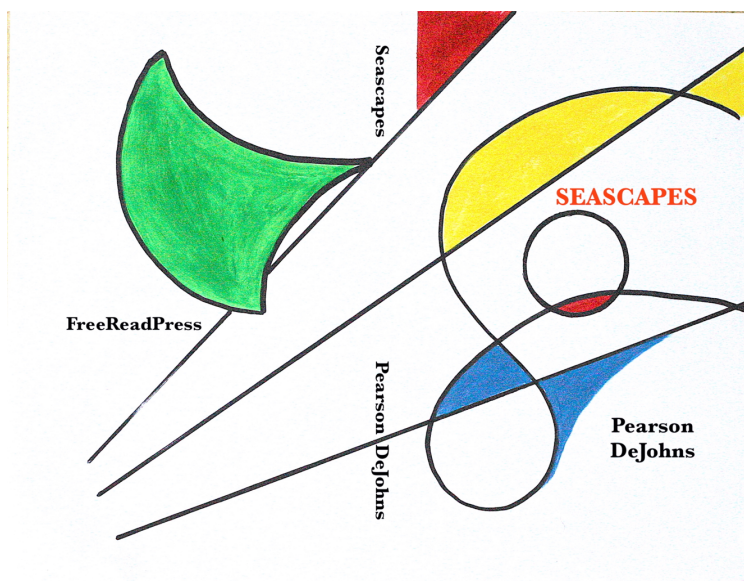


# SEASCAPES





# SEASCAPES

by

Pearson DeJohns

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## FOREWORD

by the Editors

*Seascapes* is the last in our series of novels by Pearson DeJohns, the first serious work he completed, and the only work to survive until his *Vacances*, composed, we believe more than a decade later.

DeJohns had written much prior to this, of course, developing at least the work ethic that would enable him to bring this to completion. His earliest known work, little read and now lost, chronicled a juvenile exploit of no interest to anyone in the predictable context of the anxieties of youth, the threats of parents—my God! has fiction not enough of that?—and after annoying a reader or two, the whole was deemed unsalvageable. No better than predictable characters who could be eliminated only by arbitrary deaths or consignment to madhouses, which in those days, much to the profit of bad novelists, could still be thought to exist.

Even less successful were his several attempts to follow up on the work published here, each text marked by a confidence belied by the naiveté that persisted through most of DeJohns's life. Vapid. Ponderous. And directionless. As if the narratives would form themselves as the language grew in sophistication without a shred of substance underlying it. You see remnants of these aborted efforts in later works—the writer of *Titles and Epitaphs*, the solitary scholar and the nebulous lovers who drift through pages and perhaps through his life as well. God knows the dismal end his lifework would have come to

had any of these achieved the success he dreamed of. He wrote, we find, on wastepaper stolen from the workplace; he read, and re-read, as if that act alone would recompose the whole, until these works, never completed, were finally consigned to flames.

The editing of the present work posed difficulties quite different from those we encountered with his later work. There seemed much to be done, although the bones seemed good, as one might say of an old house one wishes to sell or purchased at an inflated price. The striking dryness of style, whether intended or not, became integral to the whole, consistent with the skeletal nature of character and plot. There is simply no place for the ironies and flippancies, the occasional bursts of lyricism we find in DeJohns's mature works. Where, one wonders, reading through this, would his characters learn even the few words they speak? the thoughts they formulate, if in fact they think or speak at all? The spareness of style, often halting, often inarticulate, we determined must remain, despite the farcical naiveté DeJohns worked so diligently to ironize away in his later works. The glaring crudeness of invention and the often labored style—these came to seem not intractable flaws, but rather, for better or worse, essential components or, perhaps more strongly, the very *raison d'être* of the work itself.

Our revisions thus have been light and only touch matters we are certain DeJohns himself, in later years, would have corrected himself: certain gross infelicities of style, repetitions and clichés that would be as embarrassing to the author as they are now tedious to us—small

ineptitudes of plot and character that even his inexperience cannot excuse. In addition, there are certain elements of diction we have removed entirely—the inevitable pomp of imagined angst: the once ubiquitous *absurd, free*—these are now gone, and only a global search will determine whether a reference to the *abyss* somehow escaped our scrutiny. With these few exceptions, the whole is as he left it, and perhaps, no longer (as he had at one point wished) “unread now for good.” We have provided a new title, his various choices either misleading or of no real use; we have also omitted his tentative subtitle “*Bildungsroman*” (or worse “*A Building’s Romance*”) as suggesting a playful or perhaps bitter self-consciousness we find little evidence of in the text.

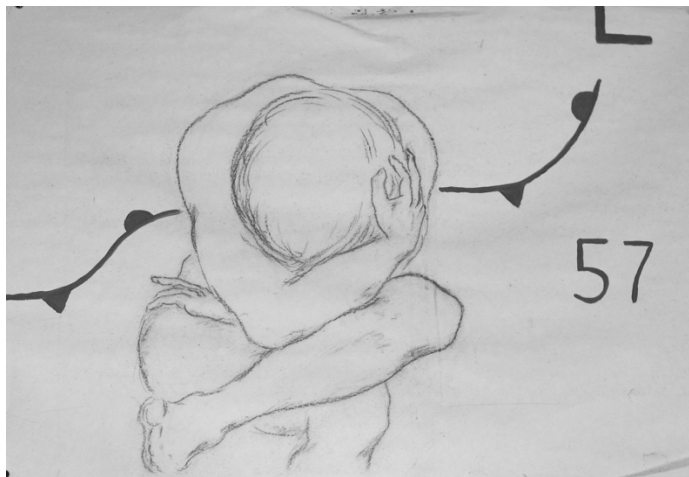
The physical typescript (a Xerox copy of an original to which we no longer have access) has corrections in both pen and pencil. Inked comments are in DeJohns’s hand, evidence only of his re-reading of the text, and indicating no clear plan to revise or improve it. Others, in pencil, note typographical errors, certain spelling faults, and errors or confusions in diction (*obstinance/obstinacy*, for example). Occasional notes of sympathy and interest: “Why not ...?” the anonymous commentator suggests. Could these be from the older lover who claimed to read the original typescript word-for-word? then brushed him off for her abusive partner and the bruises multiplied over her face? Or perhaps the aging agent, who briefly shared his fantasies of literary glory? then returned the MS with perfunctory apologies? Could it have been no more than an officious friend or relative? There are likely ways to

investigate this question, but as far as we know, all early readers (we have identified six) are, with one exception, now dead.

This then, is the beginning and perhaps the end of it. The first complete work by DeJohns and the last we have thought fit to publish. There are a few notebooks contemporary with this work which contain mere fragments, but it may well take more piety than taste on our part to revisit them.

(Seascapes)

The Whirr



Whirr. A whirring, grounds and foregrounds, perplexities.  
Convenient Truths! Intermingled, blended smooth ...

This way and that way, I feel the way.

Diffusion: combination integrate and disintegrate ...

Bump thump clump.

"Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me ..." It doesn't do.

Cardboard forms compounded on forms, strata, substrata,  
castrata ...

"Excuse, excuse, excuse ..." Nor that. *Superbia et* ... Nor  
that. Confusion yielding to symmetry—lines marked off at  
intervals, sensate, sensible, blues, yellows, greens ...

The sea is the way.

Excuse me.

Flows, a swirl, clarifying yet formless, yet imperfect.

Images of images ...

"I must ... I must ..."

And an abstruse blue muttering. ...

"Excuse me." "Sorry." "Excuse me." "Look out there."

"Excuse me." Bump thump clump.

"I thought ... No, I must ... Excuse ..." Indistinct, part of  
the whirr; better the totality than inadequacy. More whirring.  
Synergy: "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."  
Each part is subordinate to its place in the hole. The parts are  
less than themselves, then themselves than themselves ...

"Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me ..."

The sea is the sea.

Distant parodies. "Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me ..."

It doesn't do; it doesn't do; it doesn't do. "Oh please,  
excuse me, excuse me, excuse me ..."

Deafening, deadening ...

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“For I must ...”

“You must?” “Yes you must ...” “Give him room! Give him room! Give him room!”

The sea is the sea and the sea is the way.

“Room, give him room!”

Excuse me excuse me excuse me excuse me

# I



Nothingness. Pleasing. The wool pricked his fingertips and he jerked them away. But the warmth drew his hand downward and he nestled it in the blanket. Whirr, something about the whirr. Something about its power. That it could inflict such sleep! He opened his eyes in a lingering haze. Tribute to the whirr, to the bump clump and omnipotent whirr. He felt suddenly cautious and narrowed his eyes in what seemed a morning fog. He had seen something. Something that frightened him and he must be careful about exposing himself to it, yes extremely so. Then he laughed, silently so that what he had seen could not hear. For nothing out there amused him; the laugh mocked the foolish idea that his surroundings were subject to caution. That whatever he had seen might metamorphose into an acceptable thing, or perhaps vanish entirely in deference to wariness.

Ridiculous!

Yet still, he dared not fully open his eyes.

If nothing more, he might delay it, whatever it was, whatever it intended to do. Yes, certainly! Its impetus might come from his eyes; that was reasonable. So perhaps he might affect it after all.

A dilemma then.

He briefly weighed conflicting hypotheses. Perhaps, he thought, his reason itself was in error. A distinct possibility to be sure, but one he must reject, even if on pragmatic grounds. At least, he was thinking. At least that. There was little else but rationality to rely on, until of course he opened his eyes. And if that act were dependent on reason ... Or did that ... Or was it ...

There was obviously more to it, he realized. A moral demand of sorts. Formerly asleep, he was now awake. Not

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only *could* he open his eyes and confront whatever lay out there, but he *must* open them. It was a start, and one he could hardly avoid.

He peered through the haze and caught another glimpse of it, then quickly retreated into blindness. It was a face, definitely a face, if his perception could be trusted and if his intellect were not so defective as to distort or destroy the meaning of 'face'. What was it doing there? he wondered. Its purpose could not be deduced without further inspection, and he risked another peek at it. The haze had partially lifted and as a result, he saw more than he expected. He lay back to calm himself, overwhelmed as he was by the flood of sensation. On that face, yes, when he isolated the face from all the other confusion, whatever *that* might have been, he had recognized something more. It was an emotion. And a humiliating one. Compassion! He groaned bitterly, although silently. What had he expected? Whirr, whirr. Awe? Reverence? An appreciation of his shattered remains? No, none of that. Compassion was fitting, and he accepted it stoically. At least, he thought, his initial fears had been quieted. Whatever its purpose, it apparently intended no harm. Compassion, then. He felt able to face that, and courageously, he opened his eyes.

What he saw astounded him. As the whirling colors and hues and yes that face too which had instigated the whole thing slowly calmed to a more banal familiarity, he realized that he was fully awake. The whirling became a mere background for the face, which stood out boldly from a narrower field of blue and gold. A uniform of sorts, deep blue, slashed with gold. Some sort of official. He glanced quickly around and saw that he was in a small room and a drab one at that. Rectangular, about twelve by fifteen feet, he estimated. Mute green carpet and walls, then the ceiling, white, pock-

marked with tiny holes, then larger holes, four glowing circles—lights, they must be. A narrow door stood opposite his bed; a large man might have to enter sideways, he supposed. Awkward, that would be; even more so if the man were tall and forced to stoop. He felt curtains behind him and solid wall behind them. A window probably, somewhere on the wall.

With the dissipation of the whirr, all seemed innocuous and he scolded himself for the sleep-induced grandeur he had projected onto it. He was alone with the official, it seemed. He could see no other faces in the room. All was silent. He brushed his arm across the wool. The rustle reassured him.

Something had happened to him, something drastic, but he could not focus on it and all his efforts to do so were dissolved in the whirr. And then it spoke. The face finally broke the silence and spoke to him. Gently, compassionately. “You’re awake now.”

Did the inflection mark that as a question? or a simple statement?

He raised himself awkwardly to his elbow and rubbed his eyes, carefully, of course; if he rubbed too hard, all might return. “Yes. You’ll ... excuse me, I ...”

The voice soothed him: “Don’t worry. I don’t mean to harm you.”

He cleared away the remaining haze and stared into the face. It was familiar, but he could not imagine what detail might make it recognizable. Foolish, and he laughed, a subdued laugh. He meant no offence. He studied the face, which had finally become a man. “You ... you are ...” he began suspiciously. But before the man could answer, the whirr rushed in on him and the words disintegrated into disjointed syllables. Colors, flow, whirl, and he stared through it for the face. It emerged, closer now, and he felt a strange

pressure on his shoulder—the hand, the man’s hand and the face close to him whispering, “Easy now. Easy.” He closed his eyes, calming himself, and concentrated only on the firm hand gripping his shoulder. The whirr. The whirr. The hand could stop the whirr. The hand, the firm pressure, was far more *reasonable* than the whirr. He breathed more slowly and tried to relax before reopening his eyes. The face became clear.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he lied, having no idea what the question meant. The hand fell from his shoulder and he wanted to lunge for it, grasp it, and end the whirr. The man withdrew to a wooden chair a few feet away and smiled calmly. An official. A benefactor. Obviously a benefactor, he thought. Or why the hand, destroying the whirr? He thought to thank him, but the words seemed difficult and inappropriate, and the gratitude he tried to communicate insufficient, no doubt due to exhaustion. Something he recognized, he thought. Vague, vague, and it could all be the whirr. “Do I know you?” he asked. “Am I supposed to know you?”

Kind smile. Compassionate smile. “I’m simply here to help you. I doubt you know me.”

But that was wrong. There was something there, he was certain. Some detail. “Are you sure?”

The benefactor continued in a gentle monotone. “That does not really concern us. Not now. I wouldn’t brood over it, if I were you. Brood not. That’s our motto here, I suppose.” The smile left the face and the man bent forward slightly. “Do you know your name?”

He turned from the face and its insulting question. Of course he knew his name and why was he not trusted to remember it? The silence began to oppress him and he looked back at the man, who waited patiently for a reply. Even

acknowledging that a response was necessary, he thought indignantly, would be humiliating, but felt too weak to object as the man said hesitantly, “Mr. ... A?”

