

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_158222

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

This book is a gift to the library by
Dr. Pasupuleti Gopala Krishnayya,
President, Krishnayya's News
Service, New York City, as part of a
collection of American books given
in memory of

His Beloved Twin Brothers

Rama (Med. Stu.) & Bala Krishnayya (Eng. Y)

OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Call No. 813.5 / P35S

Accession No. G 10/03

Author Pearce, Moira.

Title Sunset touch. 1960.

This book should be returned on or before the date last marked below.

A SUNSET TOUCH



MOIRA PEARCE

A SUNSET TOUCH

CHARLES
SCRIBNER'S
SONS · NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT © 1960 MOIRA PEARCE

A-6.60 [V].

THIS BOOK PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND IN CANADA—
COPYRIGHT UNDER THE BERNE CONVENTION

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THIS BOOK
MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM WITHOUT THE
PERMISSION OF CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 60-12595

FOR
J. M. P.
MY "WILL"

*Just when we're safest, there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides,
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears,—
The grand Perhaps.*

"Bishop Blougram's Apology"

ROBERT BROWNING

A SUNSET TOUCH

CHAPTER

1

The church in Leicester wasn't an old one, having been built in the 1920s after the original had burnt down. Designed by an architect who soon afterwards turned to farming, it was constructed inexpensively out of the local stone, which, happening to be marble, lent it a certain dignity. Neither inside nor outside had it much beauty or grace. On this breathless July day the presence in a coffin of Medusa Nash gave the church a certain interest—macabre perhaps—it didn't otherwise have.

Lily Dewhurst sitting in one of the front pews was finding it hard not to look at her. Medusa's fastidious friends had all been horrified when they learned that the coffin lid was to remain open until the church service was over. (It was Medusa's husband, Harold, who had insisted upon it—out of malice, it was thought, since, in dying, Medusa had left him quite stranded with no one to order about.) As the church was small, it was terribly hard to ignore her, even more or less embowered as she was. Her nose, in life so piquant and tip-tilted, jutted out sharply; on her normally unrouged cheeks Mrs. Greeff, the undertaker's wife, had sketched in round pink blobs. As for the thick, wildly curling hair that was responsible for her name and that Medusa during her lifetime had seldom, if ever, submitted to a hairdresser, preferring the more individual look she achieved herself with a pair of nail scissors, this hair was now pressed flat to her skull and set with an iron in tight, formal waves. She had been vain of her long eyelashes and customarily coated them heavily with mascara, outlining the lids with black pencil, but since the idea of eye makeup had never impinged on Mrs. Greeff's consciousness Medusa's face now appeared for the first and last time in public without it.

"She looks just like the president of the Ladies' Aid Society," whispered Arthur Herendeen. He had just come in and sat down beside Mrs. Dewhurst. It was still a good fifteen minutes before the service was scheduled to start. Behind the scenes Miss Tobin,

the local music teacher, was playing Bach in a rather emotional way and through the open windows came the popping sound of a power mower.

The same thought had been taking shape in Lily Dewhurst's head but she had been trying hard to suppress it. Her chest heaved, keeping down a giggle.

"It is fascinating, isn't it?" she murmured. For a moment they were silent, staring at the last of Medusa. Then Mrs. Dewhurst said, "What do you think of the coffin?"

She was rather proud of the coffin. It was, she felt, a nice compromise between beauty and economy. She had chosen it herself in the company of Harold Nash, and over his objections which, though unspoken, were quite clear. He had wanted a mahogany one with bronze handles and, when Lily had demurred because of the expense involved, had become very petulant indeed, even going so far as to stamp his foot. But since he was without funds of any sort beyond those provided by kind friends, there was not much he could do. Mrs. Dewhurst had not picked the cheapest either. If the cheapest had been the plain deal box you were always hearing about she would, she thought, have taken it at once. Unfortunately it had been a vulgar, over-elaborate affair tricked out with gray felt and gussied up with quantities of quilted rayon. The one she had finally decided on, while it was not so pure and simple as she would have preferred if money had been no object, wasn't, she believed, without dignity.

Arthur Herendeen stared coldly at the coffin with his artist's eye. "It looks like something from Schraffts'," he hissed.

People were beginning to trickle into the church now. It wasn't a bad time for a funeral—four o'clock on a hot, somnolent Saturday. Medusa had at least died at a convenient time, not hung about till fall when everyone would have gone back to town, or been busy with new projects. Inside the plain little church it was cool, and up on the hill in the old graveyard where Medusa was going, there was always a breeze. Mrs. Dewhurst, pretending to

resettle herself more comfortably in the oak-hard, un-giving pew, checked on attendance. Most of Medusa's friends seemed to be there. A few rows behind and to the left sat Betty Levering, her flame-colored hair more or less covered with a black chiffon scarf. Next to her were Cora and William, who'd very kindly offered to give the funeral cocktail party. Tears glittered on Cora's cheeks and even Betty, unsentimental as she was, stared bleakly at the altar through reddened eyes. Across the aisle The Boys sat solemnly—plump Preston Harrower and Pierre, his man-servant and companion. There were even a few town tradespeople who, though they could have known Medusa only slightly, had evidently decided, since it was such a nice day, to quit work early in favor of this melancholy diversion.

Yes, Lily Dewhurst thought, it was a nice turnout. Medusa would have been very pleased.

"Where's Jayne, by the way," she whispered to Arthur Herendeen, next to her.

"Never goes to funerals."

Lily received this fact without comment, laying it alongside others about Arthur's wife. It didn't surprise her. She had a low opinion of Jayne and welcomed any items that would tend to support it. She filed this one away to be mulled over later but allowed nothing of her mean thoughts to appear on her tranquil, still young-looking face. She had no desire to cause Arthur any distress, partly because she was fond of him and partly because of late she had begun to find him attractive. But of course at her age—she reminded herself sharply that she was forty-five—such thoughts lacked dignity and must be dealt with sternly.

She smiled at him with vague sympathy.

"That operation, you know," Arthur's voice was embarrassed. "It's given her a horror of death."

"Of course," murmured Lily smoothly and lowered her eyes in sweet recognition of Jayne's misfortune and its resulting sensitivity. "Poor darling!" What a fool Arthur was about his wife, she

thought with irritation. That operation had taken place a good four years ago, since which time Jayne had been as healthy as a horse.

She leaned forward and a little across him, an arm stretched to pull a prayer-book out of its rack. In the movement the neck of her nice ladylike blouse parted slightly and she became conscious that Arthur's eyes were sighting steadily down the cleavage of her ample bosom. She drew back with the book, appalled to feel for the first time in so long a tiny flicker of excitement. Arthur's hand went abruptly to his collar and she heard him take a deep breath.

Heavens, she thought, what an odd thing to happen! Perhaps it was the presence of death. It was known to take you in strange ways sometimes, stimulating the life force, increasing your appetite. *Funeral baked meats*, she remembered. It was true, she had been eating like a pig ever since Medusa died. Now this. Well, you never knew, did you? She folded her hands decorously over the prayer-book and fixed her gaze on Medusa's nose.

Arthur, his neck craned around to see who was coming down the aisle (he was extremely curious about everything), said crossly, as if they had quarrelled, "Well, where the hell's John, come to that?"

"He'll be here soon," she whispered. "He never misses a funeral." It was true, she thought, that as her husband got older it seemed that he felt more stimulated than pained by the deaths of his friends. It was as if he thought of death as a game of musical chairs—it was bad management as much as bad luck if you found yourself unseated. He himself intended to march around for quite a while yet, he said, and it sometimes seemed to Lily that he took an unnecessarily ghoulish delight in attending the obsequies of those who had been counted out. He was considerably older than she—indeed, it was a year now since he had retired from a professorship at the Harvard Law School.

The flowers looked nice. People had been generous. She was glad there had been none of this nonsense about no flowers by request, please send a memorial contribution to this or that char-

ity, or this or that fund for medical research. (Small use the doctors had been to poor Medusa.) Medusa had said once during her last days that she hoped there'd be lots of flowers; it was the only sign the brave darling had given that she'd known what was happening.

There was a little flurry at the rear of the church. Lily and Arthur glanced unobtrusively over their shoulders. Medusa's relict, Harold Nash, was coming down the aisle, helped by his sister. How alike they were, Lily thought. Both so tall and both with such thick white hair. They even seemed to be dressed alike, Miss Nash's navy-blue dacron suit being, except of course for the skirt, very like Harold's, and her crisp white shirt seemed identical with his. Lily noticed later that their ties were different.

As the head of a very correct boarding-school for girls, Harold's sister was the successful member of the Nash family. Lily hoped devoutly that now that Medusa was dead and could no longer support Harold with odd jobs, Miss Nash was going to face her responsibilities toward her brother. Otherwise the hat, which had been passing repeatedly among his friends, would have to continue to be passed.

Harold Nash had never bothered his head about money. There had been a time when he had had a good deal of it and, having it, had gladly shared it with others less fortunate. When the money came to an end Harold had seen nothing wrong with allowing others the pleasure of sharing theirs with him and Medusa.

This, everyone conceded, was a lovely philosophy, possibly even Christ-like in its lack of materialism. The trouble with it, as John Dewhurst had once been so cruel as to point out, was that the Nashes had been rich a very much shorter time than they'd been poor.

Lily knew that Harold's sister had tired rather soon of the pleasures of generosity and had disgorged funds only when black-mailed into it by the threat that her brother and his wife would descend upon her at the school—possibly on Parents' Day, at which time their exotic appearance, their uninhibited conversa-

tion and their tendency to touch even strangers for a loan would have caused her acute embarrassment. And lately even this threat had lost its teeth when Harold had been put pretty well *hors de combat* by a stroke.

It had happened in the midst of a party at Betty Levering's. As, like almost everyone else, Harold had had several drinks, nobody paid too much attention when the glass fell out of his hand and his face went slack. It wasn't by any means the first time someone had passed out at a party in Leicester; the best thing was to take no notice. It wasn't as if he'd fallen down: though his head had dropped forward onto his chest, he had remained seated in the large wing chair and the gaiety continued on about his insensible figure. But by the time their hostess had managed to drift discreetly over in his direction (Betty was still, at that time, in love with him, Lily suspected) Harold had begun to make the most awful noises.

Now, with one of the undertaker's men, Miss Nash was helping her brother into the front pew. His long frame was extremely rickety; he moved slowly and with care, leaning heavily on a cane. One arm hung useless in a most gruesome way and something horrid had happened to one eye. Lily Dewhurst and Arthur Herenden were nervously conscious of the maneuverings necessary to get him seated and were terrified that he might stumble and fall. At last it was accomplished.

"Thank heavens," Lily breathed. She moved a little closer to Arthur. "I just can't get over it—that Medusa should die and he still be hanging on." There was no rhyme or reason to it.

"The bastard," Arthur muttered out of the side of his mouth, "he'll outlast us all."

The church was quiet now; the organ died away in a last blurred chord and the young minister came forward.

"I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live . . ."

John Dewhurst slipped into the pew beside Lily and she gripped his hand.

CHAPTER

2

In the new part of the graveyard higher up the hill than the old with its crooked and worn headstones Medusa's friends had bought her a piece of earth big enough for two, as they thought, perhaps wishfully, that it couldn't be very long before she was joined by her husband. It commanded a nice view of Route 19A with its busy local comings and goings, for, as Betty Levering had pointed out, Medusa liked to know what was happening. She had been socially inclined and much given to speculation about who was giving a party and who was going to whose house and who had been left out. If anything of her still lingered on in some gaseous form or other, she would not be utterly deprived of her favorite preoccupation.

Now the afternoon sun struck dully on the fake, poison-green lawn tastefully laid down around Medusa's grave. Mr. Greeff, the undertaker, and his men were slowly lowering the coffin while the minister read from the prayer-book. Lily Dewhurst, picturing Medusa with her rouged cheeks lying under the closed lid, hoped no sudden jerk of the ropes would jar her out of her comfortable position. Eternity was a long time to be disarranged.

“. . . is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow. . . .”

Lily dropped her husband's hand, which she had been clutching, and got out a clean handkerchief. Tears were gushing from her eyes. “How sad Medusa's life was,” she whimpered but recognized that perhaps it was only the worn beauty of the words that made her feel so.

Miss Nash bent down and scooped up some earth. Stony-faced, she tossed it on the coffin which had now come to rest safely at the bottom of the grave. Harold Nash watched dry-eyed, his partly paralyzed mouth offering, perhaps by accident, a slight social smile. Beside him Betty Levering's strong figure heaved with sobs.

“. . . dust to dust; looking for the general Resurrection in the last day, . . .” the young minister droned.

Through her tears Lily looked around at Medusa’s friends. Who of them would be the first to join her? For eventually here they’d all be, keeping her company. John and she, Harold, Betty, Cora and William, The Boys, Arthur Herendeen and—yes, she supposed Jayne would have to come too, how tiresome. What a “general Resurrection” it would be! Would they serve drinks, she wondered. (But probably on the Day of Judgment, as on Election Day, the bars would be closed.) And would they all fall into the old flirtations and recriminations, rooting around among their bones for grievances or passions buried light years ago? Nothing else would be natural.

Harold Nash and his sister were turning away now. Others were gathering into little groups, talking gravely. People who hadn’t seen each other for some time exchanged formal and embarrassed greetings, trying somehow to blend cordiality with a show of gloom proper to the occasion.

John Dewhurst and Lily walked hand in hand through the rows of graves, seeing again the familiar names of the locale—Harrowers, Harfields, Leverings, Pottses. Here was their own plot with the two stones. The flat, new-looking slab of marble bore the name of John’s father, Ezra, and the dates that encompassed his long life. He had been a thorn in the flesh if ever there was one, Lily thought,—querulous, vain, domineering and a conversation-hog. Nothing like darling John.

“I’m damn glad *he’s* gone anyway,” was John’s tribute as they paused. “The last two years have been comparatively peaceful.”

“I wonder how poor God is getting along with him,” she said. She was looking at the other stone, an upright marker on which a small angel was carved in relief. Moss blurred its foundations. Here was buried their oldest child, Rose, her beautiful baby who had died before she could walk. Lily stood still, staring at the angel. “Was it really twenty-three years ago, John?” she murmured. “So terribly long ago?”

John squeezed her hand tighter in his and pulled her on.

Down by the cemetery gates a horn broke the murmurous afternoon quiet. Then up the narrow one-lane roadway leapt a sports car, low, black and venomous. At the top of the hill it slowed down infinitesimally and just managed to make the sharp turn, regrettably missing a rather pretentious columned tomb belonging to the Harrower family. A few yards away from the Dewhursts it came to a neck-snapping stop.

"By God," said John, "it's Joe Larkin!" He and Lily stood indecisively.

"I thought he was still in that sanatorium or whatever you call it." Lily noticed that several others of the funeral party had also paused to see what was going on.

From the seat beside him Joe Larkin snatched up an enormous sheath of white orchids, suitable perhaps for a dead movie star, and, holding it aloft like a banner, climbed over the side of the car. Before the fascinated eyes of the mourners his knees seemed to melt and he fell, not ungracefully, to the grass. He lay still for a second or two before the frozen audience, then lifted his heavy moon-face with a jaunty smile and looked roguishly around.

"Drunk as a lord," muttered John. He rushed forward to help Joe to his feet. Arthur Herendeen and one or two others were suddenly there too.

"Well, I made it, goddamn it," Joe was shouting. The orchids were a shield now and he tried to advance behind it. "Where is she, anyway, where's Medusa, where's the bloody funeral?—cops stopped me twice on the way up, thought I'd never make it. Couldn't have Medusa buried without orchids, you know."

Turning back to Lily, John said hastily, "Look, darling, can you go on to Cora's by yourself? Poor Joe better not be left alone right now. Take the car. I'll get a lift with someone." He glanced swiftly about. "Or perhaps you could . . ."

Lily nodded. "Betty will give me a ride," she told him and hurried over to where Betty Levering stood, her pale prominent eyes bulging with interest in the scene.

CHAPTER

3

In Betty Levering's old gray convertible the two ladies drove through the village street past the scraggly green where the Union soldier brooded and up the washed out driveway to Cora's house.

Betty hadn't been at all pleased, Lily knew, at quitting the graveyard just as Joe Larkin had made such a promising entrance. "We should have stayed," she said again, grumpily steering into Cora's parking-place.

"Honestly, Betty, it wasn't decent." Watching while poor drunken Joe made a fool of himself, Lily meant.

"Nonsense," snapped Betty, to whom decency had very broad limits. She began the elaborate maneuverings that would put her in a good position from which to leave the party. Used to this providence on her friend's part, Lily sat patiently as she backed the car around so that it headed down toward the road. Betty always went through this procedure. It wasn't that she often became the worse for liquor—she had a very hard head—but (she freely admitted it) she did like to drink, so it was best to take precautions. A strategically parked car, as she had often pointed out, tended to cut down on possible casualties when it came time to say good-bye. One thing certainly had to be said in Betty's favor when her character came under discussion,—as it often did,—she was independent. She preferred to come and, if possible, to go under her own power. She scorned those who, widowed or divorced, expected to be picked up and delivered by friends, or, more likely, the husbands of friends. "Marital hitch-hikers," she called them. She herself had never married, preferring the benefits of being a free-lance.

The ladies now got out of the car and walked back up the driveway.

"What a mess this place is getting to be," said Betty, glaring at the weeds that were fast getting the better of the gravel.

"A little calcium chloride would help," said Lily. No clean, sharply edged line of demarcation separated the gravel from the grass beyond; the one came to meet the other. Veering toward the house, Lily and Betty made their way gingerly across the lawn, impeded by their thorn-thin heels, which sank into the earth at every step. Crabgrass lay about like stains on a carpet and in the untended flower beds that had been planted years ago by more affluent owners than Cora and William spindly perennials lived out poverty-stricken lives.

Skirting the swimming-pool in whose scummy water a dead chipmunk now floated, Betty frowned and came to a stop by the stone statue that stood nearby. Lily watched amused as her friend ran strong hands over it suspiciously, as if examining it for signs of wear or abuse. Betty undoubtedly was regretting the generous impulse that had caused her to present it to Cora and William. It wasn't as if she ordinarily had any truck with garden statuary. In general she regarded it and its perpetrators with openly expressed contempt. (Moreover this figure was a good deal less abstract than most of Betty's work. Though its head was not the usual shape no one, Lily was sure, would ever wonder why it was called Pan.)

"Do you know," Betty grumbled, "in some ways this is one of the best things I've ever done. I sometimes think I was a damn fool to give it to them. Nobody appreciates what they don't have to pay for." She shrugged.

"Of course they do." Lily tried to soothe Betty's bristling feathers. "Cora adores it, darling." She remembered how excited Betty had been about Cora and her husband when they had first come to Leicester to live with their children. She supposed it had been their total indifference to accepted patterns of behavior that had attracted Betty, the sort of wonderful individualism that was getting to be so rare. In this ordinary village filled as it was with eager conformists, the advent of Cora and her family had been, as Lily's husband had once remarked, like a breath of stale air.

More cars were coming up the hill now, more people getting

out. Over her shoulder Lily saw Miss Nash and Harold bearing slowly down in their direction. Betty saw them at the same time. "See you later," she said to Lily and stomped heavily off around the side of the house toward the kitchen entrance, so as to detour the Nashes.

"Coward," Lily hissed and, resigned to fate, prepared to meet Harold and his sister at the front door.

Looking at it, she supposed that upper-class shabbiness was the keynote of Cora's house, a dignified Greek Revival structure from whose portico childish fingers had peeled long strips of white paint. Cora didn't care a fig for housekeeping. She preferred babies, both human and non-human, with the latter getting the better part of her attention. In her house large dogs ranged lethargically through rooms carpeted with thin, filthy Aubussons and furnished with French antiques long unpolished, in a perpetual search for food. Cora, though she loved them all passionately, did not believe in ruining their figures by providing them with more than one sketchy meal a day, that is, if someone remembered to set it out. Aristocratically lean in the haunches they would sit at your feet and watch you gloomily as you ate canapés. Occasionally, summoning up a burst of energy, one would slap a grimy paw onto your knee and pant up at you in a desperate plea for a handout before lapsing back into its anemia-induced torpor.

Harold Nash hobbled forward as Lily held the screen door open for him and Miss Nash. Two cats streaked out, thinking it for them.

Miss Nash shuddered. "Nasty things," she exclaimed.

"You're a cat hater?" Lily asked with interest. So many people were.

But Miss Nash had evidently brought herself back under control and now spoke with reproving moderation.

"Let us say I do not relate favorably to them." She smiled a neutral smile. "It is so destructive to allow oneself to think in terms of hatred, don't you find it so, Mrs. Dewhurst?"

They continued into the house, Miss Nash helping her brother with the little step.

"And how are you oriented toward cats, Mrs. Dewhurst?" she asked in a tolerant tone.

"What?" asked Lily, puzzled. She had begun to wonder if the powder-room was empty or if she would have to go upstairs.

Miss Nash frowned slightly, conquering impatience. "I said, are you—uh—fond of cats?"

"Oh," Lily smiled. She considered the question. "Yes, I guess so. In the way you can be fond of rivals. As long as they're not too successful."

"Ah, hah," cried Miss Nash, fascinated. "You identify with them. How very interesting!"

Cora came forward to greet her guests and Lily, after saying hello, escaped. Moving down the hall she thought that in one way Cora's cats were better off than her dogs. More enterprising, less fastidious in their appetites, they made up dietary deficiencies by constant guerilla warfare against mice, moles, chipmunks and birds. But though their stomachs might ache at times, when it came to their sex lives all of Cora's animals lived richly. No birth control was practiced on their behalf, except perhaps after the event. No female under her roof, Cora would tell you, was going to be made neurotic because of spaying. All were entitled to know the joys of motherhood. At their accouchements Cora herself happily assisted, encouraging the victims to bear down, egging them on in a continuous, rippling flow of language. Guests in her house were always being urged back into the kitchen and shown boxes full of wet, wriggling life presided over by some dejected dog or cat. "Aren't they but heaven, aren't they but to eat with a spoon?" Cora would cry in her lovely, gay voice. "And what a struggle we had, didn't we, darling? Truly titanic it was, but *truly*. But now she has all these *heavenly* babies, haven't you, my angel?" and she'd give the exhausted animal a rallying slap on the rump.

Lily hoped no deliveries were being scheduled today. In the

powder-room, nervously conscious of sluggish plumbing and a defective lock on the door, she washed her hands. As she fluffed up her short, blondish hair that had been flattened by her funeral hat she looked with a housewife's curiosity around the small premises. Cora, or some deputy, had made a real effort to tidy things up. A new cake of Ivory soap lay in a Sèvres saucer and on a rack three frail, exquisitely embroidered guest towels hung web-like, their elaborate monograms attached by threads. Lily blotted some shine from her face with a bit of toilet paper and dried her hands with some more, fearing to tear the towels. She rather wished now that she were going home to put her feet up and drink a sweet and soothing glass of iced tea alone with John instead of into the crowded and alcoholic company she could hear gathering itself outside.

She opened the door and walked down the hall. Perhaps (the thought, coming out of nowhere, raised her tired spirits) she and Arthur Herenden might have a few minutes alone amongst the others. She quickened her steps. A large and pregnant dog sidled up and began sniffing at her skirts in the terribly frank way that dogs have. She gave it a surreptitious kick.

At that, she thought, you had to give Cora credit. In spite of all that silly talk about the beauties of maternity, when the time came for action Cora was not squeamish. Where another woman might call on the vet for assistance in putting down the excess animal population, she took matters into her own hands. "After all," she'd tell you briskly in her flute-like accents, "animals have no souls, what is the use of getting sentimental about them?" Also, the vet, with his fancy gas chambers and humanitarian injections, ran into money. So every so often Cora got out a certain sack, filled it with puppies or kittens and descended, cheerfully humming a hymn tune, to finish them off in the brook below the house.

The large drawing-room had begun to fill up while Lily was making herself neat. Cora and her husband, William, were now busy taking orders and making drinks as, worn out by the emo-

tions of the afternoon, most people made a beeline for the bar. Miss Nash had settled Harold in a chair and was looking about in the anxious way of a comparative stranger who has no one to talk to. Taking pity on them, Lily went over to see if she could help get them some refreshment. Miss Nash accepted the offer. Harold was allowed a weak whisky and water, as Lily knew. "It dilates the arteries, you know, and can be most beneficial," said Miss Nash. "In moderation, of course." She herself would like a little sherry, thank you.

Waiting for William to pour the drinks Lily saw Arthur and Jayne Herendeen come into the room. Arthur had evidently gone home to get her. Jayne looked beautiful and rested, thought Lily, as well Jayne might, having very probably spent the afternoon lying in a darkened room with cool, healing pads on her enormous navy-blue eyes. She watched as Jayne flowed over to Harold Nash in a swirl of gray chiffon, like a sexy nun, bent gracefully down and kissed his cheek.

"Darling Harold," she was crying plaintively as Lily came up holding the Nashes' drinks. "Will you ever forgive me? But you do understand, don't you? I just couldn't, literally couldn't, bring myself to come to the funeral. I was just too broken up. I had to be alone. To grieve. I just couldn't bear to see all those people, half of them, let's face it, only pretending to be sad, since they hardly knew Medusa at all. I just couldn't have stood it and kept silent. (Arthur, don't stand there, darling, get me a drink!) Harold, you *do* know how much Medusa meant to me, don't you? The thought of seeing her put in that—" Here Jayne broke into a deprecatory little giggle. "Well, I guess I'm just a little bit more sensitive than other people, that's all."

Harold closed his eyes. Jayne frowned and turned her back on the Nashes. It was just as she thought, she hissed to Lily. There was absolutely no use talking to Harold at all. As she had told Arthur, it didn't matter a bit, her not coming to the funeral, Harold was beyond noticing who was there and who wasn't. And as for Medusa (for some reason Jayne again gave her giggle) she

was beyond caring, didn't Lily agree? In any case, Jayne had no use for outward show. "It's what you feel in your heart that counts," she said. "I tell you, my heart is too full for words." She swung back to Miss Nash, her eyes limpid with sincerity.

(Betty Levering, momentarily behind Jayne, made a hideous face for Lily to see, looked eloquently toward heaven and mouthed a short, shocking word. She moved quickly on—Lily could see her reluctance to get stuck so early in the game with Harold and that dreary old Lesbian of a sister.)

Pressing around Jayne, Lily carefully placed a highball in Harold's good hand, which closed around it like the tendrils of a sensitive plant. Some nerve pathways to the brain were evidently harder to destroy than others. The instinct for alcohol was a well-established one in all mankind, she guessed, and would be one of the last to go. She smiled at him nervously as with great care he lifted the glass to his lips and tipped some fluid between them. Then Cora, deserting the bar for a moment, came surging up, a soiled English setter plodding mournfully at her heels.

"I know *just* how you feel," she trilled and gave Harold a bracing swat on the knee. With admirable agility she sank down onto her heels beside him. "I know, I know."

(How did she know, Lily wondered, not doubting for a moment that she did. There was a terrible authority about Cora that swept away doubts. She came of a long line of matriarchs and there were few crises in this life that she couldn't deal with.)

"But, darling, it will pass. You must *think of others*. You must not let yourself go." Cora gazed dynamically into Harold's ruined face. He nodded agreement. "We must have a long, long talk some day," she said, rose magnificently to her feet and swept off with her pitcherful of martinis. Jayne giggled in Lily's ear, for of course Harold's stroke had pretty much done for his powers of speech. Watching him, Lily thought he didn't really look too unhappy. Perhaps he actually enjoyed holding court as he was in a small way. In profile his face seemed almost the same—the thick brush of white hair, the good nose. It was seeing him head-on that

was so trying—the sagging muscles on one side of his face, the eyelid that had lost its elasticity and dangled dreadfully, like a shutter on a derelict house. Did he cerebrate at all? He was capable, she knew, of certain emotions. Petulance sometimes stirred him and he was vain. Medusa almost to the very end had been forever pressing his suits, his ties, polishing his shoes.

Automatically she looked down at his feet. A smear of dirt—from Medusa’s grave?—clung to one of them.

“How really well he’s taking it,” she said in a low voice to his sister. “What are his plans, have you—uh—made any yet?” Lily, like all his friends, was hoping to hear that Miss Nash had his future in hand.

“We have not yet talked,” said Miss Nash, “in terms of what lies ahead. Harold of course has many kind friends.” She smiled graciously at Lily, appreciative in advance of any generosity to come.

Also a fine, manly sister, Lily thought in a flurry of resentment. Was it possible that Miss Nash was going to try to slough off her responsibility? Incensed, she opened her mouth to point out that blood was thicker than water, but was quelled by Miss Nash’s look of unerring rectitude which made her feel, quite unreasonably, in the wrong. In any case, on second thought Lily wasn’t at all sure she really believed in the statement.

“Was it a successful year at the school?” she asked instead, too cowardly to press further into Harold’s affairs. But before Miss Nash could open her mouth to reply, Jayne Herendenen gave a meaningful laugh.

“If you mean financially, Lily, you can be perfectly sure it was. Really, Miss Nash, I know it’s a wonderful school, but what on earth do you do with all the money you must take in? Honestly, those tuitions! Why, as I tell Arthur, I could be dripping in chinchilla if we sent the girls to public school—”

“Where are the girls this summer, by the way, Jayne?” Lily interrupted hastily, seeing that flames were beginning to shoot up under Miss Nash’s collar. “I haven’t seen them around.”

“Oh, they’re not here, dear. They’re in this perfectly marvelous camp. They wanted to stay home, of course. They adore us both, you know. In fact I sometimes wonder what a psychiatrist would say about the way they act with Arthur.” Jayne giggled. “I definitely thought they should not spend too much time at home until this phase is over. And particularly with my health as it is.” Jayne lowered her eyes and touched her breast in a significant way. “I simply explained to them that much as we longed to have them with us it was their own good we were thinking of. I mean, sometimes the mother-bird must just force the fledglings to fly, don’t you agree, Miss Nash?”

“Isn’t it possible that there is too much emphasis these days on the healthy outdoor life,” objected Lily. She always found it very hard not to disagree with Jayne if given an opportunity. “Sloth is sometimes more productive than you might imagine.”

“Sports is all they think about,” said Jayne, ignoring this. “Great athletic things!” A malicious smile curved her perfect lips. “I must tell you what happened one day in town last spring. We bumped into this old beau of mine and he just couldn’t believe they were my daughters. ‘Jayne,’ he said, ‘they may be bright but they’ll never have your looks.’ Of course I told him that was outrageous flattery. I said, ‘I’m far too old for such compliments,’ I said, ‘Why, I’ll be forty-three on my next birthday!’ ”

This was a well-known habit of Jayne’s and one that her friends found especially irritating: to announce her age whenever possible, then stand back demurely and await the expressions of stunned surprise on the part of her hearers. Lily and Miss Nash, however, made no response. Miss Nash, in fact, turned away rather abruptly and went to station herself on the other side of Harold’s chair. After a little giggle Jayne fixed her dark blue gaze on Lily and started a long story about the old beau’s unhappy marriage. Lily sipped steadily at her strong cocktail, hoping someone else would come along so she could slip off. Her eye wandering a moment from Jayne’s madonna face, she saw that her husband had arrived and, drink in hand, was strolling out to the terrace with Betty

Levering. At the open doorway they stopped for a moment to speak to Arthur Herendeen who was leaning against the frame, with sweet old Preston Harrower clutching his arm vivaciously. As John Dewhurst and Betty went on through the door Arthur's eyes picked through the room and stopped at Lily's. His wide mouth stretched in a one-sided grin and she felt her matronly heart give a trout-like leap as she turned back to his wife, Jayne.

Out on the terrace where crooked marble-paving-stones made treacherous footing, John Dewhurst and Betty found their way barred by Cora's mother, Mrs. Brown, a mean-looking old party lying in wait in a wheelchair. A deposed matriarch, frustrated, half-blind from cataracts, she glared out at the world from behind thick-lensed glasses indescribably sinister. Like most aged people, and John realized he himself was beginning to share the feeling, the old devil was very fond of a nice death, though of course a lingering illness was better still, providing as it did not just one day's entertainment but a daily quota of enjoyable horrors. Seeing them, she reached out a claw and grabbed John's sleeve.

"Mr. Dewhurst," she said in a voice that the years had masculinized. "Just the one I wanted to see. Now tell me all about the funeral—what did the minister say about poor Mrs. Nash?" She gave a cackle and behind the horrid glasses her eyes gleamed with malice. "Not an easy eulogy to give, I would say."

Betty said, before John could answer. "You're right, Mrs. Brown. Medusa had so many virtues."

Mrs. Brown's face assumed a practiced expression. No one, she seemed to say, was going to pull the wool over *her* eyes.

"He spoke of how sad it was she had to die when her life was still such a useful one." Betty smiled disagreeably at the old woman who darted back a quick look of malevolence. Seemingly by accident, Betty directed a stream of smoke from her cigarette into Mrs. Brown's face.

Mrs. Brown grabbed a paper fan from her lap and waved it violently, coughing in a highly theatrical way. "Please," she or-

dered, "direct your smoke away from me, Miss Levering, it's very bad for my lungs." She sniffed the air elaborately. "What kind of tobacco is that, anyway?"

"Marijuana," Betty drawled.

"Betty, please!" John said nervously.

Betty, narrowly missing the old woman, flipped her cigarette off the side of the terrace. "Tell me, John," she asked, "how did you manage to pacify poor Joe Larkin?"

"Who's that?" Cora's mother asked suspiciously.

"Just an old friend of Medusa's," John answered. "He arrived late at the cemetery and—uh—caused a little commotion."

"What kind of commotion?"

"Mr. Larkin is a very emotional man," John explained patiently. "He was upset. He'd always been very fond of Medusa. The thought of her death was too much for him. He—uh—broke down."

"Drunk, I suppose," the old lady said, nodding her head with satisfaction.

Betty and John exchanged surprised, amused glances. The old were intuitive sometimes, John thought, you had to hand it to them. Or else it was just that they always thought the worst, which was generally true.

"You young people," Mrs. Brown went on, launched happily on a favorite topic. "Always drinking. Can't get together for five minutes without a glass in your hand. Why, in my young days—"

Betty raised her eyebrows. "We young people," she said, "what a laugh. Look around. There can't be a soul here under forty and most of us are well over."

"Age is a comparative business," John pointed out, feeling slightly annoyed. He noticed Cora, a few feet off, proffering martinis with one hand and mopping at her fiery red face with the other. A hot flash, undoubtedly. And none too soon, either, John thought. Cora's last baby hadn't been exactly up to par, poor tot, she'd pressed her luck having it at her age. It was just as well there'd evidently be no more.

"Look," said Betty. "Isn't that Grace Hunter? Over there by the geraniums?"

Startled, John turned around. He stared in silence for a moment. Yes, it definitely was she. How many years was it since he had seen Grace Hunter? He hadn't even given her a thought, he realized, since Lord knew when. "Excuse me," he said to Mrs. Brown. "I see an old friend I must speak to." He gave a little bow and moved away. Betty Levering moved right along with him, heartlessly leaving the old woman in the wheelchair to narrow her purblind eyes and add a new slight to her collection.

Betty took John's arm and dragged on it slightly, slowing him down. "Tell me," she said in a confidential voice, "I've always been dying to know. Did you and Mrs. Hunter really have a thing for each other one time? I know she's years older than you, John darling, but she must have been awfully pretty still when you were a young buck." Her eyes raked him over boldly, as if assaying his points.

He found himself pulling in his stomach. Betty, whose thoughts, when they were not occupied with her work, quite frankly ran to men, usually had that effect on them. "Certainly not," he told her. "There's absolutely no truth in it at all. And, if I may say so, Betty, I consider it most rude of you to ask." He knew exactly what she had in mind—that old story that years ago he and Grace had been sighted on a woodsy slope in flagrante delicto, by some bird-watchers on the track of a pileated woodpecker. (And what a splendid sight it must have been for them, he thought, with a certain amount of pride.) "She would never have looked at me," he lied, feeling very gallant. Betty relinquished his arm, threw him a jeering glance and went off to intercept Cora for another martini.

As he approached the vicinity of Mrs. Hunter he became aware, over the buzz of conversation, of a strange noise he couldn't quite identify. Then as his old friend turned around at his touch he realized that it emanated from her. Evidently Grace had taken, with age, to grinding her teeth. What tensions did she have, he wondered as she greeted him with delight, that she was compelled

to relieve in this way? Bruxism, they called it, he remembered reading somewhere. Old age had a bagful of these little jokes, he brooded. (And as she, giving over grinding, momentarily, in favor of talking, told him about the house she'd taken for the summer and filled him in on the years that had passed since last they met, he caught himself nervously giving way to his own bad habit, which was to nibble and bite at the inside of his cheek.) But at least Grace was not succumbing to the indignities of age without a struggle, he judged, eyeing her fashionably set, henna-ed hair (a wig, perhaps?) and her skillfully painted face. Listening to her he found his mind was beginning to wander. He felt rather tired, he realized suddenly, and wondered how soon he and Lily could get away. Probably not for some time. Lily was such a social creature and nowadays they did so little in the way of seeing people. His fault, of course, being so much her senior. Time he packed up and died. She could turn right around and marry some younger man, as Kinsey recommended, start living all over again. At the idea of this happening, self-pity, to which he was a prey, began to attack him. "Let's go inside, shall we," he said to Mrs. Hunter, "and get another drink."

"Lily's looking beautiful," said Mrs. Hunter as they moved off. "I saw her when I came in." Crunch, crunch went the teeth. "Fine-drawn, (grind, grind) but it's becoming."

It was true, he thought jealously. The tentative touch of middle-age hadn't harmed her, blending her old pink-and-white prettiness into a subtler tone, sharpening the bones to a greater delicacy and etching interesting shadows in her broadish face. Lily's eyes had always reminded him of Grace Hunter's as they had been that summer he had known her so well. So dark, but so full of light, so somber but so gay too. The brown pigment in Grace's had dissolved, of course. Her eyes were now the color of café au lait that had been left too long standing. Would Lily's too fade out? He looked over at her. Too bad she seemed to be stuck there with Jayne Herendeen. Lily wasn't aggressive enough to do well at cocktail parties, he thought. She was too apt to fall a paralyzed

victim to the first bore to come along, being both too kind and too lazy to break away. Surveying the field for signs of help for her, he saw that Arthur Herendeen was also watching Lily. His glance seemed to hang on her in a way that instantly suggested to John something more than a routine interest. I hope we're not going to have trouble there, he found himself thinking.

"Talking to Jayne's enough to make anyone look fine-drawn," he replied to Mrs. Hunter's remark. "By that I mean, of course, listening to her talk."

"I so agree," said Mrs. Hunter with enthusiasm. "I could never understand what a sensible seeming man like Arthur Herendeen ever saw in her. Especially after having so adored Medusa Nash who was really amusing. Well," she added charitably, "Jayne's a dull woman but I suppose fundamentally a good one, don't you agree?"

"I agree with the first half of the statement but not the last," John snapped, feeling that with this old friend of his youth he could throw discretion to the winds. "There's one thing to be said for Jayne—she may be uninteresting but she's just as bitchy as the next one."

Mrs. Hunter, delightfully titillated, gave over grinding her teeth and, tossing back her henna-ed old head, broke into a happy cackle. She took a handkerchief out of a pretty needlepoint bag and wiped her eyes which, rheumy as they were, twinkled with enjoyment and something of the gaiety she used to have so plentifully.

"Oh, John, you always did do me good. I'd quite forgotten what a sharp tongue you had," she sighed pleasantly. "Do you know, I think I'll show you something." From out of the capacious bag she took a fat leather folder of the kind used for carrying snapshots.

John's heart sank under the weight of boredom to come. "Let's get that drink," he urged but she had halted and was busy turning pages. Warily, courteously, he hooked on his horn-rimmed glasses and looked at the picture she held out to him.

It was a very clear picture for a snapshot—the face of the dark,

intense-looking young man carrying a tennis racket was quite distinct.

"Amusing, isn't it?" she said as he gazed silently. "My Joan's son. His name is David. Her other children are all quite different. Still, it's a good thing they live so far away, isn't it?"

He thought that it was indeed—for there was no denying that the boy in the picture could have been John himself as a youth. Letting his hand fall with the picture still in it, he stared at this raddled old woman who now so suddenly appeared to him, in a new and confusing light. "But how—" he stammered. "I mean, what—"

"My Joan," Grace Hunter told him. "Don't you see? She must have been your daughter."

"Joan?" he said, the name new on his tongue. "A child? But you never said anything—"

"I never knew—for sure." Mrs. Hunter gave her teeth a quick, hard grind. "There was no way of telling. She looked exactly like me, you see."

Just when Lily had at last made up her mind to get out from under the steady dust-fall of Jayne's words and walk off, Jayne gave her arm a patronizing little pat. "Do forgive me for leaving you high and dry now," she cooed. "I've just got to talk to Cora." And off she floated, having as usual got the best of the encounter.

Lily, half amused, half enraged, found herself alone. Miss Nash and Harold were talking to William—at least, Miss Nash was talking—and, looking across at Arthur Herendeen, she saw that he was still impaled on the tip of Preston Harrower's insistent finger. How irritating fairies could be, she thought crossly, even sweet old Preston whom ordinarily she rather liked. Really they were far more ruthless than women when it came to cutting you out with a man. She'd go get herself another drink, she thought. It was just as well, in any case, to put Arthur Herendeen straight out of her mind, she told herself severely. He was bound body and soul to Jayne and it was perfectly right that he should be. Some

men didn't mind being bored. Moreover, these adolescent yearnings that were possessing her were in the most deplorable taste. Love, passion, all that nonsense, it was more than time to put such things behind her. Besides a certain youthful toughness was needed to take on the rigors of a clandestine affair, a certain resiliency, an enjoyment of mischief for its own sake. Now and then in the past the thought of conducting such an affair had filled her with excited speculation—but now, of course, the whole thing would be much too exhausting.

Having gotten her drink she walked out to the terrace and joined Betty Levering who was talking to Pierre, Preston Harrower's companion. Pierre was a handsome and good-tempered man whom Preston had found years ago on a trip to France. Brought back as a valet he had fairly soon achieved social equality,—a sort of French Admirable Crichton, winning the heart, not of the boss's daughter, but of the boss. Lily couldn't remember just when Preston had begun taking Pierre about to parties with him, instead of keeping him under wraps at home but the custom was now well established. In this valley, peopled largely by widows of one kind or another, it simply wasn't realistic to be snobbish about eating and drinking with the erstwhile help, that is if they wore pants.

As Lily had suspected, Betty and Pierre were talking recipes. They had a common passion—eating. The air around them was always heavy with odorous words like estragon, shallots, bruised cloves and burning brandy.

"Do I smell something burning?" said Lily, as she came up. Pierre smiled in welcome and held out his handsome face to her for the kiss they always exchanged.

"Ah, Leelee," he said. "I have invented the most marvelous new dish. I have just been telling Bettee all about it." He blew another kiss from bunched fingers, presumably toward his stove at home. "I have said to Mr. Harrower that we must have the little dinner, for Mr. Dewhurst and Leelee and Bettee to taste." Salivating perceptibly and with no false modesty, he retailed the menu they could expect.

"How really sweet he is," said Lily when he'd left at an imperious hail from a blue-haired dowager. "And I do think it's nice the way he never calls Preston anything but Mr. Harrower. I wonder if in bed—. They really manage their lives very discreetly, don't they? You never hear of them squabbling, like husband and wife, or like some of the other 'Boys.'"

Twosomes not always so well behaved as Preston and Pierre dotted the hillsides around Leicester. Still, Lily thought, they served a useful purpose, coming willingly to the aid of desperate hostesses. Without them it seemed probable that the wheels of society hereabouts would come to a creaky stop.

"I wish I could keep from thinking about what it is they do exactly," she said to Betty. "I mean, I've never been altogether clear. It's hard enough to imagine Preston and Pierre with no clothes on."

"Don't be morbid, dear," Betty said. "Besides, you know how dressy Preston is, I'm sure he'd never dream of taking off his pajamas."

"Isn't it curious how old ladies like Cora's mother, so strait-laced and conventional in every way, can manage to be so fond of them? How do they fit them into their moral code?"

"Perfectly simple. That generation was brought up to think it was wrong to think about anything so evil. They ignore it. Look, Lily, I've got to go to the john."

Lily wandered on thinking that if she saw her husband she might suggest that they go home. Obviously nothing exciting was going to happen. The day had tired her and now she noticed that she was no longer quite steady on her feet, having out of boredom swallowed her drinks too fast.

A little way off at the end of the garden where the woods began she saw Cora's younger children, Danny and Cathy, busy at some game. In a shabby baby carriage watching them sat their little sister, Teresa, the last child. Propped up by soiled pillows, her large head with its shock of bright yellow hair lolled like a doll's whose neck needs repair and from her smiling mouth saliva dribbled. "Dead, dead, dead, dead," she was crooning.

The children were digging a hole at the edge of a weed-choked flowerbed. A small shoe box lay nearby. To one side two striped cats sat watching. Their yellow, opportunistic eyes followed each trowelful of earth as it piled up around the hole.

Danny and Cathy glanced up from their work as Lily approached.

"We're having a funeral," volunteered Danny.

"Tiggie killed a bird." Cathy glared at one of the cats.

"Of course," she added, relenting, "he couldn't help it. It's his nature."

"Would you like to see?" Danny carefully opened the shoe box. "Watch the cats, Cathy."

A stout robin lay within, on a bed of Christmas fern. "My," said Lily, "how fine and peaceful he looks! And what a pretty coffin!" So much nicer, she couldn't help thinking, than Medusa's.

"We got him away from Tiggie before he'd eaten too much. He was mad as anything, weren't you, Tiggie?"

Cathy planted a kiss on the cat's nose. He stuck out his chipped-beef tongue and licked her cheek. "I had to dig my nail into him good and hard." She held out to Lily a dirty brown hand, extending the pinky which had an enormously long nail like an ancient Chinese lady's. "See? I keep it long so when the cats scratch me I can scratch them back."

"What a good idea. I've always thought cats had things far too much their own way."

Danny laid the box tenderly into the grave and shovelled dirt back over it. Lily picked up a handful and tossed it on top.

"Why do you do that?" asked Danny.

"It's what people do."

"Oh." Danny took a small chunk of marble and stuck it at the head of the grave. On it they had crayoned an inscription.

BIRD

"Now we say Our Father," said Cathy.

In the carriage the little idiot spread her legs, yawned and fell asleep. The two cats cut their losses and ambled off.

The party was in its final stages when John Dewhurst, still feeling rather dazed, found himself again in the company of Betty Levering. Mrs. Hunter had now left and Betty, her natural belligerence increased by several martinis, was telling him how badly Cora and William had neglected her statue of Pan. When Preston Harrower and Pierre drifted by, nothing would do but all of them must go inspect what had built up in Betty's mind to a monstrous example of vandalism by negligence. They were all contemplating this with varying degrees of interest when from the shrubbery that surrounded the ramshackle swimming-pool Joe Larkin burst forth, making as an unsteady crow flies for the house.

Seeing the group he changed course and lunged over. One cheek was bleeding slightly from a long scratch and his eyes were glassy. "You son of a bitch!" he cried fondly to John. "Hiding my car keys, —ing trick." He shook a fat forefinger. "Thought I'd never make it through the goddamn underbrush." He pulled a cluster of burrs off his loud tweed jacket, then took a comb out of a pocket and ran it across his head, carefully realigning the long greasy hairs that ran from one side of his scalp so that they again shielded the bald spot on top. "Had to see that—Harold," Joe told them buoyantly. "Couldn't leave town without paying my respects to Medusa's —ing husband, now, could I, John?"

"Surely that adjective no longer applies, Joe?"

"How do I look now, Betty?" Joe asked, wheeling around perilously.

"Just lovely, Joe. Here, hold still a minute." She brushed some twigs off his collar, then, digging into her bosom, she dredged up a handkerchief which she wet with spit. "You've got a scratch on your cheek." Like a good child Joe held his big round face out to her.

Pierre, who with Preston had so far been ignored by Joe, now laid a hand on his arm. "That is not a nice cut, Mr. Larkin," he said earnestly. "Permit me please to take you inside and apply for you the disinfectant."

But Joe, with the lightning mood-change of the drunk, swung away, his happy face now ugly. "Take your —ing hands off me, you

bloody fag," he shouted and, scowling horribly, made as if to attack. Pierre, who was a very timid man, quickly gave ground, backing away right to the very edge of the pool. Here, clawing at the air for support, his face stricken, he teetered for a few seconds, then fell. With a despairing cry he broke the scummy surface of the water and disappeared momentarily from view.

This occurrence was witnessed not only by those around the pool but also by several people, including Lily, on the terrace. Apparently it never crossed the minds of many of these that Joe had not purposely pushed Pierre into the water, and so the story subsequently ran. It was all that was needed to round out Medusa's funeral. No one cared to listen when John and Betty tried to tell them that it had been an accident.

"We know all about those accidents," they said merrily.

Jayne Herenden announced that she'd always thought Joe was secretly "queer" and that in pushing Pierre into the pool he was symbolically drowning that part of himself.

"You think any man who doesn't make a pass at you is queer," Betty snapped.

Driving home with John some time later, Lily wept.

"The day has been too much for you," John said.

