



The Lepers

Frank Weissenborn
+ Guy Browning

This is not one book, but many in one. Each of these stories confronts the reader in a different way, demanding an active response – not only to the characters in their own particular situation, but to the larger questions of human morality, power and love. Frank Weissenborn's could be seen as drawing on a variety of traditions, from the morality play to surrealism, from the hard bitten 'realism' of the gangster novel to a stark, almost ethereal kind of fantasy. Yet of these genres is transformed when its easy assumptions are confronted by Weissenborn's ethical engagement. This is fiction full of ideas and originality from a talent young writer.

Jenny Lee

The Lepers

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Written

by

Frank Weissenborn

with fine art

by

Guy Browning



For Sue Francis, for putting her faith in me

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The Lepers





It's a Stone Groove, My Man

Crofty sat slumped in the chair while around him the fire burned. Standing near, Michael listened.

‘You come to a point, Michael, when you know it’s over. From then on, all caring passes. Jesus, I know it stinks. The rot around here is enough to turn anyone’s stomach. The roaches though, they upset me the most. Jimmy was a roach. He’d draw a knife and cut the coke, then sit sniffing till his eyes rolled back. Around here it got so bad that you could smell the infestation behind every eyeball. The mind is always the first to go. The speed freaks, the hop heads, the wasted crack addicts, the angels on ecstasy; I’ve seen them all. They pass through here with their minds lost in a type of false nirvana. If I could, I would take everyone of them and make them look at the suffering they have caused. But perhaps there is no helping them? You know, Michael, I went into Geoff’s room once. The smell of piss was so bad, I almost retched. He was sitting on that milk crate of his, the one he stole from the sandwich bar down the road. He looked at me as I came in. I could tell by the way he was smiling that he was high on smack. Who do they think they’re kidding, these post-beat, post-hippy kids with their plastic assembly line badges which speak of peace and change. You know I could have hit him, but Vera was sitting next to him, pleading with her eyes. She had her hand through his zipper and I guess she was trying to jerk him off.’

The fire caught on the fabric of the chair. With white, yellow and orange tongues it began to lick at Crofty's pants. He didn't appear to care but simply kept on talking.

'There is a disease, here Michael. I saw it drifting in way back, when the sixties ended and we'd learnt all we could from free love and sutra chanting. Now you can buy an era with credit cards. It comes condensed in packages. You can buy either the forty dollar or the hundred dollar kind, depending on who you want to impress. It's all fads now. Fads for the rich, labelled and sold in glossy magazines and retrospective books for the trend conscious professionals. Me, Michael, I want to be sick. I want to be so sick that I can't see it any more. If I could change things and turn things around, what would I do? You tell me, Michael. You're the only one I know not burnt out by it all. Don't let it happen to you.'

A gentle wind blew in from the window and fanned the fire. It caught on Crofty's left sleeve and began to pass up his arm towards his face.

'It's a stone groove, my man. A shot in the arm and a way out. Believe me, the passage back brought nothing but pain and disillusionment.' Crofty's face twitched as the heat drew near. Momentarily it appeared to distract him, although his speech didn't waver. 'You see, we were wrong in many ways. The halcyon days held an innocence for everyone.'

'I remember one night here with Denise. The last night before the red neon light outside our door winked out and the cops came down and demanded that we pay our rent to the misogynist who passed as our landlord. I recall telling her about Fats. He was the kid who sold us the paper everyday and then rode away with his fat arse waving in the air. Anyway, I told her that Fats was found floating in the lake not far from here; murdered by a pair of psych students who thought God spoke to

them through their father's telepager. Denise drank three quarters of a bottle of Scotch that night and the next day splattered the boys' brains across the window of the college hall with a point 44. You see, Michael, there is no telling anything anymore. We could never win; everywhere justice has played its own tune.'

Crofty lifted his eyes towards the ceiling.

'The fires of reason burn slowly, Michael. In the end hypocrisy led us to stagnation, and we became consumed by our own doubts; I just don't know anymore.'

Crofty's hair began to burn. Silently he stared at Michael. His eyes were calm, and slowly a wry smile formed on his lips. Gradually the fire consumed him completely. Michael pursed his lips, turned, and with bowed head, walked from the room.

The Lepers

To the memory of George Carrick, fellow competitor

The Lepers





The Entropy of Paine

Things looked different around here. They had started looking different a while back, since the gas station. I'd left the Oasis motel early, hoping to beat the heat, and had been driving for three hours without a stop before I'd seen the servo. An old Texaco pump station, it looked like it hadn't seen water since the last nuke test back in '58. Perhaps, I thought, the fallout had drifted here and I'd soon be pumping it into the Chev.

I sat honking the horn for several minutes before anyone came, and when someone did it wasn't the kind of person I'd been expecting. She stood leaning in the door like a hooker down on Michigan Avenue -- tight sweater, vivacious smile. She knew what I wanted all right, but I guess out of boredom she played stupid. Purring, she said, 'Can I help you with anything, Mister?'

I got out of the car, and thought it best to answer straight. 'I need gas and a coffee.'

She walked over then. That was the best thing about her, her walk. I could feel the sexual heat in every stride. When she got near, she passed real close. I reached for a cigarette but then remembered the gas. As she bent over the tank, I said, 'You alone here?'

She turned and smiled. 'There's Pa, but he doesn't get around much any more. I mostly run things now.'

'Must be lonely out here, then?'

She laughed a little. 'Yeah, I don't see many men, if that's what you mean.'

I had to turn. Things were beginning to show and I didn't want to give her the wrong idea. I walked around a bit, pretending to look the place over. Everything looked brown and faded. There was the station, and a house at the back, and otherwise just dust and desert. Behind me her voice caught me by surprise.

'Would you like that coffee now?'

'Yeah, sure,' I said.

As soon as we went inside she disappeared into the kitchen. From the back I heard her voice. 'How do you have it?'

'Black, one sugar.'

I managed to find a stool that looked like it had been used recently. On the wall behind the counter hung various photos, and on a shelf there stood an array of trinkets and other paraphernalia, mostly junk. The pictures were of family. I recognized her next to her Pa. Even young she looked like a hot one.

She came out then with the coffee. She had removed her sweater, and somehow the top buttons of her blouse had worked themselves loose. Still a few feet from me, she leant over and pushed the coffee along the counter. I smiled and I'm sure she knew why. Sliding over closer, she asked if I'd like anything else. 'A doughnut,' I said.

She produced one from beneath the counter. Placing it next to me she said, 'It's getting hot, isn't it?' To be truthful I hadn't really noticed. She was real close now, and I could feel her breath on my face. I knew I had to come up with a line fast.

'Nice blouse.'

She blushed a little, just enough so as not to look completely innocent. She straightened then, and moved back into the kitchen. I bent and tried the coffee. It needed more sugar. I poured some in but there was no spoon, so I stirred it with my comb. When I saw her again she was leaning in the kitchen doorway.

‘Would you like to come into the house? Pa’s away this morning. Drove into Hay Springs to get some supplies.’ I almost dropped the doughnut into the coffee. I knew we weren’t going there to play Loretta Lynn on the stereo. I looked at her standing there, luxuriating in her own sexuality. I was thinking fast. Generally I wasn’t much interested in dames; they had a way of working themselves on top of you and I don’t like that. Last time I had to make love to a woman I had hired a proxy. This time I decided I had nothing to lose.

‘Yeah, sure,’ I said.

We had got to the back door when we saw the car pull up at the house. It was her Pa. ‘Must have forgotten something,’ she said. I went back to my coffee but didn’t finish it. She saw me to my car. I was in the driver’s seat when she asked, ‘Where are you heading?’

‘Paine.’

Her expression changed as soon as I said it.

‘No-one goes to Paine, Mister. Those that do don’t come back the same.’ I shivered when she said that. I knew she meant it. I drove away watching her reflection in the mirror. She looked sad.

After an hour I began to notice the heat. Outside the desert was flat and lifeless, nothing but grasslands and shrubs. I watched it go by at eighty miles an hour. Something was wrong, though. I hadn’t seen another car since leaving the station, and I was worried that maybe I had

taken the wrong turn. I tried the radio but it didn't work. This was odd, because it was new. I stopped the car and nervously wound down the window. There was no sound anywhere, not even a breeze.

I drove on, feeling that maybe this was one assignment I wasn't going to enjoy. Sam had sent me out here. He had said I needed a change. I spat out the window as I thought about the conversation. 'There's a killer up in Paine,' he had said. 'What sort of killer?' I had asked. 'I don't know. All I know is they've got him in the slammer up there and I want you to get his last words. His thoughts, you know, on his crime.' So here I was, seven hundred miles from Chicago, in a hot desert, my fedora dusty, last week's Tabasco stain still on my suit, and my Smith Corona in my bag.

Driving, I had plenty of time to think. I had known Sam since I was sixteen. He'd started me on the paper. I had just been a punk from the south side but he had given me a break. As a kid, I had had it rough. My father had been a drunk, up until he died anyway. My mother had long since left. My father never worked, just lived off welfare. I'd often go out and steal for him -- just small stuff, watches, anything that could be pawned. I got to know the contacts then. I had seen the organized crime move in, the spaghetti-bar Ities, the fronts for the mob. I knew who owned the town, the deals, the undercurrent of filth that swam beneath the surface. But now the smell had become too much and I just wanted to get my nose out of the shit.

Jesus, the business stank. If you weren't chasing some monkey-house politician who wanted to shove your camera in your face, you were watching the big payoffs to the local dick who covered up the story. Yeah, I thought, after twenty years I had had enough. Now I was back

chasing the little guy, the small crim, but things weren't much better. Crime had changed, and there wasn't room for the honest buck any more. The organizations controlled it all. It was like a school of sharks feeding off each other.

Suddenly I was distracted by a rattle from the window on the passenger side. I thought maybe one of the retreads had blown but nothing else unusual was happening. I found an old brown paper bag on the floor next to my feet. I folded it up and shoved it down between the seal and the glass. That seemed to fix it.

It was another half hour before I first saw the town. It seemed to rise out of the Nebraska desert like a random collection of planks, all grey splintered wood and dark shadows. It seemed to have been thrown together, tilted and tired. I drove around a while looking for a hotel but found none. I'd passed a servo a block back, so I thought I'd ask there. I pulled up next to the workshop, thinking I'd check the tyres at the same time. An old man came out wearing an aged aviation coat with a sheep-skin collar. On his head he wore one of those caps with ear flaps. It must have been nearly a hundred degrees, and I wondered how he could bear it. He smiled at me with broken teeth. Cocking his head at me, he said, 'I used to fly one myself.'

He stepped closer and ran his hand over the roof. 'You keep her in good nick. Mind if I look in the cockpit?'

That was when I knew he was crazy. 'Sure, go ahead,' I said. He jumped in and took the wheel. Humming, he started fiddling with the controls, pulling the wiper knob and shifting the gear stick. 'How high she go, Mister?'

He seemed harmless enough, so I thought I'd play along. 'Until

there's ice on the wing,' I replied, trying to remember what I knew about planes. He beamed at me. 'That's pretty high all right. I remember the old Moths -- you'd get up that high and they'd start to shake. The ice would crack the struts and you'd have to watch she didn't go into a spin.'

I couldn't add to his experience so I thought I'd go and check the wheels. 'Bit rough on landing. I think maybe I done a wheel. Would you care to look?' He got out slowly and shuffled around to the back. I wondered if he'd seen four wheels on a plane before. Sure enough, one of the retreads had blown, but he didn't seem to notice it.

I had started getting out the tools when he said, 'Can I check her motor?' 'Yeah, sure.' I opened up the bonnet, glad to get him out of the way while I changed the wheel. When I finished I found him still bent over the motor. He was checking the fan, spinning the belt by hand.

'Would you like to hear her start?' I said. He lifted his head and smiled at me. 'Would you mind?' I shrugged and got into the driver's seat. She turned over real smooth, smoother than I remember her. He took off his cap and grinned. 'Needed a bit of a tune. Used to do stunt flying, needed to keep the engines real fine. Upside down or in a loop, if she stalls, you're in trouble. Happened to a friend of mine back in '18, crashed into a house. Nothing left, died instantly.'

I decided it was best to leave. 'Do ya know a good hotel?'

'One just around the corner.' He pointed back, hooking his thumb over his shoulder.

'Great. By the way, my name's Reg Hunt.' I extended my hand to him. He took it warmly.

'Mine's Ed, Ed Turner. Come and see me any time you need anything. Always glad to help one of the old fly boys.'

I drove around the corner just as he had said, but I didn't see any hotel. I began to wonder what kind of a town this was. Christ, the place was strange. Every building seemed to be leaning over, slanted in some way. Most, as I've already said, were grey, the wood bleached by the sun, as if they had never been painted. Some visionary, though, had painted certain buildings red. These seemed to stand out like open wounds. There weren't many people about, and those I did see seemed to move slowly, or simply stood still, staring at nothing. The streets were dusty, and litter lay everywhere, stuck in dead trees, between the broken rails of fences, piled into the corners of alleys and yards.

I had just about given up when I saw the hotel. It stood leaning at the end of a street. It was one of the red buildings. I parked the car. Just as I got out, a yellow news sheet blew against my leg. It caught there, flapping like the wings of a dying bird. In disgust I kicked at it and moved on.

Before I got to the hotel I turned around to look at the car. It looked worse here than it normally did. Its red gloss seemed more faded and its cracked headlight stared at me like a shattered and sorry eye. Inside the hotel was like outside, only gloomier, the shadows being darker and the air dustier. The publican greeted me from behind the counter. He was about thirty, thin with large dark eyes and hair slicked back, plastered to his skull. He didn't look too bright either.

‘Name?’ he asked.

‘Reg Hunt.’ He checked down a column of names.

‘Have you booked?’

It seemed like an irrelevant question. I doubted whether anyone had stayed here in the last fifty years, but I played along to keep him happy. ‘No,’ I replied.

He started shuffling about then, looking disconcerted, as if his training hadn't allowed for this deviation from the norm. I thought I'd better help him. 'The place was recommended. Ed Turner. You know him?'

It didn't appear to help. He still seemed confused. I tried again. 'Do you have any spare rooms?'

Something clicked in his brain then. He checked his book again. 'Yes, we do, sir.'

I was relieved, though I decided to handle the next step carefully. I said slowly, 'Well, I would like to book one then.'

He smiled. I felt like congratulating him.

'How long for, sir?'

I wasn't sure, so I left it open. 'Perhaps a day or two.' Again he looked at me blankly. I added quickly, 'I mean two nights.'

'That will be six dollars.'

I nodded. He smiled again, looking over my suit.

'Would you like us to launder that suit for you, sir?'

That did it. I decided to quit being friendly. 'No thanks, I kinda wear it like this always.' He stared at me vacantly, then grinned, as if he suddenly understood. 'Well my name's Chet. If you need anything just ask for me. Now, will there be anything else?'

I swallowed. 'No thanks.'

He turned the register towards me. 'Sign here, please.'

I signed. There was no-one to show me to my room. The elevator only worked between the ground floor and the first. Naturally I was on the top. My room was number eighty-six, and I found it in the middle of the hall. The furnishings were sparse: a bed, wardrobe and a small cupboard. I unpacked my bag, taking my camera, notepad and pen. I

never use a recorder -- I figure what I can't remember to write can't be important anyway. I was tired from having gotten up early, so I thought I'd take a nap before I started poking around.

I fell asleep quickly. Flashes of a dream came to me. Half-images of twisted faces and a jeering mob. They were chasing something through the desert, a large grotesque beetle. In horror I realized it was my Smith Corona. I woke up feeling dry and sweaty. I lay still, trying to focus my thoughts on the day's events, remembering again what the brunette had said about Paine. She had been scared, all right. Sam had known nothing about Paine, and neither had anyone else on the paper. I had searched the map for some time before I found the name, and when I did, I wondered how I had missed it. Now I wasn't so sure what I had seen. I got up quickly and grabbed the map. It wasn't there. I could feel sweat start to break out on my forehead. There was no air conditioning, so I went to open the window. Outside, dark clouds were gathering. A storm was on its way. Anything but this heat, I thought.

I had to get out of the room. Descending the stairs, I decided that my first interview should be with the sheriff, but first I'd eat. Chet was still behind the counter. I guess he had nothing better to do. I asked where I could get some grub. 'At Cal's, down the road,' he said.

As I came onto the street the air was a little cooler. I decided to walk. It was then that I noticed the black flag hoisted upon the court-house roof. At half-mast, tattered and torn, it fluttered there in the wind, like a sail in the rigging of a wrecked ship. Black clouds shifted above it and every now and then the sun would break through, lighting the flag with a halo.

I'd seen a few court-houses when I was a kid. I couldn't go near them now without feeling hate. Hunger has no conscience, but try telling

that to a judge. Once I was nabbed for rolling a drunk outside a bar. Not my first offence, I never expected any favours from the judge -- not since I'd beat up his boy in school. I got one year in juvenile correction. During that year Dad died. I never even saw him buried. It was during this time that I met Sam. He'd been sent up by the paper to do a story on juvenile crime, and I guess I was a good example. He was the paper's best reporter then, and soon became assistant editor. He gave me a job as soon as I got out.

Cal's was another red building. Inside, dust lay thick on the tables. Flies buzzed around everywhere, but I guessed even they were afraid to land. I found a seat and a menu. The paper was yellow and splotched with stains, and I could barely make out the writing. A waitress came out. She was shrunken and shrivelled like an old crone. She looked dead -- the way I had seen bodies come up after a few days underground. She was moving, though, so I guessed she wasn't. She couldn't speak either, and I was afraid if I opened my mouth she might start to get friendly. I pointed to something I couldn't read on the menu. She nodded and went away.

The food came out almost straight away, in a chipped, grubby bowl that looked as if it had just been freshly dusted. Behind it stood Cal. He looked like his menu, yellow and spotted. There were no other customers, so I asked him to sit down. A little warily he obliged. I introduced myself, saying I worked for the Chicago Globe and that I was here to do a story on the killer.

'The killer,' he replied, sounding a little vague. 'You mean Frank?'
'Maybe,' I said. 'I've only just got here. You're the first person I've thought to ask.'

He eyed me suspiciously. 'Why do you want to talk to me?'
I knew I had to gain his confidence so I played things down. 'No particular reason -- just fishing for angles, that's all.'

'Angles?'

'Yeah, a way to write the story, you know?'

'What makes you think I know anything?'

'Well, you must know something -- like, who did he kill, for instance?'

'Kill?'

'Yeah, murder, you know?'

I could see his eyes begin to water with the effort of thinking. 'Oh, you must mean his girl. Yeah, that's who he killed all right.'

'How did he kill her? Did they have a fight?'

'No, nothing like that.'

I was becoming exasperated. I'd swear I could have got more talk out of a dumb show. I tried again, thinking to leave the question wide open.

'Then how did it happen?'

'Judge says he fell out of love and that's how she died.'

I was beginning to feel he was playing some kind of joke. 'How do you mean?'

'Well she's not dead in the literal sense. Nothing much happens literally around here.'

That floored me. For a few minutes I couldn't speak. 'Nothing much happens literally around here.' What could anyone mean by that? I filed it away; I'd have to get back to it. I chose to question the easy statement. 'What do you mean, not dead? You mean he didn't kill her, she's still alive?'

‘That’s right. Her heart’s broken, though, and Judge says that’s the same thing.’

I got up to leave. I’d had enough. ‘Where can I find the sheriff?’

‘Most likely in the jail. He doesn’t come out much.’

I paid for the slop, then left, determined to get some sense out of someone. I found the sheriff’s just behind the court-house. I didn’t have any trouble recognizing it. With gold trim lining its windows, door frame and gutter, it looked like a great Gothic gravestone. I expected to find another loon inside, and I did. Sheriff Wade (I could see his name plate on the desk) sat stiff and immobile in his chair. It was scary. He had on a mask, smooth and black, so that all I could see was his eyes and a thin slit for his mouth. He wore a white hat and the rest of his uniform, including the badge, was crisp and shiny. He said nothing when I came in. I introduced myself, but still he said nothing, just sat there. I pulled up a chair and sat down. It was weird, he just didn’t move, I could barely see him breathing. I started to get up, thinking it best to leave. Then he spoke.

‘We had come through the nebula of Orion, where they said none could pass, our sails aflame with the blue light of the sun Gethsemane. Through the port I could see the fire from the attack ships as it struck our hull. The captain was killed and I came to pilot the ship past the eye of God, through the waste that was all that was left of the Rimm system. We came here, to the third planet from your sun, which we had called Gibye, from our word for distant, for you are a long way from our world. That was a hundred and fifty years ago. We tried to copy things but our tools had broken from the long journey, or we had forgotten how to use them. We only half succeeded. The Transmods now wander

about, like ghosts of ourselves. I wish now that we had listened to them when they told us that we were mad, that we shouldn't have come, but it is too late. I am building my ship home now. It is almost finished. Soon I hope to leave.'

This one was a major loon. I wrote everything down as best I could, then I stood up, ready to go. When I was at the door I heard him say, 'I know why you are here, Mr Hunt. I have been watching you since you got here. The killer is out the back, but you can't see him, not until tomorrow anyway.' I spun around to face him. He had turned his head towards me. His eyes were wet, dripping almost. I thought again of Cal's eyes, of how they had been running. Jesus, things were getting scary. I tried to stay relaxed but I was finding it hard.

'Why can't I see the killer?' I asked nervously.

'He is sick. It's best that you don't. No-one is going to see him till he is hanging at the end of a rope.'

I stared at him in disbelief. 'You can't hang a man for falling out of love! It's insane.'

He just sat there, staring at me as if I were stupid. I swallowed hard, wishing I could leave, but something held me. I was also beginning to feel a little dizzy. I barely heard his voice when he said to me, 'Sit down, Mr Hunt. Let me explain a few things to you.' I gave in, grateful for the seat.

'I'm trying to keep this town alive, Mr Hunt. Things aren't much different around here than anywhere else. We are living in a dying world. A dying world of structures, of labels, of things made to fit into a certain place. Emotions are only an example. They are being forgotten, being boxed in. It may be too late to save this town, but I won't stop trying -- not until I'm ready to leave, anyway.'

Another fucking idealist. Jesus Christ, I'd had enough of them. Who did he think he was kidding?

'You talk about feelings, and you're hanging a man for doing nothing. How cold can you get?'

'Lessons have to be taught. How else can anyone learn?'

I stood up, furious, knocking the chair over. 'You're insane. This whole fucking town is insane!'

He looked at me hard with his wet eyes, eyes that were a blue I had never seen before; like a kind of sparkling sapphire. They gave me a chill. He got up. It was then that I noticed he had a limp. One leg seemed to buckle under him as he walked. I moved a step or two back, not sure what he was going to do. He went to the door and I'm sure he saw my relief, but I couldn't tell. I couldn't see anything under that mask.

'Goodbye, Mr Hunt. I'll see you tomorrow at the hanging.'

I was only too glad to leave. Outside it had become darker. I wondered when the rain would begin. I could hear the flag flapping on the court-house roof. I spat in the dirt, then stood watching a while, watching the spit congeal in the dust. I was not sure what to do next. The girl's parents seemed to be the next-best bet. I realized I didn't even know her name. I went back to the hotel, thinking I'd ask Chet.

I found him sweeping the front veranda. Even the floor boards were painted red. Flakes of paint lifted off as he swept. I knew I'd have to be nice to him. 'Looks good, Chet. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?'

He looked up, sweat running down his face. 'No sir, go ahead. That's what I'm here for.' I decided to ask him straight out. It seemed to be the best way to get answers around here. 'Do you know the parents of the girl who got killed?'

‘Sure do. Why do you want to know?’

‘I’m a reporter from Chicago. I’m covering the story.’

‘Never had a reporter up here before.’

I tried hard not to lose my patience. ‘Well, it’s an important story, so I need to talk to the parents.’ He stood thinking about that a while. Eventually he said, ‘I guess it would be all right. Their name is Steward and they live on Park Street.’

‘Mind telling me where that is?’

‘Sure. It’s number five. Just go around the back of the hotel, turn right, down a couple of blocks, and it’s the first street after Jackson.’

‘Thanks, Chet,’ I said, raising my hat gratefully.

Before I turned the corner of the hotel I looked back and saw him still standing there, holding the broom, unmoving, as if he didn’t know what to do now.

I found the house easily enough. If it hadn’t been for the strong smell of rot it would have fallen down long ago. I knocked on the door. Mr Steward answered. I had seen fat men before, but this one would have looked out of place in a sumo ring. His eyes squinted at me through rolls of flesh.

‘Yeah, what do you want?’ The Tabasco stain must have given me away. I guessed he had had enough of reporters.

‘I’m Reg Hunt, Chicago Globe.’ Years of practice had perfected how to say that.

‘So?’

‘I would like to ask you a few questions about your daughter.’

‘What kind of questions?’

Mrs Steward came out then. They were a good match, like two

hippopotami. 'Who is it, Joe?'

'A reporter.'

'A reporter?'

'That's what I said, honey.' Jesus, how many times had I heard this conversation before?

'Well, ask him in, Joe.'

I followed them both down the hall. I could have sworn the whole house was swaying.

'Would you like something to drink, Mr Hunt?' That was the wife. She said her name was Jean. 'Yeah, a coffee thanks. Black, one sugar.'

The coffee came out. I would have needed an electric whipper to stir what came in the cup, but it might have produced something scary. Joe and Jean grabbed a Budweiser each. On the couch opposite me, they looked like two boulders. Joe was speaking.

'What would you like to know, Mr Hunt?' This was a change. I began to relax a little.

'Well, first up, what happened between Frank and your daughter?'

'You mean Georgina?'

'Yes, Georgina.'

Jean spoke then. 'He is a cold one, that Frank. Said he would marry her but then he changed his mind.'

'So what happened?'

'Said he no longer loved her.'

'Any particular reason?'

'He said he needed more time. He was young, he said, and he wanted to leave town and have a look round.' Joe chimed in then. 'No-one's ever left this town, Mr Hunt. Don't see why someone should now, just

because they feel like it.'

'You're kidding.'

'Nope.' He seemed almost proud of it. I began to feel afraid again. I thought I'd change the topic. 'Mind if I see your daughter?'

'She's in bed, sleeping.' That was Jean.

'Sleeping,' I said incongruously.

'Yeah, she sleeps a lot.'

'Can't you wake her up?'

Joe spoke then. 'Wouldn't be wise, Mr Hunt.'

Now I was getting pissed off. I hadn't seen the killer yet, or the victim. I thought I would try again. 'Why is that, Mr Steward?'

He stood up then. I felt like a dog about to get his ass kicked. 'I think you had better be leaving, Mr Hunt.'

I stood up and thought I would try pleading. Sam said once, it doesn't matter how you get the story, as long as you get it. 'I'm sorry Mr Steward, but my editor is expecting a story, an interview. The sheriff won't let me see Frank, so your daughter is the last hope.' He just stared at me as if he didn't understand. I saw his eyes begin to water.

'We just can't allow that, Mr Hunt. This has been hard on us. We don't usually condone this sort of thing around here. When you promise yourself to someone you are supposed to mean it.'

I began walking towards the door. 'There will be someone else, there must be plenty of young men in this town.' He almost ran at me. I got out fast. I was down the street when I heard him yell, 'She will never find another man. She's used up now, now that she's second-hand.'

It's funny thinking about it now because I'm not sure that he actually said that, or if in fact he yelled anything at all.

On the way back, I passed by the undertaker's. I wondered how I had missed it before. It was another red building. It was also the only erect building I had seen, though I could see the rot beneath. Outside along the veranda I could see a line of coffins. They were all empty, though one had Frank's name on it, on a little plaque, burnished in gold. I thought I'd have a talk to the mortician, but there appeared to be no-one home. I wasn't really looking forward to it anyway. Just as I was turning away I noticed that the door was open. I decided to go in. Habit, I guess.

It was dark inside. Black curtains hung everywhere. On the walls there were silver crosses of varying sizes. Candles provided the only light and in the centre of the room lay an open coffin. I was just heading over to it when from behind one of the curtains the loon appeared. He gave the best performance yet. Dressed in billowing chequered pants and shirt, he looked like a ghoulish harlequin. His face was as white as chalk and his eyes sunken in black pits. His lips were blue and when he opened his mouth I could see the sickly colour of a yellow tongue. He started prancing about, squealing and running around the room. Stopping once, he tilted his head, as if listening for something. Then he started up again, spinning around, shaking his head, jingling the bells of his cap. He stopped again and, without looking at me, he began to mumble.

'Beware, friend, the angels are here, mind their blackened wings. I have seen it all, how the serpent snarls, its viper tongue spreading lies of a false heaven and salvation. They are here everywhere, the deceivers, the butchers. See how the blood curls and flows stagnant with betrayal upon the ground. Here, my friend, the Pharisee festers beneath the skin and the false ones wander about drawing all into the net of deceit. Above this

town the sky hangs purple with disease, spitting upon the earth the vile bile of Satan. Only I know the truth. Here I guard the tomb of Jesus. Behold, in this coffin, his shroud.' I looked. It was a dirty bed-sheet.

