

From AMERICAN STUDIES, © Mark Merlis, 1994

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ONE

The boy in the next bed lies sprawled atop the sheets, his gown riding up on his heroic thighs, an inch or so short of indecency. I would stare, but he is on my blind side and it hurts a little to turn my head. They have tapped me like a sugar maple: a vial taped to my forehead, over the bandaged eye, is collecting some fluid I apparently don't require. Sap, sapience. When my head is empty it will cease to ache.

I don't have my glasses, anyway. Howard's supposed to bring them, if he ever shows up. So the boy is more a presence than a body, a concept whose details I am left to sketch in. I draw his contours from the memory of all boys. Merely to know he is there fills me with excitement and shame. I could be in study hall, eyes locked on my geometry text while to either side boys glow like suns I must not look upon. I long to touch myself. What would he think? He must want to also.

He may lose his thumb. It is bandaged to the size of a baseball, like that of a do-it-yourselfer in the comics, and he spends much of the day just

looking at it, cradling it mournfully in his intact hand. He tried to tell me his story, last night or this morning, a complex tale of confusion and malpractice, but he lost his way. After a while he went back to the television, which he controls, having got here first. I didn't attempt to tell my story in return. Just an especially unrewarding encounter with rough trade. While the tale is not without its entertaining features--I was quite the raconteur in the ER--it might alarm the child. He might be a little less free about baring his upper thigh.

Oh, as if he couldn't tell what I am, anyway. But maybe he can't. What with the tubes and the bandages, my flame is shaded if not extinguished.

It is Thursday morning. We are watching cartoons, though I can scarcely make them out. The boy says, audibly, "Uh-oh," as an audacious mouse skirts peril. His muscles dance as he laughs at a feline pratfall. Born in another time, he might have watched Falstaff with equal pleasure; the groundlings were no finer than he. Instead we have offered him, by way of drama, ~~Tom and Jerry~~. The tendrils of his soul curve towards the blue light, knowing no other. My tendrils would curve towards him, but for the damn tubes.

Howard comes in, carrying a shopping bag. He is wearing a tight, thin sweater that shows off his maidenly bosom, and slacks that might have fit him twenty years ago. He looks like a sausage about to burst its casing.

He is also--I know this thought is ignoble--so plainly a member of the sisterhood that I fear he has blown my cover. If any. I glance at my roommate, but he pretends to be watching television.

Howard, meanwhile, fails to suppress a shudder at the way I look: I am a visible exemplar of the price of indiscretion, and compared to Howard I am choosy.

The boy gets up to go to the bathroom, but he has put his robe on before getting out of bed, a novel precaution that suggests he has not failed to draw his conclusions about Howard.

"Mercy," Howard says. "Nicest thing I've seen in a gown since--"

"He'll hear you."

"What if he does? I've never understood why straight boys couldn't handle a little innocent adoration. As if looks could rape."

He takes advantage of the boy's absence by giving me a peck on the top of my head, the least repulsive part of me just now.

"You'd think they'd like a bit of attention," he goes on. "The only way I get attention any more is by waving money."

"That's what I did. I could have done without the attention."

"Poor dear, you must tell me all about it."

"What's there to tell? Except I thought I was going to die."

"But you didn't," he says, summing up so I'll skip the details. Now he feels that he must kiss me on the top of my head again, to indicate that the

outcome is satisfactory. "Are you--did they tell you if you're going to be able to see out of that eye?"

"They're pretty sure, yeah. I can't even see out of the good one now. Did you bring my glasses?"

"Oh." He fishes in the shopping bag, brings them forth. The horn-rimmed ones that make me look like a senescent schoolboy. I try to put them on, but they won't fit over the bandage. "Oh," he says again. "You'll just have to wait."

"I can't wait. I can't read or anything. I can't even watch TV."

"Well, what can we do? We could break them in half, I suppose. I mean, you could hold half over your good eye."

"Yes, do that."

"But you'll ruin them."

"I'm going to be here for days. I can't stay like this."

"All right." He gives them a timid jerk, as if he thought they would just snap like a pretzel. They do not. He tries twisting them from various angles; he sticks out his tongue.

The boy comes out of the bathroom and looks on. Howard says to him, "We're trying to break these glasses in half. So he can get half of them on." He holds them out to the boy; the boy raises the hand with the bandaged thumb, to show he can't help. He sits on the edge of his bed and watches as Howard goes on ineffectually toying with the frame.

Howard looks to be embarking on a classic snit. Any second now and he'll put the glasses down and stomp on them. "Just forget it," I say. "It's only a few days."

The boy gets up, goes to the wardrobe, and fetches from his duffel-bag a Bic lighter. He lights it with his good hand and gestures to Howard to hold the glasses to it.

"Aren't you the cleverest thing," Howard says. They huddle together over the lighter as Howard holds the nosepiece to the flame. It takes a very long time before it begins to soften, but soften it does. Howard keeps his eyes fixed on their little project. He doesn't dare look up at the boy, any more than I would. Now he is bending the frame back and forth at the nosepiece, as one bends a coathanger, now it is broken. And with it the working intimacy of Howard and the boy: the boy pulls back sharply, as if recoiling from Howard once the job is done.

