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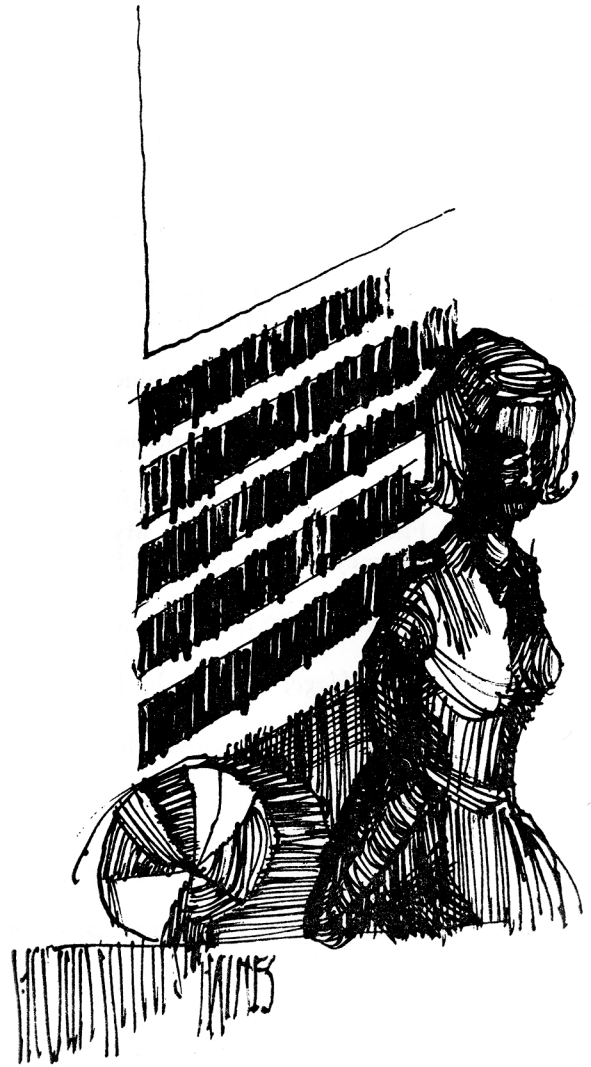
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the cage

C. W. E. BIGSBY

The room was stifling. The slatted blind kept out the glare but the heat burned mercilessly through. Down the hall she could hear the low whine of a fan as it circulated the warm, moist air along the corridors. The cheap carpets, the heavy brass-lined mirrors and the greasy bannister-rails seemed to exude heat.

She was lying on the bed in her slip. From time to time she wiped her forehead and under her arms with a hotel towel.

"Ch-r-ist," she moaned, "what a god-awful town."

Reaching into her purse she pulled out a small bottle of white pills. Juggling them into her mouth she washed them down with lukewarm Coke.

"Ch-ri-ist," she muttered, gritting her teeth, "Cer-ist." She put the glass back on the Gideon Bible beside her bed. The glass was scratched.

Outside she could faintly hear the sounds of traffic as it braked and accelerated at the intersection. It was six o'clock. There was no television.

Her luggage consisted of one large blue suitcase and a pale-green record player. The suitcase had no labels. Upending a record jacket

she slipped the disk out of the perspiring plastic and dropped it onto the turntable. The sound whispered up from a distance. She hummed the tune to herself and moved her foot in time with the music.

On the table beside the Bible was a pack of cigarettes. She picked this up and tapped one out and lit it, dropping the match on the floor.

She watched a fly which was beating against the window below the blind. It settled for a moment, as if to reassure itself of the reality of what it saw, and then fell to furious activity, crossing and re-crossing the pane. It vanished behind the blind.

There was a timid knock at the door.

"Christ, what now?" she murmured and then called out, "Who is it? I'm not dressed."

"It's George."

"Who the hell's George?"

"It's George, Alfred's brother."

"Oh, George," she gasped, thinking fast now. "I didn't realize. I won't be long. Can you wait a moment?"

"Yes, of course," George replied, "take as long as you like."

"What the hell does he want?"

she thought to herself as she pulled the damp dress over her head. The zipper stuck.

The record had finished and the needle was flicking annoyingly backwards and forwards. She switched it off.

"I won't be long now," she called as she ran to the mirror and stared at her face.

"That's all right, don't mind about me. I'm fine, just fine."

"Christ, I look like I'm dead. What the hell does he want anyway? Hell, I know what he wants but I'm not letting go, not now I'm not. By Christ, though, my face looks terrible." The water screamed in the pipes as she ran the water onto a tissue. She quickly wiped the cool paper over her face and then dropped the streaked wad into the tin wastebasket below the sink.

"I'm just putting on a face," she called, at the same time thinking to herself, "He hasn't got a hope in hell. He's too late. My God, yes, he's far too late."

She smeared the lipstick perfunctorily over her lips and wiped off the excess with another tissue. "No time for the eyes," she thought. "Hell, it doesn't matter anyway."

She carefully straightened her dress, brushed the over-blonde hair out of her eyes, and turned the key in the lock.

"Well, hello there, George, I never did have the pleasure of meeting you, although I've heard so much about you that I feel we have really met already, don't you?"

All the while smiling, even laughing.

"Why do come on in, Brother. I really do think I can call you brother although it does sound a mite strange but I suppose I'll just have to get used to it, that's all, won't I? That's what Alfred always says, though he's always teasing me; a mighty tease you have for a brother, George, yes indeed. . . ."

"I thought I'd come," he said, interrupting the flow of her protective chatter.

"Why surely," she replied, recovering slightly, "and you're right welcome. Won't you come in even for a moment or two? I suppose it's all right since you are my brother-in-law, almost. It's such a wonderful opportunity for us to get to know each other and after all we should. . . ."

"I just thought I'd come," he stammered, stopping her in mid-flight this time.

She gave way before him and let him into the room. He looked around awkwardly, as if not knowing whether to stand where he was or sit on the bed. The only chair was occupied by the record player. They stood looking at each other for a moment, the door open.

"I think I'll close the door," she said. "It is rather hot today but you know what people are." She pushed the door to. "You've come from Alfred, of course."

"No, no, I just thought I'd come."

Again they lapsed into silence.

"Won't you sit down? No, no, on the bed, after all we are almost

related," she insinuated. He looked a little flustered.

"Why in Christ's name has he come?" she thought to herself, noticing the nervous movement of his hands as he pushed his hair back from his forehead.

"I . . . I . . . it's a nice room," he corrected himself.

"It was all we could get at such short notice." She smiled at him, her teeth red from the clumsy painting.

"You come from Mississippi, don't you?"

"Why yes, I do."

"You've lived there all your life."

"Why yes, that's right. My, you do know everything about me, don't you?"

He smiled weakly at her and moved his hand to his hair again.

"Been here long?" he stammered, glancing at the door.

"Oh no," she exclaimed, smiling blandly at him, "no, you see Alfred just thought that I'd like to get freshened up before I met the family. I'd like to make a good impression, you know. You've spoiled it really."

He pulled a small colored handkerchief from his top pocket and made nervous lunges at his forehead.

"Kind of hot."

"Yes."

Again for a moment the thin whining of the fan and the dull rumble of the city.

"Miss . . . er . . ."

"Ann," she quickly interjected.

"Oh yes, of course . . . I . . ."

"It's only a simple old name."

"Why no, I think . . . no, I like it."

She smiled at him again. "For Chrissake," she thought, "for Chrissake."

"Would you like a drink? I could have one sent up," she suggested.

"Well . . ."

"I was going to have one myself."

"Well, in that case I think I would like one."

"What would you like?" she asked, pressing the button beside the bed.

"Oh, just a Coke, please."

"My, you do have simple tastes."

She laughed. "For Chrissake, what do you want?" she thought. "I've a good mind to ask him right out. Oh hell, why bother? If he's part of the price I might as well pay up and be cheerful."

"I never thought it would happen."

"What?"

"I never thought it would happen, I mean I never thought Alfred would marry. I didn't know he was interested . . . I mean I didn't really ever think . . ."

"It was a very sudden affair," she said coldly and then, smiling with her mouth, "We fell in love right away as soon as we met."

"In love?"

"Why yes," she said, pushing the bell again and hearing it this time far away in the depths of the building.