I wrote down as much as I understood, but was interrupted when he started again. 'I am not Judas, as many have supposed, but the true saviour.' Rushing towards me, he fell down on his knees and clutched at my trouser legs. 'Believe me, friend, get out while you can, save yourself before it is too late.'

I felt like taking his advice, but something about his face held me. Suddenly he rose up. Reaching under his chin, he tugged a few times. Just like the sheriff, he had been wearing a mask. He stood now with it in his hands. Except for his tongue he looked almost normal. He said, 'You're Mr Hunt, aren't you?'

His change shouldn't have thrown me but I still gaped. Eventually, I answered. 'You know me, then. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?'

He pulled out a chair from behind a curtain and sat down. 'No, go ahead. I don't like to keep a man from his job.'

Like a parrot I repeated the same question I had asked all the others. 'What can you tell me about the killing of Georgina?'

He laughed. 'No-one dies in Paine, Mr Hunt.'

I felt like kicking him. Why couldn't anyone give me straight answers around here? I retorted, 'You mustn't have a lot to do, then.'

He smiled, and for a while he did not speak. Rising from the chair he walked over to a corner. With his back to me, he said, 'Think hard, Reg. Why are you here? What has brought you to Paine?'

The questions worried me a bit but I held my ground. I remembered

also that I was the one who was supposed to be asking the questions. In defence, I said, 'How do you know anything about me?'

He remained with his back to me. 'All people are the same, Reg.'

'Is that why you wear a mask?'

'We all wear a form of mask, Mr Hunt. How can you ever be sure about what you are seeing?'

I was in no mood to get philosophical. Remembering the coffin out the front, I asked if he knew Frank's parents.

He spun around. 'Why do people avoid the difficult questions, Mr Hunt? Don't they like to think?'

I don't know why I didn't hit him. Perhaps it was because I knew he was right, or maybe it was because I knew what it was like not to get answers. I didn't say anything. He wrote down their address, and then, apologizing for having to go, he left me.

Outside it was getting dark, and cold. I decided to head back to the hotel and write up a few notes, then get some sleep.

It was still pretty warm in my room and the air smelt foul. I could smell the stench rising up from the floorboards. There were a lot of things on my mind and I found I couldn't sleep. I got up and went outside, thinking I would walk around a bit and try to settle my thoughts down.

I was tired, I guess. Tired of a lot of things. Sam called it 'world-weary'. I don't know, I'm no philosopher, I only knew I was fed up with everything. I didn't know who to blame; I only knew that the world was full of bullshit and we were all up to our necks in it. I was sick of wading around. I wanted to go somewhere clean. I thought about leaving for

the Pacific, about going to an island somewhere and maybe just lying around a lot, doing nothing. Perhaps all I needed was peace. Maybe it's peace that changes a man, I don't know.

Rot, I realized, was like a disease, like the spread of gangrene or cancer. Here, it had gone so far that it had even spread into the earth. I had not seen anything green since I got here. It seemed to eat from underneath and from within. I shivered. I saw myself staring into a mirror, perhaps seeing my true reflection for the first time.

It was behind the court-house that I saw the spaceship, in a little alley near the sheriff's office. I could just make out its structure beneath the moon. It was a rusted pile of junk, consisting of car chassis, forty-four-gallon drums, wheels -- anything you could name. In what I presumed to be the control room I found an old barber's chair, and beside it a car dashboard with various winking lights. This took the cake. If the fallout had reached this town it must have dropped here by the bucket.

To my left I heard a noise. It was the sheriff. He was working on something. I walked up to him slowly. He didn't seem to notice me, but again he just started talking into the air, as if to no-one.

'There was a town here before we came, a small place -- just a few houses, mostly full of ranchers. Our ship landed in the desert and immediately we began dismantling it. From its parts we built new homes. No-one knew what we were doing. We threw a shield around the town so that no-one could leave, then we started to build the transmod machines. The people became scared. We didn't mean any harm, but most died; only a few lived. It wasn't our fault. We had brought the disease with us, and we didn't know it until it was too late.' He paused and I remained still behind him. 'This is the directional stabilizer, Mr Hunt.

Once I've got this working, I think I can leave. I have no idea where I will go. There are few places a man can go alone, but I'm willing to try. I'm genuinely sorry that things didn't work out here. Maybe one day another ship will come. There are many lives out there looking for a home, and perhaps they won't be as blind as we were.' He lapsed into silence. I left him hammering away on the directional stabilizer; it looked like a clothes-drier to me. I walked back to the hotel.

When I got back to my room I looked out the window and saw the sky glowing red. A fire was burning outside town. I could smell ash in the air, and wondered what could be burning in this desert. The storm clouds were still there. I watched them blowing over the moon, and every now and then I saw the lightning flash toward the earth.

I had just lain down when I heard a knock on the door. Reluctantly I got up and opened it. A middle-aged couple stood there. A little shyly the man asked, 'Excuse me, are you Reg Hunt -- the reporter?'

I nodded.

He swallowed, then continued. 'I hope we are not intruding. I'm Bert and this is my wife, Wilma. We're Frank's parents.'

I let them in. They looked like decent people. Bert was losing his hair, though he didn't try to hide this by combing single strands across the bald pate, like some men do. Wilma was real homely, a little on the thick side but a nice woman. I invited them to sit on the bed while I pulled up the room's only chair. I phoned Chet for coffee, but I regretted it when it arrived. Wilma and Bert didn't seem to mind it though. Bert started talking first.

'We came to see you about our son, Mr Hunt.'

'He's a good son,' Wilma chimed in. 'Never meant anyone any harm.'

‘That’s right, Mr Hunt -- ‘

‘You can call me Reg.’

‘Sorry, Mr Hunt.’

Wilma started to cry and Bert put his arm around her shoulder. ‘We did our best, Reg,’ he said, ‘but this town, it wasn’t for him. He never fitted in, even when he was young. He was always getting bullied, always getting into trouble.’

‘How do you mean, Bert?’ I asked. He looked at Wilma, who had stopped crying, then he took his arm from her shoulder, and folded his hands together before him.

‘Well, he was smart in school, always asking questions about outside. Most people aren’t too bright here, you might have noticed.’ I nodded. ‘Well, he wanted to know everything, read every book he could get hold of, but it wasn’t enough. He kept asking questions, but no-one could give him any answers.’ He stopped, shaking his head. Wilma continued for him.

‘We tried to help him, Reg, but we couldn’t. He grew more frustrated as he got older. He got bored and started wrecking things, vandalizing the town. Sheriff locked him up many times.’ She paused for a while. ‘He just wanted to learn, Reg, about life, about what went on outside. This place was like a prison to him. No-one seemed to understand.’ She stopped and started to cry again. Bert took up the story.

‘We didn’t know what to do. We thought maybe if he got a girl he would quieten down, start to live a normal life, you know.’ He stopped as if in reflection.

I said, ‘So you introduced him to Georgina?’

He looked at me sadly. ‘That’s right. At first it was good, then things

started to change. They started to argue a lot, and Georgina got sick.'

'Got sick?' I prompted.

'Yeah, it happens a lot around here. She started to fall apart. The skin started to drop off her.'

I winced.

'It's inbreeding, Reg -- it's rife in this town. Not enough fresh blood. Mr and Mrs Steward, they're siblings.'

I stood up, shocked, and went to the window. The fire was still burning. I asked, 'So what happened with Frank?'

Wilma answered. 'It's not his fault, Reg. She spent most of her time sleeping. Once I saw her. It was horrible -- half her face was gone, she looked grey.'

I was feeling sick. I started retching and raced into the bathroom. After swallowing some water I went back to them. I had to know what was wrong with this town. I asked Bert, 'Why are some buildings in this town painted red?' He answered as if he were expecting the question.

'It was the judge's idea, Mr Hunt. He and his son, Sheriff Wade, run this town, but the judge is getting old now, and so Wade takes care of most things.' I turned to look where I had thrown up in the bathroom. Somehow I was not surprised by the news. Bert continued. 'Anyway, the judge wanted to paint the whole town red. I don't know why, nobody knows. Wade stopped him, said it would only attract the curious. He's trying to hide this town, Mr Hunt. I think he wants to destroy it.'

'He told me he wanted to save the town, Bert.'

He thought for a moment. 'Maybe it's so, Mr Hunt, I don't know. Nothing happens literally around here.'

There was that line again, just as Cal had said it. I asked, 'What do

you mean, Bert?’

He thought, then replied. ‘Nothing is as it seems in this town, Reg; nothing much happens as it should. It’s been that way for a long time. If there’s one thing that Wilma and I have learnt, it’s that life occurs how you see it, things happen the way you wish it, and that leaves room for all sorts of complexities, because often how you wish or perceive things is not how the world intended things to be.’

I stood stunned. As I said, I am no philosopher, and it took me a while to work out what he meant. Sweating and nauseous, I sat down on the chair. I started to think again about my drive up here, and how things had started to look different. Once more I had an ominous feeling. I didn’t know what reality I was dealing with. Nothing was making sense any more. Wanting to hold onto the last vestiges of escaping reason, I began to tell myself I was still back in Chicago, that I had never left, but I couldn’t get myself to believe it. In the end I could only say, ‘That’s very profound, Bert.’

He nodded as if he understood and added. ‘We have nothing to do up here but think, Reg. That’s what we tried to tell Frank; but he wouldn’t listen, he had to find things out in his own way.’

I thought about Wade again and asked, ‘Sheriff thinks he’s an alien, Bert. What can you tell me about that?’

‘The sheriff’s been spreading stories about aliens ever since I was a kid, but it ain’t true. I guess he got it from his father. People see things differently in this town, Reg. It all depends mostly on who is looking anyway. Truth lies in what you believe. We are aliens, then, if the sheriff sees it that way.’

I was getting confused again. I preferred things straight. What was

the point in looking at things differently when most things were plain to see? Wanting to change the subject, I asked Wilma if there was any hope for Frank. It was perhaps an insensitive question, but something inside me wanted to help. Crying a little, she shook her head. 'We don't allow any hope any more, Mr Hunt. The judge is too far gone and too old now. He doesn't have much influence any more, and Wade's mind is set. We've grown used to his loss, though he is a good son --' She began to cry again. Bert stood up and said they had better leave. I thanked them for coming and let them go.

I lay down again. For a long time I watched the rose glow of the fire lighting the window. After a while it seemed to be winking at me, as if it were trying to tell me that it would one day burn here also. I wished it would. I just wanted to leave this town. I was scared and fed up. I thought I had seen it all, but this place left me with a permanent chill up my spine. I found it hard to sleep. I watched the fire burn through most of the night.

In the morning I let Chet serve me breakfast. I won't say that was a mistake, because you'd be guessing that anyway. I was tired and only half awake, but I wanted to be able to leave today. I was also thinking about the brunette back at the servo, hoping that her old man would be out picking up supplies again. I asked Chet if he had any news on the Georgina killing. He told me that the killer had escaped. For some reason I wasn't surprised. Nothing in this town would surprise me any longer. 'How?' I asked. He didn't know. I remembered about seeing the sheriff out working on his space ship, but I didn't say anything.

The clouds were still above the town, black as Armageddon. Slowly I walked up the street. Outside the court I saw an old man sitting in a

chair. I thought it might be the judge, so I went up to him. He looked normal enough, only old, though I saw again the watery eyes that so many people in this town seemed to have. I put it down to the inbreeding. He recognized me as I came up to him. 'You must be Mr Hunt,' he said. I nodded. He invited me to sit down. There was no chair so I sat on the top step near his feet. It seemed appropriate somehow. He looked at me. It was hard to tell from his watery eyes whether or not he was crying, but he sounded sincere when he spoke.

'I'm sorry for what's happening here, Mr Hunt, but things have got out of control. Entropy rules here like a parasite. It feeds until there is nothing left, then it dies.' He paused to catch his breath. Patiently I waited for him to continue. 'What comes after the rot has been cleared away, Mr Hunt? Perhaps nothing, or perhaps something new.'

I thought about that, but I wasn't sure I understood. He spoke again. 'We don't have all the answers, Mr Hunt. We are not the creators, only we can't let it spread, at least not beyond this town. My son is doing what he can, although perhaps he is a little over-zealous. Forgive him if you can. Do not be the one to place the sword into his side. When you go back to report, do not write what your eyes saw, or your heart felt, but look into your mind and so tell the story, though you must not think. Nothing can be drawn up through the rot, nothing untainted anyway.' He had been looking straight at me, then suddenly his head dropped. I heard no more from him. Solemnly I walked down the steps.

On the road again, I recognized Cal and Ed heading up the street. A large crowd had gathered at the end. I ran, wanting to catch up to Ed. Today his coat was buttoned up and his cap strapped down. He had also added a scarf to his ensemble. He looked ready to fly. When I caught

up to him, I asked him if he knew where the killer might be. He shook his head.

‘Could be anywhere, Mr Hunt.’

I had liked Ed from the beginning. He may have been crazy, but only in a quirky way, I thought. His offer to help when I had first met him seemed genuine enough to me, so I asked, ‘Do you reckon you could help me find him, Ed?’

I’d like to, Mr Hunt. Did that sort of thing during the war -- espionage, you know? -- but I’m getting on now, don’t think I’ll be of much use to you.’

We had caught up to the crowd. I recognized Sheriff Wade, and I realized then that this was the posse. Ed had disappeared. As I looked at the crowd, I saw the death of this town on each of their faces. They stood bent and hunched, their eyes staring out with bitterness and hatred. The mindless mob, I thought. I felt sick. I had seen it all before.

I followed them out of town. On the way I noticed the gallows. Prophetically, the noose was swinging back and forth like a pendulum against the sky. I feared then that there was no escape for the killer.

Not far from town I saw the burnt land. There was nothing left but black waste. Whiffs of smoke were still coiling in a lazy wind, while here and there, burnt stumps stuck up from the ground. The remains of shrubs, I realized, though they had probably been dead anyway, even before the fire came.

To my right I heard a yell. Someone had seen the killer. Excitement spread through the crowd, and they were off, stampeding the soot like a herd of trampling cattle. I walked slowly behind. I knew how this would end. It was frightening to watch. The killer was being hunted over the

town's own blackened soul. I heard the crack of a shot, and saw Sheriff Wade lowering his gun.

By the time I got there, Frank was dead. His eyes were open, staring with sad incomprehension at his killers. I looked at Sheriff Wade, who was brandishing his gun about, attempting to hold back the crowd. I wondered if he would shoot them also. Where would the stupidity end? I turned again to Frank. He was young, no more than twenty. It is always the young, I thought, who die so unnecessarily. I watched his blood mingle with the ash, which stuck like flakes of burnt paper. Next to him I saw Georgina. At least I believed it to be her. She was hideous, brown and grey with rot. No tears fell from her eyes, and I thought I saw a faint smile on her lips. I felt like hitting her. Behind her I saw Frank's parents. They were crying, and I wanted to comfort them but I didn't know how.

At last I began to understand some of the things Bert had said. He was right; only our perception of things mattered. Maybe reality was perhaps only an illusion. I no longer tried to figure things out. Perhaps there was another angle on things, after all.

It was then that the rain came. A few drops at first, then it gradually became heavier. Soon it came down so hard that rivers began to form in the soot and I began to feel my shoes sinking in the black mire. I stood there a long time in the rain, hoping to wash myself clean. It was then that I saw how far we can rot when we cut ourselves off from our feelings. For some reason I didn't feel different from these people, from Frank, from the posse. I wasn't sure what I was going to tell Sam, but I knew somehow that I wasn't going to write the story. As I watched the ash churning in the dirt and saw Frank's blood slowly wash away, I felt a

pain inside that I thought I had forgotten how to feel. The pain of a tear. The pain for the good son. Another fucking idealist. I thought perhaps we could all change. I don't know, I only knew that I wasn't going to bother about the brunette any more.

The Lepers





The Woman of the Desert

About me, the sand of the desert whips and swirls into the sky. There is a rush in the wind, a constant whoosh which tears at my coat. I feel myself sway and lurch.

I come in the morning when the world is still dark. As I approach the edge of the desert, feeling the cool sand squeeze between my toes, everything is quiet. The sun is immense. It rises slowly, striking red rays into the dark. On my skin, I can feel its warmth. I can feel what it promises me.

The sand stretches away in mounds towards the horizon. At first no wind moves across the desert, then slowly the sand begins to stir and shift. As the hours pass, its movement increases until it blows so thickly that I can see no further than my outstretched hand. I stare with heavy eyes, unmoving, each moment feeling the blossoming of hope.

It is on my twenty-eight day that I see the woman of the desert. The sand eddies around her. The wind shifts amidst the white of her dress, revealing the white of her skin. I stand numb, my eyes watering. Her beauty is melancholy.

My mouth dries and I feel a hunger to possess her. She moves slowly forward, her head downcast, the sand swirling before her like a veil. I clench my hands and caress her movement with my eyes.

Years of longing pass. The curtain of loneliness rises from my shoulders. The sun bursts in my veins. Gently I close my eyes and feel the sway of my body against the wind. I dream of my home; of the passing

of the seasons amidst the cool of the mountains. My heart quickens as I open my eyes.

Her steps have slowed. Suddenly she trembles, then one of her legs buckles beneath her. She halts. Blood runs from between her legs. Her eyes fix upon me and I watch as she reaches down and wipes at her thighs. My knees tremble. I feel a sinking sensation within as her hands claw in anguish, her face twists, and her eyes narrow. In shock, I feel the wind sear my skin, the prick of needle-points of sand.

I do not understand. My desire is gone. I stand staring as she moves slowly about, dabbing at the blood with her dress, the wind whipping her milk hair across her face. There is a rush in the wind. The movement of the sand increases and appears to speak, its voice like the pulling back of the tide. I sense something tug at me, a hook sink in my heart. Tears run from my eyes and my lips quiver. I try to yell but the wind tears the voice from my throat.

From amidst the sand, the woman's eyes gaze as if from an infinite distance. The sun sinks and I shiver. Welts appear on my hand and blood drips from my palm. I look upon the woman. Her face is like worn stone. I feel a chasm cleave the air. She turns, her head cast down as the sand draws her away.

The Lepers





The Crosses Upon The Moor

I could believe none of this.

That morning, I watched them hoist the crosses against the Cimmerian sky. The men stood in groups, their legs sinking in the marshy peat as they pulled against the ropes. The preparations went on all day. From the town, men marched frequently up the hill to check the firmness of the earth, and indeed, through the day, some of the crosses appeared to sway, and I remember how desperately I wanted them to fall. But they stood all day; sombre, almost serene in their dark beauty.

Towards evening, I stood on the slope of the hill, my ankles sinking in black mire. Dark clouds had rolled in over the hill and hung brooding over the scape of the moor. The moon glistened behind them, lighting their edges with a corona of silver light, lending the spectre of beauty to death.

As the darkness of evening fell, the bells of the city sounded. Every church and hall bell rang, each bell adding to the crescendo of ringing, as if clanging in competition. I shuddered and clenched my fists as the clanging resonated and quivered over the steppe of the moor. When the shouts and jeers of a crowd began to drifted up the hill, I closed my eyes. I did not want to see the faces of the condemned, to see their incomprehension, their helpless sorrow.

I remained instead, standing; my heart feeling an immense lassitude, a reluctance to stir my limbs or my mind. Days of argument had drained

the fire from my soul, caused a numbness to choke me from within, a paralysis that clung like a dark cloak to the light of hope. I could only feel pity.

When the clanging of the bells stopped, and the noise of the people settled, I looked again upon the moor. In the darkness the crosses spread away in ragged rows, the limbs of the wood spindly and dark against the pewter light. Before each cross stood a group with torches. I watched as the crosses were lowered. From the middle of each group, I heard screams and smelt the stench of oil. When the crosses again rose into the air, from each, a woman in a white dress hung nailed.

I could only watch, pale-faced. This was nothing that could be understood. Around each cross, the men stood looking up, jeering, their torches flicking and kicking out black smoke. A sharp wind rose. The women twisted and screamed as it flapped their dresses against their bloodied and sagging limbs.

As the crosses went up in flames, I sunk to my knees and pounded the ground. A torturous wail and shrieking filled the night. I smeared my face with the black mire, dug my finger nails into the dirt until my nails swelled, pounded my head and my ears with my fists. Blood ran from my nose. I tasted the endless blood of man, the blood of sin, of guilt, of hypocrisy and betrayal.

Finally, as the screams died, I rose with heaving chest. The acrid smell of oil and burnt flesh drifted on the wind. In the distance, I heard voices murmur and the sound of feet sucking and pulling at the bog. I hung my head and remained still until all I could hear was the sound of the wind licking and beating the flames. When I was certain that I was alone, I stared at the crosses. They burned bright; the tongues of fire

chasing among the gaping mouths and bared teeth of the women. Feeling vomit in my throat, I retched. Finally I knelt; I knelt to the suffering of women and wept.

The Lepers



The Lepers

For Maree Luria and Michael Wellard



The Lepers

(A Progression of Despair)

The City of Ages

In Serene Repose

It was twilight when Maree and I arrived at the city. The gates were locked, and to reach the iron door we had to struggle through the deep snow which, over the course of the long winter, had drifted there. With my hands still in their mittens I pounded on the door, not expecting anyone in this desolate region to answer. Even now, I can hear the sound of iron against stone, the reverberating echo of the door as I beat upon it, the shunt of the bolt and finally the squeal of rusted hinges grinding stiffly as the door swung open.

It was the city of Ages that we had come to. A grey melancholic town of obsidian towers and slate roofs. A city possessed of whistling winds, white snow and of a languid calm that lay static as sorrow upon its streets. There, to its cold towers and quiet streets, our persecutors did not follow us, for it was the city of the dead or the near dead.

All this we did not know then, as we stood huddled before the city's gates. It was the captain of the guard who opened for us, and as we entered, he bowed before us, reminding me very much of a welcoming innkeeper. He asked us no questions, not even our names, for he knew why we had come. He simply accepted our arrival with that quiet resolution and acceptance that only the dying possess.

We followed him through the black cobbled streets, which I noticed were curiously empty of snow. He explained that they were continually

being swept, for otherwise the snow would lie so deep that journeying would be impossible. As we walked, I saw the maimed and crippled leaning in the doorways and watching from windows. They watched, not with curious eyes, but with a kind of serene expression, as if happy that two more had come amongst them. Outside the buildings I saw them also; some dragged themselves along on wooden boards with wheels, while others simply shuffled simply along with an unhurried gait. Between the towers, in the alleys and narrow lanes, many had lit small fires and sat there wrapped in rags, talking softly, laughing and smiling amongst themselves. Maree squeezed my palm gently. Through the warm grip of her hand I sensed her happiness, noticing immediately the extra spring in her stride as we walked along behind the captain like two contented children.

Eventually we came to a flight of stairs. After a long climb we emerged onto a ledge. From here, the city spread out before us. With my eyes I traced its jagged streets, its dark obsidian walls and white roofs. For a while I watched the continuously falling snow, the slow drift of the flakes as they fell to earth. For the first time in my life, I felt the kind of peace which I had heard spoken of so often, that sense of having arrived home, of being embraced and reborn in a kind of tranquil womb. But somehow a part of me was still frightened. I could not understand it then. Weeping, I turned to the captain, and shaking his hand, thanked him for the joy I felt. He smiled gently, as he might smile to a child, and then, taking my hand, led us to our house. It stood bleakly at the end of a street, a grey house with only one door and a single window.

It is uncertain how long we lived within the house. Disease can only be cured by death. We learnt that the city provided some with eternal

sleep, others with peace, so long as they lived within its walls. Each day, I watched Maree slowly ebb away. When she died, the mutilated came to help me bury her.

Today, as I stare from my prison window, I can still see her face, her serene repose as we lowered her into the frozen earth. For me her beauty remains eternal, frozen deep within the city of Ages. I have never known a stronger love than that which I felt for her. Her dying brought to me my final realization. My disease had gone too deep. Death could not save me. I guess I had known it all along, for at that instant, in which I stared at her languorous form beneath the ice, I was again reminded of that first day that we came upon the ledge that over looked the city. My tears then had not been for my dying and rebirth, as I had supposed, but for my further suffering, for my return to the outside world.

I did not stay long after her burial, only long enough to make my goodbyes and to part with the few friends I had made. It was the captain who again opened the gate for me. He had not changed much over the years, although his walk was a little slower and his voice perhaps a little more tired. As he opened the gate, I felt a tinge of guilt, believing that perhaps I had betrayed these people, that in coming here I had stained even them with my disease, but when I asked him this, he said it was not so.

The door shut behind me with a final clang. With sorrow, I lifted my pack and walked into the snow. When I had gone a short way, I looked behind me one last time. Already my footprints had vanished behind me, and although I was only a short distance away, I could barely make out the city. It was lost in swirling snow, almost as if it had never been. I strained to listen for it, for the ears are often more receptive than the

eyes. Once again I felt its presence, for when I listened carefully I could hear the moaning wind as it blew amongst its towers, the howl of lonely voices in its streets and gently, ever so gently, the quiet sigh of Maree.

The Ambulet

An Absurd Journey

It was early evening as we entered between the towers of the city, hugged each other and smiled at our courage over the long journey. Our joy was such that it was with horror that we stared about. The windows of the towers rose in columns on either side, shone with a red hue that appeared against the tower's black stone to bleed like open wounds into the encroaching night. Miriam could do nothing but peer from side to side, grip her hand in mine so that I felt her trembling. Then faces appeared. From each window they glared with eyes held wide like those of an assassin's.

We both slowed in incomprehension, with foreboding, lowered the cowls of our robes to cover the red cross of the outcast's mark on our foreheads. We knew well the suffering of the despised. Despair had long weighed our hearts, drawn its dark curtain. Miriam stumbled. Gripping her hand tightly to hold her, I tugged down once more at my cowl, fingered its thick sack cloth.

By a wall, a shuffling noise sounded. Some of the inhabitants had come down to stand huddled in a group. Visible on each of their foreheads was the cross of the outcast, in some, like a festering wound. Such was the septic hand of the Medics, that many times I had seen the cross sink into the skull. Miriam tried to avoid their gaze, but as we passed, they spat and cursed from behind the grey cloth of their rags so that I

had to grip her waist to keep her from fleeing. I wanted nothing more than to hold her. Weaker than I, she hobbled on one club foot, bundled in rags, rounded to bone from constant dragging. The inhabitants again spat, and not daring to halt, we quickly rounded a corner.

A few feet beyond, we heard for the first time the striking of the Ambulet's bell. A sudden loud clang, this was the great bell we had heard about; the bell which many said called to the dying. Miriam pulled me to a stop. Between each strike, I could hear her crying. Whether she cried with elation or fear, I cannot be sure, but in the light of the towers, I saw each tear glitter as if it were a jewel. I wiped at them, on my calloused and scaly finger carried them to my lips. To this, she smiled, lent her shuddering body to my breast. I could only tell her that all would be well, but as I stared into the darkening night, my body sagged with the realization that the inhabitants of the towers were incurables; those who had been rejected by the Ambulet and who now dwelt without hope on its outskirts.

Shouts and jeers sounded suddenly above. Hurriedly I tugged at Miriam's arm. She could only move slowly, and on seeing this, the sound of the jeering voices quickly grew as the inhabitants sought rocks and stones to hurl at us. Miriam managed only a few more hobbling steps, then tripped, fell to the cobbled pavement.

With anguished cry, I bent to lift her. A rock thumped on my back, and feeling splinters sting my face as rocks shattered and struck up sparks, I slumped. Miriam thrashed, screamed. Only with effort could I lift her to continue on.

Past a ditch heaped with the tangled limbs and empty eyes of the dead, a rock smashed hard against my knee. Miriam again screamed as I

fell. A gash had opened on her forehead where another rock had hit her. With trembling hand, I explored the wound. The bone gave way, and in tears, I drew her hair from the bloodied opening and cradled her. She began to mumble, though in bending to listen, I could not understand what she was saying.

The stones continued to thump and crash. I managed once more to lift her, stumble on, whilst all the while the shrieks and wails of the incurables increased. Soon, though, the aim of their pelting stones flew wild, and, on rounding another corner, there the Ambulet loomed in the darkness, caught in silhouette, high in the night.

Bent with exhaustion, I soon reached its keep, slumped within its blackened stone archway. On a door hung a large iron door knocker. Laying Miriam on the ground, I rapped loudly, pulled hard on the latch. When the door did not open, and with the noisy jeers and shouts still sounding from the city, I desperately pressed my ear hard upon the door's cold metal. For a moment I thought I heard something -- the jangling of keys perhaps, but soon realized that I had only imagined it. I heard only the bell, felt each clang weaken my hand.

Miriam moaned. Hurrying to her, I rested my cheek to her face, felt her breathing slow. She was dying and I could not save her. With fury, I threw myself again upon the door, beat with my fists, only to finally slip tired and spent to the ground.

I stayed with her all night, listened with ever heavier heart to the bell. Life moved us all on an absurd journey. There seemed little reason to anything. Perhaps, at best, we could do nothing but numb ourselves.