Howard brings me the glasses and rummages some more in his shopping bag. "Now that you've destroyed a two hundred dollar pair of bifocals I guess you'll want to read something."

"God, yes, I'm bored out of my mind. What did you bring?" I peer through my spectacles--spectacle--holding it up like a dandy's lorgnon. I can, among other things, see the boy much better now. Howard hands me a couple of books. Heavy ones, too big to read in bed. "~~Daniel Deronda~~, for God's sake? And what's this?" Tom's book. ~~The Invincible City~~. He's

brought me Tom's book.

"I'm sorry, I just picked the first ones that caught my eye. I couldn't stay there very long."

"What do you mean, they wouldn't let you?"

"I couldn't-- It doesn't look good."

"You mean, to be seen there?"

"The apartment doesn't look good."

"The apartment?"

He nods. An odd time to bring up my deficiencies as a decorator. It takes me a moment to realize that he is talking about my blood.

"I've always meant to read ~~Daniel Deronda~~," he says.

"Here, borrow mine."

"What will you do? Can you read the other one?"

"I've never been able to read the other one."

"Well, I'll try to find something down in the gift shop. What would you like, couple of Harlequin romances and a ~~Muscle & Fitness~~?"

"Shh."

"You going to need anything else?"

"Clothes, at some point. In case they ever let me out of here."

"What happened to yours? Oh." He pictures, probably, more blood: Jackie's pink suit.

"They cut them off me. Snip. And toiletries and things, I need all that

kind of stuff. Can you stand going back to my place?"

"I suppose. Maybe I should try to get someone in to clean. You know, on top of everything else, the police dusted the place for fingerprints. There's this black greasy powder everywhere." He folds up his shopping bag and picks up his coat. "I called your office for you."

"Oh, you did, good." Then, a bit alarmed--reticence not being one of Howard's virtues: "What did you tell them?"

"I didn't know what to tell them. I just said you'd been hurt and you were in the hospital."

"Did you tell them which hospital?"

"I kind of had to. I mean, it would have sounded funny."

"But you didn't tell them anything about my...how I got hurt."

"Well, I thought of just making something up, but then I was afraid they'd get in touch with you before I could fill you in."

"I hope you told them I was in a coma and couldn't have any visitors."

"Well, to be honest, they didn't sound like they were rushing out to get flowers or anything. They didn't even ask for your room number. Just when you might be back. Oh, and whether you wanted the time charged to sick or annual. They said you had a lot of use-or-lose hours and you might want to just charge it to the annual."

"That's very considerate of them. Anyway, I guess I have some time to figure out what...how to characterize my little incident."

"Don't get fancy, now. Sometimes your stories just get too elaborate."

"I don't make up stories." I lower my voice: "There wasn't anything in the papers, you didn't see anything?"

"Uh-uh, I checked. I always look for my friends in the papers."

"I know what page, too."

"Well, that's where we show up these days. You can always tell one of us: survived by a sister and three nieces. Anyway, you weren't there."

* * *

In the ER, a cop went over the story with me again. "You never saw this guy before?"

"No."

"You just--met him in this bar." The phrase charged with meaning but without apparent reproach. Mine was not a fresh story.

"Yeah."

"You think--I mean, you must have got a good look at him--you think you could identify him? I mean a picture, maybe he's got a prior, maybe he's in one of the books."

"I'm not sure. I had my glasses off most of the time." And, he must have pictured, everything else.

"Could you come in and just try, look at a few of the books, for me? You know, this same guy is going to go do this to other people."

"Okay," I said. He nodded, perhaps believing me, and went on filling

out his report form. After a while I said, "You think this is going to be in the papers?"

"Huh?"

"I'm worried about...do you people give this kind of story to the papers?"

"Oh, jeez, no. You're not dead, right? They don't put things like this in the papers." He looked up from his form. "You don't need to worry about that, mister. This happens every day."

It's funny, I guess, that I could have moved so quickly from fearing for my life back to my usual fear, that my life will be uncovered. A senseless worry: I am so poorly camouflaged it would scarcely matter if it went right on the front page: REEVE ASSAULTED BY HOMOSEXUAL PICKUP. Heaven knows they wouldn't fire me, though I suppose the biddies in the office--the optimistic ones who think I'm still eligible, if a mite over the hill--would be a little let down. So what is it I want to hide, if not my predilection? The scene itself, I think, I just don't want anyone picturing the actual scene.

I remember reading about poor Walter, last year, when they found him trussed and naked on his bed. He'd been strangled. My grief, such as it was--I hadn't talked to Walter in years--was quite overwhelmed by the vision of him on his bed, like a huge pale fish, eyes bulging. I let the paper drop and tried to imagine how he felt, those last minutes. What it was like to be in someone's power, wondering what he might do next. Now I know: it is just

like wondering if it's going to rain. Your room becomes the world ever so quickly, and your assailant a thunderhead that will or will not burst and over which you have no control, no more than over the weather.

* * *

After Howard goes, I spend some time discreetly ogling the boy through my new appliance. He loses nothing from greater specificity. Tom's book is still in my hand. Finally I let myself look at the back of the dust jacket.

