit, but the opening was just then, at eight, and it looked as if everyone had eaten hastily and elsewhere in order to attend it. Carl glanced from one face to the next among the waiters. He thought of their loss of revenue, and he wondered what each of them really knew about the Southern Winds.

At eight-fifteen a party of four that Carl had taken care of paid their check and left, and when Carl went to the table, he found an unexpectedly large tip: twelve dollars, in fact, on a bill of forty. Happy and Naomi saw what was on the tray and gave him an amused glance; Jenny saw it, too, and he got an austere glance from her; and when someone told Kent about it shortly afterward, Kent gave him a blank and cold stare.

Naomi observed Kent's attitude and whispered to Carl that, after all, Carl's receiving a tip like that was almost literally taking the bread out of Kent's mouth. She went on to say that twelve dollars would probably have provided Kent with at least two "tricks" that evening.

When Kent went by him a minute or two later, there was some muttered remark to the effect that if he didn't need the money,

he shouldn't be working there and taking it away from people who did need it—and it wasn't said jokingly. Carl was quite surprised at this about-face on the part of a man who was almost always the personification of merriment.

The situation did not improve a half hour later when Kent was doing nothing and a well-dressed party of six seated themselves at Carl's only large table. Actually, it was a table for four, but they took chairs, two, from Kent's table nearby. Kent started forward, and for a moment Carl hesitated—it did not mean that much to him; on the other hand, the party was clearly his; the other waiters urged him to take it and he did so. The people were gentle and slow-moving and expansive, and they ordered several rounds of drinks without becoming rowdy, and steaks and more drinks with dinner, and Key lime pie and cognac. Unfortunately, few other customers came in, which meant for a good deal of the time all the rest of the waiters just stood around watching Carl work and, of course, watching Robin help him. Carl could imagine their gall, and yet he had nothing to do with it, no hand in the distribution of customers at all. When this party left, Carl found another good-sized tip on his tray.

When Carl arrived in the kitchen, Kent was waiting for him.

"You know, my dear, that party of four really should have been directed by Charlotte to one of us."

"Charlotte was not watching," Carl said. "They seated themselves. Could have sat anywhere. That often happens, from what I've seen."

"Charlotte should have gone over and reseated them."

"Tell Charlotte," Carl said. He did not like Kent's tone. It was flatly rude. Carl turned to leave, to get out of that steam room as fast as possible.

"I did tell Charlotte," Kent said, persisting. "And I'm telling you, if you steal customers like that again, I'll punch you in the nose."

The words registered slowly on Carl and did not make sense to him until he was almost at the screen door. Even then, even as he stopped, he went over the words twice to be certain he'd heard correctly, to be certain that if there was a joke he'd not missed it. There was no joke. The remark was literal. Carl turned around.

Kent was standing in a funny, hunched way waiting for him to say something. May had put down her ladle and was covertly watching (and listening over the noise of the giant fan). Carl thought that Kent's response to this whole thing was wildly disproportionate, but he could not merely let Kent off with such a statement. As he paused there, Happy and Nothing-Betty came into the kitchen and busied themselves with obtaining ice-cream desserts from the deepfreeze for their customers. When Carl spoke, however, they turned round. Carefully he said, "I did not steal those customers, and you will not, under any circumstances, punch me in the nose."

Kent, also, previously had been rummaging in the deepfreeze, probably for some ice cream for himself. What he did then seemed to Carl rather like a slow-motion moving-picture sequence. Kent put down the scoop, came toward him, stood close, raised an arm, made a fist, and shot it toward Carl's face. Carl deflected the blow and took a step backward to grasp the situation fully. Kent began to raise his arm again. Carl heard objections in the background. This time, however, he felt the force of Kent's fist on his cheek. But the blow must have sounded and looked worse than it felt, because May and Daddy-O began to scream. They were screaming, "Fight! Fight!" And Carl realized then that it was a fight; he'd been hit and he was about to be hit again. It also occurred to him that May's screaming "fight" was not out of a desire that someone stop it but out of a sardonic glee to get people to see it. Irrelevantly to the matter at hand, it also occurred to him that her sadism was probably impartial, and whichever of them came off the loser, her particular appetites would be fulfilled. But upon being hit once more, for the third time, fully in the face, by an adult, something in Carl that he had thought no longer existed suddenly reappeared. Rage. Blind and insensate. He began, and even while he struck out hard, rapidly, and fairly accurately, he thought that all of this was ridiculous and his reaction more disproportionate, if anything, than Kent's.

Kent, however, had become no longer Kent, but, in that incredible inferno of a room, with the loud whir of the fan, and the shouts of people around, and arms in his way attempting to restrain him (and he was not "about" to be restrained now), Kent

became everything in Key West that had unsettled and, yes, frightened him, for, as Denise had rightly observed, there was fear in him. Kent was the essence of self-indulgence and depravity (one in the belly: Kent doubled over), of age without dignity, and purposelessness, and pettiness, and cheapness, and carelessness, no matter how amusing. And even as he threw a hard blow which connected perfectly with Kent's forehead, he remembered that Kent could be very amusing.

Quite loudly, Carl said, "You're a riot, old man," and he warded off an ineffectual clout or two of Kent's and began to pummel Kent, not handsome fighting on Carl's part, but the roundhouse socks of a man unaccustomed to a brawl. Carl pummeled the image of figures disappearing along the dark streets, and snide whores who ran away, and sharks and sting rays gliding under water, and sad songs that drifted out of bars, and sunlight that hid sickness beneath tan skin—all things concealed, and in mysterious transit or change, ungraspable, unrelatable, unspeakable.

Kent's bluff dropped, his face was distorted with pain, and he was pretending to begin to faint. Or, indeed, he was starting to faint.

Carl saw fear in Kent's eyes now, and Carl stopped hitting him for that reason more than any other—this man is afraid and fainting because of what I am doing to him—and Carl put down his hands.

Of course, Happy and Jenny, and Naomi and Robin, who had rushed in, were holding him back, but there was no need. Carl had stopped.

And Kent was steady on his feet again, saying crude things, running out the door. The gist of his remarks was that Carl had lost his mind. In part, Carl agreed.

Carl shook himself free from his protectors. He was conscious only of immense relief and some feeling of anguish unburdened. Also, he felt as if he had done the right thing withal. And, alas, he was proud; he could not keep himself from thinking that he had a firmer hold on what mattered in life than Kent had or would ever have, that Kent knew nothing really of generosity of heart, equanimity of temper, calmness of spirit, or, more to the point, friendship among men—friendship which knows distance in the relationship and shares deeply without sharing obscenely.

And having indulged himself in all of those thoughts, Carl felt himself absurd, ridiculous and extremely sorry for Kent.

There was a great deal of babble around him. Out of all of it, he saw May fix him with a bemused eye.

"He's a little terror when he gets started. Beat the hell out of that bitch."

But Carl knew that if the natural rage or outrage in him had not reasserted itself, after long absence, and *he* had run out the door, she would have been equally as caustic at his expense.

Daddy-O was so upset that he left the water running in the sink and dashed out to cadge a drink somewhere.

Nothing-Betty tended to her duties in the kitchen but kept her face averted seemingly horrified by the vulgar display.

Happy told him to "calm down and cool off," and it was true; if Carl had had feathers, they would be in a considerably ruffled state.

As it was, he found himself bathed in perspiration.

Jenny, the customary militant, was noncommittal, except for telling him he ought to put a compress on his cheek.

Robin, of all people, said, "Kent's been asking for that from one of us for a long time."

And Carl felt that Robin, Kent's friend, and only Robin, was sincere and would have been sorry if the incident had come out differently.

Romano barged through the screen door. "What's going on?" he mumbled, looking from one to the other.

"Nothing at all, Jake," May said. "Just settling a little argument."

Romano looked at Carl and his investigation went no further. Suddenly Romano clapped his hands. "All right, all right, everybody back to work. People waiting out there." Behind Romano, Daddy-O snuck in the screen door with eyes red-rimmed, probably from a fast dose of cheap liquor. "Back to work, back to work," Romano repeated, and turned around and patted the old colored man on the shoulder gently. Romano as boss was as ludicrous, but in a strange way charming, as Romano as host or, Carl thought, as businessman, which, despite the distraction of the situation with Kent, reminded Carl he must speak to Romano, must ask him.

But Romano spoke first as Carl went up to him. "I know what you're up against here. Try not to let it get you." And it occurred to Carl that in that statement Romano had stated his essence: his was the gift of conciliatory action; he knew he could do nothing to change any situation, but he did try to make the going less hard.

"Jake, will you have a moment to speak to me after dinner?"

"In the bar," Romano said, putting an arm around his shoulders. "After dinner and after the divvy, I'll come to the bar."

Carl had seen the divvy; it was a nightly spectacle.

Carl returned to the restaurant floor. There were, indeed, several new parties of customers. He offered an apology to a party of two of his whom he had kept waiting, but they did not accept it and huffily departed. And stiffed him. It was then that he noticed his face hurt and that his right cheek was considerably puffed.

Kent, meanwhile, dropped dishes, stuttered when he spoke to his customers, generally had the trembles, not out of fear any more, but out of the nervous sort of attack that comes after timid, unaccustomed people have experienced violence. His long silver-gray hair, ordinarily so carefully coifed, stuck out at odd angles. Kent was very pathetic then, and Carl wished to apologize, and wished to receive an apology, but for the moment that was out of the question. Through the rest of the dinnertime they avoided one another. Carl considered that it was his Christian duty to say something, but the opportunity did not present itself; and, at that point, it would seem to Kent, and perhaps the others, an imposition.

When Charlotte was told about it, she left her cashier's box and came over to him. She was quite concerned, but a little smile played around her lips, and her eyes were wide open in a curious way. Carl could not help but notice her reaction most resembled May's.

* * * * *

The spectacle of the divvy took place each evening directly after the restaurant closed and the last customer had paid and left. A

table was cleared of its cloth but set up with spoons and sugar and coffee cups, and—in front of Romano, Jim, Henri and sometimes Melanie—Charlotte counted the register receipts against the food and bar checks. Then the money was divided. Even though Henri and Melanie were not actually partners, they got their cut nightly. But Melanie was not in evidence this night in contrast to Henri, who was very much in evidence, with his tall chef's hat pushed back on his head as rakishly and as far as it would go without falling off.

Carl finished up his chores slowly and watched the four of them. Their concentration was intense. Once in a while they stopped Charlotte to question a check or a sum of addition (actually, Romano or Jim would take the food and bar checks and go over them again outside on the porch). It was certainly an occasion when Charlotte made every effort to speak clearly without speaking loudly, and the others tried to do the same. What the exact percentage of the divvy was, and how much was set aside for the necessary supplies and expenses of the next day, Carl had no idea, and it didn't appear as if anybody intended to inform him. But just then he wasn't concerned with that.

His mind was on whether or not he had enough time before Romano came looking for him in the bar to go up to his room and put a cold towel on his cheek. He decided there would be time. And he hoped that Romano would keep his word and come looking for him in the bar; of course, there was no safeguard against the zany spirit in Key West that maneuvered people off on wild tangents at unexpected moments, especially when they were due somewhere else, and Romano, Carl knew, was extremely susceptible to this spirit.

Twenty minutes later Carl was back downstairs. He checked the dining room; the divvy was still going on, so he went to the bar to wait, as planned. It was cool there.

And it turned out that many other people had the same idea. Unpredictable, this business. Whereas the flow of customers for dinner had been spasmodic and, over-all, not very good, the bar was jammed. Jenny was filling orders as fast as she could run, and Robin was helping her. At the bar, and along the back of the room, all the stools were taken. Carl stood in the three-deep

crowd. (Odd, the season boundaries in Key West: February 27 was hardly the heart of winter, but it was the time when people got fidgety up north and wanted a vacation.) In any event, the bar would be no place to hope to hold a conversation with Romano. They would have to go outside on the porch. Carl would insist upon it.

And just then he noticed in the corner two others who probably wanted to talk to Romano—the burly characters in the flowered sports shirts. They looked jovial and unshaven, as before. One talked—the littler one—low and incessantly, and his swollen lids opened now and then to emphasize a statement. The other one listened fatly and chewed a cigar and stared straight ahead. It had been the listener who had cuffed Romano, and Carl got the impression that he was the flunky, the strong-arm man, and, no doubt, the chauffeur: he spun a ring of keys round and round a finger, the nail of which was manicured so shinily that Carl could see it at a distance. And still, and still, they did not look lethal or even dangerous. To Carl they seemed ludicrous.

Art Troy came in, went under the bar and mounted to his place on the raised platform. He ran his hands over the keys, just chords, but very pleasant ones. He wore a white shirt and white ducks. Jenny handed him up a drink which, after a good swig, he promptly stashed on the far side of the piano.

Troy started off with an instrumental of "That Old Black Magic" and no one paid much attention until, near the end, when the song builds to a high, prolonged climax. The crowd quieted then, and they gave him a fair round of applause. They applauded more heartily, however, when Renee stepped up on the platform and raised her eyebrows at them and smiled with pert assurance. She wore a cool, silvery, cotton dress, held up by the thinnest of ribbon straps. With her deeply sunburned skin, the color of the material and its thinness showed her charms to great advantage. Carl thought it amazing that she could live the life she led and appear each night so perfect, so composed. Renee turned round to Troy to speak with him about the choice of a song and, in doing so, took Troy's hand, and the effect of the two radiant young people holding hands, Troy blond and blue-eyed, Renee so dark-skinned and soft-haired, was exciting. It took a vigilant eye to

notice that the expression on Troy's face was vacuous, and that even as he sat he wavered slightly, and that Renee's lipstick was slightly smudged, and that there was a hickey of some size on her neck, which was rather badly powdered. It would have been a mean revelation for the customers to realize that there was only such emotional rapport between them as was necessary for their work, and that the air of *tristesse,* which they seemed to share, came to each from quite different sources. They began with the song that Carl liked best, "Remind Me," which, indeed, some members of the crowd had loudly requested: ". . . I've got my heart well in hand and I'm so certain that I can take you or leave you alone. . . ." Renee sang with cocky bravado and swirled her skirt and put her hands on her hips to emphasize her independence of any love entanglement; she sang, indeed, with such conviction that even Troy glanced round at her; she seemed to be enjoying herself immensely—it was very much her song. And, as far as Carl knew, she certainly did "have it made" here in Key West.

As they finished, Romano pushed through the doors and was gratified (Carl surmised from the way he paused and waited) at the applause that had followed the song. His creation, his Southern Winds, was fulfilling its function, carrying out his intention —diverting and amusing and, therefore, conciliating his customers. Carl hoped that Romano might speak with him first; but, no, Romano went directly to the two men. Apparently Romano had suggested to them that they do what Carl thought of: talk on the porch. Romano ordered a cognac from Jenny and she handed him a tiny glass. Romano, carrying his drink, led the way for the two others, who carried their drinks, toward the door.

Passing Carl on his way out, Romano said: "This will just be a minute."

The three of them left.

Carl observed that someone else had watched Jake leave with the men—Jim. Jim was behind the bar again, having finished, as had Romano, with the business of the divvy. Jim was scowling. He evidently did not much approve of Romano's dealings with these men. And Carl wondered if Jim knew about the gambling

room and whether, indeed, all of Romano's dealings with these men hadn't to do with that, and that alone.

Carl did not have to wait long. Renee and Troy had hardly finished another number before the taller, fat man came hurriedly through the swinging door and pushed brusquely up to the bar. One of the people he had pushed aside was about to start an argument, in fact. But the fat man paid no attention; he signaled violently for Jim's attention, and when Jim got to him, he leaned way over the bar and whispered to Jim. Jim's reaction was immediate; he dashed out from behind the bar and through the door. The fat man followed him. The fellow who had been offended was speaking loudly and following *him*. Carl slid off a stool he had just acquired and, to avoid confusion, went out the other door and onto the porch and rounded the corner and saw what the rest of them, having come from the other direction, had stopped dead to stare at.

Jake Romano lay with one arm stretched across the wicker table, and his head was face down on it. The other arm dangled loosely between his legs. Carl was shocked. Jim was bending over him and suddenly straightened up. "He's breathing. Somebody get a doctor, get a doctor," Jim said beseechingly. Other people had come out to the porch now, and several of them ran inside to the phone. Romano was breathing noisily, gurgling; someone said he would choke to death that way; and, with effort and in great confusion, several people helped get Romano leaning back in the chair and his collar loosened. His face was ashen and his cheeks sunk in: saliva came from the corner of his mouth. Just then Charlotte pressed up behind Carl and screamed once before she bit the heel of her hand and got control of herself. Jim was as ashen as Romano and, fumblingly, he was trying to help. A crowd had gathered and was quickly closing in.

"Give him air," someone said, but the crowd would not move back. A minute or two later a man got through the circle immediately surrounding Romano—a man who had been in the bar, a rather dignified man who spoke slowly and said he was a doctor and said that he thought that Romano had had a stroke and, although it was dangerous, it would be better to move him somewhere out of range of the crowd and lay him out flat.

Five men got round Romano, lifted him with effort, and, without meaning to, with roughness; they carried him down off the porch and round the path into the dining patio, where three tables were put together and Romano was stretched across them. For the curious, the path to the patio was blocked by Jim, who stood astride it, who could only act now, not talk. Several dozen people hung around, wanting to know what happened. Carl and Charlotte ducked through the house and emerged into the patio that way. There was nothing to do but wait until the ambulance came. They sat down.

Carl noticed that several people had disappeared—the man who had just said he was a doctor and the two fat men Romano had gone out on the porch to talk to. Just then Carl saw Romano's arm slip off his stomach, where it had been placed: it fell straight down, his hand unclenched, and a tiny cognac glass fell to the cement floor and smashed. Charlotte saw it, too, but it did not seem to mean anything to her; nor, in fact, did it mean much to Carl.

Great tears rolled out of Charlotte's eyes as they kept vigil there in the darkened patio. The scene was eerie. The only light came from outside. Charlotte and Carl sat next to Romano, but behind him, which meant that the figure of that great stricken mountain of man was outlined in profile as it lay across the tables. Also, there were several people milling around who had found their way in and who were merely curious and who added to the confusion. Otherwise, Jim had pretty effectively blocked off the entrance. . . . Silence now, except for Romano's breathing stertorously. In Carl's mouth there was a terrible bitter taste. And he wanted to ask someone, anyone, so many questions. . . .

A voice said, "He'll be all right . . . must've fainted from the heat . . . ambulance is coming." Carl could not make out the speaker. Carl could not make out anything. He found himself wishing that the last ten minutes had not passed, that they could be erased somehow. Let it go back, he thought, to when I was sitting at the bar listening to the music and the singing . . . resist! Resist! It has not happened; nothing is changed. . . .

"Oh, my God," someone behind Carl cried out: it was May.

And that arch and caustic woman began to sob, her shoulders heaving . . . great racking sobs . . . "oh, Jake; oh, Jake. . . ."

"The ambulance is coming," Charlotte told her. But somehow that fact did not seem to hold the hope that it should. It did not much assuage May's sobs.

"I knew this would happen," May managed to say. "Knew it, knew it. . . ."

Charlotte glanced round at her sharply. "May be just a faint," she said, but as the promise of the ambulance had seemed oddly to hold no hope, this conjecture of Charlotte's about a faint seemed to hold no conviction. May half collapsed in a chair.

Two policemen arrived, surveyed the scene and went back outside.

Henri came in and Charlotte told him what had happened. He sat down to wait with them, his head in his hands. Finally they heard the siren in the distance; the ambulance arrived. Carl judged it had taken about twenty minutes to get there. He wondered if that would be the difference for Romano—twenty minutes, twenty lousy minutes—between life and death. And he called himself up short for unnecessarily morbid thinking. The interns bundled Romano in a blanket and, with help, got him—again sloppily—piled onto a stretcher and into the ambulance. Charlotte and Jim took seats in the ambulance alongside the stretcher, and they were joined by a policeman. Henri and Carl agreed to stay behind. May just sobbed. Quite quickly, the ambulance sped away.

"Let's all go have a drink," Henri said, and took May's arm tenderly and led her along.

In the still-crowded bar, Jenny, who had continued serving, and Renee and Troy, who had continued entertaining, hurried up to them. Henri, his shoulders stooped and his drawl worse with nervousness and deep concern, said that Romano was now on his way to the hospital, that they ought to hear soon. He said that there was nothing any of them could do except keep going and hope that it was just a faint from exhaustion. Jenny volunteered to go out the next morning and help Henri do the retail buying that Romano always did, and *that* arrangement was made.

Whereupon Henri, too, seemed to lose the capacity for speech.

He downed a fast Scotch and indicated to Carl that he was going upstairs to his apartment. May got up to go with him, silently. Carl thought of Melanie. He mentioned her. Henri said with effort: "She'll find out soon enough. Then God help us." And they went off.

Carl realized that what Henri meant was that if Romano was absent from the business for any length of time, Melanie would automatically become the head of it. That would be troublesome for everybody. Especially Henri.

Just a faint from exhaustion, Carl thought. Hope that that was all it was. A couple of days in a hospital for Romano would be disruptive for the place, but very good for Romano, and maybe good for the place in the long run. Carl felt relieved momentarily. The situation had been figured out, conceptualized in words; the mysterious happening was not any longer mysterious but an inevitable consequence of a process that could easily be traced . . . if it was just a faint. Carl became conscious of the people around him, many of them having a fine time, unacquainted with Romano and unaware of his condition. Carl felt sorry for Renee and Troy; as spontaneous and delightful as their performance had been earlier, he could tell now that they were just batting out the songs, anxious to finish, anxious perhaps for a drink, two, three. . . . And perhaps Troy in particular had a hankering for something stronger, something administered directly to the blood stream.

They finished their set at that moment; Troy left the room and Renee came over to him. Carl hadn't noticed it, but he saw it now: she was very drunk. But not in an unpleasant way. He gave her his seat, and they touched arms as he stood beside her, and she glanced at him once, fully.

"I'm afraid for Jake," she said.

"Didn't look good," Carl said. "But maybe it was just a faint. Couple of days in bed wouldn't do him any harm."

"An hour in bed wouldn't do me any harm," she said, glancing at him once more.

"Good hunting," he said, finishing his drink. "See you later."

"Have a ball," she said.

Carl left the bar.

On the street he headed for his car, which he'd parked only a half block down. He got in and lowered the windows. The lights of the Southern Winds made a many-colored, blurred reflection in the rearview mirror. It was cool there. Carl just sat.

Jake Romano. A man Carl had known only a week. Down. Carl was not that old that he had seen many people fall, whether permanently or temporarily. And Romano had fallen; he could not kid himself that the condition he had seen the man in was just a faint. And if it were really serious, many people would be affected. Poor Charlotte, for one. Carl decided to corner Charlotte the next day and have it out with her about the gambling room, about the men Romano had interviewed, about whatever else was important in reference to the setup. That was the only fair way. He had to know what was what before he left Sunday; if Charlotte failed him completely, he would go to Melanie, but only as a last resort. However concerned he might feel about these people and their lives, there had to be a rational limit to his sympathy and involvement for the sake of Ben's money. For the sake of Ben's trust in his judgment, indeed, in him.

In college, once, Carl had witnessed, close up, the fall of one other person—a boy whom he'd been friendly with. No one else seemed to like him. In fact, people shunned him. He was not an Anglo-Saxon type, true, and the college was mostly that, but he always seemed to Carl to come up with words about people that really described them closest to Carl's own understanding. And it was not a critical evaluation primarily—rather one that always allowed that the individual who was being discussed might have reasons of his own for behavior which seemed hostile or simply inconceivable. A forgiving perception. Carl was upbraided for so much association with this boy, but did not break off. However, during the winter term at the college, the boy became more and more morose and seemed himself unwilling to continue the relationship. One cold and snowy day Carl saw his friend being snowballed and rolled in the slush by a rowdy group. Carl tried to help, was himself snowballed and bullied—the thing turned into a free-for-all—and when Carl looked around, the boy had disappeared. Apparently, he had gone directly to his room, fashioned a noose from curtain cording, and was discovered that evening

swinging back and forth, his face black from suffocation. It seemed to Carl that the boy might not have fallen, but that somehow, like Romano, he was pushed to the brink of his endurance and succumbed. Circumstances and inevitable compulsions—could not the boy or Romano have foreseen the conflict of outward and inward pressures and prevented, deliberated, obverted the conclusion? Could that not be done in life? Carl had once read an article which detailed the minute errors, both human and mechanical, both past and present, which, altogether, had caused an airliner to crash in the East River so very short of the landing strip at La Guardia Airport. Could no one see, Carl thought, what seemed so obvious to him: that, given the setup in Key West as it was, the relentless logic of circumstances was working as surely to hasten the last of the Southern Winds as it had worked to destroy the plane. Did Romano really think he could get away with his gambling plans for long, get away with connections like the two burly individuals, get away, indeed, with the very tenuous hold he had on financial and emotional and personal physical circumstances for long? Why didn't this man turn about and disconnect the drive in himself which would—which had already strung him up partly, his face not black but ashen, his life not gone but threatened? His very life! Why hadn't Romano simply backed away, dropped it, let go of it, before it killed him? And although Carl asked himself these questions and considered them valid questions—questions he knew had always been posed against people who defended determinism—he knew (sitting there in his car) that he also had begun to glimpse in himself—hazily, to be sure, but without a doubt—some of the mechanism of his inevitable drives. And he had also glimpsed the fact that unless those drives were fulfilled, even at the cost of his physical existence, he would possess no personal identity. But that realization did not quite make consciousness.

Far down the street, walking slowly in and out of the delicate traceries of light and shadow on the sidewalks caused by street lamps shining through the palm leaves, a sailor came along. Within ten feet of the car, the sailor stopped and rummaged in his white jumper top pocket for a cigarette. Finding one, he then searched for a match. In that he was unsuccessful, and then, presumably, he saw Carl sitting at the wheel of his car.

The sailor came over to the car and poked his head in the door.

"Could I borrow a match?" the sailor said.

Without speaking, Carl pushed in the dash lighter; it took a moment to heat, and when it had, Carl handed it over. The boy lit up, handed back the lighter and said, "Must be great to have a car around here."

Carl could not see the sailor very well except to conclude he was young, towheaded and tight-uniformed.

"Yes," Carl said, waiting for him to move on. But he was in no hurry.

He leaned his elbows on the window and looked at Carl quite steadily. On a sudden, Carl leaned across and switched on the dashboard. The sailor's features were regular and unextraordinary and his skin shone with sun and health This was not a psycho.

"That's a good idea," the sailor said. "Why don't you take me for a ride?"

The suggestion was made with the frankness that Carl judged came simply of inexperienced egotism and bad taste, the sort of thing he had been guilty of so many times himself.

"I'm just sitting here getting the air," Carl said patiently.

"Seems a waste," the sailor said. "I'm in fleet sonar school and I have to get back to the base at one."

Of what possible concern could the sailor imagine his time of return to the base could interest anyone, Carl wondered. And then Carl realized that again he was being obtuse. Despite his ordinary appearance, this young man belonged to that private club, which, unlike any other club, assumed that everyone else was a member until proven not. Carl thought that that observation of his own was funny, and he grinned. He also knew that he was close to being hysterical. The sailor took it as an invitation, opened the door and climbed in.