She nodded, mopping her eyes. "Yes, too much," she agreed. "And what is really too much is that we are all such terrible people. So old, and still we go on behaving as badly as ever. No. Worse, much worse. The only one of us who conducts himself with propriety is Harold—and that is probably because he is paralyzed and can't do otherwise. What's to become of him, John?" She paused to blow her nose, then continued to castigate herself. "But do you think I'm crying because I am sorry for Harold Nash or because Medusa is dead? No, I'm crying because I've had too much to drink. I'm having a crying jag, that's all. But, John, it was so awful about Joe and Pierre, wasn't it? Why did Medusa's funeral have to end so? Why can't we have sorrow without farce butting in?"

John handed her a bigger handkerchief.

CHAPTER

4

At nine o'clock the next morning the telephone rang and before it could ring again and disturb John in his study Lily ran to answer it.

"Hi," said Betty Levering.

"Hello," said Lily.

There was a deep sigh. "How are you feeling, what time did you get home last night? Did I get you up?"

"Been up for hours," said Lily more briskly than she felt. "Who can sleep nowadays?"

"You're so right," Betty groaned. "At one o'clock I took two secondals, a dormiden and a Miltown and at five o'clock I was wide awake. God, I feel terrible. I look fifty. . . . My God, I *am* fifty!"

Both ladies began to laugh hysterically.

When they had both quieted down Betty asked, "What are you doing today? I feel too awful to work. Wasn't that the worst party? I thought Harold would never go home. It was the best time he's had in years. Everyone paying attention to him again, just the way they used to."

"Well, not quite," said Lily, remembering the Harold of skirt-chasing, pre-stroke days. (How angry Medusa had been at Betty for leading him on so, and how odd that Betty had not seemed to notice it. Or had she blinded herself quite deliberately?) Hard as it was for anyone to believe, seeing him now, Harold had had a good deal of success with women. He liked their company, found their weak points easily, and knew all the tricks of flattery. In addition to this, he was amusing, in a malicious way, and good at the sort of conversation women usually held with each other. (How was he, she wondered, in bed?) In his heyday he had been spotted in many a dark bistro lunching or cocktailing with the wives of more industrious men, keeping Medusa in a constant agony of jealousy.

"Poor Medusa," said Betty, as if her thoughts too had been following the same path.

"Yes."

"Did you get anything out of Miss Nash?"

Lily cast her mind back to their encounter. Happenings at Cora's party had blurred in her mind and she now found it hard to remember whether anything significant had been said.

"I mean about Harold," Betty continued. "Is she going to take him back with her?"

"We didn't get to that, I'm afraid." Lily was beginning to remember a little. "I just couldn't bear to go into it then."

"Oh, Lily!"

"I know."

"If only Medusa hadn't been so dead set against his going to a Veterans' Hospital."

"It may come to that anyway—"

"No, damn it," Betty snapped, "I promised her."

They were both silent, brooding without too much sympathy on the fate of Harold Nash. Betty, who had a fair amount of money, had contributed generously to the Nashes' support since Medusa's illness, but was now, understandably, anxious to get out from under. In spite of not having been always the loyalest friend in the world, she had been devoted to Medusa—but Harold was a different kettle of fish. It was a long time now since Harold had brought a gleam to her eye or, indeed, to any woman's.

"Look, I've got to go." Lily suddenly made up her mind. "I've got to go see my mother today. With all this business going on I haven't been to see her in ages."

"How is she—just the same?"

"I guess." Lily shrugged helplessly at the telephone.

"Call me soon," said Betty and hung up.

The image of her mother, pushed to the back of Lily's head by Medusa's death and the work that it had entailed (which perhaps in a way she had welcomed for that very reason), could now no longer be ignored. The itch of duty, as regular as the moon, was

at work in her again. Lily sighed. How she would love to spend the day in the garden, hitch her way lazily along the borders, pulling and tidying, her mind a middle-aged blank, her spirit recharging its batteries. The blue of her delphiniums filled the window as she looked out.

It's sure to rain tomorrow, she thought, I should really stay home and weed today. The hell with you, stern daughter of the voice of God.

Her right eyelid was twitching again as it had begun to do lately. No, better go to the nursing-home and get it over, she told herself. Turning away from the window she walked upstairs to her bedroom.

John had moved out of it some time ago, when his insomnia had started to worsen, leaving it all to her. Though Mrs. Jones, her helper, hadn't done it up yet it looked, she thought, like an old maid's room—tidy and pretty and taciturn, with none of the blowsiness of life. She pulled her old yellow jersey up over her head and pushed her way out of the tight, faded blue jeans she liked to put on in the mornings. She flung them both onto the big double bed that, still unmade as it was, was neat as a nun's. Watching herself in the long mirrors on each side of the heavy old Victorian wardrobe she took off her brassière. No longer supported, her full breasts drooped gently. Frowning, Lily lifted one in each hand and held them so that they looked again as they had before she had borne children. What would it be like to have them taken up, she wondered. Probably painful as hell.

She rummaged in the drawer of her bureau and brought out another brassière which she hooked herself into without looking again at her depressing reflection.

In the bathroom she washed her hands and rubbed some hormone powder-base fluid on the smooth skin of her face. Holding a hand-glass she stood at the bathroom mirror and examined her profile. In repose, her chin still seemed self-supporting. Her forehead was straight, the delicately convex nose curving down from it agreeably. Leaning forward, brown eyes narrowed, she

peered closely at her short blond hair. Parting it carefully every here and there she examined it worriedly. Two or three white hairs had appeared since yesterday's search and she made short work of them, even though she knew it was quite useless. Pretty soon they'd get ahead of her, a rinse would no longer do the trick, she'd have to decide whether or not to dye it. What a nuisance it was to grow old—and how expensive! She blinked her eyes rapidly: they had recently begun to rebel at too close work.

A dear little old white-haired lady. No, she'd dye it till she was ninety.

To waste more time she opened the medicine chest and stared at its well-stocked shelves. One thing about having your brother a doctor, she thought, he kept you amply supplied with free samples of new drugs. She passed over the Equanil and the Miltown, both old friends, and looked about for something more interesting. She took down a pale green package called DEXAMYL, dug her nail through its sticker.

"Lifts the patient's mood," she read fascinated, "and creates a sense of well-being—has a euphoric as well as a calming effect."

"Hmm, how lovely," she thought. Dreamily she picked up another.

"Depression. Anxiety," this one started. "Level out mood extremes with DESBUTAL. To elevate the mood . . . relieve inner tensions. Useful in mild depression, apathy, irritability, nervous exhaustion, anxiety, Parkinson's disease, alcoholism and alcoholic hangover, overeating."

This sounded like something people spent their lives looking for. She didn't think she had Parkinson's disease but she believed she could qualify for the rest. She popped a capsule in her mouth and washed it down with a glass of water.

In her bedroom again she scrutinized her body, sucked in her slightly sagging stomach and decided she could go without a girdle. She could wear that cool, yellow dress with the full skirt she had bought at a sale at Hattie Carnegie's.

Dawdling, reluctant to leave the house and set forth on the

dismal trip to the nursing-home, she took particular pains over her face, painting on her mouth three times, changing the outline, trying a different color. I might be going to a rendezvous with Sir Laurence Olivier, she jeered. Her lips were very full. How healthy I look, she thought, the peasant in me is strong today. She drew a green pencil lightly along her eyelids to take away some of the health and around her neck she clasped a triple strand choker of pearls. From the closet shelf she reached down a large straw hat crazy with roses and, suddenly feeling gay and young, left the room swinging her pleasantly rounded fanny.

She stuck her head in the door of John's study.

"Darling, I've decided to go to see Mother."

Her husband raised his bald head and looked at her through the upper half of his bifocals. "Poor Lily. Must you? Want me to go with you?"

He held out his hand and she came and gave him a kiss. How tired he looked. He worked harder on this book he was writing than he ever did when he was teaching. "No, thanks, I'll be all right."

"Drive carefully, won't you, my dear. And don't get upset over anything. Why don't you get yourself a nice lunch at the George afterwards?"

"I may," she said.

"You look beautiful," he called as she went out the door. The compliment raised her spirits even more. The day was lovely and it didn't seem too bad now to be going off to see her mother.

"Oh, Lily?"

She turned back.

"On your way out would you please tell Mrs. Jones to fix me a bicarb?"

CHAPTER

5

Pleasant Trees, the nursing-home where Mrs. O'Hara, Lily's mother, was slowly dying, lay on the outskirts of Georgetown, a small city about forty miles away from Leicester. It could be reached by two roads. One, U.S.9, was crowded but more direct than the other which wound twisting and turning through hills and meadows and hamlets, following closely the course of a rushing mountain stream. As she was not looking forward to arriving at her destination, Lily took this one.

At frequent intervals along the way painters had set up easels, either singly or in groups, and were hard at work. The countryside was pretty as a picture and they were all doing their best to make it into one. It was getting on toward time for the annual Art Show, Lily remembered, and the local artists, of whom there was an ever increasing number, must be anxious to have their entries ready in time.

The clock on the dashboard showed eleven-thirty when Lily drew up in front of the nursing-home. It was an attractive setting to house so much misery—an old and lovely Colonial house enlarged and set in the midst of ancient elms and maples and well-shaven lawns. Lily was glad her mother was here where on good days she could be wheeled out of doors to look at the flowers, feed the birds and make tart comments on the appearance of fellow patients. (Mrs. O'Hara had always preferred birds to people, who were too inclined to answer back.) The hospital in Boston that Lily's brother, Bob, had favored as being more convenient would certainly have been far grimmer.

Her heart was pounding as she walked up the steps to the front door. There was an odd dryness in her mouth and she was conscious of feeling more keyed up than usual. It's that pill I took, she thought, how reckless and stupid of me to do it. A tranquilizer would have been far more sensible. Am I always looking for a fight with Mother? I must make sure not to get excited.

Wheelchairs loaded with old ladies jammed the large entrance hall and frail white-haired figures still on their feet (some with the help of canes) tottered here and there amongst them. Urged on by nurses they were making scatterbrained headway toward the recreation room, where evidently some mild entertainment was about to begin.

Lily scanned the wrinkled faces—how similar the old looked, she thought. She smiled and spoke to one or two whom she had met on other visits. Her mother wasn't there.

Feeling apprehensive she took the elevator to the third floor and walked down the corridor toward her mother's room. On one side of the corridor was a small dormitory. She glanced into it as she passed, and met the vacant stare of a bent figure in a black dress, standing at the foot of one of the beds, motionless except for her fingers which moved ceaselessly, as if rolling bits of bread. In the bed itself a very ancient woman lay, her toothless mouth open. Lily shivered and continued down the hall. At the half-open door of her mother's single room she paused for a moment, looking through.

A nurse and a colored nurses' aide were hovering over the high, hospital bed where her mother lay. On a tall stand nearby was hanging a large flask containing a clear fluid. From it led a thin plastic tube which, drawing closer, Lily saw was strapped with adhesive tape to her mother's arm. Mrs. O'Hara, her eyes open and fixed, was moaning.

"What is it?" Lily whispered, terrified.

The nurse glanced up at Lily and smiled a competent professional smile that gave away nothing. "Don't worry," she said, "she's going to be all right."

"But what's happening? What's that thing for?" Lily gestured toward the tube attached to her mother's arm.

"We're giving her an intravenous feeding," explained the nurse. "She's dehydrated. She hasn't been keeping anything on her stomach." She shrugged. "Now we'll be much more comfortable,

WON'T WE, MRS. O'HARA?" She put her lips close to the old lady's ear. "We're very deaf today. Feel BETTER NOW, DON'T YOU, DEAR," she yelled.

Mrs. O'Hara moved her head vaguely toward the sound. Her lips moved, trembled as if on the verge of speech. She smiled at the nurse. Lily came forward and took her hand.

"Why wasn't I told?" she snapped at the nurse.

"Bless you, dear," said the nurse, "it's always happening. They sink down, you know, then they rally. There, now, she'll do for a while. Have a nice visit." She and the young aide left the room.

Lily, frantic, stood by the bed and rhythmically patted her mother's hand which had been formerly so plump and pretty. Now, its bones barely sheathed by a covering of wrinkled skin, it could no longer support even her wedding-ring. Why can't they let her die in peace, Lily thought wildly. Why must they stick her, poke her, inject her, she's covered with black and blue. She's suffering, she wants to go. Tears welled up in her eyes and she snatched angrily at a piece of Kleenex on the bedside table. "Mother," she shouted, "Mother, I'm here!"

Her mother lifted her face and looked at her daughter as if through layers of gauze. "Dear child," she murmured faintly and, slipping back into torpor, let her eyelids droop shut. Lily continued to stand helplessly by the side of the bed watching. Every now and then the emaciated body would twitch and jump, the eyes would start open wide and staring. It was as if, thought Lily, the old lady dreamed that she was falling and then, just before hitting bottom, came jarringly awake; or as if, fearing the approach of death, she dared not sleep.

"Where's Robert?" she muttered suddenly. She glared at Lily as if accusing her of keeping Robert away. (He, the son, had always been her favorite.) Her face, from which all its former fat had melted, was now sharp and angular, its strong bones, invisible throughout most of a food-loving life, now very prominent. This terminal illness that had burnt away the self-indulgent fullness of

health had left her mother's face surprisingly beautiful, Lily noticed.

"He'll be coming up soon, Mother."

"What?"

"I said, he'll BE COMING SOON."

"He'll give me something, ease me out," Mrs. O'Hara breathed. "Oh, what a nuisance I am to you all." She turned her head from Lily and stared out the open window.

The smell of her disease became very strong, easily overcoming the delicate scents of summer that blew in from the outside. Beneath the bed the electric deodorizer whirred and buzzed efficiently but was not equal to its task.

Suddenly the old lady began to toss her head back and forth on the pillow. Then came the retching sounds of nausea. Lily grabbed frantically at the paper handkerchiefs nearby and stooped to wipe up the thick brown fluid that slid down her mother's chin and onto the pillow. With her other hand she found the bell to summon help and pushed it. Breathing heavily, half sobbing, she continued to sponge Mrs. O'Hara's face and neck. After several minutes the attack ended.

An elderly nurse appeared.

"She's been vomiting," cried Lily. "Can't you do something? Where have you been?"

The nurse, strong and tough-looking, looked at Mrs. Dewhurst as at a stupid and importunate child.

"We'll get her fixed up," she said. She bathed Mrs. O'Hara's face and changed the linen and then gave her a hypodermic injection. "There, she'll do now. The infusion will soon have her feeling better." She glanced overhead at the flask of glucose solution dripping slowly into the old lady's veins, made some adjustment in it. Mrs. O'Hara, ignoring Lily, reached for the nurse's hand and pressed it. The nurse said to Lily, "You might as well go now," and Lily, feeling weak and useless and in the wrong, thought she seemed to be adding, "back to your soft, protected life."

"Where's the doctor?" she cried. "Can't I see him?"

The nurse hesitated, then nodded. "He's in the next room—the nurses' station."

Lily, with a last look at her mother, picked up her purse and left.

The doctor, a middle-aged man whom she'd not seen before, was just coming out of the next door. She stopped, put her hand on his arm. "I'm Mrs. Dewhurst, Mrs. O'Hara's daughter." She indicated her mother's room.

"Yes?" His eyes were on guard.

"My mother. How long must she go on this way?"

"We're doing everything we can," he said carefully.

"That's just it," she cried. "You're doing too much!" Her voice, in her distress, was shrill. "Why can't you let her die? That, that *thing* strapped to her arm, it's painful, I know it is. You're cruel to keep dragging her back."

"Mrs. Dewhurst," he said coldly, his look bleak, "please control yourself." He regarded her deliberately and she saw through his eyes her frivolous, flower-bedecked hat, her rebellious, flushed face, her chic dress incongruous in the midst of all the pain and endurance that surrounded them, and she felt his contempt.

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"The infusion is to make your mother more comfortable," he explained. "She was dying of dehydration, of thirst."

"She's dying of cancer," she protested, "why prolong it?"

The doctor's face stiffened. "I am not in this hospital for the purpose of practicing euthanasia," he snapped.

The pompous fool, she thought angrily. He was just like Bob, always managing to put you in the wrong. Doctors were all alike. Why couldn't they be human?

She walked blindly out the door of Pleasant Trees and got into her car. Her emotions were in a turmoil. Rage and sorrow collided inside her and her mind, overstimulated by the drug she had taken earlier and now confused by what she had been through, felt as if it were splitting apart. I must not drive, feeling like this, she told herself. Forcing her body to sit quietly, she took off her hat

and leaned her head against the back of the seat. Taking deep, slow breaths, she tried, looking off at the peaceful garden, to bring her thoughts into some sort of order.

Old ladies, alone or in groups, sat or strolled about the lawn. Lily, trying hard to get herself under control, looked at them with hate and pity—the terrible old, so powerful in their weakness. Around some of them clustered younger figures, family groups doing their duty, all of them yearning, she wagered, to be elsewhere. Why were the old so hard to love?

Disliking herself almost as much, Lily hit her forehead with the palm of her hand. This pervasive senility was making her no calmer at all. She turned the ignition key, started the little car and drove slowly down the hill and out the gate in the direction of Georgetown's main street.

CHAPTER

6

When she had finished talking to Lily on the telephone Betty Levering threw her cigarette in an ashtray, not bothering to put it out, and lighted a fresh one. She stretched out her legs in the huge bed, let her head flop back into the nest of pillows she'd built up around herself and closed her eyes. Her head throbbed rhythmically and in the now silent room the ticking of her bedside clock got louder and louder, rubbing in her aloneness.

"Oh, God," she moaned and, groping somewhere behind her head, found the knob of a radio. In a minute the satisfying strains of Beethoven's Fifth were beating about her ears forming a barrier of sound against her loneliness. In her tense body she felt the muscles begin to relax.

What a bitch Lily was, she grumbled to herself. She could have easily postponed going to see that mother of hers, whom she only used as an excuse half the time anyway. A real friend would have seen that Betty needed someone to talk to today. I wonder if she's really going to see her mother; she may just be putting me off—

At this thought Betty's eyes snapped open and she stared vindictively at the opposite wall, turning over in her mind ways and means of finding out whether Lily had been lying to her, and automatically devising plans for revenge. No one gets away with that with Betty Levering, she assured herself. As the adrenalin of anger began to flood her veins she felt the clutch of her hangover loosen; life and strength seemed to wash back into her body. Over the top of her tight nightgown one large breast had squeezed itself free. Frowning absently she stuffed it back inside. Inhaling deeply on her cigarette, she broke into a fit of coughing. She threw the cigarette into the ashtray, which was now giving forth a thin stream of acrid smoke from smouldering butts, and abandoned herself to the long morning ritual of clearing her throat.

I must cut down, she thought vaguely, and wiping her watering

eyes with a fold of nightgown she felt around the floor for her mules and struggled blindly toward the bathroom.

After washing her face and brushing her teeth she thought she might be able to face breakfast. On the table in the kitchen a tray had been set up and all Betty had to do was fill a glass with orange juice from the pitcher in the icebox, turn the heat on under the coffee pot and pour it into a cup, but for the hundredth time she wished she had a "living-in" maid who would do it for her. But it wouldn't do, of course. There was enough gossip about her as it was; she didn't want anybody knowing for sure what went on here at night, who came and went.

Slumped comfortably in a chair at the kitchen table, sipping at the tall glass of icy juice, she allowed her thoughts to finger their way cautiously back into last night. She'd come home late, around two, it must have been. She'd stayed far too long at Cora's but at least she'd got herself home alone. Drunk maybe, she admitted, but driving her own car and alone. She breathed a sigh of relief. So nobody could have seen *him* sitting there big as life on the living-room couch.

Him. Leroy. Lee-roy it was in the local tongue and that was the way he pronounced it.

Suddenly Betty heard herself chuckle—a snuffling, satisfied sound that erupted into a loud hearty laugh. What would Lily think if she ever knew about Lee-roy? How I'd love to tell her, just to see her face.

Lee-roy had made her some coffee and sobered her up before he'd go into the bedroom with her. He was a bit of a Puritan in some ways, was Lee-roy, and if there was one thing he hated, he said primly, it was a drunken woman. He himself did not drink at all. He aimed, he said, to keep himself in condition.

He was in condition all right, Betty thought, remembering last night's performance. I'd be a total wreck if he came every night.

What a liar you are, she told herself, you know perfectly well you'd love it. Remember how you felt last week when he didn't come at all? Too dead-beat from getting in the hay at the Har-

fields' farm where, intermittently, he worked. (That was his story, anyway.) The familiar tingling warmth was invading her body and she shifted her weight uneasily on her chair. I might just drive by the field and see if he's there, she thought. It might settle my stomach for lunch.

She gulped down the strong hot coffee, rose to her feet and clumped back into the bedroom. She fished in the closet for the man's shirt and denim wraparound skirt she wore to work in and threw them on the oversized bed, ready to put on when she got out of the shower. In the bathroom she took good care not to see herself in the full-length mirror. Vanity was not one of her vices and she knew all too well what she looked like—the tight protruding stomach that she kept well stocked with the best food and drink, the heavy thighs and the varicose veins that needed attention. She knew that her slightly bulging eyes would have even larger bags under them and that her cheeks would show the fine rosy color that came not so much from health as from clusters of tiny broken blood vessels. Well, it looked good at a distance. Her hair, cut in an old-fashioned but becoming page-boy style and expensively dyed an implausible but pretty pomegranate red, grew thick and manageable, thank God, and so far there was nothing wrong with her teeth. They were white and strong and even as a movie star's. She was no model but, barring accident, she'd do for another couple of years. What was fifty, after all, these days? Why, she was just coming into full enjoyment of her womanhood. Freed now from the bogey of pregnancy she could take her pleasure where she found it.

Loofah in hand, scrubbing her back, she leafed her way through the mental scrapbook she kept of her lovers. A favorite pastime, it kept her from forgetting them. When age finally got her down she meant to keep her old bones warm with a fine blaze of memories. It was important to keep the faces of her lovers in good condition and readily recallable. There was none of the musty smell of pressed flowers about this mental album and some of the pictures she had pasted in would never get through the mails, but Betty

scorned sentimentality. Snorting vigorously under the sharp assault of the shower, thinking of past triumphs of the flesh, it wasn't very long before she came to the page devoted to Harold Nash.

A shout of malicious laughter escaped her, thinking of him—but, sobering, she reminded herself with her usual honesty that it hadn't always been so. There hadn't been too damn much laughter in that little affair. For a long time this was a page that she had tended to skip over. For too damn long Harold had been no laughing matter in her life, no laughing matter at all. For a minute she paused in her scrubbing and stood gazing bleakly out of the glass door of the shower stall.

But I got back at him, she told herself, rallying. The old ruin! I've got the last laugh. Thinking of it with triumph she was surprised to feel a slow tide of blood rising to her head, suffusing her cheeks, and wondered wildly if her body was letting her in for one more symptom of change and confusion before it settled down to its new way of life. Or could it be something even less expected, she thought suddenly, turning on more cold to splash her face. Nothing more or less than a blush?

But had it been so shameful, what she'd done to Harold at the party? At that he was probably grateful to her—or should be. She'd gone and sat by him, hadn't she, when all the others had finished doing their duty by him and then, oh so casually, drifted off to more amusing companions, leaving him alone? For about ten minutes in the midst of the crowded room he had been sitting deserted. Even his sister, Miss Nash, had gone off somewhere.

Watching him unobtrusively as he raised his good arm for a sip of the weak whisky and water, she had wondered how much he minded this obvious unpopularity. Did the damaged cells of his brain still retain his old conceit? Did he grieve at the disappearance of his charm? In the old days he would have been in the heart of some gay group, talking, talking endlessly, wittily, making the outrageously controversial statements he delighted in. Or, she thought, he might just as easily have been cozied up on a couch with some pretty woman, gazing boldly into her flattered eyes, ignoring her obvious physical beauty in favor of her "superior

intelligence.” (This, she remembered, was a specialty of his—it used to get them every time.)

Did he remember those things and feel his loss? Or was he now less man than vegetable? Perhaps Medusa had known. If so, brave and loyal to the end, she’d taken the secret to her grave. Until the end she had continued to assert that, though Harold was now an invalid, true, and had trouble speaking, there was nothing at all wrong with his mind. He was still, according to her, as sharp as ever. He’d lost the knack of communicating, she told everyone, but he understood. Well, Betty had never seen any signs of it.

She went over to where he sat and plumped herself down on the spotty mauve satin ottoman at his feet. She crossed her legs, automatically making the most of an elegant ankle, leaned her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand. She clutched her fourth martini-on-the-rocks like a weapon and stretched at Harold her famous white-toothed smile. Politely, he smiled back. It was quite possible, she thought, that in spite of everything he didn’t even know for sure who the hell she was. Or care. His smile was not nice: it definitely threw into prominence the fact that one of his eyes was lower and larger than the other. His useless hand lay in his lap in embarrassing proximity to his fly. She wished she had the nerve to shove it to one side for him. A gruesome sight he was, Betty thought. (The martinis she had drunk were making her feel good and nasty and she fostered the feeling with another gulp at her glass.) He was a figure to scare children, Harold was.

“You’re looking well, Harold darling,” she confided in tones made huskier by alcohol.

Harold looked almost interested. He nodded politely. “Yes, yes,” he said.

“It was a lovely funeral, I thought. Such a beautiful day for it.”

Harold inclined his head, evidently accepting these remarks as a compliment to him. Was that a faint look of smugness?

Betty pressed on. “Medusa looked really beautiful, didn’t she?”

But it seemed that Harold didn’t agree. A puzzled frown creased his brows. “No, no, no, no!”

“Oh, you didn’t think so? Why not?”

Harold couldn't say. "No, no," he repeated.

Cora's husband, William, was passing with the martini pitcher and Betty held out her empty glass to be refilled.

"Well," she said, "now that's too bad. All that work for nothing. Mrs. Greeff would feel pretty insulted if she knew. We mustn't tell her, must we?"

The ghost of emotion that had troubled Harold's face had now fled. "Yes," he pronounced impassively.

"I suppose it was the hair you didn't like, wasn't it? So neat, so proper, so un-Medusa-ish." Betty flung her own shining vivid mane back from her face and let her pale blue eyes rest on Harold's. "It was you gave her the name of course, wasn't it, darling?"

Betty threw her mind back to the past, remembering what she had heard. "Her beautiful black curls like a nest of snakes and her look that turned men to stone. (I never quite knew what you meant by that, dear.) Did you really ever love her, I wonder? Or was it just her purity, her goodness you had to have? So different from the kind of woman you were used to. (I was more your type, really.) And of course she loved you, didn't she, the poor darling? She never once looked—seriously—at anybody else. She really loved you—that's so irresistible!"

It would be nice to carve a look of suffering on that lineless face, thought Betty, staring at him, not bothering now to look pleasant. An alcoholic meanness was welling up in her. Past wrongs began to flood her mind.

Harold returned her stare placidly, in the angle of his head a rather ghastly imitation of courteous interest.

"What bad luck that she should be the first to die! You'll never forgive her for that, will you? Poor Harold! Who's to take care of you now? Who'll protect you when things get too hot for you?" She grinned at him and he nodded politely.

"Oh, but I forgot," she went on. "Nothing's going to happen to you now, is it, darling? No more silly women running after you, getting in your hair. No more secret meetings, or cozy little dates in dark restaurants. Oh, what a wicked fellow you were! And what

a wicked, wonderful talker! Do you know I used to almost die of excitement listening to you?"

Harold continued to smile his set, impersonal smile. Carefully, he took a swallow of his highball. As if bored, he slid his eyes away from Betty and looked calmly about the crowded room. Whatever was inside of him, he was giving nothing of it away.

"The cat got your tongue?"

"Yes, yes," he replied, turning back to her.

"Do you remember at dinner parties that year, the things you used to whisper to me? It was just after Hiroshima and that was all everyone was talking about—the atom bomb. Doom and the atom bomb." Betty threw back her head and let out a shriek of laughter. Several people paused in their drinking and talking and looked around. Betty saw Lily across the room glance questioningly from her to Harold and back to her as if gauging the temperature of the conversation.

"And you'd lean toward me in the midst of all the high-flown talk and say something in an undertone—something wicked about the bomb and you and me. Oh, poor Betty! You'd have me so excited sometimes I could hardly go on sitting there." The room lurched suddenly and she had to catch herself from falling off the ottoman. She put her drink down on the floor. She must be careful, it was too soon to get drunk. She fumbled in her bag for a cigarette, lighted it and looked back at Harold. What had she been saying? Oh, yes.

"But it was all talk, wasn't it, Harold, not a thing in the world but talk. No harm at all." She smiled nastily, wondering if he remembered. She hoped to God he did. He'd certainly had her fooled—right up to the day he'd gotten careless and stayed behind with her in the studio after a party. "It was really stupid of me, wasn't it? I certainly should have realized sooner you weren't a man of action."

Now in the hot spray of the shower Betty felt again the old humiliation. She didn't care how cruel she'd sounded, he deserved every bit of it. Scrubbing away, happily indignant at Harold, she

pushed last night's encounter out of her mind and switched her thoughts back to Lee-roy. Her body remembering his remarkable equipment began again to swell with desire. Angry at it, she turned off the hot water faucet and let the cold come on full force. She leaned her hips against the icy needles until she could stand no more. God, it was a nuisance, this terrible itch of the flesh that had plagued her all her life! Rubbing a towel roughly over herself she almost wished for the day when it would let up, leave her in peace. In peace to work, to look indifferently, like other women, at the likes of Lee-roy.

Dressed, she slammed the door behind her, got into her car and drove down the road in the direction of the Harfields' farm.

CHAPTER

7

In her pretty house across the valley Jayne Herendeen sat alone at a window sipping a mid-morning cup of coffee. Arthur had gone off earlier muttering something about getting some more cadmium yellow in Georgetown. When she said she'd go along with him to keep him company, he'd said no, he intended to mosey about the countryside and see if he could find some bit of scenery to paint that hadn't already been painted about five dozen times by amateurs. She didn't see why he'd never take her with him on these wanderings but that was one thing he'd always been stubborn about—his freedom to do anything connected with his work alone. Jayne didn't see how in the world having her along would bother him—she was quiet as a mouse, heaven knew, but Arthur refused to give in to her.

It really was mean of him to leave her today. Her back was killing her as it so often did lately. She was sure she had at least a slipped disk though Dr. Parton said there was no evidence of it. With her right hand she cautiously probed the flesh on her left side where a breast had been removed—at this time of day she didn't bother to wear the sponge rubber one. She then pressed her right breast as she had been taught to do but could feel nothing—no lumps, no sore spots. Still, the cancer could have metastasized into her spinal column, she supposed, and for all anybody knew she might be dead in a week.

As she gazed absently out the window a gray sedan driven by Miss Nash came down the road and, slowing, stopped with nice precision in front of the gate in Jayne's picket fence. It was a neatly kept car, but not a new model, Jayne judged. Miss Nash could probably well afford something a good deal better but didn't want it to be known how much money she was raking in from that school of hers. She must have a very nice little piece of change put away somewhere. I wonder what she wants.

The car door opened and Jayne watched as Miss Nash emerged.

She was wearing a well-fitting cotton suit of a dark gray that matched her automobile. She gave the skirt a businesslike jerk, stepped around to the other side of the car and began the difficult process of extricating her crippled brother. Oh, Lord, Jayne thought, what a bore! She hesitated, torn between distaste for the idea of seeing Harold and curiosity about what had brought them. Should she or should she not tell Mrs. Harfield to say she wasn't in? She turned to go out to the kitchen, then saw that Miss Nash was steering Harold away from the door and into the garden. Here she deposited him with careful efficiency in a canvas chair under an apple tree, then turned and strode purposefully back to the house.

Since Harold had been disposed of, Jayne's curiosity won out. She went to the door. "Miss Nash, how nice to see you," she said, giggling a little, as if there were something subtly humorous in these words. "Do come in. I see you have made Harold comfortable outside." Again she gave the little giggle.

"I should like to come in if I may, Mrs. Herendeen."

Jayne backed up, holding the door open, and Miss Nash entered the hall. Jayne led her into the room where she had just been sitting. If only she'd thought to hide that cup of coffee! What would Miss Nash think of her sitting around in the middle of the morning drinking coffee? "I'm afraid you've caught me doing something naughty," she apologized to Miss Nash. "Now promise me you won't tell anybody. Why, do you know sometimes the whole day goes by and I hardly think even to get myself a bite of lunch. I'm so busy the time just flies by. I guess I'm just not myself this morning. I felt I just had to have a cup of coffee to keep me going." She placed her hand on the flat place where her left breast had been. "But what am I thinking of? Now sit right down and I'll get you some too, it won't take me a minute. Or would you rather have a little sherry?"

"Thank you, my dear. Yes, a small glass of sherry would be very nice. I find it is most helpful for those mid-morning doldrums."

Jayne went to a small, high table set up as a bar in a corner of

the room. I wouldn't be surprised to hear the old biddy's a secret drinker, she told herself. Jayne knew all about these frustrated old school-marms.

"You know," she said, "I think I'll join you. Of course I don't ordinarily drink in the daytime."

"Nor, of course, do I," said Miss Nash. "But today I find I am a little upset." She sat herself down on a stiff brocade chair, one of a pair ranged alongside the mantelpiece, and from a no-nonsense black calf purse she took out a black calf cigarette case. She inserted a cigarette into a short amber holder.

Jayne carefully poured sherry into two prettily fluted glasses, handed one to Miss Nash and seated herself on a nearby couch.

"Upset?" Jayne gave her little giggle.

"Yes, Mrs. Herendeen. It is my brother, of course."

Ah, thought Jayne, I knew she had some axe to grind.

"I am, I confess it, at my wit's end." Miss Nash paused but Jayne said nothing. Her enormous eyes rested gravely on Miss Nash's face.

Miss Nash took a swallow of sherry, patted her pale lips with a white handkerchief and made a fresh start. She leaned forward and stared impressively at Jayne.

"I have always felt a certain rapport between us, Mrs. Herendeen. I have always had the feeling that you and I could speak frankly to each other. I can not say the same of Harold's other friends. Please forgive me if I am treading on your toes, Mrs. Herendeen. I know you are a person who would always put loyalty to her friends above all other considerations. But I am a blunt woman. I sense, in the attitude of Mrs. Dewhurst and Miss Levering a certain frivolity that I can not understand or approve."

Jayne's perfect lips drew into a secretive smile. She got up from the couch, brought over the bottle of sherry and refilled their glasses.

"I am referring, of course, to Harold, you understand—with particular reference to his future." Miss Nash bent on Jayne a compelling look, this time not in vain. Jayne broke into speech.

"The things I could tell you about Betty Levering," she said darkly. "I don't care how good an artist a person is, it doesn't give them the right to live the kind of life she lives, does it? Drinking and carousing, why the things that go on in that studio of hers—well, I could tell you things that would make your hair curl! And, ontray-nous, there are those who don't think her sculpture is so very special, either." Jayne snickered. "Arthur says—but I mustn't go around repeating things, must I?" She put an admonitory hand in front of her mouth. "But I always say there's more than one way to get around the critics."

Miss Nash cut in. "I know nothing of Miss Levering's private life. I was speaking of course in terms of Harold. The overall picture is most perplexing. I have come to feel I can not properly evaluate the situation without some help from a sympathetic source. The point is this." Miss Nash leaned her large, well-tailored bosom forward and pointed her empty cigarette-holder at Jayne, as if pinning her to her seat. It was plain that this was a gesture that had quelled more than one argumentative parent.

It was lost on Jayne. Absorbed in her own train of thought she got up and began pouring more sherry. "As for Lily Dewhurst," she said, bending her beautiful, calm face with its halo of short black curls over the wine glasses, "I have her number, all right. Now she's one of the really dangerous ones. Everyone thinks she's such a lady, such a wonderful wife and mother—. Well, I happen to know different. She treats her husband like a doormat and, between you and I, Miss Nash, she hasn't let him sleep with her for years." Jayne lowered her eyelashes modestly, then looked up with a merry giggle. "Strictly ontray-nous, she's had her cap set for Arthur lately. Not that he'd ever give her a second look, of course, poor old Lily."

Miss Nash passed a distracted hand over her manly hairdo and sighed deeply. "This is most interesting, Mrs. Herendeen," she murmured quickly. "But speaking on another level, and within the framework of—uh—what is to be my brother's future, I am, as I say, most anxious to have the benefit of your advice. I am sure

you, with your fine sensibilities, would be the first to realize, dear Mrs. Herendeen, that the presence of Harold on the premises of a school like the one of which I have the honor to be headmistress could not help but have a deleterious effect on the student body. I very much fear that my girls, mature and well adjusted as they are, would find it impossible to relate favorably to him. And, of course, as you will be the first to understand, my first responsibility can not help being to them."

But Jayne had been thinking all this while of Lily. "There's another thing about Lily, Miss Nash. Her house. Have you ever been inside of it? No?" Jayne shrugged deprecatingly. "Oh, it's charming, I suppose, or that's what everyone says, but I always say a house can't really be charming unless it's absolutely clean. Don't you think so? Honestly, I don't like to say this but sometimes I could write my name in the dust on Lily's furniture! Well, I may be very peculiar but I just couldn't live like that, could you? I don't know what it is but I just can't stand a house that isn't just perfectly clean and shining all the time. I suppose it's born right in me. Arthur keeps telling me not to work so hard but I tell him you can't get the help to take pains unless the mistress does too. I work right along with them and make sure it's cleaned the way I like to see it." Jayne stretched her hands out suddenly at Miss Nash. "Oh, these hands have seen a lot of toil and I'm not ashamed of it. Medusa used to tell me I should take better care of them but I don't see that it's hurt them any, do you?"

"This is a lovely room." Miss Nash's glance ran appreciatively around the gleaming furniture, up and down the crisply ruffled curtains, the objects of silver and brass chastely glistening. "And such a lovely house. I do admire you for keeping it up so devotedly. And how fortunate you are to have so much space! Quite a rarity nowadays! I've heard you even have a fully equipped apartment over the garage!"

Jayne had emptied her glass and now filled it again. "It all takes a lot of elbow grease, Miss Nash, a lot of elbow grease. But Arthur says I haven't a lazy bone in my body and I guess he's right. Of

course, Lily's hands are very beautiful, don't you think so, Miss Nash?" Jayne smiled mysteriously and sipped at her sherry.

"I have not as yet had occasion to notice Mrs. Dewhurst's hands," said Miss Nash. "But I do know that I admire a good, competent hand in a woman. None of these lotus flowers for me!" She gave a gruff laugh, not noticing Jayne's frown. "You know, Mrs. Herendeen, of all the many friends Medusa and Harold had, it was always you and Mr. Herendeen they loved and admired the most! 'Arthur Herendeen is the most talented painter in America today.' Why, Mrs. Herendeen, if Harold said that once he said it a thousand times! 'And he's married to the most beautiful woman!'" Miss Nash's voice boomed out with sincerity and she fastened her eyes compellingly on Jayne's face.

Jayne fluttered a deprecating hand. For a long moment both ladies were silent. On the mantelpiece the ormolu clock chattered frivolously. The sun, coming through the glittering windowpanes, lighted up a frieze of dust motes which hung suspended in the quiet air.

Jayne was smiling down at the glowing Oriental rug, tracing one of its intricate designs.

It would look awfully well, she mused, if we did let Harold have that room over the garage. I could easily get Mrs. Harfield to help with him; she doesn't have nearly enough to do. It might be rather nice to be the only ones decent enough to take him in. It would certainly show up his other friends, so-called. What a lovely slap for Lily and Betty who had made such a to-do about all they did for Medusa, what with the funeral and everything. She'd just like to see their faces when they heard.

Then, as Jayne opened her mouth to speak, Miss Nash, like an artist who does not know when his picture is finished and compulsively adds one more ruinous stroke of the brush, uttered a final and fatal statement. Perhaps the years of practice she had had in gaining the ascendancy over the young females in her charge had made her overconfident. Or perhaps it was that, as she

had always eschewed gossip, she had come to this encounter inadequately briefed.

"It was Medusa's fondest wish as she lay dying," she said, "that Harold could be near you and Mr. Herendeen."

Any of Jayne's friends could have told Miss Nash that Jayne, beneath a surface show of affection, had always disliked Medusa intensely and had tried, in many little ways, to make her life less pleasant and that, moreover, Medusa had, in her kinder way, reciprocated the feeling. Now, hearing Miss Nash's words, Jayne felt the old jealousy of her rival spring up inside her. She awoke abruptly from her dream of playing Lady Bountiful. She frowned and rose decisively to her feet, stumbled slightly and gave a little cry.

"What is it?" Miss Nash too got up and came forward to Jayne obsequiously.

Jayne stood stiffly, the palm of her hand pressing the small of her back, her face contorted with pain. "This frightful sacro-iliac," she groaned. "I'm afraid I've been over-doing it." She smiled a brave little smile. "Please forgive me, Miss Nash. Do you know, I think I'm going to have to go right upstairs and lie down."

In the garden bees visited back and forth among the monkshood, one or two sleek catbirds swooped about and somewhere high up in the apple tree a woodpecker was wasting no time. Unknown to Harold, who slept, a large yellow butterfly had landed on his thick white hair and now rested there, its wings idling in the gentle breeze.

Miss Nash nudged him awake and helped hoist him to his feet. From behind the immaculate curtains in an upstairs room Jayne watched them go slowly down the garden path.

The Georgy Room of the Hotel George, though considerable expense had been spared in fixing it up, still managed to strike that note of gay gloom or gloomy gaiety peculiar to cocktail lounges. That is to say, it was underlighted and over-decorated. A ski instructor out of work because of a mild winter had parlayed a slight talent for caricature into a job as a muralist and had covered the walls with scenes in humorous vein depicting the strenuous activities prevalent in winter on the snow-covered slopes that surrounded Georgetown, but as the room's only illumination came from ten-watt bulbs in the table lamps, most drinkers found this art work fairly easy to disregard. The windows, which, if they had been allowed, looked out on a pleasant view of Mount Nestor, were heavily shrouded in burlap dyed pink and let in no chink of light to offend the sensibilities of the clientele. Lily Dewhurst, just in out of the sun, paused in the doorway of this retreat until her eyes could accommodate themselves to its eternal night.

Gradually forms detached themselves from the darkness and Lily was able to see which tables were occupied and to grope her way to one that was not. A child whom the truant officer should have known about took her order for a whisky sour.

How restful it was in here! How nice to be in out of the day! She felt about in her pocketbook, located her compact and, peering into it by the ineffectual light of the tiny lamp, dabbed at her shining face. She brought her large straw hat, which had veered a bit off course, back to its proper angle. Carefully so as not to knock it askew again she leaned back on the pink leatherette settee and let her hand wander among the salted peanuts provided by the management. Absently munching, she surveyed her surroundings.

Across the room at a table near the bar two of the local pederasts were having what seemed to be a very tense conversation, the one looking sulkily at his drink, the other leaning forward with fiercely

creased brows. What stormy lives these deviants led! Wiping a glass, the bartender was doing his best to eavesdrop. How long would it be before everyone in the valley knew what he had overheard? Not very interested, Lily's glance moved idly away. In the sparsely settled room she could see no other familiar faces—it was a little late for the regulars.

The child in waiter's clothing laid a paper cocktail napkin in front of her and tenderly placed upon it the frosty drink. Beads of sweat trimmed his hairless lip. Lily gave him a quick reassuring smile.

They made a very nice whisky sour here, she mused. Perhaps it would counteract the pernicious effect of the pill she had taken. I am really going to the dogs today, she thought. To take first a stimulant, then a depressant—it was the well-known primrose path. I have done those things which I ought not to have done and there's no health in me, she sighed to herself, not caring too much.

Outlined against the light of the hallway outside a bulky shape loomed up. Pleased, Lily recognized Arthur Herendeen. She waved, smiling, and after a few seconds he lifted his hand in a non-committal gesture and came over to her.

"Oh, it's you, Lily." It seemed to her that his eyes brightened. "I couldn't make out a thing in this goddamn light."

"Do sit down, Arthur, or are you meeting someone?" She moved over on the slippery banquette and he edged under the table and sat down beside her.

"No," he said. "I just felt bored, thought maybe a drink would help. What are you doing here anyway, Lily? I don't think of you as a solitary bar-fly."

Arthur could be awfully rude sometimes. She didn't know whether he was by nature or whether it was part of his act of being a man of the people. He seemed to think a painter should be a rough fellow, uncontaminated by bourgeois manners. He preferred to keep dark his conservative and Ivy Leagueish background and tried to give the impression that he had scrambled and clawed his way up from a poverty-stricken childhood in the depths of the

lower East Side of New York to his present position of eminence in the world of art.

"Really?" she said lightly. "But that's all I do—stagger from bar to bar all day long."

Arthur, grunting, caught the eye of the youthful waiter who immediately hastened over.

Peering suspiciously at Lily's drink, Arthur said, "What's that vomitous looking thing you have?" He spoke out of the side of his mouth as he so often did. It was part of the tough-guy masquerade.

"Rather nice," she said. "A whisky sour, why don't you try one? It's full of vitamins. I think I shall have another." The boy hustled away, gave the order to the bartender and sprinted back bearing a bowl of potato chips.

"Nothing like child labor for real service," commented Arthur, beginning to eat. "A great mistake to outlaw it."

Two images—those of Arthur's lumpish daughters Daphne and Melinda,—rose in Lily's mind. As if Arthur had seen them too, he continued, "A fine preparation for life. Take my girls, now. A couple of years working a twelve-hour day in a damp mill somewhere, why it'd be the making of them! Fine them down, stunt their growth, make them appreciate the finer things of life."

"And give them a lovely, romantic case of TB."

Arthur gave his evil, one-sided grin. "You wanna live forever?" He raised his newly arrived glass. "Here's to the good old days, when nobody lived forever."

Lily's mind swung back to the morning's events. "Goodness, how depressed you sound! Not everybody lives forever today." She laughed nervously. "Just old people do. Or so it seems."

Arthur looked questioning.

"I've just been visiting my mother—in the nursing home here." She waved her hand vaguely over her shoulder.

"Oh, yeah," said Arthur. "That place up on the hill with the crappy name."

"Pleasant Trees. It's terribly heartless of me and I am filled with

guilt but the sight of all those old ladies does get me down. If you could just see the poor old things up there tottering around on canes or getting pushed about in wheelchairs or lying in bed wasting away and being kept alive with drugs when you know they're longing to die!" Lily realized to her embarrassment that her voice was rising and she stopped abruptly. She must pull herself together. "I'm sorry," she smiled. "I must be boring you terribly—all this tiresome talk of death and destruction. Let's change the subject. Let's talk about the party last night."

"The wake?"

They laughed. "Let's face it," said Arthur. "Besides the weather, there's only one topic of conversation at our time of life—who's just died and who's about to!"

Lily looked at him over the rim of her glass, wondering what it was that attracted her, for she was very conscious of wanting to please him. He certainly wasn't handsome. Even in his younger days he hadn't been handsome. In fact, she decided, the rough-and-ready hand of age had actually improved him, yanking out a good part of his hair which had in any case been far too kinky and exposing to view a finely shaped head. He'd been a puny looking young man, as she remembered, with an air of sickliness that must have been totally deceptive. Inner toughness and success had disposed of that. His too delicate features had coarsened and his frame filled out. Right now he was eying her with a sort of quizzical sympathy.

"How is your mother, anyway? Is she sick or just old?"

Lily grimaced. "She was very sick this morning. It's cancer, of course. But very slow moving evidently. And every time she sinks and seems about to die the doctors do something to her, give her something, and she comes sadly back to life again. I know she wants to die, the poor old thing, and they won't let her!" Lily felt tears in her eyes and had to dive into her bag for a handkerchief.

Arthur let out a coarse bark of laughter. "Like hell she does," he said. "Don't you believe it." He sneered at Lily as she dabbed at

her nose. "Why, those old crocks, they'd all see us dead at their feet if it would give them one more day of life. Don't kid yourself, Lily, they cling to life with a death-grip."

He grinned at her, showing strong, slightly crooked teeth. "You should see my old lady," he went on. "Nutty as a fruitcake. Strictly loony." He tapped his temple. "But you never saw anybody so happy in your life. Not a care in the world, all the food she wants to eat, nurses at her beck and call, and if she feels like wetting her pants, she does."

Lily laughed.

"She has these hallucinations," he continued. "It must be better than television. She sits there in her chair and cackles at what she sees and thinks you're a damn fool because you don't see it too."

"What does she see?" Lily was fascinated. "Orgies of Oriental splendor?"

Arthur surprisingly blushed. "Mostly it's just parades going by, bands playing, soldiers marching. Now and then it's one or two people who argue with her—and usually get the worst of it. But sometimes it's naked men prancing around."

"Fun."

"That was why Jayne got her back up and insisted she had to be put away. You can't have two growing girls in a houseful of naked males whether they're visible or not!"

"I see what you mean!"

"It made them nervous, you know? They never knew when Grandma was going to pull up her skirts and start kicking her legs. It got so they were afraid to have any of their friends in."

"Why are the young so prudish?" Lily shook her head sadly; she was feeling better all the time.