The photo is badly reproduced, but still plain enough--the formal portrait Tom sat for when ~~The Invincible City~~ came out. There's one spot on the picture that has obviously been retouched. But what lay beneath this little patch of clumsy airbrushing I cannot guess. I remember no blemish there. This photograph replaces memory. Whenever I look at it I think that Tom was somehow marked. That I was the only one who never noticed. The real face I don't remember at all, obliterated for me by the sight of the smashed pumpkin head in the morgue.

He looks like a general. 1949, so he is fifty-five in this picture, but barely touched with gray. The hair is close-cut and stiff, and the eyes with their long lashes are the eyes of a general, soft and overcoming softness. His effeminacy, like MacArthur's or Eisenhower's, is just below the surface, a secret he defies you to uncover.

Between this martial picture and the hard, cadenced prose, a young

reader--if anyone still reads him--must get the idea that Tom was a model of manliness and reason. The sort of chap who could order the bombing of Dresden or who could inspect the line of English poets as if reviewing his troops.

I wonder sometimes if Tom's enemies didn't hit him all the harder--harder than the times demanded--because they felt deceived, because under that manly surface was something entirely different. Something that could also, by definition, have resided under their even less persuasive masculine armor. And I wonder, too, if he caved in so quickly because he had no strength beneath that shell, strong as he had always seemed to me. Once they found their way in, he was as defenseless as a tortoise in dishabille.

Those of us who walk about unarmored, who have no camouflage, are tougher, maybe. Here I am, after all, having flitted my way through the terror that took Tom away, having swished through every subsequent pogrom, straight through to the other night. I look around, and the people who are still standing, who haven't yet shown up on that page in the papers we all turn to first, are the ones like Howard and me, who never fooled anybody. It is little enough to crow about, just making it to sixty-two. But I think it is better to be alive than dead.

* * *

Lunch comes. Salisbury steak, they must call it, with a little globe of instant whipped potato and some nameless leaves in a green puddle. No

gravy, no salt. But there is white bread and some imperfectly congealed butterscotch pudding. I feel like a child, picking my way through a meal remarkably like my mother's cooking so I can get to dessert. This morning they wanted me to check off my meals for tomorrow, but without my bifocals I couldn't make out my unappetizing options. I told the lady just to check anything, so long as she would never, never again bring me the scrambled eggs I had for breakfast.

The boy sits up, at the edge of the bed, to eat. He is facing away from me, towards the window. The ties of his gown have come loose, leaving only gossamer white wings of cotton at his shoulders, exposing nearly all of his back, which is of transcendent beauty. As he eats, the muscles are stirred to great turbulences; they are complicated and shimmering as water coursing over rapids. When he is still, they cast their warm shadows in a pattern like a cloak of golden feathers.

Apart from his thumb, there isn't anything wrong with him. He is here while they make up their mind what to do about it. Here for observation, as they say, which means a bunch of doctors and doctorlings passing through at dawn and then, probably, nothing else till the next day. I am making up for their negligence, observing him assiduously as I try to swallow bits of my meat patty.

His great perfect back doesn't belong here. It is useless here, he might as well be baggy old me, in this democracy of the sick-in-bed. I know he is

here for just a little while, but it seems, looking at him, as though he is trapped for good, wings not thumb clipped, stranded here until every one of the muscles he carries with such casual entitlement atrophies and he is just another old carcass. Like me, a step away from the autopsy table.

* * *

The doctors said Tom didn't feel a thing. But doctors always say that: as far as they're concerned, anyone who doesn't spend his final weeks in intensive care, undergoing torture and running up bills, dies instantaneously. I am sure it was quick enough. I had to go and look at him, identify that blasted head as his. There was so little of him there, I might have been a paleontologist, conjuring up an ancestor from a jawbone and a toe. No, he didn't have time for lengthy ruminations.

Still, when I consider the millions of thoughts--~~an appointment tomorrow, what is this guy's name again, where the hell are my glasses--~~that used to fly through my head in the instant before climax, the volumes I thought at the moment when the boy first struck me the other night, how can I suppose that Tom thought nothing at all? No matter how fast he went?

I have pondered this so many times, these forty years. It is almost a parlor game for me, something I mull over on long train rides or when I wait in line at the bank machine. I believe I have it nearly worked out.

Tom pulls the trigger, the muzzle of the gun in his mouth. The bullet passes through the brain, which feels nothing, then exits through the

superficial nerves of the scalp. The impulses from the scalp, and maybe from the roof of his mouth, are travelling down to the spinal cord and back up again; while at the same moment the bullet is throwing great globs of gray matter out onto the floor. I don't know which travel faster, nerve impulses or bullets. But with these distances there's no point comparing, everything is virtually simultaneous. Even as his skull explodes, the message is coming back up his spinal cord: "Hey, something just made a big hole in the top of your head!"

I imagine--perhaps I'm wrong--I imagine the parts of his brain that weren't hit directly go on working for a few moments. So it seems to me there are two possibilities, depending on which part of the brain is intact and which part is mussing up the bare floor of that last apartment where he didn't stay long enough to unroll the rug.

The first possibility is that the part that feels pain is gone. The messages from the nerves find no one at home. And the part that's left, the part that decided to pull the trigger, is saying: "Lord, I know I pulled that trigger. Why am I not feeling anything?"