“Alex,” he mumbled. The man asked again and he answered “Alex. Alexander A.”

“Mr. A,” repeated the man. “May I call you Alex?”

He shrugged consent as he again scrutinized the face before him. “But *you* ...” No, still unrecognizable. “You knew that. I didn’t have to tell you that.”

The man smiled, “Yes, I admit I did, but it hardly matters.”

Alex continued to study the man and in the silence regretted his outburst. Clearly the benefactor was trying to help him and his own petty obstinacy was no help. He would accept the offer, he supposed. The man seemed to have no ulterior motives. He just knew his name. Nothing more. No harm in that. “I’m sorry,” Alex said, trying to correct his error. “I ...”

The benefactor’s face brightened. “No need of that,” he said. “No need of apology.”

Was it a modest hanging of the head? Alex thought. No, he must have imagined that, for the benefactor seemed neither embarrassed nor annoyed. It was a casual gesture of some sort, he thought, hard to interpret but finally meaningless. Looking for something, reacting to a slight itch or discomfort—that was it. The benefactor smiled at him and he returned the smile politely. Seeing no alternative, Alex trusted him, and his formal smile became less forced.

“You ...” The benefactor seemed hesitant. Perhaps he was afraid of causing more pain and confusion. “Do you know why you’re here?”

Whirr. The whirr was why; the whirr had done it. “No,” he answered. “I was ... sick, or something, and ...” All he could remember was the whirr. “Did you bring me here?”

The benefactor nodded. “In a sense I did.”

“Then tell me,” Alex said, his confidence growing slightly, “tell me, was I ...”

“We needn’t go into this,” the benefactor said kindly. “Not unless you wish to.”

“No no.” The evasion had distracted him, but he reformed the question. “Was I ... I don’t seem to remember ...”

“You were ...” The benefactor paused, doubtless worried over the effects of his words, but Alex maintained a forced blank curiosity. “You were quite irrational.”

“Did I say anything? I mean of interest? Something ... important?” Evidence of something now known to the benefactor. It was there, hidden in the whirr. He waved his hands, trying to formulate his questions. There was something more ... He concentrated, but the whirr, irrational ... the whirr had made him irrational. “I mean ... before ...” As the benefactor stared kindly at him, Alex grew confused. “What I want to know is ...” His past. His past. “My being here. Don’t you see ... I need to know if ...”

The benefactor laughed suddenly. “Oh *that*. Well, we needn’t bother with details, really. But if you’re worried about someone seeing you, I can assure you that no one of importance or interest knows you’re here, and certainly no one will hold it against you.”

Another evasion. Surely that. He could not have been that unclear. He began to object, then felt the hand. From the haze shrouding the face came the blue and gold, and the hand

touched him lightly. “Don’t brood, Alex. There’s time for that. Time for all that.”

He jerked his shoulder away. He was sure now the evasion was deliberate and not a simple misinterpretation of his stammered question. A certain barrier had been erected in that evasion and it seemed oddly impregnable. When he tried to retrieve his question, he could not recall it. Something the benefactor was doing had distracted him. First the touch and now something more. Rocking, rocking, leaning back in his chair then forward then back. And drumming. The fingers drumming against the wood. And more too he realized, intrigued with the movement and rhythms. Something he was saying; it was all strange and unintelligible. Too complex. Too complex. “Wait ... I ...” The benefactor paused in his rocking and looked at Alex as if expectantly. But the pause was all Alex wanted, just the break, and he said nothing. He turned his attention from the benefactor to the room and its immediacy. Something about the room, he thought, something he might recognize. It was still barren, but less oppressive now. Bed, chairs, two chairs, and a small table, and yes he noticed several thin pamphlets scattered over the surface. They lay behind the benefactor and he could see them only with difficulty. “Are those ...” he pointed to the table, “are those mine?”

The benefactor glanced casually toward the pamphlets. “Yours? Yes, I suppose they are yours.”

Alex nodded slowly, then indicated a heap of clothes at the benefactor’s feet. “And those? Mine also?” The benefactor politely followed Alex’s gestures, but casually, as if his questions were a mere childish “why why why” patiently tolerated to avoid tantrums. Alex reached for the clothes but could not touch them without falling from the bed and waved helplessly. The benefactor picked up the clothes and tossed

them to him. Alex caught them. *Deft movements, agile and athletic, picking them lightly and effortlessly from the air.* He studied them, the drab expressionless hues, so opposed to the whirr, he thought, so free of its chaos. Unfamiliar. “These? Mine?”

The benefactor shrugged, “You were wearing them.”

He felt compelled to try them on, but as he started to pull the blanket from his chest, he realized that save for an unfamiliar undershirt, he was completely naked. Too embarrassing at present, he thought, and as the benefactor had said, there was time. He dropped the clothes to the floor and was about to ask for the pamphlets instead, but they had disappeared. He stared at the table; no, he was certain he had seen them and had asked about them. He thought to call attention to the inexplicable disappearance when the benefactor abruptly stood and the question vanished. For the man was so tall, *so tall*, he thought, then realized the stature was an illusion or deception. The man was of what must be average height. “Well,” said the benefactor; the snapped cadence marked an end. There was something, Alex thought ... he had meant to ask something, but he could not remember. He had no opportunity to remember. “You look much better now, if I may say so. I must leave temporarily, but I shall return. In the meantime, I suggest you rest.”

Rest, thought Alex, deceived into that, but the exhaustion was more pronounced and he yawned. The benefactor smiled officially and turned to the door. There was a momentary hiss as the door opened, then he was gone. Rest, rest, yes indeed he could use the rest.

The fatigue had an unnatural quality to it, yet one not terribly unpleasant. He was tired, surely, too tired to investigate the disappearance of his pamphlets and too tired to consider the implications. Had they merely fallen from view,

or had they been confiscated? An idle question. Not worth pondering, and, as the benefactor had said, there was time. Time for all such questions and time now for dreams and sleep. He closed his eyes and relaxed, an easy, albeit forced relaxation. “Better,” the man had said, “better,” which in other contexts could have meant “once worse,” but now that was simply another question to be considered in time, books, curtains ... the window ... That was curious. Was there a window? or merely curtains? He opened his eyes; the curtain hung down toward him, motionless and freely suspended. He could see nothing behind it and decided to look later, when rested. Later when time time time ...

He liked the uniform. It was comical really. Too official for him to take seriously. Stiff and rigid, crisp folds and contours, forcing its wearer into a posture of attention. Such a lean athletic man within those creases. Within the blue, the deep blue, like the sea blue, and the thin bands of gold cutting along the seams. He closed his eyes and recalled the still upright collar. He laughed at the thin gold strips taut about the neck and wrists, marking the protrusion of the human form within. Hands and face. And the pants cuffs. Gold there? Gold there as well? He could not remember, shoes socks, more uniform, emerging from the pants cuffs as the man sat. He thought he might remember such a uniform. When he was young. That must be it, he thought.

Rocking. Deep blue.

A captain, he was then, not an army captain, a lower echelon officer subject to whims of superiors, but a sea captain. Omnipotent, unfettered. Alone on the sea. Blue waves and golden sun. Proud on the waves. Powerful on the waves. Envied on the waves. He laughed; even a sea captain was a subordinate. Of course. Slave to admirals. Slave too to

shipowners. But he had never seen it that way. One's own ship, one's own world, *his* design, *his* ... And the uniform. Blue, like the one he had just seen, and gold bands like those, but wider, more authoritarian, that was it! Authority! And a hat to protect the head. A real hat. Blue, with gold insignia sewn onto the face. A plastic-coated brim, also with gold leaf, jutting from the front. And yes, that was it. That was it. The rest imagined, extrapolated from the hat, the blue and gold ... Or ... he was not sure. His memory of the uniform was precise and real, but the uniform itself, he supposed, was not.

The rest was cardboard boxes and broomsticks, piled, arranged, decks, bulkheads, mazes and corridors, portholes and peepholes, his ship, his cellar the Alexander Ocean. Dangerous passages, behind the furnace, under the heating pipes. Roar of the sea, the clothes-dryer sea. How childish it all seemed now! "Captain. Sir!"

In his dreams, he retained the images—the images of a past of cardboard and broomsticks. And the sea was real then, the past indistinguishable from the dreams. The illusory crew suddenly vocal and obedient, the seas wet and violent. And he the ruler! The battler of waves and the master of crew. The steadfast helmsman through forbidding channels and threatening ledges. When the sails were set, when the crew worked as ordered, the winds died to a fair breeze and the ship of cardboard sailed through gentle swells which rocked him toward morning.

Endless seas, endless swells, endless currents and breezes; how much had been fact? How much of the uniform, the blue and gold, had been taken from consciousness and implanted in his memory? And when had the dreams outgrown the cardboard? Made the hard broomsticks mere household waste, of no value?

“As long as you don’t disturb ... As long as you don’t disturb ...” And who was that? The sea-goddess of the nether regions of Oceanus Alexandrus? He laughed aloud, as there was no one to hear him, and no one to disturb. Disappearing books, gold bands—what did they all matter in cardboard ships sailing on infinite seas?

Cardboard and broomsticks. Cardboard and broomsticks. Kadboard and brmstx. And waves blue waves, streaked with gold from an evening sun. Burning sun golden sun becoming ...

Jaundiced view!

Jaundiced view!

Golden haze. Yellow haze. Yellow-tinted filter, “jaundiced view.” Condescendingly: “jaundiced view.” A faced mired in yellow, Mr. A? Stern authority intruding upon sleep. Mr. A? Magnifying, sweeping the field of vision until universal. “But really, (sarcastically) such thinking can represent at best a rather *jaund-hissed* v- ...” When it fades, pulses back to nothingness, the world is clearly jaundiced, marred by the last visible point of the face. Table chair wall floor ceiling and an unseen point representing the intersection, x, y, z axes. *“Now, gentlemen, imagine a two-dimensional world, a plane surface, and imagine beings existing within that plane, two-dimensional as their world itself. In order to place this world in three dimensions, it is not necessary to alter their world or the way they perceive it in any radical way, nor is it necessary to float them up into infinite space.”* Here the professor produces a white sheet of paper, places a dot in the middle and murmurs “Individual” then gleefully floats the paper away. It is abandoned and lost. He produces another world. *“Nor inflict another full dimension on them.”* He places his hand flat on the paper and lifts it upward—a third dimension. He floats it away. *“We can keep*

*such a world essentially intact without disturbing its inhabitants in any way.*” Another world. *“Bend it, do you see? Move it in space? Thus!”* He warps the paper in his hands. *“In this now three-dimensional universe, their two-dimensional world maintains its integrity. All inhabitants continue to live, and love, and philosophize in two dimensions, calculate in two, lecture in two. Ha ha.”* No one laughs. *“Although they exist, as even we can see, in three. And for this, we have not had to rely on any insidious fancy or magical transformation.”* The world resumes its niche on his desk. *“Now, gentlemen, in much the same way, do you see, our own three-dimensional world—what we call space is itself bent, inflected it might be said, and ...”* Mr. A. Mr. A. Mr. A. Mr. A. “Mr. A?”

The pressure on his shoulder destroyed the lecture hall and he became aware of an irritating itch on his arm. He pulled away but the itch remained, growing into hot scratches as he shook his arm free but never free. Deeper and deeper into the scratching, rubbing and chewing into his flesh. “Mr. A?” He was in bed, half-asleep now and doomed to waking, but he fought the irritation plaguing his arms and shrank from the pressure on his shoulder, the rocking prodding pressure on his shoulder.

“Mr. A? Mr. A!”

“Yes, yes, I’m awake.” He yanked his arm away, but could not shake off the irritation, the mark of the touch.

“Are you? Well, all right. I can wait.”

He pulled his arms under him and raised his head. The face he saw was ... But ... no, he knew that was incorrect. Blue and thin gold. The benefactor must have returned. Through the haze and yellow, he compared what he saw now with an earlier image, but he had been so tired, so tired; he let it fade. He could have waited, he thought cynically. An hour or a dream or two. “Yes, yes.”

“Food, Alex. Surely you must be hungry.”

“Hungry? Why would that matter?”

“Why, you haven’t eaten in ... oh, it must be days. Of course you’re hungry.”

As Alex turned and pushed himself into an awkward sitting position, a tray shot under his chin, free-floating it seemed. As he looked more closely, he saw it was supported by a thin column of steel which extended down the side of his bed to the floor. “Yes, I suppose I must be hungry.” He studied the benefactor. The uniform seemed meticulously clean and pressed, as if carefully folded for the night. Or possibly, he reflected, the man neither slept nor sweat and over the years had grown into the exact dimensions of the uniform. Hungry. Hungry, yes he supposed he was hungry. The tray was set with several sizes of dishes, each covered with a protective metal hemisphere; to the side stood a single glass and an overturned cup. He lifted the largest cover, the smell of eggs, salted and peppered, yes, he closed his eyes, smells, molecules free-floating, galley smells, kitchen smells. “Alex?” And later smells circling the plate. “How do you like it?” “... fine, fine ...” A short laugh, seemingly embarrassed. “No, I mean coffee. How do you like your coffee?” “Oh. Black, I guess. Just black.” “Sugar?” “No. I think no.” “Just black?” “Yes.” He raised another hemisphere and uncovered a small portion of yellow fruit floating in syrup. Tasteless, he thought, reaching for his coffee. “Watch it. Hot.” He ignored the warning and sipped the coffee, feeling its strength flow into him, feeling the heat burn away the haze. But the salt and peppered ... “I don’t generally eat breakfast,” he said, then added “at least, not to my knowledge.” The benefactor smiled, “Well, you will now. I insist. You need it and besides,” he puffed with apparent pride, “I prepared it myself.”

