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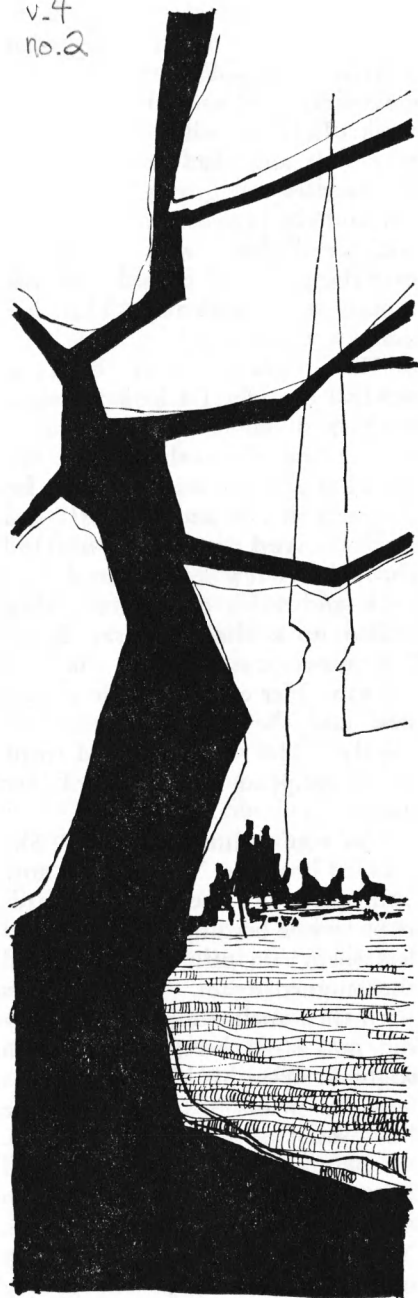
TOUCHSTONE



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Neighbors

NANCY LARSEN SANDERS

The sounds of the church picnic had died down and a warm sleepiness filled the yard. The tables were littered with food and dirty dishes but no one bothered to clear them. The children played games on the other side of the church while the older folks sat around the tables, talking quietly. The afternoon was growing warmer and the talking was becoming a slow murmur when a loud voice carried across the clearing in full discord with the stillness.

"I don't figger I'll settle in that there chair. It's got bird dropping on it." An old lady frowned at a young boy who brushed at the seat of a rocking chair with his handkerchief. The men and women looked in their direction and shrugged their shoulders. The woman sat down so quickly that her stiff body thudded against the chair frame. The chair began rocking with the impact and the wooden back bumped against a tall cottonwood tree. She grimaced, then stared at the boy. Her eyes were deep-set in a wrinkled face, piercing and cold in spite of their muddy gray color, shot through with watery red lines.

"Well! You're a fool of a dandy. Even carry a kerchief for cleaning up bird mess." When she opened her mouth to speak, her lower lip drooped, almost touching a black

porous mole with its protruding black hairs upon her chin. "What's your name?"

The boy held out his hand and said, "I'm Jim Swenson. Aren't you Mrs. Pilkington?"

She appeared startled at his friendly manner. She looked at him shrewdly, her watery eyes narrowing.

"Sure, that's me. Only I happen to know everyone calls me old lady Pilk behind my back."

His hand was still extended. She acted as though she did not see it, so he rubbed his chin for a moment, then put his hand in his pocket. He glanced around the church yard but no one was looking in his direction. His mother and father were visiting. His sisters and their friends were in the distance, sitting on the creek bank. He turned back to the old woman.

She gestured for the boy to come closer. Her heavy, stubbly black eyebrows met over the bridge of her long sharp nose and she glared at him. Her mouth fell open and her teeth, scattered among gaping holes, were yellow and chipped.

"Bothered you, didn't I?" Jim said nothing. "You're bothered 'cause I didn't shake hands." Her harsh voice sank to a low whine and she leaned forward in the chair. "It's 'cause my finger's bleeding so. You see?"

The old lady held her left hand in front of Jim's face. Her bony wrists, revealed by shrunken sleeves, were chapped to a raw redness. The middle finger of her left hand was missing and a lump of scar tissue and redness showed

where the finger had been. There was no blood.

"I was working in my garden yesterday. It ain't had no proper care since my man left me last week. Left me with all the work to do. It ain't had no water and the thistles are grown all bushed out and the pigweeds are real high with devil's horn winding around ever'thing." She paused and her mouth worked silently. Then her voice was angry.

"The children have been so sickly I thought I'd look for some taters and onions and make up a stew. And there the snake was, laying there so wicked like, his tongue going in and out, *sss!*" and her excited breath whistled through her few teeth. Jim shifted back and forth on his feet, then pulled up a chair and sat down. His movement startled the old woman. Her eyes lost their vagueness and she looked at the boy closely. Her crooked and bent hands gripped the arms of her chair.

"So you're Jim Swenson!" She cackled hoarsely. "Yes, sir. I know your pa. He's the one that reads books while herding the cows. And lets them run off! Yes, sir!" and she laughed again. His blue eyes with their mellowing tone of gray did not avoid hers. There was a slight flush on his high cheekbones and his wide lips deepened the lines about his mouth into a smile.

"Before my man ran off and left me *he* never had no time to read books when he herded cattle. Yes, sir! *He* worked hard. A lot of people'd be better off if they

worked harder. Are you as lazy as your pa?" She leaned back in the chair and seemed pleased with herself. Jim just looked at her, his hands gripped between his knees, his shoulders hunched. Her attention wandered.

"Well, now! Jist look at all them dandies. They come to a church picnic dressed fit to kill." She looked at Jim. "And you! You're jist like them. Jist look at that shirt." The boy was wearing a soft blue linen shirt. The wide collar was open at his throat and lay against the ruffled front. The old woman's hand jerked toward him and she grabbed at the fullness of his sleeve, her calloused fingers caressing the material. Then she began tugging at the sleeve and he pulled away from her. She muttered, "Dressed fit to kill. Such dandies! Jist as if they were headed for a city ball."

"Never been to a city ball, ma'm, but seems to me this is the way folks dress nowadays."

"What say?" She leaned forward, her eyes gazing at the ground.

"I said—"

"I used to go to them dances. Back in Wisconsin they was, in the town hall. All us girls would wear the purtiest dresses and the men would argue over us, and we'd carry on in a way all menfolks like and—" She sat up straight and threw her shoulders back, her breasts making a slight bulge low on her chest. The top button of her dress was gone and the bones of her neck protruded.

"We have dances here, too, Mrs.

Pilkington. You ought to come sometime—"

"You think I could dance now?" Her face was angry and she pushed against the arms of the chair, half rising.

"But ma'm, you could watch. Lots of old folks come and have a good time." Jim stopped speaking, for the old woman had slumped back in the chair and was muttering to herself.

"We danced all night, we did. I never got tired." She looked at Jim. "I never got tired. We had the purtiest slippers and our feet never got tired. You never could have danced in these things." Mrs. Pilkington stuck her feet out in front of her. She was wearing large heavy shoes that were cracked and broken, mended several times over. The soles had been patched with many layers of heavy paper. The laces were knotted where they had broken and the ends were frayed.

"Them belong to my husband. I wore my own 'til they fell to pieces and then I went barefoot. Then I started wearing his. Guess they ain't very purty. He never took them with him. The only pair he had and he left barefoot. Now what would make a man do that?" She seemed to beg for an answer.

"How long has your husband been gone, Mrs. Pilkington?"

"Nigh on forty year now, Sonny." There were tears in her eyes. "It seems longer. He jist couldn't take it. This country! It liked to killed him! He was lucky to have left," her voice rose, "but

why couldn't he have taken us too? I was there all alone on that homestead. With four sickly children and nothing much to feed them. We didn't even have decent water. The well always went dry and we'd dip out of the crick whenever it had any. There still ain't enough water there."

The old woman closed her eyes. Jim leaned back in his chair and watched two small leaves skitter on the ground, caught in a whirl of breezes.

"I reckon there's always water to be found in this part of Kansas—and plenty of it, too. A person's got to dig deep sometimes."

"Hmph! How was a woman with four little ones going to dig a well deeper?"

"How about your neighbors, Mrs. Pilkington? Didn't you ever ask them if they'd dig the well for you? The menfolks are always helping one another."

"Now jist where do you think I'd of got the money for such work? We didn't have any spare cash before my man left, nor after. You're jist a young whippersnapper who don't have to worry about money!"

Jim moved to the edge of his chair, his hands gripping his knees. The woman shook her head and waved her hand at him.

"It was jist last week that I wanted to get water to wash off my feverish younguns, and that bucket came up as dry as it went down. I didn't even have a longer piece of rope to tie onto 'er. My younguns were dying for a drink and I couldn't get it!"

"Like I was going to say, Mrs. Pilkington, neighbor folks don't ask for money to help out a friend. It's jist—just neighborliness."

"You're jist a fool! I don't ever ask for no help. I ain't going to be beholding to folks, so you jist quit your talking. I ain't never had to ask for no favors and I ain't going to!" She sat back in her chair and glared at Jim. "I didn't even have a doctor when my little ones was dying. I nursed them myself day and night. I wasn't going to have a doctor come and not be able to pay him. No! You hush now! I'm telling you I never was beholding to anyone. After my family was all dead and gone I didn't ask no favors. I worked hard and didn't have no one else to do things for me." She paused and her excited hands shook on the arms of the chair.

"I grew me a garden and I got along without good water. Crick water never hurt a garden. All the tools I had was a spade and hand rake. And I got some pigs started and I even make a little money off of them to buy what I need. I butcher them myself. I don't have to have no help from nobody and no young whippersnapper is going to say I should be beholding to people!" She watched him closely, her head tipped to one side and her tongue flicking in and out of her mouth, licking the saliva off her drooping lips.