When the sun rose in the morning, the towers of the city stood outlined like dark gravestones. The noise from the city had stopped, and

strangely, with the coming of sunrise, also had the clanging of the bell. I lay with head lowered, looked up to see a young boy with swollen and infected eyes before me. He wore the cross of the damned, with bowed head, walked slowly forward.

‘I was sent to tell you that the door of the Ambulet has not opened for five years.’

I could only stare at him. ‘Why did you stone us?’

The boy kicked with his foot till dust rose in the air. ‘Father says there is no more room in the city and that the people are starving.’

I spat, and quickly he ran away.

I did not wish to bury Miriam here. With shattered soul, I carried her a whole day and night, till at the end of the ancient road, I buried her under a cairn of rocks. There I sat weeping for two days, and on the third, rose to return home once more.

The Plateau

Bones to their Grave

This is a desolate plateau. Shards of slate stretch grey to the horizon, while above ashen clouds hang in a sombre sky. A bleak wind howls day and night. It blows over the shards and tears at our clothes so that our garments continually flap and crack around us. Only the damned wander here, the exiled, who, ringing their bell, are driven from city to city.

This is our third day here. Each day, the weight of misery rests heavier in our bones. We are forsaken, yet we continue forward. We only have our compasses to guide us, for the sun and the moon are lost to us here. Darkness is preceded only by a reddening of the sky, then slowly the clouds turn to black so that the world sleeps as if within a coffin. At night, dead dreams come, dreams that do not lie to the heart or betray the soul.

Each day, we walk in muted silence. We cannot talk here. Thoughts are lost and we seek comfort only in the regular crunch of the rocks beneath our feet. The sound is hypnotic and dulls the mind so that thoughts drift as if within sleep. At times of rest, when we eat the dried bread from our provisions, our eyes greet with sorrow. Joy and happiness are emotions of a foreign world. We have lost reason, and know of love only for those such as ourselves. We seek nothing because we are nothing, yet something drives us on.

What is it like to be us? Each night we are driven from the cities and made to huddle in pits on their outskirts. Here we wash in fetid waters

and feed on the refuse of others. Then we sleep, listening to the screams of those who have sunk to the lowest depths of human suffering. In the mornings, we pick the coins stuck with spit from our cups and go again to beg before the church and markets. None of us escape, but there are always those who, like us, seek salvation in hope.

It was within the pits that we heard talk of the damned. It was said that they had broken free from the dependence upon the cities and lived on a plateau deep within the mountains. Seldom had Marion and I allowed ourselves dreams, but on the strength of this hope, we sought out the plateau. Now that we are here, we cannot see how the damned live. There is no water or food. There is only the wind, which rattles our empty shells.

We decide to spend only one more night. In the morning we see them on the horizon. We approach slowly and stare heartbroken as they shuffle along. Their faces are like gravestones; dead with death and defeat. In the distance we hear the faint, rhythmic booming of the drum to which they march. The beat is steady, monotonous, calling the bones to their grave. We follow behind them. As we come to the edge of the plateau, we stare in horror. There they queue, and like lemmings leap into the dark.

I hug Marion to me. Our eyes greet in resolution, it is all that remains to us, acceptance of our fate. I know what I must do. There is a way of stabbing up underneath the rib cage so that the knife pierces the diaphragm and then the heart. I draw my knife from my belt and quickly thrust it upward. Marion slumps and falls to the ground. The damned gather around me, but there is nothing to explain. I can only stare at her blood as it flows in tiny rivers between the shards.

The Lepers



The Lepers





Nico

Nico leaned back against the tree. Rain fell steadily and dropped with a relentless tapping against the tree's leaves. He knew that his hunters would still be tracking him, though it had been three days since his flight from the village into the forest.

He rubbed his back against the tree, closed his eyes and arched his neck. Feeling the rain beat upon his eyelids, he opened his mouth and let the water run down his cheeks until it pooled at the back of his throat. He drank slowly, enjoying each gulp.

Fatigue washed over him and for a while he dozed in half sleep. Fragments of conversation drifted through his mind, half-formed ideas that he tried to grasp but that continually slipped from him. Images of his flight began to mix with the words, and then hearing shouts and the pounding of feet, he woke. Leaning forward, he cupped his hands to his ears, but soon realized that no one was there.

He watched the rain pool on the ground, observing how it formed circular rings upon the muddy surface of the water. The puddles gradually became larger, swelling to form little streams which then slowly ran down the slope of the hill. Occasionally, here and there, a leaf or twig caught in one of the streams. Nico smiled and hugged his arms around his knees, following the debris-fated path as it swirled out of sight.

He no longer felt cold, but sensed only a vague numbness upon his limbs. He realized that soon his hunters would catch him. Pressing him-

self again against the tree, he closed his eyes and thought back on his life.

He had known only war and death, but yet felt no blood-lust in his veins. In anger he opened his eyes. He could no longer see into the forest. With the fading light the storm had picked up strength. Lightning now arced in the sky. Thunder cracked and around him the trees whipped back and forth. Occasionally he heard the snap of a branch, then a thud as it hit the ground. He stared into the night. Here was nobility in war, a fight without bloodshed, without greed or hate. He shuddered, sensing amidst the fury, the joy of the earth as the rain and wind swept across it.

Tonight he would be safe. The hunters could not track him in this storm. He wondered how they would find him in the morning. Would he be asleep? Would they kill him swiftly? Or would they allow him his defence, a moment to explain his betrayal of them. He wondered how deep their hatred ran. What view his brother would take, or his father, Stepan, the leader of the village?

He rested his head between his knees and slept. When he awoke, a gentler wind blew. Some of the clouds had parted to reveal a full moon, against which the rain fell in silver streaks. Nico leaned his head back and peered through the swaying branches. He could make out a few stars. Perhaps they were the eyes of God? he thought. He smiled lightly. How would they judge him? He watched the slow falling rain, the silently shifting clouds. It was the first time he had noticed the night so clearly. His eyes moistened with tears. Perhaps near death our senses were heightened and it was only then that we saw the beauty of things.

Memories came to him of his father. He closed his eyes and let his

head fall. He remembered Stepan teaching him how to hold a spear and to fight with a knife. He would continually fumble and strike off target. His brother Gregor had always been the more skilful. His father only understood war and despised the weak. Nico realized that in the morning, when the hunters came, it would be his father who would kill him, and so bury his shame.

Nico remembered how, after his death sentence had been pronounced, his father had stood with bowed head as he was led to his cell. How strong was the irony, when only days before, Nico had released Ari from the same cell. Nico recalled the first day he had visited Ari, with Logan, a tribal elder. Logan had stood before the door of the cell shaking his head. 'Our enemy is our own blindness, Nico.' He had whispered. 'We cannot blame others for that which we don't see in ourselves.'

Nico shivered and clamped his knees tighter to his chest. Ari had come to the village to plead with the war council, but Stepan, fearing treachery, had imprisoned him. Over the days, Nico had come to befriend Ari. He remembered Ari's words.

'My people say that peace will bring weakness. They believe they fight for freedom, but I believe we will never be free while we fight.'

Nico had shaken his head. 'Freedom, Ari, can never come to those who build the cages of their own destruction.'

Ari had looked at him, his eyes shining. 'There is always hope, Nico ... I must return to my people.'

Nico had known then what he had to do. He had barely heard Ari when he added, 'My death will only prolong our struggle.'

Hunched beside him, Nico could only stare down. 'Why do we fight, Ari?'

Standing by the door of the cell, Ari had said, 'I am not sure, Nico. Perhaps we only fight ourselves. Maybe in fighting and through struggle we purge the demons of our past. Perhaps one day we will be free of them.'

The following night, Nico had released his friend. They had hugged on parting, and in the moonlight, Nico had seen the glint of wetness in his friend's eyes. Ari had argued that Nico should make it look as if he had broken loose, but Nico pleaded that now was the time for him to stand against his father. Quickly, Ari had fled.

As the night grew quieter, Nico once more fell asleep. This time no dreams came to disturb him. When he woke the night was a little lighter. A gentle breeze blew and the air smelled fresh. A rabbit hopped before him. Sniffing the grass, it jumped every now and again, twitching its hind legs in the air. Soon it was gone. Nico smiled, then, feeling a warm flush come over him he felt his head go light. He realized that he was weak and maybe suffering from fever. Unable to concentrate his thoughts, his mind swam with the memory of his trial.

Stepan had stood at the head of the elders, Logan beside him. The whole village had been there. He remembered every face and pictured again the children staring with wide unbelieving eyes, the mothers clutching their babies to their chest, the grizzled old men who had sat muttering and cursing. The council had stood him naked on a dais above the crowd. There the hot sun had burned down on him, and even now he felt the thumping on his back of the stones which the crowd had pelted. In the end, sagging onto the floor of the dais and weeping, his brother had come and spat in his face. Nico had no defence to offer. What could he have said?

After the trial, they had taken him to prison. As he lay in his cell, the sorrow of his life had weighed down on him. He had realized how out of place he was in the world of his father. He thought now. How could it have happened that he was not like his brother Gregor? What was it that made one person different from another? Why were some good with the spear, others better with a club? What made one quick-witted, one funny, one a slower thinker than another? In Ari he had found understanding; compassion for the plight of his people. Should he have been Ari's son? Where was the logic of life, where the sense? Who controlled his destiny? Was it he alone?

The sun was up now. It hung before him, low and red in the sky. Once more he realized that it would awaken the world; that it would shine light upon the dark. As the heat of its rays fell upon his skin, he felt the return of his life-blood through him. He shivered and felt his head flush. He curled his toes with happiness, digging the digits into the dirt. The softness of the earth on his feet brought further life to him. He remembered how often he had walked upon grass and felt the soil between his toes. Other impressions came. He reflected on the beauty of the senses: on how tranquil a drop of rain lay upon a leaf, on how beautifully a fish swam within a stream.

Inside the cell he had been ready to die. On the fifth day, Stepan had sent for him. Out of respect for his being Stepan's son, his guards had not bound him. They looked away uncomfortably, and when a noise had broken out behind them, simply nothing more than a fleeing deer, he had made his escape by sprinting into the jungle. What had followed had been days of running, stopping only occasionally to drink. He had had no plan, thinking only vaguely to make for Ari's village. In the end,

lost, he had simply gone on running until he had come to this tree.

Nico realized now that his flight had only been an impulse. He knew that he had not had the courage to die. Soon the hunters would be here. What would he say to them? What excuse could he give?

The sun sat higher in the sky. He watched as the earth's moisture slowly misted into the air, then drifted lazily in the wind. He listened to the birds singing in the trees, watched them flutter to and fro and dance amidst the leaves. In flight everything is free, he thought. If only he had run sooner, had earlier the courage to escape the unhappiness of his life.

He looked up. Out of the jungle stepped the hunters. He counted seven. Stepan, Gregor and Logan stood at the head. Stepan stood grimacing, as if he had so expected to find his son so: huddled, prone against a tree, not bothering to defend himself. Near him, Gregor scowled and twisted his spear into the ground. Logan stood between them, shifting his head left and right as if unsure what to make of things. His father's voice bellowed towards him.

'Get up, Nico.'

Nico smiled and sank his weight further against the tree. 'I have no desire, father. I am at peace now.'

Stepan's scared face twitched. 'What do you have to say?'

Nico could only bow his head.

'He is weak, father. He has no spine.' Gregor snickered.

Nico looked up. 'Is that how you measure a man, Gregor?'

'How else, Nico?'

'Perhaps by his need not to kill.'

Logan clutched his hand to his mouth and saw the other trackers shift nervously. He recognized Link and smiled. It would have been he

who had found him. Gregor wrested his spear from the ground.

‘You speak in riddles, Nico.’

Nico plucked at a blade of grass. ‘Only to deaf ears, Gregor.’

‘Enough!’ Stepan shouted.

Quickly, Logan stepped nearer Stepan, but Stepan pushed him away. ‘Words are empty, Nico. Nothing can be won with words.’

Nico looked up. The sun shifted from behind a cloud and its rays fell on his face. He closed his eyes. ‘You believe silence speaks, father.’

‘I believe only might speaks, Nico. This is what I have always taught you.’

Nico opened his eyes. ‘You can believe nothing else?’

Stepan swallowed and looked down.

‘I love you, father.’

Stepan screamed out. ‘Love is the enemy of our people.’

A gust of wind blew suddenly from the forest and brought a rush of cool air. Nico clenched his fist and tried to struggle upright. ‘Love can only bring understanding, father. It is out of hate and fear that we create our enemies.’

Scowling, Stepan turned away.

Logan hurried towards Nico and bent near his ear. ‘You must be careful, Nico. Your father is determined to kill you. Only a few in the council oppose him.’

Nico hugged the old man. Tears ran from his eyes. ‘Have I done right?’

Logan pulled away gently and nodded. ‘Yes, Nico. You are the harbinger of change.’

As Logan moved away, Nico saw his father lift his spear. It landed

with a thud in his chest. He watched as his blood slowly soaked his bear skin, then dipped his fingers into the blood and ran it in streaks down his face from his eyes. He smiled and lay still.

The Lepers





The Seasons

The War upon Truth

Fall

*As I lie in privation, in suffering
These seasons I embrace
In need
For their spirit to inflow
With vital caress
My encumbered soul.*

I have come here alone, though each day I stare upon the path that brought me down from the mountains in the hope that Inga will follow. I did not have to travel far to reach the arena of war. The plain of truth can be found within a day's easy travelling by those whose souls are weary enough. On descending the path down from the mountains, I immediately noticed the strong wind. I have since learnt that this is a wind that never abates, a wind that is the bringer of death, and of so much more.

The wind blows as it does in autumn. It sears across an earth so cracked and dry that nothing grows any longer. All that stands here is the remains of the living: the bare trees that once grew. Every now and then I can hear their branches snap with a sharp crack like that of bones breaking. The branches are then left to blow with the rest of the debris, the refuse of centuries of human folly that has gathered here over time.

Every day the sky is overcast. No discernible sun hangs; there is only a hazy light. At night, though, the moon shines. Wreathed in crimson mist, it watches like a sad eye the slow death of those who have come here. I see them wandering continually, their eyes blinded, torn out by the searing wind, oblivious to everything, while about them their garments flap, beating against their skin and frail bones. They have come upon this plain wanting only death. For them I am sorry, for they will not find it here, only constant suffering and pain. The earth will not swallow them; for them there will be no rebirth, only disillusionment, as befalls all those who seek escape in death.

I have already said that the wind here is much more than it seems. Often it is what we fail to see that serves us most, and so it is here. Truth speaks here in the wind, for it is on the plain that the four winds of the world gather, carrying with them the accumulated wisdom of time. I have come here not for death alone, as the others have, but in search of answers, to listen in death to the wind, to sift with an open mind the knowledge of centuries, for it is my belief that in the final moments of our dying our minds are the most clear. It is then that we must listen, for at that time we are most receptive to truth.

Sadly, I have not discovered as much as I had hoped. It is possible that I have come too late, that I have already become too polluted by the false prophets that speak in our world. Perhaps, then, this, my final sacrifice has been in vain, for I can see now that in our search for meaning and reason we have built around us the cages and towers of our doom.

I have at least learnt that in existence we seek only to return to beauty. We have made mistakes. One cannot create without love. In our vanity we have sought to create with our minds; beauty cannot arise

from there, only from truth. If I could return now, if it was not too late, I would say to Inga that truth is the only real creation; that only with this understanding can we return to the spirit, to the essence of beauty. Before I left she said to me that in separation our love would be stronger, for she knew I was going to my death. Everything we love we leave behind, only in death will we be returned. I will wait here for Inga, for my return to her beauty, to her love.

I rest now with my back against a tree while the wind tears at my skin. I am slowly being whittled away. The earth about me has begun to open; soon it will swallow me. I can barely write any more, for the skin of my fingers has worn away. As I sit here I find myself staring at the white of my bone, at the inner structure of my being. It is so frail. I must stop now, for I am fatigued. It is not good to write when one is tired; thoughts escape that otherwise would never have been set free. One day I know this fragile parchment will be found blowing here in the wind, swirling about in the leaves and in the decay of human civilization. Will my truth be questioned? This I ask, for truth comes to all of us differently.

Perhaps our battle will be eternal?

The Portal

Winter

We are lost in eternity, in a world of impenetrable white. It is our third day on the ice. We are surrounded by white mist and feel the prick of sleet against our faces - otherwise the world is silent, as if we wander a void.

I see tears freeze against Rachael's cheeks and notice that the clasp of the chain that hobbles her ankles has cut her flesh. My own feet are no better. At the portal they stripped us of our habits and made us wear white robes. Then our feet were chained and we were sent out upon the ice.

We do not know why we have been condemned. As Rachael and I stood bowed beneath the vaulted chamber of the hall of judgement, thousands outside jeered and shouted that we should be put to our deaths. Only one of the senators spoke for us. Dressed in a billowing cape of yellow and purple silk, he argued that our crime had been committed in innocence and that we should be set free to live in the prohibited lands. At first the judges had risen in anger, but after again sifting through the large volume of papers that had been brought in evidence against us, they agreed.

The next day we were led through the city streets. Before us, six men wearing masks depicting grotesque caricatures of our faces swept the pavement with brooms, while all around the people of the city ridiculed us with insults and smeared our bodies with ash. Once we had passed

through the gate of the city, we were made to ride jack-asses, and with our jailers before us, traversed the barren earth that stretched towards the portal. By mid morning on the second day we saw the bare ribs of the cathedral outlined against the white of the ice.

When we came within a league of the ice, we could see the fires that had been lit to warm the assembled throng. A travelling troupe had arrived, and a carnival was taking place. Dancers and acrobats turned in the sun and sent clouds of vapour from their mouths puffing into the frosted air. Everywhere people stood enthralled, entertained by jesters and jugglers, while stalls sold souvenirs and trinkets and flew coloured banners that cracked and snapped in the wind.

Buried in the snow around the arches of the portal were strewn the remains of walls and magnificently carved columns. Before the first arch, high on a dais, sat again the seven judges. As we were made to kneel before them, they rose. After silencing the crowd, they once more announced our judgement. Wild cheers erupted from the crowd as we were led onto a podium, where, with his feet apart, stood the masked and black-cloaked figure of a torturer. Our clothes were removed and we were tied between two posts to be whipped.

As the leather stung across our backs, I watched Rachael grit her teeth. Soon her face paled and her body sagged between the posts. The torturer immediately untied both our hands and permitted me to kneel beside her. As I took Rachael in my arms, and felt her blood warm and sticky on my skin, I heard the crowd direct its hatred at the torturer, who stood to one side, calm and erect. Gently I brushed the sweaty, knotted hair from Rachael's face. The colour soon returned to her cheeks, and I smiled as tears welled from her eyes to glitter in the sun. At that mo-

ment the torturer bent to my ear and whispered that he had substituted the salt that he was to throw on our wounds for a herb. I understood and instructed Rachael to cry and writhe in pain as he dosed our backs. Again, the crowd rose in cheers. Finally we were given our white robes and told to pass under the arch of the portal. I had to carry Rachael, and several times we slipped and fell on the ice. Each time the crowd booed and burst into laughter.

The first day was clear, and we could see the ice stretch unbroken to the horizon. We were told that if we followed the ice north we would come to others such as ourselves, but on the second day a mist formed and we became lost. With the sun gone, our hands and feet soon developed frost-bite. Worse still, we could only shuffle along a foot at a time against the pull of the chains. We knew then that perhaps we would die here.

I have thought often about the torturer who befriended us. Perhaps he identified with our suffering, for the torturers' guild is itself despised. Why were we condemned? We have no answer. We could only stand helplessly as our Monastery was burned and our books taken away in a cart. Perhaps we did not see the danger of selfishness, the rot to which our innocence blinded us. Now we are made to drift like hapless clowns while the world turns unchanged beneath a waning sun.

On this, our third day, perhaps we are going mad. We stare into white oblivion. Our eyes search for colour and begin to dream. We imagine shapes and forms and raise our hands, but we embrace ghosts. We begin to see the joke that has been played upon us. Here is only purity. It is the world of the ascetic and the virtuous. There is no black. The world mocks us.

Betrayal rests like a blanket across our shoulders. We want only sleep.

Our senses are numb, but slowly we feel the air stir and realize that a blizzard is forming. It howls thickly around us. We huddle together and I tell Rachael of my love for her while I suck milk from her breasts. My love inhabits her loins. We exist in symbiosis.

As night comes, I fall asleep. When I awake, the day is clear, but Rachael has gone. I search all day. Only at sundown do I find her. She is dead; her beauty frozen against the ice.

I lie all day beside her, caressing the gold of her hair. Her eyes stare with incomprehension. I watch them slowly glaze until their azure blue dulls and mists my own. I am too weary to be angry. I feel only a terrible sadness - a desire to die also. As another night passes, I shiver beside her. Again I see visions. A worm comes to feed on my mind. I feel it slither inside my skull, devouring hope. It burrows deeper, invading my soul and digesting my heart. Around me, jackals come dressed as priests. They dance and drink wine. The worm crawls from my mouth and chases them away. I see it turn and unfasten a cloak of yellow and purple silk.

In the morning I try to bury Rachael, but the dead skin of my hands scratches uselessly at the ice. I wait until midday in the hope that the sun will melt the frozen water. When it comes, it does little but form puddles. I drink and feel the water freeze against my teeth. I laugh at the sun and see a figure in the distance. I walk forward, indifferent, and hear goodness cackle like a spectre behind my back.

The Valley

Spring

Many have called me a fool. It has been their perception that, after having searched for so long and finally having found the object of my desire, I promptly left it. I no longer answer these accusations, for I have learnt that blindness cannot be cured by words but only by opening up one's soul.

Even after all these years, I have never forgotten the brook that led from the cave. I can still see the algae, wet and slippery on its smooth, rounded rocks, the conifers and ferns that grew by its banks, the sparkling water that ran so coolly between my fingers. It was spring as always in the valley, and the earth sang with fresh and renewed life, with green, golden yellow and brilliant white. I had been certain that, in that tranquil paradise, my search would come to an end.

To my left had stood a dark cave. Black, I have observed, is the most haunting of colours, the most mysterious and forbidden, and in many ways the illuminator of all brilliance. We are all drawn to it, and so I, in staring into the cave's dark opening, was irresistibly compelled to move forward. I remember approaching with little fear, and feeling the cave's air warm and wet upon my skin. There was only just enough room to stand and, stretching my arms lengthwise, I could reach both walls, which in parts were soft to the touch, like flesh. Calmly I explored the ground before me with each step.

In darkness time is forgotten, for there is nothing to gauge it by. Whether I wandered for many days or only a few hours, I know not; I know only that after a while it became not so much the passage that I was exploring, but my own thoughts. I became conscious of my mind growing and expanding, its many convoluted tunnels opening and stretching in delight. People say that we search endlessly for love, but in essence we search for that part of ourselves that isn't whole. From the beginning I was told that I was searching for an ideal that could never be, but as my mind began to expand and clear I learnt that I desired nothing more than simply to be understood. I suspected that perhaps in the quest for love we are only looking for that part of ourselves that we don't understand, and I wondered whether our final acceptance of ourselves is the only true love. For a moment I was horrified, wondering if, in madness, I was creating my own self love, the narcissus of my own demise.

Today I am often accused of never having loved, of being in a way incapable of love. They say this to one who has beckoned with his heart in his hand, to one who has given to women an honesty ripped from the depth of his soul, only to have them turn from him saying that he had nothing to offer them. It was a man, who one day, seeing my tears, came to tell me of a place of continuous spring and eternal creation. He said that I did not have far to travel, for all eternal worlds were to be found in the mountains. There he explained, in a cave deep in a valley, (which he later referred to as the valley of innocence), I would find the love for which I searched.

This was how I came to travel to the end of the world, where the earth had heaved up its belly. The valley had not been hard to find; everyone in the mountains knew of it and took great delight in showing me

the way. I remember feeling invigorated as soon as I entered, for I had immediately sensed that in its depths lay the genesis of all renewed life and hope. After many days, I found the stream, and then the cave which the man had mentioned.

At some point within that cave the walls began to glow with a luminescent light, a green glow almost that of emerald. It was not long after this that I found her, resting curled in sleep within a cavern filled from floor to ceiling with the same incandescent light. At first I dared not touch her, lest she wake. In the end I was overpowered by my enchantment. She lay naked, fresh as if she had just been born. Her skin was cream-white, soft and warm. When I touched her, my hand felt aglow, and I noticed with astonishment that it had begun to shine like the walls. It was only then that I perceived that she was not real, but rather a creation of my own mind. I remember feeling betrayed at first. Only afterwards, when I came again to the brook to wash myself, did I become aware of my rebirth.

Now as my death draws near, people say that I have betrayed myself. They do not understand when I tell them that I did indeed find love, that I can still feel the tingling warmth of that first touch. I know that I carry her with me, that I have never left her, that with the creation of my self love, I began my own life. I answer also that it is they who have betrayed themselves, for they cannot see what I, in my love, have created. What an artist creates he cannot take with him. He creates out of his own desire, in the end not for himself, but for others. Often I weep in sorrow, believing that in my death my love will go on sleeping, that it will never be understood that without creation there is nothing, without love no life, and that nothing in this world can be given and nothing perceived unless we first develop an understanding of ourselves.

The Shimmering Sands

Summer

*Upon these featureless plains, I stare
My desires a shimmer in white
Structured in illusion
A mirage of want
That can never be.*

I am a fugitive here. I have arrived here naked, leaving behind my megalomaniac dreams.

You ask why have I come. Are you unaware of how they chased behind me with bloodied stones, their hands gripping the jagged rocks so tight that they cut even themselves? They have followed me always. I have never been able to escape them. Ahead, the desert sand shimmers. Perhaps it is my persecutors. Perhaps they have come again to taunt me, to shackle my hands and gag my mouth, or maybe I simply imagine them. There can be nothing here after all.

Pain is infinite, I have felt it always. It is the pain of words that hurts the most, the inquisition of the mind. You who are like a shadow, why do you accompany me here? Do not think that I cannot feel the weight of your presence. I have never been able to step away from you. Perhaps it is you who are my true enemy.

I have come from nothing, have passed through nothing and now exist in nothing. There is no beauty in this wasteland, only the dry white sands of misery, which blow slowly about, swirling around my ankles

in a dry melancholic wind. It is perpetual summer here. The heat is intense. Above me, the fiery sun withers my skin. I feel burnt out, wasted, weary.

You ask what I have left. What hope is there? I point to my naked flesh and show you the bruises and cuts that mar my skin. 'Cast the iconoclast into the river,' they said 'Let him wash himself there.' I taught all I knew, of a beauty so simple. Now the words that I once preached, the songs of faith, lie supine upon my tongue. There is no more hope. I have come to the end of the road, carrying nothing. I wish never to turn back, only to sleep, never to wake again.

I sought only to teach love to the world. For this I was despised and called mad. Love cannot be taught to those who live only for themselves. The pure must be seen to have a stain of filth, and suspicion cast upon the virtuous, for how else can they be believed? They took all the friends I made and locked them away. I went to visit Solomon in his cell. He could not speak in the end, though his face looked at me with such anguished grief that words were unnecessary. I remember taking his hands in mine. At first they still felt warm with hope, then when I felt them grow cold, I saw that he had passed away. Looking into his eyes I saw them staring with disbelief, as if even in the end he could not accept that we had failed. Often it is the simplest message that is the least understood. Doubt erodes all. Futility perhaps can never be conquered.

You say this cannot be so, and I ask you to open up my heart and see there the blood congealed in grief and in sorrow. See my hands, how they are stained with remorse, and my eyes, how they are bowed down with stone. Can you not see, the truth in my face, as I stand so transformed?

Soon I will lie down. I have walked around in circles for many days now. Fatigue has become my greatest gift. When one is truly weary, one cares no more. I am no longer ashamed of my failure, only hurt. Love, I believe, cannot be taught as easily as hate, though I do not believe the world tends towards entropy. I believe now, as always, that the world tends towards goodness and order, for how else can we return to the whole?

The wind and the sand come now to bury me. I see you try to dig the sand away, but it only runs back again. As darkness descends, I see the tears in your eyes and I hear you ask why, why, when I have believed so strongly and preached with such hope, have I failed. I am sorry, I have no answer to this.

The Lepers



The Lepers



The Lepers

For Philip Gargano



Chocky's Come Home

Spiro said a lot of things no-one understood. We'd been friends and only Spiro had remained the same. First time I met Spiro I found him in the lane behind our house. Even then the lane had been a foul place that always smelled of piss and was often littered with syringes and rubbers that lay either buried in the weeds or jammed up in the cracks. He had been doing something strange with a tin can, holding it up to his ear, saying he could hear sounds from inside. He made me try, though I heard nothing. Then he said something weird about traffic on Hudson Street, something about how the cans there talked fast and knew more about what was going on. To a kid then about ten it made some kind of sense, and we agreed to become friends. Me, because I liked his quirky talk and him, I guess, because he had no-one else.

