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Continents of light : a novel

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CONTINENTS OF LIGHT

BY

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CONTINENTS OF LIGHT
PART 1
In the little nightcap knitted for him by his grandmother, Charles sat by the window and regarded the rain. Its freshness would not let him sleep. Like a cold tongue it licked his body beneath his nightclothes, and he shivered. He could not but wonder if his mother shivered in the room next to his, and if she did not, he wondered if she too were taken by the window's freshness and caused to sit beside it. Charles thought perhaps her conduct varied from his only in that she dressed warmly to watch the rain.

A flash of delight passed through him when he thought that she too was watching the rain.

In the morning she had been very kind to him and had taken him to the seashore. The sand had been hot and shining; she laughed and looked with interest when Charles ran to her and showed her the sea shells he had gathered. Among them was a conch in which she took a special interest when he pointed out that the crown had been broken. It surprised her that the shell should be tinted blue, but Charles told her that such a color was not uncommon among the species found on the beaches of the Chesapeake. She replied that she was very proud to have a son who had such knowledge, and after running her fingers over his head and declaring that his crown was as cracked as that of the conch, she smacked his bottom and he ran back down to the water's edge.
A tiny wave broke in front of him and the cold water ran over his feet, and he was very glad to hear his mother's laugh when he jumped up in the air to avoid the chill.

And then she called to him, "Don't go into the water."

"But I shall only wade."

And then he waded off down the beach thinking that she thought him to be very daring.

Elaine Delfold laughed. When she laughed, her hair fell down into her eyes and she had to brush it aside. In the soft light of early morning she was exceedingly beautiful as she sat on her striped blanket calmly and serenely turning the pages of her book, giving each page merely a cursory glance. She was of average size, but the light catching her delicate features and glancing in a thousand directions from her long blond hair gave her an exquisite look, not unlike the look of a freshly painted china doll.

Charles was unconsciously glad of everything that had happened to him; when he was eight years old his father had died and now he and his mother lived together, as they had for the last two years, in the green shuttered cottage on the point. He was glad too that his mother's health was bad, for it had forced her to leave Washington and come back to the beach; he had never much liked it when she was an actress, for when she went to work his father would go to watch her, and he would be left for what seemed to him to be an interminable amount of time in the dreary apartment that overlooked Bradford square.
He felt quite close to his mother now; they spent time together on the beach, and at night she remained home even after he fell asleep, and because she was so close it was easy to dream about her; it was easy to imagine her warm in the bed beside him, and at times, he could imagine her breath, as gentle and soothing as the soft breezes floating off the water, blowing coolly on his brow until he fell asleep.

The rain poured down outside his window; his ears suddenly felt cold and he pulled the nightcap down over them for protection. The rain was soft like his mother, and in the silver slender streaks of water, he felt he could see her, and he remembered the quiet friendly shadows of the evening as they settled together on the sofa, she reading and he dreaming.

It had been easy to understand her then. As she read to him it was easy to forget all the times before when she had been puzzling and frightening, smelling very much of something that he had instinctively come to despise.

She had read him fairy stories, soft and gentle fairy stories, and the shadows coming from the fire covered them and to Charles, seemingly shut out the far reaches of the cottage and made him feel all the more close to her. He could remember the soft purr of his mother's voice, rising and falling with no change in volume, assuming the qualities of a prince, now a princess locked in a tower but soon to be delivered and alarmed only because the wait was to seem so long. To Charles, the story seemed unbearably sad and he wept: tears that were so
sweet they seemed capable of soothing his eyelids many years later.

"Why are you crying, Charles. Does the story make you sad?"

"I won't tell you, I shall never tell you."

"You are a bad child," she said. "I shall give you up if anyone will take you."

Then she softly pinched Charles' chin and she looked at him as if she knew why he was weeping. Closing his eyes as if he were sleepy, Charles turned his face from her gaze, and in another moment, buried his face between her arms and breast. Putting his arms tightly around her, he remembered feeling his head swim and his body, with a glow of ecstasy, slide into her body, so that his arms became one with her arms and his legs became one with her legs.

And it seemed to him that where his mother touched, he touched, and where she sat he sat, and then for many minutes, where his heart beat her heart beat too, and he could remember the soft flow in his mother’s veins, and the terrible dread that flooded over him. What if her heart should flutter? Would his soul steal out of him, circle about the warm flickering fire, mingle with the wreath of smoke and disappear up the chimney?

As he watched the rain, with the mind of a child he remembered all of those things that are impossible to remember, and he remembered that in his joy he was not without a touch of shame and a vague muffled feeling, a half-awakened suspicion
that it was sickness to remember all that he remembered.
CHAPTER II

One evening his mother supervised his dressing, for they were to attend the carnival that came yearly to Exmore; he wore his faded blue jacket and long blue pants. In his button hole, his mother placed a white rose from the garden behind the cottage. As she inserted it, her thin white fingers fluttered like the wings of a bird, and she said to him softly, "If anyone mentions your father, you are to turn up your nose and laugh. Do you understand me, Charles?"

Charles nodded and trembled to take her fingers. Several petals of the white rose were withered, but she fluffed them until they were alive, as alive and breathing as they had been in the garden.

The carnival had always been a great deal of fun; Charles had always gone with his father, but those times now were scarcely remembered, for to him, three years ago seemed to be an expression implying a distant and only vaguely remembered past. The carnival was not the only attraction in Exmore; for after the gayer festivities the carnival personnel, the hawkers, the vendors, the star attractions, held a revival in the big tent to the rear of the grounds. Charles remembered that his father used to grumble about that, but that was almost all he remembered about his father.

He sat beside his mother in the car, and beside him sat Celeste, tight lipped and afraid, for usually her mother didn't
allow her to accompany the Delfolds. Charles edged close to his mother and listened to her closely as she conversed unashamedly with Bessie, his matron, a large rotund negress, who sat in the backseat with Jack, the family's colored gardener.

"Now Bessie, I don't want you and Jack to say anything if anyone asks you about Aaron ... I mean Mr. Delfold ... do you hear, understand me now."

"Yessum Mrs. Delfold, I jes' worry bout Jack."

"G-wan," said Jack, his young face indignant, "G-wan Bessie, my lips done been sealed tighter'n a trap."

Settling her hand on her son's knee, she gave him a squeeze as they pulled within sight of the bright lights of the carnival. To Charles, the whole world seemed to be in motion; the red blue and white lights were spinning in a huge circle vertical to the earth, and the surrounding streets seemed to be overflowing with people dressed in every conceivable manner; negroes in gay colors, some in work clothes, bankers in well-starched shirts, little children dressed in everything from short pants to only underdrawers and t-shirts.

"It was ludicrous," said Charles' mother, "the way your father strung himself up, hanging like a fool from the rafters, like a wexen mummy."

Charles remembered the word "ludicrous" for a long time; like a bite of too much apple, it stuck in his throat. "Remember, Charles," his mother continued, "he died of losing too much wealth; that's a lot more than most of these people can
As they stopped, Charles took his mother's hand, and though Celeste wanted him to go with her, he was reluctant to leave his mother; he held on to her until the last minute, thereby preventing her from leaving the car quickly, and he didn't let go until what he was doing would be noticed if he continued. She spoke to him quietly, "you go have fun now Charles... Celeste, don't you tag along with Charles if he doesn't want you."

Celeste's face smoldered with humiliation.

Her mother and father were friends of Elaine's, two of the few people with whom she could talk pleasantly, but her friendship with them did not extend to Celeste. "She's too quiet, sullen almost," said Charles' mother when she was with her son and they were alone, "you really don't care for her so very much do you Charles?" Charles would nod agreement, and then he would throw his arms about her neck and bend close to her ear to whisper nonsense in her hair.

"I sometimes wonder whether or not Celeste's parents invented their name," she would say, "I really don't think her father was ever a major at all."

Charles didn't care. It didn't much concern him. He had kissed Celeste's lips, but that had been in his mother's rose garden, and his kiss hadn't really been intended for Celeste; for when he shut his eyes to do it, he was kissing his mother. She was like the solitary white lilac that blew in the garden
and was outlined by the blue of the bay when one stood by the back garden gate and aligned its bulb just under the horizon.  

"Now Bessie, I want you and Jack to keep an eye on Charles, do you hear?"

"Yessum."

"Yessum."

"I jes' worry bout Jack."

"G-wan Bessie, g-wan home ya ole nigger woman!"

Someone had let go of strings and balloons were flying in the night air; they rose above the noise of the carnival and then disappeared. Charles watched them as they floated away, and then he and Celeste, with Bessie and Jack behind them, stood transfixed at the booth of a barker who was continually throwing down plastic chips of red, blue and green and then picking them up again. The flow of words from the barker's mouth was continuous—"round and round and round she goes, where she stops nobody knows; care to take a tumble boy?"

Charles bought a blue chip and placed it on the board. The wheel spun for what seemed like minutes and then the man took Charles' chip and put it in his apron. Charles, overwhelmed, almost protested, but then he saw Celeste laughing at him and he thrust his hands in his pockets, bent down his head, and then trudged on.

"Man, you done lost your quater," said Jack with a smile, "domme thrown it a-way like yo daddy would h' done."

"Jack, you keep yo mouth shut; you don't pay him no mind,
duz you Charles?"

"G-wan Bessie, meddlin', meddlin' with a po colored boy; at the revival t'nigh youse to be pergified sures I'se walking here aside yo."

Bessie turned as red as she could and tried to put her hand on Charles' head, but he moved from under it; he had resigned himself to not seeing his mother for awhile, for she had business to attend to elsewhere, and in the company of Celeste, bracing himself business-like by tugging at his belt, he began walking along with a decided swagger.

"Harr, har," laughed Jack.

"Don't pay any mind to Jack," said Charles casually to Celeste; he hasn't been to school."

"At's right," said Jack with a laugh, "but if's I did, I'd go a sight better dressed and done up than yo duz."

"Shush yo mouth, Jack. Ain't none of his fault if'n his moma dresses 'em at way. Sides, Jack, 'is moma's sick, and yo knows at's de truth ... she don't have no time to fix 'em up right."

"Ha, ha," said Jack, then feinting solemnity, "I ain't say-ing nothing."

"I'se a good mind to smack yo mouth, Jack."

"G-wan ole woman, I ain't said nothing."

Charles took Celeste's hand protectively and walked on quickly, but Jack and Bessie picked up their pace and were still right behind them. Twenty minutes later Charles put his hand into his pocket and found that the two dollars his mother had given him had
gun to sway mournfully to a music that remained unheard. The red light tinted their robes until they were ember and then almost red. Charles strained his eyes peering through the dark. There was blood on their robes, red streaks that ran from their bosoms and gushed in a dark flow at their waists, where the folds in their robes billowed from their thighs to the floor. They started moaning low, a heartbroken moan like a beast of the field moans for its young, and then the moan became louder. Their heads still moved rhythmically, and their hands, waving with despair and pain, moved from their breasts to their ears, and then moving to their eyes they covered red lids, and the moan became louder.

Burning with terror, Charles snapped around in his seat as a piercing wail coming from the carnival grounds blasted through the tent; he had never heard such a sound before. It was like the awful cry of a soul being wrenched from a body; he grabbed for his mother’s arm and held on to her with both hands as the voice, long and shattering, reached it’s peak and then snapped. As if the human being it belonged to were snapped like a bleached stick, the awful voice seemed to break with finality.

The first woman on the stage began keening to a pre-set rhythm, "Je-zus . . . aw Jezus is dead . . . sweet blood of my heart, my sweet Je-zus is dead."

"Oh Je-zus . . . Jezus," the second woman chanted, and then the third voice began, "Oh, Pilot yo dun croo-ce-fied him . . . oh, Pilot you done croo-ce-fied de lord."
Their heads moved faster as the tempo of the rhythm increased; their eyes rolled wide until the pupils disappeared, and then they were white like painted marbles.

Then a second horrible scream came from the back flap of the tent, and Charles could detect, moving into view slowly, a set of golden bucklers gleaming a mixture of rose and gold under the red light. There was the blast of a trumpet and three Roman guards emerged. Dressed in tarnished but gleaming armor, the three men, their faces lost behind the visors of their helmets, began a stately procession down the center isle; the leader stopped and bellowed with all of his voice, "In the name of Pilot and Caesar of the Holy Roman Empire, bring forth the carpenter of Galilee."

The women on stage screamed. They beat their breasts with their hands until their hands became smeared with blood and they were crying with misery.

"In fear and trembling, oh God. Sweet Jesus, they dun killed Sweet Jesus . . . wash those souls, my God, in the blood of the Lamb.

The flaps of the whole back side of the tent were thrown open suddenly; the rent was instantly plugged by the piercing scream of an animal. Then six tall men stepped forward dressed in black robes with their faces covered with black gauze. One man walked several paces in front of the others, two men on each side were supporting the crosspiece, and a lone figure in black, bringing up the rear, stabilized the cross.

The Savior on the cross writhed and squirmed like a snake.
He was a large black man naked but for a loin cloth around his waist, and his bellows were like the high falsetto screams of an animal. He twisted in agony, letting his eyes pop out and his mouth hang open. Charles screamed in terror as thick gushing blood poured between the man's teeth and flowed out over his glistening wet body. There the blood mingled with the sweat and turned the naked sleek torso into black glass stained red.

"O Pilot, you dun killed our lawd, you dun killed our lawd."

The procession rambled forward and the man was shrieking with each step; the mighty chest was beating as if it alone could break its bonds, and the black granite neck was twisting, bobbing from one side of the cross to the other. The figure's face was thrown up to the light, the blood from its hands was running down its hips and then down to the sawdust below. Celeste cried out, "Oh Charles, look Charles, look!"

Charles took his hands from over his eyes. The room was filled with the powerful shrieks of the dying; the procession had reached the stage, the figure was turned again to the audience. The black man's voice cried above the noise of the chanters and the passionate fury of the crowd.

"Oh Father, forgive them, for they know not what they doo-co-co-co."

Charles was staggered by the sight; the black hollow of a mouth was like the opening of a cave, and the eyes over the hollow, the eyes crowded with blood, were fierce and cunning but filled with pain and agony; they were the eyes of Jack.
"It's Jack!" exclaimed Elaine, suddenly very angry, "That man is Jack."

Jack screamed his scream of death, the blood seemed to catch in his throat, and he died, his head flopping over to one side of the cross. The mourners too screamed loud and long, and then it was dark.

"He's dead," gasped Charles, "he's dead." And he held his mother tightly by the neck.

"No he's not, Charles, Jack was just acting." His mother's soft hands rubbed his neck gently, "Oh wait'll I catch that nigger man; I'll wring his neck!" Charles sobbed and then caught himself; pushing away from his mother, he felt ashamed of himself for he'd known the truth all along.

"Did it frighten you, Charles?"

"Yes, mother, it did!"

The lights were back on and the stage was bare save for a tiny white man with a pale face and long black hair who stood before the altar waiting for the murmur to cease; he signalled with his hand, and men descended from the wings of the stage bearing long poles with baskets on their end that they passed through the crowd collecting the offering. Charles pushed the quarter his mother had given him into the basket, and he watched as Celeste slipped in her dime.

Charles felt better now. The little man on stage seemed incapable of frightening anyone; he was a very small man with a huge head balanced foolishly on his shoulders and huge hands that
seemed to hang down below his knees. Celeste looked at Charles. He saw her from the corner of his eye, and her look bothered him somewhat, for it seemed that she wished him to interpret for her what they both had just seen.

The little man on stage signalled for the congregation to arise; issuing from the two hundred throats came a shrill edition of "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." To Charles, the voice of the little man was incredible, coming as it were from a tiny misshapened puppet whose white waxen face was boxed by black hair; the voice was a deep bass beginning deep in the diaphragm and then at last bouncing off the canvas at the back of the tent.

When the song was done and seats were taken, the little doll looked solemnly out over his flock and his thin white lips began to quiver.

Then he raised his arm suddenly, and his big voice shook the room, "Pay—day some—day," he bellowed, his open hand crashing down on the lectern.

"Mary Magdelene she waited beside the still water, Mary Magdelene in the tomb fearing the Lawd's gonna smite her. In fear and trembling she waited and her body wuz all afire, wanting the body of de Lawd to lay hisself down beside her. And when de Lawd arose his muscle wuz like the cold marble, and his mouth wuz like de death, the death Pilot ordered. Mary Magdelene was like a lamp and de flame went higher, but the death in de Lawd's eyes wuz like the dousing on of the water, and the whore saw death, saw death and felt it. And the body's flame died, and de soul's
flame soared. Pay day-someday, and that day is a coming with the
death of de Lord. Pay day someday, when the wicked women of de
world's gonna feel de Lawd's sword, and the crying and the weep-
ing is never gonna stop, till the seas and de rivers is all filled up."

Charles shuddered at the sound of the voice; it was like a
scimitar about to descend; it hung in the air and shone red like
heated steel.

"And ye mens of de world that plunge in Mary's evil, de
ground's gonna open and dat womb's gonna be too willing, it's
gonna close agin in the midst of yo sinning. Pay-day someday,
and that day is a-coming with the death of de Lawd. Now yo young
men is a-laughing at dis young preacher, payday someday, and dat
day is a coming with de death of de Lawd."

"Payday someday," the voice died off.

"Payday someday."

Charles trembled as he walked behind Celeste and his mother
back to the car, and he knew for the first time what the sinking
feeling in his stomach was; he could visualize his mother
stretched out on the bed before him, and he closed his eyes to
shut it from his mind.

He tried to think of something else, and at length he conjured up the vision of Celeste sitting with her algebra book un-
der the roses of his mother's garden, "Not that way, do it this
way," he was saying to her. "Don't you see? Put the compass
here, then here, now draw two arcs. Celeste, I didn't know you
could be so ..." but then he remembered Celeste's lips, and he remembered that there was no guilt; kissing her lips had been rather a relief, a balm of sorts. Even then it had struck him as strange. The apple blossoms had been in stir ... he could remember no more.

"Where the devil is that Jack?" said his mother, fretting.
"You'd think he had enough sense to meet us here at the car!"
"Dat's a no gud nigger," said Bessie.
"Shut your mouth, Bessie; can't you see I'm disturbed?"
"Yessum Mrs. Delfold," said Bessie, putting her handkerchief to her eyes and beginning to cry, "jes saying Gawd's truth."

Elaine's mouth was locked in a frown as they drove back home to the cottage on the point. The drive seemed to Charles to be interminable and he sensed that the silence was both strained and unnatural. His mother's face seemed to be filled with intense despair, and he couldn't understand; Bessie and Celeste had fallen asleep as if in self-defense.

Charles hoped that she wouldn't drink like she used to do in Washington after a bad show at the end of which she received no personal curtain call. He could remember the way she would walk, or stagger into the apartment, and with tears in her eyes, go straight to her room so that there was no use waiting for a special goodnight, no use waiting for a goodnight at all. The nights were so lonely then, and it seemed so long until morning came.

When it got very bad then, she would have spells, horrible
spells, and sometimes he was kept from seeing her for long days on end; she would stay in bed all day and the house would be filled with doctors. He had picked her flowers on one such day but he didn’t give them to her; he knew instinctively that she wouldn’t care, that she was too sick to be bothered. Charles shut his eyes and tried to fall asleep like Celeste and Bessie. The spells didn’t seem to come so often now that she lived alone at the beach with just him; he could find room in his heart to be proud of that.

"What gets me, Charles," said his mother, slapping the wheel, "is that Jack doesn’t seem to know who we are. Doesn’t he know that I pay his wages, and that I’m not to be trifled with? Doesn’t he know that I’m a lady?"

Elaine looked fleetingly at her son; her eyes were incredulous.

Jack didn’t show until the next day, and when he did, he crept into the kitchen grinning like a cheshire. Charles’s mother dropped a dish, and her face alive with anger and relief, she scolded him soundly, so soundly that his mood changed, his face became pale, and Bessie, who was listening from the living room achieved a measure of revenge.

Jack stomped out, and through the kitchen window Charles could see him go to the toolshed, take out a hoe, and begin digging angrily about the flower beds. Elaine opened the window and called out in irritation, "Jack, cut out the nonsense and get to work properly." But Jack kept digging, throwing up dirt franti-
cally, ignoring her until Charles feared she was going to cry. She turned from the window and put her hands to her eyes. "Why don't you fire him, Mother?"

Elaine stared at her son . . . "fire him? . . . dammit, Charles, why do you kiss Celeste in the garden? Don't you think I see you? Don't you know that I can look out the window anytime I please?"

Charles got up from the table. For an instant he felt defiant, too much of a man to be spoken to in that way, but then he was overcome with a horrible sense of shame. "Oh Mother, I . . . I . . . just," then he broke into tears and they streamed down his face. " . . . I . . . just."

Her arms were around him and she was kissing him softly. "You're my little man," she said, "just my little man," and then to him everything seemed again to be alright. He pressed his cheek against his mother's white neck, and in his mind, he was listening to fairy stories and the fire was dropping ashes tenderly, soothingly on the hearth.

"I do wish you wouldn't play with her, Charles, I really do. You know what her family is like. I don't think you should play together. Listen to your mother; tell me that you won't play with her again."

"I won't" said Charles with a sob.
CHAPTER III

Charles stayed much of the time in the study, for his mother had sat up his desk there and he had come to look upon the room, with its dark blinds and rich mahogany furniture, as being his own, a sanctuary of sorts where he could sit idly and dream, tapping his pencil reflectively on the sheet of paper before him; the atmosphere of the study was heavy and dark. On the wall were faded photographs of his ancestors, photographs he had come to love and which seemed for him to dispense solace.

This was especially true when his mother had visitors; as soon as possible he would flee their company and seek the refuge of his den. He found his mother's guests oppressive, for they said things like "darling" or things like "Didn't you find the painting by Seurat positively thrilling," as if they had bells in their mouths that rang and jingled, trying to be in accord with the fluttering of their hands.

They made Charles feel that his glasses were shameful for none of them wore glasses and they looked on him as if he were peculiar for having to wear them so young. Under their scrutiny he was shy and mumbled inarticulately, putting one foot before the other, as he hoped beyond hope that none of them would bring up the issue of how well he was doing in school. He wasn't doing well; his mother didn't dress him well and he was always so shy, his grades were poor and he hadn't made any friends.

Everyone laughed at the way he talked, and then too, there
were the things that were said about his mother.

It seemed he enjoyed only putting words on paper. There were times when he would put a single word on his paper; he would puzzle over it, repeat it to himself, then laugh quietly, thinking himself foolish.

And he would write essays, short essays about his mother and essays about what it was like to be small for one's age and a little bit unpleasant in appearance.

"I don't know why he did it," said his mother.

"I don't either," said Charles, his eyes filled with tears at the remembrance of the day before when parents had been invited to the school. He had been in the lunch line refusing to give up his place when the larger boy hit him soundly on the arm. Filled with indignation and frustration, he hadn't begun to cry until he saw his mother coming down the hall, her face horrified and her lips trembling.

"Why didn't you hit him back?"

"I don't know," he said, his words a mumble.

Charles wished only that his mother hadn't repeated the story in front of her friends, for though they said with a flutter, "oh, the horrible boy, poor little Charles," their eyes were filled with a disrespect of him, and the certain knowledge of this made him become all the more shy under their scrutiny, which seemed prolonged and protracted beyond all reason.

But he felt fine in his study, sitting, as it were, at his desk before the window that overlooked his mother's garden dream-
ing of his mother, and in the dream, putting her in the garden under the trellis or stretching high to pick a red rose that bloomed in defiance far over her head. His mother was so beautiful in the garden; her white complexion contrasted divinely with the myriad colors, and the delicate shading of the roses seemed to give a red blush to her cheeks; it never ceased to amaze Charles that his mother moved like a girl, a divine little girl only a few years older than he was.

He saw red like the rose of his mother's blush that day in the lunch line when the big boy behind him whispered, "your mother's a petty." He was glad that she didn't hear and he was glad that she didn't see his elbow, sharp like a dagger, cut into the boy's ribs. It was better for her to think that the boy's blow was unprovoked, but still, the thought that he thought him incapable of fighting back filled him with shame. If she hadn't been there, the tears never would have come; there would have been anger and frustration but definitely no tears.

He was older now and was able to begin half-consciously to sort things out; he was loyal to her, but deep within, he felt that perhaps he wanted to camp out, to pack a knapsack, a tent, and wonder off for a while on his own; but he was humiliated by the realization that if he did so, he could not manage. He would yearn for her and think only of her. She, for him, would be a magnet ever drawing him home through the door and into her arms where the world, the school, the gardener Jack, would cease to exist and be done for for a while.
He seemed out of himself when he was with her; when he pressed close up against her; the old feelings he had as a younger boy were still in force, and the satisfaction of them remained his definition of ecstasy, but now something new had been added. As he looked out his window onto the garden, he felt again as he did at the revival that the something added was shame. He felt foolish; he was her son, and it was right for him to love her.

What was it in himself that urged him to stop loving her, when to stop loving her was the one thing he couldn’t do for the world. Jack was in the garden, hoeing up the ground. Charles turned his eyes away from the negro in agitation.

"That," said Elaine, pointing to a neatly framed photograph on the wall of Charles’ study, "that is the original Aaron Delfold, your great grandfather. He was supposed to be the greatest planter that ever lived on the shore. And that face is the face of the second Aaron; he represented our district when it was first established . . . I suppose the only bad thing about him was that he was always in the capitol at Richmond and couldn’t give much thought to your father . . . I wanted your father to go into politics but he found a better way to elevate himself. Charles, I want you to take after your grandfather, or me . . . I’ll expect it."

Elaine laughed as Charles looked at the pictures; they always frightened him somewhat because the faces were solemn and distinguished. They frightened him the way his mother sometimes
managed to frighten him.

"How does it feel," he had asked her once, "to be so famous, to be an actress, you know?"

She laughed at the awe and puzzlement on his face; then finally she said, "you'll be even more than that, just you wait, my dear Charles."

In the bathroom mirror Charles shook his head at the face that presented itself before him; his hair was too long and he looked a bit dirty, his clothes didn't fit, and he could imagine a rear view of himself in which his pants in the back would be foolishly bunched. He could hear derisive laughter behind him. Turning, he found that no one was there, that the source of the laughter had been only himself.

It frightened him to hear things, for it made him think of his mother's spells, and he could see himself lying on the floor thrashing in the air at invisible cats that clawed and bit him as he struggled to escape.

He could hear voices talking about him as they talked about his mother when she wasn't present. How he hated his mother's friends, for he would listen at the door of his study when they were waiting in the parlor to be received, and he could hear what they said about her, laughing sometimes and jesting, sometimes with quiet malice. After months it became apparent to Charles that in the household there was a continual joke, perpetrated by the constant flow of guests, and that the gist of that joke was that his mother regarded the intruders as friends.
"Why doesn't she dress the brat better?" And then light laughter. "Would you if he were yours, a son of old Aaron ... a gambler, Flora, a gambler ... and to think he came from a good family. And, Flora, I mean to tell you that Elaine is common ... her family runs a store, poor fish ... I wouldn't talk to her at all except that my husband Herbert needs her money in the company."

"She can't manage her affairs."

"Thank God."

Charles remembered her spells; she had had one once at the church in Exmore. He remembered her spinning on her heels, blood flowing from her mouth; he remembered the way she lay there thrashing in the air, and the horrifying way her friends reacted, the way they stood to one side and did nothing but call the deacon, who arrived many minutes later.

No one had offered to take them home afterward when his mother was calm but locked in sleep, and he remembered how at last, the minister reluctantly, despairing of all else, put them up for the night in the church, and they didn't get home until the morning when Jack, with a worried look, came to pick them up.

It usually took her two or three days to recover, and then she languished in bed, not seeing even Charles, Celeste would take the opportunity to come over and converse with Charles in the garden.

She came quietly through the garden gate and threw pebbles against his window until he would wake, then with a wave of her
hand she would invite him outside to sit with her in the arbor; she too was beautiful in the morning light. There was a softness about her skin and a brightness about her brown hair that was at once very much like and at the same time very much unlike the skin and hair of Charles' mother. They would do their algebra together, she explaining at first the technique, and then he later, after understanding, explaining the sense.

For Charles, the tranquility was invaded only by the thought of his mother, but Celeste was unbothered; when she was with Charles, she seemed to be totally at home.

He said to her quietly, "I have a poem for you; I wrote it yesterday morning." Then nonchalantly, "Here, why don't you give it a glance."

"Bethlehem" by Charles Aaron Delfold

There a virgin mother lay
A bud sprang from her womb
To the passerby the poor thing died
But to all concerned it bloomed.

Celeste's lips moved as if she were tasting a fine liqueur, then at last she tilted back her pretty face and smiled, as if to herself.

"Well, what do you think; is it good?"

Celeste said nothing, but rather looked reflectively at the roses, the lilacs, the blue creeping fox that ran like a carpet of weeds beneath her feet. "I shall have to think about it for a while. I don't quite understand it, Charles," she said, but then she added, "It's very pretty."

"Pretty?"
Celeste laughed.

Delfold laughed and turned away; there was a high blush on his face that he didn't want her to see. Then like a little girl stroking an animal, Celeste put her hand on his, "Do you remember Charles, when four or five boys at school teased you unmercifully? You ran away from them but they trapped you by the fence and circled around you."

Charles nodded, still turned away.

"You were furious," she said, "You were crying, but I remember you turning on them and shouting as loud as you could, 'I have a great soul'. Do you remember that Charles?" Celeste asked him again but without waiting for an answer, "Well I think," she said, "that you were possibly right, and to me it doesn't much matter how good the poem is."

Charles was too old to do it, but he felt an impulse to cry.

Her simple statement accentuated so many feelings that had been lying within him that he could barely contain his sorrow, and there was no way to contain his joy. In an instant he saw himself before his schoolmates, his teachers, his mother's friends, and he could see himself saying with sang froid, "So what to this, so what to that, so what that my father hanged himself because of my mother. So what?"

His voice, coming so casually, seemed to pierce into them with incredible force.

"So what," he repeated, and no one but he could find the courage to speak, "What does all that have to do with me, and what do
I have to do with you?" He looked at Celeste and his impulse to kiss her again was extreme; instead he impulsively threw his arm around her shoulder and squeezed her.

"Don't!" she exclaimed.

Charles was surprised, then he heard another voice coming from the other side of the garden from behind the huge clumps of fuchsia that divided the way, "Feeling better, Mrs. Delfold?" Jack called, looking steadily at the door of the cottage. Charles turned around and beheld his mother on the threshold of the door, her face was blistering with rage.

In an instant, Celeste was gone and he was trembling before his mother. In the morning light her face first became one of an angry and then at last, a sulky doll; her blond hair, caught in the slight breeze was streaming in her face.

"You have promised me you wouldn't see her, and now, when I'm sick, when I'm sick in bed, you become a traitor; doesn't your promise mean anything Charles? How could you forsake me for the sake of that . . . that . . . oh . . . I don't want to say it!"

"I haven't, mother, I haven't."

"You have, you devil . . . you can't be trusted, and to think of what I have given you, what I continually give you." Elaine seemed as if she would fall. Like an actress, she leaned against the trellis and put her hand to her face, "You continually hurt and abuse me, Charles, you always have, you always will. Am I not enough of a mother for you . . . putting your hands on that girl, oh Charles, I'm so ashamed . . . if only your father were here."
Jack can't be your father!"

"Don't cry Mother," said Charles, his voice breaking, "please don't cry!"

But Elaine was already crying, leaning against the trellis.

"You do nothing to make me happy, nothing to make me proud; how do you think it makes me feel in front of my friends? They all know how sloppy you are, how stupid you are in school . . .. don't you think that hurts Charles . . . to see you bumbling increibly in front of them, to know that they are laughing at you . . .. they know you're just like your father, don't you think that hurts?"

"Don't say that Mother, leave me alone."

"Alone, leave you alone. Don't you know they're going to find out about you and that girl, and when they do, don't you know you'll be a laughing stock, just like your father . . .. don't you think that hurts . . ." Elaine sobbed deeply, then suddenly she seemed to explode with anger . . .. Could you possibly not care if they find out who you are?"

Charles turned his back on her and grew quite red; then suddenly wheeling around, he cried with all of his force, "God-damn it, Mother, don't you know that you're a part of my shame?"

Her white hand on his face stung him so that he fell back over the garden bench and landed in a still heap; the sudden tears gripped him so that he couldn't breath and he struggled for breath, gasping loudly and hollowly, putting his hands over his face as if to shut out the sight of himself.
"Oh, Charles," Elaine cried, running to him and throwing her arms about him, "Don't let's ever fight again," she cried, tears running down her cheeks, and her arms holding him tighter, "Make up to me, please, Charles, oh please."

In her arms, Charles felt his head spin, and he seemed to lose hold of where he was. He had stopped crying now, and his heart had begun to feel good; he held back the tears and it seemed to him that he was plunging into a whirlpool as the sinking feeling overcame his senses, and he gave up the hold of himself to allow himself access to the whirling yet soothing darkness about him and over his head. As hard as he could, he threw himself into her breast, and it seemed he was off balance but he didn't care. His mother's arms were closing about him and everything was alright.

It was much later when he remembered Celeste fleeing from the garden. He could remember seeing her skirts disappear behind the gate, and he knew that she knew that he would forsake her, and he guessed that that knowledge would never stop causing him pain.
CHAPTER IV

The red, blue, and white balloons were illuminated by fireworks thrown from the bluff and bursting in the air. Roman candles were exploding high up in the darkness and their long and golden tails formed tremendous arcs of lights as they plunged downward into the sea; there, amid the waves, their last flickerings made beautiful puddles of gold. High up in the air, their exploding lodged a complaint against the darkness and by red and blue lights threw shadows on the faces of the boys and girls celebrating the fourth of July in tight circles on the bluff.

Charles had not wanted to come to the party; his attitude had been that there was nothing for him there, but in spite of his feelings his mother had insisted, and Jack, as usual whenever he had the chance, had mocked him cruelly.

"Wuzza matter, Massur Charles? You gonna be fraid of de dark if yo wuz to walk a cupple miles?"

"Stop it now," said Charles' mother, screwing up her face and shaking a finger. "You be nice to Charles, and I mean it! Do you hear me Jack?"

"I ain't said nuttin."

"See that you don't."

"Yessum," said Jack with a grin, "you take the ole nigger Jack's gun. I brung it jest fo you, and I want yo to take it jest for yo pretection gainst snakes and sech. I remember your
daddy bringing down that ole snake in the cottonwood ... be such as yo daddy and do us all proud."

Grimming widely, Jack handed Charles the rifle. Looking at it first with indifference, Charles took it in his hands and felt its satisfying weight, but as he held it, it seemed to become alive, a lethal suggestion of his father. To his mind, the burnished metal became like the arc of the covenant, and it meant death to touch it.

Charles wanted to drop it to the floor, but seeming to be a coward in front of his mother again was out of the question, so he held onto the stock tightly as he marched out the door, and he held his chest high as he began the two mile hike around Nassawadox Creek. The road twisted like a snake as it wound around the creek and came once again to the water of the bay. Charles cursed himself for his fears, for quite consciously, at the time, he wanted more than anything else not to be afraid of the dark, as Jack maintained he was; but it was no use. Every shadow that fell across the road seemed to him to be malevolent presence bent on his destruction.

He tried to whistle to calm himself, and he was aware that the rifle made him all the more nervous. It seemed to be a responsibility he didn't want to usurp from his father.

It was very dark by the time he could see the lights of the party. The party was being held beside a large cabin on the edge of the bluff and at the end of the dirt road he walked upon. The party lights seemed to be twinkling, for he could only see them
as they shone like so many stars through the long high hedgerows that lined the outer rim of the patio. Before he slunk in thru the arch, he stashed the rifle under shadows behind a nearby oak, carefully marking the spot, for he hoped soon to retrieve it.

All during the party he had an impulse to visit the oak and bring back his rifle, for the couples dancing, exchanging naive youthful banter, irritated him to the extent that he thought of getting his rifle and blasting away at the company. He felt foolish. There seemed to be no place he could put his hands; they got in his way to the extent that his shyness became worse, and he gave himself pep talks in the dark.

Tight groups of people were throwing fireworks off the bluff and laughing as they spun in circles or did jumping jacks with red flaming sparklers in their hands. A boy of Charles' age thrust a sparkler at Charles' face and laughed as Charles turned away and sought refuge in the shadows beside the patio, where he could hear a boy and girl giggling in the dark. They were playing kissing games all around him, and the couples on the patio were dancing closely together.

He felt an ache inside him, for though he thought it was foolish, he wanted to do it to, and he knew from experience that no one would ask him. He was too small to be a student at the Junior high; his arms were too thin, he always wore a long sleeved shirt, and he was aware that when the girls in his class looked at him, they found his hair too long and unkept, and when he spoke to them, he didn't know what to say, and they found him wanting.
He had asked his mother what to do, many times, and he had asked Celeste, but they didn't know what to tell him ... he had always suspected that part of his isolation was due to his spells, but he'd only had one at school ... also, he thought, it could possibly be because of his mother, but he didn't want to think of that, thinking that way always made him angry.

A cartwheel went off high above the bluff. The spinning lights twisted and churned in the air. It was particularly bright and it lit everyone up for a moment; even the boy and the girl in the lawn chair beside the patio were perfectly visible. But Charles didn't see them; he could see only Celeste shining like the uppermost bulb on a Christmas tree as she stood glittering, seemingly etched in lights against the framework of the bay behind her.

In a moment Celeste was sitting beside him. He fell silent. Filled with embarrassment, he fiddled with his handkerchief and tried not to look at her too closely. It had been weeks since he'd seen her and she seemed a stranger.

"I thought you had forgotten me," he said weakly, at last.

Celeste smiled.

"No," she said, "I haven't."

Charles looked at her, and then they both laughed. Charles laughed with relief, and suddenly, everything about him, the couple in the bushes, the old dowager on the patio keeping watch, seemed incredibly funny. Still laughing, he took Celeste's hand and whispered to her fiercely, his voice filled with mischief.
"What do you say to slipping away from this party with me?"

"What? Do you mean it?"

"Why not?"

"Well, confidentially," said Celeste, leaning over toward him and whispering in his ear, "I am rather bored . . . I've heard that these parties are very bad for the soul."

"Well, let's go."

"No, we'd better not."

"Well, I'm going," said Charles, "see if I don't." He got up from his chair and stood before her proud, like the embodiment of daring, "You keep your eyes on me. If I make it, promise me you will follow." Charles quaked with a ridiculous fright as he watched her; he felt like a young boy again throwing rocks at the gulls. But finally, without smiling, she nodded her head firmly. "If they try to stop you, don't listen to them; just keep on going and I'll do the same."

Charles felt embarrassed for a moment, for he knew she was more willful than he, and her eyes, incredibly determined in a quiet way, revealed that she knew it.

Without another word, Charles turned and walked without undue haste between the dancers, and at last he approached the arch without incident. At his first step outside, a voice called behind him, "Charles Delfold!"

The old woman supervising the party got up from her chair and took him by the arm; her old fingers gripped and pinched his arm like a vise. "I've told your mother," she said, her face
somewhat indignant, "that I'll watch you and make sure that you don't leave, and that is exactly what I intend doing, young man; you can be sure of that. Now go back there and behave yourself, of I'll call your mother!"

Charles trembled under her gaze, for her old wrinkled face was forbidding to an extreme, and he knew that Celeste was watching. For a few moments he hesitated, and then burning with shame, he forfeited his dignity by turning back toward his chair and walking with head bent down back across the patio where Celeste waited without expression.

She was silent for some minutes.

From the corner of his eyes he searched her face for a sign that she forgave him, and he prayed she didn't know that for all his bravado and proclaimed desire to leave, he really wanted to stay. He felt that she wouldn't understand that, and he couldn't bring himself to admit it even to himself, at least not forthrightly, but nevertheless, the desire to stay was buried there inside him.

Not quite articulated, the desire had made his exit slow, too slow. The vague feeling that he really wanted and needed to be a part of the party had been surprising. But there it was and it frightened him somewhat.

There was something very alluring about the little girls in their cocktail dresses, and something very impressive about the boys in their well cut clothes, their refined airs, and their naturalness of manner. It seemed to Charles that there were rules
to the party, rules he couldn't define, but nevertheless, rules he wanted to wear elegantly just as they elegantly wore their clothing.

It had seemed to him at the arch that he was turning his back on the chance. Though he felt sure that he could never master their ways, that attempting to do so could only end in failure and disaster, the ache within him told him that returning to Celeste was just another way of giving up. He trembled beside her, hoping beyond hope; first, that he did not seem to her to be childish and a coward, secondly, that she would not sense their sudden estrangement.

Her words caused him remorse.

"Come with me, we can do it together."

"Don't you think we should wait a while?"

"Don't be silly, Charles; what can the old woman do to me? I'll do it, but I need for you to go with me."

Following closely behind her, Charles stumbled against a pair of dancers. Excusing himself with mumbles, he saw the old woman looking out over the water, and he picked up his pace until his shoulders were aligned with Celeste's. In an effort to redeem himself, he gestured gallantly with his hand and said as smoothly as he could, "After you my dear."

"Charles Delfold, where are you going?"

Celeste passed through the arch and beckoned for him to follow, but Charles blushed and hesitated in the dark. A ringing sensation was in his ears, and they burned with the sound of
the old woman's voice, and his eyes burned with the sight of Celeste's face, only a trifle disappointed as she said good-bye to him without malice and then disappeared in the dark. Again his heart was struck by the flutter of her skirts that, like the foam of waves breaking, seemed to melt away.

"Charles Delfold, you are not to leave until eleven thirty!"

Charles returned to his seat, humbled. Though the vicious eyes of the old woman were upon him, and the dancers were swaying about him, he felt altogether alone. He forced a slight smile onto his face, for he felt in his humiliation that if anyone were watching him, they might perhaps think him a rascal instead of what he was. With his face full of shadows, he tried to hide from himself the knowledge that when he turned the second time away from the arch, he felt within him a measure of relief and a moment of pure joy that he had an excuse for not leaving with Celeste.

There was none of that in him now. Instead of plunging into the party, a thing he would never do at any rate, he felt himself a traitor, and his hands moved to his eyes, back to the arms of his chair, and then back to his eyes again. He felt that he was alone and that his aloneness was of his creation; he felt too that Celeste walking down the road, looking back at every turn to see if he was racing behind her, was an image that he could not long endure.

A chance came again five minutes later, and before the old woman could turn her head he was through the bushes with tears in
his eyes, he was crawling toward the road.
With his rifle in his hand he ran clumsily down the road, each moment searching the road ahead for an image of her. He was unmindful of the hollow clumps his feet made, the dark shadows that webbed the white dust of the road when the bordering trees thrust their fingers up into the face of the moon. After running for ten minutes, panting, he paused to rest, and for the first time realized just how dark the night was, and with horror realized that Celeste must have gone home by taking a short cut through the woods.

The knowledge burned him and he threw his rifle to the ground and walked a little way with disgust before he returned to retrieve it. The burnished metal seemed to mock him as a sliver of moon light trembled up and down the barrel. The walk home was a dreary one. The mass of pine along the road made it incredibly dark, and the wind, bristling through the trees, sent periodic showers of pine needles that, ghost-like, licked and brushed against his face.

Celeste would be crying to herself in that way she had of doing it, without asking for comfort.

There was something strange about his house as he went into the garden and saw it sitting on the point like an enormous box silhouetted against the open air above the bay. Only a faint vertical streak of light came from the cottage, and that one light came from his mother's bedroom and lit up the peonies at his feet. As soon as he had opened the gate to the arbor, he had felt the
cottage's strangeness, and his mind turned from thoughts of Celeste to a vague fear of another sort. The lights in the living room should have been on, and to Charles' heightened imagination, only one explanation for the pervading darkness seemed feasible.

"Burglars!" he whispered to himself. The cook of his rifle seemed too loud, and he hoped that the burglars hadn't heard the metal striking on metal.

He thought of his mother being tied up with ropes, lashed against the wall, and he thought of the burglars, twelve in all, sitting around in a circle, their laughing faces hidden by masks as black as the night, and he breathed deeply and let out his breath slowly. Could they be hearing his breathing? He thought not, but for safety, he held it. And now suddenly he felt ashamed that he'd left his mother all alone while he was supposedly having a good time at the party with Celeste. Her skirts disappearing in the dark, now seemed so minor, as on his hands and knees he crept up to the doorway of the cottage.

How could he have wasted time on Celeste!

And he thought of his mother's arms, white arms like the white arms of the plaster virgin Mary he had seen in church, and he thought of how she looked so much like a little china doll, and of how sweet her breath was, like sprigs of newly cut rosemary or the smell of roses that bloomed in the garden. Pushing the door open slowly with his fingers, he peered into the blackened room, seeing only bulky shapes of furniture shrouded with shadows, and the black rocking chair, rocking gently and creaking, that his
mother had bought in Washington and refused to part with. The old chair creaked when the wind from the door moved it back and forth, and for a moment, Charles thought the package in its seat, large and square, was the body of his mother.

A pencil of light could be seen at the end of the hall, coming from the crack left by his mother's door when it refused to close completely on the jamb.

Lying flat in the hall, Charles put the rifle to his shoulder, still holding his breath as he lifted off the safety. There was a low murmur of voices proceeding into the hallway, a low murmur of voices quite like the solemn drone of bees.

Then there was a light cynical laugh of derision. Charles' face contorted and he heard his mother's voice, "Oh, don't leave me, Jack, please don't leave me! I'll do anything you want, please, Jack, oh please!"
CHAPTER V

Bessie had found him in the dark, kneeling down crying beside the cottonwood that grew beside the garden; she had heard chopping sounds as if a woodcutter were working at night, but arriving at the cottonwood, she found only Charles with the stock of a rifle in his hands, and the burnished metal of a barrel gleaming on the ground.

Charles watched from the cot as the negro woman, caught in the light of early morning that was streaming through the window, stood massive and powerfully in front of the stove, frying eggs in the skillet and humming to herself. "Don't you worry child," she said, when she saw he was awake, "Don't you worry none, cause yo got a friend in ole Bessie. Nuthin gonna happen to yo when ole Bessie is around."

Charles remembered his feelings; they were like nothing he had ever undergone before. He found tears impossible. He tried to make them come, but it was impossible.

"It's that no gud Jack's fault," said Bessie, after they had finished breakfast, "don't you let it touch you, it's not your fault, and dere ain't nobody on dis here beach who don't know it ain't your fault, and no man jack one of dems is gonna hold it gainst yo, not while this ole Bessie is around!"

Bessie picked up the plates from the table and carried them to the sink. Her shed had no plumbing and she had to go outside and bring back a pail of water to pour over the dishes, "Jack's
dun turn his back on God, master Charles, and like I always says, his God's gonna let him burn and suffer in hell like no man's ever suffered before—he's gonna burn and scream, Jack is, and his screams'll be terrible."

Charles felt that he should cry but he could not. Periodically, throughout the morning, he felt that the tears were going to come bursting forth, but they never came. He would have been embarrassed, lying on the cot all day, as it were, if Bessie had remained in the cabin, but she seemed to sense that he wanted to be alone, and she left the cabin to busy herself with chores about the cottage.

She came back into the cabin at midday and prepared him a sandwich and a cup of tea. He ate and drank silently without looking at her, but he noticed that she was distracted; she kept glancing out the window over her shoulder as if she were trying to catch a glimpse of Jack or his mother. Then he could see in her eyes that someone was coming.

"Bessie, Bessie," called Elaine, and there was a quick banging on the door. Opening the door just a crack, Bessie peered out.

"Where's Jack? oh Bessie, I can't find him anywhere!"

"Ain't seen Jack this morning, Mrs. Delfold. Cain't see as to where the nigger has got to."

"Oh Bessie, you've just got to help me. I've got to find Jack, I need him right now!"

Charles caught a glimpse of his mother's face; it was white
and filled with fear; he turned away from the door and put a pillow over his face, and at last the tears came; they streamed down his face and soaked into the pillow so thoroughly that the wet linen chafed his skin.

"Jack, Jack!" called his mother.

Charles could hear his mother's quick footsteps racing toward the gardener's hut, and he could hear the frantic bangs she made on the door. And then he could hear her wail, mournfully and long, as she ran to the door of her kitchen and slammed it behind her. Then coming out again, she stood quietly in the garden under the white trellis filled with roses. She seemed quite solemn now, and Charles could see her lips twitch and he imagined that they were forming Jack's name.

Her eyes were glazed and distracted, and her long blond hair, brilliant in the sun, was caught by the gentle breezes and blew about her face. A lock of hair blew over her eyes but she went to the waterpump and looked off into the woods, that surrounded the cottage on two sides, without brushing it away; from the look on her face, Charles, who was peering out the window, could see that she did not as yet know that he hadn't spent the night in the cottage; he could tell that she hadn't been thinking of him at all.

In a few moments she was back in the house and Charles could see her face at the window of her bedroom; her nose was pressed against the pane of the window and her eyes were vacant and staring. Something caught at his throat and he struggled to control it; even
through glass at midday, his mother, her hair dishelved and her face catatonic, seemed to be so beautiful that he couldn't bear not being near her.

Their eyes met briefly through the two windows, and she quickly turned away.

Charles put his hands to his face and ran to the door of the cabin. After a few quick steps, he was in the garden and the door to his mother's kitchen, high up on the steps, seemed to hang suspended before him. He walked quietly through the living room, afraid all the time that she would hear him, and at the same time, afraid that she wouldn't.

Standing in the hallway, he could hear her sobs; they sounded muffled and low as if coming from the bottom of a well. The faint cries broke over him as the waters of the Chesapeake, also within his hearing, broke over the shore. Then suddenly, her bedroom door was open, and she, a handkerchief before her face and her skirts swishing faintly, was half way through the living room before she realized she had passed him in the hall.

The surprised look on her face changed suddenly into one of control and concern. "Oh, Charles," she said, her voice breaking as she spoke, "I'll look after you, Charles." Then the handkerchief went back to her eyes and she turned her back on him, her fragile shoulders trembling, "I've done that much . . . It's not like it was before . . . I've done that much, haven't I Charles? Tell me that I've done that much! I have! Haven't I Charles?"

"Yes, Mother."
Back in his study Charles wondered if he had forgiven her. Tapping his pencil on the paper before him seemed to relieve him; he wrote random notes to himself, small reminders of chores he had yet to perform. There were times at his desk when he could make his mother seem quite distant, but not today. In the living room, his mother had looked at him with eyes so imploring that he was ashamed that he hid from her the knowledge that he knew, and he was ashamed of himself for turning his back on her when he wanted her the most, and going off, like he did, to bury himself in the study.

He began the next morning in the study. As soon as he woke, Bessie fixed him a quick breakfast, and before his mother could get to the table, he was again in his study looking forlornly out the window and listening to the wind blown roses tapping against the panes.

At midmorning he wrote: "Dear Celeste . . . Pardon me, but I shall not be able to meet you today. My mother is ill and I feel that I'm needed here." Having written the note, he tore it up, feeling foolish, for he knew of no way to get the note to her unless he went to meet her as they had planned.

But then he wrote another one, thinking perhaps that he would go and get Bessie to deliver it.

Standing before Bessie's cabin, he could hear his mother's voice, and putting his ear to the thin paneling, he could make out her words.

"You know where Jack is, don't you Bessie?"
"No maam."

"You do, you know you do!"

"No maam, I don't know nuthin, I swears I don't. O Lawd, I'd tell ya if I did Mrs. Delfold ... I don't know nuthin bout Jack; he don't tell me nuthin. He's a no gud nigger man and I ain't got no truck wid such as he is."

"Liar, you're a liar, Bessie. You saw him at the carnival; you saw what his body's like and you wanted him for yourself! You couldn't stand the idea of a black man like that belonging to a white woman's bed!"

'Oh, no maam, no maam, oh, no Miz Delfold, dat's not true, I swears before the Lawd dat dat's not the case!"

"Liar!" There was the terrible crash of a lamp smashing on the floor, then a heavy stomping of feet, the sound a table makes when its thrown against hard wood. Charles shut his eyes tightly and from within the cabin, he could hear Bessie whimpering, whimpering low like a dog, thrashed and on harness. Then the sound of Elaine's voice soared above Bessie's laments.

"I lie with whom I choose," she said savagely, "I get the man I want!"

"Don't say that, Mrs. Delfold, don't say that please; the debil's gonna come and git you on a rail. You done hurt the boy, de boy of yo're wombi Ask the Lawd for forgiveness; git down on your knees, Mrs. Delfold, like ole Bessie done last night. Git down on yo're knees and pray!"

"Oh, my God," cried Charles' mother, "Does he know?" Her
voice was no longer vindictive, but her cry of incredulity, made without taking a breath, was like the shriek of an animal, a scream that seemed to shatter the room.

Charles ran back to his study and covered his head with the quilt that he kept draped over the chair; he trembled in the darkness, but when he took the quilt away from his eyes, the day seemed darker still, and he could scarcely control the spasmodic movement of his hands, as they futilely grabbed at the thin string that at last closed the blinds.

Before the blinds closed completely, he saw, against his will, his mother come shakily out of Bessie's door and stand with her back to it, frozen in the sunlight. Framed by the garden, she seemed aware of nothing, especially unaware of the box of fuchsia that enclosed her. Seeing her like that, her white face now waxen, broad and shiny like the leaves of magnolia, Charles' mind burned, and on it was imprinted, the photograph, as it were, of her standing before a tormentor; and her eyes were as vacuous and as dead as the sea. She seemed to stumble from the door, and as she moved, a sprig of rosemary raked at her face. And he could see that too; the thin red scratch, starting to bleed, ran from her eye, down her cheek, and then to her neck.

The trickle of blood seemed to splatter her dress.

He was comforted now when he saw Celeste sitting, waiting for him at the edge of the bluff. He sat down quietly beside her and tried to turn his attention away from the thoughts of his mother and focus them on the bay that was before them. Celeste wore a
gingham dress that fitted her waist loosely; her eyes looked serenely out over the bay and her small hands held the dress' hem close to her knees. Charles wondered if she was aware of his agitation; he kept breaking off their conversation to get up and stroll back and forth along the edge of the bluff.

Heavy granite rocks dotted the beach; he looked at them longingly as they shone in the sun far below him, and he wondered whether or not a fall from where he was would break a man in two.

"What's the matter, Charles?"

He looked at her quickly; so she knew!

It would have made him feel better to tell her what it was, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. After pacing back and forth, he sat down beside her again and took her hand in his. He fumbled for something to say, and at last said nothing, Celeste began talking of school, and he responded to her statements as best he could, but then as the sun settled on the horizon, he turned to her and said with some conviction: "Isn't it beautiful here; the sun looks something like an angry eye, and I do believe that it is staring at us."

"Is that beautiful, Charles?"

"Yes, but no, I don't give a damn about things that are beautiful!"

Celeste didn't laugh. Instead, she frowned; the corners of her mouth twitched in displeasure. "There'll be a time Charles," she said at last, "when you'll cease to keep things from me!"

The road was very black as he walked back to the cottage,
but it wasn't nearly as frightening as it was dreary and hopeless. Charles' mind seemed to distort the landscape; the square cottages seemed to be rectangular, the pines, what he could see of them, seemed short and stubby rather than tall and majestic. The wind blowing through the needles seemed to be playing a song he knew well, but it played the same phrases over and over again as if it were a phonograph that continually skipped the grooves of its record.

The lights of the cottage were on, and through the window, Charles could see that his mother was waiting on the couch for him to come home. She seemed incredibly strained; the lines on her face were tight as she listened for footsteps that would tell her he was approaching. Charles turned and almost walked away.

Something held him back. He didn't know what it was, but its grip was very firm. It was strong, he knew that much.

He opened the door and went into the living room, taking a seat on the black wicker rocking chair that his mother had insisted bringing all the way from Washington. She didn't speak at first, and he could see that she tried not to show the fact that she was watching him. The squeaks of the rocking chair seemed to take up the same song that he had heard on his way back from the bluff; the same phrases of the song were continually repeated. It seemed that she could hear it too, for her hands, supposedly busy at her knitting, seemed to keep in time with the beat.

Her face seemed to be calm, but it seemed also to be a mask, a mask she had put on to hide herself from him. He wondered if
his mother saw the mask like hers that covered his face.

"Do you want to talk, Charles?"

Charles nodded.

She looked at him carefully, and in the light from the overhead lamp her face was pale like the face of a ghost, and her mouth twitched faintly when she spoke; it was like the faint shiver of an aspen leaf, and he turned his eyes away from her and looked at the pool of light on the floor.

The quiver of her white hands was evident when she looked at him and her blond hair, in the shadows, seemed as if it were turning gray. "I want to tell you about my life, Charles," she said at last, and then as if distracted, she seemed to listen to the plaintive squeaking of the rocker. Then her voice rose again, "My family was very poor," she said, "They didn't have money to buy me things and I felt very ashamed all of the time . . . It hurt me very much, Charles, and being sick hurt me too! It hurt me very much and I never knew what to do, and I thought that I would never escape from the hurt that kept at me all of the time!"

Later that evening, in his nightcap, Charles sat at his window, watching the rain; and in the dark rain splattered glass he could see a white portrait of his mother's face. And putting his hands to his eyes, he could still see her white trembling lips, and he could feel the words, mechanical but hollow and dream-like, roll from her mouth, adding nothing but repeating what she said on the sofa. All the while her words were accompanied by the groans of his rocker.
"Then I grew up and it didn't get any better, and I met your father and he had very much money and all the things I wanted, including money. I didn't love him, Charles, I married him for money. But I got the short end of the stick because he wasn't like the rest of his family. Oh, he made money alright, but he made it gambling and I was still ashamed and the people that looked down on me still looked down on me, and after I was born, I had to get away, it was all I could do."

"I was born when I became an actress and they saw me in the theatre here and they wanted me to go to Washington, so I took no one but me; I left you here on the shore with Aaron and went there all alone, and it wasn't till you were three that you and Aaron came to live with me. Do you know why I let you come, Charles ... because I was having spells, and I needed someone to take care of me. That's the only reason. And I made it big, and I would have stayed big if it hadn't have been for the spells ... and since the spells became more frequent, I was on my way down and I knew it ... and everytime I heard you cry I knew that I had ruined your life for nothing and I couldn't take ... the easiest way out was the bottle, and when you're on the bottle you need someone, but I had no one, and Aaron kept gambling, and I couldn't stop drinking and everytime you cried I could feel the crying in my heart, and I could feel the shame of me and see people pointing and I ... oh God Charles, I was sick and I hated myself and I wanted to ... I wanted to go and do something to myself, and, and ... and."
Elaine put her hands to her face and began sobbing; Charles rocked faster in the rocking chair as if he were rocking over her body, and lifting up her eyes, she seemed to sense it, and her hands and face grew limp and her arms seemed to convulse like the wings of a wounded bird.

"Will you please talk to me, Charles!"

Charles with his face turned away couldn't force himself to speak and, half-consciously, he was aware that the chair began to move faster and the creaking became louder.

"That's why I hanged your father Charles," she blurted out, her eyes filling with tears, "Oh, his hands did the job, but they might as well have been mine! Admit it Charles, Goddamn it, admit it, you know damn well about me and Jack, why don't you admit it?"

Charles couldn't see her, even though he looked up; the room was a blur and for him she wasn't there.

"When I got into a room and see a man . . . you don't know how it is Charles!" she cried, "When I see a man in a room the room becomes blurred, and I want him so much everything seems to turn red, and the redness covers everything and I can't see, and things start to spin, and, my God, it feels like . . . it feels like," both of her hands went to the front of her dress, "it feels like if I don't get it here I'm going to go crazy, and I . . . and I . . . oh God, Charles, don't look at me that way, oh, don't please . . . please!"

She threw herself forward on her face and buried her cheeks
in the loose slip covers of the couch. The rocker moved faster; it raced across the room, and suddenly the long creaks were so close together that they blended into one long ache of sound. Jumping from the chair, Charles ran to his room and turned the lock behind him. Leaning against the door, he wept as she banged heavily against the panels.

"Oh come back, Charles, please come back!"

There was silence for a long time but Charles didn't move. He stood frozen against the door until he heard her voice again. This time it was vicious, seemingly filled with malice.

"I hate you, do you hear me, I hate you! You have never done anything for me, and I've done everything for you! It wasn't guilt that made me do it, Charles . . . you remember that, Charles . . . It wasn't guilt; it was because you were my son, and I wanted something better for you . . . I wanted something better than that little slut you go around with . . . she's common, Charles, common, and you're going to be common with her."

Charles could hear himself shouting, "Shut up, will you shut up!"

"She's got the same thing I do, Charles, the very same thing. I can tell by her eyes!"

"Liar!" he screamed, "Liar!"

The sound of his last words stayed with him all night as he tossed and turned and tried to get asleep; he couldn't hear his mother anymore, for she had gone into the bedroom at the other side of the house and slammed the door behind her. It began to
rain heavily; the rain seemed to come down as if to smite him. After several hours, he quit trying to sleep and he sat at the window and looked at the rain; but he couldn't exactly see it, for the moisture had thrown a gray mist over the window, and it was like staring off in the sky into the dense thick grayness of opaque clouds.

Charles' mother stayed in bed for the next two days. Bessie had found her lying in the floor of her bedroom the morning after her argument with Charles. She was lying in the middle of the floor and there was blood underneath her, and the blood had soaked the front of her dress. Her tongue had been cut into thin strips of meat by the involuntary grinding of her teeth as she spurned to the floor. Charles was called by the hysterical Bessie, and he stopped her from getting the doctor, "It's happened before," he said, trying to stay calm. "I can take care of it. You go get me the medicine for her tongue and then go on home."

"Oh, master Charles!"

"Don't worry, Bessie, she'll be all right after she sleeps."

Charles undressed her by himself, and put her into bed after putting on her pajamas. In the past when he had done this, he had always been afraid to strip her completely, but this time he did it. Lying naked on the bed, she once again looked like the tiny china doll he pictured her as, and her face in sleep seemed to be totally without pain.

Tapping his pencil on his paper in the study, he tried not
to think of her. After her two days of convalescence, she was up and bustling about the house, packing her bags and getting everything in order. Bessie had implored him to speak to his mother, but he seemed to be incapable of action. He merely sat at his desk and looked out the window.

Through the door of his study, he had heard Elaine and Bessie arguing all morning, "But you can't leave Charles, what'll he do?"

"He'll live on a nice fat inheritance!"

"But you can't go alone! What'd you do if yo has a spell at de wheel of de car!"

"I won't have a spell; it doesn't matter anyway!"

"Oh, Mrs. Delfold, oh Mrs. Delfold," said Bessie, wailing, "don't go, oh, what kin yo do all alone in a big city alone like that?"

"I can die," said Elaine. "I'm going back to Washington to die!"

Charles watched her pack her luggage in the car. Through his window, he could see her hurrying back and forth between the cottage and the car, and all the boy could think of was . . . What was going to happen when she was gone and there was no one left there at the cottage to take care of the roses?

He didn't decide he still loved her until the pain in his chest became so great that he couldn't talk to anyone, not even Bessie. And then he remembered just how she looked . . . all naked, stretched on the bed, her body very much like the body of
a little china doll with a red rose in its white china hair.
CHAPTER VI

So he was going to live with Celeste and her parents. He wondered how he was supposed to take the news. In front of them he tried to assume an attitude of humility and gracefulness, but Celeste wasn't fooled. . . . neither was he. She seemed to know that he felt nought, for instead of staying with him in the garden as he thought she might, she got into the car with her father and visited her uncles, whom Charles knew she detested.

Celeste's father, the major, seemed to Charles to be a rare sort of man; his hair was white and the bifocals resting on his bulbous nose, were rimmed unfashionably with steel. His stiff manner was accentuated by the wearing of dark brown; even his farm on the fringe of Exmore was painted brown, and on sides of the large barn in the rear, there were hex signs, huge white circles that glared in the sun. "They're just for show," Celeste's mother always said, "We really don't believe in such things as that!" She was a nervous little woman. When she talked, she used a variety of voices, and would go from one to the other with shocking speed.

In his bedroom at the cottage, Charles combed his hair carefully at the mirror on his bureau, and then he carefully examined his suit of blue serge to see if it was presentable. It wasn't. The blue seemed faded and the cloth seemed thin; on the right sleeve of the coat there was a broken seam where he had, some time before, snagged it on a branch of elder. When Celeste re-
turned, she would see the broken seam and she would remember; he broke it in the garden when he had bent over to kiss her.

He sat down on the straw bottom chair and tears came to his cheeks and flowed down onto the collar of his undershirt.

"She's dead," said the Deacon, shuffling his feet in front of Bessie and Charles.

"We don't know how it happened. She must have been unconscious when she hit the embankment . . . the car's totally smashed . . . just on the outside of Exmore."

Bessie's wall was long and loud, "oh Lawd, I knewed it wuz to be true, I knewed you wuz goin to strike her down and make her lie herself down in de bosom of de world, oh poor Mrs. Delfold . . . ."

The Deacon was flustered, "Let us pray," he said, then the three of them, Charles, Bessie, and the Deacon, knelt down in the living room of the cottage to pray. No one saw Charles fail to bow his head, for their heads were bowed and their eyes were closed tightly as the Deacon's melancholy words seemed, to Charles, to reverberate from every corner of the room. He could only think of Major Williams and he wondered if he had really been a Major at all, and he wondered if it were true, as his mother said, that the Williams' were little more than sharcroppers. He wanted to believe her; but in the strong stream of light that came through the living room window, he found it difficult to believe in anything at all.

He was ashamed of himself for the way he felt. To himself,
he seemed lost, and he was ashamed that he never wanted to see
Bessie again. He thought then of Jack, as if the thought of
Jack's face would wake him from his stupor; but still he felt
nothing and the drone of the Deacon's voice seemed to continue
forever, "Oh Jesus, guide this boy's steps as he wanders through
the world."

The name of "Jesus" invoked in Charles the vivid image of
Jack, writhing like a snake on the cross. He could see Jack's
face and he could see Jack's blood, as it mingled with the sweat
of his black, glazed body.

That had been only three days ago, but to Charles it seemed
like it had been at least three years. As he looked in the mir-
ror, he frowned slightly, for the busted seam, under his careful
scrutiny, seemed to grow in size and become unsightly. His moth-
er never seemed to notice the condition of his clothes. When a
piece of clothing was damaged he kept silent about it; he kept
silent because he knew that the damage was likely to grow in her
mind until the damage itself, for her, came to represent him; in
spite of her love, he knew that she to the end had been ashamed
of him. And he could understand it.

But he was not going to let the people in the parlor look
don him or her. He swore to himself that if anyone mentioned
that his sleeve was torn he would open his mouth as wide as he
could and laugh in their face; and he could imagine the look on
the imagined face, and it was so startled and white that for a mo-
ment he wished someone would mention the frailties of his mother
so that he could strike at them with all of his force, with the only weapon he had.

If anyone mentioned Jack, he would kill them.

The people of the beach who had known his mother had been holding a solemn party in the parlor for hours. The women, old and young, were all dressed in mournful elegance as they sat in the parlor in what seemed to be a circle, a string of women without end. Their talk was stilted, and they would follow their hollow statements with little bursts of laughter, as if they had laughed only in spite of tears, in spite of their sorrow.

"Poor boy, he needs to be alone!"

"He shouldn't stay by himself like this!"

"It's normal."

"I tell you, Flora, it's unnatural!"

Charles could hear them through the door of his bedroom, but nothing they said made him take special notice. Vaguely disappointed, he went to his study without being seen; he went to his study to sit at his desk and tap his pencil. The cottage would be closed up and he wouldn't have control of it until he was much older. Looking out the window, he took the opportunity to say good-bye to the garden and to the soft little roses that brushed against the panes. From his window, he could see a piece of the bay, and it didn't seem quite possible that it would remain there when he went away.

One of the more elegant women took charge of him, and ushered him into the waiting car. Celeste, who had returned with her fa-
ther, rode in the car that was directly behind the one in which Charles was riding. For a long time the five cars wound their way along the crooked road that led from the beach, and then they passed through Exmore, and in another thirty minutes they pulled to a stop in front of the cemetery.

Celeste came over to him and they walked quietly through the grass, trailing along behind Celeste's father and mother. Scattered about was a profusion of pine needles, and the wind picked up and blew them about, blew them over the black awning that covered the ground under which Elaine Delfold would soon be laid.

Charles would always remember Celeste on that day. He remembered brown, crisp leaves, cracking and snapping, breaking, seemingly, with exaggerated violence as if they were the very bones of the earth. The wind picked up and blew brown pine needles; the box of elm that carried his mother was littered with needles. With intricate and ever changing patterns, they blew across the box, danced and settled on his coat, the preacher's coat, and they caused the professional mourners to wail with voices thin and sharp.

Some of the voices were hushed and solemn, but they were all violent to Charles. The brown backdrop of dead foliage, the heavy darkness of the sky, brought to his mind the dark brownness of the earth. The day was over-cast, and in the faint light he seemed to feel and see his mother's face; it was waxen, like the
broad shiny surface of magnolia leaves, and he could see her hair, wet and streaming, flowing from her head to her shoulders with incredible beauty... and he could see that her eyes were closed ever so tightly, so tightly that he wondered whether or no; he wondered if she kept them closed on purpose, and as he bent forward to kiss her, he supported himself with his hands. Then he touched his lips to her lips, and it was as if his lips struck something cold, lifeless and hard, hard like polished wood on the edge of the box.

And then he could feel the coldness of it; at that precise moment it had become a reality, and coming like a cloud, the gray pervasiveness of grief he had expected all along, quite suddenly and thoroughly came; it was as if someone had taken a cold bar of iron and thrust it into his heart, and it was all he could do to keep from biting his thin lips so hard that blood would be drawn. It was later that a thick piece of rosemary was thrust into his mouth, and later when the blood spread over it, flowing like a river that shimmered with redness and darkness.

Celeste’s mother walked with him; Celeste, silent and seemingly older than her appearance suggested, was at his other hand as they wound through the gentle seared hillocks and stopped at a dome where stark gray tablets rose from their beds of dry brown needles. The cars, ready to go to the Major’s farm, waited by the road. Celeste had been crying but she stopped now and got into the car with Charles.

He could think of nothing but recent memories, and Celeste
being beside him made them all the more vivid. Once again he and Celeste were watching, with something akin to fascination, as the casket was lowered down, and heavy rocks and dirt, falling from shovels, made loud thumps across the thick panels that covered his mother's face. His eyes were filled with tears; he felt Celeste's hand touch his; he closed his eyes and sobbed heavily; he heard Celeste's voice coming soft and low, droning like the quiet singing of crickets. "You're mine now," she childishly whispered, and then pouting because he didn't respond, "You're mine now," she said in her unhappiness, still childlike of a sudden, "mine!" she whispered, stamping her foot.

"I think you'll like it at our place," said the Major, withdrawing the pipe from his mouth and knocking the ashes into the ash tray.

"I know he will," said Celeste.

"There are a lot of things there for a boy your age."

"All good," whispered Celeste, "Almost."

Charles tried to sleep. What a relief it had been to slip away from the funeral without seeing Bessie. As his car had pulled off he had looked back and seen her still at graveside. There was a tall figure beside her who hadn't been there before. The tall figure had taken a few steps forward and was kneeling down on his knees as Charles looked again when the car was on its way down the road. Charles shut his eyes tightly against the sight, for in the figure was all the insolent majesty, the reverent insult of Jack.
CHAPTER VII

It was pleasant jogging through the fields that outlay the pasture. The air, forcing its way through his lungs, seemed to exhilarate him and make his feet move faster. Although his arms pumped rhythmically against the long lines of pine and scrub row, he seemed not to be noting. He seemed to be a part of the swaying vegetation, as, trotting with control at an even pace, he first became visible to the people on the porch, and had then quite disappeared behind a mantle of ferns.

Charles was oblivious to the horse, who for the most part watched him demurely as he ran evenly along the outer side of the rail. One of the younger horses, Wee Willy, who was being trained by the Major for his first race at the downs, galloped along beside him for a few hundred yards, but then became tired of the slow pace and broke off running across the pasture. He was broken just right, tame enough to be trusted to win the race, and too wild to be trusted to do anything else. Charles whistled as Wee Willie ran down the slope and disappeared behind a hillock. He could see Celeste and the Major in the distance; they were two tiny specks as they sat on the porch, Celeste watching, and the Major reading his paper.

Charles felt good. Jogging along, he could feel his body growing stronger. The baby fat, which had stayed with him too long, was slowly disappearing and his arms and legs were becoming well-defined and hard. As he trotted up by the mare who was
dozing peacefully at the inner rail, he felt exceedingly strong, and almost brash enough to give her a smack on the flank. He was still too small; he didn't kid himself about that, but he allowed himself the pleasure of thinking that day by day his body was becoming better, beginning to function like a machine. He listened to his heart. It beat like a piston.

He had a surprise for Floyd and Del, the two young men who trained the Major's horses, and that surprise, he thought, was going to be the emergence of himself. He was running again in the direction of the house, for Celeste was on the porch and he wanted her to see him, and he wanted also for her to know that he was keeping right on with the training schedule in spite of the fact that Floyd and Del said he wouldn't. Trotting along about a hundred yards from the house, he waved to her and shook his head to indicate that the work he was doing was hard, and then he swerved sharply and ran toward the outcropping of acorn-bearing trees on the other side of the pasture.

Celeste smiled on the porch, and her smile had deflated him somewhat. He didn't know why, but he thought to himself as she smiled that perhaps he should be running for the sake of running itself and not to win the admiration of Celeste. Running again, in and out of the trees, a great distance from the house, his high spirits returned. They stayed with him as he paused to rest, stopping by the stream that grew wider in Exmore and at last, emptied itself into the top of the finger of Nassawadox Creek.

The water showed him his hard brown body and the sweat pour-
ing from his face, and he felt very good and laughed to see how
tired but strong he looked. He would run for perhaps half an
hour more. That made almost a solid hour of running; neither
Floyd nor Del could do half as much. If he could learn to tack-
le, as he thought he could, he would show them a thing or two.
Even the Major would have to sit up and take notice.

It was a warm day in late August; using his hands for a
cup, he splashed the cold water on his naked chest.

It hadn't been too bad living on the farm with Celeste and
her family. There was a garden nearby. It was ragged, but that
defect was compensated for by the beauty of the farm. The old
Major owned a few hundred acres of pasture land that formed a
bow on the map, running from Exmore almost to the beach, and it
seemed to Charles that the fields were almost always filled with
negroes singing as they worked, their heads covered with ker-
chiefs of red, blue, and green, their fingers nimbly stripping
the heavy-laden vines.

The negroes were usually sullen and arrogant when they
dealt with him, but he didn't mind that; he actually preferred
it to the way they treated the Major. They looked down on the
ground when he spoke to them, and when his back was turned, they
mocked him from the rear, causing their fellows to laugh.

He admired the way they laughed at the Major for he was
afraid to do so, even when there was no one around to hear. The
Major always strode about the farm in a wide brimmed hat, sport-
ing a gnarled yellow cane. "Never let yourself get kicked," he
always said, "by a nigger or a horse," and then he would bring his cane down on the railing of the porch for emphasis.

"Do you hear me, Charles Delfold, get back on that horse."

Charles remembered falling off. The cinch had been too loose and when he tried to make old Herb jump, old Herb twisted himself so that the saddle came slipping to his belly, and Charles, after a futile grab at the horse's mane, felt his shoulders crash into the ground, and he heard his knee crash against the stump. He lay there stunned, watching old Herb shake himself to make sure he was free, and bolt for the gate of the pasture, where the Major suddenly appeared with a whip. The horse veered aside and headed off toward the stable.