"I'm sorry," Carl said.

"What's the matter?" the boy said. "Won't I do?"

Carl still thought things were funny—especially this circumstance—getting funnier every minute. Carl put his arm across the seat and looked the sailor full in the face, but, before speaking, he caught the fresh odor of the sailor's starched uniform, and, curiously, it was not unpleasant.

"You will do fine," Carl said.

"Good. Let's drive out along the ocean."

"But," Carl said, not moving. "I will not. And most important I would not know *what* to do, or care."

The boy frowned, but then his eyes slitted, and on his teen-age face was the wise expression of certain sarcastic and witty college professors Carl could recall—in any event, the expression of men at least three times his age.

"It's not hard," the boy said slyly. "It comes naturally, and if you'll let me, I'll show you."

Carl smiled. He was thinking of the carefully worded newspaper articles about older men who got in trouble with the law because of association with minors. But, Carl thought, did the law ever consider, in the older man's behalf, the nature of tempters such as this?

"I appreciate the offer," Carl said, still smiling. But the humor was ironic now . . . no help for it . . . that and that only. "But I am not quite ready for that yet. The way things are going, I may be someday, God knows, but not yet."

The sailor did not seem to understand. "No ride?"

"No ride," Carl said.

The sailor put his hand on the door handle.

"Wanna give me your phone? This is a kinda lonely liberty town, you know—nothing but bars. It's nice to go to a private house, maybe a party, or go riding once in a while. Get sick of the USO . . . no matter how beautiful the scenery there."

It was totally irrelevant to anything, but Carl thought he had misunderstood, and to misunderstand, not to know, annoyed him.

"Beautiful scenery at the USO?"

"Yeah," the boy said wisely again. "Lots like myself. Say," he said, "I got some friends you might like. . . ."

Carl laughed out loud. It was hilarious: God help them both. "No, no, thank you, really. I'm not. . . ."

"Oh, sure, sure . . . well, I guess I guessed wrong. Thanks for the light. I'll be . . . goin' along. You're sure?"

"Positive," Carl said.

"O.K. Good night."

"Good night," Carl said.

The boy got out, closed the door politely, and, whistling, con-

tinued back down the dark street in the direction he had come. And Carl's feeling? Evanescent . . . that this sort of thing was part of his sense of the dreadful about Key West . . . but not the heart of it. He also felt . . . somewhat . . . as if he had refused a request that he might very easily have granted.

Friday, February 28

CARL propped himself up on his bed and opened the notebook across his lap. Charlotte would come back from the newspaper to her apartment downstairs to fix herself lunch, he knew—and he intended to catch her then. The door of his room was open so that he would hear her climb the stairs. He had gone to breakfast and encountered no one for information about Romano, so there was nothing for him to do but wait. Charlotte should have heard something by now. Meanwhile, as a distraction, he turned his attention to his note book, reread what he had written about Houlton, and, uncapping his pen, added to his continuing account of the young writer this story of their breakfast together the previous day:

> I am less organized this morning than usual. I don't know if I can remember all the things Houlton said, or the order in which he said them, but I will try. First of all, we ate in the dining room of the La Concha Hotel, the tallest building in town—must be all of six stories, and the dining room is a place of much chromium, glass and plastic, but comfortable. We both had juice, eggs and bacon, toast and coffee—he treated me for a change—and we must have remained at the table for at least two hours. Houlton had a dreadful case of conjunctivitis, but he seemed calm, natural throughout, and, also, for a change, he asked me a little about myself. I refreshed his mind as to the fact that I was considering the ministry and mentioned something about Ben.
>
> Houlton said he had heard Ben speak at the Hill School, where he prepped, and that he always remembered verbatim one of the things Ben said: "The problem of mankind is not to be solved on the drawing boards of the scientists, or in the palaces of government, but, as it was in the beginning, in the hearts of men, and it has to do

with expunging of irrational pride in its many guises." He said he thought that rather good, that egotism (inordinate self-love is what I suppose he meant) causes all the difficulty in the world. He also said that—no offense to me—he thought Ben a charming charlatan, a ministry career man of the first water, and one of the few who deserved a bishopric. He said he was delighted when he learned that Ben arrived and left the Hill School campus in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce. "That fact alone, I think," Houlton said, "made me hang on his every word." He said he thought Ben a very cultured man, unlike so many of his cloth, and that led us off the subject of religion, on which I have found him vehement and uninformed, and onto the subject of culture. He said he'd just been reading a book by Jacques Barzun called *The Great Conversation:* the great conversation is what cultured men down through the ages have had to say about how to live life. And speaking of living life led us to a discussion of how he had recently bought an old mansion on the South Shore of Long Island and how he was in the process of fixing it up.

He went on to say that the house was something solid in his life; he could kick the walls and it would never desert him, even if his inspiration did. Said he'd bought it very cheap, that it was in bad shape, that his mother and grandmother—the former of whom he was traveling with in Key West—had helped him and thought to make their home with him, which, he said, was curious, for those were the very people who were too busy to see him when he was young. I agreed that it was curious. He then said something touching: "Now that my father is dead, my mother and my grandmother, who are from great Georgia families, must follow the old Southern tradition and rally round a male, even such a male as I."

We spoke of people we knew in common, Charlotte for one, and Houlton lamented her deafness, commended her gallantry. He knew a great deal about her recent love affair with Jim (the knife-between-her-teeth business), and he said something that I questioned at the time, but have come around to at least considering. He said Charlotte was im-

mensely possessive and secretly dominating, secretly manipulating, and that if she had lost four husbands and countless lovers, and had ended up alone, it was probably because she really wanted it that way. And then: "You, dear Carl, might be the very one to save her." I said if there was any saving to be done, she would probably be in the rescuer's position. Further, Houlton said he did not know Romano well, but that he regularly patronized Romano's creation, the Southern Winds, and if that indicated approval of the man, so be it. He said that he thought Romano (after all the obvious sorrows) had a secret sorrow, or at least he thought R. acted that way; or, Houlton conjectured, "maybe he's like I am," and went on to say that perhaps Romano's problem was similar to his own—a great desire to possess, the temptation to meet, to feed upon people so strong as to cause him to be careful about his associations, cultivate a slight distance. "Loot them emotionally, I mean," Houlton said. "In the best pirate tradition of Key West."

He said he was never bored, he could find something to interest him in everyone, and that the standoffishness of which others accused him, if true, was occasioned not by others in the sense of abhorring them but by himself, on account of certain predatory drives in himself of which he was cognizant and which, for his own peace of mind, he knows he must contain.

I remember that bit of conversation fairly accurately because it preceded his paying the check and asking me to come up to his room with him. I said that I would wait for him, (if he intended to come back down) in the lobby. He disappeared upstairs, and I thought when he came down (he said he did want to go to the post office) his attitude would be quite cold: I was mistaken. I underestimated him. Quite the contrary to a break, he had thought to bring along a copy of his last novel, and he handed it to me, saying that I must read it that day and tell him what I thought. I said I'd read it as soon as I could and handed it back to him to inscribe. At the hotel desk, he wrote in the flyleaf a quote that he said was from a poem by Sara Teasdale called *Barter*. "Give all you have

for loveliness, buy it and never count the cost. For one white, singing hour of peace, count many a year of strife well lost." I thought it charming, slightly sentimental, but exemplary of his mystical bravado and capacity for the unexpected.

* * * * *

"How is Romano?" Carl said.

"Just sit there," Charlotte said breathlessly, "and give me three minutes to make myself something to eat and I'll tell you. I'll faint if I don't eat. Would you like something?"

"No, I'll eat at the beach. I want to talk to you."

"We have all afternoon," she said. "I finished my work, I'm tired, and I'm taking off. I'll go to the beach with you."

While Carl sat back on a couch littered with newspapers and cat fur, Charlotte rummaged around in the kitchen getting her lunch. The cats lay together in one corner, languid, listening, tails twitching. Charlotte came back into the living room holding two pieces of whole-wheat bread from between which dropped small pieces of egg salad. She looked haggard, but she was evidently able to keep going quite well. She possessed a curious detachment in the daytime that Carl had not observed before. She was very businesslike, a newspaperwoman through and through.

"Brace yourself," Charlotte said, taking a huge munch of the sandwich and falling back in an armchair. She talked as she ate; it seemed some kind of compensation—to put the food in—for the sad and final things she was about to say. "Melanie called me this morning. Jake is completely paralyzed. Can't move. Has to be artificially fed, drained—and they're giving him blood. He's in an oxygen tent. They know he had a stroke, but what else is wrong they don't know, and they don't know what's going to happen."

Carl grimaced at the picture of Romano. "Did you stay long last night?"

"Jim and I waited at the hospital for about two hours. They took him away, and we didn't see him again. Finally, they said there was no use our waiting around. They said he could not be seen at all today and only for a few minutes, tomorrow, maybe

—just a look in. They asked who his next of kin is and we had to tell him Melanie, though I know Jim would have preferred to be in touch with the doctors, or I would. But Melanie *is* the next of kin, so that's that. So we went right over to see her at her house and told her what had happened and she promptly got hysterical." Big bite of the sandwich, quick trip to the kitchen to check on the coffee. "She screamed and cried and carried on and wanted to see Jake that minute, and we had to hold her down for a while. Then she got calm, and that was worse. She kept saying that she thought Jake had been poisoned; but when we asked who would want to do that, not to mention how, she clammed up and simply said that she had known for a long time that 'they' were out to get him, to do in the whole place because 'they' couldn't get their money from Jake, and a whole lot of other nonsense. The hospital evidently got in touch with her this morning, or she went over, and she called me at the office."

"Are you sure it's nonsense?" Carl asked.

"It's nonsense," Charlotte said flatly. "Jake owes a lot of money, and he's connected with some pretty low characters here, and I guess in Miami, but if they murdered him they'd never get their money, so I think they're as anxious to see Jake keep going as anybody."

Carl took a deep breath. "Charlotte, tell me about the room downstairs."

"You mean the bar—oh, hell, Jake probably pays a little protection, gives gifts, but. . . ."

"No, no, I mean directly below you, here."

"It's just a storeroom," she said. "There was a lot of stuff, junk mostly, in these rooms when Jake took the house over, and he promised he'd keep it in that room as part of the rental bargain with the owners. He objected, but he agreed. He wanted to make it sort of a cocktail lounge."

Charlotte jumped up to tend to the coffee. Carl fidgeted with a corner of one of the magazines. He was assailed by doubt: should he go into this further, was it any of his business, did it have to do with his errand really? Would Charlotte level with him? He decided she would and that it was very much his business. When Charlotte came back she held a mug of coffee in her hand, hot

coffee, despite the fact that the day was hot. She asked him why he had asked.

He answered, "Have you ever been in the room, darling?"

"Um-um," Charlotte gurgled, meaning, Carl supposed, no.

"I have," he said.

"Really," she said, her interest waxing, "I've never seen it unlocked; lot of broken old furniture, isn't there? How'd you get in?"

Very carefully and with Charlotte's state of attention tightening as he spoke, Carl told her how he got in and exactly what he had seen.

"Golly," she said. "I don't know anything about *that.* Are you sure?" Her almost-finished sandwich hung in mid-air in one hand and the dripping coffee cup in the other. Her expression of surprise was genuine enough, but it did not somehow seem adequate enough. But then, perhaps, she did not see, as he had not seen at first, some of the implications. In a minute or two, however, they began to dawn on her and she traced out the whole pattern from the piece in much the same way that it had occurred to him.

"Maybe," she said, "there was some trouble going on about that that none of us knew about. Maybe some of those Miami thugs were in on it and there was some disagreement over control and Jake was the one who got it. So maybe Melanie was right. . . ."

"I don't say that Melanie was right or wrong, that anyone poisoned Jake, but there's something going on, Charlotte, and he *did* intend to open that room sooner or later, probably off season, or maybe to the movie crowd that's coming on Sunday or Saturday—which?"

"Supposed," she said, "to start coming in Saturday and all to be here Sunday. They start shooting or setting up, or whatever, at five A. M. Monday. The thing for us to do first is to get into that room downstairs. But not let the police know. Or to let anybody know, for that matter. Because then there'd really be trouble. Nobody has a key except Jake. . . ." Charlotte, thinking out loud, struck a thoughtful pose, chin on hand, which seemed to Carl as a parody, somehow. Yes, that was right; somehow Charlotte gave the impression that none of this seemed quite real to her. Carl attributed it to her hearing restrictions: invalided for so long, when she encountered a new and strange situation, she had to

play a part, play it by ear, so to speak, without having heard for a number of years the true tones of situations; her actions now resembled actions remembered from long ago, imitations, rather than responses arrived at spontaneously. "If he had the room all set up," Charlotte continued, "you can bet your life he intended to use it. And he could set it up and keep it going, because he had it soundproofed, as you say; of course, he'd have to tell us eventually, but he knows that when I go to bed around one mostly, I take my ear off and can't hear a thing, so it wouldn't bother me. Henri's bedroom is on the other side of the hallway in the back, so he wouldn't hear it either. If he had gambling after hours, after four in the morning, I wouldn't know it. They probably moved the equipment in around that time, too. The whole Fire Department of Key West could go right by and I wouldn't know it. Don't laugh—it's happened. The only way I know something is wrong is when the cats jump on my chest. I can feel that. And they did that just once, when there was a firebug who tried to burn down the mansions along the next street, one by one, and succeeded in damaging two pretty badly. Babe and Tig knew there was something wrong in the neighborhood. The police finally got the guy; he came back to watch one of his fires blaze. I interviewed him in jail. Shrimper. Said the only place he didn't want to burn down was the Southern Winds because everybody was so nice to him here. My cats are my ears at night. But they probably wouldn't bother about sounds like that from downstairs because they hear the bar noises all the time."

Charlotte could be marvelously, humanly irrelevant. And, Carl thought, no matter the occasion, in good Key West fashion she could not pass up a story or bit of gossip. If Romano was not lying in a hospital paralyzed, Carl would have been amused.

"Charlotte, do you think anybody around here beside Melanie knows about this room? Henri or Jim, for instance?"

"Not Jim, I don't think," Charlotte said. "For the simple reason that he has to watch his step in Key West: a couple of years ago the cops almost had him up for bookmaking. If he got into this, he'd surely go up. He's scared on that point, don't kid yourself. And Henri? I think it's unlikely Jake would confide in him or ask his permission or opinion on anything but the cooking.

And the rest of 'em . . . I just don't think Jake would tell anybody. They might have found out in the same way you did, sort of, but they've kept their mouths shut. I doubt if anybody is 'in' on it with Jake. I think Jake was prevailed upon to do this by some of those gangsters from Miami, and somewhere along the line arrangements for protection weren't finished or weren't made. The police department here cannot be bought, even if they do overlook a thing or two once in a while. Somebody misjudged. I'll tell you what," she said, pausing to swig the coffee. "I'll tell Jim about this—we've got to—and get him to go to the hospital and somehow cage Jake's keys. What the hell—he has a good excuse; he has to get liquor out of that storeroom. And then we'll see. I'll talk to Jim tonight. We'll get into that room somehow."

"And what will you do then?" Carl said, a tone of futility edging into his voice.

"Well, we'll know it's a good idea if Jake leaves this place in our hands for a while, a month maybe, and see if we can't get rid of all that stuff and all those bums he's dealing with."

"Do you know the financial setup? I mean things like how much money there is, and where it is, and how much is owed and to whom, and so forth?"

"No, I don't," Charlotte said. "Nobody knows but Jake, and he kept all that stuff on slips of paper in his back pocket."

"I saw them," Carl said dryly.

"Well, that's it. But I think he used the profits day by day to buy the supplies retail, and there's no reason why Henri or some of us, maybe Jim, couldn't do that for a while. At least a month. . . ."

"You're supposing Romano will recover . . ." Carl said.

"Yes, I am," Charlotte said, "and I may be wrong; it's true, the way it looks now, he won't for a long time. But what else can we do but try to keep going so Jake has some source of income, so we don't lose everything? It doesn't look so good, does it?"

And now Carl had pressed too far. The realization which she had evidently resisted was beginning to occur to her in full. Charlotte's response was more than genuine now; the great tears he had seen come to her eyes, when she could not hear because her machin failed, had come to her eyes again, only this time the help-

lessness she felt was in behalf of Romano and the Southern Winds. Charlotte . . . I care for you very much.

"Did Melanie say anything coherent?" Carl said, as much to find out as to keep Charlotte talking and assuage her upset.

Taking a tissue from her lobster-trap bag on the floor, Charlotte wiped her eyes and blew her nose vociferously. "She said that Jake would want her to take over the restaurant and that she'd spend the day at the hospital and then come down tonight. But I understand from May that she was already poking around here in the kitchen this morning. I didn't see her."

"Maybe she'll be all right," Carl said.

"She's been with Jake in the restaurant business for years," Charlotte said. "She ought to know something, and this place is her only source of income—she ought to try to take care of it. I like Melanie, but I don't trust her . . . Jake is where he is as much on account of her as anyone else. Oh," Charlotte said, "I shouldn't talk that way, I guess, but I think you know it. Everybody knows it. She ragged and nagged him, never let him alone even when he was exhausted. You know that little dog she has? Well, after Jake worked here until two or three in the morning, he had to go back to their apartment near the Casa Marina (she had to rent a house in the elegant part of town, not near this place, which would have been so convenient for Jake) and cook her something to eat—she wouldn't lift a finger—and then take the dog for a walk. No wonder the poor man gave out." Charlotte's tears began to well up again.

"She must have been good in bed," Carl said, a little surprised at his own remark.

"That's what I think," Charlotte said. "Jake thought that he had a prize in Melanie, and you know the story of how long he waited for her." Carl shook his head. "Oh, she was married to a friend of his, and they all had a house together in Boston and worked together running various restaurants in New England. She despised Jake, and when they all went out, she used to make him walk twenty feet behind. People said it was a *ménage à trois,* and then later when the friend died and she married Jake because she was afraid to be alone, people thought that they had been right. And maybe they were, who knows? But Jake was always

grateful for Melanie, and I believe that he would give his life for her. He really tried to create this place for her, so that she would have a properly romantic setting if she wanted to carry on. . . ." Charlotte paused. "It wasn't for a long time after he met her that he found out she could neither read nor write, but I guess that made him love her more. In a way, she was his little child. Someone maimed, in a different way than he was, but maimed nevertheless—like everybody Jake hires—and he saw it as his duty to devote his life to taking care of her, to loving her. She doesn't deserve it, and in this case love is blind. But, you know, the funny outcome of all of it is that I think, in her own way, Melanie loves Jake. Or has come to need him very much. She's not stupid, you know. She's entertaining, lighthearted and quippy in company, and she directed some of the Key West Players' productions so well that they were hits and the Players made a lot of money. They kicked her out—oh, I guess they didn't kick her out, but they didn't ask her to direct any more after she demanded a cut of the profits. She's a main-chance girl, that one. I don't know what she'll do now that she's lost Jake."

"I wonder," Carl said, "where this puts me."

"You mean about the loan?" Charlotte asked.

"Yes," Carl said. And thought a minute. "I think my uncle will go through with the loan if Jake is alive and if the restaurant is running; but if we could only get rid of the gambling thing . . . I won't lie to my uncle about that, Charlotte, because if that is going to go on . . . I don't think this place will last long."

"Neither do I," Charlotte said. "There hasn't been an attempt to open a gambling place, that I know of, in Key West in five years. It wouldn't go long, if it went at all, and then the whole place would be closed."

"That's what I thought," Carl said.

"I'll see Jim tonight, I promise. I don't know where he is now, or I'd get in touch with him. He used to work on the construction gangs but he gave that up. Never sticks with any job, or anyone, long."

Charlotte ended on a wistful note, and Carl did not pursue it. He suggested that they could both use some air and some exercise,

and Charlotte said it would just take her a minute to feed the cats, then get ready to go to the beach.

A half hour later, they were rounding the corner of Whitehead Street at the beach end, passing the place where the colored fishermen set up for sale dozens of their huge, rose-lipped conch shells. It was also the point where one gets an unobstructed view of the sea: it was a day known as spanking—the sun brilliant, the water light green and choppy-glittering, a few wispy white clouds in the sky and some towering ones on the far horizon.

A moment later they pulled up into a parking space on the beach street and Carl helped Charlotte out. She wore a red playsuit, and it seemed to him she had a great deal of paraphernalia; they started for the sand. The Southern Winds' crowd were all sitting together smack in the middle of the area. Charlotte was immediately hailed, because everyone wanted information about Romano, and also because because Charlotte did not often appear on the beach. Happy and Naomi were there, rubbing oil on one another, Happy peering out through those thick glasses which he wore everywhere except in the water. Robin was propped up on one elbow on a towel which said, WELCOME TO KEY WEST, having sacrificed his lion's skin to one of Kent's parties. Kent was just regaining his aluminum beach chair after doing a full, belly-down salaam to a sailor friend who'd passed. Bert, pinker than ever, overpolite, stood up and assisted Charlotte and Carl with the spreading of the huge beach towel which Charlotte had thought to bring. Renee shared a blanket with Troy—were they part-time lovers?—and, although they both had the same sort of dazed expression from their late hours and their other indulgences, they both sat up and waited—along with all the rest —for Charlotte to get settled so that they could hear the news. Even while Charlotte and Carl started to sit down, there was a great deal of conversation and wild conjecture about the matter, but that would stop once Charlotte got going. The only persons who were conspicuous by their absence were Jenny and Nothing-Betty, and then Carl remembered that Jenny had volunteered to help Henri do the shopping for that night and, therefore, she was detained by that (it probably took them a long time to get around to the various stores), and no doubt Nothing-Betty was

waiting at their place for Jenny to pick her up to come to the beach. Carl conjectured they'd be along later.

To a completely attentive audience now, Charlotte launched into a detailed description of her evening at the hospital, of her visit to Melanie and Melanie's behavior and statements—in short, the parts of the story that Carl had heard. All of them listened and their expressions grew more incredulous. Curious, Carl thought, individually he would question the sense of reality of any one of them. But here on the beach, all together, they seemed to share an agreed-upon and, in Carl's estimation, quite vivid sense of reality.

Carl lay on his stomach and looked around. The volleyball game was going, as always, and the players today were the usual proportion of old and fat but hard-stomached men, Navy boys, several of the lower Duval Street barmaids and B-girls, and the extremely lithe person Carl had seen play on his first morning on the beach, whom it was such a pleasure to watch. Near the wall, the celebrity corner was filled. Colliers lay on his stomach in the sand, and he chatted with Alan Houlton, who leaned way over the arm of his beach chair to hear: occasionally Colliers would chortle with laughter—it struck Carl as a very definite chortle, a slow heh, heh, heh. There were several other men and women on both sides of them whom Carl did not recognize: one monkey-faced man, short, heavily built, who jumped to do Colliers' bidding; a lanky, martyrish-looking young man who spoke animatedly to a dark, curly-headed fellow of about his age; and, oh yes, now Carl recognized her, wearing large sunglasses and looking quite youthful and lying back in uncharacteristic silence —Sabre Lockhart, and next to her an extremely nervous, bright-blond young man who couldn't seem to get situated and smoked and changed his position constantly. And in the middle of the beach, under the wooden umbrellas, there were the staid old men and women who came every day, whose skin was bronze and thick and wrinkled, and who watched everything unapologetically—and especially the celebrity corner. Also, scattered about the beach, groups of Navy boys who had somehow gotten free of duty early and who were trying to get a quick tan in preparation for that weekend pass and trip to Miami. And then there were the wall sitters and pier strollers: these people kept their clothes

on—they were usually tourists who merely drove up for a look, or young boys just in from the road who hadn't quite got their bearings, and sailors who really didn't care for the size of the little strip of sand and who, perhaps, sensed the cliquishness.

People from all of these groups trafficked back and forth across the sand to the water and to the soft drink-hamburger stand.

There was an amazing absence of small children, Carl thought, and, of course, no native island people—the conchs—and that included Conch, the boy at the Southern Winds; they hardly ever came to the beach during the winter months. That was a fact. And when they, the conchs, did go into the water, Carl had been told, the younger ones wore the most outlandish outfits—regular shirts and Levis cut at the knee. But, for that matter, a lot of people, Carl had noticed, wore strange outfits into the water; or, if not that, it seemed almost the thing to do to take something odd with one. Carl had been swimming a day or two before, and an old man had said to him, "Water's nice, isn't it?" And Carl had agreed politely, whereupon the elderly fellow had pulled out a thermometer and informed Carl of the exact temperature of the water. In any event, people seemed to try to make themselves at home in the green ocean by taking possessions with them when they went—not to mention the goggled, snorkled, tank-straddled, flippered skin divers who set forth now and then.

Carl turned on his back, propped his hands behind his head and looked around: inshore a pair of pelicans did their abrupt, swift dive, and then, resurfacing, with a shake of their scraggly necks, gulped down great beakfuls of fish. And far out, along the horizon line of towering clouds, Carl saw the destroyers and a submarine or two on maneuvers. A helicopter passed, flying low. The red buoys which marked shallow water rocked noticeably. Carl looked up into the sky.

Beautiful day, innocent clouds.

A day that could easily coerce the unwary, the unaware, the innocent into believing that there was no trouble in paradise. That there were no such realities as the fight to survive, the need to fornicate, the necessity of dying. Such things seemed so far away, so unlikely, so impossible to conceive there on the beach in that straight, clear light. That human motives could be devious, or corrupt, or, worse than anything, totally and forever ob-

scure, unsolvable, just seemed not true. And it crossed Carl's mind that what had happened to Romano might never be known. Who, except Romano, could tell what he had been up to with that room, with those men? What could the doctors say for certain beyond the fact that Romano had had a stroke? What had set it off, if anything? How about that glass? Was Melanie imagining dangers, or did she know more than anyone suspected? She might well know more, Carl thought.

Carl's line of conjecture was interrupted by the arrival of Jenny and Nothing-Betty. Carl sat up: the expression on Jenny's face was one of chagrin and disgust. Jenny threw down her beach things and addressed everyone. "I have now *had* it," Jenny said in her husky voice and so emphatically as to stop any side conversations, "up to here"—she indicated her throat—"and I am finished. Melanie fired me—and Betty."

Wild exclamations from everyone—then stunned silence.

Under her breath, Charlotte said, "Oh no," and stared at the two women as they got seated, as did the rest.

What happened?

Jenny cleared her throat and spoke against an emotion of disappointment and anger and hurt that was easy to see and as easy to understand. "I took Henri in my car, and we spent three hours getting the supplies this morning. It was fun, because Henri was happy about the telegram he got from Flora saying she's on her way back—be here tomorrow night. I helped him up the ramp and into the kitchen with the stuff. Then the three of us, May included, unwrapped everything and sorted it out on the table, and we made a list of what we bought and what we'd need for Saturday and Sunday, and I told Henri I'd help as long as Jake was away. Then Henri went outside a minute to put in a call to Flora. And Melanie came into the kitchen. She looks at me and says, 'What are you trying to do, take over?' " Jenny's voice broke with pure hurt. "I explained to Melanie carefully what we'd done. Then she said, 'We don't need you around here, you and your girl friend; get out and stay out. You're finished as of now. I've known for a long time you and she were talking to people about Jake and me. You've been "reached"; you're part of the gang that's trying to break us down so that you can take over.' And

she stormed out. May was there—she heard it all. We were both so amazed we couldn't talk. After working in the restaurant and the bar for two seasons. That's my story."