We were all part of a gang then. No one had wanted Spiro to join but after a while, seeing he always tagged along with me he got accepted. We'd roam the streets at night after curfew, which always began at dark; our folks wouldn't care, they'd sooner have us out of the house than in. Spiro would often walk in front. He always wore the same clothes. Baggy grey trousers, a white shirt and a long brown coat with a big collar and many pockets, in which he would keep just about anything he found interesting. His hair was black and stuck up at all angles; I never saw him comb it. From behind, against the glare of the fluoro street

lights, he'd look eerie, his hair sticking up like a tangled afro. He'd often frighten people, especially when he'd start jumping about, tapping his feet and muttering away as if to nothing. I never minded, it was just Spiro; he was just a bit different, that's all.

I never met his parents. He had some, though. I'd ask to go home with him sometimes but he wouldn't let me come in. I suspected that they beat him a lot. He was always covered in bruises, and often I would find him crying alone, though he'd never want to talk about it. School was hard for him. The teachers never understood him. Once in maths during algebra, I remember the teacher drew an equation on the board. Spiro was the first to put his hand up. The teacher let him go up to the board. Spiro started at one end, from the top left. By the time he had finished, the whole board was covered with symbols. It had taken him five minutes. No one understood the answer but he seemed happy. Teacher sent him up to the headmaster, and after school Spiro had to stay back and write the equation out a thousand times. I stayed back to help and together we came up with a different answer each time, all of which Spiro said were wrong.

As we got older, the gang slowly split up. There was only Spiro and me then. Mostly we hung around Dean's after school, playing the vidies. He had worked out a way to cheat the vids and together we'd take bets. We'd make a bit of money that way, which we'd spend mostly down at Madam Trudeau's. Spiro had a special way with the ladies there. I never worked out what he did and he'd never talk about it. Spiro never talked much about ordinary things.

I was thirteen at this time and Spiro, I don't know, he was about the same, I guess. My parents had just moved into a new home on Denby

street. I was getting on with my parents okay then but we'd still argue a lot. My old man worked as a carpenter, building roofs and stuff like that. Back then times were good because a lot of houses were getting built on account of the economy. I didn't understand much about politics, only that my old man liked the president because he stood for old-time values like him. My mum, she was okay too: ran the local neighbourhood watch committee. I never understood that vigilante stuff; couldn't see how a bunch of old grannies could stop anyone breaking in anyway.

Spiro by then was always getting into trouble at school. Most days he didn't go, though we would meet at lunch break and often spend the time then or after school at Joe's. Joe was an old codger who collected all sorts of stuff, mostly from the dump. Spiro spent a lot of time there helping him fix stuff. Once working on an old 786, Spiro got the screen working again, only it wasn't the usual computer stuff. It was kinda weird. All sorts of writing came up like Egyptian hieroglyphics. Spiro said it was just lickety-split stuff.

Once around about this time coming home, passing by Mrs Schumacher's house, he cracked up laughing. That was the first time I heard him mention Chocky. Spiro just fell to the ground and rolled into a ball, chuckling,

'Chocky jumped the fence
And landed splat
In the middle of
Porcupine's hat.'

Spiro talked a lot about Chocky after that. The year ended and Spiro

never went back to school. I did one more year. By this time my sister had got married and moved away to New Jersey. Mum cried a lot then. This left only me in the family with my folks. The town started running down. Farms now mostly ran themselves. Dad called it a depression. Most folks were out of work, though Dad still got a few jobs and I'd help when I could. Things started changing slowly. Dad talked about how people now worked less hours and how the retirement age had dropped to fifty. Often Dad would say that it wasn't good for a man not to work. People have to do something he said, or they rot inside.

Spiro never had any trouble getting work. He could fix most things around town. Helped the farmers mostly with their hardware or any robbies that ran amuck. Often you would get runaways and Spiro would be called in. He'd fix them all right most times, only sometimes they'd work a bit different. One time with a robbie, he'd got him to talk better than with the usual moro talk. It was kind of eerie. Mostly only Spiro understood him, and the farmer made us trash him.

By the time I was sixteen I started getting pretty bored around town. My girl's name then was Pam. We did a lot of drugs and hung around a lot; most times we got stoned. Mum started drinking a bit and most nights she'd be drunk. Dad was also getting less work. Inside he just seemed to get sadder and sadder as if something within him had broken. The town seemed to fall apart and many people were leaving. Most of my friends had gone and Pam talked about going also. We fought a lot on account of this. I wanted to stay because of Spiro, though she said he was a weirdo and that I shouldn't worry about him. In the end she left, and I never heard from her again.

One day, not long after Pam had left, I found Spiro round the back

of Dean's with his ear pressed to the ground. Spiro hadn't grown much since I first met him. He still looked like a scrawny kid with his hair sticking out everywhere. He mostly wore overalls now, but he still had his long coat with the pockets.

'The road here goes underground,' he said.

I replied, 'Sure it does, Spiro, everyone knows that.' Sometimes it was best just to agree with Spiro.

'Chocky's trying to go home,' he said. 'Only they won't let him.'

He started pounding the ground then and screaming out loud. I had just got my licence and later I took him home. He lived away from home now, and as far as I knew his parents had moved out of town. He said nothing on the way there and I started to get worried.

This was the first change I noticed in Spiro. Most times he seemed like a kid, and up until the last days that I knew him, that was the way I always thought of him. When I got him home, I heard him say before I left, 'Chocky is lost and he can't get home.' I felt sorry for him. I had never seen him hurt before, not even when his parents used to beat him. Perhaps Spiro lost his innocence on that day; I never really understood what happened, only that from that day on he was never quite the same.

Not long after, Spiro got his licence. He still had his repair business so he bought a van, only he fixed it so that it drove different to most other autos. Looked different to, with wires, wheels and antennae attached all over the place. The government now paid me for being unemployed, but by the end of the year I started helping Spiro with the business. Most of the rest of that year he was quiet and didn't do much, but towards the end of the year he started to get violent and smash things up around town.

Telephones he never liked; he said they stopped Chocky from going home. It was the talk, he said; most lines were jammed up. Telephones started disappearing around town. One day he got caught and the Sheriff, breaking into his room, found them all under the bed, about thirty-five of them. Most of them were smashed, but I saw one that was different. The dial numbers now spiralled round and round, spinning constantly in a vortex. If you looked at it long enough, it was kind of hypnotic. Sheriff didn't arrest Spiro on account of the fact that, as he put it, he was a loon, but he got a warning and for the next six months he had to do community work.

After new year I got another girl, named Rachael. She was a skinny chick but lots of fun. I was still getting stoned a lot since there was not much else to do. Rachael never did drugs because of her asthma. Mum was always drunk now and Dad mostly just sat around doing nothing. The house started to run down and smelled most of the time of booze and vomit. Since many people had moved away, there were plenty of houses up for rent. I moved out of home, and rented a house with Spiro and Rachael two blocks from my parents.

Spiro was still seeing a woman at Madam Trudeau's, but other than that he had no other interest in women. He got along fine with Rachael, though. Rachael worked at Col's video, which was great, so we always had plenty of vidies to watch on the tube. Spiro had fixed things so that we got 3-D pictures and Rachael and I would spend most evenings at home watching movies or playing games. Spiro mostly wasn't interested, and spent a lot of his time in his room listening on a type of wireless, which he said let him hear talk from other places. Once he let me listen on the headphones, but I heard nothing but static. The queerest thing in

his room was a large cylinder that lay near one corner. Looking through from one end it was totally dark, but when you looked through from the other end nearest the wall you could see right into the room. Once, when Spiro was out, I put my hand inside it and it disappeared. Next I tried poking a broom handle through, but it never came out the other side, though I put it all the way in. It never scared me though; Spiro had all sorts of weird stuff like that.

Sometimes Mum came around to take the washing or to cook, but most times she was too drunk to know what she was doing. Dad, though, took an interest in the house and built a shed out the back for Spiro. He built an aviary, in which I started to keep parrots. Rachael loved them, and together we spent a lot of time trying to get them to talk. Some nights Rachael's parents would come around, and together with my mum and dad we'd have a party out the back. Dad would have to leave early when Mum became too embarrassing.

Around the country, things were settling down. Unemployment became a way of life for many people. Those that did have jobs often got rotated around, moving in and out of work so that others got a chance to work also. Those permanently unemployed lived off government welfare, and they seemed happy enough that way. The moon colonies were doing well, and often I'd dream about working up there. Space became the new frontier, and there was always plenty of work for those willing to live on satellites, but most people were scared and never wanted to leave home. The town now survived off what the farms produced, mostly synthesised and preserved foods.

Rachael became pregnant at the end of the year. At first she cried a bit over it but later she was happy. I was glad, though; I always liked kids.

Near Christmas time Spiro started getting pains inside his head. Lots of days he couldn't go outside. Spiro said he didn't know what was wrong. A doctor came a few times and once took him to the hospital for a CAT-scan. I watched Spiro's head disappear into something that looked like a football helmet while a scanner whirled around his head. The doctor found nothing unusual though, and sent him home again. Next week the pains got worse. Spiro made me board the window and room with lead. This wasn't easy, but a nuke plant in the next state sent us up most of what we needed. Spiro felt better after that, but he still couldn't go outside.

One day I found him curled into a ball in a corner of the room. He had his hands over his head and he was crying. He was trying to tell me something but I couldn't hear him properly. I wrote down though, as much as I understood. This is how it read:

Clankity clank
Chocky can't win
In all this din
Spiro now go look
In spare parts bin.

A week after that, the pains went away and Spiro said I could take down the lead sheeting. Life returned pretty much to normal, and Spiro and I started working again. This was good because we needed the money now that the baby was coming.

In May Mum died. She had fallen and hit her head. The doctor said her blood wouldn't clot on account of the alcohol, and that she had

died of a haemorrhage. Dad was never quite the same after that. We had her cremated and I remember crying a lot. Most of the town came for the funeral. She had a lot of friends and the service had to be held three times to fit everyone into the chapel. Dad had her ashes scattered near where she was born. The house no longer stood, though, and the area had now become a park filled with Indian oaks. Spiro had made a little black box which he placed on the ground as Dad threw the ashes into the air. As they blew away in the wind coloured lights began to rise up from the box and dance all around us. They were very beautiful, like red, green and gold fireflies. Rachael began to cry and I remember seeing Spiro turn and smile at me.

In September the baby came. Dad drove Rachael to the hospital because I was stoned. By the time the baby was delivered I was sober though. It was a girl and we named her Christine. It was the happiest I had seen Dad since Mum had passed away, and that night we celebrated with a bottle of champagne. I stayed up late with Dad talking about things. I got to know him better then, and he told me how much he loved me and how, now that Mum had gone, and Sandra had moved away from home, I was all he had left.

Spiro loved the baby. Lots of the time he made toys for it. One toy he made was like a cube, only when you touched it, it changed shape and colour. Christine would play with it for hours. Spiro also seemed to understand baby talk, and often he would tell us what she wanted, like when she was hungry, or cold, or when the nappies needed changing. Rachael began to love Spiro too and they spent a lot of time together.

I was still dreaming about working in the space colonies and started studying again, doing mostly tech courses and stuff like that. Spiro

taught me a lot about computers and I passed most things easily. Rachael was worried that I might leave her one day, but I said that the colonies had room for whole families and that she shouldn't worry.

Dad would still come visit a lot, but by now he was starting to move about slowly and mostly he would just sit around. By then we had got one of the cockies, an Australian Sulphur Crest, to talk. Often Dad would bring it into the house and let it sit on his shoulder. He loved that bird and we nicknamed it Daddy-o.

The baby had just turned one year old when Spiro got sick again. This time the pains were stronger. With Dad, I put the lead lining back into the room, but it didn't seem to help. We all became worried. A lot of the time Spiro would lie curled into a ball. He kept talking about Chocky and about how he was trying to get home. The doc come and gave him pills to help with the pain, but Spiro said they only made him feel sicker.

Spiro still had the round cylinder in his room. One day I found tiny bells and cymbals dangling on bits of fishing line around its rim. They jangled about making little tinkling noises, although I couldn't feel any wind in the room. What was stranger still was that those at the bottom of the cylinder stuck straight upwards, as if they were hanging down.

The next day I found Spiro lying near the edge of the cylinder. He was crying loudly and beating the carpet with his fist. 'Chocky's come home, Chocky's come home,' he said over and over again. He was in a lot of pain and I carried him up to his bed. 'Chocky dance, Chocky prance, Chocky's come home, Chocky's come home.' He kept on repeating that. I went to get Rachael but when we got back to the room we saw that he had fainted.

In the afternoon the doc came and took him away. We were all sad and wanted to know what was going to happen but the doc couldn't tell us. After a week in hospital Spiro woke up. Immediately he started screaming loudly and thrashing around in his bed. No one knew what to do. Dad, Rachael and I visited often, but he was always the same. They had him strapped down now and kept on giving him needles and things to ease the pain, but nothing would help. One day the pains stopped, but Spiro was never the same. He would mostly just sit still, his eyes staring blankly away. He never seemed to recognise anyone. The doc said they would have to take Spiro to a mental hospital in the next town. Rachael started crying then. The doc made me sign some papers and the next day they took Spiro away.

We tried to visit often but on most days they wouldn't let us see him. One day I snuck in. I found Spiro strapped to a wheelchair. His head was lying to one side and I saw spit running out of his mouth. One of the warders came up. I saw him wipe the spit from Spiro's chin with a paper towel, but instead of throwing the towel away, he wiped the spit all over Spiro's chest. I screamed and ran at him. Three men grabbed me. As I was being pulled away, Spiro saw me and lifted his head. I heard him scream my name and saw him thrash about and try to get out of the chair. Another warder came and put straps on him. As I punched at the men Spiro started to cry, but by then I was out of the room and they had locked the doors.

The next day I went with Dad and Rachael to see one of the doctors at the asylum. He explained how they had been trying to treat Spiro with drugs and sleep therapy but I found out later how they had been giving him electric shocks and sticking all sorts of needles and wires into his brain. Spiro never got better.

One day in June, at night, I broke into the hospital. I found Spiro alone in a room. The door was locked but I managed to break in. Sitting on Spiro's bed I looked down at him. He was very still and quiet. I started to cry. From the chemist I had got a syringe. Pam had been hooked on heroin. One day she had showed me how much could kill. I never took any though. Secretly I'd kept some and I now injected this into Spiro's arm. There were other needle marks there so no one would ever know. Spiro started jerking a bit but soon he was still. When I got home I cried all night thinking about the old times. Rachael knew what I had done and she said it had been the right thing.

I still live in this town today. Christine is ten years old now. Dad passed away when she was five and it seemed then that all that I had loved in the world had gone from me. It is easy to be bitter about things but I have learnt it's always best to look ahead and never to forget the good times.

No one was quite like Spiro. He saw the whole world differently; perhaps he saw more than most people. I don't know. Dad always taught me to accept people's differences, and not to hate what I can't understand. The value of human life, he said, lies in its diversity. Everyone is important. Perhaps I was never smart enough to appreciate Spiro's uniqueness but we were friends. Maybe if we could all learn to be friends, we would come to understand each other better, and perhaps then we would be able to see things the way Spiro did.

The Lepers





The Man on the Bench

He sat alone on the bench. As I made my way up the path, I saw him slumped against its lime green rails. The bench was tilted slightly down and to the back; one thick, square, wooden leg sank into the ground among a tall clump of grass. The park wasn't large, an acre at the most. Weatherboard cottages, back-to-back, lined two sides of the park, while a road, and the red brick of a factory bordered the remaining sides. From each corner a white gravel path lined with poplars led to the centre.

I stopped and held myself still. He was an old man. His head was held down but I could see his tanned, lined face. His face seemed to sag with his body. His jowls hung loosely, his eyes stared half closed. I became conscious of my own breathing. For a moment I stood listening to the slow exhalation of my nostrils. I felt strangely weary.

Looking down, I ran my hand around the back of my neck. I wondered if Phillip would be home. I'd been unlucky to miss Chris at his house, which was where I'd left my car, and had then decided to walk the two blocks to Phillip's house. As I straightened my neck, I looked again at the man.

A sparrow had landed at his feet. Its head twitched from side to side as it hopped and picked amongst the gravel. I pursed my lips and smiled. The man remained still. He wore a finely cut grey suit with wide lapels, a thick fawn felt coat, and a grey tweed cap. Around his ears and

the back of his neck, white hair lay neatly trimmed. One hand rested spread against his thigh. On the thick, third finger, a large topaz ring gleamed. Briefly the sun broke through the clouds and lit the bench. The man's eyes squinted and I saw the bunching of thick crow's-feet. I swallowed and shivered, feeling the heaviness of my leather jacket across my shoulders.

I turned. Graffiti, scrawled and sprayed in bright colors, decorated the red bricks of the factory wall. Under a grey sky, the roofs of the adjacent houses lay dented and sagging. I thrust my hands deep into the pockets of my jacket and for a moment stood digging my right heel into the gravel. When I faced the man again, I saw him rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. His feet had stretched forward, his fine Italian shoes covered with dust.

I stared up at the stark and spindly poplars. The branches swayed listlessly, silently. Along the road a white Ford station wagon with a rusted rear hatch and a flecked chrome bumper made its way carefully over a speed bump. I closed my eyes. From somewhere there came the sound of a hammer. I listened to it thumping and ringing. Further in the distance, children played, a dog barked. I wondered if Phillip would be surprised to see me. Somehow it suddenly meant a lot to me. I opened my eyes.

The man seemed to have sagged further. I watched the slow rise and fall of his chest, the doleful droop of his head. An autumn leaf caught and circled in the air. It landed on the bench, curled abruptly, then drifted away. I took my hands from my pockets and ran them through my hair. I realized that I should be going.

I walked on haltingly, conscious of the heavy tread of my feet on

the gravel. Chris would probably see my car parked at the front of his house and wonder where I had gone. It was a day for visiting friends. I increased the length of my stride.

As I neared the man, his head jolted up. He smiled and nodded. Briefly I saw his eyes twinkle. I tipped my head and smiled in return.

The Lepers





Requiem

Where the man stands everything is still. Noises drift up - the squeal of tyres, the wail of a police siren, the distant babble of people. The man stands with feet apart, hands clasped before him, head down. Though his eyes are half closed, they stare far away.

Across the grey, flat, cement of the roof, a wind blows. It whips at the man's faded jeans and billows an ill-fitting leather jacket. Suddenly the man's cheeks twitch, his eyes open, his head lifts and stares into the night. Wisps of grey cloud drift over bright stars. The moon, as if eaten away, sits half in blackness. The man's hands tremble and he doubles over.

Below a street performer stands in a doorway, saxophone to his lips, a case strewn with coins open on the pavement. A young couple stand before him holding each other by the waist, their heads resting together. Other people pass by, listen for a while, then move on their way.

The saxophone player stares up as he blows. Abruptly he lowers his instrument. For a moment he is still, then he brings the saxophone again to his lips. The notes come long and sweet, melancholic, drifting, rising. All the time his eyes do not leave the roof.

On the rooftop the world is far away. The man's sneakers slip. He sways and staggers. When he comes to rest again, his breathing is heavy. With a jerk of his hand he rubs at the stubble on his chin, then draws

his hand down from his eyes over sallow, blotchy skin. His movements become erratic. He paces, clutching, clawing at his jeans. When at last he halts, his breathing comes in short sharp gasps, his teeth grit and spit-
tle runs from between his teeth.

The couple have left the saxophone player. The player steps from the doorway and moves quickly along the path. People hurry past laughing, pushing. He halts near a winking neon sign directly beneath the man. The player's face and long blond hair are damp with sweat. He lifts the saxophone slowly and blows a long haunting note.

Cars move down the street hissing steam and smoke. One stops. A woman in purple tights steps away from a post and leans in the window. The player turns momentarily and kicks at the car fender. The woman rises and glares as the car moves off. Tears squeeze from the player's eyes. His back bends and a sharp note howls.

On the roof, the man stares with trembling lips. His hands jerk spasmodically. The moon crowns his cropped hair with an aura of gold light. Darkness outlines his gaunt frame. Suddenly the man's eyes glitter, then close. He sways. The wind blows and flaps his jacket against his arms. The world stills. A pigeon flutters away and circles the air. The man's knees give. He falls and spins as the world rushes by. There is a thud on the pavement like the falling of a heavy sack.

The saxophone player lowers his instrument. For a moment he stands, then runs towards the body. Cars squeal to a halt. People scream and rush from shops. The player bends over the body. Slowly he runs his hands over the man's face, then touches his own. The crowd pushes forward. Suddenly the player unslings the saxophone from his neck and gently places it across the man's chest. He squeezes the man's fingers

down on the keys. The crowd murmurs.

The wail of a siren comes down the street. People make way. The player hugs the body and lays his head upon the man's chest. Hands grip him under his arm and he is lifted. A stranger offers him his saxophone. The player's shoulders sag. He looks for a moment at the stranger's eyes, then snatches at the instrument. The crowd surges. The player is pushed away.

The Lepers



The Lepers

For Christian Rantzau



Compassion For Klaus

Klaus gasped as Curt slid the knife into his side. He turned, a tear just visible down his cheek. Curt twisted the knife, feeling it meet some resistance as it turned between the ribs. His friend groaned and slumped against him. Stumbling back, Curt held the body tight while he bore the knife deeper. Klaus slumped a final time. Curt braced his back as the body twitched and convulsed. When it was over, he let his friend fall and wiped the knife on a rag that lay nearby.

From a tiny window, high in the building behind him, a light slanted across the darkness and lit the place where Klaus had fallen. He lay with his head buried in the torn side of a cardboard box. Paper, cans, bottles lay all around. Blood slowly ran from his chest onto the bluestone paving.

Thunder cracked. Curt sank onto his haunches and looked up. Lightning flashed against the rough sooted walls of the alley, across his pale face, across the drawn lines of his eyes. He lowered his head and sat still, misting the air in slow rhythmic breaths, his eyes half-closed. Gradually he raised his hand and touched the flowing blood. It was still warm. He dipped his middle three fingers deeper into the blood until he felt it creep under his long nails, then he stirred his hand until the roughness of the pavement slid easily against his fingers.

A drop of rain fell onto Curt's cheek. He remained staring down and

moved his hand up to the wound. The flesh felt soft and familiar against the coarseness of Klaus's shirt. He dug his fore and middle finger into the slit of the wound; bits of flesh caught under his nails and he felt the hardness of bone. He withdrew his hand quickly and stared down at it. Blood glistened against his white skin. He curled the ends of his fingers so that the blood ran into the cup of his hand. Slowly he brought his hand up to his face, and spreading his fingers, watched the blood stretch in fine threads between his tips. Another drop of rain fell against his cheek. He closed his eyes, brought his forefinger to his mouth and ran it along his lips. He heard the sound of applause, saw the fall of a curtain, he and Klaus, hands linked, bowing.

Curt looked at his friend's face again. The eyes stared open, almost smiling. He bent forward and kissed his lips. They felt warm, soft, still moist. He spread his fingers and touched the brow lightly, then ran his hand down from the forehead, over the eyebrows, and into the socket of the eyes. The eyes yielded under his fingers. He touched the eyelids, drew them closed, opened them again. The eyes looked at him calmly. Curt dropped his head. Water dripped from his nose.

'Klaus, remember the time on the ledge. I stood on the tallest tower in the world looking down. The world looked small, not large as I had expected. I stared across the towers of the city. Smog, drifting between the buildings, sat like desolate clouds on the shoulders of man. I watched an antenna sway in the breeze. Saw a bird alight. Heard it call. The world spun in a daze. I imagined myself falling, spinning down between the towers, history receding before me. We have not come so very far.' Curt shifted his weight so that both his hands cupped his friend's face. 'Why did you save me?'

The rain began to fall in bigger drops. It dropped coolly between Curt's hair, ran down his spine. He shivered, lowered his head, clutched the cheeks of Klaus's face.

'You were the only one I loved. The only one who filled my lonely nights. You were my mentor. I tried to be like you, to learn your compassion, to love as you did, but somewhere in time these things were lost to me. I have spent my life chasing them, elusive dreams that swept like wisps between my fingers.'

Thunder cracked, the rain came steadily, lightning lit the alley in a quick flash. Curt dropped his head. 'Where does one begin to look for life?'

The window banged shut behind him. Curt picked up his knife and drove the tip through his hand. He withdrew the knife. His neck arched, his mouth strained taunt. He lowered his head, watched the rain wash his blood down his arm and soak his shirt.

'Why did you befriend me? As boys we rummaged in the gutters, burnt welfare checks over lit drums in winter, lived off the filth of human kindness. Later, we rode the edge of insanity. We came to the theatre -- auditions, The Method, fame. We stoked our lives with drugs, discarded boys on the spent flame of our desire, traveled the world on stolen credit, but always, we slept in the same gutter, smelt the same decay in our nostrils.'

Curt rose. Momentarily he felt faint. Dimly he heard the squeal of a tyre, honk of a horn, people yelling, the howl of a sax, the pounding of feet as they splashed through puddles. He watched the water team down and smiled as it sparkled in the light of the window. He raised his hands and felt water run down his arms, splash across his face. He

drank. Thunder roared, lightning split the sky, his body began to wrack in spasms. He closed his eyes, clenched his fists, squeezed his jaws tight. Slowly he lowered his head. He stood feeling his chest heave, listened to his breathing. As if from far away, as if he stood somewhere else, he heard the splash of the rain, the hollow drumming of it against empty boxes, the gush from drain pipes.

A siren far off sounded through the night. He raised his head, and thought he glimpsed someone in the window. He walked forward to the end of the alley. A cat scampered away. He walked quickly back to Klaus and straddled the body. He grabbed Klaus's leather jacket in both hands and heaved the body upwards. He shook the body so that Klaus's head thumped against the blue-stone. Tears burst from Curt's eyes. His mouth strained open. His voice howled, 'Why can't I feel pain for your dying? ... Answer ... Why did you smile?'

Curt hugged the body to his chest.

'Klaus, I couldn't let you live. The world is not the place for you. You loved me, but I couldn't let you see my death.'

A blue flashing light lit the alley. The click of rifles sounded through the rain. Curt rose and stepped from the body. He bowed his head.

'In the end, we kill everything that we love. There is Klaus, for some, more than one kind of dying.'

The Lepers





The Dissolution of Jean Zucchet

Few people dared to visit since his decay had begun. His left arm had fallen off three days ago and he now sat staring at it with a twisted expression. Nothing had prepared him for the horror of his decline; not even his critics. Why, he wondered, had they not warned him? His right eye suddenly began to hurt. It had started like this with his arm. First a sharp pain, then a period of numbness. Believing that his eye would soon fall out, he placed his remaining arm upon his lap in hope of catching it.

Jean Zucchet, one of the most famous essayists of his time, had reached the height of his fame at the age of forty-two. It came then as a shock to those who reported on his every word that his life could have taken such a sudden, and very unexpected, turn for the worse.

Sitting with his arm in his lap, Jean glared at the door to his room. Since the beginning of his dissolution, the door had been kept closed. At first he had wanted it that way, but over the months he began to feel himself imprisoned. Bending stiffly, he struggled with one of his shoes, wanting to hurl the shoe against the door. As he pulled at the shoe, however, he heard a snap. His ankle had broken away. He threw the shoe to the ground and slumped back in his chair.

Where was Catherine? He had not seen her for two days. Had she finally deserted him? He looked around the room. It was sparse, una-

dorned with pictures or ornaments. It contained only his bed, another chair and his green writing desk covered with papers. The only light came from a single globe above his head. Since his illness the room had seldom been cleaned and dust now lay everywhere in thick layers, especially on the floor-boards, where it swirled and crept about at the slightest disturbance.

His dissolution had begun a year ago. Gradually his left hand had grown stiffer until he could no longer write. Then the stiffness had spread to his legs. First his right, then his left, until eventually, as his limbs began to feel like stone, he had been forced to remain in this chair. When the symptoms first began he hadn't understood what was happening. Then one day, towards the middle of the year, Catherine hinted that perhaps the bitterness and weariness that ate at him had manifested itself physically. Jean had at first scoffed, but later began to wonder, when over the months his condition did not improve.

Suddenly, at the back of his neck he felt a pain. He lifted his arm and rubbed at it. Where was Maria with his food? Suddenly his eye fell out. It slid down his face. Caught on lapel of his suit. He let out a scream. Pounded his single foot up and down.

He heard the door open. Was it Catherine? He could not turn to look. He heard footsteps. Yes, it was her.

'Catherine! Where have you been? Maria hasn't brought me any food.'

Catherine remained behind him. 'I've brought the food, Jean. Some soup that I made myself. It's vegetable. Your favourite.'

Jean tried to twist his head around. 'Why don't you come around the front where I can see you?' He tried again to turn his head. 'Why do you

leave me here alone?’

Catherine sniffed at a tear. Slowly she walked to the front of him. She gasped, then covered her mouth. Her voice shook slightly. ‘It’s not my fault, Jean. You make it difficult. Maria is too frightened to come in here. This past year she has wanted to clean your room, yet you intimidate her by arguing that you don’t want her to dust in your presence.’