"Get up," said the Major, exasperated, "get up and get him or he'll never let you ride him again."

Charles closed his eyes against the sight. The Major stood above him scowling, his face lean and lank like the face of a horse, his white hair blowing back over his ears. "You ain't hurt," he said, puzzled, "after a little fall like that."

Charles closed his eyes and didn't open them until the morning. Lying in the room he had been given, he felt sore all over. He moved his limbs slowly and found none were broken, but when he lifted his head from the pillow he felt a sudden spasm of pain; the light coming in through the window seemed to be too bright and it hurt his eyes, but when he closed them again he could hear birds singing. Their voices were bright, but the constant chirping, instead of making him feel better, seemed to cause him a
small case of nausea.

There were voices coming through the door, and shutting his mind to the chirps of birds, he could hear the Major saying, "The boy can't ride; he ain't strong enough to ride."

"I told you so," said Celeste's mother angrily, "You shouldn't have brought him here in the first place."

"But I promised Aaron."

"Aaron didn't live to hold you to it; you should have ignored it. Not a soul in this world knew, and you go and bring a boy like that to live with us. Everybody I know thinks you're out of your mind."

"Shut up, Flora; it's none of your business."


Charles could hear their steps retreating down the stairs, and before getting up, he listened at the door to make sure they had gone.

They brought him back that time but he was humiliated at the thought that he had gotten no farther than Exmore. That evening, before the fire, the Major, dressed in a dark brown hunting jacket, pulled a couple of times on his pipe and said with derision, "Exmore! I'd gotten farther than Exmore when I was five years old."

Mrs. Williams didn't look up from her needlework. She frowned, her deep red hair seeming to blaze in the flicker of the firelight; she habitually wore a martyred expression. When her husband spoke, she looked away sharply, as if she knew he were
going to lie.

"When I was in England, Flora," said the Major, "during the war," he added, "when a gentleman came home for the evening, he always had a cup of tea before the fire. I of course prefer something stronger, but if tea's all we have at the moment . . ."

"You'll make it yourself," she interrupted without looking up . . . "Get your feet out of the chair, Celeste, we're not made of silver."

Celeste, without seeming to hear her, placed her feet firmly on the floor.

"God damn," muttered the Major.

Charles opened his book and pretended to be reading; turning on the lamp beside his chair, he drew from the Major an icy stare. The light had disturbed the atmosphere of the room, which was, when only the fire flickered, one of heaviness and age. The furniture was large and bulky, the slipcovers and paintings were dreary, a grandfather clock ticked solemnly as if it were about to summon up ghosts from the shadows.

"You should be thinking about horses, not reading."

Charles felt the anger gather up inside him; for a moment, Celeste looked at him as if he were a boy.

"Horses are hardly the most important thing in the world!"

The Major's stare was incredulous.

So was Celeste's next morning when on their picnic together, down by the stream, he casually slipped his arm around her and held her for an instant very close to him. They had both been
looking forward for a long time to the day when Mrs. Williams would relax her watch and they could slip off together for a picnic in the woods. Celeste had packed the lunch in the middle of the night, getting up when everyone else was asleep, and in her novel, determined way, stealing the necessary food from the refrigerator while Charles twisted and worried in the room directly above her.

Would they finally send him away if they found out? He hesitated to think of what would happen to him then, and at the same time, he was once again ashamed of himself for failing to support Celeste in the endeavors she planned for them both.

"No Charles, don't!" she said, but her protests were feeble.

He pulled her down beside him on the grass, letting his palm run softly along her breast, and then he held her close to him, her face against his chest, until she began to cry softly and he had to let her go. She sat up straight and looked at the water without speaking. She tossed a twig into the water and watched it as it tumbled down the stream and then disappeared amidst the obstacle course of rocks that were like freckles in the moving face of the stream.

"Are you happy here, Charles?"

"I'm happy to be with you."

"I don't mean that," Celeste said suddenly, annoyed, "I mean are you happy here?"

"No!" said Charles. His voice in the faint breeze seemed as cold as the water.
"I thought not."

"I can stand it," said Charles.

"Do you like my father and mother?"

"No!"

Celeste smiled quickly. She got up and walked to the stream as if she were walking with purpose. Sitting on the bank, she let her feet dangle in the cold water as Charles watched, studying the dazzling effect the sun light, reflecting off the overhead greenery, made on her hair and face. The light threw faint shadows on her cheeks; and when she stood up, glancing back at him, she looked remarkably like his mother.

"I especially hate Floyd and Del," he said, "I don't like having anything to do with them!"

Celeste brushed the brown hair out of her eyes, then without expression, she sat back down beside him. "I had hoped," she said, "that you were going to bring some of your poetry."

"Do you think you'll understand it?"

"Try me."

Charles read to her quietly, and as she listened, she seemed to be far away. Her face was turned away from him, and since she couldn't see him, he would glance up ever so often from the paper before him and look at her brown knees, as her carelessly kept dress slid up a little too high. It seemed to him that there were flowers all about them, red flowers that were over-ripe and blooming in the water. On the far bank there was a clump of fuchsia, tiny red buds that ran across the fence of the far bank
as if the bank were a trellis. The sun was turning red as it slid in behind the trees.

"You'll be a great man!" said Celeste, approvingly, as she finished reading.

"Would you like that?"

"I will settle for nothing less," she said. "From you, I don't think anything less than that is excusable."

Charles felt embarrassed but happy.

"Then you think that Mother was right?"

"What did she say?"

"She made it impossible for me to be anything less!"

For the first time in a year, Charles could remember his mother vividly; he could remember the redness and the whiteness of her, and he could remember the things that her friends said about her when they waited in the hall, when they saw her before them lying on the floor.

"What do your parents say about her?" he asked.

Celeste frowned, "I won't tell you that."

"Because you think it will hurt me?"

"Yes, let's don't talk about your mother anymore," said Celeste. "Tell me instead about how rich and famous we're going to be. No! Don't tell me that . . . that doesn't matter; tell me about how many books you're going to write, and about how you're going to prove how wrong everybody is about you, and tell me about how much we're going to laugh at them all."

For the first time in their lives, Celeste leaned over and
kissed him; he put his arms around her waist and pulled her toward him, till at last, she broke off and sat up straight to rearrange her hair. He left his arm on her arm, and then everything seemed hazy. In the faint light, his arm seemed to merge with her arm, and he felt good all over as he felt her blood, running in gushes, flow into his body; and his hands trembled as her heart seemed to beat inside of him.

It was a long way back to the house. When Charles and Celeste entered at last, it was dark, and they were greeted by Celeste's parents who sported long and angry faces. The feud lasted over an hour, and at the end, Charles was sorry that he had not wanted him and Celeste to enter separately as they had originally planned. He was sent to his room, and with his ear to the floor, he could make out only vague muffled sounds as they lectured Celeste in the parlor. In the dark that had eclipsed his room, he seethed with hatred of them and hatred of himself and his helplessness.

It had been like the time when at the carnival, the weight guesser had guessed his weight exactly and then said, "You didn't have no muscle to fool me," and Jack and Bessie had laughed, and there was nothing he could do about it, nothing to stop the hideous laughing, no way in the world to approach Celeste as a man would, offering her protection and esteem.

He took out his notebook and made notes in the darkness. In the morning, he had been embarrassed to read them, for he remembered what he had said. There was always either Del or
Floyd about, and they didn't let him fall victim to delusion . . . Del, with his raucus ignorant laugh, Floyd, with his subtle supe-
riority and slow ironic grin . . . the image of the two men 
laughing had come to Charles to symbolize the difference between 
what he was and what he should have been.
"You ain't never gonna make no team!" said Del.
"Aw yeah he is, he's gonna play tackle," said Floyd, and 
the two men collapsed with laughter.
"Hold the gun steady, hold the gun steady!" said Del. 
Charles held the rifle steady and squinted along the barrel. 
"How pull the trigger," said Del with a grin.
"Yeah!" said Floyd.
"Pull the trigger?" said Charles, his palms beginning to 
sweat, "But you said we were only aiming at the horse in fun."
"No sir!" said Del, "No Siree! At's a very bad horse, and 
de Major said to destroy it."
"I can't!" said Charles, and he threw down the rifle. Dell 
and Floyd looked at him as if he were crazy. Both of the leath-
erly faces seemed serious and disapproving. It was as if he had 
committed a capital offense against propriety by not shooting 
the horse. Then suddenly Floyd's face broke into laughter, and 
Del's followed suit.
"How do you like that, Del?" shouted Jake, slapping Del's 
back, "How do you like that? The boy was going to kill the Ma-
jor's best horse! Now don't that beat all?"
"It shore does!" said Del. "I never seen a boy like that,
so disrespectful of his guardian's property!"

"I ain't either," said Floyd, "but what beats me is how's he gonna do it when that rifle of his doesn't have no bullets; can you tell me that Del?"

Charles' face turned red and both men whooped with laughter. Burning with humiliation, Charles made a fist and calculated quickly the size of Jake's shoulders; they seemed incredibly wide as they moved with full force to smack the smaller Del on the back. "You better watch out," said Del, still laughing, "or the gueese are going to get you!"

His face burning, Charles made his way back to the house and plunged into his room; the incident was bound to come up at dinner, for the hands ate supper with the Major in the Major's kitchen on Thursday, and it was clear that Jake and Del would not forget it, and what they wouldn't forget they would surely tell.

Charles was aware that neither Floyd nor Dell could conceivably have any respect for a boy his age who had not yet learned how to drive a tractor or ride a horse. When he tried to help them in the fields he always proved to be a hindrance, and instead of helping him, they always sent him away, accompanying his retreat with loud hoots of derision.

For this reason, he hesitated before going into the dining room; he could hear light controlled laughter, and he thought that he recognized the Major's voice. He was already late for supper, having first decided not to eat at all and lingering in his room, and now he realized that he should have been the first
at table instead of the last, for he would have to enter the room and bear the stress of the company as he made his way from the door to his place.

The walk to his chair seemed endless. From the moment of his entrance a silence had settled over the room, and from the way that Floyd and Del refused to look at him and the way the others kept their eyes on their plates, he knew that something was going to happen; but he pretended to notice nothing as he took his seat and bent his head with the others in prayer. The Major's voice, droning the grace, had within it more conviction than usual; he seemed to pronounce the words sharply, and he closed the prayer with a hope that unhealthy sin would never invade his household.

At the close of the prayer, still looking down at his plate, Charles began eating quickly; but then he sensed that on one else was eating, and he sheepishly looked up from his food. They were all watching him ... the Major's eyes, staring at him bleakly, were open wide but they were strangely repellent like the narrow spot eyes of a snake. Charles waited ...

"Charles," said Mrs. Williams, putting down her fork and looking at him sharply, "I have found one of the poems you have written to Celeste and I find the sentiments sinful!"

Charles took a bite of the beef before him and chewed it, keeping his eyes fastened onto his plate.

"Look at me, Charles!"

Charles looked up and felt the intensity of her gaze. The face, framed in a box of red hair, was as pale as ashes, and as he
watched it, a wave of rigidity and haughty indignation seemed to slide in place over the angular features. "You have done wrong, Charles, and if it happens again the Major and I will have no choice but to send you away! Isn't that right, Major?"

The Major nodded his head.

"Alright," said Flora, unfolding her hands and casually, busily picking up her fork, as if a flurry of action would indicate that no further grievance was held, "Now we'll say no more about it... the discussion has passed from our minds. It has not taken place!"

Charles began eating. He could hear the others begin to eat; also, he could hear the clatter the metal forks made as they scraped against the china of the plates. He didn't dare look at Celeste, but in his mind's eye he could see her, sitting before her food, biting her lip, and refusing to lower her eyes.

"Would you have a roll, Charles?"

Charles looked up. Mrs. Williams, without the barest flicker of an expression, held the straw basket before him in her long slim fingers. He looked from her face to the rolls, and suddenly he was revolted and sick; a sour feeling passed from his throat to his stomach, and before he could stop himself, his arm had smacked at the basket of bread and he was on his feet, fuming.

His impulse was to blurt out invectives, but he was too angry, and as he stood before the four shocked stares, he could say nothing.

Then turning his back on all of them, he marched into the liv-
ing room, slammed the door and leaned his back against it. With his eyes closed tightly, he could hear the dining room break into an excited buzz, and then he could hear Mrs. Williams snap coldly at Celeste, "Sit down, Celeste, you'll not leave the table until you're excused."

"Mother!"

"Sit down, I said!"

In order to be alone, Charles would have gone to his bedroom, but there was no way to get there without passing through the kitchen and once again enduring the silence and the grinning glances of Floyd and the Major, the indignant stares of Del and Mrs. Williams. So he sat placidly on the sofa wishing himself inside the heavy atmosphere of the antique chairs, the old loud grandfather clock ticking by the fireplace. It was strange the way the old furnishings, the oriental carpet affected him; in the room he achieved for himself a measure of solace. The room was like a grave and he so silently was sinking further, comfortably in.

But he listened to know when they finished supper, and he hoped with all his strength that Del and Floyd would go back into the yard, and that, for once, the Major wouldn't come into the living room to build a fire and play the English gentleman. Perhaps the old gentleman would go first to the kitchen so that his wife would have the opportunity of refusing to make his toddy.

The door opened slowly and Celeste appeared on the jamb, "Charles," she said softly, as if she were asking a question. Then gesturing with her fingers, she indicated that she thought he
had won a victory of some sort, possibly over her family, possibly over himself. Charles didn't answer but she went over to him quietly and sat down beside him, "You did very well; they'll have a little more respect for you now."

Charles blushed and felt miserable.

"They have no respect for me. They think I'm crazy!"

"Well, that doesn't matter, Charles" said Celeste, turning her face eagerly toward him, "Don't you see? It doesn't matter what they think. Go your own way, and there'll be a day when they'll choke on your memory--forget them now . . . what are they that you should have regard for them?" Celeste put her hand on his. "We'll have several minutes alone now," she said. "Floyd and Del have gone outside and mother and father are in the kitchen."

"Do you want to be alone with me?"

"Yes, very much!"

"You're not afraid of your parents?"

"Of course not! They've no hold on me that I don't give them."

"Doesn't it matter what they . . . what anyone thinks of you?"

"Of course it does!" said Celeste with a laugh.

"Well, who?"

"You, of course," she said, and her voice was very dreamy. She removed her hand from his and went quickly to the piano. She hummed a few bars, and then played a few notes, letting her
head bob and roll without resistance to the music. "I got in here this way," she said. "I told Mother I had to practice."

"It doesn't matter if your own mother thinks you're sinful?"

"No," said Celeste. "Why should it?"

"I don't know," said Charles, shaking his head.

Those words echoed and re-echoed in his mind and it seemed to him that he would never find an answer for them. Perhaps, he thought, part of the answer he sought explained why he took such delight in himself, as he ran over the hillocks and spreading his arms like an eagle in flight, coasted down into the dell where the pastures began.

Charles estimated that his run from the house had taken maybe ten minutes, and his return, which had been considerably slower, had probably taken about fifteen. All in all, he had run about half an hour since he rested by the water, and to him, that was good enough reason for his being so tired. The sweat pouring from his legs soaked his dungarees, and as he walked across the pasture keeping an eye out for the horses, the blue material stuck to his legs and only came loose when he would kick his leg out violently before him.

Coming within sight of the porch, he was ashamed again that he had run earlier by it just so Celeste could see him. One of the first things the Major was sure to do would be to point out to Celeste how he was showing off foolishly; he could hear the Major saying it, and for a minute, he thought of not going up the porch, but of going into the house from the backdoor instead.
Then standing by the rail, Celeste waved to him wildly, ignoring completely her father's displeasure as he, Charles Delfold, could never do, for he lacked the courage; he lacked Celeste's indifference, and in spite of what she told him, he still cared what they thought. The admission to himself of this fact was painful, but there it was before him, and he had to face it. "An artist doesn't care," she said; "he shuts himself off from all that."

"And am I an artist?" he said.

"Of course you are, Charles! Sometimes you say the silliest things."

It wasn't that Charles kept his doubts to himself; he simply had no opinion. But he did have something welling up inside of him that was very strong, so strong it threw him into a rage when no one but Celeste could see it, but he didn't know whether or not that feeling made him an artist. It certainly caused him to be angry; he had never developed immunity to insults. They bit him fiercely, savagely, so ferociously that his eyes burned and he had to hide his face from sight.

He could never have admitted it to Celeste, but when walking home from school he saw families gathered together on front porches, sitting proudly somehow as if they were perched on a height, he envied them to the extent that he had to turn his eyes away and gaze at the ground. Even Celeste and her family, sitting on the porch, reminded him of his mother's friends as they waited in the parlor. They were finely dressed; the Major looked
elegant in his wide brimmed hat, his brown suit, and he looked aristocratic as he tapped his yellow cane on the boards of the porch, so that in the distance, he could hear the solid thump, thump, thump...

And Charles was aware that he wanted to be a part of them, wanted to be a part of Del and Floyd, the Major and Flora.

"Will you come to watch me?" he said.

The Major tapped his cane against the railing of the porch and looked thoughtful.

"We start practice at three."

"Possibly," said the Major.

"Probably," said Celeste.

"Alright, probably," said the Major. "What time did you say?"

"Three o'clock."

Charles was in the locker room early looking at himself in the mirror. He was forced to admit that he cut a ridiculous figure; his pants were too large and his shoulder pads were so bulky that his head above them looked like a grotesque rubber ball. He could remember the smell of liniment, the smell of sweat, the dirt caked on the cement that caught on his cleats... to his recollection, it was like a symphony of sights and smells, feeling too... the cold shock of a living running body crashing down on his filled him with ecstasy, and the feeling of exhaustion, the pain of exhaustion when it gets past bearing, made him tremble all over with anticipation for years to
It was extremely strange that it could be like that; nothing in his past experience seemed to explain it.

But when Mason took the ball and moved slowly down the scrimmage line, it filled him with a sudden but divine fury. He supposed that there had been blockers, but he didn't remember them; they must have bounced off his legs or missed their blocks taking him for granted, but he saw the enemy through a lane that opened momentarily, and he seemed to explode with rage. The churning of Mason's legs seemed to be creaking like the runners of his mother's black rocker, and the sound filled him with joy, a wild unprecedented joy, and a thirst for the oncoming shock that sent him barreling down the lane, his body bent double, his helmet aimed at Mason's groin.

Then there was an instant of blackness that was ecstasy. In the pitch darkness, he could hear himself cry out and his own voice filled him with fear. Then he heard the voice of Mason crying in the darkness. When the light came back, Mason was all withered up, lying on the ground, and Charles moved groggily, getting up slowly.

It seemed to him to be an entirely incredible thing. Mason was the star, the fair haired quarterback, seemingly twice Charles' size, and Charles could remember the cheer leaders, the year before, yelling "Mason, Mason," as if the sun set with Mason, as if he were the only chance for victory and that to worship him was only right and proper. And now he, Charles Delfold, had laid Ma-
son low; the little boy that Mason always passed in the locker room without bothering to speak, had made Mason a twisted wreck, writhing in pain as the chalk of the lines bleached his uniform white.

Charles looked up into the bleachers to see if the Major was watching. The old man was thumping his cane heavily against the boards and his eyes were focused on the group of people who were gathering about Mason. Only Celeste was looking his way, and her eyes were troubled.

"I think it's broken," someone said. Charles turned around just in time to see the awful twist of Mason's leg. Mason had fainted; his eyes were closed as they laid him on the stretcher. In spite of himself, Charles felt a wave of exultation pass through him. "Who made the tackle?" said the coach, clip board in hand, wheeling around to his right, "Who made the tackle?"

Charles half raised his hand, and suddenly the leathery face was peering down at him.

"Name?"

"Delfold."

"Delfold, that was a god damned dirty tackle; one more like that one and you'll be handing in your suit."

Charles mumbled a few words of apology and trotted back to his position. It was a good day for him. During the afternoon, he caught the second string quarter back, Rakow, three times going back to pass, and he made a few other tackles that felt almost as good as the tackle that floored Mason for the rest of the
Celeste and the Major waited for him outside the gym when practice was over, and the walk to the car seemed very good to him later. For the first time in his life he felt like a warrior, and as he slipped into the car, Celeste looked at him with admiration, and he felt warm all over as the Major turned onto the highway that led back to the farm.

"Don't really understand the game myself," said the Major, steering the car with habitual gruffness. "It's a shame about that Mason boy though; I hear he's really something. The guy next to me in the stands said that you boys don't stand a chance without Mason."

"He's pretty good," said Charles.

The Major took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "I guess it was just an accident that you caught him like you did. Wasn't it Charles?"

"I guess so," said Charles. "I didn't mean to hurt him."

"Well, you just caught him wrong; it was an accident," said the Major. "Hell, you couldn't have hurt him if you wanted to . . . I can't understand why the coach thought you did something wrong . . . it had to be just bad luck, just the way you happened to catch him."

Charles was silent.

"Well you win some and you lose some," said the Major.

"Yeah," said Charles.

Charles thought of Mason. The more the Major talked the more
Charles wished he had killed his teammate.
CHAPTER VIII

Charles wondered if the Major thought that all the running he had been doing, all the sweating and straining, all the sacrifices he had been making had been done for laughs. Couldn't the Major see how hard his body had gotten and how much weight he'd picked up in his arms. His thoughts were angry, for the Major's silence was a bitter pronouncement that all the work he had been doing had been done for nothing. The Major seemed oblivious to his anger and because of this the anger was intensified. Had not Celeste soothed him with kind words before dinner, he would have sulked through his meal and made himself an object for further derision.

It was amazing the way Celeste sensed his moods; she always seemed to know what he was thinking. It was comforting in a way, but still there were times when he wanted to be private, even from her.

In early September the fields were still green and the trees retained their lush foliage. At such times as he could, he would walk the fields alone and idly explore the woods, especially the woods that lay at the bottom of the large dell where the stream going to Nassawadox Creek divided the groups of trees into two parts. It was in September that he missed the beach so much; it was strange that he missed the water of the bay so much, but he found a measure of comfort in knowing the destination of the stream.
By the coming of winter, however, the stream depressed him, for it would lay covered by ice, a thin sheet just thick enough to stifle its flow. Celeste and he tried skating but the sheet of ice gave way beneath their combined weight and they tumbled in, drenching themselves up to their waists. He pulled her out of the water laughing with joy, but she refused to smile and just trembled until the fire was blazing, and then she suddenly seemed inexplicably forlorn.

The snow seemed to depress them both, roughly to the same degree.

To Charles, time seemed to be moving faster now. When he was a child, every thing seemed to move so slowly, moving in agreement with the slow murmur of the sea as it withdrew from the shore. Both he and Celeste were very glad when spring rolled around again, and the film of ice broke up and was carried away in large chunks by the water of the stream moving freely. Celeste was beautiful in the spring. Copying the country girls at school they both considered so common, Celeste broke off a rose and wore it outrageously in her hair, causing Charles to laugh as if he were taken by a fit.

When Charles wasn't roaming the fields or wasn't locked in school, he would spend the time alone, reading in his room. He went days without seeing the Major and his wife, except at meals, but even that short time of exposure to them was painful and he couldn't wait for each meal to draw to a close. He found a measure of consolation in his room. The Major had bought him
a large oaken desk and Charles stuffed it with papers, making sure each time that he locked the drawers when he closed them.

Charles had learned discretion. Much time was spent with Celeste, both their heads together, plotting times when they could meet secretly, with no fear of interruption.

She was his only ally. He hadn't done well at school. He was never one to make many friends, but with Celeste about he didn't much care. They were scornful of the boys at school who had banded themselves together, who dated solely because they couldn't for an evening do without company. Only the thought that he had made the second team in football really plagued Charles, for he thought, bitterly, that he was better than the boy who had beaten him out.

He had heart and spirit he thought, and the other boy had neither.

Del and Jake let him know what they thought of his failure. Dressed in the coarse leather breeches he wore when he was training the horses, Del sat on the fence rail, sucking like an ape on a straw. "Get in the game?" he asked, taking the straw from his mouth and trying to seem serious.

"No."

"Score was too close, huh," said Del, trying not to grin. "Don't worry about it boy. Maybe next game you guys will get so far ahead that you'll get to play. Wouldn't that be something!"

Charles had stopped listening. He was watching Wee Willie frisk about the pasture, cutting in and out among the sparse crop
of trees that grew at the far end of the pasture. Old Willie was too old for racing anymore, at least for racing well; his career had been a bitter disappointment for the Major, but the way Old Willie was running now, baring his teeth to the wind, it appeared to Charles that everyone had given up on him too soon.

"Wait a minute Del," said Jake. "I don't believe the boy's paying proper attention to what you been saying."

"That so," said Del. "You, boy, look here to what I been saying. I'm saying that if you hadn't of tackled Mason with a damn chicken tackle a couple years ago, you boys would have won that year. And I'm saying that you ride the bench now for the same damn reason, always making chicken tackles."

Charles remained calm. Thoughtfully, he scratched his head and pointed off in the direction of Wee Willie. "Look at Willie go," said Charles. "What a shame it was that we didn't have anybody around here that could train him right."

Del was off the fence, shouting.

Charles took an involuntary step backward and stumbled on a pail. He fell to the ground, his arms vainly catching at the air, and the warm milk spilled over him, soaking his clothing. He couldn't help laughing at the sight of Del and Floyd seemingly caught in convulsions, slapping their legs; it was as if his hatred had taken an unexpected turn. Del and Floyd didn't know it, but it was stronger than ever.

This thought amused him. As he lay there in the dust laugh-
ing with Floyd and Del, it seemed to him hideously funny that Jake and Del didn't know what he was doing to them in his mind.

He seemed to himself to be swathed in secrecy. The Major and Flora had their thoughts about him. He knew what they were, and he knew how wrong they were. He was a mystery they were incapable of solving, and the recognition of why they were so blind filled him with a rare and subtle delight. They didn't know that there was a mystery to solve. His mind seemed to him to be a secure locked vault, hidden from view by dense shadows, and he willed the shadows darker and thicker so no one but Celeste could find him.

"Why are you laughing Charles?"

"Because I love you, and because we are alone together in the face of opposition."

"Liar," said Celeste.

He could see by her face that she was serious, and that she knew why he laughed and fully shared in it, but still she let him slip his arm around her waist and hold her so tightly that their breaths came quick, and their hearts seemed to beat with a new force and speed.

With trembling fingers he unbuttoned the buttons of her blouse, and then almost apologetically, he slipped the back of her blouse off her shoulders and down to her waist. She didn't move. Without expression, she sat watching the water as a light breeze fluffed the edge of her locks.

In a moment, she was naked to the waist and turning toward
him; her small firm breasts seemed to be bobbed gently by the wind as she leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. His hands found her breasts. They were white like a dove's, and fragile, and frail. He didn't breathe as he watched them rising and falling, flowing between his hands.

"Don't Charles," she whispered. And then she pulled the blouse up and sat there in the sunlight weeping quietly to herself. The rose in her hair had fallen into the water and was riding the current through the rushes and over the rocks. Charles watched as it at last came apart and each petal seemed to sink individually into the moving glass of the stream.

"I love you," he said.

"I know you do," said Celeste, continuing to weep.

Charles fell silent, and his mind seemed to twist in agony. He could see her leaving him forever, walking away with her back toward him, never looking around as he implored her to stay; and the sight of her filled him with grief and remorse, grief for what he had done to himself, and remorse for what he had done to her. He was a violator of the very worst sort, and his eyes burned with shame.

"Celeste," he murmured. "Please forgive me. Let's pretend it didn't happen."

Celeste shook her head, "It did, it did. And I wanted it to happen."

The walk home that evening seemed to be at the same time too short and too long. Celeste had stopped crying and all of her
tears were dried away as she walked slowly through the pasture holding tightly to his hand. Charles felt protective and anxious. As he walked, he kept glancing at her as if he were uncertain and then glancing away nonchalantly at the birds and flowers that he pretended preoccupied him.

"You mustn't feel," said Celeste, "that we've done something wrong."

"I won't," said Charles without conviction. "I promise I won't." Amid his self-disgust, there was an image of Celeste's breasts that rose before him with uncompromising beauty.

"We belong to each other Charles," said Celeste. And then she said faintly, but with embarrassed determination, "You can do that to me any time you like. You can take my pants off too, and play with me here."

Charles didn't look to see where she put her hand.

"Let's don't talk about it anymore," he said.

"Alright."

They entered the house separately, Charles some minutes after Celeste had gone to her room. Flora was reading the paper in the kitchen and she didn't look up when Charles complained to her that he had a fever and that he couldn't stand up very well.

"Go to bed if you like," said Flora. "I'll wake you for dinner."

Charles started for the door and then he turned to look at her; her profile, framed in the glass window at her side, was nothing like Celeste's, and he couldn't help wondering how she had come to have such a daughter. Her flaming red hair made her
look hideous and hard, like a sullen and grotesque wreck. It seemed to him incredible that Celeste could come from her, or for that matter, from the Major either.

The times had been bad for the Major. Pari mutuel betting had just been declared illegal and his training track in the south pasture was falling into disuse. There had been times when the training track was dotted with ponies, for the Major made a good deal of money renting it out. But now most of the horse people had moved up into Maryland, and the sight of a horse, not his own, out on the training track had become a rarity.

The Major's cane now served another purpose. He would come home late and Charles could hear his cane thumping heavily, irregularly, on the walk that led to the porch. One evening very late, Charles was awakened by the noise of the heavy cane slushing through the screen door, and the loud shouts of the Major.

"Goddamnit woman, will you let me in."

"This ain't a barn, husband of mine."

"This could only happen here," muttered the Major, tearing the rest of the screen out of the door with his cane. "I tell you woman I've been to a meeting of the town council. There ain't a drop on my breath."

"Go sleep in the barn."

Charles could see the Major stagger off and go around to the side of the house. And then in the morning, when he went to do the milking, he found the Major fast asleep, buried in the hay.
"They don't concern me," said Celeste.

Charles nodded, scarcely believing. Celeste swung back and forth on the glider to the accompaniment of loud creaks from the ceiling where the glider's chains were fastened. Charles leaned lazily back in the rocking chair and let his feet rest on the railing of the porch. Celeste looked reflective. She glanced up at the ceiling and then leveled her gaze at Charles and said quietly.

"Charles, I want you to go to college."

"What did you say?"

"I want you to go to college."

Charles felt stunned by the new idea. For a few moments he didn't know what to say, but at last he cleared his throat and tried to ask casually, "You think I could make it?"

Celeste nodded her head. "I've decided that I won't have you being anything like my father. I want you to be a great man, Charles. You have the capacity, and I'm going to see that you make it."

"Why do you think I have the capacity."

"Don't be stupid, Charles; you have a great soul."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know," said Celeste with a smile. "Because it's exactly like mine."

Charles blushed and turned away. He knew that already; he had felt as much many times before. And he felt that perhaps his mother had seen it a long time before either of them did. Perhaps she saw it because she was so close to them both. She,
certainly pressing his nose up against it. With his nose pressed against the screen so hard that it was almost flattened, he mocked in a heavy but artificial bass, "Aw gee baby do you think dat I got the brains, do you?"

Celeste laughed and he felt warm all over.

"I'm going inside," he said. "I think I need a nap."

Celeste nodded casually, pretending that she believed him, but as he turned toward his room he saw through the darkened screen that Celeste was biting her lip and gazing after him in wonder, and again he could hear the eerie creaking of the glider, straining on its hooks as it swung slowly back and forth.

His eyes filled with longing and regret and suffused with pain, Charles lay upon his multicolored quilt and gazed at the faded photograph of his mother that sat on the dresser and seemed to rock gently as his breath flowed in and out. Like a little china doll, she was dressed all in white, a cocktail dress for Sunday, and her face too was white and very smooth. Her hair, like some finely spun yellow flex, fell to her shoulders, seeming to suggest that it itself would have been a thing of unparalleled beauty if it had had the foresight to descend to the floor.

And Charles' head seemed to spin with the memory of her, coming as it were from an old photograph which in the past he had consciously ignored; when he looked at her entrapped by a gilded frame, his mind was invaded by a sort of miasma, a darkening fog, that seemed to shut out the light of his thoughts and lay like a mantle of darkness over his shoulders and heart. He was con-
scious of the gentle flowing of his blood, gathering to some den-
sity in his heart and then flowing softly in and out, sliding and
sneaking like a quiet thief through his veins.

There were promises he had to make to her, promises that had
to be whispered.

He lay on the bed muttering words faintly, scarcely aware of
what he was saying; the sound of it, like the slow drone and mes-
merizing hum of crickets, seemed to form a corporeal density as
it settled over the room and then bounded by the portmanteau up
the narrow stair that led to the attic. And Charles remembered
that her trunk, packed full of her belongings, rested in the at-
tic like a thing dead, picking up dust to be splattered by the
rain when the wind swept the moisture through the lattice.
There seemed to be an audible moan emanating from the twisting of
the stair.

In a moment he was ignoring the trunk behind him and gazing
out over the fields below between the slats of the lattice.
Floyd and Del, stripped to the waist, sweat dripping from their
brown hard bodies, were in the south pasture grunting with weari-
ness as they pitched hay to the top of the stack. The Major, on
his way back from town, walked briskly, tapping his cane on the
hard dust surface of the road with every quick step.

There seemed to be no way Charles could tell the Major the
decision he had come to regarding going to college. He felt that
the Major's red face was looming before him. He couldn't quite
breathe. Only his mother's ghost behind him seemed able to en-
dure the Major's scorn; she was like a thin vapor on Charles' face. Her hair was wet, blond, even yellow, long and streaming... about her was the smell of rosewood, rosemary and ashes... Charles could feel her dampness as she hung over him yawning. Scented with perfume, the loose blown muslin on the wall seemed to him to billow and flow like the folds of her white damask gown.

Celeste implored him to tell the Major, but he shied off, and then afterward he turned from her as she sought results; she came in smiling, but her smile quickly died.

"You didn't tell him, Charles?"

"But I will."

"For Pete's sake, Charles, you've no reason to be frightened."

"I'm not frightened."

In his musings, Charles was the soul of daring; he approached the Major as one approaches a cockroach. He blurted out his news and then laughed in the elderly man's enraged face. "I shan't work here" he thought of saying; "I shall be off to college regardless of what you wish."

But as he approached from the road the Major's white immobile figure, seated as if in a lump in the blue rocker on the porch, gave him pause; so first he circled around the barn at the side of the house, ignoring the gray geese that honked and nipped at his heels. Then, summoning his courage, he broke again into the front yard and took a quick leap that brought him onto
the porch, where he sank placidly down into the glider. The creaking of the metal rings seemed to wreak havoc on his nerves; he blew his nose, then dropped his handkerchief; he picked it up, and then turning to his left to gaze at Wee Willie being led out of the adjacent pasture, he let his finger be pinched by the creaking chain on the armrest of the glider. "Ouch!" he cried as the Major looked up from his paper; Charles put his finger in his mouth and then dropped his eyes, counting the boards traversed by the pendulum swing of the glider.

In the large, flawed panes of glass in the living room window, he could see the Major's reflection; he looked grotesque like a giant painted white. The black cane tapped soundly on the boards of the porch, but the old man, his newspaper now folded and resting on his knees, seemed to be nodding with the desire to sleep.

Charles thought that if Celeste were there, she would cry with impatience, "Now, Charles, now, before he goes to sleep." But still immobile, he sat and watched the Major as the latter's eyes became heavy, and his heavy white brows drooped to his cheeks; he counted the thuds of the cane, and he imagined the black stick slashing at his face, and he imagined the welts, the thin streaks of blood, and he wasn't yet ready to speak when the Major closed his eyes and commenced a faintly mocking snore.

The Major was asleep; once again he had somehow failed Celeste.

And as he watched the Major sleep, the thought came to him
that he too slept, yet his sleep was more terrible, more lasting than the Major's. It was as if the essence of his being had always slept, slept throughout his existence. Like a somnambulist he had walked through his life . . . and suddenly, as he sat on the glider, his crime appeared to him to be so dreadful that he bit his lip and tightened his fists to keep from crying out, and his insides began aching, pulsing with shame.

And an undeniable truth stood before him and cocked its head; he was capable of sleepwalking all through his life . . . he was a coward. In the flawed glass of the window, the reflection of his face collapsed like crumpled paper, and he staggered away from the glider and didn't stop running until the pasture was behind him and the Major was only a blurred white ball in the distance.

Floyd and Del were right, but with his hands raw from having repeatedly struck the tree, he swore to himself that they wouldn't be right for long. He turned over on his back, and with dandelions and buttercups blowing gently beside his head, he watched the clouds pass and he gazed longingly into the blueness of the sky.

He was mad; there was no use to hide it.

"Come out of the daze," Celeste said, peering at him demurely. "Have you told the Major yet?"

"No, I haven't."

"It's time you must tell him."

"I know."

"Well then, tell him."
Charles passed a hand in front of his face as if to hide his anguish. "Will you please let me do it for myself? It is my project. I know the significance of it more than anyone else."

"Do you?"
"Yes."

Celeste became quiet and then she walked silently away; the shame of it made him clench his teeth, but still, from the edge of the road where he stood, the Major looked formidable, a large broad mountain capped with snow, pulsating rhythmically to the drumming of his cane.

Charles tightened his belt and plunging through the yard rather than following the road, he was soon in the midst of a sea of buttercups, dandelions, and clover. To be a beast and to take hold of oneself, to stalk, to creep was all his desire; he had learned the trick of fantasy, learned how to make it spill over into his life; for a moment he was thrilled with his progress and the elation carried him to the porch.

His hand on the old man's shoulder caused him to start; the Major's eyes opened and he thudded heavily on the planks with his cane. Dazed and surprised, the Major rubbed his eyes and looked with irritation at the boy bending down beside him.

"What, what is it?"

Charles sunk down into the rocker; it took him a moment to find his voice, and when at last it came, it was weak and unsteady, trembling and afraid. His courage waning, it seemed to emanate from a point in midair several feet in front of him. The
Major made no sign that he had heard.

"I wish to have a talk with you," Charles nervously repeated, fidgeting in his chair as the chair began to rock slightly and creak the board beneath it.

The Major's stare was puzzled; as the sleep fled from his eyes, his eyes seemed increasingly able to pierce through Charles.

"The first thing," said Charles, beginning uneasily, "is my mother in the attic . . . I mean my mother's trunk in the attic . . . I would like very much to bring it down into my room and I would like the key."

"No point in dragging it down," said the Major; his voice was harsh and grating. He ran his wrinkled fingers over his thick white brows and spat suddenly over the railing of the porch.

"I must have it."

"Get it yourself then."

"May I have the key?"

"Don't have no key." The Major spat again, and then rested his chin on the crock of his cane. The expressionless face caused Charles to grimace with anger; he stood up quickly and with force as the Major closed his eyes again and leaned back heavily in the glider.

The creaking of the rings was merciless.

"You will let me go to college, damn it . . . I'm going to college and no one alive can stop me."

"'Cept me," said the Major.
Charles turned on him with fury, the color rising until it suffused his cheeks. "I will not be thwarted, I am my own man; I am not asking you; I'm merely informing you now so that you won't wonder where I've gone later . . . I want to go . . . my mother left me money for it . . . Celeste will be going and so will I."

"Your grades ain't like hers."

"That doesn't concern me."

The Major scowled darkly; with a sudden thrust, he crashed his cane against the railing. "Goddamn it boy, you've got a debt to pay here first. You're no damn good, but you'll work a couple of years here . . . now let me sleep."

Charles walked quickly to the railing waving his arms; he gripped the railing tightly and then foolishly stalked back to his chair. Unable to speak, the words of outrage were welling up inside him seemed to catch in his throat. The Major's eyes, like thin yellow closed blinds, were tightly shut. The Major was asleep; his nose rumbled with the beginning of a snore and the rounded point of his chin rested on his chest.

"It is not decided," Charles muttered to himself. "It is not decided."

Then as the cane continued to pat the boards, Charles, sunk again seething into his chair, became aware of his increased humiliation, and it was all he could do to avoid weeping outright; Wee Willie in the pasture frisked freely although the enraged Del shouted behind him. His black flowing mane glistened in the sun,
and he moved with such freedom that Charles drew a comparison between the horse and himself.

Like a keen knife, his deduction slipped into his chest forcing him off the porch, behind the house, and into the fields far beyond the orchard.

The sun seemed to be moving jerkily; like an angry eye it was red as it rattled in the sky.

It was by the brook, surrounded by waxen green foliage, red spots of berries, that his despair gave way to a sudden elation; where or why it had come he couldn't say, but there it was and he couldn't ignore it. Leaving his clothes on the bank he waded in the shallow water for an hour; it was brisk and invigorating, sliding between his legs; it thrilled him with its coldness.

He blushed with a sudden pride; he had lost, but he had at least, declared himself to be an enemy.

The Major would have to fight him; with tears flowing, he laughed to think of it and the water poured off of his face and joined the rapid cool movement of the stream.
"You have done the correct thing," said Celeste.

Charles looked at her strangely. She was standing beside the high white trellis dotted with tiny flashes of red, framed between the trellis on her right and the green hedge on her left. She looked to be a part of the landscape, an extremely pale part with lips that moved fatefully. Like the three sisters all embodied in one small girl, she stood rooted, immovable, her face filled with determination, her brown hair glistening almost yellow in the sun.

"He'll disapprove at first," she said, "but never mind that. We expected it. He'll come around."

"I'm not so sure."

"Of course he will, Charles. How can you be so silly? You plant an idea and regardless of how repulsive it might seem, it begins to grow."

Though encouraged, Charles suddenly felt that he wanted to defy her; he fought down the impulse but he could not resist saying, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not, Charles?"

Her question caused him confusion; he was aware that he didn't quite have control over what he was saying. He shook his head and mumbled to himself ... it occurred to him that he was troubled, there was something the matter with him; he shook his head at the ground; there was much to figure out.
"I don't know," he found himself saying, "I really don't know."

Celeste smiled sweetly, "Don't worry about it Charles. Everything is going to come out all right." She took his hand and squeezed it, and they walked together under the arbor, he suddenly gay and joking, she listening as she walked beside him.

Celeste understood.

When he stopped to think about it, he realized that he had very much to be thankful for. Over the months that followed he became aware that Celeste had been right about ideas growing; the idea of going to college, which for him had been vague at first, now suddenly seemed realizable. Though he mentioned it seldom, it had grown inside him until it now seemed to be the only possible, only logical course.

Celeste and Charles waited impatiently for their high school graduation; for them, the holidays were lost . . . they seemed to be such a dreadful waste of time when so much was waiting to be done. With trembling fingers, Charles had filled out his application; Celeste had secretly slipped it to the post office and mailed it. He wondered when he would hear from the college, and the waiting caused him anxiety. Should he beg for acceptance, should he get down on his knees and plead for acceptance?

In church, he found himself praying, but after church, he found himself ashamed of his prayers. They seemed to him to be a manifestation of his cowardice, and he blushed to think of him-
self, down on his knees, praying to a ridiculous idol looking a lot like Jack, hanging bloodily on a cross.

He watched the townspeople filing in and out of church. For the first time in his life he could look at them without jealousy. He could pass their porches, where they sat fanning themselves in the evening, without looking at the ground; he had a secret, he was going to college. Only when they spoke to him directly would his shyness return. The laughter they directed his way disturbed him only when he caught the syllables of his mother's name, and even then, his shame did not cause him the agony it had done before. But still he walked in a sort of slouch. In spite of his increased stature, he thought with despair that he would probably walk like that for the rest of his life.

But he was Charles Delfold now. He could say it defiantly, spitting it out with hatred between his clenched teeth.

The town itself seemed to amuse him; it was composed of not more than two hundred houses that lay sleepily beside a railroad track, but Charles knew that it didn't sleep. It was alive with gossip and rumors. Sitting as if buried in the deep maroon sofa of the living room, he heard the whispers of Flora and her cronies, heard the unnecessary lowering of voices that boded ill for the person being discussed.

He was sleepy . . . the soft lull of voices, the plucking of melancholy notes by Celeste on the piano made his eyelids heavy.

Mrs. Devers' husband, it was said, hadn't been seen for a month and old Mrs. Crow swore that she saw blood on Mrs. Devers'
apron, but it was a good thing, that, for old Mrs. Devers' husband was a worthless sort, drinking and gambling, and nobody blamed her much, no matter what had happened. Anyway it was nobody's business but old Mrs. Devers'.

Jim Mason was such a nice boy; not yet graduated from high school, he had found steady work, and he went to church and never took a drink.

Charles heard the name, and suddenly he was aware of how differently he was now looking at things... it didn't much matter to him that Mason never took a drink. Celeste's hands were on the piano and the melancholy notes became louder; she was whispering to him with the piano's aid, and he could see Mason before him, with a gas pump in hand, a dirty charred thing with a great vivid thickness between his ears, and suddenly Charles felt that all the boys at school were like that, and the thought nudged him in the side until he felt that he was going to break out laughing.

"They'll go nowhere," said Celeste, ruffling her skirt and spreading the picnic lunch out on the grass before her. Charles looked at the water flowing past his feet; the tiny stream cut its way through fields and woodland before at last it emptied into Nassawadox Creek; he could see the dim face of his mother gliding under the water.

"Have you ever seen red?" he asked quietly.

Celeste looked puzzled. "What do you mean by that? Are you playing games with me Charles?"

"Have you ever gone into a room and seen the wallpaper, the
"No," said Celeste firmly. "And neither have you. Behave yourself, Charles, and stop talking nonsense." Celeste reached once again into her picnic basket. "I've brought something for you, Charles. I want you to know that I went to great pains in order to steal it."

"What is it?"

Celeste opened her fingers; in the middle of her palm rested an old rusted key.

The attic was dark so Celeste carried a candle; it threw shadows on the wall, dark ghosts of an almost forgotten day; Charles breathed heavily as he struggled with the lock, until at last there was a dull click and the trunk, resting on its end, swung open with a groan. Before looking into the trunk Charles whispered, "Go to bed, Celeste. If they don't find you asleep there's going to be trouble."

"You don't want me to stay?"

"It's not that," Charles lied. "Here, take back the key."

He listened to her light footsteps as she descended the stairs.

There again in the attic was his mother. He could barely see her as she slid in and out of the darkened corners. Dressed in white gauze, she seemed to be weeping, and then suddenly her face seemed to be filled with elation. A portly gentleman was climbing onto the stage carrying a bouquet of roses as his mother, amid thundering applause, stood there beaming, waiting. Draped
in roses from head to foot she took another bow, then raised her face to the overhead lights, but the encroaching darkness caused a look of concern to pass over her face, and in a moment, her face became waxen, ashes slipped from her mouth, and she was naked and doll-like in the rose light of the garden.

Putting his hands to his eyes, Charles could again see his answer, on stationery that seemed elegant, that the college had accepted his application, and he felt warm all over. Celeste was in the kitchen, and he met her there; not seeing Flora about, he put his arms around her. As fragile and warm and as brown as the shells of birds' eggs he had seen in the arbor, she moved closer to him and held him so tightly that he suddenly felt somewhat faint and dizzy.

"Congratulations," he said, "You've done it for me; I'll never forget it."

"No," said Celeste, unbelievably angry, "you did it yourself."

"All right," said Charles, "I did it myself."

He had not planned to send Celeste away, and as he paused before the opened trunk he wondered why he did, and he felt an impulse to call after her. His mouth was opened, but then he remembered Flora; she heard everything. How many times she had caught Celeste and him trying to slip out of the house together! He was on the threshold of adventure; it was foolish to be caught at such a moment, so he held his tongue.

After opening his drawer in the bedroom, Charles thrust the
thick packet of his mother's letters in under his writings and his undelivered letters to Celeste. He had been afraid to read his mother's letters when he detected that most of them were sent to her from his father. At any rate, it didn't seem right to read them with his mother peering over his shoulder; the attic had suddenly seemed incredibly damp, and a gust of wind, pouring in through the lattice, had caused a shiver to creep swiftly up his spine. He was ashamed that he'd become afraid of the dark, but he comforted himself; he would read the letters later.

Before slipping back into bed, he went to the closet and stashed the key to the drawer in his winter boots where Flora would never find it. Once he had been careless, leaving it on his desk, and the old woman had gotten into his papers. Lying in bed he remembered it; remembering it helped him forget the letters he had been frightened out of reading in the attic. He remembered the smirks of Floyd and Del, the Major and Flora, and he remembered most vividly the way they laughed silently at him, unable to mention the cause of their mirth.

He had burned with rage.

Charles was almost asleep when the rain started, but the great crashes of thunder drove him to the window. The wind blew fiercely and slipped through the loose plaster that held the panes. He sat for a long time watching the storm, and then, finally, he fell asleep as his porch chair rocked by the window.

There was peace in the morning, and there was delight. As he
sat at the breakfast table, the streaming sunlight caught his fork and threw a glare into Celeste's eyes. She smiled and looked at him with excitement. It felt extremely good to have another secret he shared only with her.

There was only Celeste. When she played the piano, the music her fingers made seemed to fill his soul. Hearing her produce a melancholy strain seemed to reawaken the capacity for tears he had lost now for several years in the tide of events; the music made him feel like a much younger boy than he was, and though his exterior remained dry, he would weep inside for hours on end.

"Why is it," he asked, "that music affects me so?"

Celeste answered as if the explanation were a matter of course, "Because you are an artist."

"Ha . . . if that's so, why is it that I weep only when you play?"

"Because I play divinely," said Celeste, with the beginning of a laugh.

The Major was drinking more, and the farm was beginning to decry. Charles was glad of the weekends, not because school was out, but because the tired old Major would revitalize himself long enough to visit the tracks in Maryland, trying to regain his losses. The Major began redecorating the living room; now on the walls were neatly framed photographs of horses who had been winners in the past.

"I put everything on Wee Willie," the Major would say at the
Flora's taunt was automatic; her questions were rhetorical. "You put your money on nothing; eat your food. If you'd been a thinking man, like my father who gave you this farm, where would you be now ... sitting pretty more than likely."

"I'm too old for this."

"Too old," Flora scoffed. Her thin neck looked positively scrawny when she thrust her head forward. The Major's cane tapped loudly under the table, and his eyes were violent.

"Damn it," he growled, "I can't do it alone."

The table fell silent. Charles bowed his head and looked at his plate; the skin crawled on the back of his neck for he knew that everyone was watching him with hatred. But Charles braced himself; it was a waste of time to dislike them. He shoved the forkful of ham into his mouth and asked complacently, "How many horses do we have left?"

"A lot you care."

"That may be true; how many left?"

"Twenty," grumbled the Major, "but only two pay."

"I'm sorry," said Charles.

The Major's eyes were angry. His large hand slammed down on the table.

"Listen to me, Charles," I believe in education. Everyone in my family has an education, no doubt about it; but there's a time for everything, a time for planting, a time for sowing, and goddamn it, a time for gratitude."
"I'm grateful," muttered Charles, but the Major was only aroused to further fury; he stood up at the table and went quickly to the door, his cane swinging behind him like a snake. Putting his hand on the jamb, he turned viciously back to the table. ... in the candlelight, his face was yellow and rough like old parchment. He pointed the cane as his great bulk lost balance slightly and leaned heavily back against the wall.

"You lose money by planting weeds," he said. "Do you understand what I mean?"

Charles nodded.

"All right, smart fellow," said the Major, striving to keep his voice dignified, "tell me what I mean."

Charles said nothing.

"Tell me what I mean."

To Charles, as he spoke, his words seemed like an echo, a haunting remembrance. "You mean I'm too stupid," he at last managed to say.

"Yes," said the Major, "that is precisely what I meant."

The Major's eyes were glazed, and it was apparent that he was having difficulty holding himself upright; Charles could smell the alcohol on his breath, and when he thought of it, it seemed to make him nauseous; he turned his eyes away and tried not to breathe. The Major's voice was acrimonious, controlled.

"I have nothing more to say on the matter."

The dining room door slammed shut. "How very English," Charles muttered under his breath, and then, from outside the door,
there was the sound of a body crashing to the floor; Flora turned white and ran to the Major while Charles sat frozen, looking at Celeste. She was biting her lip, but she didn't move, and she looked at Charles as if to reassure him. He smiled at her and she returned a tight, bitter smile. "We can't afford to feel guilty," she suddenly whispered.

Her eyes passive and cold, Flora re-entered the dining room after putting the Major to bed. Without looking up, she began eating quickly. Upon finishing her meal, she served dessert which Charles and Celeste ate in silence; suddenly, dabbing her chin with her napkin, she asked to be attended to.

"Charles Delfold," she said, "you will not go to college this fall."

"I will."

"Maybe next fall," Flora said, shaking her head.

"This fall," said Charles.

"Mr. Delfold, how, may I ask, will you manage that? You are aware, of course, that Major Williams and I are your lawful guardians, and that you are subject to our will. Is that no so?"

"Yes, save in this instance."

"Will you explain yourself."

"Yes, I have consulted my mother's executor, Mr. Timmons, and he informs me that my mother's will contains a codicil stipulating that I am, if I choose, to be allowed to attend college upon my graduation from high school. There is money set aside for that purpose; further, Mr. Timmons informs me that if you refuse my re-
quest, you will be violating the will in such a way that a charge of fraud can be placed upon you."

The box of Flora's red hair seemed redder than before; it was as if the blood from her body had been sucked up by the roots. Her face was deathly pale. She put a hand to her throat; the pale green of her emerald bracelet glowed faintly in the light, and she looked as if a great spike, running from the top of the box of hair through her body to the chair supporting her, held her in place. Without changing expression, she managed to speak.

"You have had the colossal arrogance to consult a lawyer?"

"Yes," Charles said; at that moment, he wished with all his heart that he had not found courage to speak; the room seemed to spin, and he could feel the sweat from his brow standing in large drops on his cheeks.

"You are," said Flora, "very much like your mother."

Charles barely heard her.

"The Williamses will forget you as they have managed to forget about her."

In another instant Charles was in his room, first at his desk tapping the mahogany top with his pencil, and then at the window, staring drearily off into the light rain that seemed to have been falling for days. The rain brought the smell of the farm to him and he closed his eyes. The air was unbelievably fresh; there was the smell of new mown hay, the smell of flowers and pollen, the smell of livestock that he could see, half obscured by the mist. He touched the cold plate glass with his fin-
gers and trembled as a cow lowed in the pasture.

It was strange how Flora could be so lively, pecking away like a rooster, and then suddenly, when challenged, assume such lifeless imposing airs; he supposed that he hated her, but, as he stood before the rain as an observer, he was aware that he had an impulse to please her . . . he should cast it into the rain and let it drown, for the impulse was despicable.

Everything seemed wrong, even college. He could picture the Major, a disliked pathetic man, standing before the kitchen stove, his face twisted and broken like his dreams of something better, and he could see Flora, placing plates around the table; her face was drawn and tired . . . they were two lives; he said the words over and over, and they brought to him a vision of the paradigm of grief and unrealized desire, and the magnitude of it seemed to him to be more than he could bear; he found himself weeping, tears streaming down his face, and in the light rain falling like a blanket, covering the earth, he lost the thread of what he was crying for, and later, under his blankets, warm under the patter of rain on the roof, he cried for a long time because he wasn't a man.

On the threshold of what seemed to him to be manhood, he quite suddenly wished to turn back, and into Flora's arms he wished to plunge headlong.

"So now you think you've treated them unfairly," said Celeste, standing beside the gate to the arbor.

"Yes."
"Don't be foolish, Charles. Things are just that way, and there's nothing that can be done about it."

Charles sat down on the fence, resting his elbows on his knees; he took a cigarette from his pocket and smoked it thoughtfully. "Would it amuse you," he asked, "to know that in spite of the way I feel, I still hate them?"

"Not much; it's perfectly understandable."

"If it hadn't been for you . . ."

"Shhh." Celeste put a finger to his lips. Flora came from behind the house, spreading feed for the chickens with sweeping motions of her arm. Seeing Charles and Celeste, perched together on the fence, she stopped still, and then haughtily turned her back before going into the house. The screen door banged shut, and the chickens, flustered for a moment, regained courage and continued their noisy pecking.

"If I took a rooster," said Charles, "and wringed its neck with all of my strength until I killed it, it would mean nothing. It seems evident to me that God thinks no more of us than we do of chickens."

"There's nothing to be done about it?"

"I think I'll go down to the river and scratch in the ground."

A loud shout came from the barn, then the door flew open. Del came walking across the yard wringing his hands in pain. They were blue-black, covered with thin streaks of blood.

"You can work on the goddamned rotavator yourself," he said to the Major later, with his bandaged hands trying in vain to di-
rect a piece of cream pie into his mouth. The Major looked disturbed; it was a rare occasion on a Sunday when Flora thought to fix a picnic basket for the family, and he didn't want the afternoon to be spoiled by Del's complaints.

"Accidents can happen."

"Not to him," said Del, pointing a bandaged finger in the direction of Charles. "Some of us don't have to work for our keep." The Major said nothing, but continued to sip his lemonade slowly; he closed his eyes and seemed to be dreaming, staring off blindly to the gentle swell of land that rose beyond the stream.

"I'm sorry about your hands," mumbled Charles.

Del became sullen, but said nothing; he, at last, jammed the pie into his mouth and seemed to swallow it whole; as if to prove his loyalty to the Major, he stared at Charles with disgust, then turned his head away. "Smart boys, smart boys," he said, "ain't capable of doing nothing so they pack 'em off to college, and boy, that's a laugh; they supposed to come out better, but still they can't do nothing."

"Leave him alone, Del," Mrs. Williams spoke sharply. "He didn't have anything to do with your hands."

Del looked surprised. "Scuse me," he said emphatically, huffing away to sit on a large gray rock that bordered the stream. "See if I stick up for you again," he called to the Major in a plaintive voice, hurt. The Major opened his thermos and poured the clear liquid into his lemonade. Flora was angry; she spoke to the Major in a tone of even meanness.
"A gentleman you are, a fine gentleman you are. Don't point that cane at me. You can't afford another one."

"I've been accepted at college," Charles said.

His news was received silently, as if no one had heard him. Flora was busy picking up the plates on the blanket and shoving them into the picnic basket. "You've got to graduate from high school first. Be a smart boy and see if you can do it."

"I can do it," said Charles.

Celeste was beautiful in her long black robes, but the effect was spoiled when she placed on her head the square, tasseled hat; the tassel hung down so that it touched the tip of her nose, and Charles, himself just as ludicrous, could not help laughing. She flew at him in a sudden fury but he caught her and held her tenderly in his arms; she yielded to him and let him kiss her; the taste of lipstick stayed on his lips.

It saddened him that her breasts were so small, but when he held her, the desire to put his hands under her gown made him forget her smallness; he put his hand on her knee and moved it stealthily up her leg, but she stopped him by catching his wrist.

"I'm not resisting you," she whispered, "but they're waiting to take our photographs, and they'll suspect something if we take any longer."

Both the Major and his wife were smiling, beaming with pride; their good will seemed to encompass Charles, for his lips filled with laughter, the Major took his hand and shook it firmly. Though concentrating on Celeste, Flora had time to put her hand on
his back and whisper congratulations. Only Floyd and Del hung in
the rear; after a brief time, they ignored the celebration and
went off together, walking swiftly and slouching, in the direction
of the barn.

Their eyes bothered Charles; they were confused and resentful.

All through the summer their eyes had seemed to bother him;
they would go at their work seemingly not giving him a thought,
but when they saw him come into the yard their eyes would flash
momentarily before they dulled and then turned away. To his con-
sternation, the Major's eyes began to do the same, and then Flora's,
even though, as Charles could tell, Flora fought against it. Only
Celeste was the same; she was there when he wanted her, always
meek save when he degraded himself and she took up his defense, al-
ways ready to comply with his suggestions.

It frightened him somewhat; one day he felt he would ask too
much of her, and he would lose her. So he refrained from asking
just as he had fearfully refrained from reading his mother's let-
ters which remained locked in his drawer.

He vowed to be courteous and helpful; gathering berries for
Flora won him a smile and he felt good all over. The Major liked
to read the paper at breakfast; Charles remembered to bring it to
him after feeding the stock and lovingly using the currycomb on
Wee Willie's mane.

When the weather became hot, he plunged in the stream and
felt wonderful; the sun on his back, the water, cool and bracing
on his pale skin filled him with delight. Once, after dressing,
hidden in the bushes, he watched Flora go down to the stream and after looking around to see if anyone was watching, peel off her blouse and lay it on the gray rock that half blocked Charles' vision. When she stepped from behind the rock she was completely naked. Charles held his breath; she was thin and withered but he watched with fascination as she stepped from the water and stretched her arms leisurely to the sun, her legs wide apart so that the sun catching her thighs made the hair of her inner loins seem ragged and worn.

Flora dressed quickly.

Charles crept back to the house, feeling a mixture of excitement and sadness; her withered breasts put in his mind a vivid realization of age, its awful dreariness, and sitting on the sofa before the grandfather clock he felt suddenly depressed and afraid.

The clock struck four; the four chimes seemed to be in accord with the beating of his heart. While still it struck, he remem-

bered the nakedness of his mother.

Celeste was dating boys from the high school in order to please her mother, but they bored her extremely. "They never touch me," she explained to Charles, "I would never let them!" Charles smiled at her sincerely, adamant as it were; he couldn't conceive of them near her, let alone touching her. He lay on the sofa and attempted to chase all thoughts from his mind; Celeste had played the piano in the morning, and ghost-notes still seemed to drift and hover about the room. He closed his eyes, and, at
last, contentedly fell asleep.

He loved the oldness of the room, the old radio that stood mute in the corner, the worn oriental carpets, the grandfather clock, the cut glass figurines that sat like gems behind the glass of the what-not; it seemed to him that the room would ever remain that way, that it had been that way for time out of mind.

The thumping of a cane announced the Major's presence; Charles opened his eyes and shook the sleep from his head. The Major's fingers were playing with a doily; the crocheted whiteness fluttered like a handkerchief as he twirled it with his fingers.

"I wish to speak with you Charles!"

Charles was at attention.

The Major's face seemed passive, almost kindly; his voice was softer than he had ever heard it.

"I wish to apologize to you Charles," said the Major. Charles couldn't believe that he was hearing him correctly.

"I fully understand your desire to go to college; I confess to putting my own interests before yours." The Major leaned on his cane, squinted at Charles from under heavy lids.

"I trust that you will forgive me, and return here during the summers to help on the farm. Can I count on that?"

Charles swore that he would, conscious all the while that he was lying, "I . . . I . . . love," said Charles, forcing the words from his throat, "I love you and Flora." The Major smiled and arose; he extended his hand and Charles shook it firmly; the Ma-
jor's withered skin seemed pitiful as he grasped it, and Charles was conscious of the Major's tightness, his dread. Standing on the threshold of the door, the Major voiced a warning.

"You must study hard," he said, "You'll have difficulties. I don't mean to degrade you however; I wish you good luck." The door closed behind him.

"You did what?" exclaimed Celeste, when he told her, "Oh Charles, you should have promised him nothing!" Celeste began crying as Charles stood amazed.

"But I don't intend to keep the promise!"

"You should have told him no; you're too kind Charles, and that's going to hurt you!"

"Maybe so."

"Look at this farm," said Celeste, "do you think you can save it; the barn is about to collapse, we are deeply in debt, the livestock is nothing but a liability. You want to give your life for a dying cause, oh Charles!"

"But I won't keep the promise," Charles said, and he repeated it until she stopped crying.

Conscious that he would soon be leaving, the remainder of the summer on the farm seemed to be a constant, ever delightening feast of colors and impressions. The woods behind the pasture was cool and he seemed to bathe in its freshness; the redness of peonies, the whiteness of dandelions jumping from the green of the grass kept Celeste foremost in his mind. They would walk by the stream and talk of college for hours.
"Will you write to me, Charles?"

"You know I will."

Celeste got out a map and showed Charles the table for measuring distance. "There," said Celeste, "it's only sixty miles from my college to yours; we'll be able to visit one another on the weekends, that is," she said demurely, "if you still want to visit me on the weekends."

"Don't be silly," said Charles, running a playful hand through her hair and giving a quick kiss to the back of her neck; he took her hand in his and they ran with elation across the pasture, she panting, and he running slowly to let her keep up. In the garden, she stuck a flag, a red rose, in her hair, and thrust out her breasts provocatively, "You must remember," she said, imitating the women that yearly came to the fair, "that on our dates I'm to be dealt with correctly."

Charles laughed.

They packed their luggage together; Charles slipped into the bottom of his trunk his mother's letters, vowing at college that he would have the courage to read them. Celeste backed the station wagon close to the front porch of the house so the loading would be easier. Charles said goodbyes.

Celeste, who would leave for her college only a few days hence, cried all the while. The Major standing on the porch with a wide smile on his face, again shook hands with Charles and wished him luck. Flora patted him on the back and kissed him. Even Floyd and Del, on their best behavior, smiled at him and took
his hand when it was offered.

Celeste was to drive him to the ferry and leave him; the ferry would cross the Chesapeake, and then the bus would take him from Norfolk to Richmond.

Suddenly, in the car, Charles remembered something. "Don't go," he exclaimed to Celeste, "I'll be back in a minute." He ran up the porch and into his bedroom, there taking his mother's picture from the dresser and stuffing it in his shirt so no one could see what he'd forgotten.

As the car, driven by Celeste, moved down the dirt road and then on to the street, Charles swiveled in his seat and looked out the back window. Floyd and Del, the Major and his wife were still waving after him, and he felt a pang of regret and forgiveness; he had wanted to be a part of them all the while, and it now seemed to him that he had been the cause of so much bitterness ... it took him several minutes to push them from his mind and gain an awareness, by the landscape's flitting by, that he was actually leaving.

He took his mother's photograph out of his shirt and gazed at her face.

"I shall make something of myself," he whispered silently to her; and through the window of the car he could see the respected members of the town sunning themselves on their porches. "You are rid of me now," he muttered as Celeste looked on, amused; he put his hand on hers and she squeezed it gently.

"Are you remembering all the things these people did to you?"
Celeste asked quietly.

"Yes."

"You are remembering how they talked about your mother and how they wouldn't help her when she needed it the most. And do you remember how they couldn't have cared less when she had her spells, and how they snubbed you and her, laughing behind your backs?"

"I can never forget it," he said.

"I know, I know," said Celeste, almost impatiently, "But will you forgive them?"

Charles sat silent for a moment, "No, I don't think I can ever quite forgive them. I'll always hate the rich and the proper for how they made my mother feel . . . I despise them. I almost can't stand a woman if she wears a clean dress . . . yourself excluded," Charles laughed.

But Celeste wasn't laughing.

"Don't you dare forgive them," she said.

Charles looked up, surprised. "Don't you dare ever forgive them," Celeste said firmly. She was clenching her teeth.
CHAPTER X

As the car passed by the old carnival ground, Charles could remember Jack's face as Jack's long lithe body, enclosed in a thin gauze-like wrapping of sweat, hung on the cross, bleeding and trembling. Jack's face was twisted, and the convolution, the twist seemed to Charles to be prophecy of the life he himself was foredoomed to lead, and as the carnival grounds faded away in the distance, he found himself to be unexplainably angry and defiant.

Looking at his mother in the photograph made him hear, once again, the sounds that had so frightened him when as a boy, he stood smitten by the darkness in the great hall that led to his mother's bedroom; he could remember it so well that his heart seemed to beat faster, and for a moment he forgot the present, forgot he was in the car seated by Celeste, and suddenly thought of himself as being very young . . . too young to be going to college, too young to begin fighting as Celeste wished him to do.

Yet there were many things he desired to do for her. It was imperative that he not figuratively run into the garden, as he had once done literally, and there was no need to break his rifle . . . one betrayal of his father was enough! How pathetic he must have looked to Bessie who had come peacefully into the garden only to find a small boy, terrified, lying gracelessly upon the ground.

The negro women the car passed, walking down the single rail-
road track dressed in soiled gaudy colors, all seemed to remind him of Bessie. Suddenly, as often when he was downhearted he longed to see Celeste, he longed to see Bessie.

"I want to go see the cottage," said Charles, looking up from his photograph.

"The cottage, whatever for?"

"I don't know, but I want to see it again, very much."

"To say goodbyes?" Celeste laughed.

Charles put his mother's picture beside him, face down on the seat. "I'm afraid," he said, "that you are about to accuse me of being sentimental." Charles laughed suddenly. The knowledge that he didn't have to be embarrassed before Celeste amused him; she knew he would want to go to the cottage. She was being coy.

The sly grin on her face became wider, "Damn you!" Charles muttered, taking her wrist and then not knowing what to do with it once he had it. "Do you think we have time?"

"There are a lot of ferries leaving tonight, and I'm in no particular hurry to get home."

"What will your parents say if you're late?"

"Who cares," said Celeste, shrugging her shoulders, "besides, it's only about eight miles out of the way." After turning off the main road, Celeste became solemn and quiet; Charles watched her carefully. Her eyes were drab, as if she were depressed or sad.

"Is it because I'm leaving."
Celeste looked up quickly. "Damn," she said, "damn your hide!"

To the left of the car the water of Nassawadox Creek moved quickly by; as the creek moved into the bay small white caps were formed that moved to the bay instead of toward the shore. Charles inhaled deeply; the salt scent of the sea seemed familiar and bracing, but then the sea was no longer visible; tall clumps of black pines, hung like a shroud from the sky, blotted it from view.

Then the cottage was before them. Charles held his breath as Celeste, seemingly unaffected, pulled into the driveway and splashed the loose gravel. The cottage seemed to totter on the edge of the bluff; the tide already, coming in swiftly from the Chesapeake had washed away the pier and eaten the extremity of the front yard where the walkway had begun.

"My God!" he explained. "Part of the front yard is gone!"

Celeste nodded. "The storm last October."

"Amazing," muttered Charles, stepping out of the car and pacing to the edge of the bluff.

Then turning, Charles perceived the whole house at once, as it were, glimmering in the sunlight, huge and green shuttered, looking like a picture from a book of fairy tales, and he felt the awful stillness of it with such intensity that his body trembled all over. The red and white flowers, now growing wild and twisted, fringed the bottom of the house, and taken with the blue sky overhead, seemed to frame the white shingles and hold the house steady; every aspect of the cottage seemed to bear the marks of disipation... lost in the fantasy of the past, the shingles, the panes in
the windows, the cement walkway now cracked, seemed ruined beyond repair.

"It belongs to you, doesn't it?" Celeste said quietly.

Charles nodded.

"She left it to me in her will."

In a few moments Charles and Celeste were in the parlor; the old blue carpeting, now drab and dull, held for him a thousand memories; the polished wooden hatrack; now covered with dust, seemed still to support women's hats; festive with flowers, they hung silently on their pegs. Lost in his thoughts, Charles could hear, coming faint but shrill, the sound of feminine voices.

"I didn't grow up here," Charles said to himself, "I grew down."

And then Charles felt that he could see a cluster of women, vague shapes that were sitting on the settee, standing in circles about the hall. In the darkness of the hall the women were faceless, their mouths were shadowed, and their dead eyes were dull. The only brightness about them came from the glitter of their clothing, the faint flashes of light from sequined dresses and white jeweled wrists. In the shadows near the stair there was also something white, pale and retiring, a dove-like fluttering of hands, and Charles closed his eyes against it, closed his eyes against it all.

"Tell me something," said Charles suddenly, "I've wondered about this a long time."

"Alright," said Celeste, "If I can."
"You've always hated the women who used to be here, didn't you?"

"Yes!"

"But why, why did you hate them? They did nothing to you!"

Celeste smiled, "I hated them because they hurt you, do you understand?"

"No."

"I've always been a part of you."

Charles, understanding, blushed deeply; it humiliated him that he hadn't guessed. He stuttered on purpose so he wouldn't be forced to reply intelligibly. She was sitting on the stair, and he sat down beside her, inexplicably afraid of what she would say. As she began to speak, he kissed her.

"I must see my mother's chair."

It began rocking and creaking when he pushed it; when he sat down in it, his mother seemed to be before him on the sofa; he got up quickly, and, with Celeste close on his heels, he threw open the French doors that opened onto the garden. Though Celeste couldn't hear it, there was the sound of hoeing, and near the rose bushes, now tall and wild, Jack was on his knees.

Charles closed the doors, quietly and calmly.

A subtle change had been effected on his mother's bedroom; he remembered it as being incredibly large, but now the quilts of her bed, the dresser that held her clothes, seemed small and fragile, and he felt like he was spying into the window of a doll's house, and he caught his breath when he saw the clothes, lace
gowns and robes, that hung in the closet; they could not have covered his mother . . . she must never have worn them. Wringing his hands, he turned around and perceived Celeste waiting by the door.

"Come on," she said, "let's go into the garden."

"I'd rather not."

"Come on silly," she said, taking his hand and squeezing it with all of her strength.

The trellis, as before, was covered with roses, but deep green weeds rose to the height of the blossoms and circled around them as if to choke them and tear them from their stalks; the tool shed was opened, and the purple creeping floc made a pathway that gilded them to close it.

"It's remarkable," said Charles, "that things have kept growing!"

"Did you expect them to die?"

"No, but . . . I don't quite know what I expected."

Celeste sat down beside him; her skirt was blown by a slight breeze that crept in from the bay, and he looked at her legs, browned by the sun.

"Do you remember," he heard himself saying, "when we used to work together on our algebra problems?"

Celeste nodded, silent.

"We used to work on them over there," Charles pointed at the apple tree, bowing by the fence with the weight of its fruit; the red globes dangled down like the ripest of berries. "You sang to
yourself when you worked alone. Do you remember your singing?"

"Why talk about my singing?"

"Why not? Do algebra problems seem dull?"

His arm was around her waist, and she leaned against him, putting her head against his breast; the soft light from the sun glanced off her hair and into his eyes, and he reached down and stroked her brown legs under her dress. Then reflecting, he felt strangely removed from Celeste and the flowers about him; his voice came halting, weak, and breaking over her shoulder.

"I'm very afraid," he said, "of college."

"Why?"

"I'll confess this to you and you must never tell anyone. When I look at boys my own age they seem to me older than I am. Is that very strange? College boys seem frightening to me ... the way they dress, the way they comb their hair. I sometimes hate them and want to destroy them. I feel it very deeply. You don't know how it is, the way they seem to look through me ... I hate them I tell you. I shall always hate them and I just can't seem to do anything about it."

"Is it the way you hate my parents?"

"Yes, yes of course. It is just like that."

Celeste looked up at him serenely and put her arm tightly around his neck; his hands, seeming to move by themselves, slid up to her underpants, and he almost choked to feel her like that, and his voice like the twittering of the birds around him seemed to die out, and he removed her skirt, tearing the button from her
waist and slipping the skirt down over her legs.

In a moment they were under the apple tree, lying on the ground; looking up, the red apples, bright and shiny in the sun, like a ceiling dotted with frail red lanterns, shook and swayed longingly with the breeze from the bay. With her clothes strewn beside her, Celeste lay naked in the grass, biting her lip as Charles, his face buried in her breast, hovered above her.

And to Charles it was beautiful, incredibly beautiful. There was beauty all about, and the ravenous cavern of it all seemed to engulf him, seemed to swallow him quite, and he could feel himself going off, slipping deeper and deeper. As if caught in a whirlpool, he was sucked to a vortex that lay waiting down below him, and as if no longer a part of himself, he heard his voice cry out like a frightened scream in depths at the bottom of darkness.

Her naked arms and legs, her fragile brown body like a doll's, seemed to catch in his throat; his left hand grabbed the dress and he pulled it up against her side and his fist closed around it.