"What I mean is, he never told us nothing about you, he . . ."

"It was very sudden, just like in the movies." She lit a cigarette

from the stub of the other and inhaled deeply.

"You don't smoke, do you?" she asked, extending the pack towards him.

"No," he replied, drawing his hand back, "I never do."

"You're older than Alfred, aren't you?"

"Not very," he answered quickly.

"But I thought you were four years older."

"It never seemed that way. We were very close. Our family were always very close."

There was a loud knock at the door.

"Come in," she called, getting up from the bed.

The man who entered was middle-aged and wore a soiled white coat. It looked as though he had lived all his life in the coat and had never taken it off. He looked disinterestedly around the room. When his gaze fell on the man seated on the bed, however, a look of bewilderment filled his eyes. He glanced quickly from the man to the woman, as though unable to believe what he saw.

"Scotch on the rocks and a Coke, please."

Still he stood gazing at them both until she repeated the order.

"Didn't you get that?" she said, glaring at him. He nodded and shuffled mechanically from the room, banging the door behind him.

"Really, people are rude nowadays. The way he was staring."

George remained silent.

"Did you notice the way he was staring?"

"What? Oh, yes, yes, as you say."

They sat looking at each other, each afraid to start the conversation again.

"It sure is hot."

"Yes indeed," George replied, getting up and walking over to the blind. He lifted one of the slats and peered unseeingly down into the street.

"Are you sure it's a good thing?" he asked quietly, still at the window.

"What? I beg your pardon, I didn't quite catch that."

"I said are you sure it's a good thing marrying Alfred?"

"So here we go," she thought to herself, "so we've reached it at last." And then out loud, "Of course I do, George, why I love your brother. We just naturally have to get married. I know it must all seem a new idea to you but things like this happen."

"He never told us anything about . . ."

"I've explained about that. We love each other and want to get married and have children."

"Children?" he gasped, apparently unable to grasp the meaning of the word. He swung 'round to face her. "Is it the money?"

"By Christ, you've got a nerve. Who the hell do you think you are, busting in here making dirty insinuations?"

"I'll give you five thousand."

She felt as though the breath had been knocked out of her.

"Five thousand," she thought to herself. "How the hell much money has he got? Why that cringing miser Alfred, he never let on he was going to inherit."

"I don't want your filthy money; Alfred and me are going to Chicago, like he promised, and nobody's going to stop us. Not even your money."

Again the clumsy knock at the door and the waiter came in with a tray. He placed the drinks carelessly on the Bible. "Eighty cents," he pronounced.

"Put it on the check," she hissed, her hands wet with perspiration. "Sorry, cash for drinks—hotel rules."

"Hell."

George stood with his back to the man, who waited patiently while the woman searched her purse for the coins. At last the door closed again and they were left with the heat. She had quieted down a little now, her mind pursuing a new slant. The money was a new angle. She had never even thought he had any money. Oh, enough to get to Chicago yes, and maybe a bit more besides but never real money. How could she have been blind to that? "Why you only have to look at him," she

thought. "But he must be going to inherit."

"George," she said in a quiet, determined voice. "Alfred and me are going to get married, can't we just be friends?"

He moved away from the window. The handkerchief in his hands was twisted as he gripped it fiercely.

"Well, George, can't we be?"

He looked at her quizzically.

"You and me?" he asked.

"Yes, George, you and me."

As he turned to the door he was trembling.

"But don't you understand? Can't you see?" he said as he turned the handle. "That's impossible, just impossible."

He shut the door behind him and walked off down the hall, the sound of his footsteps deadened by the carpet.

As soon as the door closed she went over to the suitcase, opened it and took out a magazine. She took it over to the window. On the front cover was a picture of Chicago. With the magazine she crushed a fly which was buzzing annoyingly across the glass. Then she threw herself on the bed and with the pillow tried vainly to escape the thin whine of the fan.

observations from a scenic-car

HJOHNSANDERS

today i saw wind-waved trees
the strange waving of a prehistoric time
when trees were the lords
the still silent quiet lords
how does the wind's seduction feel to a tree
to have one's branches rippled
when the self is not consciously differentiated
the resilient response of limb and leaf
the strength tried
the organs of energy-reception torn
by breath by food
the great feeding force ruffled by the sea of air
molecules rushing piling jarring
diffusing light warmth color
what is it to the unseeing tree
how does a tree see
what is that state before seeing hearing tasting touching
does a tree touch
or are these things
to man so apparent
necessary to the self-unknowing
what experience is the storm
apparent to our differentiated and differentiating selves
to the tree and to the sea of air
to the white filamented clump of bearded wild grass or wheat
what forces surged in the first unself-conscious beholders
what violent union
between man and tree and surging sea of the unseen disturber
what response to ensuing quiet
to fresh pungency in spreading nostrils
to brushed rippled skin
wet and drying
chillingly cool
what felt exultancy of celebration of wind and tree
between the first two sexed human beholders

that enactment of fluid joyous violence
that response relived
of touch sight smell and sound
between he and she
the masterful penetration pulsating palpitation
between an enclosing swelling and flowing solidity of warmth
and a velvety pointed throb of scalding soothing seething pull
merging into fluid burning resiliency
vibrating heaving
around hot dancing ball of thrust
enactment
unself-consciousness regained
inexpressible

... o'clock, and all is well

HJOHNSANDERS

In deep-down cool of autumn the young man approached the
school.
The millings of the unplaced frosh spoke youngness in the halls.
Clarity was the sound of the morning sunlight.
Reflected grateful smiles warmed into the sense of his reiteration.
He attempted warm sensuosity.
Sophisticated black eyes held and gave rapport instantly,
To off-balanced trite greeting.

Spring diffusion gave birth to fragmentation.
The young-old buck was caught in the scholastic lassoes.
The bullet ricocheted about the room,
Down its path,
Into night and subconsciousness,
Riding in on the lunar consciousness of three a.m.,
Bouncing jazzily home:

"You, I take it,
Have made the choice for the things of the mind."

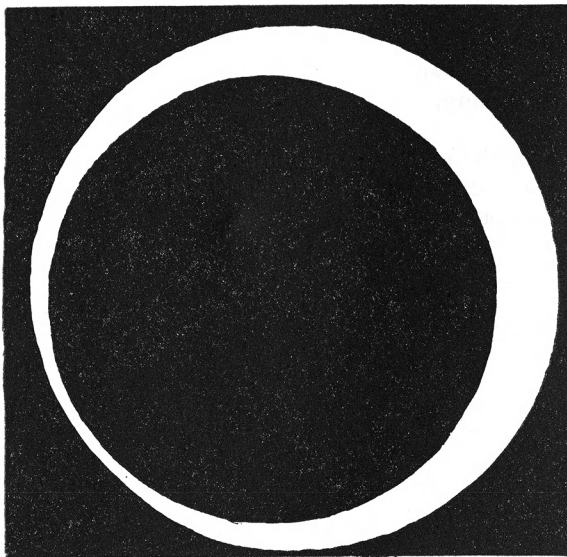
The sensuous buck jerks in his seat and finds chains mock his con-
vulsions;
One can't always die running.



a poem

BERNARD R. McDONALD

“Turn on the blasted light!” I called,
“And plop that dirt here, Belzecauld!”
We scurried here and we dashed there,
Tromping and tossing with scarcely a care.
“Throw out the fire! Light that sun!
Think we’re here only for fun?”
I scattered some seed, poured some water,
Made an animal and fed it fodder.
“We’re not done yet! Leave be there!
Blast, hurry along!”
“That bird’s cheap and so’s its song.”
Flesh was easy, but brain was hard,
Yet we built all in the turn of a card.
“There, there now we’re done.
Put out the puppet and let him run!”
And the devil and ‘Bel’ smiled, watching their work
As man and the cosmos began with a jerk.



a simple adventure (dialogue in comic-tragedy)

BERNARD R. McDONALD

Narrator: To disclose the theme, and in so, to neither tease the listener nor require in him a moment's scrutiny, is poor indeed, and thus, deserving of the critic's ire. But paradox, thought's immortal lord, assumes too many guises. Hence, behold, we present in parallel a parable of man and man-personified — his birth, his death, his brief attempts to comprehend. And as the thinker is the father of the thought, so is the thought in consequence his greatest agony.