“Oh?” Alex lifted a fork, then paused and stared at the benefactor. “A hobby of yours?”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Had he imagined the crowd and crew would roar at his acid wit? He dug into the eggs and let the yolk flow over his fork. Tasteless yellow. He nodded at the benefactor; a question of duty, he supposed, but said nothing and tested the fruit. Sweet. In merely sweet sticky syrup. He ate regardless, considering the strange sensation. Not taste, surely not taste, but texture, smooth film of syrup over his tongue. He emptied the small dish, then returned to his dutiful probe of the yellow eggs.

“Is it all right?”

“Yes.”

“And you? Do you feel any better?”

Alex raised his eyes. “Better than ... ?”

“Than yesterday?”

He lied, “Yes.”

“And sleep. I assume you slept well finally. Do you mind if I sit down?” The question was apparently rhetorical, for he slid the chair toward the bed and sat immediately, peering at Alex over the tray. He removed his cap and tossed it to the foot of the bed. If I lifted my foot, Alex thought, kicked slightly (I could always claim an involuntary spasm), the cap ... Golden insignia. And blue! How could he not have noticed yesterday! Shiny brim. He clutched at the coffee cup and drank deeply. “More?” Golden insignia, the rest extrapolated, extrapolated ... “Yes, I ... is there much more?” The benefactor held out a steaming pitcher. “Also milk, juice ...” “No.” The murky liquid filled his cup and the steam washed his face. “You can take all that away.”

The benefactor rolled the tray away behind him, then seeing Alex holding the cup awkwardly, offered him the other chair for a saucer. Alex drank in silence. It was too hot now and he rubbed the burn away. "Hot," he said. "Yes, I warned you of that." He finished his second cup, sipping cautiously, but with a certain urgency lest the remaining coffee cool to bland warmth. He held out the cup, as the benefactor reached for the pitcher. "Why don't you put that here," said Alex, indicating his makeshift nightstand, but the benefactor simply laughed, again filling Alex's cup. "No trouble. No trouble." He replaced the pitcher carefully and precisely, as if its exact spot where marked on the table. Too precise, thought Alex.

"Now, I suppose," the benefactor seemed visibly embarrassed, "you have ... questions ... or ..."

Questions? Questions?

"... I want to help you. At least, that's why I'm here."

Alex waved him to silence, trying to organize his thoughts. "Wait. Yes. One thing. I ..." He pressed his forehead, as if to compress his brain into order. "I think I asked earlier; I'm sorry if ..."

"No bother."

"Yes, yes. That uniform. You're an official, correct?"

The benefactor looked at himself as if in surprise, as if discovering his dress for the first time. He tugged at the gold bands about his cuffs. "You mean ... Well, yes ... But I don't think I understand your question."

"I mean your presence here. You're here to 'help me', you say. But what I want to know is about the uniform. Is that a part of it?"

"My helping you?"

"Yes, yes!" He wanted to demand understanding, but his frustration grew. Was he himself simply inarticulate? or was

the benefactor's ignorance a mere pretense? "The cap," he said in annoyance. "I'm talking capacities."

"Capacities?" The benefactor's calmness infuriated him.

"Capacities!" he shouted and slapped the blanket. Wrong word! He had disturbed the balance of his coffee, splashing it on the clean wool. "Shit!" The benefactor moved quickly to mop it up, poking at the stain with a handkerchief. A dark patch now marred the evenness of the blanket. "Capacities," Alex said; he knew he had lost both his line of reasoning and his energy. The handkerchief poked at the blanket. "Capacities," he added weakly.

"There," said the benefactor, standing and studying his work from a higher perspective. He cocked his head. "Nothing wrong there. Don't trouble yourself with that. It's quite all right." He returned to his seat. "You've had ... quite a bad time of it, Alex."

"Yes, a bad time. Yes, I suppose I have."

"But I don't think we need to brood over that at present. The point now is to ..."

Alex looked up suddenly and the benefactor paused. When Alex said nothing, he continued, "I was saying, the present task, as I see it, we can discuss this, is to get you ..."

"Get me what?" Alex snapped.

The benefactor stared at him sternly; he was clearly not to be easily intimidated. "I must inform you, Mr. A, that we have much work ahead of us. And you must now regard that as a 'barren fact', if you will. I am concerned for you and there is nothing you can do to change that. Do you understand?" Something about capacities, capacities. Alex said nothing, and after a few seconds, the benefactor pushed himself from the chair. "Well then," said, as he began to pile up dishes and steel hemispheres on the tray. "Oh ... coffee?"

“Are you going?” The sudden fear surprised him.

“Yes, for the present. Coffee?”

“Yes.”

The benefactor poured what seemed to be the remains of the pitcher into Alex’s cup, then turned to the tray. There was more, Alex thought; he could hear the coffee wash the sides and he could see the unnatural weight of the pitcher in the benefactor’s hand, but he dared not ask for it.

“I’ll return, of course.” The voice came through yellow haze. “Shortly. In a bit. In the meantime ...” He reached for his cap.

“Rest? More sleep, I suppose?”

“Yes, if you must.” The benefactor wheeled the tray toward the door. “If you want. Personally, however ...” He opened the door; a form walked past, unrecognized. “I would recommend a bath. In there.” He jerked his head toward a curtain on the side wall. Alex was sure he had not noticed it earlier. “You’re quite a mess, you know.” A formal grin split his face; the door closed behind him.

Alex listened intently for fading footsteps but heard nothing. Strange, he thought, and pushed off the blankets to stand; was the benefactor waiting there, outside the door, engaged in idle conversation? Surely there was a hallway of some kind; from his brief glimpse beyond the door, some sort of passageway might be deduced. Yet ... He rose, thinking to tiptoe toward the door, but he stopped as his thoughts seemed suddenly pointless and foolish. The evidence, he thought, the evidence. Consider the evidence. In the silence, he raised his eyes to the ceiling and the punctured patterns and symmetry of the tiles. Then back to the thick curtain. Muting forces. Like double-thicknesses of glass, barring all sound, and rendering the noiseless gesticulations within mad and inexplicable.

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Sound-proofing, he realized. Simple isolation, silencing even the footsteps echoing in the corridor.

The awareness relieved him. Certainly preferable to more sinister explanations. Such as: figures hushed to silence lurking behind the door. Waiting for him. Prepared for an escape. Such as: a world lost in deafening silence; a world beyond the door, soundless and inaccessible. He shook his head. The very idea that total isolation from the world beyond the door should seem so welcome to him. That he should feel so grateful for the opportunity to construct it apart from facts. Loud, silent, secure, terrifying. He shrugged. It made no difference. And speculation was useless. Brood not! He stood, imagining the whirr might return. It threatened, then fell back.

A bath. Now that made sense. That was clear and purposeful. Better than standing here, he thought, a gawking idiot for anyone who cared to look. And if the curtain led to a bathroom, then so it did. Fortunate. The urge to rid himself of the coffee seemed now paramount.

He brushed aside the green curtain and faced a bathroom. Small, but efficiently designed, he noted. A toilet and sink on one wall and a bathtub on the other. A mirror were fixed over the sink, small but positioned exactly at eye level. As he stripped off the undershirt and stared into the glass, he could see only his face and shoulders. He shrugged, refusing to brood over the implications. But his face! His face! The benefactor's suggestion that he clean up seemed suddenly less inspired. His forehead was lined with perspiration bearing streaks of dirt, and the stubble on his chin made him look like a street derelict. Dashing! perhaps. A pirate! But his fantasy yielded to the pressure in his bladder. Base necessity, he sneered, and flopped onto the toilet. Awaiting the surge in his bowels, he urinated furiously, for there was no need to be

inhibited here. Relaxation, that was the key. The act of defecating was not meant for public view and any hidden ugliness would cause no shame. His thighs met, the flesh flattened by the hard seat. They bulged as ponderous flaps of flesh, hideous and obese, yet before a mirror, he knew they assumed the supple hard athletic look that he and anyone would admire. He stroked them, rough and sticky. Red thighs. Whore thighs ... He strained, but it was futile. Of course. Two days without food, it probably had been. Little wonder. He urinated now feebly to catch up with his intake of coffee. Normal. All was normal, he thought, standing and flushing away the colorless urine. No dehydration. No diarrhea. One can be thankful for that.

He turned on the bathtub faucets and adjusted the flow to a pleasant warmth. A few minutes, he thought, and it would fill. He looked at the mirror, then impulsively leaped up to the side of the bathtub, bracing himself against the far wall. A small chunk of himself shimmered in the glass on a background of rising steam. The tops of his thighs were slender now, as if ignorant of the ugliness revealed on the toilet. His buttocks, firm and rounded. He turned but nothing made sense. Lacking the proper ground for proportion, no doubt, flanked by wiry hair, but without the full length of his body ... He stared momentarily, then stepped down into the water. Hot! He kept his foot submerged, slowly becoming accustomed to the heat. "Captain!" That was foolish, and he lowered himself into the water. "Captain, sir, beware the boarders!" And that, and that ... He did not understand it, relaxing in the warm water. Drifting toward a once elusive sleep, lost in his ease.

He lay there quietly as the water slowly cooled and his skin began to pucker. Minutes, was it? He sat up, the warmth

gone, the water as bland and featureless as the surrounding air.

Asleep? Yes, perhaps so. Running his hand over his legs to his wrinkled feet, he wondered how long it might have been. An hour perhaps? More? And how long had the benefactor said he would be gone? “Shortly ... Sleep.” “Well, half of that,” he thought, as the water ran from his shoulders, between and through the thick hair matting his chest, “I think.” He tried to compute the time accurately. At temperature  $x$ , how long must (what value for time  $t$ ) person  $y$ , body temp.  $98.6^{\circ}$  F., skin human, remain submerged in water (medium soft?),  $102^{\circ}$  F., before skin (as above) becomes consistency  $z$  (white wrinkles) if and only if ... Impossible. Impossible.  $x, y, z, t$ . Too many variables. With no means of reducing any to a constant, no means of calculating rates such as temp  $t$  striving to equilibrium, that is  $t^l$ , with surround room temperature  $t^l$  (was it  $72^{\circ}$  F.?), he was helpless. He spat into the tub and escaped it. Such questions were not for him, hardly worthy of consideration. What did the sun’s gymnastics matter in this place? ... only in relation to ... Yes, he thought, the benefactor’s return. Whenever that might be. He cursed himself for his routine obedience, his unquestioning acceptance of the benefactor’s declarations: “You’re dirty.” “I’ll be back soon.” “You’re hungry.” Better to spend time in more meaningful speculations. Grabbing the conveniently positioned towel (was nothing overlooked?), he returned to the main room.

All remained as he had left it, an observation he considered trite at first, but which gradually gained significance. After all, recognition of identity over time at least indicated a proper functioning of intellect. A first step, if nothing more, and a reasonable basis on which to proceed. He

prodded himself with the towel, then tossed it through the curtain. His movements would dry him. His naked movements.

From the different perspective, the details of the room changed, and he realized his initial impression of similarity was based more on belief than inspection. To his right, the green wall ran about three feet before breaking away in a perpendicular to encircle the door, a rectangular change of hue. He traced the line of the wall with his hand, the right angle of the corner and the ridge marking the outline of the door. The fake-gold—brass?—doorknob enticed him. Surely it was worth a try. His fingers crossed the smooth surface of the door—different material, he thought, wood or a close approximation—and caressed the cold metal. He hesitated, but he must at least try. Like a child choosing, caught between two worlds, alone and seen, he glanced about the room to ensure his privacy, then twisted the knob. The film of water on his fingers tricked him; the knob turned, seemed to turn, but then he sensed the friction as his fingers dried. There was a slight squeak. His own flesh, he realized. The knob was immovable. He felt compelled to react—he ought to feel disappointment, he thought—but did not. There had been little doubt as to the appearance of the door. An illusory exit, a fallacy, and his benefactor might have entered rather through the walls for all the door meant to him. Continuing along the wall, he was struck by the barrenness—no pictures, nor, as he inspected the surface more closely, were there any signs of previous hangings. No nailholes, nor different shades outlining a now lost frame on the wall. Standing back, he considered the upper molding, the angle between mute wall and the white pock-marked ceiling. The molding was mere molding, a transition to hide the carpenters' carelessness. He could see no

groove where hooks might have supported wires supporting ... what? He laughed softly. What could transform that wall into anything but a wall?

As he turned the corner, the curtain over the bed stole his attention from the third wall. There was time, he assured himself. Again he ran his fingers over the wall, while glancing occasionally to the upper and lower moldings. The carpenters apparently thought nothing of accuracy, he thought, the bottom molding was at least six inches high. "Incompetents!" Then the door. The silence. Obviously, they possessed skill, he thought, considering the perfection of the door and its snug fit into the wall. Then he noticed the line of molding surrounding the frame. Pre-fabricated, he scoffed, the door and frame hammered clumsily into place and corrected with sloppy finishing.

In the corners, the workmanship revealed itself. None of the angles were perfect. 45°! The easiest of all. All pieces can be cut together, and even there! He shook his head. The shortcomings of the carpenters comforted him and he confidently approached the curtain. No doubt of flaws there, he thought, as he released the wall to avoid the table. The hems, surely they would show, no need to check.

He stopped before his bed and stared deeply into the curtain, which stretched the length of his bed, nearly covering the entire wall. For the first time since he had begun his inspection, he felt hurried. Suppose the benefactor arrived? Strange, he thought, but his nakedness protected him. For it would draw attention away from his actions. An embarrassed "Oh, excuse me." See the naked man. What's he doing? Nothing! he's *naked*! The same shallow "oh."

He lifted the lower corner of the curtain. There were no drawstrings and the curtain was fixed, perhaps for his benefit.

More wall. He kneeled on the bed and raised the curtain over his head. More wall, darker in the protective shadows. And then ... In the exact middle of the wall, two feet above his bed, the monotony of the wall broke, disclosing a darkened raised circle. As he lifted the curtain so that the light fell over the wall, the circle became a window. A porthole! he thought. A porthole! He pressed his face onto the glass. "My eyes!" All was haze. He blinked to wash it away, but in vain; the glass was opaque. He dropped the curtain, refusing to subject himself to further indignities from the wall. A mere taunting image, frosted glass, reinforcing the barrier of the wall.