Then the tide seemed to flow over him, and he felt that he was drowning. In the midst of the darkness he was submerged, and a huge weight seemed to be pushing him under; he heard himself scream, and then the horror assailed him. Striking him in the stomach, the horror made him nauseous; he screamed again and involuntarily pulled the dress from Celeste's hip and rubbed it against his face.

Through tears he could see the blood stains on the dress and
he could feel the drops that touched his cheeks.

"Let me go! Oh God, let me go!"

But Celeste held on tight. With her eyes closed, biting her lips, she held his body to her.
PART II
CHAPTER I

Charles was waiting for his favorite professor, the artist, Ronald McAllister. He was tired of living in the dorms, and he could remember that day, after class, when McAllister toyed with the idea of renting him a room above his studio.

Charles waited patiently, confident of success. His infatuation with McAllister would have been complete if only the artist had been more tolerant of Celeste. Charles was confused by his feelings toward Celeste—he had to admit it. But still, he desperately wanted to live with McAllister.

The statue of a reclining male, resting seriously on the edge of the work bench, made Charles feel strangely important, and for a moment he was almost sure that McAllister's answer would be in the affirmative. The rough hewn statue, deep breasted and full throated, by its aura of rugged power and beauty seemed to dominate the room.

He thought of Celeste; by trying to live with McAllister he was taking a step away from what she wanted.

And standing there in the studio, Charles could remember how with pride he had refused to go home for Christmas and had stayed alone at the college. With the other students visiting their parents, the college was strangely peaceful and rather less frightening; spending his time in the library, at the small desk on the third floor, seemed to soothe him even more than he had hoped.
He could forget about Celeste when he was surrounded by books. It didn’t much matter whether he read the books or not; for it seemed to him that he could derive peace of a sort from their mere presence. For this reason he loved the college library. But even more than the library he loved the carriage house of McAllister’s, with its old wooden fence circling almost an entire block that cut off McAllister’s inner garden from the rest of the city. Like an oasis in the desert, the garden, the crude oaks, the brambles, the flowers blocking off the lot seemed to revive him. He was envious that McAllister, some thirty years before, had found the carriage house and gotten it for a song.

Charles sat down at McAllister’s desk, put a clean sheet of paper in front of him, and began busily trying to construct an excuse that would explain to the Major why he had not come home for Christmas. He couldn’t very well say that it was because he was afraid to see Celeste; some other reason would have to serve, but everything he made up seemed feeble and decidedly lame. He tore up the letter and thrust it aside.

And then, musing, Charles remembered that it had meant much to him not to go home for the holidays. Aside from allowing him to avoid Celeste, staying in Richmond had enabled him to remain on the campus and be there amid its woodland and white sloping hills when, at last, the snow decided to fall. Leaving the library in the late afternoon he walked the perimeter of the lake, stopping on the south side by the dam where he could turn and look at the beautiful frosted red bricks of the college’s main body.
And sitting tapping his pencil, Charles remembered the fine
features of the girl who sat on the bank, fastening on her skates,
and he could remember the pang of regret that assailed him when he
realized that he was too shy to join her. Sitting in the snow,
she looked like a gypsy. Her face was brown and her eyes were
sharp blue with the cold, and Charles sighed heavily when, after
putting on her skates, she glided swan-like, sophisticatedly cut
over the ice.

Charles wanted Marjory Kennet; he thought to himself that she
was part of the reason he felt ambivalent toward Celeste. On the
very day that McAllister told Charles that he knew Marjory and
that Marjory was wealthy and very much pursued, Charles remembered
unpleasantly how sleeping with Celeste had seemed to submerge him,
and now, standing on the bridge watching Marjory skate by, he felt
in his breast the varied beginnings of shame.

How he hated the rich! How much he had hurt himself by allowing
them to hurt him! Yet he knew how deeply he desired the gypsy-
like creature spinning about the lake as if her gay dance were
never going to end.

"You have got to get away from Celeste," McAllister had once
said. "You've got to, you know."

Charles tried to forget the words.

"Why don't you date that luscious Marjory Kennet? Do you dis-
like brown thighs?"

"But I love Celeste," Charles had said calmly.

Looking out over the ice, Charles smiled to remember just how
calmly he had managed to deal with Ronald McAllister, But Celeste's letter in his pocket disturbed him greatly; she was puzzled as to why he hadn't gone home, and Charles hoped with all of his heart that she had failed to guess why. McAllister knew well enough, for nothing seemed to escape him, and Charles was somewhat angry with himself for being so transparent. The girl was still skating; she slid over the ice smoothly, her hair trailing in streams behind her.

Charles loved the quiet, but he yearned too for classes to begin; the steady warm drone of voices in the vault-like rooms was pleasing to him. It made him become lost in thoughts that were not directly related to himself. Cigarettes tasted good in the cold when there was no one else around; he inhaled deeply and watched the cold smoke rise sluggishly in the air.

They didn't understand him here, that is, save McAllister, and as he stood at the top of the dam, gazing calmly at the girl skating below him, he felt that it was well that they didn't.

They gave him a wide berth when daily he trudged off to the library, sporting under his arm a pile of misread books. His reputation for scholarship amused and protected him; it protected his secret, that it was escape and solace he sought on the third floor of the library. It was amusing that they could take his weakness for something respectable and give him, not friendship, for he had little of that, but a somewhat grudging respect.

As for him, he respected only McAllister; the artist now becoming an old man, had the most wonderful hands, as testified by
the solemn, heavy-lidded statue that rested on the work table in an attitude of powerful ease.

"You give him too much credit," Celeste had written hastily. "Don't be overcome by him."

Charles smiled when he read it; she didn't know McAllister.

"He is a great man," he had written back coldly, "and I shall be one too."

Charles remembered that McAllister had gotten one of the college girls, a few days before, to pose without clothing; Charles sweated, miserable, as she lay there demurely on the table. Yet later he marvelled at the way McAllister took it; with his nearly bald head shining he worked furiously over the brown lump of clay, and when he looked at the girl, his eyes seemed to go through her unaware of her person, aware only of her form, as if she had been a chair.

"I shall live with McAllister if only he'll let me," said Charles in a letter he had recently written.

Celeste's answer had come on a postcard. "Why?" was all she had written.

In the dorm, alone, Charles had read some of his mother's letters, but he gave up the project because it was too painful. It would have been pleasant to obliterate the past, to deal only with the low hum of voices in the classroom and the numerous leather-bound volumes he had begun to acquire.

"I think," he remembered saying to McAllister, "that I don't want to go home because I like it here. Can there be a better ex-
planation?"

The little man, his face unchanging, rose from his chair stiffly and walked slowly to his work bench. With his back to Charles, McAllister looked incredibly heavy and ponderous. Charles knew that the artist had not bothered trying to believe him.

Charles could remember how good it was with Celeste, but in his mind's eye he could picture himself hitting her with her dress.

"Look here," McAllister had said, picking up the statue of the reclining male. "What do you see?"

"The statue, of course."

"Is it perfectly proportioned?"

Charles looked at the statue; its muscular trunk, its powerful legs and arms, gave it a Grecian look; it lay on its base in repose but ready to explode with a latent power. "Yes," said Charles, "You've created the perfect athlete. I expect to see him start running."

"Now look!" McAllister tilted the statue so the figure stood upright. Charles gaped in surprise; the arms were too long, the chest was too massive, the legs too thin. Like a freakish ape the figure stood ridiculously before him. McAllister smiled slightly at his shock.

"Proportion depends on position," he said. "It is good to pretend. A real man looks like a snake when he lies on the ground."

Charles laughed at the parallel, but, in a moment, he was
filled with admiration. McAllister put the statue back on the work bench in the correct position and busied himself with his materials, putting them in order on the table. He worked in an old white shirt, covered with paint, and Charles wondered why he had never bothered to buy himself another.

"How good is the statue?" asked Charles.

"An old trick," said McAllister. "It is bogus."

"How good are you?"

"As a man or an artist?"

"Both."

"As a man, no good; as an artist, alright."

McAllister came in once a week to the college to lecture on art history. He had no wish to instruct anyone in the art of painting, no wish to communicate to those who thought of themselves as painters. On McAllister's request, Charles agreed to drop out of the art history class at mid-semester; it was enough, McAllister thought, that Charles should devote himself to books.

"You are a fake now," he once said to Charles, "but as far as books go, you get to like them through first being a fake."

"But I already like them."

"You want to sleep with them; you have yet to learn that they must be respected."

Charles awaited the sound of McAllister's approaching footsteps as he alternated between looking at the statue and trying to dash off a reasonable letter to Flore and the Major. The snow had already melted; outside the window the carriage house garden began
to show the signs of spring. The flowers weren't good. Only a few winter flowers dotted the pathways that cut the garden into symmetrical sections, but at least the trees were green, and the lush winter grass made the ground a soft carpet.

It seemed to Charles that McAllister would never come, but there was a peaceful air about the carriage house studio and he didn't mind waiting. There was something delightful about the paint splattered shirt and the old newspapers that were spread about the floor reflecting light that streamed in the French doors leading to the garden.

He had been waiting now for almost an hour, all the while daydreaming and trying to think of the words he would use to subtly make known his wish to live in the room whose balcony seemed to sit on a high couch of flowers.

Sitting in the studio it was easy to recapture past events; it was not especially pleasant but it was altogether easy. He looked out the French doors and into the garden.

The soft grass put him in the mind of spring apples and he thought of Celeste, whom he'd not seen for months, and he could picture her stretched out on the ground with her eyes loving and gentle and her arms tight about his neck; in the car she cried to see him so disturbed. So he leaned back on the seat and pretended to be casual.

"I hate to leave you," he said, forcing his voice to work, "really I do."

Celeste nodded but said nothing, and he could see that she was
giving him the benefit of the doubt, "Damn it!" he said at last. "I acted that way out of respect for you. You knew that. You knew it all the while!"

"Don't say that Charles, you make me afraid."

"It was the cottage—Well it was!—Anywhere else would have been alright." Celeste didn't remark on that; she looked straight ahead of her, guiding the car carefully, protectively, down the road.

They missed the ferry at Kiptopeak. Returning from the ticket window, Charles told Celeste that they had four hours to wait and that he had rather wait back at the farm. "I don't understand why," she said. But instead of pursuing the point she turned the car around, and quickly they were passing once again the railroad tracks and the negro shambles that dotted the road.

They received Charles at the farm rather strangely, and, later, the second parting seemed to Charles to be rather strained and flat. The Major was flustered and Flora could scarcely control her irritation. Floyd and Del seemed to be trying to be friendly, but when Charles left in the darkness of the night, a sour taste came into his mouth; he had been fooling himself all along, for it was clear to him then that their behavior before had been something of a ruse.

As he crossed the Chesapeake in the ferry, he looked to the horizon where the lights of Norfolk stretched out in a long smooth curve. It had been easy for Flora and the Major to pretend that they were sad he was leaving, but not easy enough to leave
them energy with which to do it again; never before had Charles felt so out of place, and he was suddenly terribly afraid that the combination of college and himself was every bit as wrong.

It was a tremendous relief to leave Celeste waving on the pier, and it was only until he was submerged by the darkness in the middle of the bay that he was again aware of how truly, how intensely, he loved her.

But then he remembered how he'd struggled against her, and looking at the bay from the deck of the ferry, he wondered just why he'd been so afraid, for it seemed quite irrational. And as he focused his eyes on the harbor lights of Norfolk his breath came quick, as if too much salt air was being sucked into his lungs.

Still, at college, it was a long time before he wrote her, and then his letter was somewhat inane and complaining. One evening after retiring early he was wakened by his roommate's hand shaking his shoulder. Grumbling, he turned over and faced the wall, but there was something urgent in his roommate's voice.

"Hurry, someone for you, a girl's voice. I think it's long distance."

"Charles," Celeste asked bitterly, "why are you so unhappy?"

"I don't know."

"Are classes alright?"

"Yes, I like them alright."

"Then what's the matter?"

"I can't talk to anyone here. I'm surrounded by idiots."
"So what?"

"What do you mean so what?"

"You knew that would happen, Charles. It always does. You're not going to college to talk to people. What have you to do with boys?"

"It's not only that."

"What then?"

"I don't like the idea of you hanging around with Negroes."

"What's wrong with Negroes?"

"Nothing, I just don't like it. I don't care how altruistic your motives are; I thought your interest lay with me, if you want to be frank about it." Celeste was silent for what to Charles seemed an incredible amount of time; then she began speaking softly and swiftly.

"Charles Delford, my interest is with you. You are my whole life. But I need something to do here. It is for your sake that I do it. If I'm going to be a part of you, I want to be something too. I want to understand everything, and I can learn some things from them that I didn't know before."

Charles was suddenly ashamed of his feelings. The cold receiver of the phone seemed to become slimy, and for a moment he thought he would drop it. Then picking up his voice, he said, "Don't worry about anything. Will you promise not to worry? Everything is going to be alright. Please believe me! Everything is going to be fine!"

It was raining heavily but Charles walked down by the lake,
and from the dam he could see the dim lights of the theatre. He watched them as his clothes became sopping wet. He thought about his grades; with satisfaction he realized that they were going to be good. Then, suddenly, the desire to have the best grades in the college welled up inside him as if it were a tangible thing, a thing with a huge swelling body, and he felt an impulse to run, down by the lake, down the winding asphalt path that twisted like a snake along the water's edge. His situation was ludicrous; no one, no one at all, understood just why he was doing well. It was not because he tried to, but it was rather as a consequence of the fact that he loved only the library, with its tons of bound books, its quietness, and its antiquity that lay over his mind like a thick and beautiful dust.

Then he was aware that Celeste really didn't know him. Who could have guessed that he could ever become this way?

Only McAllister.

He could hear McAllister's footsteps pounding up the carriage house walkway. They came slowly and surely, and then with a creak the door opened and McAllister, heavy and bald, his face immobile and unchanging when he saw Charles, came into the room, took off his frayed coat, and collapsed wearily in a chair.

"Listen to me Charles. You must do me a favor."

Charles crumpled his last attempt to explain his actions to the Major and threw it with some disgust to the floor. He looked up and saw McAllister's face, suffused with red as if he had been running.
"Does it hurt you?"

"No, I just can't walk too far; I shouldn't have tried."

"Your eyes are red."

"Eh! I need new glasses. I just don't have time to go down town in this traffic and waste four hours. Will you do me a favor?"

Charles nodded.

"I've been invited to a party," McAllister said, "an affair of rather high society, next Thursday, and I'll probably be too ill to go. But my daughter wants to go. She's never been to one. Would you mind greatly being her escort?"

"But she's only fourteen!"

"She's fifteen, Charles," McAllister said, coughing and then seeming very serious. "I ask you because I think it will be very beneficial to you; you will learn much."

Charles was silent.

"You should know these people," McAllister continued. "If you are going to write about people, you should know all kinds. Society in this city is not like you think of society elsewhere. Here, it is the real thing; I want you to watch things very carefully, and tell me what you see. Your ideas about it will be overcome, not your prejudice perhaps, but your ideas. It is for this reason I ask you to go."

"How is it so different?"

"In real society people feel a certain respect for people like you and people like me," McAllister coughed again, "They won't let you be a part of them, but still, all in all, they will have a cer-
tain respect. You'll see."

"Will I be snubbed?"

"No," said McAllister, "they are real ones. They don't have
to put on airs; they'll pretend to like you and they'll be very
gracious. Remember though, they won't really take you in. I can
promise you, Charles, your ideas will change."

"Will they think of me as a young intellectual?" Charles said,
facetiously. McAllister nodded.

"I'm going to phone Montague in the morning and inform him of
your status at the college."

Charles felt numb. What before had frightened him terribly,
now sanctioned, left him vegetative, lifeless, apathetic even to
the possibility that he might have another spell. His last had
occurred at the farm after seeing Flora bathe in the stream. He
had been lifeless for two days, doctors hovering about, listening
to and enjoying the melancholy ticking of the grandfather clock.

None of the professors at the college reminded him of anyone
he had ever known before; they seemed a breed apart. Old and
young, straitlaced and liberal, they nevertheless had an indefin-
able quality in common. Some seemed old and antiquated like the
ticking of the clock and others unpleasantly reminded him of fra-
ternity boys, whom he disliked intensely because they were frivo-
rous, but still they all looked at him in the same way. They
themselves impeccable, they seemed not to see the shabbiness of
his dress.

The relief of that led him to them. Perhaps that was it.
To found their judgments they, to the man, had developed criteria that were strange and wonderful.

Charles looked at McAllister's face and momentarily forgot that he was going to ask the old artist for the room. The face was pale and wrinkled and Charles wondered if its general dishevelment had been caused by a hopeless aspiration to the heights of Richmond society.

"You should have become academic," Charles said.

"Bah," said McAllister, blinking his eyes. "They will accept anyone in academic circles. They are not particular."

"No," said Charles, "they are not."

While looking at McAllister's face Charles remembered the first faculty party he had been invited to. He had been invited because, unlike his fellow students, he had devoted himself to becoming, during the first few weeks of school, the star of his classmates.

Acceptance seemed immediate.

The music, though classical, was heavy and slow and seemed to soothe him, so much so he was at ease, lifting his cocktail glass to his lips and glancing around to discover that only a few of the best students were invited. How superior the academic environment was to the frivolous tinsel display of society that McAllister advocated and seemed strangely fascinated by, although he admitted himself that he was on the outside and that he really couldn't lift a glass with the fabulous Montagues.

Charles loved the demure, sophisticated academic women with
their sexless gowns and cold gray eyes; there was about them a fascinating promise of withheld energy.

The woman before him, as he raised his glass, was Mrs. Donleavy, professor of history. She was exciting in a straight trim cocktail dress that hung loosely from her shoulders.

Did a woman without any sort of naivete want him? Charles wasn't sure. And if she wanted him, for what?

"I understand you are something of a protege of Ronald McAllister?"

"Ah," Charles thought, "it was clear."

A straitlaced gentleman burst breathless in on the party. Dressed in a brown suit with conservative vest, the old gentleman, a professor of physics, with watch chain dangling, shouted in high pitched pehlevi, "We were victorious!" Then he collapsed foolishly and drunkenly on the velvet mauve sofa. "We have succeeded where others have failed!"

The party shifted focus, and Charles, fascination on his face, compared the man's present appearance with his rather lightshirted bearing in the classroom. "My student, Adams," the old gentleman exclaimed, taking glass to hand, "hath taken matters to himself, scored thrice, three touchdowns, and won the day, or, I should say, evening."

There were smiles of pleasure.

"Charles Delfold, I understand that you are invited to dine with Ronald McAllister on Thursday."

"Yes."
"Two triumphs for the common man in one week! May I touch you, sir?"

Charles had forgotten to answer. Mrs. Donleavy looked at him amused, but she looked at him as if she disregarded his body. Charles blushed at the realization that she looked to see what he had in his mind. If she wanted to go to bed with one, it would be because, vampire-like, she wanted to suck up one's intelligence.

The professors clumped together in groups of three and four, ignoring the registrar. The registrar stood alone in the corner of the room, his face brooding, his mouth twisted, till Charles, momentarily isolated, struck up a conversation to which the registrar pretended to listen, puffing on his cigarette, knocking the ashes daintily into the tray.

"I really don't care much," he said at last, "for all of this."

The registrar left early. He was a middle aged man with a shambling gait. He left ungenteely, slamming the door.

"Don't worry about him," said Mrs. Donleavy, "every college has one."

"A what?" Charles asked.

"A registrar!" she laughed, her teeth flashing white in the overhead light.

McAllister would have nothing to do with her, Charles was sure. The old gentleman, in his strange puttering way, associated only with the rather arty students who made no pretensions about
dabbling in the arts. None of them were artists. At the first
mention of art McAllister would flee from the room, turning white
as he left and muttering to himself. In associates, McAllister
wanted the artistic temperament without the end product. "They
are purer that way," he would say to Charles. "Only the neurotics
interest me. Artists have outgrown their neurosis, hence
their lack of ability to inspire interest."

Before asking for the room, and after McAllister turned away
and began absent mindedly puttering about his work bench, Charles
brought up the subject and elaborated on it as McAllister listened.

The old man was now dressed in a shirt splattered with paint.

"Are professors interesting?" Charles asked.

"No," said McAllister. "I want nothing to do with them."

"But society people?"

"They are symbols," said McAllister, "and I appreciate sym-
bols; they order the world."

"Then you like to associate with either neurotics or society
people?"

"Yes," said McAllister.

"Then you really don't want me to room here with you?"

"Writers are different," said McAllister, with a wave of his
hand. "They have the capacity to become gentlemen, and that is
very important too, not interesting, but important."

"You insist," asked Charles, "that I go to the party at Mon-
tagues?"

"For your own good, yes."
"Are you going to let me stay here? I can't tell you how sick I am of the people in the dorms."

McAllister was silent; it wasn't till the next day, in the middle of a conversation about something else entirely, that he muttered, disgruntledly, faintly, "We'll see . . . maybe . . . but not until this summer."

Charles loved the room that McAllister half promised him; overlooking the garden, it sported a balcony where the breeze seemed constantly to blow. Standing on the balcony with the French doors thrown open, one could take in the whole room with a single glance and, for a moment, the instinct to breathe would seem to leave one. Like the living room on the farm, the furnishings, the dark red walls, the polished floors and the faded scatter rugs, seemed redolent with antiquity.

McAllister promised to put in a desk where he could keep his writings; that was very important.

McAllister, incredibly, was not a deviate of any sort. At the beginning of their relationship, when McAllister's interest in him seemed to be inspired by a respect for scholarship, he had feared that McAllister had other motives he was slow to disclose, but none of Charles' worse fears had found a foundation. There was a time when Charles felt he knew McAllister well enough to put the question frankly. "Yes," said McAllister, using what later proved to be a favorite phrase, "I'm queer for women."

Charles laughed heartily.

"But I'm worse," warned McAllister. "I want your youth."
"He was serious," Celeste said on the phone. "He was not kidding."

Charles said nothing, but tapped his pencil on the glass of the booth.

"He told you he was no good as a person and he meant that too."

"But he's good as an artist."

"What does that matter? Oh, Charles."

"It matters a great deal, doesn't it?"

The class droned on. The day before the society party, the sound of voices humming and reverberating in the classroom, down the hall, seeming to permeate the very brick of the building, was lulling to the extent that Charles found himself dreaming; it was much better than the chatter of the undergraduates before the class began and the bell summoned them to their seats. At a fraternity party the evening before a young coed had stripped off her clothes while dancing on the piano in the middle of the room; Charles thought with alarm that Randolph-Macon must be an evil college, very unlike the college he knew. He laughed at himself but the thought passed his mind, "It couldn't happen here."

McAllister supervised his dressing. Charles felt thin, young, sophisticated, but he trembled with fear.

"There's no need to be afraid," said McAllister. "They will be kind to you. Just don't expect to be a part of them."

Charles nodded.

"And do not," McAllister said, "try to make any sort of spir-
itual contact with any one. You have a weakness about that; it's in extremely bad taste."

Celeste had told him the same.

Yes, it was true, but there was nothing he could do about it. There was a hunger about him he couldn't explain. Then a light lilting laughter, like the twinkling of light on a candelabra, resounded in the main hall, floated wraith-like through the antechamber, passed through the throng of happy dancers swaying to the waltz, vibrated the slender money tree that shimmered in the chandelier's light, and settled at last on Charles' ears as he waited quiet and alone at the far end of the ballroom floor with McAllister's daughter, Jean, tied trembling to his arm.

It was the high point of Richmond society, a festivity in the luscious ballroom of the Hotel Richmond that was to continue until dawn.

In another minute a girl entered the ballroom through the great doors and all eyes with the exception of Charles' turned toward her and savored her appearance and the appearance of the laughing young escort with whom she walked arm in arm. Charles' eyes were turned away and they were fastened on the money tree; it stood beside him, not by chance, for he found a measure of solace in it and he wished to be near it.

"It's beautiful!" said Jean, her round face amazed, for she had never seen one before.

"How elegant it is," Charles thought, "How curled are its blossoms." With shiny discs of silver it reflected the chande-
lier's light as a dark and lush woodland pool reflects the moon. How fragile it was, and gentle; it vibrated to each strain of music like the bows of a violin and seemed to thrill and shake in delicate misery.

McAllister had lied to him. Everyone but Jean seemed to ignore him, and he could tell, looking at her, that she too wished to get away from him.

Charles crushed his cigarette in its silver tray and, now that the girl who had entered was safely in the midst of the dancers, he turned his attention to the gay fête flowing about him. Another waltz had begun and the room was in motion. Brilliantly coiffured ladies, exchanging open glances, floated about, leaning on their tuxedoed escorts with wantonly wayward smiles and delicate graces, like the twitch of an eye, a shy turning of the head, an accentuation of a slender wan-like neck rising starkly from the embroidery of a damask gown. The tinkling banter of the very rich filled the room quickly; all the young ladies seemed to be laughing at once, in accord with the spirit of the occasion.

"Her name is Marjory Kenne!," Jean whispered.

Charles saw her then, Marjory, the star of the occasion, with her new lover, a little poet very much in fashion and who sported black arrogant mustaches that rose like wings when he laughed. It was difficult for Charles to keep his eyes from her; he realized with shock that he had seen her once before, skating in the winter on the college's frozen lake.

He could again see her skating, dark like a gypsy, her hair
streaming behind her like a banner in the wind. Her cold black eyes glittered with joy, and her white teeth flashed when she laughed. Charles watched as she and the poet glided together across the floor, and he listened to the laughter that rang from her lips, as her eyes flirted and toyed with the men she passed.

Charles was overcome with longing and hatred.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" Jean whispered.

"A fleeting, frivolous thing," he stammered, "a firefly."

Jean, surprised, pouted, and Charles felt she looked silly; he patted her hand to make up for the offense. He bitterly picked a leaf from the money tree and rolled it into a ball between the palms of his hands.

Each time he looked at Marjory he hated her more. He hated her for what people like her had done to him and his mother, and he hated her because he wanted her and because wanting her made him want to leave Celeste.

With a grand flourish the procession of dancers swept him by and then the music subsided; the number was over and the sound of the band gave way to the sound of clapping hands and tinkling glasses and the gay banter that had become so familiar and yet so foreign. Jean was asked to dance as the band struck up, and Charles, sitting in an isolated chair, averted his eyes from the throng and gazed at the high arched windows whose stained glass patterns stood out brilliantly against the black night behind them. He was glad that Marjory and her poet were in the midst of the crowd and not visible from where he sat.
Something inside him seemed to twist and suddenly he was revolted.

Yet in spite of his disgust he had to admit that something inside him admired them. Their luxury, their grace, their feelings of well-being and easy confidence, were things to be admired. As McAllister had said, without being snobbish really, they had a dignity that was strange and new to Charles. Each never do well at the party magically seemed to have an aura of importance about him. Charles longed for the night air, thirsted to be very far away.

He had never felt more alone and taunted. He watched as the little poet moved in a foppish manner, dangling a silken handkerchief from the tips of his fingers and putting it to his nose and giggling hysterically, while Marjory laughed at his foolish imitation, and other convulsed dancers shouted encouragement. To his deep regret, he wished he could do that as well, but the thought of such a thing suddenly became demeaning, and he saw himself as being decidedly vulgar.

How far away was the beach, and yet how near; how different from these people were his mother's friends, but yet how similar. Then he realized that in spite of their politeness, he was cast alone by them to linger by himself, just as near the end his mother was alone, and he felt a low rage mounting, and with all his heart he fought to control it.

And suddenly he was back at the beach walking home from a party with a rifle in his hands, and he was aware of the darkness
stretched out before him. The configuration of trees was roughly the same as it had always been; they were dark and stiff, black like the plumes of a hearse and they made a well guarded lane of the dirt road that ran by the cottage, around Nassavadox Creek, and then out to the point. In the darkness the road glowed faintly, as if out of a dream, and then suddenly, fading into narrow perspective, it came to be a path that slid away into the unalterable darkness of the horizon masked with a lace-work of pine. Listening quietly, he seemed to hear footfalls, faint and light. Moments passed before he realized that they were his own, patterning quietly down the road and out to the point with hollow sounds like drumsticks on a log, reverberating with rhythmical pulse, rising and falling, like a march for a funeral.

Then an opening in the throng of dancers revealed Marjory, framed by tuxedoes and flowing gowns in two rows; something twisted in Charles at the sudden sight. Her hair, long and magnificently black, her sweet lips and the indescribable beauty and radiance of her smile, thrilled him so that he wanted to run to her and throw himself before her.

Suffused with shame, he could not bear her smiling at others any longer.

It was apparent to him that he wanted pity. Did he not secretly hope to win attention and then pity by his childish withdrawal? It was certainly true. In his hunger did he not wish that the sight of himself would cause a pang in her heart and diminish the gaiety of the party for her? Did he not wish all this?
He was ashamed before himself and sick with the vision of the miserable creature he was.

In a moment, before the next dance could begin, he had crossed the room, passed through the great doors, and gone down a flight of stairs into the streets. He pulled the flaps of his raincoat about him as he was met with the wet chill of the drizzling rain. He could still hear the band playing. They had started a new waltz, and he rounded the corner, fleeing from the slow strains that filtered through the windows and into the street.

Charles' feet moved quickly, but he walked without feeling the slick pavement beneath him. The cold water on his face, in his hair, slipping down the collar of his raincoat to drench his clothing, seemed to stimulate his thought as it flayed away unmercifully at his senses. At length he stood on the bank of the James River, gazing down into the pitch black water, which having gathered force from the rain, ran longingly by in a dark cascade of power. All around him there was the sound of splashing water. The rain splattered on the river's surface, and below the surface, driftwood threshed and churned in the water's grip.

The walk, the cold rain, had done him much good; the black hills and the lights on the far bank had soothed him somewhat. But then the lamps on the far bank went out and as far as he could see there was nothing but darkness and the black flow of the river.

He was walking slowly now. His steps led him past the quays, pass the houses facing the river, and into the streets of Richmond
proper. The power had not failed on the city side of the James and the streetlights threw pools of light on the streaming water that washed at his shoes. He listened intently to the blaring voice: of a juke box in a nearby bar. The music's being crude and raucous brought to his mind an unrest and numerous speculations on which he riveted his attention.

He was back where he started, stopped across the street from the bright window of the Hotel Richmond. He determined to wait outside for Jean McAllister until the party was over.

"Got a cigarette fellow?"

A figure whimpered, got up from the street wiping water from its bony face, and then, almost staggering, it lunged against Charles and leaned against his raincoat. The voice was drunken,

"Cigarette?"

Charles, flustered, opened his raincoat to get at the soggy pack in his shirt pocket; there was no shirt pocket. He had forgotten the fact of the tux. He grappled with his jacket where the cigarettes were stored.

"Nevermind," the figure whimpered and slumped to the pavement. Getting half way to his feet, the old man decided that the effort wasn't worth it, and he just sat there on the sidewalk, hunched over and whimpering like an animal, letting the rain beat down all around him.

"Are you alright?" cried Charles, darting forward to the fallen man's aid.

The man looked defiantly at Charles, perceiving that Charles
wore a tux. His face muscles contracted and his eyes squinted
like two shiny black coals beaming with a crazed despair from
under the rage of his clothing. Forcefully, almost fitfully, he
spat at Charles' feet, then turned his eyes away.

Staggering, his head nodding back and forth, the old man got
up and made his way down the street until he disappeared from view
behind the curtain of rain and heavy mist.

Charles stood shocked.

He stood there for a long time muttering to himself, and then,
still standing there with astonished eyes, he looked up at the win-
dows of the Hotel Richmond. How did he know he was not brought
back to the Hotel by the workings of something deep inside himself?

The beggar had been the past, and suddenly Charles longed to
put it all behind him. He longed intensely to plunge into the
party.

And then he was ashamed because he was torn between the trai-
torous desire he had for Marjory, whom he could not have at any
rate, and his love for Celeste. And then it all seemed so ridicu-
ulous because he knew he hated Marjory for what her people had done
to his mother, and he knew that, in a way he couldn't quite ex-
plain, he would always be afraid of Celeste. Then looking through
the high windows, he could see the money tree, radiant, shimmering,
slender and tall, and through the silver discs, through the curled
leaves, there seemed to appear a sudden silver smile that spread
through the skeletal plant and dissolved into a hideous grin.

Maniacal, like a silver trinket beaming at his despair, it began to
laugh, and the laughter spread to the streetlights and to the brick of the hotel, and then hysterically to the sidewalk, the passing cars, the street itself. Soon, everything about him seemed to be laughing.

The shame bit into him; he laughed at it and laughed at himself. Tears sprang into his eyes. McAllister was right; there was much for him to learn. His tears were bitter, hysterical, and sweet, shot through with pain and disgrace; he longed to think that they were the tears of an artist and were cleansing and good, but he couldn't make himself see it.

"Can you?" he asked later.

"No," said McAllister.

McAllister was only a trifle disappointed. "Jean said she had a wonderful time," was all he could mutter, before retreating slowly to his work bench and continuing his work. "I expect to see Ronald and some of his friends here before too long," said McAllister. "They're coming down from Washington."

Charles nodded.

"Will I enjoy them?"

"Perhaps not," said McAllister. "They're not exactly your type."

"And what type am I?"

"You're a promising young man, not overly unattractive, with a fair amount of acumen, and you have the capacity, I believe, to become something of a gentleman."

"There are no gentlemen anymore."
"There's no harm in being knowledgeable," said McAllister.

"How would you say that I failed?"

McAllister rubbed his fingers gingerly up and down the jaw of the wet bust before him, reshaping the curve expertly so that the mouth mysteriously opened and the protrusion of thick lips seemed more jutting and violent.

"You were disappointed because they didn't take you into the fold. I warned you beforehand not to expect anything of that kind."

"It's strange they don't take you in," said Charles. "Aren't you a somewhat distant relative of Robert E. Lee?"

"Yes," said McAllister, his balding head glistening as he dabbed away at the bust. "They do have a certain respect. They had a certain respect for you also, but you failed to see it."

"That bust is strange."

"It's experimental."

Charles went quietly to the window and looked out over the garden; each path, each bench, each fountain seemed unmistakably stamped with McAllister's personality. He turned around, regarding McAllister as the little artist's hands deftly transformed the clay. The hands flashed white in the sunlight streaming through the window, and Charles caught his breath.

"Where do I fit?" he said suddenly. "Where do I belong?"

Continuing his work, McAllister smiled faintly and involuntarily, as if he wanted to keep his amusement secret.

"You don't belong anywhere, yet. That is what is so unique
about you. You do not yet belong in high society or low society. You do not belong with college boys, and you do not belong with men. I must strain to figure out where you belong."

Charles looked hopeless and disappointed as he stood framed in the window behind him. In his mind he was aware again of shining sand, blue water, and his mother beside him. He crept closer to her, putting his small face against her breast. He could see himself, hiding in her, keeping away from the large boys tearing through the water, and the little girl on the embankment licking chicken grease from her fingers.

Charles turned his eyes away from the painter.

"Here, here," said McAllister, flustered. He jammed his fingers into his pockets. "Here, here it is. You may have it now." Like Celeste had done once before, McAllister was thrusting forth a small rusted key.

On the third floor of the carriage house, Charles fitted the key to the door and, after the click, let the door swing back. His new room seemed incredibly restful, and he was swept with a feeling of elation. He had expected the room but he hadn't expected McAllister to give it to him for nothing. Nevertheless, it was finally his now; he was living with McAllister. The old man expected only medical aid and a few small services his daughter couldn't be expected to perform.

"It is good for us both," McAllister said. And then he threaded his way slowly down the winding stair, leaving Charles to himself and to the ticking of the old clock on the mantle. Charles
went to the balcony and gazed for a long time down at the perfect symmetry of the garden; from that height he could see that it was divided into seven equal parts, seven rectangles that formed a perfect square.

It was much superior to the view he had from his old dormitory window.

His dormitory room at the college was on the seventh floor, at the top of a tower rising swiftly above the blue waters of the lake. But the room was very dark when the lights were off for only a long narrow window in the corner of the room let in light, a single stream of light that garrishly and bleakly fell against the gray plaster walls. Living there, the only gloomy place on the campus in the spring, had depressed Charles greatly, but not to the extent that it depressed his roommate, Dick Brooks.

Brooks was a sullen young man who spent much of his time down by the lake, staring into the water, or at the narrow slit of a window, gazing into the sky. For days at a time he would lie without speaking, enormous and powerful in his bed with his great arms brown against the gray sheets, and stare morosely at the yellowed ceiling which hung limply over his head. He would cough and turn away when Charles looked at him, and he would scowl and mutter violently when Charles tried to talk.

"Don't you ever study Dick?"

"No," Brooks said.

"What's the matter, Dick? Maybe I can help."

"You can't help," said Dick, turning his face to the wall.
Charles felt an enormous sense of relief now that the carriage house was his home and he could move his belongings from the tower room. It wasn't that he hadn't liked Brooks, for he had never really known him, but the brown muscular boy had begun to disturb him with his nightly cries, his midnight walks, the many hours he stood silently gazing down the seven flights of the stairwell.

Charles would never forget the stairwell. From his room on the seventh floor, looking down into it was like looking into a lighted well. The floor of the basement seemed incredibly far away and the cold cement seemed to have the ability to attract him. It seemed to draw one to it, make one want to plunge over the rail, cascade down the seven floors, and merge with its bulk.

Charles could imagine Brooks standing there, looking down. He could imagine Brooks climbing over the rail and plunging down. So whenever Brooks stood gloomily over the rail, Charles felt his flesh crawl, seeming to creep across his face and run into the palms of his hands.

Brooks stood there one evening, Charles knew, for hours.
"Come on back in the room, Brooks,"
Brooks said nothing.
"Are you going to stand there all night?"
"I might," said Brooks, his hands, large and strong, tightly gripping the rail.
"Why don't you just jump?" cried Charles in a sudden fury.
"Just jump."
Charles could see in Brooks' face the face of the old hero of the gridiron, Mason, whose leg Charles had broken. Celeste had written to say that Mason had been accepted to college after all. But after failing his mid-term exams, Mason had gone into the chapel at V. M. I., placed the hilt of his sword against the altar, and impaled himself on it.

Brooks had the same sense of failure etched on his face that Charles imagined to be on Mason's when the latter, his clothing soaked with blood, had crawled from the altar and the pale hands of the Virgin Mary to die like an animal in the transepts of the church with candles lighted around him. In his imagination, Charles could see that face, pale, covered with blood, and flickering with the faint light of candles.

If there was a place for Charles at all, it was in the carriage house room, under the spell of the faint ticking of the clock. McAllister, obviously planning beforehand to house Charles in the room, had built in large bookcases and crammed them with books, so that like a fabulous wallpaper they seemed to cover the wall. The spring nights were beautiful in that room; the numerous old volumes, the ancient furnishings, the crocheted doilies on the arms of the old maroon sofa seemed to emit a low hum that only Charles could hear, a low hum of peace and serenity that Charles associated with the hum of voices in a classroom.

It was easy to lose one's person amid it all, for one seemed conscious only of time. It was as if that which had happened before and that which had been thought before were the only possible
or worthwhile realities, and Charles could feel himself becoming ever more lost in them. He would sit late at night while McAllister and Jean, on the first and second floors of the carriage house respectively, slept fitfully at best, and he would pore over books, the older the better, until the dawn arose and he fell asleep in his chair to the chirping of birds.

It seemed he couldn't go to sleep without the music of birds.

One spring afternoon when he awoke, Charles found McAllister nodding in the garden. The old man looked incredibly aged, his face was worn and as he slept it was open and loose as if it sought to pick up strength from the sun, as the sunlight slid between the trees to rest on his forehead. It saddened Charles to see McAllister like that, for the old man's appearance was comical and if McAllister was comical, what in God's name was he?

About McAllister's feet, scattered over the soft grass, were the stories Charles had written and had given him to read. The artist had taken them carefully, treating them as if they were indeed an important matter, a serious task he had become called on to perform. Charles could see that his stories had put McAllister to sleep; the old man nodded, and as his breath pulsed in and out it whistled in his nose.

Awaking, he squinted at Charles, who, now preoccupied by other thoughts, was looking out over the garden at the peonies, the cornflowers, and the hedge.

"I haven't managed it, yet," McAllister said, "my eyes hurt so fiercely."
"Oh that's all right."

McAllister rubbed his eyes sleepily and put on his glasses. Blinking like an owl, he pulled himself erect and with one hand tucked in his shirt.

"I wanted to speak to you of another matter," said Charles. "It is about Celeste."

"Celeste?"

"The girl I grew up with."

"Oh her, yes, yes. What of her? Is she doing well in college?"

"Well enough," answered Charles. "But it seems that I'm not going to see her this summer, as I had hoped. She's planning to go to some camp in West Virginia where she can work with crippled children. I don't want her to go, and I want you to suggest some plan for making her come here instead."

"Crippled children!" McAllister laughed.

"She's a do-gooder," said Charles, and as he spoke he was aware that he was ashamed of her; it suddenly seemed ridiculous to mention her to McAllister. McAllister didn't like women, and was of the opinion that the worse type of woman was the kind who tried to do something worthwhile. "They are sexless beings," he was fond of exclaiming, "they mother and corrupt."

"Forget her," said McAllister.

"Oh I can't do that."

"Listen to me Charles. You are unaware of it, but you have already outgrown the people you knew in the past. Don't let them have a place in your life. Here at college you are striving for
something better; you must live the intellectual life, cultivate people who are kin to you, people who live in your world."

Charles fell silent, powerless to argue.

"You must become something of a great man," said McAllister, "and something of a man of the world. Become arrogant. If a man is not superior, he is nothing. Do not allow yourself to think that the people of your past, barmaids, farmers, and the like, merit your attention."

"I mean this sincerely," said McAllister, emphasizing his point by looking away. "If you are not superior, you are nothing."

"I can't be cruel."

"You are cruel," said McAllister. "You have already refused to go home this summer, and I approve of that. You've got to wash those people from your life. What have they to do with a mind like yours."

"You overestimate my potential." Even as he spoke the words, Charles felt that he was lying.

He could picture Flora and the Major, busy about their senseless tasks, and he could remember Floyd and Del, the stupidity on their faces, sweating at their work, and he felt so immeasurably superior to them that he was suddenly filled with elation. It was true; he could never quite believe it before, but their derision of him had been based not on scorn, but on jealousy.

"I have not overestimated your potential; I only hope that you achieve it."

"And the people at college," said Charles, "where do you put
"Only slightly higher than your family at that farm. Why do you think I let you live here if not so you could get away from them?"

"I didn't know," said Charles.

"Ridiculous," said McAllister, putting his glasses to the ground and leaning his head back in the chair. "You have already told me that you do your college work with the back of your hand. If you had not been able to do that, I never would have liked you or given you the room. I expect you to go much farther right here than you could ever go at college."

Charles left him then and began his daily work with music. McAllister had lent him his entire collection of records, and Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, Copeland seemed to be pouring out of his ears. He and Jean, under her father's instruction, spent long hours listening to records, and when they could they attended concerts that were given in the city. Charles, only faintly embarrassed by the young girl beside him, would sit in the upper tier where the people below him were but faint dots of color.

He would listen carefully to the music. Jean giving herself unreservedly to the strains, would lift her face up to them in rapture. The music seemed to thrill her extremely, and Charles was always amused when at the crescendo she would shiver all over, her arms would tremble, and her eyes would go moist; she looked pretty then, but she was still very young.

"Was it good?" McAllister would ask later.
"Terrible father," Jean would say. "It couldn't have been worse."

"I thought it was good," Charles would say honestly, as a frown came to McAllister's red face.

"What a pity, you have yet to develop an ear," he would mutter.

"Beast," laughed Jean.

Charles felt himself courageous; he had admired the music and he thought it absurd in this one instance for Jean to cater to her father's dislike of the Richmond symphony. According to McAllister, one could not tell what good music was unless one disliked the concerts at the Mosque. "Listen again to the records," McAllister would say. "Listen until you can tell the difference between music finely played and that trash at the Mosque. When you finally learn the difference, then it can be said that you have developed an ear."

At the end of the spring Charles gave up his honesty; one sounded to him as good as the other, but now he professed loudly that McAllister was right.

For this deception he was rewarded by Jean's smiles, secret and sweet.

McAllister liked Charles' stories, but he admitted they were shallow. When McAllister read, his eyes seemed to peer through the paper and into the very soul of the writer, who stood nervously, fidgeting at the window, gazing off into the garden. "You must be better educated," said McAllister. "Here, read this and this
and this, and you will see how it is; you must not make so many mistakes. That is not the way. I wouldn't give you these books if I didn't expect you to read them."

So Charles was alone much of the time in his room overlooking the garden. Classes were ending, and without the daily interruption he was expected to make great progress. He spent the time at his desk, tapping his pencil on the old mahogany as he read. Books seemed to give him the capacity to dream. He dreamed between the lines, and the words on the page always seemed by chance to correspond to the dream, so the words seemed alive.

"I want you to change your major," said McAllister.

"To what?"

"From English to psychology, and then from psychology to philosophy."

"But why?"

"English can be done alone," said McAllister, "but you must have formal training in the other two."

"There is much I don't know about English."

"There are, maybe," said McAllister, "one thousand worthwhile works of fiction. You have already read half and you foolishly assume that you will not run out. But you will run out of worthwhile works of fiction, and since you must constantly encounter thought to stay alive, you must broaden your base."

Charles nodded, half complaisant, half interested now.

So there were new books lining his walls, strange volumes he didn't quite understand until the summer wore on and he began to
see the several patterns of thoughts. And then all at once it seemed that everything was clear, and he began to relish his task. McAllister made him keep notes on the books he had read because their discussions together would involve them, but Charles eventually felt that he didn’t need notebooks anymore. Everything he read seemed to fit in a niche, to fall into an overall pattern which appeared before him in an almost visible form, as if it were matter.

There were patterns too in the garden below him: patterns of roses, of violets, of phlox that wound their way down garden paths and once even seemed to spell his name. At two o’clock he and McAllister would have tea in the garden. Jean, white in her clean summer dresses, would sit on the grass and listen to them talk, Charles of his work, McAllister of everything in the world but his work. The old man seemed younger in the summer, when under the heavy shade of the trees the breeze rustled by and poured strength into his thick but fragile frame.

The old artist was in love with his garden just as Charles’ mother had been in love with her; at least, thought Charles, they have that in common if nothing else. After tea McAllister would go to sleep. His heavy lids would involuntarily close, and soon, as Charles went back to his room and took up his position on the balcony, McAllister would be snoring and Jean would be in the room below Charles putting on her bathing suit for her daily swim along the edge of the James.

That was a pattern, and the very rigidity of it caused
Charles to experience a feeling of order and a strange feeling that he was free at last. In its midst, he could forget about Marjory and Celeste.

Charles often encountered his professors at concerts, at teas, in the book stores of Richmond. Even though McAllister respected them little there was much about them that Charles admired; they seemed able to comport themselves with the same sense of ease that Charles now enjoyed. He could envision them as being very much like he was, spending their time locked in their studies and breaking from them only for a trip to the library, a play down at Barksdale, or a green picnic amid the sloping hills and tall pine and fir trees of the campus.

As the end of the summer approached there seemed to Charles to be a new strength in him. In the garden he would flex his arms and his body felt massive and powerful and he began to feel, too, that his mind was growing. It began to be difficult to believe that he was ever afraid of Floyd or Del, difficult to believe that college students had once intimidated him to the extent that they could force him to turn his head.

Now, as never before, his college contemporaries seemed to him to be shallow and base.

He dreaded the thought of returning to school, for it meant leaving the carriage house in the morning when McAllister might need him.

"Don't be afraid of that," said McAllister. "I am capable of taking care of myself."
Charles stood by the bedside; McAllister was coughing, pulling the bedsheets against his mouth to muffle the sound, but Charles could detect the sharp hacking sound deep in the old man's breast and it filled him with dread. What if McAllister should die; what would he do then? The old man was now taking one cold after the other.

But the next morning McAllister was up and about, puttering around his workshop, asking the surprised graduate student to undress because he, McAllister, had decided that he would paint her nude, picking the roses in the garden. Charles watched for a time, unobserved on the balcony, as she, her body glistening in the sun, leaned over the rose bush to clutch a blossom. Then suddenly, shielding her eyes from the sun, she perceived him standing there with an amused smile on his face. She shrieked and shielded herself with her hands, and McAllister, looking up from his canvas, laughed uproariously.

It was good to see McAllister laugh like that; if he could laugh so violently he couldn't be sick.

Charles could see that McAllister was still in high spirits as the three of them, Charles, McAllister, and the prim blond graduate student, had tea together at two. Though pink from her morning in the sun, the graduate student, May Winslow, seemed dark in the shadows of the sycamore as she tilted her cup. Charles knew she had never posed nude before, and he took a cruel interest in how she tried to hide her embarrassment. She fidgeted in her chair and laughed and tried to be gay.
"Oh, you know how it was," she said. "I was just surprised at the moment. I didn't know it was you at first. Oh, you know how it was, just foolish."

She made a smile come to her face, but her laugh was strained. She kept glancing at Charles, hoping he didn't remember her nakedness. When she took in the teacups, McAllister grinned and whispered, "It was her first time. She wants to be sophisticated."

"It's obvious," said Charles.

"She's yours," said McAllister, "if you take her now."

Later that afternoon, May was still trying to be gay as Charles carried her to bed. But though she chattered like a squirrel and demurely stroked her hair, Charles found out that bed for her was a first time too. When she left the cottage, still forcing the smile, Charles went to the window and saw her face break into pieces as she tumbled behind the wheel of her car.

Charles felt terrible about that. He was suddenly sick and couldn't appear for dinner.

"Don't let it worry you," said McAllister later. "It was bound to happen to her. Nothing could stop it. It was well it was with you, for others might have abused her."

"I will never do anything like that again," said Charles.

"No," said McAllister, "I should think you wouldn't. But for you, too, there had to be a first time."

"I've been to bed before."

"I don't mean that," grumbled McAllister.

Charles tried to lose himself in his books that evening. He
pored over the pages, trying hard to forget the girl he hardly knew and would probably never see again except at a distance. May had squirmed with him and yielded to him in such a way that he knew her movements and interests were feinted, and it made him sick to think of her desperately trying in the midst of her fear to impress him and convince him that she was something she wasn't. Charles had never known such power before, and to think that he possessed it caused him great anguish. Repenting, that evening, he wrote Celeste a letter. He trembled as he wrote it.

He couldn't concentrate on his books, so at last he cast them aside and lay for a long time in the dark trying to sleep. With someone like Marjory Kennet it would have been different; that he knew he could enjoy. He could see Marjory again swirling amid the dancers, and then her image seemed to dissolve, and suddenly the lake frozen over with ice was before him and he could see her skating there, her long beautiful limbs coasting over the ice, her black hair in the wind, her face brown and lovely, tense, steeling itself against the cold.

School had already started again; he would see her there.

Over his toast in the morning, half afraid, he said to McAllister in a voice unnaturally low, "I have invited Celeste . . . ."

McAllister looked up from his place.

"I have invited Celeste," Charles blurted out, "to come and see us over Christmas. I would like very much to put her up here for a few days, if you have no objections." McAllister said nothing, and defensively, Charles turned his eyes away and nervously
fiddled with the morning paper, pretending to be reading. McAllister finished his meal and went into the kitchen. Afraid he had done wrong, Charles looked to Jean for support.

"He will let you," she whispered.

"How do you know?"

"I know him," said Jean.

McAllister came back from the kitchen with a glass of milk. Pouring himself a glass, he picked it up calmly, and looking at nothing in particular he put it to his lips. Then with his bread he began casually mopping up the egg on his plate.

"Do you approve?" asked Charles.

McAllister pushed his chair back from the table and half closed his eyes.

"No," he said bluntly,

"But why?"

"You must forget her. She is not of your world."

"But I love her."

McAllister rose from the table abruptly, knocking over the milk. The carton lay on its side and the cold milk gushed out over the checkered tablecloth and down to the floor, where McAllister's cat lapped in up with delight. Charles watched the milk forlornly as McAllister, coughing and Wheezing, stumbled from the room and shut the door behind him.

"Now he'll pretend to be sick," Jean said, casually finishing her toast.

Jean had to serve McAllister lunch in bed. The old man took
it from the tray as if the effort caused him pain. "Where's Charles?" he asked, and then nodded when Jean told him that Charles was in his room. The evening approached and the trees in the garden threw shadows that crossed and then recrossed Charles' oriental rug and played charades on the wall. Charles refused to see McAllister. "Nothing," he declared, "will make me cater to his whims."

"He'll give in," said Jean, before she crept on tiptoe back down the stairs.

Later, Jean watched as Charles tied his tie before the mirror in her room, and then, with meticulous care, comb his forehead back off his brow. Dressed in a lemon sheath that looked too old for her, Jean sat in a chair watching, secretly delighted that he planned an evening out with her. "Today is Friday," she said. "Shall we go out to the college and see if there is a party?"

Charles looked at her strangely. Though she loved her father greatly and seemed sophisticated for her age, she took an infant's delight in defying his orders.

"Have you been to a fraternity party before?"

"No," she said reluctantly, "he doesn't let me date."

"Well, this evening," Charles said gallantly, "this evening, young lady, you have a date."

Still determined to be gay, Charles felt ridiculous standing in a corner of the dance floor with a girl much younger than he. The shadows seemed to flit across his face and deride him with low mocking laughter. The band played loudly; there were screams from
from the colored singer, and couples embracing openly amid the shadows and the glitter danced by too quickly to be locked together so closely. The noise, the sweating bodies, the raucous laughter, the dim lights of red, and the faint foolish buzz of numerous jokes and introductions seemed to work their way quickly to the center of his nerves.

"Cat Wilson," a voice said loudly, and Charles perceived through the darkness a hand thrust toward him. Taking the sweaty palm he was instantly repulsed, but he gave a feeble shake before the boy disappeared in the crowd.

Charles felt foolish and alone when he and Jean tried to dance. The cigarette smoke and the smell of alcohol invaded his nostrils, leaving an unpleasant sensation of staleness and nausea. A bathtub in the rear of the lodge contained a sickly purple liquid, and tasting it, Charles was aware of its crudity, its lack of smoothness, as if its mixture had known nothing of proportions.

As they danced, the spangled gaudy uniforms of the band glinted through the dark haze above them. Visiting the bathtub more often, they scooped out cups of purple passion, and holding his crystal cup to the light, Charles could see the liquid, glowing, sickly, like some dreadful poison. A circle gathered in the middle of the room where a couple was dancing wildly as others watched, and Charles could hear the applause and laughter when the girl's black straps slipped off her brown shoulders. Charles was drunk and revolted.

In his disjointed thoughts he was ashamed of himself for re-
acting against McAllister in such a disgustingly childish way, like an adolescent running away from home, and he was ashamed too because he had brought Jean. She seemed lost in the crowd, and he could tell from one look at her that he wasn't proper security. In spite of her earlier bravado, she looked frightened and uneasy. McAllister has protected her from the world too much, Charles thought; he should let her have experience. Suddenly, he was aware that he was bitter about it: the refined little girl, the little girl with a taste for classical music and a fine capacity for ebullience, had been betrayed by her father and would wonder alone all of her life afraid of the world.

Then he pictured Celeste as being as frightened as Jean, unprepared for the parties that the world made her bathe in. She was so delicate, and he had forsaken her.

"May I cut in?" A voice was at Charles' ear, a hand tapped his shoulder.

Dancing with the loud boy decked out foolishly in a blue blazer, Jean seemed ever so much more happy. It was as if she were relieved to dispose of Charles, but not noticing Jean, Charles still felt bitter about the way McAllister had created for her an artificial world, a false world of refinement. His head began to spin and he felt as if he would fall. Sitting in a chair at the edge of the floor, Charles closed his eyes and fought against the sinking feeling that had invaded his brain.

He was aware of the voices of two girls floating across the room.
"Who's that?"

"Charles Delfold," the other voice whispered.

"What's he like?"

"Smart boy, supposedly. Something of a snob. All he needs is a bath and psychoanalysis."

Charles opened his eyes quickly, but the room was a blur and he could see nothing. He wondered if he had imagined the voice or if it were real, if it were the voice of his mother whispering on the wind. Jean was out of sight when his vision cleared and the image of the dancers whirled about him. Now again in the bathroom, he put his cup in the bathtub and rejoiced at the sight of the purple dangerous liquid.

But then anger swept him for no reason at all. He clenched his fists and looked all around him. Coming out of the bathroom he could see Jean dancing again in the middle of the room, her bracelet gleaming in the red light like the eyes of a tiger. Then the music became sensuous and slow and he thought he would cry, for Celeste stood before him with all of her love in her eyes. She looked at him, cocked her head, and held out her arms.

The girl he asked to dance turned from him quickly, her red sheath strutting as if it were attached to a peacock. Joining a group of boys at the side of the lodge, Charles tried to speak and all the talking ceased. "God damn them," he muttered, turning away from the throng and plunging back down into his chair in the corner. Nodding and dozing he was unaware of how long he was unconscious of his surroundings.
But when he woke he was aware of a group of boys at the far end of the lodge assembled together. The band had stopped playing and the only noise in the lodge came from the girls' half of the room where they chatted together. The boys, dressed remarkably alike in spite of the fact that they sported a variety of color, linked their arms together and formed a concave arc so the girls could watch them sing like birds.

Charles joined the other boys who were not fraternity members.

So standing now in the shadows with the other gate crashers, he watched as the assembled boys sang song after song, bright and rousing on the fraternity songs, solemn and doleful on the rest. Then suddenly all the lights in the lodge were out. Charles stood, sober now, "What's happening?" he asked the young boy beside him.

"They'll sing their theme song," came the voice through the darkness.

"That's the most idiotic thing I ever heard," said Charles, and the boy beside him responded to the statement with laughter.

"They're clowns," said the voice.

"Is it a good song?"

"Wait till you hear it."

"Do they cry?" asked Charles, and this time several boys joined in the laughter.

Then suddenly thirty voices rose with saccharine sweetness and seemed to fill the darkness. Thirty voices sang as the light slowly came, reducing the pitch black to a solemn milky whiteness which revealed, as it were, fifteen young men kneeling with one knee on
the floor, and fifteen young men standing behind them with their right hands covering their hearts. "Clowns," said the sour faced youth standing to Charles' side. "Look at their faces."

"Sour grapes," said Charles, but he looked.

Each of the thirty young faces was well scrubbed, that was first apparent, but what caught Charles' attention was the look on each face of the utmost piety, an enraptured look that told Charles they were singing with their hearts. "I think I'm going to be sick," said the boy beside him.

"Ahh," said Charles, feeling with throbbing temples the music that gushed around him.

A few moments later the sound was over and Charles gratefully resigned himself to the horrid beat of the band. He was somewhat aroused, for the great yell and applause that followed the song made him cringe all over as if a sudden sickness had gripped his body. Jean was dancing again, the red lights were on, and once again the air was filled with the smell of punch. Even the smell now made him nauseous, but he knew himself well enough to know that he wouldn't be sick.

He could think clearly now, but everything was puzzling. It was strange, those clean white faces in a row bobbing and pious as their mouths dispensed one of the silliest songs he'd ever heard in his life. It was strange, but suddenly he felt very old and very relieved that he had somehow skipped all that. "They couldn't have minds," he thought. He would ask McAllister about that.

Yet what was this feeling of jealousy raging inside him?
Hadn't he envied their stupidity, and didn't he envy their capacity to live foolishly without feeling foolish? How comforting he thought it must be to identify with an organization and find satisfaction, unaware that you are nothing in yourself. How precious was the privilege to be corny, and to think that you are captivating, scintillating, and beautiful all the while. "Oh, God," he thought, "to be rid of my mind, feeble, ridiculous, shameful and tired as it is."

Yet, too, he envied their women, those foolish things that fluttered about them. How stupid, how really pathetic they were, and yet they could give their bodies, and he wanted their bodies then. "God," he thought, "it is horrible." And then he was overcome with a throbbing inside him that beat on his insides like hammers beating on a door, and he found his way to a chair and sat down in it, his heart beating heavily and fast. Then the room seemed to become red all over, and he fought against the rage that like a flood seemed to sweep him aside.

With the purple liquid in his hand he felt very much calmer, and as he watched Jean, laughing but lonely, he felt a little fear and he couldn't help wondering why a vestige of it, a tiny grain of it, was there.

By all standards he could respect, he was very much their superior, but by standards no thinking man could respect, they were very much his. It was then that he discovered the reality of standards, that they exist and function, and it frightened him somewhat to know that, although they knew who he was, knew he was a top
student, a boy who had a pipeline to high Richmond society, they laughed at him when they saw him and honestly, sincerely, felt that he was lower than they. And at that moment Charles saw that there was nothing he could do about it.

McAllister was right. There was in one world two different worlds, and all of the pain he had experienced had clearly been his own fault. He pounded his fist into the palm of his hand. How hopeless and foolish to try to live in the other world, the one of which he could never be a part.

And he felt frightened again; he saw Marjory and Celeste before him. He hated one and feared the other and for the life of him he didn't know which one to pick.

The liquor flowed, and soon Charles' head once again began to spin. Getting out of the car when Jean drove him home was rather difficult and unsettling. He leaned heavily on her when she helped him into the house, and Charles could see she was crying.

"I'm sorry," Charles said.

"It wasn't you," sobbed Jean.

"What then?"

"That boy I was dancing with said indecent things to me."

Charles was enraged.

"He looked at me as if I was dirt."

And then Charles felt a wave of affectionate pity for Celeste; and looking at Jean he was miserable. He had never wanted to feel that way. Traitorous, helpless, unworthy of love and trust.

So McAllister had the laugh. Bumping and falling, staggering
up the stair, Charles could imagine he was hearing McAllister,
lying awake in bed, giggling in the dark. He tried to walk quickly and quietly but the old boards of the stair creaked loudly and seemed to echo in his head, down the staircase, into the hall, and into the blackness in which McAllister giggled.

Charles lay in his bed awake, enclosed by the shadows that did slow motion gymnastics on the wall. Through the moonlight coming through and lighting the French doors to the balcony, he could see magnolia leaves, black pieces of cloth, swaying with the breeze and gently brushing the railing. Leaves blew against the glass, and for a moment, as if pasted there, they hung against the cold glass making shadows on the wall that suddenly and quickly flitted upward and away.

Spot shadowed and dark yellow in the night, the wall loomed before him and wouldn't let him sleep. When he closed his eyes the room would spin, and when he opened them the changing forms on the wall made him feel lonely and somehow far away.

And he could see again the tall pines that bordered the beach's one road, and he could hear the sound the wind made as it swept through their branches. In his imagination the pines were majestic priests spreading their black robes to take off into the air, to soar above the night clouds and fly in the blackness of space beyond. But the wind died down and they relaxed their arms; then like gloomy sentinels they stood in a row that was shrouded with darkness.

And then he could see balloons being released on the edge of
the bluff, and he watched as they were either carried up into the darkness or popped by the exploding lights of fireworks whose red fragments spangled the sky. Across the yard there were fourteen lanterns strung on a line. He counted them then, and watched to see how their gay magic lights painted faces on the pretty boys who danced on the bluff.

When the boys were older, they would bathe in red lights, music, and darkness.

There was a noise at Charles' door, but instead of being frightened, he turned over on his side and with half closed eyes pretended to be asleep. McAllister, trying to be quiet, walked heavily across the room and pulled a chair over next to the bed. "Just talk a minute," muttered McAllister, rousing Charles with his hand, "then you can go back to sleep."

Charles sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"Did you learn that what I told you is true?"

Charles nodded and McAllister laughed faintly. The moonlight, striking the top of his head, made him look like a monk as he put his hand to his face to wipe away the smile. "Did Jean learn it too? Was it pretty dreadful?"

Charles nodded again and McAllister continued, "I came to tell you that I really was sick today and that it was not as you and Jean supposed. A couple of sly dogs you two are, both of you rascals."

"But I also wanted to tell you," McAllister said, "that I plan in the near future to have Marjory over here for tea; may I
have your blessings in this endeavor?"

"No," said Charles. "I disapprove."

"Nonsense, I happen to know that you would enjoy a little tête-à-tête with Miss Kennet. Do you deny that it is your fondest wish?"

"I do," said Charles. "I don't want to know her."

McAllister laughed faintly, as if he knew that Charles was lying. "I do it for your good," he said. "It's high time you had an affair with someone of her calibre; you want to be a writer, and this is a perfect opportunity for you to learn a little of life. As a matter of fact, the meeting is already arranged. I merely seek your blessings."

Charles was becoming angry and afraid; to his utter dismay, McAllister's suggestion delighted every fibre of his being. He could already see Marjory walking into the garden dressed in white sable, her hair, black and long, flowing over her shoulders, and as she advanced toward him, her eyes announced that she was his. And he took her in his arms and held her.

"Oh, my God," Charles cried. "Why did you do it? The rich bitch probably thinks we're bugs." Now he could see Marjory turning away from the gate, her nose in the air, her hair, black and soft like velvet, streaming heartbreakingly behind her.

"Is it a deal?" asked McAllister.

"Is what a deal?"

"You weren't listening."

"What did you say?"
"I said," McAllister repeated, "that I will give my permission for you to bring Celeste here for the Christmas holidays if you'll consent to have tea now and then with Marjory and me."


"No," said McAllister. "It's your way."

"It is not," stammered Charles.

McAllister was silent.

"Leave me alone."

Again there was silence. Charles, looking at the darkened glass of the French doors that led out to the balcony, became aware of a horrible silence and stillness. Suddenly he realized that McAllister was hurt, and he looked up in time to see a look of utmost misery fade from the old man's face. Like a child, Charles bit his lip, and it seemed as if his soul was whining in the dark. He looked down at the sheets and then back at McAllister.

"You don't understand yet," said McAllister, his face tense and his eyes pleading. "What I do, I do for your good. I do it for your sake only." The voice was trembling, but it came to Charles as if through a tunnel. It was persuasive but slow, pitifully slow and drawnout.

"These people," said McAllister, "when they look at me, what do they see? An artist, just an artist. But listen to me Charles. You can be different. You can become one of them, with time, and you can rule them, you can hurt them, you can take that girl and break her like a stick."
McAllister's hands broke an invisible branch, and to Charles there seemed to be an audible crack.

"You can make them do what you will," said McAllister. "You can become a lord of the earth, a man of the world, a man of art. Listen to me Charles. You can hurt them as badly as you want to do, but you can't do it from the outside. To do it you've got to be in, in, in. That's how you've got to do it. It's the only way you can do it."

McAllister was sweating. His eyes were glistening and filling with water. "You can do it, Charles. You can rule, rule everything. You've got to be a superman to live in the world. You listen to me and we can do it; we can be like that. It's the one thing worthwhile in the world."

"But that world doesn't exist," said Charles. "It doesn't exist any more. All of this world you're talking about doesn't exist any more."

"Nonsense," barked McAllister. The old man turned away and spat on the floor. He was suddenly angry; even in the darkness his face was visibly red and hot.

"It does exist," he said angrily. "You think that because you can see only very little of it that it doesn't exist. It exists for everyone." McAllister's thick forefinger was pointing at the side of his head, "It exists here."

Charles lay in the dark looking at the shadows. McAllister, disturbed, had retreated to his room, and Charles was alone only literally. Figuratively, he was back at the ballroom of the Hotel
Richmond, dancing with the daughters of magnates, with the daughters of industrial men who owned cigarette plants and warehouses on the James. And all the while he danced he swore to himself that he would never leave Celeste, that he would keep her there beside him while he did what McAllister wished.

Celeste had been beautiful as a child. Charles remembered, as the shadows danced on the wall, that Celeste had loved the beach only in the morning, before it became crowded. She always seemed to soak up the quiet as she sat without speaking on the edge of the sandbar that paralleled the point. Even as a child of twelve she seemed to understand the bay; she seemed to act as if her blood were a vital part of it. He could see her yet, sitting as she used to.

Celeste was drenched; her brown hair was wet and streaming with sea water. Letting her tiny feet dangle into the little pool of watery glass that nestled between two low lying strips of sand, she laughed to see that the pine and fir trees, high up above her on the bluff, cast their image in such a way that the tallest of the pines pointed directly between her feet and the other pines were scattered about her.

The sun was hot and shining. Even in the morning its presence was felt. Heat came from the water along with the glitter of trinket-like shells, the shimmer of sand crabs burrowing in and out, the tiny fighting fish in schools whose emerald backs glinted with sunlight. Celeste laughed loudly to see that the world was such a candy box. She laughed as if she had time to
investigate its infinite proportions.

Charles wondered how she would be now. Much relieved that she would visit the carriage house after all, he tried to picture the changes in her that were bound to have taken place since the time he had last seen her.

Charles was a little disturbed with himself over the compromise with McAllister that permitted him to have Celeste there, but at least he hadn't given in totally. Maybe he was getting a little stronger in that. Then suddenly he remembered the graduate student, May Winslow, and he wished guiltily and for his own sake that he hadn't taken advantage. Though Celeste would understand, he himself could never forget that he'd done it, and the realization of this caused him pain.

He wondered if Celeste would be like Mrs. Donlevy or if she would be like Jean or McAllister or, perhaps, God forbid, she would be like May Winslow with her ridiculous ambitions. One thing was for sure: she would not be like Marjory Kennet and her crowd or the shimmering foolish things at the fraternity party. He was sure of that.

And then he seemed to be able to see Celeste again before him, but her face was hidden, and Charles couldn't help wondering how much she, if she removed her veil, would now look like his mother.

Before sleeping he twisted in his bed with worry, counting the days until Christmas. How he hated those feelings of unease that Marjory caused!
CHAPTER II

Charles was again trying to write the Major and tell him that he wouldn't be home for Christmas, but in the back of his mind he knew the letter was unnecessary: this time, no one had asked him to come. He hadn't heard from the Major in over a year. It was, perhaps, best that way, for him at least. Though the Christmas holidays had not yet begun, Celeste was already down on the farm. Charles understood that. Someone had to go and check the Major's grief.

With her hair, long and brown and dabbed with gray, done up in a bun, Mrs. Donleavy was down in the garden talking with some animation to McAllister, who dismissed her most impassioned comments with a wave of the hand. Clearly agitated, the woman stood up from her chair, crossed the garden, and slammed the garden gate behind her.

Charles was watching from the balcony.

"Damn her," McAllister said nonchalantly, as he puttered about his workshop, "she wanted me to attend one of those atrocious faculty meetings. I suppose I should give up a day's work for their foolish projects. I haven't many left, God knows."

"Didn't you find her attractive?"

"What?" said McAllister. "An academic woman?" His owl eyes appeared surprised as they peered at Charles. "They are all dates and statistics; they are all virgins. Don't you know that?"
"She has nice shoulders," Charles said.

"Nonsense," said McAllister. "Did you hear her stupid conversation?"

Charles nodded, "I listened from the balcony."

"Phew!"

Charles smiled and relaxed in the rocker, settling back to watch McAllister frowning over the ill-shaped lump of clay on the work bench. The old man looked at it from every angle. He squinted, and suddenly his face was alive with displeasure. As a malicious judge, he made a decision revealed by his face, and then he angrily made a ball of the clay and put it in the cabinet.

"The woman has no reason to hate the registrar. What's his name? Ferguson. Anyway, she has no reason to hate him. She's as bad as he."

"Ferguson's a bad sort," said Charles, "non-progressive. He thwarts everything they try to do at the college. They've been trying to get rid of him for years. I'm sure your support would have helped."

"Phew," said McAllister. "A whole day's work and nothing for the kiln. What have I to do with them? Conservatives, liberals--they are all the same. Neither understands anything. I have nothing for either of them. Phew!" McAllister once again locked the cabinet and this time tucked away the key.

"But Ferguson's an evil man, malicious. He desires only to destroy. He's thin and dark, with a face like a rat, and he slouches when he walks."
"Good," said McAllister. "He must be a very fine fellow. To be a man one must learn to destroy. I myself destroy. Did you see that piece of clay? Did you see me destroy it?"

"But it wasn't of value."

"Phew," said McAllister. "Nothing is of value."

Charles went upstairs to finish his letter; it was absurd to do so but something compelled him. The trouble was that he knew it was no use making an excuse, for the Major long ago had stopped believing his excuses. Without irrational explanations of his behavior, his letter must necessarily be blank; for there was nothing else worth putting down. He doodled for a few minutes more and then decided that he would just say he was sorry. His words seemed meager and weak.

They were like the words with which he tried to cheer up the registrar at the faculty party; they were about five degrees worse than nothing at all. They would cause irritation, perhaps regret. Perhaps they would make the Major remember once again what had happened just two weeks before. He couldn't have loved Flora. Charles couldn't see how anyone could. But then again, Charles supposed that the Major didn't exactly enjoy his wife's being split open on the highway, her blood bursting out of her body in drops like seeds from a pomegranate.

Charles had to write something. He decided just to write that he was sorry, that he'd always loved Flora, and that he was sorry that he'd missed the funeral.

If Charles felt truly sorry for anyone, that one was McAllis-
The old man's illnesses seemed to be increasing, and he no longer seemed to be happy with his work. He stayed in bed now sometimes for days on end, and when he did bring himself to work, his hands were slow and unsure, as if they no longer had a special knowledge all their own. He could see McAllister straining over his work, his forehead covered with sweat and his fingers struggling to regain their feeling.

Sitting at his desk Charles could remember that day at the stream when Flora unwittingly exposed herself to him. She had looked like an old chicken stripped of her feathers, and it seemed that day as if age had gotten her, as if there was nothing else about her that was living enough to be killed by a car. Yet it was ever so much later that they gave her a funeral, much later when the pine needles turned brown and drooped over her grave. It was strange that everything had waited so long.

Charles felt odd. In the very month when everything seemed so dead there was a clean white blanket of snow covering the ground, and the cold briskness of the air, the lovely ice sheeting the lake on the campus, made him feel refreshed and alive.

Celeste, reporting from the farm, told Charles in a letter that the Major had at last reached dotage. He sat all day, in his white suit, his black cane tapping, and drank in the glider that swung on the porch. One morning he had caned Del almost to death, and now there were no hands left to run the farm. The barn was on its last legs, the crops had failed, the house had run down, and the Major, all alone except for Celeste, sat all day swinging on
the porch and tapping his cane forlornly.

Celeste would be at the carriage house for Christmas. She had written that she would leave the Major on Tuesday.

In spite of his despair and reflections of no importance, the cool white snow lay all over Richmond, and Charles ran in it, up and down the campus, over the hill and through the firs, down over the snow packed ice of the lake. It stung his cheeks and wet his clothing but it didn't seem to matter, for there was a freshness in it and a feeling of rebirth. In his imagination Celeste ran with him, and to his joy there was always above him a white cloud-filled sky that seemed packed with coldness and snow. He ignored his numb fingers, his aching cheeks, his heart that beat fast and heavily like a pump. There was a freshness about and he longed to drown himself in it.

One morning he went and watched the blue swift flow of the James.

"Ronald's coming down from Washington," McAllister said, lying deep in his bed.

Charles muffled his groan.

He groaned as loudly then as he had when, minutes before, he had seen McAllister escorting Mrs. Donleavy through the snow in the garden so that they could sit, heavily wrapped but freezing, in the cold metal chairs. It seemed to him then that McAllister's eccentricity was coming to the fore, but then he caught himself, for McAllister was a maze of purposes and that was his only eccentricity.
McAllister had wanted an interview in discomfort, for such interviews tend to be short. The funny thing was that Mrs. Donleavy, in an attempt to win his good will, pretended she thought the idea delightful. Charles could picture McAllister putting to his room to have a laugh over that.

McAllister was wrong only when he equated the world of the mind with the world of society. Charles pondered this as he watched the two bundled figures sitting foolishly in the snow, Mrs. Donleavy angrier by the minute, McAllister nonchalantly waving his hand.