First Speaker: In the beginning God said, "Let there be dark." And thus, light suffered limitation.

Narrator: Molecular masses swirled and pranced. Electron cloud danced with electron cloud. Neutrons nudged protons. Catalyst capered with catalyst. Twelve quanta of drunken time, leaping to the stage, snatched a kettledrum and thundered-up cause. Form held hands with mass. Look, a jig, a reel, a fox-trot, a polka! Dirge yields to ragtime. And finally, in quivering ecstasy, energy seized matter's matrix and from the gala festival—Mortimer was born.

Chorus:

Swinging stone, Man slew the lion.
Hurling shaft, He spiked the
salmon.

First Speaker: And to synthesize a major tale, indulge in name and date, and build a minor body . . .

Second Narrator: Mortimer hurried to ready himself for work. As was usual, he lay in bed too many minutes after the alarm had clanged and he was late. Secondly, his good suit was at the cleaners, and the only unwrinkled trousers in the closet belonged to a brown herring-bone which he detested. Thirdly, the coffee was too hot. He burnt his tongue. It was a foul morning indeed. Even his toast was charred.

Second Speaker:

Man tore the bread, drank the
grape,
Found a bed, and donned a cape.

Second Narrator: Unfortunately, Mortimer, while pulling on his trousers, leaned against his large hall mirror and, lo, like impudent Alice, he tumbled through!

Mortimer: Damn!

Second Narrator: Following his first profundity, Mortimer looked

around. His lower jaw fell loose and his mouth gaped wider than it had in seven Sundays. He was in a new world!

Not only was the world entirely different, but his treacherous mirror was nowhere in sight. Mortimer was stranded!

Now Mortimer, prior to his tumble, represented in aftermath the perfection of centuries of human evolution in thought, and art, and culture. Permitting our recapitulation of the oft-quoted "verities," he believed in God, in motherhood and country, knew Democrats were destined for damnation, breakfasted on cornflakes, brushed his teeth, played bridge poorly, thought Kant was a musician, and relished bourbon and water. Consequently, he was in no way suited for adventure.

Nor, unhappily, was he prepared to suffer.

One, of course, inquires as to why the specific choice of Mortimer to act in such a drama. He had merely played his roles in life, excelled in nothing, and perhaps deserves no notoriety. Nor were his time and culture of particular eternal value. But, allowing, in this short tale, a moment's play with mystery, poor Mortimer *was* chosen in a most determined, conscientious manner.

First Speaker:

Ages passed and Man grew old,
And what He made began to mold.

Chorus:

To the piccolo and the flute
Danced the Furies and the Fates.
To the lyre and the lute
Pranced demoniacs and kates.

Second Speaker:

They conjured vanity in man
and on his motives so placed a
ban,
blank actions trailed the bleat
of Pan.

Second Narrator: Mortimer sat on the grassy knoll where he had fallen with his shirt still unbuttoned, his pants still no higher than his knees, in bare feet and charming blue-striped shorts. He tenderly probed his bruises.

Suddenly, hearing a voice . . . no . . . more like a greeting, he glanced up. Lo, above his head a square-circle hovered near the intersection of two parallel lines and haughtily berated the lines for their lack of end! Mortimer was astounded.

Square-circle (squealing): Now see here, in either direction you possess no end, and hence, no beginning. And if you don't begin, it is a well-known axiom, you can't exist. How do you expect *me* to value the opinion of a non-existing thing? Phoo! Go bend yourself.

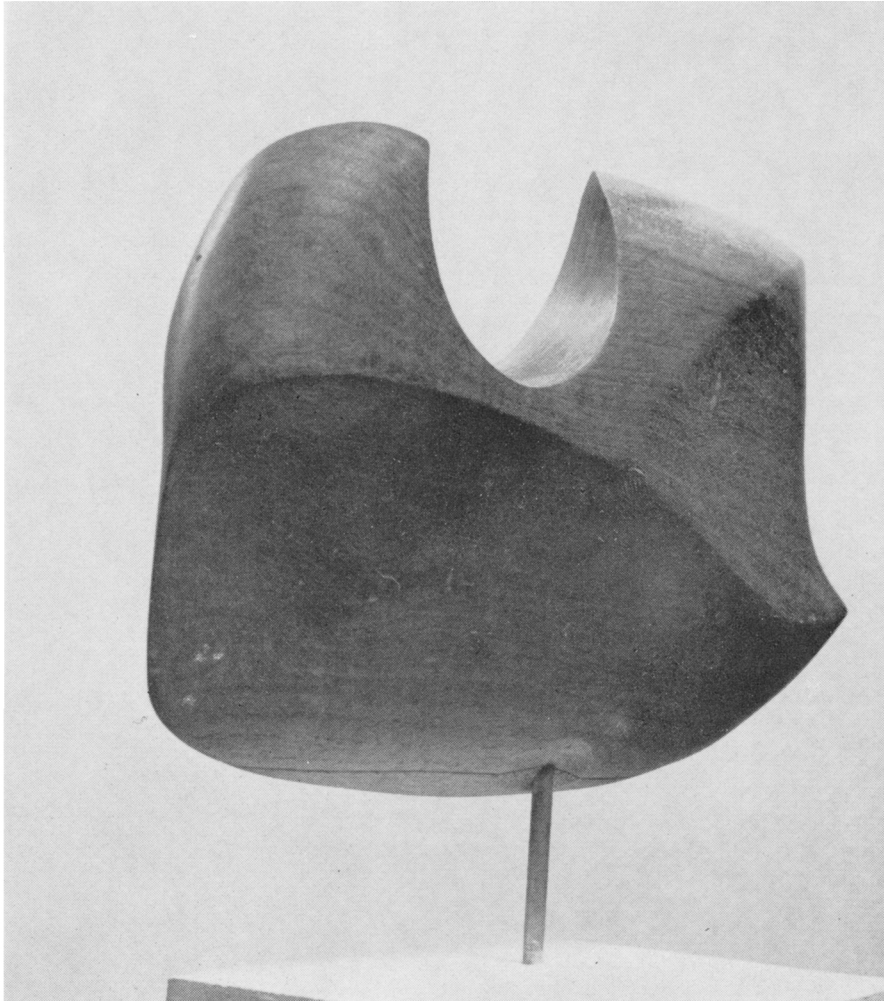
Intersection: (To Mortimer) Pay him no heed. (To the circle) You hush, or I'll clip your corner! (Again to Mortimer) You're a strange one. What geometrical configuration are you? What is the equation of your curve?