"Another thing she used to do," Arthur continued. "She used to run away. Had a liking for gin and when the feeling came on her she'd sneak out of the house the minute your back was turned. If I didn't find her first it was ten to one she'd end up in jail for creating a nuisance in some bar-and-grill. It got so all the cops knew her. I'd get a phone call, you know, 'We got your old lady

down here again, Mac, come and get her.' I'd go and pay her fine and bring her back home and she'd be laughing like hell because she'd outsmarted us. Used to burn Jayne up. Boy, did the old girl raise the roof when we finally took her off to the nursing home. I thought she'd have a stroke, but no such luck, of course! She couldn't stand the thought of not having us to push around any more. Swore she'd leave everything to a home for cats. Never very original, you know." Arthur shook his head. "Don't kid yourself, Lily, life is stronger in the old than in the young. They know its value."

"But life without dignity?"

"Phooey. Dignity is a luxury. They're down to essentials." He finished the last of his drink. "The hell with the old," he said out of the side of his mouth. He was remembering, Lily noted, his humble background. "Christ, I'm starving. Want to get something to eat?"

She had forgotten about lunch. Now she found she was hungry too.

"Look," he said, "I've got an idea. Let's get out of this black hole, it's giving me the willies. We could buy some sandwiches and have a picnic. I know a place on the way back to Leicester."

Her heart lifted to his gaiety. But it had been a long time since she and her husband had done anything spontaneously and she had learned to curb her impulses. She hesitated, doubts clambering aboard her mind. Her city clothes, the time, John alone at home—

"Or maybe you don't want to," said Arthur.

"Oh, I do want to," she cried, deciding. "It's such a lovely day!" And really it wouldn't do, would it, to hurt Arthur's feelings.

CHAPTER

9

Lily's car followed Arthur's out of Georgetown and back onto the highway to Leicester. About ten miles along they turned off on to a grassy dirt road bordered with elms. This rapidly deteriorated, coming to a bad end on the banks of a small stream over which a broken-down and boarded-off covered bridge sagged precariously.

"From here we walk," Arthur announced picking up the shopping bag of food he had bought in the delicatessen across the street from the Hotel George.

"Not across that bridge!"

"It'll damn well hold up once more." Arthur turned and grinned evilly.

"Twice more, let's hope." Lily followed him nervously through the rotting bridge and up the hillside beyond. It was a sharp climb but fortunately a short one as the high heels she was wearing were not ideal for the terrain. Arthur's picnic spot featured a roughly circular expanse of club-moss about a hundred feet in diameter and a spectacular view of the surrounding hills and valleys. Black-eyed Susan and devil's paintbrush grew in abundance and fat clumps of daisies bent and swayed in the mild breeze.

"Do you know," Arthur bragged, waving an arm and looking about in a proprietary way, "you can see three states from here." It was the kind of fact, Lily thought, that gave more pleasure to men than to women.

"That is," he glanced shyly at Lily, "if you care about that sort of thing?"

She laughed. Arthur was rather a pet. "I'm glad for your sake," she said, and sank down onto the blanket. She kicked off her shoes, wriggled her red lacquered toes and felt the sun beat down on her bare legs. A puff of wind lifted the skirts of her dress and, as she remembered that her underthings were rather sketchy today, she tucked it prudently under her thighs. Beneath the tautly

held cloth the soft flesh bulged. I must, must, must cut down on eating, she reprimanded herself, and hoped that Aruthur wouldn't notice how fat she was. Jayne was so beautiful and willowy.

"Those over there are the Atlantis Mountains," Arthur continued. "That last layer." Out of his pocket he took a small pair of opera glasses through which he ransacked the view below, then turned to Lily, holding them out. "Here, look," he ordered and she obediently took the glasses from his hand.

"Arthur, dear, I'm starving," she complained softly, adjusting the glasses and giving the panorama a cursory going over. How tiresome people could be about views, she thought as she felt him sitting down beside her. But I suppose a good view is part of a painter's stock-in-trade. Staring resentfully at a cow moving around sluggishly, munching away at the grass in a far-off meadow, she thought of the nice, damp, delicatessen sandwiches they had bought. Putting the glasses down on the side that was away from Arthur, she took off her hat and shook back her head.

"Pretty hair," said Arthur surprisingly. He leaned toward her and ruffled it up with his hand. Her eyes startled, she turned to look at him and found herself being efficiently kissed. Before she could call up her forces to resist, she discovered that she was responding with pleasure and enthusiasm. It was just friendliness, of course, not a thing in the world was going to happen. Lily had handled amorous males before now and emerged unscathed. Still, it seemed too soon to draw back quite yet—and definitely hypocritical. She remembered the sudden and strange excitement she had experienced yesterday on feeling Arthur's glance at Medusa's funeral. She was conscious that it had now returned in full force. The cocktails she had drunk, the relaxing sun and the balmy air were all getting in their insidious work—her will-power seemed to have gone off somewhere. In no time at all she and Arthur had abandoned their sitting position for a more comfortable one.

In just two seconds, she thought, you must put a gentle but firm stop to this. "What kind of sandwiches did you get," she murmured in his ear. "We must eat now," but her hips had taken

the initiative and were pressing cozily against him. "And did you remember to ask for extra horseradish? It's awfully good for a hangover, did you know?"

"I got it," Arthur grunted against her neck. "Are you always so greedy?"

"Yes," she gasped.

"I love you," he sighed. It was only a sop to convention, of course, Lily thought hazily, but she appreciated it. Really, it would be terribly rude to stop things at this point. The sun flamed red on her closed eyelids and a sharp root dug into her buttocks and was ignored.

How on earth had it ever happened, she thought amazed, as she lay spent beside him, drowned in heat and languor. What an outrageous way for two sedate, middle-aged people to behave! And in the outdoors, too! (But how easy and natural it had been!) What *could* she have been thinking of? The answer to that was only too obvious.

She still felt far too happy for remorse, too satisfied for the first time in so long. Undoubtedly in the small hours of tomorrow morning, alone and sleepless in her bed, she would begin to feel its bite. But there was time enough for that. Now she felt only a kind of lazy amusement: for two people no longer young they had not done badly, conducting their encounter with a minimum of awkwardness and achieving a highly satisfactory result.

She shifted her body slightly: the root had pierced the blanket. Beside her Arthur was breathing heavily—how frightful if, exhausted by the struggle for union, he should suffer a heart attack! She had heard of such things happening. She became aware that the sun's rays were quick-cooking the tender flesh of her stomach; she pulled her dress back over it. Well-being filled her and for a few minutes she drowsed. An odd memory floated into her mind—something she had seen a couple of months ago on the side of a building as she stood waiting for a bus.

"Spring is here," someone had printed neatly. "Let's all — now."

She broke into laughter. Arthur, lying on his back, turned his

face toward her. It was streaked with sweat and slightly sheepish. "What's so funny," he asked.

"I thought of a joke. No, don't ask me, I shan't tell you. It's nothing to do with us—at all." That was true, she thought, heaven knew. They were quite a way beyond spring.

"You should be crying now, not laughing, don't you know that?"

"No one tells me these things," she sighed.

"You should be saying," he threw his voice into a falsetto, "'Oh, Arthur, I've never done such a thing before in my life!'"

She giggled. "As a matter of fact," she said and then stopped. It was true—she had never done such a thing before and she couldn't wholly understand how it had happened this time. Doubtless it was the classical combination of the right time, the right place and the right man. But it would be too silly to admit that she was a novice—it would make it all seem much too important. Besides, so readily had she succumbed that he would never in the world believe it.

"As a matter of fact, what?" urged Arthur.

"Nothing."

She got herself up from the ground, rearranged her clothes and turned aside to allow Arthur his moment of privacy.

"I'll be back in a minute, I need some water." Arthur plowed off down the hill toward the stream below. Lily found her compact and peered at her face, searching anxiously for signs of debauchery. Her cheeks were flushed; she calmed them down with powder and dealt with smeared lipstick. Her short hair had somehow become damp and sticky and she poked at it and pushed it hopelessly about with her fingers, since she had come off without a comb.

Fairly neat again, she dug into the paper bag, got out the sandwiches and was spreading them out on napkins as Arthur reappeared. "As I was saying a while ago, I am starved."

What was the correct thing to do, she wondered nervously. What did sophisticated people do on these occasions? Discuss what had happened, psychoanalyze themselves and their motives

—or just ignore the whole thing and talk in a high-class, civilized way about art or the Russians? That was the trouble with straying off the beaten path, you were so terribly on your own.

“I didn’t know that this would happen, Lily,” said Arthur rather gloomily, munching his sandwich. “Please believe I didn’t bring you here for this purpose.” His blue eyes clung fiercely to the view.

Lily was conscious of feeling annoyed. Was it possible that he was at as much of a loss as she? She said, her dark eyes glinting mischievously, “Well, I’d be sorry to think that nothing of the sort had occurred to you, Arthur.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know. I’m teasing.” Evidently it was up to her to take control of the situation. “It was a surprise to both of us. I suppose we’ll just have to make the best of it.”

They ate the sandwiches and drank from the now warmish cans of beer for a while in silence, half companionable, half uneasy—two partners in crime. The pill Lily had taken in the morning (so many years ago), the cocktails in the Georgy Room and now the unwonted athletics had produced in her a great thirst. She was grateful for the beer, which, ordinarily, she disliked. Sex in the out-of-doors and beer as well, she thought, I am becoming very earthy.

“What is the best of it?” asked Arthur finally.

Lily shrugged. “Something people say—”

Arthur cleared his throat. “Uh—you mustn’t think—. Lily, you know I love Jayne, don’t you? You mustn’t think because this happened once it will happen again. I don’t go around cheating on her customarily.”

She frowned. How stuffy he sounded! Did all men feel compelled to sound so righteous at times like this? “Really, Arthur,” she said nastily. “Now I of course deceive John every day of my life.”

“For Christ sake, don’t get huffy, Lily. All I mean to say is that we mustn’t meet again—like this, I mean.”

“I hadn’t suggested it. In any case I doubt if I’d be able to fit

it in. I am kept hopping with all my other affairs." She lowered her eyes sulkily and began pleating a piece of waxed paper. Surely Arthur could have left it to her to protest that what had happened must never be repeated. I am evidently not behaving in the accepted way, she thought. I should have leaped right in and said that first, myself. (But it had seemed such a dreadful cliché.) This is what comes, she told herself again, of leading an upright and godly life—it leaves you with no experience when something unusual comes along. Surely ladies who know what they're doing don't get themselves brushed off quite this fast.

"Lily, give up. That flip line of talk doesn't suit you."

"But Arthur," she protested faintly, "you're being rather offensive, you know."

"Am I? I guess I *am* clumsy. The truth is I'm not used to these things. Been too busy, I suppose." He gave her an apologetic smile. "It all came over me suddenly—my mind went black, you know? You looked so lovely sitting there—I couldn't not!"

Lily's feelings were assuaged—she wanted to believe all these things.

He broke off a piece of grass and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "It's just that Jayne—I can't help thinking of Jayne." He hurled a beer can away over the crest of the hill. "Well, you know what a hard time she's had. I'm not as free as most men—she depends on me so much. She's such a lonely person."

And for good reason, Lily thought spitefully. She summoned up an appearance of sympathy and patted his arm. "I know, Arthur, please don't worry any more."

Absently she began picking up bits of paper, folding them neatly and putting them back into the bag. The beer can that Arthur had thrown away would have to remain where it had landed. Nature would eventually tidy it away. Litterers must be caught before they could be prosecuted and as far as her naked eye could see nothing human moved in all of the three visible states.

"It's a high, lonely place anyway, Lily. No one could oversee us."

“Only God and the angels.”

“I don’t suppose they go in much for watching such sights,” Arthur said. “Turn a disapproving back, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“Time to go.”

“Yes.”

They went on sitting there as if paralyzed by what they had done. It seemed as if, commonplace as it was, it had robbed them of their ability to take up their separate lives where they had stepped out of them.

Arthur looked at his watch, an old-fashioned stem-winder. She noticed with a pang that he had to hold it well out in front of him to read what it said. If only, she thought, we weren’t so old.

“What time is it?”

“Almost four.” But she couldn’t bear to be the first to break this unaccustomed bond of intimacy, imperfect as it was, and go back to being just herself alone.

Arthur wiped his mouth with a last crumpled piece of napkin which he then threw accurately into the open bag. From his pocket he took his sketchbook and flipped it open. He hooked on a pair of glasses. She watched the freckled dome of his head, the plainish, intent face.

“Nice to be you,” she said, “never any doubts about what you wanted to do with your life—what you had in you to do.”

His sandy eyebrows rose. Lily went on idly. “Most people don’t seem to know what they want to do till it’s too late to do anything about it.”

He said, sketching, looking up at her face and down again at his pad, “Maybe. But that’s one thing about growing older—you do begin to get an idea of what you’re all about, anyway. You get to know what you have to deal with. You leave a margin for error, know what I mean? You don’t any longer get too upset if you find you’re not measuring up to all that’s noblest in man.”

Lily thought he seemed to be recovering nicely from his feelings of guilt about Jayne.

“Still, things do happen to trip you up, to surprise you—”

“Like today?”

“Do we never stop learning things about ourselves?”

“No. It’s the great thing,” he pontificated, “about not being young. The young are so busy draping themselves in ideas that are fashionable or trying attitudes on for size that they never have time to see themselves plain.”

“The thing is most of what we keep finding out about ourselves is so depressing.”

“If you let it be. The trick, I think, is not to take it personally!” Arthur looked up and grinned. Perhaps working at his sketch was helping him to arrange things in his mind so that he wouldn’t have to suffer too much remorse. She wished she had some such therapy.

“Jayne is always worrying about some goddamn thing she’s said or done,” Arthur continued. “I keep telling her to take it easy, not to expect herself to be perfect.” He bent over the sketch. “I wish you really knew her, Lily.”

Lily managed to control the muscles of her face which, left to themselves, would have gone into a spasm of irritation. She wanted to yell. Why on earth did he have to keep bringing Jayne up? It seemed terribly tactless to her. The last thing she wanted was to know Jayne better. She felt that if she really knew her she would really hate her, whereas now she was able to keep her feelings throttled down to a tolerant dislike.

“Ycs,” she murmured vaguely. She reached out across the blanket on which they still sat, retrieved her large, flowery hat and, pulling her legs under her, got herself, with what she hoped was some grace, to her feet.

“I suppose we must.” Arthur took off his glasses, put away his sketchbook and stood up stiffly. He wasn’t exactly in the pink of condition, Lily guessed. Painting was sedentary work. A suspicion of a pot protruded over his trouser belt. She thought pettishly that Jayne could keep him for all of her.

Leaning over she picked up the blanket, shook it out and folded it over her arm. Arthur, carrying the remains of the lunch, took

her hand and helped her down the steep hill. They walked back through the mildewed bridge to the place where their two cars waited. Arthur turned then and put his arms around her. They stood so, silently embraced, his cheek pressed against hers and gradually a strange thing happened. She felt the crossness in her melt away as if his touch held some sort of balm for her, and she was filled with tenderness toward him.

"I won't be home for lunch today, John darling," announced Lily at breakfast. "It's the Church Fair, remember? I'm helping at the food table and it'll take us all morning to get things set up. There's really no point, do you think, in my dashing home and dashing right back again before it opens. I've got a nice chop in the refrigerator that Mrs. Jones will cook for you."

John considered the idea. To Mrs. Jones, cooking and frying were synonymous. He pictured the chop, pink and innocent to start with, condemned to sizzle in a skillet with roughly sliced potatoes ranged round to soak up the grease. His elderly stomach heaved. He breathed deeply through his mouth and, holding up a paper napkin, belched.

"Tell her not to bother," he said. "I was thinking anyway of driving into Rochester today—see if Dr. Stanley can't do something about this blasted tooth of mine. That cap he put on doesn't seem to be fitting properly. It feels higher than the other teeth. I can't chew on that side of my mouth at all." Glumly he explored the place with his tongue. Lily watched.

"A good idea," she said. They munched in silence for a minute on their dry, dietary toast.

John looked at his wife down the narrow length of the kitchen table which was covered, depressingly, with a plastic cloth.

"Do you suppose we'll ever go back to having breakfast in the dining-room?" he asked mildly.

Lily frowned. "I wish you'd stop brooding about that," she said. "You know perfectly well it's silly to go to all that trouble for the small amount of breakfast we eat."

"I suppose it would take about five minutes to slap a couple of mats on the dining-room table and lay two places."

"But it's such a long walk from here to there," argued Lily. "All that running back and forth, so senseless, really." She sipped her coffee.

He regarded her speculatively. Pacing it out in his mind from kitchen door to dining-room, he made it about ten steps. It shouldn't be too exhausting.

She smiled at him and said, as if reading his thoughts, "All right, I'm a slattern at heart. My kimono needs washing and I don't know anything about gracious living."

"Why can't you get Mrs. Jones to do it?" he asked for the hundredth time. At Lily's exasperated look, he said, "Oh, I know, I know, she's got her cleaning to do." He could hear her at it now, the steady drone of the vacuum cleaner as she methodically pushed it back and forth over the already (as far as he could see) immaculate rugs of the bedrooms upstairs.

"It's such a hell of a way to start the day," he complained, "surrounded by all these chilly devices humming and throbbing. They make me nervous. I have a feeling they've got it in for me."

"You're making it up," said Lily.

He stared gloomily at the long low freezer, invisioning the icy goodies inside, pressed by some assembly-line Procrustes into unnatural shapes. "Bad enough to have the refrigerator sitting there waiting to blow cold air down your neck every time its door is opened, but *that* thing! It belongs in a morgue."

"Think of it as a symbol of plenty," said Lily. "A modern cornucopia."

"A memento mori, that's what it is," John retorted. "And I resent having to look at it so early in the day."

Lily, drinking her black coffee, seemed to repress a sigh as John looked around for other things to carp at. His eyes fastened on the stove, which seemed to be showing its teeth at him. He thought again of their pretty dining-room so nearby, of its small-paned bay window that looked out on the delphiniums and the poppies in the garden. While they sat here surrounded by the menacing machinery of house-keeping, there in that other room the well-waxed furniture gleamed to itself, the beautiful old silver sparkled in the morning sun and on the shelves of the corner cupboard the fig-

urines and bibelots that Lily had collected over the years gave off their grace unperceived.

But he mustn't be such a reactionary, full of tiresome complaints about the present. It was silly to wish back the old days, they were gone forever (or certainly for *his* time). Kicking against today's customs just made him look even older than he was, besides irritating poor Lily to death. What had she said about lunch? Oh, yes.

Lily was looking a little strained recently, it seemed to him. A frown came and went between her brows and her eyes had a preoccupied look. Let's see, now, how old was she? Must be forty-five or so. She couldn't be far off going through the menopause. He hoped to heaven she wasn't going to have a bad time of it. He understood there were new drugs now, though—hormones and things, that kept the ladies quieted down. All sorts of hanky-panky the doctors were up to these days.

A good thing, too. He remembered his own mother—coming in to see her after school. Sometimes she'd be downstairs in the tiny back parlor but more often she'd be lying down in her darkened, violet-scented bedroom with a damp cloth on her forehead. The perfume of violets, sniffed sometimes in a crowded place, a theater or a busy street, had always had the power to disturb him, make him feel uncomfortable, both nostalgic and somehow guilty. It was only recently, as he had begun thinking more and more of the past, that the reason for it had come back to him. The truth was that, even though he'd loved his mother, he'd found her invalidism distasteful and he had begrudged the time he'd had to spend there with her, holding her hand and trying to think up amusing things to tell her. Of course living with that father of his couldn't have been exactly easy for her; today's smart-aleck psychologists would probably say a good part of her trouble stemmed from that.

He held out his cup and Lily filled it from the utilitarian kitchen percolator, a forefinger carefully holding the glass top which

seemingly had been specially constructed to fall off with a fine splash right into your coffee.

"I wonder what ever happened to that big silver coffee-pot Mother had," he said. "Funny, I haven't thought of it for years. (I suppose my sister got it.) I must have seen it every morning of my life when we lived in the old house on Beacon Hill." As he thought of the heavy Victorian pot the whole scene came back into memory: he was a small boy again and sat with his family, his tall, frightening father, his beautiful frail mother and the four children, all eating delicious hot oatmeal with thick cream.

"The dining-room got the morning sun," he continued. "We had a big round table and the linen was so white it hurt your eyes. And two maids passing covered silver dishes of eggs and sausages and buttery toast." He wiped the corners of his mouth, salivating from the thought of these past feasts.

"And everyone fat as a pig," said Lily, raising her eyebrows.

John suppressed his annoyance. "Oddly enough, no. My mother was tall and slim till the day she died . . ." His eyes rested on Lily as she toyed with a butter knife, smearing a splotch of low-calorie grape jelly from one side of her plate to the other. A bit of it, he noticed, had gotten on to her robe. Heroically repressing the impulse to point this out, John diverted his eyes toward the window and the nerve-soothing view of Leicester Mountain. He pulled his mouth over to the left and began to gnaw at the inside of his cheek. Then doggedly he went on.

"She always read her mail at breakfast. Postmen really worked in those days. There were three deliveries a day, as I recall. And people of course corresponded—a lost art. Every morning she'd get a pile of personal letters—not just ads and bills and appeals for charity." He wagged his head, not seeing Lily's hostile glance.

"And invitations, always invitations! 'Can we go to the Lowes on the fifteenth, Ezra,' she'd say. 'White tie and a musical afterward.' And every now and then there would be a note from some young man who'd fallen in love with her. My father used to make her read them aloud. For some reason the old goat liked her to

have admirers, he liked to have people envious of him, I suppose. Now and then, I remember, she'd have one of them in for tea, or—"

"Will you please, for pity's sake, stop reminiscing?" snapped Lily, throwing him a mean look.

What was wrong with her anyway, John wondered. It didn't seem to him she'd been herself since Medusa's funeral, almost two weeks ago. A nerve in her eyelid began to quiver as he watched. She put up a forefinger and pressed on it.

John drank the last of his coffee, pushed back his chair and got up from the table. He stood looking down at his sullen wife, his figure tall and trim in a neat, well worn cotton jacket.

"Sorry to be so garrulous and boring," he said lightly. "Beginning to live in the past. I must watch it."

She was looking a little shamefaced now and managed a smile. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I'm a little nervous. It's been rather hectic lately, hasn't it?" She too rose, came over to where he stood and gave him a kiss on his newly shaven cheek. "Mm, you smell lovely! Well, I must get dressed and dash. And speaking of mail, will you get it? I do hope there's something from the boys. I wish they wrote more often."

It was about eleven-thirty but the Post Office window was still closed when John drove up. The mail must be late today—or else the young postmaster sorting the mail was making the most of his opportunities with his nubile assistant, Alice Potts, known locally as Honey. And, after all, what was the hurry? Very few people had any pressing business they had to get back to; indeed, most of them had a real problem filling in their time at all. If you worked it right, getting the mail could be drawn out to cover the entire morning.

John looked around at the waiting cars drawn up in the tiny parking place in front of the Post Office building, saw no one he wanted to talk to. He decided to step over to the general store and get some coffee.

In the corner of the store devoted to art supplies John saw Arthur Herendeen talking to the proprietor, a long-winded professional countryman who enjoyed what he called a “real philosophy of life.” Boiled down, this was a gooey mixture of Edgar Guest and Norman Vincent Peale and he never lost an opportunity to spoon it out to his neighbors. John didn’t envy poor Arthur.

Hoping to avoid being drawn into the conversation, John angled off to another side of the store where his passage to the lunch bar in the rear would be hidden by intervening rows of merchandise stacked head-high. This stock-in-trade had been shrewdly assembled to provide pleasure for the kind of people who deplored the passing of the oldtime virtues and loved the accoutrements of a bygone age. Tourists came from far and wide to fall with cries of joy on candy jars filled with jaw-breakers, or licorice shoestrings, or spruce gum; on bags of genuine stone-ground flour, on bolts of fiercely quaint calico.

Lover of the past he might be, John thought, but this calculated collection of junk stuck in his craw. Averting his eyes fastidiously

and keeping his elbows in to avoid knocking anything over, he walked carefully down an aisle bristling with coffee mills, butter churns, mounds of nutmegs, and planted his spare body on a stool at the lunch counter. He studied a hand-written menu while he waited patiently for two waitresses to finish the argument they were conducting in an ill-tempered undertone at the end of the counter. The walls around were papered with comical old posters advertising Prof. Flint's Horse and Cattle Renovating powders and Kendall's Spavin Cure and over in a corner a stranger was peering with every evidence of appreciation into the peepshow machine they had set up instead of a juke-box.

John sighed. It was a damned far cry from the Tavern in Boston, or the Century in New York. Flanked by cauldrons of coffee and hot fudge he could see his face in the mirror at the back of the counter. He had an old-fashioned, old-time look himself, he thought, like someone in a tintype. A turned-inward look, not jolly. Not, certainly, a man to be overly slapped on the back. The wrinkles on his face tended downward. Even on the high dome of his forehead there were few of the horizontal stripings that most people acquired and that helped to offset vertical grooves between the eyes.

He was, he supposed, of a melancholy, introspective nature. As a young man he had not thought himself so. Deceived by the intense drive of his body toward pleasure, he had believed himself to be outgoing, gregarious, eager to know all sorts of people. But when those youthful urges of the flesh had calmed down the man patiently waiting within took charge—the scholar, the sceptic, the non-lover of humanity. Staring, his chin in his hand, at his reflexion, at the dark eyes set deep in his head and hooded over by thick, still black eyebrows, he saw again that other face, so like his, the face of that young boy who was, quite probably, his grandson. David.

Shocked as he had been by the discovery of this new descendant, he had—he supposed now that it was part of the callousness that seemed to set in as you got older—for the most part succeeded in

putting the situation out of his thoughts. Come to that, what situation was there? Presumably the boy was well provided for, Grace being rich. There was no reason for him to stick in his oar, to feel responsibility so long after the event. It wasn't even as if the lad's existence were his only assurance of immortality: he had his own two sons and was well satisfied with them. And, he reminded himself, it was not the boy himself, but his mother, Joan, who was after all his by-blow! God, she must be close to Lily's age—older than Grace, her mother, had been that summer he had known her. What was she like, he wondered. How, so late in the game, would she take the news of her parentage, if Grace should ever, in some misguided, heart-to-heart moment, tell her of it.

And Lily, who had always wanted a girl, who had never really become reconciled to the loss of the one they had had—how would she receive the news that she was step-mother to a middle-aged daughter? John found himself laughing inwardly—it was a ridiculous, but somehow invigorating state of affairs.

The two waitresses called quits to their argument and one, shrugging her shoulders, sauntered up to John. Made reckless by his thoughts he ordered a hot-dog and a plate of chocolate ice-cream. As he ate with guilty delight, knowing he would afterwards suffer hideously from indigestion, he saw Arthur Herendeen in the mirror. Their glances met and John raised his hand in pleased greeting. But Arthur, as if he hadn't seen, abruptly turned away and plunged back into one of the store's rat-runs, disappearing from view.

Queer, that. John could have sworn that Arthur had recognized him, but of course he couldn't have or he would certainly have come over. Arthur was one of the few people in Leicester he enjoyed talking to and he had always believed that Arthur felt the same way. Disappointed, he went back to his snack, but the joy he had had in it was gone somehow, and he left it unfinished. Perhaps he'd see him getting the mail.

When he went back to the Post Office the window was open and from behind the grill Honey Potts was talking to Cora's hus-

band, William. Little groups of chatters stood about here and there but Arthur wasn't to be seen. William turned away from Honey, nodded at John in an abstracted way and, without stopping to speak as he usually did, left the Post Office.

People were behaving damned oddly this morning, John thought, dialing the lock of his mailbox. Taking out the mail he saw with pleasure that, besides the usual quota of ads and bills, there were, for a wonder, two letters. One had a Connecticut postmark—that would be from Olive, the wife of their older son, Johnny. The other was from Charles, the younger boy who was doing his stint in the Army. Quite a haul for one day.

John said hello to Pierre who was at the wheel of Preston Harrower's ancient Rolls Royce and got back into his own car. He tore open the letter from Olive.

"Dear Mother and Father Dewhurst," it began.

John winced; he wished Olive would think of something else to call Lily and him. But Olive was implacable about accepting the mores of her social group. This was how you addressed your in-laws: it showed respect and at the same time relegated them firmly to the shelf. Olive was prepared to love Johnny's parents but the Dewhursts knew they mustn't get any notions about being regarded as equals.

"First of all I must apologize for not writing. You must be longing for news of your son who of course would rather die than write, the bad boy. In any event, he has absolutely no time, poor darling, as Daddy keeps his nose to the grindstone at the office and when he gets home his loving bride has him so busy helping around the house that he has absolutely no time at all. Really, it is very wicked of me, isn't it, I know what you must be thinking—that I am a very selfish wife to your precious son. (Daddy says, by the way, that he's very pleased with him—I think he was secretly nervous about having a son-in-law in the business but it's all working out wonderfully, as I knew it would!)

"And now for some very exciting news! I didn't want to write until I was quite sure and now I am. Johnny and I are

going to have a baby sometime next February. Isn't it thrilling? You know, I've been pestering poor St. Joseph for this for ever so long now—I was getting quite provoked with him but he's finally heard my prayer! Aren't you two just thrilled at the thought of being grandparents? I think Johnny has grown another inch since I told him the news, he's pleased as Punch and absolutely sure—as I am—that it will be a boy. But of course we must be happy with whatever God sends us—”

John finished the letter, folded it neatly and put it back in its envelope. If God and St. Joseph knew what was good for them, he thought, they'd certainly see to it that Olive produced a boy. Otherwise they could expect reprisals, for Olive demanded a good deal of service from Heaven in return for strict adherence to the rules and regulations of Catholicism.

How happy Lily would be about this news! Or, at least, he supposed so.

I'm getting grandchildren from all sides, he thought. How surprised Olive would be if she knew that her baby won't be my first grandchild. A pity he couldn't tell her. It would be pleasant to take some of the wind out of her sails. Two grandchildren. No, more, by God—he realized it suddenly—there were David's brothers and sisters. They were his grandchildren too. Feeling both amused and more than a bit shaken, he opened the letter from Charles.

It was short. Charles was getting some leave, he said, and would like to spend a week or two in Leicester. He would let them know later when he'd arrive.

This was good news. Charles was, John suspected, Lily's favorite. He wagered she'd be more cheered by the thought of his arrival than she would at the news of the coming grandchild. He'd just stop by at the church and let her read the letters. He started the car and drove up the hill toward the church but halfway there he changed his mind. He'd keep the letters: it would give them something more to talk about at dinner time.

In the enthusiastically decorated basement of Leicester's small marble church, the moment was approaching for the annual Fair to open its doors. Behind the tables of food, of handiwork, of white elephants, the ladies of the parish braced themselves for the initial attack of customers, which experience told them would be a vigorous one. The first wave made, as always, for the baked goods table like storm-troopers bent on taking a hydro-electric installation. Successive assaults made deep and efficient inroads on the wares for sale.

By a quarter of two the cheaper things—rolls and muffins—had disappeared. By two o'clock most of the cakes and pies were gone. Lily and Mrs. Greeff, the undertaker's wife, had very little left to dispose of beyond a few dozen wizened brownies, a large pale casserole of macaroni and cheese, which made Lily feel fat just looking at it, and some fudge that seemed to have lost its bloom. As customers came up, sniffed around disappointedly, and went off again without buying, the ladies, both of whose faces were flushed with the heat of the day and the rush of selling, had a chance to slack off, slump back for a restful moment against the wall behind them.

Lily got out a scented handkerchief and lightly mopped her temples with it.

"Do you think if we wrapped a few pieces of this fudge in paper and sold it for a nickel—" she suggested after this respite. "I can't think what ever happened to it. It looks so dull. Who brought it anyway? Are we sure it wasn't left over from last year?" She laughed merrily.

Mrs. Greeff's red face became a little deeper in tone. "I never *was* much of a hand at fudge," she said apologetically. "Don't know what got into me to make it anyways. But it did seem like nobody was making any this year and it don't seem right somehow not to have a nice spread of fudge on the table, so last night

after I got done fixing up Eph Shaw over the mountain there—ayuh, he passed away yesterday, real sudden—I come home and thought I'd just cook up a batch, kinda take my mind off things. Well, the danged stuff just wouldn't harden so I scraped the whole mess back into the pot and boiled it up again. Seemed a shame to waste all that butter and sugar but I guess I should have throwed it right out in the garbage."

During this explanation Lily had kept repeating, "Oh, dear, I'm so sorry," and "Of course I know you're a wonderful cook," and "I didn't mean—" and, all in all, was feeling extremely upset and provoked with herself for having hurt poor, sweet Mrs. Greeff's feelings and for having fallen into the trap that lies in wait for all who work at such community projects—losing sight of the fact that everything there originated in some neighbor's kitchen, work-room or closet, and hence lay close to someone's heart. Lily wasn't usually, she hoped, so thoughtless; her mind must be wandering.

"I'm sure it tastes delicious," she insisted. "I do loathe food that looks as if it's posing for its picture. Do you suppose I might have a piece?" Mollified, Mrs. Greeff handed her the box.

"You won't like it," she prophesied gloomily.

Bravely chewing the hard and grainy lump of candy, and assuming an expression of gourmetish bliss, Lily couldn't help glancing, fascinated, at Mrs. Greeff's hands, picturing them manipulating the dead features of Eph Shaw, the dean of the town drunks, trimming that wild and filthy beard, then the moment after, so to speak, cutting squares of fudge for the mouths of children. Slightly nauseated, she swallowed.

"It's heavenly," she lied. "It certainly goes to show you can't judge by—. I mean, don't you think sometimes, the most delicious looking things can be perfectly tasteless?"

She and Mrs. Greeff began wrapping up bits of the loathsome fudge into little twists of waxed paper, stopping every now and then to make a small sale. Across the floor through the aimlessly milling crowds of women and children Lily could see Jayne Herenden presiding over the handiwork table.

Would Arthur be stopping in—to make sure Jayne didn't "overdo" or to admire her as she worked for the good of others?

"Sure seems like I made enough of this darn stuff." Mrs. Greeff sucked some chocolate off her fingers, then went back to doling out more squares into the pieces of paper that Lily was preparing. "Next year I think I'll try something else, walnut fondants, maybe? Real dainty, they are."

Some children now came along scenting a bargain. Mrs. Greeff and Lily relieved them of their nickels and they went off to spread the news.

"It does seem a shame to take their money, poor little things, don't it, Mrs. Dewhurst? A nice Hershey bar, now, they'd be getting their money's worth."

"Don't forget it's in a good cause." Lily spoke absently. The thought of seeing Arthur was making her nervous and she kept looking over her shoulder at the door to the basement.

"Well, let's hope we can get rid of it before them kids find out how nasty it tastes!" Two more children came up sucking popsicles and tendering wet, sticky nickels. The ladies were able to sell them the rest of the fudge.

"I don't hardly feel right, cheating the kids this way," Mrs. Greeff moaned.

Goodness, thought Lily, what a lot of reassuring she needs! I must have cut her to the quick. "Nonsense," she said briskly, rubbing at the children's coins with a paper napkin, trying to remove some of the stickiness. "The little beasts are getting far more than they deserve, dripping ice-cream all over everything. You know how reluctant they are to part with a penny. They know a good thing when they see it."

There would be a good deal of throwing up during the night among the small fry of Leicester, Lily thought.

The two ladies stood idly for a time, their wares pretty well exhausted, observing the customers who swam slowly past, like fish in an aquarium, passing and repassing, nibbling at the tables, smelling out things to buy that wouldn't be too hard on either pocketbook or aesthetic sense. Fashionable summer people in sim-

ple linen dresses brushed shoulders with worn-out women down for the day from desolate hill farms, wearing babies slung over their shoulders and absently cutting with the sides of their palms at the heads of whining youngsters who tugged at their skirts. It was a red-letter day in Leicester.

"I do love the Fair, don't you, Mrs. Greeff?"

"Why don't you go take a look around, Mrs. Dewhurst? I'll mind the store, here. Nothing much more to sell anyway, now."

Lily gave Mrs. Greeff a grateful smile. "Thanks, I'd like to. I won't be long. I'm dying to see what they've got at the white elephant table."

Taking off her apron, Lily joined the lethargic crowd circling endlessly from booth to booth. Here in the basement of the church, very little air stirred, although the windows were open. Old Grace Hunter was serving behind the white elephant table and as Lily approached she could hear, above the steady hum of talk and the cries of young children, the relentless, business-like grinding of her teeth.

Seeing Lily she waved. "Darling," she said. The word came out indistinctly, drowned in the surplus saliva generated by her ceaseless dental activity. She had to stop and swallow before she continued. Her old, heroically corseted body was encased in a tight pink dress more appropriate for a country-club porch than for waiting behind a counter at a church fair.

"I've been longing to see you," she said. Extending a bare arm from which the pale, mushroom flesh of age hung draped in scallops, she laid it on the shoulder of the younger woman who stood pensively beside her. "I've been wanting you to meet my daughter, Joan, Mrs. Canfield. Joan dear, this is Lily Dewhurst."

Lily leaned across the counter and shook hands while Mrs. Hunter happily resumed her mad grinding. Mrs. Canfield was, Lily supposed, about forty. She and her mother had the same heart-shaped face, dark eyes and high arching brows, but it was evident that in Mrs. Canfield a different spirit prevailed. Reacting perhaps, as daughters sometimes do, from her mother's frivolity,

she had let her hair go gray and wore it pulled back and piled in a rather messy bun at the back of her neck. She looked nice, though, thought Lily; she was more than just pretty: her face was beginning to show those gentle lines that indicate both humor and sadness. She wore no perceptible makeup. Inside an aggressively plain shirtwaist-dress she was beginning to run tranquilly to fat.

What a contrast she made to her mother! Mrs. Hunter, it seemed to Lily, no longer looked real at all but like a rather ghastly doll built up skillfully, layer by layer, out of papier maché. Her true face could only be conjectured at, so deep was it buried in cosmetics, but the milky brown eyes still peered out gaily and wickedly from their black-rimmed sockets. Was she a terrible embarrassment to her conservative daughter?

"Is it your first visit to Leicester, Mrs. Canfield?"

Grace Hunter's old eyes sharpened with malice and she nodded her red dyed head, vigorously confirming this fact. Mrs. Canfield looked apologetic. "I'm afraid so," she admitted. "My husband is a great sailor—I can't get him away from the shore in the summer. The children too. There's so much for them to do there. And we do see Mother in the winter-time." She smiled at Lily.

Mrs. Hunter unclenched her jaws and burst into speech. "Oh, the children, the children," she jeered. "It's all you ever think about, Joan. When I was a child nobody catered to *me*, I'll tell you. I was supposed to find my own amusement wherever my parents chose to take me." She gave a bawdy cackle. "No time ever hung heavy on *my* hands. I managed to keep myself entertained, beach or no beach. The truth is, Lily, she thinks her poor old mother will be a bad influence on her precious children!"

Mrs. Canfield closed her eyes as if in prayer.

"What treasures have you here," asked Lily, nervously beginning to paw through the surrealist jumble of strange objects on the long table. Beaded bags with bald patches slouched against jelly jars, a kewpie doll lay swaddled in an ancient sealskin muff, and from the ironstone pot-de-chambre that showed up yearly ostrich plumes grew, molting and dusty.

Punctuating the action with a tooth-shattering grind, Mrs. Hunter extracted a long string of pearls from a welter of costume jewelry, broken and tarnished, and held them up admiringly to her blighted neck, inviting Lily's approval.

Little love seemed to be lost between mother and daughter. Was it always so, Lily wondered mournfully. She and her own mother had never hit it off. If Rose, her baby, had lived, would they too have grown apart? If Rose had lived would she too have disapproved of her mother, been irritated by her attitudes as Mrs. Canfield so obviously was by *her* mother's? There was no pleasing daughters, it seemed. If you were conventional you bored them; if you were not you embarrassed them—they were ashamed of you. There was a great deal to be said for being an orphan, come right down to it, though of course she and her sons had always got along perfectly well. Boys, being by nature biased in favor of females, were able, perhaps, to take their mothers less personally than girls.

It all served to remind her that it was getting to be time for her to pay a visit to Pleasant Trees again.

"Did you see this?" Joan Canfield held up to Lily's gaze a pale gray shawl. "It's lovely wool—pure cashmere—so nice and warm, like new really." She stroked it admiringly. You could see it embodied all the virtues she stood for—quality, worth, unobtrusiveness.

"Don't be a fool, Joan," Mrs. Hunter advised, unclamping her teeth. "Lily wouldn't be seen dead in that."

"It is lovely." Embarrassed, confused, Lily patted the shawl. It *did* seem rather elderly, but probably that made it specially desirable to Mrs. Canfield, who, it was evident, was taking to middle-age as to a lover she had spent her life waiting for. Everyone, it seemed, had a time of life where she was most comfortable.

"But gray," she said, shaking her head ruefully. "It's not my best color nowadays. It matches my face too well." She and Mrs. Canfield smiled at each other.

Out of the corner of her eye Lily saw Arthur Herendeen stand-

ing near the basement entrance, looking about. For Jayne, she told herself firmly, not for her. Hastily she snatched up a little bundle of fruit knives.

"How sweet these are," she murmured. "May I have them?" Opening her pocketbook, she handed some money to Mrs. Hunter.

"Now, that's what I call a real buy, Lily dear. Do you see, Joan, Lily has an eye, I've always said so. Just have them resilvered and there you are—if you don't want to keep them yourself, you've got a nice, cheap wedding present!"

"Perhaps I can give them to Johnny and Olive for their anniversary," said Lily feigning enthusiasm, wishing Mrs. Hunter's arthritic hands would hurry with the wrapping. "Please don't bother to tie them up, I can just put them in my bag."

"How is John feeling?" asked Mrs. Hunter, paying no attention. Her stiff, twig-like fingers, impeded further by red nails shaped like garden trowels and almost as long, went on unconcernedly fumbling with the string under Lily's impatient eyes.

"Very well, thank you. You and your daughter must come by for a drink with us very soon. I'll call you."

"Joan's leaving at the end of the week," said Mrs. Hunter firmly. "If she'd told me a little ahead of time that she was coming I'd have arranged some parties for her, but no—after years of refusing to come at all, she suddenly appears with only one day's notice."

"Mother, you know I don't want to be entertained."

"I tell you what, why don't you and John come for cocktails on Saturday. Two of Joan's children are coming up to drive her back home—Claire and young David. It will be most amusing!"

Abstractedly, her mind on what Arthur was doing across the floor, Lily wondered how the presence of one's grandchildren would add to the amusingness of a cocktail party. She would have thought it was the other way around. To get away she said, "That sounds very pleasant, we'd love to. Around five or so?" Putting her hand out she gently tugged the clumsily tied package out of Mrs. Hunter's hands and dropped it in her purse.

The crowds were abating a little as the pickings of the Fair

dwindled. Turning away from the white elephants Lily, as if idly, glanced over toward the gift-and-handiwork booth. Jayne Herenden, if she were still there, was hidden behind a sort of setpiece on which aprons of varying degrees of hideousness and utility flaunted themselves. In front of it a cluster of heads broke apart and Lily saw Arthur, his back to her.

Torn suddenly between desire and panic at the thought of speaking to him, she came to a stop at the Christmas booth. Here she bought some ribbon and a few Christmas cards. By the time Christmas came she would undoubtedly have either mislaid them or forgotten about them completely but buying them now gave her a feeling of forehandedness and efficiency which she enjoyed. Opening up one of the cards she read the message inside. "May the blessed Yuletide Season take Peace and Joy from Our House to Yours," it wished the recipient. Frowning slightly, she continued on her calculated way toward Arthur, repeating these cryptic words to herself. The more she thought about them, the more obscure they became.

A tug on her skirt stopped her in her stroll. It was Cora's little girl, Cathy. She wore a fillet of wilting pansies and ground-pine around her straight-hanging yellow hair and, suspended from her neck by a ribbon, she carried a basket of flowers.

"Buy a nosegay, Mrs. Dewhurst? It's for the Girl Scouts."

Lily stopped and smiled down at the child. Digging in her purse for a quarter she wondered where Cathy had picked up that sweet, old-fashioned word. So much nicer, she thought, than corsage, which made you think of caterers and gilt chairs, or even bouquet, which so often involved all the tricky business of flower-arranging. Nosegay had a light-hearted, spur-of-the-moment sound. She chose one of daisies and cornflowers and tucked it in the neck of her dress.

In the pure, uncompromising light of a northern afternoon that came slanting through the ground-level windows, the church basement was now seen to be a good deal the worse for wear. Decorations were coming askew; the gay crepe-paper hangings and

table covers over which the ladies had labored lovingly were beginning to attract the attention of bored children who could be observed here and there happily absorbed in tearing and shredding. Faces were shiny, debris was collecting under foot, and at all the tables prices were being reduced.

Mrs. Greeff sold her last half-dozen brownies for ten cents, a real crime it was too, and pressed on a passing urchin some broken bits of fudge. She began neatening up, sweeping the crumbs off the table and piling up the plates to be returned to their owners. She counted up the receipts in the old cigar-box and found they had made almost fifty dollars. It didn't hardly seem possible but summer folks always did go for home-made stuff, no matter who had made it. Some of the kitchens those fancy-looking pies and cakes had come from she'd rather not think about. Well, Mrs. Dewhurst would be pleased. They'd done better than last year.

She bought herself a bottle of coke and sank down with a slight groan on a nearby chair. Her varicose veins were acting up again, it didn't do them no good, all this standing around. She'd be glad to get home. Thank the Lord she and Elmer were having a quiet spell. Nothing new was coming up that she knew of. Still, you never could tell. Sucking at the icy coke through two straws she looked around, her kind eyes flicking professionally here and there among the crowd, trying to spot potential customers. She'd long ago given up thinking she could smell death, or guess where it would strike. Death was a sly fox and she'd never had any luck reading his intentions. But she never could help trying, never could help wondering to herself, when she saw a crowd of folks like this, who'd be the next one to come under her hands. Her wandering glance fell on Harold Nash.

Seemed queer he and his sister would care to be seen out in a public place so soon after his wife's death, but there was no accounting for the way summer people behaved. Maybe being in a church made it seem all right to them. Mr. Nash looked mighty spruce, considering. She'd have sworn for the past few years that he'd go off any moment, but here he was still, chipper as you please. Well, chipper wasn't maybe the word exactly—but he still

was here and that was more than you could say of his poor wife. He must be quite a care for that sister of his.

She'd heard from Charmane Stops who kept the boarding-house ("Stop with the Stops") where the Nashes had been living that Miss Nash sounded pretty sharp with her brother sometimes.

Yes, he must be quite a trial to the poor lady. Being a spinster and all she couldn't be too used to menfolks. Menfolks could be real mean sometimes, even when they had their health. Well, she thought, somebody'll have to take care of Mr. Nash for quite a while, more likely than not; the doctors are getting real smart about keeping folks alive, invalids especially. She'd bet Mr. Nash took about a dozen different fancy drugs every day to keep himself going. Now in the old days, in his condition—so frail and all—he'd get a nice little case of pneumonia, and phfft, off he'd go in two, three days, as neat and tidy as you please and no trouble for anyone. Seemed a pity, if you asked her, that the doctors couldn't leave well enough alone any more.

There now, poor Mrs. Dewhurst had run right smack into them!

At the gift table Jayne Herendeen rearranged her shrinking stock. Articles formerly hidden below were beginning to rise to the surface as the top layer was sold off. She unearthed an infant's sweater, knitted with loving care in a mustard colored wool. She spread it out so that it was clearly visible.

"Can you imagine anyone picking a color like that for a baby?" she said to Mrs. Harfield, her cleaning woman, whom she had commandeered to work with her. She peered at the price. "Thirty-five! Who in the world priced this? Heavens, no one in her right mind is ever going to pay that for it!" She picked up a pencil and briskly crossed out the three, putting a one in its place.

Mrs. Harfield, whose sister had contributed the sweater, frowned. "Mrs. Herendeen, the wool alone cost more than that," she objected.

"There's Lily," said Jayne to Arthur who was looking in fascination at a green felt tea-cozy trimmed with a mink tail. He put it

on his head and gingerly picked up a hand-mirror that someone had gone to enormous trouble encrusting with small sharp sea-shells. He gazed at himself, raising his upper lip in a sneer and pushing out his nostrils.

"Arthur!" giggled Jayne. "Take it off at once!"

"I like it," said Arthur. "It gives me that Karamazov feeling." He leered terribly at Mrs. Harfield who put her hand up to cover her mouth, where two front teeth were missing, and choked with laughter.

"My goodness, she does look her age these days!"

"Who?"

"Lily. I think she's coming over here. She certainly has got her eye on you, Arthur! No, Miss Nash has got hold of her!"

A very young, very pregnant girl wearing a pale blue taffeta maternity dress slowed down in front of the table and began eying the merchandise.

"Hello, Pearlene," said Mrs. Harfield. "How you feeling?" Jayne nudged her with her elbow and picked up the little sweater.

"Now, here's just the person this darling sweater has been waiting for! It certainly has her name on it, hasn't it, Mrs. Harfield?" Jayne snickered and the girl looked up shyly.

"You really think so?" she said. "It's pretty, all right. Unusual." She fingered the soft wool. "But I was thinking maybe pink or blue—"

"No, no," cried Jayne. "This color is the newest thing. Everyone has pink and blue. Your baby will look just darling in this."

"It's nice and practical, Pearlene," put in Mrs. Harfield. "Don't show the soil, like them pale colors. Besides, 'twill do for a boy or a girl."