But the artist wasn't nonchalant the last time his son Ronald came from Washington for a visit, and he wouldn't be nonchalant when Ronald came again. He would hide in his room like a child and mutter at the table. He would try to disassociate himself from Ronald and the conversation at hand, for the truth was that the young man with yellow hair and deep blue eyes never failed to distress or bore him.

It was after McAllister had gone to bed in frustration that Charles, sitting in the high-backed stuffed chair of the studio, gazed down at Ronald and his friends as if from a height, and felt himself suddenly to be very old and, like the chair in which he was sitting, very outworn.

"It's love, love," said Ronald, his thin frame shaking. His stubble of blond beard trapped the light and seemed to Charles to sparkle and shoot flames like a candle. The curly heads of young boys nodded in agreement. Charles flicked the ashes away from his
cigarette and let them lie on the floor.

The gypsy, a black haired boy, sharp chinned and swarthy, turned to Ronald and stared with the frankest admiration.

Effecting a grin Charles asked, "So it's love you seek?"

Ronald turned away, embarrassed because his two younger companions nodded in agreement. "Stop it," he shouted, "he's playing you for fools." The thin tall boy rose quickly from his chair and seemed for a moment as if he would shake a fist in Charles' face. As Ronald stood watching Charles saw in his face a resemblance to McAllister. His eyes were blank; when he shook his arms it reminded Charles of the gliding of a bird.

"Do you like Nietzsche?" inquired Charles.

"Yes," said Ronald. His face seemed like jelly, quivering with hatred.

"And you advocate love?"

Charles laughed long and loud as Ronald stammered before him. The thrill of pleasure that passed through Charles' frame made him grip the arms of the striped chair to keep from giggling hysterically; it was a pleasure to him to know himself superior to a boy much older than he. But as Ronald stomped out of the room leaving his cohorts behind, Charles' breast seemed to be suddenly flooded with shame.

"Why is that?"

McAllister put on his glasses and tried to sit up in bed, but the effort was too much; continually attacked by the flu, he was weak and sluggish.
"Because," said McAllister, "you think you've taken his place."

"And have I?"

"He was never my son," said McAllister. "His mother took him away from me when he was ... let's see now ... when he was sick at the age of ... let's see ... ten. He comes around the old man now only because his mother is dead. Phew! He's no son of mine. I don't know him."

In his room, tapping a pencil on his desk, Charles thought about Ronald's feminine ways and the way he thought, as if his mind were a mire, as if he struggled in vain to make order out of the commonplace and found only despair. He was no proper son for McAllister.

Charles gazed in the mirror against the yellow wallpaper, and in a fit of sudden and uncontrolled egotism he found McAllister's legitimate son, and he gasped to observe himself, standing filled with smugness and deceit, admiring his strong arms and shoulders and the shock of brown hair that fell only a short distance down his brow.

Charles' face was very dark, not his complexion, but his face. His brows were dark and his hair was dark, but that didn't explain it. There was a darkness about him, a darkness that, now observed, suddenly seemed strange, and for a moment Charles was shaken as his name seemed not to fit him and the boy in the mirror seemed no longer to be real. With panic inside him he fought for himself, and with great difficulty he tried to find the syllables that taken together sounded his name. But it was all in vain. He stood in
front of the mirror until his movements became frantic.

It happened to all boys, but why him? Now? He was almost twenty.

That evening in bed he fought long hours for order. He was Charles Aaron Delfold, a student in college in the twentieth century, a protégé of an artist who was also a professor and who had standing in society, faded as it was. He hoped to be a writer and there was reason to think he could be. But there was a yearning inside of him, and he felt like a child.

He was better than the aimless son of McAllister, but inside of him still was the conviction that he was nothing. The shadows in his room seemed to be forever joking with him: they crossed the room as if they were dark nebulous fairies, they slammed shut the French doors to the balcony, and they creaked and squealed as they ascended the stair to dance in his room.

There was much work to do before Celeste arrived, work Charles felt he could not put off, but he admitted to himself that he enjoyed every minute he spent in the library or in his room. There was a strength in old volumes of books, a strength in their yellowed pages and their musty smell.

So another Christmas was to be spent in Richmond. There would be only one more if he went to school in the summer. Ronald wasn't coming to visit again until Celeste left. Charles thanked God for that, for he would hate to kill Ronald and bloody the show.

"Mr. McAllister," said Charles, "you took me in because you wanted a replacement for Ronald, didn't you?"
McAllister said nothing, but with a look of disgust continued his work.

Charles felt put down. He knew he’d been stupid.

Jean’s thin torso had seemed to fill out over the year. She was dating now, going out with high school boys who flustered in front of McAllister. It grieved Charles to know that she would leave her father the following year and go to school in New York, but she seemed to anticipate it happily. She was already picking out new clothes with excitement, excitedly reading books that were required for her courses.

Charles did not begrudge her her happiness, but it frightened him somewhat to know that the next year he would have to care for McAllister unassisted. And it irritated Charles that McAllister didn’t seem to notice Jean was going. It seemed the old man could talk of nothing but Marjory.

"She's sort of a renegade," he said.

"A renegade?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said McAllister, as with his fingernail he scratched off a spot of wet paint that had splattered on his clothes, "that Miss Kennet takes a foolish pride in not being proud. I mean that Miss Kennet would probably marry a commoner to keep up her image, if you know what I mean."

"I don’t like it," said Charles.

"Don’t like what?"
"You know damn well what I mean."

Next day McAllister waited at the door of the carriage house frantic with worry; his bald head glistened in the light of the winter sun and his hands seemed to tremble as if with the cold. "She's late!" McAllister exclaimed. His hand went to the top of his head and then brushed down across his forehead. "I don't know where she can be."

Charles came quickly up the gravel walkway trying not to reveal his relief, but he couldn't help feeling that it was cruel for Marjory to keep the old man waiting. All morning he had been straightening the living room and the equipment for cocktails was waiting in the kitchen. The night before McAllister had spent a lot of time selecting the right music, and the records were stacked on the phonograph ready to be played.

McAllister's living room was like a library, one with easy chairs and thick stuffed sofas. In the fireplace a blazing fire cracked and spit flames and seemed to make the frost on the cold window panes glow. When she came at last, Marjory failed to comment on the quiet beauty of the room with the fire twisting on the hearth. Without seeming to notice her surroundings, she sat primly in her chair. Her fingers were brown against the white of the cocktail glass when she put it gently, demurely to her lips.

She looked like a gypsy when Charles took her coat and mumbled a greeting. Dressed in a straight black sheath with a small silver necklace, she appeared as elegant as McAllister could have wished. When she took her glass she smiled. Charles, turning his eyes in-
voluntarily down, let his glance fall on her black sleeves, which were studded at her wrists with a silver clasp. The long sleeves made him catch his breath; it was as if he had never seen anything like them before.

"Oh, dear Mr. Ponti!" Marjory responded with a smile. "Do you really know him Mr. McAllister."

"Of course," said McAllister, who, dressed comfortably in vest, coat, and tie, was a vision of respectability and manners. "His mother was my mother's cousin." McAllister gingerly fingered his glass, and turned to Charles.

"You shall know Mr. Ponti," said McAllister. "He's a crazy old bird who lives in the mansion at the entrance to the college. Poor old Ponti. He lives there all alone."

"He's quite funny at parties," Marjory said laughing. "He's a dear, really, but he gets so drunk Mamma's afraid to invite him. I'm afraid when he's drunk he's often quite a lecher, but you can't invite one Ponti without inviting them all."

"He's a Montague, Charles."

"Oh yes," said Marjory, "very much so."

"Whatever happened to old Mrs. Beevil?"

"She's about. Surely you've seen her."

"No," said McAllister. "I've been ill, and my work has been such that I haven't been able to get about as I should."

"Oh, a pity," said Marjory, again taking her glass to her lips and smiling at McAllister. "I am glad you asked me to come today. It's quite scandalous the way you've ignored us the last
few years. But everyone says you're very busy."

McAllister stole a look at Charles, but Charles looked away and rested his eyes on Marjory. She was the same girl he had seen skating, the same one he had seen at the dance, but she looked somewhat different now, seated by the fire, fingerling her glass. There was a sophisticated look about her, but there was in her face something wild, something he had been too blinded to see before.

"She's a rebel, a wild animal, inside," McAllister had said. But then he added later, "It doesn't matter much. Have you noticed, Charles, that she has the most wonderful, the most beautiful thighs?"

In his seat before the fire Charles could not help but watch her. McAllister was right. Deeply sensuous with her long black hair and her dark blue eyes, Marjory was to Charles, nevertheless, the epitome of refinement. She did not speak to him but concentrated on McAllister, talking delightedly with him, dropping names and stories that both of them knew.

Charles could feel himself becoming lost in the flow of bright, shimmering words as he sat by the fire and watched Marjory's face. There was something in it that puzzled him, something he couldn't explain. It made a shiver run up and down his back.

Marjory laughed and exclaimed to McAllister, "Oh, the Stants would be alright if they knew where they stood. Oh, they are too comic! But I love them dearly."

Charles had it then. Suddenly he knew what had been bothering him all along. Marjory had two expressions, one a smile and
the other a somber look, and between the two there was nothing, no expression at all, as if she could register only the extremes. Her voice was a purr. It rose and fell, or seemed to jump inexplicably, between great joy and great sorrow.

"She's locked in tight," said McAllister at the door after seeing her off. "There's things inside of her that she'll never be able to get out."

Charles nodded his head, "She's strange."

"But beautiful."

"Yes, she is beautiful," said Charles.

"Did you ever see such thighs?"

"I admit I haven't."

McAllister laughed heartily, and he collapsed back in his chair to finish his cocktail. "You know," he said, becoming somber, "it's easy to see her very romantically. She seems to be a beautiful lady who has had great unhappiness. She seems to lie there, smiling sweetly and stoically, waiting for someone to come and make things alright. Her smiles are a cover-up for a great unhappiness. Do you think you can save her? There's a lot of money in it, and the best of society for the rest of your life."

Charles poured himself a drink. "Regarding her," he said with a laugh, "I would say there is less there than meets the eye."

"But she's romantic."

"Yes, she's romantic."

"It's an experience anyway," said McAllister with a grin.

Charles' nap that afternoon was a long one. In his dreams he
constructed the way it would be: standing before the mantle with a cocktail in his hand, he laughed at the world, unafraid of retaliation. There was money in his pockets, money in his bank, his railroad, his real estate company. There was a long line of people waiting at his office to see him, and with a nonchalant glance, he recognized the women he had known at the beach.

"Please Mr. Delfold!" they cried.

But the best of it all was Marjory cowering before him on the sofa: as she squirmed and wiggled, he drained his glass calmly, thoughtfully deciding what to inflict on her next. Then turning, his eyes on fire, he commanded—"Strip!"—and on the edge of the fireplace he made a fearful noise with the black handle of his cane.

He woke with a start.

McAllister was awake and the living room was lit only by the fire. It was already evening, and the shadows the fire made reminded Charles of the shadows of his room and of the shadows of the beach when the moon behind the trees spilled long and fierce shadows silently across the road and onto his face and body trembling in the dark.

"Did you notice how she looked at you?" asked McAllister.

"What?"

"Did you notice . . . ."

"I hear you," said Charles, "but what do you mean by that? She talked to you the whole time and didn't ever look my way. I've never been more ignored in my life."
"Listen to me, Charles," said McAllister, lifting his old head from the back of the chair. "When you went to the door to hold it open for her, I saw how she looked at you. Listen to me, I tell you that she was positively eating you up. It was almost indecent, disgusting..."

"Bull," said Charles, going back to sleep.

That night Charles was laughing at himself in the mirror when he suddenly realized that he was looking in it to see if what McAllister had said could possibly be true. No, it couldn't be, and yet he believed it. He laughed again in the mirror and for a moment he felt better. But then, inexplicably, he began to feel angry.

Was it possible that he'd somehow been demeaned?

He thought about it a long time as he lay in bed amidst the playing of shadows. Things were confusing and somehow incomplete. At last he realized that by accepting Marjory at all, beautiful as she was, he was undermining himself, and suddenly he was bitter that McAllister had invited her to tea. Well, it was over. He could be grateful for that.

He was glad, too, that he had found the courage to read some of his mother's letters before being subjected to Marjory. He could remember them now, and he could remember how painful it had been to insert his key in the box's rusted lock. Closing his eyes, as if to shut out all knowledge of what he was doing, he pushed back the lid and then waited for a moment before he looked at the papers lying before him.
His mother had saved more than just her letters, for there were other papers mixed in with them, papers that related to his family. He found a family tree sketched out with pencil, barely legible on faded yellow paper. Fascinated, Charles was up all night, curled up in the heavy chair by his bed with his night lamp gleaming, then flickering, in the dark. As dawn approached he put most of the letters aside. He still could not bear to read them, most of them anyway.

There seemed to be ghosts in his room, ghosts that leaned over his chair and whispered and laughed.

But now lying in bed, he was glad he had read at least part of what his mother had unwittingly left him. The remaining letters were again thrust away in the closet, but with him still, now that the shadows seemed to be a screen, was a projection of his father that had always eluded him before.

There were sounds below him. McAllister and Jean were going to bed.

And Charles could see the estate on which the Major now lived, and the past seemed to roll back and open, presenting him with a vision of his father, Charles Aaron Delfold, standing tall amid a crop of green and long blades of alfalfa. His father was sweating, but the drops of water were caught by the absorbent band of his wide panama hat. His father's hands were brown and strong, and rested arrogantly on his hips as he surveyed his crops.

And then Charles' father smacked a horse on the flanks, unmindful that his white suit might become covered with grime.
There was a proudness in his father's eyes, a courage, a fortitude, as arrogant as a fighter, he threw back his head and laughed at the colts scrambling and falling over the clover. Aaron Delfold's jaws were lean; they would snap shut like a vise when he turned in anger.

Aaron was a strong man; he was not a man of genius as McAllister supposedly was, but still they were much the same. Charles saw his father standing above a single tombstone as the bulldozers, the trucks, the loads of sweating negroes backed off from him. Aaron had taken his case to the commission: "No roads through here," he declared, clenching his teeth. "Not here. You'll have to kill me first."

And Aaron had won; the wide grave still stood, or rested, in the earth where Aaron's father had put it. The first Aaron Delfold had been a strong man. He too had worn a white panama hat and stood in the fields like some colossus, protecting the grave he had made for the use of his slaves. It was holy to the first Aaron, that grave where thirty-five slaves lay under one marker. No one was allowed to cut the grass, and the grave lay there in the sun surrounded by weeds as high as a man's shoulder; it stood there, an old faded marker accompanied by high weeds, and made a strange sight amid the smooth cultivated ground where it was like an oasis of weeds and memories amid the desert of the present.

Those bodies would lie there for time out of time, if the Major adhered to his father's will. And as derelict as the Major now was, and as destroyed as the land was, he would never let the grave
be desecrated for money, for Aaron's will had said clearly that if
the grave went, the farm would no longer belong to the Major. This
would keep the Major clean, and those bodies, the bodies of men and
women and children who had died over many years, would stay together always.

Charles recalled how he had read that the Delfold family,
which then owned the Major's farm, once had thirteen children living in the huge white house, and that each of the children had thirteen slaves of his own. It seemed strange to Charles, not so much that there had been so many slaves, for he'd heard his mother speak of it, but that the Delfolds once had had thirteen children but were reduced to one only a few generations later.

So as Charles lay in bed unwillingly thinking of Marjory, his father seemed to come and stand before him, and in the shadows, as they flickered and moved slowly back and forth across his face, his father was magnificent, and Charles felt a love for him he had never felt before.

The light from the lamp was insufficient. The lamp must have had a short in its circuit, for it kept flickering and flitting over the yellowed pages till Charles' eyes became tired and sore, and, rubbing them, he longed for bed.

He couldn't read his mother's letters anymore. They were bearable for a time, but then they began to deal with things that Charles didn't want to know. He couldn't bear their tone when they talked about his father, but it got worse than mere unpleasantness of tone when the letters became more explicit, and Charles
thought that he would weep at some of the things his mother had said and done. He didn't want to know how his father had been destroyed. It pained him to read how his father had lost so much and had come at last to the point where he didn't care about things much any more.

It was in Washington that the worst had happened; Charles knew that. But whatever that had been, he didn't want to know, and he threw the letters and papers back into the closet.

Failing to sleep, Charles got out of bed and went to the window. Throwing the French doors open, he stood and looked out over the garden, where the snow lay lush and thick like grass on a meadow. And beyond the garden, he could see the black Richmond streets, already cleared of the snow that lay in piles on the curb, and he let the cold air gush across his naked chest as he divorced everyone from his mind—his father, his mother, Celeste, Marjory, everyone—and thought about himself.

The really important thing was to not have spells; it had only happened twice, but each time he entered a room there was always the chance. When he began to tremble, when his head started to feel as if it would fly, that was the time to stop and get a breath of cold air from the snow, the refrigerator, from anywhere at all. The cold gust of air coming through the snow laden trees swirled against the French door, and Charles felt good as it slashed across his naked breast.
CHAPTER III

Celeste sat on his bed. She was more sophisticated that he had remembered her being and was decidedly feminine in her white frilly blouse. Her white arms and the new lightness to her hair made her contrast softly with the dark faded books around her and the shadows from the lamp, that fell across the walls and made a second carpet, darker than the first, running the length and width of the floor.

"Do you mind talking about it?" she asked. "I don't think you're being dramatic or trying to complain."

"There's nothing really," said Charles, rocking softly in his chair. The boards below him creaked, and the creaks were sharp and pervading, and they seemed to mind what he was saying for spitefully, hatefully they echoed it about the room. "I can't explain it really. But imagine a dam. Imagine the water building up until the dam can no longer hold it. What happens then? Something breaks in the dam and the water goes cascading through the break."

"Has it happened often since you've been here?"

Charles held up three fingers, and the room, save for the creaking of the board, was silent for a moment. "It's nothing, really," said Charles. "It's just that one minute you're awake and the next minute you are awaking to find that you've been out a day. That's all it is. It's nothing, really, unless no one can find a stick to put in your mouth. In that case your tongue is sore for a couple of weeks because your teeth tear it up a little bit."
"I just wanted to know," said Celeste, lying back on the bed and looking out the window at the snow that had been falling all evening. It made a faint steady drone as it hummed against the panes.

It was warm, lying in bed with Celeste that evening, warm, soothing and gentle like something Charles had forgotten. Under the covers, like two children, they held tightly to one another and watched the white snow in a dark sky falling over Richmond. It hung in the trees and accentuated the blackness of the boughs, and it fell faintly and stuck to the glass of the balcony doors. Celeste was in her nightgown, sleeping, and her breaths flowed in and out as he quietly watched her breathing, holding her tightly, until his eyes became heavy and he too fell asleep.

The fire he had lit died on the hearth, but while it blazed brightly and Celeste lay in his arms, it had seemed that he was at home again. But it was a strange sort of home, one, perhaps, in his imagination but one which he had never experienced. Like a child, he had wept to the ticking of the grandfather clock, and in his mind were maroon sofas, doilies and lace.

Charles was angry at McAllister for treating Celeste coldly, as if she were nothing.

McAllister was coldly civil as he stood at the door; humoring Charles he had dressed for the occasion, but he wore a ragged suit, an old tie, and, by the time Celeste arrived and came walking bundled up to the steps, he had unbuttoned his vest, revealing the wrinkles of his shirt.
"I'm so glad to meet you," Celeste had said.

McAllister took her hand. Overly formal, he remarked that he was delighted to meet her, and he thereby revealed his indifference. He was a little too quick to take her fur cap and white flannel coat and too non-attentive when he dispatched them with haste to the closet.

Charles saw her hair when she took off her cap. Embracing her at the door he ran his hands in it till she laughed. "Did you bleach it?" he cried. "My God, it's almost blond!"

"I did not," said Celeste.

Charles didn't know then whether or not to believe her, but after McAllister had gone to bed, he looked closely at the roots; it was blond all over. "Stop it, Charles," Celeste said, pushing him away. "It got that way this summer; it's just a little bleached from the sun."

"Was it good working at the camp?"

"It was rewarding."

Charles looked at her carefully and then shivered with delight; she looked like a woman. Her skin was still pale, since the summer's sunburn had gone, and she was thinner than before. She was fragile and light with delicately chiseled features, and the overall effect of her made Charles think of his mother. It was evident she belonged to the world of small sophisticated parties, dangling a china teacup from her thin white fingers.

Celeste was beautiful; he scarcely would have known her.

McAllister's participation in the evening was nominal. The
old man, with a martyred expression, had set out the records and prepared the tea and cakes, but when Celeste did her best to interest him in the conversation he spoke in monosyllables, rocking slowly in his chair, and his ill-concealed boredom caused Celeste to ask later, "Should I have talked of his work?"

"No" Charles said. "He would have left the room."

"What then?"

"Nevermind. He was just in one of his moods."

It was a relief to Charles when McAllister, at the stroke of nine, trudged off to bed, muttering to Charles that he would appreciate it if he would be so kind as to let in Jean when she returned from her date. Jean came in later, obviously disturbed. She barely looked at Celeste when Charles introduced her. Her face seemed to break and in another moment they could hear her weeping as the pounding of her feet marked her trail up the stairs.

"Me?" asked Celeste.

"No," said Charles, becoming irritated and anxious. "It couldn't be. It must have been her date; I've told her repeatedly that she shouldn't date that fellow."

Then the evening became quiet as Charles and Celeste sat together on the sofa. Celeste wore a silver bracelet that flashed in the light. Charles, becoming uneasy, leaned against Celeste's shoulder and began talking of himself as she listened, silent and attentive as she ran her fingers softly through his hair.

"I've done quite well," he could hear himself saying, "really, I have."
Then he told her how it was about the books, how he loved them extremely, and he laughed to tell her that it was because of this that he was doing so well and not because he was studying. Actually, if the truth were known, he was getting all "A's" in spite of the fact that he was doing his school work with the back of his hand, as McAllister suggested.

"My real work is with writing," he said.

"I can understand that."

"Yes," said Charles, "McAllister thinks I've got it. To tell the truth, he's a big part of the reason I'm working so hard. Look, look here." Charles got his notebook from McAllister's work table and held it before her. "This is what I've read since September," he said. "And look here, these are the stories I've written." Charles' finger pointed to the long list of titles, but Celeste's eyes ran down the list and seemed to be frowning.

"I still don't work as hard as I can," Charles said.

"Why not?"

"I think if I did," Charles said with a laugh, "and failed to succeed wildly, I think it would ruin me. Can you understand that?"

Celeste nodded.

"I leave myself an out," Charles said, suddenly stuttering. "If I fail I can explain it by the fact that I didn't work as hard as I should have."

"Yes," said Celeste, "you've always done that."

There was something about Celeste that disturbed him then, and before he went to sleep that night he remembered her sitting
on his bed, looking divine in her white frilly blouse as it fought with the shadows; he remembered her crying softly as the boards squeaked under the weight of his rocker. She tried to hide it at first, but, pulling her hands away, Charles could see the bright tears running slowly down her face, and he stood in the near dark amazed, his heart beating wildly.

"You don't have to impress me," sobbed Celeste. "Why do you think you have to impress me?"

Charles was ashamed, and suddenly, everything he'd done that evening seemed deliberate and false. As he put his arms around her he could remember with distaste how uncomfortable it was when he forced her to listen to his records, the tight way he held onto his chair praying that the stories she was reading, his own, would not make her admire him less.

He was cleansed by the morrow. As they walked together through the hills of Richmond College; the snow drove all the thoughts of himself away, and it was no longer important that he'd ever worked, or accomplished anything at all. It was enough to be on the snow bank overlooking the frozen lake. The sun was bright in Celeste's hair, and when the reflection was right it seemed almost yellow.

He watched her breaths then; he watched the moisture coming from her lungs freeze in the air.

"Are you still upset?"

"Not really."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You subordinate yourself to Mr. McAllister."
"Why, yes," Charles was surprised.

"Well, you shouldn't do it," said Celeste angrily. "You are going to be so much more than he is. You look at him as if he were a god. You just shouldn't do it."

A glance at her face told Charles she was serious. He whistled to himself. Perhaps she was right; he'd never thought about it before. But how could he feel competitive toward McAllister? Besides, it was ridiculous. He, the intelligent Charles Delfold, was merely a boy.

"He's a great man," Charles said.

Celeste was silent, but without looking at her Charles knew she was angry; her eyes would be hard, her pale skin, wetted with the occasional flurry of flakes, would seem to be smoldering. He took her hand and squeezed it hard, as, sticking to the asphalt path, they wound their way down the hills, treded their way through the maze of snow covered pines, and at last were walking slowly down the path that wound itself around the edge of the lake.

"It's beautiful here," he said.

"Yes," she said, "and so cold."

The sun through the pine trees, working its way through the whiteness, made shimmering crystals of the snow. A girl came trudging up the path in the opposite direction, and Charles' heart seemed to stop when he saw who it was; he turned his head away and for a moment pretended not to know her, but such an action quickly seemed ridiculous, for Marjory had recognized him immediately and snapped out a casual hello.
Charles felt foolish but relieved when Marjory, without stopping, continued on her way along the water's edge; looking behind him, Charles could see her stepping tentatively out over the ice.

"Do you know her?" asked Celeste.

"Yes."

"What's her name?"

"Marjory Kennet."

"She's beautiful," said Celeste. "You should date her one time; every young man should have several dates with beautiful women."

Charles looked at Celeste strangely, and he could perceive, once again, that though she spoke casually, she was deadly serious. "I trust you," Celeste said, smiling firmly. "I know that you shall always be there when I need you."

Marjory was skating when Charles and Celeste stopped at the top of the bridge and looked out over the lake and the red brick houses of professors that dotted the opposite shore and seemed to nestle gently, asleep amid the pines. The snow flurries had begun once again; the small snowflakes seemed to form a veil of jewels that obscured Marjory's features, as she skated to one side of the lake slowly and then turned and skated to the other with all of her speed.

And Charles noticed then that Marjory always skated alone, and he couldn't help but wonder why.

With surprise, before one of his classes, he had heard a comment from a fellow student concerning Marjory's character:
"She's a weird one," the boy said.

"Weird? How weird?"

"Beats me," said the boy, "but she's weird alright."

"Nuts."

"Date her one time; you'll see how weird."

The bell rang then, and Charles hurried off to class; he had never believed the rumors about Marjory. "Sour grapes," he would think, when one of his fellows began running off their mouths.

"They talk about her because they know she can hurt them."

In the men's room at the student center Marjory's name was on the wall; Charles blushed when he saw it, but at the same time seeing it there somehow made him happy. He was ashamed of such happiness, and waiting for the men's room to clear, he stared at the name. When the students had gone, he pulled out his pencil and quickly erased it, for it seemed burned into the wall and he could no longer stand to see it.

He had asked McAllister about it.

"Rumors," said McAllister. "Everyone wants it from her, and when they don't get it they get mad and tell everybody they did; she's no virgin though, I can tell you that."

"You know for sure?"

"No," said McAllister, seeming irritated by so naive a question. "I assume she's not. After all Charles, you don't seem to understand; she's a sophisticated lady, a woman of the world. I would be horribly disappointed in Marjory if she were a virgin, and so should you be."
Charles didn't know, but as McAllister looked at him sternly he felt suddenly that McAllister was right.

"I'd hope so," McAllister said. "She must be twenty-one; if she has yet to be in love, then it's rather obvious that she's incapable of loving. You don't wish that."

Standing on the bridge amid the falling flakes of snow, Charles let his arm wind firmly around Celeste's waist, and as she moved closer to him he kissed the top of her head. "Do you see that girl," he asked, "there skating, the one we passed on the path?"

"Yes."

"Well she's the one," said Charles. "She's the one McAllister would like to see me date; he wants me to marry her."

"Oh," said Celeste, and though she knew the story before, knew that McAllister was trying to set Charles up, on seeing who it was she was mute with shock and her mouth opened wide. As it opened Charles kissed her. "Oh!" she exclaimed again, this time only feinting outrage and surprise. "Come on," she said at last, putting her cold gloves against his cheeks, "let's go home before we freeze."

Charles relaxed before the fire as Celeste lay on his bed; they could share the shadows too, as they shared everything else. As he read, he glanced at her and smiled at her nakedness, aware, though he read, that the shadows were playing across her body, flitting back and forth from her skin to his chair as if they wished to join them. There was no terror now in the shadows as there had
been before, when he lay in the bed all alone.

And Charles was aware of her breathing; as he bent over her and kissed her it seemed to be in accord with the room's musty books, the lamplight, the grandfather clock, the loud ticking and the silence that nestled down deeply in the room's heavy furniture and oriental carpet.

Celeste's loins were similar to, but not really like, Flora's. The ragged old woman was dead now. The scrawny neck that would stick out defiantly at the world was, like a chicken's, wrung until the life, all life, had, like a noisy thief, slipped on the stairs, kicked over a few pails, and at last fled away. It was strange, Charles thought, that when he thought of death he always thought of brown needles, dry twigs that snapped and cracked underfoot. And speculating thus he looked again at Celeste, lying naked, breathing softly, stretched out on the bed and he could imagine brown needles swaying over her body.

Marjory had ceased to be important. All things save Celeste were unimportant. And he was aware, terribly aware, that some day Celeste would be dead.
CHAPTER IV

Decidedly Early American, Mrs. P. J. Donleavy's furniture shone with a high waxen polish. As she sat, stately and with reserve, before Charles, she seemed like the furniture. Her hair was done up in a bun and showed a touch of gray appearing prematurely on her temples, and her horn rimmed glasses, black and old fashioned, were secured on her ears by a loop running behind her neck of thin silver chain.

She was thirty nine years old, but to Charles she looked older. He sat quietly on the sofa fondling the history books she had given him. With narrowed eyes she insisted he read them, for when he had done so she would prepare him another list of books to read. Mrs. Donleavy felt that one should be able to see history as a continuum, and Charles knew that she meant by this that he must learn to visually see one age flowing into the other.

"She is correct in that," McAllister said.

"I believe so."

"It is good to use her," said McAllister. "Do it with good heart, but do not take her seriously. I will be disappointed if her tutoring makes you as pedantic and foolish as she."

She didn't seem pedantic to Charles, for though she seldom laughed, she talked to him as if she liked him, as if she were delighted to have him there in her household. She took off her glasses and smiled when he questioned her.

When she did that Charles was surprised, for she seemed very
pretty in an interesting sort of way.

"You need her for experience," McAllister said, scratching the dried paint from the front of his shirt and sitting heavily and wearily on the little stool beside his workbench. Charles felt a twinge of fear, for before sitting down, McAllister had suddenly grimaced and put his hand to his heart.

"What kind of experience?"

"History," said McAllister.

"You're conning me, sir. I'd like to know what's really on your mind."

"Rascal," said McAllister, his hand again at his heart, "you trust no one."

Yet Charles came to trust Mrs. Donleavy; he found to his surprise that they were allies at the flurry of academic parties occurring on each weekend at the end of the year. She seemed to look for him upon entering the room, and, oblivious to the other guests, she would sit demurely beside him and attempt to occupy him for the rest of the evening.

"You are more educated than these people are," she said, looking at him with the frankest admiration.

Charles was silent.

"I'll say that you have profited under McAllister," she said, as if admitting an error. "He's a coarse, insincere, snobbish old geezer, but he's done a good job with you. I'll give him that."

When Mrs. Donleavy looked at him, it seemed she looked through him, and more than once Charles had to fight against the impulse to
turn his eyes away.

"I find in you what I liked in my husband."

Charles looked at her, surprised.

Amid the tiny glass figures that shimmered faintly on her dresser rested a tiny portrait she had had done of her husband the year before he was killed in Korea. "The fool volunteered," she said. "He was too old to go." And Charles could see, much to his discomfort, that her own words were beginning to move her to tears. The new carpets and the Early American furniture she had put in the apartment after her husband's death had aided somewhat, but she was sentimental enough to keep what hurt her the most: the portrait of her husband and the tiny glass figurines that reacted like prisms to the sun.

As Charles lay in Mrs. Donleavy's bed, the room seemed filled with lights: red lights, green lights, blue lights, yellow lights. The atmosphere of her room was dependent on the sun, and on bright, sunny days it was a collage of color with a coldness, a stark coldness, that made her, as she stood at the window, look cold and thin and brittle as a piece of cold steel.

Except when he was there, as Charles knew, she spent all of her time in the study. Charles wondered if books affected her the same way they did him; he wondered if she too were a victim of the subtle disease.

"I am," she said, one evening late, "but how can you call it a disease? How can you do that, Charles?"

He could see that she was alarmed.
"Just being flip," he answered weakly. "You know," he said, with a wave of his hand.

Charles sat stiffly in his chair fidgeting when no eyes rested on him. It was once again August and the carriage house garden was lush and full. Once receptive to it, its high trees, its dots or yellow and red, he was now oblivious to it, for his head was full of worry for McAllister's health and of the immediate tension when Mrs. Donleavy talked to him.

Ronald McAllister, his blond beard fuller now, his hair a little longer, leaned against the stone bench while sitting crosslegged on the grass. He finished chewing on a rose stem and tossed it in the air, and then looked around surprised that no one seemed to notice.

As Mrs. Donleavy continued her labored conversation, Charles saw Ronald open his eyes wide, mockingly, and he was filled with a pure hatred of Ronald that was so intense it caused his eyes to water and his hands to tighten on the wooden arms of his deck chair.

"I hate to bring it up," said Mrs. Donleavy, "but if you'll only give us your support, we might yet do something about that registrar Ferguson."

"I'm too tired," said McAllister, in lieu of something stronger.

"Ah well, I suppose you are," Mrs. Donleavy blushed when she realized what she said. McAllister seemed choked on the words he was ready to spew forth, and Charles held his breath: McAllister
was red; in the bright sun he looked frightening.

"Why don't you get up and sit in a chair correctly," McAllister shouted suddenly. Ronald looked shocked, leaped up from the grass and then sat down slowly. "Don't take it out on me."

"Why not?" said McAllister.

Charles was delighted. Laughing to himself, he felt that at that moment he was very much like McAllister when the old man giggled all alone in the darkness. The laughter, though, was totally inside him; he felt evil and cynical, the master, suddenly, of all situations.

Charles' hatred of Ronald had raged anew on the day that Celeste had to leave the carriage house and go back to her home. There had been a horrible sadness about in the garden. Though it was incredibly silly, when he saw Celeste in her hat and her long overcoat, standing by the gate with her suitcase in hand, he felt weak all over, as if a dream had suddenly become more real and dirty, as if it had suddenly been flooded with a harsh cold light. Yet she looked ineffably sweet as she stood in the garden, her hair bright yellow in the sun that had already begun to make water of the snow.

Carriage house . . . cottage house . . . house . . . cottage . . . it had all been the same. He could see them each as a magic box of infinite proportions, but the magic must not have been infinite, or at least not consistent, for it constantly disappeared. He wondered if the garden of McAllister's would evaporate in the sun without her.
"I've heard of your mother," Ronald McAllister said to Charles as McAllister, still dressed in his worn, ragged suit, poured Charles and Celeste their last cup of tea. "Elaine Delfola," said Ronald, upsetting the calm. "That was her name, wasn't it? Be civil Charles. Tell me, wasn't that her name?"

Charles nodded.

Then Ronald brought to Charles' mind a vision of his mother, famous throughout Washington, not only for her acting, but for the strangers who waited outside her dressing room door, and who were admitted, if they looked fairly presentable, for an extraordinary length of time.

And Charles could see his mother touring the bars, slipping to the floor from her chair, crying loudly that as long as she was there the bar would never close. She did all this at first with a refinement that was stunning, but no one came to see her acting any more; people came to see Elaine Delfold, who swore to the press that she had never married, who swore to the press she wanted no notoriety at a press conference she had worked for months to arrange.

The night before Celeste left, she and Charles, in the quiet shadows of his room, had opened the box, read the letters, and scanned the clippings. Celeste read quietly; Charles read burning inside. He would have thrown the clippings from him had not Celeste been there, but she lent him a special strength, a strength he couldn't do without.

"She was poor as a girl," Celeste said.
Charles said nothing.

"She tried very hard to make up for it; she gave everything she had to make up for it, and nobody cared. I can remember them laughing."

Charles went to the French door and looked at the snow, falling faintly against the panes.

"It has nothing to do with you, Charles," Celeste said. "Most people are here." Celeste held her hand a foot from the floor. "You are up here." She raised her hand to her shoulder.

"I must agree," Charles said. Looking down the black streets that were rapidly becoming white, Charles knew just how serious he was.

"I can't stand to be little," he said.

"Of course not."

"I mean," said Charles, "that if I owned all of this, every bit of it as far as I can see, I would be a failure. It wouldn't be enough."

"How much do you want?"

"You'll laugh if I say it," Charles said, "but I want to be a god."

"I'm not laughing."

"I want people to feel bad when they look at me. I want them to look at me, and I want to see in their eyes that to themselves they are dogs, that they are vulgar, inferior worms, compared to me."

"They are."
"Only that can atone for what they have done to my mother and me."

She was suddenly silent.

Charles laughed then; he turned from the window and caught Celeste up in his arms. "And I want you with me," he laughed, kissing her neck and then undressing her so fast that she resisted him at first.

"His stories are excellent," Mrs. Donleavy said, trying to casually assuage McAllister's feelings. McAllister coughed and his chest shook with the effort to clear his throat. "You have certainly put him to work, haven't you Mr. McAllister." McAllister was still growling at Ronald though Ronald sat correctly, his palms flat out on the marble bench.

"Charles is far from being good," grumbled McAllister at last.

The old artist was extremely glad when Charles went to the garden door and saw Mrs. Donleavy off. He sat collapsed in his chair, holding his chest, as Ronald saw his chance and scurried away. "I miss Jean," said McAllister when Charles, having finished his chore, came again into his presence and sat on the grass as Ronald had done.

"She'll be alright," said Charles.

"That Donleavy woman ruins my day."

"Why see her then?"

McAllister coughed loudly. Charles trembled to hear the hollow cough come from the old man's chest. "I do it for you," he said, coughing again, this time turning red with the violence of
his cough. "One progresses in life as if up a ladder, and although Mrs. Donleavy is dreadful, I fear that for you she is a necessary rung."

Charles was suddenly angry.

"Are you telling me . . . ."

"Preparation," said McAllister, "that is all I believe that must be necessarily said."

Later in his room Charles was bitterly ashamed to have been tricked by McAllister. McAllister had known what would happen when he encouraged Charles to see her, to get from her a list of books he should read, and Charles was ashamed to admit that heretofore he had been using Mrs. Donleavy, perhaps unconsciously, but nevertheless exactly, as McAllister wished.

He could picture the woman's face, suddenly not lonely, delighted to see him. Charles felt himself a fraud.

Mrs. Donleavy was seriously reading his stories as soon as he finished them. She would put on her glasses, seat herself solidly behind her desk, and screw up her eyes as if she were scrutinizing a valuable and ancient manuscript. She would spend long periods afterward putting her thoughts into words, trying to help him over difficult parts. At night, before he slept, Charles could see her putting her hand to her forehead, racking her brain trying to solve a problem that was out of her line.

Her husband had been a writer, not a good one, but Charles knew he was slowly taking his place.

"Did you try to help him?"
"Yes," she said, "when I could."

It had happened the first time in early June just before school ended. They had spent the day together in the book shops of Richmond, hunting for bargains, down on their knees together rummaging in musty book rooms until they were both tired and their joints, from constant bending, had begun to ache. She put her hand on his. "We'll find something yet," she said, and then she got up, brushing the dust off her dress.

As night fell she fixed him supper in her apartment, and slacking her reserve, she laughed to see him eat with such relish. Later, after a long conversation in which Charles told of his mother, she took her glasses off suddenly, and Charles was aware of how attractive she was. Seeing her with her hair down filled him with delight.

"Excuse me," she said, and then without another word she disappeared into the bedroom.

Charles trembled on the sofa. In spite of its newness it seemed musty and old, and the smell of it and the leather bound books stacked around the room was heavy and sweet in his nostrils. He flipped through an old magazine until he saw her shadow move close to the bedroom door, and then draw back, as if she who cast it were afraid.

Then he looked up quickly, his heart beating fast, and perceived her in the door.

Her face was red with a blush. Her heavy shoulders and tall frame were covered with a bathrobe, her hair was down, streaming
over her shoulders, and she looked very pretty. Her glasses were off, but the tiny crow's feet in the corners of her eyes were obscured by the darkness behind her.

"Are you coming in?" she asked quietly, softly.

Charles could remember her, large and brown, tawny like the leather skinned jackets of her books. Thinking about it later, as he watched the throats of two robins singing in the garden, he remembered the heaviness of her pulsing body, the apology she made for her shoulders, and feeling sick, he damned McAllister.

"Satan," he muttered later.

McAllister grinned, turning Charles' anger into a subject for jests.

Charles smiled in spite of himself. "I'm going to summer school this summer," he said. "If I graduate in three years I'll be rid of you sooner."

With a smile on his face, McAllister went back to his reading.

"Everything I do," said McAllister, "I do for you."

"Nonsense."

"You've a message from Marjory."

"Where?" asked Charles.

"On the kitchen table."

Charles let Marjory's message slip through his fingers.

"What the devil is going on now," he muttered to himself as he ascended the stair to his room. "Why in the world does she want to see me?"

It was impossible to tell at first, for Marjory was reluctant
to get to the point. She was extremely quiet, and as they sat together in her father's den she spoke very softly, so that Charles found himself bending toward her to hear her words.

"I'm very glad you could come, Mr. Delford."

Charles nodded.

Dark and attractive, Marjory, in a white cashmere sweater, sat straight up in her chair in an attitude of attention, her heels locked together and her brown hands carefully folded and placed in her lap. "I asked you here to talk over a business proposition," Marjory said at last. "Would you consider writing a small column for a magazine of the arts?"

Charles blinked with surprise.

"You see," she continued, "my father has purchased a small magazine in New York for my brother Paul. Paul's budget is very small, so we need someone relatively new. I thought of you because Mr. McAllister recommended you so highly."

Marjory paused; Charles cleared his throat and managed to speak. "What . . . what would my job be?"

"An occasional book review," Marjory said with a shrug. "Oh, it's nothing much, part time, but you'll earn a little money. Is the idea appealing to you?"

Charles nodded. "Yes, very," he said. "Very."

He knew then how very frightened he was; his hands had begun sweating and the words he was about to utter seemed to stick in his throat. As Marjory sat so properly in her chair she looked like something he had never been close to before, a jeweled thing,
he didn't know exactly what, but something concocted of crystals, mystery and lace.

Charles was aware, too, of how foolish he must have seemed to her, a ragged boy out of place in the opulent room.

For half an hour now he had been fighting the feeling of awe that had first arisen powerfully in him when he saw Marjory's house and property: the lawn, cut closely and of a deep rich green, seemed incredibly enormous, and he had to catch his breath when he observed the tall iron lances that, strung together, made a fence, black and impressive, that circled the estate.

It seemed to take a great deal of time to walk down the cobblestone path that led to the door. Wisteria dotted the way; it hung high above him, and Charles felt very small as his hollow footsteps clattered up the path and vibrated faintly on the surface of the stones.

Charles was afraid to speak when he first saw Marjory, yet he admitted to himself that she attracted him strongly. In the softness of the den her legs were beautiful and dark, and Charles tried to cover up his nervousness by looking at her boldly. She didn't seem to notice, for she seemed unaware of him except when he spoke, and even then she had a disconcerting way of looking at him suddenly, as if now and then a chain briskly jerked her chin and snapped her eyes into focus.

His hatred of her mounted, irrational but real.

He was fuming when he left the house, and he fumed all the way to Mrs. Donleavy's. Arriving there, he watched silently as
Mrs. Donleavy ate supper. Already in her nightgown, Mrs. Donleavy was upset that he wouldn't take food and that he sat at the table staring at the floor. "Here, Charles," she said. "You've got to eat something.

Charles shook his head, and Mrs. Donleavy, her eyes heavy with worry, ate swiftly, casting glances his way.

"It was pretty bad, was it?"
"Not so bad."
"Why are you so depressed?"
"I don't know," Charles said.

Looking up, Charles could see the kitchen light reflected in Mrs. Donleavy's glasses. He could picture Mrs. Donleavy sitting on her bed in her nightgown, standing at the window in her nightgown, studying all day in her library, still in her nightgown, waiting for him; he could imagine her staying all day in her dreary house, amid the play of red, yellow and blue lights, every now and then lifting her gown past her hips in elaborate fantasies of what would happen when at last he came.

"The girl irritates me," he said.
"Because she is rich?"
"Yes, and because I want her."
"Take her," said Mrs. Donleavy. "It's easy enough. All you have to do is pretend that you're Jewish."

Charles looked up sharply as Mrs. Donleavy laughed and finished her tea.

"What do you mean by that?"
"Didn't you know that your friend is promiscuous?"

"No, I didn't," said Charles, "as a matter of fact."

"But Charles," said Mrs. Donlevy, "everyone knows it. Her family has been quite scandalized by some of Marjory's exploits. Can you guess, perhaps, why she took a sudden trip to Canada last fall?"

"She has a good heart," Charles heard himself saying.

"Jewish boys think so."

"Will you stop talking in riddles," Charles snapped as he stood up suddenly. "Just what do you mean to say?"

"Don't be angry Charles. The word is that Marjory likes to go to bed with Jewish boys. She pities them," Mrs. Donlevy laughed. "She tries to make up for Auschwitz."

"Nonsense."

"I admit it's peculiar."

"Yes, it is," said Charles. "It's damned peculiar."

Charles thought of Marjory and how they walked together slowly around the grounds of the estate. She took delight in watching the goldfish in a backyard pond, their golden scales through the blue of the water seemed to be emanating light, a light coming in delicate flashes that caused Marjory to smile; when she smiled, she looked like a gypsy.

Opening a kennel, Marjory gently pulled a bird dog out by the collar. Her hands were on his neck, his ears, his stomach; he rolled over quickly when she commanded him softly, and she laughed again delightedly when he licked at her arms. "I love dogs," she
said. "They're so much nicer than most human beings are. Do you like dogs, Mr. Delfold?"

"I don't mind them," Charles said.

"Dogs are kind," she said. "They're not at all snobbish."

Charles couldn't wait to get home to McAllister.

The old man had taken sick in the afternoon, and although it was only eight o'clock in the evening when Charles slammed shut the carriage house door, McAllister was already in his bed and a note pinned to the door informed Charles that the artist wasn't to be disturbed.

Getting down on his hands and knees Charles could see through the crack under the door that McAllister's light was still on. Through the keyhole he could see McAllister's bald head and eyes as they flowed back and forth following the sentences in a book. "Reading," muttered Charles, throwing open the door. "I thought you were sick."

McAllister coughed; he looked extremely healthy.

"Look here," said Charles, pulling a chair up beside the bed. "I would like very much to know just one thing."

"What's that?" asked McAllister, continuing his reading.

"This Marjory girl," Charles said, "what's with her anyway? From what I gather she makes love only to dogs and to Jews? Now's that? What the devil's going on?"

"Don't worry about it," McAllister said, calmly turning a page and not looking up. "It doesn't matter at all. Look at it this way: she's an outcast in society but everyone wants her back. To
get back she needs a writer who's something of a gentleman. For you she has money and prestige. In society's circles you'll be the reforming angel. You'll be in."

"She'll marry one of them."

"No, she'll want to make a poor boy rich; she won't marry a Jew however. She's not that much of a rebel. She'll compromise by marrying you. Aren't you delighted!"

"No," Charles said loudly. "I hate society. I hate those people. They've done things to me that I don't like: they've hurt me here." Charles dramatically placed his hand over his heart. "I will not marry one of them."

McAllister smiled.

"Why are you smiling?"

"What is a better way to pay them all back?"

"Marjory is stupid."

"I'm relying on that."

"And still you think," Charles shouted, becoming angry, "that she's a step upward, that being rich and being in society makes her better than anyone else."

McAllister, amused, thought for a while, and then at last he nodded.

Charles slammed the door, and as he stalked up the stairs to his bedroom in the darkness he thought he could hear McAllister laugh. Hearing that, he stopped on the stair's top step. His face filled with anger and he heard McAllister's laugh again, thin and wheezy, floating up the stair. In spite of himself, his anger
quickly fled, and in the darkness he put his hand over his mouth. Everything seemed insane, and he was laughing too.

Next to Celeste he loved McAllister the most.

In the middle of the night there was the sound of loud coughing. Charles ran down the stairs to McAllister's room and filled the old man with medicine. It was cold in the house, and his bare arms shivered as he looked down once again on the drowsy old man; McAllister took his wrist and held it for fifteen or twenty minutes before he was at last asleep.

It had been three days since Celeste had written him last, and her letter then disturbed him. She wrote to tell Charles of a boy she had met. "He is the only boy I've ever met," she said, "who is actually unhappy because he doesn't believe in God."

Charles would have to ask McAllister about that. With her letter before him again, his lamp flickering, the shadows enclosing, he felt a bit jealous. He lit a cigarette and sat quietly in the dark; it seemed to him suddenly that while he sat smoking he had been unconsciously listening for McAllister's laugh.

It was strange he should be doing so, for as he sat quietly the muscles in his back and neck seemed to relax, and his own little laugh assured him that he understood everything now. Life had seemed very plain and simple as he sat beside McAllister, letting the old man hold on to his wrist. Sitting there as McAllister coughed blood, Marjory and Celeste were divorced from his mind, and nothing seemed so important as McAllister. It was important that the artist go to sleep.
McAllister was something like God.
There was something so sweet about Marjory, stupid and rich as she was.

"The important thing to do," she said, plucking a rose and putting it into Charles' lapel, "is to avoid hurting anyone. Does that make sense to you, Mr. Delford?"

"Yes, it does."

"My family and I don't really get along," she said. "They don't seem to understand that basic fact of life."

"What basic fact?"

"That you should never hurt anyone, of course. There's pain enough in the world, don't you agree?"

"Yes, I do."

Marjory led the way down the cobblestone path that sloped to the iron fence; she picked another rose and smiled sweetly. Was she flirting with him? Charles couldn't tell, but he knew that looking at her made his blood quicken, and as she stood framed by the wisteria behind her, he hated her for it.

"You must tell me of your life sometime," Marjory said, stopping when they reached the street. "Were you really very poor as McAllister said?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, I find you very attractive, and I believe Mr. McAllister when he says you're talented; I know you'll help my brother immensely."

"I hope so."
"I know you will," said Marjory with a laugh. "We shall be the very best of friends, you and I."

"I hope so."

"You hope so, you hope so . . . I know so," said Marjory. "I just feel that it's very possible to tell you things."

Charles said goodbye. Decidedly confused, he turned his back and began walking down the street. "Oh wait a minute," called Marjory, coming after him quickly. "I want you to know something or you'll think I'm awful." Marjory took his arm, and unwillingly he was thrilled by the touch of her fingers, the glitter of silver on her wrist.

"Do you remember," she said, "when we first met and I didn't talk to you all afternoon? I want you to know why even if it is hard to tell. I was afraid of you. I'd heard so much about you, that you were so intelligent. Everyone admires you so, that I was afraid to open my mouth."

Charles could remember every word, the way she looked. Sitting there in the dark he was still flattered. He smiled to himself and put out the cigarette. It flared briefly when it touched the cold tray.

He could almost excuse everything that Marjory was said to have done; even Celeste admitted that she was fond of sex, that there were boys on the street she wanted to know even though they meant nothing. "Of course," she had said, "I find men attractive." And then she said with a laugh, "I have sex fantasies too. I'll tell you about them some time."
She never had.

Charles was aware that Marjory was responsible for his present feeling of elation. He had never before realized that girls could look at him like that, as a man to be admired. He looked at himself in the mirror, but the mirror was dark and he saw only shadows.

As he sat rocking in his chair purely for the pleasure he received from daydreaming at night, Charles suddenly imagined that Celeste was out of the picture, and he began breathing fast, faster than he rocked.

Because he could make that foolish Marjory love him, he would live in a mansion, and he would have servants and a great deal of money. When he said strip, Marjory would strip. And he would visit the Eastern Shore again, visit everyone of his mother's old friends and bulldoze their property, throw them in jail, and make them low, so low they would tremble when they looked his way.

For a few moments only, Charles was lost in elation. He was master, emperor, king of the world.
It seemed to Charles now, dressed in an elegant white dinner jacket with a red gash of a cummerbund, that he had taken the poet's place. Dinner had been excellent; it thrilled him to taste the wine in the weal, and to cock his head when he was addressed, but best of all was the chatter after the dinner, the banter, the delicate smiles and stately manners of the ladies who clustered about, whispering of each other's indiscretions.

Marjory exhibited him to her friends as if he were a prize of incredible value.

She had planned the occasion with him in mind; she wanted her friends to know that she was doing all right, that in spite of herself she had somehow hooked the famous Charles Delfold; she flitted about the room laughing and joking, constantly touching his arm, making sure that he was beside her. The lights were low, the wall-to-wall carpet seemed thick and lush; high overhead, the chandelier, reflecting light in tiny gem-like flashes, seemed to sparkle in tune with the slow soft music emanating from hidden speakers.

The women, in gay cocktail dresses that left their arms and shoulders bare, gushed when they spoke to Charles; it seemed to him then that he was a personage of tremendous importance, a vast improvement over the little poet with foppish mustaches and an ivy league blazer.

All the young gentlemen wore watches, and most wore rings; their clean-scrubbed faces, pink with health and youth, seemed to
be merely a part of their apparent finery, the brilliant cummerbunds, some madras, some red like Charles', the white dinner jackets contrasting sharply with coal-black trousers ... like bright buds their faces rose from a pile of colors and the glitter of silver.

Things were like ice; Charles bathed in the cold tinkling of cocktail glasses; Marjory held his arm as they moved, swiftly, adroitly about the room from one group of ladies to the other. The music changed, cheers were heard, and someone shouted "Long live Dixie," a remark that brought derisive laughs from all corners of the floor. Charles' head spun, he undulated, and clapped with emotion; the heavy wine had gone to his head and the room seemed to be in motion. It spun about in a swirl and a mad confusion; to his mind, the young people at Marjory's dinner suddenly seemed to be children filled with sly jesting intrigues and flirtations, pretensions by the score, and their heads bobbed like tassels in a sea of gilt until at the height of the motion, the scenario seemed to Charles contemptible and beautiful, to be envied and pitied.

All evening he had been aware of the eyes on him; his eyes were glazed from a surfeit of attention. Though no one respected Marjory, they gave her such homage ... how foolish he had been when he had seen her before at the Hotel Richmond ... how blind he had been to the situation.

Marjory had a painted laugh; even now when she smiled at him she seemed to wear a mask. Charles knew that it was only beauty that saved her, but he revelled in her smile ... it was dark and delicate like the folds of her gown.
Charles had seen most of this younger set before. Many were students at the college. He would not have troubled to speak to them on the campus, but it was different here; he enjoyed their glances of admiration. Having beaten them in the classroom he had taken the war to another front, and he was ahead here too because Marjory was beside him; he imagined that their eyes were hungry and envious.

Marjory had laughingly introduced him as a direct descendant of Sir Phillip Sidney.

Charles could imagine the beggar he had met before looking at him through the window, and he laughed to wonder who would be alone and angry beside the money tree, if the money tree were there; then suddenly it seemed to him that beside the money tree was the ghost of himself, worn and haggard, red fire rimming his eyes, bitterly plucking a leaf, breaking it, and hurling it, silently, ashamedly, to the polished tiles of the ballroom floor.

"Charles," said Marjory, in a voice of infinite sweetness, "this is Katherine Horner."

"Delighted to meet you." Charles took her hand.

"Oh, I've heard about you," said the young lady. "Aren't you the valedictorian at the college this year?"

"Yes," Charles said with assurance. It was his senior year and there didn't seem to be much doubt about who would come out on top; but the money tree was still there before him ... he turned away from Marjory and the girl, and his ghost, standing beside the money tree, was staring across the floor, vivid with hatred.
He was in both places at once now, and tilting his glass, he took a long drink of the heavy wine to drown out the sight; the fire-like eyes seemed to blaze in the darkness.

Charles could imagine commencement exercises that would take place in a couple of months... commencement exercises... commencement exercises... the words sounded good and stately; in the past he simply would have termed the function "graduation," but now he felt the need to invest it with a new dignity and worth; he could imagine the square caps, the black flowing robes, the dignity of the academic procession as it wound its way around the lake; he could hear the pomposity of the march, a sound his heart ached to savor.

Assembled together, the figures in black, their eyes filled with respect, looked up humbly as he stood there above them, distractedly, nonchalantly running his fingers through his papers; he could hear the sudden hush when at last he rose to speak, and the thought of it made him tremble all over.

Everywhere he looked there was evidence of his glory... everywhere, everywhere; the throng parted and he could see his mother, tears in her eyes, proud to be received. He took her hand and walked again into the garden, she weeping, he unaware of anything but her.

"Life is very bad," he said to her. "It is very bad, but it's going to be all right."

"I believe you, Charles."

"But it is very bad, everything about it is very bad; we've
got to know that before we know what things mean to one another; it's knowing that that brings all the sweetness."

"You've got to go on, Charles."

"Don't you worry about that," he said, puffing out his chest bravely, "don't you worry about that."

"But I agree with you," she said, "that life is very bad."

Then Charles was aware of Marjory again . . . poor thing . . . she wasn't aware of it yet, that life was bad, but he was going to teach her. When she introduced him she did it with pride, as if to make certain that her company respected him fully; the woman before him was little better than the Major, a little more elegant perhaps, a little more demure and refined, but she wasn't, Charles knew, what he considered an intellectual.

Mrs. Kennet, Marjory's mother, was extremely dark and decidedly English; how the Major would have trembled to meet her.

"I am sorry that Ronald couldn't come."

"Mr. McAllister," Charles said, lowering his voice, "is very sick; to be frank, I'm quite worried about his health."

"Oh, what a shame."

"Yes," said Charles, "I fear your cousin is coming down with one cold after the other."

Mrs. Kennet squinted. In her eyes Charles imagined that he could see the picture of a childhood, the remembrance of a time when she and her cousin were on equal footing, spending their summers on her father's estate just outside Richmond. McAllister had something of an affair with Mrs. Kennet before she married her hus-
band, a gallant young man who came from New York and who condescended to elevate her from a fringe position in Richmond society to the one she presently enjoyed.

"Were you bitter?" Charles once asked.

"Bitter?" said McAllister, agitated by the question. "Of course I was bitter. She didn't love him; she just wanted his name."

McAllister had a terrible story about that. He told it to Charles one quiet evening. The reception after Mrs. Kennett's wedding had been a gay affair, but he, Ronald McAllister, had not joined the festivities. After trying to put on a brave front, he could carry on no longer and after a time he found himself in a corner of the reception room, staring morosely off into space, burning with anger each time Dorothy smiled at her husband.

Palming a knife from the table, McAllister slipped off into the garden, and waited until he saw the lights from the bride's room slash into the darkness. With the noise and laughter of the party still in his ears, he crept to Dorothy's window with knife in hand, and listened for the sound of her voice . . . to his surprise, he also heard the voice of her husband; then he realized that the newly married pair had slipped off to be together; he could hear the sound of the lock when Dorothy closed the door.

He stumbled away from the window and back into the darkness; trembling with rage and misery, he seemed to hide in the darkness; it seemed to flow into his heart. Then like a killer he looked at the knife in his hand; the light from the window made the blade
gleam bright yellow.

As if in the midst of a convulsion, he determined to kill them both, and like a thief, he crept miserably back to the window, whining like an animal all the while; the peak of his humiliation had come when he peeked in under the shade, and he could see their two naked bodies, sweat-soaked and bright in the light, twisting on the bed.

Then he could hear the voices of the very rich, the laughter, the arrogance, the assurance of their gay voices, seemed to drift from the parlor into the garden.

And then again he looked at her he loved, naked, twisting on the bed beneath another man, and something seemed to break inside him; he dropped his knife and collapsed, crushing roses beneath him.

And in the morning, when he next saw her, she knew ... or seemed to know ... and her eyes were pathetic; they seemed to say, "Oh, Ronald, forgive me, will you please ... please forgive me." McAllister sat before her, trying to leave, not able to leave, and her one glance, begging forgiveness, stayed with him so well he couldn't follow the trivia she talked of.

She would do it again. He knew that and she knew it too, but as she talked of mundane matters it was as if she would cry any moment. And he looked again at her, looked in her eyes, and still seemed to be saying, "I've gotten what I want, everything should be fine ... it is fine, but God ... oh, Ronald, I love you but forgive me, please, please forgive me."
"Will you stop it," said Charles, turning away angrily. "I don't want to hear anymore."

McAllister stopped; he had related the story with profound indifference, all the while working furiously on the clay with his hands; his eyes blinked continually like the eyes of an owl; the sweat on his bald head glistened in the light.

"Why didn't you kill her?" Charles said. "You went to the window; why didn't you kill her?"

"It was too late," said McAllister, pausing from his work and looking foolishly at the wall. "By the time I got there and saw them, he already had her."

Charles forgot the story by going into his room and pulling out his books; he opened one and began reading furiously, forcing his mind to concentrate on the matter before him, but still he could see Mrs. Kennet, before she was married, and Ronald McAllister, younger and more attractive, walking hand in hand in the garden, stopping before the roses he later crushed, and whispering to each other, quietly ... tenderly ... secret, childish vows and delicate promises; they were inseparable from the ages of fourteen to twenty-one, when Dorothy was married.

Mrs. Kennet was old now; she stood before her daughter speaking flatly, but pretending to be excited by the success of the party. Charles was made uncomfortable by the wrinkles of her face, the blankness of her eyes ... she sparkled in the chandelier's light; her neck seemed to be swabbed in silver. She took Charles' arm. Her grip seemed to him to be like the grip of dried and dead
fruit clinging to the vine.

She had had her affairs, Charles knew, even one with McAllister, but nothing had come when it counted. "Do tell Ronald," she said, "that I am very sorry he couldn't come; will you tell him that for me?"

"Yes," said Charles. He blushed because she patted his hand before turning him back over to Marjory.

"She would do it again," said McAllister later.

"Do what again?"

McAllister was calmly eating his grapefruit. "It should be a point of interest for you," said McAllister. "Mrs. Kennet's husband is a puff, a ridiculous man as it turned out, but still if she could choose again she would make the same choice, and then say she was sorry."

"I sensed that."

"Phoo," said McAllister. "It's the way of the world. You've got to work hard to be happy."

Charles had worked hard all winter.

"You've got to work hard," McAllister would say, leaning over his desk to see what he had written. "Look here," he said, "this is extremely sloppy. Never allow yourself to be sloppy; don't say to yourself, 'I'll go back and fix it,' fix it now . . . what you need is discipline . . . no man has ever written anything without first developing discipline."

"But it's only one sentence."

"Do it over," McAllister said, suddenly coughing and stumbling
so he rested against the wall. "Let sloppiness set in, and you're through, finished before you start."

The work was going slowly; Charles would sit long hours before his desk before anything worthwhile came, and then he seemed to himself always capable of destroying its value; there was much he didn't know, and regarding his work, he felt that he was being forced to grow up too quickly. In despair he felt that he just wasn't ready.

But he had to be ready. McAllister already had the publishers lined up, and Celeste expected it; he couldn't stand to look at Marjory, her brother, or the society boys, if he failed in that. There were moments when things just weren't going right; there was something so wrong with his style, the way he looked at things; each time McAllister took the manuscript in his hands, Charles expected to be denounced for a fraud, but McAllister, though his criticism was vicious, always encouraged him.

"It had to be good," McAllister would say. "You are nothing without this."

Charles knew it was true; every time he thought of Marjory or Celeste he knew it was true.

Celeste read the beginning of his book with tense lips and eyes filled with excitement; he watched her worriedly as her ivory fingers quickly flipped the pages, and he smiled when he saw her smile, and when she frowned he was horribly afraid.

It was Easter and they sat together in the carriage house garden though it was sopping wet and filled with musty smells of dead
foliage; the water in the air made the pages of the manuscript wet, but the coolness of the air was pleasant; it was romantic.

McAllister, working gloomily in the house, was terribly angry, for Charles had stopped working for a day in order to be with Celeste, a lapse in discipline he found alarming . . . and Charles was disappointed; he had hoped that Celeste would come alone, and as he looked at her, and looked at the crew-cut, square-faced boy beside her, he felt the disappointment keenly.

Celeste had made good her promise to bring the boy that interested her so, the boy who was upset because he couldn't believe in God, but Charles had found him hopelessly boring . . . . He found too, though admitting it to himself was difficult, that he was slightly jealous of the square-jawed farm boy who had somehow found his way to college, and who now sat without expression looking out over the garden.

"You will be good," Celeste said.

"Thank you."

"But you must get much better than you are now; you know that, don't you Charles?"

Charles nodded. "I know it better than anyone else." Charles was sorry he had spoken; he hadn't wanted to speak in Bill Daffron's presence.

Yet when Celeste looked up from his work, smiled and said it was good, it was all he could do to keep the elation that was welling up inside him from bursting out of his breast and flooding the garden; the memory of Celeste's smile of approval made him think,
as he stood amid the party with Marjory on his arm, that perhaps he deserved the adulation; the attention he was getting.

At any rate he was getting it, and for the first time in his life, the sight of cummerbunds and dinner jackets, the tinkling of glasses, the delicate and stately manners employed by Mrs. Kennet and Marjory's friends, failed to make him afraid, failed to make him feel, as they had done so often in the past, that he belonged off somewhere cringing in the corner like a sad and pathetically lonely child.

In the full length, gilded mirror he caught a glance of himself, his white dinner jacket, the red sash around his waist, the coal-black trousers, and he was impressed by himself; he looked so affluent and daring, and then he understood what he imagined people like Marjory and her friends found at their balls . . . the flavor of himself was intoxicating. He could argue with and censure himself all he wished, but the elation remained; it was like being drunk, and he could see in the mirror what others already knew . . . that when you are the center of attention at a society party, your eyes are glazed, and in spite of yourself, you can't stop laughing.

So, feeling like a fool, he shook hands with Mr. Kennet, and then escorted Marjory swiftly to the bar. McAllister had taught him the rudiments of mixing cocktails, and he felt a wave of confidence when he shook them expertly in a silver cannister.

He should have been used to the feeling by now . . . it was familiar.

Marjory had taken him to her club several times; they sat at
the best table in the house, and Charles could remember once a bleary-eyed gentleman who joined them. Raising his glass high to the light, he drunkenly toasted Marjory and Charles and then he offered a toast to their happiness together. Only Charles was embarrassed; Marjory sat demurely looking straight ahead, unaffected by the spectacle.

Much to McAllister's chagrin, Marjory enjoyed the concerts at the Mosque; she and Charles would sit in the uppermost box, Charles distractedly looking over the crowd below him, Marjory seeming to concentrate on the music ... Charles felt close to her then ... when she seemed lost in dreams, her dark face in the shadows intent on the music which Charles felt, now agreeing with McAllister, was decidedly bad.

They went to plays together, but Marjory never seemed to enjoy them; they seemed always to prompt small arguments about religion, arguments that Charles was afraid to win ... Marjory had such a naivety about religion. She seemed to look upon Christ as if he were a puppy, a thing to be loved and petted; Charles could scarcely keep from laughing.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Nothing to do with you," Charles said. "I just happened to think of something else, something amusing."

"But we've got to protect Christ against the onslaughts of atheism, especially in these times, don't you agree."

"Certainly," Charles said.

But in his mind's eye he was elsewhere, shutting out the con-
He could see Marjory skating against the wind, her black hair flying. Marjory, unlike most women, was beautiful in motion; when she ran across the campus she held her outstretched arms like wings beside her and seemed to glide over the grass. The vision of her doing that made him forget the absurdity of her questions.

More than once Charles had thought of introducing her to Celeste’s religious friend, Bill Daffron, but then he would remember the farmboy’s love for Celeste, and finding himself shuddering, he would turn his thoughts another way. Daffron was incredible; one evening in Charles’ room he trapped Charles into an extended conversation.

Shadows were all about the rooms, and Daffron, sitting sluggishly in his chair, his huge gaunt face like granite, looked at him as if he were pleading.

“I can’t talk,” said Daffron, his heavy lips controlled but strangely immobile. “I’m non-verbal; I can’t express myself very well.” Daffron’s words were painfully slow in coming; Charles felt an impulse to shout at him, but was discouraged by the enormity of Daffron’s physical presence; without being fat, the young man seemed incredibly heavy... though his appearance was gentle, his brown arms seemed to ripple with power.

“She loves you, you know.”

Charles nodded.

“I won’t stand in your way.”

Charles came close to laughing, but something in Daffron’s man-
ner told him he shouldn’t; in spite of himself he pitied the boy’s awkwardness, the desire to be honorable, and just that made him appear awkward.

When they walked together later that evening, the Richmond streets were still slick with the late afternoon rain; the trees, elms, maples, catalpas, that bordered the road released moisture from their leaves, and it felt good and clean on Charles’ face, as he slowed from his walk to let Bill keep pace; stopping under a streetlight, Daffron’s voice was suddenly intense . . . he stuttered when he spoke.

“You’re her whole life,” he said. “Everything she does, she does for you.”

Charles felt embarrassed.

“When someone says something about you she gets angry quick,” Daffron went on. “She gets quite violent.”

Charles was mildly shocked; he hadn’t known that before. As Daffron spoke, it seemed to him that there was a lot about Celeste he hadn’t known before. The impression Daffron gave him that Celeste just about ran her college, that she was an organizer, a manipulator, seemed absurd and ridiculous. “She really got the students moving,” Daffron said. “You knew she organized a civil rights march, didn’t you? She also got the students to strike for an increase in pay when they have to wait tables in the dining hall . . . man, she does a lot of things that you don’t know about.”

After a moment, Charles could believe it; in her shy, quiet way Celeste had always gotten things done; he laughed quietly to
himself at the thought of how she must push the enormous Bill Daffron around.

"She's a good person," Daffron said. "She believes in all the right things." But then Daffron's voice was lower. "She told me herself that she does it all for you. You're a lucky man; I wish I was in your place ... I love her, you know."

Charles nodded; in his imagination Celeste was stretched out, naked on his bed. He was drenched with his emotion ... there was so much of himself he wanted to give her. He could picture her then defying her mother, her lips tight, silent, paying little attention because her loyalties were already established, and, at the time, they included no one but Charles.

How she listened with clenched teeth when Charles told her that he was seeing Marjory!

"And I want you to know one thing," said Daffron, continuing, embarrassed, "that when I made out with Celeste, oh, I just kissed her a little, that it didn't mean anything to her; it was just a little physical you know; you understand that."

Charles nodded. "Certainly," he said; it angered him slightly that Daffron brought it up. "Oh, I want her to show emotion," he said at last. "She likes you very much and I understand your relationship with her, so don't worry about that, don't think anything more about it."

Daffron offered his hand and Charles shook it, then they walked back to the carriage house in the darkness and said nothing; Celeste was already asleep in McAllister's spare room. Throwing open the
door to his room Charles showed Daffron his bed. "Here's where I sleep usually," said Charles. "You can sleep here tonight; if you open the balcony door it's much more pleasant."

Daffron's chest was enormous when he took off his shirt and stretched out on the bed. "This is much better than the floor; I expected the floor. Thank you very much."

"I'm going to go sleep with Celeste," Charles said.

"Sure," said Daffron, surprised that Charles should feel that it was necessary to tell him; "certainly . . . I know that." Then Daffron pulled the covers up about his neck and locked out the balcony door into the heavy moist air that ballooned over the garden. "It's warm," he said. "I'm sleepy; thanks a lot."

Charles nodded. Saying goodnight, he slowly closed the door.

It was later he realized that sleeping with Celeste was more than just sex or just love; when he was close to her he had feelings that were impossible to describe; it was as if he were submerged, as if her body were healing . . . he was home again with her; it was as if he were dead and everything were quiet, he could cry in her that evening.

Even when he was most happy with Marjory he believed that Celeste had something that no one else could give him, and it didn't matter that she had kissed Daffron . . . How absurd, how silly, how amusing; he loved Celeste more for pitying Daffron, and he was ashamed that, at one time, he had been foolishly jealous.

He remembered that evening how, lying by Celeste, he couldn't sleep, and at last, giving up, he had slipped out of bed, down the
stairs and into the garden; the moon, half hidden behind the mist, emitted a delicate glow, a soft light made blurred by the moisture in the air, and he felt fresh and clean as he trod about the garden paths, and seemed to lose himself in the fragile dampness of the foliage.

Celeste's limbs were slender and white; they were almost too slender, like the limbs of a child.

"Poor Celeste," Marjory said. "Really, Charles, you should treat her better."

Charles looked at her strangely.

"She loves you, doesn't she?" Marjory asked, her face becoming serious as she glanced at the program and ran a slim finger down the list of characters in the play.

"Yes, she does."

Marjory said nothing, pretending she didn't hear him; but he could see by the sudden whiteness of her cheeks, the firm lines around her mouth, that she was upset. For the rest of the evening she watched the play without commenting on the action, as was her habit; usually she was forever turning to Charles and filling his head with whispers.

In the car that evening she was strangely oblivious to Charles' patter about the playwright's mistakes; turning to him suddenly, she began speaking heavily.

"I'm worried about father," she said. "He's awfully quiet at meals and none of us knows what he's thinking. Really, Charles, it was bad enough when he got into the habit of sleeping in the guest
room, but now he doesn't even bother talking to us. When we try to talk to him it's like talking to a wall."

Charles was going to tell her to deal with the issue at hand, when looking to his side, he perceived that her hands were to her eyes, the shadows had stifled the gleam of her silver bracelet, and she was crying refined, noiseless tears. He was secretly glad of her tears; to his shame, he was suddenly filled with joy, and he admitted to himself later in his room, that at that precise moment, the desire to seduce her was more than overwhelming.

Fighting himself, he drove her quietly home.

"Will you tell me one thing," Charles said to McAllister.

"Will you tell me what she sees in me?"

"You should know," McAllister said, glancing up half-heartedly from his book.

McAllister was in bed; the doctor had been to visit him in the morning, but with a curled lip he continually refused to tell anyone what the doctor had said. The old artist had been in a vile mood all day; his work was mounting and he couldn't get out of bed. He had just received a letter from Jean saying she wouldn't be home for Easter.

"She was damned frank about it," McAllister said. "She said she was having too good a time."

"You didn't answer my question; what does Marjory see in me?"

"Security."

"Security! You can't be serious."

"You're a rock of Gibraltar compared to the people she knows."
She wants to go middle class and find pristine virtues; your only
difficulty lies in keeping her from doing it. Will you pass me
that medicine bottle?"

McAllister took the bottle and put it in the drawer by his bed-
side; too late Charles realized that to discover McAllister's
malady all he had to do was read the label; the artist laughed faint-
ly as Charles turned red with chagrin and stalked from the room.

"I think you're faking," Charles said, turning at the door;
McAllister didn't hear him, or didn't seem to. His face was to
the window and he was pretending to snore. Closing the door softly,
Charles hissed in the room.

"Fake."

Yet he knew that McAllister wasn't totally a fake, for nothing
minor could keep him from his work; he had been commissioned by Mr.
Ontaigh to do a bust of his wife, and since he had once had an af-
fair with his subject, he regarded the chore as somewhat a pleasure.

And there was something to say for McAllister's interpretation
of Marjory's behavior; Charles wished it wasn't true, but he knew
that it was.