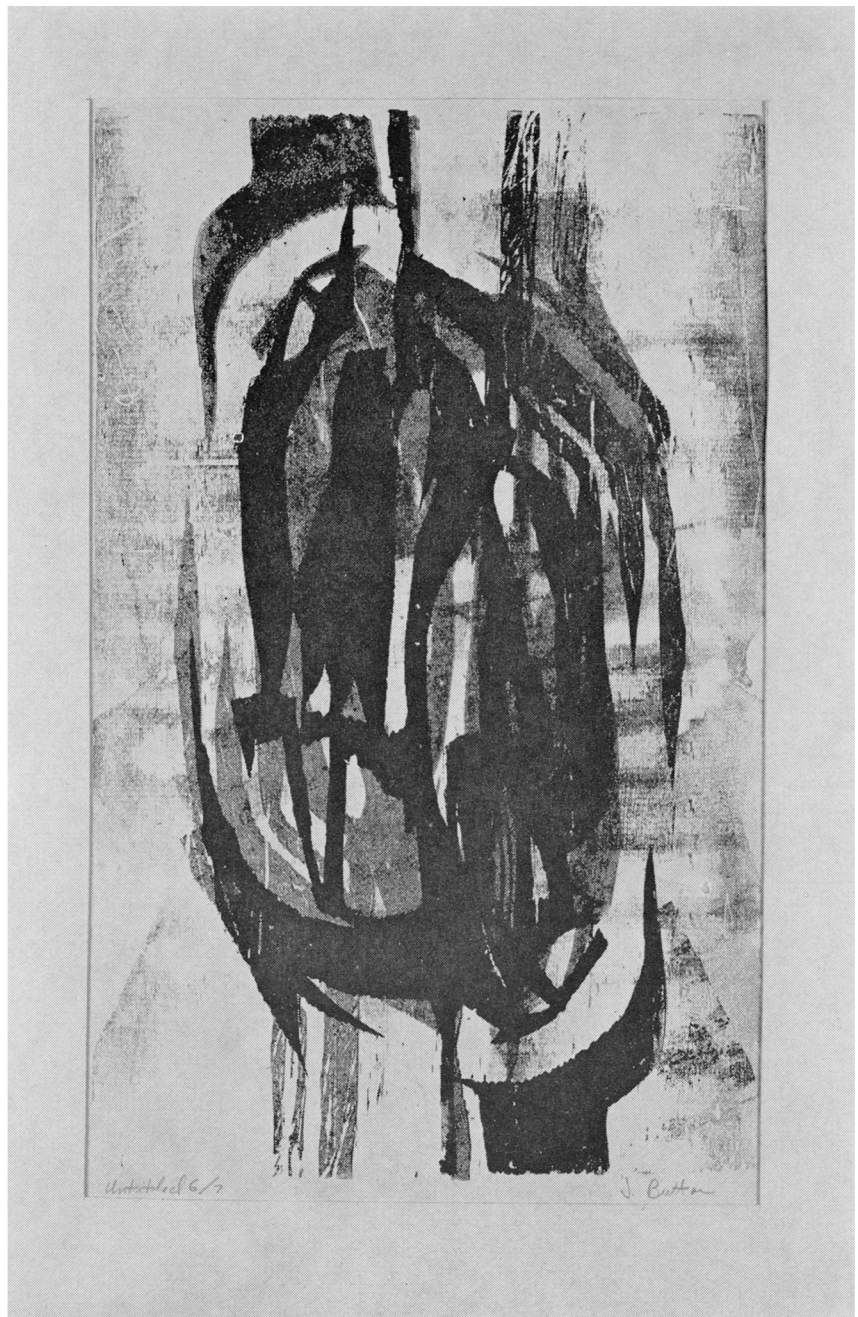
Mortimer: I have no curve, I'm Mortimer, a man.

Circle: A man? Aha. It is said that man has calculated "Pi" to 100 decimal places and this alone does separate him from beast.

Intersection: No Curve! Listen, Mortimer the Man, all moves ac-

Continued





ording to predestined plan. You and I are mere transition, trite momentary strands cementing endless halyards. We Are, only so more may Be. Each possesses curve. Even chaos pleads for law to maintain itself from order.

Ah, but . . . yet . . . prior to such sweeping suppositions, man, consider.

If blessed thought, as Circle leads me to conclude, is thy differentiating element, then it alone distinguishes, it alone bequeaths "elan vital." But, thought, all the while breeding continuity, nurses at its breast the consistency of system. Yet, its continuity, demanding meticulous pursuit, terminates inevitably to paradoxical conclusion, and thus, the shattering and the death of your beloved consistency.

And, yet, to devoid yourself of rationality is forced surrender to mysticism's psychic fantasies, and in such, to cultivate a maddening induction from one single specific to universal law. And through this leap, reason crumbles before the language of vague metaphor.

Yours . . . an unhappy lot. You pretend to think.

Suffer then when Cretans state, "All Cretans speak but falsehood."

My card, sir.

Second Narrator: The intersection thrusts a printed card to Mortimer. Mortimer reads the card. The first side states, "What is written on the other side of this card is true." He turns the card and reads, "What is written on the other side of this card is false."

Intersection: You must read the "third" side, Man.

Narrator: But before Mortimer could seek a third side, the card abruptly vanished. Instantaneously the totality of mirror world likewise disappeared and Mortimer was left alone in void, with only thought's thorned summit, paradox, for comfort.

Chorus:

The body summoned mind and there was dichotomy.
The mind summoned will and there was freedom.
The will summoned desire and there was purpose.
But desire summons cause and . . .

Glory! Glory! Hierarchy collapses!

Narrator: Poor, poor Mortimer, finally so alone. The shifting cosmos, scarcely his to own, abandoned him and he was strangled in its wake. Yes, Mortimer proved humble second to seething universe.

First Speaker:

And on an ordinary unremembered day,
Man, the sublime and absurd, ceased.

Narrator: Alas, Mortimer could not breathe the void. He was a limited creation. And in one single, violent convulsion . . .

Mortimer died.

First Speaker: Oh, there were many to mourn, though. Mortimer lived high in his day. Old Poseidon came, and Cronus and Rhea, all wearing black. The Olympians were present. Gany-mede brought his cup. And, of course, Nemesis paid his tribute.



There were Ymir and Woden,
Njorth and Ra. Bel, Baal, Dyaus
and Varuna sat near the center,
while Atropos stood above the
casket. Anubis and Thoth kindly
lit the candles and Tyche spoke
an eulogy. Many shed a tear. And
in the vestibule, the fairies and the
dryads, the nymphs and gnomes
all gathered.

Second Speaker:
Once Man rose, once He fell.

Which was heaven, which was hell?

First Speaker:
And for decaying body in eternal
womb,
What He built had now become
His tomb.

Narrator: And man, once born,
but lives to wallow in his paradox
and die, while all sweeps on as if
he never was. To his finite Alpha
and Omega may we sing a seven-
fold amen.

from the coffee house after the blast
or
who flicked their ashes in my coffee?

SIDNEY CHERPITEL

Coffee cups & cocoa cups
On the table—
Coffee & cocoa
Spilled
On the table—
And people falling off the chairs.

In comes a man
Wearing snowshoes
Carrying a nailfile—
He sits and files his toenails
And doesn't spill his coffee & cocoa
And doesn't fall off his chair.

He gets up and plods out—
And all laugh:
Laugh very hard
And very long—
And spill the coffee & cocoa
And fall off the chairs.

The man looks back
And smiles—
Rather kindly

first journey

SIDNEY CHERPITEL

In from the cold he came—
Bare feet: blue-numb with ice & snow
Thawing on the front room rug.
He was old:
Skin crinkling as peeling paint on a weather-worn house.
In his hand was an empty bird cage—
Weighted down by cycles & chunks of ice.

Always he comes at this time:
The time of the ice, the snow, the cold.
Always searching for his lost bird—
Looking for a ride to another town
Where he may search again.

Years have passed—
Many towns gone by—
Many miles behind him—
His shoes long since left shredded by the road.
Onward always he moves—
His bare feet: now club-stiff with cold
Leaving their odd imprint in the snow.

He knows not what everyone says:
His search is
Futile— Pointless— Absurd!

But life flies with that bird—

And so onward he goes—
Through the ice, the snow, the cold—
The old man—barefoot—
With the cage—
Empty



a long time until morning

JAMES ANGLE

The darkness of the room was almost complete, except near the windows where a faint glow from a street light invaded the room, making a metal bedstead gleam dully. The only sounds to be heard were the heavy breathing and intermittent snores of the other patients. Evans lay awake, listening.

A voice from the newcomer's bed, harsh and jarring, suddenly broke the silence of the ward. "Where the hell am I? What is this place?"

"A hospital, buddy," said Evans.

"Hospital? What for? I'm not sick."

"Yeah? Looked like something was wrong when they brought you in today. You weren't too lively."

"Hell, there's some kind of mistake. I wasn't sick, I was drunk."

"Yeah, I noticed. Don't worry, buddy, you're in the right place."

Evans heard the sound of rustling sheets, then a sharp gasp. "What is this? I can't move. I'm tied down!"

"Relax, you're just strapped in bed. They do that to everybody the first night in. Just in case you wake up and feel like going someplace."

"Who are you? What kind of a place is this? Damn it, I got to

get out of here." The sheets rustled again, and Evans heard the sound of creaking leather.

"You might as well stop pulling at those straps. It won't do you any good. If you'll shut up a minute, I'll try and explain." Evans lighted a cigarette, and the flare of the big kitchen match briefly illuminated his fleshy, heavily lined face. After shaking out the match he inhaled smoke and continued. "This here is a drying-out ward. You get put in here when your family or whoever it is gets sick of picking you up off the streets. Me, I'm voluntary. This is my third time in. Been here two months now."