Jenny fell back and put her arm over her forehead. Little tears crept out of the corners of her eyes: Carl could not have imagined that the stalwart could cry, but there it was. Everybody was talking at once. Nothing-Betty looked lost and quite humble, now that they were evidently out of jobs, and very willing to accept Jenny's leadership in matters; she opened a book, as usual, however, and pretended to read. Charlotte said she would speak to Melanie as soon as she got back. But Jenny shook her head and said she wouldn't go back if Melanie asked her now, that she'd find something else, even if it was late in the season, or simply pack their things into their car and head north.

It certainly seemed, on the face of it, outrageous and unmotivated. What in the world could Melanie be thinking of? And yet Carl had to acknowledge to himself that he had only been there a week and could not know the intricate involvements (who confided in whom—who never spoke to whom), feuds that had developed over two seasons. And the fact remained: at the moment, Melanie was boss, and her word had to be taken seriously.

Someone in the crowd pointed out that Melanie was probably immensely upset over Jake and that it would be considerate of Jenny to disregard, at least for one more night, Melanie's instructions. Melanie might indeed forget the whole incident. But Jenny seemed to feel that the issue was closed, and Carl could not help but admire the proud, decisive, resourceful way she was handling the matter. Had he been in her position, he would have been more undone.

Carl wondered who would fill in as waiters for Jenny and Nothing-Betty, (Bert, for one) who would help at the bar (probably Robin), and who would assist Henri with the buying (probably Jim).

Melanie was certainly not making the situation any easier. And it occurred to Carl that a wiser course for her to follow would be to let things strictly alone, hope that the place would run itself, and try to do everything to facilitate that. It was inconceivable that Melanie would use her husband's absence as a time to vent

whatever vindictiveness she felt toward anyone around the Southern Winds. She must know she would only be destroying herself and, of course, Romano.

It was about then that Jenny, who had tried to contain herself, absolutely broke down in tears under the tidal wave of conversation directed at her—and she keeled over, weeping into Nothing-Betty's lap, and finally that woman responded by putting her book aside and, with tenderness, stroking Jenny's hair. It would have been a hard heart which could not sympathize with Jenny's situation. "I never did anything to her," Jenny sobbed. "I worked very hard for the Southern Winds, and now I have to go. It's all spoiled." And it became apparent that the incident was more than just a loss of a job for Jenny; she had enjoyed the place, as did they all, and it meant something very personal to her. "She's spoiled it all; I can't understand it," Jenny murmured. And Carl could imagine that Jenny thought the place itself had turned against her, not to mention the sense of unfairness she must feel regarding the unjust reward for her devoted work. Besides the fact of being unemployed, there would be no more pleasant evenings in the bar, no more fun with the gang. . . . Fired. Disestablished. They were all quiet now, except Robin, who said, in his funny, high voice: "I wonder who'll be next. Well, my father is talking about going to Hawaii anyway, so if it's me, it's on to bigger and better beaches. How about a dip?"

Carl had not been in the water yet that day; the big clouds on the horizon had moved nearly overhead, which meant that there might be a little rain; and he needed a respite from all this emotional outlay.

"Be right back," Carl said to Charlotte, and he rose and went with Robin.

"Melanie's gunning for me, too," Robin said as they crossed the beach. "I think I'll be next."

"Charlotte will speak to Jim and Henri; maybe they can arrange this business with Jenny yet, and there won't be any 'next.' "

"My friend, you haven't known Melanie a long time—nor Jenny. They are in their different ways very decisive women. Jenny will never go back."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Carl said.

"Oh, Jenny can take care of herself," Robin said, dismissing the subject. Indeed, his attention, his gaze had wandered. "See that big piece of silver metal over there?" And Robin pointed.

Carl saw near the wall, at the water line, a large and twisted piece of what looked like aluminum bulking out.

"Yes, what is it?"

Robin and he stepped gingerly across the seaweed line and the shell line, up to about their knees in the water.

"Pieces still wash up," Robin said. "A couple of years ago we were all sitting on the beach and from one direction overhead came a Cubana Airlines plane and from the other a Navy plane. They hit, or, rather, the Navy plane clipped the edge of the wing of the Cubana plane. The Navy plane spun off and crashed in a swamp a few miles away, but the Cubana Airlines pilot remained aloft long enough to gun his motors and overshoot the beach—and, incidentally, save all our lives—and went down in the water about three hundred feet out. Forty people, all dead. Arms and legs floating in. Very messy swimming that day. And occasionally you still get a piece of wreckage pulled up by the tide."

It was a hideous story, and Carl let Robin drift away from him in the water as soon as possible. Violence, mystery, perversion—Key West. It was beginning to appall him.

As Carl waded out, he felt distinctly chilly—not just a skin-prickling chill, but one that went all through him. Perhaps he should pass up a dip today. Or at least wait until the weather cleared a bit; the clouds, indeed, had partly obscured the sun. Oh, he'd take a quick one. He stood in water up to his waist. A sudden breeze had even got going. There were other people nearby in the water, however, and they did not seem affected. Carl continued out further until the water reached his chest, then, deliberately falling backward, dunked wholly and paddled along on his back. As it had happened each time he'd swum at South Beach, any preliminary chill dispersed, and the moment was as it had been—untensing, liberating, exhilarating. He kicked his legs, backstroked, made his way slowly into deeper water, but not over his head. It would be necessary to go quite far out to achieve that. When, suddenly, but not seriously, Carl experienced a windedness, a dizziness, and, again, the illish chill. He splashed up-

right, sunk his feet into the soft sand bottom and, staggering a bit, stood up. The water was around his neck. There were people within ten feet of him; he was reassured, and yet he could not control a vague conviction of impending panic. He knew he was steady enough to simply walk the thirty feet or so to shore if he wished. But it seemed absurd to give in to this; it was just nerves, or, finally, a bit too much sun—that everyone had warned him about—finally catching up with him. So he waited a moment, hoping whatever it was would pass. It was then that he saw that the people around him were all making their way in, and, curiously, the people on the beach were gathering up their things, and the people on the pier were standing up and pointing out to sea. Carl's ears were blocked from the water, so he existed in a silent world. He couldn't make out what the matter was, but it was easy enough to surmise that it had probably started to rain, although he'd felt no drops, and people, seeing the storm coming, were retreating. However. Carl looked out to sea in the direction the others were looking and pointing, and he could see no great blackness, nothing—nothing, that is, except some newspapers drifting and turning high up in the sky. The breeze, however, had freshened greatly. And, as he stood there, this puzzled him: everyone in the water had now gone in, everyone on the beach seemed to be arranging to take shelter in the hamburger stand, but the people on the pier were still there, making no effort to leave. Carl wondered if his thinking had been disturbed by the sun. The hell with it—what did a little rain matter? He'd get wet along with the people on the pier. Still, he ought to work his way in leisurely; but as he took a step he tottered and realized that he was more dizzy and without strength than he had thought.

It was then that he tensed. Carl had long considered that physical injury to any other part of the body was not so bad or terrifying as injury to one's senses or distortion of one's senses. Needless to say, the visual or auditory senses, especially—distortions which, presumably, the conscious intelligent individual is perfectly aware of. As Carl reached the point where the water was down around his chest, he could not believe the evidence of his eyes that the water was actually frothing—not vast waves, but white froth. And it alarmed him. Also, he could hardly compre-

hend the fact that the people on the beach were running toward shelter and that the canvas beach umbrellas and light aluminum chairs were not merely being overturned or carried across the sand by the breeze, but were being carried almost straight upward, hurtling aloft. The people on the pier had not left it, but they were all lying down to be out of the way of these objects. Carl looked behind him; the cause of all of this still seemed to be out there. In one place, and in one place only, the sky was very gray, but nothing else. Still, he reasoned, something, some natural phenomenon, must be going on—something that happened in this semitropical land that he had not heard about, nor had ever before experienced anywhere else. And then Carl sensed, rather than saw, the center of this disturbance. He held his footing in the positively boiling sea. It was about fifty feet to his right, having evidently circled right around in back of him, and it was sweeping toward the beach. It was totally invisible, however, except for the fact of its force, except that the clouds directly overhead were swirling.

In a moment of consciously delightful superstition, Carl considered that at last the demon which governed here in Key West had chosen to reveal itself, and perhaps wrathfully. But how amazing and wonderful, he thought—in this very civilized, ultra-arranged world—to have the enemy, the ultimate spiritual enemy, clearly there, tangible, attacking. How to combat it, though, where to get to . . . he was outflanked, and it might very well turn right toward him with its lethal load of flying objects . . . now, indeed, he could not think clearly . . . he distinctly saw Charlotte on the beach in her red bathing-playsuit, frantically waving to him, and then he saw her picked up, revolved slowly about in the air, still in her waving position, and deposited back on the sand on her feet. Impossible. But now she was running toward the water, toward him, and waving frantically, and her mouth was open and he supposed she was calling but, similar to her with her "ear" off, for some reason he could hear nothing. . . . It seemed necessary to Carl to do what he had read somewhere that they had done in primitive times to defend themselves against an unholy intruder. He offered an incantation: Carl said to himself, and he knew his lips were repeating it nonsensically: "Wind and water, sand and sea, sunshine, whiteness, blue. Wind and water, sand and air, do not let

me drown." But that was nonsense! Incantations: there were no such things as demons anymore. Local ones? Evil ones? I thought I saw. . . .

Carl was only conscious then of standing still, of being wet and shivering.

Ridiculous to come down with a cold. But there were several sick people around with one thing or another. How terrible to have committed one's life to someone else's good pair of legs. Or breasts. How could he have seen Charlotte revolve slowly in the air? Absurd. I saw it! Never happened. Speaking of colds, there was a woman at the Parish House once who stayed for a year, who believed absolutely in the legitimacy of her colds. Carl had thought this woman simply a shopgirl at heart, because that is what shopgirls believe. Charlotte, I shall save you—had Houlton said that? But no, he'd better hope for Charlotte to save him just now.

Carl was aware, remotely, of hands upon him, pulling, urging, helping, of course, and there seemed nothing he could do—limbs like rubber. It might help, Carl thought, whatever is happening, if I said it again, and so he said it to himself as they carried him: Wind and water, sun and air, sunshine, whiteness, blue . . . and he was pleased that he had remembered that sequence, at least, perfectly. . . .

When Carl came to, he was lying spread-eagle on a towel on the cement floor of the dressing room of the little bathhouse. There were a couple of familiar faces above him and his head was propped up in someone's lap, someone who was pouring salty fluid down his throat. It was Charlotte doing that, sitting on the floor behind him, and he took the glass she proffered him and drank it down. Charlotte then put a cool cloth over his forehead and asked him how he felt. In answer, he tried to get up, and just made it to the bench along the wall. On advisement, he finished the glass of salt water. And Jenny, Happy and Robin were all telling him he'd had too much sun.

Jenny said to rest a minute and then she'd drive his car back to the Southern Winds for him, and Charlotte would go along and put him to bed.

You are all so kind, he thought, and recalled a famous line of Colliers' concerning dependence on the kindness of strangers.

Jenny (at heart if not in fact, still the captain of the crew of the Southern Winds) said to Charlotte on their way back in his car that tonight at dinner, with herself and Betty not working, and now with Carl out of commission, Charlotte should tell Robin and Bert to wait on tables instead of bus and have everybody do his own bussing. It would slow down the service, she said, but the dining room could function, at least. And to remind Melanie that there had better be sufficient help when the movie-company people arrived Sunday night—even to conscripting Flora again as a waitress.

Jenny said to Carl that he would feel better after four or five hours' rest—in fact, would not have any bad effects at all.

Charlotte asked him if he'd seen the waterspout.

"Waterspout?"

"Oh, it knocked everything all over the place. Baby cyclone, but nothing serious; usually picks up water instead of swirling air, but this one just came in and blew sand in everybody's hair. Rare this time of year."

Jenny drove his car slowly down Duval Street. Carl was about to ask Charlotte if she had revolved in the air but decided against it. It was enough that he had seen . . . and was warned.

When they got to the Southern Winds, they insisted he try to down another glass of water with some salt tablets Charlotte gave him, and he managed it. Charlotte covered him with a sheet as he fell back on his bed (it was good to lie down), and then she did a curious thing: she leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. Carl was very content and happy about her being there.

Carl woke up quickly and without a trace of drowsiness. He also sat bolt upright in his bed. The room was entirely dark, the street light shone through the single window at the far end as before, but there were no traffic noises from below and the house was exceedingly quiet. He had no idea how long he had slept, or what had awakened him, until he heard, then, someone absolutely pounding on his door. Carl threw off the sheet, fumbled for the overhead light, blinked, glanced at his watch—four-thirty, four-thirty A. M.; it couldn't be! But the second hand of his watch was moving, so it had to be, which meant he'd knocked off about twelve hours straight. He wondered irrelevantly if Charlotte had

spoken to Jim, as she had promised, and whether they'd been able to investigate the storeroom. And Carl noticed that he was ravenously hungry. More pounding. Carl unlocked the door and swung it back.

Art Troy, doubled over, hung on to the door with one arm and with the other arm grabbed at his middle. His facial features were all working as he peered up at Carl, his hair was totally dishevelled, his eyes were frighteningly bloodshot and dilated, and Carl thought that the chronic withdrawal symptoms were now quite immediate.

"Carl, please," Troy said hoarsely, "get me to the Monroe Hospital, will you? I'll be all right if I can just get there. They know what to do."

"Yes, yes, Art," Carl said, backing up. "Come in, sit down, my pants . . . my keys. . . ."

"No, it's easier if I just stand like this," Troy said clearly.

Carl saw that he was still wearing his bathing suit, and that his clothes, which Charlotte and Jenny had brought back from the beach for him, were neatly laid out over the single chair in the room. His car keys were in full evidence on top of his clothes. Carl threw on his shirt and, hopping around, fumbled his legs into his pants.

"We'll have to look for the car, Art . . . I don't know where Jenny. . . ."

"Right around the side," Troy said. "Saw it earlier tonight. . . ."

Carl didn't bother with anything, got into his sneakers and started downstairs with Troy.

"Can I help you, Art?" Carl asked as Troy clung to the banister, effortfully letting one foot down after the other. Troy seemed in great pain.

"No," Troy said. "It's all right, if I can just get to the hospital. They've got stuff to knock me out. I've had this before . . . it's . . ." and Troy seemed desperately to want to confide, "from imperfect solutions, or an overdose, or something the stuff didn't mix with in my system. . . ." And Carl gathered without doubt that some sort of dope was involved here.

"Sure about the hospital, Art? No trouble there. . . ."

"No, no . . . they understand . . . no trouble. . . ."

They made it to the street and down the walk. Troy hobbled along. It was sad to see a person as handsome as Troy, and as charming at the piano, so disfigured, so torn.

They found the car. Troy sat on the seat doubled over, his forehead leaning against the dash. Carl got in, gunned the motor and pulled away.

"Hospital's out on Stock Island. Same place they got Jake," said Troy with a tone of bitter humor. "You go out Simonton, turn left on Truman, and all the way out Roosevelt Boulevard. I'll show you where to turn off."

Carl did as he was instructed. He was able to make very good time up Simonton, along Truman . . . and in less than five minutes he was racing pretty fast along Roosevelt Boulevard. It was the same route he and Charlotte had taken to go to the jet show at the air base on Boca Chica Island. In fact, they passed a few sailors hitching back to it. It ran past the hired fishing-yacht basin and the yacht club, and even this early, with the first light dissolving the total tropical night, the boat owners were out and moving around. In fact, it was a lovely time of morning: the air as Carl had never experienced it, wet, forest-aromatic. But Carl felt guilty for enjoying it while Troy was in such a condition. Troy, however, had thrown his head back on the seat now, and his eyes were open.

"I smell it, too," Troy murmured, but with a curious, wistful tone.

"Yes," Carl said, driving a little faster.

"I wish," Troy said low, "I could get off the stuff and ride out like this some morning without feeling like I do."

"Will it be all right, Art?"

"I think so. They've got the antidote out there, whatever it is; they'll keep me overnight. I'll sleep it off, wake up shaking, but I can usually handle it. Tomorrow's Saturday, a big night at the S.W.; I've got to play. . . ."

They passed under a street lamp. Carl glanced at Troy: his face was ticking badly, and he'd seemed to turn gray under the sun tan.

"No chance of getting off, Art?" Carl said, wanting desperately for something helpful—to help Troy talk, which, in a way, Troy seemed to want to do.

"I've tried fighting it. But I've got to play. And I play better

if . . . I've had . . . a fix or two. Nobody knows what nerves . . . my nerves . . . can do to a guy . . . and it helps me, it really does . . . if I'm careful with it . . . it makes me play very beautifully, I think. . . ."

There was a pleading, upward turn in Troy's voice. Troy had turned his face to Carl and Carl said: "I'm sure it does, Art."

"Thanks," Troy said softly. "I begged for that. Well, it's true, I do play better when . . ." and Troy gulped with pain. And pointed, "Swing off . . . here," Troy spat out. And Carl crossed the highway into a little road on the left marked by a white sign which said, "Monroe General Hospital."

A minute or two later, they drove up to the doorway, and Carl went around and helped Troy out; he was terribly doubled over. They were met at the door by a nurse, and Carl and the nurse got Troy into a wheel chair. "Take it easy," the girl said sympathetically to Troy.

Carl was gratified to see that the hospital was modern, air-conditioned, and, apparently, efficient.

The nurse took a moment to jot something in the logbook on her desk—Troy was rocking back and forth in the chair—and then, gingerly, she got behind the chair and pushed it through a swinging door. The place was utterly silent. There was absolutely no hospital odor and Carl thought he detected the odor of flowers. The nurse came back.

"Can I give you any information? Do you want anything from me?" Carl said.

"No," the nurse said cordially but wearily. "Mr. Troy has been here before."

"Will he really be all right tomorrow?"

"Oh yes," she said. "He recuperates almost as fast as he goes down. Couldn't do that in a climate where he didn't get so much sun and air, though. Someday he won't, maybe, but I hope that isn't soon." Her tone was crisp and breezy.

"So do I," Carl said.

"Want some coffee?" the nurse said, lifting a container from her desk so that he could see it.

"No, I won't take your breakfast," Carl said. "I'd better get back." He turned to go. "Oh, shall I call for Troy tomorrow?"

"Not unless you want to," she said. "We have a hospital truck that goes in town several times a day. Troy usually rides back in that. You see, we even deliver them."

She was quite charming, completely objective, excellently trained. Thank God, Carl thought, for intelligent people in crucial places who did their jobs well.

"Good night," Carl said. And then it came to him that Troy had said Romano was in this very hospital. He went back to the nurse. She looked up from her desk patiently.

"Jacob Romano is here, isn't he?"

"Yes," she said.

"You couldn't tell me how he is, could you?"

"I can't," she said matter-of-factly. "I know just about as much as you do. He's alive, and he's a very sick man. Critical list."

"Yes," Carl said, exhaling. "I asked because I work at the Southern Winds. They said to some of the people down there that we just might be allowed a look-in today sometime."

"Came in Thursday night, didn't he?" the nurse said. "You might look in late today. I don't know. The doctors would have to tell you."

Carl nodded. "Yes . . . well, thank you."

She went back to her work and Carl went through the glass doors.

The light had changed again—great streaks of magenta across the sky—the darkness was gone. It was undoubtedly morning. He had better get something to eat. And, except for the hunger, Carl felt alive and well—in sharp contrast to poor Troy—perhaps, indeed, because of the contrast.

Going along the boulevard again, Carl saw that the boat owners were mostly all out now and that their tasks had become specific: to a man, they were either swabbing or polishing. The boats swayed gently and the fittings glittered. Carl thought he would stop at the all-night diner on Duval. Then back to the Southern Winds for his book and possibly a ride on that beach road, to watch the sunrise, to read, and perhaps to consider the decision he had come to Key West to make. He certainly was not sleepy.

At the diner, he sat on a stool near rumpled sailors, who'd closed the bars and still wouldn't give up, and the whores, for

whom six in the morning was midday. Carl ordered orange juice, coffee, fried eggs and potatoes. The former were served up floating in grease, but he gobbled them down and ate the potatoes with his fingers; the coffee was strong and salty, the orange juice was fresh and tart. Carl experienced for the first time a strange kind of fitting in here, the inward wherewithal to meet the challenge of this town.

From the diner he drove slowly down Duval toward the house. When he was a block away, he saw a moderate-sized and unfamiliar truck swerve out of the driveway which led from the loading platform of the Southern Winds, rev up rapidly on the street, take the corner beyond the house with tires screeching, and disappear.

If he was not mistaken, he knew the game. He parked his car in front and went up the front path. Just inside the entrance door was the door to the storeroom. The lights in the main hall were still lit. With one finger, Carl pressed against the storeroom door. It opened. He pushed it back all the way . . . in the anteroom junky furniture piled to the ceiling, and beyond that the few cases of liquor Romano kept in reserve. But he would have to go in to see further. Carl propped the door open with one of the antiques. Just enough light came in from the hall to let him see as he progressed. He reached the entranceway of the large room where he had come upon Jake and Melanie. As he had anticipated, the room was completely empty.

Saturday, March 1

PARKED on the beach road, Carl watched the sun rise, read his book and decided he'd retreat that day to one of the local churches for what Ben called "a quiet time," although he felt that the direction of his feelings about his career in the ministry were already indicated.

He drove back to the Southern Winds about eleven, intending to see Charlotte, if she was in, and tell her about the storeroom, and, indeed, just as he arrived at Charlotte's door (it was open) he was accosted by *her*—and told that if they set out immediately, they would be allowed to visit with Romano at the hospital. Charlotte said also that May would like to go and was ready and waiting in the kitchen.

Carl simply dropped his book upstairs, turned around, went downstairs, and, with Charlotte, who wore a cabbage-rose dress, and May, outfitted in a prim navy dress, he found himself a few minutes later once more on the road to the hospital on Stock Island.

There was not much conversation; neither Charlotte nor May expressed surprise when he told them about Troy. As it developed, Troy had made his five A. M. emergency call several times on each of them, and they were not amused. On the other hand, neither were they censorious; it seemed their attitude involved an acceptance of the inevitability of it, as far as Troy was concerned, and a wish that when it happened again, he'd knock on somebody else's door.

"I don't mind helping him with his problems," Charlotte said. "Even late at night. But not *that* late. I lock my door now, or, rather, I had an automatic lock put on."

They were both far more concerned with Romano.

May's caustic wit had deserted her entirely. She seemed, indeed —as she had been in the patio when Romano was prostrated— on the verge of tears. Carl could see in the rear mirror that she sat very straight and that she sat in the middle of the back seat.

Out of her kitchen and away from her chores, she seemed uncomfortable, lost. Now and then she would say a soft yea or nay to Charlotte, but not much more. She appeared genuinely and sadly impressed with the correctness of her prognostication about Romano's outcome.

Charlotte, on the other hand, tried to be positive. She said that people recovered from strokes; she doubted Melanie's diagnosis of poisoning, thought it the perfectly understandable statement of an hysterical woman whose husband had just been stricken; said that among May, Henri, Jim and herself, they could keep the place going until either Jake got back to take over or the season (and the movie-company business) ended. Romano would certainly be in shape for the next season and—indeed, if he chose to keep the S.W. open all summer—for the details of *that* operation, which could not be too great, because there simply was not that much summer traffic in Key West. Charlotte offered, too, that the rest would do Romano good and, glancing meaningfully at Carl and speaking slightly lower, said that there would be a chance to discourage certain undesirable associations of Romano's.

"You mean the gambling?" May said archly.

Charlotte turned around swiftly to face May, and Carl's impulse, except for the driving, was to do the same.

"Oh," May said. "I know everything. There isn't much I don't know about that old scoundrel. I told him he'd never get away with it."

"How did you know?" Charlotte said.

"I knew," May said. "My crazy husband cleans up the place, remember?"

"I didn't know until Carl told me he'd seen the room," Charlotte said emphatically. "But if Jake had told me, I'd have demanded out."

"Which is why he didn't tell you," May said. "But if he'd made money for you, and offered you a coupla extra thousand, you wouldn't have minded that."

"I don't think that remark. . . ."

"Forget it," May said. "I'm sorry, Charlotte. You're one of the few around here I like . . . and Jake likes you . . . if there is a Jake any more."

"You knew about that room then," Carl said over his shoulder.

"Sure," May said. "They moved the stuff in late one night about two weeks ago. Never used it, though. They were waiting till all the right connections in town were made. Didn't make 'em. If I miss my guess, that's what Jake really wanted your uncle's money for—the pay-off."

"Well, they moved the stuff out last night," Carl said.

Charlotte now turned abruptly to him. "How do you know *that?*"

"I saw the van pull away, and the room is open. And, except for the anteroom, empty."

"Then maybe those guys did have something to do with Jake," Charlotte said. "They were on the porch with him when he . . ." Charlotte did not finish the thought; it was a fairly formidable one.

"Naw," May said. "He probably had another stroke. He was due for one. Then his pals from Miami got scared—him not around—and pulled out their equipment, that's all. Suppose you went to the police," May continued. "What would you tell them? That Jake planned to have gambling, had the room set up, and got bogged down in arrangements for protection? Jake would be the only one to go to jail, right from the hospital."

As bitter as it was, Carl thought that May was thinking clearly, if her premises were correct. But he was not sure . . . sure! He had forgotten what the remotest feeling of sureness, certainty, was like. Reality had become lately (or he was making of it) a dream . . . not a dream into reality, but reality itself, of which he was cognizant and conscious, into a dream.

At the hospital a nurse received them and said that Romano was still on the critical list; they would be allowed to stay just long enough to say hello; Romano would probably not be able to answer them.

They were ushered down a hallway, glass-enclosed, but with curtained rooms on one side, and a glass wall looking out over the water on the other. The day, as usual, was perfect. The sun tried to burn through the glass, but the halls were cool. To be sick and confined to a hospital on a day like this . . . to be dying. . . .

The nurse stopped at a panel, knocked, slid it back, popped her head in (there was evidently another nurse sitting there with Romano), and beckoned them to follow her.

The curtains had been drawn so that the room was dark and, of course, temperate and quiet. Romano lay slightly elevated in the bed and completely surrounded by an oxygen tent. There was a hissing noise that Carl guessed was the oxygen feeding in. And a tank of it, with a mask, stood only a foot or so from Romano's head. A nurse was seated nearby.

She stood up and let them each come to a side of the bed. May was on the right, Charlotte on the left, Carl at the foot. The other noise in the room was Romano's breathing, still irregular and stertorous.

Since what there was of the light came through the drawn curtains from behind the bed, it was hard to see the figure in it, but slowly, as Carl's eyes became accustomed, and through the obscuring plastic tent, Carl saw Romano, a great heap of person under the sheet, with his long white arms straight down beside him. The nurse in charge now moved up to Romano, reached in and held one of those arms firmly. Romano's head moved from an averted position to a forward one. Carl could not see at all clearly, but Romano seemed unshaven, his skin positively gray; and his eyes, deep-sunk in their sockets as they had been, now sunk even further, just indefinite shadows.