Marjory seemed to take pleasure in the glasses Charles wore
for reading and she wished he would use them more often; they lent
him an academic air, and she loved to see him in his white dinner
jacket, his black pants, and he remembered how with delight she
would tell her friends, "Oh, he will be a professor, a college pro-
fessor." Charles couldn't understand it, but she was so scornful
of the friends she had; "they will come to nothing," she would say
haughtily; "all they want to do is squander their father's money and gad about the town."

It wasn't money Marjory wanted, but emotional security; it was apparent at the dinner party.

At the moment she seemed gayest to others, to Charles she seemed frightened. When she smiled at the ladies, that wide stiff yet enchanting smile, he was now aware of the strain, the disappointment and fear that she felt, and after the party, alone with Charles walking the paths of the estate, she would break down and sob for a time without telling him why.

"She was engaged once before," McAllister said.

Charles was surprised. "I had no idea."

"Neither had her parents."

"What happened?"

"Wasn't he an acquaintance of yours, a tall dark boy; his name was Levin."

"Oh," said Charles, "he was killed in a crash; word is that he was doing a hundred and five at the time."

McAllister nodded.

Charles could remember the Jewish boy, but that was all he could remember... that he was a Jew.

After a long bout with Mrs. Donleavy and a longer conversation, Charles felt exhausted and he looked at her wearily with a jaundiced eye; she was in her bathrobe, quietly sipping her tea as she read over the first pages of his book.

"By the way," she said, still reading, still calmly sipping her
tea, and with the sleeve of her bathrobe wiping the steam from her glasses, "Is something bothering you? . . . You've been strange all evening."

"Yes," said Charles. "You gave me an "A" in your course when I didn't deserve it."

"You know more than I do," Mrs. Donleavy smiled. "You are lying to me across the board."

"It's the novel, just the novel," Charles said, "It's worrying me to death; nothing seems right and I'm working as hard as I can."

"Don't worry about it. You have the spirit of Goethe, Mann, and a lot of others; you have the spirit of an artist and it doesn't much matter how good your work is. You may not have their talent, but you have the spirit, and the older you get the more you'll realize that that is all that really matters."

"Did your husband say that?"

"Every day of his life," Mrs. Donleavy laughed.

It was a cruel question for Charles to ask, and he was relieved to find her smiling; that night in his room, everything he knew seemed to be reeking with death . . . everyone he knew seemed to be dead in one way or another, or at least in the process of dying.

It was dying that made gardens so dear; dying buds, dying flowers, dying grass, dying trees.

It would be pleasing to merge oneself with the society Mrs. Donleavy enjoyed; he could think of the quiet life most professors led, no glitter, no streamers, only the prosaic, only the drone of
books and the hum of the classroom. How superior it was to the
life of high society! How tiresome it seemed trying to be gay,
dressing in elaborate costumes; putting on airs, Charles thought,
requires energy, and I don’t have it.

When Marjory beckoned to him he followed, in spite of the
fact that his knees felt like rubber; the wine had begun to get
to him slightly, and his feeling of euphoria began to rub off on
the walls as he leaned against them. Holding up his glass he could
see the chandelier through his liquor . . . a faint purple glow on-
ly just thinner than purple passion.

In the parlor someone had begun to play the piano, and the
faint strains of music settled on the throng and as if unconsciously,
the chatting couples began to drift nearer it; Marjory coaxed
Charles to go with her. "Oh, my cousin Ann is playing," she said.
"She plays delightfully, Charles."

Charles watched the fourteen-year-old play; her fingers seemed
to drift slowly over the keys and flutter like the delicate wings
of a ghost.

Then suddenly the doors of the parlor opened and the young
girl stopped playing. "Paul!" she exclaimed and leaped from her
stool, throwing out her arms and beaming broadly. "Look, everyone,
it’s Paul!" Suddenly there was noise from one end of the house to
the other, and Charles was aware that his position at the center
was to be stolen by the dark young man who lounged and laughed in
the doorway.

"My brother, Paul," Marjory whispered, hastening to greet him,
pouting slightly because young men crowding around the door, shaking Paul's hand, blocked her way; Charles followed her quietly, suddenly resentful that the young men had chosen such an inopportune time for his yearly visit.

Paul was a twenty-eight-year-old business shark, the hero of many.

Charles was surprised at and envious of the adulation the dark young man received, though the latter wore merely a business suit. Paul was decidedly ugly; in a dark gypsy way he was so ugly that he was almost attractive. His eyes, flashing, like Marjory's, were glazed and wild, his manner was one of extreme condescension; he pumped the hands all around, paying attention to none, and Charles found himself surprised . . . he hadn't expected Paul to be like that: coarse, rough, and at the same time attractive.

As if conscious of the spotlight, Paul flashed a smile in Marjory's direction; there was a wickedness in the smile that frankly said its owner was unscrupulous.

Charles laughed in spite of himself when he shook Paul's hand; at twenty-eight, Paul was reportedly worth half a million, and Charles could imagine green coming off on his palm.

"Oh, Marjory," Paul said later, with a glass in his hand.
"That magazine bit, you remember, I pulled it off; about two hundred New Yorkers are dying to kill me."

Paul laughed briefly as in a convulsion, then turning, his face was transformed, deadly serious now, and his eyes lost their glaze. "Delfold. . . Delfold, is that right, man? Listen, Del-
fold, I want to see you after the party . . . a matter of business."

"All right," Charles put his glass to his lips resentfully, and in another moment, Paul was gone; he was laughing and joking in the corner of the room; every female eye, even Marjory's, seemed to be riveted on him. Paul tore off his coat. "You've got to dig, man, if you want anything, really dig." Charles watched him hoist his glass to the light; the sweat pouring off his brow plastered the collar to his neck.

"Paul's a megalomaniac," Marjory whispered.

Charles flushed with anger; something about the young man fascinated him entirely, but the fascination was maddening; Charles squinted down the length of his cigarette, aimed at Paul's back, as Paul, pumping hands, turned about the room. "Bang," said Charles, and then finished his drink; inexplicably, he was ashamed of himself for having dealt gently with Bill Daffron, as the farm boy sat disturbed on Charles' bed, fumbling for words.

"What is it?" said Daffron, sweat rolling off his face and his arms beginning to shake. "What is it I'm trying to say to you?"

"I understand you," Charles said.

"No," said Daffron, "it's very difficult; I can't explain it, I can only feel it . . . there just isn't anything . . . there's nothing anywhere . . . nothing, nothing good, . . . do you understand, can you tell me what's the matter?" Daffron seemed to be begging with his hands. "I know God's corny, and I don't even mean God; there's just something . . . I can't stand it, I swear I can't stand it."
Sweat poured off Daffron's face, and Charles felt for a moment that the sluggish boy was going to jump off the bed and run about the room breaking furniture, or plunge headlong off the balcony; Daffron was sick, Charles thought angrily, but what have I to do with the sick?" Watching Paul, Charles was pierced with envy and loathing; it had seemed to him then that he had spent his life catering to weakness and life that was low.

In the cork-lined study after the party, Paul outlined briefly the work Charles was expected to do; Charles, controlling himself with difficulty, listened while Marjory beside him held his arm... the sight of the mahogany furniture, the wall-to-wall carpet, made him sick, as sick as Bill Daffron; he would destroy Paul and take over the estate, the high bookcases that rose to the ceiling; the sweat on his brow was hot and bitter, and as Paul's voice droned on he despised Marjory, and a redness, a sheen of scarlet seemed to settle over the room and work into his tux, and coming from his chest, the color of blood seemed to stain it.

What did Celeste want except to climb on his shoulders?
CHAPTER VI

Mason's sharp fiberglass cleats bit into the grass and the screams of the grass blades was piercing and loud, as loud as Mason's panting, as loud as the sound Mason's knees made, when like pistons, they pounded heavily, deeply into the grass churning the black dirt, sending it flying into the blue of the sky; then the line opened, two black jerseys parted and left Mason, sweat streaming down his face, his face of death clenched, framed as it were as like a mad bull he charged down the lane, his orange helmet gleaming, his head blushed red. Charles waited, then charged; like a bayonet his shoulder seemed to cut Mason in half, and the boy lay withered, groaning on the ground, and his mouth was filled with blood.

Charles waited and sweated; his teeth were clenched. "Don't get up," he said, "I'll kill you if you do." and then he backed away, his mind alive with the memory, the sound of bone breaking like the snap of pine boughs; and he could remember raking Mason's chest with his cleats and how the cleats had slid up and raked open Mason's mouth, but it wasn't Mason's mouth that looked so twisted and bent; it was rather his leg that lay limp, folded up and blue.

And he was glad of it; even now Charles was glad. And he lay awake in the shadows of the room, disturbed by the shadows and trembling when the shadows flew at his eyes, flew around the room and perched on the wall.

Celeste understood about his art, how much it meant to him; he
could see her then as she was just the week end before when she came to stay with him at the carriage house; there was no Daffron with her at all this time, and Charles was tremendously relieved; Celeste was beautiful in the garden. The red of the roses highlighted the pale sullen whiteness of her cheeks, made her limbs seem more fragile, even more delicate and thin than the cane the Major, still alive somehow, thumped on the floor of the porch ... Charles could imagine the Major; he wanted the Major still alive so he could enjoy the show.

"Do you think that it's good?"

"Yes," Celeste looked up from the papers and nodded, "but not as good as it has to be."

"That doesn't matter," said Charles impatiently, "I can rewrite every page, every single paragraph until it is good enough; it's going to be perfect, just wait and see, every line will be perfect."

McAllister, pale and worn, having just gotten out of bed, stood at the door and watched Charles and Celeste sitting together on the grass; Charles saw him then, and gathering his papers together quickly, left Celeste under the roses as he went back to the house.

"Is that the way to get work done?" said McAllister with a grimace. "I've had a publisher waiting now for more than three months."

"I'm getting to work," Charles said. "She's going to take a nap there and I'm going to my room to work; look at her there;
she's been angry all morning."

McAllister said nothing, but limped to his cabinet, and groaning with its weight, he pulled from its recesses an unfinished statue and sat it on the bench; as Charles went up the stairs he caught a glimpse of McAllister, leaning on the workbench, his head in his hands.

"Will Jean be home soon?"

"Soon," said McAllister, coughing very loudly, and holding his chest.

"Medicine?"

"No, it will pass in a moment; will you please stop standing there looking like a vulture? And don't tell me to get back to bed, I haven't worked in two weeks. I can't stand lying there in bed."

In his room, Charles sat at his desk for hours; nothing seemed to come and he sat looking at his paper, tapping his pencil on his desk; McAllister's condition worried him, and in spite of the old artist's protests that he was getting stronger, Charles feared the worst, and he was tired of the strain, tired of getting up in the middle of the night, tired of pounding the old man on the back, and then afterward feeling the impulse to pray for his recovery.

McAllister's comments were beginning to annoy him.

"It's time you were rid of Donleavy; you've learned all you can from her."

"She's a tired, pathetic woman; she needs me around her."

"And you need to be rid of her; let her spend her time with her
books; that's where she belongs."

When Charles thought of Mrs. Donleavy he was filled with compassion; for, still very attractive, she refused to believe it, and everyday after her last class she would go quickly home and stay in her bathrobe until he went to see her. "You were happier before I came along," he said.

"You didn't matter," she said. "I'm just tired of my work."

Her square shoulders shook, and putting her hands between her glasses and her eyes she began to cry softly. "It's ridiculous to cry," she said, sniffing, "absolutely ridiculous ... it's started too early; you know that, Charles, if you've taken biology ... but no ... that doesn't matter; the fact is, Charles, that I'm still young and sexy. Have you seen the way Fergusson looks at me? ... I'm not old, I know that ... that's why it's so ridiculous."

"The important thing is your work."

"Yes," she said, clumsily putting her glasses back on, and brushing her bangs away from her forehead, "if only I wasn't so tired." Charles shuddered as she put her head back down on the table and began to weep; he put his hands to either side of her face, and his heart burning inside of him, he stroked her tawny cheeks.

"Why, I haven't cried like this; I haven't cried like this since ... since ... do you know when? Can you imagine?"

"No, when?" said Charles gently.

"One day," she said, "when I was about sixteen, I took down
all my poems from the closet and read them carefully, and do you know I realized it then, that I couldn't be a poet. It was really fantastic. I knew it even then; I knew it instinctively."

Without knowing why, Charles felt an impulse to pick up the coffee pot from the table and throw it about the room.

That evening in bed he could see Mason tearing across the field, and he lowered his helmet to Mason's groin and charged, but the blow was not as satisfying as it had been before, because he could see Mason, a bayonet in his chest crawling into the transepts away from the white ivory hands of the virgin Mary, and at last coming to rest and dying amid the flickering, uncertain light of a choir of candles; and it suddenly seemed right what Daffron had said, or rather tried to say but couldn't quite explain.

Celeste told Charles once that Bill Daffron had been married, but it wasn't a happy marriage because Daffron kept disappearing for days at a time, and once his wife had found him in a dingy hovel, living like a monk in the back woods of Georgia.

"Everyone is insane," Charles said suddenly.

Celeste looked up from Charles' manuscript and smiled at him as he sat fidgeting in the garden waiting for her to finish the book and approve of how it was going. "People are interesting," she said. "The only interesting people I know are neurotic, or crazy, or something like that."

"Do you believe that?"

"Well, yes."

Celeste looked like a doll and it was difficult to say it.
"Is that why you hang around with Bill Daffron, because he's something of a nut?"

"No, that's not all."

"Well, why then? Don't keep it a secret."

"Because I like him," said Celeste, her face becoming determined, "I like him very much as a matter of fact."

"Is that all?"

"Yes," said Celeste, biting her lip and averting her eyes; they fell on McAllister standing in the door. "Yes," she said with more violence, "yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Charles," she said bitterly, "you know that I love you; why are you doing this? I told you before that I've made out with him, nothing serious; you know that I do every now and then. Why are you going at me like this?"

"Because you don't love me."

"Damn," said Celeste, half spitting out the word, "I've always loved you . . . you are my life; why do I have to tell you again? What's wrong with you today? If you didn't want me to come why didn't you say so?"

In his mind's eye, Charles could see a chair rocking; it moved faster and faster, the boards creaking louder and louder. Though Celeste was crying, her fragile hands to her face, her hair wet and streaming, he pressed down on her wrist with her fingers, and with his other hand held her chin and made her look in his eyes; she closed her eyes tight and whined with despair.
"You would like to go to bed with Daffron, wouldn't you?"

"No," said Celeste, "I wouldn't do it."

"But you would like to."

"No."

"But you do like to go to bed."

"Of course, of course ... everyone does. Oh, Charles, why don't you leave me alone? I love you; you know I do.

"But other men tempt you, don't they?"

Celeste's face seemed to break. "Well, yes, they do. Yes, as a matter of fact they do, yes."

"And Bill Daffron tempts you too, doesn't he?"

"Yes, yes."

"That's why you keep him around isn't it?" Charles shouted angrily. "Because you've got the idea you can have him anytime you wish."

Putting the manuscript to her pulsing breast, with tears in her eyes, Celeste strove to retreat, drifting back into the rose bush behind her, her arms trembling and mashing back the foliage; to Charles' mind the roses, red like spring apples and waxy, seemed to swim in the whiteness of her face. "Please Charles, please stop, oh Charles."

Then suddenly he was kissing her and running his fingers over her legs, and it seemed to him then that they weren't white anymore, but brown like bark, like dry pine needles, and his hands reached round her waist and he held her, and as if his head were of a tremendous weight, he dropped it in her lap and felt his chest tighten
till he wanted to scream and sigh, hold his breath till he died.

When he had recovered himself and comforted her, he sat quietly on the grass and let her try to read the manuscript again, and when she looked up and said it was good he felt a wave of elation pass through him, but when she pursed her lips and then said it could be better, such a stab of agony went into him that he, looking up and seeing McAllister, his bald head shining in the doorway, he got up quickly, dizzily, went through the door, up the stairs, and plunged into the familiarity of his room.

From the French doors that opened onto the balcony, he could see her still, sitting, just as she had been a moment before, with the manuscript in her lap, half-hidden by the roses. On the balcony he imagined that there were ashes on her breath . . . damp, sodden ashes; and the impulse to make her look at him and forgive him completely became overwhelming. "Hey," he called. "Hey," he called foolishly, "get your clothes on, Celeste, and I'll take you to the museum after lunch, and tonight I'll take you to the Mosque. There's a concert at the Mosque . . . they play excellent music."

Celeste looked up beaming. "All right," she said slowly, but Charles couldn't hear her; he knew she agreed because she got up from the grass and went into the house. Charles threw open the French doors wider and went out onto the balcony; he stood looking over the empty garden and the black Richmond streets till he groaned with despair.

A car stopped in front of the carriage house and out of it popped Ronald McAllister.
McAllister didn't come to lunch because of the presence of his son; muttering to himself, he retired to the bedroom, and Charles could hear him groaning, the springs of the bed creaking, as he got into bed. His son, Ronald, his blond beard looking thin and silken in the light, calmly stirred his soup as he looked questioningly at Charles and Celeste.

"Why are you dressed up?" asked Ronald, and with his thumb trembling, Charles tried casually to break a cracker.

"We're going to the museum," Charles said at last.

"Interesting party last night," Ronald said drolly. "I've been in Richmond since yesterday, and last night I went to the most interesting party, avant garde party you know; you wouldn't have liked it, Charles, but guess who was there?"

Celeste's disturbed eyes found Charles; she seemed to ask who was this strange boy and why was he gloating.

Celeste was in high heels. Charles loved her in high heels; they made her look like so much of a woman. She was dressed in a tight yellow skirt; her white blouse seemed frilly. It was strewn with lace, and except for the high heels, which made her look like a woman, she looked like a child, and Charles felt protective, and the anger that was always present when he saw Ronald McAllister welled up inside him.

Ronald sat too near to Celeste for comfort; it seemed that his nastiness would rub off on her.

Ronald paused for a moment; his long blond hair, dropping almost to his shoulders, his blond beard now streaked with red soup,
his tight black jersey, the beads around his neck, the red cloth hearts sewn to his bluejeans, made him seem dangerous, a contagion that mustn't be allowed ever to touch Celeste's hand, or defile her ears with the words it spoke.

"All right," said Charles, "who did you see?"

"I saw Mrs. Donleavy," Ronald said, his thin fingers once again stirring the soup slowly; he blew on the soup and then suddenly laughed foolishly. "She's a strange old bird, she is," Ronald giggled. "She's even stranger than me."

"You're not strange," Charles said, "you're stupid."

"Be that as it may," said Ronald undisturbed, now calmly blowing his soup, "That Donleavy woman is a strange old woman . . . very straitlaced in appearance, you know . . . but you do know, don't you? . . . Don't you, Charles?"

"Yes," said Charles.

"Do you know what angers me," Ronald said, becoming suddenly angry. "That old man is there; he makes me angry." Ronald pointed to the door of the bedroom. "Do you think he cares whether I come home or not? Hell no . . . he runs to his room . . . Now what kind of way is that for a father to act?" Throwing his spoon into his soup so that it splashed on the tablecloth, Ronald looked down gloomily at the table, and seemed to lick his lips.

"Do you care?"

"Care?" said Ronald, looking up defiantly. "No, I don't care; why should I? I just come here to eat."

"Everyone knows that."
"Why shouldn't they know it? Listen, man, that old guy is a bust; he lives in a different world . . . he gets hurt a couple of times but still, like a damn fool, he tries to be high society; God, he makes me sick."

Charles sat saying nothing, looking at Celeste as the look of surprise faded from her face, and her lips began to tighten.

"Everything makes me sick," Ronald continued. And then suddenly, he looked at Charles. "Will you tell me something? Just what in the hell does he see in you?"

Charles allowed himself to smile.

Turning to Celeste, Ronald spoke loudly. "What do you think about it? You're supposed to be his girl friend, or hooch, or what you will; what do you think of your boy running around licking an old man's boots?"

Celeste said nothing.

"All right, don't talk to me; just forget I'm here," Ronald half shouted, and then turned back to Charles. "All of which brings us back to the case at hand."

Ronald spread his hands on the table.

"It seems Mrs. Donlevy talks terribly about you, you know; she slanders you up one side of the street and then down the other. She makes fun of your living here like a puppy with my father; you're a laughing stock, man, and you don't know, but I'll tell you one thing . . . I don't like it at all; you may not believe it, but I don't like the way they talk about my father. I'm mad, man, I'm mad, and I want you out of here . . . so get out of here, right now,
and don't ever again let me see your face . . . so get, get, get."

"Is that why you're here? To tell me that?" asked Charles, controlling his anger and dipping his cracker slowly in his soup; he was aware of Celeste watching him, aware that she was biting her lip, that her blue eyes were piercing him through.

"You're damned right," shouted Ronald, his face flushed, rising from his chair; then his tact suddenly changed. "You're funny, man, damned funny; some of those things the old lady said about you had us in stitches." Ronald allowed himself a laugh; he threw his chin to the ceiling and let himself go.

Charles exploded inside. The opportunity having presented itself when the bearded chin was poised in the air, Ronald found himself sprawled on the floor, blood streaming from his mouth and soaking into his jersey; he spat as Charles kicked him, and then screamed with pain, his face white, a red gash opening up on his forehead.

"Don't Charles, don't," screamed Celeste, clutching his arm and throwing her weight against him. "Stop kicking him, stop it, for God's sake, stop it." Charles collapsed wearily in a chair, no longer aware of the boy sprawled out before him; he held his head in his hands and the room seemed to be spinning. The sickness came and like a lethal poison it seemed to spread through his veins, and he bent over double, holding his stomach, breathing hard, his eyes bulging with exertion.

He fought off Celeste's hands and made his way to his room, where locking the door behind him, he lay stretched out on his bed, his eyes gazing at the ceiling, his arms seeming to lie lifelessly
beside him. He could imagine Mrs. Donleavy at Ronald's party, getting drunk and laughing about him . . . it was funny that he could never imagine it before . . . but he could now and it made him afraid. Did she laugh inwardly when she read his work; did she also laugh at his pretensions? Could it be possible that he wasn't what he thought, that for others he was a subject of jests? Could he have been deluded about everything, everything of importance?

Mrs. Donleavy's shadow seemed to tell him that he was; the shadow was laughing with a wide open mough . . . Charles screamed silently. He couldn't understand; everything seemed so confused that he scarcely knew where he was. What kind of a woman would laugh at her lover behind his back? And then Charles remembered that she had given him an "A" when he hadn't deserved it, and the memory filled him with dread.

The room seemed to spin about. Did Marjory regard him as a plaything? When McAllister giggled in the dark, was he absolutely sure what McAllister was giggling about? Charles almost cried, and he remembered himself standing before the mirror.

His eyes were sunken; there was darkness around them. His coat was ragged, and his light face seemed dark like a gypsy's; he could understand the parts of his face; his nose was straight, a trifle too long; his forehead was all right; his cheeks were firm and young looking; but behind his eyes where was he? . . . Was he there, or perhaps there; maybe he wasn't even behind his eyes, for his eyes seemed to fasten on his reflection; they seemed mesmerized,
empty, vacuous, and the parts of himself became unhinged and seemed to be scattered about the room.

And what in God's name did Celeste see when she looked at him? The thought of Celeste was fascinating, ghostly; he could see her in the garden, sitting under the rose bush, her feet bathed in the creeping phlox that flowed at her feet. How hard it had been to form an attitude toward her; she sat determined, faithful, permissive, quietly biting her lip when things got too bad.

And suddenly a new fear swept over Charles, one larger even than the one that had gripped him before; he could see Ronald getting up, wiping the blood off his mouth, looking embarrassed, humiliated, and then he could see Ronald looking at Celeste, and the sight of her staring at him. Her eyes filled with scorn and a maudlin pity, would make him want to say things to her, things that would hurt her.

At that moment, Charles knew, Ronald would be telling a frightened Celeste that he, Charles Delfold, was having an affair with a woman twice his age. Charles could hear the sound of high heels clattering on the stairs.

And Charles thought of her then as she must have been at college, usually not dating when the other girls were, spending her time in the library working for him, working because she wanted to be like him, because everything he was she wanted to be. The time for her must have passed slowly; she would glance at the clock on wall wishing the hours to pass swiftly, for if the hours passed swiftly the days would too, and the weekend would come, and she
could wait in her room for him to call, waiting for him to come
got her and take her with him. She waited there for him, reserv-
ing herself for him, but he rarely came.

The moments they had spent together had been few and widely
spaced; it must have disappointed her bitterly, for she knew all
the while that he was only a few hours away and could easily come
for her if he wanted to.

Charles could remember the balloons and fireworks that lit up
the bluff and made the rye grass glow bright green and red, and he
could hear Celeste asking, "I'll go first and then you follow me," and then he could see her safely outside the row of hedge, waving
her hand for him to follow, and he knew that she knew he followed
half-heartedly, trying to be caught, not wanting to join her, and
in the bright lights of the fireworks, he could see her child's
face, see the bitter disappointment indicated by her teeth on her
lips.

And it broke his heart to remember the look on her face; a
look of pain it was, but not surprise, and he knew that she ex-
pected him to betray her.

It quite broke his heart.

The clatter of heels was louder on the stairs; the sharp
pointed heels made quick hard sounds on the steps, and he wandered
across the room, half in a daze, when the feeble knocks came on the
door, weak but determined.

She didn't say anything; she just looked at him, and all he
could do was nod.
"It's McAllister's fault," Celeste said at the door. "I'm going to get him."

Then she was down the stairs, running through the garden, past the peonies and red tea roses, through the gate and into the streets. With pounding heart Charles chased her, calling to her, but his voice seemed lost in the blinding light that bounced off the pavement.

And he was back at the beach lost in the shadows of the road and all about him was an impenetrable darkness, a darkness of woods when the pine needles join hands and blot out the moon; the buildings like black pines rose from the whiteness of the sidewalk, and from their great heights, they extended their arms downward and struck him as he called her.

Walking swiftly now, she rounded the corner and disappeared into the park behind the museum; from a distance, the white lace of her blouse against the green grass of the lawn made her look like the sister of the marble museum, but when Charles approached, she moved and walked the sidewalk hastily, and at last he aligned his shoulders with hers and matched his steps with hers, quick, impatient, and sharp.

"I'm going to get him," she said.

Charles kept up with her speeding strides.

"An old woman, Charles, an old woman; he can even make you hurt an old woman."
"He didn't make me."

"He did, he did," Celeste cried, suddenly crossing the street, "and I'm going to get him for it."

They were back at the carriage house and into the garden and the maple trees became pine and the shadowed covered paths became pine, the yellow glowing lilacs and lilies became eyes rimmed with red that gleamed in the dark, and disappearing suddenly into the house, Celeste became a child biting her lip who was swallowed by the soods and lost in the maze of pines that bordered the dusty road, and before Charles' eyes flowed the turbulent and mysterious waters of Nassawadox Creek.

A stillness settled over the table at lunch as Celeste, not eating, sat staring at McAllister as the old artist sat dumbfounded in his seat. Ronald was gone; he had packed his bags and gone back to Washington, but his blood was still on the table because Celeste let it sit there, dull red and dried, beside her plate.

"Why are you looking at me?" McAllister said, coughing over his food.

Celeste said nothing, but looked at the artist with the purest hatred.

"She's going to have to leave the house," McAllister said, getting up quickly, coughing loudly and shaking.

"I'm not going back to school," Celeste said. "I'm staying here for awhile."

"You will leave this moment," McAllister said.

"I will not."
McAllister coughed then so loudly and heavily that his
strength seemed to be suddenly drained and he held his chest as
he slumped against the table, coughing into his plate and across
to the place where Ronald's blood lay dry and dulled; Charles was
on his feet, but McAllister waved him away as Celeste slipped from
the table and ran up the stairs.

Charles caught her where the stairs twisted and he pulled her
down beside him on the steps; she was crying again and the twist-
ing stairs seemed to be a well, a trumpet that magnified her cries
and sent them whining into the garden. "You can't stop me, Charles.
"I'm going to pay him back for what he has made you do."

"He didn't make me," Charles cried; "I tell you he didn't make
me."

"He's made you small, and I won't stand for that."

"He wants me to be big."

"No," said Charles. His words sounded hollow and the beams
of the stairway seemed to twist and groan.

Celeste ran into the bedroom and closed the door in his face.
Putting his shoulder to it, he tried to knock it open, but the lock
held, and in a few minutes he was sore all over as he slumped down
on the top step of the stairs; he looked at the door and it seemed
huge and forbidding, shrouded with darkness, honeycombed with black
vines from ceiling from ceiling to floor.

"Are you going to let me in?"

"No."

Plunging down the stairs, Charles found McAllister collapsed
and coughing on the studio sofa. As Charles bent over him he looked withered and wrinkled like Flora, and in desperation Charles felt he should blow in the old man's mouth...frantic with desire, he wanted to pour life into him.

McAllister's eyes opened and the dulled eyes looked up at Charles' face; there was a yellow glow about them. "What the hell has happened?" McAllister said, with the back of his hand wiping the vestiges of blood away from his lips.

"Don't you worry," Charles said, "I'm going out with Marjory."

"When?"

"Right now," Charles said. "I'm going to call her right now."

Much of Marjory's magic lay in her clothes; even without her jewelry her person had an aura of sophisticated refinement. Her brown hands, peaking demurely from the cuffs of her black blouse dipped into the water and stirred the reflection of the tall green trees that bordered the lake; she smiled then, she laughed, and her laugh reminded Charles of running water and he could see her again gliding over the crests of the campus hills.

"It's beautiful here," she said, holding her knees with her arms. "Oh, how I love it."

Against the blue of the water her face was magnificent. Charles caught his breath, and for a moment he didn't remember either Celeste or McAllister.

The campus was alive with flowers in the spring; with night
falling slowly, there was a certain freshness about the air
that pervaded one's senses. It seemed to add a new and wel-
comed lightness to Charles' steps as he and Marjory wound their
way down a black asphalt path that twisted through outcroppings
of woods and then, snake-like, squirmed over the freshly grassed
fields and then coiled around the lake. In the lake's clear
glass the spire of the chapel was reflected; they sat on the
bank so that its tip end pointed between them.

Marjory fell back on the grass and seemed to be looking
straight into the sun. Her dress pulled up, exposing a portion
of her thighs, but she failed to notice; she put her hands be-
hind her head and yawned luxuriously. There was something in
her manner, her lack of concern, her ability of relaxing; in awk-
ward times that irritated Charles; he determined to say what was
on his mind, he couldn't hide it any longer.

"Shall I say that when I am with you I am very happy, and
when I'm away from you the desire to be with you is strong and
urgent?"

Charles' face was composed; he had managed to lie without
a smile.

"Is it the same with you?" Charles' voice seemed metallic
and cruff; the words seemed to snap at her.

Pausing before answering, Marjory used her hand to indicate
that an answer was difficult; the fluttering brown fingers seemed
to describe a fine line of meaning. "Well, it's not," she began,
"as... it's not as immediate as yours seems to be."
Charles grimaced noticeably; the heat of his cheeks told him, to his mortification, that he was blushing. He pulled a reed from the water's edge and put the end of it into his mouth; the lake seemed to be in pain and suddenly he was angry. Getting to his feet, he threw the reed into the water and watched the minuscule ripple spread to the shore. "What about Jewish boys, what do you know about Jewish boys?"

Marjory looked surprised.

"Are they dark and rich, are they more attractive?"

Charles could see her understand suddenly. Unconscious of herself, she cried aloud, forgetting to hide her face with her hands. Trembling all over, she tried to speak, and then she turned from him quickly, putting her face to the ground. Still angry and now also ashamed, Charles threw a rock into the water and watched with absorption as it scattered the bright fragments of the cupola in a thousand directions.

Marjory sobbed quietly. "I loved him," she said. "He was wonderful and I loved him, and I'm not ashamed of it."

"Was he the only one?"

Marjory looked up disbelieving. "Why, yes," she said, "of course he was the only one ... he's the only one I have loved."

"That's not generally believed."

"What?" said Marjory. "What?" And then, horrified, she put her hands to her eyes and began to cry pitifully.

"Do you love me?"

"I don't know," said Marjory, "I don't know...I think
that I do."

Charles could picture her then amid a flood of saffron streamers that pulsed wildly as the band broke into fast music, and the tinsel-clad couples spun about the room laughing and joking, passing him by without so much as glancing his way. He could again taste the bitterness in his mouth. As if having bitten into a lemon, his mouth drew fiercely into a box, and his tongue seemed to swell as if packed with poison. The procession passed him by, and he knew if he joined them he would be like a housefly, annoying but only an irritant, a small dark thing to be unconsciously brushed off a plump succulent arm, a thing to be cast into shadows and forgotten.

Charles closed his eyes and clenched his fists tightly. And then he saw Marjory break out of the group of dancers who had frayed her, and the pain of the sight seemed to be running sharply through him; how could he feel superior to her when the misery was so keen? Marjory's laugh came to him like a blade in the dark, and he made his way down the stairs trembling, shamefully reluctant to run from her, but run he did, into the rain, into the black Richmond streets.

And then sitting beside her as she cried by the lake, he felt vindicated and ashamed.

That evening in her car he pressed her close to him and looked out the car window at the procession of tall pines that seemed to play in the glass; they were bent and twisted and flitted quickly by; they were drenched by the moisture that fell
from the black sky. She was warm in his arms and he put his face against her neck.

"What do you believe in, Charles, will you tell me that?"

"I believe in fire, water, ice, and fog. I believe in the cupola on top of the administration building, and I don't believe in anything else, including you. I especially don't believe in you."

"Oh, Charles," she said, frightened, holding him tightly about the neck.

"I'm sorry," Charles said, and his voice seemed hollow and false. "I'm sorry you have to prove it to me, but that's the way it is; that's the way things are. You're going to have to prove it to me."

Harjory cried softly. Strangely soft and darkly brown, Harjory was very charming stripped to the waist, afraid to sit straight up in the car but hiding herself by pressing close to his breast. Charles removed the few pins in her hair and the blackness fell quickly to her shoulders; she was at once both soft and firm, elastic, and her olive complexion and light green eyes lent to her a peculiar sensuality that was moist and radiant.

Whining faintly with pleasure, she yielded to him quickly, and he closed his eyes tightly. As if enchanted afterward, he lay quietly in the car, between sleep and waking, and in the wet glass of the car window, almost submerged by the darkness, a piece of faintly shimmering black silk moved the length of
the car and then disappeared. As Charles awoke, he became increasingly aware that she was gone.

He sat up quickly and perceived a faint movement in the midst of the pines. Shouting for her to come back, throwing open the car door, Charles plunged into the woods, and in a few seconds was aware of the incredible darkness. Looking around him wildly, he could see nothing, but he was aware of the swish of water near by and he was suddenly afraid.

In a sudden rage he struck himself, with all of his force, across the breast, and cursing himself loudly, his eyes filled with despair.

"Marjory," he called foolishly, hearing the desperation in his voice, "will you please come back!" He listened for a moment; hearing nothing, he was again angry and he stumbled on blindly, barking his shins on a stump, slipping once, amid loud curses, falling finally on a bed of wet leaves where his pants became muddy and damp.

The trees on the high ridge were hollow; in the moon's pale light, the openings looked like great black slabs of black paint spread across the bark. The campus lake, bounded by three large hills covered with elm, maple, pine and fir, black like the robes of a priest, kept the moon's light from lighting up the water, but there was on the dark glass of its surface a low gleam of ghost-like white, a cloudy vapor that huddled close over the pitch-black water. All about Charles and in the dark sky above, crickets and the nonotonous drone of things unseen, like leaves
rustling in the wind, a sudden splash from the black water, 
seemed to make a forbidding melody, a melody of sudden whis-
pers filled with lower murmurs and groans. Inanimate things, 
a rotten stump, a silver web stretched from tree to tree, from 
bush to bush, bathed in and wore made iridescent by the pale 
filaments cast by the moon. Charles looked around him, 
frightened and shaking.

It seemed a time of witchery; the cold sheen rising from 
the lake seemed to dampen and chill the olm by the water that 
rose starkly and defiantly, poking finger-like twigs into the 
pervading solcan blackness of the dampened sky.

Charles went forward slowly. A branch caught at his face 
and raked down his cheek to reach his neck. With a frenzied 
motion he brushed it aside, cursing as the dry branch snapped 
and fell to the ground. In a matter of moments, a lane of 
faint light told him that he had found the asphalt path. He 
paused for an instant, staring at the white light that emanated 
from behind a closed curtain in the dormitory that stood at the 
top of the hill. The light heartened him considerably; it 
brought to his mind a sense of where he was, and he strode on, 
feeling foolish but better.

Only as a child had he known such tangible darkness. It 
seemed to have substance; thick like a blanket, it seemed to 
enshroud him. Its cool wetness lent it a smell and general 
character that was impossible to mistake; it was like the im-
penetrable darkness he had known as a child. The small clump
of woods on the college campus seemed to become the forest of
pine he and his mother had, hand in hand, traversed with a mix-
ture of dread and weary delight on many occasions many long
years before. He could see his mother beside him, turning her
head and breathing into his face; she was crying then, softly,
bitterly, so that it wrenched his heart, and he could think of
Geloote still locked in his room, Harjory locked in the woods,
and his guilt was such that he had to take it up in his hands,
and with a fierce look on his face, cast it away from him and
into the bushes.

His mother once again breathed into his face, a breath
fierce and pungent, and the night sounds increased, the orches-
tra seemed to blurt out full force... suddenly, coming through
the maze of trees, he heard a muffled cry. He turned half about,
stock-still with wonder.

The moon, peering through the trees, lit a circular clear-
ing; its light illuminated the flesh of uplifted hands, and
Charles' breath was drawn in sharply, involuntarily. He could
see Harjory's face below him twenty yards down the hill, un-
shielded now by the ring of trees, which to her prayers were
now pronouncing their benediction in low baited breaths, like
the pungent breath of Charles' ghost mother who blew softly and
slowly, wetly on his eyes.

Harjory was stone still, down on her knees; the moon on her
face shone white and ghostly, and Charles was suddenly struck
with a mad desire to weep, to wring his hands and cry out, to
bellow with his soul. Himself a black shadow on the hill, outlined against the sky, his breaths came quick and a sense of amazement overcome in....it was as if the hills and fields, the water, the air, the atmosphere of darkness and mist, laughing and jeering, had suddenly risen like a black cat to claw and draw blood from his face.

Marjory was praying aloud; her voice droned on in the night, a black cloak thrown over her shoulders.
CHAPTER VIII

In his revelry by the lake after taking Harjory home and stealing a fifth of vodka from his father's cabinet, Charles leaned back against the black fir, letting the moon strike his face. He put the empty bottle to his eye and laughed as the moon seemed to melt, spread itself out and diffuse in silver streams through the density of the glass.

Harjory had wanted to know why she found him crying fiercely in the car, and he told her it was because that morning he had gotten word that his dear Flora had died.

"But she died over a year ago."

"But I just got word." At her somber face Charles found himself laughing.

The moon was cold in the sky, but Charles could see it in the blackness, a hard lump of coldness and paleness, a thing freezing but hot to his touch; trying to touch it, he found it in his bottle and he huddled over it to keep from letting it escape. The fir trees around him, in his drunkenness, seemed to be bending over him, drooping their long fingers down and trying to knock the bottle from his hands.

But he wouldn't let it go; with freezing hot fingers he held the bottle by its neck, and with his eyes filled with angry tears, he put the bottle's mouth to his mouth, and with all of his breath he cursed into the glass.
In the middle of the lake there seemed to be a fire blazing, and he strained his eyes to see Jack twisting in agony, writhing on the cross, his feet touching the lapping water, huge bugs of fire breaking out and flaring deep red as they screamed on his body, jumped on his legs, raced madly over Jack's black stomach and chest.

Reaching an enormous arm out over the water, Charles laughed as he touched the top of the cross; then, laughing as Jack shouted, he pushed the fiery cross under the water to watch Jack struggle and drown. Blistering bubbles rose to the water's surface as the fire was extinguished, but when Charles took his hand off the top of the cross it popped back to standing on the surface, once again bursting into flame.

Just barely seeing, Charles jumped up shaking; in a rage, his angry trembling arm gripped the neck of the bottle and threw it at the cross. He shrieked with delight at the explosion, but when the smoke cleared Jack rose again, his black body streaming with water, with the moon, shimmering with its silver light clenched in his teeth.

Losing consciousness, Charles fell on the cold ground, and in his dreams the coldness seemed to be packing itself into his bones till his bones were brittle, breaking with the cold. He awoke to find the fir trees swaying over his body; through their branches, red streaks of sunlight found their way to his face, and they seemed to burn, gouge into his eyes.

Going back to the carriage house, the sun seemed to follow
him; with every bump of the bus he glanced out the window and held his head in pain to see the angry sun rattle in the sky. He had never been quite that drunk before; he could still taste the vodka on his breath and feel it coursing through his veins, and he could remember the violence of the night as it contrasted with the warm reality of the morning.

When he awoke there had been just trees about, nothing more, and when he went to the spot where Marjory prayed, it was just a doll with flowers sprinkled about, and to his relief, nothing but his mind retained evidence of the nightmare of the day and night before.

Jack had even abandoned the cross. As for the cross, it had probably sunk forever, and with throbbing head and bleary red eyes he was happy for that. The sun sat on Jack's head, and Jack's body was covered and washed clean by the water.

Charles tumbled off the bus, and after rejecting the idea of going into the carriage house to find Celeste, he crept quietly through the garden gate and into the garden, where, nearly collapsing with exhaustion, he lay stretched out in the warm shade on McAllister's marble bench. Contented for a moment, he lay half in a stupor looking at the flowers that blew softly in the garden.

The marble statue of Diana, hounds at her heels, reminded him of Marjory.

It was necessary to shun her from his mind; he had done with her what he had never thought he could do, and in the back
of his mind he was surprised for she was just flesh and blood, softness and darkness and very little more. It was strange to him...the way she had changed, the way she had unbuttoned her aristocracy and dropped it at his feet.

With an effort he thought of something else and let the light breeze, rustling the bushes of the garden, play about his face and gently rub his eyes. Jean McAllister had written him that she was coming home for the summer after all, and confided to him that she wanted to see his graduation, and hoped he would deliver a speech for her in private.

McAllister would be very happy that she was coming home; from where he was, Charles could hear the old artist rummaging in his cabinet; he could hear a bang and then a clatter, sounds which told him McAllister was getting out of bed to sneak in a day of work behind his doctor's back; through the carriage house door, Charles caught a glimpse of McAllister getting out his pallets and setting up his easel, and Charles closed his eyes and tried to make himself melt in the breeze.

Waking up gently an hour later, looking again through the carriage house door, Charles could see faintly the whiteness of naked flesh, and lying on his stomach, though the bushes and flowers, he could make out the delicate outline of the backside of a woman. For a few moments, with pleasure, he studied the curves of the woman, before at last getting crossly to his feet and moving to the door.

McAllister was looking at his canvas as Charles, for a few
seconds, stood in the door eyeing the model; her back was to him and with his eyes he followed the flow of her limbs, her blonde nakedness from her feet to her shoulders. Her legs were delicate, her bones fragile, the cheeks of her soft buttocks were white like ivory; they were slender and frail. They seemed to be china...Charles caught his breath; the girl’s buttocks were white, china, delicate, like the cheeks of a doll. The light coming between the girl’s legs gave a peculiar lightness and softness to her loins.

Charles staggered and the door slammed, causing the girl to turn with a jolt.

"Charles Dolfold," Celeste exclaimed, "you don’t belong in here."

Celeste jumped into her robe, and, weeping, covered herself, but not before Charles could imagine her full nakedness blatantly confronting McAllister; he could imagine her body writhing under his stare, and Charles held his head, closed his eyes in pain, and fell against the door.

"Charles," McAllister shouted, sweat leaping to his face, "Charles, are you all right...Charles?"

They both ran to him now, Celeste red with despair, McAllister sweating and afraid; Charles could feel their hands on his shoulders and neck, their combined strength as they lifted him from the floor; as he bent over Charles, McAllister’s sweat seemed to pour in Charles’ face, and Charles fought wildly, his arms flailing at the air, shouting unintelligible invectives...
in his mind's eye he was again at the door of his mother's bed-
room, and he could hear the noises, and his mother's voice and
Jack's laugh, and the pain filled his arms and legs till they
flashed out in a fury.

In an instant he had beaten the hands back, and he was
running through the garden and into the streets; his arms pumped
and his legs thrashed away at the pavement until at last, in the
park behind the house, to the twitter of squirrels and the sound
of cars passing, he collapsed on his face and his aching hands,
like the paws of a fox, dug into the soft ground, throwing up
grass...he looked up suddenly, and through bleary eyes, he saw
what he thought was McAllister coming, running through the park;
and, scrambling to his feet, oblivious to passersby, he ran the
Richmond streets until he was lost.

Near midnight, coming again from the museum to within sight
of the carriage house, he crossed the street so as to remain a
certain distance from it and sat down on the curb. In another
moment, he got up and walked twice around the street-light and
then sat back down on the curb; he lit a cigarette and, taking
two puffs, he threw it into the street, and walked around the
block, stopping again in front of the carriage house on the
opposite side of the street.

Should he go in? The compulsion to do so was inside him,
but he lit another cigarette and this time smoked it down to the
filter. He had to have her; he couldn't leave her there, but
he didn't want her either. But on the other hand, he did want
her. Then he laughed to think that he would go in and save McAllister, but then he hated the artist bitterly. "He didn't care about it, McAllister didn't," Charles said to himself. "He just thought of her as furniture." But then Charles could see McAllister's eyes roaming over Celeste's naked loins, and he held his head, lit a cigarette and threw it into the street.

He would just sit there on the curb and let them see him from the windows of the carriage house...that was what he wanted; but in the next moment he remembered how pathetic he looked, and not wanting them to see him, he got up from the curb and walked a pace down the street. Suddenly, he threw a new cigarette into the street, and turning, he hurried to the gate and plunged into the garden.

He crept behind the foliage because he didn't want them to see him.

Breathing hard, flat out against the side of the building beside the door, Charles almost decided to return to the marble bench and let Celeste and McAllister discover him there, but his legs seemed to have turned to lead, and he doubted his ability to walk; he whined lowly to himself and groaned with agony, tensing himself to take the necessary step, throw open the door, and walk casually into the house as if nothing had happened. Or did he want to destroy them?...He didn't know, and the uncertainty, the conflicting emotions, seemed to paralyze him, plaster him against the wall.

Inside the carriage house there was a creaking of board as
if someone were walking toward the door; Celeste's words hung like lanterns in his mind. "You don't belong here," she had said, and he held his breath, as to his horror, he perceived the doorknob twist.

The door swung suddenly open, and Celeste was upon him; he backed away from her, heavily against the wall, but her hands were on his face, in his hair, stroking his neck. The smell of roses was about and it seemed to drift over him. "Silly Charles," she said, weeping, "you're mine, you know, and I'm yours." Then she pressed him close to her and covered his face with her hands; she kissed him and her breath was like the odor of ashes soaked by the rain.

"Forgive me, please, oh please; it will never happen again."

Charles buried his head in her shoulder.

He could see her then, doll's face, doll's hands, doll's hair, blazing yellow in the light reflecting off the redness of apples. "I had to pay him back, I just had to," she said. "Please understand that... it was the only way I had; I couldn't let him take you from me."

Celeste's hands were all over him; looking up, he could see her white hands engulfing him, her mouth drawn into a pout, her white hands fluttering, flashing in the light, drifting quickly high above like gulls screaming in the sky; the hands passed over his face, his shoulder; they were on his hips. Celeste drew him close to her and his breath was sucked tight into his lungs, and the force of the air seemed to break then.
Crying heavily now, bucking away, Celeste shuddered all over and her hands went to her eyes. "I admit I enjoyed it," she said, a tremor seeming to pass over her limbs. "I didn't think I would, I honestly didn't." Then she shuddered again all over, and it was as if her delicate bones were cracking, snapping in a thousand places, and to stop her shaking he grabbed her, hysterically trying to hold her body still.

He saw her pretty face in the garden's light and there were roses in it, and then her hands seemed to float about him again, and it was as if they were gulls with poisonous beaks, for, crying, "No," he struck at them. "No," he cried, striking at them, knocking them away from his face and body. "No," he cried again, and he struck at them, taking great swipes at them until they fell wounded from the air. Leaving Celeste weeping behind him, he was suddenly at the gate; slamming it behind him, he caught a glimpse of her standing broken in the garden, with purple phlox at her feet and roses above her, but he didn't hear it; he was already on the sidewalk, quickly, hunched over, making his way down the street.

The only one he could stay with was Brooks, his old roommate. The leather-faced boy morosely condescended to let him sleep on the floor, but Charles could not sleep, and he walked the halls all night. It was then he fully understood Brooks' passion for the stairwell that fell thirteen stories to the hard cement floor of the basement: it was because of the powerful basement light, flashing white, and round, and small like
a beacon in the middle of the blackness caused by the string of thirteen darkened floors.

Charles lay hunched over the rail when Brooks, his face hidden by shadows, came quietly up behind him.

"You don't get out of that well," said Brooks.
Charles barely heard him.

"No, sir," said Brooks, a bit of laughter in his voice, "you go down that well and there ain't no coming up. That's one well without a bucket, man. You go down that well and there ain't no bucket to pull you up."

Charles looked down the stairwell and he could see himself sprawled out on the cement, blood running out of his mouth, his bones broken like sticks, lying in the light, white and gleaming.

"I want none of that yet," Charles said, backing away from the rail as Brooks returned laughing to his room and closed the door behind him.

Charles went again to the rail and looked down on the cold cement floor that shone like a mirror; his reflection was as distorted as it had been in his bedroom mirror that lonely evening when his body, in small pieces, seemed to be cast helter-skelter about the room. He peered through the darkness, but try as he might, it was impossible to create a clear image of himself, and he felt sick all over, nearly crying aloud for Celeste.

The boards creaked under his rockers as he moved the chair back and forth, all the while his face concentrated on the flushed features, the delicate gestures of his mother; he could
see himself with her, and his mental picture of them both was clear and defined, but as she spoke, when she told him of the redness, and when she evoked for him an image of herself standing, naked with trembling white ivory limbs, before men who sweated, laughed and taunted, she, talking on the sofa, seemed to fade and disappear in the darkness of the cottage. And then he was alone with himself and his horror mounted till he could see himself no longer; his face, his eyes, his hair, seemed to disappear in the shadows with his mother, and he no longer had himself. Who he was became a mystery to him; as he turned again and looked down into the well his face was a blur, and he could hear himself scream and collapse against the wall.

His hands shook when he tried to call her; the cold receive was hot to his palm, and his fingers felt flimsy and weak, too weak to dial McAllister's number. It seemed an eternity before anyone answered, but when the phone was picked up Charles shouted hurriedly, "Celeste, is that you? I've got to see you."

There was an awful silence at the other end of the line that made Charles frantic with worry; he fought with the impulse to put the phone down, till at last he heard a cough and the sound of McAllister's droning voice.

"You come here to see me," McAllister barked, his voice cracking and breaking, shaking with a cough, "tonight," he said. "You come here tonight."

Charles' legs turned into water, and dropping the phone, he made his way down the stairs, through the dormitory doors,
and out onto the campus of the college. It was alive with crickets singing in the darkness, and their voices seemed filled with desperation and madness; he had heard the drone of cricket voices precisely that same way before, and putting his hands to his ears, he tried to shut out the sound, and the memory of when as a child, with yellow leaves about him, he waited and listened with dread and fascination to the insistent pulsing and throbbing rhythm of the song they sang.

His mother's face was in the garden, and it was waxy... broad and shiny like the leaves of Magnolia.

She carried a lantern that threw light on the places she expected him to be hiding, but still in the shadows she waited, watching his mother peering through the vines with Jack behind her; and he felt for his rifle and almost pointed the barrel at her heart, but when under the pergola she seemed dotted with wisteria, and he put his face to the ground to drown out his cries.

In the lantern's light and all about there was a redness: the redness of peonies and tea roses, and a delicacy, the fragile whiteness of Queen Anne's lace, the dying blue of his mother's Sweet Williams. And as he closed his eyes and tightened his hands on the stock of the rifle, there was a roaring to be heard, the roaring of crickets singing in the brush.

Then with angry eyes Charles could see Celeste before him, sitting on the campus grass amid the shouts and cries that rang from the dormitory windows, and laughing, she tore a bloom from
the lavender creeping phlox at her foot, put it to her lips, 
and with a gentle breath of ashes, blew the petals toward 
Charles and then resumed her reading.

Then he could see her naked, the light streaming between 
her legs, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, tight-
ening her buttocks and thrusting her hips forward, forcing her 
nakedness close onto McAllister's sight.

And then Charles held his breath; Celeste was alone with 
McAllister in the carriage house; would she be doing it again, 
would she be twisting beneath McAllister's old body? Stealing 
Brooks' car, Charles drove with the windows open through the 
black Richmond streets, and the cold water from the sudden 
thunderburst drenched his clothes, and made him slow his driv-
ing to almost a walk; the cold rain on the windshield flooded 
the glass and obscured his view; with panic he drove between 
the tall drooping black trees.

Then he waited for an hour in the carriage house garden; 
the rain had stopped; the crickets again sang. In his memory 
there was swishing of skirts as his mother came into the arbor, 
down the rose collonade and through the gate of leucothoe. Be-
fore him then, as he stood shivering in clothes soaked through 
with water, the lights of the carriage house burned through the 
darkness.

The carriage house would never be his home again, and the 
realization of it filled him with despair.

The bright lights which had once brought him a measure of
comfort and peace, now flared harshly on Celeste's naked body, and the carriage house doors seemed to be locked firmly against him, holding him out and keeping her in; keeping her squirming in the horror of its lights. And Charles could remember her words that struck him like a blow. "Charles Dolfold," she said, "you don't belong here." And Charles rubbed his hands frantically against his face, rubbing against the rain water that sloshed in his eyes.

On his way to the stairs, Charles crept stealthily through the studio and then by the door to McAllister's room; holding his breath and walking very softly, he at last reached his stairs, and with every step as he ascended in the dark, he clenched his teeth and closed his eyes against the creaks that seemed to be trumpeted through the house. At the twist of the stairs he paused and waited; he could see the door to his room shut, and cocking his head madly, he listened for the sound of Celeste's breath coming from his bod.

Trying the lock, he found that the door swung, quietly opened, and he struggled to see Celeste's body as the moon's faint light fell across the sheets. "Celeste," he called faintly, but receiving no answer, he crept into the middle of the room and called softly again: in another moment he was at the side of his bed and throwing back the sheets; to his surprise, he found himself gazing at two pillows that had been placed in a row.

And a sudden rage came over him; he had to restrain himself from screaming, and he felt the frustration rise up in
mammoth proportions inside him.

There was suddenly a numbing flash of light, and Charles reeled about, throwing his hands over his eyes. Without seeing the hand that had thrown the switch, Charles was immediately aware of what had happened; the hacking cough coming from the doorway told Charles that McAllister had trapped him.

Sitting on the bed wearily, Charles moved his hands and let his eyes adjust to the overhead light. McAllister, sitting by the door in the striped, stuffed chair, had the same problem with the light, but with his hand over his eyes he kicked the door shut and moved his chair in front of it.

"Move the chair," Charles said angrily, lurching forward.

"I will not," said McAllister, and then the old artist coughed loudly and held his chest. "We are going to have a little talk."

"Where's Colecto?"

"She's gone."

"Gone?...Gone where?"

"Back to college, of course," said McAllister, his hands straining against the arms of his chair, still coughing, his handkerchief wiping away the sweat from his forehead, till in the light Charles could see that it was seeping wet, as was his tattered bathrobe. McAllister coughed again; he was almost blue from having controlled his coughing while Charles crept up the stairs and across the room.

Burning with rage Charles almost attacked, but the sound
of the old man's hacking lungs made him back up quickly and sit on the edge of his bed.

"Make it quick," Charles said, "very quick."

"I warn you," the old man said wearily, "that I will exonerate myself completely."

"Go ahead if you can."

Charles looked at his watch. "I'm going to give you about two minutes, then I'm going to knock you away from the door."

"All right," said McAllister, mopping his forehead with the handkerchief so that the loose damp lace kissed at his nose and cheeks. "I only need two minutes, and afterward I doubt that you'll want to knock me anywhere; I have been intensely loyal."

"Skip it," muttered Charles.

"All right," said McAllister, "here's what happened; I swear by this. I was just starting the painting and I needed only a figure outline and I mentioned it to her to get her to talk. She just kept staring at me all morning and I couldn't stand it. So to my surprise she said she'd do it, that she had a bathing suit she could wear if I just needed the outline. I agreed and she came down stairs in a robe; I swear I assumed she had something under it." McAllister coughed, and with the handkerchief he daubed his forehead quickly.

"Then she took off her robe," McAllister said weakly, "and she was standing there with nothing on, thrusting her hips toward me; I was shocked, I swear to you, Charles, and then you came bursting into the room before I knew what had happened......."
McAllister looked up, his old face imploring, "That's all it was, I swear to you, Charles, on my word of honor."

To his utter dismay, Charles felt that McAllister was telling the truth, and his head began to whirl; he could hardly see McAllister when the artist's voice, now harsh and grating, continued trembling between coughs.

Charles clenched his fist; he had never been so angry and hurt in his life.

"You expect me to blame only her?" he suddenly shouted with all of his force, and then he stared at McAllister icily before dropping his gaze to the bedspread and giving his mind up to the whirl that had already begun throwing the lamps, the pictures, the books, the chairs about the room in a widening gyre. He put his fingers to his temples as if to stop the motion, and McAllister's voice was loud in his ears.

"That's why she did it, Charles...you know it's true; she wanted you to hate me...she knew you'd be unreasonable; she used her knowledge of you. She knew you'd hate anyone who saw her naked even if it wasn't their fault."

"Stop it," shouted Charles. "I can't stand what you're saying."

"And she knew you'd forgive her," the artist continued, his voice becoming louder. "She knew it damn well; she knew she could get you...she knows now that she's got you just like this." McAllister gripped one hand with his other and squeezed as hard as he could. "She knew you'd be afraid to be a man on your own;
she knew that you are more her than you...and God damn it, Charles, she was right about everything...I still love you, Charles, but God damn it, boy, I'm ashamed of you for not being a man, I'm ashamed."

Charles' palms were against his eyes. "It's not true," he mumbled. Then looking up, he said loudly, "She was upset over what she did; I could see it in her face...she was very upset and you can't explain that."

"Fool," said McAllister, coughing and throwing his handkerchief angrily to the floor, "she was upset because she liked it, she liked posing nude...that surprised her greatly; she hadn't planned before hand on throwing out her hips...she didn't know how good it would....."

"Stop it," cried Charles. "Will you please, please, stop it!"

He was in his mother's garden again, breaking his rifle against a tree; the maddening bark shone cold black in the darkness and he took the stock of the rifle and swung it as hard as he could, and it felt good when the blow sent a fierce shock through his limbs. And the next time, grabbing the rifle by the barrel, he swung it even harder and it felt so good and clean that he could stop swinging, so he swung again and again, each time crying with the shock, till the parts of the rifle lay scattered over the ground, black and burnished by the moon.

And at the bottom of the stairwell Charles could see his mother, blood on her skirt and blood on her mouth, fleeing
down the brick path of the garden, flooing pass the forsythea,
the violets, the lilacs, and then disappearing behind a curtain
of boxwood and form. And in the bottom of the well when his
mother disappeared he seemed to disappear with her, and there
was nothing of him left, nothing to hold him together, and he
seemed to come apart; the parts of himself seemed to flee from
the room, and when he saw Celeste, saw her naked before him, he
could find himself, and his hands moved fiercely trying to feel
his body, but it wasn't to be found.

He could hear himself cry out, and out of the darkness he
heard McAllister's voice droning.

"So it wasn't my fault....it was just...." and then sud-
denly McAllister's face grew and Charles could perceive the
artist changing: his head became huge and balanced foolishly
on his shoulders, his huge hands seemed to hang down below his
knees; his hair was black and long, and flowed down behind him
in streams when he spoke.

"And ye men of de world that plunge in Mary's evil, de
grounds gonna open because dat words a-willing, but its gonna
close again in the midst of yo sinning.....Pay day someday, and
that day is acoming with the death of de lawd."

Charles could feel himself sinking and suddenly he shouted,
"My work, where is my work?" Then running to the desk, he began
pulling out papers frantically and piling them up on his chair;
he looked around, as McAllister watched, astonished, and then
went to the closet and pulled down a box of his own work and the
little cardboard box storing his mother's papers.
"What are you doing?" said McAllister, getting up from his chair, his bald head glistening in the light.

"None of your business," said Charles.

"None of my business? What do you mean none of my business? You're going to continue living here...."

"I'm not going to live here." Charles piled the papers, one on top of the other, and with a strong cord from his drawer, tied them up in a bundle.

"Of course you are."

"No!" Charles snapped, taking the bundle in his arms and then plunging out the door before McAllister could recover to guard it; in a moment, Charles was outdoors, running through the garden as McAllister stood in the door of the carriage house, cursing to himself.

Tucking the package under his shirt, he protected his manuscripts from the rain as he ran, slopping in the wet streets, sloshing water over his face and shoulders. The lights from windows threw pools of light on the watery sidewalks, but Charles charged through them unmindful of any substance, save the tangible darkness that encompassed him, as he ran along the black asphalt between two lanes of sodden trees; and at last, his heart pumping and body aching, he passed the museum and was within sight of Mrs. Donleavy's house.

He would give her the manuscripts, make her sit up all night and read them, and he would make them seem good to her by the promise of sleeping with her if she liked them very much and
thought them professional.

Then as he ran, he thought to himself that he would live with her for the rest of his life, that he would forget McAllister, Celeste and Marjory, and devote himself to the woman who needed a man such as he. He could see her in her library waiting for him all day, her glasses on her face, making her face old and pitiful, and he could see her at the blackboard of her class, her fingers holding chalk, drawing lines on the board with delicate, feeble strokes.

He would spend the rest of his life in the library with the sedentary woman, prowling in the archives, peering into journals, down on his knees in front of book racks, inhaling the dust of books long forgotten, relishing the droning drone of the library and the drone of the classrooms. He would spend a quiet life with her in the deadness of the library, in the warm deadness of ten thousand books.

He could taste it in his mouth, and the taste of dust and antiquity drove his legs forward.

Mrs. Donleavy's living room lights were on, and coming through the windows they were like warm beacons in the darkness; he felt warm all over as he stopped on the opposite side of the street. How glad she would be to see him! A sudden blush of cold rain fell over his shoulders and he shivered, shaking all over, but with water running from his forehead to the tip of his nose, he was strangely joyful.

Just when there had seemed no place for him, one now lay
waiting within his grasp; he felt himself already in Mrs. Donleavy's arms, and her face was buried deeply in his chest, as a car passed and drenched him with water from the curb. As he took a step into the street, he suddenly stopped still; Mrs. Donleavy's door opened slowly and the shaft of light from her living room seemed to split his face in half.

A bundled figure stood on her doorstep as Charles strained his eyes to see; the figure had a rain cap pulled over his head, but he held the brim and lifting his face, he kissed Mrs. Donleavy on the lips, before she at last shut the door and disappeared inside.

Charles stood shocked on the sidewalk; the disappointment was such that at first he didn't believe it, and tried to find reasons that were innocent, that could have led Mrs. Donleavy to see a man at three o'clock in the morning. No reasons could be found, and seeing to himself like a soundly snatched child, Charles focused his eyes on the muffled figure splashing his way down the sidewalk.

He let his manuscripts fall from under his shirt and lie in the water. Later, when he came back, he could retrieve only the letters of his mother, and by then they were soggy and the ink had begun to run down the pages.

On the opposite side of the street Charles walked swiftly to catch up to the bundled figure who was fast disappearing in the mist of the rain. He began jogging heavily, his heart on fire, and when the man turned to see who followed him, Charles
dove behind bushes and lay there panting. Then guessing that the man would continue in a straight line for a number of blocks, Charles ran a block to his right and then dashed for three blocks in the direction the man was heading. At the end of three blocks, Charles turned left, hoping to make the corner that the man had to cross before the man passed it.

Secured in the bushes, Charles could see the figure walking slowly toward him, unaware of his presence. The rain had stopped now and the man fumbled with his cigarette pack, taking out a cigarette and putting it to his damp lips. Striking a match, the figure stopped under a streetlight, and the red blazing light of the match, and the white light of the streetlight, Charles could see the man's illuminated face.

Something jerked inside him and he was torn between laughter and tears, merriment and utter despair.

Ferguson, the Registrar.
PART III
CHAPTER I

When Charles heard that Celeste had married Bill Daffron, he took his wife and in-laws and fled down to the plantations that bordered the James.

It was early afternoon and Mrs. Kennet, sitting alone in the back seat of the car, was sweating furiously as Charles, with Marjory and Mr. Kennet beside him, turned on to the gravel roadway that circled the plantation's fields, and at last stopped in front of the out-buildings that, standing in two rows, framed the main house as it stood glistening in the sun.

"You need an air conditioner for your car," Mrs. Kennet said, as demurely as she was able.

Charles nodded and ground the car to a halt; getting out of the car he held his breath, overwhelmed, as it were, by the magnificence of his surroundings; the blue James River ran like a ribbon by the main house and fed the land with such rich minerals that the crops were ripening early, and all about there was the thick smell of corn, of dogweed, of jasmine. The maple trees in the front yard were in bloom; the huge leaves, swaying as the gentle wind gushed between them, were already broad and green, and the leaves of the magnolias were waxy.

Walking hand in hand up the gravel with Charles, Marjory said with disappointment, "Oh, it's beautiful. We should have brought Lydia."
"Nonsense," said Charles. "The heat would have hurt her."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course," said Charles with a smile, squeezing her hand; Marjory was always so concerned with their daughter's welfare. Still an infant, Lydia had already seen just about every worthwhile sight in Richmond.

The plantation never failed to thrill Charles, and for an hour or so he could forget about Celeste, living in New York with Bill Daffron. When looking across the fields, he could imagine negro men and women, with bright red kerchiefs tied about their heads, singing low, with sweat running over their dusty arms and faces, bending over cotton, their fingers deftly plucking the balls of white cotton as they overflowed their stems.

And it came into his mind then that he had been somehow disinherited, and he stood looking at the main house as if it were the farm that his father had been forced to leave; the tourists in the field to the right, in their bright colored clothing, seemed to him then to be horses, mares, and colts, prancing across the pasture, neighing in the wind. When very young Charles had seen his father once, standing in the main door of the farm house, white and gigantic like a colossus as he surveyed the fields, and he could imagine that the frail little man in the plantation house's doorway was actually his father, and that the man was dressed in white pants and a white shirt, and smiled when he slapped a black whip across his thighs.
A voice called to Mr. Kennet from across the yard, and Charles turned his head to see Mr. Slater, who maintained the plantation, coming bouncing down the gravel path with his hand outstretched. The man's voice was jovial; he was decidedly plump, and his thick black belt seemed to cut deeply into his girth, and as he pumped Mr. Kennet's hand there was the suggestion about him of great latent force.

He walked very swiftly and escorted the family to the wrought iron chairs that bordered the river; in a few moments drinks were brought by the colored maid, and Mr. Slater was only mildly disturbed when Mr. Kennet refused a glass on the grounds that his constitution was already destroyed. Kennet had burned himself out many years before; the dour-faced little man rarely expressed excitement or pleasure; he was in the habit of spending ninety percent of his time in the glassed-in back porch of his estate, with only his bird dogs for company.

Marjory cried whenever she thought of her father; Charles knew that Mr. Kennet had no delusions about why his wife had married him. Stroking the head of one of his dogs, he had once confided to Charles in a rare lucid moment:

"And I married her for physical pleasure," he said. "She was something then; you should have seen her."

"Like Marjory?"

The old man blinked wearily. "Yes, they still look a lot like each other; heaven help the unwary male."
Charles pitied the old man intensely; even when he say with Mr. Slater, a long-standing friend, he slouched in his chair, and rejecting the drink, appeared tired, preoccupied and bored. Charles put his glass to his lips as Marjory and Mrs. Kennet sat relaxed and gracious, but at the same time intent on Mr. Slater's words.

"I don't think so, Martin," Mr. Slater said.

Mr. Kennet nodded, "How about the third district? How does young Bryan sit:"

"Young Bryan's a weakling, and he can't carry the third. You, Martin, have a better chance of carrying the third than any of the Bryans."

Mr. Kennet nodded again, this time indifferently; he looked at his wife as if he expected her to carry the conversation. Receiving no help, he looked around as if he were trapped and then suddenly he turned to Charles, who was carried away, listening to the sounds of the river, and the noise the tourists made traipsing through the house.

"My son-in-law here," said Mr. Kennet slowly, nodding toward Charles and glancing at Slater, "doesn't believe the political situation as I outline it for him. Will you tell him for me just how many men determined who would be governor in the last election?"

Charles forced himself to attention as Mr. Slater leaned back in his chair and said, "Let's see," as he counted his fingers. "I would say that there were eleven, counting myself and maybe one other. There were twelve or maybe
thirteen. That's about right, I think."

Mr. Kennet gave Charles a knowing wink and then halfheartedly settled back in his chair as Charles laughed to
himself; they had never spent one moment discussing politics
between them, but Charles, instead of being angry, gave the
old man credit for invention. He had been aware for a long
time that Mr. Kennet was in the habit of wearily faking his
conversations; even when Marjory told him she was pregnant he
had to fake a reaction, and as soon as he was able, he retired
to his porch to be with his dogs. As if to make up for her
husband's lapse, Mrs. Kennet had been incredibly angry.
Threatening until the last minute to make Marjory have an
abortion, she only became reconciled to their last-minute
marriage when the baby was born; even then she looked at
Charles with scorn and hatred, amazed that Marjory would marry
someone so unimportant.

So McAllister had his revenge, and Charles could imagine
the old artist giggling in the dark.

"Take her too," McAllister had said.

"Take who?"

"Take Mrs. Kennet too; her husband doesn't give it to her."

Charles laughed long and loud. "Have you seen her
recently? Have you seen how she looks?"

"All right, don't do it," McAllister said, laughing,
happy as his words were lost in coughs.

Walking hand in hand with Marjory down by the river, Charles
could imagine a fleet of merchant ships sailing up the river to deposit their goods and maintain the plantation. The sailing ships, captained by names like Braddock and Cornwall, had first charted the James, and then carried the cargoes that made plantation life possible; he could see the schooners, broad in the sail, like great white winged birds, sweep around the bend in the river to wait in the harbor, where hundreds of slaves waited with cotton and tobacco, ready to again fill the hulls after they unloaded them. In his mind's eye Charles could see his father managing the unloading and loading, but he knew that his imagination was playing him tricks, for by the time his father grew up those days were gone, and far in the past; but still his father had been brought up along those lines, taught since childhood how to function in a world that had already collapsed.

In his musings, Charles was aware that his father's tragedy had been caused by his grandfather. The second Charles Aaron Belford might as well have thrown a black robe over the bough of a tree and then strung his son up; Charles felt himself being carried away, and as the light breeze coming in over the water fluffed his hair, he was aware that the situation was as simple as that.

"Don't you think," Marjory said, still holding his hand rather tightly, "that we need a new carpet for the front hall? Really, Charles, that awful green ...."

"A new carpet," Charles said. "Oh, yes, a new carpet;
get a new carpet if you can find one that suits you."

"But the expense," Harjory frowned.

Charles turned his full attention to her and couldn't keep himself from laughing; she always mentioned expense with such concern, as if it had reality for her.

"Why do you laugh at me?" she asked, confused and hurt for a moment.

"How much does a new carpet cost?"

"I don't know; maybe three or four hundred."

"Then we can afford one every day," Charles said, "so why worry about it? You're silly to worry."

"But it's so extravagant."

"Expense, my dear, is relative," Charles said, feeling very gallant as he escorted her down to the boat ramp and stood beside her. Together they looked out over the water at the skiers being towed rapidly past the pier, childishly waving their hands and getting no response.

The concept of expense to Charles was a thing of the past; when he looked at his home in the west end of Richmond, aware that he was only twenty-three years old, expense became a word that suddenly lost all meaning, and he saw only the hedges, the sprawl of the house as it twisted its way across the manicured lawn. McAllister had been right; though Mrs. Kennet hated him, she had felt it incumbent upon her to buy him a place in society for Harjory's sake.

Charles knew that the last joke on Mrs. Kennet had been the realization that money couldn't quite do it, and again in
his imagination, he could hear McAllister laughing.

Charles looked back to the table where Mr. Kennet still sat submitting himself to the fierce blows of conversation.

"I like you because you don't talk," Mr. Kennet had said.

Charles nodded sincerely, but in his heart he knew that Mr. Kennet cared for no one, that he professed to approve of Charles merely to avoid the necessity of being vehement in his disapproval. Mr. Kennet loved only his bird dogs, and ever so often it appeared to Charles that the old man perhaps had a grain of affection for his plants.

They had stood together against the metal rail and listened to the pounding and pulsing of the machinery; then suddenly Mr. Kennet had seemed to forget himself, for his eyes were half-lighted as he pointed to the far corner of the plant and began jawing soundlessly, for Charles couldn't hear his words; they were lost amid the din of machinery.

Though his arm was around Charles' shoulders, Mr. Kennet looked relieved when Charles wouldn't accept a position at the plant.

"You'll work only for Paul?"

Charles nodded.

Mr. Kennet nodded. "He needs you," he said, and then walked away to inspect one of his boilers.

Writing the articles for Paul's magazine was extremely tiresome and it was good to escape to the plantation for a
while and forget about his work, about Celeste, who had written him earlier in the week and upset him, and about the necessity for hiring adequate servants to help Marjory with the cooking and gardening; Marjory had insisted on a garden like the one at the carriage house and Charles hadn't had the heart to refuse her; she insisted on it with lips that tried to be firm and resolute, and he was tired of taking her resolutions and tearing them in half.

When he saw that even the infant Lydia took advantage of his wife, he could take advantage of her no more; he resolved then to show his gratitude and please her.

Each day she grew more beautiful. Brown and soft, naked under a chandelier's light, she was so luscious then, that when writing of her he couldn't find words to describe her; the baby had made her figure seem more full and completed.

He could see Marjory, trembling, standing before her mother, her hands shaking, insisting that the old woman treat her husband with respect. Charles knew that whenever a disparaging word was said about him at any of her social gatherings, Marjory would fly into a fury; it flattered him greatly, and to a certain extent, it made him love her.

"I knew it would be like that," McAllister chuckled.

Charles was incredulous. "How?"

"She is secretly very middle class. She identifies your success with hers; she is content to be your servant."

Charles felt the impulse to contradict the smug old
gentleman, but McAllister coughed so fitfully that he merely took the bedclothes in hand and tucked them in under the artist's thin neck. Jean was back in school and her visit had brought McAllister little comfort; she wore a miniskirt and talked with a flighty trill.

"Does your work go well?"

Charles nodded, hating to admit that Paul so submerged him in work that he hadn't written on his novel for months.

"Does it matter to you now that I'm rich?"

McAllister looked at him strangely.

Charles had been trying to write all winter and had a private study designed for that purpose, but his work teaching school and the trash work Paul continually heaped on him kept him from serious work of his own. Even when all his other work was done he couldn't write; he felt drained, and sat unproductively tapping his pencil on the desk in utter despair for hours on end.