He shivered. His nakedness bothered him now, chilled him, and he began to gather up his clothes, the undershirt dampened by the steam from his bath, the rest in a crumpled heap on the floor before his bed. He dressed slowly, surprised that the clothes fit. He squatted and bounced twice, then stood. The fit was adequate, if not exact; he might check that in the mirror, balancing himself on the bathtub. The thought repulsed him, and he returned to his inspection of the room.

Pamphlets, he remembered the pamphlets which had been on the now bare table. He looked about him, but saw only furniture, chairs and the small square table, wooden, simple, and spare. Two chairs—at least the room was designed for something other than solitude, he thought. There ought to be a closet as well. But he saw only the one door and the curtain over the entrance to the bathroom. Surely there was storage space of some sort, and he might find the pamphlets there. He smiled, nearly breaking into a laugh. Under his bed, of course! He lifted the wide blanket on his bed. What he saw disgusted him. A bulkhead, wooden this time, with two neat drawers. Even this, he thought. Even this. He pulled open one of the drawers. It was empty, lined with white paper like all

unused drawers. Then the other. He didn't care, he didn't care, he knew that. But of course he must be expected to inspect his room. At that moment, as the second drawer lay open, the door opened. There had been no knock. He turned quickly, angry and embarrassed. Wanting to show indifference but knowing how contrived the effort would appear, he slammed the drawer closed and faced his intruder.

"Sorry there's nothing in there." The benefactor leaned to one side and pointed around Alex to the drawer. "We'll give you some things shortly." Alex set his jaw rigidly; no need to respond. The benefactor continued, "I see you haven't finished your inspection." Alex wished he could expose the malice in that remark, but it was hidden beneath a spurious nonchalance. "The bathroom is through there, and ..."

"Of course!" Alex said, with as much contempt as possible, but the benefactor seemed not to notice.

"... you'll find shaving implements if you look for them. In the cabinet, below the mirror."

Alex rubbed the stubble of his chin and cheeks. Yes, he would let it grow. He was expected to shave, and he would simply let it grow.

"Of course, you're not required to," the benefactor added. "It's merely a suggestion. Did you have your bath?"

Alex hesitated, but remembered he had not drained the water in the tub. No use aggravating him with transparent lies. "Yes," he mumbled.

"Good, good. I'm sure you feel better. Baths are always so refreshing." He removed his cap and placed it on the table, then brushed his thinning hair back into place and sat down. Alex refused the offer of a chair and defiantly remained standing until his own petty obstinacy annoyed him. As a compromise, he chose the bed. "Cleansing, invigorating," the

benefactor mused. "Don't you agree?" Alex shrugged. "Care of oneself." He shook his head. "Or something similar. That is just my own opinion of course." He turned toward Alex and became more serious: "How is it going for you?"

"How could it be going for me?"

The benefactor sighed. "Yes, yes. I can understand that, I suppose." He toyed with his uniform, straightening the gold rings about his cuffs, then stood abruptly. "Well, we have things to do now, both of us. You'll have to meet some people ..."

A shock of fear, confused, irrational. Why should he be afraid to leave? Why should he want to stay in this characterless place?

"... but it can't be helped. You're ready for that, and it's really unavoidable. Eventually, that is." He paused, noticing Alex's nervousness. "Of course, if you want to postpone it, well then, that's permissible."

"No." Too abrupt. Too abrupt, thought Alex, then added more calmly. "What will I have to do?"

"Oh, nothing really. Formality, you might call it. An interview, if you will."

"With whom? And why?"

"Don't worry." The benefactor laid a soft hand on his shoulder, which Alex shrugged off. "It's nothing. You won't have to do anything, and it won't take much time. Just a few questions, that's all."

"But ..." asked Alex slowly, "why can't you ask them? What difference could it make?"

The benefactor laughed. "That's quite funny. But to answer you as best I can, there are regulations. Or rather, conventions, you might say."

“Do you mean,” he could not resist, “that you’re not trusted? That you ...” His motives were obvious, and the benefactor only smiled at him.

“Subtleties are wasted on me. They’re quite ineffectual. And that was not a good effort, Alex,” he added. “But come. Oh. Do you ...” He waved toward the bathroom.

“No.”

“All right, then.” The benefactor walked toward the door and opened it, and the muffled voices footsteps movement frightened Alex. “Come on,” the benefactor reassured him. “I’ll be with you at all times. And no one will stare at you. Come.”

Alex slowly approached the door and stepped out into the corridor in obedience to the benefactor’s outstretched arm. The sudden light, the white, and the rush of noise. All blended to a blur, a featureless background outlining the blue form of the benefactor, and he felt the sounds and shapes indifferently pass as the corridor flowed by him. Conscious only of the firm hand on his shoulder, he clung to it, the power of the guiding benefactor.

The blurred haze; it was the blur that soothed him and let him submit to the hand. The soothing blur that obscured the sinister details, the reality of the walls, the opening and closing doors framed in blue, uniforms, uniforms, blue shapes on sterile white, the white-washed blur which buffered and protected him. He walked through passages, through doors, around corners. Left and right. Disordered maze. And followed the blue form until it led him into a room and to a chair. And as the haze retreated before shimmering blue outlines, he realized the chair was for him.

Obediently, he sat and found himself facing three faces over a ponderous slab. Behind him was something he could

not quite make out until he turned away from the faces and met the reassuring smile and nod of the benefactor. Someone was repeating his name, at the left of the slab. Shimmering form. Speaking. Finally, he took it as a cue to respond and he mumbled something like assent, yes, yes, and they all stopped their murmurings abruptly and he blushed, realizing he had been asked nothing. He waited now for direction, as they continued to speak in low voices, shuffling papers and nodding to one another, perhaps not fully aware, he thought, that he was seated in front of them, and perhaps his yes yes had somehow surprised them or shocked them or perhaps perhaps ... He tried to focus on the sounds before him and slowly slowly as he concentrated he heard the sounds disintegrate into a distinct—at last!—silence, which he understood. He glanced over his shoulder to the kind gentle encouraging concerned then back to the three somehow oppressive faces then down to the white tiled floor beneath his tapping feet. So that was the tapping, he thought, nearly chuckling, but keeping it to himself and consciously bidding his feet to be silent, or at least polite, for before him he heard a cough replace the tapping in the silence and someone called to him, though not by name, a questioning “sir?” which seemed so preposterous given the circumstances he could not respond then “Alex?” which came from somewhere, perhaps behind him and ...

He breathed deeply and raised his eyes to the three faces, which now stared directly at him. One began to speak, the middle face.

“How do you feel?” Rhythmic cadence, meaningless question. Phatic, it was. And when he answered “Fine, fine,” as he was sure he was accustomed, they did not seem to hear him at all, or were simply indifferent. Perhaps he had said

nothing and answered with no more than a noncommittal nod. Silent, he thought. He should be silent, if ... Or did they want that? A shrug, a subtle gesture of bewilderment. They began to whisper among themselves and he saw the papers handed back and forth, left and right, across the slab, exchanged and likely considered, and again, over the papers, above the papers, he heard a voice and a distant question that was apparently addressed to him. He understood nothing, until the voice paused as if interrupted; when he looked at the faces, the man in the middle was staring harshly at him. "I realize this is difficult, sir. But you really must pay attention. The time is crucial, as much for you as for us. Distraction will gain us nothing."

He turned to the benefactor, to the kind reassuring compassionate ... then back to the face before which seemed to await an apology. Humiliated again, he mumbled, "I'm sorry." I'm sorry I'm sorry. Excuse ...

"No need for apology," the man said. "But please pay attention." Alex looked up and his eyes must have narrowed, for all he saw now was the face in the middle, the others mere distortions in the surrounding blur. "Now we must ask you a few questions. If, that is, there are no objections?" He was speaking, it seemed, to other faces in the room, but all Alex saw was a blur. "Good. Excellent. Now, the questions I mentioned ..." Questions? He did not recall any questions, but listened as attentively as he could; distractions were dangerous, he decided, and he must be careful if he were to avoid reprimand. "... easy, perhaps, or difficult. The difference is negligible. But please answer as coherently as you can. We mean no harm. Surely you understand that we mean you no harm."

And as the face leaned over the slab, across the sliding papers on the slab, Alex looked back to the benefactor. Was that a question? Did he have such ‘understanding’? The one face he trusted only nodded in encouragement, he supposed, and he turned back reluctantly to the slab. Again, someone was talking, but the voice had changed. It was now a high-pitched whine that ill-suited men of such authority. He ought to correct that, Alex thought, but when he found the face in the middle of the slab, he saw it staring back at him, the lips unmoving.

Then someone else possessed that voice, but not the benefactor. Not him. It was so confusing. The cough, repeated now, came from his left. And he understood then that it came from the other man hidden in the blur. A small slight man with bulging eyes. “... and if they seem difficult to you, we are sincerely sorry. But please try to respond regardless,” the high-pitched voice continued. “As we have said, we mean you no harm. And the questions, as you will see, have no right or wrong answers. There are no absolutes here. You cannot err, I suppose one would say. Do you understand? Are you sure you understand?”

He would have preferred they let him remain silent, but as his shrug (he thought he shrugged) was disregarded, he decided he must again test his voice. Although even a monosyllable proved difficult, he answered “yes.”

“Good. Good.” This from the man in the middle, the leader, Alex supposed, as he had been the first to speak. “We are not concerned with overly complex speculations or schemes, foolish secondaries and irrelevances. Try for the facts, as you see them; we forgive you your inaccuracies. One more thing, before we proceed. You have questions, doubtless, but time is quite limited. We prefer that you reserve them until

the end, at which point ... do you understand?" He nodded. They ignored him. "At which point, you may ask as many as you like or as time permits. We will be happy to answer as we deem fit. Agreed?"

"Most fair!" High-pitched, from the left. Alex said nothing and squirmed in his seat, a hard wooden chair not designed for comfort. "Fine, fine." The man in the middle continued, although Alex was certain he had given them no sign of assent. "Now the preliminaries. All for our records. The name?"

Alex shifted his weight, seeking the elusive comfort he knew must lie somewhere in the chair, then realized that several seconds had elapsed and he had said nothing. Embarrassed, he tried to speak, but the words seemed distant, as if spoken by another. "Alexander A."

They nodded, two in unison, and Alex focused on the third man. To the right of the two interrogators, he bent over a task of some kind, and Alex saw he was writing something, scribbling intently on scattered sheets of paper. Finally, the man looked up, his eyes so distorted by thick glasses that Alex doubted he could see beyond the eager strokes of his pen.

"Good. Fine. Now ..." The leader paused and Alex realized with annoyance that he had again succumbed to distraction. "More preliminaries. Please pay attention. Residence?"

Perplexed, Alex stared at the man, who repeated, "Residence? Where you live? Or perhaps occupation?"

"At present?" Which question was he answering? They were confusing him, he thought, perhaps intentionally. The room was white, off-white, appallingly white, broken by distant blue, a band of blue before him, tapping tapping. His feet, of course. The tapping stopped.

“Before. The past?”

He thought for a moment; the question seemed clear enough, but he had no answer, and said simply “No.”

The man on the right bent over his papers and scribbled hurriedly. A scribe of sorts, thought Alex. A writer. But what could he possibly be writing? What lengthy gloss could be composed for an answer so simple and routine?

“Fine. Fine,” said the leader, as the scribe finished what must have been a sentence and stabbed his work theatrically, then sat back with an air of satisfaction that Alex found particularly unnerving.

“Do you know,”—it was the squeaky voice and Alex turned to his left, away from the scribe—“or, I should say, have you yet considered ...”

“Get to the point!” the leader snapped. Alex was relieved to discover he was not the sole object of the leader’s scorn.

“Yes, yes.” Squeak. “As I was saying ... approximations will do ... do you realize, for example where you are? Right now, I mean. Or why? What you are doing here? Anything?”

“Now?”

“Yes, of course now.”

He wasn’t certain he understood and shook his head. The scribe stabbed and slashed and scribbled scribbled scribbled.

“Then, say ...” But the leader’s impatience had apparently grown and the squeaking voice finished quickly, “where we all are?” He swept his arms outward, and Alex recoiled, before realizing it was a mere gesture, just a gesture and not a threat. Stupid, foolish. He hoped they had not seen his reaction. But he had lost focus and could not recall the question. The scribe scribbled scribbled scribbled.

“Fine. Fine,” said the leader, with marked annoyance. But what was fine? He had not answered. “And now, final

preliminary, and you will excuse the necessity of asking. The question may seem vague ...”

“And perhaps you cannot answer,” said the slight man to the left. The leader, apparently irked at the interruption, glared at him.

“Yes, yes, indeed. As I was saying, final preliminary, although at this rate, we may never get to substantive matters. Do you recall what brought you here? What immediately preceded your ...”

The whirr, the whirr. The whirr had brought him here. Out of the cardboard into the *jaund-hissed view* and blurred corridors. “It was ... I was ...”

“Yes, yes.” A sign of impatience.

“I ...” The whirr; the whirr; it was all in the whirr. He shook his head. “No, no. I don’t remember.”

“Good. Fine.” And the scribe wrote furiously as the leader waited for him to catch up. Surely there was something he had said to generate that fury, but he did not think he had mentioned anything. Cardboard. Broomsticks. The sea is ... “Now,” continued the leader as the scribe leaned back. “We are ready to proceed to matters of more substance. Now please try to calm yourself. Would you like some water? You there, give him some water.”

And there was movement behind him, which he could not follow. When it stopped, there was a small glass of water before him, held in a steady hand. Blue, gold streaks. Reaching out. He looked up to a gentle face. Most reasonable face. His benefactor. He smiled, barely noticing the firm hand on his shoulder. He drank the water, clumsily, and it seemed to revive him. When the hand took the empty glass away, he felt less alone.

“Better now?”