"You have guests, Mr. Romano," the nurse said clearly.

The body itself was still. A finger twitched slightly, the head moved a little from side to side, the lips parted, and Charlotte and May and Carl strained their attention to receive any word or sign. Carl waited for that guttural mumble, no matter how subdued. But hardly anything came. Romano seemed to be trying, but there was only a moment or two of high-pitched, utter gibberish. Now the head rolled some from side to side, the fingers twitched a little more, as if the person there were making a supreme effort to get through; but it also seemed as if all his human faculties were blocked, had failed. The nurse removed her hand from Romano's arm. And shook her head.

Carl glanced at May: great absurd tears rolled down her face.

And tears came also from Charlotte's eyes, except her eyes were wide with disbelief and stunned perception.

"Say something to him," the nurse said. "He may be able to hear you."

And May began on a halting monologue, a series of disconnected intelligences about the Southern Winds, the kitchen especially, the fact that the fan was working good. Interspersed with her blowing her nose and finishing with, "Oh, Jake, get better."

Charlotte tried to be forthright, said that Henri was doing the shopping, Jim was tending bar, and that she was doing her job and filling in where needed, and not to worry, they'd keep going until he got back.

And then it was Carl's turn and he said, "Try not to worry, Jake, I'm sure that with the business doing as well as it is, Ben will send down the loan."

But no sign from Romano, no sign at all. In fact, the fingers had stopped, the head was averted.

The nurse nodded to them and they left the bedside and went out. She smiled and, stepping back inside, she slid the paneled door closed behind them.

All three were much affected; May leaned against the glass wall for a minute. The brightness out here was cruel. But it was impossible just to walk away.

"I knew this would happen," May said, blowing her nose again hard. "Knew the way things were going. . . ."

"You should have told me," Charlotte said softly, sincerely. "I might have helped."

"Yes," May said. "I probably should have, but I've known him for years, he seemed to be all right. . . ." She broke down again in sobs.

Carl had had no idea that Romano meant so much to this tart New Englander; but there were no pretenses now, and it was evident her dependence on Romano had been very great. It was also evident, to them all, that there would be no easy recovery in the near future.

And then May said one more thing, not meant with malice, but characteristic of her, "If that's the way he'll be, he'd be better off dead."

Charlotte did not answer, and Carl imagined that silence was her method of sad agreement. And it was strange—he found himself agreeing, too; he'd heard that phrase before; it was one of

the few things that caused everything in Carl to rebel; where there was the least spark of life, it was worth preserving. But he had not conceived of the sort of thing he had just seen, an almost idiot state of being, which, if that was all there was for the individual, could only be an insupportable burden . . . and, perhaps, the other . . . was preferable.

Just as they were about to go, Melanie came down the corridor. She was neat in a gray dress and high heels, bejeweled, perfectly made up and apparently composed; the fall of her husband had not seemingly distressed her; but her eyes gave her away, and her voice—both were frantic.

"He's all right," Melanie said as she clicked up to them. "But he's been seriously injured. The first thing they did, you know, was pump him out. Somebody slipped him a dose. . . ."

"A dose, your . . ." May said, and Carl knew she was about to be crude out of sheer impatience. "He had a stroke, Melanie," May said flatly.

"Yes, he had a stroke," Melanie said indignantly, "brought about by heightened blood pressure from something somebody put into his drink."

Charlotte looked from one to the other to Carl, as if she either could not hear or did not trust her hearing.

"Oh, my God," May said, turning to them. "Let's get out of here."

Melanie's voice went up three octaves. "Do you think I'm talking through my hat? I've just come from the head doctor's office and he agrees with me that Jake might have been poisoned. I'm going to get to the bottom of this situation and root out everybody responsible. They won't find it so easy to get the place away from Jake and me. And I have a pretty good idea who it is."

"A head doctor is what you need," May said, rather too flippantly, Carl thought. And May began to walk away. Charlotte didn't move, and, consequently, neither could he.

"How dare you talk to me like that!" Melanie said crisply. But, with effort, caught herself up and said to May's back: "I don't put the blame on you, but if you've been instructed to oppose me, you can take that fool husband of yours, any time you want to, and leave."

Now Melanie had had her flippancy.

May turned around and said very calmly: "Lady, leave is just what we intend to do, me and my fool husband."

Charlotte and Carl strongly remonstrated with the other two. The loss of May would be a serious blow to the Southern Winds —much worse than the departure of Jenny and Nothing-Betty— and, therefore, to Melanie's income and, therefore, to Jake, who needed the money so desperately now. Both women were distraught, saying things they didn't mean.

"Then do it," Melanie said with hardness. "I don't need you. You're an obstruction. Your kind I can hire in Miami a dime a dozen. Kitchen cook. Ha! Daddy-O could do a better job."

"Then get Daddy-O," May said, ice-cold.

Glass-paneled doors slid open, several nurses appeared and there was confusion. They were all hustled out into the entrance foyer of the hospital.

"When will you pull out on me?" Melanie said to May, a touch of panic in her voice now. Carl thought she would have given anything for the slightest show of contrition on May's part, and she herself would have easily given an apology had she been asked. But neither woman budged.

"Not pulling out 'on you,' " May said. "You just told me to go. Remember? If you don't, I got two witnesses. Goin' as soon as we get our stuff packed and the old coupé down off the jacks."

"Well," Melanie said. "I hope you have the decency and loyalty to Jake, if not to me, to stay through Monday until I can contact the Miami agencies on the phone to send someone down."

"I'll do that," May said calmly, decisively. "For Jake's sake."

Charlotte tried then to interfere, but Melanie turned her back and went inside and May started out the door toward the car. Carl estimated that by Monday maybe the situation would alter, but when they got settled in the car, May said: "Just threw away ma bonus. Well, can't worry about that. And don't you worry, Charlotte, she'll find someone from Miami to do my job. I wouldn't have stayed without Jake's being around anyway, with that crazy woman in charge. . . ."

Carl wondered how many of the rest of the help would feel that way, and, indeed, how many of the customers. . . .

"She'll never get anyone to work as you worked," Charlotte said, fairly undone now, as ineffective as Carl about all of it—and there was no court of appeal. Melanie was boss, and unless they all got together, Carl thought, and tried to put her away . . . but it hadn't come to that, surely. And who knew? Maybe Melanie was right after all.

"A-course she will," May said. "Might have to pay 'em a little more, but they'll do it. About time the old man and me packed up and went north anyway. A little earlier than we expected, but not much. Got to open our house, go and see my old boss on the Cape maybe, get me fixed up in a kitchen for the summer season."

There was a tone of finality in her voice, of acceptance, even relief and anticipation.

After that, they were all silent. The whole way back. Carl dropped May off at her kitchen, took Charlotte to the newspaper office. They agreed they would speak to each other later, and Carl drove back and parked his car near the Southern Winds.

Then he walked up Duval Street toward the white-stucco, tall-windowed Episcopal Church, against a stream of sailors heading in the other direction.

The Navy is paid in Key West on the first and the fifteenth of the month. This is a fact with emotional consequences, as the town police, the town merchants and the B-girls will readily tell you. On the first and fifteenth the streets are crowded with white uniforms, and if payday falls on a Saturday, as it happened to do that month, the boozing begins as early as two in the afternoon. And lasts until the bars close at four A. M. And even longer if you have a car—the bars on Stock Island are open all night. This special activity is prolonged for not more than two or three days; by that time the money has been mostly spent. But on the first and fifteenth, how the liquor flows!

Carl made his way up Duval Street against the tide of sailors heading for the bars on lower Duval. It was only three o'clock, but most of these would have a load on by six or sooner. They were merry on their liberty, with money in their pockets, and they progressed toward the nirvana of liquor, music and girls (not so many girls or such good ones, but there were a few places they

hung out and would dance with you if you bought the drinks), with many a quip hurled back and forth among the groups walking.

The Episcopal Church was three blocks above the Southern Winds and only a block below the central business district. It was a lovely, lofty white building with a single tall bell tower at the side, surrounded by palm trees and shrubbery, and with all its doors and windows flung open. Carl had passed it both walking and driving many times now, and he had, on several occasions, been on the point of entering, but the moment was not opportune. This day, however, he was prepared.

Carl entered the church, crossed the tile floor and seated himself in a back pew. Several others were there. It was a beautiful place: the slanted roof was made of polished small planks, and it was very high. The ornamentation was simple—splashes of red and white and gold. The tall, thin, stained-glass windows on the left-hand side caught the sunlight. A painting of the crucifixion hung over the altar. The effect was exactly right: brilliance, simplicity and openness. Indeed, through the lower windows along the side, one saw nothing but the billowing and flowering red poincianas. Considering the fact of the church's proximity to the main street, the silence was stunning. And yet, of course, distantly, one could hear the whir of wheels on the pavement, and just now the voices of the young men passing, calling to one another in pleasant tones. Not unuseful reminders of the immediacy of the world, Carl thought, in a room where one could so easily lose oneself. Carl knelt to pray.

Now Carl had had at least one good lesson in the art of prayer, and it happened to him where so many have been affected—in St. Peter's in Rome. It was during his "gentleman's time in Europe," his uncle's college graduation present, and it had been summer. Rome was very hot. Pilgrims jammed the great gold church, although there had been no special occasion . . . a sight to see; they arrived in buses, looking frazzled and unkempt, but, with a leader holding a banner before them, they marched down the central aisle toward the altar and gathered round it to pray. There was reason, therefore, if one wanted to kneel there, to be quick, in order to get it out of the way. Carl had knelt, his mind open for

guidance, as he had been taught, and two thoughts were given to him. The first: have sympathy for yourself; and two: get up off your knees because they hurt. These were both immensely sharp impressions, and Carl had left that house pondering them. The second he felt he certainly understood—it meant be brief; but the first statement of guidance he felt he had not yet wholly grasped. He knew that it did not mean to pity himself, and that it meant more than merely self-compassion. This experience had its influence on Carl Solon as he knelt there in Key West to pray.

"Lord, help Jake Romano to recover, and help me to know what I am to do with my life, whether in your service or not. Also, help me to understand these people I am with here in this town, and the effect of the town itself upon me, for I feel it is having a special effect. Help me, if I may, to be helpful to others here, and to continue to try to understand what is meant by having sympathy for myself. I ask it in Jesus' name. Amen."

Carl got off his knees and sat back on the seat. Certainly, he thought, he did not much understand the behavior or the motives of the people he had met at and through the Southern Winds. They seemed to operate out of a unity and a disunity of which he had no personal experience. What held them all together he could but barely conceive. As far as helping anyone was concerned, he had been remiss in the extreme. An invalid spiritual agent, as Ben would say. Carl remembered the moments, the many times in the last week or so, when Ben would have stepped in with the right word or phrase, to make a superbly positive situation out of a grimly negative one. But, of course, he was not Ben. And that sort of thing, if he attempted it, would be ludicrous. Still, he had been aware of the necessity—and his lack. Perhaps, in this case, to have sympathy with himself might mean to observe, and to consider this new experience, and to realize that, indeed, there was much he did not know about people and had better learn.

There was much about himself he *had* discovered in the last few days. However, some curious drive, some life or self quite separate from his conscious existence, seemed to be trying to assert itself finally. Finally, because he had sensed it long ago. It came closest to being a hunger, a need; in any event, it seemed to want

fulfilling; but what it was, or what fulfilled, Carl did not know. It was the same thing that he'd seen in others—automatic, and, it would appear, sometimes quite destructive. It was, in any event, a source of motivation often unharnessed and out of control—and that, more than anything else, was probably what made it dangerous. To have sympathy for himself in this instance would seem to mean to try to understand this . . . in him. As, indeed, Houlton seemed to have attempted an understanding. Strange, that Houlton should come to his mind. Still, of all those here, he probably lived the most consciously perceptive life. What responsibility Houlton took for what he knew was another matter entirely. In fact, he took little. But that was not the point. The point was to discover the nature of this many-faceted nascent drive. It looked from one standpoint to be the very stuff of connection with other people. And he felt instinctively that his own drive would be different in kind from Houlton's. And that he could achieve mastery over it someday without crushing it or letting it come forth and master him. But it did seem important to know it, to let it burgeon, to seek some fulfillment of it. Perhaps, after all, this is what Ben meant when he said, "Let go and let God."

All of which indicated, Carl thought, that he was a poor candidate for the ministry, although he had heard Ben declare that the best young men for the church were those who came to God with their weaknesses in their outstretched hands. Well, it was another remark of Ben's that hit home for some, but not for him. Carl acknowledged to himself that he had never felt a call, that he had not the exquisite capacity—a capacity he had actually witnessed in some of the young preministerial students around the Parish House—of a perfectly natural knowing of men's hearts and God's will. He simply did not. And, since that was the case, to undertake responsibility for the salvation of others, when he had not even begun upon his own, seemed totally wrong. He would tell Ben no. He believed that God had a will for him, but that it was not the ministry. And, of course, Carl felt, having made that decision, a relief and a sense of direction, even if he was proceeding in the dark.

It was time to go.

Carl got up and left the church.

He headed back along the three blocks toward the Southern Winds; he wanted to take a nap. It was Saturday, which meant that the business in the restaurant that night would go at full tilt and he would need his wits about him. The early rush for the bars on lower Duval Street appeared to have abated; no one was walking down the street in the direction he went; indeed, there was a group of sailors coming toward him—presumably they'd already "done" those bars. In fact, there were seven sailors coming toward him, in civilian clothes but unmistakably Navy because of their shoes and socks, seven men walking abreast on the sidewalk, and, for some reason, looking all disgruntled and pugnacious. It was not hard to understand: it was early in the day; except for the bars, there was nothing to do; amusement was not easy to come by. So, Carl guessed, they were looking for trouble.

As they proceeded toward Carl, the two in the middle of the group conducted a brief conference and then said something to the others. All seven were slightly unsteady on their feet, Carl noticed. He also knew that he was going to have difficulty getting by, no matter which side he chose to pass on. They were watching him, and they would tighten their formation so as to block him. Whether it would be a brief moment of ribbing, or whether he was going to have to fight, he did not know. They were now within a few feet of him. He tried to edge to the right, but they presented a solid barricade. He came to a halt and they formed a loose circle around him. Curiously, although some vehicular traffic was passing, there wasn't another pedestrian on the street for at least a block in either direction. Broad daylight: four-ten in the afternoon, Carl thought, glancing at his watch, how absurd!

One of the young men, who had been in the center and who was apparently the agitator, was tall, and he was equipped with dangling, coarse, farm hands and very dull eyes. This fellow put up these hands now and began making gentle feints at Carl's face.

"C'mon," he muttered thickly, "take a swing, just one swing."

The rest of the group watched as if it were a show of some kind. It had happened fast, and, Carl thought quickly, whatever was going to happen would go fast, too. Although there was no time to think about it, really, Carl simply wondered what he'd better

do. One against seven. In the movies, again, yes; in life, maybe, but not usually. The fellow kept up his belligerent feinting and parrying of Carl's nonexistent blows. Carl had heard all the ugly stories of unprovoked and unpremeditated teen-age violence, but he had never quite believed them. And, curiously, he still didn't believe them. Quite lightly, then, the fellow actually connected with Carl's face.

The lack of sense of it, the complete reasonless action of this particular buffoon, and the others' passive condoning of it! Outrage rose up in Carl like vomit. That life should so place anyone —these boys! himself!—in such a ridiculous and meaningless position, ridiculous as far as they were concerned because they were letting off anxiety of which they hadn't the least knowledge, ridiculous as far as he was concerned because he was now called upon to defend himself against impossible odds, impossible in the sense that they existed at all, and impossible in the sense of succeeding against them. Still, he couldn't just take it: he put up his guard. Physical violence again, so soon again—only this wasn't Kent; this was a strength which, if released, could seriously injure him. O.K., so be it again. Now that Carl's guard was up, a slight smile twisted the features of the lurching figure in front of him, and Carl was being crowded back to the wall; the other's arm was bent and fist readied for a haymaker, and Carl kept his eye on it.

But Carl's sense of outrage and fiasco had communicated itself. The others' interest in the fun melted, they grabbed the pugnacious one by both arms and held him back. He began to curse loudly and Carl joined him, but louder, with all the ferocity of the indignation that gripped him. For one moment, the other stopped in surprise, then started toward him again, but the rest drew him away. And Carl saw why—a gray patrol wagon was coming down the street. Pulling along Carl's particular adversary, the seven sailors continued up the street. The wagon stopped at the curb.

"Trouble?" an officer said.

"No trouble," Carl said, controlling his voice.

"Looked like trouble to me."

"No," Carl said again, turning away, feeling anxiety swell over

him like a chill, as the possibilities of the situation he had just encountered occurred to him. This was the fear that he had no time to feel. But: "No trouble," he said. As with Denise, it was pointless to make an issue. The turbulence was passed. There was nothing more to be said or done; nothing had happened. Had something really happened, it would have been different. Nothing had. Carl felt the trouble really started when the person involved in such an incident began to celebrate it to himself and to others. It had become quite apparent to Carl that this was a town in which one lived, in a sense, fairly close to physical reality, to physical violence; and since that was the case and he knew it, why be surprised or upset when one came to grips?

He continued in the direction of the Southern Winds. But he continued to feel rage. His heart was pounding; he was angry not at these bastards—and they were, in a sense—but at the nature of the existence that allowed for such things. That was the real enemy—the compulsion, motiveless, reasonless, which had permitted the action. Here it was again, forces erupting in human beings of which they hadn't the least notion. That was the issue. Forces of a different sort erupting in him in Key West of which he hadn't the least notion. That was *his* issue. Curious, his standing up to them. Now that he thought about it, it might have been wiser, considering the seven, to have made a run for it. But he had not.

And, Carl wondered, what was it on this island that undid one's civilized reconciliations, that caused one to exist, defensively and offensively, in the center of perhaps more primary life forces? In many ways, in this town, a man was challenged down to the ground, and it was something in the nature of the situation here generally, he felt—not only his situation. It was certainly vitalizing in one way: he was now, of course, tingling with life again, as he had been after the sleep which followed the waterspout incident, but it could go too far, and if it did, it might be paralyzing.

He reached the path of the Southern Winds. What he wanted to do more than anything just then was to go down to one of those noisy bars on lower Duval and let the bongo-drum music of an especially wild Negro quartet he had seen at The White Cap bar

play over his nerves. But it would be a hard night in the restaurant; he'd better calm down and do as he'd planned. Afterward, after eleven, I will go, Carl thought.

* * * * *

Word was out about Romano's real condition, and, at dinner, sitting around with Kent, Happy and Naomi, Robin, Bert, and Conch, Carl saw only glum faces. And he guessed his own face was glum, too. Not to mention the fact of Jenny's and Nothing-Betty's absence and the impending departure of May. May was not well liked because of her bitter tongue, but she was recognized by the crew for her efficiency and devotion to the Southern Winds. Kent said she had even gone out with Henri that morning to help him buy the supplies.

There wasn't much conversation until they'd almost finished their dinners. Then Robin said: "Well, I, too, will be leaving town, I guess. My dad's sold the boat, the trailer and the car, and he says we're going to Hawaii."

Now Robin might or might not be serious, Carl thought. He glanced at Robin, but there was only a deadpan expression on his face.

"No, I mean it, really," Robin said. "Off to bigger and better beaches. No use staying around Key West any more. Town's through. Not like it used to be. Now, I'm told on the beach at Waikiki it's possible to get a tan in two hours if you go at it right. And talk about water skiing—my God, everybody does it; comes to people as easily as walking. . . ."

It was a description of a pointless existence, Carl thought, but Robin truly seemed to look forward to Waikiki as some men might look forward to a promotion at their jobs. Such commitment to an obsession had some admirableness about it, if only for its steadfastness.

"It's a long way," Carl said idly. "How will you go?"

"Dad says fly," Robin said. "It'll cost him a fortune, but that's what he wants, and I have to go with him because he won't give me any more money if I stay here. Well, I don't mind flying. Any other way takes time and I might lose an awful lot of my tan."

Robin still spoke with absolutely no expression, but Carl guessed he was saying these things with full knowledge of their absurd and amusing quality and trying thereby to dispel the troubled air.

"What about the money you owe?" Kent said. It was a deliberate attempt to embarrass.

"Well, now, the money I owe to other people, and some of the merchants," Robin said, "will have to be tax-deductible as uncollected debts in the case of the merchants and, in the case of my friends, tax-deductible as contributions to a worthy cause: the maintenance of the world's most accomplished beach boy."

"And me?" Kent said.

"You," Robin said, "I have taken care of. In payment and grateful acknowledgment of all you've done for me, I'm going to leave my most treasured possession . . ." Robin paused for effect. "My water skiis."

"Because you can't take them on the plane," Kent said.

"You know, you've lost a lot of your sense of humor lately," Robin said.

" 'Tween you and me, my dear," Kent said, "you're right. Murcee, yes. Getting fed up with all of this round here. Now Jake's gone, you won't see me here too long. No, no."

Carl was sorry to hear them talk like that; now, indeed, was the time when they were most needed to keep the Southern Winds afloat. On the other hand, that was the nervous nature of these resort operations, he guessed, which recruited their help from whatever source available. If Melanie kept things in hand at all, it would be with a complete turnover in personnel. But, then, there were a lot of people in town looking for waiters' jobs, he supposed, and she'd no doubt find others to fill their places. But Carl wondered if Melanie alone would be able to preserve the special atmosphere.

The public phone in the hallway rang. Bert, who was on his way into the kitchen, changed his course and went up the several porch steps into the hall to answer it. A minute or two later, he came out and stood at the top of those stairs. He just stood there. They all turned to look at him.

"Who's it for?" Kent said.

"I don't know," Bert said vaguely. "I think it's something terrible."

Carl thought that if this was a sample of Bert's theatrical ability, the poor fellow had better stick to writing poetry. No individuality about it. His lines were said too softly, too humanly.

Kent got up. "Shall I take it?"

"It's some man," Bert said, his eyes wandering, "who says he's a state trooper and that the only address they have is this one, that they've only a last name to go by."

"What's the name?" Kent said quickly.

"Herron, Herrin . . ." Bert conjectured.

"Hurrow!" Kent said. "That call's for Henri; it's Flora they're talking about."

"Shall I disturb him?"

And Carl understood Bert's apprehension. To speak to Henri now would be like approaching a star performer just before the curtain rose.

"You damn well better," Kent said.

Bert turned and went to do so. And in his place at the top of the porch sairs, Carl saw Charlotte's cats, Babe and Tig, loose again, looking down startled at the group in the dining room. And, a minute later, Charlotte's piercing call—"Babe, Tig, come on, you darlings, come to your mother; don't make me chase you" —and the slapping sound of Charlotte's slippers as she hurriedly descended the inside stairs, and the sight, shortly, of her as yet unmade-up self hastening into the dining room after the cats. She waved gaily to everybody and retrieved the cats from under the bushes at the side.

Once more, having had their little game, they accepted with docility a place under each of her ample arms. Charlotte had her ear on, and Kent told her what Bert had just told them. Charlotte stood there while they all listened to Henri run downstairs (followed by Bert, who joined them), close the telephone-booth door, and a minute later open it and go upstairs again.

"I have to go and finish dressing," Charlotte said. "I'll knock on his door and find out what's happening."

Meanwhile, it was getting on six o'clock; Henri was due to arrive in five minutes in his usual dramatic fashion. The waiters

brought their dishes to the kitchen and came back to the patio and stood around. They could see beyond the entrance that people had already begun to line up outside. It was conceivable that, along with the usual Saturday night crowd, some of the movie-company people would have arrived a day early to swell the number of customers they'd serve tonight. It got to be six—the chimes sounded—then six-five, six-eight, and finally six-ten.

"Something's up," Kent said.

"I think . . ." Bert began, but there was no necessity. Charlotte came back downstairs to take up her post at the cashier's desk. She was made-up and dressed now, but she was extremely solemn. She walked to where they stood in the rear.

"It's Flora," she said. "Head-on collision. Bahia Honda bridge. With a truck. Cadillac rammed so hard it flipped over the guard-rail and into the water. If Flora wasn't dead when she hit, she drowned when the car went over . . . they haven't recovered the body . . . found some papers floating. I don't know," Charlotte said, turning around and looking toward the inside stairs, "what he's going to do. . . ."

Each of them was horrified.

Carl doubted that the Southern Winds would open that night. At this point, he thought, Henri was probably in need of a doctor. Carl wondered if he ought to go up and try to help, to say something . . . but he guessed not. And then he remembered his own anxiety that first afternoon, driving down to Key West on the slotlike highway. Flora would have been driving just as he had, into the sun. Carl could visualize the girl cutting out from behind to pass, perhaps, and the massive truck front coming the other way . . . and the skidding and the noise . . . and the blackout as the picture-making mechanism in Flora's head was crushed. Carl remembered Henri's words: "And there's no way to help—nothing I can do to stop her." Every one of them was affected and quiet.

Somebody said that they ought to phone Melanie. But nobody did.

But then, as it happened each night for all of the nights Carl had been there and seen it, a switch clicked, the triple spotlights over the charcoal broil went on, and they all heard the slow and

steady step upon the stairs. Henri appeared in uniform—his tall, puffed white hat at its usual angle, mustache scrupulously curled —and they watched him as, impassive, he went behind the broil and signaled to Charlotte to let the rope down, to let the customers in. Henri intended to do his job as he always did it. As much as anyone might question Henri's relationship with Flora, one could not help acknowledging the man's suffering and, now, the quiet bravery with which he bore it.

The customers hurried in; they were seating themselves and, in a moment, would be looking around for service. The saddest fact then, as Carl thought about it and could imagine it through Henri's eyes, was that the world went on . . . despite one's loss . . . when, by rights, it should stop . . . and grieve with one. But it did not, and several minutes later Henri was receiving steak orders and putting the meat on to broil, just as he always did, but, tonight, his face a calm mask, his actions mechanical.

It unnerved Carl greatly to go to Henri and merely give an order. There was so much more to say. Yet perhaps it was better this way: to continue, simply, to do what there was to be done until one could reconcile, adjust. Despite his sorrow, through the whole busy evening Henri never asked for a repeat of an order or made a mistake in the preparation of one.

Melanie arrived on the scene at the tail end of the evening. Carl got a look at her as she stood chatting first with friends at tables, then with Charlotte at the cashier's desk; the strain she was under was beginning to show; her hair was undone and her eyes were haggard. She spoke with Charlotte and smoked nervously. Carl could not hear what they said, but a few minutes later word drifted around to them all that she'd spent all day at the hospital, that Romano's condition had not changed, that he was still in the tent, still being fed intravenously and catheterized. There were mutterings and headshakings among the crew, and it was the general consensus that Romano was all washed up. But Carl thought that no change in the man's condition meant at least he was no worse. And although he had considered it would be a grim thing to live as an utter cripple, Carl could not resist the old, persistent belief that where there was life, there was indeed some hope.