He would have given up teaching school ... Mrs. Kennet didn't like it, no one liked it .... But being away for the day kept him away from his desk, and that was to be desired; the mere sight of blank paper before him filled him with dread, and he would have to bolt from his desk and stand at his window, fighting depression as he looked out over the lawn to see Marjory and her friends in the shade drinking tea, or to see the snow in winter as it threw a white blanket over the roses - and then the lawn, the roses, the snow, the garden,
brought him memories that, soaking in him, made him sick with discomfort.

When he wasn't tapping his pencil he stood at the window for hours.

"What if everyone knew he was a school teacher?" Mrs. Kennet would say. "How would that be?"

"He shall do as he wishes," Marjory insisted each time she asked, "and nothing will be said to anyone about it."

"I don't like it."

And Mrs. Kennet, her hair in a spinster's bun, her withered face screwed up grotesquely, would shout with disapproval when Marjory refused invitations to parties in deference to her husband's wishes. Charles liked to be alone in the evenings; he was the victim of a masochistic with to torture himself in his study, and Marjory endorsed it, for she readily pretended, with firm stoic lips, that the gatherings bored her as much as they bored Charles.

The banter and glamor of Marjory's life had lost its fascination for Charles. It seemed to him unreal, tortured and forced, but he didn't hate it as he had before; it simply held no interest for him now, aside from the joy it brought him indirectly, when Marjory sat before her mirror, decidedly feminine, dressing with excitement, her face childishly masked with ill-feinted indifference.

The only respite from his despair were derived from seeing Marjory, childish and happy, and visiting the plantations that hung onto the edge of the river and seemed to hold the
moving, swirling water in place; it saddened him to think that the plantations were working plantations in name only. When he could divorce this fact from his mind, the large green fields, the antique furniture, the memory of white sails rippling with the wind, managed somehow to hearten him considerably.

His father had had a plantation of sorts, and if times hadn't changed, he would now have it; at times he considered coming back to the Eastern Shore and claiming the farm, but the Major wasn't yet dead and he feared meeting with Celeste.

Marjory sat beside him, very prim and proper like a young mother should sit, on the grassy bank of the James as the sun set on the river and the drone of Slater's voice reached out to them like many fingers groping in the darkness.

"Won't you have a last drink," Slater called.

Charles shook his head, and once again, tightening his hand on Marjory's, gazed at the river and speculated as to how long it would take the particles of water, dancing immediately before him, to flood out to the Chesapeake and then merge with the waters of the Atlantic. Or perhaps, he thought, the water would linger in the Chesapeake, touch Washington, and then settle at last in the backwater of Massawadox Creek.

"You could have at least been polite, Charles," Mrs. Kennet said, as Charles pulled off the gravel driveway and
turned onto the black asphalt road that led back to Richmond.
"You needn't have behaved so priggishly."
"I was the very soul of politeness."
"You were not," said Mrs. Kennet, flustered. "You most decidedly were not."

That evening in his study, Charles became discouraged and laid his pencil flat out on his desk and listened for a few moments to the low hum of voices that emanated from the living room where Marijory, excited and happy in her element, entertained her guests, two bespectacled old dowagers who tittered incessantly.

He could hear the tinkling of cubes of ice against glass as he ascended the carpeted stair, and sat for a moment by Lydia's cradle, as Lydia, brown and firm like her mother, went back to sleep quietly. After a while he went to his and Marijory's room and sat for a long time smoking a cigarette in the darkness.

After some minutes, though there was no fire, no smoke, no blaze of sudden light, he was aware of Celeste's letter burning on the dresser.
CHAPTER II

Celeste scorned him in all her letters; she couldn't understand how he could waste his life in the sleepy little city of Richmond.

"You've got to grow up," she would say. "Got out of the nest."

Charles read his letters at his desk and they never failed to make unhappy and drive him ignominiously to his window to watch the fading light as it fell over Marjory's garden; he couldn't escape the gardens; at night they revolted in his dreams and swirled in the air. He had known so many gardens, and they all were alike; in his dreams he couldn't distinguish one from the other. All were pervaded by roses, and lilacs and brick walks that seemed to trace his name as they scrambled through the hedge.

He could never forget Celeste, and each letter she wrote left him at his desk alone and burning; Marjory was delicate, but Celeste was Celeste.

"I love you," she wrote, "and I always will."

Celeste was incapable of holding Marjory against him; he wrote to her explaining that he'd gotten married, but Celeste already knew, and as he stood by the window looking out over the garden, he wondered why he'd written it and caused himself so much pain.

"I can no longer trust you," he said to McAllister on a rare carriage house visit. McAllister, looking extremely weak,
no longer able to work, smiled in a way that Charles could remember too well.

"You look at me as if I were already a success and didn't have to write any longer."

"You must continue to earn your position."

"My position," said Charles, "my position - for God's sake, I've earned it."

"No you haven't, Charles, you've only begun."

It was difficult to get McAllister's words out of his mind; even when he sat lecturing to his class of high school students, a chore that presented him with numerous defeats, he pondered McAllister's words until he was angry, and much to the surprise of his wide-eyed students, he would leave the class suddenly and disappear into the lounge. Then smoking a cigarette slowly, he would think of McAllister and think of Celeste.

He found it difficult to teach, for he couldn't bear the administration of the school; Celeste had put it right when she said they all had dying eyes, that an education major was stupid by definition.

His superiors at the school weren't worthy of teaching; when they made the attempt, it was blind leading blind. As he stood at the board, chalk in hand, he became aware of the futility of trying to instruct. American students were so mishandled that when they reached high school they had no chance of remaining; they had already begun associating stupidity with knowledge, aspiration with the imbeciles that
stood before them trying to instruct.

"Discipline," said the principal, standing before him.

"I see, said Charles, "then you agree with those who disapprove of or haven't read Dewey, Montaigne, Russell, Neill, Goodman, and a host of others."

"With who?"

Charles laughed loudly and long; all through his classes he would remember the incident, and chuckle. But then when he remembered the old principal's face, he felt ashamed of himself, ashamed of all the time he spent trying to insult and humiliate his inferiors.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Malcolm Trent."

The boy's baby cheeks were like apples; they bulged with redness.

"Can't you behave in school, Malcolm?"

"Nope, I guess I just don't like school, and in a couple of years I'm going to get out and join the Navy."

The boy's jaws bounced rapidly, but as he spoke, Charles missed his words, for he was hearing a voice inside himself.

"You misbehave, Malcolm, because you are unhappy. You are unhappy because you are unattractive and stupid. You wouldn't misbehave, Malcolm, if you didn't want the girl in the front row to look at you."

"I'm a hell-raiser," said Malcolm.

"Yeah, Malcolm, sure," Charles could imagine the boy
saying to the principal.

"Here, Mr. Education Major," he could hear himself saying, "do your duty, please. Castrate this boy before he becomes a problem."

Each letter of Celeste's implored him to come to New York and each day at school, each time he conversed with his associates, each bout he had with despair at his window, he was tempted further to do as she wished, but upon leaving his study he would encounter Marjory, her eyes not especially happy, but contented and trusting, and the resolution to leave would die suddenly within him.

And he loved the moments he spent playing with Lydia.

"You should go to New York," Marjory said, pouting slightly, stirring her tea.

Charles let his newspaper drop and he stared across the white table cloth that sparkled in the light.

"You should pay Paul a visit. I know you're interested in the magazine and I think you should be."

An intense excitement had entered his chest and it stayed with him for hours, stayed all the next day as in school he sat dreaming at his desk, staring at the blonde little girl who sat immediately before him. Receiving encouragement from his glances, Katherine lingered behind the other students and approached his desk timidity at the end of class.

"Everyone thinks I'm stupid," she began firmly. "You don't think I'm stupid, do you Mr. Delfold?"
"No," said Charles, "you only act stupid."

Charles hated himself for loving somewhat the sixteen-year-old girl who stood before him; he loved her in part because she actually very intelligent, and in part because the other teachers seemed to despise her; he felt a sudden impulse to take her hand and tell her things would be all right, but then he remembered who he was, and began talking as gruffly as he could.

She fluttered her hands before him, keeping her eyes on his face, and he turned to look out the window so he wouldn't have to see her.

Everything near him seemed to remind him of Celeste and the gardens.

"Ch, Mr. Delford," she said, "you're teasing me again."

He had protected her against onslaughts, daggers in the dark of the teacher's lounge, and the more vociferous he had become in her behalf, the more his colleagues had disliked her, and the futility of it drove him away from the desk in his study to stand gloomily before the window.

He was unimpressed by the massive skyline of New York that hung lit like a Christmas tree in the dark sky above him; the black buildings, the black streets filled with colors, people seemingly on the run, did not affect him as he was told by Paul it would. He imagined that if he had gone to New York a few years before he would have felt small, but now, for a reason he couldn't explain, it exhilarated his spirits and somehow made him feel more powerful than he was.
Paul met him at the airport and drove him to his townhouse in Manhattan.

He could remember Marjory standing on the porch and bidding him goodbye; there were tears in her eyes, but she tried to hide them with her hands, and her lips, locked firmly together, seemed bent on his going in spite of the imagined hardship his leaving would cause. Kissing Marjory on the lips, he had run his hand over Lydia's hair, and now in New York he missed the feel of her and the feel of Marjory's body, which had never seemed more precious.

It was then, listening to Paul talk, that he supposed he loved Marjory, but still the desire was in him to escape Paul's company and visit the Bronx apartment of Celeste and Bill Daffron.

"What do you think?" Paul said, exhibiting to Charles the long rows of glassed-in offices, the people milling about the office, some typing, others reading, some staring off into space.

"Where are the presses?"

"Presses? What presses? We have that done; we're not much, you know."

Paul laughed and swiveled halfway around on his chair. "I'm going to drop this, you know, as soon as I get the capital to go on in something else; there's no money in staying in business. I prefer to sell for a profit; do you know what I mean?"

Charles nodded, feeling suddenly uneasy in Paul's office;
the carpet seemed incredibly thick under his feet. In spite of the air conditioning, Paul's shirt was already soaked through with sweat, and he was surprised to imagine a strange tension radiating from the young man behind the desk; Paul's brows were knit, his voice was too loud, and he talked too quickly.

"We're going to go down soon," Paul said, "maybe in six months; there's not a chance we'll survive." Paul suddenly threw a dart at the dart board and laughed lightly when he missed and the dart stuck in the wall.

"Why is that?"

"You see," said Paul, "our product, our magazine, is designed for initial appeal, so we gobbled up a lot of quick subscriptions that aren't going to renew. We blow the circulation up, we sell the magazine for a bundle, and then we blow out and let it all go boom."

"Who'd be stupid enough to buy?"

"Thousands," said Paul, "literally thousands." Then he laughed once again, and continued, "You think the people in Richmond are stupid; well here they are imbeciles, and I thank the Lord for that every day of my life."

Mockingly, Paul raised his hands to the sky, and Charles shivered as he remembered that night with Marjory. "My sister's a simpleton," said Paul. "I was shocked to find out she married you. If you come to New York for good, we could raise hell together. Let me tap along and do the thinking, and you hold on tight and watch. Do you like the idea?"
"Why were you shocked?"

Paul looked at Charles to see his blood rising and then he broke into a laugh. "I expected her to marry a doct," he said. "What else could I mean?"

Charles felt luxurious in the pale blue light of the bar; he sipped his cocktail slowly and let the soft music and shadows envelop him as dark figures moved unobtrusively in the background and seemed to drift about the floor. And Charles, to his surprise, felt very good, as good as he had felt when he was the guest of honor at Carjory's party; he liked the idea of never walking in New York, the feeling that you are being escorted places by invisible servants. Nothing he had been told about New York was true; it wasn't very large, at least not as large as it had been in his imagination, and it wasn't frightening. It slept easily between two rivers and seemed to be lying there, ready for him to take it for all it was worth.

Of course, glamorous people were about, but he comforted himself with the idea that glamorous people could be bought, and that he would prove to be a buyer.

"Listen," said Paul, "I don't care what you do here. If you want a babe, who am I to object? In fact, I might join you; I told you before I'm going to take care of you, I need you to work for me. I need people with talent like yours."

"I just want to slip off to see an old friend," said Charles.

"Sure," said Paul, tipping his glass into the pale blue
light and draining the liquid. "Listen, my friend, and then
rest easy; I won't tell my sister. My sister makes me sick."

It was easy to find one's way around New York; all
talk to the contrary must have been started by imbeciles.
Charles sat in a subway car and checked off the stations as
he passed them. He had called Celeste from the bar and he
was delighted to know she wanted him to come, and that Bill
approved and, in fact, had expressed a desire to see him. In
the black glass of the subway, he could see his face, and it
seemed to him strange that as he approached Celeste's stop his
face began gradually losing its composure.

A grill work, iron bars covered with ivy, separated
the street from the stairs that descended to Celeste's sub-
terranean apartment. He saw her then, after ringing the bell,
when she opened the door, and her white cheeks were verti-
cally crossed by bars of green ivy. The thin streaks of light,
coming from the streetlight, fell across the leaves and sat
softly on her blonde hair as she slowly unfastened the latch
and swung open the gate.

On the plane going back to Richmond, in the dark black
sky as he relaxed and dreamed and could picture again the
red of her mouth, the softness of her skin, as she emerged
from the darkness of the stairs to have her white cheeks laced
with light and shimmering dark leaves of ivy. Looking through
the window, he could see Washington below him; though he had
no means of spotting it, he could imagine that his mother's
old theatre was done up in lights of bright green and red.
The marquee silently below him had once spelled her name, and it felt strange to be in the dark sky flying far above it.

He couldn't think of Marjory until he saw the lights of Richmond and the plane came nosing down through the darkness, and when he did, his heart was suddenly filled with regret and guilt. She was waiting at the barrier with Lydia in her arms; she looked extremely happy though Lydia, expressing her indifference, howled for sleep.

Yet he couldn't put Celeste from his mind as they drove home silently. It had been soft and warm with Celeste, when like children they had found an isolated place in the park, and he had removed her clothes as he had so many times before; she had encompassed him, and amid leaves and grass and the fear of being discovered by children playing nearby, they both had wept and felt themselves foolish. Both were embarrassed by each other's sentimentality, and afterwards, it was painful but deliciously sweet to talk, to sit in the high grass and pleasantly dream.

"It was a mistake," Charles said, putting the stem of a dandelion between his teeth and folding his arms around his drawn-up knees.

"No, it wasn't," said Celeste. "We wanted to, and I will never regret it."

"You misunderstand," Charles said. "I mean it was a mistake that separated up, just a lousy mistake, a misunderstanding."

Charles looked at her then, knowing what to expect. She
was biting her lip, a habit she could never break; and suddenly it seemed to him that he had began talking with precisely that intention in mind — to make her bite her lip as she had done as a child.

"It was a mistake because you stopped working," Celeste said, at last, and looking at her closely, Charles detected bitterness in her expression. "You've got all the money you want, and now you'll never do anything."

"I will," said Charles.

"You've got to for your own sake," Celeste said quietly, and then, pulling a flower and breaking a blossom suddenly, "and for mine," she added.

When Celeste had opened the grill to Charles for the first time, the iron bars seemed to float back into the darkness of the stairs like ivy boughs being blown with the wind, and without saying anything, Celeste had put her arms around him, seemingly unmindful of her husband who waited in the living room. She took his hand in the darkness, and at her touch, Charles knew that not for one instant had she given him up.

Charles spent the evening discussing religion with Bill Daffron, who was attending class at the seminary; in spite of Bill's presence, Celeste watched him strangely, and when she fixed his bed in the guest room for the night, though Bill sat close by in the kitchen, she stood in the bedroom door watching Charles prepare for bed, and when he was at
last undercovers, she crept to his bedside and kissed him.

Celeste's party had broken up early, and Bill Daffron, his eyes morose, swaying on the sofa with drink in hand, mumbled low into the shadows, into the debris left by the swift, bright pace of the party.

"Her friends, as you noticed," said Daffron, looking at Celeste and speaking to Charles, "are rather artsy-craftsy."

Charles nodded.

"They are good people," Celeste said calmly. "We don't have any fakes here; all of the people who were here work hard."

Daffron appeared as if he would respond violently, but then he said nothing. It wasn't until a few minutes later that he at last muttered that he was sorry for his behavior during the course of the evening.

"They don't like talking about religion," Celeste said, "and neither does Charles."

"I don't mind at all. In fact, I rather enjoy it."

"That's not the truth," Celeste said, inexplicably angry, then turning to Daffron, who sat brooding into the glass in his hand; "Don't talk about religion, Bill, I don't want you to drive Charles away tonight. I want to show him around the park tomorrow."

Lying awake in his bed that evening, mournfully looking up at the shadows that crossed his ceiling, Charles could vividly remember Celeste's party, and suddenly he was afraid for her, afraid and disgusted...she was beautiful in the low
light but she flitted about the room, showing him off; she wore a straight lemon sheath that fell without definition to her knees, and her friends were all such beautiful people.

Tossing her head this way and that so that her earrings threw out sparks of light, she waved her hands at a colleague, a young man with a full head of hair who shook when he talked. "My, Celeste," he said, stammering and stomping his foot, "I simply had the most dreadful time arriving...this horrid little cab man...."

Charles heard himself laugh, and the young man went on, shaking his thin arms, "this horrid little cab man simply insisted on me paying him what amounted to...almost double fare." Celeste laughed and greeted her other guests; most were colleagues, colleagues who worked with Frauleiner's, designing women's wear.

A young man with long flowing hair, plopped down on the sofa, holding Celeste to his knee; she stroked the underside of his chin, and he, giggling, let her go. Charles and Daffron slipped from the party, and stood quietly on the balcony, overlooking the park.

"They think she's quite wonderful, you know."

"I could guess as much."

"Yes," continued Daffron, "they think she has great talent."

"Do you think so?"

"As a dress designer?" said Daffron with a shrug.

"How the hell would I know?"
Charles looked through the balcony doors to see Celeste talking with some animation to an elderly woman who contrasted sharply with her apparel, a black silk gown highlighted by the crystalline sparkle of silver earrings; all the while Celeste talked to her, the woman's hands, long-fingered and slim, twisted the clasp hanging from her ebony beads.

"Do you see that man?" said Daffron suddenly, pointing through the door at a sour-faced, pale young man who sat frowning to himself on the sofa. "That's Eric Blazer. He's a writer too; have you heard of him?"

Charles shook his head, "No, I haven't."

"Would you like to meet him?"

"I don't think so," Charles said, putting his hands on the rail, looking out over the city, thinking all the while of the young man's dark good looks, his yellow striped jacket, his corduroy trousers.

He had never thought of Celeste as having a reputation of her own, and he was a bit overcome with surprise; he had known she was doing well, but not this well. He knew that Daffron was still in school, and he found it hard to imagine that Celeste could maintain such an opulent apartment. The apartment had an air of richness about it; from the ivy-covered entrance beginning below the street, the house rose by means of split levels to the balcony on the third floor which hung high above a slate patio in the cramped, but well-tended back yard; the living room was a picture of modern elegance and taste, the furniture was suspended by polished
black bars, the gray wall to wall carpet was soft and thick.

Going back into the living room, Charles found the talk to be concerned with contemporary painter. Celeste spun about the room and trapped Charles in the corner, holding an empty glass and looking forlorn.

"You should come to New York, Charles. You belong here."
Charles smiled and emptied his glass.

"You don't belong in Richmond. I swear, Charles, sometimes I think you're afraid to leave."

Charles laughed at her, and glancing about at the other guests who were milling at the bar, drifting out toward the balcony, she tried to hide her anger. So getting out of his bed late that evening to stand at the window, Charles could picture her face involuntarily contorted, and the pale image seemed to spread out and superimpose itself over the darkness of the park below.

He shivered when he slid back under his covers and heard the door to his bedroom opening. "Are you asleep?" Daffron asked, before pulling up a chair beside the bed and cutting on the small lamp that hung over the headboard.

Charles wished he had answered Daffron's question with "Yes."

Daffron's leathery face was heavily shadowed, and his huge brown arms trembled as he tried to smoke; he bent over and put his elbows against his knees, started to speak, and then took another puff of his cigarette before flicking his ashes to the
floor.

He stuttered when he spoke. "Charles," he said, trying to be casual, "er...what I want to say is this," he took another puff of his cigarette and looked toward the wall. "You're not going to take her from me, are you?"

Daffron was visibly relieved when Charles, embarrassed, said, "No."

"Let's talk of something else," Daffron said suddenly, beginning to speak rapidly and with emotion. "If a child builds sand castles on the beach; if he builds them all day and likes them very much and they make him feel good...no good father would come along and knock them down, would he? I mean to say that it would take a pretty bad father to come along and knock them down, don't you agree? Oh, nevermind, I can't say what I mean."

Daffron threw his cigarette to the floor and stepped on it as Charles tried to understand him.

"I see," Charles said.

"You see," Daffron exclaimed, "you do understand me?"

Charles nodded his head, "You mean to say that Celeste means more to you than most women mean to a man, and that you couldn't stand to live with God if ever you lost her."

Daffron was surprised.

"But I didn't think you believed in God."

"I don't" Daffron stammered, his hands still shaking, "But I just...I...that's where the trouble is, do you understand; everything is so bad, no, uncertain, no, there isn't a word
for it... I just can't stand the world; there's no criteria for anything, nothing... do you understand me? I had a feeling about you at first, I felt that you were capable of understanding me."

"I read a lot."

"The sociological philosophers, the metaphysical?"

"Yes."

Daffron beamed for a moment. "No one ever seems to care. You do care about criteria, don't you?"

"Yes, very much."

"Is that why you write?"

Charles felt an impulse to turn off the light and sink out of sight into his bedclothes; the farmboy surprised him greatly, and when at last he was gone and the light on the head board was finally extinguished, he gazed up into the darkened ceiling for an hour before finally falling asleep. His last emotion before sleep was shame; he was ashamed that he had allowed himself to forget Marjory for so long. It didn't bother him at all to miss school on Monday; he spent his time with Celeste in the park. It was then he made love to her, and it took an effort of will to forget Bill Daffron's face.

"She still lives her life for you," Bill Daffron said; "all of her ambitions are centered on you."

"Leave Richmond," Celeste said, seeing him off at the subway. "That is imperative; you've got to leave Richmond and come to New York, you simply must."
"I can't."

Charles was holding her in his arms, and she suddenly was squeezing him tighter. "If you think I'll let you go forever, you're crazy," she said, hugging him passionately, angrily. "you are going to come here and be big, very big; listen to me, Charles, I can help you now, I can get you published."

"I can't, not yet."

"Damn it, Charles, damn it," Celeste shouted, clenching her fist and striking his back in anger,"You can't give up what you have. No one else has it. Do you understand that, do you grasp the importance of that?...I'll never let you stop until you have made it."

Celeste was crying and he made an effort to stroke away her tears, but she knocked away his hands. "You're going to do it," she said, "in spite of yourself."

Back in Richmond, Charles sat long hours at his desk, after school, after finishing his work for Paul, but nothing seemed to come. He seemed incapable of putting down words, much less thoughts; in a constant sweat, he forced himself to sit at the typewriter; Marjory brought coffee, and he found himself drinking too much, for he found in coffee a respite from trying to work.

In despair, he would sit long hours in Marjory's garden; he could shut his eyes to the garden, and in that way find rest.

The visits of Mrs. Donleavy, which in the past had always seemed to inspire him, were no longer possible now; when he saw her on campus, she seemed to be able to talk of nothing
except how to get rid of Ferguson. With sick heart Charles decided to no longer use the college library, which was his only excuse for visiting the college; for when he did, Mrs. Donleavy invariably pounced on him as if she'd been waiting to do it all week. He couldn't stand to sit across the table from her, knowing her inclination to damn all her lovers.

"How's the work going, Charles?"

Charles shut his eyes.

Even while talking to Mrs. Donleavy, he thought continually of Celeste.

It was pleasant to dream of a life with Celeste, but he couldn't admit that he wanted it, and he couldn't admit that, even if he had it, it wouldn't be right unless his work was right. And he found himself writing trash, groups of words that couldn't be considered writing at all.

When he saw Marjory in the garden playing with Lydia, his heart would overflow with love and shame.

"Look here, McAllister," Charles said, staring at the old man who pretended to be asleep in bed, "I don't know what I'm going to do, I'm just not happy. Are you listening to me?"

McAllister opened an eye; his health seemed to be improving. Charles found him most days puttering about his workshop as he had done so efficiently in the past. "I hear you," McAllister said, before once again shutting his eyes.

"I don't know what to do."

"Don't do anything."

"I have to do something."

"Learn to play cricket."
"Cricket is dull."

"So is badminton."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know," said McAllister.

Charles left the carriage house angrily: when the snows came in early December he resumed going to the college, but only to walk and think amid its snow-covered hills. The snow fell around Charles and bit at his face with tiny pincer-like fingers of flakes. The whiteness slid beneath his clothing, chilling him with its iciness, and made him tremble with cold and misery, for it seemed to accentuate the uneasiness that for months had invaded his senses. He slowly followed the icy walkway up the hill that seemed to him to be virtually a mountain of snow; bleak, bare, and so cold in appearance, the hill, rising like a frozen thumb, seemed to be jutting arrogantly into the sky's angered midriff.

Then like a huge chunk of granite, the dormitory building broke from the ground austerely; it resembled a prison from which no emancipation was possible, and he paled to think of himself as a prisoner within its walls, one allowed only an occasional turn about the courtyard. Like the Bastille, the Marshalsea, the building was cold, the color of red earth; but now the snow clung to the bricks and it was a sepulcher, ice cold and harsh.

After getting out of school and before getting at the work for Paul, he would drive to the campus for his walk; he never stayed more than an hour, for he had determined to do
half of Paul's work before dinner and he stuck rigorously to
the schedule. After dinner with Marjory, he would finish the
day's work on the reviews, then take a break with Marjory and
have a quiet glass of sherry. It was after the sherry that his
problems began, and many an evening, when he resolved not to
stand at the window, he would find himself sleeping at his
desk with his head in his hands.

He tried to play with Lydia for a half hour each day, and
on weekends, with Lydia in the stroller, he would spend time
roaming up and down the Richmond streets, stopping for a moment
at the museum, and now and then at the carillon when the Richmond
artists exhibited their paintings. It was a blow to him when
snow fell and he had to go for his strolls without Lydia. But
it delighted him to live on Monument Avenue; though near the
heart of the city, the large stately house had lawns filled with
color, even when winter painted the foliage white with snow.

Berries peeked at him; the whole street seemed decked
out in bright winter blossoms.

The pain was with him; he couldn't put it from his mind,
even when with Marjory he visited the Kennets, and smiled,
amused at Mr. Kennet, who would join the family only to eat
his meals, and then when they were over, would slip stealthily
to his glassed-in porch to be with his dogs.

"You are wasting yourself in Richmond," Celeste wrote,
and he couldn't stop thinking about her words as he spent the
day teaching his classes, hearing his own voice hollowly
filling the classroom, hearing it rebound in a hum-like
drones from the bulletin boards in the back of the room and then, coming again to the front, sit softly and heavily against the blackboard where he stood poised with the chalk.

The chalk made his fingers seem dry and lifeless.

He taught three classes and a study hall in the morning, and in the afternoon he taught two classes, instructing with weariness until three in the afternoon. At twelve o'clock he took his lunch with tedium, for the principal always pulled up a chair beside him and spent the half hour wearily arguing.

At tea with Marjory, and in the evenings while sharing at times a single glass of sherry, Charles would sit upright in his chair, feinting interest in Marjory's chatter about one of the many Montagues. Elwood Montague was thinking of leaving his wife; Marjory hoped to prevent it.

"Perhaps he loves another," Charles said.

"Oh, no," said Marjory, her hands folded in her lap.

"Oh, no. He simply couldn't!"

Charles lingered over his sherry. His impulse was to leave it, but to leave meant that he would have to return to his study, and the house passed so slowly there; in the back of his mind was the slow ticking of an antique clock, and, in a rage of despondence, he sometimes felt that he would like to take the hands off the clock, pull them with all of his strength and wrench them backwards ... or forward; it seemed that to wrench them either way would suddenly ease him.

Yet in the study he was half relieved to be there; the
sherry ritual seemed to last so long always. Getting in bed with Marjory at the end of the day, she always insisted that he tell her he loved her, and each evening he did so gladly, and she would turn over satisfied and softly fall asleep; her face, brown against the white lace of her nightgown, was so gently beautiful he would kiss her eyes while she slept.

"So what if he's a school teacher?" Marjory would say pouting. "It's what he wants to do."

Mrs. Kennet, her face filled with insolent anger, refused ever again to speak of it.

In December Mrs. Kennet refused to go with him to visit the plantations in spite of the fact that he had struck up an agreeable acquaintance with Mr. Slater; so Charles went alone every weekend he could, and would sit long hours in the white metal chairs talking to Mr. Slater, who knew the history of all the river plantations and took pleasure in relating it. Charles would sit and listen to the man with his eyes closed, thinking always of how the plantations' development paralleled the development of his father's estate.

The first Aaron Delfold had found the large tract of Eastern Shore land barren and wild; the soil wasn't good so he took to raising live stock, and soon, over the dry earth, could be heard the thudding of horses' hooves, and they brought a profit and the land grew until at last it spanned the peninsula from the Atlantic to the Chesapeake; then more horses were raised, more profit gained, and the land began spreading to Maryland, and a finger of it began groping to touch Cape Charles. Then the slaves came, and there were thirteen of them for each member of the household.
When the civil war broke out they were spread out over the countryside, dying of starvation in droves. It was then that the first Aaron, smarting under the irony, with the money he had managed to save, collected their bodies from all corners of the shore and put them together in a common grave, a grave that the carpetbaggers would have denied them, when like a thick horde of flies they swarmed over the fields and claimed the land on technicalities; it had cost the first Aaron the use of his rightful land to protect them as they slept, but he didn't begrudge the loss; what he almost lost defending with a rifle, he at last won in the courts.

And then the farm, reduced to almost nothing, began growing again, because Aaron and his negroes, in the dark of might, mounted soaked on their horses, swam through the Atlantic to Assateague Island where they gathered up wild ponies and drove them to the mainland as the water howled about them; the first Aaron could have been shot for that, but when the federal troops rode up to the farm his negroes gathered around him and swore to the man that Aaron had owned the ponies all along, and that the old man had never heard of the island. And since the negroes were free, the federal troops had to take their word, and they rode down the dirt road away from the farm, their stomachs sour with bitterness and the unspeakable irony.

And then the farm began to grow again, and it didn't stop growing until the depression wiped Charles' grandfather out, and the burden of maintaining the graves and keeping the land fell on Charles' father.
And Charles' father could possibly done much if it hadn't been for his wife, Elaine, who led him a merry chase through the streets of Washington; for they found Aaron Delford in his wife's secret apartment, hanging grotesquely from the ceiling. Only his son, Charles, ever found out just why; everyone suspected the reason, but only Charles knew the particulars.

So as Charles listened long into the afternoon to the drone of Mr. Slater's voice, he became obsessed with this pattern, and found that on both the plantation and on the farm incredible energy had been expended, catastrophe had occurred, and then both rose from the ashes by hook or by crook, only to be destroyed again in the twentieth century. But this time the destruction of both was permanent; there would never again be life in the ruins, life would never spread out and recreate in its pattern.

And he was aware that it had not been change his father had been opposed to; he had been opposed to that one change, the one that hastened in the modern age, that destroyed the capacity for change. McAllister was like his father in that; it wasn't change that revolted the artist but rather the elevation of the mass, the mass stupidity that destroyed all contexts and left the individual man a stranger in the world. Charles could see his father, with a rifle in his arms, protecting the graves, and he could see McAllister before him, standing on the moving river, pointing a thick finger to his head and saying loudly, "It is here, Charles, it is here."
It was only on the plantation that Charles could delude himself about his worth; on the plantation it thrilled him to observe the changing of the seasons. As if mesmerized, when he could force Celeste from his mind for a moment, he wandered through his classes, concerned only with the blonde-headed Katherine who sat close to him as he talked.

"I have a deal to make with you," Charles said. "School is ridiculous, am I correct?"

"Yes," said Katherine, surprised, but smiling wearily.

"All right," said Charles, "the deal is this. You are no longer required to take tests or to listen in class. You are an intelligent young lady and I will give you an A in the course no matter what you do. Do you agree?"

Katherine cocked her head over to one side. "There is a catch, isn't there Mr. Delfold?"

"No catch," said Charles. "I would like you to spend a lot of time in the library, but if you don't it's none of my business; you still get the A. Is it agreed?"

"O.K.," said the girl, distrustfully, but then she took his hand and shook it.

Charles spent the weekend walking the streets of Richmond; though the snow had melted, the days were fiercely cold, and Lydia couldn't accompany him on his jaunts to the museum and back. The cold brisk air, however, seemed to invigorate him, until behind the museum he suddenly stopped still. Nothing seemed to be moving; there were no cars passing by, nor was there movement of any kind. The squirrels must have been hidden
in their trees; there was no wind and not a leaf stirred, and suddenly he felt as if he were in prison, and it didn't much matter how far he walked, for the white sky on his either side would always enclose him.

He couldn't stop thinking about it, and he thought about it still when he got home and found another letter from Celeste, entreat ing him, begging him to come live with her in New York. Daffron had gotten angry about something or other and had stalked out of the house, and Celeste was alone.

She wanted him near.

At his desk, writing to her to tell her he couldn't possibly come, that such an idea was ridiculous, Charles felt extraordinarily tired, and he dreaded the party Marjory had planned for that evening. And he dreaded too that he had encouraged her to have it, but he would have done so even now. He was aware, as she went about the house gloomily, stoically trying to be merry, that he was taking too much of her former life from her, and he begged her to have the party; he almost pleaded.

She was always divine at parties; even Charles was overwhelmed by the sophistication of her manners and dress. She was beautiful, as much the center of social occasions as ever before, but when she moved about the room, greeting others, Charles found himself hopelessly bored, and it was silly trying to talk to the gadflies that roamed about, or the matriarchas that cluttered up the hall.

"Oh, the Montagues are back together," Marjory whispered happily in bed before falling asleep. "Isn't that just wonderful, Charles?"
"Yes," Charles muttered, pressing his leg tightly against hers.

"I'm so glad," Marjory said.

Charles buried his face on her breast and held her close.

"I like to think," said Marjory humbly, "that I played a part in their reconciliation."

Charles hated to sleep for it meant getting up early in the morning to drive to his classes; he was groggy in the morning and it was in the morning that his voice seemed so hollow, reverberating about the room, that he could barely stand it; and he couldn't stand at all the bored look on the faces of his students, and dismissing the class and letting them have a study period, he found himself often in the teacher's lounge, alone, smoking a cigarette.

His mouth felt dry and sticky with the taste of sherry, and he licked his lips.

"You drink too much, Charles," Mrs. Kennet said, looking out at the snow that was falling in the garden. "If you didn't drink so much you wouldn't be depressed so often, you know that Charles, don't you? Charles, are you listening to me?"

"I never drink," Charles said, seated at his desk, waiting wistfully for the holidays to arrive; things, he felt, would be much better at Christmas. He wouldn't have to go to school, and Paul had promised to find a temporary substitute who could do reviews for a few months, while Charles was
recovering from a cold he swore to Paul he had.

"You do drink, Charles. Why do you bother denying it? What if Lydia sees her father in a stupor, what then?"

"Lydia's grandmother has been known to take a few drinks."

Mrs. Kennet's eyes widened. "But not in private, Charles, not in the privacy of my own den. Of course I have a few social drinks; one must, you know. But I certainly have never drunk in private."

"What does your husband do when he retreats to that glassed-in porch?"

Turning pale and taking two steps backward, Mrs. Kennet put her hands to her throat, and pretended, badly, to be crying bitterly.

"Oh, it's so cruel for you to mention, especially to me, a thing like that. How could you?"

Turning away from her, Charles smiled; he was aware that she would run to Marjory and tell her what he had said, but he also knew that Marjory would defend him, that she would misunderstand the import of his words, and assume that he was merely being responsible and corrective.

When Mrs. Kennet had left, Charles turned his attention back to the papers lying on his desk; they were all blank and white as the snow as it fell, tapping, knocking lightly against the windowpanes. He listened for Mrs. Kennet's voice, but there was silence; he could hear only the gentle rapping of
the flakes as, falling out of a black sky, they knocked against his windowpanes. The silence was tangible; it seemed to keep him from writing, and as a sudden wave of disgust rose up powerfully within him, he threw his pen to the floor and angrily got up from the chair.

While he stood at the window, the snow stopped momentarily and no sound at all was audible; everything was still. Looking out over the garden plunged in blackness and covered with white snow, he tried to find motion, but there was no motion to spy. Everything was settled and complete; it was diffused with no energy left; it was solemn and still and chilling. It was dead, and the very deadness of it was like chalk in his mouth; he could taste it, and he could feel it spreading white and deathlike over his hands, and rubbing his fingers together, they suddenly seemed chapped and incredibly dry.

And then the phone rang and he walked slowly out into the hall to answer it; holding it to his ear, he heard Celeste’s voice and a numbness seemed to spread over his limbs, and he sat down weakly on the settee. "Is that you, Charles? Listen, Charles, I’m calling from Washington. You’ve got to come up here immediately."

"What? I don’t understand."

"Listen, Charles, take down this address: 2001 Bainbridge, top floor; meet me there."

"What? I can’t," Charles said frantically, scribbling down the
address on the note pad beside him. "Why do you want me to come?"

"Silly," said Celeste, "to live with me a while, of course."

"But ... Marjory ...."

"Tell her it's business."

"I can't do that," Charles said incredulously. "Listen, Celeste, what's this all about? What's happened to Bill? You can't expect me to go traipsing off without knowing what it's all about. I have responsibilities."

"You have responsibilities to me," said Celeste angrily, and then she cried to Charles bitterly, and Charles held the phone away from his ear. "You've got to come; I can't live with Bill any longer; he disappears for days; I've left him in New York and I'll never go back."

"I can't; be reasonable."

"Charles, you can make it with me. I can get you published, and you'll just die with her; we can't let that happen. Oh, Charles, please come."

"No," Charles said, becoming angry. "I have a child."

"Please Charles, just for a few weeks, at least that long."

"No," cried Charles, beside himself, and on a sudden impulse he hung up the phone.

It took a few minutes of staring at the receiver snuggled in its cradle for Charles to come to a realization of what had just happened; his heart was beating wildly, as if he had been in a fight for his life, and he felt that his face was becoming pale. Breathing became harder, until at last,
getting up from the settee and staggering back from the hall into his study, he felt himself close to fainting and he lay down on the cot that lay against the wall and under his window.

He had almost told her that he was willing to do it; for an incredible moment he had been willing.

Then a fear seemed to descend on him from the direction of his work desk and he was suddenly a little boy playing in the water, and his mother was lying on the hot sand, turning the pages of her book, and looking away from her and down into the water he saw something white and glimmering, bulbous, resting in the sand below the water; and stooping down to pick it up he was aware that the white object was a conch, and turning it over in his hands he was aware that its crown was cracked.

And when he pointed out that the conch had streaks of blue, his mother had smacked him playfully, and he could still feel her white stinging hand on the back of his bathing trunks, and then the wind and the salt seemed to be in his teeth, for he was running with elation back down to the water's edge. He stepped into the water and then jumped back out, for now it seemed very cold and he shivered with the chill.

Then it was dark in the cottage but the fire, flickering, flaring, and then fading, seemed to throw warm shadows against the cottage walls, against his mother's face, and it felt very good to be close to her, to be near to her, when she read to him, fairy stories, soft and gentle, letting her
voice rise or fall according to the character she portrayed. It was then in the firelight, in the shadows, filled with warmth that seemed to cross and then recross, that he began to feel afraid as his breathing merged with hers, and his arms seemed to float into and become a part of her arms.

And at the window of his study he watched the snow falling over the garden, and it seemed very much to be a part of roses, and the garden, of Celeste and the perpetual lines of creeping phlox, pale blue and red, that seemed always to be at her feet. And he felt contained within it all, and he could feel his head swim, and then, as if his mind were out of his body, he tried to hold on, to keep his physical body above the surface, but he saw his hands shake, and he could feel the blood on his lips before his shoulder cracked against the cot and his arms began flailing away at the light.

"What day is this," he asked.

"There's no need to know," said Marjory, wiping his forehead with a damp cloth, and then squeezing the damp cloth over a metal basin. "All I want you to do is sleep; the doctor says you must. Everything has been taken care of."

Charles experimentally put his tongue against his teeth, and spasms of pain were acute and seemed to run through the length of his body. Shutting his eyes against the pain, he was quickly asleep, and he remembered later that his sleep was refreshing and extremely peaceful.

"What the hell's wrong with me?" he asked Marjory when he awoke.
"Oh, Charles, you know," she said, afraid to say the word. "It's my mother's fault," he said. "She gave it to me." "You can't blame her for that."

"No ... I don't know what I'm saying. I can't seem to think anymore."

In his bathrobe he spent the days prowling through Marjory's garden. Mrs. Kennet visited him, bringing her husband's regards, but he escaped from her as soon as possible, and went out and spent the rest of the day in the garden, seated in front of the workstand that Marjory had mounted with a typewriter. With relaxation uppermost in his mind, he fiddled with the keys, and took numerous breaks with a small glass of sherry.

The words seemed to come then and he was pleased with his work until at the end of the week he read it in its entirety and a frown came to his face. "Will you bring me that book of poetry by Shelley?" he asked Marjory, who hurried into the house and came back quickly to present the book with devotion. Charles read the poetry, counting the beats, and then he would read his paragraphs and frown. At last he wearied and tore up his manuscript, and on the blank paper before him tried to compose poems.

In an hour he looked up from his work with an expression of utmost horror.

"I can't make the meter fit," he said to Marjory. "I simply can't do it."

"You're not well," Marjory said.
"No," Charles said, impatiently tearing up his paper, "you don't understand. I'm incapable of doing it; I honestly can't do it."

Marjory looked at him strangely; she stopped pouring her tea and let the cup remain half filled on the tray. "It doesn't mean so much, does it?" she asked. "Is there cause to become so alarmed?"

"Why, I'm nothing, nothing," Charles said. "I can't even make the meter come out."

Marjory looked disturbed.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Charles suddenly. "It doesn't matter anyway." He shrugged his shoulders and let his head fall back heavily on his chair. He felt then that there was a great deal for him to think about. He was too old not to know a great deal about himself, and suddenly, he laughed, because he saw himself as being extremely silly.

"I don't have it, do I?" Charles said to McAllister.

McAllister, in bed, grimaced as a pain struck his chest. "What do you mean? I don't understand you."

"I don't really have what it takes," said Charles abruptly. McAllister made an effort to understand and as his face brightened, he coughed, holding his chest. "You have the potential to be a pretty good writer. You have that much."

"But not a great writer."

McAllister shrugged. "Great writers are rare."

Charles looked disappointed, but then looking at the artist, the beginning of a smile crossed his face. "It's very
strange you never mentioned that to me before; I didn't really think you knew it."

"So who had to be a great writer?"

The smile faded from Charles' face, and he looked out the window at the garden, the marble bench, the trellis that was strung with greenery; and suddenly worry was clearly etched across his features, for in the garden he imagined that Marjory was walking, and in the sunlight she looked childish and helpless, just a trifle foolish.

"There was a time when I felt I had to be a great writer for a variety of reasons."

"And you don't anymore. Is that it?" asked McAllister. Charles laughed at that. "I don't know," he said, "I don't know whether or not I have to be. I don't even know for sure that I can't, but I think perhaps I can't; the problem is where to go from there."

"Are you going to try?"

"Oh, I'll work hard," Charles said, "but I don't know."

"Damn," McAllister shouted, pushing back his covers and sitting up in bed. "It is Celeste's fault; you've got to get rid of her Charles; I've known that from the start. She's going to destroy you."

"I love her."

"But can you get rid of her?"

"I don't know," Charles said, "I honestly don't know."

McAllister was silent.

"It might be that I absolutely have to be a great writer
and that I absolutely must have Celeste, and that I will
never have either."

"You have been diffused in the past," McAllister interrupted.
"You have not had any identity; you have not known who
you were."

"I know now," Charles said, "or I at least know the
possibilities, and I am beginning to know which ones aren't
exactly open for me."

"Possibilities," grumbled the artist, coughing and
looking down at the floor. "What are the possibilities?"

"I might be a dead man," Charles said, and from his
tone of voice, from the expression McAllister saw when he
looked up from his pillows, he knew that Charles was serious,
and more than that, he knew that Charles was right.
CHAPTER III

It was cold and his steps on the sidewalk seemed hollow; there was behind him the sound of hundreds of footsteps, as straining slightly, he thudded down the sidewalk supporting the right front end of McAllister's coffin. It was amazing to see the great number of people who had turned out in defiance of the bitter cold, and who were genuinely moved by the funeral; Mr. and Mrs. Kennet, with Jarjory and Lydia beside them, quietly watched the procession as it filed by them through the thin sheet of snow that lay stiff and brittle over the graveyard.

Jean cried when she looked at her father's cold face, but Ronald stood alone in the back of the funeral parlor, upset and defiant.

"He wasn't faking this time," Charles thought, as they lowered the casket into the ground.

On a whim, McAllister had made Jean promise to pass out money and candy for he thought the Chinese custom quaint and he said that it would add flair to the funeral; he couldn't bear the thought of his funeral being dull, so Charles received a tiny packet, one of many handed around by the ushers, and opening it, found a piece of wrapped candy and a new dollar bill; the candy to sweeten the taste of ashes and death, the money in order to scatter the artist's effects and at the same time to provide sustenance for those remaining behind him. Thus McAllister's death forgives death, Charles thought; it is a sacrifice designed to rejuvenate life. Leave it to
McAllister to think of something like that.

When Charles was summoned by McAllister's voice on the phone to come to the carriage house quickly, he was slow to respond, and he sat slugishly on the settee in the hall before he dragged on his clothes and started his car. Charles felt guilty about that; he should have known from the feeble voice that McAllister was desperate, but he hadn't. The seriousness of the matter only came to him when he opened the carriage house door to find Joan white with shock.

"Why didn't you hurry?" she said weakly. "He's already dead."

They sat together for a long time in the garden, both gazing at the carriage house door, hoping to see McAllister, in his faded robe, his bald head shining, puttering about his workshop, putting the finishing touches to all of his statues. It was cold in the garden, and the snow, only an inch or so deep, was like a white paste that held them there, staring at the glass panes of the frosted door.

At the funeral Charles stood only a few paces away from Mrs. Kennet, and beside Ronald McAllister, who was impeccably dressed, but who had refused to shave his beard and cut his hair shorter. Charles glanced at Ronald. The young man was angry; he ran angry eyes over the throng at the graveside.

"Hypocrites," Ronald muttered.

"Everyone is a hypocrite," Charles said.

The preacher's voice, and even the pause and awful silence when the preacher stopped speaking, seemed to descend over
Charles liked the drumming hum of a chorus of crickets; about the grave there seemed to be, in spite of the white snow, a blanket of darkness from which Mrs. Kennet's face seemed to emerge; she stood silent, looking at nothing in particular. She was staring straight ahead as if she were frozen by the cold, and when she opened her pocket of money and candy, Charles suddenly wondered if McAllister had chosen that means to deliver cryptic notes. But when she opened it there was no change of expression on her face, and Charles supposed that McAllister, at last, had forgiven her.

She had long since forgiven herself; Charles could see it in her eyes.

"He was a fool," Ronald said.

"He wasn't a fool."

"All his life he tried to be something with those people; on, they are all here now, but they don't care. My father didn't know how shallow, how nothing they are."

"He knew it very well."

Ronald looked surprised and irritated.

"Your father lied deliberately to himself for the sake of establishing order, and he was brave enough to live through those moments when his lie was apparent to everyone. Your father knew himself better than anyone I know; he know himself better than you'll ever know yourself."

"One trip and I know more," said Ronald, grinding his teeth.

"Nuts," said Charles, walking back to his car.
Riding home with Marjory, Charles couldn't forget Celeste's party; he could still see the young man popping in the door, complaining about the cab man, and he could see the foolish old woman who talked with a trill, the writer who gloomily and picturesquely sat on the sofa scowling as if posing for a photograph, and he could imagine how McAllister looked on such people and he could see why McAllister could never bring himself to become a part of their world. The New Yorkers, in their own word, were kingly; they associated frills and poses, femininity and slibness, with art.

How lonely it must have been for McAllister, with that enormous skill in his hands, to contemplate the bloodless state of affairs.

The car wheels were grinding through the snow; Marjory was sitting beside him. "He chose me at random," Charles said.

"What?" said Marjory.

"He chose me almost at random, and he wanted me to marry you so he would have a hold on your mother, and on society; he wanted your people to be forced to deal with him before he dies. He chose that fool, almost arbitrarily, to bring order into his life."

"I know," Marjory said. "Mother often said that it was something like that."

"Why not?" said Charles. "That's about as good as anything else, is it not?"

"I haven't thought about it," Marjory said, stroking the
back of Lydia's neck.

"That's what an artist is," said Charles, "someone who has to choose or make an arbitrary world to live in; that's the definition of an artist; all of the others are frauds... an artist looks at death as if it were life, and vice versa as if it were death."

Maelory smiled, and Lydia, waking up, swiped to cry softly and snivel away from her mother, and then it occurred to Charles, as he turned up the driveway and parked his car, that he didn't quite know what he was talking about.

"And you don't have to write, you don't have to compose on paper, you don't have to draw to be an artist; most of those who do are not artists after all."

They walked quickly through the snow and entered the back door of the house, and Charles held the door as his wife and child stumbled into the kitchen; the colored maid was evening before the stove, wiping her face with her apron, and Charles nodded and followed Maelory into the parlor.

"Mozart was an artist," he said.

And Charles couldn't help thinking that his father was an artist, more of an artist than his father was at any rate. Like Callister, Charles' father was unable to fit himself into the flinty world of his mother, and his father couldn't quite bear the disintegration and dispersion of the first Aaron's form; the only difference between McAllister and his father was that McAllister had the ability to create enough of a world to live in, and his father couldn't create a world to live in, so
instead he created a world to die in.

And in the parlor Charley could see his father swinging at the end of a rope.

That evening in the bed beside Varjory, he could see McAllister's face in the coffin and he could see that they had applied red rouge to keep out the paleness. And as he stared down into the coffin, his heart wrenched with confusion and misery, the red rouge, not a part of which was McAllister, seemed to him to be a shameless desecration of the essence of McAllister.

His mother, wearing red rouge, whispered low to him, and it seemed that she and Celeste had bound together, and were offering him red rouge to smear on his cheeks, as if they wanted to deprive him of his natural color, and sitting up in bed he was aware of the great number who wore it on their cheeks already, and he felt the impulse to run to the bathroom sink, spray water over his face, and watch bravely with tight lips as the color came off and fled down the drain.

It was then he felt so strongly the necessity of not going to Celeste, but then he suddenly shuddered because he didn't know whether or not he could do without her. Crouching off the fact of McAllister's death, he tried to pay attention to his school work, but again he found himself rising from his work desk to go stand at the window and look at the snow. Not two weeks passed before he missed McAllister greatly, and it seemed to him that the supports he had established for himself had suddenly given away, and he was falling verticilly through the
night air, straight through his window, the garden, and then on to Washington.

"What have you read?"

Katherine proudly handed him a long list of books.

"Excellent," Charles said, "excellent!"

"Thank you, sir."

Katherine's sixteen-year-old face blushed at his gaze.

"Really, Katherine," Charles said, "you have done incredibly well."

They talked for an hour after school and Charles was heartened considerably; he could feel the young girl's face inside him, warming him. He thought, after all, that perhaps he was a teacher, and it wasn't so dreary that evening as he sipped sherry with Marjory. He wasn't a society boy, that didn't work for him any longer, and he wasn't a producing artist. If he was an artist at all, he didn't belong to the average world; he was a little too bright for that; but then he thought of the books and how the low hum they emitted always seemed to please him; he stood before the mirror and buttoned his shirt, thinking all the while of Katherine, her tiny china face, her doll-like complexion.

He was glad it was Christmas; since he took five glasses of sherry his mind was spinning.

He was listening to the wind roar outside his bedroom window; there was something mystical about it as it hurled white flakes of snow through the dark sky and against the cold glass; there
was something alluring and magical about the evening, this Christmas eve, that spoke of princesses and snows, elves and assorted fancies, candy apples, tinsel, and the shimmer of pine boughs in a veil of jeweled flakes.

He lost all thoughts of McAllister and Celeste.

There was no one in the bedroom but Charles; Marjory, not attending his dressing as she usually did, was in the living room reading a magazine, as Charles preoccupied himself with the mirror, excitedly brushing his black hair back over his head. Amid the sound of swirling flakes, Charles thought of himself as some sort of Christmas demon...he yielded to the impulse to celebrate, to be frivolous.

In the mirror, he ginned to see himself looking like an elf, and laughing at himself, he rejected the red vest that made him look like a child; the principal had called him earlier and asked him to chaperone the high school dance, and he had willingly accepted.

"I need to get my mind off things," he said.

Marjory nodded, putting down her glass of sherry.

"This evening," said Charles, "I'm dedicated to being happy."

"Because of that girl?"

"Possibly," said Charles, "It's a rare occasion in my life when I know I've done something worthwhile."

Marjory in the afternoon had gotten a letter from the mailbox and put it on Charles' dresser, but seeing that it was from Celeste, he put it away from him...he knew from experience that
any minor thing might break his euphoria, and tonight, he
wanted desperately to be happy.

The sherry had quieted the rape inside him.

Forcing himself to think, Charles thought of bells, Chris-
tmas bells, and then by association, he thought of other bells,
and this led him to think of Katherine who would be at the dance.
He could imagine the young girl wearing a pink corsette and he
could picture her gay face beside the tinsel streamers, and the
picture was gay and in accord with Christmas.

Charles felt suddenly that he was tired of thinking things,
all things except maybe the beautiful cold snow murmuring at
his window and whispering discreetly— that to plunge into it
is to plunge into a magic veil, one which contains bells and
streamers, saffron and music, and laughter tinkling like light
from a candleabra.

How incredibly wearisome it was to think of himself as a
writer!

Charles looked at himself in the mirror, and he smiled with
pleasure...his face was no longer foolishly scattered about the
room, and he felt complete and whole. On a whim, he put on his
ascot without blushing; it was blue and was spotted with red, and
suddenly, deciding to leave it on, he didn't much care whether
or not it was pretentious. But looking in the mirror, he sud-
denly hated himself for all his past pretensions; as he looked at
himself he heard Marjory coming slowly up the stair.

"I wish you would go," said Charles, lying.
Marjory shook her head, "It's too late to get a sitter."

"I won't enjoy it much," he said, "that is, without you along."

"The ascot looks sort of affected, Charles."

Charles glanced at his wife and in the gentle lines of her face he seemed to find something disconcerting. "Sing me a Christmas song," he said, and Marjory laughed; he smiled at her then... for a moment her comment about the ascot had taken the music, fairy-like and thrilling, out of the air.

He was walking through the snow to his car before the fullness of his rare mood returned.

In the garden he could hear the round tones of the Church bells as they rang out under a blanket of flakes; then Christmas, once again, seemed to be in the air, and he could make himself think of balls, and plum, and sugar and many things that made him glad to know that it was Christmas.

He couldn’t forget the coldness of McAllister's face.

To him, the Christmas was invigorating; it was something that couldn’t be escaped or explained. He didn’t believe in it the way his wife did, but still he felt, as he pulled out of the snow covered driveway, that he could somehow stop the pain inside him by getting next to the heart of Christmas. There seemed to be magic in the air, such a round and whole and beautifully clean magic.

He laughed to himself, for suddenly he began to believe in things again; he suddenly believed in other people and what he
meant to other people... He was extremely glad that he hadn’t opened Celeste’s letter; it would have tempted him, and he could picture Marjory’s and Lydia’s unhappiness; but then Charles caught himself, and began thinking of the sights along the road to the school. The whiteness of the black Richmond streets, the colored lights in townhouse lawns, seemed to enthrall him; he took delight in a string of colored lights strung together and draped over the boughs of a tree.

The snowflakes were beautiful as they hit his windshield and were sloshed away by his windshield wipers; the steering wheel felt good in his hands as the sound of the motor went on purring in the snow. Taking pity on the shapes at the side of the road, standing beside a car, Charles pulled over to help and got out of his car.

He had recognized his students though the two girls were dressed in winter wraps with scarves, and the two boys were dressed in long elegant overcoats with flaps drawn up around their chins. The rose-cheeked Malcolm was bending over the motor of the car and cursing under his breath.

"It’s no good, Mr. Delfold," Malcolm said as Charles drew near to where Katherine was shivering with cold, "the damned thing is not going to work. See that?" The boy pointed to a tangled mass of wires that was shooting tiny sparks.

"Can you fix it, Mr. Delfold?" Katherine asked, and Charles noticed that her coat was open and that her red corsage was getting covered with snow.
"Why don't you all come with me?" Charles said. "We'll have somebody call a garage and they'll fix it while we're at the dance."

Malcolm poked his head from under the hood. "Aw, hell no," he said, forgetting himself but not really caring.

"Oh, please Malcolm," said Katherine, "let's go with Mr. Delfold."

"Oh, all right."

With the four children in his car the sound of the chatter was such that Charles could barely hear the soft purring of the motor and the steady sound of snow being turned to water under the slow moving wheels. Katherine and Malcolm, Malcolm brooding, looking out the window, sat together beside Charles on the front seat while the other couple whispered together in the back. Charles was surprised that no one noticed his ascot.

Then Charles felt very close to the girl sitting beside him; she was much like Celeste and it would have been. But then he caught himself, and he fought against the hideous urge to take her in his arms and press her close up against him, but while he fought with himself, he could see Celeste and himself as children, she sitting on a sandbar silently, while to impress her, he ran about picking up sea shells, flapping his arms like a bird flaps its wings.

"I hear Sharon and Dickie broke up," said a thin voice from the back seat.

"Yes," said Katherine," and so have Sharon and Eddy, Mr.
Belford. It seems everyone is breaking up, doesn't it Sue?"

In his rearview mirror Charles could see Susan nod.

"It's because," said Malcolm, "nobody wants to spend the
dough on a Christmas present, and so they break up instead."

"Can't blame them there," said Charles.

There was a sudden silence in the car, and Charles felt
that he was expected to continue speaking. "Well," he said,
"it's not very good to go steady anyway." Immediately after
he spoke there was not a sound, aside from the noise made
by the car and the sounds made by the falling snow.

Charles seemed to be talking as if he were unaware of
his words; he couldn't tear his mind from Katherine, and the
desire to take his right hand off the steering wheel and
place it on Katherine's hand was overwhelming. He tried to
make himself think of the dance, the scenes of Christmas,
laughter and shouting, the flirtatious gestures he expected
to find when he reached the school.

"I know what I'm talking about," he said. "There's a
lot of wrong in going steady. Suppose you love someone so
much when you're young that you can never escape it, and you
become a slave, and as a slave you are made to hurt others
and destroy yourself. Suppose, as can happen when you're
young and need so many things, that you can't help giving
yourself up to that person and then when you're grown up you
can't help continuing to do it."

No one dared to answer for a moment; even the two stu-
dents in the back seat were listening to Charles. No one
seemed to him to understand what he was talking about, save Katherine, and she leaned over toward him to ask him if that was what had happened to him.

"Yes," he answered before he could think, and because he couldn't control the impulse to confide in Katherine. He even muttered "Yes" again, but the second time he spoke very softly.

And then he was suddenly aware that if a pin dropped in the car it would break the silence by its clatter; everyone seemed to be embarrassed, staring at him, and he glanced to Katherine for comfort. The bright little girl probably understood, and then suddenly she bit her lip like Celeste did, and reaching down he took her hand and squeezed it in the dark, and she responded, returning the squeeze. They held hands for only a few seconds when the blinding light of the streetlight, flashing against the windshield, told Charles that Katherine was horribly afraid.

"Understand," he said, pleading, "it's a very sad thing to waste your life. A man likes to think he can do something important."

But she was beginning to cry with fear as she held tighter to his hand, and in spite of his struggle against it, Charles could hear Celeste close by, and the warm feeling of submersion when he swept his hand away from Katherine and put it against his brow was like the warmthness, the incredible delicious agony that overcame him when he made love to Celeste. And to the amazement of his students, he thrust his hand away from
his eyes as if striking at invisible birds that flew by his eyes.

And then the silence in the car was complete, and he moaned to himself.

"Someone say something," he said, trying to seem jovial, turning into the school's parking lot and stopping the car. The snow was still falling, and to Charles, it seemed the most clean, the most gorgeous, the most beautiful thing in the world; he could hear the sound of the dance coming from the gym, and it added a fresh ache to his heart.

Malcolm opened the door and light flooded the car. "Hey, man," Malcolm said, and then he let out with an appreciative whistle, "will you look at that?" Malcolm was pointing to Charles' ascot that in the car's light looked like a red and blue banner. "Catch that, baby, catch that," Malcolm said, and reaching across Katherine, he put his hands on the ascot.

Charles jerked his head and the ascot's tail came out of his shirt and lay foolishly across the collar of his coat.

"Don't do that," he shouted.

Everyone in the car but Charles began to laugh and pile out of the car's doors. "Wouldn't you know, just wouldn't you know," said one of the girls crossing in front of the car, "that he's the type to wear one of those things?"

As Charles watched the students run through the snow to the school, he could hear the howl of Malcolm's laughter; then Katherine looked back at him, and with fear still in her eyes, she called, "Aren't you coming in, Mr. Delfold?"
Charles shook his head, and the students disappeared into the building, as he sat alone in the car. To Charles it suddenly seemed very cold, very cold and lonely, and he thought of calling his wife on the phone to ask her if she wanted him to come home, and then he realized that such a question might seem very funny, even to Marjory.

There was snow all about him; the wind was picking up, and there was music from the gym that seemed to color the snow in gay colors. The snow seemed to embody, being painted suddenly red: the white blush of roses, and the pain in Charles' chest made him hunch over to lean against the wheel of the car. Seeming to come from the snowflakes, the snow cut into him like a hard cold knife.

"Marjory, wake up."

Marjory stirred as he squatted by the bed, and she was frightened to see for a moment a large black shadow hovering over her bed. "Charles?" she whispered.

"Yes," Charles said weakly, "it's me. Listen to me carefully, Marjory, there's something I want to tell you. Will you try to understand?"

In the darkness Charles was wet and cold; he had driven the Richmond streets for hours with his windows open, and on the college campus, he had gotten out of the car and walked slowly around the frozen lake. He stood forlornly looking at the black ice and the lights streaming, on the other side of the lake, from the dormitory windows, lighting the sky as they blazed out onto and cut through the screen of white falling
flakes.

When at last he crept into his house like a thief he sat for a few minutes thinking at his work desk until at last, taking pen in hand, he took out a sheet of blank paper and wrote out his resignation and left a note for Marjory to be sure to mail it to the principal; then he got up from his chair and stood smoking for a while at the window.

It had occurred to him that he was dangerous and shouldn't be allowed to deal with school children, and he sighed with relief to know that his letter to the principal would take care of all that. He would not be incapable of letting a little girl help him get back into his childhood; he dropped his cigarette and crushed it against the floor with his heel.

There were no lights on in the house and he slowly made his way up the stairs and stood, a huge dark bulk, hovering over Lydia's cradle; he stroked her hair but she didn't wake. She would be waking soon, and as he watched her breaths pulse in and out, he knew he longed to see Lydia come toddling across the room to plunk in his arms. In his own bedroom he found Marjory incredibly beautiful and he sat for a long time before he could bring himself to wake her up.

Marjory was helpless; for the first time, he was totally aware of just how helpless she was, and squatting beside the bed he gently nudged her shoulder. When she was fully awake, watching him intently, he found it difficult to begin and he folded his hands, unfolded them, held her hands, and folded his own again before lighting a cigarette and letting it lie
burning in the ashtray, unsmoked.

"I'll have to go," Charles said. "I can't keep living like I am now; I'll have to go and beat this thing. I'll be no good for anyone until I do."

"Not tonight," Marjory said, crying faintly.

"I won't have the courage to go tomorrow," said Charles. "Don't worry, Marjory, I'll do everything I can not to hurt you."

"You promise you love me?"

"Yes," said Charles, "I do."

"Oh, Charles," Marjory said bitterly, "why do you have to go to her, even for two weeks?" And then she held him tightly, still sobbing faintly.

"I'm sorry," said Charles, stroking the back of her neck. "Oh, I'm so sorry I'm sick."

"You'll come out of it. You'll do all right."

"I think so," said Charles. "Washington, Washington. You know what I'll do ... I'm going to my mother's old theatre and sit there, even if it kills me; it's all right, Marjory, I'll be back to you soon."

Charles felt ashamed; the overwhelming cornyness of his situation humiliated him deeply. He could think of himself then as capable of throwing his manuscripts into the fire, but then, he knew that for a moment he had suffered from a delusion; he knew that throwing his papers in the fire, in the redness, the yellowness, the radiance of it, would be like
throwing his papers into his mother's waxen face, and that there would be an explosion of green boughs and ivy.

Charles bit his lips with resolution as Marjory helped him pack his bags and he bit them too when she stood at the door, her eyes filled with misery and sympathy, trying vainly to find something appropriate to say.

"I'll pray for you, Charles."

"No, please," said Charles, "please don't do that."
CHAPTER IV

Charles wished he could count on himself to go back to Marjory. He had already been in Washington for two weeks, but it felt to him like he had just arrived.

Dressed in an elegant white sheath, her hair drawn up, Celeste, with flashes of silver on her wrist and black beads in a circle about her throat, puckered her lips and let her eyes roam upward with the magnificent swell of music that vibrated the chandeliers at the top of the hall. The theatre now was used only for music; the orchestra now sat where Charles' mother used to walk, her face radiant and her dress cut low, under the lights that flashed brightly on Nora's Doll house.

And in the balcony Charles trembled familiarly under the touch of Celeste's white fingers; they were cold like five pieces of delicate china, and Charles felt himself swoon under the magnificent pulse of the march. As he gazed down into the blackness of the theatre he could see again his mother's face and he felt so warm inside, dissolved, that he tightened his grip on Celeste's fingers until she laughed at him and told him they ached; and he could see, even in the faint light, that her fingers were turning red.

She had always been like that. The white conch would so quickly, under pressure, turn red.

And Charles could tell that Celeste was in her element there at the theatre. She even looked like a woman who could
serve as a model for the theatre type. Then the music stopped and she began to chatter, and the sound of her words, the softness of them and the briskness of them, seemed to be very much in accord with her white sheath, the elegance of her silver wrist, and their mutual surroundings. She laughed gaily and ran a slim finger down the length of the program.

At intermission, in the lobby, it seemed to Charles that all eyes were on her, and people said hello to her, people Charles had never seen before and who seemed sophisticated but decidedly juvenile. Celeste did not seem to notice the foolishness of their comments; it seemed to Charles that she took them seriously and his impression served to disappoint him and make him feel afraid for her.

He felt alone in the lobby, amid the chattering throng of sheaths and the flashes of silver; there was something unimpressive about the effeminate young man who puffed on a cigarette, until, with a delicate flick of his wrist, he deposited it in the tall silver tray. Celeste smiled, and her face was alive with color, and there was a glaze on her eyes; she beamed at Charles and he was relieved, in a few moments, to find himself and Celeste covered once again in the dark shadow of the balcony.

He might as well have been watching his mother on the stage, for Charles could see her there, and as if he had passed back into time, he held his breath and watched the fleeting, ghost-like figure, who was standing at center stage, blush and beam and smile, as the short fat old man climbed onto the stage and decorated her with roses. And now more than ever before, to Charles the past seemed alive, and he could feel his heartbeat.
getting stronger as he found himself wondering just which board of the stage, which wrinkled board, had once borne the weight of his mother's legs...she must have been a wondrous actress to deserve such acclaim and afterward such notoriety; that she was beautiful he knew...he remembered her lying, hated and doll-like, before him on the bed, and suddenly he felt such love for her and regret for her life that he found himself crying, desiring with all of his heart to run from the theatre.

Life again seemed very bad, indescribably sweet but too bad and too weary and too hopeless and sad for a man to remain sane if he were ever conscious of its ineluctable despair in all its entirety. But still Charles sat, forcing himself not to rise from his seat and run from the theatre, and he felt that if life were unbearable he must not run from it but he must endure the pain.

What cowardice men are guilty of when they try to avoid pain, as if pain weren't man's lot and as if they didn't think themselves to be men. So Charles sat in the theatre listening to the music, deliberately and violently conjuring up those images which hurt him the most, and in agony squeezing Celeste's fingers until they turned red and once again she laughed at him, removing her fingers from his grip, and patting his hand.

And laughing to himself, Charles remembered Daffron and he thought now that he had found the criteria, the standard, the universal element that Daffron seemed to sink into the earth without, and Charles clenched his teeth and laughed bitterly for that universal substance was pain, the unspeakable agony of liv-
ing; that was framework enough for anyone's cosmos. But Charles could still see Daffron's thick pale lips, and he could see Daffron's handshake, the wings of a wounded and helpless bird.

Charles dreaded daily that Daffron would come to find Celeste and would find him with her.

And it was apparent to Charles just why Daffron had left her, for Celeste was promiscuous; Charles could see it at her parties, flitting from one man to another, toasting the beauty of life with glass held high...Charles could imagine Celeste in the room with another man, the zipper of her white dress half down, her white fingers struggling to unzip it the rest of the way.

It was months before, but Charles could remember Daffron folding and unfolding his hands, his eyes red with weeping as Charles sat up in his bed. "It isn't that she does it," Daffron had said over and over again, "it's just that she doesn't love those she does it with, and she always does it with a feeling of such righteousness; it's almost as if she felt she should."

Charles said nothing but looked up into the dark.

"She married me...she did it..." he stuttered, "because she knew she could get away with it with me. She knew," he said, his voice becoming weak, "that I love her so much that I won't say anything about it."

"She has to," said Charles. "She can't do anything about it."

"I know," said Daffron, pounding one fist into the other, "I know, but it doesn't make it easier."

"Of course not," said Charles. "Nothing ever makes anything
easier."

"She could have been true with you," said Daffron, suddenly, jealously.

Charles shrugged his shoulders.

After the concert Celeste had a party planned in his honor, and Charles didn't know whether or not he could bear it; she had made friends so quickly in Washington, and Charles noticed, when those friends looked at her, that they admired her insanely and felt her to be a woman of extraordinary talent...she knew all the byways of the Washington fashion houses, and her friends were always alike; their hands would flutter when they talked, they would talk of contemporary painters....

"Do you know the work of Ronald McAllister?" Charles asked the frail young man before him.

His cold black hair falling forward over the edge of his brow, the young man squinted and withdrew his eyes for thought.

"Why yes, of course," the man said. "Ronald McAllister, oh, yes, doesn't he make those divine old statues?"

"Yes," said Charles angrily, putting his glass to his lips.

Charles let the soft lights of Celeste's apartment descend over his thoughts; the music was low and about the room there was the chatter that irritated him so.

"Do you read Merleau Ponti?"

"No," said Charles, lying, making his way quickly into the kitchen to refill his glass.

A bald man, his chin sporting a brown goatee raggedly kept, leaned with his elbow against the electric range, talking
fiercely with two smiling young men, who passed between them a yellow cigarette. "It is harmless and non-habit forming," the man was saying. "Had I the courage I would recommend it to my classes; here, sir, won't you join us in a rather pleasure-filled amusement?" The goateed gentleman, retrieving the yellow cigarette from the two students, held it before him, offering Charles a puff.

Charles dropped two ice cubes in his glass.

"Won't you?" said the gentleman. "Not habit forming, you know. According to the latest reports, Charles Delford...that is your name, is it not?...according to..."

"I read," said Charles without looking up, pouring the brown liquid into his glass.

"Don't be haughty, sir. Can it be that you disapprove?"

Charles looked at the ragged goatee, and then at the old gentleman's long fingers. "What is your profession, sir?" said Charles, continuing to pour.

"I am a professor of history, sir."

"What did Napoleon do on Elba?"

"Ah," said the professor, "he plotted to take over the world."

"Wasn't that fantastic?" Charles asked. "He was in exile, isolated; does it amaze you that his mind was capable of such grandiose imaginings?"

"It does," said the professor.

"You are banal," said Charles.

"But, sir," said the professor, laughing a bit, "you have made no point."

"Exactly," said Charles.
With drink in hand, pushing open the kitchen door and going into the living room, where he saw Celeste, through the soft lights and smoke, talking to a dignified old woman with elaborate gestures...it never ceased to amaze him the Celeste could afford such beautiful apartments; two art students were at the far end of the room, engaged in a heady debate as to where the coffee table, clear glass top and mahogany finish, should best be placed to give the room a streamlined effect.

"In the cellar," one giggled, and the liquid in the other's uplifted glass ran off as the man laughed, and spread over his chin. "Oh, Roy, don't," he said. "Don't say such things when I'm drinking."

The group surrounding Celeste, most women in sheaths but sprinkled with young men in red, blue, and orange sports jackets, were talking excitedly, propounding highly the advantages of the new mod line of clothes, among them, last but certainly not least, their value as decor; a designing house in Philadelphia matched clothes to furniture...all one need do was find out exactly the kind of furniture one's host had, and when the time came for the party, quick orders could be made.

"Oh, Mr. Delfold," said a middle-aged woman from the midst of the circle, "how do they dress now in Richmond?"

"They go naked," Charles said.

The woman blushed, then laughed.

"You are banal," Charles said, becoming fond of the word, but the woman laughed harder, as if she thought him amusing.
"Really, Charles," said Celeste, trapping him in a corner, "you must stop being rude to these people, you may be able to use them some time."

Charles started to speak, but Celeste put a finger to his lips. "Listen to me Charles. I didn't tell you before, but an old friend of yours is coming to the party."

"Who?"

"Paul Kennet."

"Paul Kennet?" said Charles, amazed. "Why is he coming here?"

"Business," said Celeste, being playfully mysterious.

"Stop being coy."

"Oh, Charles."

Sitting alone now in the corner of the room, Charles wished to be in bed in the room Celeste had fixed for him and now called his own, and it grated on his nerves to know that Celeste understood his reticence, understood his childish behavior and didn't blame him for it; in the shadows her hand had gone out to him and he had taken it, squeezing it tightly and desiring to pull her ever closer against him. "I know you're chagrined," she whispered, "but it will wear off in time."

Living with Celeste he could delude himself again about his abilities; using her workroom, he sat long hours at her desk and the words seemed to pour, cascade from his mind, and he found it difficult to write them down fast enough; missing phrases, whole sentences, he recorded his thoughts with ecstasy, and would only frown at the end of the day when he had read over what he had
written.

Only then would the words seem lifeless and dry.

It was much the same in Washington as it had been in Richmond; when he wasn't working at Celeste's desk he would spend the day walking the streets, prowling up and down the cold sidewalks to ease his mind...he was complacent about what he saw; inside the Washington Monument, as he stood looking out over the city, he was aware that he was looking without interest; the cold white stones of the government buildings, the parks so carefully arranged and scattered with trees, seemed to him beautiful but rather artificial, and he couldn't take them seriously.

At the top of the monument, he supposed that he had left Marjory for good, but then he changed his mind. Uppermost in his thoughts was the idea that he had left her at Christmas, and that fact seemed to forge a sharp edge for his misery.

Walking slowly by the White House, glancing at the grass that ran like a green carpet to the door, he thought about the festival of the arts that had been held there the spring before, and he laughed to himself, forcing his eyes away and stepping up the pace of his walk, That was the type of thing Celeste seemed to go for—gentlemen in suits, pretentious and overbearing, scattered over the lawn, bowing and scraping, pretending they were artists, and the President, an illiterate man, pretending he cared for the arts and supported them.