"My God, how do I get out of here?"

"Little thirsty, are you? I know how it is. The first couple of days are always the toughest. Here, let's see how you're making out." Evans stood up, shuffled barefoot to the newcomer's bed, and struck a match, holding it over the head of the bed.

The wavering flame revealed a thin face, sweat beaded and unnaturally pale in the yellow light. The young man's mouth was tightly closed, and muscles bulged along his unshaven jaw line as he

clenched his teeth. He turned his face to the wall, away from the light, shutting his eyes quickly. "What're you trying to do, blind me?" He kept his face averted for a moment, then slowly turned back to look at Evans, his eyes squinting. "Hey, you've got the run of this place, you can help me. Hell, there's just been a mistake, that's all." He tried to smile, but a twitch in the corner of his mouth marred the effect. As he continued talking, the words came faster and faster. "Just get me loose from this bed, and I'll do the rest. That's all, just let me up, and I'll be gone. How about it?"

The match died, and Evans turned back toward his own bed. His voice was softer than before as he said, "Sorry, buddy, I can't do it. They'd know it was me."

"But Christ, man, I've got to have a drink!"

"Hang on, buddy, you'll make it." Evans climbed into bed, sighed, and pulled the sheet up to his waist. He lay on his back, his hands clasped under his head, and tried not to hear the harsh rattle of the young man's heavy breathing.

Finally the room was quiet again, except for the noises made by the sleeping patients. Evans listened to see if there would be anything more from the newcomer, hoping that he was asleep, not wanting to listen to any more pleading. The snores, occasional groans, and creaking of hospital beds were constant reminders of the presence of the others in the room. He wondered if anyone else

was lying awake in the dark, but then he guessed that he was the only one, he was alone. Practically everyone in the ward was on sleeping pills.

He turned onto his side and drew his knees up, trying to fall asleep, but his mind kept working. "Sure sleep good, these guys do. Must be nice to be clear out of it for a whole night like that. Maybe I ought to get ahold of some of those pills. No, no use kidding myself, they won't do the trick. Only one thing'll do it right, really do it."

Turning restlessly in bed, he forced himself to think about the newcomer. "He's a kid, really. Can't be more than twenty-four or so. How old was I the first time around? Thirty, I guess. I lasted longer than he did." Evans started to laugh but stopped suddenly as he thought of the young man's face. "He must have been pretty far gone when they got him. Looked like he'd claw a hole in the wall if he could get loose. Must have been on a good long drunk. Yeah, a good, long drunk." Evans began to sweat. He drew his knees up closer to his body and clenched his fists, muttering, "Jesus Christ, here we go."

It was a half hour later when he forced himself to roll over onto his back and straighten his legs. He breathed deeply several times, then threw back the sheet and sat up, swinging his feet to the floor. He lighted a cigarette with trembling hands and sat, smoking, as the slow, silent minutes of the night passed.

Shortly after three o'clock the newcomer began moaning. He whimpered, then started to make a steady humming noise, as if he were forcing the sound through clenched teeth. Evans knew the sound well, the sound and the kind of dream that went with it. He moved quickly to the young man's bed as the moaning became louder. He rested his hand on the sleeper's shoulder, feeling the muscle twitch and shudder. As he slowly increased the pressure of his hand, he said quietly, "OK, buddy, OK. It's all right. Come on, wake up now, that's it, buddy, wake up."

The young man stopped moaning and strained against the leather straps that held his arms, trying to move away from Evans. "Who are you?" he whispered.

"Relax, buddy, relax. It's just me, Evans, the guy in the ward. You're in the hospital, remember?"

The young man sighed shakily, and his breathing began to slow. "Oh yeah. Sure, I remember. Drying-out ward? What am I doing here?"

"Look, don't try to con me. You know what you're here for just as well as I do. Was it a bad one? The dream, I mean."

"Yeah, falling. Didn't think I'd ever stop. My God." The newcomer's voice had begun to shake again.

"All right, take it easy. There's nothing to get excited about. Just take it easy and ride with it, that's all you can do. And try to keep it down, or we'll have the whole hospital in here." Evans stood by the bed for a moment, listening

to the harsh breathing slow again. Finding that he was holding his arms stiffly at his sides, he forced himself to relax, shrugged, and turned away from the young man. "Why me?" he thought. "Why'd they have to stick him next to me?"

As he slipped under the sheet he thought, "Yeah, I was a few years older than he is. Not much, though. I was working at the car lot then." He laughed shortly in the darkness. "I couldn't have had a job sweeping out the show room after that little episode."

Abruptly, Evans sat up in bed. "No use, no sense in it," he muttered. He lighted another cigarette and lay back, watching the tiny glow move as his hand trembled.

The newcomer began to struggle against the straps again, and Evans said, "Easy, buddy, easy. You're all right."

The ward was quiet for a few moments, then the newcomer said, "Hey."

"Yeah?"

"What day is it?"

"It's Thursday. How long you been drunk?"

"God, I don't know. Little over a week, I guess. I remember things here and there, but most of it is pretty blurred."

The newcomer lapsed into silence again, and Evans could tell from the change in his breathing that the young man was asleep. "Yeah," he thought, "must have been a good one. Sounds like some that I've been on. Like that one that landed me in this place the

first time. It must have been a couple of months before I had enough information to piece everything together. I knew right away when I woke up here that it had started at a party at the boss's house, though. Yeah, I remembered that party, all right. I bitched myself up good that night, and that started everything."

Evans laughed, a single harsh sound in the darkness, then said, "You know better than that. It started earlier, a hell of a lot earlier."

He hadn't intended to speak aloud, and the sound of his own voice startled him. Listening, he decided that he hadn't awakened anyone. Unbidden, his mind returned to a recounting of the earlier time.

"They kept asking me if I had a reason, all the doctors and everyone. Hell yes, sure, I had a reason. Those damned people bored me. I didn't want to go to the party in the first place, but Susan insisted. We got there late, because I wanted to stop for a couple of drinks on the way, and when we walked in Allen was telling some story. Old Allen, what a boss. He damn near drove me crazy. Always telling some story, and it was always the same one. He was talking about conning some sucker on a car, unloading a dog. But I didn't listen. I just got myself a drink and started thinking about Susan."

The newcomer started to cough. Evans could hear, almost feel the gagging rattle shake the young man. Finally the coughing stopped, and as the newcomer

gasped for breath, Evans said, "You OK, buddy? Make it all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm all right. My God, I want out of here. Get me out."

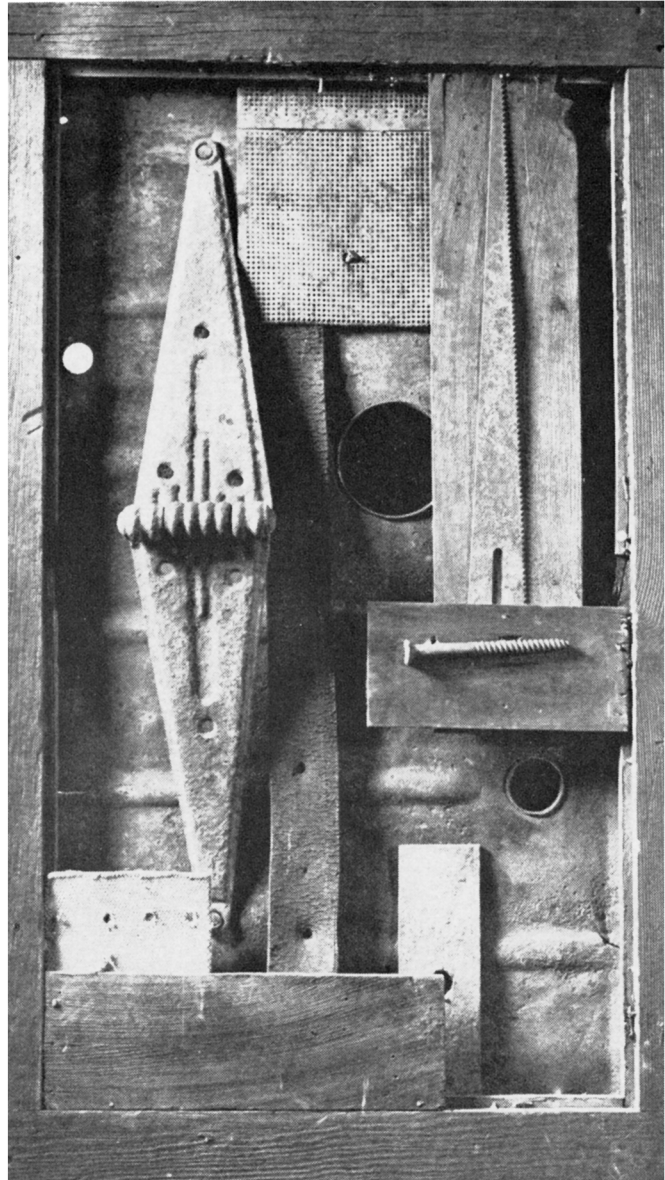
As the voice trailed off Evans returned unwillingly to the endless story, told and retold in his mind. "Sure, I started thinking about Susan, my wife, Susan. She was sitting right there, eating up every word old Allen said. She figured we'd ought to butter him up that night. She'd been on my back for weeks, trying to get me to hit him up for a raise. That's what we were doing at the party. When she heard the boss was throwing one, right away she said, 'We're invited, aren't we?'"