The girl hesitated, then nodded, making up her mind. She opened her big white plastic bag. Jayne shot Arthur a triumphant look from her beautiful eyes.

"I have a lovely idea, why don't you and Harold come for dinner tonight?" Lily was saying to Miss Nash, cutting into one of

her strangely worded sentences. Arthur, she thought, would have disappeared completely if she had any more of these interruptions. An evening with Miss Nash and poor Harold was perhaps an expensive price to pay but not too high if she could get away from them now. "Of course, it's terribly short notice—" (With any luck they'd refuse.) She glanced from Miss Nash to Harold who was, she saw, staring at her bosom. Did he still have an interest in such things—even if only academic? Self-consciously she put up a hand and touched the nosegay.

"Well, now," said Miss Nash. "That sounds most agreeable, most agreeable indeed. *Doesn't it, Harold?* Mrs. Dewhurst is speaking in reference to coming to dinner tonight, dear." She gave her brother a sharp poke. He raised his eyes from Lily's bosom, inclined his head and gave his polite smile. Lily, stepping around them, touched Miss Nash's shoulder to soften her hasty departure. "Around seven-thirty?"

It would be a trying evening, she realized. She and Harold had never been too fond of each other and she suspected that he had it in for her over that business of not buying the expensive coffin he'd wanted for Medusa. She hoped John would take over the burden of the conversation and not fall into one of his silent moods. Perhaps she could start him off on the old days again, she thought meanly. She wondered if she could get Betty to come too. There was all that chicken in the freezer.

Arthur was still, she saw with relief, at Jayne's table talking to Mrs. Harfield. What in the world was that green thing he had on his head? It looked like a tea-cozy. Jayne, her thick, short curls bent at a saint-like angle, was busy with another customer. Lily hurried her steps.

"Arthur, what a smart hat!" Her voice sounded silly in her ears—breathy and artificial. How ridiculous it was to feel this way. Arthur turned around. He grinned at her with some embarrassment—his tough boy's grin.

"Makes me look distinguished, doesn't it?" He looked away from her quickly and fell to admiring himself again in the sea-

shell mirror, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips in a not very successful attempt to imitate Preston Harrower or Pierre, you couldn't quite tell which. "I think I'll paint myself in it. Portrait of the Artist in a Tea-cozy. Like Van Gogh with his bandaged ear. The madness of genius, know what I mean? I'll be famous." Lily was afraid her approach had made him nervous.

Behind the counter Mrs. Harfield, her hand again held up like a shield in front of her depleted teeth, rocked in helpless laughter.

"They'll do a piece on you in Vogue or Harpers Bazaar," said Lily. "Something classy called the New Eccentrics."

Arthur threw down the mirror suddenly as if it had bitten him and raised a finger which he pressed anxiously. A drop of blood appeared and he sucked at it. "Damn thing cut me," he said ag-grievedly.

Mrs. Harfield, managing to control her mirth, said, "Don't forget, now, Mr. Herendeen, you owe me two dollars."

"What!" Arthur cried, outraged.

"All that mink, it's a bargain." Snickering again, her upper lip folded in under her front teeth, Mrs. Harfield pointed to his head.

He took off the tea-cozy, held it out and observed it from all angles. "What do you think, Lily? Should I take it or should I shop around first?"

"Oh, take it by all means," Lily laughed. "You'll never regret it. It's a hat you can wear with everything."

He looked innocently over at Jayne, who was still busy. "Have you been over to Georgetown to see your mother lately," he mumbled.

Lily shook her head. "I might be going on Friday." She felt herself beginning to blush and lowered her eyes.

"Want to lunch," he said out of the side of his mouth. "Around twelve?"

It seemed quite natural somehow that he should have changed his mind about their meeting again even though she hadn't dared to think too much about the possibility. Her heart beating faster, she cast her mind forward, tearing through the pages of her en-

agement book. There was something else she had planned to do on Friday but she couldn't remember now what it was. She was sure it couldn't be anything very important. She could certainly rearrange things so as to be able to meet Arthur.

She picked up the tea-cozy, remembering Jayne so nearby, and looked at it consideringly. "Nice," she murmured, nodding her head.

Arthur turned his back to the table and to Jayne and muttered, "You know that place on Mount Nestor, what in hell is its name?"

"The Wooing Frog?"

"Around twelve, okay?"

"Hello, Lily, dear," said Jayne pushing a messily-wrapped package at her customer and turning to Lily. "Now what are you whispering about to my husband?"

"Jayne dear, how do you manage to stay so beautiful and cool-looking," Lily cried, waving Jayne's favorite red herring in front of her nose. "This heat is destroying me. I think another year I'll suggest selling whiffs of oxygen." Clutching her purchases, she made a little play of fanning herself with her handkerchief.

"You do look awfully red," said Jayne with an elaborately sympathetic look. "I guess I don't feel the heat as much as some." She giggled. "I remember how my poor mother used to suffer when she was around your time of life. She used to just drip with perspiration!"

Stamping on an impulse to throw all her bundles as hard as she could into Jayne's face, Lily summoned up a vague, ladylike smile. Well, one thing. Jayne's bitchiness helped to ease any guilt feelings she might find herself suffering from. No matter what Arthur might think, Jayne deserved all that was coming to her.

"What mad thing can you sell me, Jayne," she said lightly. "Where are all those needlepoint fly-swatters I saw? Or the pot-holders with sequins?" She picked up the shell-encrusted mirror. "Do you know, I don't think I can resist this."

"A lot of work on that," Mrs. Harfield approved. "Every one of them shells glued on separate—must have taken dog's years!

Don't see how folks have the patience! Still, they should have left off somewheres so you could pick it up without cutting yourself. Kind of got carried away, they did, I guess." She wrapped it in several sheets of tissue paper and handed it to Lily who then turned to go.

Smiling goodbye at the two Herendeens, her foot slipped in something and she looked down. An ice-cream cone lay smashed under her shoe, spilling out its strawberry insides in a pink mess.

Betty Levering had dropped in at the Fair as she did every year to buy her Christmas cards. They were cheaper here than you could find them later and since the whole business of Christmas was silly anyhow there was certainly no use spending any more money on it than you could help. Also this was a comparatively painless way of helping to support the church. Betty approved wholeheartedly of the church—for others, of course, not for herself. She needed none of that mumbo-jumbo.

Waiting amongst the crowd in front of the booth for her turn to buy, looking about at the busy scene, she saw the small encounter between Lily and Arthur at the gift table. She stared inquisitively, her artist's eye automatically analyzing what she saw. There was something about Lily's figure, something about the way she stood as she looked up at Arthur. In her mind, Betty rapidly sketched the lines Lily's body had fallen into. Damn it, now she was moving. It was gone. But it had been there, all right, she was sure. You couldn't fool her on a thing like that—the way a woman stands when she's with someone she's attracted to, in love with. A sort of openness.

Well, thought Betty, I'll be damned! So the irreproachable Mrs. Dewhurst is human, like everybody else! An invigorating glow of spite brightened her slightly protruding eyes and she took a deep, happy breath. But imagine picking Arthur Herendeen! Aside from the fact that, behind that proletarian front he put on, he was equipped with the most formidable set of middle-class morals that she, Betty, had ever attempted to break down, there was the fact

of Jayne. Poor Lily! Unless she was very much mistaken Lily stood absolutely no chance at all. Arthur, crypto-bourgeois that he was, was one of the most utterly married men she had ever known. For not only was he still dazzled at finding himself married to a real beauty (Betty suspected that when it came to women Arthur still thought of himself as the plainish young man he had been, forgetting the passage of the years and what it had done for him) there was also Jayne's strange resemblance to Medusa, with whom he had been for so long in love. Betty was sure that in possessing Jayne Arthur was able to kid himself that he also possessed Medusa. It was a formidable combination all right and one that made it easy for Arthur to overlook his wife's faults. In addition, there was Jayne's misfortune. The frightful operation, though it had removed one of her main charms, had also endowed her with the halo of suffering.

No, Betty didn't envy Lily.

The crush in front of the Christmas cards let up a little and she was able, by leaning her weight on a little old lady, to maneuver herself into a position to buy two assorted boxes. Seeing Lily sauntering across the floor she made off to intercept her, all her antennae out.

Lily turned around when she felt the hand on her shoulder. She smiled happily at Betty.

"How lucky to find you here," she cried. "Do you know I was going right home to telephone you. I need your help terribly."

Startled, Betty ransacked Lily's face. Was it possible Lily wanted her for a confidante? It was a stimulating thought. Well, at least Lily knew enough to come to an expert.

"I don't know what got into me," Lily chattered on. "I've just done something ghastly. I've asked Harold and his sister to come for dinner tonight. John will die. Please say you'll come and help us out. Otherwise I shall cut my throat. Please, Betty, be a true friend."

Betty eyed her suspiciously. She did sound over-excited, she thought. She wouldn't ordinarily carry on this way about a small

matter like having the Nashes for dinner. Betty hesitated. She had other plans for this evening, but it might be fun to go to Lily's, see what she could pick up. She could put Lee-roy off till later.

"Lord, Lily, I don't see how I can. I've got another date." She flung back her mane of red hair pettishly. She wasn't going to have people think she was always available at the last minute. "I don't see how I can break it at this point. Oh, hell, all right, I will." Betty grinned.

"Bless you," said Lily. "Around seven-thirty—or come earlier, we'll have a preliminary drink."

CHAPTER

13

Stomping heavily in her Mexican sandals up the steps from the church basement, Betty wondered what to do now. It was too early to go home and get dressed for dinner, too late to go back to work. Besides, she had done a fair stint today. She always hated this time in the afternoon, this empty, waiting time before the onset of evening. It was still too soon to have a drink—at least by herself—and most of the people she knew would be messing around their kitchens, throwing things together for their families' dinners, or napping, reading, resting themselves while somebody else did it for them. A poor time to drop in.

Out of the pocket of her blue denim dress she took a mangled package of cigarettes and stood still to light one. Sucking in the smoke she spread her fingers and let the still burning match fall to the ground. Here and there under the tall elms groups of women were standing about chatting, laughing, showing each other their purchases. Yak, yak, she thought sourly. There was no one she wanted to talk to in sight. Kicking aside the punched-in dixie cups and the scraps of colored paper that littered the church lawn, she strong-armed her way through a gang of children pushing and shoving around a grab-bag and made for where she had parked her car on the other side of Main Street. She wished she were the napping type. It must be a good way to pass the time, to say nothing of doing so much for your looks. Sleep that knits up the ravelled skin under your eyes, she thought, I could certainly use a little more of that.

But the hell with how she looked! After a decent day's work it was excitement, stimulation she needed, not to lie around like some parasite. She was too restless by nature to stretch out on her bed at this hour—unless, of course, someone was sharing it with her. A little nap *à deux* would be a different thing. Betty's eyes brightened at the thought.

But who was available at this time of the afternoon? Lee-roy

worked late into the evening these long summer days and, time or no time, who else was there? What with the prevalence of fairies, pickings were small in this part of the world and, let's face it, getting smaller as she grew older. She ought to get the hell out, she told herself, sell her house, go some place else. But she was too damn lazy to start afresh; this was her home, like it or not. She took a final drag on her cigarette and snapped it into some shrubbery, frowning.

She wasn't the kind to go around worrying about the future as a rule but still she couldn't help looking ahead sometimes and wondering where her next man was coming from. For quite a while now there had only been Lee-roy that she could count on and, outside of bed, he wasn't too satisfactory. Since he had, for social reasons, to be kept under cover, he was no use to her as an escort. To tell the truth she wasn't any too proud of herself over her association with him. Not only was he illiterate, he must also be twenty years younger than she. Well, all right, more. First thing you know, you old tart, she told herself, waiting for a car to pass before she crossed the street, you'll be hanging around the school yard at recess time.

Even transients couldn't be counted on any more to tide things over. The sad fact was that men didn't seem to hold out as long as women. Oh, it wasn't that they didn't find her attractive still. They still gave her the eye but when it came down to brass tacks most of them didn't seem to have the energy for anything but tamely going home with their wives. And the ones who were more enterprising weren't always up to it any more. She'd had a couple of nasty experiences lately with old goats whose eyes were bigger than their — . . .

Grinning, she opened the door of her convertible and got in. Maybe she'd just better go home, take a tranquilizer, put her feet up with a magazine, and sweat it out.

A station wagon coming up fast behind her jammed on its brakes and came to a stop parallel to her, its tires screaming.

"Betty!" Cora's voice sang. "How are you, darling?" She leaned

across the front seat where her youngest child, little Teresa, sat beside her, slapping at her lower lip with flaccid fingers and blowing big, wet birds. "Come up and have a drink with me, I've had the most frightful time. I've been with the vet, my dear, all afternoon."

"The vet? What on earth for?" It was not like Cora to have any truck with veterinarians.

"Oh, it was too ghastly," trilled Cora. "My poor darling Sheila, she's lost all her babies, the poor angel. Such a brave thing, she was. We heard her groaning all night, we knew she was near her time of course, but nothing happened and this morning she just lay there heaving, my dear, as if she were going to die. Finally at lunch time William said he simply couldn't stand it any longer, I'd just have to take her to Dr. Pound."

"She okay now?" Betty dimly remembered Sheila as one of the many large beasts that roved about Cora's place. A black, morose Labrador retriever she was, always knocking into things, clumsy as a spastic.

People in the two or three cars that had had to come to a stop behind Cora's now became restive and began lightly touching their horn buttons.

"Balls, dear," cried Cora, throwing an irritable glance behind her. "I'll have to move. Come up, won't you, pet? I'm dying, but dying, for a drink and a swim."

More or less comfortably seated in faded and perilously ragged canvas deck chairs at one end of Cora's swimming pool, the two ladies began on their drinks. Under a maple tree nearby sat old Mrs. Brown, Cora's mother, in her wheelchair, holding up to thick glasses a bit of grimy crochet—probably, thought Betty, one of those messy little mats people used to put under vases. Cora had changed into an aged cotton bathing suit but Betty had declined the loan of one. Now, looking at the water, she was glad she had. It was even filthier than it had been the day Pierre had fallen into it.

"For God's sake, Cora," she said, "why don't you get the children to clean the pool? You'll all be getting polio."

"Nonsense, darling," said Cora briskly. "We've had shots. Anyway, don't you know standing water is much more germ-free than any other kind? The sun kills all the bacteria, you know. I remember Lily's brother telling me—*such* a load off my mind!"

"Well, I'd hate to get a mouthful of what's in there, germs or no germs. It looks more like a swamp than a swimming pool." Patches of green slime drifted about sluggishly increasing themselves and the dead bodies of half a summer's insects clustered together in a chain of islands. Eying the scene with disgust, Betty gulped down a cool mouthful of Scotch and water.

"When I was a girl it wasn't considered proper to be seen drinking whisky," remarked Mrs. Brown in her flat voice. "A little sherry now and then or a glass of champagne on a very special occasion. Only bad women drank whisky."

"Do shut up, Mother," Cora flung the words over her shoulder. "I want to talk to Betty."

Betty again congratulated herself on her own mother's untimely death. That was what they'd called it, at least. Actually, she thought, it was very timely: to die when you were still lively, before you had become a nuisance to everyone—what could be better? She hoped it happened that way to her—but not yet, of course! Only the young ever really wanted to die, when you came right down to it, she admitted glumly. The old kept talking about it in a self-pitying way but you practically never caught an old person committing suicide, she'd noticed. Certainly old Mrs. Brown seemed quite determined to hang on and make her presence felt as long as possible. Cora was a real saint, Betty told herself. If she had the old bitch on *her* hands she'd boil up some toadstools and slip her the juice in her goddamn sherry.

"What did the vet say about Sheila?" she asked Cora. "Is she going to be okay?"

"He's such a stupid man," said Cora. "Imagine, he insists on spaying her, the poor darling. He says she's had too many litters

and is worn out. Of course that is the most utter balls. 'Dear Dr. Pound,' I said, 'surely Mother Nature knows best about these things.' But he refused to discuss it; just said Sheila would die if she had another litter and as it is, it is still touch and go. Oh, I am so provoked. You know it is against all my principles!"

"Well," said Betty. "You could always let her die in that case."

"Betty! How can you be so completely heartless? Really, you do shock me sometimes. You know how I adore Sheila."

"One less animal around here would never be missed," observed Mrs. Brown, seizing this opportunity to line up with her daughter's opposition.

"Now, that's quite enough, Mother. I won't have you saying a word against my beautiful pets." Cora's voice, so musical as a rule, for once sounded a little shrill. She put her drink down on the roughly cut grass and rose from the deck chair. "I'm sorry, but you've really made me quite cross." Walking around a lounging English setter with a sore place on his rump, she went over to the wheelchair and pushed it away from the swimming pool toward a sort of pen roughly enclosed with a few yards of sagging snow-fence. This was used as a run for little Teresa who might otherwise wander into the pool and drown. Cora dragged the loose end of the fence shut behind the old lady and secured it with a length of rope.

"Cora," said Betty with admiration in her voice, "you certainly are a strong character. You rule the roost with a rod of iron, don't you?"

"Darling, *somebody* has to, after all!" Cora sat down again and retrieved her dark brown highball.

Betty was silent. It was the first time she had ever heard Cora come near to admitting that it was she, and not William, who wore the pants in the household. Hitherto she had always given at least lip-service to the notion that her husband was in charge. She must be really upset. Could it all be on account of that silly old Labrador?

Cora took a long drink and sighed. "Really," she said, "it's too

exasperating! I am expected to do everything around here. I can't think, I literally can't think, what they'd all do if anything ever happened to me."

Betty, feeling that floodgates were about to open, continued to say nothing. It was a rare day when, in spite of having her share and more of misfortune, Cora intimated that all was not well in her tight little world.

"It would be such a relief to tell someone—" She cast speculative eyes at Betty. "Swear to me you'll never repeat this?"

"Cora, *darling*, of course not!" Betty promised eagerly, giving Cora a reproachful look. Good heavens, what was coming? Then, as Cora hesitated, sipping her drink, staring ahead of her, "What is it?" she urged.

"I hardly know how to tell you," said Cora finally. "It's so absurd—really utterly *unbelievable*, but utterly. . . . You know that little bit of goods who helps in the Post Office?"

"You mean Honey Potts?" Betty couldn't imagine what Honey had to do with Cora's trouble.

"Mm, hmm. Well, *darling*, you'll never credit this, never, it's sheerest farce," said Cora in her beautifully cultivated tones, "—absolutely *sheerest* farce, Betty, but my poor William's gone and knocked her up!"

"Good God!" said Betty, genuinely taken aback. For once she had not suspected the worst before hearing it. It was the most sensational piece of news she'd heard in ages. "I couldn't be more stunned!" She looked at Cora in honest amazement. "Why, that rascal!" she said, admiration creeping into her voice. She wouldn't have believed William had it in him any longer.

Cora got up and took Betty's glass and her own over to the warped wicker table where she sloshed in more whisky with a lavish hand. She added some ice and a token helping of water.

"How far is she gone?" asked Betty as Cora handed her back her glass. "Though of course any distance is too far."

"Only a couple of months, I believe," said Cora. "Naturally I told him she must get rid of it at once, there is no time to lose

ever in these things, I know a perfectly splendid man on Commonwealth Avenue, quite respectable. I can arrange the whole thing. He does something called a therapeutic abortion—right in the hospital, I believe, it couldn't be simpler. He's done practically all my friends at one time or another and is most reasonable, considering. But can you believe it, my dear, William said it was positively *out* of the question and he said what was more he couldn't credit my even suggesting such a thing when I was usually so understanding about everyone being allowed to have babies. Can you imagine his being so thoroughly mixed up? I certainly should have expected him to realize without having it pointed out that animals and people are *quite* different and what's sauce, so to speak, for one is certainly not sauce for the other. I can't think how he can get these things so utterly confused."

"What is the upshot?" Betty's eyes were bulging with interest.

Cora sighed. "My wretched William, I've never seen him in such a state. 'What ever were you thinking of, darling,' I said, 'not to have used some precautions?'"

"It does seem frightfully careless," said Betty, "especially for William who has no reason to think that babies are brought by the stork."

"Yes," said Cora with a certain complacency. "I have always become pregnant all too easily."

"It almost makes you think that Honey is hoping for marriage. Is that possible?"

"I believe so, but, as I told William, that of course is out of the question. 'My poor William,' I said, 'you can't be serious! You know I should never dream of consenting to a divorce.' You know my views, Betty, I am a firm believer in the sanctity of the home and the family. Besides, divorce is so frightfully middle-class, don't you agree? 'Fornicate all you like, darling,' I've always told William that, 'but let's not have *any* nonsense about divorce.' It's really all been a very great shock to me. I should never have believed it of William. I suppose the trouble is he's at the dangerous age. He keeps talking about 'love,' can you imagine?"

"Love!" Betty frowned as if to say, "What in the world is that?"

"Yes," said Cora. "He's really become quite soft in the head."

The two ladies sipped at their drinks, contemplating William's folly.

"Perhaps a psychiatrist—" Betty offered tentatively.

"Ridiculous," said Cora, to whom psychiatry was just one more silly fad that had nothing to do with real life at all. "What do they know about such things? All William needs to do is face up to the perfectly simple fact that I have five of his children and Honey the mercest embryo of one. Once he does that, he'll come to his senses."

Betty admired the sturdy logic behind this but wondered whether William was in a state to see it.

"I've even told him that if Honey refuses to have herself aborted I'll take her in here. She can come and stay with us—we can work things out somehow."

Betty said, "My God, Cora, what a terrible idea! You could none of you possibly stand it." She was beginning to feel very sorry for Honey, faced with the implacable Cora.

"How odd, that's just what William said. He got quite dramatic about it. Said it would end in some awful tragedy, I can't think why. It seems a very sensible solution to the problem—far better than breaking up a happy family. Besides," Cora's eyes grew dreamy, "it might be rather nice to have a tiny baby around again."

As Betty watched, half-repelled, half-fascinated, a look of bliss crept over Cora's face. Obviously Cora was thinking back on the joys of pregnancy, on all those perfectly heavenly labor pains and the divine, ecstatic moment of fulfillment when the baby at last pops out.

"Perhaps I could even deliver her!" she mused. "After all, goodness know I've had plenty of experience. The whole thing could be kept a perfect secret. No one need ever know the first thing about it." Cora's voice warmed with excitement.

"No, Cora, no! You're joking." But Betty could see it happen-

ing: poor little Honey fixed up like a cat in a bureau drawer somewhere in the back regions of the house, Cora bending over her urging her on to greater efforts, caroling encouragement— “Oh, that was a *fine* pain, Honey!”—and then, not too soon after the birth—for darling Honey must not of course be done completely out of the pleasures of having her milk come in and nursing her baby for a few days—Cora’s trip, sack in hand, down the familiar path to the icy brook below the house.

Betty shuddered. Could she really put it beyond Cora? She was a frighteningly ruthless woman.

“No, Cora,” she repeated. “This is a human being!”

“But, of course, Betty darling, what *do* you mean?” Cora’s handsome eyes were quite cloudless.

Betty took a deep breath and put her drink down on the grass. It no longer tasted good. I am letting my imagination run away with me, she thought.

But something seemed to have happened to the lovely summer afternoon. She no longer felt comfortable. There was a queer smell about, too, now she came to notice it, a smell of decay—from the ooze and rotting insects in the pool, probably, and the sky’s placid, insistent blueness was beginning to get on her nerves. High up in the branches of the nearby trees a nasty little breeze had started running about, as if spreading tales. She fished a broken wrist-watch out of her bosom and looked at it—it wasn’t too soon to leave.

Over in the enclosure made by the snow-fence old Mrs. Brown broke wind and the little idiot let out a shriek of laughter.

"Come talk to me while I have my bath." Lily, returning home in the late afternoon, paused in the doorway of John's study. After the various pleasures of the Fair she was feeling tired but far more kindly toward him—and indeed toward all the world—than she had this morning. Some of the side effects of guilt could sometimes be benign, she was discovering, sweetening your character more than a morning at church.

She spilled bath oil into the water and stepped gingerly over the edge of the tub, being careful not to slip, for this would be no time to break a leg. Submerging her body she laid her head back against the sloping end and breathed in the hot, sweet fumes that rose up around her. She extended her arms loosely and felt them float of themselves, sustained just beneath the surface of the water. Lying so, euphoria spread through her. How simple it was to be happy! How few things were needed! A little house to return to, a hot bath to lie in. I am cozy and old and catlike; how easily I am satisfied, she congratulated herself, letting her eyes drift shut, ungratefully pushing her devoted husband, her children, and the exciting business of Arthur to one side as of no real importance to her well-being.

John had two letters in his hand when he knocked and came in.

"Such steam," he said, taking off his jacket and sitting down on a chair by the open window. "How can you stand it, you'll be weak as a cat."

"What cat is that?" she asked drowsily. "What are the letters, anything exciting?"

"From Olive and from Charles," said John. "Shall I read them to you? 'Dear Mother and Father Dewhurst.'" He looked at Lily who made a hideous face. They both laughed.

"Why did Johnny have to marry anyone so tiresome?" said Lily for the hundredth time. "She really *is* tiresome, isn't she, John? It's not just the mother-in-law in me, is it?"

"Partly," said John. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

"I suppose so," she yawned, putting on a look of elaborate boredom and closing her eyes again.

They snapped open when John came to the part about Olive's expectations. So I'm to be a grandmother, she thought, wondering how she felt about it. Well, I am old enough, and of course it will be lovely, really it will, to have a baby to visit and to visit us.

"Well," she said flatly. "What good news!" They stared at each other. "It doesn't make you feel exactly younger, though, does it? One of those jolly milestones you see in the life insurance ads."

"Women become grandmothers much younger than you," he said, meaning to console her.

Lily was silent. She wasn't used to tactlessness from John. She gave him a rather cold glance.

"Though, looking at you," he continued, evidently feeling that something more was necessary, "no one would ever believe it. You look like a child lying there, so pink and pretty."

"Liar," she said fondly, feeling better. She laughed. "I'm getting as bad as Jayne, always thinking about looking young, twisting people's arms for compliments. Read Charles's letter, please. . . . Oh, how lovely," she exclaimed when she had heard it. She sat up in the tub and began to wash her face and neck. "Isn't he a lamb to come home for his leave instead of going off to some more exciting place! We must have a party for him. Now, let me see, who is there about for him to play with?"

"Well," said John with a straight face, "there's Betty—"

She giggled.

"Too bad Jayne's and Arthur's girls are away."

"Yes, though they are rather young for Charles."

"That leaves Honey Potts."

Lily aimed a handful of water at him and he ducked.

"Snob!" he said.

"Where are all the young people nowadays?" Lily asked, rubbing more soap on her washcloth. "All off on summer jobs, I

suppose, waiting on tables, being household drudges for mothers who have too many children. So earnest, poor things."

"Nobody bothers to tell them that youth's a stuff will not endure. It's a serious-minded age with no time for frivolity. The young can't wait to be old and settled."

"When I was a girl, summers on the Cape, there used to be crowds of girls and boys dancing about like flies, going on picnics, dashing off to speakeasies. Not I, of course." Feeling nostalgic, she let the washcloth slip back into the water. "I wasn't a bit popular; I used to stay home and listen to my mother complaining about why I wasn't out on the beach or playing tennis like Bob, getting fresh air and exercise." She stopped, falling into a pleasant reverie about her sad youth, while John watched her, his eyes ironic.

She sighed. "Afternoons I'd go hide in the bathroom, lock the door and soak for hours in cold water reading things like 'Dusty Answer' or 'Lady Chatterley's Lover.'"

"Now who's reminiscing?" said John.

Startled, Lily looked up at her husband. They both burst into laughter, feeling full of love for each other.

"Anyway," said John, "you know perfectly well you're glad there's no pretty young girl around; you want Charles to yourself."

"Do I, really?" She drew the washcloth up her arm, around her armpit and down under her breasts. Suspended by the water their slight droop was hardly noticeable. Still how shaming it would be to be seen unclothed by a stranger (Arthur) who would undoubtedly see her as she was—mature, that loathsome word, and not as darling John seemed to—as she had been.

"Am I really silver-cordish about Charles?"

"Maybe a bit."

"But I do have other interests in life, don't I?" One thing you could say about Arthur, she thought, he was certainly another interest. For a wild moment she was tempted to tell John, just to show him she wasn't purely and simply a son-eater.

"I should have shaved my legs," she said, spreading out her toes,

poking the cloth between them. "It's true I will hate his wife," she admitted comfortably. "But that's only natural, isn't it, it doesn't at all mean I'm abnormally tied up with him, does it? I shall probably do everything I can to make her life a burden to her, oh, it will be such fun."

"What a horrible woman you are, darling! Do you hate Olive?"

She laughed. "Of course not, but that's only because she's such a bore. If she were more interesting I probably would."

John looked disapproving and she laughed. "I've got something terrible to tell you, John. I hope you're feeling strong. We've got people coming for dinner. Harold and Miss Nash."

"Oh, God, Lily."

"I know, but they seemed so pathetic."

"Just don't get carried away and invite him to stay for the rest of his life. I don't trust Miss Nash. She's a very hard-boiled old girl. Don't give her any encouragement or she'll move him in here bag and baggage and be off in a cloud of clichés."

"You're the one who must be careful. In spite of your misanthropic ways, you are the one with the heart of gold as everyone knows, not I."

"We must present a united front, now. For God's sake don't let us become expansive with liquor and make any wild promises. Remember we have the boys to think of." John was half-serious, half-joking.

"Anyway, Betty is coming too. I thought it would help to spread their fire."

"Good," he said. He liked Betty. "That will be a help." He got up. "I'd better get the drinks organized. Then I think I'll lie down for a few minutes. There's time, isn't there?"

"How awful of me, sweetheart, I forgot to ask you. Did you get your tooth fixed? What did Dr. Stanley say?"

John turned in the doorway, his long face mournful. He shook his head. "Said there's nothing wrong with it that he can see, not a thing more he can do. I'll just have to live with it, he says."

"What a bastard!" said Lily cheerfully.

She was in the kitchen, helping Mrs. Jones with the dinner, when she heard Betty drive in. She stuck a finger in the salad dressing she had been mixing and tasted it anxiously. Betty was such a pig about food. She called it being a gourmet, of course, but what was the difference? She still ate like a day laborer—but then, come to think of it, she was. All that hewing and chiseling of stone and welding of metal must require more than the ordinary kind of flabby feminine muscles. Betty's vital fires undoubtedly needed more stoking than most.

The salad dressing tasted all right to Lily but just to be on the safe side she squeezed another garlic bud into it. If you used lots of garlic and wine in your cooking people thought they had eaten like Lucullus and didn't seem to mind going around all the next day smelling like a Neapolitan dockhand.

"What time shall I dish up?" asked Mrs. Jones.

"Around eight, please. How is the chicken doing?"

Mrs. Jones shrugged. "It's roasting," she said. Her attitude toward cooking was not only refreshingly uncreative, it was fatalistic. Once the food was out of her hands and in pot or pan she lost interest in it. The rest was up to the stove.

Lily opened the oven and looked in. Pieces of chicken simmered sulkily, still pale, just beginning to sweat repulsive beads of fat. Behind Mrs. Jones's back she emptied the dregs of a vermouth bottle over them and hoped for the best.

Outside in the little patio under a trellis dripping with trumpet-vine Mrs. Jones had set the long marble table with green mats and pale blue Italian plates. It looked pretty and cool. In the center, between the candlesticks, campanulas and foxgloves stuck stiffly out of a white bowl. Trying to soften this self-conscious arrangement Lily poked at it tentatively, hoping to give it, with one or two lucky strokes, a look of unpremeditated grace. As if sensing her lack of confidence, the whole thing fell uncooperatively over to one side.

"Damn," she muttered, and turned her back on it.

Farther out on the grass Betty strolled about with John who

was giving the garden its evening inspection, peering nosily into the face of each plant, gauging its state of health. Humming birds needled about through the long shadows. Like tiny helicopters they paused over the delphiniums, beating the air around the blossoms into a green, translucent froth. An iron dog, bequeathed to Lily by a great-aunt, glared out from the depths of a honeysuckle bush and, under a clump of cosmos, thinking himself invisible, Amos, their fat, striped cat, crouched, waiting for an easy mark.

Lily poured a martini from a pitcher and jabbed a cracker into a viscid green substance in a sherbet glass. It was mashed up avocado again, the work of Mrs. Jones, to whom it was the height of culinary elegance. Still, Lily thought, munching, it didn't taste bad.

She was about to join her husband and Betty when another car came into the driveway. Hearing it, she thought, what a nuisance, the Nashes are early. Hastily gulping down a prophylactic mouthful of martini and shuddering, she put a hostessy smile on her face and went to greet them. The evening had started.

But it was her brother, Dr. O'Hara, who appeared around the corner of the house, not the Nashes.

"Bobby," she exclaimed, going forward, arms out to hug him. "How marvelous!" What luck this was! Bob would round out nicely the number at her dinner table, providing a man to balance Betty and in general lightening the burden of the Nashes. In gratitude for all these benefits, she beamed at her brother and gave him a solid, more heartfelt kiss than she might have otherwise, for they had never been close. She considered him a little dull, a little pompous. The fondness that she felt for him was of that rudimentary kind that is based not on free choice but on kinship, or common memories of having been, inadvertently, prisoners together in the same childhood surroundings.

"Can you put up a weary wayfarer?" he asked. "I suddenly saw a little light ahead in my operating schedule, thought I'd drive down and visit Mother. Hear she's had a bad spell lately."

"She's better now, I believe. I've been calling up every day.

Well, almost every day. They had her out in the garden yesterday and today. Isn't it extraordinary how she rallies?"

Bob nodded. His eyes had that guarded look, she noticed, that irritatingly superior look doctors have of knowing something that they can't be bothered telling you because you could never understand it. As so often when she was with him she found herself searching about for a pin to stick into his self-esteem, then remembered that this was no time to pick a quarrel. She needed his good-will.

"We're having a little party," she said, putting her arm through his. "Well, not really a party. Betty and the Nashes. Come, have a drink, you can go and wash later."

"Well, Robert," cried Betty coming up. "How's the beloved physician? Lily, why didn't you tell me your madly attractive brother was coming?" She flung her improbable orange-red mane of hair away from her cheek and shone her good teeth at him. "Now come sit right down by me and tell me all the gruesome things you've been up to. What famous entrails have you been into lately?"

Dr. O'Hara smiled fatuously. It was odd, Lily thought, that he never seemed to mind the way Betty talked, feeling it evidently to be in some way complimentary. Well, of course it was. In her dealings with men Betty usually had just one object in mind and she wasn't going to jeopardize it by indulging in any misplaced irony. She had the art of making a man feel he was not only of primary interest to her but also crammed with brains and distinction.

Betty and Bob sat down together on a garden bench and were soon happily engaged in flirtatious conversation, generously aided by gin. Lily and John, seated on chairs at either side, exchanged relaxed glances.

They had started on their second drinks by the time the Nashes arrived. Temporarily blinded by the rays of the setting sun they emerged from the house, and just outside the French doors stood stiffly for a minute, like two spectres waiting to be made visible.

Harold wore his most aloof look; his tall figure was held as erect as its tumbledown condition allowed. The breeze of evening ruffled his thick white hair as he leaned with patient hauteur on his cane. For the first time, seeing him so, Lily felt her heart touched by the dignity with which he bore his affliction.

John took her hand as they went forward to greet them. "Change and decay in all around I see," he quoted under his breath.

"For God's sake, darling, don't be so depressing." That was what made it so hard to have poor Harold around, it reminded you so of the relentless passage of time. She darted a fearful, diagnostic look at John, raking his face for signs of approaching dissolution. But he seemed much as usual—thin, sinewy, sad. It couldn't be long though (she knocked wood mentally) before he fell prey to some disease or other. He was older than Harold. The good years must be pretty well played out.

Miss Nash was wearing what might be called evening attire: her well-cut, mannish suit was of silk, a dark red shantung, really rather handsome, Lily thought; her shirt had a hint of softness about it and might even be called a blouse. With a rather touching air of festivity she wore in her lapel a bachelor button. Instead of her usual oxfords there were low-heeled black calf pumps with flat, grosgrain ribbon bows.

She gave her host and hostess firm, sincere handshakes, looking them squarely in the eye, and allowed herself to be persuaded to have a pre-prandial hooker of Scotch-on-ice.

"A delightful evening," she observed at dinner to John as he doled out the chicken Mrs. Jones had placed in front of him. The sun had set, leaving angry streaks of color in the sky down the valley. But blessedly the evening chill held off; the warmth of the day still lingered in the protected patio where they ate and the candle flames hardly bent in the gentle wash of air. "You are to be congratulated on your fine view. I do like to see a sunset."

"This one bids fair to outdo itself," said John, glancing off to the west where the nightly occurrence was building up like a color

organ to a mighty climax of sullen purples and pinks shot with orange. "I sometimes find them a little trying, myself. Nature is so prone to a vulgar display of riches." He smiled at Miss Nash sadly.

She laughed indulgently. "Oh, I'm sure you don't really mean that, Mr. Dewhurst. I know that, deep down in your heart, you relate to a sunset just as favorably as the rest of us." So she must jolly her students back into the fold, he thought, when they tended to stray into unknown fields.

"Views are commonplace hereabouts," he continued. "Everyone's view has something to recommend it. Some houses put their best foot forward in the morning, some later in the day. I like to think that ours has a little of everything."

"Every prospect pleases," said Miss Nash as he had expected she might.

"And the next line," he teased, "do you endorse that too?"

"Oh," she cried delightedly. "But dear Bishop Heber was not writing in terms of Leicester, was he? I have met only with kindness here. You know, it was with a sense of real appreciation that I accepted your charming wife's invitation this afternoon. . . ."

John stopped listening and went on dealing out the chicken. Betty settled herself in her chair with that same happy wriggle of the rump that cats and dogs give, like a kind of grace, when faced with a dish of food. She sampled each of the offerings on her plate with interest. A look of pleasure came over her face, Lily was happy to see—the food must be acceptable. Next to her Harold Nash picked up a fork with his good hand and speared a bit of tomato. Oh, dear, she thought, how stupid of me, of course he'll need help cutting the chicken. But Betty, mellowed perhaps by the idea of food and drink, had turned to him and taken in the situation.

"Here, let me do that for you," she said as he made ineffectual stabs at his second joint. With her own knife and fork she soon had the meat off the bone and separated into small-sized bites. The tiny parslied potatoes she neatly quartered.

"Most kind," said Miss Nash.

"Thank you," Harold said to Betty, or something giving that effect. Curious, that air he had of accepting help rather as a favor to you than because it mattered to him one way or another. Lily supposed it was something he had developed in self-defence over the penurious years; it had kept charity from sticking too much in his craw. People like the feeling of being generous, she remembered now he used to say. They like to do things for others—it puffs up their self-esteem—so it is only kind to indulge them in their weakness.

"Why, Harold," cried Betty meanly, "how gabby you are getting."

He picked up his fork imperturbably and began to eat.

"Did you hear that?" Betty demanded of the others. "He said, 'Thank you,' isn't that fine?"

Lily frowned at her but Betty didn't see, having gone back to her food.

"Harold is now able to utilize *several* words," Miss Nash informed John. "I am assured that, while a full recovery is not perhaps in the overall picture at the present time, still, within the framework of what he has been able to accomplish so far in terms of re-education of his speech centers, it is not impossible to conjecture that at some future date some substantial improvement may be observed."

"Is that so?" answered John, who would not willingly have placed any bets on it.

"I have been urging him to persevere with his exercises." She lowered her voice. "I do not wish to seem to speak ill of the dead but I greatly fear that Medusa did not do her best to aid Harold in realizing his potential. She was a little apt to let things slide. Her orientation toward Harold's illness was perhaps slightly ambivalent."

"Well," said John, losing the thread of Miss Nash's thought, "of course she was so very tired. . . . And it can't be easy for

Harold to find himself back doing lessons. None of us is getting any younger."

"I consider that he relates very favorably to this new learning situation," Miss Nash said with a certain severity.

"I am so happy to hear it," John murmured. "It must make things much easier for you."

"Though of course honesty compels me to add that I must occasionally utilize all my school-marm tricks to get him to apply himself to his task." Miss Nash gave a humorous smile.

"A love of work was never one of his faults," muttered Betty, overhearing some of this. She wished she could have been seated next to Bob O'Hara who was a terribly smug guy but who was at least able-bodied and articulate.

"I beg your pardon?" said Miss Nash, inclining her head in Betty's direction.

"Tell Miss Nash what you were telling me before dinner," John interposed. "Miss Levering's been asked to do a figure of Justice for the lobby of the new little Court House in Rochester. What were you thinking of making it out of, Betty, marble? Or something symbolic out of battered bronze? Granite shot full of loopholes might be appropriate." He gave his bleak smile.

"How do you think Betty looks?" Lily asked her brother in a low tone. There had been a time when she had hoped that he and Betty might marry, in spite of viewing life so differently, but neither of them was a marrier, it seemed. Bob, she had decided, had small capacity for emotional involvement. It was she, it seemed, who had inherited the lion's share of susceptibility to the pangs of love.

"She seems much the same," said Bob, "except, of course, a little more so, like all of us. Her eyes protrude a bit more than they used to, don't they? I wonder if she is hyperthyroid? It might be a good idea for her to have a thorough checkup. What kind of thing does she do nowadays? I mean, when she's not in bed."

"How malicious you're getting, Bobby. You sound as bad as

Preston and Pierre. I'm beginning to have strange thoughts about you." But most likely he was just an old pussy-cat, not up to much any longer but an occasional flick of his claws. "She's gone off stone recently, I believe; she's doing things with iron and bronze."

"Blow-torch stuff, I suppose?"

"Uh huh. She twists it and corrugates it and melts it and pounds it into senselessness and calls it 'Mother and Child' or 'Social Consciousness,' whichever she happens to think of first."

"I know what you mean," said Bob. "You see the same kind of thing along the roadside when a truck has collided with a Volkswagen."

"What a gruesome thing to think of, Robert, but of course you are a surgeon."

Harold Nash seemed to be trying to speak. He had laid down his fork and now his lips trembled and a frown of concentration creased his forehead. Lily said, nervously, "Can I give you something, Harold? Do have some more chicken." Why am I talking in such a loud voice, she wondered. He's not deaf.

Everyone stopped eating and looked with solicitude at Harold. John seized the basket of bread and offered it. "A piece of bread, Harold?"

"Yes, yes," he said.

"Try to say it, Harold," his sister ordered, to everyone's embarrassment.

"Bread, please," he brought out. Everyone began to laugh in relief.

"There, you see?" said Miss Nash, not so much to Harold as to the others, Lily thought. She had evidently been putting in some hard work on the problem of increasing her brother's social acceptability.

Harold took the piece of bread, managing admirably, in spite of his sister, not to look like a dog whose trick of barking the correct number of times has been rewarded with a biscuit.

Betty watched him as with perfect dignity he used the bread to mop up the remains of the gravy on his plate. He ate it placidly,

chewing slowly, ignoring the others. He maintained his forced silence so well, she thought, that it might almost be the result of a deliberate withdrawal, a feeling of superiority to his surroundings.

"I've got to hand it to you, Harold, you're a mysterious fellow," Betty said to him, starting on her second helping. He turned to her courteously, with interest or a semblance of it. From within the house a clock struck nine. Darkness had been steadily gathering and the candlelight was tactful to the ruins of his face.

"You know what I think?" Betty muttered, chewing at the same time. "I think you've never been so happy in your life as you are right now. You've found the perfect funk-hole. Nothing more can be expected of you ever again, can it? You can't be expected to support anybody ever again and never again can some fool like me expect you to go to bed with them. All your inadequacies are now done up in one great big inadequacy—and no one can blame you for a thing. It's the perfect escape, isn't it, Harold? It makes you wonder if somehow you weren't able to manage it deliberately. Can the psyche influence the soma that much?"

"Bob's going to Spain next winter, isn't that marvelous, John?" Lily called down the table.

Gnawing at a drumstick, Betty peered at Harold vindictively, hoping for some reaction. She couldn't see the slightest bit more sag to his cheek, the faintest trace of feeling in those horrid, asymmetrical eyes. The bastard had escaped her again. But the old anger was subsiding now. Surprisingly she felt pity. I must be getting soft, she thought.

"Do you know," she said in a louder voice to the table at large. "Harold's given me inspiration." She flashed a dazzling smile at him, her superb teeth bared like a threat. "For a big new heroic figure—the spirit of man triumphant over adversity. I think I'll make it out of pressed tin."

In a spasmodic movement Lily struck a little silver bell. The tiny sound, lingering in the air, seemed to underline Betty's cruelty rather than to draw attention from it. No one could think of anything to say. Mrs. Jones emerged from the kitchen and be-

gan unhurriedly removing the dishes. Betty turned back unconcernedly to her plate and gave it a last, efficient swipe with a crust of bread. Miss Nash accepted a cigarette from John and fitted it into her short amber holder. At the end of the garden bats reeled in their spooky, soundless flight across the night sky and one or two late-working swallows checked in at their nests in the old gray barn.

"A good dinner, Lily," said Bob, sighing contentedly. "Alas, I am very, very fond of a boiled potato. I shall have to starve tomorrow."

Eating strawberries, Lily felt suddenly tired in all her bones; she longed for bed. The thought of Arthur came again but now their encounter seemed both silly and rather shameful. The idea of seeing him on Friday filled her with weariness. Why did I get into this thing, she wondered, and knew at the same time that tomorrow, especially if tomorrow were dull, she would be again ripe for destruction—strong and willing and eager to be up to no good.

Torpor was descending on them all, trapping them at the table. Tranquilized by food, unable to move, they stared at the candle flames. In the ashtray in front of Betty two burning cigarette ends made a smudge of smoke. Out in the darkening garden fireflies turned on and off. Soon the moon would be up. John's face across the candles looked like an El Greco, Lily thought, remote, haughty and melancholy. Poor dear, he was probably absorbed again in his digestion, feeling the chicken lying heavy and greasy in his delicate stomach, the oily lettuce and the strawberries rolled up together in a hard ball stubbornly resisting the digestive juices. And he was so ascetic!

Oh, to sleep, she thought. To close down until tomorrow.

"Come," she said, with an effort rising to her feet. "Let's go into the house for coffee, shall we? I'm starting to have sad thoughts. Remember, Bob, how Mother used to say the night air was poisonous? She was right, you know."

Hoping that the after-dinner stage of the evening would not

stretch out too long, she led Betty and Miss Nash off to make any repairs they found necessary. Miss Nash and Harold would not linger on, she was sure, and if John could control his compulsion to be a good host and refrain from pressing too many whiskies on Betty, she too would perhaps bear it in mind that tomorrow was a working day.

"How is the new figure coming?" she asked her now. If Betty could be kept thinking of her work she might go home at a reasonable hour, remembering the danger of a hangover. The trouble was she was strong as an ox and needed less sleep than most, so that what laid her friends low for twenty-four hours constituted only a mild amount of entertainment for her. I wish I could get Bob to take her off somewhere, she thought, forgetting ungratefully that she had begged her to come. But it wasn't likely that he would, as he took very good care of his health.

"Which figure do you mean?" asked Betty, looking haughty. "I'm working on three."

"Oh," said Lily, dashed. "I'm sorry," she felt compelled to say for no reason except that it was important to artists to be sure that you knew and understood the fact of their natural superiority. Why did she have to apologize for not knowing how many separate bits of iron or stone Betty was hammering at?

Cowed, Lily could think of nothing further to say. No such disability affected Miss Nash who was used to dealing with much more hardened egoists than Betty. Standing at the bureau Miss Nash smiled at her genially, perhaps patronizingly. "I do look forward to having a good talk with you about your work, Miss Levering. I am so interested in modern trends in sculpture."

Betty stared at her, giving no sign that she had heard. She pulled up her skirts behind her and headed rudely for the bathroom, the door of which opened into the bedroom. When it became apparent that Betty was not going to close the door, Miss Nash turned away and made a tactful pretense of inspecting herself in a mirror. Out of the pocket of her neat jacket she drew a crisply folded handkerchief with which she patted her pale lips, perhaps not knowing

what further repairs it was customary to make. Primping could hold small interest for her. This sachet-scented room, glistening with silver objects, prettily cluttered with jars of complexion stuff and bottles of toilet water, was not her milieu.

Betty asked, getting to her feet and shaking down her skirts, "How does Harold manage these things, by the way, Miss Nash?"

"Betty, *dear*," said Lily hastily, hoping Miss Nash had not heard. "Look, I want you to smell this perfume Charles sent me for my birthday." She grabbed a small bottle up from a bureau and advanced on Betty. "It's called 'Tais-toi,'" she hissed, pushing the phial more roughly toward Betty's nose than she would have if she had not been annoyed with her.

But Miss Nash turned around and fixed Betty with a quelling eye as if she were a pupil who had gotten out of line and been sent to the head-mistress's office for taking down.

"Miss Levering," she said and cleared her throat in a way that precluded possible interruption. "Although I am surprised that you consider such matters within your jurisdiction and though I can not say that I approve of your question in terms of good taste, I am happy to tell you that my brother is entirely self-sufficient in the area to which you have reference. Indeed, dealing with all matters regarding his personal appearance is at present well within the framework of his present competency. He is fast learning to utilize muscles that—"

"You mean he can shave and dress himself?" Betty cut in.