The converse possibility is that the part that decided to pull the trigger is out on the floor. That part is Tom, his will and being and memory. What is left behind is a chaotic congregation of motor and sensory centers, with no Tom to call them all to order. The messages from the nerves are duly received and logged in. Two messages from the roof of the mouth and the

scalp, entry and exit, nothing in between. Elsewhere, the sound of the gun is registered. The optic nerves file their report: everything is red. The inner ears sound the alarm that he is falling, confident that he will correct the problem.

Some kernel of consciousness, not Tom any more but Everyman, manages in the last moments to piece all these messages together. Something went in one side and out the other. It checks its hypothesis with whatever other parts of the brain are still functioning, and they come up with a consensus. Someone has shot us. God in Heaven, who has done this to us?

* * *

There came a point, the other night, when I was persuaded that the boy was going to kill me. No, I wasn't sure, I thought he probably would or, more precisely, ~~might very well~~. Might very well.

I wasn't ready, exactly. I didn't want him to, I was not content that he should do it. But I was not resisting it. I was kneeling on the floor, naked and bleeding, my wrists bound, as he stormed around the apartment with the carving knife, demanding to know where I had hidden the cash. I was not resisting. Oh, I am sure some part of me would have tried to fend him off if he had actually stood before me and raised his hand for the coup. I don't mean that the animal in me had given up. But I, ~~ego~~, had withdrawn to the heights, watching with an interest only lightly tinged with melancholy, and even that giving way to an abashed near-eagerness: so this is it.

We could have been anywhere. My room had disappeared, and it was just the two of us. As in Homer the battle recedes from view and you are left with two men acting out their ~~moira~~ in the dust. They may still wear their epithets like heraldic bearings: bureaucrat-Reeve, hundred-dollar-trade. But under that useless armor of names they are just bodies. They complete their episode and the winner strips the loser and drags him around in the dust, as if a dead body could be humiliated. So I was strangely calm, just a body.

He went out into the living room, banging around, upsetting books and opening drawers. I was shivering. The window behind me was open, I never felt anything so cold as the draft from that window. I wanted it to be over so I wouldn't be cold any more. After a while it was quiet, no sound but the breeze stirring the blinds behind me. I never actually heard the door close. After some time I just felt that he could no longer be there. I crept forth into the hall like a child who has been sent to his room and wants to know if the punishment is over.

It was over. I didn't feel that at once. When I went into the bathroom for my clothes and saw what he had done to my face I thought the worst was ahead. That the worst would be riding the elevator down to the lobby and having to show my face to the woman behind the front desk. I didn't know how badly I was hurt. I thought I would have to get her to call a cab, and then I'd have to sit in the lobby while she stared at me--knowing what had happened, she had seen us come in, probably watched us on her closed-circuit

monitor as we rode up in the elevator. I thought the punishment was ahead, having to sit there and become a story for her to tell.

I think it is better to be alive than dead. But my tormentor only lingered a few minutes in the living room before departing. I only felt for a few minutes that I had lost my name and become just a body to be discovered in the morning. And even in those minutes I was nearly ready for it. If I had lived as Tom did, so many months being stripped of his titles and his armor, just a body, I might eventually have said: Hurry, finish it.

* * *

My roommate has a visitor. His girlfriend, evidently, sitting by his bed. I don't know when she came in. I've just been staring at Tom's book. My spectacle has slipped off onto the covers. I pick it up to look at her. I think she was here last night, but I was still groggy from the surgery and anyway I didn't have my glasses then. She is a tiny and rather plump redhead, her hair very long and straight, as from the 'sixties. Her dress seems to be from the same era, very short, but more austere than provocative. Perhaps this is all in fashion again. I don't spend much time scrutinizing hemlines.

She is aware of my inspection. "Hi, hon," she says. "You got an eye on me, huh?"

"Just one."

She laughs, but grows serious at once. "Yeah, what's with the other

one? Is it going to be okay?"

"They say it's fine. It's the socket that got hurt."

"Jeez, how'd that happen?"

The moment of truth. I really meant to think it through this morning, before I got all wrapped up in Tom. Now I have nothing worked out. "I got mugged," I say.

"Wow, that's awful."

The boy looks over quizzically. Has he heard something to the contrary? Did I say anything to Howard, or have the nurses been talking? The expression fades and he turns back towards his girl.

She goes on talking to me, though. "This one's here for his thumb. Well, you can see that. But they had him here a whole week. They come in and unwrap it and then they wrap it up again and that's all."

"Uh-huh," I say.

"You know what this costs, just so he can lie around here? This kind of money, we could have a suite someplace, with champagne and stuff."

"Well, I hope you can afford it."

She laughs again, a laugh of all-embracing good nature. "Don't look at me," she says. "I don't got to worry about his bills. Not for a while yet." So they must be engaged, or in one of those semi-engaged states children have concocted these days.

"But it must be thousands," I say. The boy is wide-eyed. I entertain,

just for an instant, the ludicrous notion of helping with his bill and winning his heart. We go to recuperate together in a suite someplace, with champagne and stuff. We watch television. I teach him to talk.

"Oh, it's no problem. He'll get worker's comp. It's just such a waste." Such a practical girl: he will do well to stick with her. Someone had better mind him. "Anyway, they're going to decide tomorrow, one way or another." This is said so lightly as to seem almost cruel. The boy shrugs, trying to act stoical for her. She gets up from the visitor's chair and sits on the edge of his bed. She strokes the back of his neck. He accepts this with no expression. "If they're not going to do anything, we can go home." Then she whispers something to him, and he smirks.