‘I don’t like her wandering around all the time. Moving furniture, scraping chairs...’

‘Jean, she’s cleaning.’

Jean snapped his head back. ‘She knocks things over. She’s clumsy. She can’t even speak English.’

Catherine stared down at the soup. ‘You’re pitiless, Jean. Cynical of the world and its people.’

Jean’s face reddened and his eyes bulged. ‘Cynicism is a state which befalls us.’ Jean swallowed. He tried to look away from Catherine. ‘But I’m no cynic.’

‘Jean!’ Catherine took a deep breath. ‘Even your own friends don’t want to see you because they think you hold them in contempt. You go as far as to demand that they write for permission to see you.’

Jean thumped his fist on the chair arm. ‘That’s not true and you know it. I only asked it from that fool Harris.’

Catherine threw the bowl down. ‘He is your editor, Jean.’

Jean glared at the soup soaking up the dust. Catherine fell to her knees and buried her head in his lap. ‘I’m sorry, Jean. I didn’t mean to do that.’

Jean tried to push her away. Catherine got up quickly and straightened her dress. ‘Do you want me to bring you some more food?’

‘Yes, and hurry.’

As Catherine opened the door, Jean tried again to turn around. ‘Catherine, haven’t I done what I can for everyone in this household? Don’t I pay Maria twice the wage any servant of her standing deserves? Haven’t I sent your daughter through college ...’

Catherine slammed the door and stormed towards Jean. ‘Your daughter! What do you mean, your daughter? She’s your daughter too.’ Catherine threw her hands in the air and pulled at her hair. ‘Oh, what’s the use!’ She hurried out.

After a while, he again heard her light steps behind him. She walked carefully forward, balancing a new bowl of soup. She helped him eat, then cleaned up the mess on the floor. Before she left, she asked, ‘Do you want me to take your arm and foot to the freezer?’

Jean glared up at her. ‘No! just leave me alone.’

On hearing the door close behind him, Jean sagged in the chair. A slight guilt weighed on him. He wanted to call Catherine back, but he could not bring himself to yell for her. Instead, he tried to move his legs, hoping vainly that he might be able to hop to the door. The effort, however, made him tired and he soon fell asleep.

In the morning, Maria came. Immediately on opening the door, she shrieked, then slowly approached. When she came to stand in front of Jean, she stumbled back, almost dropping the porridge she had brought.

Jean looked up at her. His single eye narrowed. ‘Well don’t just stand there. Bring the food here.’

Maria extended the bowl in a shaking hand.

Jean snatched at the bowl. Balancing it on his thighs, he ate quickly. He spat repeatedly back into the bowl. ‘It’s lumpy.’

Maria stood looking down, twisting her finger in her apron. When he had finished eating, Maria took the bowl and removed his toilet from under the chair. Before leaving, she curtsied and asked, 'Monsieur Zuchet...' She began to shuffle her feet.

'Yes, what is it?' Jean snapped.

Maria fumbled with the bowls. 'John asks if you need him.'

Jean blinked up at her. 'Tell him to come up.'

Tall, thin, with wire-rimmed glasses, John walked in slowly. Glancing repeatedly behind him, he knocked the edge of his suitcase on the table. After fumbling with the lock, he drew out a sheaf of papers. They slipped from his hands and fell on the floor. Quickly he gathered them up and blew away the dust.

Jean coughed into his hand and pulled at his tie. 'I want to begin a dictation.'

John sat and readied his fountain pen. Jean coughed again. 'History has told us many lies. I will state an example...'

John's pen ran out of ink. Sweat broke out on the back of his neck. Half an hour later, when Jean had finished, he asked that his dictation be read back to him. John swallowed and squirmed about in his chair. As he was about to confess, Jean began to struggle with his left ear.

John hurried over. 'Can I help?'

'No!' Jean screamed. 'You can go now.'

John left quickly.

Jean's ear fell off. For a moment he sat staring at it as it lay in his lap, then he picked it up and shoved it in the pocket of his trousers.

No-one came again until late afternoon. By this time, Jean had undergone a remarkable transformation. He now had only one ear, one

eye, one arm and one leg. In short, he was now only half the man he used to be. To a man not used to admitting that he was in any way less than other men, this was not easy to take. It was Catherine who stood before him.

‘Where has everyone been?’ Jean demanded. ‘I’ve been alone nearly all day. Because of this I’ve had unsettling thoughts. I blame you for this.’

Catherine stood with her hands in her cardigan. ‘What do you mean, Jean?’

Jean frowned. ‘Half of my body is gone. I have become a cripple. You know how I despise deformity. What is a man to do when he becomes that which he despises? I feel like I’m living a nightmare. I hope you have brought me some good news.’

Catherine looked down. ‘Harris is here.’

‘That idiot. What does he want?’

‘He has come with the proof of your latest book.’

Jean glared at the ground. ‘I’m in no position to see him. What’s he going to say when he sees me like this?’

‘You don’t have much choice, Jean.’ Catherine squatted down beside him. ‘Anyway, he is a caring old man. You really should be more kind to him.’

Jean clenched his fist. ‘I treat him well enough. He makes money from me, doesn’t he?’

Catherine quickly kissed him on the cheek. ‘I’ll send him up right away.’

Jean raised his hand, but Catherine already stood by the door. As she opened it, Jean called, ‘Catherine, do you really believe I’m bitter and

twisted?’

Catherine swayed in the doorway. She bent her head and stood silently. A call sounded suddenly from downstairs. She looked up. A wet gleam lay in her eyes. Quickly she left.

Jean prepared himself as best he could. The last time Harris had been here, he had still been a whole man. First he squeezed his eye back into place. Then he dragged his shoe over and stood it beneath the severed stump of his ankle. He didn’t worry about his ear since his hair covered the hole. For a moment, he thought about what to do with his arm. Picking it up, he positioned it in place, and sat with his other arm holding it.

He heard Harris knock. Jean looked quickly across at his writing table. ‘Come in,’ he yelled.

Stephen Harris was probably in his last year of service as head of the publishing house. He wore a brown sports jacket with matching corduroy trousers. His tie was a shiny green silk and his shoes a warm tan. Balding and flecked with brown sun-spots, he sat his frail frame carefully in the chair next to the desk.

Jean smiled dolefully. ‘Why are you here?’

‘I have brought the proof of your book, *The Didactic Tentacle*.’

‘Yes, I know; Catherine told me. Why have you brought it to me?’

Stephen squinted and rubbed at his eyes. He shifted the chair forward a little.

‘Well?’ Jean snapped.

Stephen swallowed and bowed his head. ‘Jean, because of my age and health, I’ve had to hand over much of my editorship to my assistants, one of whom will take over when I retire. Most of them are

young, nervous, aware of your reputation, and know that you don't like to make changes. It has only been at this galley stage that I have seen the manuscript.'

Jean sat perfectly still. 'And?'

Stephen was silent for a while. He ran a hand over his face. 'Jean, you know that I have the highest respect for you. I've published nearly everything that you've written, but this book ... you are going to have to reconsider some of the material.'

Jean pursed his lips. 'What do you mean?'

Stephen looked up. He shielded his eyes against the bare bulb. 'It's a very bitter diatribe, Jean.'

Jean gripped his arm and fought to remain still. He realized that any movement might betray him to Harris. 'So,' he said.

Stephen rose and began to pace around the room. As he came around the back of Jean, he frowned. Quickly he returned to his seat. He looked hard into Jean's face. Something was wrong with Jean's left eye.

'Jean, this is my final plea. Let us just tone this down a little. The house will absorb the cost of the changes, you won't have to pay anything. Subtlety often works better than blatant outspokenness.'

Jean began to rock about in his chair. Stephen leaned closer. Jean's left eye was back to front. Stephen brought his hand up to his mouth. Sweat began to run from his forehead.

Jean frowned. 'You look ill, Stephen.'

The old editor lurched forward. 'Jean I'm sorry ... Excuse me.' With his hand still to his mouth, Stephen ran from the room.

Jean tried to spin around. With a thud his arm fell onto the floor. Jean cursed. Fool, he thought. The proof sheets lay scattered around his

chair. Across many of the pages he saw red correction marks and circled paragraphs. Jean tried to bend forward but could not. He kicked at the papers.

Throughout the rest of the day he sat slumped in the chair. Only Maria came again to visit. While he dozed, she left him some food on a small table she had brought and once more took away his toilet.

Over the next month Jean's condition remained stable. Since his sudden sharp decline had begun, he had, perhaps not unexpectedly, started to look more closely at himself. Again and again he wondered if Catherine was right. Was he bitter? Had the bitterness manifested itself physically? But did he not love the world? Was he not doing his best, through his essays, to save the world from its own folly? He spent the month deep in introspection. One day, when Maria came, he smiled at her. She dropped the tray of food she was carrying in shock. The next day he let her clean his room, and towards the end of the month, he finally allowed his friends to visit. Catherine, too, came more often, staying longer each time.

Sadly though, the ideal didn't last. On the sixth week after Harris's visit, Jean's book was released. A storm of controversy developed. As the news slowly filtered through to Jean, his sudden acquired tolerance broke. The first sign was that his teeth began to fall out. Jean became violently depressed. All visits to him stopped and only Catherine was allowed to enter his room. On one such visit, Jean spoke to her sourly.

'Catherine, haven't I given my life to the pursuit of teaching the world's innocent? And what have I got in return but condemnation! This very country has been against me all along. Haven't I every right to be angry? That grotesque caricature in the paper, for instance. Do

you really think people see me like that? Like a type of armed academic mercenary.'

Catherine stood silently. When Jean paused to fiddle with a tooth, she broke in. 'Jean, your agent rang to say that the press are coming tomorrow morning. She wants to know if it's okay with you. If not, she said she'll be here to handle the questions.'

Jean pounded his fist on the arm of the chair. 'The press. What makes her think I want to see them? Tell that squirrel of a publicist that she's not to set one foot in this house. She probably engineered the whole thing just to get her face in the spotlight again.'

Catherine stepped closer. She said quietly. 'Don't you think you should see them, Jean? It would give you a chance to clarify things.'

Jean clenched his jaw. His lips puckered inwards. 'All right...I'll see them, but she's not to be there.'

Catherine sniffed and wiped under her eyes. Quietly she left.

Jean was unable to sleep that night. How could he fool the press? He tried to think of a speech. Slowly he slipped into an abyss of melancholia and despair. By midnight all his hair had fallen out and lay in huge tufts beside his chair. To him this was the final indignity; however, his mind continued to burn feverishly. Slowly, as morning approached, he thought of what to say. He rehearsed his lines over and over. Strangely though, a guilt, a certain reservation about his speech weighed on him. Despite this, he tapped his fingers on the chair arm as he waited for Catherine.

As soon as she walked in, without giving her a chance to speak, he told her what to do. Immediately she went to get his severed parts from the freezer. With duct tape she tied his arm and ankle into place. Next,

by using some suture thread, she carefully sewed on his ear. Then, after sweeping up his hair, she glued it onto a bathing cap and drew it tightly over his head. Finally she made a patch to cover his missing eye and did her best to wash and freshen his suit.

The press crowded into the room at nine-thirty. Jean found himself blinded by the glare of flash bulbs. When most of the excitement and babble had died down, he raised his right arm into the air.

‘Ladies and gentleman of the press, I want to make it clear to you that you are fortunate to be here; you well know my disposition to the media is not a kind one. I also want to stress that no-one is to interrupt the discourse which I am about to begin. If there are any questions, you may ask them when I finish. If I am interrupted but once, I will ask you all to leave.’ Jean narrowed his eye and gazed around the room. ‘Is that clear?’ The press murmured and jostled but were soon quiet. Jean Zuchet continued.

‘Thankyou. Now, as you are all aware, the release of my book *The Didactic Tentacle* has aroused some controversy. I ask you why?’ Suddenly Jean began to experience a series of aches from various parts of his body. He felt sweat drip down the back of his neck, but carried on.

‘People believe me to be bitter and cynical. I say that I am not. I have always sought only to show the truth. I do not believe in self-denial because facing the truth is harder. Why then am I, when I speak with such sincerity, dismissed as a bore and pessimist? I will tell you. It is because of fear. You are all afraid. You are afraid of your lives. At home you sit and tremble. At night you sweat in your sleep. Life is an uncertain thing, you say. Life is fragile. Yes, it is. But your lives will come more easily to you when you admit that you must be honest to yourselves.’

Jean drew in his breath. 'I write of birth and death, of the struggle of life, and of the search for identity. Why? Because I do not deny my existence. I do not deny that there is a reason for my birth, for my life and for my death.' Jean cocked his eye and grunted. 'So what am I speaking of? I am speaking of altruism. Selfless devotion to the welfare of others.' Suddenly two of Jean's back teeth spat out. The press gasped. Jean did his best not to mumble.

'I say you sit and tremble. This is because you are forever running away. You run away from yourselves. But yourself catches up with you. It stretches out a hand that tugs at your throat, at your breath, at your denial of your responsibilities. Why should I sympathize with you?

'I at least have written of suffering. And I have sought to understand suffering. I have written of alienation and I have sought to free people from alienation. I have also written of love. Of the struggle to obtain love, and of the struggle to maintain love.'

Abruptly Jean slumped to one side. Looking down he saw that his right leg had broken off at the thigh. Immediately there was an excited babble and a simultaneous firing of flash bulbs around the room. Jean quickly hurried on.

'We must all learn to love our fellow man. Only that way can we overcome our selfishness, our desire, perhaps our want, but not our need, to help ourselves first. I may be talking about an ideal, but I believe it is one to which we must aspire. In my book I have essayed, in detail, our past crimes, our selfish acts, our callous turnings of a blind eye to acts of barbarity and greed.'

Jean paused to catch his breath. He was sweating profusely now. He continued with effort. 'I will not list man's crimes again now. Or at this

moment reveal anything new to you. You must read the book. Everything I have to say is there. It is a summation of my life's work.' Jean paused again. He tried to wipe his face but he could not move his arm. He swallowed and felt a tooth move inside his mouth. He coughed out a light spray of blood.

'You are probably asking then, why you are here. I will tell you. I want to prove to you the extent of my sincerity. I want to explain, how all my life, I have desired nothing else but to make a difference in the world for the sake of good.' With a thud Jean's right arm fell on the floor. As well, his head began to loll precariously to one side. The press jostled and muttered with increased excitement. Jean wanted to scream. Suddenly he saw Catherine standing at the edge of the crowd.

She stood dabbing at her face with a handkerchief. Jean felt a pain in his chest, like a burn. His head felt light and his eyesight misted. Suddenly and finally, the realization came that he had been deluding himself throughout his whole life. An overwhelming fear came over him. Catherine fought to squeeze forward. He thought he heard her call his name.

Sweat ran all the more profusely down Jean's face. Was it too late to explain? Was there still hope for him? Again he tried to wipe his face. He flung his head back. The press pushed forward. Flash bulbs fired.

'Please.' Jean shouted. 'Let me finish. Out of respect...please!' Jean sniffed. The press was quiet. Catherine now stood at the front.

Jean bowed his head. 'Representatives of the press, I am sorry.' Jean raised his head. 'Only now have I realized that I have been deluding myself. In preaching to the wider audience of all mankind, I believed my efforts so noble that I forgot the individual, and more importantly, those closest to me.' Jean shook his head. His mouth stretched and contorted

wildly as he fought to explain.

‘I appeal to you. You must look at all my work. You must strip away the bitterness. You must look past the apparent pessimism and gloom. You must examine more closely the themes. I talk of the struggle to understand, and of love within that struggle. How better could I have hoped to portray the beauty of life than to show people in struggle? My essays dealt with truths, and may have showed the horror of life, but they at least confronted life’s issues, which surely is the first step to finding solutions.’ Jean felt a sudden overwhelming weariness. There was a searing ache in his neck. ‘Throughout my life, I have been misrepresented and misunderstood. Because of this I worked hard and learnt to harden my heart to protect myself from pain. Consequently, my arguments became ones of intellect rather than emotion. Will the world forgive me?’

With a thud Jean’s head fell to the floor and landed with a squelch on the severed underside. Jean’s single eye stared sadly and tear-laden at the press. He tried once more to speak, but as his lips touched, they froze. A single tear dropped to the floor-boards.

Catherine broke into a wail and ran to him. Gently, she picked up the bloody, severed head and cradled it. The press broke into a frenzy.

The Lepers



The Lepers





VISIONS OF I

Johanna and I walk on broken glass, shattered towers of yesteryear, megalomaniac dreams.

Paths lie over-grown with weeds. We pick amongst them with sticks, we examine each other's souls, broken like the towers, holed like the walls, tattered remnants that once had vision.

Dust blows down nameless streets, whips at fallen posts, billboard advertisements, messages for the hungry. Our eyes stare, Campbell's soup tins, hollow on paper.

I clutch at Johanna's hand, stare at her face; wind blows golden hair, mist fills my eyes. We cry tears that spill on dry ash.

Memories burn in empty skulls, gilded by time, by hope, by blind longing. Passages of wrath, chained desires, trapped vessels of grief. Johanna and I, our bodies stand unsated. We explore each other with questions.

Desolation fills our nostrils. We clothe ourselves in torn sheets like togas. We rummage beneath fallen idols, under the over-turned carcasses of rusted automobiles, watch Saint Christopher dangle from broken mirrors.

The world speaks of tragedy, of sorrow, of why. There is the stink of sewer, of decay, of entropy in the faces of man. At night, stars like questioning sentinels gape between the towers.

Johanna and I entwine. We embrace in moonlight, kiss each other's

breasts, we copulate like animals among the broken tenements of hope.

Rain falls like mist, melancholy tears that cling in droplets of despair to the eaves of our desire.

Store mannequins glare, used people, broken and accusing like statues of antiquity. We clutch at their smooth skins, embrace their dreams, clothe them in togas like ourselves.

Empty lots beckon, black wounds, seeping shadows of tar, overblown now with dust and tumble-weeds.

Deserted halls stare and echo judgement across polished floorboards. We gaze at cobwebbed ceilings, at dust-lined drapes, at chandeliers that glisten dead light.

Electrical wires snap and spark, dancing vipers that once clung between posts, lost now like fireflies in the night. They talk no more.

Centuries are brought to dust. In succession the works of man erode and are brought to bow.

Like Broglas we tango amid the ruins, we laugh in madness, we dance on tightropes between the towers.

We buy time, we speak silently in silence.

The Lepers





THE PODIUM MOTH

(A Narrative Screenplay)

I

Across from her, the Pakistani businessman's teeth shone wetly. Linda rubbed her hands over her belly and slid her g-string down her thighs. She spun and faced her back to him, then bent and cupped her hand between her legs. Quickly, she flicked her hand away and spun again. The Pakistani's hands kneaded the couch to either side of him. Linda leapt into his lap and ground her groin against his chest.

Lying in shadow at the far end of the couch, Jack closed heavy hands to either side of a long, pinched nose and focused his eyes on the mirrored ceiling ball. Across the dark tan of the ceiling, the ball fanned out rainbow-edged diamonds in concentric circles. Jack felt the heat of his breath as it caught against his palms and closed his eyes.

The bar was full. From the direction of the stage, the staccato beat of dance house pop thumped constantly. Men sat in black lounge chairs grouped around the stage, or stood leaning against the bar counter. Next to a table, a man laughed into his friend's ear. As Linda sprang from the Pakistani's lap, she brushed Jack's leg. He lifted his head slowly. Linda smiled at him gently and ran her hands up through her hair. Jack rubbed at his eyes with thumb and forefinger. As he straightened, he noticed someone standing before him.

‘Do you mind if I sit down, Jack?’

Jack looked up and recognized Elaine. He shook his head.

Elaine sat down heavily and fell against the back of the couch. Jack stared at her silently. She pushed herself forward.

‘There’s something I have to tell you, Jack.’ She looked down. Jack reached for his drink on the table and turned towards her. ‘Two men came looking for you today.’

Jack’s eyes glazed. He swallowed and sat staring down silently. His hand shook slightly as he lifted his glass. ‘What did they want?’

‘They had a picture of you.’ She turned towards him. ‘They were showing it around.’

Jack drew in his breath and removed a packet of Camel filters from the inside of his jacket. He tapped out a cigarette. ‘They ask any questions?’

‘What nights you come here. If you were here last Thursday.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I said I didn’t know.’

Jack leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He stared at her, then drawing slowly on the cigarette, puffed upward. ‘What about the other girls?’

Elaine crossed her legs and was momentarily silent. ‘Most of the girls I saw shook their heads. I don’t know about the doormen.’

Jack rose. He walked from the couch and halted his long, lean frame by an empty table. Elaine came up behind him. ‘Are you in some kind of trouble, Jack?’

Jack took his cigarette from his lips. ‘There are many kinds of trouble, Elaine.’ Smoke blew in streams from his nostrils. ‘What kind do you imagine I’m in?’

She swallowed. ‘The police come here all the time. I’m just warning

you ... to maybe stay away.'

He looked at her as she stared down. Her long brunette curls brushed her breasts where they sat round and full against the transparent black of her body suit. 'I need to come here, Elaine. I think you know that. I'll take my chances.'

She looked up. 'Jack ...' Her brown eyes shifted slowly. She snapped her head away.

Jack threw back his head and drained his glass. The ice clinked as it fell against the bottom. 'I'm going to get another drink. Come and see me later.'

Elaine nodded weakly.

At the bar, he watched the swish of her black tutu as she made her way through the tables. A man in a blue suit approached her and took her by the upper arm. Elaine bent towards him and stared over his shoulder to where he pointed at a table. Jack lowered the grey brim of his hat and leaned forward onto the bar counter. He ordered a brandy from the waitress. When it came, he stood staring down for a moment, swirling the drink, then with halting steps moved towards the podiums.

Kyra sat with her legs open before a row of men. She slid across onto her stomach, smiled and pumped her hips up and down. Jack sipped from his drink and moved to where the men sat. Two men held house money, another a five-dollar note. They whispered to each other. The one with the five held it up to Kyra. She arced her leg in the air and folded the note into her garter. The men laughed and leaned back on the couch. Jack pursed his lips, stared for a while at his drink, then lifted his head.

On a couch to his left, three young men in blue jeans and shirts

sat nudging each other. A group of men came in through the door. They halted and stared with wide expressions. A hostess approached them. Near the glass-curtained showers, Elaine moved between a group of lounge chairs, her garter hanging with twenties. She bent to a man slumped drunkenly in a chair. Jack swung down the steps and pushed his way along the bar.

In the men's room he splashed his face with water. For a moment he stood with hung head, gripping the bowl, then raised his face to the mirror. Light reflected off his high cheek-bones and shadowed the hollows of his cheeks. Five years had not erased his saturnine pallor. He closed his eyes and squeezed his hands to his face.

Outside he made his way to the pool tables and lit a cigarette. A dancer in a blue-sequined, tasselled bra smiled at him as she led a man past. Jack stared after her. On one of the couches edging the pool tables, she propped a stilettoed heel on the man's knee. The man folded a twenty and pushed it under the elastic of her garter. Jack drew on the cigarette and began to pace. Turning near a pillar, he looked for Elaine. She sat with another dancer by a table near a black curtained wall. He hurried over and sat down. Her companion rose as Elaine leaned forward.

‘I've been looking for you, Jack.’

Jack reached for the ashtray. Suddenly the thump of the music stopped and the DJ announced, ‘Okay gentleman, podium change coming up.’ Jack glanced toward the booth. The DJ touched his hands to his headphones. ‘Will you welcome, from the harbour city, on podium number one, the lovely Alisha, next on podium number two, Cindy, the Indy 500 poster girl, and finally, on podium number three, the delightful

Tanya.' The girls stepped off the stage. The DJ prompted further. 'Remember gents, the more tips, the more you see and enjoy.'

Elaine picked up her drink. 'I thought you'd left?'

Jack tugged at the brim of his hat. 'I'd like to see you later.'

'It's against the rules, Jack, you know that.'

'I know.'

Elaine edged her chair closer. 'They'll have my butt if I'm found out.'

'Maybe.' Jack tapped into an ashtray. 'But you're the most popular dancer here, don't tell me the management won't allow you some liberty.'

'There are liberties and there are liberties, Jack. You're supposed to take your fantasies home with you in your head, not on your arm.'

Jack stared at her. Elaine's lips quivered. He drew on the cigarette. 'My address is Regency Towers, top level, number 48. I'll expect you around three.'

Elaine stared at her drink as the manageress approached with her clipboard. Noticeably pale, Elaine turned to her. They spoke quickly. Elaine rose.

'It's my turn on the stage.' She put down the glass, nearly missing the table. 'After three ... if I can.'

Jack ground his cigarette into the ashtray and lay back as she made her way to the change room. He felt the dampness of sweat at the back of his neck. A dancer in a slashed pink bodysuit approached. He waved her away and turned the menu holder over and over against the black enamel of the table.

On the stage, Elaine stepped from behind black curtains. The DJ's voice rose and fell. 'Okay gents ... from the pages of Kitten and Pet mag-

azine, will you welcome Elaine Duvall.' His voice drifted into a drool. 'She'll be on the stage for about ten minutes, then she'll be available for some table dancing.'

The music started, more upbeat and with a faster tempo than the previous dancer's. Jack sat up. Elaine now wore a red g-string beneath a pink mini, matching red top, and shimmering, rainbow chequered sleeves which were cut away beneath the arm and bound at the wrist, armpits and at the collar of the neck. She scissored and spun from one pole to the next, her shimmering sleeves lending her an exotic quality.

Jack became conscious of the dryness of his throat. The tempo of the music changed. Elaine pumped the pole with her hips. She flung her head back, tossing her knotted, sweaty hair through the air. The men whooped and whistled. She played lasciviously with the pole, milking its stem, stroking it up and down, pumping her hips in slow thrusting arcs. Jack snapped his head away.

After ten minutes she came off the stage. Four men in suits dug into their pockets by a table. She moved the glass and bottle littered table aside and stood with her legs apart, the line of her g-string splitting her cheeks beneath the mini. Jack kneaded the back of his neck as Elaine raised her hands into the air and pouted. She twisted and ground her hips over the men's groins and brushed her breasts against their faces. Jack bent and lit another cigarette.

For a while he stared down at the lit end, feeling sweat break out on his forehead. Looking up, he caught the arm of a passing waitress and ordered another drink. Elaine had moved to another table. On a chair, opposite two men, she sat with her legs splayed in a V. The DJ announced, 'Gentlemen don't forget, coming up shortly is almost any-

thing goes. I'll be looking for volunteers, so this is your chance to join the ladies on stage.' Jack drew heavily on the cigarette, drained his drink and moved again to the men's room.

He paced beside the mirror, flicking ash onto the tiles. One of the three young men he had seen earlier came in, halted, and turned away quickly. Jack pulled at the knot of his tie, flicked the butt of the cigarette into the urinal and hurried out. Near the exit, he heard Elaine call sharply behind him. Without turning, he nodded curtly to the doorman and rushed down the steps. Outside, he stepped into oily, black rain.

Along the pavement, the rain rolled away in rainbow-edged streaks. Jack fastened the collar of his trench coat. The Men's Bar stood at the end of Phoenix. Four other clubs lined the path until it crossed Lexington. In front of each club, doormen stood beneath striped canopies with sweaty faces, their shirts clinging to chests and forearms. As Jack turned left into Lexington, a couple, bent and hunched, hurried past, coughing and holding masks to their faces. Down Lexington the buildings were only half lit. From doorways and cracked windows, sulphur light spilled across the way, while all around, brown water ran from corroded and pitted drain pipes.

Jack followed Lexington for two blocks, then turned right, then left again, coming finally to a twisted sign that indicated Belrose Lane. He halted. It hadn't changed much. There were no lights on, except at its end where the flickering purple neon of a window sign scrawled out Phil's Cafe Espresso in longhand. Jack picked his way between the puddles, past sooted walls hanging with tattered and torn bill posters. At the end of the lane, he stepped down rounded steps and halted before a barred door. Inside, Phil the Fat stood wiping the counter. Jack pushed

open the door.

Phil looked up and straightened. His puffy face paled as Jack moved slowly down the steps. Abruptly he shook his head and threw the cloth down with a sweeping gesture.

‘Jack ... Jack Costello.’

Jack lifted the brim of his hat and thrust his hands into the pockets of his trench coat.

‘Good to see you again, Phil. You been keeping busy?’

‘Sure, I was just closing.’ Phil came around the counter, his belly bouncing, and clapped Jack on both arms with thick fingers. ‘But Jack, sit down, sit down.’

Jack stepped over to a stool and loosened the collar of his coat. He rubbed at the greasy film of rain that had found its way down his neck.

‘The rain, Jack, it’s getting worse. I’ve holes in the roof the size of cannon shots. Still it doesn’t let up. Emma, she refuses to go outside. I have to send the kids out to do the shopping. They come back with Twinkies and Hershey bars. What can I do?’