Miss Nash nodded her cropped gray head curtly. "Yes, except as regards his tie. Honesty compels me to confess that tying it is still somewhat beyond his capacities at the present time."

"It's always been beyond mine," said Lily rapidly. "I've always envied women who can help their men tie their neckties. Mine always come out in granny-knots. I am all thumbs."

"It is a matter of practice," said Miss Nash tolerantly.

Betty shrugged, bored with this conversation. She went to the mirror, took up a comb and began running it through her long red-orange hair.

"Damn it," she growled, peering at the part, "the gray is start-

ing to show again, that means I'll have to go to town. Christ, what a nuisance! You're lucky you don't have to dye yours yet, Lily—or do you?" Her bulging blue eyes combed through Lily's blonde hair suspiciously.

"Not yet," said Lily, again feeling apologetic, "but it's going fast. I'm forever pulling at white hairs."

"How disgusting," said Betty.

Miss Nash now emerged from the bathroom. Lily murmured, "Shall we join the gents?"

"God, yes," said Betty.

In the long, shadowy living-room, big parchment shaded lamps made out of Italian vases drew circles of light. The windows were open. Against the screens moths hurled themselves with little pinging sounds. Lily, throwing a housewifely look around, thought that the yellow linen curtains would need to be washed soon.

Mrs. Jones came in, carefully carrying a tray on which were demi-tasse cups of prettily flowered pottery and a glass pot of coffee. She placed it on the long table behind the sofa. Lily began to pour. It looked like a good strong brew, enough to insure several hours of nocturnal tossing and turning. I must remember, she thought, to take a sleeping-pill. Still these thick small cups held very little. I should have put out the nice thin china ones to please John—and used the silver things. Her lips curved up as she bent over the tray. Poor John (she felt both mean and affectionate) always so frustrated in his desire to have things as they used to be in more expansive times.

The three men now entered the room through the shuttered doors at the other end. They had probably been watering the ferns at the end of the garden, she thought. To piddle out of doors at night, the stars twinkling high overhead, the smell of the rich earth in one's nostrils, there was something highly satisfying about it, John had told her. It made a man feel very close to the natural world, he said solemnly. She smiled fondly at him as he came up to her.

Betty tossed her hair back and began to glitter at Bob but was

beaten to the draw by Miss Nash who stepped forward and laid a large square hand on his shoulder. She pressed him masterfully back onto a tiny loveseat upholstered in gold velvet which was only large enough for two.

"Dr. O'Hara, I can not express to you what a genuine treat it is for me to see someone from Boston." She laughed temperately. "I spent my student days there, you know, eons ago, of course, and although I was born and raised in the Middle West I still think of Boston as my native heath. Everyone has one place that he or she is oriented toward, don't you find it so, dear Dr. O'Hara? I confess it, I tend to identify with Bostonians. I shall tell you my secret dream. It is to make my home there when the time comes for me to retire."

"I hope for the sake of your school that that will not be for many years," said Bob with a gallant smile. "Lily, do you suppose I could have some Sanka? I don't want to take a chance on not sleeping tonight."

"Of course, darling," said Lily.

"Your specialty is surgery, I believe, such a rewarding life-work, I have always felt, especially when practiced in Boston. Medicine is a noble profession, one of the most truly noble, I always say, and in Boston it seems to me to have reached its fullest, and if I may say so, its least commercial flowering."

"Well, now," said Bob who would have been the last man to deny any of these remarks. He looked quite fatuously pleased, Lily thought, turning away. It wouldn't be more than a couple of minutes now before Miss Nash managed to turn the conversation toward those aspects of medicine which were particularly concerned with such illnesses as Harold's. As John had said, she was a smart old party and not at all above getting a little free medical advice when the opportunity offered.

Betty, thwarted, had drifted over to the record player and was glumly examining a pile of records and albums lying next to it.

"I suppose that old buzzard is picking Bob's brains," she said as Lily joined her. "Do you mind if I put on some records?" She

began loading the spindle as she spoke. "How do you work this thing? Oh, yes, I see." She pushed a button and the machine whined into life. The bottom record plopped down, the arm of the player made a feint in its direction, hesitated, pounced down on it, then, calling the whole thing off, went back to its corner. Betty began pushing buttons at random. Another record peeled itself off the pile and dropped down on the first. Again the arm went through the same sulky routine.

"Damn," growled Betty, making to grab it.

"Don't touch it!" cried Lily, for she was terrified of hurting the machine which was of a vengeful temperament and capable of terrible and expensive reprisals if tampered with or treated roughly. "Here, let me do it."

As Betty watched impatiently, clouding the air with cigarette smoke, she reassembled the records, balancing them again carefully above the turntable and started it up. This time the needle stayed down on the first record and soon the relentless ta-ta-ta-Ta-ta-ta of a Mozart concerto was assailing them from all parts of the room.

"Isn't it divine?" said Betty. "Like being in the very heart of music."

"For God's sake," John called from across the room, "do we have to have that thing on so loud? It's like being trapped in a cement mixer."

"Philistine!" Betty yelled at him, making a hideous face. Lily turned down the volume.

"That better?" She smiled over at her husband who nodded, more or less appeased.

"Why do you bother to have hi-fi at all?" Betty grumbled. "It's no different from an ordinary vic if you don't have it on loud."

"It's Charles's idea, not ours. The ordinary set was quite good enough for us."

"How is Charles? I haven't seen him for about two years, do you realize that?"

"Fine. Loathing the army but making out all right, I believe.

He has something to do with ballistic missiles—not too much, I hope, as otherwise we may all be annihilated at any moment. You remember how clumsy he was, always dropping things? He’s coming up soon—any day now, isn’t that nice?”

“Well, I hope I shall be allowed to see him this time,” said Betty. “You always keep him so close to your chest.”

“Honestly, you know he’s hardly been here at all in recent years.” Goodness, there was really no end to Betty’s touchiness, this evening, it seemed. One thing that generally bored her to death was people’s children. But she never could stand to think she was being excluded from anything, whether it interested her or not.

But Charles was a child no longer of course. For a moment Lily had forgotten how few years it took to grow up. Charles was a young man now. Young and personable. Heavens, could Betty possibly have designs on him? How laughable, how outrageous!

Still, she mused, sitting down on the window-seat, it might not be such a dreadful idea at that. Betty with her infinite experience could undoubtedly teach him a great deal. Those mysterious dodges and tricks of love-making they always referred to in veiled phrases in books. All the ways to heighten and prolong desire; when to be coy, when aggressive. Lily wondered how much there was in it, in reality. All that geisha-girl thing. Could it be just put about to make ordinary virtuous women feel inadequate? Still, the trial-and-error system most young couples went in for, the dogged, do-it-yourself method with the husband holding his wife in one hand and a copy of “Ideal Marriage” in the other—it couldn’t be too satisfactory, she was sure. As for herself, she had always been grateful that John had been, before his marriage to her, such a wicked one with the ladies, and she hoped Charles too would get a little education along those lines before he married some nice innocent girl. A workshop course with an expert like Betty mightn’t do him any harm at all.

Sipping her coffee, she looked at Betty trying to see her as Charles would. She was really getting to be a trifle beat-up, but

presumably, in spite of the dissolute look about the eyes and the flaccid and leathery flesh of her neck, she still wore that old unmistakable aura of not so much sex as, according to John, availability. That quality alone meant a lot to those in need. But Charles—the young are so critical and so conservative in their criticism—would he be put off by the flamboyantly dyed hair, the heavy mature breasts usually a good quarter visible above a low-necked dress or blouse?

“I’ll have a party for him,” she told Betty. “You know, he’s quite grown up now, quite pleasant to be with. But he’s always been rather sweet to his elders, Charles has. He treats us practically as equals—not at all patronizing the way Johnny was at his age.”

“Has he got a girl?” asked Betty, lowering her eyes to her cigarette and watching as the long ash detached itself and fell to the floor.

“I don’t know of any right now,” said Lily. She smiled. “Of course, there was Honey Potts—”

Betty’s eyes snapped up.

“He was mad about her one summer, don’t you remember, Betty? Fortunately they were both too young for anything to come of it. Or, at least, nothing did.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about *that* any more.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, really. I just happen to know she’s interested in someone else.”

“Who?”

Betty hesitated. A guarded look came into her eyes. Obviously she was in possession of some rather juicy tidbit about Honey. Lily could see her struggling with the temptation to display her inside information and tell all about it. She waited, mildly curious.

Rather to her disappointment, Betty decided for discretion—or possibly, probably, she really knew nothing at all. “Oh, some local person, I’ve forgotten his name.”

“Poor Honey,” said Lily comfortably. “I suppose she’ll marry and immediately start breeding. One wretched baby after another

until she's completely worn out and all her prettiness gone. Well, Charles will be devastated. I must remember to send her something. Why are you frowning at me that way, Betty? Have I said something wrong?"

"Sometimes you sound so goddamn stuffy," said Betty violently.

Lily sighed. She never could hope to understand Betty. Really, it was too fatiguing to try. "I'm sorry, darling," she said in a placatory voice. "But I *am* stuffy, you know. Look, let's go and talk to John and Harold, shall we? John looks as if he could use some help."

"I saw you talking to Arthur this afternoon," said Betty, ignoring this suggestion as if it had never been made and speaking in a meaningful tone. She bugged her eyes out at Lily in a challenging way. Confess, they seemed to say. You know you've been up to mischief.

Lily was at once wary. "You did? Oh, yes, at the Fair," she agreed placidly. She let her eyes wander over to John again but to her dismay she felt herself beginning to blush. Had Betty noticed something? Instantly convinced that she had, she imagined Betty willing her to speak, to drop some revealing remark about Arthur. She told herself to take her coffee and leave, go to join the safe company of Harold and her husband. She picked up her cup but found herself unable to move her feet, held fatally, not only by the desire to speak her lover's name, as is always the case, but also to find out what, if anything, Betty knew.

"I've never seen anyone so mad about his wife as Arthur is, have you?" Betty's eyes continued their probe. She was as bad as a psychiatrist feeling around for a sore spot in your soul. She was waiting for Lily to smirk, to deny, to protest that, no, it didn't seem so to her, that she personally had good cause to believe that Jayne was not the be-all-and-end-all of Arthur's life. Betty would then immediately make the right deduction and press on for further revelations.

"I never have," she forced herself to say. She gazed guilelessly

at Betty. "It's amazing, isn't it? He's absolutely insane about her."

Betty's eyes flickered with frustration. She turned around, threw her cigarette down in the large blue pottery ashtray. "Of course," she said, going off on another tack, "it is really Medusa he sees in her, you know. You know he could never be interested in anybody who didn't somehow remind him of her." Lily could feel Betty's look dwelling disparagingly on her tan-blond straight hair so unlike Medusa's, feel her ticking off on some mental list her solid body, her level brown eyes and the unethereal look of health that had plagued her all her life. "Ever since Medusa he always has gone for those willowy, curly-haired, fey types. Haven't you noticed how all the women in his paintings look like that?"

"Naturally," Lily snapped. "And if I had not, Jayne would have pointed it out to me."

"Arthur is the one man I know who I'm absolutely positive never has been or could be unfaithful to his wife," Betty now stated. The pale blue eyes bulged out compellingly at Lily who felt as if she were being taken by the shoulders and shaken. For a moment she struggled against her weaker self. What fun it would be to give a low, musical laugh, to look knowing, to drop a hint suggesting that perhaps Betty did not, for once in her life, know all there was to be known. But of course that was what Betty was lying in wait for. "I'm sure you're right, darling," she murmured. Feeling very *femme du monde*, exhilarated with her powers of deception, she smiled at Betty. "Let me give you some more coffee."

Outside the black July night was intermittently brightened by flashes of heat lightning. The moon rode somewhere behind clouds. Later on it might storm, Lily thought. The Mozart jittered to an end; another record dropped down and the room began to shake with the thunder of hoofs as Die Walküre set forth on their ride. Lily saw John's thin cheeks fill with air as he repressed a belch. He was no music lover. Wagner, especially, made him nervous. All that incessant huffing and puffing, he said, that rising up to climaxes that were never quite achieved but petered

out into trailing clouds of inconsequentialities. Most unsettling.

"So hot for Wagner," he muttered as she poured him some more coffee.

"It'll be over soon," she soothed him. "This is the worst part."

Betty, looking bored, wedged her heavy body down beside John and leaned her head against the back of the sofa. She opened her mouth in a huge, voluptuous yawn, stretching her arms out before her and elevating her bosom. "Christ, I'm tired," she groaned.

John ignored this and went on with an anecdote that Lily recognized about one of his former students. Harold nodded politely. There was no reason, Lily thought, why Harold should not carve out a very nice social career for himself built on his talents as a listener. You couldn't say he was a very stimulating companion, perhaps, but on the other hand he was attentive and, at least outwardly, uncritical. Unlike others, he was not, as he listened, merely waiting for a pause when he could seize control of the conversation and wrench the subject around to what interested him. You never need fear that Harold would interrupt you.

Over in their corner Bob and Miss Nash were still talking with moderate animation. The evening seemed likely to drift more or less satisfactorily to its conclusion without much further effort on Lily's part. She might just take this moment to go off to the kitchen to shower praise on Mrs. Jones for all her efforts with the dinner. Not that Mrs. Jones could be got around by sweet talk. As she often told Lily, she "saw through" flattery. Still, without it she was apt to droop like an unwatered plant and to dwell more and more on her delicate health, her bad knee, her near-fatal operation last year for a ruptured appendix. ("A whole quart of pus they drew out of me, you never saw the like, Mrs. Dewhurst!") She would drop nerve-wracking remarks about her husband's desire that she give up work, stay home and take care of him.

Miss Nash was on her feet when Lily got back to the living-room.

"The lightning seems to be getting nearer," she said. "I fear Harold and I must be thinking in terms of departure." A crack of

thunder cut into Haydn's Surprise Symphony and suddenly all the lights went out. The record player stumbled to its knees, then picked itself up with a snarl as the electricity came on again.

"Come, Harold."

"I do wish you wouldn't go—"

"I suppose I'd better go too," said Betty reluctantly.

"Oh, I'm sure this will blow over, don't go yet."

"Well—"

Bob said, putting an end to Betty's indecision, "I'll take you home and walk back. I'm sure there'll be time before the storm breaks. Need a little fresh air before I turn in." He patted Betty jovially on the shoulder, urging her toward the door.

CHAPTER

15

Drops of rain were bouncing like gravel off the canvas top of Betty's car as she pulled around to the rear of her house and parked in front of the studio door.

"You certainly can't walk back in this downpour, Bob, come on in till it lets up a little," said Betty. She was glad she had told Lee-roy not to come unless he saw lights in the front of the house. She launched herself off the slippery leather scat and ducked into the studio, holding the door open for Bob.

The room was two stories high which didn't mean as much in the way of height as it might elsewhere, as in the unaltered rooms of this old salt-box you were apt, if you were of any more than average height, to find yourself wedged between floor and ceiling like a caryatid. The northern wall had been knocked out and replaced by glass which provided, as well as the cold, gloomy light that artists require, a long view down the valley.

Betty put on two lamps and then went to look out. "I love to watch a storm," she said, her face close to the glass. It was a glimpse into the real nature of things, she thought, the dark, unpleasant, tormented heart of reality. "Come and look, Bob, isn't it thrilling?" Thunder bolts boxed their ears, deafening them; the glare of lightning repeatedly white-washed the night. Placid old maple trees, intermittently visible in the weird light, writhed and twisted their branches and tossed their leaves about in a theatrical and unseemly display of agony they never were guilty of in clement weather.

"God, that was close," said Bob, ducking nervously as a particularly eyeball-searing streak of lightning zigzagged down from the enraged heavens and landed with a frightful crack in the general vicinity of Betty's herb garden.

She looked at him, amused. He visibly took hold of himself and advanced closer to the window. "Behold the works of the Lord," he said in pious tones.

“—,” Betty thought. What an ass he was! “Shocking temper He must have,” she drawled. “Let’s have a drink.”

“Just a short one, please—Scotch. I must go the minute this is over.”

“You shall go that very instant. I know you have a hard day coming up tomorrow,” Betty said in her most soothing and reasonable tones, pushing down her irritation. “If you think I have designs on your virtue, rest easy, darling. Nothing could be farther from my thoughts.” She gave him a teasing and provocative smile.

He really was none too appetizing at that, she thought. He had gone off considerably since that summer (God, it must be ten or twelve years ago!) when they had had their little fling. Rather than being neatly bald, his brachycephalic head was sparsely covered with palish hair, some of which had recently been allowed to settle, in a tentative sort of way, on his upper lip. If he had not held himself heroically in check his figure would have run to fat; but of course he ate abstemiously since he believed, like most doctors, that to be stout was to invite early death by coronary occlusion. No crumb entered his mouth, she believed, whose calorie count was not carefully noted—and, more than that, its cholesterol content. Poor Bob, what a way to live! And in spite of it all, in spite of the fact that he couldn’t eat much more than an inmate of Buchenwald and in addition worked long, gruelling hours each day at the operating table, hacking, sawing, sewing and piecing together, still there hung here and there about his frame isolated pockets of fat that refused to be dislodged. Like a chipmunk he seemed to carry, in each cheek, peanuts for future reference, and from his formerly stalwart shoulders the flesh had slipped to re-establish itself, in a less desirable form, around his middle. Mentally removing his bluff and baggy summer-weight suit, Betty thought he was beginning to look positively eunuchoid. He had never been the most virile of men, she remembered; though interested in sex he had seemed to regard the act as therapeutic rather than purely pleasurable—something done for the sake of keeping fit, like a fast game of squash. It was part of being the

well-rounded man. He had gone about it vigorously, with more zeal than passion, and this grim, bulldog determination in his performance she had found rather shaming. Even she, she had thought, devoted as she was to bodily joys, would have welcomed some show of affection, some small evidence that a different, a softer, kind of emotion was involved than that associated with a gymnasium.

One thing she remembered with satisfaction. It had been she who had called a halt to the relationship—not, it was true, because of hurt pride or anything of that sort, but because her eye had been caught by someone else, she couldn't recall now just who it had been. Bob's self-esteem had sustained quite a shock but as he had ample supplies of this she didn't flatter herself that he had pined too long.

He took the drink she handed him and began wandering about the room looking at things. He stopped before a plaster head of a child.

"This is nice," he said. "What are you going to do it in?"

"Bronze, if I finish it," she said. "It's Cathy, Cora and William's child. I've rather lost interest in it, though." She frowned and turned away from it. She was sick to death of that family. "This is the kind of thing I'm working with now."

She led him over to a corner where on a pedestal a grim and rusty creature glowered at them out of empty sockets in its head.

"Good God, Betty," said Bob. "Did you make this thing yourself?"

Betty nodded proudly. She was not displeased with the figure which, in addition to the pangs of creation, had cost her many hours of hard labor, sweating like the village smithy or a worker in a steel mill.

"I thought perhaps you'd found it in a junkyard," Bob let out a bray of laughter. "A bit of old bedspring here, isn't it?" He reached out and touched the figure's midsection but quickly withdrew his hand when he glanced at her and saw the expression on her face, which seemed to reflect the storm going on outside.

Betty had trained herself over the years to take a good deal of chafing from men and continue smiling, but ridicule of her work always stuck in her gorge.

Bob threw an arm around her and squeezed her waist in a rather patronizing way. "Only kidding, dear," he said, "don't blow your pretty stack."

She doubled up her fist and just managed to restrain herself from landing it on his silly mouth. The stupid fool, she thought, but she looked anxiously at her work and wondered if there could be anything in what he said. It was a skinny, well-ventilated figure of indeterminate sex, made of iron strips which she had welded together with enormous care, building up with absorbed delight the places where the metal had melted and turned golden. Bones were suggested and a sort of tired muscle, but nothing of the weakness of flesh. The round bits she had used to indicate navel and nipples she now saw bore a fatal resemblance to the washers used in plumbing.

"Actually, it is very impressive, very powerful, the more I look at it," Bob continued, standing back and giving it a penetrating look that precluded its having any secrets from him. "Yes, it definitely has power. What are you calling it?"

Betty was somewhat mollified, but had no intention of showing it. "What difference does *that* make?" she asked loftily, raising her eyebrows and laughing lightly, hoping to make him feel properly humble in the face of art. She had been wondering herself what to call it and was teetering between "The Spirit is Willing" and "Aged Maya," afraid that both these titles might be over-explanatory, catering to uneducated tastes. It might be better to stick to something cryptic like "Figure—no. 5."

"I do prefer your other work though. I'm only a poor, uncultured doc, I know, but give me something I can recognize, a nice clean piece of marble or bronze. Still," Bob went on charitably, "I suppose nobody can afford to stand still. You have to keep up with the times, keep searching for new materials, new media. But, I wonder, is the hardware store the place to look?" He gave Betty a

winning smile to show he meant no offense and his eyes, snared in a net of wrinkles, looked kindly.

What nice teeth he had, she noticed. Funny, she'd forgotten that. No, by God, they hadn't used to be so nice! They'd been discolored, flecked with brown spots, she remembered now. Oddly enough, she had rather liked them. Well, poor old Bob, what a nuisance for him!

Moved by a sudden feeling of affection (it was somehow endearing that he, pompous as he was, should be feeling the effects of time like everyone else) she took his hand and led him over to a couch in front of a large stone fireplace at the end of the room. Outside, nature was still throwing its temper tantrum but not quite so close by now. Betty was afraid Bob would decide to leave immediately; though she didn't find him attractive she found the prospect of being alone even less so. It wasn't very likely that Lee-roy would come out at this hour and in all this rain. It was old Robert or nobody, she feared. She definitely wanted somebody.

Pulling him down beside her, lightly so as not to frighten him off, she leaned forward and held out a cigarette for him to light, thus affording him a panoramic view of her large and still shapely breasts which, as usual, swung free and unencumbered by brassière under the loose bodice of her dress. (If she was not confusing him with others, Bob was pre-eminently a "breast man." As some men are especially taken by a good leg and a pretty ankle, so he loved what he called a well-developed mammary gland. The sight of one, she remembered, used to cause his eyes to water, which was, through some complicated system of reflexes which he had more than once explained to her in the old days, his particular way of showing desire.)

She remained in this inviting position until it seemed as if her cigarette would not only be well ignited but wholly consumed by the flame of his lighter. Then, inhaling deeply, she withdrew and let her head sink back against the pillows at the couch's end. With one hand she quite automatically arranged her skirt so that its silky folds fell into the trough between her thighs, fully indicating what

lay in wait above. As if idly she extended, for good measure, one of her pretty, high-arched feet and twisted it about. Through the smoke that at long last returned thin and depleted from the bottom of her lungs, she watched for the effect. Her cards were now on the table and behind her head her hand was ready to reach and turn off the lamp. If all went as it usually did, it was only a matter of a short time now before she would be stretched out comfortably beneath his weight and, locked together companionably, they would start their gratifying exertions. Betty no longer demanded a lot of preliminary maneuvering; indeed, for the most part she considered it a waste of time. The main event was what she was interested in. Inside of her, the demanding pulse was beating steadily now, and, sinking back, as if relaxed, she eyed him brightly, trying to hide her impatience. Let's go, she thought irritably. He should now put down his glass and move closer.

But something about Betty's attitude must have suggested slumber rather than sex, for Bob's jaws were clenched to choke off a yawn. To hide it he turned away and, still holding his glass in one hand, picked up an art magazine from the low round table in front of the sofa. He began turning the pages listlessly, sipping at his drink.

"Do you see much of Harold?" he asked.

Betty frowned. What was the matter with the fool, anyway? Couldn't he see she wasn't in the mood for talk?

"As little as possible," she answered shortly. "He's a bit of a ghoul, nowadays. Do we have to talk about him?" She moved irritably.

"He used to be one of your favorites, I thought." He flashed his good new teeth at her in a teasing smile. She felt a gust of fury start up in her chest and had to use considerable force to clamp a lazily agreeable expression down over her features. No use antagonizing the bastard yet, he might still come around.

She shrugged and spoke amiably. "Oh, yes, we did have rather a mad crush on each other once but, poor darling, he's not the best company in the world any more, is he?"

"His conversation lacks a certain sparkle, shall we say?" agreed Bob, allowing himself a small smile, "but is that any reason for old friends to desert him?"

"No one's deserting him," Betty snapped. Damn it, she was still paying for his keep at Mrs. Stops's place, wasn't she? How far was she expected to go for Auld Lang Syne, for God's sake? "It seems to me people are pretty nice to him. Anyway, he's got his sister, hasn't he?"

"I gather they've never been very close," said Bob. "But she's done a good job by him—or perhaps it's Time, the Great Healer. He seems much more alert than he was when I saw him just after his stroke."

"I should think Time, the Great Healer, had left things a little late this time."

"Oh, he's not much over fifty-five," said Bob. "Lots of people come back nicely from these early cerebral accidents. Rehabilitation can accomplish a lot."

Betty raised her eyebrows. Like John Dewhurst, she wouldn't have placed any bets on it in Harold's case. Besides, rehabilitation sounded dreary as hell to her. All that boring repetition of words and movements. Poor old Harold, how he must hate it! She knew he'd much rather be left in peace to enjoy the benefits of his affliction.

"Miss Nash tells me he's cooperating amazingly well."

"Curious," said Betty, "how that word seems to have changed in its meaning. It means you're doing just what someone else wants you to do, doesn't it? Well, I wish him all the luck in the world. I imagine Miss Nash is very hard not to cooperate with, once she puts her back into it." She gave her mischievous, white-toothed grin and put her head back again against the cushions, letting her expensive red-orange hair spill across her cheek in the old, seductive way.

"Still the same enfant terrible," said Bob.

Was that sarcasm, Betty wondered and glanced at him sharply. But no, he was smiling and looking at her rather admiringly. She threw a languorous expression into her eyes, saw him put down

his glass and hesitate, his head still turned toward her. A last grumble of thunder sounded faintly down the valley, then the night was still.

"Well," Bob said briskly. He slapped his thigh smartly and rose to his feet in a businesslike way. "Storm's over, I guess. Must get on the road. Many thanks, my dear, for your charming company and your excellent whisky."

Betty closed the door after him and locked it. She put out the lights, left the studio and walked down the passage to her bedroom. What a horrible day it had been! First that business at Cora's—so unpleasant somehow—and now this. Days like this you could understand why people liked to have a husband about somewhere—it would be someone to talk to at least, someone to take things out on. Well, thank God she still had her work.

She turned the radio on good and loud and soon Schoenberg was rasping away at her nerves, affording a kind of helpful counter-irritation. Standing on one foot and then the other she peeled off her stockings and tossed them onto a chair. She pulled her dress and her lacy slip up over her head and stood naked in front of the mirror. Standing, hands on hips, legs spread apart, she looked at herself fully.

"I guess you're no bargain at that," she told herself, regarding the folds of flesh with a cold, appraising eye like a second-hand furniture dealer. "A shop-worn Rubens."

Then she began to laugh. I bet I know what Dr. O'Hara's trouble is, she thought. Not up to things any more, that was it. She was damned lucky to have escaped. There was nothing she hated worse than that kind of ineffectual fumbling around.

Feeling better, she yanked a chiffon nightgown down over her head and made ready for bed. Pulling down the covers she had a second thought. She padded down the hall to the front of the house and flicked a switch inside the living-room door. A lamp near the windows came on.

There was still just an off-chance that Lee-roy might stop by, now that the rain had let up.

Friday in Leicester dawned sparkling and full of promise and, instead of thereafter petering out into grayness as happened more often than not, increased in beauty as the morning went on. After the storm there had been a day of alternating sun and sullen, spitting rain—an open-and-shut day—but today was perfect. Each leaf on each tree stood out in the brilliant light as if starched and pressed by hand. What few clouds there were were small and puffy and kept well out of the sun's way. They were for purely decorative purposes. People meeting each other in the store or at the Post Office agreed that it was a "real Leicester day," by which they meant of course that it was a notable exception to the norm. This lack of logic seemed to bother no one, except possibly John Dewhurst.

He was sitting at his desk absently looking out at the view and biting at the inside of his cheek where a bit of loose skin dangled tantalizingly out of reach, when a car turned into the driveway. He got up hastily, winced at the stiffness of his joints and limped over to hide in a corner of the room that couldn't be seen through the window. From here he peered out from behind the linen curtain and recognized Arthur Herendeen. After a moment's indecision he decided to abandon temporarily the complicated sentence he was in the midst of fitting together and allow himself to become visible. He stepped out of the French door that led to the terrace.

"Morning, Arthur," he said.

For a beautiful summer day in the country Arthur was very formally dressed, John thought. That is to say that, though his shirt was, as usual, as crumpled as if he had slept not so much in it as on it and his luridly colored tie looked as if it had been knotted by a butter-fingered boy of three, he was wearing not only matching jacket and trousers but also a very citified gray fedora set uncompromisingly straight.

"How are you, John?" Arthur grunted.

"Can't complain. Still, I do," he added. "You're awfully dressy, aren't you? Going off some place?"

"Yeh. Got to go over to Portland for a couple of days. Thought I'd stop by and see if Lily would give Jayne a ring while I'm gone, make sure she's okay. Lily around?" Arthur scanned the garden where she was usually to be seen in the morning. "She in the house?" He made as if to go in.

"I'm afraid not," said John. "She's gone to see her mother in Georgetown."

Arthur looked startled, frowned, then shrugged.

"I'll tell her you stopped by. We'll see Jayne is all right. Perhaps she can come over for dinner. You going to be gone long?"

"Don't know yet. I hope not. It's my old lady. They called from the nursing home this morning." He grinned evilly through clenched teeth. "Silly old bag's gone and cracked her fool skull."

"Good Lord, how did that happen?"

Arthur shook his head. "Christ knows. They were very close-mouthed over the phone—probably afraid I'll sue." He let out a cackle of laughter. "Only too glad, you know, if she'd conk out, for God's sake. But these old girls are tough as the devil; takes more than a little knock on the head to do them in. And the docs—they'll pull her through all right. 'Don't worry, Mr. Herendeen, we're doing everything that can possibly be done,' they said on the phone. I'm sure they are, the mugs." Arthur's voice was full of gloom.

John found himself slightly shocked at this attitude, forgetting for a moment that he had felt very much the same way about his own father's longevity, which had seemed quite uncalled for for so many years. A man shouldn't talk that way about his mother, he thought, then, being just, remembered that *his* had taken herself off before she had become a burden to anyone. He sighed and nodded. "Right in there with the antibiotics, I suppose. How old is she?"

"Eighty, or so, I believe."

“Well into what they so revoltingly call ‘Our Senior Citizens’ category. Still, do you know, I can’t help hoping I’ll last till then myself.”

“Not a question of years so much as of what you’ve got left in the upper story,” Arthur growled. “Mother’s got strictly fruitcake. Arterio-sclerosis since she was in her fifties. Well, I suppose I’ll be in the same boat some day. A dirty old man chasing skirts, an embarrassment to Jayne and the girls.”

John laughed. “Worse ways to go,” he said.

Arthur said, “Yes. Well, I must be off. It wouldn’t do not to be the dutiful son keeping vigil at the bedside of his dying mother, would it? Uh, you’ll tell Lily I stopped by, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course. Don’t worry about things here, we’ll keep in touch with Jayne.”

He stood and watched Arthur’s car go down the road. He really didn’t blame Arthur, now he thought about it, for his un-filial talk which, in any case, was probably affected as part of his revolt against middle-class mores. He hoped just the same that his sons wouldn’t have occasion to speak so of him some day. His hand stole inside his jacket and felt around his chest in the vicinity of his heart. That little pain was at him again and his arm was beginning to feel numb, he was sure. Dr. Watkins had said he was sound as a dollar; there was absolutely nothing wrong with him except nerves. But John wasn’t at all sure. Doctors had been wrong before now. He sucked in his breath sharply, then belched. There, that was better. Sighing, he turned and went back into his study, regretfully leaving the beautiful morning outside. He wished now that he had gone with Lily to Georgetown. He had suggested it, thinking that perhaps he ought to share the burden of the visit to Mrs. O’Hara; in any case it was a nice day for a ride. But she had turned him down, rather decisively, now that he came to think of it. He had decided not to press the point—there were times when people preferred to be alone.

Not Jayne, evidently. She was one of those attention-demanders. She liked the feeling of being taken care of. Still, he had never

had the impression that she was especially fond of him and Lily. Odd, in a way, that Arthur should think of asking them to look out for her in his absence. He'd never done it before. Did Arthur have some special reason this time for wanting them to know he'd been suddenly called away?

Musing idly about this as he sat down again at his desk and rearranged his papers, and thinking about Lily's not wanting his company on her trip, it didn't take him long before he guessed at an explanation. He tried to dismiss it as nonsense but jealousy immediately pitched in, reminding him of one or two other bits of evidence—Lily's irritability lately, Arthur's avoidance of him the other day at the store. All in all, not more than a few seconds passed before he was convinced that he had hit upon the truth.

I wonder how long it's been going on, he thought to himself. Had anything yet happened? Or was it still in the stage of preliminary, pre-summit negotiation. He gave the inside of his cheek a sharp bite, this time reaching the loose piece, and his mouth filled with the silvery taste of blood. He found that, even though he had now for some time felt that the exertions of love were, if not, he hoped, beyond his capabilities, no longer worth the risk of suffering a heart attack, still he did loathe the idea that someone else might take his place with Lily.

But that was not being fair: Lily was still a comparatively young woman, presumably still with passion to spend. And who does not, at whatever time of life, want to be wanted? He couldn't expect his pretty Lily to live happily with him, two old maids, together with their books, their garden and their cat. He wouldn't even want her to: sexless women had always bored him.

It was necessary to be reasonable about this. Better men than he grew horns. He had, come to think of it, been the cause of a few himself in the past. Now he was getting no more than his just deserts.

And if it had to happen, he was glad it was Arthur. Arthur would not get above himself and begin looking down on John. Also, unless he was very much mistaken, there would certainly be

no tiresome question of a divorce—Arthur was good and married to Jayne. “Committed,” he believed was the word they used nowadays. Poor Lily! He hoped she knew what she was doing.

He wondered now if Arthur would be able to reach her somehow. He hated to think of her waiting somewhere watching the clock, worrying, thinking that Arthur had forgotten or not bothered to come. He debated whether to try to reach her at Pleasant Trees with some excuse or other. No, better keep out of it. Arthur would probably manage things somehow.

The burning sensation was back in the pit of his stomach. He needed another bicarbonate of soda.

In the mirror in the hall he stared at his long, furrowed face, his melancholy eyes, examined again the strange forked vein that zigzagged down one temple. Smiling grimly at his reflection, he hoped his horns would not become visible to anyone else besides those immediately concerned.

Lily arrived early at the Wooing Frog, the rustic but expensive restaurant on the slope of Mount Nestor where she had arranged to meet Arthur. Glancing about a trifle nervously, for she was afraid she might see someone she knew, she walked through the main rooms to a table out of doors on a balcony that projected perilously out over a turbulent mountain stream. She offered up a small prayer that its builders had known what they were about, or alternatively that it wouldn't collapse during lunch today, and sat herself down with her back as much as possible to the other tables. The usual magnificent view of the surrounding valleys and hills unrolled itself below. In flower boxes along the railings white petunias stirred in the softest of breezes; bees and butterflies were busy above them. The air smelled of sun-warmed pine.

In a comfortable maple armchair Lily would have been content merely to sit waiting for Arthur, hands folded, breathing in this delicious and relaxing scent but as the luncheon rush hadn't yet started the waitresses were restless and anxious to get early customers fed and on their way. Suspecting Lily of being a hanger-about, they hovered, paced to and fro, taking silver from here to there, splashing water meaningfully into glasses and smiling falsely, eyes lowered. To placate one Lily ordered some vermouth on ice.

Looking out, seeing a trout leap in the brook, she sighed with pleasure. What luck that it should be such a beautiful day! It was lovely to sit here quietly in the scented air, the afternoon still a delightful uncertainty, no dangerous or regrettable steps yet taken.

She was much more in control of herself, she thought, than she had been that other day when she and Arthur had met accidentally. She was not in the least suffering from a hangover and she had swallowed no pills—either to calm her down or (as the drug people called it) to elevate her mood. Her mood had, she thought, just the right amount of elevation. The visit to her mother had

gone well; she felt the sense of virtue that comes of having performed your duty before taking your pleasure.

As her brother Bob had told her, Mrs. O'Hara was in the midst of one of those inexplicable comebacks on the road to death that the old and ill sometimes stage. They were like those guests, she thought, who, constantly getting to their feet to say goodbye, can not bear to tear themselves away from the party, and perpetually sit down again for yet one more nightcap or cigarette.

This time, driving up to Pleasant Trees in mid-morning, Lily had found her mother in the garden, seated in one of those steely, implacable looking wheelchairs. In spite of her extreme emaciation she looked almost well today. Someone had taken trouble with her thick, white hair, arranging it prettily under a sort of blue mantilla, and her eyes, in spite of all the drugs she was undoubtedly pumped full of, seemed clear, their blueness emphasized by the scarf over her head. She took the bouquet of pansies that Lily had brought and buried the white waxy bone of her nose in them with a pleased smile.

"Pansies are for thoughts," she whispered. "How kind! You do think of Mother sometimes, don't you, Lily?" Her head sagged pathetically to the back of the chair and she gave her daughter a rueful look that accused her of neglect and also forgave her for it. This look both enraged Lily and aroused all her feelings of guilt to fever pitch.

She forced herself to smile. "Of course, Mother," she shouted, nodding violently to allow for her mother's deafness. "I think of you often."

"You don't come to see me very much."

Lily was silent. It was true, she supposed. A more truly devoted daughter would come more often, and spend whole days sitting at her mother's side. How wicked and selfish I am, how thoughtless, stony-hearted, lacking in compassion!

But evidently the old lady was disposed to be tolerant. "Well, I guess John keeps you pretty busy, doesn't he? I remember your father used to hate me to leave his sight for a minute after he retired." She tossed her head proudly.

"It does tie me down," Lily muttered.

"What?"

"I say, it does tie me down, having him home all day." What depths I am sinking to, Lily thought, adding lies to my other delinquencies. No one could be less demanding than John. I even manage to find time for infidelity, so far is he from tying me down.

But now the thought of her date with Arthur, instead of making her feel ashamed, as it should have if she had been a really good wife and daughter, was somehow salutary. It raised her spirits in the most exhilarating way. She felt armed by it against whatever shafts her mother might still have in store.

"You don't look very well," Mrs. O'Hara droned, looking at Lily in a pitying way. "Have you been taking good care of yourself? You haven't been drinking too much, have you, Lily?" She frowned at her daughter who immediately experienced again the feelings of a little girl who has been caught smoking.

"No, Mother," she protested, "of course not."

"Your eyes don't seem to sparkle like they used to."

Lily lowered them. They sat in silence for a few moments. The sound of voices from other groups drifted over. Here and there on the poison-green lawn white-garbed nurses walked or pushed malevolent-faced old women about. Lily fixed her gaze on the bunch of pansies in Mrs. O'Hara's pincers-like fingers. They jerked rhythmically, reflecting some disorder of the nerves.

"I suppose it's the Change," Mrs. O'Hara said finally.

Smiling with difficulty, Lily shook her head. "No, Mother, not yet."

"Oh, it's working, it's working," said the old woman quite happily, for there was nothing she liked better than a nice chat about female physiology. "You're old enough for it. Are you sure you haven't missed any periods yet? Come now, surely you have, tell Mother the truth!" With a roguish smile and eyes sharp as a district attorney's, the old lady peered at Lily.

"No, Mother, really I haven't." She shook her head again, violently. But why am I so anxious to deny it and spoil her pleasure? Why not let her mother believe what she wanted to believe? But

it was beyond her to strip herself of this last evidence of youth. It would be true soon enough.

"I'm sorry, Mother," she added idiotically, wishing to please.

"Your face is a little flushed," her mother said in triumph. "I remember how I used to suffer from hot flashes; why, the perspiration would pour off me, literally pour off me." She sighed in wonderment at the strange ways of nature. "Well, your time's coming soon, I can see that very clearly. I only hope you don't suffer as much as I did."

"They have drugs nowadays, I understand—"

"What's that?"

"I say, there are these new drugs they give you that seem to help."

"Nonsense," Mrs. O'Hara laughed merrily. "There's no fooling old Mother Nature, I tell you. These medicines they're always giving me, they don't do me a particle of good, I tell the nurses." Her morphine-bright eyes filled with tears of weakness. "Well, I guess nothing can help me now, I'm going fast. . . . I've worn out my welcome, I see that very clearly. I guess you won't be sorry when I'm gone, will you, Lily?"

Exasperated, her heart wrung, Lily took one of her mother's cold hands between her own and began to knead it gently. "Mother, don't talk like that, of course I will."

"Bob will be sorry, anyway," Mrs. O'Hara said. "He's so loving, so kind." Glaring at Lily, she snatched her hand away and got a Kleenex from the pocket of her kimono. She blotted her tears and wiped her nose, sniffing. "Did I tell you he was here yesterday? Oh, we had a lovely talk. He's such a dear boy, isn't he, Lily?" The thought of her son and first-born set off one of those swift, senile changes of mood and raised her spirits. Now she included Lily in her benevolence. "Oh, I'm blessed with two wonderful children." She took Lily's hand again and laid her head back in the wheelchair. The suspicious, shrunken blue eyes rolled up to meet the falling lids and she slept.

Thank God the old needed frequent naps, Lily thought. Stra-

tegic withdrawals, they might be called, temporary lulls in the never-ending battle to dominate their descendants. From even the shortest sleep they seemed to awake refreshed, wits resharpened, eager to resume hostilities. Grateful for the tiny truce, Lily sat back gingerly, careful not to disturb her hand in her mother's, instructing her muscles to relax and take advantage of this moment of peace. Allowing her eyes to wander she watched a woodpecker beat his head against the trunk of a white birch and wondered at his toughness. A well-nourished robin hopped along the lawn, stopping every few feet to listen. In front of Mrs. O'Hara he stabbed the grass with his beak and efficiently brought forth a large pink worm.

The old lady came awake with a great jump as if a gun had gone off at her ear; her eyes clicked open. The pansies fell to the ground and Lily stooped to get them.

"A little tired now," sighed Mrs. O'Hara. "Call the nurse, will you, dear? I feel like going to bed again."

The nurse came and Lily walked beside them to the door. She bent and kissed her mother goodbye. Now the terrible fecal smell of her disease was noticeable as it had not been before.

In the brilliant air of Mt. Nestor the smell came back in Lily's imagination. Her nostrils flared and she moved restlessly. Tables were beginning to fill up, she noticed, dragging her eyes away from the hypnotic running water below and looking about. Suddenly she began to feel conspicuous, sitting there, the only lone woman on the porch. Was it obvious to all that she was waiting for her lover? But of course not, she jeered at herself. If they noticed her at all, they would believe her to be waiting for a relative or friend, staid and female. No one suspected people of her age to have lovers. Anyway it was a silly word to use, wasn't it? Affected, overly romantic and literary, the kind of word you hardly ever heard spoken, at least in this country. In France did they still use it? *Amants, amis*, they were supposed to be standard equipment in France for every respectably married woman. But that, she thought, might be another of those myths perpetuated

to make American women feel inadequate, like the geisha-girl business. Now that she thought of it, the French women she had known all seemed far too busy keeping house to have energy left to conduct much of a love affair. Shopping twice a day for food, poking shrewdly at lettuces, sneering at the butcher's best cutlets, these activities surely left little time for extra-marital sex. Woman in America really had much more leisure for sin, if the truth were known, than Europeans. A pity infidelity was not the accepted thing—American women would quickly outstrip their European sisters as grandes amoureuses, directing toward love the fierce vitality they now wasted—well, expended—on working for charity.

Of course, not all women, she must remember, were so frivolous as she. Lots of them were constant-hearted, faithful, cleaving only to their husbands, eschewing those of others, untempted, it seemed, to stray.

Nice to be like that, Lily thought, quite glad she was not. How strange it was, though, that she had turned out not to be, after believing herself virtuous for so long! It was as Arthur had said, you don't really know what you're like, what you're capable of, till you're beginning to grow old. She commenced for the first time to anticipate with a mild curiosity the years ahead, wondering what other surprises she would give herself.

Where *was* Arthur, by the way? She glanced down at her wrist-watch. He was late. It was almost twelve-thirty. Still he had said *about* twelve, not exactly. Probably he had met with one or another of those delays that are a part of country living—the chewing of the fat with the local service-station man to insure his goodwill in case of real car trouble, or the truck loaded with logs that crept up the twisting hill roads and sped, impossible to pass, down straight ones. But really, he should have made an effort to be early so as not to keep her waiting. Lily found herself frowning. She sipped again at her vermouth and tried not to notice the activity around her.

Would Arthur suggest going back to their hillside after lunch? The trouble was that spontaneity would be lacking this time. It would be terribly embarrassing to set about those thoroughly ri-

diculous motions with malice aforethought, so to speak, and in the broad daylight, too. Premeditation, it seemed, was just as apt to throw a wet blanket over the fires of passion as to fan them.

But probably she was worrying for nothing. He might not find her so attractive today. She looked down at the rather staid shirt-waist dress she was wearing. She had chosen it purposely this morning, disdaining any special attempt to appeal to masculine senses. I do look dowdy, she thought. He'll probably wonder what on earth he ever saw in me. How terrible it would be if after lunch he made no move at all! Damn it, why had she gone and sabotaged herself with this matronly dress?

For some time she had been sipping melted ice, she noticed now. The vermouth in her glass was quite gone. Thinking that perhaps it might dispose of her worries, she beckoned to the waitress and ordered a martini. She did wish Arthur would put in his appearance; she had announced when she came in that she was expecting someone. Not, of course, that it mattered at all what anyone thought.

"He's real late, isn't he, ma'am," said the waitress vindictively, putting a very yellow martini down in front of Lily, spilling it slightly.

"Is he?" Lily frowned. In retaliation she said, staring at the drink, "Are you sure this is a martini, it looks frightfully like vermouth."

"No one else ever complains any," said the waitress raising her eyebrows at Lily, whom it was obvious she had written off as an alcoholic.

Touchy now, Lily decided she would finish up her cocktail and not wait any longer. What was Arthur thinking of, anyway? A dreadful idea now came to her. Could he have forgotten all about it? Instantly sure of this, she opened her pocketbook, got out some money which she laid on the table. She drank down the weak cocktail and got up.

As she was opening the front door to leave the Wooing Frog, she hoped forever, the lady who ran it called her back.

"Oh, ma'am? Are you Mrs. Dewhurst, by any chance?" She

nodded at the telephone she was holding. "There's a gentleman here says he wants to talk to you."

The telephone was on the wall next to the desk where the proprietress sat.

"Hello," said Lily.

"I'm in Portland," Arthur's voice said glumly.

"Portland? Whatever for?"

Another voice now came on. "Are you through, are you through?"

"No, no," Arthur shouted. "Don't cut me off. Are you still there, Lily?" His voice dropped and became inaudible except for a few words here and there. "—old bitch," she caught, and—"nursing home."

"I can't hear you," she interrupted, confused. What was it all about? Had he gone to Pleasant Trees for some reason? No, of course not, Portland, he'd said. What old bitch did he mean? Surely he couldn't be referring to Jayne, could he? "Do try to speak up," she said.

Suddenly his voice came loud and distinct in the receiver which she held jammed as tightly as possible against her ear. "Now listen, Lily, I'm sorry about not showing up," he said. "It's my mother; remember I told you about her?"

Light now dawned and disappointment filled her. She might have known he'd never say a word against Jayne. "Oh, yes, of course, what's happened?"

"Old fool's gone and cracked her skull open." Arthur's voice was harassed and worried. "They called me this morning. I tried to get hold of you but you'd already gone—"

"Never mind, Arthur, it's all right. I understand completely. I'm terribly sorry! The poor old lady! Well, perhaps it's for the best." It was what you said about the death of the old, wasn't it? Silly to pretend to be shattered by grief when a person who had long outlived her usefulness came to an end. On the other hand, you really couldn't say, "Well, thank heaven for that!" At least, not over such a public phone.

But Arthur laughed. "Don't go burying her yet," he said. "The docs are working on her now. One of them told me he was sure they'd be able to pull her through. Seems they have a new method of dealing with these skull cases and they couldn't wait to try it. Sanctimonious bastards! It's made their day for them! They're all busy as bees pumping penicillin into her and sending people out for more pints of blood!"

Lily giggled. What a louse Arthur was, she thought fondly.

"Thank God, mine turned out to be the wrong type," he continued, "or those Draculas would keep me on tap here for days!"

The proprietress's ears now seemed to be moving like fronds and her lips were drawn up tight and disapproving.

"How on earth did it happen, anyway, Arthur?" Lily asked, hoping to turn him aside from these irregular remarks and back to more or less straight narrative. "It does seem as if someone must have been awfully careless?"

"No, that was the first thing they hastened to tell me—that no blame attached to them. Afraid I'd sue, I suppose, the damn fools. Seems the old girl had one of her erotic attacks. There's a young orderly she's had her eye on—she got away from her nurse and made an allout dash for him, skirts up and yelling obscenities. Poor boy must have been scared to death. Luckily for him, before she reached him she slipped and fell down and knocked her head against one of those soft-drink machines."

"Good heavens!" Lily felt an almost irresistible desire to burst out laughing.

"She always did think she was some kind of femme fatale."