In any event, it was good to know that Romano was all right as far as the Southern Winds was concerned. If Melanie could hold on here, they had a very profitable thing. Carl had never seen such a crowd as they served that evening—without even taking into account the fact that some of the picture people had drifted in a day earlier than expected. Surely, with a reputation thus well established, the place would move almost on its own, and some arrangement of the finances could be made. Carl intended to leave Monday, as planned, to keep in touch with Charlotte as to Romano's condition, to tell Ben everything—and Carl thought that Ben would still lend the money, would certainly stick by Romano as long as he was alive. As to the gambling angle, Carl did not think Romano would soon be in any position to manipulate such an enterprise and that the money, if Ben loaned it, would go into the restaurant and, possibly, the bar, where it belonged. Carl thought these things over as he hurried about his duties. It was going on ten-thirty, the dining room was still jammed, people had lingered long over their meals—most of them were finishing their main course. But there were, as always, one or two late parties who were just starting. Carl conjectured that he would not get out of the dining room this night until eleven-thirty or so.

Considering the strain all of the help was under, the affairs of the restaurant had run with surprising smoothness. Perhaps special attention had been paid and there was a certain gratitude on all their parts for something sheerly manual and fairly automatic to attend to, to get their minds off other aspects of the situation of the Southern Winds. Carl certainly felt this to be true of himself.

Carl was going toward the front of the room with a check for a jolly party of six tourists at a table near the broil when it began.

Melanie had evidently herself asked Henri to cut her some sliced steak. He had done so, and she had taken the plate to the cashier's desk to eat.

Carl was just offering the check to his party when he heard Melanie say to Charlotte, "It's lousy; the sauce is bitter, I don't care what happened to Flora—I'm going to tell him," and saw Melanie step out from the desk and start for the broil and Henri.

Carl did not want to witness it, but the man in his party who was paying for the dinner fumbled and joked greatly in producing the money. Now Carl could have left the check on the table and let the customers pay on their way out. Some of the waiters did this. But Carl had wanted to hurry his parties along a bit, so he had presented the check himself and stood by for payment. He was sorry.

It meant that he was within easy sight and earshot of Melanie. Melanie took up a stance in front of the broil, where the orders were received. Only there weren't but a couple of orders on the fire now and Henri was cleaning up. She slammed down on the counter the china plate with the unfinished portion of sliced steak on it. And Carl heard her say, "Number one, I asked for this rare and it's medium rare; number two, the sauce is bitter."

No one else was paying much attention to Melanie just then. Having had her say, Carl hoped to God she would walk away, or that Henri, realizing the strain she was under, despite his own and worse sadness, would hand her another platter. There was a moment's pause, Henri didn't look up, but Carl heard him speak quite clearly and through his teeth, "If you don't like the way I cook it, come back here and cook it yourself." Which is exactly, Carl remembered, what Henri promised he'd tell Melanie if she tried to score off him again. And, truly, Carl could not believe that Melanie had received a bitter sauce or a wrongly-done order: Carl had accepted, on the chef's behalf, nothing but compliments all evening. She was simply asserting herself for a multitude of other reasons, wrong reasons, Carl thought. Meanwhile, his customer had paid the check and he carried the money for the bill to Charlotte.

"Can't you stop her?" Carl said. "Henri won't take it tonight."

"I tried," Charlotte said, sounding very upset. "I told her about Flora, but she said dreadful things about Henri just now, and she's going to make a row if it kills her."

Charlotte made change, handed it back to him, and he returned it to his customers. The man who paid the bill so ostentatiously said, "There you are, my boy," and although such ostentation usually resulted in a less than adequate tip, this time was the

exception to the rule: the man was generous. Carl thanked him and stepped to one side.

Melanie and Henri had evidently exchanged some further remarks, but they had not changed positions.

Robin brushed by Carl. "I'll try to break it up," Robin said, indicating the difficulty at the broil. Robin went over and addressed a remark to Melanie, but she whipped around and said, "Get out of here," loudly enough to cause several people to look around in her direction.

That, Henri abhorred. He picked up his razor-sharp carving knife and played with it as Melanie stood glaring at him.

"How dare you threaten me!" she said loudly. This time a lot of people looked around. There was some embarrassed laughter. People turned back to their dinners. "I've had about all I'm going to take from you," Melanie continued—louder. This time everyone looked around and remained looking. "You can just get out from behind there right now," Melanie said—and Carl thought to himself, dear lady, you have gone too far. "Absolutely all I'm going to take!" Melanie spoke in her best dramatic manner. There could be no mistake as to the sense of her remarks or the serious intent with which she made them. "If you think you're going to run this show, you're sadly mistaken. And if you think I don't know that you're the one behind all the trouble around here, you're wrong again. I'm going to have you put in jail. I'm going to let everybody know what a slimy, vicious bastard you are, trying to take over our business by undermining the help, serving bad food and hurting Jake."

The room had come to a standstill. It was cruel and mad beyond words. But Melanie was not finished.

"Jake and I have been used, maligned, threatened and poisoned by you and your group. I've heard you slandering Jake with my own ears, and don't you think I didn't tell him." She was snarling.

But Carl knew what she was referring to: the evening Jake and Henri had had the argument about Conch, and Henri had been grumbling when Melanie had walked into the dining room behind him and had stopped to listen. Far from having had the grace to discount it, she had distorted it.

"I'll have no more of it," she went on. "I don't care if you knife

me on the spot—I'll stand up to you, and they'll all see"—Melanie gestured wildly toward her audience of diners—"what a murderer you are."

Several parties of customers who were ready to go anyway made a hasty exit up the stairs and in through the house rather than go out the front way and have to pass the broil. Conch had come back from some kitchen errand, and he went behind the broil and stood with Henri and glared at Melanie.

"Melanie," Henri said carefully, "go about your business."

"You're finished here!" she said hysterically. "You're not telling anybody what to do any more, least of all me. Get out from behind there this instant; get your stuff out of the building by tomorrow morning or I'll call the police and tell them everything. Get out of there!" she screamed. "And take all your friends with you! All! All the spies and informers and little sneaks."

There was nothing anyone could do now, Carl thought. Whatever there was to do about Melanie should have been done the day before, or that day, and they all should have foreseen this. Now it was too late. Still, Charlotte had the presence of mind to slip from behind her desk and go into the bar and get Jim.

Jim strode over to Melanie at the broil. He tried to take her arm and draw her away, but she resisted. People all over the room were standing up to see better or to gather up their things and leave.

"Please, darling," Carl heard Jim say with an urgent familiarity, a familiarity which seemed to have flared out accidentally and which suggested to Carl that there was some intimacy here.

But now Melanie not only resisted, she struggled. "Let go of me," she screamed. "You two-bit gigolo!" And with her free hand she grabbed the china platter which she'd slammed down on the counter, lifted it, and struck Jim on the shoulder with it; the plate fell to the floor and smashed.

"You little son-of-a-bitch!" Jim said, holding his own arm now; and he slapped her, backhand. Not hard, to be sure, but he'd done it, and some of the customers, friends of Melanie's apparently, rushed up to him and got between him and Melanie. There was not a fracas at all—Jim was a big man—just people milling around

in mild confusion. Melanie still had not given up her stance: she held her ground for her dismal purpose.

"I still say!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, "GET OUT FROM BEHIND THAT BROIL AND GET OUT OF THIS HOUSE!" But even screaming, Carl thought, her enunciation was perfect.

May and Daddy-O had come from the kitchen and were standing in the rear watching. And now that Melanie saw that her friends were behind her, that the crowd was behind her and she was protected, she let all her fear, her hate come through in one remark. She said: "Get out of there, you freak!"

And Henri came out then, with a knife in his hand. Conch grabbed his arm first, others helped, and Henri was quickly disarmed. He was pushed—Carl saw his hat fall off—and finally he received a punch or two. Conch was trying to defend him. Melanie was hollering, but there was a great deal of noise and stumbling around, and her voice was overridden. Henri was ejected to the edge of the crowd and Carl saw him head upstairs. What, indeed, Carl thought, had Henri to stay for any more?

Melanie swept from the dining room surrounded by congratulating friends. Congratulating friends! There was, of course, Carl thought, the tiniest possibility of logic and reason in her actions and statements, and someone prejudiced in her favor could always be relied upon to see it. And yet, and yet, at this point, who was positively to say she was wrong, mad, when, indeed, she was morally and factually partially correct about certain things? By what firm, personal process of evidence and adjudication, Carl wondered, did one arrive at a decision, then take a stand, draw a line? He did not know, and it sickened him not to know.

The dining room was in complete disorder. Jim had recovered himself and was asking people to either please leave or return to their tables, and said if they had not been already served, their money would be refunded. Actually, there were only two orders on the broil, which Conch shoved over into the waste can. And Conch also began dousing the fires. Tears were rolling down the boy's cheeks. And, Carl surmised, had not Charlotte been so busy at her desk taking checks and making change, she, too, would have been in hysterics. But she still was showing presence of mind,

sticking to her job. With people leaving so abruptly, everything was a mess. Robin was absent, so Carl supposed Jim had deputized him to work in the bar for the moment. The other waiters began gathering checks that had been simply left on tables and silver and napkins and even plates from the floor—all the dishes on the tables which ordinarily would have been cleared in a gradual and careful fashion. Carl pitched in.

Jim pitched in, too, transferring dishes from the tables to a bus boy's tray, and he spoke out loud to no one in particular, but to anyone in range, with the feeble bravado of the cheerleader of a badly-losing team: "We'll get this thing straight yet," he was saying. "You all rely on old Jim; I'll handle her if it's the last thing I do, and we'll get her to apologize to Henri, and the old Southern Winds will be just like it used to be."

But, Carl thought, it had gone too far now—Melanie with Henri—she had destroyed the foundation of the place. It would never be the same. The question was, tomorrow night, could it function at all?

Carl looked around and saw Conch near the broil picking up Henri's hat where it had fallen.

* * * * *

At quarter of twelve, Carl left the dining room and went upstairs. He was drenched in perspiration. He took a shower, he dressed; his nerves were in a far too exacerbated state to simply put himself to bed, and yet he was too tired to think through with any clarity what had happened that evening. He drifted, then, down the main stairway, along the halls (glancing in at the crowded bar: Melanie's Fantasea Room—as predicted, Troy was back at his old stand), and out the front door. It was as if he were reacting to some posthypnotic suggestion, could not exactly recall where he wanted to go but knew that he had received specific instructions to go somewhere. And then it came to him; earlier in the day he had wanted to go down Duval Street to one especially noisy bar which featured a Negro rock-n-roll quartet that he'd listened to from the sidewalk once.

Tonight he would go in. Noise, beat, chanting was the opiate

he felt his nerves needed—participation (no matter how vicarious) in the primitive ceremonial hysteria that that bar evidently provided.

Carl went down the front steps of the Southern Winds, shielding his eyes from the glare of the spotlights which illuminated the house. Lower Duval Street in Key West at one A. M. on a Saturday-Sunday night that is also a pay night is a busy place. The neon lights over the bars, some steady, some flickering, seemed brighter or more rapid in their flickering than on other nights. And the music from bands, the pianos, or the jukeboxes in the various bars, as cushioned as it was in the soft warm air of the tropical night, was nevertheless distinctly audible. And, of course, the sidewalk was crowded. One traveled down this street as into a colorful, impressionistic, three-dimensional stage setting. Mood: erotic euphoria.

Carl walked slowly past the open-air garden at Luigi's, where he'd sat with Houlton; past the Mambo Room next door, which was getting to be a popular place; past the Gallery Bar, so named because of the paintings, abstract and otherwise, mostly nudes, which hung on the walls; past Duffey's, which seemed always to feature a nasal cowboy trio—"Please help me, I'm fallin', I'm fallin' for you; close the door to temptation, don't let me walk through"; past Don's Green Room, where they served beer only and fellows underage could play pool on five green tables; past Pepe's, the Cuban soup-sandwich-hamburger joint—where Cuban blades with long sideburns stood out in front (Cuban influence in the town was strong: geniality and tolerance to counterbalance what might have been a sticky southern shipping village); past the cavernous Sloppy Joe's bar, where Hemingway and Dos Passos used to go; and around the corner (but in sight), past the Duval Club, with the murals still on the wall from the days of the WPA artists' project in Key West (Charlotte said they painted on everything, even the barn doors); and, also in sight around the corner, the 116 bar, with the loudest jukebox and B-girls in town, and a cab pretty handy waiting in front; on down by Rudy's, with bearded Rudy at the door himself, checking the I.D.'s and welcoming the nondrunks; past the Top Hat and the Downtowner, in

both of which there were bands and dancing; and finally to The White Cap.

At the door of The White Cap Carl was asked for identification. He produced his driver's license and was allowed to enter. Smoky and black atmosphere. The band had apparently been between sets, for the quartet (lanky and zoot-suited colored men) was just climbing back up on the stand behind the bar. The bar was a large half quadrangle, which occupied the right-hand side of the room; and the other side was occupied by a great many small tables and a dance floor that could not have been more than ten by ten. The tables were jammed with white uniforms and B-girls crawling around. And, if he was not mistaken, there was Denise, smooching heavily with one of them: she came up out of a clinch, looked in his direction and away,—hadn't the least notion of who he was. The bar was mostly filled, too, but Carl found a seat—and at the far end. A hugely-bosomed woman bounced over to him and said through her chewing gum, "What'll you have, sweetie?"

Carl ordered a double whisky and water, and it was a lucky thing he'd got his order in, for a moment later he would have had considerable difficulty making himself heard. The quartet started off with a song called "You Got What It Takes," rendered with the loud-speaker system turned up full volume. Carl wondered if there was not some psychological reason for this, if noise were not specifically used here, and indeed elsewhere, as a quite conscious method of control. Except for the dancers and the smoochers, all activity, especially conversation, was at an absolute minimum. One would have to make a determined effort to get across a simple remark. The sailors and girls sat around in various poses of immobility or stupefaction. No conversations, no fights: that certainly was one way to look at it—and with all of this throbbing youth intent on getting drunk and laid, fighting came as a natural concomitant, no doubt, and, from the point of view of the owners, regrettably. Carl could conceive how easily at times matters might slip out of control; it could be a rough and messy business. It was also, however, at least tonight, a thriving business.

Still, as loud as it was, the quartet was good: a man with black-

gold fingers at the piano, a fat little one on the drums and tampons, a sad-eyed one on the base viol, and at the microphone a man in a checkered vest and long, long gold watch chain who sang and strummed the electric guitar around his neck. Now and again, on the choruses, they would all chime in, singing (harmonizing) or whistling. In any event, no matter what they did, they did it together—were on key and in tempo—and they all acted out the mood of the song; no casual band, this. Whether they were drunk or not, Carl could not tell, but to maintain their kind of concentration and output through a whole evening, every evening, must have required either some kind of nerve balm or superhuman strength. But perhaps they had that. Carl ordered another double. The bartenderess bent over in front of him to get ice from beneath the bar and she displayed practically all of her bosoms to Carl, and to several others sitting nearby who immediately pounded on the bar and let out howls of delight. She bobbed up, pushed her bleached hair back and said, "You like it, boys? Drool." They reached out for her, but she was fast and too expert at dodging to be trapped so easily.

"Volare—oh-oh-oh-oh—no wonder that happy hearts sing . . ." chanted the quartet. Carl's eyes began to sting; the air conditioning could not handle that amount of smoke and heat of suppressed passion. Still, the effect he hoped for began to be forthcoming; in the midst of that brawl, somehow the turbulence in himself was objectified and he was rid of it; he began, within himself, to be quite quiet. "Put your arms around me, honey, hold me tight . . . oh, oh, I never knew any girl like you . . ." banging it out, the curious reverberations of that three-dimensional echoing, hot, electric guitar. . . .

The white uniform next to him left his seat; Carl looked over and met Alan Houlton's eyes head on.

"Why, it's Carl," Houlton's lips formed the words rather than said them, and Houlton slipped across to the vacant seat next to Carl. "You've discovered me in one of my lairs," Houlton shouted in his ear.

Carl nodded with what he hoped would be an interested expression of "is that so."

The quartet started on a slightly more subdued Spanish love song.

Carl was not very glad to see Houlton. He would have preferred a drink or two more to accomplish his purpose, and then, slightly high and relaxed (he should hope, by that time), wanted merely to return to the Southern Winds and go to bed. Now Houlton would start his usual, mostly one-sided conversation, and although Carl had been grateful and amused by Houlton's interest, he was not in the mood for it tonight. If Houlton suggested leaving for a more suitable place to talk, he would simply refuse. But he misestimated Houlton, as he had once before. Houlton had no intention of leaving. In fact, the young novelist ordered another round of drinks and began a series of remarks, which, at first, were completely incomprehensible to Carl. To begin with, Carl wasn't paying much attention, hoping thereby to discourage a conversation. In the second place, the quartet had resumed with a violent rock-n-roll tune called "Red River Rock" (stomping their feet and pounding the drum), so he caught only snatches of what Houlton had to say. Houlton leaned close and began: ". . . I come here . . . when Dr. Houlton wants to take home for a performance . . . in his gallery of horrors . . . a piece of trade . . . see that one? . . . no trouble . . . he'll go for five . . . therapeutically the greatest thing in the world . . . not to devote your life to . . . like Kent . . . an addict but . . . advise it for all tense neurotics . . . do it and forget it . . . best expiator in the world . . . but . . . must be absolutely beautiful . . . nothing else fills the bill . . . voluptuously muscular . . . superbly narcissistic, interested only in your interest in him . . . dangerous sometimes —psychos when they're done, some of them, but worth any cost, all sacrifices . . . if only . . . those frustrated biddies, male, female . . . could . . . Dr. Houlton recommends it as the connoisseur's choice of religion . . . to see one of them . . . fiery, mean, ready. . . ."

And then Carl could no longer ignore it: it was obvious and insane. Carl had been nodding pleasantly, and now he stopped nodding. He looked squarely at Houlton. Fantastic, Carl thought, and he also thought he had never seen a face so riven with compulsion, lasciviousness, a face freely relishing a kind of fiendishness. The face of a man who was acting to please or appease an

insensate madness in himself—mouth tight, eyes slitted, ears up. Houlton noticed Carl's observance and tried to avert his head, but Carl had seen it: the Hyde face. He had always thought the Hyde face an amusing burlesque, but it was not; it could not but have been suggested by that expression quite fastened on Houlton's features at that moment. The wonder, Carl thought, was that the man could with daylight pull back and conduct himself in the world of men reasonably, that evidently, having learned what existed within himself, he was not wracked with horror.

And those remarks addressed to Carl from Houlton (who, together with his pressing inclinations, was drunk) were, Carl thought, a kind of delayed-action hostility directed toward him, coming now in return for the rebuff he'd given Houlton the morning of the breakfast—a sadistic attempt to shock, to unnerve. And Houlton was beginning to succeed. Carl tilted his drink and downed half of it.

But Houlton would not let him go so easily. Despite the band, Houlton shouted in his ear: ". . . fear . . . is what keeps them from it, not physical danger . . . afraid of their own conscience . . if they submit . . . play the least one . . . afraid of the bully in themselves . . . if they bow down . . . despite the wish, the desperate desire to do so . . . like the virgin who thinks that she will die if. . . ."

Carl moved away from Houlton's voice in his ear, and he lifted his glass to finish it and get away from this guy. But Houlton had moved, too. He had gotten off his seat and indicated to Carl with a fairly hefty shove that he wanted Carl to look in the direction of the men's room; Carl had been faced around by Houlton's motions, and he glanced in that direction with irritation. He saw a blond sailor go into the john. Indicating for Carl to wait, Houlton staggered into the john. Carl knew it was monstrous, but for some reason he remained at his place, fascinated. In a moment, the sailor came out, followed by Houlton. The sailor went directly to the door of the bar and left. Houlton came back to where he had been sitting next to Carl, downed his drink at a gulp, made an obscene measurement with his hands for Carl's benefit, and proceeded to leave. "Flying out of Key West . . . Monday . . . we're eating at Mrs. Slocum's tomorrow, so I won't see you again

. . . telephone listed, call me in New York. . . ." And Houlton left swiftly, stalking his quarry. Carl quit his drink, also; wanted more than anything to get out of the place; did so, and saw Houlton a block up the street walking along rapidly with the sailor. Call you, like shit, Carl thought. Rip up that notebook. Gallery of horrors with your picture in the first frame. And Carl was aware that he was drunk, too, and staggering, and he thought of Charlotte. He had to talk to her. Charlotte—she was the only one—Charlotte of the orchids, Charlotte of the water, Charlotte of the air—who knew, who could save . . . the Southern Winds. She'd kept her head through the whole lousy evening. during all the last lousy days; she'd know what to do now, had to be encouraged to take over.

Carl hurried up the street, started to run, muttering her name. She was used to being waked up in the night; she would talk to him now, even if she was in bed; she'd help him; they could straighten out a lot of things together: stop Melanie, reinstate Henri and Jenny and Nothing-Betty—Nothing-Betty!—he laughed out loud at that name; help Romano preserve the Southern Winds. Charlotte: he had to see her, it wasn't late, tomorrow was Sunday, she could sleep, she wouldn't mind, she might even like him to go to her, to stay with her to . . . Charlotte!

Carl ran up the front walk of the Southern Winds, took the porch steps two at a time, and ducked into the busy bar. Jim said Charlotte had gone upstairs a half hour ago. Carl went through the hallway and up the main stairs at the same gait. Completely out of breath then, his heart beating wildly, colors in his vision still of the neon lights on Duval Street, noise in his ears of the music, spinning in his head from the liquor and Houlton's madness . . . "Charlotte," he said softly outside her door. But no answer. "Charlotte," he said again, and tried the door. It was locked. He knocked on it. "Charlotte!" he called, knocking harder. (Someone downstairs would hear him and think he was breaking in; he didn't care.) "Charlotte!" he screamed and pounded—and kicked the door as hard as he could, until he realized he'd hurt his foot and people were standing at the head of the stair well looking up at him. He tried once more, pounding with both hands on the door and calling "Charlotte, the Southern Winds—Charlotte!"

until tears were coming out of his eyes from his hurt and his need.

But Charlotte had taken her "ear" off and gone to bed; she was as deaf to his entreaties there at the door to her apartment in the Southern Winds as the radio operator was deaf to entreaty on the famous ship which had battened down for the night so few miles from where the liner Titanic—lights on, rockets blaring, whistle sounding—slipped slowly beneath the swells of a starlit sea.

Sunday, March 2

THE first words that went through Carl's mind as he awakened: RIP UP THE NOTEBOOK. But, he thought, *that* remained to be seen.

He glanced at his watch: almost noon. Well, he'd needed a long sleep—up late last night and very little sleep the night before. Also, he was leaving the next morning, so he had better be rested for the drive.

He lay back and relaxed even though the room was warm this morning. Uncommonly beautiful day again. He wondered if he ought to make it to the beach. Oh, hell, he'd had enough of beach to last him for a while. He would laze around, pack, take it easy until dinner, maybe have a few cocktails with Charlotte, possibly at one of the beach-club bars. Charlotte—well, no point in going into that right now. . . . He noticed his right shoulder and neck muscles were slightly stiff for some reason. Probably lying in the wrong position, or, Carl thought, I'm frustrated.

As far as ripping up the notebook was concerned, he knew he wouldn't. He'd certainly kept the devil's notebook. But that did not make him the devil's disciple.

Houlton's presence in Key West would stand, he knew, very close to the heart of his experience here, as demonic as the lesson of Houlton's life seemed to be. Curious he should feel that as the fact: that someone as unrepresentative as Houlton should wander on stage and, in a way, give a new dimension to this world and possibly his own life. (For Houlton did wander on stage. He stepped from the wings, meandered or pussyfooted across the boards while the action was going on, and in some dreamlike fashion he became part of the action; then he was on his way off stage again before you knew it. Except, Carl thought, it was possible to tell when he was on his way off . . . the irritableness in his voice, the clenched-teeth expression, the errant eye. . . .)

Of course, Houlton was the epitome of the colossal egoist, but Carl understood why: it was only this egoism which sustained Houlton when he was working and alone, and for that reason

Carl had found it fitting to forgive. What was not easy to forgive, or amusing, was Houlton's assumption of others' inferiorities. It was too bad that the one went part and parcel with the other. Houlton undoubtedly had gifts, which he rightly boasted of and celebrated, but his denigrations were abominable and could, at any moment, be turned like a gun on his immediate companions, if he became in the slightest displeased. To be enjoined to cater to such instability was fatiguing and, shortly, boring.

Also—not amusing ultimately—Houlton could be scrupulously honest about his deviousness, which disarmed one's opinion of him, but did not, in fact, change his deviousness one jot; rather, indeed, it made a better game for him, provided a challenge as to what deviousness he could trick you with, having revealed (so it would appear) all of his tricks—like the magician who shows you that there is nothing up his sleeve, then proceeds to draw out of it an endless bolt of colored chiffon. If only, Carl thought, Houlton's deviousness were as harmless as that. But this—the subject of Houlton's denigrations and his deviousness—was all beside the point.

What was important, Carl reflected, was what had happened last night. The thing he had seen with his own eyes. In a sense, that was the worst side of Houlton, and the best. The worst side, inasmuch as what he was engaged in was so onerous, mad, and presented to Carl so maliciously. The best, in that this sort of thing was precisely Houlton's gift to him, as wild as it was, and . . . not that Houlton was pretending or exaggerating. He wasn't, more's the pity. Yet, despite his malicious intent, last evening, to unnerve, the fact of the matter was that Houlton had done Carl a service, a very great service: Houlton had thrown open his life, unlocked the doors in the most remote part of the castle of himself for Carl to see inside and, having seen, to thus at least enable Carl to perceive imaginatively that it was possible to throw open such remote doors in his own self without fear. And not that those doors would necessarily reveal the same things.

Truly this business of self-discovery was a staggering thing, but Houlton had made it obvious that it was not so difficult an undertaking as to cause human strength to quake and fail. To face what was patently irrational in one, and to face it down, to per-

ceive the patterns of one's eroticism. . . . If Houlton, ravaged as he was, could do it and function, anyone could do it. That this was the young author's gift to him, to anyone, was undeniable. And that Houlton had actually accomplished the job, emotionally, was also undeniable. It was one thing, Carl realized, to blithely and intellectually talk about attending to one's needs; it was quite another to risk the recognition, to seek the fulfillment, to live with oneself afterward. But, Carl thought, it gave Houlton a power, and a wholeness if not a wholesomeness, which would probably enable him not only to survive but to prevail.

The question became, then, what were his own needs, irrational or not, and how did he go about fulfilling them. Need number one: breakfast. Time to get going.

Carl rose and dressed and was pulling the sheets straight on his bed when he heard a soft step coming up the stairs, a padding step along the hall, and finally a soft but insistent knock at his door.

He opened it; it was Melanie.

She was still puffing from the three-flight climb. She gave him a perfunctory smile. Carl stepped back—not, he thought, that there was much of a room to let her into, or even a decent chair for her to sit down. Nevertheless, in she came, as she seemed intent on doing.

She scuffed her sandaled feet across the room to the single window and fanned herself with her hand. She was dressed like a little girl: sky-blue porkpie hat, Scottish-plaid blouse, light-red pedal pushers, and white sandals. Having caught her breath, she sashayed around the room and poked with her toe at his luggage, which was spread out on the floor. As against the night before, her face was composed and brightly made up. Her manner was perky; she hadn't said anything yet, just smiled at him, waiting until she was completely in command. Then she said, "When May and Eddie leave tomorrow, why don't you take their room? I believe it has more furniture in it, and I'll just put the new kitchen woman in this room. You've kind of a seniority around here now." Her tone was an attempt at lightheartedness and helpfulness.