"People around here don't mind working for nothing." Jim reached for a twig on the ground and began chewing on it. "Most people like to help others get ahead. This

is a tough land and sometimes it takes everyone working together to get anywhere."

"You bet it's a tough land!" The old lady slapped her thigh with her hand. Dust from her faded gray dress sifted into the air. "When my man and I came here we had some money, tools, and a couple of horses. We worked hard and what did we get for it? We'd been here two years when no more rain came and nothing would grow. I carried water and he carried water but nothing helped. Sure, this is a tough land and there ain't nothing good in it. We had those four children and they all died because this land ain't no good. For forty years I've been alone trying to work this land and it ain't done nothing but drive me lower and lower!" She bent her head and her mouth drooped. "He was a dandy once. We used to go to city balls. I'd dance all night . . ."

She was quiet. The wind rattled in the crisp leaves of the cottonwood tree and crows cawed in the distance. Jim looked skyward and saw the crows flying toward a cornfield next to the church. He blinked his eyes against the afternoon sun and held his head back and looked up into the green of the tree. And when he spoke it was as though he were describing a picture to the old woman.

"Someday I'm going to have a farm. I'm really going to make the land look like something. I'll have lots of trees. Kansas just doesn't have enough trees and I'm going to plant some. I'll plow

some more sod if I have to and I'll grow the best crops. There's going to be a crick running through my farm. That's the best! I'll sure have to work hard, but you know, no matter how much I have to do, I'm going to be happy!"

The old lady stared at him. He squirmed in his chair. She held up her left hand. "It ain't bleeding now. It's stopped." She leaned toward him. "You know what happened yesterday?"

"No, ma'm, I don't."

"I was getting some taters and the snake, he was laying under the weeds where I didn't see him. I had a hatchet and was whacking at the weeds trying to find the tater vines when all of sudden I see him laying there. He went sss at me—" she paused to wipe her chin; "—he was looking at me and before I knew it he was ready to strike. I gripped onto my hatchet real tight and let fly at him but he got me first. Right here in my finger. Lordy, I was mad! But I got him, I did!" Her voice rose and she grinned at Jim. "I kilt him, I did. He must've figured he'd fixed me good. But I showed him. I held my finger against a rock and whacked it off before the poison had time to get me!" She waved her hand close to his face and Jim moved away from her.

"I jist let that there finger lay there in the dirt and weeds. I sure enough didn't need it anymore. I took my hatchet and I whacked that snake up in so many pieces you wouldn't recognize it. And then I cussed him clear back to

hell. Shoo! I was mad! All the time my hand was dripping ever'where but I didn't care. I kilt that snake!" She grew so excited that her breath came in gasps.

"That couldn't have happened yesterday, Mrs. Pilkington."

"There weren't even any taters and onions. I looked ever'where. And my younguns were crying for something to eat. There he was just laying there and he reared up his head—I got sore mad! The big thistles— It never rained. So thirsty all the time. I had to go for water—yesterday I went to the garden—"

"You cut your finger off a long time ago, didn't you?"

Huh?"

"It isn't bleeding now." The boy pointed to her hand.

Her eyes shifted from her hand to Jim's flushed face. "What you talking about?" She looked around the clearing, her old eyes shifting from object to object, then back to her crooked hands that twisted the limp material of her dress. "There was a snake there and he scared me so terrible. The blood and ever'thing. It must've really shook me loose 'cause all of a sudden I got a big pain in my belly. Oh, yes," and she nodded her head at Jim, "my man even went off and left me when I was about to have my fifth child. He jist up and left. Never could figure it all out. Shoo! I was mad at that snake for causing me so much trouble! I sent my oldest over to the neighbors and when them women came they thought I was crazy. And I jist told them to—to

get on with their business, then get back home. They got mad when I wouldn't let them wrap my hand. But you know, that there hand made me forget the labor pains. I jist laid there with my hand up in the air and watched that blood drip. When them women told me the baby was dead I didn't even care I was so mad about losing my finger." She fell back in her chair and was silent, her blurred eyes closed. Jim was thoughtful. The twig was still clinched in his teeth. He rolled it back and forth between his lips, then chewed hard. He spit the twig close to the old woman's feet.

"Excuse me, ma'm." The old woman's eyes opened. "I reckon it's about time for us all to be going home. The womenfolks are gathering up the food now." She looked around the church yard, then pushed herself from the rocking chair.

"Well, I'm going." She started toward the road.

"Say, Mrs. Pilkington, why don't you ride with my family?"

She laughed coarsely. "You think I'd take a ride home? I don't ride anywhere. I walk and I don't bother anyone that way. When I take a notion to come to church I walk. And I get home the same way."

He smiled. "My mother has some of her cake left. I thought I might snitch a piece. Would you like some? It sure is good."

"No, don't want any! Even if it is good—wisht I could say the preaching was good. Talking about God and loving our neighbors.

That's why I don't never come very much. That preacher don't know what he's talking about. That's what I told him one day, too. And I told some other people that was standing there and they didn't have nothing to say in return. It's jist all lies. I told them so. I'm going." She turned abruptly and walked away.

Jim drove the buggy home. His father was reading a book while his mother and the girls talked about the picnic.

"There's Mrs. Pilkington." The old woman was walking in the ditch. She moved slowly, her clumsy shoes kicking up the dry dust. Her shoulders were bent and she leaned on a small tree branch.

"Stop and pick her up. She's too old to walk by herself." Jim's mother moved over to make room on the buggy seat.

"She won't ride with us, Mother. I asked her back at the church and she said she won't take any favors."

"Well, stop anyhow. I'll ask her."

Jim slowed the horses to a walk and his mother called, "Mrs. Pilk-

ington, won't you ride with us? We're going your way."

The old woman turned, leaning on the stick. She stared at the family and her forehead was heavily creased with a frown.

"Hmph! I sure wouldn't want to disturb no book readin'." Jim's father seemed not to hear her. Jim grinned and she glared at the boy. "You folks get on now."

"But Mrs. Pilkington, we've got room," Mrs. Swenson gestured at the space beside her, "and I thought since we're neighbors you might just as well come along."

"No!" The woman hit the bank of the ditch with her walking stick. "You get along now," and she turned and clumped down the ditch.

Jim's father closed his book and watched the old woman's retreating back. "What did she want?" he asked.

Jim slapped the reins on the horses' backs and the buggy rolled down the road, passing the bent figure in the roadside ditch.

"Not a thing, Father. Not a thing."



Edge of Winter

JOHN BURNHAM STEARNS

In the late of the year,
Before the morning mist
Begins to clear,
I know the frightened heart-clutch to subsist
For yet another year.

The last stone in the last wall,
The last stalk in the last field,
The throat-caught call
For help — repealed —
I own I doubt the fall.

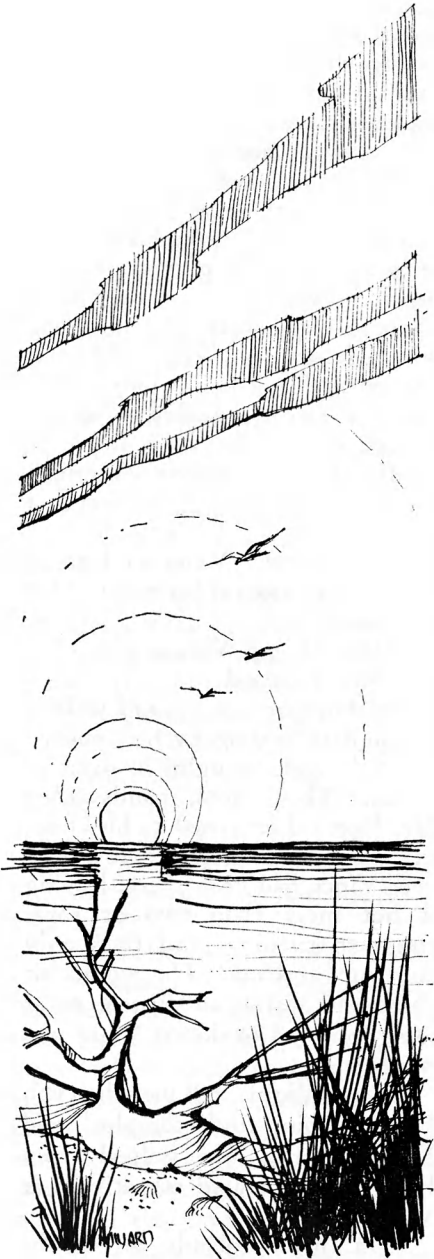
Deserted Beaches

MICHAEL DRY

Vince Stockton lay on the sheet-covered double bed with his hands behind his head, staring at the corner of the ceiling where a small spiderweb flexed gently in the late afternoon breeze. He had been watching it, off and on, ever since he lay down. He tried to determine how long he had been there but became lost in the excitement of knowing that it made no difference. He closed his eyes and smiled. He thought about that afternoon: only a little while ago he had been lying in the warm sand next to Lisa, his finger just touching hers; the ocean sounds were soft and seemed to be all around them as they lay very still; gulls squeaked in high-pitched clarinet voices. It had been like that many afternoons that summer, each the same.

Vince sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bed. He felt a few grains of sand on the wooden floor and began to shuffle his feet, listening to the scratching with child's delight. He took a cigarette from a small table by his bed and lit it with a silver lighter. He got up and walked to a window and exhaled, watching the smoke drift through the window screen toward the long stretch of white sand and quiet ocean. The sun was disappearing into the sea.