He nodded to the question as one he had heard many times, then spoke calmly, "Yes." And although he was not certain, although he had reservations, he did not consider that a lie. The blur had dissipated; the three faces seemed more clear. A smile. A harsh frown. Then glasses and pen, waiting.

"We can end this, if you like. Proceeding later, if the questions at present seem too difficult."

"No. No. I can answer your questions."

"Fine. Fine. Much better that way." The leader reached under the slab and withdrew what appeared to be several sheets of paper, which he held out over the table surface. Alex stared at them, then realized as they jerked toward him that he was expected to take them. "Do you recognize these?" Pamphlets, three pamphlets, old and battered. Much used. Slowly he began to nod. Of course. They had been in his room, and before that ... he concentrated ... Yes, they were familiar to him. "Yes."

"You are saying they are yours?"

"Yes, I guess. They're ..." He turned them over in his hands, shuffling them like cards, then opened one at random. In the margins, he saw several familiar dark lines, asterisks, arrows. Annotations. "Yes!" he said excitedly. "These are mine. I'm sure they are. I recognize ..." He clumsily raised the book to face them and peered around it to point to the marginal notations. "These here," he jabbed at the asterisks. "These are my marks. I always, when I read, that is, not just skim, I always ..."

"Very well." The leader reached out, and Alex realized he must return the pamphlets. He did so reluctantly, wondering whether eventually he would be allowed to keep them. Remembering the leader's injunction to reserve his

questions, he said nothing. "Can you tell us something about them?"

Although he had recognized the annotations, the pamphlets themselves meant little to him. They must contain a text of some sort, but he had no idea what that text might be. He shook his head.

"Fine. Surprising perhaps. But fine."

"There are no wrong ..." the squeak offered, but was quickly silenced.

"Yes of course." The scribe scribbled scribbled and they waited for him. "Now this next question is rather open and you may answer it as you wish. Recollection, facts, memory of memories. Whichever you prefer."

"Approximations will do. Approximations ..."

The leader winced, "Yes yes ..."

"And no question of right or wrong. That does not concern us."

"Yes, yes!"

"And you need not answer at all, for that matter ..."

"Enough!" the leader shouted, silencing the exuberance of his colleague. "Now." Calmly. "Mr. A. What we wish to know is something of your history. As you ..."

Cardboard? Cardboard? Had he mentioned the cardboard?

"... general outlines. Specifics, if you wish. Anything you consider of importance."

They were silent. It was impossible. "I'm afraid ... I ... I don't think I ..."

"Yes yes. Bother with that. We don't need your apologies. Anything is adequate. Anything will do."

"Memories? Facts?" Inadequate particulars.

"Anything at all. Delusions. Hopes. Inventions ..."

“Anything,” he repeated and began slowly. It was chaotic and the few coherent sequences of detail quickly became disjointed and confused. A name mispronounced. A face he recalled but had no language to describe. Familiar voices he could not imitate. He talked quickly, repeating phrases that seemed connected to the question, stringing together outright imaginings with what seemed like facts. Skirting his dreams, which he dared not attempt to reveal. His past was a voice lecturing to him; a childish tantrum; it was a sadistic experiment he had once conducted, yes! “Am I proceeding correctly?” Something about thresholds of sensation and apparatus and method and conclusions and ...

“Fine. Fine. Now ...”

He was interrupted, and the half-completed description made him seem even more confused than he was. What would they think of all that? he wondered. Frogs indeed!

“And beyond?”

Frogs! Why would he trouble them with that? Of course there were thresholds and degrees of sensation. Of course ... He began to apologize for his pointless ramblings, when the leader leaned toward him, repeating, “Beyond? And beyond? Beyond the mere details? Beyond the recollection?”

Details, frogs, memories of ... Too confusing. He heard the flat monotone of the leader—“Fine. Fine.”—who made no attempt to disguise his disappointment.

And tapping. Tapping.

“Do you have anything to add?”

Alex glanced up, then noticed that the question was addressed to the hitherto silent scribe, who looked up briefly, shook his head, then returned to his task. Punctuating his scribbles with a violent period, he swept his arm away from the paper and sat back proudly. Gloating, no doubt, over

something. The leader folded his hands on the slab and leaned over them. "I suppose that will be all for now. We ..." he looked to his right as the other interrogator fumbled with what must have been a concluding gesture, "we may have you in again. I doubt that will be necessary. At least," he turned toward his colleague's failed attempt at communication, "not for the present. Now ..." The leader stood abruptly. He was tall, far taller than Alex had imagined, and as he bent over the slab he gained stature. Alex shrank back. Mass. Power. "We mentioned before. Questions. Do you have any questions?"

Alex looked away. Questions. Of course he had questions. If they would just let him sit for a moment and formulate them.

"Excellent!" The leader nodded to the benefactor. "That will be all, I suppose." Together, they began to gather up the papers on the slab. Again Alex felt the gentle hand of the benefactor fall on his shoulder. He looked up into a broad smile. "That was magnificent. Ready?" Not answering, he allowed himself to be led from the room. As the papers shuffled, sliding across and between and over each other, he suddenly remembered his pamphlets. He turned, but met the stern stare of the leader. The benefactor led him into the corridor.

During the days following the interrogation, Alex grew more relaxed in his conversations with the benefactor. Their talks consumed the bulk of his day, several hours in the morning following breakfast, and again in the afternoon prior to supper. The interrogation itself had shaken him, he realized, and was probably responsible for the increased trust he now extended toward the benefactor. He had been the first face out of the whirr, the only face until the interrogation, and Alex realized that if he ever were to cope with the corridors, the passing forms and distant rooms, he would need help. Despite the fact that the benefactor granted him little specific information about his confinement within the stark walls and corridors, Alex was assured that it was simply a matter of time, and he had tacitly agreed, much as he had in the interrogation room, to postpone all questions until such time as he felt confident enough to formulate them clearly.

He began to appreciate the value of the benefactor's reticence. The answers to the questions he had once blurted out concerning the windows, the pamphlets, and even the strange men behind a now remote ponderous slab—these could do him little good, as the benefactor constantly reminded him, and would hardly speed his progress, whatever form that might take. After initial protests and occasional childish outbursts (of which he was most ashamed!) he accepted evasiveness as another of the benefactor's "barren facts," which his own obstinacy was powerless to overcome.

At times, when relaxed and in good humor, he let the evasiveness become a game for him. He would try to pierce through the barriers, extend his knowledge beyond the locked

and sound-proofed door, discover even when such unknown facts would finally be his. But there was little he could do, he found, that tricked the benefactor into revealing the secrets of the place. All his games, cautious insults fashioned to generate a rash response, all his ironies, however subtle—these were totally ineffectual and eventually he found the very constancy of that fact strangely comforting. The areas he could not penetrate were clearly if not explicitly defined. He did not know where he was, nor what had brought him here. And the door, obviously, was completely impregnable, save for brief fleeting glimpses. He would probe subtly and casually, working slowly toward one of the forbidden areas until a smile would grow on the benefactor's face, and both would share in the laugh.

His sole annoyance now, one he could not so easily overcome, was his suspicion that the benefactor knew not only more of the place than he did, but more of his personal history as well. Apart from his dreams, too private to reveal, his own knowledge encompassed little more than what he had revealed to the interrogators and its scope did not increase through time. Disconnected images, occasional sourceless injunctions, and a few indistinct faces were all he could recall, and the benefactor resisted all his efforts to probe deeper into the past or to connect some of the disordered fragments, responding with a shrug, or depending on the mood, a laugh.

The benefactor was equally reticent about his own history, revealing mere anecdotes, which for all Alex knew were contrived or fictitious. His attempts to compare their two histories invariably devolved into confusion and Alex soon gave up his search for parallels. The one fact he did note about the benefactor was his reluctance to deal with theoretical problems. These came easily to Alex, evidence perhaps of a

distant education; but despite the force with which he formulated an abstract concept, despite the enthusiasm he tried to generate, the benefactor dismissed such things as trivial. Was this a true lack of concern? an inability to follow such reasoning? Or was this simply a matter of professional demeanor? In any case, the benefactor seemed uninterested in philosophical matters, thwarting any serious discussion with an indifferent “Yes, yes. I suppose so,” and if Alex persisted, a pointed yawn. A seemingly simple man, Alex concluded after the many talks, and honest within his restricted sphere. Yet that apparent simplicity was deceptive, for the man was not to be underestimated. In respect to guessing motives, detecting dishonesties, playful or serious, or exposing Alex’s many ingenious attempts to uncover some forbidden secret, he was a master. And Alex soon resigned himself to the fact that whatever information he sought, whatever understanding he hoped to achieve—these were not to be coaxed or coerced from him.

The talks helped Alex, and he soon felt a welcome confidence building within his confines. The walls ceased to oppress him. They were mere walls. Nothing more. His once debilitating frustration subsided, and he began to appreciate his present world, the room, his talks with the benefactor, even his ignorance of the world beyond the locked door. He ceased his hypotheses and fanciful constructions of the outside world and accepted his own, on its own terms, learning to derive satisfaction from his daily activities, his talks, the bath, and even shaving, as his initial impulse to grow a beard as an act of defiance came to seem as foolish to himself as it must have been to others. It was a healthier attitude, he felt, far more rewarding than his pointless flailing at limits. If he could shave in a leisurely manner, caress his face with razor and gentle

fingertips, and if he could enjoy the innocent narcissism of gazing into his own features in the small mirror, he could seize that and extract whatever pleasure it had to offer; to rebel against its ultimate insignificance was pointless. He had time now, time to rediscover or more strongly reinvent himself, time to throw off the inaccessible complexities of his past, and time to re-imagine himself in the guiltless solitude of his room.

Temporary, temporary. He knew all would pass, and he was not surprised when the benefactor began to discuss change. “In steps, Alex, steps. And you must be patient.” And yes, that was reasonable. Steps, steps. To gradually increase his awareness and test his new confidence. Steps, steps. To learn at a pace he could comfortably handle. He was told then of an auditorium, other people in the auditorium, and warned of its dangers. He did not heed those warnings, for all he saw was the door behind the benefactor, beckoning to him, it seemed, inviting him into the corridors.

And he waited, fighting his own impatience which, despite himself, he could not control. When the benefactor smiled at him one day and nodded to the door, he knew. The door would open and reveal its secrets, lead him to a distant auditorium that he had so far only imagined. “Steps,” he said.

“Steps,” the benefactor repeated.

They stood together. The benefactor paused, then turned and led him to the door. He removed from his pocket what seemed to be a small key, then replaced it as if it were unneeded. Alex could feel himself flush in anticipation. There was a slight click, from the lock apparently, as the door opened. There was a hiss from outside, and they were in the corridor.

It was all so simple.

White walls and surfaces. Glare from lights, overhead it seemed. Reminding him of the interrogation. Different corners, different turns. Right, left, and finally to a large double-door, where they stopped.

“You know where you are. I will stay if you wish,” the benefactor said.

But Alex paid no attention. They had discussed this many times. He needed no one now; the first door had been opened; the second lay before him. He would prove himself worthy of both. The benefactor smiled, nodded kindly, excused himself, and left him there alone. Alex waited. The door creaked open. Light from within. Noise and movement. A blue arm beckoned to him and he walked inside.

The auditorium was as the benefactor had described, large, extraordinarily so to Alex, who could compare it only with his own room and the somewhat larger interrogation room. Had there once been a podium or stage, they had been stripped, leaving only barren space, vast, the walls lined with chairs. Before him, consuming that space, was a swirl, an aimless and somewhat disturbing flow of forms and faces, about fifty, he guessed, yet how was he able to estimate such a figure? And there was also a hum, which had lowered when he entered, and he thought then, that had he been able to distinguish the individual faces in the swirl, he would have discovered them all watching him. He lowered his eyes, as if in doing so he might blend into the large double-doors through which he had been led. The hum returned to original volume.

He glanced back toward the door; it was flanked by two columns of blue, yes, other benefactors perhaps, but similar to his own only in dress. They seemed indifferent, as if other things concerned them. And he regretted his arrogant refusal to allow the benefactor to accompany him this first day. He

might have offered some form of aid, he thought; he might have introduced him to the faces or perhaps a single face. One would suffice, he thought. He would never be a gregarious member of the swirl, nor part of a large group. Merely one or two—that would do.

He tried to calm himself, worried that his agitation could only make him more conspicuous. Not today. He realized that since noticing the swirl, he had yet to move, and he took two casual strides to his left. In those two strides, he had effectively vanished, he thought, eased out of the swirl's field of concern. The movement relaxed him, but he felt far too weak to walk the borders of the swirl. He would have to sit; somewhere he would have to find an inconspicuous place where he could observe and not disrupt the swirl. The hum stabilized into a monotony now, and he walked slowly along the near wall until he came to a corner and the first seats. Someone was sitting there, and he thought he noticed the eyes once turn to him; he quickly broke away from them, moving along the haphazard arrangement of chairs, some in circles, some facing each other, some alone, but no, he could not choose one of those, for the solitude would only make him stand out. He must find a spot indifferent to the swirl, one that implied neither fear nor contempt, but a mere studied or casual aloofness. Yes. Today, his goal would be to observe not to participate. Search for points of identity, perhaps a pattern to the motion, gain a familiarity with it so that it could not oppress him. In time, the monotonous green of the walls would become as innocuous as the colors in his own room. Now they seemed massive, and as the swirl crept up on him, he turned his attention to what could be a dangerous encroachment. It must not catch him unawares. Later, he thought, later he would consider the wall. There was something about it, something strange that had

revealed itself to him in his few seconds of attention. Later, he thought.

As he walked, examining the chairs, he came to a small empty couch. It stood apart from the facing circles of chairs, but did not proclaim its solitude to the swirl. He smiled, yes, a good place for him today, a comforting place, a place to observe. The couch would flatter him and deny any erroneous impressions that he pled for company. His efforts to sit were awkward and inept, despite his athleticism he had seen in the mirror. He still felt conspicuous and self-conscious. Each movement seemed artificial and contrived. He fumbled with couch, finding its actual comfort less than what it had promised. No one had seen him, he thought. He could relax.