"That's thoughtful of you, Mrs. Romano. . . ."

"Oh, call me Melanie, for heaven's sake . . ."

"All right, Melanie. That's nice of you, but I'm leaving myself tomorrow. I thought you knew. . . ."

"No one told me," she said briskly. "Do you think it's the right time to go, with Jake in the hospital and people so obviously uncooperative? Do you think you have the entire picture to present to your uncle?"

"I think I'm going to have a very tough time trying to make clear to my uncle just what the situation here is, but. . . ."

"Then stay, for goodness' sake. There's no reason for you to rush off, is there? You're picking up pretty good tips, I've gathered."

"Yes," Carl said, aware that he would be able to get in one remark in his own behalf at least: "But it's not exactly my work, and I have to get to New York and begin on that problem."

"I suppose so," Melanie said, still pacing about. "But it's pleasant work, and you look about five times better than when you arrived."

"Yes," he said. "I've got a good tan to show for Key West."

"I'm not asking you to consider carefully and a little longer for *my* sake before you speak to your uncle, you understand, but for *Jake's.*"

"Melanie, I'm not going to say anything to Ben which will prejudice him against the Southern Winds. On the other hand, I am certainly going to tell him everything I've seen and heard, and all that's happened."

She faced him and stopped. "We need that money more than ever now, Carl," she said.

"I'm sure you do," Carl said. "And it is no wish of mine that you shouldn't have it, but. . . ."

"Surely your uncle . . . whatever his name is. . . ."

"Ben. . . ."

"Ben . . . would not abandon Jake now."

"If the business is going and Jake is alive, I don't think he will either. . . ."

"But you're not sure. Must you tell him everything?"

"You mean about Jake?"

"About Jake and other things—the chef, for instance. . . ."

Melanie was playing it so cagey that the only way Carl saw to

cope with her was with frankness and as much sympathy as he could muster without totally abandoning his honesty.

"The chef is not here any more, is he, Melanie?"

"No," she said, her lips pursed. "Somehow he must've got hold of movers and got all his furniture, every stick, everything, out between the time I fired him last night and when I looked in his apartment just now. In a hurry to leave . . . for the simple reason he was behind the plot to ruin this place, grab it for himself, and knew that I knew it and would expose him. I thoroughly intended to bring charges. He not only was instrumental in hurting Jake, if he didn't do it himself, but he 'reached' as many people in the place as he could, to get them on his side. It's a wonder he didn't reach you."

"He didn't 'reach' me, Melanie," Carl said, and his tone was deliberately terse, and he thought he would make one attempt to oppose her. "And I don't know—but I don't think Henri had much idea of doing anything like that."

Surprisingly, she did not jump on him.

"Oh, Carl, he did, he did. If you only knew the lengths he went to. I can't tell you now because it's too complicated." Her voice broke down. "Every minute he was looking for a chance to destroy Jake and me. I heard him with my own ears."

And again Carl knew what she referred to, but he could not now hope to convince her.

"Well, be that as it may, he's gone. What are you going to do about this evening?"

"If you think," she said, drawing out a small hanky from her blouse pocket, "that I haven't been up all night working on *that.* . . . First, I'll be there. Then I've called Miami and finally reached a chef whom Jake and I met at the Fontainebleau when we were up there for a few days, just before you got here. He's actually an hors d'oeuvres chef, and he's Chinese, but I remember distinctly his telling Jake he'd worked on charcoal broil. Well, I spoke to him, and he said he finishes his duties at the Fontainebleau—that is, the hors d'oeuvres will be made and he can leave—about four. And he'll drive directly here, which means he'll arrive at the door at eight and be able to go right to work. The movie crowd won't be getting here much before that."

"You mean you won't open till eight?"

"We'll open at six, as usual," she said. "Until eight I have another chef—in fact, two—who can manage." She was extremely evasive. Carl waited. "Well," she continued, "you know the old colored man in the kitchen?"

"Who? Daddy-O, the dishwasher!"

"Yes. You may not regard him very highly, but, as a matter of fact, until he began to drink, he used to cook at home for Jake and myself, and he's quite competent with steaks. And lately he's helped May a lot with the kitchen work, and he's much better. I've spoken to him, and he's promised me he'll stay off the bottle tonight and work at the broil until the chef from Miami arrives."

Carl was too astounded to say much.

"And that Conch boy," Melanie continued, "will be in as usual to fix the fires and run plates and hot pots. I called his mother, and he may not like it here without Henri, but he needs the job. And I have one more."

"Who?"

"You know Bert, who's been waiting now instead of bussing? Young actor, I believe—I really should get better acquainted with him, try to coach him; I've had experience in the theater, quite a bit. Well, I've spoken to him; he cooks his own food in his back yard over a fire and he eats mostly meat, so he knows something about how steaks should be cooked. . . ."

"Yes," Carl said. "He likes his meat just singed."

"That's right, that's how he likes his. But he seems an intelligent young man and he can assist Daddy-O—write down the orders and keep track of who gets what—while I stand behind them and supervise. And when the chef from Miami comes around eight and relieves them both, Bert can go back to waiting. Which will give six waiters on the floor—you, the Fitzes are three, Kent, Robin and Bert later is six. Oh, and I've told May to get Eddie to do the dishes in place of Daddy-O. If that old fool is going to hang around here, he's got to earn his keep and help us in this emergency. I'm sure it will work."

Melanie's voice pleaded with him to believe her.

"Someone said something about expecting over three hundred and fifty people, including the regular customers. . . ."

"Oh, I hope so. But those movie folk don't eat till all hours. We'll be ready for them at eight."

"I hope it works," Carl said. "How about supplies?"

"May and Henri had sense enough yesterday—we always do this on weekends anyway—to buy things for last night and tonight. Tomorrow May said she'd go with Jim and myself and show us where to shop."

"Damned decent of May," Carl said.

Melanie chose to ignore his remark and, no doubt, the quality of May's action.

"I'm sure it will work," she said. "I haven't been in this game for so many years with Jake for nothing. Mama knows a thing or two, and, for good measure, I've been in close touch by phone with someone wiser than I, someone who also knows a thing or two, to whom I've confided the whole situation to get his advice, just to make perfectly sure. He'll be here tonight—my cousin—with the movie people. And if anything does go wrong in the dining room, he'll explain to them about the service and that we'll feed them all perfectly tomorrow night when we're a little more organized. He's quite famous in Hollywood and used to be in pictures himself."

Melanie said her cousin's name. Carl had heard of him vaguely.

"What did he have to say?" Carl said.

"Well, his first piece of advice to me when I told him about Jake over the phone was to 'clean house,' get rid of all the undesirable elements here who would continue to work as hard against me as they had against Jake. So that's just what I did, starting with Jenny and that other strange girl. And ending with Henri. He was the real troublemaker."

"And May?"

"I didn't plan to fire May, but Henri had reached her, so she had to go sooner or later. Anyway, you see that I'm not totally without resources in these matters, and I think you ought to stay a few days to convince yourself that I can run this place as well as Jake, and that it deserves . . . Ben's . . . loan."

There was some logic in what she said, as always, and Carl foresaw that he would probably have to remain at least one more night.

"Maybe . . ." Carl said.

"I know," Melanie said, "that I can rely on you, as a deputy of your uncle's friendship, to stick by us, not like some of the rats around here."

"How is Jake?" Carl said.

"I've been back and forth from the hospital for the last seventy-two hours," Melanie said, her voice breaking again. "He's completely paralyzed, but he seems to be able to understand. He's quiet and he can move his eyes. Of course," she said quickly, "I haven't told him about Henri's leaving, and, frankly, I don't want anybody else to—not that I did wrong, but Jake was more forgiving than I am about Henri's sabotage, and he also overrated Henri's importance to the business . . . he'd be upset over it without being able to understand it, or do anything about it, so naturally I don't want anyone to tell him. . . ."

Carl had never seen guilt so patent on anyone's face. And yet, he knew, the lie of pride and self-deception was deep and involuted, and, perhaps, after all, this woman was in her own eyes a sincere person.

"I guess I'd better stay through tomorrow night then, Melanie," Carl said.

"I'm glad, Carl; I really am. I need a strong arm. I'm a woman fighting desperately to keep what little she has"—she was being little-theater now. "With a husband who's down and enemies on every side, you have no idea what I'm going through. Every minute I try to keep myself from breaking up. If you think I enjoyed that scene with Henri, you're very much mistaken. . . ." She began to go off again with her fingers working her handkerchief, but she pulled herself together. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I have a favor to ask you which I don't want you to give me an answer to now, but I wish you'd think over."

Melanie crossed her arms, her sad look disappeared, and she slanted her voice so that the tone was slightly challenging.

"The doctors tell me, if all goes well with Jake, he'll be out of the hospital in a month—of course, helpless. I'll need a strong arm then more than ever. I thought maybe you, caring for Jake as much as you seem to, would like to stay in Key West and work for us, in charge under me of things here at the restaurant in the eve-

ning, and, during the day, maybe giving Jake a rubdown once in a while, driving me where I have to go occasionally, and living in our house with a nice room of your own. You'd be well paid. And Carl," Melanie said, "I am not an utterly unattractive woman. Now don't answer me right away; just think about it. . . ." And Melanie began to edge out. "I'll see you tonight, and you'll see how well things go that I've arranged. We'll keep the flag flying above the old Southern Winds."

Melanie wiggled her fingers at him and slipped through the door.

Carl just stood where he was, breakfastless, contemplating his future at Melanie's hands: headwaiter of the Southern Winds, her husband's nurse, and, if he understood aright, her live-in lover. Of course, he could pack up and leave now, or tomorrow morning. And that would take care of Melanie. But what about Romano? And Ben? In fairness to them, he had to stay, at least through tomorrow, to see if the business could really be salvaged.

As Carl went to breakfast, he contemplated the spectacle of this woman whose words, because of her accidental position, and in spite of everything, still resulted in action on the part of other people.

* * * * *

Charlotte said that they should have their farewell drink that afternoon—even though he wasn't leaving until Tuesday morning (because the paper was busy on Monday and she wouldn't have a really relaxed moment and would be dead tired Monday night)—out at the Casa Marina Hotel in the Bird Cage Room, where there was a pleasant atmosphere on Sunday.

Charlotte wore for the occasion a yellow dress, a musky perfume, and a straw, wide-brimmed, so-called picture hat with a brown-velvet ribbon around it tied in a bow, the ends of which trailed in back. She kept this hat on in the car despite her own amplitude and the lack of space in the car. The hat brim flopped so that he could not see her face always, but she was silent and he had the impression she was sad.

And this Sunday afternoon had a curious sense of finality about

it. There was a sun, and it was bright and hot, but there was a slight haze and the shadows were not sharp. Also, no wind—the palm trees, as they drove out to the old hotel, were motionless.

The Casa Marina is a great place, reminiscent of the twenties, a several-winged, four-story building with a tile roof the color of plant pots. The entrance road is very grand; one can actually pull up under a portico, dispatch passengers, then drive around and park. Charlotte and Carl parked first and walked to the doors.

The lobby of the Casa is one of those several-hundred-foot-long affairs with arched windows facing on the sea, an over-all carpet, and a tea-dance band of a few pieces playing delightfully at the far end. But Charlotte wanted to drink, and although he guessed they could have had drinks there, they made their way to the Bird Cage Room through long lobbies and a huge ballroom.

Except for the fact that the Bird Cage Room seemed many-sided and blue-glassed and an immense golden bird cage (imitation) hung in the center of it, the room made no special claim to its name. There were other people, but it was not crowded. They took a table near tall windows from which they could see the ocean. Although the time was hardly four-thirty, the room was dark because the sun was lowering behind the building and, except for a reflected light, it was not illuminated, which added to its restfulness. They were served.

Sitting there at the table, in her yellow dress and her straw picture hat—a martini of palest hue in front of her—Charlotte made a memorable impression.

"You haven't said a word," he said.

Charlotte sipped her drink. "I'm gonna miss you," she said bluntly. "And I don't want to get upset."

"All right," he said, "I'll tell you a funny story. . . ." And Carl told Charlotte about Melanie's proposition. Charlotte laughed uproariously and shook her head, could hardly believe it. He assured her it was a fact.

"That takes the cake," she said. "I've heard everything about her now."

"Why do you stick?" Carl said.

"Stick!" Charlotte said loudly. "Do you think if there was any

chance of getting my money back I'd stay? After she fired Henri and everything? You're crazy. But if I walk out, she has my money and I'll never get anything back. I might as well stay now; I have to stay."

"She won't return the money to you?"

"She doesn't even have it. I asked her. She showed me her bankbook. She's operating strictly on credit. Wait till they find out at the hospital; God help Jake. . . ."

"So her only hope is the Southern Winds."

"That's it. And don't ask me what's going to happen tonight."

Carl told Charlotte the details of Melanie's plan for the evening. Surprisingly, Charlotte thought it might work; at least she hoped it would work. And Carl realized she had very little alternative. In any event they agreed neither of them wanted to arrive on the scene until absolutely necessary. Charlotte said she'd rather drink her dinner—he'd eaten late—so they decided not to get to the Southern Winds until a few minutes before six, which would give them a little less than an hour together here.

There was no music, there were few people, but the soft light and the view of the ocean caused a mood in the room all its own. It was quiet, and it was reserved, and it was easy for Charlotte to hear.

"What will you do in New York?" Charlotte said.

"I don't know yet," he said, taking a breath. "But I've made one decision."

"What's that?"

"Not to go into the ministry as I was considering doing."

"No," Charlotte said positively. "The ministry is not for you. You have too much life to renounce it."

He realized she was flattering him—what evidence had she as to his "life"?—but he enjoyed her remark and hoped, in a way, it was true.

"I don't know what I'll do," he said.

"Come back to Key West," Charlotte said with fervor. "Lots of good jobs here for anyone who wants to stay and will work."

"Now, you wouldn't want me around all the time," he said.

"That's what you think," she said clearly, and then her tone of voice failed. "Want you around very much. But I'd better not

say things like that . . . I'm . . . an old lady . . . and I'll scare you," and with not a trace of embarrassment she wiped her eyes with her napkin.

Carl said: "If I haven't been scared by now by what I've seen and done in Key West, you, certainly, my darling, are not going to scare me."

"Well, there are jobs here, if you want to come back. And I've got a spare room at the Southern Winds."

"Ah, Charlotte, I do wish I could live with you on your island, but I'd better not. . . ."

"Why not?"

"Because I've got to go where there is some possibility of filling my major need, which, at the moment, is for money. . . ."

"Money," Charlotte repeated. "That might come later, but you couldn't hope for a lot to start with here. Well, I've thought about your going, and I've reconciled myself. I cried last night, and I'm determined I'm not going to cry today. . . ."

Carl remembered the previous night and his own feelings.

They had two more drinks and became a little tipsy. Carl thought that being that way might get them through a difficult and perhaps embarrassing evening at the restaurant. They reminisced about their good times together, Kent's Von Cosle party, the yawl trip with Stanley, their visits to the air show and the flower show, and then they were silent.

Carl reached over and took Charlotte's hand on the table.

She grasped his firmly and said, "Oh, I had so much to say to you today before we came here, but now I just can't think of it."

To hear that familiar sentiment expressed by someone one cares for is a lovely thing.

"I really will miss you very much," he said. "And we will keep in touch. Maybe you can get up to New York during the summer or I can come down next winter."

"Maybe," Charlotte said, and she looked down, and the floppy hat brim covered her face.

He paid their check; then Carl helped Charlotte to her feet and they walked back through the lobby arm in arm. At the car, he opened the door and saw that she was comfortably seated, then went around and climbed in behind the wheel. Without either

one planning it—very gracefully and with no suggestion of impropriety—they leaned toward each other, Charlotte put her arm around his neck (and, with the other hand, held up the brim of her hat), and they kissed. Then she smiled secretly and amazingly contentedly, and Carl drove them home to the Southern Winds.

* * * * *

Carl was dressed in his waiter's uniform, bow tie forward, and in the dining room at twenty of six. It was necessary to do the setting up of the tables formerly done by the bus boys, and that took fifteen minutes—tablecloths, silver, condiment shakers, sugar bowls (full), water glasses, and candles lit. They all were extremely busy, each of the waiters doing the same as Carl . . . and Conch, looking sullen, but starting the fires, running the hot vegetable pots from the kitchen to the rack near the broil. Charlotte was at her post early, a white flower had replaced the hat to conceal the hearing aid, and Melanie was everywhere, like oil.

At five of six, Daddy-O hove on the scene, very resplendent in Henri's apron and cap, which kept sliding off, but proud of it withal, and in spirit jubilant. Melanie apparently did not notice it, or refused to notice it, but everybody else could see that Daddy-O had had a few, not drunk, but halfway there.

Going behind the broil, Daddy-O said: "Neva mind, Missus Melanie," and he spoke sufficiently loud for everyone's benefit and picked up a knife and brandished it professionally, "ah take care o' it, jest like we used to do at you house, out in de back yard. Daddy-O know all 'bout this cookin' business. Nothin' 'bout cookin' steaks he don' know. You jes wait over dere and watch 'im go."

At least he did not attempt Henri's grand entrance.

Bert, on the other hand, whose job it was to stand by the broil and write down the orders for Daddy-O as the waiters gave them—in short, to keep track of who got what—could not have looked more miserable. He was perspiring terribly—his nylon shirt soaked through, and the wet, pinkish aspect of him repelling to see—and the dining room hadn't even opened. And, as far as that

was concerned, so far they were fortunate and Melanie was correct; there were no customers waiting at the rope. Perhaps only a few customers would drift in before eight or so, when the Chinese chef would arrive, and then when the movie people did begin to come, they'd be able to handle them.

The bar, however, was jammed. Carl had looked in on his way downstairs: people were standing three-deep, as crowded as on a Saturday around midnight and Melanie had clearly made more of her "arrangements," because Jim had a helper behind the bar (and, Carl imagined, a fairly unwilling one): Renee. Art Troy was up at the piano playing his first set, and he wisely played very soothing music, which was piped into the dining room, to keep everyone's nerves in order. Heaven only knew when Troy would ever be let off the stand long enough to have his dinner this night. But, Carl supposed, Art Troy had taken proper precautions against hunger or too great consciousness of anything that was going on. If the bar business was any indication, they'd have their feet run off them before the dining room closed at ten-thirty.

And if the Southern Winds had as good a crowd as had been predicted, and the customers could be serviced at least moderately well, Carl thought that, indeed, the financial situation of the place was solved, at least momentarily—and that was something.

At six o'clock sharp, they were ready to go; a party of two and a party of four came in, were seated, and Kent and Naomi started off. There were drink orders first, of course, and it would be a moment or two before they got the dinner orders and went to the broil.

Although Melanie stood right there behind him, Daddy-O bowed to her, slipped out from behind the broil, ran across the room and up the ramp to the kitchen. Carl would bet anything he had a bottle hidden somewhere. A moment later, Daddy-O ran back, his white eyes brighter, just in time to meet Naomi, who, looking distressed, carefully gave her order from the party of four to Bert, who, in turn, wrote it down and carefully stated it to Daddy-O.

With high flourishes of his hands, Daddy-O attended to the meat and placed it over the fire. The muscles in Bert's face relaxed, Melanie ceased straining forward, and it appeared that

Daddy-O was humming at his work. Carl thought that, with a great deal of luck, the thing might just be managed. Charlotte's face (as clearly as Carl could see it from where he stood with the others at the back of the room) looked scrupulously unconcerned, which really was the most heartening attitude for her to show to the rest—as if she fully expected everything to turn out all right, except that Carl knew the martinis they'd had at the Casa Marina were the primary cause of the look and that really she was almost in the position of gambling her investment, several thousand dollars, on what happened in the next four and a half hours.

It was only then that Carl noticed he himself was fairly composed. The evening was pleasant, still absolutely no breeze, but the haze had cleared off, and when he peeped up at the sky from one side of the shed, he saw that though it wasn't dark, the stars were already out.

One more couple came in and Happy Fitz got busy.

Which left Robin and himself.

Twenty minutes later, they were still standing there and Daddy-O had apparently successfully delivered the first steak order for four to Naomi and was about to successfully deliver another steak order for two to Kent.

It seemed to be going smoothly. A minute later a party of six came in and seated themselves at two of Robin's tables, and Carl was alone. It was then twenty of seven. Carl's private hope was that the Chinese chef made good and safe time over that hellish causeway. At exactly seven, a party of four came in and took one of Carl's tables. He proceeded over to them.

They were very proper and polite young Naval officers, in uniform, who had trouble finding a place to put their hats and decided on their laps covered by a napkin. He sized them up as new in Key West and anxious to do the right thing, so that they would not, Carl thought, be difficult to deal with. They ordered a cocktail all around, Carl told them to consider the chalk-written menu on the blackboard attached to the pole and he would return directly to take their order. Carl went to the bar.

Air-conditioned or no, the temperature in the bar was not much different than in the dining room, due to the jam of people. It was an effort even to get into the little area marked "Service, Waiters

Only," and then he had to wait until Jim was free. Carl noticed a great many of the regulars around, probably for a glimpse of the movie people and the stars. He saw Houlton and his mother established on seats, Stanley standing in the rear with some of the townspeople who were prominent. They would all, no doubt, converge on the dining room later. But, at least for now, they seemed well content where they were.

As Jim prepared the drinks which Carl had asked for, Carl watched Renee. That she hated—abominated—the job that Melanie had forced her to do was obvious. She looked sour and undone, and he was truly sorry to see her that way. She filled drink orders with her customary nonchalance, except that here and now it was hardly appreciated. Troy tinkled away at the piano, giving Carl the impression that he dared not stop, and the expression on his face was one of great, benign serenity. Carl thought that his supposition that Troy would fortify himself against shocks this evening with an extra dose of whatever he took was not wrong. It did not, in any event, hurt his piano playing; in fact, it seemed to encourage him to risk rather complicated harmonies and counterharmonies. It was too bad that Renee would not be able to sing for this crowd, but, Carl thought, she might not be heard anyway.

When Carl returned to the dining room, a few more parties had arrived, and Carl could see at a glance that the consternation had returned to Bert's face and was beginning to insinuate itself into Daddy-O's cooking. The flourish was still there when he wielded the knife, but it seemed indefinite and leading to no action. Carl served his party their drinks and took their dinner order: filet mignon all around, same dressing on their salads, nothing to start with. Carl headed toward the broil.

Melanie, meanwhile, had left it. He spied her seating a party of four who were evidently connected with the movie company. As she seated them, she said to them what Romano used to say: "Enjoy yourselves, menu's on the blackboard over there, waiter'll be with you in a minute," except her greeting had not his conviction. Nevertheless, she was putting a good face on it. Her silver bracelets clicked together as she moved her hands to gesture, and when she turned to come back to her post, her plain, gray, pleated skirt swirled pleasingly.

As she approached, Carl noticed that she had rouged and mascaraed heavily to obscure the lines that apprehension must have inevitably put there. She arrived at the broil just as he stated his order to Bert. Melanie leaned over to Carl and said: "I've just had a call from the Chinese chef. He had tire trouble, but it's fixed now, and he's within a half-hour's drive from here. I told him to be careful but to hurry."

Bert wrote Carl's order down and, shaking now, haltingly said it to Daddy-O. At first the old man did not appear to catch it, busy as he was stoking the dozen or so portions he had already going on the fire. Then he turned to Bert and said: "See, ah got the rares h'yer, the medium rares there, and the mediums and well-dones way over ta th' side."

"That's fine, Daddy," Bert said. "Now Carl has just given me a new one. Shall I say it again?"

"Didn't hear ya the first time," Daddy-O said angrily. "You gotta speak loud; old ears ain't too good with all this noise and fryin'."

Bert repeated Carl's order, but Daddy-O still seemed not to understand and tried to look around and over at the pad from which Bert read.

"How many ole filets we got cookin'?" Daddy-O said.

"You're supposed to have eight filets going," Bert said. And Carl's heart sank for Bert and his valiant attempt to keep track of all that.

"Now I gotta put on fo' mo'," Daddy-O said.

"Right," Bert said, relieved. "All rare."

"All rare," Daddy repeated, leaning over to get the meat. "See? Ah follow ya. Don' need nothin' writ down. Do it jest like ole Henri; he never need nuthin' writ down. Daddy-O's the same."

Bert glanced at Carl and there was pain in the look, and as Carl went to the kitchen for the salads, he said a quick prayer that Bert and the old colored man would be able to hold everything for just another thirty minutes. Carl hadn't been in the kitchen a moment when Daddy-O lurched through the screen door.

"What do you want?" May said menacingly. "Now, don't you misbehave, you old bastard; get out there and lay off that stuff."

"Jest one quick one, May, please," and the old man's voice quavered.

May looked at Carl and made a helpless gesture. She nodded to Daddy-O. He went to a cupboard, withdrew a whisky bottle and took a healthy swig. When he put the bottle back, he actually did look better. He scurried through the screen door.

"Do you think he'll make it?" Carl said.

"Old bastard can hold a lot," May said. "But I don't know if he can cook."

It occurred to Carl that some orders had been delivered and that thus far no complaints had been made. Seven twenty-five . . . if they could keep on another few minutes . . . providing, of course, that that Chinese was burning up the highway. And providing the *Chinese* could cook, he thought.

Carl got his salads, but when he returned down the ramp to the dining room, his stomach jumped. It looked as if the movie-company people had come in busloads, for they were pouring in the front door and down the steps from the bar. Melanie was rushing around trying to seat them, but Carl had a terrible feeling that they'd run aground. It would be better, Carl thought, to simply close down for the moment; and after he had delivered the salads (and glanced over the number of people who crowded in and were already sitting at his tables waiting for service), he went to the cashier's desk and told his opinion to Charlotte. Charlotte stammered that she'd already said that very thing to Melanie, but that Melanie wouldn't hear of it—said they'd managed so far, they were not going to be torpedoed now. Carl went to Melanie and he spoke frankly to her.

"Get back to your people," she said rudely. "Are you trying to take over this show?"

Carl went back to his people, took some drink orders, and went to the bar. There was hardly any getting through. The other waiters were in the same state. They decided to stand in line for drink orders until Jim could fill them, and the last one in line was to go to the dining room and explain to the customers that there would be a slight delay. That, Carl thought, would at least be a gesture in the right direction. On the other hand, holding them all up at the bar like this would mean that their orders at the broil would be ready with no one to receive them, and that would be fatal. Carl did finally get some drinks from Jim, and when he

got to the top of the porch steps into the dining room, he saw that every table was filled, that people were cluttering the entrance. Carl resisted the welling up of a feeling of hopelessness but he knew he was trying to hold a completely impossible position. One simply did what one could. Carl delivered the drinks, apologized to the people at his tables that he hadn't even gotten to, and headed for the broil to pick up on the four filets for the Naval officers. He was met at the broil by Happy, whose face, despite the glasses and the usually nondescript expression, clearly told the story: it was the end.