Vince had been here at Martha's Vineyard for over a month and



everything was beginning to look the same: the small summer house which his parents had bought that winter; the little fishing towns; and the people, especially the friends he had made there during the summer.

Vince turned from the window and walked to his closet where he pulled out a pair of blue jeans and a tan pull-over sweater. He put them on over his swimming trunks and T-shirt, then brushed the sand from his feet and stepped into a pair of brown loafers. He walked over to his dresser and picked up his hairbrush and swiped quickly his long blond hair which had bleached white from the sun. He rubbed his hand down the side of his face and around his chin. It was rough, but it could wait another half day or so before he had to shave, he thought, because it was so light that no one would notice unless they were up close. He put his wallet in his back pocket and walked out the back door to his small M.G., which his parents had given him for college graduation last spring before he entered law school.

II

As he climbed up the concrete stairway to the Howards' house, he saw Lisa pass in front of the window. Vince had met her when he was a sophomore in college on one of the fraternity "road trips" to Smith College and had come to the island several times each summer to visit. They had never been very close until Vince's parents bought their summer home.

He rapped on the screen door, answered the yells for him to come in, and walked into the living room where Lisa's parents were sitting with drinks. Lisa's mother jumped up from the couch and walked toward Vince with her arms outstretched, smiling broadly. She was as tall as Lisa and had the same thin little legs, but the rest of her body was twice her daughter's size and proportionately so much heavier than her legs that Vince always wondered how she was able to stand up. She was dressed in black slacks and a blue cashmere sweater pushed up at the sleeves.

"It's so nice to see you, Vinnie," she said. "Won't you have a drink?"

"Yes, please," Vince said as he put his arm around her waist. "I'd love one."

"Doug, bring Vinnie a drink," said Mrs. Howard.

Mr. Howard got up and walked to the dark mahogany bar, poured a drink and brought it over to Vince. They shook hands, then Mr. Howard returned to his chair. He was always in his chair whenever Vince had been there, leaving it not more than two or three times an evening, and then only to pour a drink. He would sit there and watch and listen, or at least appeared to do so; Vince was never sure.

"Now, Vinnie, tell me what you kids are going to do tonight," said Mrs. Howard. She gulped from her glass and stared attentively at Vince.

"Oh, just probably go to the

Big Apple and see what happens," Vince answered. "It's hard to tell."

"You'll probably end up at some *wild* beach party, if I know your bunch."

They both laughed.

"But what about you tonight, Mrs. Howard? You haven't told me what you'll be doing."

"Oh, the Florens have asked us over for bridge, but I don't know if I can get Doug to take me." She turned and made a face at her husband who had turned to look out the window by his chair.

"Well, if somebody needs a date tonight, I'll give you a call and see if you're available—how about that?" Vince said.

"I'll come only if you promise to show me how to rock and roll, Vinnie."

They both laughed again.

"Don't make any deals like that with my mother, Vince," said Lisa as she walked into the room. "She's liable to show up if you call her."

She was tying on a white silk scarf over her black hair which hung past her shoulders. She wore a man's white dress shirt, knotted at the bottom, and blue jeans.

"Are you ready to go, Vince?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know. I can't decide now whether to go with you or stay here with your mother. But since I asked you first, I guess I'd better take you out *tonight*, Lisa," said Vince as he glanced over at Lisa's mother as if they had made some secret arrangement between them to meet some night and go sailing in the moonlight.

"For that, you get kissed good-

night," said Mrs. Howard. She got up from her chair and quickly kissed Vince on the cheek. "You two stay out of trouble tonight."

"I swear by my sword," said Vince as he withdrew an imaginary sword from its scabbard and kissed it.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Howard. And thanks for the drink," said Vince. He turned to Lisa's father. "Good night, Mr. Howard." He smiled and saluted Vince with his glass.

III

The drive to the Big Apple took twenty minutes over dirt and poorly paved roads. Vince eased the car behind a dark black Porsche, only one of the multi-colored sport cars which trimmed the dark street. They crossed the street to a large candy-apple red and white house and walked in.

There were two women and a man, all in their fifties, looking at the various tourist items; several tables displayed sea shells embedded in plaster bases; a small forest of driftwood covered the floor; tall revolving racks of picture postcards stood in each corner while two smaller ones were strategically placed on either side of the cash register; most of the remaining floor space was covered with household antiques which had been used during the days when the island had been an important whaling port.

Vince and Lisa walked past them heading for a closed door, but did not look at them.

"Excuse me!" said one of the ladies.

Vince and Lisa stopped and turned around.

"Is this the place where they have the beatniks who play guitars and drink foreign coffee?" the lady asked hesitatingly.

Vince looked at Lisa, then said, "I don't know if this is the same place you were thinking of, but there are some people who play guitars and sing here. They're in the back room."

They turned and walked into the next room, which was a small dimly lit kitchen where two large coffee percolators sat on the stove. In the back was another door which had been painted the same bright red as the outside. "The Big Apple" had been stenciled in white on the door. They could hear a soft tenor voice singing, accompanied by a guitar. They went in and sat down at one of the gray wooden tables; the room was filled with identical tables around which were seated groups of five and six people.

A very lean straight-haired woman came over to the table and lit a candle which was stuck inside a Chianti bottle in front of them.

"Two coffees, Margo," Vince said without looking up.

She nodded and disappeared through the door.

Vince glanced around the room at the other people: long-haired girls wearing blue jeans and dress shirts of yellow, blue, and white; rumple-haired boys in blue jeans, red bandanas flowing from some back pockets; guitar cases lying between tables where people

smoked and drank coffee, everyone staring toward the front at the singer who sat on top of a table with lighted candles at each end.

Vince leaned close to Lisa. "Who's that boy sitting next to Muffet?" he asked. "I don't remember seeing him before."

"That's Muffet's cousin," Lisa said. "He's a folk singer. I heard him last summer, but he's not too good. He has a real loud voice and sings a lot of weird songs nobody's ever heard."

Margo came back and placed two coffees in front of Lisa and Vince. He gave the woman a dollar and looked back to the singer. The small boy played a twelve-stringed guitar and was singing a song which Vince had heard many times on records. The voice was soft and even toned, inflecting a quivering falsetto. Vince always enjoyed listening to Davy sing. The song ended and the group applauded wildly, shouting out song titles to the boy. He smiled and balanced his guitar on the bench with one hand.

"Now, I'm sure you're all anxious to dig the fresh sounds of the big fella from the West Coast—Phil Rose." The boy nodded toward a very clean-looking boy who sat at a crowded side table.

There was polite applause. The tall heavy-set boy stood up and pulled at his cigar, then threw it on the floor and stepped on it. He picked up his guitar from beneath the table and walked to the front.

After he had tucked in his knit shirt, he sat down on top of the table.

"I picked up these songs about a month ago while working through the South," Phil said as he began tuning his guitar. "They're integration songs. . . . Lots of them have been written lately . . . but I like these the best."

He began to play, his deep voice filling the room, rough but passionate from the beginning. He quickly identified with the suffering and injustice in the songs he sang: "They put Little Luther behind those cold prison walls where he can't say nothin' at all," bobbing and swaying with tightly closed eyes; "But those little children is big and brave and they gonna walk down those halls," wailing between stanzas in high-pitched moans which sounded as if they might have come from an African native lying in the hold of a slave ship bound for Georgia. Sweat covered his upper lip and agony showed in his features while his voice cried out about Faubus and Little Rock. He was now a preacher in the wilderness, condemning the evil of the world and begging people to repent and be clean. He sighed a low falling phrase, pulled a strong minor chord and dropped his head on his chest.

His shirt was stained with sweat, hair hung over his forehead, eyes red and watery, oblivious to the

soft applause and the newly started conversations around him. He bent over and gently placed his guitar into its case, then walked trance-like out a side door.

Vince watched the boy leave and stared at the closed door for several minutes. He was deeply moved by the words which he had

just heard and by the boy who had sung them. Here was a little of the world's insanity brought to life and commented upon; but most important, he had seen a human being react to them, a human being who unashamedly cared about

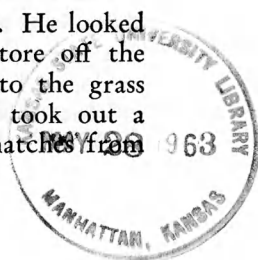
them, one who would cry tears for them at night when he was alone.

"Vince, let's go over to Muffy's table and find out if she's having a party or something," Lisa said as she got up.

Vince stood up. "Uh, you go on over, Lisa. I'll be there in a second. I'm going to step outside a minute."

He walked over to the side door and went out. Phil Rose was sitting on the steps, staring up at the clear blue night sky and the white quarter moon. Vince pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Phil.

"Thanks," Phil said. He looked at the cigarette and tore off the filter and threw it into the grass in front of him. He took out a small square box of matches from



his pocket and lit their cigarettes.

"I enjoyed your singing . . . very much, Phil," Vince said, the "very much" sounding weak and inadequate.

"Thanks again," Phil said, smiling. "I'm afraid you were about the only one." He laughed. "But it was the same way last summer. Only I don't remember seeing you here then."

"No, you didn't. This is my first summer on the island."

Vince sat down on the steps beside Phil. A car drove noisily past them, the sound magnified by the stillness.

"I hear you're Muffy's cousin," Vince said.

"Yes, that's right," Phil said. "Whenever I work Boston I give Muff a call and she comes in for a couple of days, then we come out here for about a week—it's a nice place to rest."

"I guess you travel around quite a bit?" Vince said.

"Yes," Phil said. "But mainly in the summer. During the winter I like to work out on the Coast."

"How long have you been working?" Vince asked.