"I told her I guessed we were, but I didn't feel much like going. I tried to tell her how much those damned people bored me, but that just set her off. I can still hear her. 'Yes, and that's why you don't make any more money than you do,' she said. 'We're going to that party, and you're going to get a raise. I'm sick of not ever having any money. You ask him tonight, when he's feeling good.'

"Sitting there at Allen's, looking at her, I remembered what she had said. Because it seemed funny, like she was just talking at me, not to me. When I tried to tell her why I didn't want to go, it didn't make any difference to her. We used to talk to each other a lot sometimes. Like late at night, in bed. Susan and I'd talk about plans and us and, oh hell, anything. But that was a long time ago."

Continued





Evans ground his cigarette out in the ashtray, concentrating on killing the last spark. He turned his head toward the newcomer's bed, wondering if he was asleep. Now he wished that the young man wanted to talk. His hands were shaking more than they had been before.

"There I was," he remembered, "sitting at that damned party and not listening to the story Allen was telling. I had a good buzz anyway, from the drinks I'd had on the way there, and when I got to looking around the people all looked strange. They were all flat looking, like they were made out of cardboard or something. There was one guy there, a salesman, a big fat guy with red hair and freckles on the backs of his hands. He was laughing at Allen's story, his mouth wide open and his big stomach shaking. I felt like I could go over and put my fist through that stomach, and he'd keep right on laughing. It scared me, because I didn't know what was happening.

"Then later, I was in the kitchen. I guess it was quite a bit later. I was fixing myself a drink, and the clock on the wall showed midnight. I was trying to figure out what had happened in the last couple of hours, when Allen came in. Right away I thought of what Susan had said, and I knew she'd be hell to live with if I didn't say something to him. I sure didn't feel much like it, though. Just the same, I asked him if he didn't think maybe it was time I got a little more money, since I'd been

managing the lot for over a year.

"He looked at me a while, then he said, 'Evans, I've been meaning to talk to you. You know the lot hasn't been going too well lately. I've been thinking it might be a good idea to put someone else out there with you, kind of help put some life in things. Someone to keep an eye on the whole operation while you do a little more selling. That's what you're really good at, unloading those heaps.'

"That really tore it. If it hadn't been for the bourbon I wouldn't have said anything, I guess, but I let him have it. I told him to take his car lot and shove it.

"He stood there and stared at me for a minute, then he walked out. I gulped down the drink I was holding and poured myself another, straight. I was still standing there when Susan came in. Allen must have told her what I'd said, because she just looked at me, too. Didn't say anything, just stared at me with this funny expression on her face, like she wanted to spit at me, or something. Then she turned and walked out, like Allen did. She didn't say a word to me."

Lying in the hospital bed in the darkened ward, Evans muttered, "Long time ago. It's all over. Forget it." But his mind continued to work, like a tape recorder playing back an old, worn reel. "Nobody would talk to me. Nobody said anything and everybody was made out of cardboard!"

Evans jumped as the newcomer began to moan again, louder this time. Suddenly there was a shout.

"Help, falling! Jesus, I'm falling!"

Evans got out of bed and moved shakily to the young man's side, saying, "It's OK, buddy, it's OK now. Come on, wake up." As he put his hand on the newcomer's shoulder again, his mind kept repeating, "She wouldn't talk to me. Nobody says anything. I want someone to talk to me!"

The leather straps began to creak, and the voice from the bed rose to a scream. "For Christ sake, somebody, help!"

"Nobody will talk to me. Nobody has anything to say!" Evans was shaking the young man's shoulder harder and harder, trying desperately to bring him out of his dream. Then he heard quick footsteps coming down the hall, and he hurried back to his own bed. The other patients had begun to mutter in protest, but they were silenced by the opening of the ward door. Light spilled in from the hall, and through half-closed eyes Evans could see the shadowy figure of an interne step into the

room. The interne moved the beam of a flashlight from bed to bed, temporarily lighting up the features of the patients. Evans closed his eyes completely and turned his head toward the window as he heard the interne cross the room to the bed where the newcomer lay moaning. "A hypo," he thought. "That'll put him back under for a while."

The door closed softly, and Evans wiped his sweating palms on the sheets, the remembered taste of bourbon sharp in his throat. He opened his eyes and saw that dawn was coming, paling the glow of the street light. He looked toward the newcomer's bed and saw the young man's limp form, arms held helpless at his sides by the straps. In the dimness Evans could just make out the sheen of sweat on the pale, drawn face.

In the silence of the ward, Evans whispered, "I'm voluntary," then he turned and buried his face in the pillow to shut out the growing light.

a poem

LINDA PETERSON

I thoughtlessly brushed the
grime from the window of
that dark room

filled with smoke
and repetitions of borrowed
dialogue and saw

a tall boy
sun in his hair, sun in his smile
silently looking at the sky

a poem

C. W. E. BIGSBY

Nine long winter months
We waited
Pausing in the passing years
For one brief period.

Lips trembling
We waited
For life

Cold, frost-crisp days with life pulsing away
Within
Cell upon cell
Gathering strength for a spring
Below the horizon.

We laughed and cried together
And read the books
And breathed deeply
And sometimes thought we felt
What should not, could not be
As yet.

And then waiting had its spring
The ice melted and flowed red.

And suddenly the moving world
Was stilled
And I looked down on impossible death
As from a height.

Scalding tears have never engendered
Life
And the breath of despair has never brought about
Re-animation.

The false spring lapsed treacherously
To winter
And for a day the frost shone in the sun.



isaac

NANCY LARSEN SANDERS

Two hawks floated over the hillside, their long wings outsweped as they dropped down from the sky. They perched on fence posts by the road, bodies still, wings tucked to their forms. The hawks watched a wagon and mule that followed the road. Walking slowly, the mule jerked his head up and down with the motion of old jaws chewing and drooling over the bridle bit. The dirt of the road was powdery and it fell in a trail down the back sides of the revolving wheels. The air was still, the dust barely rising and falling behind the wagon.

Isaac held the reins loosely in one hand, his body upright and straight. He sat on a plank that was laid across the sideboards of the wagon and his small, thin frame bounced up and down with the wagon as it rattled over the washboard road. He braced his feet on the wagon floor and the bend of his knees hugged the plank tighter.

The wagon lurched over a rut and Isaac turned to look at his load. An upright piano was in the wagon, its tallness covered with a protector made of clean gunny sacks. Heavy blocks were nailed

close to the piano legs to keep it from rolling around in the wagon. A revolving piano stool was lashed to the tailgate with a heavy rope. He tugged at the gunny sacking, then turned to the front of the wagon, slapping the reins on the old mule's back.