Daddy-O was lurching about aimlessly, really, Carl saw. Bert was standing near the chef, speaking low, and Melanie herself was attempting to turn the broiling meat. No one, it was apparent, knew what was what, or what was done or not. Just then, Kent came to the broil, followed by Robin, and that made four waiters waiting and nothing forthcoming.

It was probably the sight of them all standing there that set Melanie off. She began by berating the old man. He only muttered and tottered away to one side to wipe his forehead. She turned on Bert then and accused him of trying to sabotage her. He simply backed up, speechless. She said she'd do it herself. She speared portions of meat and threw them on plates without regard to what they were, or how well done, and slammed these plates pointlessly on the counter.

"Take something, take something," she said loudly.

It was so pointless, so ridiculous, that it was humorous; but, of course, no one laughed. One or two of the waiters tried to sort out what they needed—*they* had no record—and transferred a few of the plates to their trays . . . but waited to see if they could not get all the portions and thus complete at least an order for one table.

Melanie, meanwhile, had instructed Conch to stoke the fires and add more kerosene, which he did. Melanie was not satisfied with the results, however, and she grabbed the stoker from the boy and poked at the coals furiously. Carl was conscious, as were they all, that the customers had begun to discover something amiss. None of them dared look around now; rather, they all tried to hunch over and hide the fiasco taking place in front of

them. The coals still, apparently, were not burning to Melanie's satisfaction. She then grabbed the kerosene from Conch and doused it liberally into the broil. Simply, she caused a blaze-up, which forced her to step back, which forced them all to step back. The flames soared up, circumvented the overhead smoke ventilator—as large as it was—touched the wooden beams which supported it, and started a fire.

It was not much of a fire, to be sure, and Happy said he knew where the extinguisher was in the kitchen and ran to get it. Meanwhile, Melanie, Conch, Daddy-O and Bert came out from behind the broil because a few sparks were falling from the burning beam. The flame was creeping along toward the outside, toward the rolled-up, dried-out, old canvas curtain. In a minute, Happy was back with the extinguisher, he unwound and untangled the hose, turned the extinguisher upside down, and directed the nozzle at the flames—but nothing happened. Then, as he fussed with it, as several of them shook it, the canvas curtain caught like a wick and the fire licked up quickly and spread along the underside of the roof at the front end of the dining room.

A smart aleck yelled, "Back to the bar!" And the room began to empty. People went up the porch stairs and through the house rather than through the front entrance, which, indeed, would have necessitated passing the fire. Again, the scene of an undone dining room, dishes and silver scattered, except that this time chairs and tables were also overturned. Melanie stood with her hands to her head and watched, as did they all, rather than opposed the fire, which burned further and further up the slanted roof and began to spread back, too. It was Bert, finally, who broke the spell—which, indeed, had lasted but for a few seconds—and, saying that he'd call the Fire Department, hastened through the amused and not at all stampeding crowd of customers. Bert disappeared among them, and, Carl presumed, toward the hall phone and help. Help was what they needed now, without doubt. Melanie was screaming for somebody to get water glasses or sand or something, but Carl ignored her; the effort was over and out of his hands. He went to Charlotte, who was scooping up into a paper bag her bank of money from the register.

"Can I help?" he said.

"No, I haven't much; just want to get this change in the bag. Do you think it's serious?"

"I think it's going to burn down this pavilion, at least," Carl said, and sparks began dropping quite near them from overhead. "The flames seem to be going straight up in the air and maybe the Fire Department can get here in time to save the house."

"My God, I hope so," Charlotte said. "My cats . . . all my things . . ."

"I don't think it'll take them but a minute to get here, but we'd better get out."

The shed was burning now about halfway toward the back along the other side and at the top. Embers were dropping down and here and there setting afire a tablecloth and table. The fire progressed toward the rear of the room as each furled canvas curtain caught and flared up. With the bag of mostly change, Carl and Charlotte joined the last of the crowd going up the porch steps, and they closed the glass porch doors behind them. It occurred to Carl that he had better be sure someone bothered to tell May and Eddie in the kitchen what was going on. Charlotte said she needed a drink and would wait for him in the bar if, indeed, she could get in.

Carl went through the front way and around to the kitchen. But they had already gathered the situation: Eddie was in the parking space at work unjacking his flivver, and he said May had gone upstairs to get their suitcases. Carl thought it was curious that Eddie would bother unjacking the old car; he himself was not as pessimistic about the progress of the fire as Eddie seemed to be. Still, the engines hadn't come, and when Carl went back around the front, people were pouring out the door and into the street and lining the sidewalk, as if they expected to see a pretty good show. "No," Carl thought, "I am not running this show, dear Melanie, and now, my love, neither are you." He wondered, incidentally, where she was. It also occurred to him that the Chinese chef could take his time now.

Carl literally fought his way into the bar. Charlotte must've used her elbows, because there she was, right in the center with Stanley next to her and some other friends around, with a drink already in her hand. Carl finally got near her and noted with

slight satisfaction that at least the bar was well-manned and would perhaps make up in some measure for the money lost in the dining room: Jim was there working like mad; Renee had continued at it, but without any comment now; and Robin had pitched in merrily, drinking almost as much as he served, no doubt. And there was Art Troy at his piano, taking a long swig of a drink, which act he no longer attempted to hide. The crowd railed at him for some music; he put the drained glass down and played something bouncy. The air conditioner was going, but Charlotte sniffed and swore she could smell smoke and said she couldn't imagine why the engines weren't here by now. She asked him who had telephoned. He told her Bert. Where was Bert? No Bert. "This is an old house," Charlotte said, "and no matter how rebellious the spirit, it will burn, and everything I own is either wrapped up in this building or in it really." Carl said he would go and phone again, and, laboriously, he pushed his way through and into the hallway, where there were people trying to get in.

Carl looked out the front door and saw no engines, but he did see some policemen approaching up the walk.

The phone was back near the glass door to the porch. Carl observed clouds of smoke coming against that door and tiny eddies coming through the cracks, and he guessed that the dining pavilion must be going fast and no doubt would collapse against the house proper. He also saw that the phone booth was closed and the light was on, and when he got to it, there was Bert collapsed on the floor in a hunched-up ball. "Oh, my God," Carl thought, which of course meant that the Fire Department didn't even know there was a fire yet, unless the neighbors had called, which, evidently, they hadn't.

Carl struggled with the doors; hands came to his aid. They got the doors back enough to slide Bert's inert body out, whereupon Carl called the Fire Department, which took down all the information carefully, and a strong voice said they'd be there right away. Bert, meanwhile, had come to and was sitting against the wall, looking around senselessly. Naomi had owned one of the pair of hands which had aided, and she and Carl managed to haul Bert to his feet. He was covered with perspiration and kept sliding out of their grip, but they got him along to the porch for some air and safely ensconced in a chair there.

Carl thought a minute and considered that he ought to warn Charlotte, that it would be still a little while before the Fire Department arrived, and that she and Art Troy ought to gather their most valuable possessions together from upstairs, as he planned to collect his own, just in case the top of the building was burning.

So Carl fought again through the bar, this time with a great deal more difficulty. People weren't being served at all, or not as rapidly as they thought the occasion merited, and they were testy about letting anyone new in or anywhere near the bar. He *did* finally get to Charlotte, and whispered in her ear, and she said: "My cats and my silver." And she whispered to Jim, who passed along the word to Art Troy. But Troy simply threw up his hands and shrugged his shoulders, which stopped the melody and irritated the crowd. Troy said audibly that he had nothing in particular in his room that he would worry about saving. It was a foolish statement, Carl knew, brought on by Troy's condition and the excitement the poor guy saw all around him. He no doubt simply refused inwardly to cope with it, and Carl thought that when he went to his own room for his luggage, he would look in Troy's room—he knew Troy never locked it—and see what he could gather together . . . perhaps some clothes.

Charlotte was like a bulldozer through the crowd, though she knew intimately some of the people she almost struck aside. She gave them a big hello and a nice smile anyway. It was then that they heard the siren go off, but it must have been the firehouse siren, for the engines were still not in sight. They got free of the bar, and into the hall, and around to the stairs, glancing again through the glass porch doors, but all they could see was smoke and, infrequently, a flame. But they knew, without saying it, that the Southern Winds was going down.

"It's really burning," Charlotte said, "and I'll bet the top of the house is on fire in the back."

They hurried up the stairs. Carl left Charlotte fumbling for her keys at the door of her apartment and he continued on up to the third floor. There was still not much smoke in the hall, but it was very warm. Carl opened the door to his room. A wall of smoke almost knocked him down. He closed it quickly. The top of the building was going first—odd house, rebellious house. Well, there

was only his luggage, a few summer clothes, a couple of hundred dollars, and—the notebook, destroyed after all. But he had almost a hundred dollars in his pocket, so if worse came to worse, which it was rapidly doing, he had at least enough to get him back to New York.

Carl went to Troy's room—it was not bad yet—and put over his arm a few trousers and sports coats he found hanging in the closet. He came out of Troy's room into the hall and ran right into May, who had her hands full with two huge suitcases which she was going to carry down. He tried to take them for her, but she gestured to her room; Carl looked in and saw several more suitcases, at least four cardboard boxes, and an amazing number of dresses and suits thrown over all of that. That these two, whom Carl had rarely seen appropriately attired and had never known to entertain in their room, should have so much stuff! He took two of the smaller suitcases and followed May down the stairs and onto the front porch, where they both dropped everything. Eddie joined them, saying he'd gotten the flivver down off the jacks and away from the house. Carl accompanied May and Eddie back up the stairs to help them salvage more of their belongings. Still, no engines. It seemed, of course, an interminably long time; actually, it couldn't have been more than three minutes since he had made the call.

On the second floor, however, Charlotte emerged from her apartment and said please to help *her;* May and Eddie nodded, and Carl went in to do what he was bidden. He had no sooner got inside, though, when he heard screams from above. He and Charlotte rushed into the hall just as May and Eddie stumbled down the stairs screaming that the whole upstairs was burning and that the ceiling in the back was giving way. Carl thought that if Charlotte wanted to save anything, she really hadn't a moment to lose, and he also thought that someone had better warn those people in the bar. And he paused just a moment to think if there was anyone else who lived in the building who should be warned; no, Henri was gone, but, just to make sure, he stepped across the hallway and pushed in the door to Henri's apartment—it opened, and it was startlingly vacant, except for some papers on the floor and a broken chair. He shouted to make

sure, but no answer. He noticed wisps of smoke coming through the ceiling. Then he heard the engines roaring down the street. Back to Charlotte's apartment. "I'll have this box filled with the silver in just a minute." She was dashing around grabbing pieces off of tables here and there. "You'd better go down to the bar and tell them that the building is really going, in case May and Eddie forgot to, which I think is more than likely."

Carl ran down the steps two at a time holding onto the banister, which creaked, swung himself around on the smooth old newel post, ducked his head when he jumped by the porch door, from which a considerable amount of smoke was leaking (but being drawn upward). Carl got to the bar. But the police had beaten him to it; they were lunging around in the crowd, shouting for everybody to leave, but Jim was still pouring drinks over the bar, holding a bottle in his hand, and just aiming generally at the glasses which were proferred to him, accepting a dollar a drink. And Troy had given up on anything but the loudest pieces—in fact, he began then on the "Maine Stein Song." Standing at the door, Carl was run into rather hard by Stanley Cooper, who stopped to apologize and wipe his forehead. He wore his neat blue blazer and white flannels.

"Damnedest commotion I ever saw," Stanley said slowly and with a tremendously amused smile playing across his face. "Think it's goin' right to the ground, don't you?"

"It might," Carl said. "I'm trying to give Charlotte a hand with her silver and maybe her clothes. . . ." But Carl did not have to explain further, because Charlotte was leaning over the banister and shouting at them.

"Help me with my stuff, will you? The roof's beginning to buckle!"

Carl took a step or two before he realized that Stanley was not with him. In fact, with the smile full across his face, he was shaking his head.

"Wouldn't go up there," Stanley said in his tired, twangy voice, "for all the tea in China."

"Help me, for God's sake," Charlotte screamed.

"Aren't you coming?" Carl said.

"She hasn't got anything up there worth saving, for heaven's

sake," Stanley said. "And even if she had, her life's worth more than anything she could possibly have."

It must have been this ungentlemanly action that prompted Carl to say something he had no business to, but the moment was so unpromising that it was propitious: "I'm surprised you haven't done something for Charlotte—her hearing, for instance."

"My dear boy," Stanley said, "Charlotte inherited ten thousand dollars about three years ago. If she wanted something done about her hearing, she should have tended to it herself then; but no, she let it piss all away helping this bum and helping that bum, and all they were doing was boozin' it up or downright stealing it out of her pocketbook. And she boozed it up some herself, let me tell you . . ."

Carl and Stanley were separated then by the firemen, who rushed into the hall in full fire-raincoat regalia and charged up the stairs. Carl turned his back on Stanley and charged up after them: they had gone all three flights; Carl stopped at the second and went into Charlotte's apartment. She shoved the cardboard box with the silver things piled in it into his hands. "Here," she said, "throw it carefully out the window."

"Carefully out the window!"

"It will land in the bushes around the porch and we'll get it later; nobody will steal it."

"I could carry it down," he said.

"No, I want you to help me down with something else," she said, getting a little hysterical. Meanwhile, she'd gone to the closet and begun throwing dresses over her arm. "I'll have to save these; I can't get those in the bedroom—too much smoke."

Carl went through the window on to the porch, and as he appeared on the porch, an audible and uniform shout went up from the crowd, for there was a real crowd now lining the sidewalk and sitting on the raised lawns of the houses opposite. In the street, the fire engines were pulled up almost one on top of the other, and more equipment, probably Navy, was arriving noisily. The place was going up in flames, and they weren't even nearly ready to leave the building, Carl thought. He went back in.

"What about the cats?" he said. "Where are they?"

"Oh, animals know about things like this; they sense danger and can protect themselves."

Carl thought it was true, and the ruse which had got him up here in the first place was therefore dispensed with with womanly expertness.

"Charlotte, did you inherit some money a short time ago?"

This was the point beyond which Carl could get no completely coherent answer from Charlotte. She rushed around now, with her dresses thrown over her arm, mumbling. All of a sudden the door burst open and a fireman told them (gruffly) to vacate, but he didn't wait to see that they did. The door slowly swung shut again. Charlotte still had a moment, therefore, and she seemed to Carl to be racing around the apartment now, looking for something she might consider valuable, rather than searching for actual valuables, and he began to think how he could persuade her to leave.

"Come on," he said strongly. And, indeed, the room was getting smoky. Charlotte suddenly ran to the window, ducked through it onto the porch (causing the same audible reaction as he had from the crowd), and tossed her dresses and whatever else she had in her hands to the bushes below. She came back in.

"I want you to help me with one other thing," she said plaintively.

"What?" he said.

"That!" she said, and pointed, her arm fully extended, to her immense console television machine. Carl thought surely that under the strain of it all Charlotte was giving way.

"Darling, you can get another one; it's too big; even if we got it onto the porch, it would smash when we threw it over."

Charlotte began to cry and sat down.

"We're not going to throw it over," she blubbered; "we'll take it down the stairs, you in front, me holding it in back."

"No, Charlotte, now come on."

"Then you can go to hell with Stanley!" she cried. "I'll do it myself." And she got up and began to take hold of it.

This is absurd beyond all absurdity, Carl thought, but this is Key West, anything can happen, and almost everything has happened. It also occurred to Carl, as he stopped a moment, that the television machine, as large as it was, was on wheels, and that maybe, if he could get it into the hallway and get Charlotte's apartment door closed behind them, he might get a fireman to

help dissuade Charlotte and to help him take her, forcibly, if need be, downstairs and out.

Charlotte was already hauling and pushing at the machine, and Carl went over to it and first disconnected it. Together they maneuvered it away from the wall, and it rolled quite easily to the center of the floor.

"I don't see the point," he said under his breath.

"Because," Charlotte said, tears streaming down her cheeks, "this is the only thing I'll have to keep me company in my old age."

"Oh, Charlotte," Carl said, but they almost had it to the door now, and in a moment it would be in the hall and he would slam the door behind them. There was a hallway door to the porch, it was true, and if she wanted to go through it (break through it, because it was kept locked), she could, he supposed, and then climb back in a window to her apartment from the porch, but he hoped she wouldn't. The big machine bumped over the doorsill and rolled into the hall freely, at least before its wheels got snagged on two hose lines. Carl stood up and, before Charlotte could do anything, he closed the door hard.

"The bag of money . . . my purse . . . my keys," she said dazedly.

"Your life is more important," he said, scheming quickly as to how to get her down the stairs.

"I did inherit some money," Charlotte said disjointedly. "But I spent it all." She sighed. "All except what I invested in this place and what I bought this machine with. All gone now."

"Charlotte, let's leave it," Carl said, inwardly lamenting the fact that there wasn't a single fireman in sight, although he could hear them clumping around upstairs and calling to one another downstairs.

"Isn't it a beauty?" Charlotte said, resting a minute. "I love the wood." He eyed the wood—it was polished very well, it was true. Then Carl heard, rather than saw, someone coming up the stairs. He wheeled around. It was Melanie. It couldn't have been anyone he'd rather see less. She was a sight—completely fallen apart—coming doggedly up the stairs.

"Melanie, go back," he said, but she paid no attention.

Charlotte also told her to go back, but Melanie reached the top

step, sidled around the machine, and said something about having to see that there was nobody in the house, that it was not her fault and she wanted to explain. Carl noticed that somewhere Melanie had lost her shoes. Her toenails were painted scarlet.

"Go after her!" Charlotte said.

Carl started across the hall after Melanie, who had begun to climb the third flight. She would be stopped by the firemen, of course, but she might get hurt. Carl grabbed her waist from behind and tried to simply lift her up, turn her around and set her going in the other direction. He got as far as putting his arms around her waist; she propelled both elbows backward, and he caught one squarely in his right eye. He held on to her, however, and brought her down heavily. At this moment a fireman came to his assistance and took over; he marched Melanie across the hall, shoved Charlotte's television machine out of the way—for which Charlotte, standing aside, cursed him—and continued on down, with Melanie forced to go before him. Carl held his eye. It stung greatly.

"You'll have quite a shiner," Charlotte said happily, and he grabbed her arm prefatory to escorting her out. "No!" she screamed. "Machine!" And she pointed to it. "You promised. Don't fail me!"

Carl looked around, but there was no fireman to assist this time. There was, however, a tremendous crash from upstairs, more sounds of boots clumping excitedly around, and then relative silence. Charlotte and Carl both stood still, both joined the listeners whom Carl had sensed in the hallways of that house one calm afternoon so short ago. And he knew what they were waiting to hear—Charlotte and he both heard it clearly—the loud crackling of the flames.

"You get in front of it," Charlotte said, "and face forward. I'll stay in back and hold it from slipping."

And then Carl foresaw his solution. He did get round in front of it, and, stumbling over the hose lines (the object now of loud and severe criticism from three firemen who were coming through the hall below), he let Charlotte tip it down and start it sliding, and then, simply because she couldn't hold it back, and neither could he, and he had no intention of doing so anyway, he stepped

aside. The wheels of the machine snapped off and it slid along wildly, gaining momentum. Carl shouted "look out below!" as the TV caught the railing—tore it down—and hit the newel post with a crash so violent the picture tube exploded, the cabinet burst apart, and the newel post itself went over. The three firemen didn't stop long; they just kicked aside the debris, cleared their hose lines, and one of them, who came up, assisted Carl in getting Charlotte down the stairs. Suddenly there was shouting from above, and the fireman let go of her arm and rushed away. But, at least, Carl thought, she's down. They were standing near the door to the porch, where the smoke was something terrific, and he began coughing. Charlotte, with sad and glazed eyes, was looking at the bits of pretty wood lying all around. Carl took out his handkerchief, covered his nose, got hold of Charlotte and began pulling her along.

"No," she cried, and yanked away. She was back and leafing over something on the floor.

"It's all broken, Charlotte, ruined; there's nothing . . ." But Carl saw what she was leaning over; it was the toppled newel post, hollow at the base, and she was poking her hand around inside it.

"I've found it," she yelled, and slowly drew out what appeared to be a very large, furled, moldering piece of cloth attached to a short, stout stick. "Bonnie Lee's flag!" And the cloth dropped open, revealing a background of faded blue stars. "Do you realize the historical value of this?" she said; and Carl said, "All right, bring it along, but I'm choking. . . ." But he was glad she'd found the flag; it made up a little bit for all she had lost. Charlotte was enchanted and she allowed herself to be dragged by Carl to the front door. He was leading her for a change. Before going through it, however, Carl stopped—Charlotte went ahead—and looked into Melanie's Fantasea Room, possibly for the last time.

The doors had been propped open, but it was still cool there. Yet the acrid odor of the fire was strong. Carl saw that, in spite of it all, there were still some people drinking, and that Jim was behind the bar trying with an iron rod to pry loose the whole cash register, unable for some reason to get it open apparently. The loud phonograph had replaced Troy. Other people were behind the bar, pouring themselves drinks or just stealing whole bottles

of liquor. Jim didn't seem to care, as occupied as he was. Water ran down from the corners of the ceiling, and a stream started in the center of the wall and splashed down over the little light above Troy's music stand on the piano. It was still lit. Delight and charm past, all gone, or soon to be, Carl thought. But then more firemen were passing through the halls, hauling in more line, and he was forced to leave.

Carl glanced on the porch for Troy's clothes, which he'd put down there, but these were missing—he thought probably May or Naomi had taken them away. At least, he hoped so. He found Charlotte rummaging in the bushes along the side of the porch, retrieving her dresses which she'd thrown over. He joined her and she pointed to the box of silver, which had landed fairly intact. Carl wondered about the cats; he hadn't seen them. They grabbed up everything they could find and, threading their way through the maze of fire apparatus, headed across the street to safety. Many hands helped them to the curb and up on a raised lawn. They sat down—flopped down, more accurately. Just at that moment several firemen came running out of the front door; there was a terrific crash and it seemed that the third floor was giving way.

After the firemen—and Jim, toting the cash register—the last few customers quit the Southern Winds. They carried with them, quite openly, full bottles of liquor and the bar stools. It would appear that they were going to make a long party of it.

It was almost dark then, and the light from the fire brightened the clear evening sky, so full of stars. The smoke continued to flow straight upward, and it streamed from the upper stories of the house, the windows of Charlotte's apartment now, and what used to be Henri's, like blood. Carl turned to check on Charlotte. She was sitting up, also watching, and clutching the flag to her breast.

"At the very end," she said to him, "the house told me its secret. But it resisted until the last moment. Brave house, gallant house," she said. And there she was, quite a different sight than at the Casa Marina, three hours earlier this very day (it seemed impossible to believe), seated on the lawn looking a wreck, with a box of silver on one side, her dresses crumpled in a pile on the other, the flower over her ear fallen, her usually bunned hair fallen also, and a flag clutched to her bosom. Lastly, coming stealthily but surely toward

her in the grass—Babe and Tig. When the cats got close they jumped in her lap. Never were there two more hungrily loving animals, and Charlotte embraced them with a gentle, "Bad pussycats, where have you been, running away from your mama like that? But you knew, didn't you? Bad, bad pussycats. . . ." Carl would have cried, but his eye hurt too much where Melanie had poked him. He turned back to watch the fire.

Curiously, the lights in the house had still not gone out, including the lawn floodlights, and, most curious of all, somehow the phonograph had been turned up full volume so that music poured out of the loud-speakers in the bar and in the main hallway; it was a sad-voiced record of Mabel Mercer. The firemen were shouting that everyone was out, to stand clear; and from the great truck fierce streams of water were directed into the windows. The waterfall sound rushing down the walls was noticeable even intermingled with the music and the roaring of the flames.

Carl glanced up and down the street. Not only were firemen hosing the Bonnie Lee House but every other house for several blocks in each direction. It was not difficult to understand why; what with the smoke and flaming debris floating straight upward, an ember might carry for miles. Still, he thought, there were only three big streams of water attempting to control the blaze; it did seem that something might be saved if there were more. It crossed his mind briefly, but he as quickly disregarded the idea, that there would be elements in the town who wouldn't mind the total disappearance of this building and all it stood for, despite its historical associations. He turned his attention back to the fire fighting. Many people manned the hoses, which were hard to hold—some of them obviously Navy men, all of them volunteers, all of them drenched.

For the most part the crowd was well behaved and silent, even morose. Only one group, the one which had taken the bar stools with them and were sitting along the curb on the opposite corner, were obstreperous. Several times they started singing, "Nearer My God to Thee," "Auld Lang Syne," but each time they got started the police hushed them. One elderly man in the crowd, quite near to Carl, stood watching the Southern Winds go, tears streaming down his cheeks. Several people were pushing through along the

sidewalk, behind the stationary lines of people, and Carl knew that the faces were familiar, quite famous, movie people, but, as sometimes happens, he could not remember the names. One said to the other in Carl's hearing: "Is that where we were supposed to have the steaks? Man, what a charcoal broil!" People all around laughed, and, as grim a joke as it was, Carl could not help laughing, too. He glanced back again at Charlotte. She was just sitting there as before, her brown eyes wide and stunned. Carl did not know anything helpful to do, so again he turned back to watch.

The fire had reached the main floor now, or at least smoke was billowing out of the front door and out of the bar windows, which the firemen had smashed open. Still, the lights were all on and the music blared. It was an eerie and ominous effect. Carl spied Emmette Colliers edging along through the crowd, head up, shoulders thrown back, hands in his pockets, eyes most intently observing.

As for the others, he couldn't spot them, except for Renee. She was among the bar-stool singing group; oh, and Troy was there, too, sprawled on the ground. Renee was surrounded by sailors and was laughing a great deal. The liquor was not exhausted by far.

A murmur went up from the crowd. Flames could now be seen downstairs; in fact, some were shooting out the front door.

Another murmur from the crowd . . . a spire of flame shot out of the widow's walk on the roof and rose and fell at least twenty feet in the air.

One of the firemen shouted, "She's going to cave! Get that crowd back!" And the police made an effort to push everyone further off the sidewalk and into the yard where Charlotte sat—but without much success. They moved back a little bit, then they all moved forward again, or sat down—hundreds of people.

Now they could see pure fire ripping out of the bar windows and that the ceiling was dropping there. All of a sudden a lot of pops like firecrackers went off and Carl guessed that the few remaining liquor bottles had exploded. And, because of the pure tongues of fire coming out of the windows, the large and lovely palm trees next to the house began to burn. The firemen momentarily switched the direction of their hoses, but not before the trees went up like great torches.

It was then that Carl saw Melanie. She, too, was edging through the crowd, still barefoot, her light clothes torn and soiled, approaching first this one, then that, trying to tell them something; then she would listlessly pass on. Melanie finally going naked in the world . . . Anyone could see that she was in a severe state of shock, if not worse. She disappeared down the street.

Stanley saw her, too. He glanced at Carl and shrugged his shoulders. Carl wanted no communion with Stanley, but still the man came up.

"Cuckoo," he said, indicating Melanie, and since he got no response from Carl, he turned and went over to where Charlotte was sitting on the grass.