He raised his eyes slowly, and the swirl dropped into his vision. It ignored him now and he began to study its motion. Random, he concluded, composed of many as yet undifferentiated faces and forms. The colors and tones sharply contrasted with those of the benefactors, whose rich gleaming blue now flanked the doors and stood fixed at certain apparently critical points of the auditorium. The swirl itself seemed restrained by comparison—greens, yellows, dulled and subdued. Looking more closely, he found no pattern or scheme, no uniformity among the colors and styles. As he glanced at his own clothes, he realized these too were unique. An amusing paradox, he thought with pride, the individual differences the first point of similarity.

He began to focus on individual faces, hoping to follow one through the swirl and thus discover individual components to the whole. Each eluded him, too ill-defined to maintain itself in the swirl. And after following a face for several seconds, he grew uncertain as to its identity, feared that he was following his own imagined patterns and not those of the swirl.

The face had changed perhaps, given up its identity to another, who swirled and in turn dissolved into yet another. Occasionally, a pair of eyes would catch him and during the brief moment he averted his own eyes, they would be lost in the swirl. All was well. He chose another face, concentrating on it against the background of the swirl. This face turned quickly to him, with a gaze unlike the others. Piercing eyes, aggressive, something distinct about them. Angry, he thought, as protective of their privacy as he was of his. He must respect that, as the swirl would respect his own wishes. In the meantime, he must be more subtle, he thought, as a fat awkward form passed him and vanished into the swirl.

He must be more subtle.

He searched through another section of the swirl for a suitable face, caught one briefly, then lost it. And he swept the swirl, left to right. In the middle, once again he was caught by those same eyes that had fixed on him earlier. Observe, observe, observe. He could not risk returning the stare. The rest of the swirl had blended into an undifferentiated flow now, background for the one face that refused to ignore him. He turned to the right side of the swirl, trying to create a point of distinction. Yet in the periphery of his vision, he felt those eyes and again he was caught, staring into the face—harsh features, the nose small and subdued, flanked by strong prominent cheekbones and rigid lines of eyebrows and lips. His lapse in caution irritated him and he turned away, although aware that this time he was too late. The face approached him out of the swirl. He glanced at it briefly—aloof, dispassionate—hoping it might disappear; it continued toward him. A woman, he saw, approaching him, with a certain sensuality that was not grace, no it was not grace. He felt an uneasiness and shifted his position as naturally and as casually as he could. She walked

more slowly now. He could not avoid her, he knew. He raised his eyes. She stood haughtily, as if fully aware of his discomfort.

“You were staring at me.” A harsh voice, not gentle and seductive. He blushed in embarrassment. “May I sit down?” Then she laughed. “I don’t have to ask you that. And your permission would mean nothing.” She dropped down beside him and looked at him, smiling now, as if mischievous or challenging. He coughed; he knew he must speak, perhaps apologize. “I ... I’m sorry ...” But the effort was futile. He was frightened, and his own arousal further unnerved him, crumbling what few defenses he felt able to construct. The eyes swept over him, up, down, up, settling onto his face.

“Sorry? For what? For looking at me?” She touched his arm and he immediately pulled it away. “You can look at me,” she said. “No harm in that. I don’t mind being looked at.” He was staring at his feet or rather through them, wishing he possessed her confidence and could answer her challenges politely, wittily, and with resolve. It was impossible and he squirmed. She grabbed his chin and twisted it until he faced her. “Here,” she said, now as an order. “Look. Look.” There was no gentleness in that touch and his jaw ached from her grip. If he had only exercised more caution! he thought. If he had only been more discreet in examining that swirl, he might have avoided this, the taunting eyes and the now dull throb in his jaw. She was manipulating him—physically with her grip and more powerfully with her insistent eyes. Obediently he followed the line of her face, and as he did, the pressure on his jaw subsided, although she gave no indication that she would release him. “Not just the face,” she ordered. He hesitated, wishing to dissolve into the swirl as other individual faces had, but there was no escape. She forced his eyes downward to her

feet. It was vicious, he thought, and he cursed his stupid decision to cope with the swirl alone. The benefactor. He would never have permitted this. Now he stared into her legs, the complex curves of her knees; her thighs strained as if indignant against the thin confining cloth as his eyes obediently proceeded upward. Surely she could sense the embarrassed flush of his cheeks, but he could not avert his eyes and he saw the strain on the cloth gentle loosen. A slight parting and relaxing of her thighs, which he assumed was intentional, but would not acknowledge. Her waist was hidden by the folds of her shirt, which hung from her breasts in two folds from the nipples, falling into her lap, the top of her breasts rounded and, as the legs, defying the cloth. She taunted him, gently modifying each part as he examined her—gentle elevation of the hips, inhale and reaching for him ... He came to her throat and looked again into her eyes, pleading with her eyes. Again the face laughed, as if ridiculing his embarrassment, the telling heat in his face, the arousal which grew contemptuous of his will. She dropped her hand from his jaw. A dull throb now, and he rubbed it as his eyes fell in thanks. “There,” she said, all traces of malice gone, her voice clear and musical. A game, he thought, mischievous, but only a game. “You didn’t enjoy that. But I don’t care. You’d rather sneak glances at me?” A question, he supposed, but he said nothing. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I get like this sometimes. It gives me a sense of power, I guess. And that’s harmless, don’t you agree? You forgive me?”

He tried to answer coherently but settled for “Yes. Of course.” Innocuous.

Then she laughed, a quiet laugh this time, meant to put him at ease, he supposed, and strangely effective. “You’re new here, right?” and she touched his arm. “I haven’t seen you yet

and I'm fairly observant. I don't stare at people like you do, perhaps, but I'm generally aware of them." He disliked that touch; it was unnaturally gentle with its innocent tracing of the form of his arm. Whereas! he thought while he cringed at the touch, whereas! what comforts is firmness! An acknowledgment, yes, even the grip on his jaw was preferable to the unsettling softness of that caress.

Apparently, she sensed his discomfort and withdrew her hand. That too was wrong, he thought. That too was not the proper response, and he wanted to leap from his chair, shriek, and strike the spot on his arm which still retained the impression of her touch. Smash it until it felt the reassuring pain. He calmed himself, fought the caress until it vanished. He must not react so violently, he thought; it defeated all his plans. Observe, listen ... She repeated her question. He nodded, "Yes ... new. Yes, I guess, that's true."

"You've not been here before?"

He looked up. What did she mean by "here"? Her eyes no longer threatened; they glowed softly beneath the eyebrows, their former aggression now gone. He nodded dumbly. It was easier simply to consent, even though he was certain he had already answered her. She had confused him with her eyes, and he turned away.

"That's good," she said. "Excellent. I'm glad you're new."

He didn't understand her. It was his first day, he reminded himself, and he was not expected to understand everything. Observe, observe. Let others take the initiative.

She had sensed something in his face, he thought, for there was a reaction of the eyes, not fully comprehensible. They had narrowed, as if in defense, as if the deep breath he had taken to calm himself had somehow offended her. And

there was a smile cutting across her lips, promise of a laugh, but not an innocent laugh, he thought. "You know why I'm here?" she asked slowly, the rhythms harsh. "I failed to kill myself." And then the lips split apart in a smile. He cringed; the smile was threatening and sinister, somehow unnatural. "Is that why you're here as well? Is that what brought you here? Or did you do something even more heroic?"

And no, she could not have believed that. As if the privilege of the auditorium and the benefactors had to be earned through slashing one's wrists; as if the whirr had been nothing.

"Everyone does that. Fail, I mean. At one thing or another."

Observe observe observe. He repeated the word silently, until its meaning disintegrated into the pure sound. Ub-zerv. Aub-zerv. She was waiting for a response. But the repetition of the now meaningless syllables twisted even a simple 'no' into an incomprehensible jargon 'know' 'ubzirv' 'noh' ... He shook his head slowly, and found himself rocking his head, right, left, forgetting the question, something about ... something about ...

"I didn't think so." And certainly, it was a sneer, a derogatory sneer. Then that hideous laugh with a new inflection, redirected and perhaps internalized, its force expelled within her. "I botched mine. Too bad, don't you think?" Ironical. A challenge. Best to be non-committal. He nodded. Proper functioning of intellect. "Pills, I took some pills. Stupid. I'll never do it again. I had thought you just drifted away. That's what I heard. You start to sleep, dream, and never wake up. Never know you're dead, as if that were a good thing. That's what I heard. That's what I was told. But how would anyone know that?"

He had recovered now, or rather she had relented. Observe observe observe. And one must always observe, forming careful questions with no preconceived hypotheses. Thus no distorting expectations. "Why," he tested his voice and found it functioning, if not perfectly, at least adequately. "Why, I mean, why not ..." It was ridiculous; she had no chance of understanding him. "Why didn't you ..."

"You mean why didn't it work? Because ... You want to know what really happens? What happens is you spend the night vomiting and trying to keep your headache medicine down."

Something about her hands. Something they were doing, tugging and pulling at each other. A warning gesture? Pure nervousness? Possible. The hands locked, strained against each other, the fingers resistant. When she finally looked at him, the aggression had drained from her face. Her eyes seemed to have dulled, now neither threatening nor exuberant. The lips broke apart and she was speaking. He looked away. It was an alluring face and he felt transfixed in her gaze. Observe, observe, observe. "Gentlemen, it is clear that until we rid ourselves of prejudicial bias ..." But no, it was she who was discussing bias.

"... unbiased, don't you see?" She must have perceived his confusion; perhaps his face revealed it, for she was now irritated: "Are you listening to me?" He nodded, not convincingly. She shrugged, "Oh well. No matter. You're new. All is permitted." Then she laughed; it must have been apparent he had no idea what she was talking about. "And you're deaf to boot!" she exclaimed. Completely unfairly. "What I mean is that since you're new and since you've never seen me, I can be anything: a virginal queen, a mistress of

torture chambers, a driver of camels. I have no past. What choice do you have but to believe all I say?"

He rubbed his forehead. He could not object, even though he could not accept her logic. She smiled wryly and stared at him. "So I can dream now. Act it all out. Do you do that? Are you doing that now?"

He made no attempt to answer and she shoved him playfully. He was not to remain silent and he mumbled "yes." There were images distracting him, strange images.

"And what?" she said. "What do you dream?" Alex said nothing. "Not now then. I mean old dreams. Real ones. The ones you had before you learned what a dream was."

"I don't understand."

She was exasperated with him, he felt, but it was her fault, altering her meanings capriciously and pretending to resent his lack of comprehension. "Well, she continued. "There are dreams you have now. And you know what they are. But then ..." she paused. "Then there are the dreams you once claimed to have, when someone asked you what you dreamed. Maybe you were a young child and had no idea what adults meant by the word *dream*. Judging by the stories they told, you determined it meant a surreal narrative of some sort, taking as your model the fantastic tales everyone else told when asked the same question. Do you see?"

"Fictions," he said. "You mean fictions."

She frowned and continued. "That's close enough. Not particularly accurate. But come on, now. What did you tell them?"

Tell them? "Who?"

"Why those ..." she hesitated. "Anyone. It's not that important, is it? Like the dreams themselves."

He shook his head. Incongruous flow. Or was it his weakened state that confused him?

“And anyway,” she said, “we’re not talking about people; we’re talking about dreams.”

He blushed, or imagined he blushed. The embarrassment he felt was real enough ...

“Tell me. I’ll bet, yes, you look the type, I’ll bet you were a pirate. Or claimed to be one.”

He shook his head. The sea is the way. The sea ...

“Then a spaceman, flying to different worlds. That? Flat ones and round ones, good ones and bad ones ...” All you must do is *bend* it, the universe I mean, and no one will be the wiser, no one will be the wiser ... “Are you listening?”

“Yes,” he said distractedly. “My dreams ... Or whatever. I ...” kadbod and brmstx “A captain. I was a captain.”

“Like a sea captain?”

“At sea, yes. They’re the ones with power.” Rote repetition, he thought. He did not want to proceed.

But she heard only his words. “Well, I was at least close. A captain is like a pirate, isn’t he?”

Forbidden ground. It was complicated. He tried to concentrate. He must not ... “Not exactly. At least, not my captain. I was a good captain.” Brmstx. He could not recall their function ...

“Convenient truths!” she said with what he assumed was mock scorn. “Convenient distinction. Good! What is that?” Oars? Masts? Radar mounts? What was their function? He doubted he had ever known. “What happened? Did it sink?” The words were distant. “Your ship! Did it sink? Come on. Won’t you stay around for a minute?”

“Yes, yes. My ship,” he said. “It was ...” kdbrd brmstx unbending, bending and all one must do ... “In our cellar, you

see, I ... I had ..." Cardboard boxes and roaring sea, Ceeeee. "... boxes. Big ones, lots of them. Of all sizes and ..." brmstx, the bromstcks. "the rest of it. So I piled them up as a warship, or no, not a warship." Captain! "One with no crew. Just ..." His voice trailed off.

"Well, a captain is a thing unto himself, I guess."

He was fighting the images, struggling to grasp their coherence as they returned in chaos, suddenly threatening. And behind the images a voice was saying, "Come on, now!" He left the images and reached for the voice; the voice would pull him out of it. "Hey!" The whirling reached for him, caught his ankles and dragged him as he clung desperately to the voice. "Snap out of that!" It was as if a slap had shocked him, as the images vanished. She was standing before him, bent over him, her hand drawn back. He raised his own hand to his cheek. "It's all right," he said. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" She kept her hand raised, but he tossed his head and her hand relaxed. The pretense of confidence that had brought him here was groundless. "Brood not," the benefactor had said. "Diversion. That's all you need to seek."

"Enough?" It was a strange voice, not the one that had pulled him back from the chaos of the sea. He was alone on the couch, a slight impression on the cushions the only evidence of her.