I am stung with jealousy. No, it isn't a sting any more, not the way it would have been when I was younger. Just a little empty feeling. When I was a kid, I was continually tormented by the happiness of others. Back in my rooms at college I would hear, beneath my window, a car door slamming and a burst of talk and laughter. Or I would see a couple--any permutation--walking down the street and exchanging their tiresome secret smiles. And, until not very long ago, I would say, Why not me? Why am I alone left out? Even when everything was going fine.

I could be on a streetcar on a spring evening, on the very day of getting a promotion at work, headed for a celebration dinner with a fresh lover. Then I would glance at the man standing next to me and--maybe just

because he was handsome--imagine I could smell his contentment wafting over at me. Picture the finer dinner and more charming lover he was headed for. Only now, when for me the summit of happiness is an effortless emptying of my bladder, am I able to tolerate--almost to be thankful for--the sights and sounds and smells that betoken the existence of happiness in the world. Thankful but a little empty feeling.

She turns back to me with a sudden look of concern. "You getting worker's comp, too?"

"No, I--" I am about to remind her that mine wasn't an on-the-job injury when I realize that she's only worried about my bill. "I can handle it."

"Oh, you got money. That's okay. Some day we'll have money, if I can get this one out of here." She gives this one a quick kiss and jumps up. "I gotta get moving. Oh, my name's Janice," she says to me. "I hope your socket gets better."

"Me too."

She is scarcely out of the room when the boy turns up the volume on the TV.

* * *

He couldn't believe there wasn't any money. I was on my knees, with the belt tight around my wrists, he had every drawer in the bedroom open and now he was coming back from the kitchen with a knife and he was going to have to kill me if I wouldn't tell him where all the money was.

Where had he been all his life? As blood dripped from my head onto my bound hands and I averted my one eye from the carving knife that was starting to look like my future, I tried to explain the world where people keep their money in banks and use little plastic cards to take it out, a bit at a time. There was the hundred he was supposed to get and maybe another twenty or so in my wallet and that was it.

No, bullshit, this apartment, my fancy watch and all, I had to have money around someplace.

I was going to die over a silly cultural misunderstanding. I begged him to take anything he saw before him, Jesus, if I felt better I'd help him cart it away, but what he saw was all he was going to get.

It's easy enough to guess, now, that he probably believed me already. He hadn't just landed here, like some captured aboriginal escaping from the anthro lab and wandering baffled through the big city. He knew about bank cards. He was just keeping it up to make sure, to be certain I wasn't the kind of eccentric who actually did keep money around the house. Or maybe it didn't matter if he believed me or not: maybe he understood his miscalculation, and was mad enough to kill me just for all the wasted effort. Coming all the way to my apartment, too late now to score again, and getting only the contractual amount. When he stalked out into the living room, leaving me there on the floor blubbering, maybe he had to master himself, maybe he had to just stop looking at the pathetic red-and-white blob I had

become to keep himself from finishing me off out of simple disgust.

These alternatives appear in hindsight. At the time, all I could think was that I had to make him understand. It was a scene from one of those movies in which the hero, armed only with the implausible truth, dashes himself hopelessly against a wall of disbelief. Don't you see, the pods; or there aren't really witches. I don't have any money.

* * *

I was rich for three weeks in 1952. Tom, provident fellow, left a will. Not an agitated testament of his last days, but a clean humdrum legal instrument, written some years before his death. He endowed a fellowship, named for his father. Odd joke--an arrow shot at a dead target by a dead archer. The stipend was specified, stupidly; what might have supported a frugal student for a year in the 'fifties wouldn't cover his recreational drugs today. Students probably get more excited about a good night at poker than about winning the Slater.

There were some other gifts: to the maid who left him when he was thrown out of Winthrop House, to various good causes, many of them on the Attorney General's list. And the remainder, including the entire income from his trust: the residual estate, as they call it, he left to me.

To me, of all people. Well, I can guess his reasons. He didn't want to leave it to his family, of course. And he couldn't give it all to charity; that would have been to declare that he had passed a whole life without ever

making a human connection. So he just picked the first name that came to mind. My name. He might have picked more carefully if he had had some tangible property. But a trust is such an airy thing. He bequeathed it as casually as a monarch gives away a million acres in a New World he has never laid eyes on.

In his last weeks we had stopped speaking. He could have revised the will, must even have considered doing so--it was left in plain sight on the desk in his new apartment, not filed away with everything else in his cage of unopened cartons. He had laid hands on it, had sat down and looked at it. And he had, to the last, stuck with me.

I enjoyed, then, in those slow August weeks after his death, the usual consolations of the executor. These are twofold: first, you have a great deal to do and, second, you get to paw through the decedent's private papers. One of the reasons I have never seriously thought of doing myself in--not even on the day when I realized that my looks were irrevocably gone and I was damned to permanent toadhood--is that I cannot bear the idea of someone rummaging through my droppings as I did through Tom's.