Jack wiped at his face. ‘I’ve been in retirement, Phil.’ He reached into his jacket and tapped out a cigarette. Phil stepped back. His hands squeezed the counter. Jack lit a match. ‘I always wanted to drop in, but you know how it is, things slowly begin to slip.’

Phil swallowed. ‘Don’t be sorry Jack, please. You’re the last one that would ever have to apologize. It should be me. The last time I loused up on you. Johnny, the rat, he’d been on the take, dealing the cards both ways; anyway he got doused with petrol one night, went up like a Christmas tree.’

‘I’m not blaming you, Phil.’ Jack stared at Phil’s hand. ‘You’ve been

a friend and I know you know what's good for you.' Jack pulled over an ashtray. 'Right now I need some information. Something happened last week, and now two suits are looking for me.'

Phil sat down heavily. His jaw hung open. 'You mean you haven't heard about the hit. I thought ...'

'You thought what?'

Phil stood and wiped at his brow. 'I'd better get us both a drink. He squeezed his paunch behind the counter and poured two glasses of brandy. 'You still take ice?'

Jack nodded.

Phil came around the front again. 'I can't believe you haven't heard. It's been all over the news.'

'I put a slug through my TV, Phil. My radio only plays violin and piano concertos, and I haven't bought a newspaper in five years. Now fill me in.'

Phil took a large swig from his glass. 'Jerry Schwaiger got hit.'

'The media mogul.'

'That's the one. Rumour had it that he was on the way out with a failing ticker anyway, but I guess someone wanted to pin him in a hurry. I thought it was you, Jack.'

Jack frowned, his cheeks puckered inwards. 'Why is that?'

'Glock 9mm, close range, straight through the right temple. Your calling card, Jack.'

Jack lowered his glass. He stood up and turned towards the window. Rain ran in filmy streaks down the pane and collected in glittering puddles between the oily cobblestones. The neon light arced and flickered. A rat sniffed and scurried its way between the bars of a drain hole.

‘Someone’s obviously setting me up. You got any ideas?’

‘No, Jack. Like I said, I thought it was you. I’m not surprised the suits are out looking for you. When you came in I ... I thought ...’

‘I know what you thought. It’s clear now. You better get yourself another drink.’

Phil nodded and hurried behind the bar. Jack returned to his seat. ‘I want information, Phil. I want to know the name of the button guy, who’s paying him, and why they want to set me up. I’ll give you two days. You’ll be well paid.’

Jack stood and moved to the door. On the steps, he turned. Phil stood white-faced behind the counter, his eyes bunched in rolls of flesh. The neck of the brandy bottle tapped against the rim of the glass as he poured. Jack fastened his coat collar.

‘Don’t ever cross me, Phil, not ever.’

He moved quickly up the steps. Along the lane a window banged shut above him; somewhere a woman shrieked, a dog barked. Jack looked at his watch and quickened his steps.

On Queen Street, a figure in a shabby brown coat and hat stumbled along. As the man passed, his face caught in the light of a window. His nose sat half eaten away and the skin of his cheeks lay peeled back, exposing the bone. He stumbled and slumped against the corroded iron of a fence. A bottle fell from his pocket and shattered. Jack threw him a fifty.

Two more blocks took him to Regency Towers. Jack keyed in at the entrance and pressed his palm to the hand plate. The guard nodded from behind his counter as Jack made his way across the black marble floor to the lifts and keyed in the floor code. Number 48 lay at the end

of a palm and orchid dotted corridor. At his door, Jack again had his palm print identified and entered a dark, high-ceilinged entrance hall.

In the living room he immediately poured himself a double Hennessy and switched on his stereo. He looked at his watch and moved quickly from room to room, checking shelves and the tops of tables. In the bedroom, some papers lay on his bed. He flicked through them, then locked them in the bureau in his study. Back in the living room, he removed two photos that stood on a shelf at the back of the bar. He moved to the middle of the living room and breathed in.

Mozart's Prager symphony played on the tuner. He stared out across the balcony and over the city. A yellow mist obscured the highest of the buildings, though every now and then the red and green staccato flash of roof antennae lights blinked through the haze. Jack refilled his glass, and moved to his couch. He sat down heavily.

The room lay in heavy shadow, the only light coming from the mirrored bar. The bitter-sweet second movement of the Prager symphony played. He leaned back and loosened the collar of his rain coat, feeling his body sag against the firm leather of the couch. Suddenly the alarm of his console sounded. Quickly, he pressed the mute button on the stereo, then moved to the console near a ceiling high bookshelf. The guard's voice came through the speaker.

'Jack, there's a woman here by the name of Elaine Duvall. She says you're expecting her after three. She's clean as near as I can tell.'

'Send her up, Walter.'

Jack removed his coat and hat and brushed his hand back through his dark hair. In the bathroom, he splashed his face with water. The mirror reflected the shadowed, fragmented hollows of his face. When

the door bell rang, he snatched a towel from a rail, stood for a couple seconds with the towel pressed to his face, then again brushed quickly at his hair and hurried to the entrance hall. Near the door, he pressed his lips to a panel.

‘Name.’

‘It’s Elaine, Jack.’

The corridor video camera picked up her image. Jack opened the door.

Elaine stood peering up at the ceiling, dressed in high heels, jeans, a red stretch top, hat and raincoat. She smiled and shrugged her hands into the air.

‘This is quite a place, Jack. I’ve only ever seen it from the outside.’

Jack opened the door wider.

Elaine hesitated. ‘Are you going to turn on the lights, or do you always move around in the dark?’

Jack flicked a panel.

‘That’s better.’

She stepped past him. ‘Now how about the rest of the apartment?’

Jack lit the living room. Immediately Elaine gasped and moved from one wall to the next. ‘These paintings, Jack, where did you get them?’

Jack remained still. ‘I used to paint.’

‘You painted them?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you don’t any more?’

‘That’s right.’

Elaine moved along a wall. ‘What made you stop?’

‘Once you give birth to something, why keep pushing.’

Elaine halted and turned. Her eyebrows pinched and she let out a half smile. ‘That’s very profound, Jack. Suddenly I’ve learnt more about you than in all the time at the bar.’

Jack picked up his glass from the coffee table. He moved to the bar and stood with his back to her. ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘You can take my hat and coat. That would be a romantic start. Then maybe some of that brandy to warm me up.’

Jack moved up behind her. Elaine removed her hat and held her hands to the shoulders of her coat. Jack’s cheeks pinched inwards as he stepped closer. Elaine leaned back so that her shoulders brushed his chest.

‘Are you surprised that I’m here?’

Jack stepped back. He faced away. ‘You were nervous, you’re not now. It might be an idea to explain.’

Elaine turned and arched her brows. She shrugged off her coat. ‘We get offers at the bar all the time, Jack. I didn’t know what to think when you asked. You’ve always been distant up to now.’

‘So what changed your mind?’

‘The men with the badges.’

Jack threw back his head and drained his glass. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve never seen you so agitated, Jack. The girls thought you were going to slug them. I got worried ... especially when you left without saying goodbye.’

‘So you came out of curiosity.’

Elaine’s face clouded. She looked away. ‘Is that all you can say?’ She rubbed at her face. ‘You asked me here, remember? You said that you needed to see me.’

Jack's shoulders stiffened. He walked to the bar and poured another Hennessy. 'There are some things we need to talk about.'

Elaine pressed her lips together. 'I'm not listening to anything you've got to say until you take this hat and coat.'

Jack frowned and hurried over. Elaine yelled behind him as he made his way up the entrance hall. 'And how about a drink?'

Jack returned to the bar and poured a glass. Elaine came over.

'That's better, Jack.' She sat herself on a stool. 'Don't you know it's important to make your guests feel at home?'

Jack capped the bottle. 'You heard about the Schwaiger hit?'

Elaine frowned. 'What about my question, Jack?'

'For now it's unimportant.'

Elaine shook her head. 'Oh, I'm sorry Jack. Please forgive me. I've only been pumping my butt all night and trading off verbal ping-pong with wise-cracking sauce heads wanting to massage their yo-yos. But yeah, it's unimportant. I'm wasting your time. Really I should be going.' She slammed her drink down and strode towards the living-room door. The door slid shut in her face.

'Sit down, Elaine!'

She spun around, her face red. 'You've got a nerve ...'

Jack came around the bar and pressed a series of buttons on the wall console. Iron shutters slid across the outside of the balcony door and window. The living room door gave off a double set of clicks. The light dimmed. Elaine stood with her mouth agape. Jack brought over her drink.

'Are you going to sit down?'

Elaine swallowed and took the drink, splashing the liquid slightly.

She moved haltingly towards the couch and sat down. Jack moved to the middle of the room and lit a cigarette.

‘Jerry Schwaiger got himself pinned last Thursday. Two suits came to the bar today looking for me. You’re smart enough, Elaine, to add the arithmetic. Now I have some questions. The bar’s got security cameras on the stairs; I’ve noticed four in the bar as well. Did you see the suits talking to security?’

Elaine looked up slowly. ‘I don’t know, Jack. I only saw them walking around asking the girls.’

Jack sipped from his drink. ‘I want to know exactly what they asked you.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘How did they phrase their questions?’

‘Do you mean if they asked me specifically whether I knew you?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Yes, they asked if I had seen you before.’

‘And you said no?’

Elaine remained quiet.

Jack blew a stream of smoke from his nose. ‘Didn’t you realise that if they’d looked at the video tapes they would have seen us together.’

Elaine paled and stared down. She shook and rubbed at her arm. ‘I’m sorry, Jack.’

‘So am I.’

She looked up. ‘They suspect then that I’m covering for you?’

‘Almost certainly.’

‘But you weren’t there last Thursday night, Jack.’

‘That’s exactly the problem. I haven’t got an alibi.’

Elaine shifted forward on the couch. 'Where were you then, Jack? You've been every night since you first came.'

'I was here.'

Elaine stood and moved slowly towards the steel-shuttered balcony. She touched the window and leaned forward against the glass.

'You frighten me, Jack. You always have, but yet ...' She turned. 'When you first came to the bar and paid me on the podium ...' Abruptly she shook her head and covered her face with her hands. Tears squeezed between her fingers. 'Jack, the moment I looked into your eyes ...' She shuddered and slid down the glass. Drawing her legs to her chest, she buried her face in her lap and hugged her knees.

Jack stabbed his cigarette into an ashtray. For a moment he stood staring down, then, going over to her, he bent to his haunches.

Elaine shook her head. 'Don't say anything, Jack.' She looked up. Mascara ran from her lashes. Her eyes were puffy. 'I want to understand you, Jack. Nothing about you makes sense.' She pointed with a finger and thrust her arm towards a painting. 'How can you paint like that and be so cold?' She sniffed. 'You're one of God's sorriest creatures, Jack. You prowl around the bar trying to get a rise in your pants, and when it happens, you break out in a sweat. It's kind of pathetic, don't you think?' She struggled to her feet.

'I've known you for a month now. You come and watch the girls but never let them dance for you. All you do is lie on the couch rugged up like Nanook of the North. Occasionally you stir for a drink. Oh yes, and you smoke too. You can always tell where you're sitting, somewhere behind a cloud.' She tugged at her top and paced from the window.

'In one month, what I know about you is dick, and I doubt that you

even have one of those.'

Jack spun and grabbed her arm. Elaine tugged.

'Let go, Jack.'

Jack released his grip. Elaine threw her arms wide.

'And what have we now? Two cops come looking for you and you invite me up to your parlour. And what a parlour it is, Jack. Steel shutters, self-locking doors, permanently lit like Old Nick's cavern, and hanging with paintings that look like Edvard Munch trapped in a surreal hell.' She tipped up onto her toes and spun across the carpet.

'How shall I perform for you, Nick? now that you have me in your cage? Shall I ...'

Jack slammed his glass on the bar. 'Enough Elaine ... you've made your point.' He clenched his fists. 'I brought you up hear to explain things to you.'

'Oh really Jack, how wonderful.' Elaine marched over to the living-room door. 'First unlock this door and take those damned shutters away.'

Jack breathed in heavily. 'For now they're staying up and the door stays locked. I can't be sure that you're not going to try to leave.' He reached for the ashtray lying on the bar counter. 'At the moment I want you to sit down again. We'll start from where we left off.'

Elaine slammed her hand against the door. 'Okay Jack, I'll let you win this round. I'll listen to you, but I wouldn't mind a coffee first.'

'I haven't got any.'

'You what?'

'I don't drink it.'

'Tea then?'

'That either.'

‘What have you got?’

‘Brandy.’

She shook her head and snatched her glass from the coffee table.
‘Well that will have to do then. If you get boring it might at least put me to sleep.’

Jack took her glass.

‘Whoa, that’s enough.’

Jack gave her the glass and filled his own. Elaine sat down and crossed her legs. ‘Okay.’

Jack moved to the bookshelf and picked up a volume. He thumbed through it. ‘Someone’s setting me up for the Schwaiger hit.’

‘How do you know?’

‘It’s got Armani and Versace suits all over it.’

‘That’s very colourful, Jack. So it was an o.c hit. What’s that got to do with you?’

Jack threw the book on the coffee table. ‘I kill for a living.’

Elaine stared at the book. For a moment she remained still, then stood up, her face down.

Jack stepped up to the table. ‘That’s a book on Jerry Schwaiger. I worked for him once, only you won’t find it in there. I suggest you have a look at the picture on page one hundred and seventy-four. The man on the right is Mario Spiteri. He’s from a good family, if you know what I mean.’

Elaine looked up. Slowly she picked the book from the table. She found the page, and holding it close, squinted in the dull light.

‘Mario and Jerry go back a long way. Six years ago Jerry hired me to clip a member of the Spiteri family. I did the job. I think the curtain is

coming down.'

Elaine put down the book and slumped heavily against the back of the couch.

Jack stood silently, swirling his drink. Suddenly he looked up. 'Elaine ...' He paused and swallowed. 'There are many ways to die. We are all drawn to our death.' He took in his breath. 'I killed for the first time when I was thirteen. It was no accident. I knew what I was doing. I pitched an eight-inch blade through my father's throat. Then I took my mother's battered head from where it lay slammed between the wall and the door. She was dead.' Jack sipped at his brandy.

'I'm not going to make a case for myself. I chose my life.' He turned and walked to the steel enclosed window. 'Life is nothing but a descent towards death. The only difference is, I chose it sooner.' He stood silent for a moment, then quickly drained his glass. 'We all withdraw from pain. We recoil into shells and learn to stop feeling. The death of feeling is death. It makes you a very effective killer.'

Elaine shuddered. She sat pale and hunched, her glass cradled in her lap.

'I don't want any sympathy, Elaine. I didn't ask you here for that. I ...' He swallowed and took in his breath. 'I just feel I owe you something.'

Elaine looked up and wiped at her face. She put down her drink and walked up behind him.

'Jack ...' She fell silent and folded her arms around him. 'I know why you come to the bar. I sensed it on that first day.' Jack stiffened. Elaine pressed her head between his shoulder blades. 'No one can deny their living self, not even you, Jack.' Jack turned so that Elaine fell against his chest. She stared up. 'I can help you, Jack.'

Jack lowered his eyes. He raised a trembling hand to the side of her face and brushed at her hair where it lay wet along her cheek. Elaine sniffed and pressed closer. Slowly, Jack pushed her from him.

‘I’ve come to the end of everything, Elaine.’ He dropped his hands and stepped away. ‘When one is truly weary, one cares no more.’

Elaine took him by the arm. Jack shook off her grip.

‘I think you had better go, it’s almost morning.’

‘I’m staying here, Jack.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Why?’

Jack stood staring down for a moment, then moved towards the wall console. The living-room door slid open. Elaine spun towards him.

‘I’m not leaving, Jack.’

Jack stood breathing heavily. He shook his head and reached for his cigarettes inside his jacket. ‘OK,’ He struck a match and cupped it to his face, then pointed to the hallway past the bar. ‘You can stay. The bedroom’s through there. Make yourself at home. I’ll see you when you get up.’

‘Aren’t you going to sleep?’

Jack puffed into the air and flicked at the end of the cigarette with his thumb. ‘I’ll think about it.’

‘You’ll think about it!’ Elaine propped herself up on a bar stool. ‘That’s great, Jack! I’ll be in there sleeping like baby bear while you parade around here with your gun half cocked and your emotional thermometer on zero.’ She sprang from the stool. ‘I shouldn’t be expecting anything unpleasant to come slipping in between the sheets should I?’

Jack pulled on his cigarette. ‘Only if you’re unlucky.’

Elaine threw her hands in the air and started towards the passage.
'Where's the light switch, or am I expected to flap around like a bat?'

Jack hurried past her and flicked on the light in the hallway. 'Everything's where you need it.'

Elaine gave a salute. Jack made his way down the hall and turned right. In the open doorway of the study, he heard the sound of the shower taps being opened. He halted with his hand against the door frame. The steady stream of the water broke and began to fall with a heavier flow. He gripped the frame of the door as his breath caught in his throat. There was a momentary squeal from the pipes as the taps were adjusted, then a yelp. Jack shuddered and squeezed his eyes tight. Quickly he closed the door and moved to the centre of the room.

The room lay in darkness. Morning light crept around the edge of drawn horizontal blinds. It fell weakly on his bureau and outlined the edge of two high backed chairs in opposite corners. On one long wall, a stray shaft of light gleamed off the raised surface of blue paint on a canvas. Jack stood motionless with his eyes closed.

In time, he heard a weak knock. Slowly he opened his eyes. The door clicked as it opened.

'Jack!' The door opened wider. 'Are you in here?'

Jack stood with his back to the door. It was a moment before he answered.

'I need to be alone, Elaine. You can sleep as long as you like.'

'What about you, Jack?'

'I'm fine where I am.'

Elaine opened the door wider. Light from the hallway speared obliquely across the carpet. 'Why do you like the dark, Jack?'

‘It offers a certain comfort.’

Elaine stepped forward haltingly, then paused. Quickly she left the room.

II

The street lay under a yellow haze. Rain fell in a drizzle through the mist and collected in heavy drops against the brown stone facades of crumbling, cracked buildings. Violet street lights hung suspended over the street, lighting every now and then the passing of a gaunt figure hunched in hat and raincoat. Behind windows, flickering neon signs advertised late hours and personalised services for any imagined game and pleasure. Bloated pushers, with puffy faces and narrow eye slits, stood leaning in doorways, their bellies protruding through the torn buttons of greasy, sweat-soaked shirts. On their breaths, the musk scent of nirvana tabs could be smelt.

Jack halted beside a lit window hung with snakeskins. The open-fanged heads of snakes sat along a ledge together with a display of belts, boots and wallets. Jack opened the door and sounded off a bell. No-one stood behind the counter. After a moment, a door to his left opened. Sammy the dwarf halted with his mouth open. Jack lifted his hat.

‘It’s been a long time, Sammy.’

Sammy waddled over, his bent legs unable to move fast enough. He threw his arms around Jack’s legs.

‘Jack ...’

Jack bent down. Tears moistened Sammy’s blue eyes. His wide mouth stretched open across large, even teeth. Jack clapped him on the shoul-

ders. He opened his mouth to speak, but then bowed his head.

Sammy threw his short, round arms up in the air. 'Jack, you've got to come in and see Kay. She talks about you all the time. Just the other day she asked about you. She said, why don't Jack come here any more? Maybe he don't want to mix no more with his old cronies now that he was no longer in the burying business.'

Jack remained with his head down. 'Sammy, I need your help.'

'Anything, Jack, any time, you know me.'

Jack raised his head. 'Phil the Fat tells me that Samuel Williams is trying to gloss over his bed partners. Since only Schwaiger and I could link him to Spiteri, Williams cleared it with Spiteri to have Mike Bronstein clip Schwaiger and set me up at the same time.' Jack rubbed the back of his neck. 'It's a fact then that Bronstein's lost his cherry and that a deal's gone down through the state. Both John Humphries and Mike Gordon are in on it. It's a net I don't think I can easily shake.'

'Jesus, Jack, everybody's humping each other every which way.' Sammy stepped back. 'I heard about the hit. Spiteri's been wanting to move in a long time. His boys have been buying up the rug under Schwaiger's feet ever since they first shook hands. You put a twitch on their balls for a while there, Jack. I guess Schwaiger knew who was laying the cement. In the end, though, it's always the one who's prepared to fuck the hardest.'

Jack straightened. 'Schwaiger fucked dirty like every one else, Sammy. I guess though, he just didn't know all the angles.'

Sammy's face lit like a cherry. He doubled over, almost in pain from laughing. 'Jack, you've got to see Kay. She's right out the back, cooking up a stew. Why don't you come in?'

Jack rubbed at his face. 'I've never been good company Sammy, you know that. It's been too long now ...'

Sammy grabbed Jack's hand and tugged. 'Jack, you're coming. She loves you. You've been like a hero to her. She's never forgotten that time you got her out from under that horse.'

Jack lifted the brim of his hat. He nodded weakly.

The kitchen lay at the end of a slanting corridor. The floor boards creaked. Down the walls moisture seeped, so that the rose patterned wallpaper hung brown and peeling. In the kitchen, Kay stood on a wooden crate up against the sink. Her arms were working back and forth, so that her round rump wiggled beneath her dress. Sammy yelled out, 'Kay, guess who's here.'

She spun around, splashing soppy water across the floor from a wash rag. 'Jack!' She jumped down. She ran, almost falling, her crippled ankle buckling beneath her. She clutched Jack's knees. Tears burst from her eyes.

'Jack, you've come back. Always the carnies comes back.'

Jack picked her up under her arms and sat her on the kitchen table. It swayed slightly on its wooden legs.

'Kay, I'm ...' He turned away.

Sammy came around to the front of Jack. 'Don't be embarrassed, Jack. We're family. All ex-carnies.'

Jack loosened the belt of his trench coat. He pulled at the buttons. 'Can you get me a drink, Sammy? It may help.'

'Sure, Jack. We always keep a bottle capped for you. The best in the house.'

Sammy rushed off. Jack breathed in and turned to Kay. 'Kay ...'

Again he fell silent.

Kay smiled so that thick crow's-feet wrinkled around her eyes. Her thick, blonde hair, tinged now with streaks of light grey, gleamed under the bright glow of the bare overhead globe. Her voice was as deep as ever. 'Jack, I know you've been trying to forget. But no one forgets anything. That's what Myra always said. Thirteen years old you were, when you came to the Carnie; a thin, gawky kid with a pearl-handled knife. No one ever learned to pitch like you. Never seen you nick flesh once. That's the way you will always remain to me. A good kid who never threw a blade the wrong way ...' She burst into tears. Quickly she wiped at her face and wrung her hands in her apron.

Sammy came down the steps that lead from the store room. 'Kay ...' He reached the table, and stepping up on his toes, pushed a bottle of brandy just over the edge. 'Don't cry.' He climbed up on a chair and hugged his wife. 'Jack don't want to see you cry. He didn't come here for that.' He pinched her cheeks. 'Go and fix the stew. We can sit down and tuck in while we gab.'

Kay nodded her head and lifted herself off the table by her arms. Brushing the back of her hand across her mouth, she made her way to the stove and stirred the stew. Sammy blew the dust off two tumblers that stood on the shelf of a lime green cabinet amidst pieces of bric-a-brac, china and several stained and dog-eared postcards that hung pinned against the edge of the wood. Jack sat down as Sammy poured the glasses.

'Thanks, Sammy.'

He shook his head and smiled. 'Don't thank me, Jack. It's good to see someone from the old days. Time leaves everyone behind.' He dragged

a chair closer and struggled up. ‘This street ain’t what it used to be. One time, you remember, you could walk down from one end to the next, everything was alive, jazz in the air at night, Darkies, Slavs, Chinks, Spics all in the same street, dealing, hawking wares like at a flea market. It was carnival here, Jack, all the time. Now,’ Sammy slammed his hand on the table. ‘It’s gone to seed. Everywhere there is a stink. People walk around here like they’re in a trance; zombies living out their lives in the pharmaceutical catalogue from a to z. It’s a horror story, Jack. More geeks around here than at the back of any carnie wagon.’

Jack tipped his hat forward and leaned across onto the table. ‘Sammy, I’ve spent a long time away ...’ He stared into his drink. ‘I’ve lost touch somehow. Somewhere in the flow of blood down the pavement my life ebbed away. Every time I killed, I killed part of myself. Now there is nothing left to kill.’

Sammy took hold of Jack’s forearm. He squeezed lightly. ‘You’re like we remember you, Jack, the saint with a gun.’

Jack squeezed his glass so that the veins at the back of his long, white hands bulged. ‘I’m no saint, Sammy. I killed for whoever paid. Life became cheap because it ceased to mean anything. Now it means even less.’ He emptied his glass. ‘At first I thought killing was a way of staying numb, a way of walking through the horror, but in the end I became the horror. There is nothing now except the dark, only that offers me something.’

Jack fell silent. Sammy turned slowly from him and stared across at Kay. She was wiping some dishes, her large doll-like face lost in thought. Sammy turned back to Jack. His blue eyes were clouded, his face seeming to have put on weight.

‘What happened, Jack?’ He gripped Jack’s hand. ‘You left here that last night, your face almost to the ground. When I closed the door on you, it was like saying goodbye to someone else. You never looked back, just walked away, step after step.’

Jack swallowed and pressed his hand to his forehead. ‘That night I killed Jimmy Maloney.’

‘Jimmy?’ Sammy fell back in his chair. ‘It was you that killed Jimmy?’

Jack drew his hand down over his eyes. Sammy leaned forward and gripped his glass. ‘Jimmy was like a father to you. He took you in.’

‘He talked too much, Sammy. He was always talking. Never putting up.’

‘He was a clown, Jack. All clowns are trapped in their past. He only wanted for you not to be like him, empty inside because his dreams had all gone.’

Jack picked up the brandy bottle. ‘He strayed in the line of fire, got up out of his seat as Mitchell came through the door. If he hadn’t been drunk ...’ Jack slammed the bottle down. ‘The bullet took him in the eye, a .45 calibre. Mitchell fired. I plugged him in the neck and two between the ribs. Jimmy lay against the wall, his brains sliding down the wood and slopping on his head. Blood came out of his mouth. His single eye stared up. He never knew it was me.’

Sammy sat silently. Kay was no longer in the kitchen. Down the hall, there came a rustling sound. Sammy’s stubby legs swung beneath the chair. He turned his glass around and around.

‘I stood looking down at him. I wanted to kick him, hit him, for getting in the way, but I felt nothing. That was when I knew how dead I was.’ Jack filled his glass. ‘I shot at a mirror, Sammy. All my life I’ve

been shooting at mirrors.'

Sammy stared towards the doorway for Kay. Jack followed his gaze. Faintly he heard Sammy say, 'Remember Little John, Jack? Remember his Narcissus mirror?' He turned back to Jack. His eyes stared as if from away. 'If you went to touch your image in the mirror it would fade and you would realize that there was no glass there at all.' He sipped from his drink and shook his head. 'And if you stepped through the mirror, what would happen? You would again see yourself further away, but as you reached out, once more there would be no glass.' He fell back and his eyebrows knitted. 'I'm not that good at understandin' the way of things, Jack. You know that. But I've been thinkin' all these years, weighin' up what I've learnt on the midway.' He swirled his drink. 'You see, Little John's mirror was no con. He wasn't tryin' to fool the marks. By callin' it a Narcissus mirror, he was havin' a go at the myth; sayin' that we can't love ourselves, cos a mirror really reflects that part of ourselves which we don't want to see.' He took Jack's arm and squeezed it. 'That's why the image in Little John's mirror would always fade. What Little John was sayin' was, all images of ourselves are an illusion, a reflection created by our perception of ourselves.' He squeezed Jack's hand harder. 'You see, Jack, you haven't been shootin' at yourself; you've been shootin' at your beliefs, at everythin' you believe yourself to be. Don't rely on mirrors, Jack, rely on the love that people have for you. Love of others is the only reality.'

Jack stared straight ahead. He rose and walked from the table. 'Little John died three years ago, Sammy. I found his body cut and bleeding at the base of some stairs beside the shards of his mirror. He must have fallen through as he was carrying it down. We can't escape, Sammy,

sooner or later we have to face ourselves, and our self is the reality we create, illusion or no illusion.' Jack turned. 'Little John died like we all do, by falling through the mirror.'

Kay came back into the kitchen and hurried to the stove. 'The stew must be done by now.' She stood up on the crate and stirred the pot, then climbed down and fetched three bowls and spoons from the dish rack. Jack stood by the door.

'I can't stay, Kay.'

She froze by the kitchen table.

'I've stayed too long already.'

Sammy rose. 'Jack, just a little while longer. You haven't talked to Kay yet. She's been ...'

'I can't, Sammy. I only came to ask you for help.'

Kay stood with the bowls. Sammy took them from her and hugged her to him. 'Jack, sure, but sit down, just for a little while.'

Jack walked forward. 'Sammy, I want you to call on Mike Bronstein. I want you to tell him that I thought he was a lot smarter. Williams is probably already having him measured for a pine suit.'

Sammy let go of Kay. She ran towards the door. Jack caught her and lifted her again to the table. 'Kay, I'll come back.'