"There must be something I can do to help. Drop in and see Jayne, perhaps. I suppose you'll be staying in Portland for a while?"

"Afraid so," he said. "Lily, I'm awfully sorry about this— God-damn frustrating. Don't let it put you off, will you?"

But it had, somehow, of course.

He said, "We'll—uh—get together again?"

"Yes, of course." Her voice sounded crisp and brittle in her own

ears and she glanced over her shoulder. "Don't give anything here a single thought."

They were both silent. Faintly, as you did on telephones in the country, Lily could hear other voices conducting far-off conversations; then the operator came back again.

"Deposit another twenty-five cents, please."

"We're through now," Arthur snarled. "Goodbye, Lily."

"Goodbye," she said. Dully she put the receiver back on its hook. She thanked the proprietress, who nodded curtly, and walked out to the parking space. She got into her small sedan and drove off.

Wearing a pair of washed-out chinos and a clean but sweaty white shirt open at the neck, young Charles Dewhurst strolled down the shady back road to Leicester. Jacket slung over his shoulder, he stared about him as he walked. The sky was as he always remembered it,—summer soft, a gentle blue that seemed, like the cushiony white clouds, itself to move, here deepening, here fading. Every now and then he stopped to pluck a dusty blackberry from the bushes that lined the road. What a disappointing fruit they were, he thought, munching, both insipid and sour. But he continued to stop and pick them, partly because there was something soothingly bucolic about the act that was appropriate to the afternoon and partly to delay the moment of arrival at his parents' house.

His leave had unexpectedly been pushed forward. His mother and father wouldn't be looking for him for days yet. From a friend he had bought, at what he thought a very good price, an ancient but still serviceable sportscar and, all the way up from Boston, he had been anticipating the moment of his arrival. He'd sweep up to the door in the dashing red car, toot the expensive-sounding horn, and give his parents a lovely surprise. Instead of that, here he was, ignominiously tramping along on foot, like someone in an old-time novel. Some damn fool Adam-of-the-Road. For, panting up that steep climb just outside of Redding, the beautiful old car had suffered some sort of stroke. In a cloud of smoke and spewing forth a rusty fluid, it had just managed to drag itself to the summit and around the bend. How lucky, he thought, that the service station had been so close by: the car might have ruined itself if he'd pressed it on much further. As things were, the repair job was going to cost him a hell of a lot, he was afraid.

"How long will it take to fix it?" he had asked the mechanic, not really expecting an answer. The natives in this mountainous country were as superstitious as a remote tribe of Amazonian Indians.

They seemed to think it was bad luck to commit themselves on any question.

True to form, the mechanic shook his head hopelessly. "I'm straight out as 'tis," he groaned and leaning against the gas pump he had gone on to list several other pressing jobs on his agenda. Exasperated, Charles had seized the opportunity for a ride with a truck that had stopped for gas, announcing that he would return for the car next morning.

He could already hear what his father would say when he heard this story.

"Well, now," he would grunt, eyeing his son bleakly over the top of his glasses. "Of course, it's not for me to say how you conduct your affairs; you're a grown man now, one of 'Our Gallant Defenders,' ha, ha, eh? But I do wonder if you might not perhaps have looked the car in the mouth a bit more thoroughly before buying it. And I'm not saying it in a spirit of criticism, you do understand that, don't you, Son, but it does seem just to border on irresponsibility, leaving that valuable car with some completely unknown garage-man. Are you altogether sure he could be trusted?" Then his father would laugh, trying hard to restrain his pedagogic impulses, to be genial and fair, and say, "Well, I'm sure you've taken all that into account, haven't you?" and start nervously gnawing away at the inside of his cheek.

No, Charles thought gloomily, he'd just as soon postpone explanations as long as possible.

Coming around a corner he began the slight rise that led past Betty Levering's house. As he came up to it a blast of music rent the late afternoon quiet, startling a rabbit who leaped suicidally from under a lilac bush into the middle of the road and causing a flock of jays to take off excitably from their perch on the telephone wires overhead. Recognizing it as the beginning of the Bach D Minor Piano Concerto, Charles came to a halt. It was one of his favorites and he stood listening with pleasure. Perhaps, he thought, it might be all right for him to go around to the back

of the house to Miss Levering's studio where the music seemed to be coming from and where perhaps he could listen more comfortably, stretched out on the lawn. Also he could use a glass of cold, wonderful, Leicester water. Thinking of it, he felt the saliva immediately dry out of his mouth, leaving him with a raging thirst.

As he walked down the driveway past the side of the house, another sound joined in with the music in a kind of ruinous counterpoint. God, what was it? Had some itinerant smithy set up shop under an elm? For it sounded like someone beating on iron. He looked vaguely about but no one was to be seen. Drawing nearer, he realized now that the noise was coming from the house.

He turned the corner of the drive and peered through the glass wall of the studio. Here he saw the source of the noise. At a long worktable Miss Levering stood, her back to him, wielding with bare, muscular arm a hammer with which she struck, more or less in rhythm with the music, some indistinguishable object. There was no use knocking, he thought; with this racket going on she'd never hear him.

Remembering from childhood visits where the kitchen was, he went in, turned on the faucet in the sparkling-clean sink and got himself a glass of water fresh from the spring on the hill above the house. He drank it gratefully. Then he walked through to the studio and stood watching. Miss Levering was still hard at it.

How splendid she looked! Vigorous, shining with sweat, strong as a man but at the same time so completely female! How different from the girls he was used to, with their skinny loins encased in eternal Bermuda shorts. A cigarette hung from her lip and her eyes were squinted to avoid its smoke. She wore her hair pulled back from her face and piled with combs on the top of her head. He had forgotten what a beautiful color it was. Set off by the faded blue of her denim working clothes it glowed in the thin north light. Coming in from the ferny scented air outside, he was conscious of the different smell of this room. A mixture of smells,

rather, he thought, his nostrils flaring out in an effort to identify them. Hot metal, cigarette smoke, dust, and a background of some kind of fashionable perfume. He breathed it deeply, liking it.

Betty stopped hammering, took the piece of metal off the stone form and held it up, peering at it critically through the smoke of the cigarette. The Bach concerto sprang up in a beautiful fountain of sound as Charles came tentatively forward.

Looking up and seeing him, she detached the cigarette, threw it at an ashtray and laid down the metal object. "Who is it?" she said. She glared at Charles challengingly.

"It's Charles Dewhurst," he said, feeling rather frightened now. Perhaps he shouldn't have interrupted her. "Do you mind my coming, Miss Levering? I heard the Bach from the road and wanted—" He looked at her admiringly as she stood there in her worn blue skirt, her feet planted solidly on the floor. There was something monumental about her, he thought. She had a rare quality: an intensified presence; she seemed in a way to be *there* more than most people.

"But of *course!*" Betty cried. "Charles, I didn't recognize you at *all*. But, darling, you're a *man*, now, aren't you?" She came forward and gave him a hearty kiss. "How heavenly," she said. She smelled of sweat and cigarettes and that perfume—was it jasmine? He thought there was also a suggestion of gin. She might have had a martini for lunch.

Betty *had* had a martini for lunch. In fact, two. Her morning had not been pleasant. The alcohol had helped, and the orderly music and the hard work of hammering and creating, but she was still seething inwardly with wrath, frustration and pain. She felt like a wounded animal, wanting both to hide and to bite. The wound wasn't, she knew, mortal, being more to her pride than to anything deeper, but still, it was hard to bear.

It was a real help to see someone—even this gangling young Charles with his callow, unlined face.

But he had improved, she thought. She gave his cheek a little

pat of approval. His skin had emerged clear and golden and unscarred from its adolescent acne and his eyes, which she saw were the same warm brown as Lily's, had his father's intelligence and awareness.

"Come and sit down," she said and took his hand to lead him across the room. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! Is it too early to have a drink? I'm dying for one. You've no idea how depressed I am—" She fished a bent cigarette out of the pocket of her overall and stuck it in her mouth. "Oh, Christ, where did I put those matches?"

Charles quickly produced some and held the flame up to her. She inhaled deeply.

"But I don't want to interrupt your work," he said. "But I have already, of course, haven't I? I had no business coming in."

"Oh, I'm finished, finished," she cried. "I can't do any more today—I'm not working well."

"What are you working on?" he asked diffidently. He was looking around the room with curiosity.

"Just an experiment," she said vaguely, not feeling like explaining.

Charles nodded, accepting this. He paused before two nebulous figures, indistinctly entwined, carved out of pinkish marble. He ran his hand over them.

"It feels comfortable," he said and gave her a shy smile.

Betty was enchanted. How intelligent he was! "I'm glad it does. I call it 'Affection,' as a matter of fact."

Wandering about, inquisitive as a cat in a strange place, she thought, he came to another stop before an angular construction of wires and rods from which sprouted, here and there, random curly leaves of copper.

"I was trying to do something with space," Betty growled, forestalling questions.

He looked at it from all sides.

"How gay it is!" he exclaimed. "May I touch this one?" He examined it with seeming pleasure, like a child with a new toy.

He walked around it again. "It flows," he said, smiling. "It seems to shift, like a kaleidoscope."

Betty took her eyes off the construction and gave him a quick, suspicious look. She had a sharp nose for insincerity but Charles passed muster. He really did like it, she thought, pleased. How wonderful the young were, after all. So unhidebound, so receptive to new ideas.

"You've no idea how much good that does me," she told him. "Around here all I get are heavy-handed jokes about plumbing fixtures."

"But in the city?" Charles said. "The critics always say the most wonderful things about you."

"Those precious little bastards," said Betty, ungratefully. "Who can credit them? Anything they don't understand impresses them."

Charles shook his head, politely denying this.

"Tell me," Betty said, "how long have you been here in Leicester? Have you just arrived?"

Trailing after her as she poured some whisky into two tumblers, got some ice and water from the kitchen, he told her the story of the red sportscar.

"What revolting luck," she commented and he was encouraged to tell her about his reluctance to face his father. She threw her head back and gave her raucous laugh at his little imitation of John Dewhurst's judicial airs.

Charles was cute, she thought. Really, he might be any age. He didn't talk at all in that irritating, half-polite, half-patronizing way so many young men used for their elders,—well brought up young men, that was, she thought.

Which let out Lee-roy, of course. The persistent memory of this morning's meeting with him hopped back, flea-like, to the fore of her mind. What a real bastard he was! She was well rid of him, she told herself, smiling at Charles as he talked and sipping her drink. Yes, well rid of Lee-roy and his greasy pompadour, his hayseedy accent, and his blank, sexy eyes.

How long would it take her to get over this one, she asked her-

self glumly as she listened to Charles's pleasant remarks and fed him little questions, little comments.

Not of course that this was anything at all comparable to the thing with Harold, being only a question of hurt pride. Still, it *did* hurt. At times like this she wished she were not such a lone wolf. Not that she wanted to be one of those blabber-mouthed females who kept everyone filled in, like prurient newscasters, on all details of their love lives, exhibiting their spiritual wounds for your sympathy like professional beggars. It would be handy to have a confidante, though,—some indulgent, broad-minded confessor. In the old days Medusa had served the purpose. Before Harold, that was, and before Medusa herself had become so queer.

"I suppose I should have stayed with the car till it was fixed, shouldn't I?" said Charles.

"What?" said Betty, getting control of her obsessive thoughts. "Oh, darling, no, of course not. Stay in that dreary mountain-top garage all night? Don't worry, nothing will happen to your car. One thing about the natives around here, they're far too backward to be dishonest. Look, Charles, I've got the most marvelous idea! Why don't you stay here? I can drive you back to the garage in the morning and you can show up at home later in the day as if you've just arrived in town. John and Lily need never know a thing about it."

Charles looked dubious. "I couldn't do that," he demurred. "Make so much trouble for you. But thank you—it's awfully nice of you, Miss Levering." He gave her his shy smile.

His broad, bony face wasn't exactly handsome, she thought, but it was certainly attractive. And what a pleasure it was to see the light of intelligence in a young man's eyes!

"Are you afraid of what people might say?" Betty flashed a teasing grin at him. He shook his head rapidly, politely, to deny it.

"Not a soul would know," she urged. "I'm free as a bird to-night. I'll cook you a marvelous dinner—I'm a wonderful cook—and afterward you can listen to some more music or go right to bed. You must be tired."

It would be fun, she thought, getting excited about the idea. Rather one in the eye for Lily if she should find out later—but that was all to the good, in a way. In the meantime, it would keep Betty's mind off her own troubles. She was feeling far too restless and miserable to stay here alone this evening and the thought of seeing any of her usual friends, who knew her so well, filled her with irritation. It got depressing always to be with people who had each other's number so damned thoroughly. Charles's advent was heaven-sent, really.

Not of course that she had any designs on him—that would really be too outrageous. Certainly no one would suspect her of harboring any such notion. No, it was merely the pleasure of Charles's company she wanted—. He was someone new. He would be able to divert her.

"Do please stay," she cooed, throwing all her charm into the words. "I can't tell you how much it would mean to me." Her voice took on a keening note, musical and persuasive. "I've had the *most* terrible thing happen to me today. I feel so sunk, I don't know what I'll do if I have to be alone this evening. Do please take pity on me!"

Charles hesitated. Obviously confusion afflicted him. Betty, sitting on the sofa, distractedly passed the palm of her hand across her forehead, then reached up and plucked the tortoise shell combs and hairpins from her hair so that it fell in shining waves about her shoulders.

"God, that feels better! I hope I'm not in for a headache."

Charles still seemed unable to make up his mind.

Betty threw up her head mournfully. "No, of course you won't stay—how stupid of me to ask—you must have all sorts of irons in the fire—girls that are dying to see you—" She let her voice trail off into a throaty whisper and smiled sadly at Charles.

He began to blush. "No, no," he protested, "of course not. I haven't planned a thing. Do you really mean I wouldn't be a nuisance?"

"You'll be an answer to prayer," she cried gaily. "Then it's set-

tled." She took a deep breath. "Now tell me, what do you like better—chicken or veal? I do a veal and cheese thing that is absolutely heavenly. Do you like garlic?"

"I should," Charles said, "I was raised on it. Mother believed plenty of garlic was all you needed to be a Cordon Bleu. As a child in Boston I was known for blocks around for my terrible breath. Shunned by all, never invited to parties, I was on the verge of having to go to a child psychologist for treatment when father decided he could afford to have a cook. But, please, don't go to a lot of trouble. And tell me what I can do to help. I'm very good at tasting things and making encouraging noises."

"You shall, darling, when the time comes," said Betty. "But let's just sit a while, shall we, it's still early. It would be nice to go outside but perhaps it's better to stay in. Someone might come along—" Betty flashed him a mischievous grin and rolled her pale blue eyes. "Oh, I can't tell you how wonderful you are to stay with poor Betty!"

Charles said, "'Poor Betty,' nonsense! You know perfectly well it's *you* taking pity on *me*!"

He was still a little embarrassed by the situation, she thought, and doing his best to appear grown-up and relaxed. His voice had a sort of crack to it, a roughness that she found most appealing. It hadn't quite healed, perhaps, from its youthful break. The sound of it quite disarmed her.

How would he be as a confidant, she wondered. He was still young enough to be honorable about repeating things and he was, she believed, already sympathetic to her. She knew the signs—the sweet, eager look in his eyes, which surely was quite uncalculated, told her he'd automatically be on her side. Really, it would be like telling a stranger.

She looked at him tragically from beneath the sweep of her pomegranate hair. "If only you knew what happened to me today!"

Charles looked fascinated but said nothing. Undoubtedly he'd been told not to pry into people's private concerns. What a nu-

sance good manners could be! Betty gave a melodramatic sigh and said, "But you can't possibly be interested in my sordid affairs. You're far too young and good."

Charles laughed. He wasn't altogether unsophisticated, evidently. "All right," he said. "I'm dying to know. What happened?"

Betty shrugged and leaned back against the sofa, staring at the glass in her hand for a moment. She took a long drink out of it, then spoke in light, slurred tones. "Oh, the usual thing of course, pet—a man. What else?"

"He was—unkind to you?" Charles's gruff voice was nicely diffident.

Betty gave vent to a rather grim yelp of laughter. Unkind! What a word that was to describe Lee-roy's tough, brutal approach to life! But, she reminded herself, life had at least one uppercut ready and waiting for him in return.

"Yes," she said, "I guess you'd call it that." To her astonishment tears welled up in her eyes. Christ, she thought angrily, do I have to be this realistic? Embarrassed, she turned away, but young Charles had seen. He took her empty glass out of her hand and went with it to get more whisky. The drink he placed in front of her when he returned, she noticed with satisfaction, was a good dark brown. It was another sign of his intelligence.

"Thank you, Charles." She took a small sip. It wouldn't do to give him the idea she was some goddamn lush. "God," she said, "I must look a wreck." The young, sympathetic or not, were apt to be awfully critical about how you looked. She got up and peered at herself in the gilt-framed mirror that hung over a rack of sculpturing tools, blinking her eyes to take away the redness. Not too bad, she thought, and gave her face a quick dab with the dirty puff of a compact she kept on a shelf. She fluffed out her good thick hair and turned back to Charles. "Well, the hell with it," she grinned.

"You look wonderful," he said. "Really."

Betty sat down heavily on the sofa again and picked up her glass. She stared broodingly ahead of her.

Charles said, in a rallying tone, "Come on, now, tell me about it."

She glanced at him, tempted again. She sat in silence for a moment, hunting out the words she would use. A sentimental Tchaikovsky-ish record was playing now, reminding her vaguely of movics she had seen.

"I suppose you'd find it awfully shocking, wouldn't you," she asked finally, "that I should have been—in love—with someone I could never marry?" It was better, she thought, to fantasize a bit, the young being so prudish. Though from all accounts they spent a hell of a lot of time thinking about sex and how it could be obtained, still they were apt to be disapproving of it too. They liked to dress it up in the chiffon folds of romance. Charles, she judged, would find the story of a fat, old woman fornicating with a young farmhand a bit too gamy to swallow without gagging. He'd be much more apt to be sympathetic with the idea of lovers kept apart by malign fate. Yes, ambiguity was the better part of honesty.

Charles protested that *of course* he wouldn't find it shocking. He would be too polite, she knew, to press her for details. Very likely he was already supplying his own, building her up in his mind as the noble, long-suffering mistress of a graying, ruthless captain of industry irrevocably tied to a wife whom he had long since outgrown but who was either a Catholic or hopelessly insane.

"He was," she continued, throwing a tiny sop to truth, "one or two years younger than I."

Charles blinked his nice brown eyes understandingly.

"But we were very happy together—oh, for some time, though there were endless difficulties about meeting. The whole thing had to be kept so utterly secret. . . . Of course I hope you don't think I would have cared in the least if it had become public—you know ordinary conventions don't mean a thing to me, don't you?" She smiled deprecatingly at Charles who nodded enthusiastically. "But you understand it would have been quite ruinous for him if it had come out. . . . You do swear you'll never breathe a word of this, don't you, Charles?"

Charles agreed solemnly. Evidently it had not struck him yet that there were very few facts he could divulge. Betty continued.

"In spite of all this I was terribly happy, living is a fool's paradise, of course. Till this morning. I went—uh—he came to me here—I wasn't expecting him at all—not until this evening. Out of the clearest sky he told me that it was all over, that we were never going to meet again. This would be the last time for us." Betty lowered her eyes modestly to indicate a veil drawn over love's ardors and heard Charles give a long, trembling sigh. Poor lad, she thought, his imagination was by now working feverishly, making up all the expurgated details.

"I really thought I should die right then and there. But of course one doesn't, does one? Much as one would like to cut one's throat, one doesn't." Betty fluttered her eyelids and hoped she wasn't overdoing things. She was getting to sound like some high-toned British film star; she'd better watch it. It was probably the liquor.

As a matter of fact, if she'd had a knife handy she just might have cut Lee-roy's throat, the uncouth lout. Rage attacked her anew, thinking of him. The truth was he'd been maddeningly elusive lately and she'd been missing his attentions badly. After a restless night, she had made up her mind this morning to go look for him on the remote farm where he worked. They'd met there before occasionally—behind a fold in a high meadow.

He was, as she had hoped, working alone. Driving a tractor across the stony field, his shirt off, his splendid torso glistening in the morning sun, he was, to her, a sight for sore eyes. She'd stood by her car for a moment watching him in anticipatory pleasure before drawing herself to his attention.

He came to a halt then and descended like some shambling backwoods Apollo from his perch. He stood there grinning down at her from his superior height, pretending in his stupid, oafish way not to know why she had come.

"Want some hay mowed, lady?" he asked in his damn-fool cracker-box drawl. "Can't get nobody else to do it for you? Hey?"

She had to stand and watch him as he died laughing over his own wit. Fighting down the urge to punch his handsome nose, she had managed to go on smiling, suffered him to swat her on the buttocks. After a searching look about the landscape, he led her up the hillock and into the hollow below. Here he had performed with his usual prowess.

"I give satisfaction, ma'am?" He'd asked conceitedly as he rolled his weight off her.

"You're a wonder, darling," she had said not wanting to offend him. But now that her body had been pacified she found his manure-smell disgusting and the greasy fall of his cherished pompadour revolting. She was anxious to get back to work. Getting up she dusted grass off her clothes and smiled absently down at him, a lady taking her leave. He went on lying there.

"Well, make it last, ma," he said, a nasty look of triumph in his smallish eyes. "There won't be no more."

Betty became conscious that she was hitting the table in front of her with a clenched fist. Charles was regarding her worriedly. Some of her drink had spilled on her skirt. "Oh, God," she said, "if only I didn't get so upset."

"He must be a complete scoundrel," Charles said severely. "What did he mean? Had he found another woman?"

Betty frowned. Damn it, there was no point in having Charles believe her a pathetic cast-off. "Of course not," she snapped. "There's nobody else. I know that, believe me." As she made this statement she stared, with some rebuke, into Charles's eyes, which were now, she noticed, thoroughly bemused. "He had to do it. There are—family reasons. You understand?"

Charles said, hastily, "Of course. I see," and looked respectful.

Stashed away behind the discreet bars of the fashionable sanatorium, the hopelessly insane wife had now, perhaps, miraculously recovered, another triumph for the new drugs? Betty watched him as, in a tactful silence, he sat, legs crossed, fiddling with the ice in his glass and regarding a spider who was making his way up

the leg of the pale-green coffee table. Her thoughts returned to Lee-roy in the meadow. Surprising as it was to remember, she had actually laughed when he had made his insulting statement.

“Don’t be tough, darling,” she had told him lightly. “It doesn’t suit your bucolic charm. You know I couldn’t possibly do without you. Come around tonight, hmm, you’ve played hard-to-get long enough, now. Around eleven, okay?” She had blown him an airy kiss and turned to go.

Lee-roy, still lying on the grass, got out his comb and ran it through his hair. “I said, it’s the last time. You’ve had all of me you’re going to get.” He grinned at her again in that patronizing way. “Gotta save myself for my bride. I’m getting married—tomorrow.”

Betty came to a halt. “Well,” she jeered, “I never. So you’re tying yourself down, are you? And who’s the lucky girl? And what’s the big hurry, anyway? Have you gone and knocked her up, you bad boy?”

She had forgotten Lee-roy’s puritanical strain.

“I don’t fool around none with a girl I respect,” he said with a stupid look of virtue. “Always plenty of others ready and willin’ to spread their legs.” He leered up at Betty’s from where he lay. “Younger than you, too,” he had added, consideringly. “No, ma’am, I’ve never laid a finger on my girl, nor nobody else has either. She keeps herself to herself. Yeah, aim to have myself a right good time my weddin’ night.”

What a really repulsive creature he was, Betty thought. How could she ever have stood him? The chill of loss, the humiliation of being discarded in this insensitive way, had not yet begun to set in. She said lightly, “The advantages of sleeping with a virgin are not always what they’re said to be. And who is this paragon of virtue?”

“Huh?”

“I said, who’s the girl? And where have you been keeping her?”

He smiled smugly. “Had my eye on her ever since she was no bigger’n a pint of cider. Always liked her. Folks always said Honey

aimed to stay an old maid. I figured different. Jest waitin' for the right time to come, that's all. Honey could pick and choose, I said, and I aimed to be there when she got around to choosin'!" Lee-roy grinned fatuously. He sprang to his feet.

"Honey? You don't mean Honey Potts, do you?" asked Betty, hardly able to believe her ears. God, how wonderful!

"Uh, huh. Works in the Post Office."

"I'll be damned," said Betty. She threw back her head and laughed heartily. What an ass he was, she thought, to let a little thing like Honey pull the wool over his eyes. Well, she'd soon set him straight!

"What's the joke?" said Lee-roy, frowning.

Betty opened her mouth to tell him about how thoroughly he had been taken in. Then something made her close it again. Poor Honey, she found herself thinking. Why make things harder for her? It was true that she had been a little fool to get involved with a married man, and with, of all married men, William. Anyone looking at him and Cora should know there was absolutely no chance of splitting them up. Honey undoubtedly deserved all the inconvenience that came of her carelessness. In general, the plight of the unmarried mother bored Betty to death and she would never have dreamed of giving a nickel to any charity that tried to do anything about it. Any girl who got herself into that spot was an incompetent to whom society owed little and who should expect little back.

Nevertheless Betty knew she'd never be able to look herself in the face if she spilled Honey's beans. Honey was evidently doing her best to solve her problem without asking help from anyone. Marriage was the intelligent solution. Since she couldn't marry the father of her child, someone else would have to do. Lee-roy might even make her happy eventually. They had a common background; he was one of her own kind. And, Betty thought, insensitive dolt though he was, she'd rather take him on in Honey's position than give herself and her coming child over into Cora's hands.

"What's so funny?" Lee-roy insisted.

"Nothing," she said. "Just the idea of you marrying—it amuses the hell out of me. You shouldn't be privately owned, you know. It's a shame. They should set you up as a public utility."

"Very funny."

"Well, congratulations anyway. You're getting a very pretty girl."

"Sure am." Insolently he looked her up and down from her dyed hair to her heavy legs planted sturdily on the ground. "Not that we didn't have some great times, though, hey? You're all right," he told her kindly. "A good-looking woman for your age. But's about time I got me some young flesh."

If only she could erase now the memory of his patronizing smile! Resolutely, she looked at Charles. He was watching her with concern. How lucky Lily was to have him! Damn it, she thought, how lucky anyone was to have anyone! God, it was hell to be old and alone; why hadn't she realized sooner what it would be like? If only she had!

Angrily she picked up the glass of whisky that was sitting in front of her and as she drank was appalled to feel tears again welling up in her eyes and coursing uncontrollably down her face. The alcohol, her upset state of mind and young Charles's sympathy had combined, she realized, to make her maudlin. "How stupid of me," she croaked, half laughing, half sobbing. "Do forgive me, Charles, I'll stop in a minute."

Blotting her gushing eyes with a crumpled, grayish handkerchief she found in her pocket, she felt Charles's hand giving her shoulder tentative little pats. Absorbed in trying to stop her ridiculous weeping, she leaned toward him to show that she was grateful. His arm seemed to slip quite naturally around her shoulder and blindly she turned her set face toward him and hid it against the warm flesh of his neck. She felt him place a childish, comforting kiss on her cheek. So, from time to time, he must have comforted his mother.

"It's all right," said Charles. "Go ahead and cry. I don't mind."

But Betty no longer felt so much like crying. The summery,

young male smell of Charles, the roughness of his whiskers as they brushed her face turned her mind to other pastimes. She tried to fight down her resurgent desires but soon decided they were too strong for her, for though she still had many good impulses she had gradually formed the habit of getting the better of them. Excitedly, fearfully (for there was a very good chance that she might be rebuffed if she did not work with the greatest care) she made the first tentative plays in the old, familiar game. She heard Charles give a little gasp of surprise and she became still, waiting anxiously to see if he would withdraw from the contest. But, perhaps not knowing quite how to do anything else, he stood his ground. With a smooth, expert movement of her bountiful hips she made it quite clear to him that his sympathy mustn't stop with a kiss on the cheek.

"Charles, darling," she breathed reproachfully when under her unobtrusive guidance they had progressed so far along the way that surely there could be no turning back. "Charles, what are we thinking of," she said in a dying voice. As he shrank away nervously, her hands reassured him and drew him closer. The serviceable old sofa creaked only faintly as she made herself more accessible to his rather awkward approach.

Unheard in the background another record plopped down on the turntable. In after years Charles never could remember why it was that Chopin always made him feel so strange.

During the night the temperature rose in Leicester. The slight increase in heat was enough to waken a good many people, particularly those of that age at which sleep had become only a nodding acquaintance.

Lily was lucky. Sick of being with herself, nervous and irritable over not seeing Arthur, plagued by her conscience which had again started to carry on in the most shrewish way, she had vindictively swallowed two large sleeping pills. Her body dealt with the warmth by kicking off the blanket while, slugged by the pills, she remained happily unconscious.

In the next room John woke shortly after two o'clock. His pillows were soggy with sweat. He tossed off his covers and tried hard to keep his mind a blank but it was no use. Almost instantly he began to worry about Lily and Arthur, putting them in scene after scene in which they performed the act of love. In seedy hotel bedrooms, in automobiles, in bosky dells, they worked tirelessly, at a pace that would have exhausted less shadowy creatures, driven on by his nocturnally inflamed imagination.

When he had tortured himself past endurance, he rose and, soundless on bare feet, made his way in the dark to the door of Lily's room. It might be that she too was awake and unhappy. They might lie together and comfort each other. He approached her bed and peered down at her where she was whitely visible in the light that came into the room from the stars. She lay uncovered; her nightgown had ridden up to expose her fat and pretty thigh and she looked drained out as if by love. She breathed heavily through her delicate, convex nose, obviously deeply absorbed in sleep.

He hovered over her for a moment, put a hand out to touch the tousled amber hair, then withdrew it. He stood for a minute biting the inside of his cheek, then turned and left. Back in his own room he snapped on his bedside lamp and took up a copy

of "The Guermentes Way." Proust could generally be relied upon to put you to sleep. You gave yourself over to the swell of his sentences like a suicidal swimmer till at last they closed over your head and you slept.

It didn't work tonight though. As he read on he did indeed forget Lily and Arthur in the intricacies of Proustian sentence structure but a new anxiety was making itself felt. He became conscious of a queer feeling of distention. Although he had just visited the bathroom he got up and went back. It didn't seem to be that, though. The full feeling was not to be relieved. God help him, could he have a tumor?

He got the bicarbonate of soda out of the medicine cabinet, mixed himself a dose and was able to bring up one or two satisfying belches. Feeling slightly more comfortable, he returned to bed. As he read doggedly on the room filled with the smell that rises from the ground at dawn in late summer, the sad, troubling smell that comes from decaying flowers, stubble decaying in the fields, weeds gone drearily to seed.

It was dark and quiet at Cora's house but she and William were awake. In the wide double bed that was, more than passion, responsible for their large brood of children, they lay side by side pretending sleep.

Really it was ridiculous of them, Cora thought, to be thus exhausting themselves instead of building up the energy they needed for tomorrow's tasks—and all over a trifling bit of fornication, a little slap-and-tickle that would have amounted to nothing, just nothing, if poor, stupid William hadn't gone and lost his head. Irritably she turned over from her left side to her right, forgetting that it made her neck and arm hurt to lie on that side. Those arthritic cervical disks had been giving her hell off and on for a year now. The doctor kept telling her she should wear one of those ghastly metallic collars to keep her head immobilized but she was certainly not going around looking like the Tin Woodsman at this juncture of her life. William's eye was wandering quite enough

as it was. She gave an exasperated sigh and swung over onto her back.

She did wish William would come to his senses. But the worrying thing was that there was no sign of it yet. Instead, he was becoming more and more peculiar. Really, it was all she could do to keep her patience. Where formerly he had been docile and sweet-tempered, now he was recalcitrant and morose. He refused any longer to discuss the situation, saying, in fact, that it was none of her goddamned business, that he'd appreciate it if she'd keep her hands off. He would work things out in his own way.

Cora couldn't imagine how. The fact was (she had had to face that a long time ago) that William had very little gray matter to work with; what he would have done without her all these years she hadn't the least idea.

So there was no reason at all for him to look at her as he'd taken to doing lately. As if he hated her. Which of course was too silly and dramatic for words.

Really, Cora couldn't think why it was *women* who were said to be so trying at this time of life. Men, heaven knew, were far more difficult. She supposed the thing was they weren't so used to being the victims of their bodies as women were. When their hormones began acting up in odd ways, they just couldn't take it. Here *she* was, having now missed two periods, feeling so tense and keyed up she was just about ready to jump out of her skin, but she still managed to carry on cheerfully.

Well, she must just continue to do so, to be patient and firm and gay, and pretty soon the whole absurd affair would blow over and all her ducks would be nicely in a row again.

The grandfather clock downstairs in the hall tolled three times and shortly after she felt William get out of bed. She heard him pad through the darkness and followed him in her mind to the liquor cabinet. The poor darling had rather stepped up his drinking lately, but Cora thought on the whole that it wasn't a bad idea. People who drank rarely got around to more positive action.

Coming back upstairs a long time later he fell over a ladderback

chair outside, making a good deal of noise and waking up the children. Footsteps began to patter through the house, toilets were flushed, and in the nextdoor bedroom Teresa began to moan and cry.

Old Mrs. Brown was the only one in the house who slept on. Cora believed it was only kind to see that the poor dear, who had so little in life, had at least a good sleep at night, so she habitually laced her mother's bedtime ounce of whisky, ordered by the doctor, with a lavish slug of barbiturate.

When William landed heavily back in bed, causing it to rock and bounce sluggishly, he filled the room with the smell of liquor. He began to snore almost instantly. Cora knew it was most unlikely that she'd get much sleep the rest of the night. Every now and then she said in her rippling, ladylike tones, "William darling, do be quiet," and placed a sharp kick in the small of his back but it did absolutely no good at all. He had gone beyond her.

Across the valley Jayne Herendeen too awoke, feeling hot and uncomfortable in her neat twin bed. She lay for a while trying to keep her mind a blank, hoping that sleep would return, but it did not. She remembered that she was alone in the house and became frightened. She hated to be alone at night, especially here in the country. The country stillness made her nervous. Her imagination spread out before her the dark grounds outside and peopled them with sinister male figures who prowled about, silently trying doors and peeping through curtains in the hope of seeing her unclothed. Somewhere in the old house a board or a piece of furniture creaked and Jayne's heart began to pound.

She groped for the lamp on the table between the two beds and snapped it on. Fearfully she gazed about the room but all seemed normal. No skulking rustic started up from the shadows. The silky draperies hung undisturbed in their careful folds. Gradually Jayne's heart resumed its normal rhythm. Still, it was horrid being alone. She wished now she had gone with Arthur to Portland but, as he had said, she could be of no use there and waiting around

the hospital would be a distressing experience for her. She would be better off here in her comfortable house.

If only Arthur's mother would die! She was the most terrible expense to them. Arthur wouldn't hear of putting her in a cheaper place; so there was all that money going out month after month, just as if it made the slightest difference to the batty old thing where she was.

Still, it was certainly better than having her at home, heaven knew, a burden and an embarrassment to them all. Her last year of living with them in New York had really been frightful—one alarm after another over the old woman. For, besides being incontinent, the disgusting creature, she had been able, in spite of all precautions, to elude her nurse and her family's watchful eye and escape from the house just about whenever she wanted. "Grandma's gone again!" the children would shriek with excitement, going into her room for a visit and finding the old bird flown once more. And what a time it was finding her!

Jayne, remembering, gave her little giggle. She got out of bed, pulled down the blanket and folded it neatly at the foot. She fluffed up the pillows and smoothed the beautifully monogrammed sheets which she ironed so carefully herself, trusting no one else to do it. From a thermos bottle on the table she poured a glass of water and watched herself drink it in the mirror over the mantelpiece across the room. A slight, childish figure, she thought bemusedly, with creamy skin and an aureole of black curls. From this distance and covered up by her high-necked frilled nightgown her deformity did not show. She walked over to the mirror and stared with pleasure into her deep blue eyes. How enormous they were! Ever so much larger than Medusa's had been. And she didn't have to load her lashes down with mascara to make them look thick.

But why think about Medusa? She knew what everyone thought—that Arthur had married her as second-best—but it simply wasn't true. Who should know better than she? Jayne smiled

secretively at herself in the looking-glass. Arthur had told her a thousand times if he had told her once that she was far more beautiful than Medusa had ever been.

I wonder what she looks like *now*, she thought suddenly, and was seized again by the horror of death, picturing her own face, so like Medusa's, beginning to disintegrate, to deliquesce, all alone deep down there in that terrible box. She shivered. A good thing she hadn't let that Miss Nash put Harold over on her. A fine thing that would have been—him forever underfoot, a constant reminder of Medusa. She must have been out of her mind to consider it even for a moment. She giggled, remembering how neatly she had side-stepped out of the situation.

Gazing at herself, she let her perfect lips open invitingly, fluttered her heavy black lashes and practiced looking up under them sideways. What a pity it was Daphne and Melinda were so plain. They took after Arthur's side of the family, the poor dears. Well, perhaps brains were better than beauty. Giving herself a last affectionate smile, she turned back to the bed just as the telephone beside it began to ring.

Who in the world could be calling at this hour? Had something happened to one of the girls? Frowning, she picked up the receiver.

But of course it was Arthur.

"Well, she's gone," he said flatly, without preamble.

"Gone!" cried Jayne, startled and confused. Had old Mrs. Herendeen broken loose again, cracked skull and all? "Gone where?"

Arthur gave a loud guffaw. "Who knows where," he said. "I was speaking euphemistically, my middle-class background cropping out. I mean, she's dead."

"Oh," said Jayne. Well, that was more like it. "I thought you meant she'd skipped off to some bar again." She giggled.

"Let's hope she'll find one in heaven," he said. "I'm awfully sorry to wake you up, darling. I suppose I should have waited till morning, let you sleep. But I guess I had more filial feelings left

than I thought. I feel kind of shaken, you know? I got worrying about you, too. Just wanted to hear your voice. Listen, are you all right, beloved? How's your back?"

Jayne shifted her weight from one foot to the other. There it was, that twinge of pain.

"Not too bad," she said. "I've been wakeful, though. I do hate it being alone. I get such awful thoughts. It's so frightening, Arthur."

"I know, darling, I wish I were there with you," he said.

She sat down on the bed. There was a silence. Jayne knew what was coming. Arthur would expect her to go to the funeral and of course she should. She supposed there was no question about that. But what a nuisance it was! Still, she realized what people would say if they heard she was sitting here in Leicester while Arthur, all alone in Portland, went through all the horrid business of burying his mother.

The thought of leaving her beautiful house and going off to assist him made her shudder with revulsion. Her heart was beginning to pound again.

"I could start out now and drive to Leicester and pick you up," Arthur was saying. "I know you hate the thought of it but I would like to have you with me on this. Do you think you could possibly face it? It'll all be as simple as possible."

Jayne sighed. She hesitated. If only she had said right away that her back was worse, that she could hardly walk around the house, much less go to a funeral. Her mind wriggled about for an excuse but she could think of none.

"All right, Arthur," she said in a faint voice. "Of course you mustn't be alone."

"Thank you, dearest," said Arthur. "I'll make it all as easy for you as I can. By the way, I've called up the camp. They said they'd put Daphne and Melinda on a bus in the morning."

They talked for a few minutes more about arrangements and then Jayne hung up. Frowning, she swung her legs onto the bed and between the smooth sheets. How annoying it was! She had

had it in mind to give the dining-room a good turning-out tomorrow; those chairs could take a much higher polish than Mrs. Harfield gave them last time. She had looked forward to showing her just how to go about it.

Now death had crept dirtily into her nice clean house, spoiling everything. She'd been feeling so happy lately, too. For hours at a time she had been able to forget her mutilation and what it might mean. Now fear was back in her. She could feel her breath coming short and her stomach muscles tightening.

But the doctors had said she was perfectly all right. There was absolutely no reason for her to be afraid. She must get control of herself, think of something else. Resolutely she pulled away the hand that had strayed to her breast and picked up a book that was lying on the bedside table. The lady in the bookstore had recommended it highly. It was very entertaining, very risqué, she had told Jayne. "A lusty, surging tale, rich with the bawdy, brawling flavor of Elizabethan days," it said on the jacket.

Jayne adjusted the light and settled herself comfortably against the pillows. She liked to read a good book now and then.

As the uncomfortably warm air seeped through the windows of her bedroom Betty Levering fought hard against returning to consciousness. It was no use. Sleep romped off heartlessly, leaving her stranded, awake and alone, on her huge bed. She kicked off her blanket viciously and turned over to lie facing the window. Her eyes continued to feel sleepy but her brain was beginning to turn over relentlessly, anxious to fill her in on all that had taken place the night before.

Damn it all to hell, Betty thought as the finger of consciousness kept tapping at her. All right. I'm awake. What is it this time? What outrage have I committed now?

Charles.

She groaned, moved her head back and forth, searching for some comfort from the rumpled pillows.

Through long practice, Betty had learned to accept her more

reprehensible acts with something less than despair. Long ago she had become accustomed to her falls from grace. (Falls? That was too passive a word to express the way she behaved. Tumbles? Even that sounded too involuntary. Flights, perhaps?) Yes, she supposed she was well used now to dealing with her flights from grace so they didn't cause her too much suffering. She could usually make short work of any stupid guilt feelings that came sucking around.

The so-called sins of the flesh—what, after all, did they amount to? It wasn't as if she were cruel or unkind to anyone.

At least Charles wasn't lying here beside her. That would really have been embarrassing. Thank God, she'd had the sense not to try to drag things out all night. She had shown him to the guest-room after dinner like a real lady, just as if nothing had happened.

Still, it had.

Now, as she stared with inflamed eyes into the darkness of this debilitating, pre-dawn hour Betty found the job of justifying herself less easy than usual. Her brain refused to follow instructions, began arguing and making difficulties. The very fact that she had been able, in the past, to find guilt so easily bearable, now seemed, in itself, impossible to forgive.

Christ, she thought, she'd certainly come a hell of a long way from that serious-minded young girl who had first and (it was comical to remember it) with so many high romantic notions parted with her virginity for the love of—God, what *was* his name again? She could remember his face, of course—he'd been a handsome bastard. And his marvelous body, she'd never forget that. An easy mark she had been for him with his corny talk about marriage being the death of love.

As she lay thinking of that young girl, Betty, for the second time in so short a period, was conscious of wanting to weep. How horrible it was, this waking in the early morning hours! Your life-force was at its lowest ebb, they said; everything seemed utterly hopeless. The tired body, caught helpless in its bed as a bug on its back, was no match at all for the coldly rational pessimism of

the brain. No wonder so many people died at this time. To go on with life seemed suddenly altogether beyond her. It was as if her insides were sore with unshed tears.

But this is insane, she told herself. I must be coming down with something. I must have picked up a virus.

For why should the memory of young Charles bring on this maudlin over-reaction? What had it amounted to? Their coming together had been a nothing, really. It was so unexpected, so unpremeditated. Where was the wrong in it? It had been only an accident. A rather charming accident. A mere demonstration of affection. The image of her pink marble piece of sculpture in the studio slid smoothly into her mind. Yes, that was all it had been—a little show of affection, an effort to console her. And everybody agreed, she reminded herself grinning, that nothing was more effectively consoling than,

Damn! Why was she thinking of Medusa again and of what Medusa had once said to her?

In the early days of their friendship Medusa used to laugh indulgently at Betty's ribald confidences. Later on she had listened but no longer laughed. Then once she had suddenly clapped her hands to her ears and begged Betty to stop.

"I can't bear to hear any more," she had cried. "Are you an animal, Betty, that you behave so, rolling over for any dog who comes along, degrading yourself and all the goodness that's in you? You'll end by destroying it and yourself utterly. We can not live like beasts and aspire to goodness. It's not possible to degrade the flesh and not degrade the spirit."

Feeling astonished and rather contemptuous of Medusa, who had obviously been overtaken by some menopausal, religious madness, Betty had tried to explain her position. Didn't Medusa understand that she had to have this freedom in her way of living, that it was important to her? A variety of physical love, far from dragging down her spirit, kept it in fighting trim, freed it for her art. If the spirit influenced the body, causing it to stumble, fall prey to asthma, arthritis, tuberculosis, God only knew what else,

so, Betty believed, could the body influence the spirit. What was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. If she kept her body happy and satisfied her spirit too should have nothing to complain about. It could get on with Betty's true *raison d'être*, art.

"Art!" Medusa had screamed. "There are more important things in life than art!"

"What, for God's sake?" Betty had been genuinely surprised.

"Goodness is more important," said Medusa. "Goodness, and love."

"Crap, darling," Betty had said lightly for obviously Medusa was talking through her hat. It would be a pity if she started really losing her grip, she remembered thinking, and began now, as the sky outside her window grew paler, to think of Harold.

Had Medusa ever known how she'd felt about him? She hoped not. For, if anything was unforgivable, that had been, surely. Running after her best friend's husband like any frustrated, empty-minded housewife snatching at a little excitement on a Saturday night. When she'd been taken by that crazy infatuation she hadn't given Medusa's feelings a single thought, so convinced was she that she had to have what she wanted. Even Harold, bastard that he was with his little flirtations all over the place, had in the end found it harder to betray Medusa than she.

Harold's tall, gimcrack figure, Harold as he was now, rose up in her mind. He's being well punished, poor old thing, she thought, for whatever he did.

And I, she thought in sudden superstitious terror, will something happen to me, too? I'm not not so goddamn young any more myself. She reached up and gave the wooden headboard of her bed a sharp rap, then smiled at herself. Would she never get over that stupid childish belief that sin must bring punishment?

No, it was impossible to imagine Betty Levering so stricken—limping around, staring like a ghoul. It was out of the question. She sat up and switched on the light. She'd had enough of these morbid night thoughts. She grabbed up an almost empty package of cigarettes and impatiently tore one out.

She was strong as a horse.

In body, anyway.

She inhaled deeply on her cigarette. The smoke soothed her, but not enough. A good slug of whisky was what she needed. It would help her get things back into proper perspective, put an end to these sloppy, Medusa-like vagaries. It was too late, though, or too early. Over at the chicken farm down the road some god-damn cock was already greeting the day.

"Amos has wet on the gold sofa," Lily announced. She stood in the doorway of John's study, her dark eyes flashing with indignation, breathing almost visible fire from her faintly hooked nose. She had slept for ten hours and felt renewed, restored and interested again in the humdrum.

Having caught her husband's attention she continued in more normal tones. "Good morning, darling, I'm so sorry I overslept. Did you get enough breakfast?"

John pushed his glasses down on his nose and smiled.

"I had some frozen orange juice from day before yesterday," he intoned, "a small slice of de-calorized toast with a delicious dab of margarine and a cup of hot water with a tea-bag in it as I couldn't find the coffee dust. If that's enough breakfast, I had it. Where is Amos now?"

"Outside, laughing under the lilac bush. Really, what an outrageous thing to do! And it's the second time this week. What do you suppose ails him? He never used to behave so. I think he must be losing his mind."

"Just getting old, more likely," said John. "His sphincters loosening up."

"How revolting! But it can't be that. He's only five and he seems perfectly spry."

"Then it's boredom. Nothing exciting has happened to him lately. Birds and mice are too easy to catch. The bloom is off the catnip. To wet on the gold sofa is his comment on the monotony of life. Cats have a very vulgar sense of humor."

"Well, I shall have the last laugh. If he does it just once more, I shall take him over to Dr. Pound and hold my sides while he's put into a nice little lethal chamber. He need not think he's the only cat on the beach."

Lily walked to the window and looked out. Amos lay picturesquely stretched on top of the stone wall, washing himself lan-

guidly. "Just look at him," she scolded. "Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

John sighed. "Lily, much as I should like to go on discussing Amos, I am trying to finish up this chapter today."

"Darling, of course, how thoughtless of me. But there *was* something I wanted to say. Oh, dear, what was it? My memory is absolutely hopeless these days." She struck her forehead dramatically. "I *know* my mind is going! What will ever become of me? I shall be the most awful burden to Charles and Johnny, having good days and bad days and eventually being pushed off to vegetate in a nursing-home—like Arthur's mother. Oh, yes, I remember now. (I *didn't* tell you, did I?) We're going to Grace Hunter's for cocktails after the Art Show this afternoon. She's got her daughter and her daughter's children visiting her. She seemed awfully anxious for us to come. She said they're not going to be here long."

John looked up. He removed his glasses. "Which daughter is that?" he asked sharply.

"I don't think I know," said Lily. "Really, John, what difference does it make? Let me think. Would it be Joan? It's the one I met that day at the Church Fair. I think she lives in Baltimore. She's a Mrs. Canfield."

John looked away from her and began fidgeting with the papers that lay in front of him on the desk. "Well, I don't see how I can manage it anyway. I've got to get this chapter finished. I can't waste time going around to cocktail parties, listening to Grace Hunter clacking her teeth like some damn croupier shaking a handful of dice. I'm sorry, Lily, you'll have to go without me."

"But, John, darling, you know it's you she really wants. Besides, I promised."

"You shouldn't have, my dearest. The mere fact that I have retired is no reason to think I am no longer capable of making my own decisions about accepting invitations. No, Lily, I'm afraid it's out of the question. You'll have to make my excuses."

"How tiresome you are, John, really. It would only take a half hour or so and it would give the old thing so much pleasure. . . ."