"Well, I left college in '52, so I guess it's been a little over six years now," Phil said.

"Oh, you took the big gamble!" Vince said laughingly. "I suppose it's worth it, though, since you made it."

Phil smiled. "I'd never thought about it as a gamble," he said. "It was just something I felt like I had to do, so I did it."

Vince shook his head and smiled.

"What's the matter?" Phil asked.

"Did you do the same thing?"

Vince looked up, his face blank. He looked down at his cigarette and flipped off the ash. "Oh, I thought about it for quite awhile. But I just couldn't convince myself it was the right thing to do."

"What made you think about leaving?" Phil asked.

"Well, for a time, I fancied myself as the new Thomas Wolfe," Vince grinned. "But it didn't take me long to realize there's not much demand for a new anybody today."

"Yes, it must be pretty rough at first, writing hard and not getting anyone to take your stuff. I've met a lot of—"

"Oh, I got published all right," Vince said. "A couple of little magazines took two of my stories. It's not so hard to do that, but the odds of selling your work to the big boys is another thing."

"You shouldn't have let that bother you," Phil said. "I've met a lot of writers who've been working away for years and . . ."

"You mean *wasting* away, don't you?" Vince said.

Phil looked at Vince but said nothing.

"Well, what difference does it make if a writer or any artist *is* able to make it to the top?" Vince said. "Just because he gets someone to listen doesn't mean that they'll be affected the way he wants them to be."

"Granted," Phil said. "But do you think there would be many artists around if that was their *only* reason for doing what they do?"

"Well, if it isn't, then it's no better than sitting in a soundproof

room and talking to yourself," Vince said. "And that's certainly a helluva wonderful way to spend the rest of your life."

"How *are* you going to spend the rest of your life?" Phil asked.

Vince began to grind out his cigarette on the porch step. "It looks like I'll be spending it in a law office with my father," he said.

"I guess that soundproof room *doesn't* look too attractive," Phil said.

"No, it doesn't," Vince said. "But at least I'll be doing something that *will* affect people. I can be sure of that."

"Is that the way you want to affect people?" Phil asked. "I mean, can you tell them what you really want to tell them?"

"No, I can't," Vince said. "But let me ask you this: are *you* affecting people the way you want to? Do you honestly think you've instilled enough fire and guts in any one of those kids in there to make them go to Arkansas and fight segregation?"

"No, I doubt that very much," Phil said.

"Do you even think they know what you're talking about, what the word 'segregation' means?" Vince said. "I'll answer that for you: the only thing they know is what's happening right here in their own little world—that's *all* they care about. A few months from now it'll be their little world at school and in a few years it'll be their little world in a plush suburb. And you're telling me to waste my life trying to tell *them* something."

Vince stared at Phil, waiting for him to speak. Phil looked away and slowly pulled out a little tin box. He opened it carefully and took out a small cigarillo, then put the box back in his shirt pocket. Vince lit it for him and waited until he had taken two long pulls, letting the smoke float out into the cool night air.

Phil turned to Vince. "You think you're any different?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Simply because I have a more accurate vision of reality," Vince said. "If you don't believe me, give me five—"

"Oh, I believe you," Phil said. "But that's only because I've talked to you. Suppose I *hadn't*. Why would I think you were any different?"

"Just because I associate with them doesn't mean that I believe in their ideals," Vince said.

"Yes. But you live in their unreal world, as you called it," Phil said. "You live the same way they do. Isn't that the thing that really counts—what a person does?"

"No, I don't think so," Vince said. "The important thing is to believe in your ideals and look at life realistically, no matter what."

"Well, are you satisfied with reality? Do you like what you see?" Phil asked.

"How could I?"

"Do you have any ideas how to correct it?" Phil asked.

"I wish I did."

"Don't you think it would help if you acted on your ideals, the

things you really believe in?" Phil asked. "Can't you see, your ideals don't really exist unless they're reflected in what you do."

"I'm sorry, Phil, but I don't see it that way," Vince said. "I don't feel it's worth the effort. I simply have to see reflections of *my* actions on other people."

They both sat quietly, Vince waiting for Phil to speak. He turned to Phil, then stood up. "I'd better get back inside," he said. "I've got a date."

"You'd better get going then. We've been out here quite awhile," Phil said.

"Well, listen, Phil, I enjoyed talking to you," Vince said. "I really did."

"Good. I enjoyed it myself," Phil said as he looked up at Vince.

Vince smiled. "I'll probably see you later on tonight," he said as he turned and walked to the door.

Vince walked into the now brightly lit room, which hurt his eyes. He closed them quickly, then eased them open until they had adjusted to the light. Several groups had formed at various tables: a boy was playing his guitar at one of them, leading the others in a song. Vince recognized the same little units, each with its own leader, all different, yet all the same. At the largest group, which was in the far corner to his left, he saw Muffet sitting at the head of the table with Davy and Lisa on either side of her.

Vince had never hated these people as much as he did now. He wanted to leave, carrying away with him this absurd picture of

them; perhaps he would take a ride, think things over awhile, maybe leave the Vineyard. But he had been over that before: he would have to explain to his parents and that was futile. Law school was very important to them. He could just go back to the house and forget about these people; but Lisa would call and he would have to try to explain to her—impossible! Besides, she would never accept him unless he accepted the others and he would need her after he had been alone for awhile; yes, he would have to have Lisa around. He could still perceive the difference in himself and these people. It would be no different—he could accept them outwardly and still not believe in them. This was the way Phil looked at them. He said he was here for a rest; Phil would be leaving in a few days and he would be leaving in a few weeks—yes, it was merely a long rest.

Vince saw Muffet speak to Lisa and nod in his direction. Lisa turned around and motioned for him to come over. He hesitated for a moment, then walked to the group and stood at the end of the crowded table, facing Muffet.

"All I said, Muffy, was that I think Phil's voice is a little rough," Davy said.

"Well, I'll just say this: Phil's played in coffee houses all *over* for three years. There must be a *few* people who think he's pretty good," Muffet said.

"I'm not trying to run him down, Muffy—for Christ's sake! I honestly believe he's the best on guitar I've ever heard." Davy took

a sip of his coffee and stared into his cup.

Muffet started to speak but stopped when she saw Phil come in the side door and sit down by himself at a table on the other side of the room. She leaned over the table toward a small blonde-haired girl, sitting next to Lisa. "Missy, will you do me a big favor?" Muffet asked in a very serious tone. "Get some coffee for you and Phil and go talk to him awhile—just tell Margo to put it on my bill. You can come to the party with Phil. He's driving one of our cars. O.K.?" The girl smiled and nodded, then walked to the kitchen.

"Are you having a party tonight?" Lisa asked.

"Yes," Muffet said. "My parents are playing bridge at the Florens' and they said I could have some kids over. You and Vince are coming, aren't you?"

Lisa smiled, "We'd love to!"

Vince noticed that Lisa had accepted the invitation without even looking at him. She planned everything they did together, and he had done almost everything with her that summer. Even though it had bothered him at first, he had come to accept it as part of their relationship—she would have it no other way. And it had been easy to accept it, for it was the only concession that he had to make; in return she denied him nothing.

"Well, I want all of you to come," Muffet said, looking at the other people seated at the table.

"What about drinking, Muff?" a boy asked. "I don't want to be

around if your old man sees us again."

"Daddy was sorry about that the next morning. He was pretty loaded that night," Muffet laughed. "And besides, if Jamey hadn't broken that statue . . ."

Vince looked across the room at Phil and Missy, who were drinking coffee and talking. "Phil won't get much rest if Missy gets a couple of drinks in her," Vince thought. He had gone out with Missy several times at the first of the summer. But she was too unpredictable for Vince; he couldn't always count on her when he needed a girl, like he could with Lisa. He saw Phil reach over and start playing with Missy's hand. Vince smiled. "It doesn't matter what you think of people," Vince thought. "You always need other people, someone besides yourself—you can't always be alone."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lisa wave at him. He walked around the table and sat down beside her. She took his hand, pulling him toward her, and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm beginning to believe you really did want to go out with my mother tonight, Vince," she whispered, as she squeezed his hand.

Vince looked at Lisa, and thought about earlier that evening when he had come to her house and how he had actually dreaded talking to her parents and taking her out. Now it seemed very funny, because he realized that she loved only part of him, that other person which he had created for all these people, and that the

other part of him, the conscious part, was now watching a ridiculous relationship between two ridiculous people. He smiled.

"That's not a fair accusation," he said. "You haven't given me a chance to prove myself tonight."

"You'll get your chance after the party," Lisa said. She put Vince's hand between her knees and tightened her legs on it.

"... anyway, Daddy said he was sorry and that we could use his bar tonight to make up for it," Muffet said.

Vince looked at Davy, who was staring down at his cup. He knew Davy was still worried about having upset Muffet and that his relationship with her was more important to him than to anyone else there. He lived in Boston and had met Muffet there at a coffee house where he worked. She had gotten him a job taking care of her father's boat and cars so that he could spend the summer on the island.

"I hope you're going to play at the party, Davy," Vince said.

Davy looked up, glancing at Muffet. "Well, I don't—"

"Certainly he's going to play," Muffet broke in. "If I have a party, I always like to have my favorite singer there." She laughed and rubbed her hand quickly through Davy's rumpled black hair. He smiled back at her.

It took so little to upset these

people, Vince thought, and it took so little to please them. He felt very powerful now, for he knew that he understood this simple little system of balance and that he was able to control it merely by placing a word here and a word there.

Muffet looked around the table. "Well, if everyone's ready, I guess we might as well go over to my place."