Carl heard Charlotte say, "I'm mad at you. You wouldn't help me with my stuff. . . . You're a coward. . . ." And other things. And Carl heard Stanley's funny voice remonstrating, and Carl knew that before long Charlotte and Stanley would be reconciled, at least somewhat, regardless of what had or had not happened. But Stanley evidently felt discouraged. As he passed Carl, he said, "I guess I'll be movin' along," and he, too, disappeared into the crowd, with the attitude, Carl thought, of a naughty boy who had done something wrong and was afraid to come back. But he would, Carl knew, he would. . . .

Carl spied Robin and Kent, drunk as coots, arms around each other, joining the crowd with Renee and the sailors. Happy and Naomi appeared, too. But Carl's attention was diverted by a vast cry from the watchers: the lights and the music suddenly went off (the fire truck spotlights and the street lights went on but were not needed); this time flames jumped from the widow's walk at least fifty feet high. Someone yelled, "There she goes!" And it was as if a great hand were putting a crease in the exact center of the roof; it began to sink—in, in and down; sparks flew brilliantly outward and upward; timbers crashed—a large thrust of flame and smoke, and the whole building seemed to collapse. Just the sides and a bit of roof at each end seemed to be standing.

And the only part of the Southern Winds left intact now was the large sign at the upper end of the property, near the driveway, on the grass, that Carl had seen when he first arrived in town. It was on hinges; the firemen thought to wet it down—it swayed

slightly and glittered evilly as it announced its purposeless message: The Southern Winds, Restaurant, and Lounge.

Charlotte was saying something behind him. He turned to her.

"Gone," she said.

"Yes," he said. And he thought how strange it was to watch one physical form change into another and be lost before one's very eyes.

Just then a woman dressed in a uniform with a white-and-red band on her sleeve found Charlotte. "Miss Tully," the woman said loudly, bending over, "are you all right?" Charlotte slowly allowed herself to be helped to her feet.

"I'm all right," Charlotte said. "And I'll bet you have some coffee somewhere and something to eat." Charlotte turned to him. "This is Miss Thayer from the Salvation Army; she's always around when something really bad happens." And Miss Thayer stepped to the sidewalk and hailed a man who was pushing a sizable cart with hot coffee and doughnuts on it. Miss Thayer got one of the paper cups of coffee and a doughnut in a napkin for Charlotte and gave the same thing to Carl and to several others who wanted it. Now, Carl thought, it really is like a party. But the party was almost over.

Even the sides of the Southern Winds had fallen in now, and the remains burned brightly at the base and smoked a lot, but there was nothing left and not much more to see. When Charlotte had taken some of her coffee and eaten her doughnut and asked for two more, she told Miss Thayer of her discovery in the newel post. This seemed to interest that lady greatly, but Charlotte would not surrender the flag from her presence.

"This stays with me," Charlotte said firmly, "until I get it to the Key West Historical Society. It's the last message from the old house. . . ." Whereupon Charlotte began to blubber again.

Miss Thayer wisely left her. But Carl went over, he latched arms with Charlotte, and together they watched the fire die down. House of love, burning brightly, house of love . . . and they stood together and watched the last of the Southern Winds.

Now what? Carl thought.

But Charlotte was sentient again.

"Let's go to the La Concha and get rooms," she said quietly.

Carl imagined she did this for his benefit, so that he would not be alone, for there must have been many homes in Key West which would have welcomed Charlotte that night. And so, Charlotte carrying the cats and clutching the flag still, and himself carrying the box of silver and her dresses in a bunched bundle, quit the lawn and made their way through the crowd.

As they went, they heard a woman say to a man, "Ominous place, that restaurant; the end of an era here." Carl and Charlotte looked at each other and laughed.

They walked the four short blocks to the hotel, and Carl thought that in all his traveling he had never checked in anywhere with such strange luggage—a middle-aged, disarranged lady, a tiger cat and a spotted brown one, some dresses, a box of silver, and a Confederate flag. Nevertheless, the clerk at the desk, who instantly recognized Charlotte, was most solicitous and said that though the hotel was crowded with the movie-company people, in this emergency he'd simply renege on two reservations and give Charlotte and himself adjoining rooms. He called the manager and the manager accompanied them upstairs himself. Sadly the rooms were at the top of the building, which gave them a view of the twinkling lights of Key West, but from Charlotte's, which was a corner room, also a perfect view of the commotion down the street. Still there was nothing else to be had. They were grateful. The manager switched on the air conditioning and asked Charlotte if there was anything she wanted "on the house" and Charlotte, with her customary presence of mind, called for a bottle of champagne—two, in fact. And shortly, giving them just time enough to wash up, this was delivered—iced. The bellboy, who also knew Charlotte and was solicitous, opened the first bottle for them and poured the clear, cold, bubbling fluid as they held their glasses. He twirled the other bottle in the bucket, and said it would not take but a few minutes to be ready, and left.

Carl rose and went to the window, pulled up the blinds, and then went to the light switch and turned it off so that there was no light in the room. He then took Charlotte's hand, and they stood at the window, holding the glasses, and watched the activity a few blocks down. The fire was still burning, and strongly enough to throw faint reflections on the ceiling of the room. Carl thought

that they were both going to have a nervous reaction to what they had just been through, and he gulped the champagne to prepare for it. Charlotte gulped hers, too, and poured them both more. They just stood there and watched until their hearts stopped beating so fast, for Carl noticed that his heart had been beating very fast for hours, and he was beginning to feel that annoying, deep fatigue.

"Let's sit down," he said. And they turned a sofa around to face the window. He had not told Charlotte about his heart and he had no intention of doing so now. From where they sat, they could see the remnants of the blaze, the crowds still milling around, and, of course, all the fire apparatus in the street and the glaring spotlights. They sat in silence; Carl calmed down and was not tired then; and, as naturally and as unplanned as had been their kiss in the car at the Casa Marina earlier that day, they kissed, fully, firmly; they set their glasses down and flung their arms about one another.

In a word, Carl had had no idea of the feeling he had for her. It was very great, he discovered; and it was decidedly sexual. He had no trouble at all, which amazed him, and she received him with the utmost concern and consideration.

They slept for a long while in one another's arms. Carl awakened first and glanced at his watch: three-thirty. He looked at the ceiling, but there was no longer any reflection. He glanced at the champagne bottles, and they were both almost empty. He got up out of bed for a glass of water. Charlotte turned over and looked sweet lying in the shadows. He went to the window and saw that some of the fire apparatus was still there, and spotlit, but that the fire was out. Charlotte woke up then; he handed her a dressing gown; she put her "ear" on, and a paper flower; and Carl filled their glasses with the few remaining drops of champagne. She sat up in bed and Carl lay with his head in her lap.

"What will you do?" she said.

"Well, I've got to go to New York and tell my uncle . . . what happened. How I'm ever going to explain that, I don't know . . . seems funny, the whole place gone, the whole point of my trip . . . gone."

"Come back," she said.

"I wish it were that easy," he said.

"Just come back," Charlotte said. "To me. I mean, I'll have a place—I've got to rent someplace—and you can have a room."

"I need time, Charlotte," he said, caressing her hair that had fallen, "to think about . . . everything. And what would I do for a living if I came back?"

"I told you there are a lot of quite good jobs in Key West," she said with more than a trace of civic pride, "for someone who really wants to work. This town is growing every year."

"I know," he said. "I read it in your column."

"That's an idea," she said. "Might even be a job on the newspaper for you somewhere." She paused. "Come back," she urged again.

"I'll let you know, Charlotte. We'll be in close touch."

"I can't," Charlotte said with utmost restraint, barely holding back the tears, "say all the things that are in my heart. But if you come back, you will not be sorry."

"I know that, darling. I really do."

They spoke more. Charlotte said that she always had her job on the newspaper, which was her primary source of income, even though it wasn't much; that she had intended to get rid of all the furniture in her apartment at the Southern Winds anyway; that she had her cats, and some of her dresses, and her silver. Things weren't so bad.

"It's really good silver, you know," she said softly. "My grandmother gave it to me as a wedding present . . . my first marriage. She was the only one of the family who approved. . . . I take after her, I guess . . . I go my own way . . . and the night before my husband and I left the little town in Ohio, my grandmother came to our bedroom and handed me the silver in a cardboard box very much like this one. She said she'd just gone downstairs and collected it off the mantelpieces and out of the cupboards, that it was hers, and she didn't give a damn what my mother and father said —she wanted me to have it. So you see why I wanted to save it. I couldn't let it go. . . ."

Carl understood.

"Anyway," she said, massaging his neck, "promise me to keep in touch, and I'll let you know how Jake is, and what happened to

Melanie and the rest. I think," Charlotte went on, "that I saw Melanie in the crowd, and it looked to me like she'd lost her mind . . . I know there's no reason to feel sorry for her, but I do. . . ."

"Funny," Carl said, "so do I . . . compulsive forces. . . ."

"What?" she said.

"Nothing, darling," he said, and she leaned down, and they kissed; then they made love once more.

Early in the morning, Carl slipped out of bed and, instead of waking her, wrote Charlotte a note, which he propped on the desk. He remembered to go into his own room and muss the bed, and, since he had nothing to take with him, simply departed. The hotel clerk said that there would be no bill.

It was shortly to be another beautiful day; it had cooled during the night; and, after breakfast at the hotel, Carl walked down the street past the ruins which still smoked here and there and were still attended by a truck and several firemen.

He found his car and headed for New York.

March 14, a Thursday, Twelve Days Later

A TRAVELER by plane from New York to Key West must change at Miami. National Airlines runs a two-motored DC-3 between Miami and Key West. The afternoon flight departs from Miami at three-thirty and arrives at the Key West International Airport approximately forty-five minutes later. It is an interesting ride; one is flying at a low altitude over the tiny overgrown islands, hundreds of them, which dot the shallow sea in the vicinity of the larger Keys. The plane is crowded usually, and especially so during the season. Carl was lucky; he had a seat by the window, which he liked, and as he looked down on the maze of islands and the curving waterways between them and across them, he thought what a terrible thing it would be to be marooned on one of them. Then Key West came in sight, the plane circled around, lost altitude, and landed easily, not counting that first bump when the wheels touched.

Carrying his raincoat over his arm, Carl walked the distance between the plane and the terminal and breathed deeply of the fragrant air. When he'd left New York, five hours before, it had been snowing. Here, the sun, lavish as the northern sun was austere, caused him to feel uncomfortably warm even in his light suit.

He waited with the other passengers for his luggage to come through, and with the help of a porter he transferred it to a taxicab. Now the airport cabs at Key West are large limousines, and the one Carl happened to get was a fairly old one. He sat back in the well-used seat and waited while the requisite number of passengers was assembled; four other people climbed in with him in the back and another got seated in front. Then the driver, a pleasant, white-haired, heavy "old conch," came round and installed himself behind the wheel. Truly, Carl did not mind any delay, and no one else seemed to. The thought that was in his mind might well have been the thought in all their minds: it was good to be back, and, contemplating that, no one talked much.

The driver asked where each of them was going: two people wanted the Casa Marina, three wanted the La Concha Hotel. Carl told the driver the address he wanted to go to. Very carefully, the driver explained that in order to expedite the trip for everyone, he would first let off his Casa Marina passengers, then go on to the La Concha, and, lastly, because the address Carl wanted was at the far end of town, he would drop Carl off. It occurred to Carl that since the La Concha Hotel was only a few blocks up Duval Street from the location of the Southern Winds, perhaps they would pass it and he could at least see the site of it once again.

From the airport the cab went along the palm-lined beach drive, and the brakes of the old limousine clenched and ground crabbily as they rounded the sharp curve at the end of the drive, where, indeed, Carl's accident had occurred.

"Old car," said the old conch. "Wouldn't give her up, though. It rides smooth, motor's good, and it just has to be eased to a stop."

When they eased to a stop under the grand portico of the Casa, the driver did a thing which cabbies in New York rarely do: he got out and helped his passengers with their luggage, and—something else they don't often do—he said thank you clearly and sociably for his pay and his tip. He eased the car out of the entrance driveway and on toward the center of town and the La Concha.

As they headed in, Carl noticed things he hadn't noticed or had never seen before—like the number of small boats in people's back yards, and all the different kinds of walls and fences (Key West seemed to dearly love its walls), and the number of palm trees whose boughs hung so low over the road that the top of the car was brushed, and the complicatedness of trees and shrubbery interwoven in a view, and, as they started along Duval Street toward the business area, the immense amount of sky always visible—this seemed both to confirm and reaffirm the fact that one was on a rather remote island after all.

At the La Concha, the driver's regimen was exactly repeated, and when everyone was taken care of, the car eased off again with Carl as its only passenger.

"Is the place I want to go down along Duval past Bonnie Street?" Carl said.

"We go down Duval two blocks further on than Bonnie," the

driver said, "then right. It's a little street that kinda runs between a couple of big ones, if you know what I mean."

It only took them a few moments to drive down Duval toward the block Carl knew so well, and, of course, the first thing he saw was the tree, the great tree, which hung across Duval, that he had seen that first day. Probably because of their proximity to the event in time and place, the driver began to tell him some local news. . . .

"Worst fire we've seen in Key West in a long time," the driver said. And Carl knew who it was this man sounded like: it was the slow, slightly tired, cockney-accented speech of Stanley Cooper. "A-course," the driver continued, "nobody died, so I guess that don't make it a great tragedy. Quite a historical place, you know. Called The Bonnie Lee House. I'll miss it not being on that corner all lit up. And the funniest thing, Miss Charlotte Tully, who's on the newspaper here in town, she had an apartment in the building and worked in a restaurant they had there . . . why, she found the old flag in the newel post—yes, the old Confederate flag that Bonnie Lee waved at the Union troops. That's the funniest thing about that fire. Found the flag in the hollow newel post just as she was gettin' out of the burning building."

They were passing the corner of Duval and Bonnie streets now. Carl had not known what to expect, but he did not expect quite as clean a sweep as he found. The whole corner had been leveled to the street—everything removed, ruins, trees, shrubbery, even the raised plot of ground on which the Southern Winds had stood—and, in its place, there was an open parking space covered with the most glittering white gravel Carl had ever seen.

"Pretty grave," the old conch said. "All the white diamond stones. At night it's the easiest thing to see to park your car."

But there was one memento. Leaning against the high fence which separated this property from the adjacent one, there was the sign. It had been painted out, but its shape in the form of an heraldic crest was unmistakable. Carl sat back.

"Busy restaurant they had there, real fine food, but a lot of skulduggery goin' on all around it. Sort of a night club, you might have called it. Not a sailors' joint. Fine fellow who owned it . . .

sad . . . sad about him and his wife. But very fishy, the whole gang. We used to have a lot of places like that years ago, but one by one the police got 'em, or they just fell apart. This one went with considerable spectacle. Big fire, burned to the ground, everything lost. A lot of people 'round here will miss it, I guess. Some say it closed an era on the island, but I've seen a lot of eras come and go; seen the railroad bridge come in, seen that go, seen the car road built; seen two wars; and Key West is still here. Changed but not changed, if you know what I mean."

They had been turning corners while Carl had been addressed, and they now were rolling slowly along a very narrow street.

"Should be up somewheres at the end," the driver said. "Many years as I've been around, I still don't know these numbers. Why, look, there's Miss Tully now; she's the one who I was telling you 'bout. Oh, you're going to visit her? I see. . . . Hi, Miss Tully!"

And, indeed, there was Charlotte waiting for him, standing in the front yard of a small, neat, two-story house on the corner. She wore a bright-orange dress with a long string of big glass beads around her neck and an orange flower behind her ear. Babe and Tig were slithering around in the grass at her feet.

"That you, Frank?" Charlotte hollered. "Can't see with the reflection on the wind shield."

"It's me, Miss Tully," the driver said, pulling up, getting out, going behind to the luggage compartment.

Carl got out.

Charlotte came to the picket-fence gate and they embraced briefly without speaking. Carl paid the driver—who carried his things to the porch, chatted a moment with Charlotte, and then drove off.

"Come and see my new house," Charlotte said little-girl-conspiratively, and took him by the hand. "Well, it isn't all mine —I just rent the ground floor—but the top floor's empty, and I don't think they're gonna rent it right away, at least I hope not. I'll sic my cats on anyone who tries." They went through the screen door into a large living room furnished with wicker chairs and couches that had striped cushions on them. The kitchen was newly equipped and there were two bedrooms.

"And wait till you see the yard!" she said, clapping her hands.

"In fact, why don't you wash up and change your clothes, and I'll get the ice and mix some martinis and we'll sit out there."

Carl did just that. He washed and changed into a pair of fresh khakis, a blue polo shirt, and new white deck sneakers that he'd bought. Except for his slightly faded tan, ten minutes later, as he lay out in one of those aluminum beach chairs on the open-platform back porch, one would never have guessed he'd been away.

The garden was not large, but there was a lawn, and three great palms, and sufficiently tangled vines and shrubbery along the tottering, high wooden fence to fairly well seclude it. There was an avocado tree, and a banana tree with its one peculiar, downward-facing blossom. And a tree which was in full bloom: a red-flowered poinciana. It was lovely. It was still. The quiet of that garden, Carl thought. And that was something else he hadn't observed before—this sort of intense stillness of which Key West was capable. Not the stillness that occurs in the Midwest before a cyclone hits, and which is suffocating and eerie—another kind entirely: everything existing intensely at the moment . . . the towering palms, the shrubbery, the very air . . . not stirring. Of course, he thought, this stillness, like that of the Midwest, could, no doubt, be eerie, but it certainly wasn't now. It was a perfect setting. Lull before the storm or calm after it, he didn't know; but exactly the right mood for emerging, as he was, as they both were, from one experience, and about to go into, as he was, as they both were, a new experience. Rarer in life than one supposed—pivotal moments that were appropriate. And weather so perfectly suited. It was getting on six, and only a few truly innocent clouds above.

Charlotte joined him, bringing with her a pitcher of martinis and two blue cocktail glasses.

"I bought them specially," she said. " 'Cause I know you like blue."

"Did I say that?"

"I think you did," she said. "Anyway, they're nice."

She poured the drinks and held back the ice, and some of it, just a little, dribbled down on her dress. "That's all right," she said. "It'll wash." She handed him the glass.

He sipped it. It was very dry and very good.

"Good?" she said.

"Good," he said.

"Well, at least I can make drinks," she said. "I don't cook so well, but I make a damned decent martini, and that's something."

She gurgled a laugh. He could see she was extremely nervous. He didn't know what to do to make it easier. She, too, sat on a beach chair, but she sat on the edge of it, her back very straight.

"I like the garden," he said. "And the apartment."

"I'm glad," she said, ducking her head and taking a sip. "I got my hearing aid really fixed while you were away—you know, I was only getting about seventy-five per cent reception—I mean my good one, my six-hundred dollar one." And then, more to the point, she said, "I didn't know whether you were coming back or not."

"I am back," he said. And it seemed, as abrupt as it might be, the right time to do the difficult thing at the beginning, as doctors did when they operated, or dentists, so that one went from well-being directly into whatever shock there was and, therefore, avoided a build-up. "I am back," he repeated, "and I have made up my mind. I would like to share your kingdom. I would like you to marry me, Charlotte."

It also seemed right to look directly at her.

"Oh," she said helplessly, as if she might have been preparing for the moment, and now that it was here, she was again, as she had been once before, unable to think of what she wanted to say. Even though she held her glass, she touched her hands together in her lap. Then she took a real gulp of her drink. Then she said, "I'm not very pretty; you don't have to marry me."

A tiny leaf drifted down from somewhere, and Carl saw that it caught in a small spider's web which was strung in the grass. The spider came to look but, seeing what it was, seemed annoyed and went to the center of the web and raced around and around. There was, Carl thought (irrelevant to his conversation), absolutely no symbolism in that at all. It was just what it was, but it happened to occur just then and he had observed it.

"It's not a case of 'have to,' " he said. "I want to marry you . . ."

He had not finished, but Charlotte was off and running. "I'm not a good cook and I'm a sloppy housekeeper"—the tears had started—"and I haven't much money, and I need you very much,

and you wouldn't like that." She tried to take more of her drink, but only succeeded in spilling most of it over the front of her dress. "It was spotted anyway," she said. "It looks like I'm washing it in martinis." She laughed loudly at her own joke. Carl smiled. She produced a handkerchief and dabbed vigorously at the widening stains and sobbed a little. It was a moment to say nothing. Charlotte recovered. She looked up at him: "What made you decide?" she said.

"We are suited," he said airily but firmly, conscious of the pose, conscious that he meant what he said nevertheless. "Beyond words, we are suited." Carl leaned back in his chair and addressed the innocent clouds. "We are fiascos, you and I." And he was aware that that sounded hard, or at least impolite. He therefore lowered his voice and deepened it so that she could still hear him, but would know that he was not, with his frankness, meaning to hurt her. "And marrying you," he continued, "may save me. I was wrong before. I need love more than money. And with you here makes this town the area of the greatest possibility of fulfillment of my need. That's it in a nutshell." He turned to look at her. "If anybody had asked me before this moment for that explanation, I couldn't have given it. But now I am absolutely certain."

"I *am* a fiasco," she said, looking down at her dress.

But, Carl thought, they had gone far enough along that line just now.

"How is Melanie?" Carl said.

"I heard from Stanley, who went to Miami en route to New York and Europe, the bum—you know what he does: he goes to the steamship offices and waits for people's cancelled reservations second-class—and I never want to see him again anyway after how he behaved at the fire—and he stopped in Miami to see Melanie at the insane asylum, but he said she didn't recognize him. She's in a ward, the place where they put the sickest people, and Stanley said the doctor told him she might be there for years, and there was only a small possibility of a partial recovery, and only then if she found someone who would take care of her with love."

"That will be very hard for Melanie to find," Carl said, and knew the remark was cruel, but that it was also true. Charlotte was even more upset in the telling of that information than before.

"Her cousin—I don't even know if he was her cousin—was here, apparently, took one look around, and shoved off. Oh, and incidentally, the movie company went up to another Key for their location, bag and baggage, and they live in a trailer camp."

"So Jake's contract would have fallen through, after all. . . ."

Charlotte nodded, tilted her glass, discovered it was empty, poured another for herself, and one for him.

"Jake had a lovely funeral," Charlotte said, and the second she mentioned it, she choked up. We're in for a lot of tears this evening, Carl thought. "It amazed me how many people turned out and sent flowers. We took up a collection to bury him. He had no insurance on anything, himself or the Southern Winds. But a lot of people . . . loved him."

"Yes," Carl said, "he was a lovable old scoundrel."

"That's a very accurate description," she said. "I wrote my column about him the day he died. I'll show it to you later."

"I'd like to see it," he said.

". . . why do you say I'm . . . you're . . . a fiasco?" she asked.

"Because we are. Bumblers, both of us, off point, inept, deceived somewhat, inappropriate mostly, without pace." And Carl was surprised at his facility at this and wanted to keep going, but he couldn't think of any more words to describe it. "And, you know," he said, "if we accepted all this about ourselves, we might make it."

"Make . . ."

"Make it together, I mean."

She took a deep breath and plunged in. "You won't like it," she said. "But I will try to save you if I can." She looked now at him squarely. She did understand, he thought, some of the things that had better not be gone into too deeply.

"You probably can't," he said. "But it's worth a try and you haven't too much to lose. At least I can keep a job, and, I'll say it now and not again, if we don't get on together, you'll have a little something to show for your effort, I promise you."

"I am forty-one years old," Charlotte said forthrightly. It was her last secret, he thought. Now she can go forward with a clear conscience.

"And I am twenty-five," he said. "But that isn't the question." He leaned forward. "There is only one question, darling, and it is

one you must ask yourself. Do you want to marry again, and will you marry even such a male as I?" Again, he was quite conscious of the pose, and from whom he'd borrowed the last phrase.

Charlotte shook her head yes, and the sobs began again, and, sensing his annoyance, she suggested that she go inside and mix another round. She literally ran around him, along the open porch and through the screen door, which banged. He could hear her in the kitchen, crying, moaning uncontrollably, and sniffling.

What, he wondered, would it be like in bed again? Especially if he happened to be completely sober and without the previous excitement of a fair-sized fire? Wouldn't it amount to a rather supreme eroticism in which he gave his body and she took it? Which of them would be the bride, indeed? The paradox of his life again —a husband, somewhat, but not wholly. And Carl knew himself a heel for thinking such a thing. Indeed, maybe only a heel or (as Melanie had put it to Jim) a two-bit gigolo did this sort of thing. But that was his need, and if it made him a heel, so be it. I am a heel, he thought, in the eyes of the world, for wanting to marry a woman who is forty-one, who has been married four times before (perhaps for the same reasons he put forth, but he doubted it), who is obviously the stronger partner emotionally, and with whom I have only a moderate compatibility. A martini compatibility, he thought jovially. Still, he thought, that is something. Better than nothing. And, as Carl considered this, he was not without an inward glimpse, for the first time in years, of the bright tail feathers of the bird of hope disappearing into his private, interior, semitropical sunset.

Charlotte returned with the pitcher and poured him ample measure.

"To begin with," he said, "I've sold my car. Didn't get as much as I should have for it, but I couldn't wait to have it fixed. We don't need a car, really, and that will be a little to start on, plus what I've saved, plus what Ben will probably kick in."

"What did he think . . . of your coming back?" she said.

"I'm afraid my dear uncle was somewhat dismayed," Carl said. "He attributed it to what he called my 'querulous character,' having forgotten that I gave him the phrase, but as I left, and he saw

I was really going, he blessed me, and, as I say, I think he'll kick through with some dough. Which we will accept."

"If you think so," Charlotte said hesitantly.

"I do," he said. "Now you," he continued in a tone of kingly command, about to give Charlotte the only command that he would ever give her, no doubt, "you will find me a job."

"I'm sure I can," she said. "On the paper. There must be something in the advertising department. I'll speak to Marvin tomorrow. We fight, but he's good to me."

"Fine," he said. "And we'll live right here."

"Yes," she said.

"We're getting somewhere," he said.

"Yes, we are," she said.

Charlotte's brown eyes were large as she looked out into the darkening garden. She seemed to have exhausted her tears. The cats sat a short distance away, together in the grass, observing them.

"And," Carl said, lowering his glass. "We will save for your ear examination and operation. That will be our first goal."

She rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands like a little embarrassed child. She was, he knew, perfectly ridiculous. All those assumed, attention-getting mechanisms, that disingenuousness, so planned for effect, and yet, of course, now actions and attitudes that were part of her. She was Charlotte, she was delightful.

"I don't know what to say," she said.

"Perhaps for the first and last time," he said.

She started laughing spasmodically, and then hard, and then tempestuously, till she could barely hold herself on the chair and had to put one hand down on the boards to steady herself. She quieted.

"I think I'll go in and start some dinner for us," she said in a slow, small voice.

"I'll go in with you," he said deliberately.

"No, not yet," she whispered. "Let me fix us some dinner. I have steaks."

She rose, balanced on unsteady feet, pivoted, and, in her characteristic loping step, the step in parody, he thought, of a happy schoolgirl, she made it to the screen door and in.

Key West, fantastic Key West, Carl thought, has clasped two more to its bosom.

Carl slipped down comfortably in the beach chair. The innocent clouds had almost disappeared, and the sky was gradually shaded from the lightest blue directly above to the deepest blue around the perimeter. He sipped his very dry martini. It was almost time for the carillon