Well! I fairly moved in with him, night after night in his last sad digs on Marsden Street. There were a million things to read. Prep school literary magazines, with Tom's deeply closeted love poems, manner of Housman. Letters from Pauline, his abandoned fiancée, with the breathless dashes modern maidens have learned how to fill in. And letters, sealed and never

mailed, from Tom to his boys--letters as coy and full of dashes as Pauline's. There must have been other letters he actually got up the nerve to send, for there was an entire carton of replies. Brief, adequately cordial notes, stolidly declining to notice Tom's dashes or get his hints. How industriously Tom cultivated those Dink Stovers and Frank Merriwells, for so little return.

More. All the manuscripts, of course. The scholarly work, most of which I'd seen. Short stories, which I hadn't seen: manly tales of fishing and the like, destined for the ~~Saturday Evening Post~~. Could he actually have printed any of them? Under some other name, how many names did he have?

And the journals. Intermittent--on a year, off a decade--and uninformative. Weather, meetings, bad parties. Little book reports. Predictions, mostly political, all inaccurate. Only occasionally a titillating ambiguity. ~~X stopped by, or Y is warming~~. The journal for '43 and '44 I took back to my place, meaning to read through it a second time, minutely. He couldn't have gone through that entire year, our year, without mentioning me once. Not even as X.

It was, I think, while I was sitting in my rooms engaged in this hunt for my third-person self that the knock came.

I opened my door and saw Tom. The apparition spoke, in Tom's voice. "Mr. Reeve?" I stepped back, and the ghost glided into my living room. It didn't walk like Tom--it had none of Tom's military bearing--and it was, now that I looked, puffier than Tom. Its voice, as it spoke further, was Tom's high

simper, yes, but with none of the insinuation behind it. "Mr. Reeve, I've just gotten in from Chicago. We were out of the country, you see, my wife and I. So we didn't hear anything about my brother until we got back."

"Uh-huh."

"We were--I assume I can be frank with you, Mr. Reeve--we were just a little surprised that there hadn't been any attempt at all to contact us. And now I find--really, I'd almost think there had to be a mistake, it's so, well--they tell me that you're actually in the middle of settling his affairs. All of this going on with us not knowing a thing about it." He smiled and shook his head in mock bafflement.

"I have been going through your brother's papers," I said. "Looking, among other things, for some clue as to your whereabouts. The attorney was going to advertise, I think. You know how slow lawyers are." This was improvisation. I can't say I had forgotten Tom had a brother, but I had no more thought of hunting for him than of trying to find the jar with Tom's appendix in it. Tom had, over the years, mentioned his appendix rather more often. I went on: "Actually, I was surprised--considering the write-up Tom got everywhere, the ~~Times~~ and all--I was surprised not to have heard from you."

"That's how I found out, yes. People coming up to me after I got back and asking if that was my brother, they hadn't known I had a famous brother. To tell you the truth, I didn't know myself. I mean that Tom had

made such a success in his little field."

"Some little success, yes."

He stuck his hands in his pockets. "I shouldn't have been so awfully hard to find. I am a Slater."

When he said that, I imagined Slaters giving off a unique scent, so that they could be traced anywhere. Or answering, perhaps, to a special whistle. But I suppose he meant that he was in the ~~Social Register~~. Tom, of course, was dropped by the ~~Register's~~ spinster watchdog in 1920, after he ditched Pauline.

"Anyway," I said. "You're here now."

"I have a three-thirty train."

"Then you'll--I can take you where he is. We haven't got the marker up yet."

"No, that can wait." Forever, I gathered. "I understand that everything is still in his apartment."

"Most everything," I said. Everything but the journal I had brought back to study and that lay open on my desk, the one without my name in it. God knows what I ever did with it.

"Yes. Well, I thought I might go on over and start getting things in order. Just make a start, you know."

"Everything is in order."

"Of course, yes, I've been told how much you were doing. And I want

you to know how sincerely the family appreciates it. I didn't mean--what I was saying before, about finding me, I understand that you've had a lot to handle. I didn't mean to suggest that you'd been negligent." All of this came streaming out in a narrow monotone, as from a ticker-tape. Then, cheerily: "So, I understand you have a key to Tom's apartment." I said nothing. "If you could just let me have it."

"I'm...you know, I'm Tom's executor."

"There was a will," he said, matter-of-factly. His impassivity was like Tom's: perhaps it was a Slater trait, or perhaps it was beaten into them at St. Martin's.

He sat down and took from his breast pocket a platinum cigarette case. I heard myself asking where he'd got it. "A wedding, long time ago. I was an usher. Tom, too, I think. He must have one--must have had--just like it."

"I haven't been able to find it."

"No? You have a light somewhere?" He started opening boxes on the coffee table. As if he owned, not only all of Tom's things, but all of mine as well. When Tom behaved that way, one could chalk it up to absent-mindedness or democratic unceremoniousness. Watching his brother, I wondered if this was another Slater trait. Or perhaps a habit of the rich generally, just to go on casually appropriating things until someone protested.

I lit his cigarette, found him an ashtray. I wanted to smoke, too, but I didn't want to be chummy.

"So," he said. "You're the executor. And a beneficiary?"

"The only one," I said. "Except for charities and so on."

"What about the Wonamaddock?"

"Stays in the trust for twenty years. Then it breaks. I think that's how it works, his lifetime and then twenty years after--"

"Yes, that's how trusts work." He stood up, waddled to the window.

"You haven't gone to probate?"