She hugged his neck. 'I love you Jack. Don't ever forget us. Don't stay away so long.'

Jack prised her hands away. 'I have to go, Kay.'

He hurried to the door. Sammy ran behind him up the passage. 'Jack, Bronstein and I stopped talking after you split with him. I don't think he'll see me.'

Jack turned before the front door. 'He'll see you, Sammy. He'll be ex-

pecting you.' Sammy shifted on his bowed legs by a glass case displaying silver buckles. 'Bronstein's always stayed clear of the family. He's nervous. He's going to want to clear his conscience with you.'

Sammy nodded weakly. Jack opened the door. 'Goodbye, Sammy.'

Sammy looked down. Jack stepped out and closed the door.

Along the street, the rain fell relentlessly and steadily. There were more people on the street now. Shrunken figures in brown raincoats stood gazing in on windows where women stood chained between chrome poles, snarling in leather corsets and studded collars. Other windows displayed mock copulation positions in pink and blue neon which flashed quickly from one position to the next. In the doorways, the pushers wiped at their faces and rocked on their heels. Occasionally one stepped forward into the rain and thrust out a hand to offer a pass to a staggering figure.

Jack moved past a bench where a young man sat with his head in his hands. His friend sat nearby. Further on, someone lay sprawled head-down in the gutter. The brown water of the street ran over the body. In the crook of the arm, refuse lay collected and a brown bottle bobbed up and down. Jack turned a corner.

The mist lay thicker here, eating its way slowly between the buildings. To his right, the thump of falling stone could be heard as the edge of a building broke and clattered to the ground. Stopping to light a cigarette, Jack stepped into a doorway. Across from him, music played from the open door of a diner. Three men sat at a table digging from a plate of nachos. One stood and shrugged off his jacket. A holstered gun flapped at his side. He sat again and placed the gun on the table. Jack tugged at the brim of his hat and hurried on.

It wasn't far to Phil the Fats. Jack turned down Belrose Lane and hurried over the puddles towards the cafe. The door stood open. Quickly he pushed himself against the wall of the steps and drew his gun. He heard nothing. A shadow could be seen turning against the floor of the cafe. Hearing nothing, Jack rushed down the steps. Phil swung from the ceiling fan, his neck tie knotted around his throat. His tongue hung black and swollen from his mouth, his eyes bulged, the fat flesh of his face was blue. Jack clicked the safety on his gun and holstered it. He climbed up onto the counter. Phil's bruised face swung towards him. One eye lay cut open from which dry blood streaked down the side of the cheek. Jack drew his knife from his boot and cut the tie. The body thumped to the ground.

He remained on the counter, breathing heavily. It was the same, the same darkness for all. He stared down at the body. The weight of it sagged against the floorboards like the blubber of a whale. Water, dripping from a hole in the ceiling, ran off Phil's forehead and collected in a crimson puddle beside his bloated cheek. Jack jumped down. He dragged the body up and leaned it against the counter. Gently he pushed Phil's eyelids down over his swollen eyes, and then slumped back against a bar stool. He closed his own eyes. For a long time he did not move.

Towards midnight, the murmur of voices sounded down the lane. Feet came down the stairs. There was a gasp. Jack snapped his head towards the door. A man and woman stood hugging each other. He rose quickly and pushed past the couple. At the top of the stairs he turned.

'Call the police. Tell them anything you like. It makes little difference now.'

Along Lexington, the mist lay so thick that Jack walked in the mid-

dle of the road. Light from doorways and windows stabbed the mist at points but illuminated little. Along the sidewalk, the movement of figures could be heard. Suddenly a dark shape fell before him. A bandaged hand grabbed the edge of his coat.

‘Help me, Mister, I can’t see; something’s gnawing at my leg.’

Jack squinted. Below the torn strips of the man’s trousers, one of the man’s calf muscles lay eaten away. Maggots crawled in the soft, white flesh along the edge of the bone.

Jack drew his gun and pressed it against the red skin of the man’s temple. The skin crinkled and peeled away. Jack fired twice. The body fell back and twitched spasmodically. Jack holstered the gun and walked on.

He turned onto Phoenix. Outside The Men’s Bar, the doorman greeted him with a tip of his head. Jack flashed a pass at the top of the stairs.

Men stood shoulder to shoulder. All three podiums were loaded. On the stage, a dancer in a cat suit slunk on all fours along the floor. She dipped her back and arched her neck, then brushed her breasts against the hypnotized face of a man leaning against the stage. Jack moved to the long couch that sat below the level of the podiums. He sank into a corner. The shadow of a wall fell across him.

Music thumped from the direction of the stage. ‘Do you feel like making love?’ There came the sound of cymbals clashing, drums echoing and thumping. ‘Do you feel like making love?’ Again the drums pounded. Jack pressed his neck against the foam of the couch. The music beat through his ears. He felt the numbing of his nerve ends. He closed his eyes and stared into blackness. Only the music sounded.

‘Desire in this lonely heart ... how can I hurt her? ... How can I go?’

‘If only it could be you ... don’t draw away ... don’t leave me in tears.’

The DJ spoke into the microphone. ‘Okay gentlemen, don’t forget every Monday night at The Men’s Bar is amateur night. So come along, there will be plenty to see and enjoy.’

‘Time is unending ... in this world of pain ... in this world of pain ... desire ... desire ... set me free.’

Men laughed. Clapped each other on the backs. Drinks clinked on tables.

‘If only you and me ... so certain that this is the end ... the day you left me ... what did I ask? ... what did I do wrong?’

Someone yelled. Voices whooped through the air. There came the sound of clapping.

‘She’s got me in her arms tonight ... can my love break free ... doubt consumes me ... don’t let me go ... not into this world without your love.’

Distantly, a voice sounded in Jack’s ear. ‘Are you all right, sir?’ The voice came again. ‘People are concerned.’

A hand touched his arm. ‘I was told to come over. You haven’t moved in a long time.’

Jack shook his head and snapped upright.

‘Were you asleep?’ The woman, a dancer, sat down. ‘You’re not allowed to fall asleep in here. They’ll throw you out.’

Jack sat with his head in his hands. He raised the collar on his rain-coat and looked down. ‘I’ve been thinking ...’

‘About what?’

‘About death.’

The dancer brushed a hand under her nose. ‘That’s not what you

should be thinking about in here. You're supposed to be having fun.'

Jack looked up at her. 'Will you dance for me?'

'Sure.'

He leaned back and removed his wallet from the inside of his jacket.

'My name's Michelle. You come here often, don't you? I've always seen you with Elaine.'

She came closer and leaned forward so that her breasts fell heavily in their white bra. 'Elaine's really nice. I don't blame you for ...'

Jack handed her a twenty. 'Will you let me touch you?'

Her eyes shifted slowly. 'In places ... if you're nice.'

Jack leaned back as she placed the money in her garter. Slowly she raised her hands above her head and ground her hips in a circle. Jack's eyes burnt as he focused on her. She ripped at the thin film of a white shirt tied at her waist, then thrust her belly forward and rubbed at her breasts where they stretched against their diamond cups. Jack closed his eyes. She rolled forward, licked her lips and brushed long strands of blonde hair from her face. Jack sniffed the heat of damp sweat between her breasts and swallowed. His hands trembled as he cupped her buttocks and felt her hips against him. She ran her hand through his hair and jiggled her breasts over his mouth. Jack parted his lips and felt the dryness of his tongue against his teeth. His hands tightened against her buttocks. Michelle sprang back and smiled. A shudder passed through Jack and a flash split his skull. He shook his head as a sharp pain stabbed through him. Michelle stopped and stared uncertainly. Jack raised his hand towards her, then cupped his face in his hands. 'Please ...'

She sat down beside him. Jack squeezed his fingers against his eyes. 'You'd better go.'

Michelle stood. Slowly she picked up the thin gauze of her shirt.
'Maybe another time?'

Jack breathed in heavily and rubbed at his forehead. He nodded. Michelle made her way through the tables. Jack leaned back and hung his head. He lit a cigarette, drew once and sat with the tip burning in his hand.

Laughter rose into the air around him. A man stood on the stage. Swaying, he posed with bent knees and one hand behind his neck. A bouncer, his chest puffed out, took him by the arm and pulled him down the steps. A man in a checked suit and broad neck tie sat down beside Jack.

'Great place isn't it?' He smiled, showing crooked, rotten teeth.

Jack turned his head slowly towards him. The man swallowed and shrank into the couch. Quietly he left.

The DJ announced, 'It's two o'clock Gentleman, time for a cat-walk change ...' Jack stood. At the bar he asked for a bottle of Hennessy. He filled a glass and swallowed quickly.

'Starting on a full bottle tonight, Jack?'

Jack lowered his glass and stared to his side. Elaine stood with her arms folded, chewing her lip.

'You're full of surprises, Jack. I saw Michelle dancing for you. You showed some real passion there for a while. What happened? Did you take your skippy out of the deep freeze?'

Jack's cheeks puckered inwards. His jaw shifted tightly and stiffened.

Elaine unfolded her arms. 'I've been waiting for you to turn up. I couldn't sleep the other night. I'm sorry I left without saying anything.'

Jack remained quiet.

‘Haven’t you got anything to say, Jack? How about a kiss for old times, sake?’

Jack lowered his hat. ‘Have the suits been back?’

Elaine threw her hands up and flicked her hair from her face. ‘Jesus, Jack, remind me next time not to waste any time being friendly. I should know to get straight to the point.’ She crooked her arms on her hips. ‘Yeah, the suits have been back, and they brought reinforcements, two blue shirts with muscled balls. Do you want me to show you the bruises?’

Jack’s eyes narrowed. His sat his glass down on the bar counter. ‘Bruises?’

‘They took me downtown. To a nice quiet room with a rather bright ceiling light. They made me comfortable, then the two Jocks showed me their balls.’

The muscles of Jack’s cheeks twitched. He turned. His shoulders tensed under his raincoat.

Elaine stepped quickly in front of him. ‘Jack, I didn’t tell them anything. I swear.’

Jack took her by the shoulders and drew back her hair from her shoulders. Blue bruises showed along the side of her neck. He stepped back. ‘I want to know the names of the suits and their station. Did they give you a contact?’

Elaine straightened the line of her bodysuit where it sat above her breasts. ‘They gave me a card but I tore it up. Their names, though, are Stanton and McPhee.’

‘McPhee!’ Jack picked up the Hennessy. ‘Tall guy, pocked marked face, big ears?’

‘That’s him.’

Jack filled his glass. ‘The guy’s got his prick up every lubricated ass in the state. I should have whacked him years ago.’

Elaine turned to the barmaid. ‘Can you get me a glass?’ Quickly, she took Jack’s arm. ‘I can take a few minutes off. Do you want to grab a table?’

Jack picked up the bottle. In a shadowed corner near the showers, a table was free. He walked over and banged the bottle down. Immediately he poured himself a glass. Elaine sat herself so that she faced the cat-walk. She leaned forward and held her hair back from her face. ‘The other guy ... Stanton, do you know him too?’

‘No.’ Jack lit a match.

‘He was quieter, treated me with softer hands. Under other circumstances I could have got to like him.’

Jack flicked out the match. ‘What did he look like?’

‘A bit like you, tall, broad-shouldered, pallid features.’

‘And you thought him handsome?’

‘When he smiled.’

Jack drew on his cigarette. For a moment he was silent. ‘You said you couldn’t sleep last Thursday, why?’

Elaine leaned back in her chair. She looked down and brushed her hair back. ‘I couldn’t get comfortable, not with you walking around.’ She sat still, then looked up. ‘I went into the kitchen hoping to get something to eat; the cupboards were all empty, and the fridge. Don’t you eat?’

Jack stared across at her. ‘Certain types of hunger can’t be sated. I’ve learnt to manage.’

Elaine's eyes clouded.

A new girl came down the cat-walk. Her eyes were glazed. She leaned back against the pole and crossed her knees from side to side. Her breasts sat firm and upright in spangled red cups. She smiled down at Elaine and huffed. Elaine shifted forward and filled her glass.

'I'm frightened, Jack. They've got this place staked out. They told me they're just waiting for the case to build against you, then they're moving in.' She leaned forward and shielded her eyes with her hand. 'I've been wanting to call, to warn you, but I didn't know your number.'

She sat with her eyes still covered. Her breasts rose and fell slowly, the nipples, beneath the sheer white of her bodysuit, brushing lightly against the edge of the table. Jack stared down.

'Elaine ...'

She removed her hand from her eyes. 'What is it, Jack?'

'Can you come over again tonight?'

She stared, blinking. 'If you like.'

Jack turned towards her. 'I'm being set up all down the line. The Governor, Samuel Williams, wants to be re-elected next year. He found out about my one-time involvement with Schwaiger and got scared. The D.A., John Humphries, and the police commissioner, Mike Gordon, are all in on the setup. The family's bought them out. I want to warn you ... things are going to get rough.'

Elaine picked up her drink. 'I can handle it, Jack.'

'I can let you stay in my apartment until everything's over ... one way or another.'

'Wouldn't that be the least safest place for me?'

Jack shook his head. 'No one can get to you there. I've got screens up.'

The code can't be broken.'

'What about getting there? Couldn't I get picked up along the way?'

'I'll arrange for two of my boys to pick you up from here. They'll show you a route you can take. It's mostly underground. There's a private lift which runs up through the building and opens in my study. I've been using it the past week.'

Elaine finished her drink. 'Jesus, that's quite a setup.' She slid her glass towards Jack so that it clinked against the bottle. 'You must be an important man?'

'I'm important for what I know.' Jack filled her glass. 'The world that most people see is just a thin veneer. The real world lies underneath.'

'The real world, Jack?'

'We're all puppets, Elaine; the world is run by people pulling strings from underneath.'

'You believe in conspiracy theories, then?'

He sat silent.

Elaine leaned back. 'You're deep, Jack, really deep. When can we continue this talk?'

'Tonight. My boys will wait here until you finish. Their names are Vic and Chris.'

Elaine stood up and finished her glass. 'I'll look forward to meeting them. Perhaps they'd like a dance.'

'You could always hope.'

Elaine grinned and flung back her head. 'I always hope until the end ... I'll see you after three.'

Jack stared after her. She limped slightly, her right leg moving stiffly under her white tutu. He drained his glass, stood quickly and grabbed

the Hennessy. At the exit, he slid the bottle into the outside pocket of his trenchcoat.

III

Handel's Messiah played over the stereo. Jack stood on the balcony with the doors open. Wind blew the door curtains, whipping them around the corners of the glass so that the curtain rings clanked on their pole and the edges of the fabric folded and snapped. The rain fell as always. It ran greasy and brown along the balcony pavement towards a central drain. Puddles had formed here and there where the concrete had been eaten away.

Jack leaned against the balcony rail. Water dripped from the brim of his hat. Along the back of his neck, beneath the collar of his coat, the rain sat sticky against his skin. Far below, the traffic stood banked against a red light. Horns hooted as a man with a briefcase rushed across the road. Jack tensed his arms against the rail. Suddenly he heard Elaine's voice behind him and turned.

She stood in the frame of the doorway, the wind brushing her white blouse tightly against full breasts, her hair playing over her face.

Jack thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat. He had not come here directly, but had spent two hours walking the streets. When he arrived from the lift, Elaine was sitting waiting for him in the dark of the living room. He had immediately switched on the stereo and gone out onto the balcony.

Elaine came forward half a step. 'Jack, the rain will eat away your skin.'

He remained still. For a moment he said nothing, then he hung his head. 'I'm sorry to be here late, I ...' He raised his head towards the sky, and again remained quiet for a while. 'I've read about the feel of rain against skin. Once it was one of life's pleasures, now it exposes our bones.' He lowered his head. 'Things change in endless cycles, first cleansing then soiling again. In the end, though, the future remains the same.'

Elaine stood blinking. Jack's chest rose and fell slowly; the skin of his face seemed to sag against his bones. Elaine rushed forward and hugged herself to his chest. Jack lifted his hands. Slowly at first, he pressed her tight.

'Elaine, you can't stay out here ...'

She looked up.

Jack gripped her shoulders and prised her away. Quickly he led her inside and switched on the light, setting the switch to a dim glow. He sat her on the couch. 'I'll make you some coffee. I bought some.'

Elaine nodded without looking up.

When Jack returned with the coffee, she took the saucer in shaking hands, sipped, but placed the cup down again quickly.

'It's hot, Jack.' She looked up. 'Aren't you having any?'

'No.'

Elaine rested the saucer and cup on the table. 'Jack, I've only ever seen you drink brandy and smoke. That's no way to look after yourself.'

Jack moved to the bar. He took the bottle of Hennessy from his coat and poured a glass. When he made no comment, Elaine stood up.

'Do you mind if I change this shirt? It's wet.'

Jack put his glass down and fetched a white shirt from the bedroom.

Elaine stood in her bra. She tucked the shirt into black stretch pants and buttoned only the lower buttons. Jack returned to his drink.

‘Are you still afraid, Elaine?’

‘Yes.’ She picked up her coffee. ‘But not for me.’

‘You’re afraid for me then?’

‘In a way, yes.’ She wrapped her hands around her cup. ‘I don’t know what’s going to happen. You don’t seem afraid. That worries me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I don’t want you to die, Jack. We were followed nearly all the way here. Chris and Vic only lost our tail when we went underground. When I got here and couldn’t find you, I thought you had been taken in.’

‘I was walking around.’ Jack rubbed at his face. ‘I didn’t want to wait for you here.’

‘Weren’t you tailed?’

‘I shook the tail early. There are tunnels along the sewers where you can loose almost anybody. You would have seen them tonight.’

Elaine stared into her coffee.

Jack returned to the bar. ‘What did Stanton and McPhee tell you about me?’

Elaine remained still for a moment, then looked up. ‘They said that you were ruthless, that you had no conscience, that you would kill your own mother.’

‘Is that all?’

‘No, they also said that you had cost this country a lot of money and that many important people were dead because of you. They showed me a list which read like a who’s who of international politics, then they

showed me pictures of friends of yours who they said had gotten in your way. All had clean bullet holes to the temple.'

'And they warned you that I couldn't be trusted, that I would plug you.'

'Yes, but they were more explicit on the details.'

Jack filled his glass. 'And so what do they want from you?'

Elaine came forward. 'They said that they had two witnesses that saw you kill Jerry Schwaiger. Now they're both dead. One was killed Monday night, the other, Tuesday night. They can't prove that you did it. They thought that I might know something.'

'And when you told them that you didn't know anything, they beat you?'

'That's right.'

Jack moved over to the stereo. 'The two witnesses were members of the Copolla family. Both were moles in the Schwaiger corporation. I had Chris and Vic take care of them.'

Beethoven's violin concerto began. Jack lowered the volume. 'All they've got against me now is a Glock 9mm without finger prints and the fact that I can't provide an alibi. The fact that they can't get anything out of you isn't going to help them either. The best they can do now is to hope I get shot while being arrested.' Jack stepped away from the stereo.

'So is that what's going to happen? Is that how this is going to end?' Elaine moved to a bar stool.

Jack swallowed the rest of his brandy. 'It depends on how well they can shoot. Up until now, I think they've been a bit short on target practice.'

Elaine stood up from the stool. 'Is that all you can say? Aren't you

afraid?’

‘In a way, yes, but not in the way you imagine.’

‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means, Elaine, what I have feared all along, that we can’t escape our past. What we are, we will always be.’

‘You’re being obtuse again, Jack.’

Jack moved to the window. ‘Obtuse, Elaine, or am I just facing reality. Death is a lonely life.’

Elaine slammed down her coffee. ‘Damn you, Jack. You’re full of double meanings. What are you trying to say?’ She stormed towards a painting. ‘What is this painting all about? That looks like a baby being strangled as it is comes out of a womb. Are you saying that you’ve never been given a chance to live, that life has been continually strangled from you?’

Jack approached the painting and looked up. ‘The baby is actually being pulled out of the womb.’

Elaine looked across at him. ‘You mean it’s being pulled into the world?’

‘It’s wanting to be born.’

Elaine looked again at the painting.

Jack moved away. Elaine turned.

‘Jack, I want to know more about you, about your past, about how you grew up.’

‘I grew up in a circus, in the back of a carnie wagon.’

Elaine sat herself on the couch. ‘Were your parents Carnies?’

‘No.’ Jack moved to a bar stool. ‘My father was a mechanic, my mother spent her life waitressing. We lived in a brownstone tenement.’

‘And you ran away to the carnie?’

‘After I killed my father, yes.’ Jack rose from the stool. ‘The carnie arrived one morning. I was up early, not having gotten much sleep. Down by the local park, the carnie was setting up. I watched them unload, bringing out the elephants, tigers, horses. There was so much life and colour. I wasn’t used to it.’ He paused. ‘The carnie brought to town a spangled kingdom where fantasy became reality and reality became abstraction. I became lost.’

‘This was at the time you killed your father?’

Jack nodded. ‘Dad had a split personality. Mum met him as a waitress on one of his quieter days. They married when I was conceived. Not for moral reasons, just convenience, in order to get more welfare. I grew up getting shunted from one rat hole to the next. Mum’s only happy moments were when she picked me up from school. At least then she had someone to cry to.’

‘You don’t miss your father then?’ Elaine stood up.

‘No, I don’t miss him. What good qualities he had didn’t amount to more than bringing home a .40 to shoot the crows off the back fence. I taught myself to toss knives by pitching them at a photo of him on the wall. When I killed him, the carnie took me in, first as a roustabout, then as a knife thrower.’

He turned towards the bar and picked up the bottle of Hennessy. Elaine put her hand over the glass. ‘You don’t need this, Jack.’

Jack’s hand froze. She came forward, so that the inside of her thigh touched against his leg. Her shirt, buttoned just beneath the fall of her breasts, hung open. Sweat dripped from the fall of Jack’s back as he felt the rise of heat from her cleavage. Their eyes met. Elaine’s brown eyes

stared from beneath arched brows; her glossed lips sat parted against white teeth. Jack shuddered and turned his head to the side. Elaine pulled his face back and brought her lips down firmly against his mouth. Jack sprang from the chair.

Words waited. Through the open balcony, the curtains flapped. A light spray of rain fell against the carpet. Liszt's *Harmonies du Soir* played.

Elaine moved forward and pressed herself against Jack's back. His shoulders stiffened, but he did not move. After a while he lowered his head.

'Slowly, ever so slowly, the descent towards the dark begins. There can be no turning back.' Elaine pressed herself tighter. Jack turned.

'Elaine ...'

She tugged at the belt of his raincoat, then twisted the buttons and slid the coat down over his shoulders. Jack gripped her firmly by the upper arms. 'Elaine ...'

She pulled away and tugged at the sleeves. Jack shrugged the coat from his shoulders and threw it on the couch. He swung towards her, the veins of his neck stiff. Elaine held up her hand. 'You invited me here, Jack. What were you expecting?'

Jack's fists clenched.

Elaine stood breathing heavily. 'Jack, I can help.'

She came forward slowly. Jack shook his head and ran his hand down slowly over his face. 'I have known only betrayal, Elaine, all my life I have known only betrayal.' He dropped his hand and looked up.

'Slowly everything is stripped away. Life tends towards simplification.' He turned and moved towards the balcony. In the frame of the

doorway, he stretched his hands to the side and rested them against the frame. The wind caught his suit and flapped it tight against his chest and arms.

‘Look outside, Elaine, everything erodes, everything is reduced to death, to simplicity, to nothing.’ He stood quietly for a moment, then arched his neck so that the spray of the rain caught his face. ‘The pull of life is strong, but so is the pull of death. In the end everything dies, everything ends. This is our betrayal.’

The curtains flapped and cracked. Where the rain fell on the carpet, brown spots appeared. The fourth movement of Mahler’s fifth symphony played. Jack turned. Shadow hid his face. ‘Elaine, you say that you wish to help me, but you must know how I have tried. This city caters well to the flesh.’ He stepped forward. ‘The first day that I came to the bar, I saw in you that vitality for life that I have long sought. It was what drew me to you.’ He looked towards a large canvass showing a huge monocled eye peering from a haze of black cloud. ‘We hunger for what we do not have, without realizing the truth of our fate.’

Elaine came forward and held herself to his chest. ‘Don’t we decide our fate?’

Jack kept his eyes ahead. ‘Do we, Elaine?’

She squeezed herself harder against him. ‘How much of the decision was yours, Jack? The decision not to live?’

Jack looked down. ‘When I joined the carnie, a clown by the name of Jimmy Maloney took me in. ‘Jack eased himself away and tapped out a cigarette. ‘For a time things were fine ... then alone one night, I led a woman before the pitch board. I miss-threw and drove the knife between her ribs. No one knew. I buried her in the marsh beside the

sideshow tent, and the next day the carnie left, driving its wheels over her grave. I loved her, and I sank her bones in slum. I never threw a knife again, but picked up a gun. There are many ways to kill, and in the end I learnt them all.'

Elaine moved back to the bar. She picked up the Hennessy and poured a full glass. 'I'm going to be hard, Jack, not sympathetic. You could still have gotten out.'

'That's my point,' Smoke coiled from Jack's cigarette. 'I did get out. I learnt to numb myself.'

'How, Jack, by killing? By killing again and again.'

'That's right.' He drew on the cigarette. 'It was a way of easing the pain, the pain of living in a world that doesn't allow you to forget who you are.'

Elaine drained her glass and coughed. 'You're full of shit, Jack. Where did you learn psychology? Whatever happened to positive thinking?'

Jack moved to the book shelf and tapped the ash from his cigarette into a tray. 'I could tell you other things.'

'Could you, Jack.' Her voice sounded slurred. 'I bet you're full of tales of woe and misery.'

'Maybe.' He turned towards her. 'But what about you?'

She poured another glass. 'What about me, Jack?' She came forward unsteadily. 'Don't you think you've learnt enough about me already at The Men's Bar?'

He caught her arm as she sipped again from the glass. She pushed her hand through the buttons of his shirt. 'How do you feel when you see me dance? Does it excite you?'

Jack stepped back. Elaine brought his hand to the base of her throat

and ran it gently down over her breasts. ‘How does that feel, Jack ... hot?’

Jack yanked at his hand. Elaine tugged and pushed herself closer. ‘Sometimes we let the men touch us, but not all the time.’ She sipped from the brandy, then slowly drew the glass from her lips and tipped it so that the brandy splashed between her cleavage. She drew in her breath. ‘It’s sensual, Jack ... cold against hot.’ She rubbed his hand around. ‘Are you getting stiff?’

Jack’s heel kicked against the bookcase. The opening of Tchaikovsky’s Capriccio Italian came over the speakers.

‘Great music, Jack. It starts off with a bang, let’s hope it doesn’t finish with a whimper.’

The ribs of the bookcase pressed against Jack’s back. Elaine slid Jack’s hand over her stomach and along the elastic of her pants. Jack snapped his head to the side. Quickly she sprang back and reached for the volume dial on the stereo. She turned it up and twirled.

‘Dance, Jack.’ The Capriccio swept her along. She dipped, bent to the side and span. ‘This is life, Jack. This is called letting your hair down and not giving a fuck.’ She laughed. ‘Well maybe later ...’ She drew him with her hand. ‘If you’re lucky.’

Jack ran his hand over his face and kicked at the carpet. Elaine grabbed the Hennessy and took a swig from the bottle. She spun with the bottle in outstretched hands.

Jack thumped the ledge of the bookshelf and hurried to the volume control. He turned it off. Elaine fell forward.

‘Oh, Jack ...’

She tripped against him and slurred. ‘You’re no fun, Jack, why don’t

you get these off.'

She hooked her hand in his trousers and yanked. Jack pulled her upright. 'It's no use, Elaine.'

'Why, Jack? What's wrong? You can have me any way you want.'

He stepped away from her and tried to move her to the couch. She pulled away and stood swaying on her feet. She swigged again at the bottle.

'I want to get pissed, Jack, you're too hard a man for me.' She cooed the word 'hard'. 'It's the only way I can cope.'

Jack made a grab for the bottle but she snatched it away. 'Leave me alone, Jack.' She fell back. 'Why don't you slip out of that dreary suit. Let's see you in a g-string.'

The Hennessy was nearly finished. She lurched forward, gripping her stomach. 'I think I'm going to be sick.'

Jack grabbed her by the waist and helped her to the bathroom. She slumped onto the floor and hung her head over the tub. 'I'm sorry, Jack. I haven't eaten since late afternoon ...'

She retched, but vomited only spittle.

Jack clutched her around the waist. She turned her head, but then retched again, this time with more force. Jack held her until she finished. She shuddered several times, then leaned her cheek against the edge of the tub.

From the living room, the sound of rain and wind could be heard through the open balcony. Air, moist with the oily smell of the rain, drifted down the passage. From outside came the wail of police sirens as a helicopter hovered overhead. The chop of its blades rose and fell.

Jack stood and washed the bathtub. As the water swirled down the

drain, Elaine groaned and tried to lift her head. He took her below the arms and carried her to the bedroom. She groaned again and shifted her head from side to side as he lay her on the bed. The room was dark; only light from the bathroom, jutting in through the open door, stabbed across the carpet.