All right, then, be selfish, but everyone will think it awfully queer and feel frightfully sorry for me when I show up all alone. Perhaps I'd better not go, either."

"Don't be ridiculous. You'll have a very good time without me. You'll be able to flirt as much as you like—she's certain to have others there. Perhaps you'll make a new conquest." He threw his wife a rather satirical glance over his glasses, which he had now put on again.

What did he mean by that, she wondered but thought it better to ignore the remark. She raised her eyebrows and was starting to leave the room when the telephone rang. John frowned.

"It's probably for you," he said, but he picked it up.

"Hello?— Yes, just a minute, please. It's for you. Some woman."

"I'll take it outside." Lily made to leave the room.

"No, that's all right. Take it here."

"Are you sure? I can perfectly well take it in the kitchen? Very well, then. Hello? . . . Yes, of *course* I remember you. . . . Oh, *no!* I'm so sorry. How awful! How did it happen? . . . Wouldn't you know! Bathrooms should certainly be abolished. Go back to the old days of tin tubs in the bedroom and maids bearing pitchers of lovely hot water. . . . And I suppose there's absolutely no telling how long she'll be there? . . . And so hard on *you*. . . . No, of course you can't. Certainly not. I understand *completely*. Please don't give it a thought. . . . Now, if there's anything we can do? . . . Of course we will. . . . Yes, just as soon as it's possible. . . . Oh, not at all! Goodbye." Lily hung up.

"Well," said John, interested, "who's broken her hip *now*?"

Lily laughed. "How did you know? It's old Mrs. Hunter. So there won't be any party, after all. Aren't you ashamed, now? That was the daughter, Mrs. Canfield. Poor Mrs. Hunter fell in the bathtub of course. They've got her in the hospital in Rochester and heaven only knows how long she'll be there. So Mrs. Canfield will be stuck here for a while holding her mother's hand, which I gather she doesn't enjoy doing too much at the best of times."

“Poor old Grace! I suppose this spells the end of her,” said John with rather more satisfaction than sympathy, it seemed to Lily.

“Darling, of course it won’t be the end! Not nowadays! After a nice, long, expensive stay in the hospital she’ll be right back in the bosom of her family, good for another twenty years or so.”

“Lily,” said John, looking somewhat nettled, “forgive me for reminding you that I am not too very much younger than Grace and perhaps I am oversensitive but I’m beginning to find your remarks in this vein a little hard to take. In any case, what I meant was that poor Grace, though, as you say, she’ll undoubtedly recover, will find life very different from now on. Even if she’s not in a wheelchair she’ll certainly not be able to gad about as she’s been accustomed to doing. I only hope her teeth will stand up under the strain. If she had reason to grind them before, now it will be so much worse. Well, we must go see her whenever she can have visitors. . . . Uh, tell me, Lily, what is the daughter like?”

Lily thought. “Rather nice. She looks like Mrs. Hunter but evidently isn’t. Much more gentle. Subdued. Her hair is going gray and she is letting it and her clothes are determinedly inconspicuous, as if she were trying to counteract the effect of her mother, who must be a trial to her. And will now be so much more of a one. Well, I must go, I have a thousand things to do before I can go out to shop and get the mail.” She gave John a kiss on his bald crown and left him to his work. Now, where had she put that list for the laundry man?

How well she felt this morning! In spite of a failing memory, in spite of several new white hairs that had come since yesterday, in spite of weighing two pounds more on the bathroom scales, still cheerfulness possessed her. Such, she thought, is the regenerative power of sleep, for really nothing at all had changed for the better since yesterday. The circumstances of her life remained the same—quietly, pleasantly repetitious. And the absurd, frustrating situation between her and Arthur Herendeen still remained at the same stage of development.

No, perhaps that wasn't altogether true. There was (had been since she had talked to him on the telephone at the Wooing Frog) the nagging thought that if he had really wanted to see her he could somehow have managed to get up the mountain, even if only for a few minutes, before dashing off to the bedside of his cracked old mother. She recognized this thought as thoroughly petulant, unkind and generally unworthy, but there it was nevertheless. If she had been prettier, younger, had a deeper character and looked less able to take care of herself, more frail—more, in fact, like Medusa or Jayne, would he have left her sitting there alone in that wretched little tea-room?

But she began to hum a little tune to herself as she counted the sheets and stuffed them into the laundry bag. Medusa was dead, Jayne was of course beautiful but she was—well—Jayne. She was Lily, selfish, frivolous, getting on, inclined to be fat, but Arthur liked her, she knew he did. How stimulating it was to be desired again! And to desire. For soon enough now the blight would be on. And she pictured her skin powdery soft and oyster pale and her face like a relief map, altogether beyond the help of hormone cream. Inside her dress her breasts would have withered to two empty pockets and where her waistline had been there'd be no telling. Men and women got to look a good deal alike when they grew older. Lord, what a depressing thought it was! She and John sitting here in this house, two old friends of the same neuter sex, reading (if their eyes held out) or watching a quiz program. Why had John been so cross this morning? She remembered the cantankerous Ezra, his father. Was John too going to become one of those terrible old men who sink deeper and deeper into a melancholy and who, no matter how hard you try, will not let themselves be pleased?

Yes, the future no doubt held little enough of joy. There were said to be compensations of course—the calm pleasures and quiet satisfactions of what social workers called, so damn tactfully, the Later Years, meaning senility. Lily couldn't think now what these pleasures and satisfactions would turn out to be; whatever they

were, they could wait. She wanted no part of them right now. She was happily occupied with the pleasures, so unexpectedly exhilarating, of the middle years! Her full lips were stretched in a smile as she dragged the heavy laundry bag down the stairs and out to the kitchen.

She was still feeling light-hearted later on in the morning when, her errands done, she drove back home in her small sedan. There was a strange car in the driveway as she pulled up—a red sports car, not new but still very dashing. Whose could it be, she thought excitedly. She was sure it belonged to no one hereabouts. Could Joe Larkin be back in town? The car looked like one he might take a fancy to, though his were usually newer than this. I do hope he is sober, she thought, worrying about John whom she didn't want upset any more today.

She gathered up her parcels, the box of groceries, the soggy bag of meat (hamburger and chops), and the bundle of impersonal mail, and staggered with them into the house. From the terrace she heard the sound of voices—John's and another. Standing still a minute listening, clutching her packages, she thought, relieved, "No, that's not Joe's voice."

Could it be? It *did* sound like—. Yes, of course it was Charles. She'd know it anywhere, that touching gravelly quality it had had even when he was a little boy. Leaving everything in a heap on the kitchen table, she dashed out to him, crying, "Oh, Charles, how lovely," and they embraced while John looked on, benign and proudly paternal.

"Why didn't you let us know?" she demanded, frowning up at her son. "We didn't expect you for another week. I've got none of your favorite things. It's not fair, you should have warned us you were coming."

"Given us time to defrost the fatted calf," John put in.

"Shall I go and come back later?" Charles grinned.

"Did you get any beer, Lily? Charles would like some, wouldn't you, Charles? I'll get it, Lily, you stay here and talk to Charles."

She sat down with her son on the iron settee and took his hand

and began, as they talked, to search his face for signs of growth, of change, since she had last seen him. As he told her about the friend who had lent him the sports car she thought she noticed a certain evasiveness, as if the story had been expurgated, shorn of something. His nice eyes weren't so unguarded as they used to be. Well, it was only reasonable to suppose that he had an exciting life that he saw no use telling her about, full of complicated relationships and involvements. Like most sensible young people he believed in protecting his parents from the rough-and-tumble of life. She didn't, she assured herself, at all expect him to tip his hand.

Perhaps, she thought, he'd had a girl with him whom he had deposited somewhere along the way, and instantly she saw beside him on the seat of the little red car a sultry, lusty blonde done up with a black chiffon scarf around her head and dark glasses.

"You're filling out," she said and stroked his shoulder, feeling the good chunky sinews beneath his wrinkled shirt. "Aren't these much broader?"

"The Army making a man of me." Charles grinned shyly.

John came back with the beer and the three fell to relating all the family news, drinking from the cold glasses and crunching pretzels while the noon sun beat down on their heads and bees buzzed around the pots of fuchsias hanging in brackets on the wall. Amos, the cat, had flung himself like a gray feather boa at John's feet.

"If only Johnny were here, too," Lily sighed contentedly. "And, of course, Olive."

How strange it was that, at the same time as she was feeling so warmly maternal, so happily part of a snug, safe, family group, she should still want, even long for, with a kind of generalized ache, the sight of Arthur, the sound of his carefully lower-class voice. How greedy I must be, she mourned. And how deceitful. And talking gaily she wished with all her heart she were as she seemed outwardly. Here they were, father, mother and son, to all appearances a happy threesome with nothing on their minds but each

other, and yet—. For at least two of them, herself and Charles, were at the same time pursuing quite different lives somewhere else. How fascinating—and how frightening—it was, this layering of existence that goes on ceaselessly.

She looked from Charles to her husband, his grave face now lighted up as he listened to his son. John too, though, poor angel, he seemed more and more withdrawn from life—if life means being attached to people—he too must, in the past at least, have led a more private life than the one that showed on top. Perhaps he still did? There were other things in the world, she reminded herself humbly, beside the obvious business of the attraction between men and women. Yes, undoubtedly John too was following some secret path of his own. In search of what? Additional evidence of aliveness?

“Oh,” she said in a moment’s pause in the conversation, “I ran into Cora at the Post Office. She said Jayne had called her to say Arthur’s mother had died. She said the doctors had been perfectly wonderful, done all they could, had her on the operating table for about six hours. Then, after all they’d done, she went and died.”

“How provoking for them,” said John. “Is the funeral going to be here?”

“No, I believe not. She’s evidently got some people waiting for her in another cemetery somewhere.”

“I thought Arthur had bought a plot here, somewhere near ours.”

“Yes, but that was Jayne’s idea, I think. She never liked her in-laws.”

“Good lord,” exclaimed Charles, “what a couple of ghouls you’re getting to be. Here, let me give you some more beer, or would you rather have a swig of blood?”

“Your father likes a nice funeral,” said Lily, looking mischievously at her husband.

“Nonsense,” he said and smiled at his son. “Your mother is of an incurably flippant temperament, Charles. I only hope you don’t let yourself inherit it. You’ll find it gets very much in the way in the practice of law. How long are you staying, Son?”

"I don't know yet," Charles answered, looking vaguely off into the garden. "I haven't made any definite plans. One or two things may come up—."

His parents looked questioningly at him but he didn't continue. Yes, Lily thought, he has unseen irons in the fire. She sighed.

"Well, you're just in time to take your mother to the Art Show this afternoon. Save me the agony. Not of being with you, my dear, of course," he bowed to Lily, "but of being incarcerated in that hot smelly auditorium with all those heavy-breathing art lovers. Not to mention the pictures."

"John, darling, you know you didn't have the slightest intention of going anyway."

"I'll be able to get that blasted chapter finished up and lie down for a little while. I'm really very tired, Lily. I didn't sleep too much last night."

She looked at him, suddenly worried. Yes, she must be more thoughtful of him, not insist on his doing these stupid, social things. He wasn't so young any more. Even though longevity did run in his family, there was no guarantee that he might not be cut down at any moment.

He was still behind the closed door of his study (she hoped napping on the couch) when she and Charles left the house for the Art Show. They drove the ten miles to Rochester, the small town that was the county seat, at what seemed to Lily the speed of light and pulled up neatly in front of the high school where the exhibition was being held.

As Charles helped his mother climb out of the low car there was a ripping noise as the slit in the back of her narrow skirt tore itself open a few inches higher. "Oh, damn," she said, shaking down her dress and dropping her purse distractedly. "I do feel terribly messy, Charles." She patted her windblown hair and put on the big, rose-trimmed straw hat she had been holding in her lap.

"Does it look all right?" she asked her son anxiously.

"You look fine, Mother," said Charles, giving her a cursory

glance. He handed her her pocketbook and went off to park the car.

Lily found herself mildly nettled at his lack of interest in her appearance. Still, it was a healthy sign, she consoled herself, showing he wasn't emotionally involved with her. As long as his mother was adequately covered in neat, unobtrusive clothing, looked as if she washed at fairly frequent intervals and did nothing to attract undesirable attention, she looked, in his eyes, fine. She thought of Arthur's crazy mother suddenly. Perhaps that was one of the compensations they promised you for growing old: the freedom to behave disgracefully, to not give a damn what anyone (especially your prudish children) thought of how you looked or what you did. Lily hoped that, along with her inhibitions, old Mrs. Herenden hadn't lost too much gray matter to get some enjoyment out of embarrassing her family.

"What are you smiling at all to yourself in that rather sinister way?" It was Betty, who had come up the walk unobserved and now laid an affectionate arm around Lily's shoulder.

Lily came back to her surroundings. "Betty, dear, I didn't see you. I must have been a thousand miles away."

"Taking a ride on a broomstick?"

Lily laughed. "Did it show so much? I *was* having rather improper thoughts, I'm afraid. Charles just told me I looked 'fine' when what I wanted to hear was how glamorous I looked and I was planning revenge."

"Oh," said Betty, accepting this as quite reasonable. "Well. So Charles is home again. That's nice for you, dear. When did he arrive?"

"Just before lunch. We weren't really expecting him until next week some time. Isn't it lovely? Oh, here he comes now!"

The two ladies stood watching as Charles walked toward them. A slight breeze was blowing. Lily held her hat on with a hand on the top of her head. Betty's heavy shining hair whipped about her face and she bared her white, perfect teeth in a welcoming smile.

"Charles, darling," she cried. She threw her arms around his

neck and gave him a hearty kiss. "I would never have known you! Let me see, how long is it since I saw you last?"

Charles was blushing, Lily noticed. He really was, in many ways, still a little boy, she thought fondly. She took his arm, feeling full of pride in him, and they walked up the steps of the high school.

"What is the show like this year?" she asked Betty who, as an artist of note, usually had something to do with passing on the pictures to be hung.

"The usual crap," said Betty. "If it had been left to me I'd have turned everything down and skipped the show entirely this year. Really, why every neurotic schoolchild, every thwarted matron and every retired business man feels he can paint is completely beyond me. They should be forcibly restrained."

They entered the school gymnasium, which had been changed for the occasion into an art gallery. On walls temporarily draped with burlap the pictures hung, gay splotches of color. As far as the eye could see at first glance, they reproduced faithfully the surrounding countryside. Weathered farm buildings abounded, mountains in summer, mountains in winter; brooks rippled with varying degrees of verisimilitude; elms and maples and white birch trees spread their branches.

"Good God," cried Charles, startled and shocked, for he was used to the abstract art fashionable in cities.

"Yes, dear," Lily agreed. "Now try to be receptive, don't close your mind to new ideas."

"Look, Charles," laughed Betty, "there's a nice nude! That should help some!"

"How stuffy it is," complained Lily, sniffing. "I'd forgotten the way it always smells. The air permanently permeated with the sweat of a thousand basket-ball games. If only they could ventilate it somehow! Well, shall we plunge in?"

"What a strange light everyone has in his eyes," said Charles, observing the crowd which moved and stopped, moved and stopped, before each landscape like cows grazing in a rich meadow. "They seem almost somnambulistic."

"It's just that they're intent on finding bargains, darling," Betty told him. "On this day everyone for miles around takes on the mantle of an art expert."

"I rather like this one," said Lily, stopping in front of a large canvas. "Oh, it's one of Preston's," she said, leaning forward to decipher the signature. "I do think he's improving. He's done that tree very well, don't you think so? Let's see, that's the one in the Harfields' meadow, isn't it, Betty?"

Betty threw her friend a suspicious look. What had she said, Lily wondered, to annoy her now?

"How would I know, Lily dear, I don't work from nature." She glared at the picture, shrugged and raised her eyebrows, obviously withholding adverse comment.

They drifted on, pausing, gazing, giving way to others.

"Goodness!" said Lily, when they were half way around the room. "Here's that tree again. How vain it must be getting! I must have seen it at ten different shows over the years."

"A certain sameness does seem to be setting in," said Charles who had been rather quiet, it seemed to Lily.

"Yes," she said. "After one of these things I have red barns flashing before my eyes for hours." Probably Charles found all this extremely boring. Regarded as art, it undoubtedly was. And he, of course, didn't have the personal interest in the artists that helped matters so much. There *were* some good pictures, of course. Arthur's work, for instance, was not at all dull. Wandering on, they came to his portrait of Jayne. She and Betty stared at it coldly.

"What a fascinating looking woman," said Charles, with new enthusiasm.

"Yes."

"Oh, it's Mrs. Herendeen, of course, isn't it? I didn't recognize her at first."

"Small wonder," said Betty.

"Oh, look," said Lily. "There is Preston holding court. We must go over and speak to him."

Cora was just turning away from the little group around Preston as they approached. With her was an extremely pretty young girl with reddish brown hair and a stylishly sulky look about the eyes and mouth.

"Who's that?" asked Charles, his hand going up to pull the knot tighter in his tie.

"Betty!" cried Cora. "And Lily! How absolutely heavenly you both look! Isn't it the most divine show? Now, Betty, I know *just* what you're going to say and I won't hear a word of it. What earthly use it is to be so frightfully downbeat, I simply can't see. I've just been telling Preston how absolutely thrilled I am with his pictures."

As Cora's voice flowed on, like a shower of sweet but rather implacable bells, Lily saw the young girl and Charles taking each other's measure.

"Cora, dear," she interrupted, "I don't think you remember my son, Charles."

"But I *don't* believe it!" cried Cora. "You can't possibly have such an enormous son!" She suddenly remembered her young companion and turned to her, putting a hand firmly on her arm. "You must meet Claire Canfield. Claire, dear, this is Mrs. Dewhurst, and this is my darling Betty Levering, the *great* sculptress, whose name of *course* you know, and this is Charles Dewhurst. Claire is Mrs. Hunter's granddaughter. Doesn't she look just exactly like her? Isn't it too uncanny? I am taking care of her while her mother stays at the hospital with poor dear Grace."

Claire Canfield, Lily thought, looked as if she needed very little care taken of her. She had moved easily around Cora and was now gazing up out of greenish eyes into Charles's face. The sulky look that she had been wearing was quite gone. Charles's spirits too seemed to have perked up, his mother thought. She hoped he had found a playmate in this little Claire. He was much more apt to stay on happily with John and her in Leicester if there was an attraction in the neighborhood like this girl. Indeed, how suitable

it would be if—but it was ridiculous to start at this early date thinking along those lines!

“I must say something to Preston,” she murmured.

“He’s happy as a clam,” she told Betty afterward. “He’s sold two twenty-five dollar paintings to two schoolteachers from New York. He couldn’t be more pleased and excited if they had been the Metropolitan Museum.”

“They must be out of their minds, buying such things,” Betty said in a bored voice, tossing her long curve of hair that gleamed a lovely gold-orange from the spotlights fastened here and there above them.

“Nonsense, Betty, they’re a very good buy. You know what fabulously expensive frames Preston puts on all his things. And the paintings are really very pleasant. Not too interesting, perhaps, but pleasant.”

Betty made a rude sound.

“Don’t you think it’s extraordinary though, Betty, that someone who’s had the courage to lead the comparatively unconventional life that Preston has should paint in such an unadventurous way? Wouldn’t you expect something—well, a little more offbeat? A bit of surrealism, at least.”

“I don’t see why his taste in sexual partners should have anything at all to do with his taste in painting.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“And surely, Lily, you’re not making the statement that all abstractionists are homosexuals?”

“Darling, of course not,” protested Lily, now utterly routed.

“I certainly have never been accused of making a pass at a woman,” Betty announced in righteous tones.

How trying one’s friends could be sometimes, Lily thought. She stopped in front of a good-sized painting that seemed to be attracting a particularly large crowd.

“It’s one of Arthur’s,” she said, delighted. She did not know it but her brown eyes softened and began to glow. “I didn’t know

he was showing anything this year besides that one of Jayne." For Arthur, whose fame went considerably beyond the confines of this valley, was beginning to be snobbish about being grouped with the local escape-artists, as he called them.

Lily gazed at the picture with pleasure. It showed children playing in the Luxembourg Gardens under the clear, grave light of a Paris sky. A needle of jealousy jabbed at her as she looked, for she couldn't help wishing it were she instead of Jayne who was able to travel about with Arthur to beautiful places, to live with him in some tall, shuttered house on a Paris street. It was all quite wasted on Jayne, she was sure, and became conscious that a man standing nearby in the crowd was staring at her. She took her eyes away from Arthur's picture for a minute and looked at him. Rather nice-looking he was, she thought idly. Well-dressed, tall, thin, with dark hair going becomingly silver at the temples. As she looked away again he gave her a half-smile. Do I know him, she wondered. He seemed quite unfamiliar.

"I do think it's a marvelous painting," she said, "don't you, Betty?"

Betty gave a grudging shrug of the shoulders and Lily remembered that she rarely had a kind word to say for other artists unless they were dead or about to die of starvation. What was the use of building up the competition? "He's very slick," she said. "He has great facility." Frowning, she looked around. "What's become of Charles?"

"I think he's with that little girl, Claire, was that her name? Yes, there they are, over there."

Charles and Claire Canfield were standing together at the other side of the gymnasium.

"They're not wasting much time on the pictures, are they?" said Lily, for the two seemed quite absorbed in each other.

Betty was glaring across at them as if the sight provoked her somehow. Goodness, thought Lily, what difference could it make to her?

"She's awfully pretty, isn't she?"

"Do you think so? I don't like those little pug-dog faces," Betty stated. "Oh, Christ, there's Harold!"

"Where?" Lily said, nervously.

"Up on the balcony. God, how did he ever get up there?"

"I suppose Miss Nash gave him her brawny arm. Yes, there she is!"

"That's my figure they're looking at," said Betty.

"Oh, yes, so it is," said Lily. "I remember seeing it in your studio. That lovely thing you called 'Grief.' Look, Betty, he's touching it. He likes it."

"I'll be damned," said Betty, watching. "Do you suppose there really is something left in his upper story?"

Lily smiled at her friend who continued to stare up at the balcony, her eyes bulging slightly. "Evidently there must be," she answered gently.

They strolled on, inspecting dutifully, stopping here and there to speak to friends.

"There is the usual large proportion of 'senior citizens,'" said Betty glumly. "God, all this white hair gets me down."

They nodded to Cora's mother, old Mrs. Brown, who was being pushed about in her wheelchair by a grandchild. "For God's sake, don't stop," hissed Betty, grabbing Lily's arm and steering her firmly on past.

How close Betty was sticking to her this afternoon, Lily thought. Usually at these events, non-artist friends got short shrift as Betty hobnobbed with her peers; for the show, mostly amateur as it was, nevertheless drew a certain number from the greater art world outside. Small museums and galleries sent representatives and there were occasional journalists as well. Betty's artistic integrity was not without an eye for the main chance. Surely there must be someone here Betty would rather talk to than her. She glanced over her shoulder, wanting vaguely to keep track of Charles, and found herself again looking into the strange half-smiling eyes of the man she had noticed before. Who could it be? He was really rather attractive. Her interest was piqued, but, feeling self-conscious, she

turned her back again. She opened her pocketbook and got out her compact to peer at herself. She gave her face, which was beginning to shine from the heat of the crowded gymnasium, a few quick dabs of powder. She really did look rather pretty today. The large hat with the roses was a great flatterer, of course, but it *was* exciting to be admired.

"Betty, dear, don't look now," she murmured, "but do you see that man just behind us—to the left? Tall, with the black hair going gray? Do you know who he is?"

Betty turned carelessly around and flicked a casual look over the crowd. "You mean the one in the Oxford gray suit?" she said.

"Mm."

"That's Cora's brother-in-law," said Betty promptly. "Haven't you ever seen him before?"

"You don't mean William's brother, the one who—who's lost his mind?"

"That's the one. He's got hardening of the arteries of his brain."

Lily began to laugh. Oh, dear, how funny it was! "He keeps staring at me."

"That's how it takes him."

"What a terribly sad thing! And he looks so attractive still, in spite of it. I was getting quite excited, do you know? I thought I'd made a conquest. What a fool I am!" She couldn't seem to stop giggling, though there was little reason for it. "The poor creature!"

"Oh, he's happy enough, they say, ogling the girls. It's his wife I'm sorry for. There she is, that old girl with the white hair right there behind him. Younger than he is, actually, but you'd never know it, would you?"

"That poor woman," said Lily, stricken. "Oh, Betty, how frightful for her. Why am I laughing? I hate myself! How terrible it is to grow old—and how funny!" Laughter overcame her again and she took out a handkerchief and held it up to her hot face. Betty, too, caught the hysteria and, giggling and shaking, the two continued on their way around the gymnasium. Now everything began to strike them as funny. They shook with merriment at two

bearded young men staring with identical contempt at a still-life of green apples, executed blamelessly by Miss Tobin, the music teacher. The sight of old Tom Harfield, who was ninety-two, angrily knocking away his elderly daughter's hand as she tried to wipe the dribble from his chin caused them agonies of mirth.

"Oh, dear," Lily groaned with a shuddering sigh, "here's Charles again. I must control myself. This is the kind of conduct children frown on in their parents. Do I look all right?"

"Yes, dear." But Betty was looking at Charles. Going up to him, she laid her hand on his arm so that he was startled out of his preoccupation with Claire. A quick frown came and went between his eyebrows. Not meeting Betty's eyes, he smiled politely. At the same time he gave ground a little so that her hand was dislodged.

Claire burst into speech. "Oh, Miss Levering, Charles has been showing me your work. I do think it's perfectly fascinating! The remarkable variety of shapes in those beautiful, simple rectangular figures!" She gave an admiring sigh. "How in the world do you manage it?"

Lily watched the girl's face with pleasure and curiosity. It was even prettier now that it was animated. She looked very much like her mother and her grandmother, of course, but there was something else too. Some air about her reminded Lily of someone—who was it? Resemblances are such strange things, she thought. Perhaps it was someone in the movies she had fixed herself up to look like. Lily remembered the hours she herself had spent in front of the mirror as a girl, trying to make her face look like some movie star's.

"I've been studying sculpture myself this past year," Claire was saying, with a sweetly diffident smile. "With Gorchikov, you know. That poor man! He does suffer so with me! I tell him I know it's absolutely hopeless, me going on trying, but my family says I'm not bright enough to become a secretary." She smiled cheerfully into the silence that greeted these words. "You do know Gorchikov, of course, don't you, Miss Levering?"

"No," Betty stated flatly. She managed to slide her shapely,

substantial body between Charles and Claire so that her back was turned to Claire. "Charles, come with me a moment, will you, darling. There's something I especially want you to see." Flaunting her hair and shining her white teeth at him she seemed to give a little shake, to resettle herself somehow inside the clinging silk dress. Betty looked well today, Lily thought, a bit worn, granted, but still breathing sex. She was like a figure in sculpture herself—an Epstein woman, perhaps, heavy and female and elemental. But what in the world was she up to now?

Whatever it was, she was foiled in it. Charles was begging off. "I'm afraid I can't, right now, Miss Levering," he said. "I've got to see Claire to her car—she's late and people are waiting for her." He gave Claire a little, proprietorial nudge and she put her hand out prettily and said goodbye to the ladies.

Lily said, "I think I've had it, too, for today. It's really not possible to see anything in this crush, is it? Charles, I'll meet you outside in ten minutes. Will you be ready to go then? First, I've got to go and say a few words to Harold and Miss Nash."

Betty looked peevish. "Count me out of that one, if you don't mind," she said. "I'm not in the mood for good deeds. Anyway, it's about time I got over to the club for the exhibitors' reception. I promised to help."

It wasn't really that late but Betty was suddenly sick of Lily. She decided to go down to the girls' washroom in the basement. There was a soft-drink machine down there too, she remembered. Her throat felt bone-dry.

What a snot that young Charles was, she said to herself as she maneuvered her way through the crowds. Here she'd given up a morning's work to drive him halfway back to Boston to get his car, to say nothing of entertaining him the previous evening, and now, a couple of hours later, he was hardly willing to be civil to her. She could certainly have saved herself all those wakeful hours of remorse last night—Charles was well able, it seemed, to take care of himself. She wished she had had the sense herself to be cool to him, not let him beat her to it. She hadn't expected to be shaken

quite so soon. It was damned annoying. All the fault of that young twitch, Claire Whatsername, she supposed. If he hadn't met *her* right away—

Not, of course, that she had in any way counted on things developing into anything more than they were; the very last thing she wanted was to become involved with a child, for of course that was all he was, actually. Deep in her thoughts, Betty walked blindly past Cora's husband, William. The hand that he put out to get her attention fell loosely back to his side and he stepped out of her way.

Charles *had* been rather sweet, though. There was no denying it. He had shown definite promise. With a little more training he could be, she was sure, a very satisfactory performer. She found herself wondering what she would do if he should change his mind and come around again to see her . . . Well, he wouldn't, she was pretty certain of that. Besides Claire, there was the embarrassed way he had looked at her—or, rather, *not* looked at her. Obviously he wanted to forget the whole episode.

Betty stomped downstairs and along a corridor to the soft-drink machine. Several people were pressed close around it, like pigs, she thought meanly, around a sow, eager for their chance at a nipple. With some surprise, for she hadn't known he was in town, she recognized Joe Larkin. His back was turned to her but there was no mistaking it—the long strands of pomaded hair espaliered across his bald spot, the flashy, expensive sports jacket. He turned as she approached and his guileness, porcine face lit up in a smile.

"Betty, goddamn it, how are you? That's good, that's good. Fine, fine," he said, beaming, getting the whole business of their health out of the way before she had time to respond.

"Why, Joe," she cried, fondly, "where have you been, baby? I haven't seen you since Medusa's funeral. Betty's missed you. Now stay right there while I squeeze a drink out of this mother-image."

"Here, take this," he said, profering a paper cup. "I haven't touched it yet. Sick of it anyway, goddamn it. It's my third."

"You're sure? Well, thanks, darling. I'm dying of thirst." She

drank down the cupful of pop without a pause. "God, that was good!" She sighed. "Why do we addle our wits with alcohol when there's this sweet, comforting stuff?"

"I wonder often what the cokesters buy one half so precious as the goods they sell," said Joe, grinning. "Great stuff, great stuff."

"Let's go somewhere and get a drink," said Betty, throwing the cup toward the receptacle and looking away as it fell to the floor. "My thirst is quenched now."

"No, no, Betty, dear. Sworn off, you know. On the bloody wagon for good. You'll see, you'll see," he added as Betty looked incredulous. "I'm a changed man. Seen the light."

"Christ, Joe, don't tell me you've got religion? I can't bear it, pet." So many drunks ended up in the arms of the church. God knew poor Joe had tried everything else, Alcoholics Anonymous, new wives, fast cars, group therapy. He'd also been a star boarder at most of the fashionable Retreats along the Eastern seaboard.

It wasn't as if Joe was a problem drinker in the usual sense, though. He never disappeared on solitary sprees or beat up any of his wives or children. It was just that, drunk, he behaved so outrageously. He might drive the wrong way down one-way throughways or push people into swimming pools but he never did anything *really* anti-social.

"No, no, no! Certainly not, certainly not," said Joe, looking quite shocked at the idea.

"Then you've found a new psychiatrist?" But Joe had already been to so many of them. He'd had the works, analysis both deep and shallow, old wrinkles ironed out of his personality, others pressed in. Nothing had lasted, perhaps because, since Joe was such a simple soul, there really couldn't be too much for the psychiatrists to get their teeth into. The truth was Joe had very little up his mental sleeve. In a way, it was the nice thing about him.

"F— psychiatrists!" Joe roared, causing several heads to swing around from their rapt concentration on the pop machine. "Excuse me, Betty, shouldn't have said that."

"It's only me, darling."

Joe smiled at her gratefully. He said, "No, no more psychiatrists, I'm on my own this time. Got my own method."

Betty looked questioning but he shook his head. "Bad luck to tell. Not going to talk this time, Betty. Don't ask me, please. Own little secret, hey? Change the goddamn subject."

"Of course, pet." Well, if he wanted to be mysterious it was all right with her. She wished him luck. Not that she had too much faith that he'd be able to cling to his resolution.

"Saw your work upstairs. Very beautiful, Betty, very beautiful. Real works of art, most impressed."

"Why, Joe, that's kind of you. I appreciate that coming from you." It was true. Joe had taste and he did respond to beauty. It was one of his likable traits.

"My hat is off," Joe sketched out the business of removing an invisible hat with a bow and a flourish that set his fat, amiable cheeks to quivering. "Had a little talk with Harold up there, by the way."

"You had *what*?"

Joe grinned. "All right, not exactly a talk. We both stood there looking at that statue of yours—could tell he liked it. Bastard kept saying, 'Nice, nice,' " and Joe wickedly threw his face into a caricature of Harold's.

Betty laughed, then to her surprise was immediately filled with a feeling of disloyalty. But Joe didn't really mean any harm, she knew. His malice was only skin deep.

"Shouldn't do that, should I?" Joe went on. "He can't help it, can he? Not that it didn't serve him right, getting a stroke, the son-of-a-bitch. But he really did like that statue, you know. Kept touching it like a goddamn child."

"I'll thank him to keep his creepy hands off it," Betty snapped, feeling herself in danger of becoming sentimental. "I wonder how much longer he's going to be around here anyway. Did Miss Nash say anything?" Betty knew Mrs. Stops would not keep Harold on all by himself after his sister had gone back to her school. "It must be getting toward time for her to be leaving."

"I suppose so," said Joe. "He going with her?"

"Not bloody likely, dear. Can you see him hobbling around amongst all those proper young girls, scaring them to death? It would ruin the cachet of the school and Miss Nash knows it. She keeps hoping one of his old friends will take him in, spare her embarrassment and expense. I'm surprised she didn't try to palm him off on you."

Joe looked startled. "That what she was trying to get off her chest? Made a long speech all about how Harold needed a 'sense of belonging' or some such—but I couldn't follow it."

"Lucky for you. You would have been led right into a nice trap. She knows a good thing when she sees one. Well, I suppose I've got to get to the reception and show my face like a good girl. Are you going over, Joe?"

"No, no. Avoiding bibulous gatherings. How about dinner later on, Betty? But I suppose you're tied up. Well, some other time, some other time."

"Joe," Betty said, smiling and putting her hand on his arm, "shut up, will you please? I'd love to have dinner. But where's—uh—(what was his new wife's name?)—your wife? Isn't she with you?"

"Thing of the past, dear. She's gone off to Reno. I am once more the jolly, carefree bachelor."

"Well, that was quick work. Good riddance, I say. I never liked her."

"Oh, a nice girl," said Joe tolerantly. "I guess she found me a little too much for her. Bad boy and all that. Mustn't blame her."

"You're too sweet and forbearing to live, Joe. How much is she taking you for?"

He grinned and shook his head. He left that sort of thing to the lawyers, who enjoyed it. Otherwise, Betty knew, he'd have long since been milked of every cent of the large fortune he had inherited.

"Pick you up around eight," he said and they parted.

Some days after the Art Show, Preston Harrower and his companion, Pierre, had a dinner party. The house where they lived their pleasantly aberrant lives lay on a high meadow in the midst of a worn-out apple orchard. The road leading up to it, unlike the perilous one that led to Cora's, was well maintained. No asphalt paving spoiled its rural look, of course, but it was smooth and well-banked and firm in the shoulders. You could be sure that the rustic bridges lifting it every so often over an angry brook that had gouged a gully down the hillside were sustained by something more solid than the habit of years.

So that it seemed to Lily quite unreasonable for John to complain as he always did when circumstances obliged him to drive up the winding hill.

"I don't see why people have to build their houses in these God-forsaken spots," he said now, as he always did, shifting quite unnecessarily into second gear as they neared a hairpin turn at the beginning of the climb. "Supposing we should meet some fool speeding down?"

"Darling, we never do," said Lily, trying to keep the impatience out of her voice. "Everyone is going this way." She wished he would go a little faster; it was ridiculous to creep along like this. If only he would let her drive! But he considered it a slur on his masculinity if she even suggested it. "The road is quite safe, really; you know Preston spends a fortune on it. He's probably had men working on it all afternoon to get it quite perfect for this evening."

John grunted. They drove along for a few minutes in silence.

"What has Charles got on the agenda for tonight?" he asked finally. "He seemed awfully close-mouthed about his plans."

"I think he was hoping to see Claire—you remember that girl I told you about that he met the other day? Mrs. Hunter's granddaughter."

John scowled. He tore his eyes away from the road for a quick

look at his wife. "I don't think he should be getting involved with a girl at his age, Lily. Can't you discourage it?"

"One or two dates, dearest? I hardly think that constitutes an engagement, John. Let the poor boy have some fun out of staying up here with us. We can't be the brightest company for someone his age, you know."

"This incessant desire for company on the part of the young," he said fussily, "I have no sympathy with it. It's as destructive as a craving for drink. The gregarious instinct should be rigidly controlled. It's been the ruin of more than one young man I know."

"Surely you're exaggerating, John? In any case, I don't think this is so much a question of an excess of sociability as of sex. I should have thought you'd agree that the two things were quite different." Lily gave her husband an ironic smile, which he did not see.

Coming to another blind turn, he pressed his horn button irritably. "Whatever you may call it, I wish you'd use your influence to see that he doesn't get too interested in that girl. She sounds like the sort of selfish feather-brain that would make his life a living hell."

"Honestly, John, I can't see why you're taking on this way about poor little Claire. You make her sound like some kind of Jezebel, with a low IQ. She's really a very nice child. It's extremely unlikely in any event that anything will come of it but if it does, I do think Charles could do worse. Claire's pretty as a picture, comes of a very good family and she'll probably have money of her own."

John pulled his cheek over and began gnawing at it as he stared at the road. "I see I can not count on you," he said finally in a voice that meant he was deeply hurt.

"Really, John, that's most unfair! I don't know what's gotten into you."

"Let us change the subject, if you don't mind," he said haughtily. "Who's going to be there tonight?"

"I didn't think it polite to ask," Lily said rather nastily, though she had spent some time wondering the same thing herself. She was hoping that Jayne and Arthur had been invited. She hadn't

heard yet whether they were back from his mother's funeral.

"I wonder if Jayne and Arthur will be coming. Are they back yet?"

"I don't know," she answered sulkily.

"Well, I certainly hope it won't be just us," said John who, although he was fond of Preston and Pierre, found that a little of them went a long way.

"Darling," said Lily, "don't you think you should try to curb that unhealthy gregarious instinct of yours? It will be the ruin of you."

Both smiling, they drove into Preston's parking place and got out. Two other cars were already there and with a leap of the heart Lily recognized the Herendcens'.

Preston's house had come a long way from its humble eighteenth century beginnings. Walls had been torn down, or replaced, or extended, rooms and windows added. From being a very rudimentary farmhouse it was altered into a most tasteful witness to the ample funds of its present inhabitants.

"What a heavenly place it is," said Lily.

"A real gent's dwelling, all right. I always wonder what the original owner would think if he could see it now. I picture him as a glowering, soil-worshipping, Desire-Under-the-Elms type covered with mud and manure and smelling of sheep. If he could come back he'd undoubtedly take a horsewhip to poor Preston."

"And Preston would probably adore him. So divinely 'period.'"

They walked through the short hall of the house, paid tribute to the two trompe-l'oeil chests and the Italian mirrors above them and passed through the French doors at the other end to the wide marble terrace that overlooked the aged orchard. Huge urns bordered it; from them grew dwarf shrubs whimsically clipped. Twilight had set in but the scene was as skillfully illuminated as a stage set. Pale Japanese lanterns hung here and there and a mysterious, silvery glow came up from the gnarled old apple trees where lights had been craftily hidden.

Lily, as Preston bustled over to greet her and John, made a

rapid survey of the other guests. Yes, Arthur was there. As their eyes met over Preston's shoulder Lily hoped hers didn't show too much of the delight she felt. She must be careful, she reminded herself, telling Pierre what she wanted to drink. For not only was Arthur's wife there but Betty as well—Betty with her talent (she called it "intuition" but John insisted it was just her suspicious nature) for sensing things that people were trying to hide.

"Good heavens," she said, "is that Joe Larkin?" She looked at Pierre. How forgiving he was!

Pierre spread out his hands. "Mr. Larkin has made me the apology and sent me personally a case of Moet-Chandon. I am not one, Leelee, to hold a grudge." He shrugged cynically. "I can not afford to."

"You're too good for this world, Pierre," Lily said, smiling at him. Pierre affectionately pressed a hot, meat-stuffed canapé into her hand. Juggling this and her glass, she and John joined the others who were standing about admiring the decor.

"My," said Jayne with her little giggle as the two ladies brushed cheeks with each other, "how dressy you are, Lily! Isn't that a beautiful dress, Arthur? Goodness, you make me look like a perfect old frump. Just look at me!" Jayne indicated her own form which was clothed in lilac silk organdy, cut primly high at the neck and billowing forth from a tiny waist into a full and filmy skirt. "I must have had this dress for three years. Remember the day you bought it for me at Lanvin, Arthur?" She laid a hand on her husband's arm and leaned toward him. "What an extravagant boy you were!" She sighed and bent her beautiful dark blue eyes toward Lily's décolletage. "I do wish I could wear low necks!" She gave a little snicker and fingered the round collar of her exquisite dress.

Embarrassed, Lily turned away to speak to Betty and Joe. The simple white piqué dress that she had bought earlier in the summer off the rack in Rochester's one uninspired department store was rather tight and revealing, outlining her pleasant, neatly girdled buttocks and thighs and affording a glimpse of the flesh that

swelled above her uplift bra. Till a moment ago she had felt attractive in it; now, next to Jayne's, it seemed vulgar and tartish. Damn Jayne anyway.

"Fine, fine," said Joe to her as she put out her hand. "That's good, that's good." He was beaming all over his round face but he didn't seem drunk. Lily's glance went to the glass in his hand. It was filled with a colorless fluid which she judged to be straight gin. Joe wouldn't be sober long.

"Joe's on the wagon, Lily. Can you imagine?" Betty looked in a proprietorial way at Joe while Lily made admiring sounds. "So help me, I think he means it this time. Doesn't he look fine, Lily? Full of virtue and soda water."

"Shut up, Betty," said Joe with his amiable smile.

The French doors opened again. Everyone turned around and watched as Cora swept out of the house, trailing William behind her on a stream of talk. A couple of the various "Boys" in the valley arrived and the evening began to take the familiar course of parties in Leicester. Many strong, mind-obliterating cocktails were drunk before dinner so that the beautiful meal that Pierre had toiled over all day was either gulped down like hot dogs at a carnival or left half-eaten by people who had lost interest in food. Preston could have saved himself large sums of money, thought Lily, by skipping the rare, delicate wine he brought forth and poured with such reverence into exquisite stemmed glasses. What a waste it was! Most of his guests wouldn't have known the difference if it had been Virginia Dare. Indeed, Lily herself would have preferred it. Something sweeter would have been far more soothing to a palate deadened by three extremely dehydrating martinis than the elusive, desiccated taste of this expensive tippie.

At the deeply gleaming table in the dining-room she found herself seated between William and one of the "Boys." William ate practically nothing and refused the wine. Instead, he kept getting up to replenish his pre-dinner glass of whisky from a decanter on the sideboard. In between times he surprised Lily by making several attempts to caress her leg under the table.

“What’s got into you, William,” she said finally, vexed, tired of pushing his hand away. He’d never behaved this way before. But William merely regarded her with vague, mindless eyes and made no reply. She doubted if he knew himself why he was doing it or, indeed, that he was doing it at all.

If only Arthur had been placed on her other side! But (really, it was very obtuse of Preston) he’d been put across the table next to Cora who was using all her wiles to fascinate him. And here *she* was stuck next to this pathetic old thing with his dainty ways and his lisping, high-pitched voice, who had absolutely no interest in her at all. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” She tried to direct her thoughts back to him.

“I thaid, don’t you find it tewwibly hard to gwow a weally good wadish?”

“I do get so tired of fairies,” she said crossly to Betty after dinner as they were making repairs in a bedroom. “Kindly as they are.”

“Mm,” said Betty, slapping some powder on her handsome, ravaged face. “Listen, Lily,” she hissed, as Jayne appeared in the doorway. “Come outside with me a moment, will you? I’ve got something I want to talk to you about.”

Lily gave her hair a last pat. Grabbing up her cherry-colored sweater and giving Jayne a wide smile as they passed, she followed Betty out of the room.

They stood for a few minutes in silence at the end of the terrace, staring at the mesmerically lighted orchard and the vast, black arch of the sky that was now thickly studded with stars. Betty threw her cigarette over the side and, turning around, planted her rump on the stone wall. Lily sat down beside her next to one of the artfully pruned trees in the stone urns. Here and there among its tough, Northern foliage, lemons had been wired.

“What a pretty idea,” Lily said idly, touching one.

Betty gave the shrub a scornful glance. This kind of House-Bautiful chichi was beneath her notice. She fished a beat-up package of cigarettes from her bosom and lighted one, flipping

the match over her shoulder. Some day, Lily thought, Betty would set fire to someone's house.

"Lord," she wailed, "I'm reeling. Why did I drink so many cocktails? How insane it is! Do you know I've already forgotten what we ate for dinner? All I know is I ate far too much."

"It happened to be one of Pierre's better efforts," said Betty, eying her friend severely. "He sometimes tends to over-season but this was the best rack of lamb I've tasted in my life."

"Well," said Lily airily, for the superior airs of gourmets sometimes made her feel bad-tempered, "it could have been long pig for all of me."

Betty ignored this and continued to smoke moodily. What did she have on her mind, anyway? Was she deciding not to tell, after all?

In the pretty light of the lanterns the black iron furniture scrawled graceful doodles against the white clapboard wall of the house. Through the windows Lily could see figures moving about, members of the party arranging themselves for the rest of the evening. She did hope Betty would hurry with whatever it was she had to say. She longed to be near Arthur, to have a chance to talk with him.

Someone came to the French doors and stood staring out. It was William, she thought. How queer he was this evening! Morose and rude, quite unlike himself.

"What do you suppose is the matter with William tonight?" she said, but at the same moment Betty chose to emerge from her brown study and William was trampled underfoot by Betty's absorption in her news.

"Lily," she said, "what would you say if I told you I was getting married?"

Lily was thoroughly startled, not only by the unexpectedness of the question but also by an almost maidenish diffidence in Betty's face and in her voice. She regarded her friend in honest amazement.

"I'd have to say I could hardly believe it," she said at last.

“Betty Levering and marriage? I thought you cherished your independence much too much.”

Betty grinned and with an air of embarrassment tossed her brilliant head. “More can change than just your endocrines when you hit fifty,” she said. “Your ideas about things can change too. I’ve been thinking lately that maybe to be really independent you have to have somebody to be independent of!”

Lily said gently, “I suppose it does add a little spice to life.” What Betty was saying, she supposed, was that she was lonely. “Is it Joe?” she asked, knowing suddenly that it was.

Betty threw her her usual suspicious, probing look. “How in hell did you know, dear?” she asked. “Did you notice anything?”

Lily shook her head. “It just seemed to fit,” she said.

“What do you think of the idea? I suppose you think I’m absolutely insane to saddle myself with a not-too-bright, over-married, alcoholic slob like Joe, don’t you?” She glared defensively at her friend.

“I’ve always been fond of Joe,” said Lily. “I confess, more perhaps when he was sober than when he was drunk. There’s a lot of sweetness about him and he can be awfully good company. Also,” she smiled, “that money’s not to be sneezed at.”

“I assure you I hadn’t given *that* a thought,” said Betty in her loftiest tones. “I certainly hope no one’s going to think his money matters to me in the least. I’m not exactly hard-up, myself, you know.”

“Of course not, darling,” Lily murmured. Still, scorned or not, the money would certainly help to cushion their life together.

“We’ve always gotten along, of course, but it never occurred to me (you do believe me, don’t you, Lily?) to think of him as any sort of possible partner, marital or otherwise. That is, till recently.”

To her distress, Lily immediately found herself thinking of Joe Larkin in bed. His flesh would be white and soft and oily, she thought with distaste, pressing it mentally with a forefinger that promptly sank up to its first knuckle.

As if reading her thoughts, Betty said, “It just goes to show you

can't go by appearances. Of course, I shouldn't tell you this because I know you don't approve of talking about such things, but let's face it, dear, we're no longer children, and I never did see any use buying a pig in a poke." She gave a hiccup of laughter and inhaled a happy lungful of smoke. "Joe is a very manly little fellow. . . . He's surprisingly moral, though. Would you have believed it? I suppose that's why he's been married so often. If he'd been less moral his first marriage would have lasted. Amusing thought, isn't it? He's always believed he had to marry everybody he got a lech for, can you imagine?"

The ladies shook their heads in wonder. "How sweet," said Lily.

"I told him," Betty continued, "that if we did get married, there'd be no more nonsense like that. I'm an old-fashioned girl and don't believe in divorce. I told him he needn't think I was going to let him go around making an honest woman out of every sexpot he took a fancy to."

"I should hope not," approved Lily. Privately, she doubted if at his time of life Joe's sexual energies were such as to take him very far from the home pasture but she saw that to Betty it was a matter of pride to build up an excessively virile image of him, both in her own eyes and in those of her friends.