"You seem to be doing all right. That's good. I'm pleased." Alex looked up to the voice and saw the gold-lined blue of the benefactor. They both turned to the swirl and the disappearing form of the woman who had been next to him. Alex began to speak then checked himself. He had found something. Completely on his own, he had met someone and had survived her initial teasing and taunts. He did not want her to disappear into the swirl.

“Don’t worry,” said the benefactor. “You can come back here. None of this will disappear.”

“When?”

“You mean when can you can back? Why whenever you want. Except now, of course, this being your first day. But this place can be yours if you want.”

“I ... I don’t know ...” He looked past the benefactor and thought he saw her against or amidst the swirl. “I just thought you ...”

“What? Do you think I might take this away? No, that’s not it.” He took Alex by the arm. “I thought you might need a break from all this. I understand it can be quite oppressive at times.”

“Oh, yes.” He was will-less, he thought, subject to both the whims and logic of the benefactor. “Will I ...” He didn’t finish. Although he had kept few secrets from him earlier, he did not want the benefactor to know about her. As Alex stood, the benefactor smiled kindly and released his arm. The two walked out together.

He was rude to the benefactor the following morning. Rude and obstinate, like a young child hoarding a new possession. Other than the benefactor, the woman he had met was his only contact with the world beyond the door and he subsequently felt entitled to her. His secret now. Yes, certainly that was fair; that was reasonable, although he could not so easily rationalize what felt to him like spite. The opening of the door, although no gift, was a privilege he had earned and thus one within the power of the benefactor to withdraw. And he must be careful not to risk the loss of even the most trivial gain, let alone ... He ate slowly, listening to the droned questions posed by the benefactor. "And how did you handle yourself out there? Were there any problems?"

He shrugged. That was enough. A shrug was sufficient.

"And today? Do you want to return? Please understand ..."

"Yes. Yes."

"Please understand," said the benefactor, ignoring the interruption, "that it is not mandatory. If you'd rather talk, why then ..."

Alex looked up from his food. There was a hidden warning in the benefactor's tone, which he did not fully understand.

"I don't know, Alex. You seem a bit tense this morning. Yesterday also, of course, but that was understandable. I don't want to push you or upset you in any way."

"Push me? Upset?" Alex asked warily and chewed at his food. Like someone in his past, he thought, or someone imagined, slurping noisily as he ate. "What makes you say

that?" The benefactor seemed to be testing him. There must be something else. More to it than simply compassion.

"The food, Alex. Look at it."

He did not want to continue with the benefactor's ploy, whatever it was. But there was little he could do and he glanced down to his plate. Mere curiosity, he thought, nothing more. Disorder on his tray.

"Sloppy this morning, Alex. Reminiscent of a few weeks ago. You have become much more orderly recently." He stood as Alex suppressed his annoyance. A test. That's all it was. And he would not fail it. The benefactor tapped his fingers. Tapping, tapping. Inaudible tapping. Converse of the white tiles. Yes, same effect. Intriguing movements of the fingers. Gentle drumming, he might call it. He shook his head away from it. Too involved, he thought, those fingers, and turned to the face. It was smiling at him. Had there been a challenge, he had answered it.

"All right, Alex. We can go. When it is time."

Alex pushed the steel tray away from him. Time, time. An hour, he supposed. Much like yesterday. The benefactor ordered the dishes and wheeled the tray aside, then sat down. He began to rock slowly and remained there, silently rocking, giving no indication he meant to speak at all. For a few minutes, Alex stared at him. The slow rocking, intriguing silent rocking. Another test, this of quiet rhythms and he lay back on the bed to face the curtain. Dead, still curtain, ignoring the rocking.

"You met someone out there?"

The curtain still and lifeless. "No." But the outright lie seemed pointless and he modified it. "Not really. One, two. Mostly observing."

Again the silence, and he felt he could sense the now unseen rocking, the rhythms transmitted to the bed.

“Names? Any names?”

“No.” He was grateful for that question, excusing the lie.

“None I might recognize?”

“No.” He rolled over to feel his body press the mattress, but he could not look at that rocking rocking, the benefactor’s rocking. Alex closed his eyes. He did not want to sleep. But the façade was preferable to the rocking, and he twisted over the mattress, involving his body in the blanket. Behind him, the benefactor was talking to him, probably about the auditorium. Warnings, suggestions, now in rhythm with the rocking, blending to a smooth harmony, both soothing and dangerous, Alex thought. He did his best to ignore it and instead concentrated on the mattress, trying to sense its form in each crease beneath him. Subtle pressure gradations against his back—firm, soft—relative secondaries. Then he shifted his position to produce a new scheme, concentrating, ordering. Finally, he heard movement and turned to see the benefactor standing over the tray and muttering something about “Order. Order.”

“Is it time now?”

The benefactor glanced at him. “Yes. When I return. If you’re still interested. Or adamant, I should say.” He opened the door and steered the tray into the corridor. The hum still seemed foreign to him and died as the door closed.

The gratitude he felt irritated him. Despite the tests. Despite the aggravating silence and rocking. He slapped angrily at the blanket. “Brood not. Brood not.” He breathed deeply, controlling, controlling. Results. A question of results, that was all. If irritation was the price for releasing the lock, it

was one he could afford. He calmed himself and sat quietly on the bed.

The benefactor returned quickly. Punctual. Always so punctual. And without a word, he led Alex into the corridor. A routine. Now familiar to him. Glaring white. Mere surrounding. Soon to be innocuous, he knew, and nearly invisible. A few forms passed them there in uniform; the faces turned to him, dutifully it seemed, and then away. As he walked, he could feel the benefactor's hand reaching for him, to guide him perhaps, but he walked swiftly now and alone beside the benefactor. He did not need the hand; if left in the corridor, he could find his way unaided. They came to the double-doors of the auditorium; the benefactor pushed them open and with a slight smile left him there alone.

He faced the swirl. Aimless movements. Arbitrary motion, or simply incalculable. Unchanged from yesterday. But it did not interest him today. The patterns, flow, counterflow—these were mere quirks of the swirl. Epi-phenomena, they had once been called.

He sought the single face and did not remain long in the doorway. The subtle lull in the hum as he entered did not bother him as it had the day before. Let it seek another. He, now experienced and thus inconspicuous, would walk unnoticed in and through the swirl, past the chairs and doorways. Soon, he saw her, to his left striding through the swirl as if oblivious to it. He stood rigid, waiting for her, but rough hands on his shoulder jarred him. "Excuse me," the voice said, as the hands eased him aside. "Excuse me." An obstacle, he thought, standing there. He was an obstacle and nothing more. He must keep moving here or find a place to sit. He drifted slowly from the hands, ignoring the stranger who had jostled him, then realized as he approached the small

couch that he had lost her face. Distraction. Can't be helped. Foolish that he had paid any attention to the rough hands. He was out of the swirl now, on its borders. And safe, he thought, near the chairs, some occupied with a quiet hum, details, details, barely audible challenges to the swirl.

To observe was no longer enough for him; he felt alone and embarrassed. She would need to approach him. Perhaps harshly, like the day before. Swirl, flow and counterflow. Left, right, random. Faces. Points of interest. He scanned it and found her. The eyes. It was the eyes he first noticed, then the movement of her confident strides through and against the swirl. There was something different about her today. Curious. He watched her briefly and then saw she was not alone. Another walked beside her, echoing her movements in a lewd parody. Shadow. Blasphemous shadow. Defiling and ...

No, no. That was unwarranted, he thought, and looked again at her companion. A man, he saw, large and obese. Clumsily plodding beside her. The swirl blocked his view and he raised himself to his toes. Irritated now. Angered by ... by the frustrating screen of the swirl. Yes, that was it, he thought. Blocking his view.

The man walked awkwardly beside her and Alex could not suppress a contemptuous chuckle. The bumbling, clumsy gait contrasted so pointedly with her rhythmic strides. Strange that the man could even keep pace with her, he thought, and stranger still that she should permit it. And then she saw him, or so Alex assumed; for she turned quickly in his direction with a smile of recognition. She came toward him, with a graceful determination that the swirl clearly respected. And he wished she would dismiss the lumbering darkness of the shadow trailing her. Round face, like one he had seen before but had forgotten. "Hello," she said. And it was so simple that way, so

simple. He smiled and nodded, then looked at the man who had followed her. How rude, he thought, for him to assume he was welcome here. The man suddenly began to bow, his head rolling forward over the fat bulges of his neck and chest. It was disgusting. "Good day. Good day, sir." Consecutive bows, the formality awkward and inept. And a thin whine. "Good day." The man turned toward her, rolling the formless flesh toward her, while contorted in a clumsy bow, as his hands, tiny and white like an infant's, clutched each other over the belly. "Yes, and you *will* excuse me." Thin whine, irritating whine. "For I ..." The hands unclasped and one of them gestured toward the swirl. "Obligations. Friends. I promised." And as the man giggled stupidly, Alex followed his halting gesture to a nearby cluster in the swirl. Friends indeed. Contemptible lumps in the swirl. Densities, that was all. Mere densities.

"Oh no." And it was her voice, relieving the whine. Clear and musical. And the man bowing with revolting servility. "Sir sir sir." Bowing and groveling. Nearly stumbling, as he turned toward the cluster and was gone.

"That's too bad. I was hoping ..." She turned to Alex, her eyes bright against her face, an acuity framed by the swirl. "What's so amusing? What are you chortling about?"

Her wry smile surprised him, but he realized he was still laughing. A mistake. As he lowered his eyes, the image of the man clumsily bowing remained clear and distinct, and still, of course, ridiculous.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." Calm, calm. He must not offend her. "I'm still 'new here', as you say." Casual. Uninterested. "I ... Who was that?"

"A friend," she said slowly. "You find that surprising?"

Standing is so uncomfortable! Why it is only *reasonable* that one shifts about, looking for balance. Taps taps, yes much like his feet were tapping. “Can we sit down?” He had not intended to plead with her, but his voice nearly broke. “Here ... I ...”

“Does all this bother you?” And she took his hand. A firm grasp. “But of course, this is only your second day here. Am I right? That excuses you, I suppose. Has the place improved since yesterday?”

Did she expect him to answer? As he stood over the chairs where she had led him, the act of sitting seemed complex and mysterious. How to be graceful in that movement? Slow? Casual? Turn and lower? His self-consciousness and concentration only made him more awkward and he felt comical before her and before the swirl. Would he have to learn or perhaps re-learn even these simplest of civilities?

“Relax. Relax.” She slowly eased down next to him. “Nothing will hurt you here. And don’t worry about another outburst like yesterday. I already apologized.”

“I ... I remember nothing about that. Outburst, I mean.”

He tried to return her smile, but instead, he found his attention drawn to the cluster in the swirl. The man had not changed; the bows, the servility ... and yes over the hum, he thought he could still hear the whining voice. He wanted to sting him with his contempt, but the man was too distant and the cluster slowly moved into the random flow of the swirl where it would disappear. He continued to stare until she shoved him roughly. “Pay attention.” A jarring, like that from the stranger, only now untempered by a formal apology.

“I ...,” he mumbled. “I was ... Or I’m still nervous, I guess.”

She gave him no sympathy. “You’ll have to get over that yourself,” she said. “Are you always so exasperating?”

“Exas- ... I’m sorry.”

“No, no. Don’t apologize. All it does is make you look even worse. Here. Look at me.” A remembrance of the force she had shown the day before brought his eyes up to her and away from his own hands. “There. Much better. But be careful. I won’t put up with much of it. You are attractive, somewhat at least. Although maybe that’s just because you’re young, like so many others. And if you ignore me, I’ll just have to leave.”

“No!” He started, then swallowed. Something in his throat. From breakfast, no doubt, and he should explain that to her. Surely she would understand; why, one could hardly be blamed for failing to chew the bad food. But no, she would laugh at him, he decided. And he could not bear that now. Not now. Second day. “No. Please.”

“Why not?” She drew her head back and brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen over her eyes. Lightly with her fingertips, easing it away. And he saw the eyes, “glowing” one might call it, there above the smile. Mischief, taunt—he knew she would make him answer. The chairs! Why obviously the problem lay in the chairs! Unreasonably harsh and uncomfortable, they stole one’s concentration and how could he be expected in such circumstances to ... “Why not?” and the chin jerked upward.

He coughed. Still that food in his throat. Teasing clump, bump, thump. He rubbed his eyes. Bump, thum ... Too far to permit such backsliding. He had come too far. “Distracted,” he said weakly. “I’m sorry. I forgot what you asked me.”

“No matter,” she sighed. “You wouldn’t have answered, I’m sure.” And then she began to rise, as if to leave. And no!

No, she must not do that. He reached for her arm; his hand stopped inches away, trembling as she glanced indifferently and, yes, with a certain amusement. A game then. To her it was just ... “No wait. I remember. Please.”

She stared at the hand until it fell back to his side. He wanted to hide it, order it behind him, under him, punish it for its rude tremors. “You’re the only one I know here.” And it was difficult, he thought, most difficult to speak against the tiny clump.

She shrugged, “Well, I understand that, I suppose. I sympathize. With your plight, I mean.” Again she made a movement to leave and this time he lunged at her, grabbing her by the arm and clinging to it. He could see the muscles in her jaw tighten; he felt the strength of her arm, resisting, as she glared at him. But she made no attempt to leave and he saw the lips curl dangerously as she said, “Now you tell me.” It was a command. “Now you just tell me what it is you want.” He released her arm. “Tell me.”

His breathing was not functioning properly. “Nothing. I’m ... just not at ease. Yet, I mean. That’s all.”

She nodded, “Anything else?”

Like yesterday, he thought, when her hand dug into his jaw as his eyes helplessly examined her. “Say something! Is that too much for you?” And he could not tell whether that anger was genuine or if the quick step toward him were a mere feint. “Because ...” he stammered, the words difficult. “It would be better for me if you were here.”