Isaac's shoulders were drawn back and his left thumb was hooked in his worn suspender. He looked around the countryside, his deep-set eyes squinting behind steel-rimmed glasses. His hair was thin and combed back, giving him a high, broad forehead, shiny with the oil of his skin. There were no wrinkles in Isaac's face, only a tightness of skin over bony features, so tight that the tiny veins shone red on his cheeks. He constantly sucked his thin lower lip in and out between his yellowed teeth and his thumb tugged the elasticity of his suspender. He wore a clean, unironed work shirt, its large collar gathered against his thin neck with a heavy blue woolen tie. His blue serge coat was shiny and worn and its lapels were thrown back because of his grip on the suspender. Isaac's baggy trousers were pleated around his waist with a homemade leather

belt and the suspenders tugged the trouser length high above his waist.

He sucked in his lip, then pursed it out, his forehead creased in a frown. He slapped the reins again and the mule jerked his head. "Come on, mule. Let's get there! You ain't got all day." His voice was high and excited and his lips seemed to tremble when he spoke.

The weed-lined road wound up and down hills, and sometimes Isaac had to get out and lead the mule up the steep hump of a hill because of the heavy load. Often the mule would veer off to one side of the road and duck his head to snatch a clump of grass or weeds. The sunflowers were turning and drying, and the pasture land had the greenish brown color of early fall. The trees that lined a winding creek were dropping their leaves, and the willows were almost bare. The creek was a deep cut in the earth, its sides steep and jagged. Where the road crossed the creek the banks were worn and sloping. When he came to the crossing Isaac climbed into the back of the wagon and braced his small body against the piano in case the dip into the dry creek bed should lurch the piano loose.

"Git up, mule, git up!" He held the long reins and leaned against the piano. The mule grunted, and the wagon rolled down the incline and jerked up the other side of the creek. Near the creek was a heavy grove of trees and a white frame house. Isaac guided the mule into the farmyard and stopped the

wagon under the tall cottonwood trees.

"Howdy, Isaac!" A tall, gangly boy plunged out of the house, and the screen door slammed several times against the door frame. "So you got here all right. Good thing there wasn't no water in the crick. You would've had a peck of trouble." The boy stood looking at the stiff figure seated in the wagon. He clasped his big hands behind the bib of his overalls and leaned against a tree.

Isaac wound the reins around the stake nailed to the front of the wagon and jumped down to the ground. "Johnny boy, you're getting bigger every day. Bet you eat your ma out of house and home!" He looked up at the tall boy and poked a finger in Johnny's ribs. "Not much meat there yet, but wait! When you fill out those ribs you're goin' to be a big man. Take my word for it. You're going to be a big man." Isaac whirled around and grabbed the mule's bridle. "Let's get this here thing ready to go. The sun's dropping fast."

"There ain't no rush, Isaac. Come in the house for a while. Ma's got some dandy egg sandwiches and hot coffee all ready. I was just getting ready to sit down. How about it, Isaac?"

Isaac shook his head and began tugging at the mule's bridle. "Nope. Ain't got time. I got to get this wagon over by the platform and the pianner all set to go 'fore anybody comes. You show me where to put it now. I brung my own supper. This durned mule

is the stubbornest!" He pulled at the mule's head.

Johnny shrugged his shoulders and grinned at Isaac. "Sure. Just move it over there. But you're mighty welcome for supper if you want." He led the way over to a large platform built several feet off the ground.

"You sure got a dandy dance floor, Johnny boy. Your pa is real good at building things." Isaac climbed the wooden steps that led up to the platform and walked across it, sliding his heavy shoes on the wooden surface. "Johnny boy, how do you do it? You got the best dance floor in the county! How do you make it so slick?" Isaac gave a short run and slid across the floor.

The boy laughed. "You sure are a sight, Isaac. Sort of like a rooster caught in a tailwind. Pa says I shouldn't never tell anyone how we get it so slick. Ever'body would copy us if they knowed how. We wouldn't have the best dance floor, so go along with you, Isaac. Not going to tell you."

Isaac hurried down the steps. "Well, all right, if that's the way you want it. You just ain't much of a friend for an old geezer like me." Isaac gently shook Johnny's shoulder and tried not to grin. "Well, now!" He whirled around and looked at the platform. "Where'll we put the wagon, boy?"

Johnny rubbed his chin and looked at the dance floor. "I s'pose just about anywhere except in front of the steps. Don't seem to matter none."

"Let's put 'er over here, boy, by this corner. That's a likely spot." He pulled on the mule's bridle until the wagon was close to a corner.

"That ought to do it, Isaac. Good a place as any."

"Now wait, boy, that ain't right enough."

"Well, why not? What's the matter?"

"Just ain't right, that's all. Let's pull 'er out and get 'er in at a better angle." Isaac climbed on the wagon and reined the mule away from the platform. Johnny shook his head and moved to one side. "Looked all right to me," he muttered.

"This ought to be better." Isaac drove the wagon up to the platform.

"Looks like the same place you had it before, Isaac."

"Tain't neither, boy. Much better this way." The man looked around the scene from his perch on the wagon seat.

"If you say so, Isaac. Why don't you come in and eat with us? It'll be a while yet 'fore anyone comes."

"Nope! Going to eat my own supper. If you don't mind I'll put my mule in the corral."

"Sure, go right ahead. I gotta go eat and wash up. See you later." The boy waved his hand and hurried to the house.

Isaac unhitched the mule, removed the harness and draped it over the wagon box. After he had put the mule in the corral he sat on the wagon tongue and took a package of bread and butter from his coat pocket. He hooked his

thumb in his suspender and leaned against the wagon front, chewing a hunk of bread. It was almost dark now. A faint redness colored the horizon and quiet twitterings came from the bird nests in the cottonwood trees. The screen door slammed, the noise loud in the quietness. The birds set up a startled chirping.

"Isaac, how about helping me light the lanterns? I've got four of 'em here. I figure some of the neighbors will bring theirs, too." Johnny put the lanterns on the ground by the wagon, and the kerosene smell was strong.

"I've got one, Johnny boy, to set on my pianner. It's in the back there."

Johnny reached it out of the wagon. "How come you haul this piano ever'where?" he demanded. "Don't it hurt it none?"

"Nope. Why should it?"

"Ma won't even hardly let us touch our piano for fear of hurting it. You're hauling this all over the county. But we sure like it. Wouldn't seem a dance without it."

A lantern was lit and Isaac adjusted the wick. "I say, boy. Why don't you help me out tonight? Get your accordi'n and play with us."

Johnny was silent for a moment. "Tell you, Isaac, I sure would but I ain't very practiced up. I just wouldn't be much good to you." He shrugged his shoulders and jammed his hands in his pockets.

"You just ain't had time to practice, boy. You been too busy doing other things. Huh?"

Johnny was embarrassed. He bent down to strike a match to the lanterns. Isaac helped adjust the wicks. "You got a girl you been going to see pretty much, huh, Johnny?" The boy didn't answer. He turned abruptly and walked over to a tree. He reached high and hung the lantern on a nail in the tree.

"Well, now, Johnny boy. I reckon that's all right. You'll be mighty busy tonight dancing that girl around. Yes, sir, that's all right." Johnny was relieved. He squatted down by Isaac and struck a match for the last lantern. Isaac smiled, a soft smile that rounded his face and made his chin seem even smaller. "Yes, sir, Johnny boy. That's all right. A smart young feller like you ought to have a girl. If you get worn out tonight from dancing you just get that accordi'n out. It won't matter none that you ain't practiced up."

"I just might do that."

Isaac drew close to the boy. "I say, Johnny boy," he said quietly, "how would you like to have a little nip?"

Johnny shook his head slowly. "No, don't think I'd better. Thanks anyhow."

The man walked over to the wagon, untied the piano stool and let the end gate down. He climbed into the wagon and began pulling off the gunny sacks. "I'm going to have a nip. Sure you don't want none?"

"I'm sure."

"It's good for a feller just before a dance. Makes you sweat real good and you don't have a chance

to feel feverish." Isaac reached under the keyboard, close to the piano leg, and pulled out a flat flask of whiskey. Johnny's eyes widened.

"How do you keep that there? Ma's piano hasn't got no place for a whiskey bottle."

The trees moved in the evening breeze, and leaflike shadows flitted over Isaac's face in the lantern light. He ducked his head for a moment and chuckled. "Nope, don't reckon your Ma's got a whiskey holder. See, look under here." He squatted down and pointed to a small wire rack attached to the piano. "See that there? I made that out of baling wire. My bottle rides real nice there. Right handy when I get thirsty while I'm playing." Isaac leaned back on his haunches and pulled out the bottle cork. He tipped his head far back, and his large Adam's apple moved up and down as he swallowed the liquor. Then he corked the bottle and replaced it under the piano.