She stood up, taking Davy's arm, and walked to the kitchen door. Vince got up and put his arm around Lisa. They walked past Muffet and Davy, through the kitchen and into the gift shop in front. He heard Muffet yelling, her voice echoing behind him: "If you two can tear yourselves away, you can follow us to my place. And you'd better drive, Missy. Phil's liable to lead you off to some deserted beach and you'll never get to the party."

"Speaking of deserted beaches," Lisa said, looking up at Vince, "I happen to know of one near Muffy's I might be interested in seeing—that is if I could find anyone who'd like to go there with me."

Vince looked down at Lisa and drew her tightly against his side. "I think I might be able to find someone for you," he said.

They both laughed, their voices filling the dark and empty room.









To a Fat Friend

JAMES VAN BUREN

Let calory counters squint and squirm,
We're just determined to stand firm,
Resisting slurs, ignoring pouts,
Discounting wild, alarmist shouts.
Our fate, inexorable's, that
We're rotund, portly, just plain *fat!*

But should we suffer living death,
Draw dieting and shudd'ring breath,
For ten *more* years in torture's grip?
Nay, rather, we'll go with the ship!

Nail to the mast the sausage flag!
Let bread with peanut butter sag!
Pour out the syrup, bake the cake,
Let gravy run and sweet rolls flake!

Our certitude without alloy
Is that all things we should *enjoy!*
And that proud, thin one there, so prim,
We may hold services for *him!*

A Dream of Birth

JAMES VAN BUREN

Two women clad in white, and one man,
Stood stooping o'er a pallet or a bed
From which came gasps and cries from one in pain.
I came near, as one said, "He's here."
And I heard, then, a different cry, again.
"What is it, is there hope?" I said.
"No, it is fatal, it is certain death."
The answer came— "For what he has is breath."





Contrails

THOMAS REMINGTON

Keen needles pierce skies
Stitching an epiphany;
Nature in surprise
Views the embroidered decree
Sewn in deadly filigree.

Death's Easter

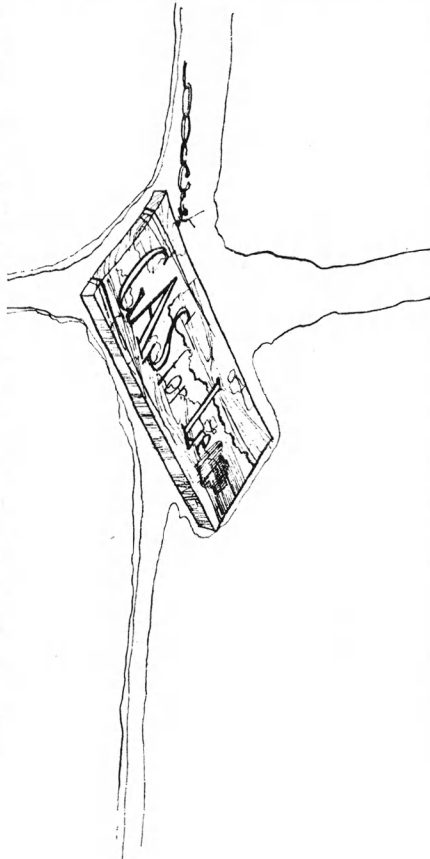
ROBERT COULSON

The old man was riding toward town from the foothills of the Sandia Mountains. A dusty, underfed burro labored beneath his master and strained with the added weight of dragging the rotting hulk of the once proud, but hungry beast of the brush. Soon the shapeless trio reached the road and passed the skeleton of a long-forgotten structure. It was the kind built by someone possessed with a momentary desire to build, but far greater than this desire, the power to dream in the unreal but heavenly abandon of pressing hungers. The originator of this temple to idleness had stripped the branches from a tree limb, and had hung a sign attesting to the nature of his dreams. The sign, which now dangled from a single rusted chain, read, "Gas for Less," but the warped and cracking board and the sun-bleached paint made the slogan

seem as one word having some abandoned religious meaning, or merely someone's name which no one remembered.

The desert twilight was entombed with the gaudy and capturing tapestry of the pre-nocturnal heaviness. It was like the weight of a net set to capture some predatory night prowler with the webbed justice of man. Soon this net was the bier of the lion's mockery as its hulk was dragged

through the rough rouge-colored desert. As the milky crust of its eyes shone through the prisonlike coarseness that had engulfed it for a week, the decaying matter filling the mold-ridden orbs of his skull reflected the wanness of the final moments of the sunset. The lion scraped onto the road, and its head jolted from its body and rolled—bloodless—to the far end of the snare, where it played idly with the blood-caked car-



cass of the lamb that had lured the cat to its doom.

The three labored past the wreck of attempted fortune without noticing or contemplating the fate of those who build the deserted shacks that adorn the world. The cat bumped along behind the dilapidated burro, making a dull sliding sound as they plodded along the dusty road into town. The old man's thoughts wandered from drinking the whiskey that the bounty would buy, to guilt for not checking the trap earlier. He hoped that the sheriff would give him the money for the decaying and torn corpse of the lion. His thoughts left him as he stubbed his boot on a large rock protruding from the side of the road. He slowly moved his foot to avoid having it drawn under the burro's hoof. His feet regained their regular position, dangling a few inches from the road, and the burro trudged on. The sounds of the town's single tavern were now audible as they entered the shadow cast by the crude low buildings of the settlement.

Mechanically, the old man lumbered from his mount and untied the simple knot that held the rope binding the carcass. Feeling the taut rope no longer at his flank, the burro, as by habit, sauntered around the corner of the sheriff's office to where the sheriff's horses peacefully shared their straw and hay with their longtime acquaintance.

The old man turned toward the sheriff's office — the rope that bound the snare still in his left

hand—and nearly wheeled directly into the sheriff, who had been awakened by the stench of the killer and killed. The sheriff thrust a sleepy hand into the right pocket of his wrinkled uniform pants and produced a twenty-dollar bill. He reached out with a slow logy motion and tucked the money into the old man's flannel shirt pocket.

The old man then turned on the heel of one boot and the sloppy torn toe of the other and lugged the putrid-smelling cat and bait toward the creek. By standing on one end of the snare and giving the other end a snap as he brought the stiff net up to his face, the old man flung the three shapes over the embankment. The lion and the lamb frolicked down the slope and fell into a position of eternal embrace on the mossy creek's edge. Here their bodies would rot in the brotherhood of the innocent, possibly content that both had lived and died so that one quicker and slyer might live to prevail until provided with his own creek-bank. The head had rolled down a path leading to the water and now floated and spiraled in the yellow-brown fluid of the creek. Occasionally it would bump against a tree root, adding a drumlike heartbeat to the serenity of the bank. The head floated as if it were attached to an invisible body, and then drifted away down stream, leaving the chapel-like clearing in natural silence. Only the buzzing of insects and the guttural emissions of the frogs disturbed the silence as they droned the night hours into the breathless moments

before dawn. Far away, the noises of the tavern echoed with the might of a new voice, then dwindled into the nothingness of the desert night.

The moon was on the verge of drowning in the infinite sea of the heavens when the old man left the tavern to weave and stumble his way back to his shack. In the stuporous haze in which he left the tavern, the old man denied the burro the simple sanctity of home, and proceeded on foot to where he imagined his shack to be. He was now walking westward, toward the sinking moon. He tripped and fell and regained his footing with the desperation of a frenzied pilgrim nearing the holyland. He began to run, with his head turned upward. The wind darted past his dry teeth and over his whiskey-stained tongue. The wheezing in his throat sounded like a broken organ attempting its final hymn.

Onward through the night the pilgrim clawed his path, reaching and grasping for something that seemed only a few yards away. He raced through the obstacles of time as his mind swarmed with the infection of his single homeward drive. The showers and peltings of his thoughts did not deviate him from his course, though in reality he now was stumbling backward and nearly falling. He staggered toward where the sun had set as if possessed by the wild abandon that makes the old want to die in the presence of the young, innocent, and holy.

The old man lurched backward and fell in the dust, trying to sear

the cool night with a curse and a plea to a god to be delivered to his shack. He lay thrashing for a moment, and then rolled onto his face and covered the back of his head with his forearm. He sprawled lifelessly across the road and his teeth gritted in the sand. His tongue tumbled between his teeth and fell limp onto the road where it searched the desert sand for wetness.

The old man awoke and attempted to clear his throat and mouth of the slimy green-yellow phlegm that had accumulated and made a gurgling sucking sound with every gasp he attempted. He detected a tremor in the earth around him as he rolled slowly and painfully onto his back. The first rose-amber of the sunrise shone on his gritty skin much as the sunset of the previous day had reflected on the desert sand.

Through his dust-caked eyes, the old man peered into the clouds that enflamed the sky. He felt the earth's trembling increase and turned toward the gloomy west. The earth shook with defiance as he crawled on. At that moment, he felt and heard the first pain of the molten fear of self-destruction tear through his brain. His mind shook with the intensity of the earth around him. He lifted his head, his throat stretched and quivered, and attempted to scream at the horror before him. He covered his crusty eyes with the backs of his thin, weathered hands, but through his interlaced fingers, he could see a raging sea of people. The earth and everything on it

shook as if in vengeance. He again started at the crowd as his spotted and bony hands fell lifelessly to his sides. They were all watching the same object in the distance with the intensity and sadness of a funeral procession, yet their actions were wild and teeming with unleashed emotions.

He struggled and pawed at the ground as he imagined himself pushing and shoving his way through the throngs of people. The earth was shaking even more violently now, more than the old man had ever thought possible. He was nearing a hill. He felt dizzy as he floated through the raging crowd, and believed he was actually being spiraled into the center of the crowd's attention. He found the thrill of being shoved down a ravine, and as he struggled to the other side, he noticed that he no longer was surrounded by people. He could feel their breath behind him, but he was now aware of the feeling of being completely alone. He looked up at what had appeared from a distance to be a ship's mast, but now he could see plainly what it was that the crowd was watching.