"No. There's--I understand there has to be some waiting period."

"In case any kin turn up."

"Yes." Kin. I realized then that I didn't even know this man's name.

Tom had never spoken it, nor written it in a journal, nor for all I know thought of it, not in thirty years. The kinsman stayed at the window, his back to me. "Well, that makes things simpler. I mean, we can reach an understanding, you and I, before the estate files. There won't have to be a whole lot of publicity."

"What kind of understanding?"

"You'd sign over your interest to--my children, say, Tom's nieces. And then there'd be some sort of cash settlement."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. This wasn't bravado: I really was very slow to get the point. His calmness, on the other hand--that

was bravado. He lit a second cigarette from his first.

"Tom was...funny, wasn't he?" One doesn't hear "funny" spoken quite that way any more. So many more explicit words have come into use that anyone now resorting to "funny," even with the twist he gave it, would fail to make himself understood.

Even then I pretended not to get it. "How do you mean?" I said.

He looked at me reproachfully, as if it were rude of me to make him say it. "Tom never married."

"That's not so unusual. A lot of the faculty here--"

"A lot of the faculty here are pansies."

I should have let him stick with "funny." Really, of all the names for us, I like "pansies" least.

He turned from the window, finally. He was, amazingly, blushing. Perhaps he had a premonition of how it would be to go into court and call his brother that name. Much could have been made of that, I suppose, but I was too numb. In times of peril, my adrenalin quite ceases to flow. I am not subject to the fight-or-flight syndrome. My response is like the rabbit's: I freeze. And when I regain control of my muscles I drift into the familiar make-me-a-settlement-offer syndrome. One of the great steps in human evolution. It didn't work the other night.

Nor forty years ago. While I was immobilized, he recovered. "You seduced my brother," he said. Not accusingly, just sketching out his case.

"You preyed on his neurotic, deviant tendencies. Otherwise it would never have occurred to him to alienate his estate from his loving family."

"Well, maybe you should just go ahead and make that case," I said, in an anaesthetic haze. "They have newspapers in Chicago?"

"They do. Indeed they do. And they have prisons here." Spoken like Tom--Tom's rhythm, exactly.

Even in those dark ages, of course, the threat was less than plausible. But I had no difficulty imagining less extreme consequences. Loss of job, for example, that prospect was especially daunting in my pre-bureaucratic days.

"Now, I believe five thousand is a fair sum," he said.

"Five?" The trust paid that much in a quarter.

"Oh, ten, then." He held out his hand, as if the matter had been cordially concluded.

"Why do you need any of it, for God's sake? Why can't you just let your brother have his way, with the little bit he got? You don't need it. You must have--"

"A lot." I was almost relieved to be cut off in mid-whine. "A lot," he said again. His frown suggested that it was tedious to contemplate a fortune so enormous. "You're right. We don't need any of it. I might just give it all away."

I may have asked the obvious question, but I don't hear it, remembering. He answered anyway, with a cold, sad sincerity. "There are

just some things no decent man can permit."

He shook his head and averted his eyes from me: how degraded I must have been, how far fallen from the light, if it was necessary for him to explain something so elementary. He went on: "I do think you might--after we've gone over everything--if you wanted any of the furniture. Or books, say, Tom must have had books, you might be interested in those. It's really--for me, it's hardly worth the trouble of going through a sale."

"I don't want any of it," I bleated.

"Ten," he said, offering his hand once again. Numbly I shook it, and he was gone, along with my inheritance. The catalogue for the book auction came in the mail that fall. I suppose Tom's brother had it sent, as a kind of lesson. The greater part of Tom's fortune was in that wall of cardboard cartons.

* * *

The phone rings. It takes me an instant to realize what it is, and it has rung again before I have arranged my tubes and whatnot so I can reach and get it. I remember calling old Cochran after his bypass: the phone would ring several times before he'd pick it up, and I'd wonder if my innocent call had precipitated some cardiac crisis.

"Hello, Mr. Reeve?" It is my boss's secretary. Lydia, enormous Lydia.

"How are you feeling?"

"Pretty lousy." I let my voice lapse into feebleness, like a child

wanting to be let off school. It is so easy, letting go: I could just slide into it forever.

"I'm awfully sorry about your accident." She sounds as though she really is. "How did it happen?"

"I got mugged." If I keep saying this, I'll believe it.

"Oh dear, where?"

"On the street." Even as I say it, I worry about being contradicted somehow. Is there some way they can find out?

"Of course on the street," she says, betraying a limited imagination. "Where, near your place?"

"Yes, right near." Is there some form I'll have to bring to excuse my absence? A note from my doctor: Reeve couldn't come to school because he was beaten by a trick.

"I just don't know how you live downtown like that. I'd be scared all the time." I can't imagine why. To attack Lydia would require the bravado of that boy in China last spring, the one who stood up in front of all the tanks in the square.

"I guess I should have been."

"What time was it?"

"Pretty late." No, I won't need a form, I'm using up annual leave. I don't need a certificate for that.

"Well, you shouldn't go out late."

"No, I won't do that any more."

"Mr. Pollen wants to talk to you. Let me put you on hold for a minute."