It was all too comical; the United States, by refusing to give draft deferments to men in the arts, had announced that they
did not consider the arts a critical industry... and the decision went unprotested by the people; never in the history of the world had a whole country's concern for the arts seemed so low, so non-existent, and the White House to Charles seemed to be the very center of stupidity and corruption; he laughed when he passed it, but as he continued down the street, he couldn't shake it from his mind.

It seemed to Charles that even when a correct decision was made in the White House, it was made for the wrong reasons; logicians had to laugh, and the helpless intelligentsia had to grind its teeth in the dark. And it didn't bother Charles much that the country was ruled by the worst, but it frightened him terribly to know that everyone knew it and no one cared much one way or another... so for Charles patriotism was impossible in America; it wasn't for him. He was frightened of the mass, its stupidity, its colossal deadness and indifference.

It seemed to him then, with the vision of the White House in his mind, that he could hardly be more estranged from his environment; he couldn't exactly give himself to Richmond society and Marjory—he didn't belong there, but he was out of place too with Celeste and her pack of mangy artists; the business world too was a place he couldn't align himself with anymore than he could align himself with the likes of Ronald McAllister... and he knew too he couldn't practically be either a teacher or writer, and stopping beside one of the bare cherry trees that lined the Washington streets, he felt suddenly lost and put his arm around
the dark bark and leaned up against it.

Looking back in the direction of the White House, with no physical spasms entering his body as they had done so often before, analytical and cold, he was objectively afraid.

When Celeste got home from work he would be hard at work at her desk, busily marking out line after line which he had written. She watched, leaning against the frame of the door with her eyes happy, clam but contented. "Are you making great progress?" she asked.

Charles shook his head.
"It will come," said Celeste. "I know it will come."

Charles bent down over his papers and continued to work, not wanting to admit that he had spent half the afternoon walking...

Celeste was dressed in a lemon sheath; she had sheaths of many colors and almost nothing but sheaths. The lemon was transparent and she had taken off her slip. In the light coming from the windows over Charles's shoulder, Celeste's limbs were visible, white and delicate, as for ten minutes she stood there in the doorway and watched without speaking, her hair in a bun, and her earrings making her face even more lovely.

"I feel," said Celeste at last, "that with you here I'm a complete woman."
"I'm going to leave."

"No," said Celeste, "we've been through too many things together, and we'll go through many things more; I'm your family. Charles, why don't you admit it?"
"It's your body I want."
"Liar," Celeste laughed. "Charles Delfold, you are a liar." Charles was silent as he looked at her.

"I need you," Celeste said. "I don't like the people around here anymore than you do; I couldn't bear them if I didn't have it in my mind that you and I together were going to the top."

On the sofa Celeste pulled his shoulders down on her fiercely as she cried in his arms. She always cried a bit when they made love together. She would tremble all over and dig her nails into his back as if she were afraid he would suddenly bolt and run, and he could see his mother again, her face broad and waxen, the pine needles dropping over her grave, and Celeste felt so good that he couldn't help crying out and struggling against her.

"I love you so much I think it's unhealthy," Celeste said, rolling over on her side and putting her face against his. And looking into her eyes, Charles was aware that she had many of the problems he did, and in misery, he groaned and held her shoulders and forced himself against her...and his mother was reading him fairy stories, soft and gentle in the dark.

"We are children," he said.

Celeste nodded.

"None of this is real."

Celeste bit her lip. "I know it isn't; but, Charles, I can't do anything about it, so love me please, love me all that you can."

Celeste, with a thin white finger extended, plunked a piano key and the note seemed to freeze in the air, and then particles of it seemed to drift and diffuse themselves about the room, put-
ting a quick end to the busy chatter of the assembled guests; a
dark young girl stepped quickly from the bedroom and stood beside
the piano; Charles was slightly shocked. Dressed as a torch sing-
er, the young girl wore a frayed loose skirt, and her small breasts,
supple and brown, were fully exposed. As Celeste hit the second
note, the girl, clowning heavily, cocked her head, put her hand
to her cheek and broke into a melancholy wail that ended with
the beginning of a song.

"The old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom," the girl
intoned heavily, "following the drinking gourd." The heaviness
of the song caused Charles to momentarily turn away, but the man
and women at the party clapped with delight. "Oh, Irene," said
the dark young man behind Charles. "Oh, what a scream." All about
Charles there was laughter and shouts of delight. He turned from
the crowd and went into the kitchen, where the droning voice
seemed to follow him..."follow the drinking gourd."

In the kitchen he slumped into a chair, his head heavy and
spinning, and looking down at the table, he profoundly missed
Lydia and Marjory. But through the kitchen door he could see Ce-
leste playing the piano, her fingers running lightly over the
keys just as they had done in the living room of the Major's
house, and he found that he could tell himself that he was still
on the farm, that Flora was fixing dinner in the kitchen, that
the Major was thumping his cane on the porch, that Celeste was
very young still, and that he was lying drizzly in the depths of
the old maroon sofa, listening to the loud steady clicking of
the grandfather clock and melancholy plunks of piano notes that
wanted to put him asleep where he lay.
In Celeste's workroom on the second floor, seated heavily in his chair, Charles sat at the window and, looking out over the strip of green park below, imagined himself to be resting peacefully on a balcony; his mother had had a balcony when she lived in Washington... it must have been very much like the one he imagined himself on. He had a vague recollection of green trees below it and a bright, dappled blue sky split in half by the Washington Monument, which was at noon a long marble finger poking its way into the clouds.

He could see himself as an old man sitting on the balcony and trying to sleep; the breezes coming from the park were chilling but gentle to his wrinkled arms and face; but they were too chilly and he found that for comfort, he had to put his arms under the quilt that lay over his knees. He felt that seen from afar, the red and blue quilt, the grey of his hair, and the green trees of the park probably made a pretty picture of death on a balcony.

But if he went back to Marjory it might be worse; he might become like Mr. Ponti, the pretentious old lecher who hung grinning and foolish at the edge of parties... or if he followed in Mrs. Donleavy's footsteps, he would find himself swallowing dust in the basements of libraries; there seemed to him no out, and as he stood by the window looking out into the black night, he trembled at the sound of the meaty voice, beginning another song in the living room.

He listened unwillingly and noticed that the woman now sang without a piano; turning around he saw Celeste standing fretfully
in the door.

"Are you sulking?" she asked.

"Yes," said Charles.

Celeste said nothing, but stood unhappily in the doorway.

"I would appreciate it," said Charles, "if you stopped introducing me as a writer."

"Oh, come back to the party," Celeste said. "Paul is here and you really should see him."

With his dark visage and white sweat-soaked shirt, Paul appeared an anomaly at the party; he was like a drab, crude painting on a wall splashed with color, but still he was the center of the circle and everyone laughed at the witticisms that came fast and furious. Charles stood watching at the door, resentful that Celeste had established contact with Paul...according to Celeste, Paul laughed heartily when he heard that Charles had left Marjory.

"I had only one date with him in New York."

Celeste came up behind Charles and spoke defensively, as he watched Paul, with an almost obscene laugh settle back on the sofa; Charles blushed angrily. "You should never have gone to see him," he said. "It was presumptuous of you."

"I wanted a job writing fashions," Celeste said with a shrug. "I had to get Bill through school at the time; I'm sorry if you didn't want me to use your name."

"It was dating him that I didn't like," Charles said. "You slept with him, didn't you?"

Celeste controlled her expression, and reaching down, took
his hand in hers. "That was a long time ago," she said. "It doesn't matter now. Talk to him, Charles, he's come all the way to Washington to see you, and besides that, I think he's going to offer you money."

Charles sat complacently in the study while Paul, excited, paced up and down the floor, rubbing his hands together, talking too loudly and quickly, as if a half-deaf prompter were urging him on.

"You're a monomaniac," Charles said.

Paul laughed uproariously, rubbing his palms together, turning his head in such a way that the overhead light glinted oddly in his eyes. "What I am I am," said Paul. "I enjoy myself, Charles, I like to make money; I like to get in there and fake everyone out of their money."

Turning quickly to Celeste, who stood quietly at the window, Paul smiled and recounted, "Today in Washington, I passed by the White House and just had to drop in; I stood on the White House steps and all of a sudden I could hear..." Putting his cupped hands to his mouth, Paul sucked in and simulated the noise of a crowd.

"They were calling your name?"

"Of course," said Paul, repeating the noise and laughing at Charles, who passed a hand over his face in an attitude of disgust; he hated to admit that Paul's ugly face, his enthusiasm, seeming to flow unceasingly into his hyperactive limbs, was magnetic to an extreme, so much so that Charles felt an impulse to take up a fife and pipe a sprightly dance as he followed Paul
"You do a short novel," said Paul, "and we blow it up big on our pages, sell a thousand copies overnight on advertising alone; there's no telling how much we can make. You take any book, no matter how good it is and give it the coverage that we can give it, and it will sell millions; well, not millions, but it's going to sell...it can't hurt the mag, the mag's going to go boom any day now, but don't worry, we'll sell it before it happens."

"What's my cut for writing the novel?"

"Fifty percent."

"What does it have to be about?"

"I've got the outline here," said Paul, pulling the papers from the pocket of his shirt. "This," he said, "is a guaranteed plot...filled with action, sex, the civil rights movement, Vassar girls, tons of characters, so no one will notice that none are developed; here, take a look at it and tell me what you think."

"You should do it," Celeste said, imploring, long after Charles had said no and fled from Paul's presence; the party was over. Refuse littered the sofa and floor, the soft lights and music were off, and Charles sat in a high-backed chair staring at the bright light coming from the ceiling. "It's a way to start," said Celeste, leaning over the chair's arm. "Well, it is. Charles, it can be good, you can take the plot Paul wants and make something of it, something artistic."

"Nuts," said Charles, getting up from his chair and starting
off to bed. "I won't do it. Number one, my dear, is that I can't do it; number two is the fact that if I could, I wouldn't waste my time with it."

Celeste, giving up, sat down carelessly on the sofa, her face filled with disgust and disappointment; in the harsh light she looked older, and her skirt, drawing up far past her knees, made her look like an old woman foolishly dressed in the clothes of a girl.

"I don't like your friends," Charles said.
"I don't either," she said.
"Why do you put up with them?"

Celeste turned her head. "You know as well as I do," she said, bitterly.

Charles stopped at the piano and drove his fingers hard against the keys; the notes, jamming together hard and loud, smashed against the room like a boxer's punch, and Celeste fell back, her head jarring against the back of the sofa; and in a moment, Charles stood breathless, begging the chords to come to rest and the terrible droning sound to stop.

"What are you?" Charles said sharply. "Will you tell me what is it you want; will you please tell me, once and for all, what it is that makes you go?"

Like a little girl, Celeste sobbed noiselessly as the sound of the piano slowly died away.

"Tell me," ordered Charles.

"I love you," she said, "that's all that I know. And now that I've worked hard for you and made a place for you, a place
you can start from, you tell me that you don't want it."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Charles, "that I'm expected to believe your ambition to be only for me?"

"Yes," said Celeste, looking up; her face revealed surprise that he should have to ask, and once again, to Charles, she was very young and roses and ivy seemed to be swimming her cheeks; undressing her for her bath, he was reminded of his mother, and later when she lay still sobbing in the tub, he leaned over and pressed her against him, letting the water from her shoulders, soak into his jacket.

Her body was hot and the steam from the water seemed to weaken his eyes; even Celeste's yellow sheath seemed dear as it lay shimmering, draped over the hamper.

"You've got to do it for Paul," said Celeste, standing in the tub, letting Charles run the wash cloth over her freshly glistening body. "You know that, Charles, you've just got to do it; you know it's the only thing that can ever make you happy."

"Don't talk about it," said Charles. "Will you please let me rest for while and not talk about it?"

She was silent for a few days; at the theatre she would sit quietly beside him, holding his arm as if afraid he would be sick at any moment, and he would watch the play dismally, all the while thinking of his mother, how, but for the grace of God, could still have been in Washington, treading the boards while Washington remembered and talked. The performance was beautiful; Ibsen was a master. At intermission a wave of music, as the lights went up, swelled in the theatre and rose gently to the ceiling.
"What is that?" said Charles, catching Celeste's wrist.

"Nothing," she said.

"That's not true," said Charles. When Celeste had opened her purse for a cigarette, Charles' eye had caught the glint of something long and silver; Charles took the purse from her, and opening it quickly, he saw stashed beneath the kleenexes, a long silver spoon. He closed the pocket book angrily and thrust it back in her lap, turning his attention below him to where the audience was filing into the lobby.

"You've been worried," Celeste said.

Charles kept his attention on the people below him; his grip tightened on the balcony rail.

"Well you have," said Celeste, becoming upset. "You have been worried."

"I will not have a spell."

Charles said it with such rancor, so indignantly, that Celeste turned away from him, quite afraid to speak; he let her sit there in the darkness untended, willing to let the expression of false shame remain on her face.

And Charles' mother, in the middle of the stage, seemed to spin on her heels.
CHAPTER X

And then in the balcony his chest seemed to swell out, strive forward to meet the bullets that were coming from the gilded stage; each whisper of the characters in the play, each line, each murmur seemed to glitter in the heavy darkness like bright poison barbs, and his whole frame seemed to lurch forward involuntarily, as if enchanted at the prospect of being impaled.

With a blindfold over his eyes, he felt, with his fingers, the harsh bricks he seemed to be backed up against, and the sudden swell of music at the end of each act seemed to lift him high and then throw him into the blackness of the stars. Celeste's hand was on his leg, she was tapping for his attention. He had begun to think she was there; it had been so long since she last spoke.

"I'm sorry about the spoon," she said.

Charles stared off into the darkness and tried to keep his mind from imagining pine boughs and ashes, the blood running from his mother's mouth in a long stream, curving around the chin and dripping onto her neck. "Why do you come to these plays?" Celeste said angrily after getting no response. "You shouldn't come here with me if the plays upset you so."

"A silver spoon," Charles said disdainfully. "Can you honestly believe you can use a silver spoon?"

"Well, yes."

"Don't you know that silver is soft, that a silver spoon
would bend in my mouth, that the only good it could possibly do is strangle me? On second thought...yes, yes, a silver spoon by all means for precisely that reason."

"You are becoming irrational."

"I know it," Charles said. "Let's get out of here now."

At the door of the theatre, as he and Celeste walked quickly to the street, Charles heard a sudden burst of music from the orchestra behind him, and it was like shots from a rifle, and he could see a snake blown in half before the heavy bullets thudded into his chest. Out of breath, he held the door of the cab for Celeste and then jumped in beside her, not looking at her, but riveting his gaze out the window at the colored lights and the blackness of sky that squeezed in between them.

"I want to live calmly here," Charles said. "I don't want to go to the theatre any more, and I don't want to go to anymore parties. You can go if you like, but don't ask me to go with you."

"All right," Celeste said calmly, giving him a worried glance and then turning away. "I won't go either, I'll stay home with you. Would that make you happy?"

"Yes," said Charles, letting his head rest back against the seat. "Yes," he said wearily, closing his eyes, letting sleep overcome him.

On the morrow he worked a few hours at Celeste's work desk with Celeste, not at work because she was taking an early vacation, watching him intently; at length he rose from his chair and resumed his habit of walking the Washington streets, walking slowly to the Washington Monument and then to the Capitol; in
the mall, beside the rectangular pool of water, he could see the
cold stone of the monument reflected, and dipping his finger into
the water, he stirred away the image.

It reminded him of the reflection of the fir tree on the
campus lake, that when he and Marjory sat by the water's edge,
pointed directly between them as if it wanted them apart. Charles
breathed deeply; feeling like a boy, he yearned for Marjory and
Lydia. Returning to Celeste's apartment, he found a letter wait­
ing for him on the kitchen table; opening it, he was aware that
his fingers were weak. Her previous letters had never failed to
cause him despair.

He was twenty-four years old and it horrified him to know
that he was still capable of going to pieces as he had as a stu­
dent.

"You can't go back to her," Paul said, hoisting high a cock­
tail glass as Celeste sat frightened in a corner of the room.

"And why not?" said Charles angrily.

"She is no good for you; she will make you enter into a
state of living death."

Paul turned suddenly to Celeste and took a quick gulp from
his glass. "It's a good thing I came here," he said. "It looks
like your boy was about to bolt and run." Silence ensued, and
Paul could see that his words had made Celeste slightly angry.
"Excuse me," said Paul, "I am being rather rude, but damn it,
Charles, you can't afford to throw yourself away on my sister."

Paul's face was so close to his own that Charles felt an im-
"Why do you hate her?"

"I don't hate her," Paul said, "I'm being practical."

"She worships you."

"Perhaps that's why I'm not overly fond of her."

Charles looked away from him and let his eyes stop on Celeste; she had been arguing dispassionately all evening, but now she looked indifferent, as if Marjory's name had never been mentioned.

"All right, all right," said Paul, sweating heavily and unconsciously rolling his eyes, "let's put it this way. I'm a louse; I don't like my sister because of her sickening humanism... in short... she's nuts. I hate my father because he doesn't talk to the family and besides that, he's nothing... but I like my mother and I'll tell you why; because she's practical... she's a megalomaniac like me, and I think it's funny that she left Ronald McAllister... put it down, go ahead and write it down; I am a first class louse... but I'm right about things, Charles, and you know I'm right."

"You want to use me."

Paul's face became stony. "Grow up, man, nobody told you you were getting a gift."

"Why don't you get another hack?"

"Because I want you."

"It's no secret," said Charles, "just why you want me."

Paul's face turned red but he refused to show surprise; he assiduously avoided looking at Celeste, and turning, flopped down
on the sofa and slowly sipped his drink. Hearing Charles' words, Celeste had fled into the bedroom, and Charles could hear her sobs drifting steadily through the door.

"You'd better go comfort her," Paul said.

Charles said nothing.

Decidedly calm, Paul put his feet up on the end table and put his glass against his chin. "I've never...in spite of my being a first class louse...said anything that callous in all of my life."

Charles stood for a moment watching Celeste cry on the bed, holding a pillow to her face, and she didn't stop crying even when her arms were tightly around him and he was covering her neck with kisses, begging forgiveness and swearing that he wouldn't desert her. "You've got to do as Paul says," Celeste cried miserably. "I won't let you give yourself away, I swear it... I won't let you."

"But I have a child."

"Get it from Marjory; if it's yours I want it."

"That's impossible," said Charles, "you know I can't do that."

"But why?" Celeste wailed. "You know she's incompetent, everyone knows it."

"She's getting better."

"That's not true," said Celeste, angrily biting her lip. "You know she's not better...how can you let your daughter be brought up by her?"

"Don't say that again," Charles said.
Celeste had already expressed that opinion once before, in the early evening when Paul had just taken off his coat and begun to mix the cocktails. And Charles was frightened then, for Paul sat across the room from Celeste and when she spoke, he smiled, and from time to time Celeste would glance over to Paul, as if seeking approval.

It was evident to Charles then that Paul and Celeste were very much together.

Walking the streets of Washington in cold February, Charles could see McAllister's face before dirt submerged it; it seemed incredibly old and unhappy and he could imagine shadows painting the bald head black and then covering the old cracks that reeked with artificial color. McAllister's eyes were dull and gray, disillusioned with death, and disappointed in Charles, who could imagine McAllister calling for him, coughing violently, straining to make his words clear to Jean, in that final hour...when McAllister, according to Jean, realized that he needed more consolation than he had previously allowed for.

It was bitter for Charles to know that he hadn't hurried to see the artist, that he had thought the artist to be faking.

Charles sat on the cold stone of the museum steps, sat watching the hundreds of people, dressed in bright sweaters and sport shirts of myriad colors who passed into the museum; he would have liked to believe that the museum preserved some of Ronald McAllister's paintings or sculptures, but he knew that McAllister, known chiefly in Europe, was unheard of in Washington.
So McAllister's face, to Charles, took on an aspect that was pale and horrible, and in his imagination, touching McAllister's dead face with reluctant fingers, Charles screamed to feel the skin float away; McAllister's skin was loose and dry; it had the consistency of ashes, and the stain of ashes remained on Charles' fingers to remind him that he had brutally ignored the artist's finest wish for him: that he should not give himself up to Celeste and his mother.

But he couldn't leave Celeste, not even after she had formed an alliance with Paul.

"I would like you not to say anything further about Marjory," Charles said gently, half pleading as he took off Celeste's nightgown and tucked her into bed. Sitting beside her, he stroked her forehead until she was asleep and her breath, pulsing in and out, seemed to him easing and beautiful; it had become almost a habit for her to cry to sleep in his arms, but then when she slept all the tension seemed to fade from her face, and she was once again, not the shimmering dress designer in sheaths sequined and lemon, but a little girl, delicate and fragile as she slept.

In the apartment door Bill Daffron stood, his face alive with a painful incredulity.

Responding to the doorbell, Charles had slipped on a robe, left Celeste sleeping, and opened the door to the apartment casually only to stand shocked and still as Bill Daffron peered down on him, his face, after the hurt and surprise had passed, becoming lifeless and white and very much like Ronald McAllister's.
Daffron stood there looking down on him for what seemed like hours, and then turning away, his arms seemed to melt and his strength seemed to suddenly drain. He turned slowly from the door and then walked away, leaving Charles to look after his shadows after it had merged with the other shadows of Washington's streets...Daffron's face had been so pale, his white lips had seemed to struggle for words, but the words had never come.

And to Charles, sitting on the cold steps of the museum, it suddenly seemed that he had put Daffron and McAllister in a common grave, and that over the grave hung pine boughs that were dark and incredibly dry...dry like the wind-blown brown needles that swept the black ground over their coffin; Daffron had gone back to New York. This morning there had been a heart-breaking letter for Celeste, sitting on the kitchen table beside a thick letter from Marjory.

Reading his letter from Marjory, Charles had discovered that Jean had gotten McAllister's statues and money, but that the carriage house and the garden were his.

"When are you coming home?" Marjory had asked.

Charles' fingers froze when he tried to write an answer.

"Lydia is old enough to ask for her father. I have prayed for you daily, Charles; forgive me, but I do so want you to come home for Easter. My father is sick and everyone is unhappy."

The stiff breeze seemed to blow straight from the Washington Monument as Charles walked toward it, glancing down from time to time to view his distorted reflection as the wind gently rippled the water and sent small portions of it sloshing over the rim of
the pool, against Charles' ankles as he walked briskly along, buttoning the top button of his coat and pulling the flaps up to his chin.

A man had given him a carriage house, though he had disobeyed the man's wishes. Though the young man wished him well, he had killed something in Bill Daffron when he opened the door, and he trembled to think of what his selfishness was doing to Marjory.

"Hey, Delford, get in."

Paul, beaming at the wheel of his car with Celeste smiling beside him, had stopped suddenly and there was a squeal of brakes behind him, followed by an overflow of words, as Paul sat calmly, waving for Charles and reaching behind him, opening the back door. "We are taking a vacation," Paul said gaily, as Charles slid into the rear of the car. "Listen to the wind, don't you hear Ocean City calling, don't you hear the humming motor of a yacht, a deep sea fisher?"

"We need a break," Celeste said. "Really we do; I've already packed your bags, Charles, they're in the trunk of the car...we'll all feel much better if we spend some time fishing."

"Where?"

"Atlantic City," said Paul, "where else? Hold your hat, my friend, we're almost there."

Charles could remember the steel pier when its aspect was that of a carnival, but in the winter months the pier seemed cold and bare; the only life came at the water's edge when small craft pulled up to dispose of their passengers and their fish,
threw gold light on the fishing boats, the bright white sails of a schooner that slid close by the pier. Two young boys, burnished brown from long exposure, complacently lay, stripped to the waist, on the pier with fishing lines nestled in their fingers; there was a sudden tug on a line, and a brown skinned boy jumped up and began reeling it in excitedly, but in his imagination, Charles saw fireworks exploding out over the pier; they lit up the sky, taking the place of the sun, and they cast an orange light. In Charles' memory the light of the fireworks combined with the lanterns that hung on a line at the edge of the bluff, and just a few steps behind him, and to the right, Charles stood looking over the line of bushes, waving for him to come and join her.

How he'd ached to join her, but how foreign a concept to him at the time; he let her go into the shadows alone though he felt that snakes infested the woods, and that his rifle, if he accompanied her, would provide ample protection...perhaps he had lost the capacity for freedom then, and then confirmed the loss by failing to kill Jack, and instead cried at the tree and cracked up his rifle, so the burnished parts lay like accusing eyes in the moonlight, gleaming.

And standing on the steel pier Charles knew that he would have used the rifle then, on himself or on Jack, had not the rifle once belonged to his father. And he had wanted his father then desperately. He remembered how desperately, he remembered how he had sobbed, calling for his father. But then he had
cracked the rifle up against the tree... it was a sacrilege for him to touch the rifle, and his father was weak and absent, far too ineffectual for him to rely on, and the horror rose up before him: Jack would go unpunished.

Walking back to the car, on a sudden impulse, Charles took Celeste's hand and squeezed it hard as they walked behind the swiftly moving Paul.

And now the steel pier was dead; its banners were down, its lights were off, and the string of concession stands that ran along in a line down the pier were boarded up and closed.

"Shall we go to Chincoteague?" Paul said. "We've several hours before dark."

"I don't care," said Charles, shutting his eyes. Paul let his foot fall heavily on the gas pedal, so that the car jolted forward forcibly and flew like an arrow down the long winding road, that, twisting on its belly, snaked through the trees.

It was odd returning to the Eastern Shore again; as the trees flitted quickly by the window, Charles counted up the years since he'd last seen it and heard the malicious gossip floating darkly from the porches where proper folks spent their monotonous evenings listening to crickets and the fast, winding noise of swarming mosquitoes. Together, the noises made a symphony that was familiar, but one he wished never again to hear; when nightfall came, he would close his ears to it.

As Charles mused wearily, Paul sped along the artificial finger of land that, beginning on the mainland, reached out and poked the center of Chincoteague Island. Assateague, the home
of the wild ponies, lay further out in the Atlantic, and Charles was suddenly aware of what his great grandfather, the first Aaron, had done, for the land bridge of Chincoteague wasn't built in his day, and he had had to swim the ponies not only to Chincoteague, but to the mainland which lay some distance beyond it.

"Have you been here before?"

"No," Paul said, "but I've heard a lot about it."

"When I was a boy," Charles said, "this place was quite primitive; the people had practically no contact with the mainland for generations; you can still hear traces of middle English in their speech."

"What you call middle English," Paul said, with a smile, "I'm sure is not quite so romantic; I'm willing to bet that its origin is stupidity."

"Think what you wish," Charles said. "What you think doesn't concern me."

Charles, looking over the water, could picture Aaron Delfold shouting, his body soaked with water, a black whip in his hand raised high above the turbulent water, lashing out at the horses that tried to swim away from the pack. The negroes were shouting, but he couldn't hear their cries; only Aaron's voice rose above the noise of swirling water and thunder, and Charles could see him, his face livid with determination and anger, shouting vilely, his heels, under the water, flailing away at his horse, as if he was afraid the wild ones would outrun him.

There was a wild courage in Aaron, a fierce independence;
and Charles could think of him almost as if he were a god, and as if his horse were a charger capable of breaking the bit from his mouth, and tearing loose from his bridle; for Charles, there was a beauty in the wildness, a savage fierce beauty in his great grandfather that made the rage of war against man seem trivial and unworthy; the only real war seemed to him to be a war against the elements, a war against the way things are.

It's no credit to a man to fight a war he is capable of winning. And his grandfather must have known, all Virginians must have known, that the cause they fought and died for would be dead in the end. "Certainly they knew it." Charles muttered to himself, quite lost in his reflections, and then he sat up straight, suddenly shocked at the sight that loomed up before him.

Chincoteague was lined with motels, sporting goods stores, movie halls with gay marquees; the fishing boats of the islanders must have still been out at sea, for the docks were lined with light craft, yachts, catamarans, and touring boats with New York painted on their sterns. "Your community is no longer ancient," Paul said with a laugh."

"The islanders' boats are still out fishing; they are not yet like these."

"I'll have to see it to believe it."

Charles was silent, brooding, but Celeste happily pointed out the place she remembered, places that had been spared ten years before when the waters rose and tore down the fishing shacks, the crude planked churches, and decimated the last remains
of antiquity that hung about the island. In his dismay Charles realized he had forgotten about the flood, but still he was surprised to see the island built up the way it was...with coffee houses and drug stores, supermarkets, and automatic laundries.

And now there was a bridge out to Assateague Island, and the pony penning was no longer a necessity but a ritual. On Assateague Island, the ponies, once the island's sole inhabitants, no longer were free but were penned in, and Charles saw with agony that the National Park Service had denied the ponies the rugged sandy beach. A long metal fence restricted the ponies to the marsh and kept the beach safe for swimmers. "Let's get out and see if the ponies will eat sugar out of our hands," said Paul, carried away with the opportunity for decision. "Would you like to do that?"

Charles said nothing but went to sleep in the back of the car; it would have surprised him then to know that Chincoteague had any fishermen at all.

At Ocean Downs that evening the horses strained for the tape and Paul was delighted. "Fourth winner tonight," he said. "We should come here more often." Charles didn't hear him; the loud speaker was calling the valiant Brett Hanover to the line. Hanover. Hanover. The name rang a bell; Charles' father had owned two Hanover horses before the Major, Floyd and Dell ruined We Willie.

"Wee Willie," said Celeste, "my father lives on Wee Willie."

"Out to stud?" Charles asked.

Celeste nodded. "Really, Charles, you should have known that Willie is a Hanover; that last winning horse is probably a son of his, or a grandson."
"Did you bet on him?"

"No," said Celeste. "But Paul did. He's gone now to pick up his winnings."

Filled with sudden disgust, Charles turned away. "God damn him; it's the last buck he'll ever make off my family."

Celeste looked at Charles, her eyes flashing with surprise, but seeing Charles' face, the stern set of the muscles that made it a mask of resentment and constraint, she turned without speaking back to the rail and feinted a sudden intense interest in the horses at the far end of the track, who broke suddenly from the post. Charles was annoyed with her as she pressed to the rail and stood tiptoe, exclaiming with delight as the horses passed.

Nevertheless, the horses, sleek and powerful and brown under the arc lights, thrilled him extremely, as to the violent noise of pounding hooves they strained against one another. It brought to his mind the animal power, the violence and grace he attributed to his progenitor.

"Oh, by the way," Paul had said in the car, just after Charles awoke, "we stopped in Chincoteague while you were asleep, and the people speak like other hicks, no better, no worse."

"You talked to tourists."

"They didn't look like tourists."

"Did they say things like 'thar,' and 'what?'"

"All hicks do that," Paul said.

"They do not," Charles said, turning over on the back seat to sleep facing the rear. "I wondered what Paul would see in the horses at Ocean Downs, and anticipating the answer to his
question, he was becoming angry.

"I'm a hundred dollars ahead," Paul said, counting his money, and leaning with his back against the rail as the race was in progress. "This is where I belong. Have you ever thought, Charles, of how much you could make by buying into a track? We should look into it."

Charles, not hearing, looked out over the track. He knew nothing about horses really, but he felt he could understand them. Then he blushed to think it, but, nevertheless, in his arms and legs there seemed to be a quiet but strong surge of muscle and he could imagine himself running with the wind in his teeth.
Aaron Delfold, Charles' father, was brought up by the waters and by the pasture.

Charles could think of his father as he sat on the porch of his cottage looking out over the dark black Atlantic, as the water rolled mercilessly in on the shore. Paul and Celeste, playing gin at the card table with contented faces, cared nothing for the porch and the water; they seemed to be happy playing together in the shadows of the cottage Paul had rented for the evening.

All the while Charles sat there the water rolled aggressively in on the shore, but finding the sand and secondary breakwaters too much to surmount, it seemed, to Charles, to cry out in rage and agony as it withdrew from the shore. He tried to watch the Atlantic's waves as they moved in and out, but he could barely see them. The water was too dark and a black, lightless sky perched on its shoulders. Charles could only see a vast dark space, a black canvas only visible at the shore-line where the froth of waves breaking made a luminous ever shifting piece of lacework that hung swaying in the dark.

Then Charles could see his grandfather, a young man, hoist the third young Aaron Delfold up to the mouth of a horse that stamped and neighed in its stall; and Charles' father, unafraid under his father's protection, caught the horses' jaws in his two small hands, put pressure on the muscles, and then, when the
horse opened his mouth, successfully and calmly slipped the bit into place.

His father was very young, and Charles could see the pride that was glowing in his father's eyes, as he swaggered back to the house tapping a black whip arrogantly against his thighs. And Charles saw him, once inside the door, fleeing to the kitchen to tell his mother the news.

And then Charles' father was older, and it was apparent in his demeanor that he was raised with the idea of power. At his father's desk he had maps before him and a father leaning over him who said casually, "We control from here to here." And then the second Aaron would move his pencil several inches from one point to another, making clear to his son, Charles' father, the boundaries of his power. And sitting on the porch Charles could imagine that to his father, at the time, there was nothing strange in the words, "We control from here to here. Within this area people have to deal with us." And even as a boy Aaron Delfold had looked at his land with an owner's eye, and after a time the land became a part of himself. And later, in Washington, he would be nothing without it.

Charles looked up at the sky. There were no stars out, and there was no moonlight to light up the deadening noise of the sea that seemed to sing all about him.

And as old as he was, he was frightened of the sea.

But when Aaron Delfold the Third took over the farm, the depression hit him hard and destroyed the tendons that held the
farm's parts together, and he had difficulty holding the small chunk that remained in his name. Even then they came with their bulldozers and roadbuilders, bearing injunctions that allowed them to weave black asphalt snakes over the land. And the roads went up and the pastureland became smaller. To train the horses Aaron had to take them to the track, and even then their legs would be stiff and it was hard to excite them, and harder to keep their spirit from dying in the stalls. And as they kept losing, they lost their brothers, and the only horses Aaron could keep were the ones he put out to stud.

Charles could see his father again beside the only valuable plot of land he could altogether save, and his father was weary and broken as he trod about the grave where the slaves lay buried. This plot still remained uncovered by roads, but Aaron hadn't done it with a rifle; he had done it by begging in the courts.

It hurt him to beg with powerless hands for what was his own; it hurt him almost as much as the knowledge hurt him that while he stood surveying his fields, his young wife was slipping out of the farmhouse and disappearing into town. After working in the fields all day for himself, for the sake of the first Aaron who long since had been laid in the grave, he would wait with heavy heart, topping his plate with a knife at the kitchen table, for his wife to come home. Charles could see him then, sweating in the darkened room.

And that above all else had destroyed Aaron's spirit—the waiting, the humiliation that assailed him from all sides.
He must have sat and pondered, muttering to himself, "If only I didn't love her. If only..." And it wasn't long before Aaron found himself without disrespect for others, or self respect, for that matter, and he found himself supporting that which he previously considered vile. And to keep Elaine from leaving him, to keep her from hating him, he let her go to Washington, not knowing how quickly he would find being without her unbearable, or how soon he would go to Washington just to be near her.

All this Charles had gotten from his mother's letters; he didn't have to be told any of the rest.

He could imagine the young men at his mother's parties; they would talk quickly, dressed in the latest fashions. They would discuss the broad collars and thin ties that were then all the rage, and Aaron would sit aloof at the parties, aware that when he spoke his words were an intrusion to be borne as patiently as possible.

And the dumb farm boy, sitting in the corner of the room, would find himself suddenly mute, suddenly wondering how Elaine could tolerate the young man with fluttering hands who wasn't a man at all, who draped his hands over Elaine's shoulders, held them over her eyes and whispered, "Guess who." Aaron sat in the shadows. And even though he lived with her, it was some months before he understood what was going on, and then he couldn't quite believe it.

He would drop his eyes when the young men talked.

It amazed him that they considered a college education so
important.

With a bouquet of roses, Aaron, at the stage door in the rear of the theatre, stood waiting with a vision of Elaine in his mind. The play had been too subtle, too modern, and he couldn't quite understand it. But he could remember Elaine, drifting gracefully across the stage, her cheeks flushed red, and she was so extremely beautiful that it seemed to him that his pain had been for a purpose. Suddenly he wasn't scornful of her scenes, her drunkenness, the gay clatter that seemed ever to surround her; he could forgive her for everything in that special moment, and at play's end he found himself on his feet, shouting, applauding with the rest. And in his hilarity he had scrambled for flowers, and then, after only moments, he was at the door with the roses with the feeling at last that he now understood, that he now approved.

And in a later letter to Elaine he had told her that as he waited, he had felt that he could sacrifice himself for what she was doing, but when she came the throng of admirers converged on her, and he found himself on the fringe of the circle where she didn't see him until halfway down the street, when she looked out of the back window of the cab to where he was standing under the streetlight. She stopped the cab, but, as she wrote, he looked so comical standing there with the pathetic roses in his arms that she could hardly bear it.

And it was then that Aaron had seen how really small he was, and he didn't go home to their apartment until dawn.
Charles knew that his father would have gone home to the farm if the land hadn't been dying; but their track was decaying, the fields were lying spoiled from lack of care, and Aaron couldn't go home because doing so would have put in his mind the enormity of his loss, and that he couldn't bear. Like a thief hiding from the law, he hid from the knowledge, but at last it found him and strung him from the ceiling.

Charles remembered the cigarette lighter and he shivered with horror; the shiver ran through him and he was suddenly cold all over as he looked at the sky where the stars should have been.

Behind him he could hear the voices of Paul and Celeste as they chatted, playing cards. Looking in the window Charles could see Celeste drawing a card and, alughing, throwing it down on the table. Her laughter seemed to merge with the sound of the sea, and taken together the two noises seemed to be hollow as they reverberated, as if they were trapped in the shell of a conch. In the distance two lights, one red and the other blue, marked the extremity of the steel pier, but out over the water there was nothing but darkness and the murmuring swell of invisible waves.

And Charles remembered that his father, hanging from the ceiling, had not really seemed to be his father when he'd first found him. The face seemed different, dead white and stretched, and nothing at all like the face of his father. And he might have pinned on his chest a red rose and a white card saying calmly, "I am a victim, Elaine, but you are a victim much more than I am."
Then Charles was miserable, for he remembered the cigarette lighter and he was aware of how steadily the waves were washing away the shore. With gnarled blue hands the sea grabbed at the sand and threw handfuls into the dark mutinous waves. Worn down considerably since Charles was a boy, the strip of beach, black and narrow, was now a sliver of what it once had been.

There was a sudden scream from inside the cabin that drove Charles from his chair and up against the window. The scream, like an electric shock, had flashed through his body and he was immediately at the window, trembling, as the cottage's harsh light revealed Celeste with her fingers clutching at her face and the phone's receiver, black and deadly like a snake, sprawled grotesquely at her feet.

And then things happened so quickly that Charles, before he could compose himself, found himself forcing his shoulder up against the bedroom door, as Celeste's loud cries droned through the pine panels. The door's lock wouldn't give, and in desperation Charles glanced at Paul, who sat foolishly, impotently, on the dark wicker sofa. "Celeste, let me in." Charles cried, throwing his forearm at the door. "Will you please let me in."

But there was no answer and Charles could only hear Celeste's sobs, half muffled now by a pillow. Charles angrily kicked at the black receiver lying obscenely on the floor.

"What happened, Paul? What in God's name happened?"

Paul was nonplussed. "She was going to call a friend. She
did call a friend, to tell her she wouldn't be going to work to­
morrow."

"For God's sake, Paul, will you tell me what happened?"

"She only said one thing, something her friend told her, and I could barely hear it."

Charles turned red with agitation. "God damn it, Paul, will you tell me what she said."

Fumbling with his matches, Paul lit a cigarette. His large hands shook as he touched the flame to the cigarette's end. He took a quick puff and trying to relax, he blew the smoke in the direction of the overhead light.

"Celeste said that Bill Daffron was dead. Suicide. He deliberately cracked up his car against the pillars of an overpass. He did it this morning."

Charles closed his eyes tightly and turned his face away, letting the top of his head strike and rest against the panels of the door.

When Celeste finally came out of the bedroom Charles was sitting drearily on the sofa next to Paul. For a long time they had been sitting there silently, Charles with his head in his hands, Paul confusedly staring off into space. They both looked at Celeste intently when she came through the door. "I'm alright now," she said firmly, but the next moment found her face breaking and her chest convulsing, and she went back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

She had broken down when she looked in Charles' eyes.
And she cried again later, sitting on the sofa with Charles.
and there was nothing he could do about it but give her his shoulder. But then he tried to hold her she pushed him away and once again retreated into the bedroom, flopping on the bed as Charles pounded on the door.

Her face had been dry and composed when she had come out the second time, and she hadn't resumed crying until he held her, but when he did she cried and beat at his hands until she escaped them and fled back to the bedroom, drawing Charles with her to beat on the door as she cried beyond it. "Please, Celeste, please," he shouted. "You've just got to talk to me."

"Leave her alone," Paul said.

Turning in anger, Charles realized that Paul was right and he slumped down on the wicker chair that stood gleaming white by the door. From where he was, he could hear Celeste crying, a vague far-away sob that was muffled by her pillow. "Will she hurt herself?" Charles heard himself asking. And then he heard a sigh of relief coming from within as Paul slowly and surely shook his head "No."

Charles heard the lock on the bedroom door click open and he held her in his arms as he closed the door behind him. Her thin shoulders shook and she buried her face in his chest, and in another moment she was lying on the bedspread with Charles sitting beside her, stroking her hair as she cried with her face to the mattress. "It's my fault," she sobbed. "He did it because of me. Oh, Charles, he's dead because of me. He's dead because he loved me."
"He had other problems," Charles said, remembering Daffron's pale white lips. "It wasn't just because of you; you know how Bill thought. Besides that, he was right."

Celeste looked at Charles, and her eyes were frightened and wild.

"And besides that, it was my fault, too," Charles heard himself saying.

"No," Celeste exclaimed, biting her lip to keep back the tears. "No, Charles, you musn't say that; please don't ever say that."

"Well it was my fault."

"No," cried Celeste, "don't say that...Please, Charles, I asked you not to say it." Celeste was holding to him now; her white face was quivering and her features were broken, cracked like a white china plate. And Charles could sense the fear that was spreading into her limbs, and suddenly he was incredibly horrified to know just how frightened he was. He could feel the fear in her fingers, in her arms as they wrapped around him, but also in the darkness he could see the pale skin on the farmboy's lips sloughing off in large flakes, as if the pale bits of tissue were ashes, ashes from a fire that blazed deeply and fearfully inside him.

"You can't leave me now," Celeste cried, her fingernails drawing blood from his arm. "Oh, Charles, you can never leave me now," she whined, holding fiercely to his neck.

And Charles couldn't drive the words from his mind as he sat the rest of the evening on the porch, determining half consciously
not to go to bed with her but to sit out on the porch until the sunrise threw its traditional ball of fire out from under the earth to sit uneasily on the glass surface of the water.

Charles wished he were in California so he wouldn't have to look with horror at the rattling angry eye, and watching it at dawn he found that sleep was impossible.

And suddenly he felt that it was his fault, that there was no one to blame but him. It was all his fault, and sitting in the rocker as the chair groaned and croaked on the porch, he could see his guilt spread out angry and red across the sky. And trembling, Charles kicked the porch rail with his foot and the rocker lurched backward then careened swiftly forward as he threw an arm over his eyes to shield them from the dreadful stare of the sun. And then he seemed to be mesmerized by the light and he took his arm away.

Paul's voice called from the cottage but Charles didn't hear it.

Then suddenly Charles was a boy again helping his mother with the breakfast dishes in the little kitchenette of their Washington apartment; and he couldn't help much because he was too young and his hands were too small, but he was old enough to remember, as he took the silverware, silver spoons and forks, to his mother, the evening before when he had been sent to his room in the apartment's rear. He was angry about that as he struggled in the kitchenette with the silverware, dropping a silver spoon, but he dearly loved his mother, and he would not
ask her about the voice of a man who, the evening before, he had heard speaking faintly from the darkness and shadows of a distant part of the apartment.

Possibly the voice came from his mother's bedroom, but he was very young and it only seemed strange.

But she had told him earlier that his father wouldn't be home, that he couldn't or wouldn't get in the cab with her when she stopped for him, seeing him standing under the lamplight at the theatre's stage door. Though young Charles had been up all morning, daring not to ask her, he had failed to notice the cigarette lighter and the man's watch that ticked on the table in front of the sofa. Charles remembered it now. Before the sun arose our of the Atlantic, the watch and the lighter had seemed to gleam in the dark. Tiger eyes, they seemed to gleam like two eyes of a tiger.

And he remembered that the watch and the lighter seemed to attract him; why else would he, when his father was home at last, get them out of the drawer where his mother had put them and parade them foolishly about the room, with the silver lighter lit and the watch, held close, ticking in his ear.

"Whose are those?" Aaron barked.

Elaine dropped a plate, and the fear in her eyes was like the fear Charles had seen in Celeste's eyes only several hours before.

"I said whose are they?" Aaron shouted again, grabbing the lighter and watch from Charles, crying out angrily when the flame of the lighter caught his hand. "Whose are they?" Aaron
said. But then he saw the initials carved on the lighter's silver surface, and shouted, disbelief in his voice, "That black haired boy. That effeminate black haired boy." But then Aaron's voice was weak, and, clutching his chest, he was crying.

And one week later he sent Elaine a bouquet of withered blood red roses.

Charles could see his father's face in the angry sun before him. He could see his father's face as it was when he first saw the lighter and the watch.

And his father's face at that moment seemed to blush like the sun, and remembering the blush, Charles almost screamed with agony. And then the sun's blood, the blood streaming from the sun, flowing into the water and turning the water red, seemed to strengthen in color as it grew more diffused, and all about there was the unbearable redness of blood roses, his father's blood and his mother's weakness, and it flowed out to encompass the hot sand, the cottage, the tall pines, the boughs of holly red with berries.

Even the green leaves of the Christmas holly boughs seemed to lose their greeness, and the fat berries of Christmas holly sitting by McAllister's bed, on McAllister's window sill, seemed to swell with blood and become concentrations of redness as Charles, white and afraid, with features breaking further each moment, tried to blow air in the old man's lungs.

"Stop," cried Jean, weeping. "It won't do any good. He's already dead. Oh, he's already dead."

But Charles in a rage frantically pushed at the old man's
chest, pushed and struck until the ragged neck let the old head fall sideways, the mouth opened, and blood, in a long black-red stream, gush out and soak Charles' hands. Then standing before the garden window, Charles raised his hands high and wept as the morning light broke and made Charles' bloody hands like roses with their mouths opened to soak up the sun.

And that had been the moment of the most overwhelming despair.

The doctor had stood there and watched him, thinking he was mad, and he had been afraid to ask the doctor just why McAllister had died, because vivid in his memory was the image of himself dressing slowly, slowly tugging on his socks, slowly putting on his shoes, whistling to himself as he drove slowly to McAllister's through the snow, that now in the morning light beamed so radiantly.

And as he stood with uplifted hands at the window he could hear the ticking of a clock, and the ticks were loud and fearful. They were ticks coming first from a man's wrist watch, then from a mantle near a maroon, a vaguely red, sofa where he was buried, and then there were the ticks he heard as Marjory slept, as the snow fell coldly outside, as he casually and sleepily pulled on his socks, as he slowly put on his shoes.

And all about him at McAllister's there was Christmas holly, and berries like bright lights. Then, on the porch, he remembered fleeing to the bright red lights with Kathleen, trying to throw himself in them, and he could then remember Celeste's face,
framed, as it were, in glistening, waxen green sprigs of ivy.

Sitting on the porch in the wicker rocker, walking in the morning light from the early morning sun, Charles didn't much care that Paul and Celeste, having arisen from their fitful slumbers, were calling to him ever so often and busily and quietly setting the wooden table for breakfast. He didn't turn to look at them and he was somewhat indifferent to the looks of worry they had on their faces, but occasionally he could hear Celeste weeping in the kitchen and he could hear Paul's words, though he couldn't understand them. They were muffled words, as if Paul were cursing under his breath.

And Charles looked again at the sun and he could imagine Bill Daffron's funeral. It would be raining during the funeral and the ground would be cold. The ground would crack like a broken stick as he trod over the sodden leaves and threaded his way through the flock of black umbrellas, whose black silk would echo the sound of falling rain. Thump, thump, thump: that was the sound of death, the sound of the Major's cane, the sound the rain made when it struck the black umbrellas, the sound the rocks would make when they thudded against the coffin lid that closed over Bill Daffron's face. And the pine boughs, wet and sogging, drooping over the open grave like huge black umbrellas, would be in stir, for the wind, blowing mournfully, would be rifling through their priestly garb.

At last Bill Daffron would find what he had been looking for, and it was ironic to note that if Bill Daffron failed to find God, he would never know of that last ultimate failure.
Lightning split the black sky, the rain poured down with a new burst of power, and as the thunder rolled, Bill Daffron's coffin lid, at the bottom of the grave, swung open to reveal the pale lips and white face; and as Charles peered downward Bill Daffron's brows filled with water, and the rain splattered over his pale face, cooling the dead brow and filling the eye sockets with ice.

At the funeral he was down on his knees; the wet grass at graveside painted his palms green as he let his eyes slip over the lip of the cavern and dangle, tiger eyes, above Bill Daffron's face. And behind him, high up in the sky, the black sun seemed to be shredded and sliced by the rain until it at last began to drip blood on the boy's dead, ice-sheened features. Ever spreading, ever changing patterns, the red vein-like rivulets cutting gorges through the ice changed Daffron's face to Aaron's and then Aaron's to McAllister's.

And it seemed once again that Celeste's scream was loud in his ears. It had seemed so all evening, and frantically he wiped the blood from McAllister's brow. "Dear girl," he cried, "I've killed too many fathers." Then he wiped the blood away with his hands until his hands were red, two roses in the morning light streaming through the garden.

"Listen, Charles," Paul said, coming out onto the porch, rubbing his hands together, sitting warily on the steps, and looking out over the water. "I think we should have a little talk, don't you?"
Though Charles' head was turned toward Paul, his eyes seemed blank, as if they didn't see him.

"I hope," Paul said, "that, er, that, this doesn't interfere with your doing the novel."

"No."

"Now look here," said Paul, his white shirt soaked with sweat, his face angrily contorting. "You can't leave her because of something like this. Damn it Charles, she needs you now more than ever before. She's been crying all morning. She thinks you're going to leave her."

Over the blue waters of the ocean, on top of the sun, Charles could see Celeste and his mother sitting, as if on a throne. And he could see himself running through the garden at his mother's cottage and he was like a mad child, as buzzing like a bee he flicked a pulsing finger over his humming lips. He dashed through the roses, scraped his face on the trellis, rounded Bessie's cabin and peeked out at Jack, whose black bloody arms swung a hoe that hacked like a cough in the black loam chest of the garden.

And then, stumbling forward, madly singing like a lark, he held aloft a lighter and a watch. And amid the green wax foliage a thousand eyes watched as the droning ticking began and the black flame of the lighter flared like a blade through the ticking and the ivy.

And there before him was the red white pale blusing face of his father.

Celeste was on the porch and standing at his arm, but Charles, after turning his head away from Paul, refused to turn it again.
"Charles," Celeste said, putting her hand to his as his rested on the rail. "You didn't mean what you said to me last night, did you? You didn't really mean any of those things?"

Charles said nothing.

"Oh, don't leave me, Charles," Celeste was crying softly, holding her breath, letting her face rest up against his sleeve. "I've got to," Charles said.

"Oh no."

"I cannot write that novel."

Celeste looked as if she'd been struck in the face. Her lips trembled, and with tears in her eyes she burst out crying angrily, tightening her grip on his arm. "You must Charles. Oh Charles, oh...I won't let you. I can't let you come to nothing."

"She's right." Paul said, now calmly biting his nails; each moment Paul's shirt appeared to be wetter. As he sat on the steps, water rolled off his face, and he took out a handkerchief to begin mopping his brow. "You know she's right, Charles." Paul, feigning disinterest, put the handkerchief back in his pocket and looked at the boats, red and blue boats, rocking with the tide.

Though looking straight ahead Charles could see them both staring, Celeste on the right side, Paul on the left, and suddenly he felt he was locked within their stares and the two barbed wire stares lodged deeply in his breast, moving away quickly he was off the porch and striding rapidly across the sharp blades of rye grass that grew in clusters on the lawn.

"Charles," Celeste said, "where are you going?"

Charles stopped suddenly, his face red with anger. "To the
boat," he snapped, walking swiftly past the barrier where the rye grass gave way to the sand. "Let him go," he heard Paul say behind him. "Listen to me Charles," Paul shouted, "the blue boat is ours."

"I'm going for a ride to relax," Charles said.

Paul nodded on the porch as Charles, after rolling up his pants, waded out to the motor boat that rocked by the piling. As he crawled into the boat the sea spray, slapping against the black timber of the pilings, splashed salt into his face and against his dry lips. It felt very good to hear the low hum of the motor, the sound the waves made as they struck blow after blow against the hull and splashed a fine spray of water that drenched Charles' clothing.

The cottages on the beach, from a mile out on the sea, were tiny miniature houses, toy houses, doll houses, painted brightly white, red and green shuttered. Like magic boxes they sat there, refreshing tiny dots of color on the rather monotonous line of shore.

And it was glorious to be in a small boat out on the Atlantic, absolutely glorious. The boat thudded against the waves as they rose to greet it; the small craft lurched and skidded toward the sun as the white spume fell over Charles's head like a coverlet of frothy delicate lace, descending swiftly after glowing white against the blue of the sky. And Charles turned the wheel firmly, dipping the boat's starboard side in the water so that its lip cut into the waves, and once again, after righting the craft and prowling along parallel to the string of sandbars,
Charles felt exhilarated as the wind became a cold shock to his teeth. It drove against them making his mouth come open, and like Wee Willie he bared his teeth to the wind.

Reminded then of his great grandfather, Charles drove the horse before him. A great neck rose from the water, and it was tawny in the morning light. It neighed fiercely, but with his whip held high, Charles drove it forward, thrashing. And the first Aaron's face was strong and monstrous in the gale as the rain beat down about him, but the first Aaron's face delighted Charles as he sped the boat forward skipping over the waves; and it was glorious, all so very glorious.

But suddenly the joy was gone. He remembered the first Aaron, and that was gone, all gone. That was the only place for him and it was gone. He was his father, a dead man. He might as well be hanging by a rope.

In the sudden deadness, though the boat still sped along, everything seemed to stop as it had at the museum, and he was conscious that he was crying. The clear water of his making was streaking down his face, and he knew that he had been crying for some time now. He had been crying all the while his boat had been bouncing, bouncing like a rock is skimmed over the water, and he knew that he had been crying for himself, crying for the lives of Marjory and Lydia.

The sea, for the most part, like Marjory, lay placid and still. The waves were gentle and with love seemed to caress the bottom of the boat. And the violence he wreaked on it with his churning motor, his slapping prow, brought him an anguish that
bit his sides acutely; how much pain he must have caused Mar-
jory, and how great the atrocity Celeste and his mother had
caused him to inflict on his gently sleeping daughter. And al-
most numb with shock and despair, Charles wrenched the steering
wheel violently, crying aloud, with tears in his eyes because he
couldn't leave Celeste.

The boat spun round. Biting at the water, with Charles
standing anguished at the wheel, it straightened out and blazed
for the shoals. And then Charles was blinded by the sun; he threw
his arms before his face to keep out the morning light, and the
wheel whirled round.

"Try your luck, son," said the carnival Barker, and the wheel
whirled round. But Charles didn't see or remember losing his quar-
ter, for from the corner of his eyes he was watching the next
booth over, where half-naked girls were prancing on the stage.

And Celeste was beside him, swathed out in boughs of ivy.

"Oh Jesus. My God," Charles cried, "Jack." And his voice was
lost in a torrent of water.

Instinctively, Charles battled to the bottom and tried to
thrust his chest deep into the sand; over his head the murderous
propeller whirled, trying to plunge into his back, and he could
imagine himself, as the breath he was holding seemed to burst
his lungs, being covered with blood, torn to shreds in the water.
And for a moment he felt he would black out from the throbbing
pain that pulsed below his knees in the back of his leg.

Coming at last to the surface of the water he gulped for
air, and he could see his boat, some hundred years away, spin-
ning crazily in erratic circles and splashing water as it tried to plough itself into the sea. And Charles could feel the sand with his toes. The water was up to his chin. To breathe, he had to tilt his face so he was staring into the sun. His cold fingers felt his leg. It was numb and he thought he could feel the steady flow of blood.

There was a sputter in the distance as the boat's motor died, and the small craft, freed of its rider, lurched out to sea.

Then a horrible stillness settled over the water; there were no sounds to be heard, or sights to be seen. The only things visible were the long smooth blue glass of the water, and the hot sun, glowing red, rising slightly on the horizon like an angry eye staring before it moved behind a lid of clouds.

The stillness was complete.

And the stillness wasn't broken until the sun moved from behind the clouds and from a higher perch stared bloodily at Charles, picking him with its rays; it seemed to Charles that he had been waiting almost an hour and the sun was almost directly over head. And still he had to stare directly at the sun, for the water was rising, and though his face was almost horizontal to the surface, the water had begun to seep into his mouth.

With red eyes he was staring into the sun, waiting to founder. The shore land was too far away to be seen, and he was too exhausted in mind to try to find shallow water. He stood there, from time to time stroking his legs, feeling the flow of blood until he could feel it no longer.

And to him then the comedy and tragedy of it all seemed to
lie just in his being a man; it was just because of that that everything happened. Human beings were just flesh; you shoot flesh and it dies, you drown flesh and it drowns. The mind was flesh, too; you bend the mind and it grows sideways and dies, or it doesn't grow at all. You make it the wrong shape, and there's no where it can fit.

It was a pity that no one, not even odd minds, could quite conceive of that. Charles thought of trying to swim, but his arms and legs felt numb, and the water, as it crept and gently sloshed over his forehead and chin, felt good and warm.

Nothing inside him would ever think again of writing a novel.

The water was over his head and it seemed to him that death was a long time coming. He thought of expelling the air from his lungs, for that would make it quicker, but he felt with alarm that any exertion might make him thrash, and he didn't want to thrash, not even involuntarily. It was said that a man couldn't drown without thrashing; Charles didn't believe it until his hands began moving slowly, as if in slow motion they were churning for the top.

He could still see the sun blazing through the water. The water he had already swallowed made him groggy, and the sun in the water became a haze, a thin scarlet sheen that was closing in around him as if he were to be wrapped in a garment of flaming red satin; And then there were shadows in the cabin that crossed and then recrossed; they ran up the walls, across the ceiling and the floor, and then to his mother's feet as she read him
fairy stories, soft and gentle fairy stories that were so sweet they soothed him still.

His eyes were sore and he rubbed them, and where he touched, his mother seemed to touch, and when her pulse quickened, his seemed to quicken too, and he could feel her blood flooding through his veins. And as the sun shone red through the water, in death there seemed to be the redness of his mother.

And suddenly he screamed and the water churned with his kicking and the flailing of his arms. She had come to him there with her broad waxen face, her breath of ashes, and she was strangling him with green hands and fingers like young shoots of ivy.

And as the green fingers tightened on his throat Charles was suddenly hideously angry; in a sudden rage he struck at the fingers. He screamed again, striking at the fingers, and in his panic, in his mother's green face and blazing red eyes, he could suddenly see the situation for what it was and he screamed again. "God damn it mother," he screamed into the water. "I want to live."

And then his mother's pale green face floated before him with mouth open as if she would suck him into herself, and he exploded with anger, striking at her face with claws, with all of his force, until the green flesh tore, the eyes ran blood, and he could feel himself swelling up and then, like a new born infant, bursting out of her body.

Cracked open and red inside like a pomegranate, his mother was suddenly below him, and he broke to the surface of the water, gasping for breath. The air seemed to strike his lungs with such
force that it left him reeling, and only dimly he could see the red sun above him.

Beating wildly at the surface of the water, he struggled to stay afloat and make his way to the shore line, which behind the vapor lines before him was only a thin green strip on the horizon. His arms and legs were numb with exhaustion, and he cried as he beat at the water. Fainting with fatigue his head fell below the water once more, but this time he could see the bottom through the green water and it seemed very near him. He struck downward with his feet and almost shouted with joy as he struck hard sand.

The water was only to his waist, and with the sun on his head and shoulders he stood there drenched, somehow massive in the sun's light, and the joy gave way to an incredible anger. In a sudden burst of fury, disregarding the weariness of his limbs, he reached down and blasted the water with his fist. But still the anger grew. It seemed to take hold of his body, and he trembled all over, and it continued to grow; it was enormous, incredibly enormous, and it grew larger as he saw a motor boat on the horizon speeding in his direction.

The old fisherman who saved him was mostly amused. "Don't go out alone again," he said, helping Charles out of the boat and onto the beach and then disappearing before Charles could thank him.

Celeste saw him first, coming across the sand, and she turned white, putting her hand to her mouth. He was exhausted, burnt by
the sun but also pale, with the right leg of his pants torn and matted with blood. But he walked surely, with his eyes straight before him. Paul, coming out of the cottage, dropped what he was doing and stood, shocked, with Celeste on the edge of the rye grass.

And Charles cringed to see them, waiting there like fools. Everyone else might as well have been there too, everyone he had ever known: Mrs. Donleavy, Fergusson, Jean, McAllister, all of them. They might as well have been there for all that he cared.

"What happened?" asked Celeste, as he waved her away from him.

Charles spit on the sand.

"I have composed myself of too many people," said Charles, "That's what happened."

His eyes were still red and he could barely see Celeste, as mystification and fear spread over her delicate features. Still angry, he turned from her and tried to make his way into the house, but Paul, standing foolishly with spread legs, was unintentionally blocking the walkway.

"You both have made me torture Marjory," Charles said.

"I haven't," said Celeste. "I haven't meant to."

"You more than him," said Charles, pointing at Paul's confused face, as it twitched in the light. "You made me take revenge on her class by marrying her, and now, having done that, you want me to leave her."

Paul suddenly laughed and put his hands on his hips; his
shirt was soaked with sweat and the light in his eyes danced with derision. "You have the wrong slant," Paul said. "I dare say that you had the most to do with those things; you've had quite a lot to do with everything that has happened, have you not?" Paul laughed again, and when he laughed his face seemed to embody everything Charles detested.

The anger in Charles made him explode into action: grabbing Paul's arm suddenly, he frantically jerked at his shoulder, screaming invectives until Paul lost his balance and lay on the rye grass flat on his back. With hatred in his eyes Charles stood over Paul.

"Go ahead, move," Charles said. "You make a move and I'll kick you."

But even as Charles spoke he felt his strength give way, and it wasn't until much later that he could feed himself without his hands shaking. It took an enormous effort for him to pack his bags, and an even greater one to find someone with a car who could take him to the station.

On his way back to Richmond he looked calmly out the bus window at the black sky that seemed to sink down and settle over the roadside trees. "I will not let you go," had been Celeste's last words, and it had cost him enormous effort to break from her then. Even now, in the bus, he could see her in his mind's eyes. And with her doll's face before him, he knew he would always love her, and he knew that he would always dream of her delicate limbs.
"Marjory," he called later.

Marjory was walking, holding Lydia's hand, down a Richmond sidewalk. Her black hair, like a gypsy's hair, was beautiful in the light, and her high heels made a continual clatter, tapping on the sidewalk. "Marjory," he called, and then suddenly she turned, perceiving that he was standing, looking at her, half a block behind her.

She smiled then and her face was simple, but radiant.

But then Lydia cried when he took her in his arms.
CHAPTER VI

It was now five years since Charles had seen Celeste. He was a professor of history now, and now he controlled himself so well that he could go days at a time without thinking about her.

Charles enjoyed the low drone of the classroom, and he had despaired when school was out for the summer. He was one of those men who strive to let things happen without him, who live one day at a time and take things as they come. He was deferential, glad to manage petty affairs: the selection of a tie, a dinner jacket, a cocktail dress for his wife, or the best seats at the theatre. These were the things that occupied his time. He had developed a profound sympathy with the bourgeois.

"Charles," Marjory said, as summer approached, "let's go to the beach for the summer. We don't have to stay in your mother's old cottage. We can rent one near it."

And Charles had agreed out of a sense of obligation to his wife and daughter. Lydia, looking at the time much like Marjory, beamed and clapped her hands with joy at the prospect of visiting her father's old home. She was delighted at the idea of playing in the sand, of being able to swim whenever it pleased her to do so.

"Why not Virginia Beach?"

"Oh, Charles," Marjory said pouting, "it's so crowded there."
Charles had to admit that his mother's old beach wasn't crowded. The only cottages left at the beach were those that were strung, as if on a line, along the edge of the bluff. And those cottages, each tiny and like a pillbox, were in a dreadful state; the timbers were rotting, doors swung on rusty hinges, small animals wondered freely in and out, glassed windows were smoked and painted gray by dust. The beach was almost totally evacuated; it was inhabited by only a few diehards who foolishly believed that the waves of the Chesapeake would not wash away the rest of the bluff.

Charles was glad that he had been able to rent a small, fairly decent cottage at the end of the beach, for it would have frightened him to stay at the cottage he inherited from his mother. When he thought about it, he even avoided looking in the direction of the point, where he knew the cottage, like something from a fairy story, would be sitting and frowning in the afternoon light.

Controlled as usual, as controlled as he had learned to be in the last few years, Charles was thinking of Celeste as he stood fascinated in front of the bathroom mirror in the rear of the cottage. Marjory's guests were in the living room of the cottage and he could hear the low drone of their voices drifting through the walls of cedar and pine.

In the mirror Charles saw a man who was rapidly getting older; he was still rather plain, and though his features were nothing that would attract attention, they were a little too
sharp and angular. He felt then that if he were seen from a distance, he would seem to have the sharply etched profile of a weathercock. Reflected in his face was a certain intensity that made others uneasy in his presence; he looked tight as if he were out of breath from being punched in the stomach.

The strained lines strung under his eyes, the narrow wisp of a mouth, the tense thin grooves on his brow, spreading to his cheeks to form a faintly etched trellis, suggested that a tight but brittle control was habitually employed to hold in his emotions. "You ask about Delfold," once said one of his colleagues at the college. "Delfold is a stack of straw held together by a cord around its middle. His intellect is that cord. Snap that knot and the straw would be scattered by the wind."

Charles calmly combed his hair; he had made up his mind that he couldn't see Celeste, and he was somewhat bitter that her letter had destroyed the pleasantness of the afternoon, the peace and ease he had earlier found by sitting in a deck chair on the edge of the bluff, placidly soaking up the warmth as he nodded his head and, with eyes half opened, regarded the blue waters of the Chesapeake bay.

The morning and early afternoon had seemed so restful. All morning, while Charles had been trying to sleep in his deck chair on the crest of the bluff, Marjory had been scurrying this way and that, cleaning and brushing, putting what she called "spring freshness" into the natural dullness
and morbid air of the cottage.

It was wonderful the way that Marjory always put things in order. No one would ever have guessed that someone who seemed so aristocratic could be so preoccupied with domestic chores. Marjory really believed that cleanliness was next to godliness. She couldn't have done a better job; the cottage was not fit for human habitation when they first arrived at the beach, and now, just two days later, its sparkling facade set it off from the rest of the scenario in marked contrast.

Charles only wished that the general character of the beach had not changed so drastically.

In his deck chair before the bay, Charles, his eyes still closed, pulled the cover tighter about him. Currents of air nipped in and out along the coast-line as if they would sew the fold of the land to the edge of the sea; they came from across the bay, fluffing the water as they came so that the frothy lace of the bay slapped at the shore. Lightly and playfully the breezes teased each other as they played cat and mouse along the irregularities of the thin ribbon of beach, slung like a hammock between two sandy points, that made Charles' chair the midpoint on the curve of a long jagged crescent.

So on Charles' body there were a diversity of sensations; the sun above was unpleasantly hot as it hung over the bay, but the gentle breezes on the water, coming from the north, were like little wisps of ice that slid beneath his clothing and made up in coldness for the brilliance of the sun. Charles felt strangely
comfortable as he sat before the water. There were memories of a distant past, lulling memories associated with the sun, water, and wind that made the afternoon seem peaceful; he wanted to be conscious only of that.

Out over the bay, Charles could hear the tremendous thunder of guns rocking over the waves and colliding with the shore. Destroyers and battleships, in the middle of the Chesapeake, were shooting at targets and the vibrations added ripples to the water at Charles' feet. Before Charles went to sleep, he could also hear the murmur of soft feminine voices coming from the cottage.

There were people on the beach below him: a fat dimpled woman with two sleek sons, but if they were speaking it was too far away to hear what they were saying. It was a long way from where Charles sat to the hot sand below him; the red clay bluff dropped as would a plumb line twenty feet down to the beach.

It seemed a crime to Charles that the beach was almost destroyed by the water.

There were so many changes, almost all caused by the tide. The line of identical cottages was further back from the deep drop of the bluff, for as the water washed away the bluff, the owners of the cottages had been forced to move them. Each year the tide washed away a foot or so of the land and made the strip of sandy beach a foot or more narrower. It was as if the tide was some stern predator bent on consuming the cottages, the woods, and the dusty land that stretched, mostly furrowed and plowed, to the edge of the Atlantic, and it seemed to Charles
that it was prevented from doing so only by the immense breakwaters that protruded like fingers from the coast.

Charles, sleeping, could forget about the letter from Celeste that was tucked under his blanket; only when the sun was low in the sky, and sleep had refreshed him, did Charles venture to open it and read the sentences Celeste had so feverishly composed.

She wanted to see him. She had changed a great deal from having lived alone. From the realtor she had rented Charles' cottage on the point. She had tried to find him in Richmond and finally discovered where he was. In desperation, she had rented Elaine Delfold's old cottage, because she felt that even if Charles didn't want to see her, he would come to the cottage to pay his last respects to the garden. All the foliage seemed withered, and the garden was permeated by the sour dusty scent of faded, dead roses. Come to the garden, she begged.

Charles had let himself fall back heavily into his chair. It seemed incredible that such a thing could happen, and in a matter of instants the character of the afternoon suddenly changed: it became dark, almost overcast, as if the sky had pulled a muddy cloak over its shoulders; and there was a darkness, a black line of sea weed that fringed the edge of the water. Charles drew his breath in slowly and then slowly blew it out again. The fishing nets, hung up to dry, threw rectangular shadows on the hot sand below.

And in the bathroom he paused before the mirror. He was
sure of himself. He noted that his fingers didn't tremble as they had so often in the past. He combed his hair with assurance, and laid his comb calmly on the dull white enamel of the sink. He was composed now, listening to the voices of Marjory's guests hum steadily in the living room.

After reading the letter, after he had opened it and looked out over the sea, he had remembered his mother, her soft hands and the way she kissed his lips. He had remembered again the way the beach was when he was a child, long before he had known any Marjory or known any Celeste; long before he had known any Charles Delfold or cared who he was. Rough and brackish, the water had then seemed to Charles to sweep in on the shore, and as if it were in time with Delfold's slow breaths, it had seemed to flow up the bank and through him. It was as if a pulse-like movement, generated deep within the water itself, pushed the water in gushes across the terrace behind him and then through the cottage door, until finally it flooded the deeply rutted road some twenty yards beyond.

Then he had remembered that as a child he had pretended that his breath controlled the waves, that when he was a child the water had seemed to recede as he exhaled. He remembered, too, that it had seemed to flow to the middle of the bay and there, cancerous, would gather force to rush back on him when he drew air in. It was as if the water and the salt air around him were seeking to encompass him, to unite with him, and then to drown him. It was strange that he had felt that way as a
child, but even now, Charles realized, he was associating the water with the large far-away cottage, standing lonely but majestically on the point.

All during the pleasant parts of the day the cottage far to his right and at the tip of the point had seemed to affect him adversely. And at the bathroom mirror, he could remember that while he sat on the bluff, there had been, half buried in his mind, an almost unconscious fear that he would suddenly, in the window of the cottage on the point, see a faint light, a beacon from the ghost of his mother, blaze dimly across Nassawadox and find him, as before, unprotected and all too willing to be attracted.

Charles turned on the tap and washed his hands. He would not give in to any of that now. He never expected to defeat the pain and longing, but he vowed that never again would his weaknesses be allowed to determine his action. Putting soap on his hands he glanced into the mirror and laughed as he thought of himself as a dispenser of knowledge.

He could imagine himself at the college standing before his classes, and he could imagine his students, watching him intently, scribbling into their notebooks as he talked. And all about the room there was the sound of his voice; it was a sound in accord with the spirit of classes, a low hum, a library voice.

And it seemed then that he somehow deserved the respect his students gave him, and it seemed to him then that there
was a certain value in that. And looking in the mirror, deciding not to meet Celeste, he realized once again that he was content as dispenser of knowledge. It was a matter of spirit, and he found difficulty in explaining it to himself.

"Eat your oatmeal, Lydia," Marjory, in Charles memory, was growling at Lydia. "Your father had to work hard to buy that for you."

Charles smiled at the table. It felt good walking the Richmond streets with Marjory and Lydia; each Sunday they would visit the museum or the carillon, and on such occasions he would feel foolish, feeling himself to be their guide and protector. It was touching to watch Marjory with Lydia, for only Charles seemed to trust Marjory with the child. Mrs. Kennet was in favor of getting a governess for Lydia, but Charles said no.

He smiled when he thought of how well he was getting along with old Mrs. Kennet. There were times now when they visited the plantations together. They had found a common interest there, but also, as it seemed to Charles, Mrs. Kennet's affection for him seemed to increase as her relations with her husband became more violent.

"I have only you to lean on," the old woman said, and Charles knew it was the truth. Mrs. Kennet, her old face tired but relaxed, sat on the bench which marked the site where Bradford had celebrated the first Thanksgiving many years before.

"I can talk to you," Mrs. Kennet said, "now that I'm used to you. Tell me Charles, are you quite happy with my daughter?"
"Yes," said Charles. He could remember the times when she swore Marjory to silence and then asked her the same question concerning him.

"Tell me the truth, Charles," Mrs. Kennet said. "You know you can trust me."

Charles looked at the old woman carefully; she seemed drab and dull, brown, quiet, and slow. Her person seemed to embody the melancholy, bored aspect of quail sleeping in the brush, and Charles felt sorry for her, sorry that so few people loved her that she had to turn to him, the man she hated the most.

Charles shrugged his shoulders. "I may be a little young," Charles said, relaxing and gazing at her as he talked. "I live the life of the average middle aged man. I get up in the morning at a reasonable hour; my sleep is usually peaceful. I have a very nice breakfast. I shave with assurance that the after shave lotion will make my face forgive the shaving. I teach two classes in the morning. I spend two hours in my office, and then the rest of the day is my own."

From the corner of his eye, Charles glanced at Mrs. Kennet; she was studying him quietly. Getting up from the bench he again shrugged his shoulders and looked at the water of the James as it beat its way over rocks and around islands in its desire to flow eventually into the Chesapeake bay.

"I enjoy my sleep; I enjoy my breakfast; the after shave lotion invigorates me. There is nothing I like better than to
teach my classes. My hours away from the college are pleasant ones. Pleasure is not contemptible." Charles laughed suddenly and looked at the old man, the caretaker of the plantation, who was working in the garden. "Neither is physical lover, and I am pleased to have both. I live like other middle aged men—I have no ecstasy, no adventure. But I do have my varied and sundry pleasures."

"Yes," said Mrs. Kennet, her eyes bright. "I know exactly what you mean."