Jack brought over a chair. Elaine lay quietly. He hung his head, and closing his eyes, sat perfectly still, listening only to the sound of his breath as it passed to and fro from his nostrils.

The chop of the helicopter sounded down the passage. A wide circle of light played over the living room, momentarily bathing the hallway. A megaphone sounded. The crack of gunfire echoed over the roof top. Bullets sprayed across the balcony and sent the dust of concrete into the air.

Jack hit a console on the bed-head and drew the steel shutters shut. At the end of the bed he pinched his nose between his hands. Elaine raised a limp hand to her forehead. Jack moved slowly towards her. She groaned and turned. Jack wiped at his face and quickly bent towards the elastic of her pants. He felt down her thighs until he found the zipper, then tugged and drew down her pants. Beneath the floral pattern of a white g-string, her hair lay neatly in a narrow stripe. He held the pants above the knees and watched the slow rise and fall of her taut belly where it sat pinched under the elastic of her g-string. His eyes followed up towards her breasts. They lay heavily against her skin, the nipples sitting upright in their dimpled aureoles. He lifted her and removed her shirt, then gently pulled off her boots and pants. She lay white and smooth, her long, wavy brunette hair beneath her, and flowing over her breasts. He covered her lightly and slumped on the bed. Slowly he hung

his head and covered his eyes. Elaine rolled and pushed against him. He remained on the bed as morning passed behind the blinds, making its way in thin white lines through the closed slits of the shutters.

IV

Jack swung the torch in an arc. A man in a grey, tattered trenchcoat shuffled along. His shoes, the soles worn sliver thin, grated like sandpaper against the dust and debris strewn concrete. Jack lifted the light to the man's face. His eyes lay molten, and ran from their hollows in glistening pools towards a flat nose and flat cheeks so that his face appeared to fall in one plane from below the forehead. The man raised a bandaged arm and groped. His feet kicked a bottle and sent it shattering against the corner of a wall. Jack shone the light further along the way. A tunnel branched off to the right. He entered.

In the distance the sound of rushing water could be heard. The sound grew steadily until he entered a wide cavern where water gushed from pipes and flowed rapidly down a channel. Carefully he made his way along a steel railed walk-way beneath a ledge. Beside him, the water foamed along. It had eaten through the concrete of the channel and made a deeper furrow in the rock and earth beneath. In the water flowed the garbage of the streets. Occasionally, through the brown murk, a bloated body or limb could be seen bobbing along.

Jack continued along the railing until he came to a steel stairway. As he stepped onto the next level, he heard the scurry of footsteps. A group, huddled against a wall, shielded their eyes and groaned. Jack halted and shone the torch over them. At one end of the group, a tall thin woman

dropped a bundle swathed in cloth. As she bent forward, Jack moved slowly towards her. He picked up the mass. It was a baby doll, its arms and legs torn away. The eyes, though, stared open and it lay smiling. Jack handed the bundle back to the woman. She snatched at it with trembling hands. Abruptly, behind him, Jack heard a yell. He turned and saw a young boy holding a gun. He raised his hands in the air.

‘I want everything you’ve got ... money, watch, that hat and coat.’

Jack kept his hands up. The boy had no legs. Severed from the top of his thighs, his upper body rested strapped to a wheeled tray. Jack felt hands grab him. His hat was yanked from his head and hands pulled at the sleeves of his coat. He shrugged the coat off. The boy gasped, and his hand momentarily shook. The group backed away, dropping the coat and hat. The boy pulled back the firing hammer of the gun with his thumb. He stuttered.

‘You preparing to fight some kind of war?’

Jack nodded his head. ‘People are waiting for me.’

The boy lifted a hand and motioned in the air. Two men moved to either side of Jack.

‘What do they want with you?’

Jack stood silently.

The boy smiled, showing yellow teeth. ‘You’re not being very helpful, but at a guess, I’d say they’re trying to kill you.’

Again Jack said nothing.

The boy signalled once more with his hand. ‘You’re very cool. What are you doing down here? We don’t normally get your type.’ Footsteps scraped behind Jack.

‘I told you,’ Jack breathed in. ‘People are looking for me.’

‘Are you someone important?’

‘I was once. Not any more.’

The boy was silent for a moment. He bent his neck to the side, trying to look behind Jack. He straightened again. ‘I don’t believe you. You look important to me.’ He grinned crookedly. ‘You down here just to look at the freakshow?’

‘No ...’

‘You’re lying.’ The boy’s hand shook. ‘You’re armed with more semi-autos than you’ve got hands and feet for.’ The boy leaned forward, stretching his back straps tight. ‘I don’t think you’re hiding out at all. I think you’ve been sent down here to make a report, to find out how the clean-up’s going.’ He blinked. ‘Well you don’t have to tell us anything. We know what we are. We’re what washes off the street, the gutter crawling reality of the world. It’s easier to wash us all away than to let our stink float to the surface.’ The boy scowled. ‘What’s wrong is, the rain’s washing away the wrong kind of filth.’

Jack remained still. ‘The rain falls the same everywhere.’

‘We know the theories, Mister.’ The boy snapped. ‘You don’t need to tell us. What we want to know is, what’s going to be done about it?’

Jack made no comment.

The boy leaned back. His eyes shifted in their orbits. He raised his gun. ‘Grab his weapons.’

Jack spun and kicked. The boy fired as Jack knocked the edge of his tray. The boy rolled back and crashed with the ringing noise of tin against the railing of the ledge. His gun fell. Jack kicked it into the water. Quickly the men surrounding him drew back. Jack drew the 9mm Glock and motioned it towards the group remaining against the wall.

‘Someone get me my hat and coat.’

A man moved slowly forward. His face hung heavily scarred and pitted beneath matted grey hair. His exposed legs were swollen. Pus oozed from a gash above one of the knees. He handed Jack his things.

The boy yelled ‘Fucker.’

Jack drew on his coat and reached into an inside pocket. He took out his wallet and removed several items. He tossed the wallet over the edge of the railing so that it landed just beside the swirling water of the channel. ‘Don’t expect me to make any comment on your predicament, but if you’re smart, you’ll grab what’s in that wallet.’

The boy levelled his eyes towards him.

Jack turned and moved off. He heard the sound of feet scurrying behind him.

In the street above, the rain fell in a light spray. Yellow mist swirled everywhere in pockets and wove its way down narrow lanes and over pot-holed bitumen. Along the edges of the streets, the wrecks of cars sat like the hollow, guttered skulls of the dead. Hatted and coated figures made their way between them, hunched beneath torn, bare spoked umbrellas. The only light along the streets came from second-storey windows. All the windows and doors beneath lay hammered over with boards and tin.

Jack checked the street signs. He had come out of the sewers two blocks earlier than he had planned. He turned down Remsen street. The mist hung damply here. The side of a building had crumbled and lay strewn across the road. A woman sat howling, clutching the hand of a young girl whose arm jutted rigid and torn from beneath the wall. Near-

by, a man stood in blood-soaked pyjamas with his head in his hands. Jack made his way between the fallen stone and saw more bodies. The eyes of a man stared open at him. Rain sat in a bloody puddle in the cracked hollow of his skull.

Jack checked across the street. The sidewalk lay in shadow and turned sharply around a corner. He crossed over and followed the walk. Sammy's street lay at the end.

The sign on the door said closed. Jack gripped the door knob, but then hesitated. There was a slowness about the street. The lights in the pleasure parlours still glowed, but seemed to flicker dully. Everything seemed to hang suspended. The rain drifted rather than fell, and over the sewer drains, the water sat stagnantly. Jack felt a tightness in his stomach. Carefully he opened the door to Sammy's shop.

The front of the shop lay in darkness. Something crunched his feet. On the floor he noticed the glitter of glass and saw that the display case lay tipped over. Quickly he slipped his hand through the buttons of his coat and flicked the stud off a holster. From behind the door he heard someone sobbing. Jack kicked at the door.

Sammy sat kneeling on the floor. Down one wall of the corridor, against the peeling rose wallpaper, ran bloodied handprints. The floor-boards lay smeared with blood in long streaks. Kay's body lay slumped in the kitchen doorway, her battered head resting in a crimson pool.

Sammy pulled at her clothes and beat his head against her back. His knees slipped in blood. He turned to Jack. His face fell in crevices; dark shadows etched against the white of grief. His eyes swam in tears.

'Jack, it was Danny Lewis. Bronstein tried to stop him but he kept coming at Kay ... kicking her in the head as she crawled on the floor.

They held me pinned against the doorway so that I could watch.'

Jack knelt beside her. Her head lay twisted around. Flesh hung curled from her cheeks. In the kitchen, the body of Mike Bronstein lay ripped with bullets. Sammy gripped Jack's arm.

'Kill them, Jack, kill them the way they did Kay.' He broke into a wail and fell forward. He clawed at Kay's body, and slapped his hand again and again against the tiled floor.

Jack stood slowly. With his hand clenched tight against the grip of the Glock, he walked heavily up the corridor. Outside he halted momentarily beside the door, then walked into the middle of the street. The rain blew in thin streaks against his cheeks. It soaked him with a clammy wetness, sticking in droplets to his trenchcoat, and dripping in shiny, oily lines from his hat. The same stillness pervaded the street as before. There was no movement, except for that of a gentle breeze. He lifted his head.

Below a full moon, the tallest of the city buildings stabbed into yellow cloud. Against the light of the building windows, the rain drifted in lit sheets. Jack closed his eyes. He stood breathing in, feeling his skin tingle and flush warmly as the rain came to rest upon his face. A helicopter circled above. Slowly the rain seeped through his shirt. He hung his head and walked on, keeping to the middle of the road. There was no traffic; the debris and pot-holed streets being unpassable except by foot. Once off Sammy's street, he quickened his stride.

The roads began to broaden. Other people hurried along, clutching tightly to facemasks. As Jack approached Phoenix, he slowed again. Taxis waited in a long line outside The Men's Bar. In a narrow lane, across the road, a white sedan sat parked close against a wall. Jack looked up and

stared along the line of windows in the building opposite. Only one was lit. The curtains were drawn, revealing a slight part in the centre. Jack lowered the brim of his hat and raised his coat collar. Outside The Men's Bar, the doorman, Paul, took his arm. Jack pulled, but Paul gripped his arm firmly and tipped his head towards the car opposite. Jack nodded.

At top of the stairs, he held his pass ready. The cashier stared at him with thin, closed lips. Jack threaded his way through the couches and made his way straight to the bathroom. Inside, he removed his hat and flicked it against the floor, then brushed at his coat with a paper towel. At the basin furthest from the door, he splashed his face with warm water and combed back his hair. When the door swung open, he replaced his hat and hurried out.

Near the pool tables, he looked for Elaine. All three podiums were loaded with dancers, and a dancer twisted on each cat-walk. Men stood in groups around the stage. Elaine was not visible. He moved to a lounge chair that sat by itself against a black dividing wall and slumped down. He stared over the room, then lifted his head to the ceiling and closed his eyes.

An announcement sounded. Distantly he heard the sound of applause and whistling as a rumbling noise came over the speakers. It built slowly and was joined by the thump of a bass drum. Jack opened his eyes. The music rose to a sharp, staccato booming as smoke burst across the stage. Suddenly the curtains parted and a dancer in a black-hooded robe strode onto the stage. The audience hollered and screamed, clapping the flat of their hands upon the edges of tables and the stage. The rhythm of the drums picked up. The dancer dipped her head up and down, and striding back and forth, billowed and flapped the ends of her

robe. Suddenly she threw back her hood, revealing the skull of a death-mask. Jack paled and straightened.

Again the music picked up. The dancer flapped the ends of the robe in increasing wide arcs, this time dipping her whole body forward as she strode back and forth. The music thumped and screeched. She spun and threw off her robe. Beneath she wore a black leather one piece suit, cut high at the thigh and beneath her breasts, so that they sat exposed. Her arms were sheathed to the elbow in tasselled, satin gloves and she wore black, laced, knee-length boots. She stood still, her arms crossed against her chest, each hand holding a torch. The music drove on wildly. She pumped her arms up and down, arcing and crisscrossing the beams of light as red lights flashed over the stage. The audience clambered closer and stamped their feet. The dancer threw back her mask. It was Elaine.

Quickly she strode back and forth and swung around the poles. From the top of each pole she brought down chains. Two dancers in black robes, holding a man, naked except for a black hood and black g-string, stepped from behind the curtain. Elaine cupped the man's wrists in the chains so that he stood bound between the poles. She brought out a whip and slashed it against the floor. The man pulled and strained against the poles. Elaine fingered his groin and ran her tongue up his chest, then cracked the whip to either side of his face. The man pulled harder. Elaine whipped him behind the knees and he fell to the stage. The hooded mistresses brought out a chair.

Jack moved quickly behind the crowd. Two men, to the side of the stage, bit their forefinger and thumb between their teeth and whistled. A droning came from the speakers. It rose, cut short, then rose and fell again. Elaine straddled the chair. Clutching the man by the top of the

hood, she forced his head to her groin. The men hollered and ribbed each other. Elaine peeled off the top of her suit and thrust the man's head between her breasts. Quickly she jumped from the chair, and cracking the whip in the air, strode behind the man. The drone from the speakers rose higher. Elaine slashed the man across the back and drew the hood from his face. The man's face hung limp and sweaty. He was middle-aged, his hair streaked with grey. Elaine gripped his hair and twisted his head around. Jack moved forward through the men and stopped at the edge of the stage. Elaine looked up and froze. Her face strained. Slowly she stepped back, and as if she spoke through water, mouthed his name.

The men fell silent. Elaine threw her head back and ground the man's face between her breasts. The audience erupted. Jack spun and pushed his way to the bar. Behind him the music softened and slid in a slow rhythm from the speakers. Jack kept his back to the stage and ordered a brandy. When the final applause came, he hurried to his usual seat by the shadowed pillar below the podiums.

Elaine had gone. Jack shuddered. A lethargy seemed to come over the room. The dancers scribed their hips in ever slowing circles, smoke drifted from lit cigarettes as if weighted. Jack rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. He felt his mind numb, recede, his thoughts drive inwards. The music beat against his skull. People moved as if from far away. Someone sat down beside him and touched him gently on the arm.

'Jack, you don't look well.'

He lifted his head and sat still, blinking. Elaine squeezed his hand.
'Where have you been?'

Jack hung his head. Elaine moved closer. Jack leaned forward and

sniffed.

‘I’ve been living in the sewers.’

‘You stayed down there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. I had to get away.’

Elaine touched her other hand to his arm. ‘Things have gotten bad, Jack. Chris and Vic have been looking for you.’

Jack pinched a cigarette loosely between his lips and lit a match. ‘Have they been taking care of you?’

‘Yes, they’ve been sweet.’

‘I’ve known them a long time.’ Jack puffed.

Elaine sat silently for a moment, staring down. ‘Jack, why did you stay away?’

A waitress came past. Jack lifted his hand. She bent towards him and nodded. Jack stared after her as she left. ‘I thought about leaving, going away.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Smoke coiled about Jack’s face. ‘I thought I could learn to live again. I thought you could help.’ He looked towards her. ‘We are given only one chance. Birth, existence, the beauty of love, which is life, these are gifts.’ He drew on the cigarette and sucked in. ‘Fate is our blanket. We cannot want what we haven’t got.’

Elaine withdrew her hand and leaned back. ‘I was sick that night, wasn’t I? You put me to bed?’

‘I undressed you ...’ Jack leaned forward. ‘I watched you till morning, then left.’

‘Did you feel anything?’

Jack twisted towards her. ‘Is there beauty in suffering, Elaine?’

‘There is beauty in you, Jack.’

‘Beauty, Elaine?’

‘You have so much to offer.’

‘Maybe once.’

‘Even now, Jack.’

The waitress came with Jack’s drink and placed it on the table with the change. Elaine stood up. ‘Chris and Vic told me that all the money you’ve made, you’ve given away in the sewers.’

‘I have no need for it.’

Elaine spun around. ‘The human condition, Jack, it defies every law.’

‘It is our complexity that we can both love and kill.’

‘And you have no answers?’

‘That’s right.’

Elaine took a deep breath. She leaned forward and snapped her arm towards the door. ‘Do you know what’s out there? Half of the city police. As soon as you leave, they’re going to blast away.’

Jack pursed his lips and reached for his glass. ‘I’ll be all right.’

‘You’ll be all right! Don’t you care that you’re going to die? Don’t you care about me?’

Jack dropped his hands between his knees. ‘They killed Kay because of me. I can’t live with the pain any more. I thought once that killing would ease the pain of living, but I was wrong. At the end of pain, there is still sorrow, a wish that things weren’t the way they were. We are at the mercy of change; change that in the end, brings everything back to the beginning. We cannot deny what we are or what we have become. We

can only accept.'

Elaine sat down. 'Who was Kay?'

'She was a dwarf from the circus. When I left the carnie, she and her husband Sammy, came with me. They opened a snake-skin business which I used as a front. Now she is dead, and she is dead because of me.'

'I'm sorry, Jack.'

Jack stood up and walked past the table. 'I knew they were in danger. Like you, I got them involved. I asked Sammy to talk to Mike Bronstein, an old friend of mine who Samuel Williams hired to do the Schwaiger job. Bronstein came clean and said that the money had been too good, that he only did the job because he knew they couldn't make the rap stick and because he knew that Schwaiger meant nothing to him or me anyway. What he didn't know was that the D.A. and the police commissioner were in on the deal. After Chris and Vic took care of those witnesses and when Williams found out that Bronstein was wanting to spit the cherry right back into his face, Williams got Spiteri to send his boys around to where Bronstein was hiding with Sammy. I was on my way to bring Kay, Sammy and Bronstein back to my apartment, but I got there too late. Both Kay and Mike were dead.'

Jack stood staring into his drink. Elaine rose slowly and stepped up behind him. The number of men in the bar had thinned. Only two of the podiums were loaded, and what men remained, sat in tight knit groups before the tables. Dancers that were no longer working, lounged and chatted with the men. The manageress stood with her arms folded by the bar. Elaine took Jack's arm.

'Jack, you don't have to go out. They've got no case any more.'

He turned to her. 'They'll keep killing my friends, Elaine, one by one

until I let myself get caught. Williams knows that he'll lose the election while I can say something about his connection with Spiteri. Like I said, the world is run by what happens underneath the surface of things. Those in power stay in power, because they know how to keep up the front.'

Elaine let go of his arm. 'I don't want to lose you, Jack.'

'I can't love you, Elaine, not the way a man can love a woman. I'm too far gone.'

'I don't care, Jack. Somehow it will work. I believe you can still change.'

'Can I, Elaine, can I deny what I am?'

'And what are you, Jack?'

'What I have always been.'

Elaine stepped away. She slumped in a chair by a table and buried her face in her hands. Her chest wracked back and forth. Across her bare shoulder, where her hair had fallen forward, the strap of her bodysuit sat twisted. She kicked her legs back and fell forward.

Jack walked up to the table. 'It's time for me to go.'

She threw her head up. Down her cheeks and over her eyes, her hair hung wetly. 'Then go, go for all I care. See what sort of martyr you can become.'

Jack stared down at her. She sniffed quickly and wiped her hand under her nose. Near the stage, two businessmen lifted jackets from the backs of chairs. Jack walked slowly towards the exit. At the door, he halted with his hand against the frame. Elaine rose and hurried forward.

'Jack ...'

Jack stiffened. He clenched his fist and hurried down the stairs. In

the entrance way, Paul stood with his feet apart, facing the street. Rain dripped in light brown streaks from the edges of the canopy around him. He turned as he heard the thud of Jack's steps behind him and held up his hand.

'Cars have been arriving every ten minutes or so for the past two hours, Jack.' He stepped back and shook his head. 'Don't try your luck.'

Jack halted at the edge of the canopy. The whirl of a police siren sounded to his right as a car screeched to a halt. The street was blocked off at both ends. Barricades had been erected, and in front of them, red beacons flashed in rows. Beyond the median strip, patrol cars ringed the bar in a crescent. Officers sat in the crevices of the car's open doors, hunched beneath plastic sheets, their pistols drawn. Two helicopters circled overhead. Giant search lights hung from their bellies. The beams crossed and crisscrossed over the circled cars.

With a hard splatter, the rain fell against the road. It collected in oily streams and ran in a torrent down the grates of the sewers. Above Jack, the canopy sagged and flapped. In places, where it had worn thin, the rain dropped through and fell heavily onto the pitted rubber mating of the bar entrance. Paul touched Jack on the shoulder.

'It's suicide, Jack. Give yourself up.'

Jack reached into his jacket and unclipped a holster. He withdrew a .45 calibre Colt. Paul pinched down harder on his shoulder. 'Jesus, don't.'

Jack shrugged off his grip. To his right, over the top of an unmarked car, a megaphone cracked into life.

'Jack, Jack Costello ...'

Jack fired in the direction of the phone. The bullet sparked off the

bonnet of the car. Immediately there came the simultaneous click of guns and rifles being snapped ready. The megaphone echoed again through the rain. Jack fired quickly into the headlights of the car. Feet scurried and splashed. He turned to the doorman.

‘You’d better get inside, Paul, but move slowly.’

A shout came down the stairwell. Elaine threw herself into the frame of the doorway.

‘Jack ...’

She stood clutching the folds of a raincoat, her hair pushed roughly beneath the brim of a hat. Jack gripped Paul by the arm and screamed, ‘Take her back in. I’ll put my hands up.’

Jack turned quickly and lifted his arms. Elaine pushed herself forward. ‘Jack ... no.’

Jack spun and drew the 9mm Glock in his left hand. He fired, hitting her in the arm. Paul caught her as she fell back. Jack lowered the Glock. ‘She’ll be all right. They won’t shoot while you take her up.’

Elaine’s lower lip trembled. She rolled heavily into Paul’s arms, a strained sound coming from her throat. Jack caught Paul by the arm. ‘Can you love me now, Elaine?’

Her face twisted. Slowly her eyes clouded and she lowered her head. Paul shrugged his arms upward and glared at Jack. Silently he carried her up the stairs.

Jack watched until they rounded the first flight, then turned and walked from beneath the canopy. Rifles and hand-guns fired simultaneously. Jack’s body twitched back as the bullets hit him. He holstered the Glock and aimed the Colt at two officers. He fired, hitting them in the temples. The spark and smoke of gunfire emptied into the night around

him. He walked on, his arm held stiffly forward. He emptied four more shots, then clipped in another magazine. Behind the doors of the cars, the officers stood and threw back their plastic covering. Their eyes stared wide beneath their clear polypropylene masks. Jack walked from car to car and emptied the Colt with precision. The officers fell, white-faced.

Blood eddied down the street in crimson patches and poured into the sewers. There was a momentarily lull in the fire. Behind the row of police cars, in an armoured van, Jack saw the sweaty, thin face of Samuel Williams. He moved forward, and clipping in another magazine, fired three shots against the windscreen of the van. The glass shattered but held. Williams jumped out with his hands up. Jack raised the Colt. Around him, officers crept forward, their guns held in front of them in stiff arms. Williams swallowed and shook his head. Jack fired twice, hitting the shells into both kneecaps. The officers opened fire. Jack reeled back, but kept his feet and aimed the Colt. It jammed. Quickly he hit the butt with the heel of his palm and twisted the barrel. When the jam didn't clear, he threw the gun aside. The officers fired again. Staggering, Jack unholstered his .40 Smith & Wesson. Four officers fell before the rest withdrew.

Samuel Williams slid over the road on his ruined legs. The beam of a searchlight circled both men in burning light. Williams turned and shielded his eyes. Between the chop of the helicopter blades, a speaker sounded.

'Jack, we'd like to make a deal. Leave without further fire and we'll drop all charges.' Jack recognized the voice of the police commissioner. He spun.

'Fuck you, Mike.'

He raised the Smith & Wesson and fired against the search beam. The helicopter tipped to the side, momentarily jerked, then sped away. Jack bent towards Williams and removed the Governor's hat. The rain plastered heavily against his thinning hair. 'You were never going to win, Sam. You forgot one thing. For the dead there is no end.'

William's arm shook where his hand rested flatly against the road. His eyes stared wide. Jack straightened. Williams blubbered.

'Please ...'

Jack emptied the Smith & Wesson. William's body twitched and convulsed. His legs kicked out several times. Jack re-chambered the .40.

Voices and screams sounded about him. He stared over the road. Officers stood still beside their cars, their guns limp by their side. Their faces beneath their masks hung white. Slowly they retreated.

Jack stared ahead. The rain was slowing. He felt the weight of his coat against him. Heavy with blood, he pulled it outward. His chest lay torn open. He pressed the coat back gently and stood still. Blood soaked into his shoes and he felt the soles of his feet stick against their socks. Slowly he made his way forward onto the pavement and looked up. Near the corner of a building, against the white light of a white shielded globe, a moth fluttered. He lifted his hand and cupped the moth in his palm. Carefully he closed his fingers, feeling its warmth as it dusted its wings. He turned towards The Men's Bar. The doors were closed. The street lay silent. He closed his eyes and felt the moth still, then beat its wings again. He tipped his head, nodded, and walked into the shadow of the building.

The Lepers



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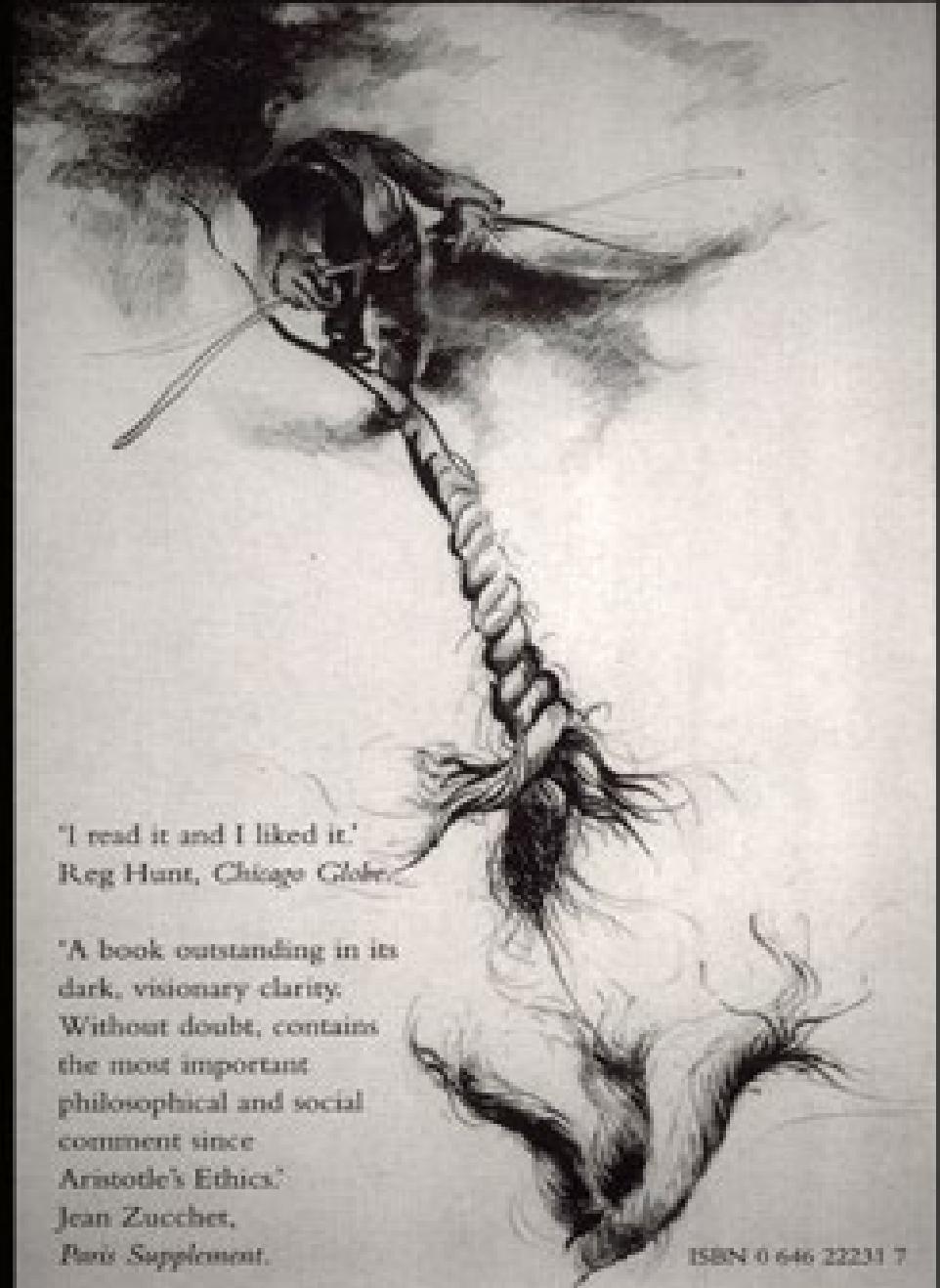
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