A moving light caught his eye, and he pointed toward the road. A team and wagon could be heard crossing the creek.

"Won't be long before everybody's here!" Isaac excitedly twirled the piano stool, adjusting its height to suit him. He moved the lantern so more light fell on the keyboard and ran his fingers over the keys.

A large crowd of farm folk soon gathered under the tall cottonwood trees. They were excited, and many hadn't seen one another for the entire summer. The children

were quiet at first but when they were acquainted they ran screaming and hollering in and out of the trees. The men hung their lanterns in the trees, the breeze blew the flames and the light fluttered back and forth over the platform.

"Isaac, you old cuss, how you doing?"

"Hear you had a dandy wheat crop, Isaac. What price did you get for it?"

"With that good of a crop you ought to be able to afford a woman. Going to get a wife now, Isaac?"

Isaac sheepishly joined the group of men, his thumbs excitedly thwacking his suspenders against his shallow chest. "Don't reckon I need a wife at my age. I get along all right."

"Say, but don't it begin to eat on a man? I been married thirty year now — sometimes wish I wasn't—but I'd think it'd begin to eat on a man." George Henry leaned toward Isaac, his face questioning in the lantern light.

"Well, like I say, I don't reckon I need a woman much. Don't seem to bother me none. I sure ain't pining away."

"See you brought your piano again. Ain't that thing about to give out, the way you treat it?" One of the men gestured toward the wagon.

"Don't seem to be nothing wrong with it, Jake. I've taken it to ever' dance in the county for six years now and it ain't had to be tuned once. I keep it in a tight shed. Never have to take it off the wagon. I'm careful when I

haul it. Don't think it's ever hurt none." Isaac looked steadily at the other man.

The farmer cleared his throat. "Well, it just seems a crazy thing to do."

"Seems to me you don't gripe when you're dancing," Isaac said sharply.

The other man turned away. "Guess I'll go get a drink."

Someone hollered. "What say we dance? That's what we come for!" Isaac hurried to the platform and clambered into the wagon. The men sought out their partners, and squares were formed. Isaac sat hunched over the piano, his fingers tapping on the wood front piece next to the old, yellowed keys. Suddenly he swung around on the stool and shouted, "Let's go, boys! Cut 'er loose!" He swung back on the stool, stopping his movement with his hand, his legs too short to reach the floor. He hooked his thumbs in his suspenders and they snapped back against his shirt, already wet with excited sweat. As though his suspenders were a signal, a tall, bent man huddling over his fiddle flung up his head and struck the strings with his bow, a heavy shock of wiry hair falling into his eyes.

"Honor your partner! Do si do your corner gal!" The calls came from a feverish-looking man standing on a box in the corner of the platform close to Isaac's wagon. The caller threw his arms about loosely, and the large red handkerchief that flopped from his breast pocket seemed to fly to his forehead every few minutes. The

man, lean and hard faced, rolled his eyes around in their sockets, and the people standing on the ground by the dance floor laughed. He slapped his legs, knobby hands against bowed knees as his voice gained speed.

"And you all join hands, circle to the left, alleman' left, in and out, in and out, 'til you meet your beauty again!"

Isaac struck the keys hard, his small, slender fingers jumping over them. He didn't look at the keyboard. He watched the dancers. The men grabbed the calloused hands of their women and swung them hard, and the women tried to hold their flying skirts down with one hand. Large, full breasts that had nursed healthy babies swung under flour sacking and calico dresses. Heavily starched petticoats and rows of lace flew in the swinging dance. The dancers puffed and panted, and dark stains appeared under their armpits. Their shoes scraped on the floor and an occasional poorly cobbled nail would catch on a floor seam, but the victim only laughed and regained his balance in a light jig.

When a set of four dances had ended the people moved back under the trees, their sweat cooling and drying on their bodies. A bucket of well water and a crock of lemonade were on a bench under the trees. The water dipper was passed around. The menfolk moved back in the shadows, and bottles of whiskey were brought from the wagons and buggies. Isaac slipped his flask from under the piano and joined the men.

"That was good playing, Isaac!"

"What you got there, Isaac? Bootleg whiskey? Why don't you try some of mine? My brother brought it to me from New York. Man, it is good stuff."

Isaac sniffed at the open bottle and smiled in appreciation. He took a swallow, then a second. He smacked his lips and took a third swallow before handing it back to the other man. "You're right. That's real good."

"I notice you seemed to like it," the other said dryly.

Isaac moved back to the more lighted area. He saw Johnny and a young girl standing by the water bucket. He walked over to the couple, his nervous thumbs snapping his suspenders against his chest. "You got to help me, Johnny boy!" His breath was strong, and the young girl watched him warily. "You got to get your accordi'n and help me out. Them there dancers holler so much I don't think they hear my pianner."

Johnny grinned at the man. "Gee, I'm sorry, Isaac, but I'm pretty busy now. Janie promised me the next set of dances and I sure don't want to miss out on them."

When Isaac turned to look at the girl, his eyes grew soft and a smile came to his face. "A mighty purty girl, Johnny boy." His eyes traveled over the girl, and she grew nervous. "I bet this here purty girl would sure like to hear that there accordi'n playing of yours. You know," and he moved closer to Janie, "I bet you're the purtiest gal here. I watch all the women-

folks and I bet you're the purtiest. I put my wagon up close to the dance floor and I see a lot. And I think you're the purtiest." He tugged at his suspenders, and his body swayed back and forth. Janie turned abruptly and walked away.

Isaac looked at the boy. "What say, will you play your accordi'n?" He gripped the boy's hand and pumped his arm up and down.

"I'll think it over, Isaac."

"Yes sir, she's a mighty purty gal. You ought to play, Johnny. She'll be proud."

"I'll think it over," Johnny repeated. "Well, I'd better go." Johnny pulled his hand from Isaac's grasp and hurried away. Isaac stepped back in the shadows and took another drink from his bottle. He climbed back into his wagon and put the bottle under the piano.

"The Texas Star!" The caller stomped the box and clapped his hands. The dancers gathered on the floor, the squares were formed, and new sweat poured over the dried. Isaac's piano playing became automatic, and his shoulders slumped closer to the keyboard. His eyes were wide, and sweat poured down his forehead. His glasses slid lower on his nose. He stared hard at the dancers, and when a woman was swung close to his corner his head jerked up and his fingers hit the keys harder.

The dance was over, and Isaac's bottle was almost empty. He stood on the dance floor, weaving a bit, watching the people go home. Johnny brought the old mule to the wagon, but Isaac didn't notice.

"Isaac?" Sarah Brown approached him. "You all right? Do you need any help getting your piano home?"

Isaac slowly swung around to look at her. He shook his head. "No," he spoke hesitatingly. "No, I'll get home okay. This old piano don't give me no trouble." He looked at her closely and ran his tongue over his dry lips.

Sarah touched his shoulder. "We sure appreciated your music, Isaac. Why don't you come over some Sunday for supper? Might be pot-luck but we'd sure like to have you. It must get lonely for you sometimes."

A group of children ran screaming across the platform, their laughter high and shrill. A little boy fell against Sarah, and she bumped Isaac's chest. He caught her around the waist, his own body unsteady. As he held her, a longing seemed to fill his eyes and he brought his hand up, touching her

heavy breasts gently. Sarah regained her balance and moved back in surprise. Her face was sympathetic.

"Isaac, it gets lonesome. We ain't meant to be alone. Wish you could find someone, Isaac. You're close to fifty now and it ain't right to be alone." She clicked her tongue sorrowfully and walked down the steps away from the platform.

Isaac stood there for a long moment, staring at his clenched fists. Finally he relaxed his fingers and got a tight grip on his suspenders. He looked around and saw that most of the people were gone. He saw that the mule was hitched and stepped down to his wagon. He closed the tailgate, hesitated, then took the bottle from the piano and, clutching it, climbed up on the plank. He slapped the reins on the mule's back and drove off, his shoulders slumped, the bottle huddled against his chest.



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