Charles laughed at Mrs. Kennet then, but watching the old caretaker pulling the weeds in the plantation garden, he suddenly felt that there was a certain validity to what he had been saying. There seemed to him then to be a certain glory in being a man; there was a certain joy and a certain courage in simply earning one's bread. The old gardener, with sweaty, dirty hands, seemed to have, after all, something in common with him and his father, even with McAllister.

Charles, at the bathroom sink, washed the soap from his hands and gazed at his forearms, glistening with water; they were sufficiently covered with hair. They appeared to be strong; like a laborer's arms, they seemed to promise sturdiness and power. The water that still lay over them accentuated their capacity for force. Yes, his arms were the arms of a man.

He would not see Celeste.

Later, as Charles sat once again on the bluff, the sun,
disappearing, slid over the horizon. Marjory's four guests were still in the living room of the cottage; Charles, after combing his hair, had paid his respects to them, but now, achieving a feeling of ease, he forgot their presence momentarily and concentrated on the red bloody glow that rose to the surface of the sun when the sun slipped below the horizon.

The voices behind Charles, droning steadily in the living room of the cottage, became merely murmurs in the night; the conversation contained no words, but was like the sound of white leaves settling on water to the slow rhymic clicking of a choral of crickets. A lull seeming to proceed from the gently falling darkness made Charles feel like an old man as he sat before the water under white, just appearing, stars that were half lost in the thickness of a darkening gray sky. Though the breeze from the bay had momentarily ceased, Charles picked his blanket from the rye grass where it had fallen and pulled it over his legs as he seemed to nod to the soothing voices of Marjory's guests.

The old woman to whom Marjory had introduced him, after he had left the bathroom, slipping on his glasses to achieve an academic air, had seemed disturbingly familiar.

The sea, too, was familiar. As he once again drifted off to sleep, he had been half unwilling to close his eyes, for the sea stretched out before him was incredibly beautiful as dark shadows fell over its surface and seemed to flow with the tide as the persistent waves licked at the shore. But the
sea was horrible, too, as it struggled to do away with the land. Before he went to sleep, Charles felt a twinge of dismay, for the sea seemed to want to wash away all that remained of his father's farm.

In his dreams, Charles could picture the old woman who only a few seconds before Marjory had implored him to meet, and he could remember how she appeared when he had left the bathroom and gone into the kitchen, stopping before the kitchen sink to look at her briefly through the half opened kitchen door.

In a way, the old woman had immediately reminded him of someone he had known a long time before; she looked very much like an old friend of his mother's. There was something about the whole circle of women in the living room that was dreadfully familiar. Marjory had met them by chance at the beach's single country store, and striking up a conversation with them, she became involved with them to the extent that she just had to invite them to the cottage for tea. Marjory was always doing something like that.

Charles watched from the kitchen door as Marjory, laughing, put her tea glass on the table beside her.

Marjory had a passion for making everything symmetrical in the living room, circling chairs were placed around the rim of the circular carpet and the wicker table was balanced by the wicker magazine basket by the door. There was a single painting on each wall of the cottage. They were all still lifes;
all pervaded by dark colors save the painting opposite Charles' meshwork of somber flowers and dark, dusty blinds.

It was an appropriate setting for Marjory's gathering, for the women with her seemed to be very much like dark, dusty blinds.

As Charles lingered in the kitchen, it was clear to him that he would rather be outside, for he could still feel the lure of the wind and sea. In fact, the lure had become greater, for through the glass panes of the kitchen door, he perceived that the atmosphere was thinned with the first signs of darkness, and that the fading light had begun to throw faint shadows, shadows that softened the glare of the dusty road and took the sharp contours away from the harsh brown and green pillars of pine that bordered the road like gloomy sentinels standing in a row.

The day was ending like all days end, but this particular dusk cast a spell that to Charles was very real and almost tangible. It was a dusk that matched his mood; it was a dreary dusk, one that was gloomy, but it was not without beauty, for though all colors seemed dim and fading, weak and dying, they managed with a quiet grace to pervade the atmosphere and make something of it that Delfold admired. Something about it was quite fascinating.

What it was Charles couldn't imagine, but it was strong enough to keep him in the kitchen, fretting at his irresponsibility and resting his eyes first on the window and then on
the crack between the door sill and the kitchen door. The voices in the living room were speaking of him; he could hear the murmurs becoming lower, the sudden rise and fall of inflections.

The women, with their chairs in a circle, seemed to him to be functioning in time without end, and he could see from where he was that Marjory, still in animated conversation, seemed to be merely another link in the endless chain. As he stood there by the door, he felt a definite alienation from Marjory, and he experienced the unexplainable sensation, the conviction, that if he entered the room the alienation he felt from his wife and for the three other women would increase as he neared them.

Still, he could not imagine where he had seen the old woman before, and he racked his brain trying to think of where it could have been.

One of the women was clearly over eighty, and the other two were younger, one possibly forty, the other not much over thirty.

To Charles, the dream-like aspect of the day continued; the morning and the afternoon had seemed as if they were enveloped in a bright sunlight, and now, as he stood in the kitchen leaning against the stove, watching and waiting, it seemed as if the cloak of light had been exchanged for a shroud of drabness and melancholy. The women were old line beach people, he had known all too well as a boy.
They were Eastern Shore aristocracy, a dying breed, a breed in accord with the slow fading of the light that made the woods in the rear of the cottage minutely darker. Still staring at the old woman, Charles held his breath with the presentiment that the old woman was about to speak words that would somehow affect him. And then he recalled the sound of her voice. How often, in dreams, had he heard it?

The old woman's lips, in the faint light of the cottage, were like two shriveled, illuminated earthworms connected head to tail, tail to head, shimmerring phosphorically with a pale green light and flashing on an opaque screen of gray formed by the open window behind her. Her lips squirmed, drew themselves up in a bow, spread wide then pursed. Incredibly detached from the old woman's person, they shivered, two pale green streaks of light laughingly and cruelly forming words.

"O, yes," said the woman, "I knew Professor Delfold's family well. I acted with his mother."

In the back of Charles' mind the old woman was suddenly associated with roses, faded roses, and old cloth, old cloth that lay fading in trunks, and for a moment, standing by the stove, he was back in his childhood shyly putting one foot before the other as he took the hands of his mother's old friend, who even then had an air about her of dusk, old furniture, dusty blinds, disease, twilight and the solemnity of death. She was very old even when he was a boy, and now she looked positively ancient and withered.
"oh, is that so?" said Marjory, stupidly. "Did you really know Charles' mother?"

"Indeed," said the old woman. "Oh yes, indeed I did."

Charles framed in his mind the words, stones, he would use to shatter the metallic shell of talk that rose about him with a pervading and blanketing dullness, bespeaking lack of light like the shadows behind the backdoor of the cottage that were beginning to crawl across the road and nuzzle into the pines.

Back on the bluff, before falling asleep, sitting watching the water, Charles could remember Celeste outside the line of hedgerows waving for him to follow her, and it was then, watching the dark water, that Charles remembered the dead face of the matron who caught him trying to escape the party. The face was younger then, but it was the same face; Marjory was entertaining the old woman whom so often he had despised as he lay on his bed at night twisting with fitful dreams.

So sitting in his deck chair with the blanket over his knees, with the night becoming pitch black around him, the old woman's face rose before him, broad at the top and narrow at the chin; it sat like a triangle on a pair of tired withered shoulders. The eyes, like two pieces of gray coal, peered at Charles with the barest flicker of life. She was dressed in a black dress of heavy material, and an ebony clasp at her neck held together the two halves of her large lace collar that seemed to grow out of the black stem like the white bloom of a
flower. Her hair was snow white, brushed straight back over her head and tied in a bun; when she moved her hands to fix it they seemed to move in spasmodic jerks, and to Charles they seemed to take up and beat out the rhythm of the song chanted so often by the pine trees that bordered the long dark dusty road that led to the cottage on the point.

And now in his memory, pulling the blanket up around his chest as the night air became colder, Charles tried to find in her eyes the spark of an actress, but in them was only polished rosewood or polished mahogany, and Charles was suddenly shocked at the certain knowledge that the Eastern Shore and the beach on the Chesapeake, his past life, the memory of his father and the firsts Aaron, were quickly and quietly dying.

Before he slept, a wave of grief spread through him as he watched the waves of the Chesapeake steal another fraction of the coast.

When Charles awoke at last there was no sound coming from the cottage, and like all night skys at the beach, the summer sky was incredibly dark. Before going for a walk beside the water's edge, through the window Charles saw Marjory, alone now, reading a magazine with her back to the hanging light. It wouldn’t hurt if he took a little walk, and determining to walk only to Nassawadox creek and back, he stood at the top of the rickety stair that descended to the bottom of the bluff.

Poised at the top of the stair, Charles could see the sand below, where at the fringe of the water pieces of nettles,
jelly-like and luminous, were scattered on the beach, glowing green like emeralds. He remembered that as a boy he thought of them as gems, but the gems were soft, would shimmer at his touch and would with a ghostly fluidity slip away at will, slide between his fingers to avoid being held.

Perhaps on his walk he could forget the old woman.

Moving lights out over the water, red, green, and white eyes failing to appear in pairs, winked, blinked as if they were alive, as the black water rose and swelled, revealed them at will, and then suddenly blotted them out, as if the water's nature willed darkness to the world. Charles held his breath before starting to descend; this before him was the bay, the sea so beautiful and grand, the deadly and dark killing mother who circled the globe, who ran her fingers through continents of light.

Charles wasn't afraid of her now. Striding forward, he began his march down the stair that fell, as if down a well, to the beach far below; the stair seemed to rock and sway, to groan with his weight. The timbers snapped and cracked as if they were breaking, as if they threatened to throw him quickly to the bottom of the dark pit below. Then suddenly the bottom step of the stair creaked under the weight of his foot and as he stepped off the stair onto the sand, the loose rotten plank rang hollowly out into the night.

Charles walked across the packed sand near the water's edge at a slow even pace. The stars above were exceedingly
clear; the tiny pin pricks of light lay scattered across the sky like so many white buds in a garden of darkness. The wind on the beach was now as forceful as it had been on the bluff, but there was a certain calmness, in spite of the wind, a certain stillness that soothed him. Then suddenly, as Charles, stopping to watch, gazed up at the sky, a star disappeared, and then without warning another was gone as if evaporated. As he turned his gaze toward it, Charles stood amazed. Then a constellation, Pleiades, the seven sisters draped in white milky gowns, began to decrease in number; there were only six stars, then five, then four, as a stray cloud, close to the earth, flew by unaccompanied by others of its kind.

All things seemed dead; the beach, the water, everything seemed to have given out of life. Then a ghost, a shadow, seemed to be chasing ghost. He turned about quickly, seeming to hear the pattering of footsteps, but whatever it was that was following him disappeared in the darkness.

Charles walked quickly down the beach; if he was followed, the steps would have to move quickly to catch him. For an instant he had started to speak, but then, thinking better of it, he held his tongue and strode on quietly for a time without hearing a sound behind him. The ribbon of beach was swerving inward toward the bulk of the peninsula. Having rounded a bend, Charles could no longer see the lights from the row of cottages behind him; there was only water, land and foliage. And now the beach became darker. A few hundred yards ahead of Charles the
beach cut inland again and continued for some two or three miles before it started out again and continued seaward, completing the loop that stretched to Nassawadox creek.

All about Charles were the sounds of the bay, the one being the roar of the bay proper and the second being the haunting swish of water as the bay cut into and flowed with the waters of the creek.

Charles stopped. All about him there was the attitude of abject piety, as if the trees, the melancholy hoot of an owl in the distance, were mourning at a funeral. Everything was dying; the lights on the opposite coast of the bay, the land itself, the stars in the sky high overhead twinkling but dimly once again as a cloud covered their face.

Yet strength for Charles was a reality now; with his hands on his hips, not hearing the sound of footsteps, he stood firmly on the sand, staring at the single beam of light that fell across the water from a window of his mother's old cottage.

In the darkness, Charles felt that he knew what death was like; he could remember at twilight being back in the cottage, glancing through the kitchen door at the old friend of his mother's. Outside the cottage, the sun, which had already plunged into the water, was but a thin slice of red on the horizon. The blinds on the front windows of the cottage made slices of shadow and light that played, as the old woman moved, in horizontal shifting stripes across her wrinkled face. Charles whistled to himself. That's what death was. And then
it had seemed to be consuming the shore.

He laughed; the negroes on his father's farm, buried in the wide circular grave, could never have imagined that at last they would be buried by the sea, that the waves would wash their remains up from the dirt, and that their dust would be scattered and diffused by the water. Charles' laugh was short. Everything he thought of seemed to depress him.

And then he was aware that he was standing beside that area of sea-washed metals that Celeste, as a child, had called her own private "Witching Dell." It was littered with the debris of an ancient ferry that had cracked up on the coast. Lying in the sand were a number of faintly glimmering lights from pieces of rusted metals. They were barely perceptable, glowing dully in the darkness like the pale reflections of rough amber disks.

Once again Charles could hear the sound of footsteps padding up the beach. He lapsed into complete silence by holding his breath. The sounds stopped, and once again, he let his breath out, carefully, gradually. Sitting on a log, he was aware that each ripple that broke in on the shore was becoming increasingly unfamiliar, and suddenly he seemed to have no connection with them at all. He looked out over the water at the single light coming from his mother's cottage, and suddenly it seemed strange and not a part of his experience.

Yes, it still hurt him, but he seemed to be removed from the scene. He seemed to be removed from that element which all
of his life had seemed to cause him grief, but then, looking at the water as it washed away the shore, he felt decidedly empty, and the pain of that made him turn and look at the old broken fragments of the ferry that were still, after years of being washed by the tide, half buried in the sand.

But he knew that they, too, would be eventually washed away and lost to the beach.

He looked at the sea.

He wondered how much longer it would take for the water to eat away the cottages on the point and then to eat away the cottages still remaining on the bluff. He wondered how long it would take the black water to creep across the cornfields, to rise above the hillocks, to cover the pines and pull them under its dark arms and midriff; and how long would it take, one hundred years, ten million years, before the waters of the Chesapeake, like one vast sheen, would lie over the peninsula and merge its being with the Atlantic? A cold chill went down his spine as Charles heard the hooting of an owl and he tried to concentrate on the melodic drone of crickets that came from the woods behind him.

The dead souls of sailors were trapped in the pieces of metal that littered the "Witching Dell" as Celeste had called it. No one had been able to free the souls from their glimmering prisons.

And then Charles was aware that he had experienced the same sort of chill before. He remembered playing on the beach
in the "Witching Dell," playing in the midst of the debris with Celeste, and he remembered the ghastly stories they had told each other about the ghosts, and he remembered how Celeste whistled, imitating souls crying in the wind. Her whistle was, at the same time, both soft and whiny; it was sad and horrible and very much like the crying of a ghost.

Charles became a little flustered. It was strange, he felt, that perspiration should be gathering on his brow, strange that he should suddenly feel afraid and angry. The wind was like ice and its cold tongue seemed to run up and down his back, after slipping beneath his clothing. Each wave that came in was like a threat, vague in the total darkness of the bay, but imposing and potent.

And then suddenly, Charles thought that he heard a ghost whistle in the wind.

Celeste, in a letter, had once told him she was dead, and while sitting on his log, Charles could imagine Celeste's five years in New York, her taking one man after another, but always going home to an empty apartment thinking about him, wishing he were with her. She had sworn to him in another letter that when and if she married again it would be for convenience only, for she could never love anyone again; she didn't trust herself enough to love someone with the intensity she had loved him.

And as Charles sat listening to the hoot of the owl, he was aware that he could have saved her if only he had genius, if only he had been able to write well enough. If he could
have done that he could have accepted her love and still retained himself. He would have had something to build with and he could have taken her love and at the same time, with an identity of his own, stood far above it, instead of sinking into her love and merging his being with hers. If he had genius he could have loved her and still have been a man.

But how in God's name could he have retained himself while loving her, even when he wasn't loving her he didn't know who he was. And he knew then that a man must live a life of his own, and that if he had lived with Celeste he would have been, not Charles Aaron Delfold, but her.

Charles laughed faintly. How difficult it was to avoid killing fathers.

You take an intelligent man, one not overly intelligent, and put him in an unstructured world, and he spends his whole life trying not to go mad.

He thought of Marjory then, and he realized that life with her had been easy because he didn't love her too much and she left him something of himself, whatever that self was. She supported his vacuous identities, and he was grateful enough for that. Then, he suddenly jumped up off the log and peered all about him.

He had distinctly heard footsteps coming across the sand, but once again, turning around, he saw only darkness. Sitting down again, he heard only the rush and roar of the waves breaking high and sending water almost to his feet.
But if Lydia needed a father he would be that father, and if the world needed teachers, even if teaching wasn't for him, he would be a teacher. It wasn't so hard to mentally eliminate one's self from the picture. Perhaps the world needed physical men, but then again, he wasn't especially physical either.

There was a low moan and suddenly the ghost of a sailor was crying.

"I have changed once again," Celeste had said in her letter. "I know exactly why it is impossible for us. But oh, Charles, how much I want to see you."

Then suddenly Charles seemed to be back in the kitchen staring at the old woman, who, with quivering lips was sitting, talking, in the yellow wicker chair on the fringe of the circular rug. And for Charles, then, the singing of the sunlight could no longer be heard, and the atmosphere was alive with a vague sodden dread that permeated and distorted his perceptions. A pattern of shadows seemed to be playing about the room. The intricate shading fell across it in streaks, and the streaks, like fingers, crossed then re-crossed, fell over the carpet, the old woman's yellow wicker chair, and seemed to play an infinitely slow game of tag in the deep hollows of the old woman's eyes.

"It's almost dark," Marjory said.

"Oh," said the old woman, glancing behind her and out the window, "but it's not night yet."
And then, in the single beam of light coming from the
cottage on the point, Charles seemed to see Celeste's face,
waxen like his mother's, waxen like broad shiny magnolia le-
aves. And he could see her hair, wet and streaming, flowing
from her head to her shoulders with incredible beauty. And
he could see that her eyes were closed ever so tightly, so ti-
ghtly that he wondered whether or not, he wondered when if ever,
she could open them again. And as he bent forward to kiss her,
he supported himself with his hands, and his hands struck some-
thing hard, hard like polished wood on the edge of the box.
And her china face was very pale and blood flowed from her
mouth. Then, sitting before the water, Charles had an impulse
to scream, but the light coming from his mother's cottage told
him that Celeste was still alive. But still the fear was upon
him, and grabbing a piece of driftwood he coldly thrust it into
his mouth and sat like a Buddha on the sand to await the hours
that would come. His horn-rimmed glasses slipped down his nose,
and the wet sand, pushed by the water, seemed to crawl into his
pants legs and rake at his flesh.

"Eat your food, Lydia," Marjory had said. "Your father
had to work very hard to get that for you."

And then Charles kept his eyes opened defiantly as the
light from his mother's cottage began to slip out of the win-
dow and crawl over the water. It had seemed only yellow at
first, but now it seemed stronger, as if its yellow beams were
about to catch fire and blaze, resolve themselves into red to
form one eye of fire against the black of the sky. Charles put his hands over his eyes and then angrily took them away.

"Destroy me if you can," Charles muttered in a rage against himself. But the darkness before him seemed to keep increasing its density, and the light from the window had become a red glow starting across Massawadox creek at a single point and then blossoming out like a flower halfway across the water. The glow was reflected in the black glass of the water and the reflection seemed to slide in his direction till at last it slithered up the beach and posed before him like a hypnotic and poisonous animal.

Charles shouted with rage, and taking the stick from his mouth, he hurled it at the neck of the serpent. In blowing apart, the serpent became a mass of red and blue light exploding in magnificent streams out over the water. The sky seemed lit; the trees, the sand, the water, seemed to become a violent overflow from the moon of all the colors, and Charles lay exhausted on the sand as the explosions continued above him, until at last the sky was clear and all that could be heard was the sound of the owl, the crickets, and the water.

And pine boughs seemed to sway in the wind as they drooped mournfully over the brown pine needles that, like a blanket spread by the wind, lay over Celeste's grave and hid her face from view. But even the brown pine needles seemed to be drowning in blood, and Charles closed his eyes and let the tears come.
He could imagine Celeste alone, always alone, waiting for him to come to the cottage on the point. Then Charles knew that he wasn't so very special; he had suspected it all along but now he knew for sure that every problem he had, Celeste had too, and his heart began beating with compassion. So his father had been right after all. Charles could see him then, stretching by the neck, with the note pinned to his collar: I am a victim, Elaine, it read, but you are a victim much more than I.

Charles put his hands to his breast and breathed heavily. He would have to go to her and say to her, "Isn't life sad, my dear Celeste. Here I am, a professor, and I love you very much, but things never are as they should be. I can give you nothing but the back of my hand, but I love you more than I could ever love my life. But let's face it, dear, I couldn't leave my little girl, Lydia, for a whore.

Charles brushed the sand off his suit. He felt better, now, standing before the water and slipping on his glasses. After his limbs trembled violently for a moment and he seemed to be shot through with ice, he felt the warmth and strength returning to his limbs. It seemed difficult to him then to refrain from going mad, but confident he could do it, he put his finger to his tongue, and since it was whole and contained no soreness, he smiled to know that he hadn't had a seizure.

Charles tucked in his shirttail and hitched up his belt; his pants were slightly wet but the dampness felt good on his
legs. He would always be able to pick himself up, but there was no way to stop the pain. It would always come like a knife, twisting inside him, but at least he could withhold his own pity from himself, at least he had learned not to give his pain any degree of importance.

Just as he found it difficult to feel compassion for soldiers who died in wars of aggression, he found it difficult to be compassionate for himself. The sufferer in him would have its way, and he wasn't going to encourage it by giving it his pity.

The spells he had at school now affected him only for the moments of their duration. It was easy to feel them coming on and not difficult to find a place of privacy before they swept him to sleep. The spells had occasioned only a few hasty exits and no one was ever the wiser when he dismissed classes suddenly and walked quickly across the campus to his new home.

Charles, walking slowly down the beach, could picture how he must look striding across the sand: a man of average build, academic looking, with bland features, the type of scholar who emerges from the archives only when the temperature is right, a dignified man who looked closer to forty than he did to twenty-nine.

But it wasn't that he simply looked contained; he was contained.

"Hello, Dr. Jekyll."

Charles stopped quickly, and turning, his eyes probed the
darkness behind him. Nothing was visible, but he was sure he had heard a voice. Holding his breath and listening carefully, to his satisfaction he could hear other sounds. A hundred yards down the beach there were footsteps falling faintly but audibly, and Charles, without daring to breathe, fastened his eyes along the stretch of beach where old boat ramps were rotting noisily in the wind.

At first he could see nothing, but then he detected movement from behind the breakwater. The movement occurred again, and this time in the dark he could dimly perceive the black outline of a man stumbling over the rocks and then leaping quickly to a surer footing of sand. Charles looked around him, seeking an avenue of escape. In the darkness he could barely see, down the beach to his left, an old rickety stairway that ran to the top of the bluff.

He hesitated for a moment, knowing that the stretch of land along Nassawadox creek had been deserted for years and that the stair, a vague outline in the darkness, was undoubtedly made many years before. And he knew that the stair emptied into the woods. He trembled at the prospect of getting lost in the woods, of having his face and hands torn by the vines and sharp branches that made the woods almost impenetrable at night.

Yet he didn't quite want to be murdered by a thief. It was important to him then to see Celeste that evening, and he was suddenly angry that anything would try to stop him. With
eyes blazing he stared off into the darkness where the moon made shadows against the face of the bluff, and in the faint light he could see the figure moving slowly. Now and then it would pause as if it were unsure of its way, as if it were lost and blinded by the darkness. Making its way down the beach it passed by the boats overturned on the sand, hopped casually over the boat ramps with agility and fervor.

In the dark, with a backdrop of moon and stars, the figure seemed to slouch, move close to the ground like an animal. In the figure's dark hand there was a slender streak of black, a stick that tapped at the ruined hulls dotting the sand. For an instant the stick seemed to support the creature's weight, but again the black streak moved quickly back and forth. The melancholy hollow thuds carried faintly to Charles' ears; the only sound he could hear was the sound of beached woods striking up against the rotten timber.

Charles stooped, picking up a piece of driftwood before he ascended the stair, and lay flat out on his stomach at the top of the bluff. His piece of driftwood was waterlogged but dead white, and he could remember how as a boy of ten he'd found an old ax handle and had prowled the beach in the darkness, all the while pretending that fierce beasts were about him. He remembered thrashing out at the black seaweed, the tangled vines and twisted foliage that grew where the bluff thrust upward and then disappeared in the dark sky above. The ax handle, which had a metal strip around the stock where the
head had once been, caught the moonlight and glinted like the eyes of an animal.

The driftwood, too, would make a flashing arc of light as it drove down on the dark figure's skull. But then Charles knew that he could never do it; how did he know that the man on the beach was not more valuable, or at least more happy, than he was. The white club slithered in his hand like a mutinous snake, and falling from his hand it clattered down the bluff, coming to rest gleaming white on the sand below.

It seemed to smile in the darkness.

"Charles, please come to see the garden."

"Alright, alright," Charles muttered, remembering Celeste's letter and looking out over the water.

Charles, afraid, trembled as he watched the figure arrive at the stair and then suddenly stop. The black shadow seemed to listen carefully as it inclined its head upward and silently watched for signs of activity above him. Charles felt his face go pale; he feared that the black figure would ascend the stair. But the figure stood still, watching silent in the darkness that fell over his back and shoulders like a cape and obscured him partially, causing his torso to blend with the sea.

Through the openings between his fingers Charles could see the rise and fall of water. He could hear the horrible sound of the bay's waves eating away the coast, inch by inch, foot by foot; the melancholy roar seemed to break in over him, and he was solaced only by the reflection that his father had heard
what he was hearing now, and it seemed to him that this connec-
tive, this bond was trying to force him over the edge of
the bluff and toward the creature below him.

And quite suddenly, Charles realized that he was totally
without fear. The figure below him seemed to be calling him,
seemed to be begging him to descend the stair and join him.
"No," Charles muttered, "I've got to see her." Then Charles
looked out over the water to where his mother's cottage hung
in the dark. It was a two hour walk through the woods to
circle Nassawadox creek.

"I've got to see her," Charles said.

Charles' eyes snapped instantly to the tall figure who
had began to walk to the water's edge, where he was silhouetted
against a backdrop of sea and the many lights that now seemed
to be flickering on the far side of the creek. The figure
laughed faintly, a muffled laugh from a dark hollow of a mouth,
and then the figure suddenly turned and plunged into the water.

Charles last saw him vanishing amid the waves, swimming
straight for the cottage light that made a bulb of bright light
in the darkness as it hovered over the point and lit up his
mother's garden.

An instant later Charles was in the woods, waving his
hand in front of his face, brushing aside the branches and
sharp twigs that tried to scratch him and steal the blood from
his wounds. Crouching low he brushed aside a luminous cobweb
that shone in the dark, and then he broke into a little dell
where dark shadows shrouded the flowers and the noisy brook
that gurgled and broke the dell into two large semi-circles
that were pitch black. The forest seemed to moan softly, as
if for the dead, and to avoid breaking the spell Charles trod
lightly and imagined that his feet were shod with soft leather
mocassins.

He was a Chincoteague Indian creeping through the brush,
his long black hair hanging to his shoulders, his tawny red
skin making him feel a part of the night. And then suddenly
his skin was balck, his arms and legs were sore, and he was
half naked in his tattered garments; there were streaks across
his back, and he was half dead with fear as he heard the mel-
ancholy baying of the hounds.

Charles wondered if it was ever like that; he didn't think
it was. The first Aaron had carried the whip for his horses;
maybe in other parts of the country it had been like that, but
not in Virginia.

Debouching suddenly from the woods, Charles' feet struck
the hard sun-baked dusty road, but in the darkness the dirt
seemed soft and he felt the impulse to take off his shoes and
run as fast as he could. He felt a wild impulse to suck the
night wind into his lungs.

The figure that had followed him and then plunged into the
water held no fear for him now; in fact, now, the memory seemed
rather pleasant. Deep inside of him he had known all along
that the figure was his father, and more than that, he had known
all along that the figure had never really been there at all.

At his ease, Charles glanced at the wide fields that broke into his view on the right; there was a sudden still silence, and the air seemed to tell him that the negroes, with red and blue bandannas on their heads, had just ceased their singing, the low hum that nestled into and floated about the dark black trees of the forest. It was almost pitch black on the road. The old converted barn at the creek's finger tip, now a combination grocery and grain store, had closed its counters, for it did not do business at night.

Daybreak was only a few hours away.

Through the darkness Charles could see at the head of the bend the giant oak tree he remembered so well, and without a thought, rather by reflex, he trained his eye on the black hole that he could see only barely, half by imagination, some forty or fifty feet from the ground. He could remember a snake, as thick as his leg and knotted like a rope, hanging from its nest and surveying the road. The eyes were sharp and piercing, lit by a fire smoldering deep within.

What was it? A black snake? Charles couldn't remember but he could remember how he felt when it watched him, and he shivered to recall his old sickly feeling of dread and positive foreboding. And he could remember the time his father shot the snake with a shotgun so that it blew into two parts and fell twice out of the tree. It was strange he could remember that, and he laughed to realize just how much clearer his
father was to him now.

He wondered, amused, if the snake blown in half emitted a virtual rainbow of lights.

And then as Charles, taking off his glasses and thrusting them into his pocket, walked down the road slowly, he felt that he was somehow retracing his steps. They led past the negroes, sweating, frightened in the dell, past the red Indians in soft leather mocassins, past the planter striding across his land, and he was suddenly walking down a road that men had yet to walk upon. It was a natural, leaf covered road created by an unexplainable parting of the trees on either side as they paved it with their foliage.

Deep in the past, Charles wondered if ever there would be a red hunter in soft mocassins who would eventually step where he stepped, and then, as he walked on, he seemed to feel the Indian following behind him, following in his footsteps, and then there were the slaves; he could hear them rattling their chains as they stepped exactly where he had stepped so many years before. Then the Indian and the planter, the negro and Charles, all stood on the edge of the bluff, and hearing the murmur of the waves, they all cocked their ears as if they were hearing the same sound. They all heard it and looked at one another, and each face, in the light from the cold, golden and irretrievably passive moon, seemed to Charles to be incredibly dead and alive, and to be, beyond measure, incredibly sad.

And then once again, in his hard leather shoes, Charles
brought a foot heavily down in the dust of the road, and the road, like the breaking shell of an egg, began to slowly ooze water until the deep footprints were drowned and covered with an unalterable darkness and drear light, a light drear and dark like the light in the darkness when the morning, immovable, decides not to break.

How foolish it had been to shatter the gun against the tree; how dreary had been the sight of broken and burnished metal.

The cottage before Charles loomed up suddenly as he rounded a bend in the road. Just as he had been able to many years before, he could hear the sound of the bay and the sound Nassawadox creek made as it backed up and shoved a long hard finger into the midriff of the coast.

The shadows in the garden made it like a jungle, heavily laden with black vines that stretched from tree to tree. It appeared to Charles to be a graveyard of sorts, a meshwork of intricately woven panels bisecting each other to form innumerable crosses of black wood that the wind, with soft mournful murmurs, pushed to and fro across the dark gate of ligustrum, the white high arching trellis. The light from the bedroom window forced the appearance of little red flashes of roses that in the darkness seemed to be crawling across the ivy, and as the red spots ran across the garden, Charles stopped and stared, holding his breath.

It suddenly seemed like he had been through it all before,
and a morbid dread struck him. Would he find himself once again pale and shivering, crouched in the hall watching the crack of light from his mother’s bedroom door? And then, now standing by the gate, he seemed to hear voices coming from within the cottage. No, it was only the wind, but the wind seemed equipped with such icy white fingers.

From within the cottage there was the sound of water coming to Charles as he turned about, reacting instantly to the snapping of dry twigs behind him. Nothing was visible behind the hedgerows, but for an instant Charles felt suddenly cold, and he knew he had been followed, or was it the same figure, lurking, waiting for him where once his mother, her white skirts visible through the foliage, watched him teach Celeste algebra and then take her fingers fearfully in his own?

And then Charles could see his mother. He was pressing his nose up against the window glass, looking out over the garden from the safety of Bessie’s cabin. His mother, in the garden, turned suddenly, her face white and splashed with grief, and Charles thought that she would spin, that blood would flow from her mouth, but instead she turned weeping and after running across the garden, threw herself violently up against Jack’s door. And then her face was waxen and shiny and Charles knew, despite Bessie’s protests otherwise, that the nigger Jack had killed her.

Charles went to the fringe of the garden, where the broken rifle lay, and he looked for his father. He was crying for his
father, but in answer to his voice he heard only the steady and horrible creeping of the bay. And then on the edge of the garden, for a moment only, Charles thought he saw the shadow, but it disappeared before he could reach the brittle whiteness of the trellis. Walking carefully and quietly, slipping on his hornrimmed glasses and feeling incredibly foolish, Charles moved closer to the bathroom window. The light in the bathroom was on now, and all about there was the sound of gushing water.

And Charles was suddenly afraid that Celeste had been dismembered by robbers, and that pieces of her body were being washed down the bathtub drain. Charles took a breath, taking in all the air he could; his head needed clearing, he wanted to strike himself, flail away at his breast for the sin of behaving as he had behaved some seventeen years before. But then he looked in the bathroom window and saw Celeste, her hair soft blonde and streaming wet as she lay naked in the water.

Her delicate limbs were fragile and white. She was frowning, dabbing at her eyes with the clear, soap free water that immersed her. Her blonde hair was soaked, she dipped her face into the water and the bathroom light made her shoulders shine like twin pieces of ivory. The water suddenly seemed blue, and she was laughing again, kicking with a slender leg at the colored fish, glittering, that flitted by quickly.

But then suddenly her hips seemed old; her loins seemed ragged and worn like Flora's, and standing with held breath at
the window, Charles could see, as the light fell on the water, the deep lines that were beginning to divide Celeste into sections, sections that would eventually split off from the main body and reduce the whole to ever dividing parts ridden with age and disease.

In Washington she had, while shaving her legs in the tub one evening, let the ragged edge of a razor blade nip her skin, and Charles could remember then how the little wound had caused the tub to fill up with blood. The blood from the scratch spread out and diffused itself through the water, and, terribly frightened, Celeste just sat there, letting the warm redness of water and blood bathe her white enamel hips.

Charles picked her quickly from the tub and buried his face in the wet blondness of her hair; he had come into the bathroom to tell her he would leave her, but now he stood still, supporting her with his arms, pressing his suit up against her wetness and breathing heavily as she wept.

He owed her that much, he thought. Yes, he should always owe her at least as much as that. He could see himself yet, horn rimmed glasses, brown drab suit that bagged at the knees, standing in the middle of the bathroom, holding her above the water as it mixed with the blood. And suddenly, again, from the hedgerows behind him, Charles heard a faint laugh, but turning about suddenly, he saw only a milky substance that seemed to gush from the roses.

But he could feel the presence of shadows and he seemed
to turn ice cold. His heart seemed to stop, but then it started again and seemed to be pumping only icewater through his limbs, as he broke out of the garden and walked quickly once again to the door of the cottage.

But there he faltered. The coldness seemed to freeze him and he stood there for several minutes, his hand poised to knock, suspended in air until he was again aware of the noise the waves made assaulting the wasted shore. Then he knocked quickly and his knocks seemed hollow as they joined in and were carried by the night wind that was blowing in from the bay. Then once again Charles heard the shadow laugh, as Celeste, in bathrobe, opened the door, led him into the living room, and sat him down on his mother's old black rocker.

How hard, at that last moment just before Celeste opened the door, had he tried to retreat from the cottage. He had suddenly broken into a heavy sweat, and now, as he rocked dreamily in the rocker, he took his hankerchief out of his pocket and dabbed at his face. The rocker's squeaking was like the sound of the sea. The rhythms and meaning of each were the same, and the black branches knocking on the living room windows were like the melancholy but steady tapping of the Major's cane.

"The Major's dead," Celeste said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Charles mumbled, turning halfway from her and wiping his eyes with the hankerchief, and then, as demurely as possible, sticking it back into his pocket. "I can't tell you how sorry I am."
"It was better for him that way."

"Yes," Charles said, "I think you're right. You didn't have to tell me that anyway; you have already told me. Remem-ember? In the last letter."

"Oh, yes," Celeste said; she was embarrassed, and she pulled at the collar of her bathrobe with nervous fingers, as if she was frightened.

"I expected you earlier."

Charles nodded.

"I waited for you a long time, and then I thought that I had better take a bath and go to bed."

"I watched you."

"I assumed it was you," Celeste said, looking away, nervously taking a cigarette from her pack, lighting it quickly, quickly blowing out the match and then looking around, agitated, for the ashtray she never found until she had already dropped the ash on the floor.

"You look older."

"As do you," Celeste said; her fingers were trembling as she put her cigarette to her lips. In the shadows her hair was almost brown as it hung, wet and streaming water, down to her shoulders.

Charles had almost failed to recognize her when she had opened the door; with the light behind her, she had looked at him suddenly, strangely, and then her lips had begun to quiver. He had imagined that her face would be laced with rose-
wood and ivy, streams of green that would soften her features, but instead, her china face in the harsh sudden light made her appear much older than she had looked while bathing.

She had seemed to walk with a new grace to the living room, now using a manner that was more sophisticated, sure, but yet slightly tired, and she hadn't spoke to him when they walked through the parlor. His nerves were on edge, and he sat in the rocking chair with a feeling of relief.

"How are you, Charles?"

"I'm fine," he said, and then it seemed exceedingly difficult to speak and both of them sat watching the other, listening to the faint creaking of Charles' rocker. Charles watched her hands; the tiny fingers were fluttering as if she were horribly afraid.

"Are you nervous?"

"No," Celeste said, putting her right hand firmly on the arm of the sofa. She looked at the fireplace then without seeming to see the bricks or the embers on the hearth that were dying before her, and she didn't speak again until the grandfather clock on the mantle chimed four thirty. "It's very late," she said.

"I am truly sorry about the Major."

"It surprises me," Celeste said, "but I'm very sorry too."

"I'm sorry I didn't go to the funeral."

"It doesn't matter," Celeste said.

And then Celeste looked at him as if she understood
him, as if she understood exactly what he was thinking and
as if she knew that words between them were of no use. Her
eyes looking into his told him that she knew that nothing
could be said or done, that all things were hopeless; and then
a silence rose between them. Minutes passed slowly and neither
of them spoke, but they looked at each other with what seemed
to Charles to be a singular lack of embarrassment. Then she said
something so softly that he couldn't hear her, and he stared
at her as if she were a bough of birch sprigged with elder, and
as if the smell of rosemary and dust had soaked into the depths
of her voice.

After glancing away he looked back at her quickly, for
suddenly she had seemed to be a withered old woman languishing
in a rocker, and the sudden spectacle of her sitting there with
an alarming deadness in her eyes drained him of whatever hope
remained, and he turned away quickly again. He now felt the
silence acutely as he fastened his glance on the black glass
being tapped with tiny thin canes of maple; and all about there
was the murmuring, mournful rustling of leaves as they slid into
black swirling water, and spun round and round.

"It's very dark outside," Charles said. "I have walked all
the way from the cottage we rented. Have you said your last
goodbye to the garden? I can remember when we had a good time
there. It was very good then."

Celeste nodded, and Charles could see that she was forcing
herself to refrain from crying, and then it seemed to hurt him
when she bit her lip.

"Lydia is getting very big. She is six now, or is it six and a half? I really don't know. I wish you could see her."

"Yes," Celeste said, "I would like to some time."

The groans of the rocker continued, but Celeste grew silent, and Charles looked away from her, looking at the hearth that he remembered so well. He could imagine that a fire was within it and that the flickering light threw shadows all about the room. Then the creaking of the rocker seemed to grind into his mind; he stopped rocking but the creaking seemed to continue. It was as if he were sharing the rocker with his mother and she were gently, secretly, pushing it back and forth.

"This is insane, silly," Charles shouted suddenly, stopping his rocker stone still and turning to Celeste. "We must talk," he said angrily. "God damn it, we must. Tell me about yourself, Celeste, everything that's happened. You must talk to me; I demand it." Out of breath, Charles paused, and he felt the warmth rise to his face. As Celeste stared at him with surprise he was aware once again that there was really nothing to say.

Celeste shrugged; she appeared to be holding tightly to the arm of the sofa, and it seemed to Charles that only with effort was she managing to hold her other hand flat out on her knees. He wondered why she didn't clench her fist. "Nothing much has happened to me, Charles. I'm getting rich and becoming well known, but nothing else of importance." Celeste's
voice was quavering, as if it would break. Her neck suddenly seemed tense and her manner strained. "Of course, I have a succession of lovers and I drink rather heavily; I'm not liked much any more; I have acquired a reputation for being mean, even vicious. People I deal with are beginning to think of me as being a manly woman. Look at me, Charles, don't you think I've the bearing of a man?"

Charles shook his head; her yellow hair, still wet, startled him a bit, but he held his tongue and concentrated on the way her shoulders seemed to be shaking, as if she were suddenly taken by a chill.

"Ha," said Celeste, with a nervous smile and a quick laugh that caught in her throat. "You don't think so because you don't work under me. If you did, well, you would."

"Are you happy?"

Celeste's expression was non-committal; Charles' voice seemed hollow as it rang softly and forlornly in the living room, and like a ghost the words seemed to develop a body and slide into the parlor, where many years before a circle of beach women, refined and elegant women, buzzed like bees about Elaine and her dirty little affairs. They had all known about Jack; Charles was sure of it, and Charles could imagine them whispering and laughing in the parlor.

"Poor Charles," he heard even while facing Celeste, whose face tightened as she sat on the sofa. He watched her face as it became engulfed with the hollowness of his words. "You want
a helicopter," Charles said, coughing. "Of course, that's what you've always wanted. You wanted to come back to this beach in a helicopter because you wanted to impress all the people in there." Charles pointed toward the parlor. "You wanted to bring in the helicopter about five servants to wait on you because you wanted all those people you used to know to see you. You wanted your mother, your father to see you, and everyone else to see you, too. You wanted to put them in their place, didn't you?"

Celeste smiled, and Charles almost laughed. He had talked to her foolishly, as if he were an inquisitor, as if his charges against her were intended to seem dreadful.

"Of course," Celeste said, her mouth in a bow. "But it didn't quite work. If you'll think about it, Charles, you'll realize that all of the people who have hurt us in the past are either dead or too stupid to even realize how glamorous and great we are."

Charles nodded, "But I'm not great," he said, laughing and lowering his voice. "I'm something of a drudge, if the truth be known."

Celeste's eyes were suddenly sober. She looked out the window. The branches were tapping harder on the panes and it was as if they now wished to burst out the panes and let the cold wind enter the cottage and bury itself in the embers of the hearth. Charles stopped smiling and he looked suddenly sad as Celeste, without a sound, put her fingers to her eyes and
turned back to him saying:

"There are just two things wrong with your idea about my wanting a helicopter. Or why not a rocket ship, or anything like that? Well, anyway, there were just two things wrong with what you said."

"I know," Charles said, and Celeste watched him bitterly as he folded his hands in front of him and slowly began once again to make the rocker move back and forth, squeaking as its weight cracked into the withered boards. "The people you want to impress are no longer around. They're dead or...we've said it before."

"And what is the other thing, Charles," said Celeste, her eyes angry as they fastened on his face. "You can tell me the other," she said. "I know you can."

"You'd want me to own the helicopter," Charles said at last. "You'd want me to be the first one out of the door; you'd want me to get back at them."

"Yes," said Celeste, "Yes."

"You would settle to hang on my arm."

"Yes."

"You would want to do it through me, and the reason you'd want to do it is because of what happened to me. That's the only reason you hate them."

"Yes."

"You have always lived your life through me, always. You are nothing to yourself unless you are something through me."
"Yes."

"Your success in New York and Washington means nothing to you because it doesn't elevate me. You don't have me."

"Nothing means anything to you. Your whole reason for being is me. You have no meaning without me. You are nothing without me."

"Yes, oh yes Charles." Celeste put her hands to her face and began crying softly. Charles turned pale, and, feeling sick all over, he felt a sudden impulse to leave the room, but he couldn't retreat from Celeste's sobs. "Excuse me," she said, "I didn't mean to do that." Deftly, she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You have always been the context for my life," she said suddenly, fiercely.

"Don't use the word context."

"Why, Charles?"

"I have unpleasant associations with the word."

"What...what do you mean?"

"Your husband always used that word."

"Oh," said Celeste, getting up from the sofa and walking to the window and there turning her back on Charles as she looked outside to see the rain that had begun to fall and splatter the black window panes with tiny drops of water. The clouds must have parted and the lights inside the cottage must have dimmed, for soon the moon, coming in through the window, seemed to be spreading itself out across the floor, and it was a bright yellow
glow that hid from the cloud burst by sliding under the sofa.

And then it seemed to Charles that his mother was suddenly present, for the rays of the moon, emerging now from the sofa, seemed to congeal and form a white magnolia-faced woman who was spinning on her heels, blood flowing from the mouth and staining her breast. And the people in the room all seemed to contentedly watch her do it. And when at last she hit the floor, someone made a remark about the evil epileptic, and someone laughed and said something about Jack. Then Charles clenched his fist, and with his pulse racing, fairly cascading, through his arms he stared at Celeste as she stood watching the rain through the window.

And in the nightcap knitted for him by his grandmother Charles was regarding the rain, and he could hear it splatter against the roof, against the windows of his mother's room, but he could also hear the horrible torn sound, the muffled gurgling cry, that involuntarily, that horribly was emitted from his mother's bloody mouth. And it seemed to come from her breast as it rose and heaved under its blood stained and spotted cotton.

And there he was with Celeste in the garden, and leaving their bed of pine needles. Celeste walked into the cottage and she was suddenly naked, her hips thrust forward as he watched the pulsing motion of her buttocks, and over her right naked shoulder there loomed suddenly the face of McAllister, who was dead then and beyond being revenged. For revenge McAllister
had to rely on Charles.

"My mother had it very hard," Charles said. "All her life she fought to be respected. She didn't know that the people on the shore would never respect her. When they didn't respect her, she drank; when she drank, they respected her less."

"We've been through that before," Celeste said, still watching the rain.

"She thought she would be respected if she married my father. She was poor as a girl. But even then she failed because my father was ruined and she didn't know it until after she was married."

"Please stop it, Charles," Celeste said. "I don't want to hear about it again."

"Life is very hard," Charles said.

"It is impossible," Celeste said, turning about. "Life is impossible."

Charles was ashamed for having attacked her, but she stood before him without a trace of resentment on her features. She went back to the sofa and sat down, putting her feet on a footstool and letting her hair wet the slipcovers that were covered with roses; and then she was silent. She seemed to be listening to the tired creaking of the rockers.

"So we live in two different worlds," she said at last. "I live in New York, attend cocktail parties twice a day, know only idle chatter and how to mix drinks; and you, with your hornrimmed glasses, your chalk, your baggy suit, you know only
history. I'm not criticizing you, Charles, so don't look at me in that way."

Charles could see himself before the board in a brown suit, dried and brown like an old husk of corn; the man before him seemed to be a shell, and the entire man was not to be found. He was like the sloughed off skin of a locust. You pick up the brown skin and think you have a man, but then you see there is nothing inside.

"I love you, Charles."

"Yes," said Charles, "I love you, too."

There was a sudden noise at the window and Charles' eyes flashed toward the darkness. On the black glass there was only the soft pattering of rain, but Charles, his hands tensing on the arms of the rocker, felt that he caught in the damp air a suggestion of his father. Looking back to Celeste he cursed his imagination for forming images, images that frightened him yet made him feel something unfamiliar, unfamiliar and thrilling. Glancing down at his tense arms, he was aware of the strength with which he gripped the chair.

So he was seeing Celeste, the very thing he had sworn not to do. Though he retained his pity for her, he was suddenly disgusted with himself and his weakness. "I love you," he said, "but you know it's no good. You know full well that it's no good."

Celeste brushed off his comment; she pulled the flaps of her bathrobe together so that he could no longer see the white
of her breast and neck. And something in the modest gesture reminded Charles of his mother, and he closed his eyes tightly, as if he were suddenly overcome with a maddening desire to weep.

"You didn't shoot Jack," Celeste said, "because if you had, she would have hated you and you would have lost her. As it was, you lost her anyway. You had already lost her, in fact, when you heard Jack in her bedroom. And there was no way out for you; there is never a way out for anyone."

Celeste's nervousness seemed to have transferred itself to him, and he fumbled with his cigarette pack, knocking against the arm of the rocker to extract a cigarette. Realizing he didn't want it, he put it back in the package, and as if to defeat his nerves he looked at Celeste and tried to imagine that she wasn't quite there. Then he felt a strong impulse to return to Marjory and Lydia.

Then there was another noise at the window, and Charles, turning quickly, perceived in the dark glass the face of his father.

Celeste was still talking, but her words meant nothing to Charles. Her words seemed to break up and divide themselves into syllable, syllables that were at best unintelligible.

And the figure of Aaron Delfold seemed to lift its head so that the light streaming from the cottage fell flickering, played a game of shadow chase shadow across the broad planes of Aaron Delfold's face. The light in Aaron's eyes glittered, then flashed, and the dark hair of his head, blown by the wind,
blew down over his forehead.

Aaron lifted his hands, and in the light there was the shining bright circle of a whip, glowing blackly, splattering the rain that struck it and throwing the moisture to the ground.

Aaron was strong and tall and decidedly handsome as he stood behind the black glass. His face was swathed in a melancholy expression, but in the glitter of his eyes, Chinese yellow and red, there was suddenly a horrible blaze of anger. And then, as Charles watched, the face seemed to assume a purposeful expression and then dissolve in the glass.

"God, I hate to see it, Charles," Celeste said, with a grimace; she put her legs up on the sofa and lit another cigarette. "I hate to see you bury yourself in the library; when you are fifty years old you'll be wearing a baggy suit just like you are now. You will carry a brief case. Oh Charles, you're going to be a harmless little old man."

"Stop talking," Charles said.

"I'm sorry," Celeste said. "I didn't mean to upset you; it's just that I love you.

Charles caught his breath when she got up from the sofa and kneeled down before his chair. She took his hand and put it to her cheek, and suddenly the hardness went out of her and she began to cry softly. She kissed his hand and looked at him, her face filled with regret and misery as the chair began to rock more quickly.

"Forgive me, Charles," Celeste cried. "I know it has to
be that way; I've known it for a long time, I just never wanted to admit it."

The rocker moved quicker, and suddenly it seemed to Charles that he wasn't in it. It seemed that he was at the bedroom door watching the vision of the rocker dissolve into a black whirl.

And then he could see his brown arm poise in the air.

"So we are in the same boat," Celeste cried, "and there's nothing we can do about it."

And in the cottage light Charles saw his brown arm, like a brown scythe, slash downward through the air, and he could see his opened palm strike Celeste's face as hard as it could, and he held his breath as he saw Celeste stagger backward and fall to the floor. The rocker still groaned as he fell on her, and he could still see the runners whirl as his fingers, brown in the red light, tightened on her throat.

The room seemed to be out of perspective; it was still rectangular, but now the ninety degree angles seemed much greater than they were. They were now one hundred and sixty degrees or they were thirty five. The room seemed to be rising hard and fast, and then before everything became dark, Charles could feel himself being merged with a suddenly felt presence.

Through it all he could hear Celeste's cries ringing in his ears.
CHAPTER VII

The sea beside him was a sheen of deep blue. Flat and smooth like an enormous plate of glass, it reflected the soft light of early morning and made Charles' environs gently, quietly white. Here and there a sea gull spiraling high swooped down to the sea, and the only noise was their shrill, far-away cries as they took their fish.

Charles walked slowly down the beach to where Marjory and Lydia were just beginning to stir in their beds.

The gull, who had been moving in a circular course, swept back to the beach so close that Charles could hear its cries and see the tip of its wings, frothy and white, dipping into the sea and floating ghost-like against the blue richness of the sky. There was no one out in the water; the beach had rarely seemed so deserted, but still Charles felt good as he strode over the sand. Never before had he felt so free from worry. Never before had he felt so calm.

It was extremely peaceful on the beach. Never before had his perceptions been so free of distortion; everything about him, the boat ramps, the boat, the blue sea and the rye grass of the bluff seemed clear, almost stark. The refuse of the beach existed apart from its usual connotations, and it gave Charles the feeling that he was free at last, free to do as he pleased and think as he chose.

Waking earlier, as the morning had broken through the
windows of the cottage, Charles had been relieved to see Celeste, then lying on the floor beside him, still faintly breathing, and his fingers had scarcely trembled at all when he called the police.

It seemed to him that his emotion had been totally drained and he felt weak but very good as he strolled along the water's edge under a bright clear sky, quietly kicking at the sand and shading his eyes with his hand as he watched the antics of the gulls. The breeze from the water cooled him somewhat. The gulls were not further out at sea, and suddenly their cries could no longer be heard; they were now dark pieces of string floating over the horizon.

Upon waking up in the cottage, the first thing he had done was to put his fingers to his lips and then to his teeth. To his surprised delight there had been no blood. His tongue wasn't sore, and if Celeste hadn't been lying there beside him, half-conscious, he would have shouted with joy because whatever it was that overcame him wasn't a spell. And then he had felt Celeste's pulse and he could feel the warm blood being pumped through her arm, and he suddenly felt weary but very happy and relieved.

Walking along the beach he looked at the line of fishing nets that had been hung up to dry, and for the first time he noticed that the shadows caused by the fishing lines broke the white even flow of sand into shining squares that were outlined in black; they were in profusion on the higher level of
white and diminished in number as they ran down into the sea.

Then he remembered how just a few hours before the room his mother had decorated so finely had seemed to lose perspective, the rectangles becoming irregular, the squares becoming circles. The whole room had seemed to be floating, the pictures in bright elegant frames became detached from the walls, the sofa rose in the air, and Celeste, kneeling beside him, seemed to rise and, like an umbrella, open over his head. He could hear her words but they lost all meaning while he listened. To his horror, she was suddenly speaking gibberish, and colors seemed to cascade before his eyes. His hands were squeezing something tightly before, at last, the whole cottage seemed to go dark and the darkness increased until there was blackness everywhere. He remembered screaming for the lights to come on, and then the furniture must have risen from the floor and swung in his direction, for something incredibly heavy seemed to strike him on the head and he blacked out totally, just at the moment his body fell to the floor.

Only a slight headache remained when he finally opened his eyes to see the new sun shining through the windows. His body was limp, and when he looked at Celeste, lying beside him, he was amazed that he felt like a dishrag, that within him there was a total absence of nerves; and for a moment then, though happy, he had suddenly feared that his heart had been stripped of all feeling.

The feeling came back, but not the nerves. It was his
feeling for Celeste that made him call the ambulance and the police. But it wasn’t grief he felt, or hopelessness, or despair, it was simply concern, human concern for the creature that lay struggling for breath beside him. Then he put his mouth to her lips and blew in slowly. The lungs he felt concerned for responded. He could feel them quiver as they began to draw air in and out, and he was delighted. Leaving the room quickly after calling the police, he weakly plunged through the cottage door and began to walk slowly down the old road that circled Nassawadox creek.

After a time he left the road to cut through the woods and then continue his journey home by following the beach. The woods were incredible, they were filled with such calmness, such serenity, such beauty. There were birds in the woven hair of the forest, finches, wrens, blackbirds, and as he approached bushes and trees, they floated out of the greenery with cries which seemed to contain a mixture of ecstasy and fear. He strode about the woods feeling very much better.

At length Charles broke into a little dell bordered by a charred ashen timber from a fire in the fall. The dell’s circle was split in two by a stream of cold blue water that gushed steadily, almost merrily, from the southernmost end of the thicket, which was shrouded with vines and honeycombed by the water’s blue-veined pattern of rivulets. The wind was bracing, almost cold. Foolish thrushes and seven colored linnets, still unaware of his presence, sang in warbles beyond the woodgate.
And it was there, Charles remembered while walking slowly on the beach, that he had begun once again to think of his father.

He remembered sitting on a log and watching the birds, and then he remembered that while sitting there he had felt as if he were a negro and an indian all in one; then he felt like his father, then like Aaron Delfold the first, with a haughty black whip, and then he remembered thinking that the two Aarons, the negro, and the indian were all combined in himself and some of the weariness went out of his limbs. But he trembled to see Celeste once again down before him, once again holding his hand and kissing it as the rocker seemed to be racing, tearing across the floor, pulling up the wrinkled boards.

And he trembled to hear the footsteps of his father as Celeste stood before him weeping, and he could relive the moment that, when looking up, he had perceived that his father, black and magnificent in the faint light, was standing in the living room of the cottage with a whip in his hands, a black whip that like a snake lay coiled after slithering from the broad heavy shoulders that blocked out the light from the embers that were dying in the hearth.

And Charles screamed when his father's being seemed to merge with his, but the power in his hands as they tightened around Celeste's neck came directly from his father, for his father was inside him, living in his arms, in his hands and his blood, and he gave himself up into his father's care and
let Celeste slide to the floor with his hands still buried in the whiteness of her throat.

And then suddenly in the darkness Charles could make out vague shapes. They were at first merely white figures with undefined features, but then they moved closer and he could see that they were people he knew standing in a row; there was McAllister and the Major with fife and drum respectively, and then followed the old school mate, Mason, with a bandaged head, swinging the bayonet on which he had been impaled.

At their side was Flora weeping bitterly, and Mrs. Donleavy and Fergusson locked in a passionate embrace. He could see Ronald McAllister, his redish beard gleaming, and Mr. and Mrs. Kennet turning away from one another. And there in a corner of the darkness was Jean walking slowly with Brooks. And then Charles caught his breath when he saw the Indian and the negro, water logged and washed by the sea, and then he saw the first Aaron Delfold, standing tall in a white suit with a whip over his shoulder. Even Marjory was there, saying she didn't understand, and Charles fingers tightened and he screamed when he saw her.

A vertible throng of people were there and they seemed, with eyes blazing, to be rooting him on, and as his fingers tightened around Celeste's throat their combined strength seemed to flood into his hands. And he was his father now but he was also Charles Aaron Delfold, and when he looked at his victim it wasn't Celeste anymore, it was his mother, pine trees, red
apples, sprigs of ivy, a china face and waxen features and the fragile limbs of a doll. Closing his eyes his fingers tightened and blood came from her mouth.

And looking again into the darkness he saw that Celeste stood in the row beside McAllister; her face was strained and Charles felt his strength double as she let her strength flood into his. Then it was all very comical because McAllister beat the drum and the roll was terrible, and the Major marched forward playing on the fife; and then Charles looked down at the face above his fingers and it wasn't a face at all but rather a well of darkness and shadows, and looking up again Charles could see that his mother had joined the ranks of the ghostly onlookers, and he could see that she was pouring more strength into him than all of the rest put together.

"Kill it for me," she cried. "You must kill it for me."

Then the rest took up the chant and they all shouted it so loudly that Charles burned with rage and with all of his strength he again tightened his fingers and gazed down into the hollow of the suffocating face.

Then tightening his grip, letting his father's strength fill him, he shouted with alarm; the great black man, his father in the shadows of himself, was suddenly strangling the old beach woman who used to linger in the parlor, then Floyd and Dell, then almost all the people that Charles had ever known. Then it was more than people he was strangling; he was strangling gardens, then the house on the point, then Washington and the
theatre, the White House, the center of stupidity. And then suddenly he was strangling all those things he despised.

And then he was strangling the stars and the sea, the broad and flat plains of the world, the narrow hillocks and broad high mountains; he was strangling the valley, and then at last he was strangling concepts, thoughts that made his head spin and reel with misery; and then a bright light broke over him and he was strangling death. The rage overcame him and he put his heart in his fingers as they strangled away the pine trees, the wind blown brown needles.

Looking up once again into the darkness all the white figures seemed to merge and he saw Bill Daffron's face, pallid and strange, and Bill Daffron's lips, stuttering, trying to form words, seemed to be urging him on. And looking down again he found the hollow of darkness to be filled with the sea, the sea that washed away land and covered all life in its depths, and it seemed to him then that his rage became divine and he threw his weight hard against the white strangling throat.

And he was strangling it all because no men belonged in it, and then, in spite of his rage, he was struck with the realization that he could tolerate it the least. He was doing it for them and they cried for him to finish, but the pain of the murder was killing him, too. So he closed his eyes then and made himself forget that he loved more than himself the very thing he was killing.

And it was like he was dead when the furniture rose from
the floor and struck him; he felt an incredible throbbing in his head, and then blackness descended as he struck the floor, senseless. The last thing he remembered was that the room was in a whirl.

And then awaking, dazzled by the light of early morning, he saw Celeste, and bending over her he pumped light back into her lungs, and apologizing to the figure, he feebly said he was sorry that it had to be her.

The gulls now swept back to the beach and Charles watched them describe circles in the air; their shrill cries of ecstasy seemed to fill him with sadness and peace, and totally without self pity he cried to himself as he watched them dive to the sea and then shoot swiftly back up into the blue cloudless sky. And standing there watching the gulls he understood that he had let the hatred and love for his mother spread out in all directions.

It had become hatred and love for people, and then hatred and love for all things, and he knew that he had let the hatred and love color all his perceptions; he had let it dominate all of his life. And he knew that all people constantly do the same thing he had done, that it in fact was the human condition.

But in his case it had rendered him useless. Yes, he thought, as the embodiment of the human condition he was rendered useless; he was fit for nothing, there was no where he belonged, and Celeste was right when she had said that there was no help for it, no higher court of appeals.

As he walked down the beach and in the distance saw the cottage he and Marjory had rented, it no longer seemed to matter
that the beach was fading away, that the tide was still eating away the coast and seemingly trying to cut its way to the Atlantic. As he stopped for a moment, it surprised him that he was so calm, that his attitude to the beach had so suddenly changed.

He flexed his hands and felt his strength returning. There seemed to be a suggestion of his father in his hands. It wasn't a suggestion, particularly, of his personal father. After all, he thought, my father killed himself, but the strength was a suggestion of the Indian, the Negro, the planter in his sun-shielding Panama hat. And then Charles could picture himself continuing at the college.

Standing at the board he wore a brown baggy suit; there was chalk dust on it, dust that was working its way into the threads, but it didn't seem to bother him as, with his horn-rimmed glasses firmly on his head and his fingers painted white with chalk, he pointed at the board while his hollow voice reverberated about the room and settled at last on the ears of his students.

He didn't cut a dramatic figure then, but Lydia didn't mind as she ate her cereal, and Mrs. Kennet didn't mind when she came over to talk to him, trying to make her life a little easier. Yes, he could continue doing that. He could do that forever.

He clenched his fists again and he felt that he could feel the strength of the first Aaron as the first Aaron drove the wild ponies to the mainland across the choppy water, laughing and heedless, disregarding the storm that sought to down him. Yes, there was a certain strength in that; he had felt it when his fingers
had tightened around Celeste's throat. He felt it now on remem-
bering the tacit admission his father made to his mother: "I may
be a victim, Elaine," he had written, "but you are a victim much
more than I."

"No," Charles said to himself, suddenly, "the beach is not
being eaten away at all."

And he felt it very strongly as he sat on the bottom rung
of the stair that twisted up the bluff to where the cottage stood,
prim and green shuttered, sparkling in the early morning light.
The sounds coming from up above him indicated that Marjory was
scurrying about, possibly straightening up the cottage or fixing
breakfast for Lydia, whose voice he could hear while he sat watch-
ing the water.

The red motor boat he had rented, anchored close to the shore,
bobbed like a cork on the surface of the bay's blue water. The
wind pushed it back and forth, and Charles, watching, was amazed
at the serenity the boat's moving seemed to bring him. He stood
up on the bottom step of the stair and looked as far as he could
out over the bay. The bay seemed to be only water, the sky was
only sky; never before had he seen things so clearly. It was as
if he had suddenly taken off tinted glasses and for the first
time in his life been able to look at the world as it was.

He looked out at the boat bobbing on the water, and he could
imagine himself with a handful of sand leaning over its keel; he
dropped the sand into the boat a grain at a time, and each grain
seemed to represent a part of his personal past. He was holding
each grain tightly in his fingers before letting it fall in the boat. After a short time the boat appeared to be filled with sand, and he was burdened no more. He was free.

"Oh Charles, Charles."

Charles looked up to see Marjory crying, coming quickly down the stair, her gypsy face alive with worry, her long black hair streaming behind her foolishly as she made it down the steps two at a time. Holding her tightly in his arms he stroked the back of her neck, and as she sobbed, he whispered softly into her ears. "Don't worry, Marjory" he said, faintly, "everything will be all right; just wait and see. It will be all right."

"You want to see her," Marjory sobbed.

"Yes."

Marjory was crying heavily now, and it thrilled him to feel her breasts throbbing against his chest. "Will you stay with me? Will you stay with me now?"

"Yes," Charles said.

"Oh thank God," Marjory said, taking her head from his shoulder and wiping her eyes. "You should get down on your knees and thank God for that. Oh Charles, I've prayed so long."

On the bluff Lydia was playing with a red plastic hoop that Mrs. Kennett had given her for Christmas. She put it around her waist and shook her hips like a dancer. She was deliciously dressed in a bright blue jumper. Her black hair and pale face, the red hoop around her waist, made her look like a dervish as she spun over the rye grass of the bluff. "Oh Daddy," she cried,
racing to him with her chubby arms outstretched, "oh daddy, what did you bring me?"

Charles fished in his pockets; there was nothing there, and regretfully, he turned his pockets inside out to prove it. Lydia frowned and then she pouted; her little lips drew up in a bow.

"Kiss me anyway."

Charles bent toward the rye grass and Lydia kissed him; he picked her up suddenly, as Marjory watched, a tense, brave smile on her face, and then he threw her over his shoulder as she screamed with delight. Through the corner of his eyes Charles could see Marjory. She was beautiful standing there with her back to the sea, and she was happy, even though once again it appeared that she was going to cry.

Charles looked alarmed and put Lydia quickly to the grass as a black car, its brakes squealing, pulled up suddenly into the small driveway that led to the cottage's back door. Four men got out of the car quickly and four doors seemed to slam all at once.

"Now what do they want?" said Marjory in shock. "Why in the world would the police come to see us?"

Charles said nothing as two men in bright blue uniforms walked angrily across the yard; one of the men cursed as his foot struck a stone, and Charles was mildly surprised that the voice was vaguely familiar.

The first officer, a large white haired man at least fifty years old, his angry face filling with redness, hurried up to Charles. Then stopping in front of him, for a moment he said no-
thing. The second officer, a young man in his twenties, looked at Charles in puzzlement, his thick black brows soaked with sweat.

Charles took a step toward the younger man and extended his hand.

"It's good to see you again, Rakow."

A slight smile appeared on Rakow's face, and then he looked uncertainly at his superior officer. "We went to school together," said Rakow sheepishly. The old man pretended not to hear his comrade. Turning toward Charles, his silver badge shining in the sun, he squinted his eyes and snapped briskly, suddenly, "You named Charles Delfold?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't have left your name at the station. She wasn't going to tell us who you were. Damn fool thing you did there Delfold."

"Don't worry, Marjory," Charles said, holding Marjory's hands. He said under his breath, "I had to hit Celeste, but it will come to nothing."

Marjory understood immediately; she looked as if she were going to cry again, but she held her mouth firmly and nodded. Lydia, still holding her hoop, started crying because she didn't understand.

Turning back to the policemen Charles studied Rakow's broad Catholic features, his heavy brows, his Grecian complexion that had changed not one iota since the days when he was a high school quarterback and made a habit of handling the ball of the illus-
trious Mason on each and every play.

And Charles could remember that after Mason had broken his leg, Rakow had become the star. He could remember Rakow's heroics, and how the whole Eastern Shore had once been aware of his prowess; and Charles couldn't help but feel that he himself had made it possible, and he wondered if Rakow felt the debt, or if Rakow was aware that the academic gentleman before him had provided him with his one and only day in the sun.

"How's the team this year?" Charles asked.

Rakow shrugged warily. From the corners of his eyes he glanced again at his superior, and it saddened Charles immeasurably to see Rakow, whom he remembered as a god, torn between smiling at his old teammate and cringing in fear before the old senseless red faced man decked out like a child, decked out in a blue uniform with a bright shiny star.

"Let's go, Delfold," the old man blustered.

"Did she press charges?"

"No, but she will, even if we have to go to Washington and make her."

"She won't do it."

"Let's go, Delfold. We don't like murderers."

"She isn't dead."

"We don't like people who attempt murders either."

"It's going to storm later in the day," Charles said. "I'll have to pull my boat up the ramp."

"Which one is your boat?"
Charles turned toward the edge of the bluff and pointed to the red boat bobbing in the gentle waves. Having turned, with his arms still outstretched, he looked down the edge of the bluff, the red clay edge of earth that dropped down twenty feet to where large heavy and jagged rocks lay smiling on the sand. If a man hit those rocks right it would split him open quick; all he had to do was take a casual step forward and it would seem like he had stepped off the edge of the world.

But then Charles could sense Marjory and Lydia behind him. Lydia was still crying and her face, he felt, would still he broken with mystery and fear, and imagining himself on the hot rocks below he could also imagine Marjory standing struck, helpless like a child on the crest above him. And suddenly Charles was near weeping, and turning once again he took a single harmless step toward the cottage.

"That's the one," he said, "that's it."

"We don't have time to pull it up on the ramp," the policeman said. "Go ahead Rakow, put the handcuffs on him and throw him in the car before he spoils my dinner."

"Now see here," Charles said angrily. "I know my constitutional rights. You're going to be in trouble already for dragging me in."

"Go ahead Rakow, put on the handcuffs."

Rakow started forward but hesitated. "He's right," he said suddenly, his voice cracking. "we don't have any charges
against him. We have to let him take care of his property."

"I told you to put on those handcuffs, Rakow, and I meant for you to put them on."

"Listen to me," said Charles, his face bristling with anger, "how would you like me to throw you off this bluff."

The red face paled. Startled, the old policeman drew his pistol. The color still seemed to be draining from his face as he pointed it at Charles and took two quick steps backward.

"You have threatened an officer of the law."

"Nonsense!" said Rakow, suddenly angry. "He didn't threaten nobody. Let the man go take care of his boat. For Pete's sake, it's not going to hurt anybody. We shouldn't be here in the first place.

Sweat stood on the officer's brow. "Go ahead," he said, "go ahead." But we're going to watch you every minute you're down there. At the sign of the first rotten move I'm going to shoot."

Charles made his way slowly down the stair, and behind him he could hear Marjory, frightened, no longer able to refrain from crying. Looking back he saw her take Lydia in her arms, and then he was sorry he had made such a fuss about the boat. He waded out to it and the cold water seemed to steal away his anger as it rose to his waist.

He put the anchor in the bottom of the boat and began pulling it in toward the shore; he would need the boat later
on. He told himself then that he owed Marjory and Lydia many vacations and that he was going to see to it that they got them. The time had passed when he wished to live totally for himself, and now, as he pulled the boat behind him into shallow water, he was aware of the summer breezes. How good they felt in spite of the situation.

The sand of the beach, too, was good. It was beautiful, even when seen clearly. The gulls flying overhead still managed to thrill him. How heartbreakingly beautiful their cries were! It was as if their shrill cries were some sort of promise of fulfillment and immortality. Immortality no longer had to be personal.

"Hurry up, Delford," the policeman yelled.

Charles nodded, pulling the boat behind him.

What was it he remembered? Mrs. Donleavy had said it. He struggled to remember. Ah yes, she had said, "Charles, you have the spirit of Goethe, Mann, and a lot of others. You have the spirit of an artist and it doesn't much matter how good your work is. You may not have their talent, but you have the spirit, and the older you get the more you'll realize that that is all that really matters." Charles smiled to remember it as he walked through the water with the waves splashing at his thighs. How foolish his momentary concern to keep his pants dry seemed; the wet cloth felt good as it rubbed against his legs.

Looking seaward he perceived smoke flying from the stack
of a vessel in the middle of the bay; it occured to him that Celeste might be on the ship and he watched it for a few minutes as it slid north toward Washington.

Celeste had that spirit. Yes, certainly she did... and so did his father.

Charles felt the beach grow silent for a moment. The water pulled at his legs, and then, as it flooded by him, he seemed to understand. Standing stock still in the water, the boat's bow nudging his shoulder, he was aware that his father's note explained it all perfectly. It was human spirit outraged that caused Aaron Belford to be strung from the ceiling, violated spirit that made Aaron's lifeless neck stretch and go pale. McAllister too had human spirit, it infected his hands, and Bill Daffron, trembling lips, shaking fingers and all, had a fair amount of it.

Goethe though of it as a striving of the soul, and standing in the water Charles felt a sudden passionate love for Goethe and a suddenly increased love for the Aaron Belfords who fought a hopeless fight for a hopeless dying order. Then, as the boat nudged Charles once again, the spirit of Goethe, McAllister, and even Donleavy, with her death-like vigil over forgotten books, seemed to Charles to be the one thing ingrained in the shore that could not be washed away by the tide.

The heavy water-soaked cloth of his brown pants clung to his legs, but he scarcely felt its weight. And to him then, at that precise moment, human spirit seemed to be a gift, a gift of
a sort of strength that flowed into one's hands from innumerable fathers.

Maybe the gift was, in an indirect way, a capacity for despair. The gift seemed to be throbbing inside him. It seemed to make his hands tingle and their veins to swell with a sudden flow of blood.

Charles let go of the bow of the boat. The boat bobbed in the water and seemed to be following him as if it were a dog being pulled by a leash. He breathed deeply, looked at it, and suddenly it seemed to be a symbol of his past life and that life's consummate darkness. He turned the boat about and pushed it out to sea. It lingered for a moment on the crest of a wave, but then it dipped its nose and went with the tide. His fingers tightened around the long oar he had extracted from under the seat.

"Hey!"

Charles looked up; the old policeman on the bluff seemed to be in a fit of panic.

"Hey, goddamn it," he shouted, the silver barrel of his pistol flashing in the sunlight. "What the hell are you doing?"

Charles said nothing. Failing to turn around, with his fingers tightly embracing the oar, he watched the boat move toward the horizon as if it were beginning a dangerous venture on its own.

"Hey!" yelled the policeman. "Do you hear me? Hey!"

"I can hear you."
As the boat slid out to sea, Charles could imagine Marjory and Lydia on the bluff; they were both eating cereal. And he could imagine himself in the classroom. There would be no darkness in the classroom, no melodic drone of coarse voices like the voices of crickets in the dark; there would be only a brightness, and sweat, and clarity.

Turning toward the bluff, Charles could see Marjory and Lydia patiently accepting his inexplicable action. And then he could hear a whisper coming from his father in the vines. The voice came soft and low, but it was there and it was audible; he could hear it coming through silken leaves like the whisper of a ghost.

"Let's go, Delfold, let's go," shouted the red faced man on the bluff, showing his pistol angrily into the black holster and starting down the stairway that led to the beach.

"I'm coming," Charles said, stepping out of the water and onto the sand.

"Let's go then!"

"By the way," Charles yelled, "She'll never testify against me."

"We'll see about that," said the policeman, 'huffing, as he stopped halfway down the stair.

Charles turned about and looked after the boat that was floating away in the distance. The tide was moving it quickly in a straight line to the far side of the bay. So like McAllister he had made a sacrifice; his personal being seemed to float
away. It seemed to him that he had traded it to become a part of the immortal voices that murmured in the pines, and now he was free to work for his family without rest.

And then, as if it were a rifle, Charles held up the car.

Arthur, 1967
VITA

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