"And it's not only sex, you know," Betty continued. "He's really terribly sweet to me, Lily. The other night I was horribly depressed—over my work, I mean—and I called him up after midnight and he came right over and took me for a long ride. Then he brought me back home and put me to bed, just like a goddamn baby. We're alike in a way, you know, Lily. Both babies, beat-up, hard-living old babies. I think we'll get on."

"I think you will too, Betty, dear," said Lily. "I'll be rooting for you." She took Betty's hand and stroked it.

"Here come Preston and Arthur," said Betty as the terrace door opened. "Queer, isn't it," she said, "that you and I should both be taking up with Medusa's victims, isn't it? Her legacy to us." She laughed.

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about," Lily pro-

tested, assuming a completely puzzled expression, but Betty smiled derisively.

"Don't pretend with Betty, dear. Hello, boys," she cried as Preston and Arthur came up to them. "Preston, darling, I've been longing to talk to you all evening. Arthur's had you long enough." She rose to her feet, put her arm firmly in Preston's and, exerting the considerable power of her muscles, turned him around and headed him for the other side of the terrace. "I've got to have your advice about this Court House thing I'm doing—." She made a conspiratorial face at Lily as she dragged Preston off.

Lily looked, rather embarrassed, at Arthur, who now sat down in Betty's place.

"It looks as if we have a friend," he grunted.

"I don't know what she thinks she knows," said Lily. "Please believe me, Arthur, she has no reason to think a thing."

"She smells things in the air," said Arthur out of the corner of his mouth. "Medusa used to be the same way."

"Yes," said Lily. She was beginning to get a little tired of hearing about Medusa. "It was one of her less attractive traits. I do hate it when women set themselves up as sibyls, with some private pipeline to wisdom."

"Chrissake, what's the matter with you," he growled. He ran his eyes appreciatively down the neck of her dress and over her outlined thighs and moved a little closer, at the same time casting a quick glance at the windows of the house, to make sure, she supposed, that Jayne was not watching. "Damn those lanterns, I'd like to kiss you just once."

She moved away perversely. The idea of kisses snatched under the noses of husbands and wives struck her as awfully unattractive.

"Are you angry because of the other day?"

"Of course not, Arthur. You had to go to your mother. I quite realized that. Anyway, it was just a lunch, wasn't it?" She smiled. "You did make it clear you weren't going to make a habit of infidelity."

"That's right, rub it in," he muttered. "And don't think I'm not

still the same pure, noble guy. My super-id has been screaming like a wounded rabbit ever since that day.”

“Well, so has mine.” It may not have been strictly true but she wasn’t going to admit that her super-id was less on the job than his. Women tended to be less moral than men, anyway, she thought, being more realistic.

“But that doesn’t stop me,” he went on, “from wanting to give it one more punch in the jaw, just the same. Just one more time won’t make it a habit. Know what I mean?” He leered hideously at her from one side of his face.

“I’m afraid I do,” she admitted, wondering why in the world she found him attractive at all. She wished he didn’t find it necessary to be such a rough diamond—but perhaps it was that very uncertainty in him that made her like him. “But sometimes I think I have more than a natural bent for wickedness.”

Arthur casually stretched his hand behind Lily and began, while staring at the house, to caress the small of her back. It was very pleasant. How strange that the slightest, most tentative touch of the beloved could be far more relaxing than the most expert massage at Elizabeth Arden’s. It both soothed and stimulated. She could feel her nerve ends rolling over like pussy cats, settling themselves back for more. She sighed with happiness and, for the sake of observers, patted her mouth as if to cover a small yawn.

“We’ve got to go somewhere,” Arthur said.

“How ridiculous,” she answered. “Where is there to go?” In her mind’s eyes she saw them pulling in to some anonymous small motel and walking under raucous neon lights to a twin-bedded cabin in the pines, where, on a Beauty Rest mattress, watched by the monstrous eye of the television set, they would make love far more nervously than a couple of delinquent teen-agers. “No, it’s impossible!”

“Shut up,” said Arthur. “I’m thinking.”

He stretched his lips in a grimace and with his forefinger tapped at his crooked teeth. Then his hand dropped to his knee where it continued its drumming. His nails could do with a cleaning, she

noticed. Paint was probably hard to get completely off. They were nice hands, though, anyway, strong, competent, freckled.

"Been meaning to go to New York," Arthur muttered and she put her head closer, so as to hear him. "See that crooked dealer of mine. Have a hunch the bastard's getting more of a cut out of me than he should be." Distracted by this disquieting thought, Arthur brooded heavily, his thickish lips thrust out. He was known, Lily remembered, amused, to keep a close watch on his funds. "Might as well go sooner as later. Couldn't you dig up some reason to go at the same time? Sick friend? White sales? Dentist?" His other hand began redoubling its efforts behind her back, doing its best to persuade her. "Say something," he said.

"How can I?" she said. "How can I suddenly take off for New York? It is out of the question. Now, if it were Boston—I might find some reason to go to Boston." She could suddenly feel the need for a medical check-up, she hadn't had one for a couple of years. Nothing could be more reasonable. "But no," she wailed, "I can't go anywhere now, not while Charles is here."

He gave her an irritated look. "All right, damn it, if that's how you feel." He withdrew his hand and instantly Lily was plunged into desolation. She thought, well, that was that. That was the end of it. Now, she must get up and leave, go in to John.

She began to pull her feet in under her.

"I should have thought," he continued in a huffy tone, "that this would be the ideal time for you to have a little break—while Charles is here to keep John company. . . . Go to some plays, get a little culture, improve your mental outlook, know what I mean?"

Lily sat back again, beguiled anew.

"I wonder if I could," she said dreamily. "It's true. I haven't been to New York—anywhere, really—in ages. I do need a change, don't I?" She wrinkled her eyes at him. "Perhaps I could talk to Charles. He's always saying I stick too close to Leicester. He's very understanding for one so young." And he had Claire Canfield to make his stay happier, she thought. "Oh, do you suppose it would be possible? Do I dare?"

Hurriedly, for they had already been alone out here much too long (Betty and Preston had gone inside quite a while ago) they fell to making plans designed to throw dust once more in the eyes of their nearest and dearest. Lily never remembered how the rest of the evening passed.

After she had paid off the bell-boy in the rooms he had shown her into at the Park-Plaza Hotel, Lily remained standing quite still under a chandelier that dripped big crystal tears from the middle of the high ceiling. The week or so of days intervening since she and Arthur had arranged this rendezvous had passed with the frightening inevitability of a countdown. From time to time during those days Lily had found herself hoping that some hitch would occur that would postpone the meeting, if not prevent it for good, but everything had gone with quite terrifying ease. John had agreed that this was the perfect time for her to have a holiday and had insisted on calling up himself to arrange for a suite for her at this hotel which, he said, was the only one remaining in New York that retained any vestige of its old-time elegance and where, he was sure, she would be well looked after.

Left to her own devices, Lily would rather have gone some place where, perhaps, she would be less well looked after and more anonymous, but she had decided to bow to fate and her husband's wishes. Now, standing alone in this impersonal, unfamiliar room, cut off by her own wicked hand from the safe ties of home, she felt an almost overwhelming temptation to call the whole thing off. If the bell-boy had reappeared at that moment of his own volition and picked up her bags, she would have followed him down the hall with the greatest relief. How had she ever let herself be led into this folly? Flirtations in the starlight were all very well, but this was quite different. This was terribly real. Did she honestly want Arthur this badly?

Right now Lily doubted it very much. Her right eyelid was beginning to twitch, a sure sign that she was feeling tense, and she put a finger up to hold it still.

"I know now what they mean about the way of a transgressor not being easy," she thought, "but it's too late to back out now. To run away before Arthur comes would be even more childish and

reprehensible than it was to agree to come in the first place. I've made my bed and must lie on it."

So thinking, it seemed to her that she might as well go in and examine it. It was of a good size, she saw, and covered in a not unattractive greenish striped material. She began poking at it. It seemed firm and resilient but she wondered how it would behave under the combined weight of herself and Arthur. She didn't think she could bear it if, its wind gone in the service of past sleepers, it began to squeak and groan. She was shy enough, as it was, over the whole sorry prospect. The thought of herself, a lady no longer very young, appearing undressed before Arthur Herenden (who, when you came right down to it, was little better than a stranger, in spite of everything) was unnerving enough. The whole business would become utterly impossible if the bed took to commenting on their every move.

She kicked off her high-heeled pumps, raised her tight skirt above her knees and, after a quick look around to make sure no maid or other hotel attendant was hovering about, stepped up on the green bedspread. Gingerly, then more bravely, she jumped up and down, first toward the head, then toward the foot. What fun it was! She hadn't done anything like this since she was a child. The bed bore it in stoical silence, giving as good as it got.

"Thank heavens," said Lily, getting herself down on the floor. She wouldn't have to stuff things under the mattress.

Arthur was to arrive at around five o'clock. She went over to the luggage rack and opened a suitcase. She took out the new cream silk nightgown she had gotten for Christmas and never worn, and flung it with its matching peignoir onto the bed. She hung her dark, city dresses in the closet and arranged other things neatly in the bathroom and in the drawers of the dresser. Opening up one of the little cases, she came across a bottle of tranquilizers.

How lucky, she thought, for she'd forgotten it was there, if I ever needed one, heaven knows I do now. She went back into the bathroom, got a glass of water and washed the pill down.

She squinted at the small diamond wristwatch that John had

given her a few years ago to console her for being forty. Its tiny, secretive face blurred before her eyes. She blinked and held her arm out farther. Yes, there was still an hour to get through before Arthur could be expected. She would have time for a leisurely, relaxing bath. The three-hour drive from Leicester had left her feeling very sticky. She decided to wear the floaty, black chiffon dress, which had the advantage, highly practical in these circumstances, of not needing a girdle. It was cool, too, and its thin sleeves helped to hide the upper part of her arms where the flesh lately seemed to have seceded from the muscles and to be leading a disgusting life of its own. She gave it an angry slap and it swung away. Damn, she thought, I must certainly start doing those exercises again. But what a terrible bore they were!

Clad in her silk robe and a few lacy underthings, she was standing at a mirror brushing her tan-blond hair, which was still damp from her bath, when a knock came at the door of the sitting-room.

"Oh, God!" she said in a panic. It had somehow not occurred to her that Arthur might be early. Her newly washed face in the mirror was pink and shining; she'd never looked less glamorous. Should she keep him waiting while she at least got herself into the chiffon dress? No, better get it over with. Her heart began to pound with nervousness. Quickly she dabbed on some pink lipstick and, her head held high as if on its way to be chopped off, she went to the door and let Arthur in.

He took immediate action. Without speaking or giving Lily a chance to speak, he took her in his arms, pressed her body against his and began kissing her accurately on the mouth. Her nervousness at once disappeared in rising excitement. How competent he was, she thought. What a good thing that there was to be no preliminary palaver, no sending down for ice to make drinks for Dutch courage. Sweet alarm bells started to ring through her body; her legs felt delightfully weak. "Arthur, darling," she breathed, and, to slow things down a bit—for Arthur still had to undress, didn't he—she pushed against his chest till he released his strong

pressure. Still holding her, but loosely now, he fell to kissing her neck.

“Did you have any trouble downstairs?” she murmured in his ear.

“Uh, uh.” He had run his hand under her robe and was happily fondling her shoulder. “Said I was your grandfather.”

Lily giggled, feeling suddenly light-hearted. They were both much too staid and settled looking, she was sure, to be suspected of illicit activities.

It hadn't seemed that way, though, when she had registered at the reception desk. And walking through the discreet, fashionable lobby she had never felt more of an outcast. Passing little groups of women of her own age innocently having tea, or waiting placidly for friends, she had wished with all her heart that she were one of them, back safe in the fold of respectability. How disapproving they would be if they knew what she was up to! But some, of course, would smile, would think it terribly funny, love among the middle-aged being mildly ridiculous at best and utterly so when it was extra-marital.

“Seeing all those nice, good people downstairs,” she said to Arthur, dodging his kisses, “I thought what a mistake it was, coming here. I should have gone to one of those tall, dusty hotels around Broadway, some place where sin seems the natural order of things, where nothing but a murder would arouse the house detective. Here, I felt his eye on me from the first. It's probably pasted to the keyhole at this very minute.”

Arthur released her rather abruptly and went across the room where he stood looking down at the traffic ten stories below. “I know what you mean,” he said. “An atomic glare of light seems to beat down the minute you leave the straight and narrow. But you know,” he turned around, “we're conceited fools to worry. Who's going to suspect two old parties like us of being up to anything we shouldn't?” He gave his one-sided grin.

Lily frowned. He had a real talent for tactlessness, she thought.

“You’re probably right, Arthur. But just the same, there’s something terribly dampening about being called an ‘old party’ at a time like this. I think, if you don’t mind, I prefer worrying about the house detective bursting in on us to being completely beneath his notice.” She turned her back to him and began fiddling haughtily with some artificial rosebuds in a pewter bowl on a small console table. “Really, Arthur, do you have to be quite so tactless?” Tears came to her eyes.

“Oh, Lily, for God’s sake,” he snarled. “You know I didn’t mean it that way. You’re the touchiest damn creature.” He came over to her again and attempted to embrace her but she wriggled away and refused to meet his eyes. They stood angrily in silence, Lily staring stubbornly at the fake rosebuds and thinking in an onslaught of wretchedness, of mortification, “Oh, give it all up, it’s too silly to go on making believe this way, we are strangers.” She wished again that she had never embarked on this perverse adventure, that she were back home in her pretty, quiet room.

Coming to a decision, she raised her sulky face to tell him that it was no use, that she had made a mistake, and met his eyes. The bleakness in them took her aback. She stopped thinking about her own foolish, hurt feelings. Sympathy for him flowed back into her. She experienced once more that sense of nearness, of apartness with him that had followed their disreputable encounter that day on the high plateau. Poor Arthur! she thought. This situation they had made for themselves couldn’t be altogether easy for him either.

“You know perfectly well,” Arthur said in his toughest voice, his teeth clenched, “that if I didn’t find you the most attractive female, young or old, I’ve known for some time, I’d be miles away from this dismal trap. God knows I’ve got plenty of things I should be doing. You’re a mature, beautiful, desirable woman, Lily, and you know it, so for the love of God please stop carrying on like a stupid child.”

“I’m sorry,” she said and smiled. She felt at this moment a kind of despairing love for him that went beyond the physical appeal he had for her. For reasons that perhaps it was best not

to examine, they had both strayed into this queer, unfamiliar, nettlesome bypath and there was nothing left to do but to help each other through.

"I keep forgetting what a low-class, insensitive boor you are," she said. "I keep expecting you to act like a smooth swine, full of suave compliments."

Taking his arm, she led him through the double doors to the bedroom. Together they pulled down dark shades and loosened draperies so that the room was thrown into a premature twilight. She drew him toward the bed, which now seemed to her not much more than a necessary resting-place where they could administer a kind of first-aid to their ailing spirits. Sitting on its edge, she helped him to undress, for he now seemed more afflicted with shyness than she. Resignedly, they stretched themselves out side by side but desire had retreated and they lay motionless, becalmed between the cool, embarrassing sheets. Each waited, in a paralysis of the will that was half pleasant, half fearful, for the other to make the first move. The hypnotic hum of the air-conditioner blotted out the sounds of the city and underlined their isolation from ordinary life. In the dankish air of the room Lily felt her flesh to be clammy to the touch, unappetizing as a fish's found on a beach. The hair on Arthur's chest was white and she had been reminded again that his stomach no longer had a young man's flatness. Thinking of it, hysteria began to flower inside her. She had to bite her lip hard to keep giggles from erupting. Laughter would be fatal, she knew, at a time like this.

Then, blessedly, compassion came to her aid and steadied her. A wry pity for them both released her from the stony immobility into which they had fallen. She put forth her hand and gently began to fondle him.

Afterward they were gay and at ease. Arthur splashed in the shower and sang an unrecognizable song in a cheerful drone and Lily put on the black chiffon dress. Sleek and noncommittal as cats, they sallied forth into the hot, dark streets of the city. They had cocktails in front of the Prometheus fountain and dinner

around the corner at a small, snobbish restaurant where the food was served on supernumerary bowls of ice, or under silver domes, or from beds of blue fire. Arthur expansively ordered champagne and Lily teased him because he looked so outraged when he saw the bill. But, heroically, he paid it without complaint and must even have left a substantial tip, Lily thought, judging by the waiter's obsequious bow as they left.

"A real clip-joint," Arthur commented. "You have to admire their nerve all right, they don't even bother to wear masks."

"Perhaps you can write me off as a legitimate expense," said Lily. "Who knows, I might buy a painting some day."

"What would you like to do now? Go dancing? Some romantic roof?"

"Arthur," she laughed, "you must try to control yourself. Such sinful extravagance! You'll hate yourself in the morning."

"Very funny," he growled.

"Besides, I'd really rather just walk—it's so nice out tonight. Look, there's even a moon!" She pointed gaily to where it had just come into view, full and remote, from behind a parade of clouds.

A hot wind was blowing now, and Lily's diaphanous skirts swirled and whipped against her legs as, arm in arm, they slowly strolled. Wrapped up in themselves, they admired the aloof perfection of mannikins in department store windows, gawped at jewelers' rubies and emeralds and paused to stare bemusedly into the treasure houses on 57th Street.

"Let's go to some galleries tomorrow," said Arthur.

"Do you think we dare? It would be marvelous to look at pictures with you but you're bound to be recognized."

"No one's in town. Or if anyone is, we could have just happened to run into each other." He grinned his nice, evil grin.

"I wonder if anyone in Leicester will start counting noses and discover we're both away. Why didn't I think of that? It's just the kind of coincidence that Betty would never believe in for a minute," Lily said, sounding just as righteously indignant as if she and Arthur were actually innocent.

"I forgot to tell you. Jayne's away too—went to see her mother. But as far as anyone knows she's right down here with me."

"Oh," said Lily. It was a relief to hear this but the mention of Jayne's name was enough to bring back constraint. Lily became aware again of the dreadful irresponsibility of her conduct. Her own mother, she worried, what if she should suddenly become worse—die, in fact, before Lily could manage to get from New York to the nursing-home? "Goodness," she exclaimed, "I wonder how *my* mother's doing."

"Seen her recently?"

"Of course," she said, virtuously. "I went up just yesterday. She seemed all right then—"

"Not suffering too much?"

"I don't think so, really. That stuff they give her—thorazine, I think it is—keeps her amazingly happy, between attacks, that is. She was quite like herself—full of malice toward all the other old ladies and making little cracks about how old I was looking!" Still, she thought, the day was bound to come when, in spite of all the efforts of doctors and nurses, who, with their potent injections and infusions, kept death cooling its heels, the progress of her mother's disease would be too much for them.

Arthur seemed to sense the way she was thinking. "Don't start worrying now," he said and squeezed her arm in his. "Nothing will happen. Let's go back to Prometheus and have a nightcap, want to?"

They were just a little drunk when they returned to Lily's hotel around midnight.

"I don't think you should come up, do you?" Lily whispered as they entered the lobby, which was now disconcertingly empty. "It's getting late. Time you got home to your apartment." Jayne might have been trying to get him, she thought. She really must make him be more careful.

"Nonsense," said Arthur. "Of course I'm coming up. See you safe home, make sure no one's under the bed—like Betty."

They stood solemnly silent, trying not to laugh, as they were

wafted up to the tenth floor. Walking stiffly down the hall, they felt the eyes of the elevator boy follow them.

"You mustn't stay," she hissed as they closed the door.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her long and vigorously. "Don't see why you're so stupid and stubborn about going home with me," he muttered. "Safe as a church down there, no goddamn elevator boys thinking snide thoughts."

"Arthur, you know perfectly well I must be within reach of a telephone—especially at this hour. We've been through all that." It wasn't the whole truth, of course. There was also her reluctance to be with Arthur under his wife's roof. Though why she should jibe at that, when she was already so deep in sin, she was sure she didn't know. It was a last tattered remnant of honor, she supposed.

"Let me stay, just a little while then, please?" Pressing his length against hers authoritatively and lifting her a little off the floor, he began making for the bedroom.

The old, lovely feeling of lassitude was rising up in her and she thought fatalistically, "Why not, why not?" If they were caught, thrown, bag and baggage, out of the high-toned shelter of the hotel—well, there was nothing she could do about it.

Laughing softly, they fell together in a heap on the invitingly turned-down bed and he had, over her quite insincere protests, succeeded in unzipping and pulling down the tight bodice of her dress when, nearby, the telephone cleared its throat.

They were startled into stillness, not recognizing the sound for a moment. Then Arthur said hoarsely, as it came again, "Don't answer it. Let it ring."

But of course that was beyond her. Holding her dress up with one hand to cover her breasts, with the other she lifted the receiver and put it to her ear.

"Hello?" she said and heard her voice shaking. "Yes, this is Mrs. Dewhurst. . . . Yes, put them on." She glanced at Arthur who had gotten up from the bed and was standing watching her. "It's long distance," she told him. "Yes? Hello? . . . Oh, Charles! . . ."

No, you didn't wake me. I was—reading. But what's wrong? Why are you calling me at this hour?"

"Now keep calm, Mother. Everything is quite all right." Charles's voice came quite clearly over the miles of wire. "Everything's been taken care of—you're not to worry—"

"For God's sake, Charles, what are you talking about? What has happened? Has your grandmother died? Please stop trying to break things to me gently!" How exasperating children could be! She flicked a look at Arthur who was regarding her worriedly.

Charles said, "It's not grandmother, it's Father. He had a sudden attack around lunch time and the doctor took him straight to the hospital here in Rochester. They had to operate right away but everything's fine, they say. He stood it beautifully. I spoke to him right after he came out of the anaesthetic and he didn't seem too bad at all. Right now he's sleeping like a log."

"Charles, dear," said Lily, reaching for calm as her heart started to pound. "Do you mind beginning at the beginning? Just what is wrong with your father? What was the operation *for*?" And why hadn't he tried to reach her sooner?

Charles muttered something she couldn't quite hear.

"What did you say?"

"I say, it was his *prostate*." Charles sounded bashful but his voice, this time, was quite audible, even to Arthur, who, Lily could see, was pretending not to hear. She found herself dumbfounded—and struck with embarrassment. Prostatitis—serious as it was, there was something inescapably comical about it. She'd long been prepared for John to have a coronary or even a tumor somewhere (he was always complaining about pains in his stomach)—but his prostate, that was something she had never thought of. She wasn't even sure what it meant, what it implied exactly, except that it was the subject of bawdy jokes about old men.

"He started having this awful pain a little while after you left. I got the doctor over right away and he said it was this emergency prostate. It was better not to wait, it had to be taken care of right away. Now, Mother, you're not to worry, everything's going to be

fine. I'm here and taking care of everything. Father said I shouldn't tell you till tomorrow, let you at least have until then, but I got to thinking—" Charles's voice trailed off apologetically. The poor child! He was undoubtedly feeling lonely and a little scared. It couldn't have been an easy day for him, bearing all that responsibility quite alone.

"You were quite right to tell me, darling, I'll start out at once. I can't bear it that you had the whole burden of it." And that she hadn't been with John to comfort him with her presence.

"No, Mother, that's ridiculous. There's absolutely no point in your coming now. You'll just exhaust yourself. Take one of your pills, get a good night's sleep and come up in the morning." Charles sounded quite jaunty now, she thought, having passed the buck of worry on to her. "I've got a room in the hotel here and I'll call you first thing in the morning after I've talked to the hospital."

Lily hesitated. "Well, all right. I suppose that would be best." There was no use racing uselessly through the night, just to salve her conscience.

She hung up the telephone and turned to Arthur. "You heard?"

He nodded and grimaced. Lily rose and pulled her dress back on her shoulders without looking at him.

"Life wasted no time in letting us have a good kick in the pants, did it?" he said.

They smiled ruefully at each other.

"Poor old John," Arthur offered. "But he'll be all right, Lily. Try not to worry too much. I know lots of guys who've gone through this and come out—uh—fine." He was doing his best, she could see, to be both sympathetic and nonchalant, to lessen her worry and embarrassment.

"Yes," she said and lowered her eyes, torn between tears and laughter, feeling herself blush. One thing was glaringly clear to her. It was the end for her and Arthur. Their attraction for each other, always on the verge of getting lost in the shuffle of family duties and loyalties, always in danger of being laughed out of ex-

istence by their own sense of what was fitting, could never survive this shrivelling brush with vulgar reality.

“Damn it, Arthur,” Lily cried. Tears ran unnoticed down her cheeks. “I wish I knew how some people manage to be wicked. Try as I will, life keeps butting in and thrusting virtue upon me!” In a last protest against the way the world was run, she beat the air with clenched fists. Then, as Arthur patted her soothingly on the shoulder, she quite suddenly relaxed and, opening her hands, let them fall in a gesture of submission. She looked up at him dolefully, then, all at once, they were both laughing.

At the door they kissed each other a gentle goodbye.

“Don’t take any sass from your conscience this time, please, Arthur,” she said. “I couldn’t bear it, thinking you wished it hadn’t happened. It’s bad enough, ending this way.”

He shook his head. “I won’t,” he grunted and gave her his cocky smile. “I’ll show it who’s boss. Goodbye, Lily darling. Everything will be fine with you, won’t it? But think of me, sometimes?”

She swallowed and smiled. “I’ll never stop,” she vowed, but as she closed the door and went to get out her sleeping pills she was already beginning to live in tomorrow, was already half-way back along the road home to John.

The gray light of a cloudy morning came through the studio windows over Betty's shoulder. She sat hunched over a drawing board at work on a sketch for the Court House figure she had been commissioned to do. Beethoven's Seventh was blaring forth from a corner and she was happily humming along with it. Absorbed in her work, her back to the outdoors, she didn't hear or see the approach of Miss Nash till it was too late to hide.

Goddamn it, she thought, and glared around wildly looking for cover, but it was no use. Miss Nash had of course seen her and was already opening the door. Rudely Betty remained seated, maintained a good grip on her piece of charcoal and scowled at her caller coldly—the artist interrupted in full flight of inspiration. The nerve of that old biddy making a call in the middle of the morning! Who did she think Betty was anyway? Some stupid housewife ready any time to lay down her duster and knock off for a little kaffeeklatsch?

But Miss Nash, as Betty should have realized by now, was impervious to most forms of rudeness and, where a woman of weaker fibre would have stammered an apology and turned tail, she stood her ground.

"I can see," she announced, "that I am interrupting your work!" She gave Betty no chance to agree with this statement but swept immediately on, quite undeterred by the baleful countenance before her. "Please believe that I would not do so if I did not judge it to be necessary, Miss Levering. I think that what I have to enunciate is of sufficient importance to warrant this intrusion on your privacy, especially in terms of time, as my plans with regard to my brother have now matured and I am myself on my way back to school."

Betty, in spite of her resentment at having her work cut into, began to be interested. Had this smart old operator actually succeeded in palming Harold off on somebody at last? Who, she

wondered, could it be? Not Lily and John, she was sure. True, they had been very fond of Medusa and Harold in the past and were as inclined as the next to philanthropy, but they had their own troubles these days and would have too much sense to bite off any more.

Cora and William? Well, ordinarily, it might amuse Cora to open her doors to Harold. He could have easily taken his place in her menagerie, been given a plate in the kitchen, moved about the large, messy house, hardly noticeable in the prevailing squalor. But Betty doubted if Cora, who was after all no fool, would fall for the idea at this delicate juncture in her life, when it looked as if William was trying to get back his pants. Cora certainly had enough to cope with right now.

Arthur and Jayne, then? They had the room, they had the money. And Arthur, the sentimental slob, had that old feeling about Medusa.

But no, it was impossible. Never in the world would he be able to talk Jayne into it. Jayne would never put up with having Harold underfoot, dragging his beat-up frame about her pristine establishment, an eyesore that no cleaning or redecorating could help, and a silent, irritating reminder that she had not always been first in her husband's affections.

Or would she? By God, Jayne just might see it as the one good deed that would definitely put her in a class by herself, the ultimate jewel in her halo. She would be the local saint. It would not only redirect Arthur's eyes back home, where they belonged, but would make all of Medusa's other friends look like a bunch of penny-pinching hypocrites. Yes (Betty was now convinced that she'd hit upon the truth) it would be just like that self-loving hag to take advantage of poor old Harold. A spasm of something that was close to jealousy twisted her insides and she stared nastily at Miss Nash, waiting to hear what she had guessed put into words.

Miss Nash, who had fitted a cigarette into her holder, now lighted it with slow deliberation and, punctuating the moment's silence, snapped shut her business-like lighter. She gave a slight

cough and began again to speak, shifting her voice now into a richer, fruitier gear in which the a's seemed to broaden and the r's to throb portentously. It was evident that what she was about to say she believed to be of more than ordinary significance.

"A distressing piece of news has just been brought to my attention, Miss Levering. I confess I can't understand why I have been kept in ignorance for so long. However, the matter does not come to me altogether as a surprise. Devoted as I am to my brother, I have long been aware that there are certain areas in which he demonstrates a curious ambivalence with respect to money."

Well, Betty thought, if that meant what she thought it meant, Miss Nash would get no argument there. She nodded. "Crookeder than a milk dealer," she agreed cheerfully. It was one of Lee-roy's favorite expressions and Betty meant it more admiringly than disparagingly. She was therefore surprised to see a flush rise up from Miss Nash's neatly collared neck to deepen the healthy pink of her unpowdered cheeks.

"An interesting way of putting it," Miss Nash commented curtly. "To continue. I have been apprised by Mrs. Stops, our landlady, that she has been in the habit of submitting my brother's bills to you for payment. It is of course entirely due to my own stupidity, my own naiveté, shall we say, that this situation has gone on for so long unchecked. I should have realized at an earlier date that it would not be possible for Mrs. Stops to create the climate of gracious living that has surrounded us there for the comparatively modest sum I personally have been expending." Miss Nash drew a deep breath. She tapped her cigarette against an ashtray that needed emptying and frowned. "To summarize matters, Miss Levering, I have here a check made out to you for the amount quoted to me by Mrs. Stops as that of which she has been in receipt from you."

Here Miss Nash removed a piece of paper from her wallet and laid it down on Betty's drawing-board. Betty stared at it in amazement and from it back to Miss Nash. It represented money that

she had not had the slightest thought of seeing again and she was caught badly off balance.

“Thank you,” she mumbled. “It’s quite unnecessary, you know. You do understand, I hope, that I did it for Medusa’s sake, of course!” For she wasn’t going to have Miss Nash thinking that it mattered a rap to her whether Harold lived or died.

Miss Nash’s eyes bored into hers. “I do not pretend to know what your motivation was with respect to this generosity, Miss Levering. The human heart has its secret places. One can not always prophesy with accuracy where its commitments lie. Whatever your reasons for this action, permit me to thank you on behalf of my brother. And now,” she thrust her hand at Betty in manly fashion, “I shall say goodbye and leave you once more to your labors. It is unlikely that we shall meet again.”

Betty, eaten by curiosity, ignored Miss Nash’s hand. “But Harold,” she cried, her eyes bulging, “what’s going to become of him? What are you doing with him?”

Miss Nash raised her eyebrows and shrugged her neatly tailored shoulders. “I can only say that my poor brother has been forced to take a long, hard look at his position,” she said, leaving no doubt in Betty’s mind as to who had done the forcing, “and he has faced up to facts. His work-life is over. To be quite truthful one would have to admit that he had throughout his lifetime formed very few useful work patterns. However, that is all in the past. There are still areas of development in which he can relate to life on a positive level. What he needs is a sense of belonging. After evaluating his current potential, he agrees with me that a veterans’ hospital offers him his best opportunity to satisfy that need within the fabric of a—uh—framework of rehabilitation know-how. And beggars, I have told him, can’t be choosers.”

“A veterans’ hospital!” cried Betty, extracting the kernel of information from the chaff of verbiage. “But that’s impossible! He will loathe it! Besides, Medusa would never even consider the idea.”

"What do you suggest instead, Miss Levering?" snapped Miss Nash.

Betty lowered her eyes uncomfortably and waved a charcoal-soiled hand vaguely. It was, she thought, put up or shut up. She said nothing.

"Medusa," said Miss Nash, "was of a thoroughly impractical turn of mind, a fact of which I feel sure you are quite cognizant. Moreover, Miss Levering, she is dead. Unfortunately I am not in possession of the means to go on indulging her—problematical—ghost."

Across the studio the telephone rang. Betty muttered, "Oh, Christ, what now?" and got up to answer it. Miss Nash turned to go.

"No, don't leave yet, Miss Nash. Wait a minute, will you? . . . Hello? . . . Yes, Cora. Look, darling, can I call you back? I'm frightfully busy right now. . . . Oh, Cora, *no!* How horrible! I can't bear it! . . . No, no, of course it couldn't possibly be, what a terrible thing to suggest. I'll be right over, darling. Yes, of course I will." She hung up the phone and looked at Miss Nash.

"William's dead," she announced in a dull voice.

"William?"

"Yes, Cora's husband," for that seemed now to be his only identity. "The children found him in the swimming pool this morning. Can you imagine anything more horrible?" In her mind Betty saw him floating there in the scummy water; was he looking up for help at the impersonal sky with his dead eyes or did he stare peacefully down into the cozy depths, at one with the decaying flotsam that eddied about.

"The swimming pool? An accident?"

Betty didn't answer. Cora had said of course it was his heart, that he must have had a heart attack. He'd gotten up in the middle of the night, as he had so often lately after sleeping a couple of hours, and gone downstairs. She said he'd probably gulped down too much whisky and wandered outside and down to the pool. He must have been taken as he stood there beside it. It was the

only explanation, Cora had insisted. It was utterly ridiculous for the doctor to say that the coroner had to be called in. It was absolutely out of the question that it could be suicide. William would never have dreamed of doing such a thing. Didn't Betty agree?

Betty became aware of Miss Nash again. She gave an unmirthful laugh. "It's getting so you hardly dare answer the telephone any more. It's always bad news now. Living has boiled down to broken bones, broken hearts, swollen up prostates, deterioration and death. God, but I'm bored with it!" She aimed a kick at a scrapbasket, which scuttled across the room, spilling its contents and coming to rest against the windows. Miss Nash watched its course with imperturbable eyes.

Betty said, feeling rather ashamed, "Well, I guess I'd be a damn fool to think things will ever get any better from now on, wouldn't I?"

"Yes," said Miss Nash.

Betty flung back her bright, disheveled head of hair and glared impatiently about the studio, as if searching for something to sweeten this bitter truth before she swallowed it. Joe, she reminded herself, thank God for Joe. The memory of his plain, moon-face gave her comfort. She didn't give a damn what people thought about her marrying him. She knew it was right for her. He'd cause her a certain amount of trouble, she knew (for she didn't put much stock in his staying on the wagon) but he'd get as good as he gave, come to that.

Miss Nash put her cigarette holder back in her pocketbook. "It would be unrealistic to expect the overall picture to be one of too great brightness for those of us who are approaching the Later Years," she said, holding Betty's eyes. "What is necessary is for us all to maintain a posture of courage."

She seemed to include Betty and Cora and William and Harold and herself in a sort of dismal share-the-sorrow plan, but she gave out a certain strength just the same. Betty began to understand her success.

“And now” (briskness took over) “Harold will be getting impatient. It is time for us to be on our way.”

“Harold? Good God, is he outside? Are you going this morning?” And as Miss Nash inclined her head, Betty growled, “Well, I’ll just come out and say goodbye.”

It was certainly going to rain. Clouds hid the mountain tops and trailed dirty ragged edges down into the valley. As Miss Nash and Betty walked around the house a chilly drizzle came to meet them. A proper day for deaths and departures, cheer had no part in it. If I don’t get the hell out of this place soon, Betty told herself, I’ll probably hang myself. She shivered and folded her arms around each other to ward off the damp.

In the gray sedan in the driveway Harold sat, staring straight ahead through the windshield with that baffling look he had of aloof, noble suffering. Viewed from the side as he was now, she noticed again that he retained some of his old handsomeness. At her heavy-footed approach he turned, regarded her calmly through his disarranged eyes and twitched his lips affably. Arms akimbo, Betty, with a cold stare, repelled the smile. She saw no reason for wasting her energies on any display of manners this late in the game.

So this is how it ends, she thought. All the old, happy times, the fun they had had, the quarrels and hurts that were part of it. This elderly, white-haired hand-me-down in a bad state of repair was all that remained of the pleasures of friendship and the pains of love.

Harold inclined his head courteously. His mouth worked. Sound came forth, formed itself in a makeshift way into words. “Good morning,” he got out, but Betty’s glowering glance slid off him.

Miss Nash opened the door on her side of the car, got in and arranged herself neatly behind the steering wheel.

“Wait a minute,” Betty mumbled. She left Harold, came around past the front of the car to the other side. Miss Nash paused, her fingers on the dashboard, ready to start the motor. She ducked her head inquiringly at Betty.

"I'm a slow thinker," Betty said finally, "and things have been moving pretty fast for me. Let's talk this thing over a little more, can't we?" She shot an ill-humored look past Miss Nash at Harold. "If you'd only come to me sooner about this, we could have fixed something up." She brushed aside the fact that if Miss Nash had approached her with any proposition overtly involving increased aid and comfort for Harold, she would have turned her down in short order.

"I tell you what," she continued in a harsh voice, "why don't you leave him here for a while? God knows I've got room enough. Just till we see what might turn up." As she said it she knew perfectly well that she was burning her bridges, that nothing was going to turn up for Harold ever again. Nothing but death, of course. Till then she would be stuck with him, that was sure. Well, the poor old bastard, it might not be too long a wait.

Miss Nash gave a cough, vaguely admonitory in effect. "I can't believe you're speaking in serious terms, Miss Levering."

"Yes."

"May I ask why? Have you viewed this offer within the frame of your own future?"

Betty moved her shoulders irritably, still hugging herself against the rain. "Let's say I still owe them something, him and Medusa." She gave a sudden, bright grin and tossed back her hair on which droplets of mist were beginning to sparkle. "Don't worry about me, Miss Nash. Harold won't have things all his own way, you know! It won't be all roses for him! Come on, show me which are his bags."

She'd really screwed her life up now, she thought, for having Harold on her hands would throw a wrench into things with Joe Larkin, of course.

Or, who knew, perhaps it wouldn't. Joe was so generous, so easy-going, he might not really mind. A *ménage-à-trois* might work out very nicely for them all; the brunt of living together might be tempered, divided so by three. On a wave of optimism she opened the car door and grabbed Harold's arm.

“Come on, you old crock,” she said gaily. “You’re going to live with Betty now.” She’d get him settled upstairs and then drive over to Cora’s. Cora wouldn’t be the only one with a piece of grim news, she thought, quite anticipating the look on her face when she heard. There was Lily to tell too. Lily was bringing John home from the hospital today, she remembered. Perhaps she’d run in and see them later on in the day.

She had a moment of panic as Miss Nash demonstrated the workings of the hardware that held Harold together, the grisly brace that enabled him to walk. “He needs very little help with it now, he’s learning fast,” Miss Nash assured her quickly, as if she feared Betty might still think better of things.

“He’d better,” Betty snapped, eyeing Harold unsympathetically.

Miss Nash, having unpacked his things and stowed them neatly away in drawers and closets, was not disposed to linger. She placed an aseptic kiss on her brother’s cheek, thanked Betty with far less circumlocution than she customarily used and took herself off.

She’s certainly not giving me any chance to change my mind, thought Betty darkly, and was at once visited by the suspicion that she had been played like a fish, that Miss Nash, with Machiavellian cunning, had from the very beginning maneuvered her into her present spot.

Well, the hell with that. She was in for it now. As she left the room Harold was sitting by the window, listening with evident content to a soap opera.

Grinning to herself she put on her old trench-coat and, squaring her shoulders, thumped out to the garage. As Miss Nash had put it, it was necessary to maintain a posture of courage.

William's funeral took place two days later. Although he had played a rather small part in the life of the village many people were seen to weep and as Miss Tobin, invisible at the organ, sailed enthusiastically into "Sleepers Awake" there was a steady undercurrent of sniffing and of discreetly blown noses. Afterwards on the soggy, leaf-strewn lawn in front of the ugly church red-eyed groups stood about, their collars turned up against the nippy wind of autumn, seemingly too depleted by emotion to leave the scene.

"Are you going to the cemetery?" asked Betty, coming up to John and Lily. She and Joe Larkin had Harold Nash between them, like two stout tugs salvaging a derelict.

"I suppose so, eventually," said Lily. "But I hope not for a while yet." She giggled and began wiping her eyes again. Betty frowned impatiently and John looked at his wife with concern.

"Do we have to?" Joe asked, his big face doleful.

"I thought I would," said John, looking quite eager.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Lily. "It's out of the question, darling. You must get right back home and, preferably, straight into bed. He really shouldn't have come at all, so soon after getting home from the hospital," she told the others.

"That's right, that's right," said Joe. "Bloody raw out today! No use taking chances, John. You take care of him, Lily, see he gets the old virility back."

There was a bleak silence as the unfortunate word bounced around. Betty glared at Joe across Harold's unconcerned figure, but John smiled.

Changing the subject, he said, looking toward the church door, "Why do you suppose Honey Potts is taking on so over William's death?"

"She is crying harder than anyone," said Lily. "Is that the young man she's going to marry?"

"Yes," said Betty, darting a glance and then quickly turning her back. "That's the handsome Lee-roy."

"What's his other name?" asked Lily.

Betty said, irritably, "How the hell should I know?"

"How emotional the young are," said John, watching Honey as she wiped her eyes. "They catch sorrow as easily as the measles."

"Yes, yes," said Harold Nash.

"Who did you ever weep for," snapped Betty. She was more upset than she would admit, Lily thought.

Harold frowned and, surprisingly, stamped his foot.

"That will do, Harold," Betty said sharply. She gave his arm a shake but his tiny burst of anger was over. His face relaxed back into vague amiability as he looked off toward the road, evading her, it seemed.

"Young people enjoy melancholy," Lily said. "The tears of things." Why was Betty glowering so? "Their hearts are very tender."

"Why are you so patronizing toward them?" Betty burst out. "Honestly, Lily, sometimes I can't understand you, you're so incredibly un-understanding. Can't you see at all that Honey must have been in love with William?"

"Honey? William? You can't be right, Betty, she's only a child!"

"Joe, give me a cigarette, will you?" Betty held her hand out to him, two fingers extended.

"You may be right, Betty," said John. "Who's this?" he said in an undertone to Lily as a gray-haired woman with a pleasant face approached them. Lily turned.

"Hello, Mrs. Canfield," she said, holding out her hand. "I've been meaning to telephone you. This is my husband. John, darling, this is Grace Hunter's daughter, Mrs. Canfield. How is your mother doing, Mrs. Canfield?"

Betty gave Joe a signal and she and he turned Harold around and faced him down the path.

"Goodbye, goodbye," he said as they pulled him off.

"You're called Joan?" asked John.

"Yes," said Mrs. Canfield.

"You have your mother's eyes," said John. He was peering at her in a very inquisitive way, thought Lily. "Yes, you really do look a great deal like her. Your mother is one of my oldest friends. I hope she is improving."

"Yes, it is quite remarkable how well she is doing. They have put bits of steel through her hip and they say she will be walking again in no time now."

"It reminds me of those little china dolls I had as a child," said Lily. "If their legs came off you got a quite ordinary pin and bent it and attached them back on as good as new. I never thought they'd be doing the same thing to people."

"I believe this is rather more difficult," said Mrs. Canfield.

"Doctors do the most extraordinary things these days, don't they?" said John. "Nothing seems to be impossible for them any longer, does it? That is, of course, if the patient is old enough. It does seem, doesn't it, as if they are more successful with older patients than with younger ones?" He shook his head humorously. "But you mustn't think I am being sarcastic at their expense. Speaking as one who is at least on the verge of happy senility, I am grateful to them and hope they'll continue to keep me in running order for some time to come."

Lily squeezed his arm. "I hope they do, too. John is just out of the hospital, himself," she explained to Mrs. Canfield.

"Yes, so I have heard. I hope you're fully recovered, Mr. Dewhurst?" She turned from him to Lily. "Your mother is ill too, they tell me."

"Yes," said Lily. "Poor lady. Death is very mischievous sometimes. He's continually tapping her on the shoulder, but always goes off at the last minute, looking the other way."

"Perhaps the doctors keep hiding his scythe," said Mrs. Canfield with a bleak look in her eyes. John regarded her with melancholy interest.

"On the other hand," Lily said, "somebody once told me that the very old never want to die. So, though of course we do, perhaps we shouldn't altogether blame the poor doctors."

Arthur was coming down the church steps now, she saw. She

wondered if he would see them and if he would come up to speak, if he did. Perhaps it would be better not. She shivered a little. Leaves were falling from the trees: the wind led them a last sad dance before piling them up in red and yellow drifts against building or stony wall. How pale and nervous John looked. It was really much too soon for him to be about, she was sure, in spite of what they had told her at the hospital. Or had something happened to upset him? She must get him home and settled before a nice fire.

"It was so kind of your son to drive my Claire to New York," said Mrs. Canfield. "What a good-looking boy he is. You must be very proud of him, Mr. Dewhurst." She looked rather shyly at John.

"He drove your daughter to New York?" John repeated. His voice was sharp. Was he getting deaf, Lily wondered.

"Didn't I tell you, darling," she said. She had not, she knew, judging that he might disapprove. He had behaved so oddly about Charles and Claire. "It was so nice for him to have company," she said to Mrs. Canfield. "And it quite made his leave, meeting Claire. She's really the prettiest thing, John. I wish you could have met her." She smiled at him, begging him silently to be polite.

But he said nothing, merely continued to stare rather rudely out of his sad, deepset eyes, at Mrs. Canfield. How difficult he was becoming, Lily thought. Holding his arm, she gave it a hard pinch but was defeated by her gloves and the thickness of his tweed sleeve.

"I wish I could think who it is she reminds me of," she rattled on to Mrs. Canfield. "Of course, it's obvious where she gets her prettiness. But there's something else as well. Well, it will come to me. Aren't resemblances the most fascinating things?" She turned to John vivaciously and was quite taken aback by his scowl.

"I must go," said Mrs. Canfield, holding out her hand.

"Goodbye," said John, sounding, to Lily's irritated ears, barely civil.

"Give your mother my love, won't you, Mrs. Canfield," she cried, "and tell her we'll be in to see her soon. . . . John, darling, why were you so rude to her, couldn't you see how shy she was?"

Really you are impossible. You get more like your father every day! I don't know what I shall do with you!" A wave of vindictiveness swept over her, momentarily swamping her love for him, and she felt herself trembling. Her frivolous, unregenerate spirit was at it again, beating its head against the cage of duty, of circumstance. But soon it would quiet down again, she knew, would fall back into comfortable somnolence, come to life at less and less frequent intervals.

"I'm sorry," said John. "Let's go home now—I've got something I want to tell you."

But Lily hardly heard because Preston and Pierre were standing in their path, with Arthur. Talking together, exchanging sad comments about William and telling each other little bits of news about their health, they all began to inch along toward their cars.

Arthur's grizzled, baldish head was bare and he kept his hands in the pockets of his topcoat. He wore his horn-rimmed glasses, which gave him an unfamiliar look.

"You've been crying," he grumbled, looking at Lily sideways.

"Hasn't everyone?" She raised her swollen eyelids and tried to read the expression behind the glasses. "This one is even sadder than Medusa's, don't you think so?"

He nodded. "All those children—"

"He had no business dying," she cried, as if it had been inexcusably careless and perverse of William. She felt full of confusion.

"There goes Mrs. Greeff," said Arthur, as a car started up. They watched her edge out into the road, headed toward the cemetery.

"Where is Jayne?" asked Lily. "Oh, I forgot," she added, her brown eyes glinting with false innocence. "Jayne hates funerals, doesn't she? How is she, Arthur?"

"Nervous," he answered tersely, from between his teeth. "Thinks she may be getting another lump."

Lily put her gloved hand to her cheek in consternation. "Oh, no, Arthur! Poor Jayne!"

"She told me to ask some people in tonight after dinner. Cry in

our whisky, you know, cheer each other up. Betty and Joe are coming. One or two others. Think you and John could come? Uh—we're going back to New York at the end of the week."

The news seemed to sink to the pit of Lily's stomach, filling it with a kind of heaviness. She'd known that he would be leaving Leicester soon, but hearing it now—.

She hesitated, tempted. How nice it would be to spend one last evening with him, even in the company of others. She turned to John who was ahead with Preston and Pierre, meaning to ask him what he thought of the idea.

But no, she decided. It wouldn't be fair at all, asking him to take her about so soon after his operation. He was still much too frail.

"I'd love to," she said, "but I think John's had enough today. You know how exciting funerals are for him!" She gave a little hiccup of laughter and Arthur threw her a searching look. "Besides, this is the night he likes to watch television."

"I don't suppose things have been too jolly for you lately, have they?" he said uncomfortably.

There he went again, making her feel pathetic. She repressed a frown and said lightly, "I haven't really had time to notice. Anyway, I guess it's time I put away childish joys. Remember the hymn we were just singing? How did it go? 'All the vain things that charm me most'—"

They exchanged a smile. Lily's mood again underwent a change. She felt quite exhilarated suddenly, full of virtue, purged of selfishness. It wouldn't last, of course, but sufficient unto the day—.

"Give my love to Jayne," she said blandly. "Tell her I'll call her before she leaves. Come on, darling," she called to John. "I'm freezing to death. Let's get home and have some tea."