That is what I have been thinking. I won't do that any more. An inevitable resolution: I am not such an awfully slow learner, obviously I'm not going to bring hustlers home to beat me up any more. But of course this entails a bigger never more I haven't really thought about. Never more anybody, never more touching or smelling or waking up with anyone beside me.

Never again, I used to say when I was a kid. I'm not going to do that any more. I'm going to study and go to college and get out of Winslow and nobody's going to fuck me any more and I'm going to stop wanting it even and I'll get married and it won't ever happen again. That was always a lie, thank God, yet time has brought me to the same conclusion. Never again: the world where these things happened no longer exists, the world of my youth, the world of three days ago, both as distant and fabulous as Arcadia. Not my fragile vows but the years have beached me on this blasted shore I used to pray, so long ago, I'd get to.

So the resolution should be easy enough to keep. A little bargain I have struck with the deity I consult only in adversity. We negotiated right there in the ER. I was lying there on the gurney like Isaac on the altar, shaking as Isaac must have done, and swearing: if He would give me my life,

I would give up everything. Wouldn't live any more. And here I am.

Pollen's voice. "Reeve, is that you? Tell him I haven't looked at it yet, if he was in such a big hurry he should have had it up here sooner." This evidently not directed at me. "Reeve, how's the boy?"

Succulent, mysterious, vacant. He means me. "I'm doing okay."

"What happened?"

"I was mugged," I repeat. There, that is my official line.

"What, on the street?"

"Yeah." Having told the story three times now I can nearly picture it: the old man stumbling home, a sudden whack, unsolicited. Not his fault. He slips to the pavement without even crying out. A poor old man on the ground, irreproachably mugged. "Just came from nowhere."

"Were you hurt bad?"

"Uh-huh. They had to operate. I was afraid I was going to lose an eye."

"Jesus. But it's okay?"

"They say it'll be fine."

"Great. So how long you in for?"

"I don't know, a couple more days here, and then I'll probably have to stay at home a while."

"Uh-huh. Were you working on anything?" A reasonable question, in light of my negligible output, but he amends it: "I mean, is there anything

that can't wait till you get back?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, you take care of yourself, okay? You rest up and come back as soon as you can."

"I'll do that."

"And listen, you really ought to think about getting out of the city."

"Yeah, I should," I say. "But the commute, you know I don't even drive."

"Well, your time's almost up," he says heartily. I am startled until I realize he means at work. "You ought to be thinking about where you want to retire."

"Oh, I'm not even thinking about retiring." I hope I have spoiled his day.

He pauses, about to urge me to think of it, his tongue checked by the thought of my age discrimination complaint. Hearings, paperwork. He's a political appointee, he doesn't need any hassles on the way to the next bullet point on his résumé. "Well, nobody's pushing you. I don't know what we'd do without you."

"I'd better hurry back so you don't find out."

"That's right." He essays a laugh. "Anyway, I'm glad to hear you're okay."

"Thanks."

"You take care now."

So ends the longest discourse we've ever had. I have served the government for just under thirty years. That is the normal term; Pollen and I must both have the magic day circled on our desk calendars. I could stop soon. I could stop working, Adam's curse lifted, back to the garden. Where, with no job to go to every morning, I would spend my days sipping distillates of the grape, the juniper, the homely potato.

With Tom gone, of course, I never finished my degree. I guess I am what they call now--they didn't back then--an ABD. There should be some special honorific, I think, for people who manage to stay ABD for forty years. It's rather like being an elderly Crown Prince, an Edward VII or Akhito, whose predecessor takes too long to die. Anyway, I taught high school for a few years, leaving a permanent lacuna in the education of several hundred youths, and then slipped into the civil service when no one was looking.

My thirty years, 1959-89, span nine Presidentiads. This means that I have lived through eight redraftings of the organizational chart. In the first one or two my name moved vertically, towards the empyrean of the supergrades. More recently my motion has been horizontal.

Each redrafting was accompanied by some slogan meant to signify that we had reached the last stage of the dialectic and the State was about to wither away, taking old Reeve and his position number (07921088) with it. The New Frontier was one past which I was to be exiled, the Great Society

would be the greater for my absence, the New Federalism promised a leaner, trimmer government purged of frills such as Reeve. Each time, as the beneficent dust settled again, old 07921088 was still hanging on.

Ever more peripherally, it is true, relegated to the very margin of the chart, that edge past which less wary pilots would sail straight off the earth. Assigned to Special Projects or Long-Range Planning, cloudy regions from which no bureaucrat returns, yet clinging there.

We at the edges of the map are a safe distance from the great storms, the quadrennial whirlwinds that stir the dust at the center and hurl a few of our colleagues out to join us in Thule. True, we look around us and see crudely limned monsters, and we must wonder: am I one of those? A creature that never was, dreamt up merely to relieve the awful blankness at the edges of the paper? Sorriest are those who do not see where the wind has cast them or who do not understand that they will never be called back. They work. My office mate sends memoranda to the center, like messages in a bottle, with no more hope of response.

Tom, you could have lived at the margin. I remember you joking about it, just after the catastrophe. How you could go to Smith, there was an opening. "But God," you said. "Nothing but women and an occasional fey Spanish teacher." Or you could have gone into exile, with your trust fund and your books, off to Paris, comfortably ruined. You could have made your bargain somehow and stayed alive. As I have: all you have to do is swear off

everything you call life.