In the glory of that dawning morning, he saw the remains of a man, once alive and productive, nailed to a crude and roughly hewn cross. The man stared down, but the eyes were hazed over with the same crust which the old man felt in his own eyes. He reached out to touch the foot of the saintly looking man, but lunged forward

and fell. As he fell, he grasped at the man on the cross, diving for the leg that looked solid and stable, to give him support, but the limb tore away and the old man crashed to the earth below. He felt another tearing within his skull. Turning to question the crowd, he saw the final touch of the sunrise. He lay lifeless, staring into the sun as if his trial had ended in a hell of light and vision.

The old man lay in a dusty heap, gritty with vomit and stench. His body lay twisted and half-rested against a fence post, the legs bent sharply back beneath the body. His neck was twisted and his tormented face lay in the direct sunlight near the post. Close to his left ear, partially beneath the shadow of the bottom fence rail, a dried, bloody chunk of wool and skin, hidden from the torturing sun, bristled and whispered in the morning breeze. A crow dangled—wings outstretched—from the top rail of the fence, casting its crosslike shadow over the old man's body. A few threads of wool matted in the dull black matter which clotted around the crow's beak. The crow hung with one foot reaching toward the other as if in a desperate attempt to regain the lost appendage which lay engulfed in the old man's clenched fist. The crow and the old man cast a warped shadow across the morning desert sand around the fence, as their dead eyes stared blankly into each other's.

Old Men in the Park

PATRICK S. KELLEY

The cruelest fantasies are created
among the block-drawn brittle leaves;
the least wanted chilled eddies
drawing them up,
scattering them like brown ashes of the dead.

The flow of each hour
is turned to whirl back upon itself,
making new and terrible sounds
of angry time,
looking for prey among the magnificence
of drowned temples;
looking only for the dead,
and perhaps us.

In Anticipation of Easter, '63

KEITH LAQUEY

As in moist Spring
When water droplets hang against themselves
Clinging brightly to hot banana leaves;
Rubberfaced frogs ascend in small straw raincoats
Bleeding black across porcelain hilltops
Covered with pinks—

It is the son of man
Flooding the valley floor, the son
Striding azure beard rolling against
Cracked ribs,
The son, with watch-thin eyelids
Blue veined,
Digging a wooden whore.

You too, come in under this wet rock;
Third day in rough robe scratching,
With inscrutable grin and thin brown ankles;
("And suddenly the whale smiled at me!")
Splashing water colors,
Pastel in faulty portrait pigment,
A weathered chimney grasping toy balloons—
Then gone.

But anthologized! A poor poet with ragged
Wine skin, coughing blood, etc.; And always smiling—
Smiling, rotted gums and foul breath squirming
Through decayed teeth, whirling through the skull
While chewing pale flowers like
Breakfast food on Sunday afternoons—
But a Rebirth! And smiling! Smiling over a
Colored bowl of crystal plum blossoms.
Promising

A place where the lollypop chucks
Scoff comfortably of Rimbaud and Rilke,
Where egos transcend and there is trembling
Without fear of doorknobs or fly-specked windows,
Really—
An erotic symbol in universal chapel veil, a glass dome
Crowned with a green twig;
And Saturday night is ever
April.

It's Not the Dying

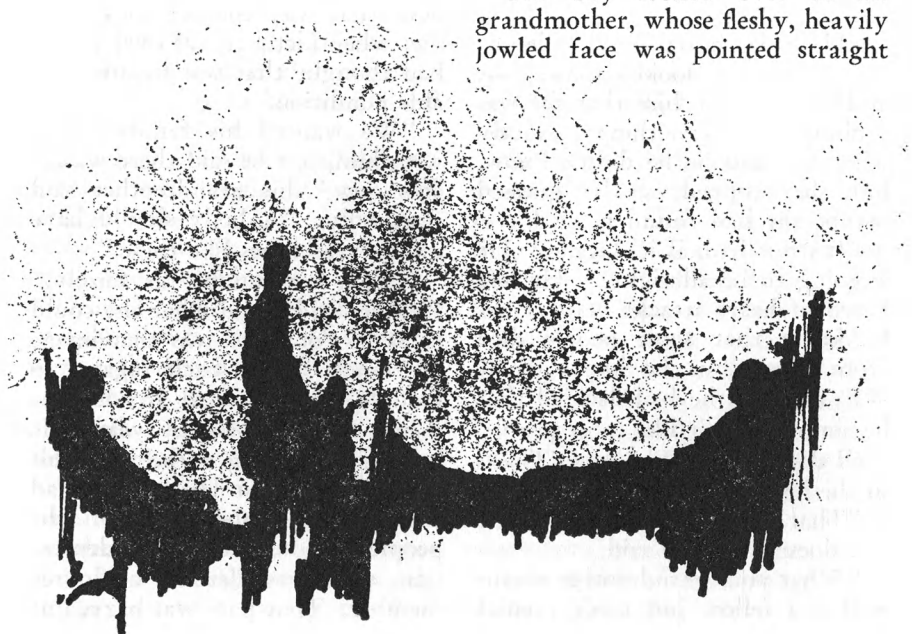
ROBERT JOHNSON

When the pick-up left Edgerton, gaining speed and stabbing its lights far out into the blackness, Grandmother fell silent, gripping Fletcher's hand still more tightly. He responded with a light squeeze and then tried to forget that she was holding his hand at all. Watching the road ahead, he anticipated each rise and curve, however slight, proud that he remembered

the road so well. Bugs seemed to materialize in the sticky night, leaping suddenly into the light and flashing toward the truck. They struck the hood and ricocheted high over the cab, and they smashed against the windshield, bursting out into lurid figures. Fletcher watched, fascinated.

"Fletcher . . .," his grandmother said tentatively, drawing his name out softly.

The boy looked over at his grandmother, whose fleshy, heavily jowled face was pointed straight



ahead. Beyond her, he could faintly make out his grandfather's lean profile in the light from the dash. It seemed to Fletcher that his grandfather was frowning, but he couldn't be certain because he always looked intense when he drove.

"Fletcher . . . There's something we've got to tell you," his grandmother said slowly, looking not at the boy but at the man by her side. "You remember Uncle Will, I'm sure," she said irrelevantly: Fletcher had written to them only a week earlier saying how anxious he was to see Uncle Will again. "He's poorly, Fletcher."

"Poorly?" Fletcher said. "He's sick? Uncle Will? But that's not right! . . . What's wrong with him, Grams?" He put his right hand over his grandmother's hands, barely conscious of their chapped roughness.

"He had a heart attack, Fletcher." She finally looked at the boy, and it seemed to him that she was probing for something; exactly what it could be he didn't know, but she stopped, so he guessed maybe she had found it.

"It's not bad, is it, Grams? He is going to be all right?" He had heard of heart attacks before, and he knew that some people died from them, but he knew Uncle Will too, and he had decided that he simply wasn't like most people.

"I don't know, Fletcher. That's in the hands of God."

"That means he won't get better, doesn't it?" he said.

"What your grandmother means is that a fellow just can't predict

this kind of thing." Grandfather's voice was deep and hoarse. He had glanced at Fletcher, but he quickly shifted his eyes back to the road. He remained silent and intent while he steered the truck around a curve, then looked back at the boy. "You have to prepare yourself, Fletch. He'll look considerable down from when you last saw him."

Down? Fletcher could not understand. All of the people he had known who had died were already down, and he had supposed they had always been down, that maybe they were born down. Now, Uncle Will was a man of sixty, tall and straight, who always carried his head back with its huge shock of white hair ruffled by the incessant breeze along the creek. He had been that way when Fletcher was younger, and he had been that way the previous summer when Fletcher was twelve. He had thought that was his unalterable condition.

"We wanted his family to be with him, but he said there wasn't any now," his grandmother said resignedly. "A body should have a family at times like these."

"Well, we can be his family," Fletcher said. And what else could he say? For there was that image of Uncle Will back again to trouble him as it had at odd moments during the past year. He had been chatting with him in his shack, or at least Uncle Will had been talking—about all of the people uprooted during the depression, so far as Fletcher could remember. That part was hazy, but

what he could remember, what he couldn't forget, was Uncle Will's reaction to his question, "Where did you come from, Uncle Will? Was that why . . ." He had seemed to look at Fletcher, yet he hadn't looked at him. All expression, all emotion had drained from his face, leaving a cold, impenetrable mask which had terrified the boy. So he never asked again. Now his grandmother seemed to confirm his year-long impression that Uncle Will's family had died, probably some horrible, unnatural death.

When Fletcher saw his grandparents' yard light, he wanted to tell his grandfather to stop, for heaven's sake, to turn from that place—from the house and the man entombed in it. The pickup pulled into the gravel driveway, jolted around behind the house and stopped. "Where is he, Grams?"

"He's in the bedroom off the front hall, Fletcher, the room below yours. I 'spect he's awake and anxious to see you."

Fletcher, who had pulled back on the door handle, stopped and let it fall slowly. "Uh . . . Grams," he began. But he couldn't let her think badly of him.

"Edna," his grandfather said, "maybe it'd be better if Fletcher went right on to bed. He must be pretty tired after the trip."

"Well, I just thought since Fletcher was . . ."

"Never mind. It's late and he can see him in the morning. That'll be plenty of time," Grandfather said. His taut lips smiled faintly at the boy. He swung his door

open and the light flashed on in the cab.

Fletcher, helplessly exposed by the garish light, had to look away from his grandmother. "Yes, in the morning," he whispered and climbed out of the truck. He walked a few steps away from the house, the gravel pushing up through his sneakers. Pivoting slowly in the heavy night he made out shadowy but familiar shapes against the densely clouded night: the barn, the silo, the garage, the house—all mere silhouettes, ghost-like forms of objects intimately known. The door to the house slammed. Fletcher inhaled deeply the acrid scent of dust and decaying ensilage and strode deliberately into the house.

Next morning after a late breakfast, Fletcher refused his grandmother's invitation to go to town for medicine. She nodded, with a flicker of a smile, when Fletcher said, "I decided last night that I'd visit Uncle Will, right after breakfast."

She looked intently at him for a moment and then sputtered, "Oh my, I can't stand here the whole day through." She smoothed her blue and white checked dress over her pudgy hips. "You're grandfather'll be back about noon, Fletcher, and you can go out with him this afternoon." She kissed him on the forehead, and he allowed himself to be pressed against her full bosom. "It's so nice to have you back. We miss it when you're not here."

Left alone, Fletcher stood leaning against the stove, his fists

jammed deep into the pockets of his new jeans. With the toe of his white tennis shoe he traced the pattern of the red, blue, and green interlocking squares on the linoleum. His mouth felt dry and puckered as he ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth, so he walked, springing high on his toes at each step, to the sink and ran himself a glass of water, slowly, carefully running half the stream into the glass and half out. He sipped at the water until he had swallowed half of it and poured the rest out. He paused with the glass suspended, decisively turned on the water, filled the glass, and strode quickly to the door of Uncle Will's room. He knocked softly and went in.

He was met in the semi-darkness by a strong odor of sickness—disinfected sickness—sickness which rolled over him in waves and made him feel like vomiting. He shuffled grudgingly toward the bed which stood at one side of a window, whose cream-colored shade admitted an unpleasant, muted half-light. Stopping at the foot of the bed, he looked down. There, completely covered, save for the long, pale, ghostly oval of his face and one emaciated hand which was held out toward him, its long bony fingers curled stiffly, was Uncle Will.

"Hi," the boy said hoarsely. "I brought you some water." He rolled his eyes away and looked at the table lined with medicine: pills in squat bottles; greenish liquid in a tall bottle; a fat envelope with typing; a large glass pitcher full of

water. "Oh, you have some." He shifted his eyes slowly back to the old face and noticed that the long, white hair had been carefully parted and combed back.

The mouth in the paper-white face opened. "Good morning, Fletcher. Come here," it whispered. The hand waved weakly at a chair by the bed.

Inching closer, Fletcher stared at the face, as though trying to make sure that it *was* Uncle Will after all. The hand from under the sheet took his, and he forced down the reaction that shivered through his body. The skin felt dry and scaly. And as the face gained definition, horrible lines could be seen to be deeply drawn into it; but the eyes, shining from the wasted face, were unmistakable. There was Uncle Will's life, there and in the mouth that stretched out at the corners, crinkling the dry skin in his cheeks like tissue paper, in what the boy hoped was a smile.

"I was pretty tired last night, Uncle Will." He strained to meet the old man's stare, trying not to look at the bumpy sheet. Out of the corner of his eyes he could sense the one unexposed arm lying across the body, dormant as death, and further down the bed, the feet, twitching. "But I came right after breakfast," he said hurriedly.

"I'm afraid I shan't be much company, Fletcher." His voice, though feeble and strained, had lost nothing of what his grandmother called the accent of the really cultured.

"Oh, that's okay." Fletcher

slumped a little in the chair. "Can I get anything for you?"

"No . . . No . . . I'm all right. Is there anything that you should be doing for your grandparents?" Uncle Will's eyes turned from Fletcher toward the ceiling.

"Oh, no. I'll stay with you. Does it make you tired to talk?" Fletcher looked at the old man's blue-veined hand, which was still loosely holding his. He put his free hand cautiously over the top of it.

"I'm fine so long as I don't overdo."

Fletcher sensed that the feet under the white cover had stopped their agitated motion. The old man looked at the boy again, an easy smile lighting his pale face. They gazed at each other, and Fletcher began to see in the ashen remains the face he had known: the white eyebrows, which peaked peculiarly just over the corners of his eyes; the high protruding cheekbones, now almost puncturing his tightly drawn skin; the nearly circular ears which projected almost straight from his head.

"How was school this year, Fletcher?"

The question startled the boy. School seemed so far removed from this hushed and isolated corner of the world. But he recalled that Uncle Will had tried last summer to brace up his flagging interest in studies, and that he had gone back to school actually anxious to learn. But after a month or two school had become a chore again. He considered the expectant face in front

of him and said, "I liked it fine, Uncle Will."

The old man looked disappointed; his smile vanished and his eyelids sank slowly, opening again over eyes that were looking beyond Fletcher. He felt his hand gripped more tightly. "What was wrong with school?"

"*Nothing*, Uncle Will. I mean," he said, "it's not the same as when you tell me about all those things. You make them interesting. My teachers don't. It's just a bunch of junk to memorize, that's all."

"I'm sorry, Fletcher." The old man closed his eyes and lay quietly, the sheet rising and falling with the arm across his chest. "I'd better sleep now. I'm feeling tired. I'm afraid it doesn't take long now."

Fletcher released his hand with mingled regret and relief and watched it come to rest along the edge of the bed. "I'll come back later when you're stronger, Uncle Will."

In the living room Fletcher sat leafing through a magazine, looking absently at the pictures of combines and tractors and harrows, the pale image of the dying man lurking in the shadows of his mind. He laid the magazine down on the sofa beside him and leaned back, his hands interlocked behind his head. The old black-faced clock on the mantel over the fireplace began tolling its delicate chime. It was ten. Rising, the boy went to the window, which faced the road, and stood gazing across the neatly trimmed yard.

Coming from the direction of town, a red car slowed and pulled

into the driveway. Across the front door of the car, in large, white block-letters, were the words, "Rich's Taxi." The driver pointed to the house, nodded once, then again, and two people crawled out of the back, a tall skinny man with a slight stoop, and a short, chubby woman. The man handed something to the driver, and the taxi backed into the road and drove off toward Edgerton, leaving the two people standing several feet apart gazing impassively at the house, their heads tilted with that thoughtful inclination peculiar to the casual student of art treasures. They studied the house in stolid silence for what seemed minutes, until the tall, stooping man inclined his angular frame toward the woman and mouthed a few words, to which the woman responded by marching onto the front lawn, her short arms swinging freely at her sides. With three long strides the man fell in beside her, and they marched together, in step, across the grass to the front porch, where Fletcher lost sight of them.

When the bell rang Fletcher had the sensation that he had never heard its raucous voice before, and as he reached for the knob, he realized that it was true; no one had ever come through that door, not in all the time he had stayed with his grandparents. When he yanked at the stubborn door, he felt, for a brief instant, that he should yell through the heavy, windowless wood, commanding the strange visitors to leave and use the back door. But then it was too

late, and it didn't matter after all, not after his eyes had traveled up the elongated torso to the immobile face which made Fletcher think of a highly polished statue of white marble with clumps of jet-black hair sprouting out in about the right places.

"Hello, Fletcher, are your grandparents at home?" the woman asked, low and smooth, almost at his ear, startling Fletcher. He had lost track of her in his fascination with the marble face.

"Oh, no, no, no," he said, flustered, and tore his gaze away and shifted it to the woman, who was almost close enough to lean over and peck him on the cheek. "They're out." Her eyes met his from under her heavy black eyelashes. He had never seen eyelashes so long and heavy, and it seemed as though she had given up trying to hold them open under their weight, for they hung lazily, half closed. "May I help you?" he asked, and watched as she pursed her lips and raised one fine line of an eyebrow.

"Perhaps," she said. "Would you be so good as to let us come in and sit down? The hotel, you know—it's not the best." She brushed by him into the hall, shifting her eyes from one object to another, like a hen myopically looking for seeds to peck.

"Fletcher, we're terribly sorry. We haven't introduced ourselves. I am William Ashburton and this is my wife, Myrtle," the man said in a glassy monotone. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton froze and stared expectantly at Fletcher, who

looked from one to the other, waiting for them to say something further. "Ah, then . . . You *don't* know who we are?" Mr. Ashburton chuckled and rubbed his hands together. He stepped gingerly over the threshold and eased the ponderous door closed.

"No, Sir," Fletcher said. "You're brand new to me."

"Hah! That *is* grand, Fletcher," Mr. Ashburton said, and patted him on the back.

"May we sit in the living room?" Mrs. Ashburton said as she strolled into the living room, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Oh, sure," Fletcher said. "They won't be long." He hastened into the room and held a chair, which she sagged into, with a deep sigh expressive of immense relief. Walking on the balls of his feet, Fletcher crossed to the sofa and sat on its edge, the hard line pressing uncomfortably against his buttocks.

"Please relax, Fletcher. There is certainly no need to be formal with us," Mr. Ashburton said, leaning against the side of the upright piano next to his wife, his legs crossed on the floor. With two bony fingers he drew a single cigarette from the pocket of his white shirt and placed it precisely in the center of his outthrust lips. Taking a wooden match from his pants pocket, he struck it with his thumbnail, waited for it to flare out, and lit the cigarette, drawing it back, his lips curling tightly under his teeth and then relaxing. Smoke began to drift from his nostrils in grey, ebbing wisps.

"When *will* they be back?" Mrs.

Ashburton breathed. She crossed her legs and leaned toward Fletcher, exposing a large white patch of flabby thigh.

"Uh . . . Not long. Maybe an hour," he said. He felt as he watched them that he was the entire audience for two very accomplished actors. He liked the sensation. "Grandfather's in the field, and Grandmother's in town after some medicine," he said, settling back on the sofa.

"Medicine?" Mr. Ashburton loosely pushed his lanky frame from the piano and assumed a stance next to his wife's chair, his long, thin left hand coming lightly to rest on her shoulder, with the informal stiffness of the family portrait. "Is that for my father, Fletcher?"

"No, it's for Uncle Will," Fletcher said. "The medicine's for Uncle Will." He stared at Mr. Ashburton, wondering if he had been dumped at the wrong place.

"Uncle Will!" Mrs. Ashburton stretched her double chin taut as she looked up at her husband's face. She began to smile broadly but stopped. "Fletcher, your Uncle Will is my husband's father, William Ashburton, Sr."

"But that's not right," Fletcher said. He rose suddenly from the sofa. "He doesn't have any family." If they were still acting, he would like to be told; he wished simply to sit and watch, and he resented being drawn from his seat at the edge of the stage into the play itself. He stood shakily, looking at the posed Ashburtons.

"Yes, Fletcher, he does," the wo-

man said. "It pains us that he could have forgotten us so much as not to mention us even to you." Her voice broke a trifle. She bowed her head, and Fletcher felt sorry that he had said anything. He gazed at the top of her frowzy head. The lean white hand lifted stiffly from her shoulder and mechanically stroked her hair.

"Father deserted us, Fletcher, deserted us without a word, many years ago. One day he was there with his children"—he motioned with his free hand to himself and his wife—"and the next, gone, leaving an unimaginable void in our lives." As he talked nothing in his face moved but his lips, giving Fletcher the distinct impression that his mouth operated by wires pulled somewhere inside his smooth, sculptured head.

"Are you really his family?" Fletcher asked incredulously, advancing half way across the room toward them. "I thought you were dead or something."

Mr. Ashburton removed his hand from his wife's head and drew himself up, almost to attention. "As you can see, we are certainly very much alive." His wife looked up again, smiling. "But perhaps, as you seem to indicate, we are no longer so in my father's eyes."

"Well, William, I said that he would forget us when he left. I said so." She nodded a single, abrupt nod at Fletcher. "I put it to you, Fletcher," she said petulantly, her heavy eyelashes working up and down slowly. "How would you feel if you were to return from the war—with a new

bride—and move into your father's home, upon his invitation, mind, and then, just like that," she snapped her fingers with a flourish, "after only seven months he were to vanish?"

Fletcher could not imagine, but he supposed it would be terrible, what with the war and the bride and the home and all the rest. But, and he said, "Uncle Will never did anything wrong." They didn't answer, except with stifled laughter, like he used whenever he didn't really have any laughter to stifle, but wanted to make someone feel small. They made him feel small.

He was relieved when he heard the back door slam. "That's Grandmother now," he said. "Grandma," he yelled. "We're in the living room."

"We?" her high-pitched voice yelled back, followed by the dull, rapid thud of blocky low-heeled shoes coming down the hall. She appeared in the doorway and smiled brightly at her guests, primly smoothing her white hair in back.

"This is Uncle Will's son and his wife," he said. "My grandmother."

"How do you do?" the Ashburtons said together, bowing slightly.

Grandmother stood transfixed, her smile washing away in a flood, her whole body stiffening into an awful rigidity. Standing there in the doorway with her feet braced slightly apart, her little, chubby hands clenched into fists, and her entire face set into a hard, unyielding expression of stubborn resistance and hatred, she looked like an old bull dog trying to defend

her last litter from a pack of wolves.

"Fletcher," she said, "leave us. Go see Uncle Will." The command crackled in the taut air.

He glanced guardedly at the Ashburtons who were frozen into the tableau of the old family portrait, glittering and perfectly controlled. He was flustered and confused. Now there was something *urgently* in need of explanation. He had understood little that had happened since he arrived in Edgerton, but before this moment there had been the opportunity to withhold judgment, at least until the Ashburtons had announced that they were the family which should have been dead. His grandmother had released him from that problem only to plunge him into the black, yawning gulf of a yet deeper one. He felt ashamed for his grandmother's reaction, but he could not say whether it was because of her inhospitality to the grieving family or because she had been able instantly to perceive what he had not—a hidden stain beneath the shining exterior of the Ashburtons.

"Fletcher!"

The sharpness of her voice startled him. "Yes'm," he mumbled, and quickly fled the room, unable to look again either at the Ashburtons or at his grandmother.

He crossed the hall and put his hand on the doorknob to Uncle Will's room, pausing with the hope of hearing a final word which would shatter the opaque globe of obscurity which had descended about his life. No one spoke, so

he stepped into Uncle Will's room.

He looked at the bed and his breath caught. Uncle Will was sitting up, propped against the head of the bed, his eyes thrown wide in a look of surprise and terror which seemed to deepen every line in the forehead and cheeks of his ghastly face. He stared hard at Fletcher, his bony horror of a sunken chest, exposed by his unbuttoned pajamas, rapidly rising and falling, his breath rasping into the close, soupy air of the room.

"What's wrong, Uncle Will?" the boy asked frantically, moving hastily to his side. "What's wrong?"

And still the old man stared, as though to sear the boy to the very center with the naked flame of some terrifying perception. Then he blinked, once, twice, in rapid succession, and released the tight grip with which he had been holding the undersheet. "It's not the dying, Fletcher . . . not the dying." He shook his head mournfully.

"You're not going to die?" Fletcher leaned over the bed to make it easier to hear the old man's faint, tired voice.

"They're here. I heard them," Uncle Will said. "I didn't know they knew. I tried not to let them. . . . You'll have to do something for me, Fletcher."

"Sure, Uncle Will, anything," he said anxiously. As he bent closer he could feel Uncle Will's hot, dry breath on his ear.

"In the shack, in my desk in the right-hand drawer . . ." He paused, breathing harder. "A bank book

in a white envelope . . . Bring it, please."

Fifteen minutes later Fletcher reentered the house, panting heavily, the white envelope clutched in his right hand. He was anxious to get back to Uncle Will, to understand why he had been asked to carry that little book with the "Spoford Savings and Loan Association" gilded on its cardboard cover.

He approached the door to Uncle Will's room and stopped abruptly. It stood, not as he had left it, but wide open. A fractured rectangle of light streamed across the floor and up the wall. Uncertainly he walked into the room. The dazzling scene which confronted him gave the impression of a harsh, melodramatic unreality, and he had the sickening sensation that his entrance had hurled him into the middle of the action. They were all there, frozen in bold relief by the glaring bare bulb: his grandmother slumped on a chair in the far corner, gazing at him as though she had been crushed by a vastly superior force; Uncle Will, still propped upright on the bed, his eyes lingering exhaustedly on Fletcher; and the Ashburtons. They stared coldly at Fletcher from either side of the bed, the woman with impatient, foot-tapping composure, the man with the same white, inscrutable, unwrinkled countenance gleaming beneath the bulb.

Fletcher held up the envelope, and Uncle Will nodded stiffly, motioning for him to bring it to him. Fletcher glanced back at Mr. Ash-

burton, whose hand was extended rigidly, his eyes fixed immovably on the envelope.

"If you please, Boy, let me see that." Mr. Ashburton's harsh, metallic voice cut the oppressive air.

"But . . .," he began, and that single weak negation was all he could muster. He looked back at Uncle Will imploringly, but the old man's face was expressionless and dull.

"Boy, the envelope! I want the envelope, please." Mr. Ashburton took one step toward him and brought his heels together with a resounding click.

Fletcher glanced down at the white envelope, quickly handed it to Mr. Ashburton, and retreated to his grandmother's corner. He put his arm around her pitiful, sagging shoulders and felt her lean against him.

Mrs. Ashburton waddled to her husband's side where she peered around his arm at the tiny book. Fletcher could not see her face, but Mr. Ashburton's was vividly clear. When he had leafed through most of the book, he looked down at the old man, who was staring blankly toward the door. "Well," he said, his voice glossy and bur-nished, "it would seem that my *prince* of a father has been lying." He gazed steadily at the old man. Mr. Ashburton lifted the book again and turned to the last page. He looked and looked and the brittle, shining surface of his face began to crack, first around the eyes, then across the forehead, then in lines shooting out from his thin

lips, until it shattered and spewed its contents into the foul air.

"You God damned son-of-a-bitch!" he exploded. "What's the meaning of *this*?" He waved the book before his father's face, but Uncle Will's eyes had closed and he wouldn't look at it. "Don't shut your miserable eyes when I'm talking." He grabbed the old man by the jaw and shook his head. "How could you spend it *all*, for Christ's sake?" He shook harder.

Mrs. Ashburton touched his arm lightly and said, in a timid whisper, "Now, William, surely there's a better way." He released Uncle Will's jaw and smashed her face with a vicious stroke of his forearm.

After his first stunned shock, Fletcher dashed at Mr. Ashburton. He began beating on the long back

with his blind, ineffectual fists. Suddenly he felt his feet leave the floor, two powerful hands crushing his sides, and he flew, smashing against the wall and crumbling to the floor. He opened his eyes, preparing for another onslaught, but Mr. Ashburton was almost out of the door, dragging his wife after him. His grandmother was leaning over him, whimpering softly.

When he finally did stand up he looked at the figure which had slumped over and lay curled on the bed, its long white hair hanging over the edge. And Fletcher knew—even before he helped Grandmother roll him onto his back; the emaciated chest had stopped its labored heaving and Uncle Will's face had settled into a placidity perfect and final.





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