She cocked her head and folded her arms under her breasts, as if deciding whether to grant this stammering idiot her presence or laughingly depart into the swirl and its undifferentiated faces. Perhaps he could just watch them—smile, nod, dissolve. There might be others like her, or none

like her, he thought, and it might be days before ... Pair of eyes. Catching him staring. Advance. Days or silence forever, returning to the benefactor with a casual nod “Fine. It was good. Thank you.” He looked up at her. What was there to hide? he wondered. The cost of her company a mere pittance of discomfort. He was less afraid now, and when she spoke he knew he could answer.

“Are you getting used to me?”

“Used to you? No. Or rather it doesn’t matter. Just it would be better ... I mean, I want you to stay of course.” What would he do for that? He held up his hands before him and looked down over his now relaxed body. Weak, he supposed, exhausted. “I don’t mind ... making a fool of myself, if that’s what you want.”

And at that, she smiled. He supposed it had been a test of some sort, that her threat to leave had not been serious. He didn’t care, he thought. He was now exposed and naked before her, he thought grandly, but relaxed and breathing comfortably. The former harshness of the chair had softened.

“Interesting,” she said and sat beside him. And yes, he thought, that was worth the stammering and the clumsy and childish clutching at her arm. “So you don’t mind seeming ridiculous? You would do that?”

What would she demand of him? he wondered. To strip himself naked and slither through the swirl? Crawl ineptly on the floor, arms bound behind him, rolling rolling as on the sea surface ... A pudgy hand patting him. Even that ...

“Don’t worry,” she said finally. “I won’t ask anything much of you.”

Of course, he could protest, he thought. Yes yes. But now rational, he knew he would ask even less of himself. Crawling and rolling through the swirl? Ridiculous. He would never do

it. Submit to the bump, thump, clump? And no, not that. Not that. Better even the empty awakening and narrow confines of his room than the bump, thump, clump ...

"There," she said, reaching out to his smile but not touching him. "You're better that way. Nearly alive. And for being nice, you deserve a reward. Would you like to meet some people? I could introduce you to them."

"No," he said quickly. "No. Not today."

She did not seem to understand and asked him again. He shook his head. There was someone in the swirl bowing and groveling and moving awkwardly, his flesh out of his control. He was a disgusting man, obviously, sweating, as the simple tasks of walking, bowing, speaking were beyond his strength. Alex coughed. Imagined imagined imagined. "No, I still don't feel ready for that." It was not completely false, he thought, considering what he had said. Surely, his disgust was real, as was his contempt of the obsequious shadow who had so defiled her.

He assumed she had not noticed his uneasiness. "All right. For now, I guess. You're still new and in fact you have done pretty well."

"What do you mean? Well?"

Only teasing. She glanced about her distractedly. "Oh," she said, then turned back to him. "You're coherent at least. That's a start. Some aren't so lucky. I admit I was hard on you. But that's all right too. You survived. You didn't run away. You can take pride in that."

Pride, pride. Strange that she should say that, he thought. He shook his head. No, it was not pride. Wasn't pride a sin? *Superbia? Invidia? Ira ... Superbia et invidia ira ...* Pride was reserved for action and initiative. What he felt now was mere comfort. He should acknowledge her concession, even if it was mere

flattery. He looked down at the narrow space separating them. Inches, an empty strip between their chairs. He wanted to close that gap, perhaps shift casually where he sat and end up touching her, his hip in contact with her hip. Casually. Hardly noticed. The thought unnerved him. No one would fall for such nonsense! It was easier for him when he had no choice. The slight parting of her legs. Breathing, the firmness of her breasts. The chair became uncomfortable and he shifted his position. A certain sensuality he had not experienced. "I ... I still don't know you," he said. "Your name. We never ... yesterday, never got the chance."

She looked at him as if perplexed. "Really? Are you sure? Well, that's easy to correct, if it matters to you." He nodded. "Gina," she said. "I'm Gina." And there was something he was supposed to feel, he thought, that was elusive. Gina, Gina. Nice name, pleasant. He should compliment her, but then, no, it would be ridiculous. Gina was her name, but it could be any other name. And he said simply, "Alex. I'm Alex. Alexander A."

She was looking into the swirl and he wondered whether she had heard him. He was about to repeat himself. Surely there was something she had not understood. He was Alex. His name was Alex. That was important he thought, and it was important that she know that.

She faced him, apparently indifferent to such concerns. "Alex. All right. That's nice, I suppose. Someone christened you, for what it's worth. I hardly doubted that to begin with. I don't know you any better now, do I?"

True enough. In a sense true. But it was more complex than that, he thought. How to explain it to her. He turned to the swirl, less oppressive, nearly innocuous, but still inexplicable. Forms moving within and against the aimless

flow. Clusters, pairs, single faces, identified and gone. What was the step the benefactor had mentioned? Was she it? What was there for him in the swirl? Aimless. Random. Arbitrary flows and counterflows. It confused him suddenly and he reached blindly for her. His hand must have grazed her breast. It shook him and he let his hand drop to her arm then to the space between them. She had not reacted in any way. Probably she had not noticed. When he turned to her, she was looking straight at him with an expression he did not understand. No offence, at least she had taken no offence. He stared back at the swirl. He could not answer the look she offered him. "This ... place here," he said. "I don't think I understand it." He doubted the expression on her face had changed. "No, I ..." It was difficult to speak to her. "What I mean is ... I don't know what I mean," he said leaning forward in his chair and resting his elbows on his knees. He was away from her now. No need to apologize for an inadvertent touch. "Are you comfortable here? I suppose that's what I mean. I'm asking what you do here."

And he saw in the periphery of his vision her face turn to the swirl as his had. She remained silent for a few seconds, difficult seconds, so difficult for him, and then spoke quietly, "Do here? That's odd. I don't think of it in those terms. Is it necessary that one ..."

"Well then ... enjoy, perhaps. Do you enjoy it? It's just that I see no ..." The swirl bothered him suddenly. "... purpose, I guess is the word."

She brushed the question away: "How can I answer that!"

Her laugh reassured him, but he was afraid she might be only teasing him and he pretended not to notice. "Yes. No. I don't care really," he stammered, his phrasing halting and

inept. "I just ... I'm just curious what exactly you would say. Anything, I guess."

She laughed again, now tossing her head slightly as the hair danced back from her face. "I don't worry about purposes. And I'm not sure what you mean by that." She shook the hair from her face. "What does it matter, really? Enjoy? Yes. I'm content here. I'm cared for, fed, occasionally loved. Isn't that enough?"

Occasionally loved. He smiled politely. But no, it was not enough. The sea was enough, the tides racing against a coastal sea breeze. The dreams might be enough, but not that. He tried to articulate his objection, but as he did, she touched him, destroying both objection and questions. He was silent, as the hand lightly squeezed his arm and followed it to his shoulder. Inadequate; he knew even the touch was inadequate, but then it fell away suddenly, leaving him alone.

"Well," she said, looking past him to the right. "I see that's all for today."

All? Confused. He glanced over his shoulder and saw through the swirl a blue figure, gold, gold, approaching. And it might be another, he thought, but when he saw the face, he knew it was the benefactor. She had half-risen, and he turned to her quickly. "Tomorrow," he said. Yes, tomorrow. Promise for tomorrow, so he would not risk another passive probe of the swirl or find other shadows trailing her. "Will I see you tomorrow? Here?"

"If you want." And when he sensed the benefactor standing over him, she was indistinguishable from the swirl.

To awaken with a goal, he thought, ah! that was a novelty. To sense the first traces of consciousness and seize them, drag oneself out from the blanket and soothing warmth of sleep. When had he last done that? Standing naked, he felt none of the usual clumsiness and haze that shrouded his now normal morning; rather the walls, the angles, and the shifts of color, the subdued green of the wall blocked by the light tan of the chairs and tables stood out for him in clear definition, lacking the blurred zone of transition where the colors merged, each striving to displace the other. None of it. He followed the sharp outlines of his furniture and the crisp folds of the curtain. Yes, as if he had been previously blind to the brilliance and clarity of their hues ... Or was it a new brilliance? One granted the curtains, the walls, the chairs in celebration of his alertness? Or the cause? But not that, no, not that. He knew the cause. No benevolent god had repainted his room.

He stretched and whirled to confirm his balance and agility. The effort made him dizzy, but he merely stumbled under it; even the whirling could not smudge the colors. He hurried through his bath and dressed, impatiently awaiting the arrival of the benefactor.

It was foolish, he thought, indicative of the little stimulation his immediate surroundings brought him. That he should put so much faith in a mere appointment and even go through the trouble of beautifying his room. For the first time, he had extracted the promise of a specific meeting on a specific day. He had taken the moment into his own hands, he thought, in defiance of probability and chance. He returned from the bathroom and sat down, patting the bed, drumming out imagined seconds to speed them into the past. The

benefactor maintained a regular schedule; there was little he could do to hasten his arrival and what would be his gesture toward an open door.

Bouncing on the bed, he imagined the silent footsteps approaching. Too enthusiastic, he thought, and frowned. It would never do; far too risky and revealing. Once the benefactor knew of Gina, there would be no secrets beyond his dreams. The thought unnerved him and increased his impatience. He jumped up from the bed to stretch and wring the strange tingling sensation from his fingertips.

Somehow, he must hurry, he thought. Surely there was something he could do short of pleading or exposing his true motives. Something. Something. Then he grinned. Boredom! That was how to persuade the benefactor. In his kindness and desire to interest him, the benefactor rarely lingered in areas that seemed of little concern. He giggled. That was how to manipulate him. Not positive suggestions, but negative implications. That would work. So easy. So easy. If he could just subtly indicate to the benefactor that today, the idle breakfast chatter bored him, there would be little recourse but to alter the schedule. And as his present situation, as far as he knew, was restricted to a pair of alternatives, disregarding of course the possibility of a second interrogation ... He shuddered. The memory was still clear and undermined his reasonings.

Boredom. Was that it? He caught it again. Simply trick the benefactor into leading him to the auditorium with some such comment as, "Well, I know this won't help much, but perhaps you might feel better, or at least, shall we say, more animated here." He chuckled at his ingenuity and wondered whether he could enact his plan as easily as he could construct it.

The doorknob twisted, causing a slight break in the silence, but seeming to reverberate through the room. Quickly, he lay down on the bed and tried to exude the lethargy and nervous boredom he had planned. A simple goal. An ingenious plan. He rested his chin in his fist and with his free hand traced the mountainous ridges and valleys of the blanket. Seas, waves. They magnified and swelled before him; he followed them as they meandered about the small area bounded by the edge of his bed next to the curtain and his elbow. Swirling, then dropping suddenly down to him and disappearing beneath his chest. Returning, yes, they grew out of the flat folds beneath him and forced their way outward, merging into greater waves and rolling across the surface.

“Alex?”

He slapped the wavelets, flattening the once mountainous contours of the sea. The last few weeks, the ease he had gained and the ability to appreciate the details and nuances of his environment had turned against him. Boredom, he reminded himself; the present goal was the pretense of boredom. He rolled over lazily and faced the benefactor.

“You look well today, Alex,” the benefactor said cheerily as he deftly wheeled the breakfast chair to the bed.

Looking well. Of course. But bored! Could he not see it? The food would certainly do it. At least regain what he had lost in the idiotic contours of his blanket. He scowled at the tray and flipped away a steel hemisphere. It spun on the tray toward the left edge, tottered for a moment, threatening to fall, then righted itself and rocked, left and right. A bit aggressive, Alex thought. The cover could have fallen, causing all sorts of ... He poked at the food, occasionally lifting a bland morsel to his mouth and concentrating on its tastelessness. Much better, he thought, but it would be so much better if the benefactor

would remove that foolish grin from his face. “It seems like a good day for you, Alex. None of the usual stupor and recalcitrance.”

“Hmm,” he sighed, attempting to disprove it. He ate slowly, then jerked his face back from the plate. What had been done to the food? It had somehow acquired the same subtle reality his room had shown him. Interesting. Nuanced. Must everything obstruct his purposes? Was it necessary that all details of his surroundings ... He ate regardless. He could not resist.

“Oh,” said the benefactor. “I have a message for you. Let me see. Somewhere ...” He began a clumsy search through the various pockets of his uniform, then stood as if confused. Again, he patted the pockets and drove his hands into them, but with no success. With a sigh, he sat back onto the chair.

“Message?” He had practiced the response in the few seconds he had, and it proved to be as dry and monotonous as he had hoped. Tedious, this game, he thought. But then, all projects are essentially tedious, especially those that are necessary.

“Yes, message, from ...” The benefactor continued to dart his hands about his uniform as if there were a hidden pocket he had overlooked. “... from, oh, I don’t really know. As a matter of fact,” he added, “finding it won’t do any good. It wasn’t signed.” He eyed Alex mischievously, a look Alex refused to dignify with embarrassment. “Oh, by the way,” he said, as if toying with Alex’s impatience, “I see no reason why we cannot dispense with our talks this morning. You’ve done well enough out there.” He waved toward the door. “I meant to ask you. Would you like to proceed immediately? Now mind, you aren’t required.”

“No, no,” said Alex, then slowed his cadence to salvage his plan. “No, that would be fine. Yes. That would be fine.” His plan, he thought cynically. His wonderful plan.

“For you have done so well. I really see no reason ...” He paused suddenly, grinning broadly, then sat back in his chair. “I am so impressed with your spirits this morning, Alex!”

Spirits indeed. Yet he could not help returning the smile. His ingenious plan meaningless, not even a failure. But “The message?”

“What? Oh yes. The message.” The benefactor resumed his search through and for his pockets. To no avail, of course. Even he must have realized the effort was perfunctory. “Yes, message. I seem to have lost or misplaced it.” He twisted as if to see if the note might be pinned to his back, then gave up. “Well, I didn’t forget it. At least, not entirely. Something to the effect ...” He placed a finger on his lips. “I can’t recall it fully, I admit, but someone you were to meet. Today.”

A sudden heat stung his face.

“Someone you were to meet ... I hope this doesn’t disappoint you too severely. Whoever it was is ... I don’t know ... in some fashion ‘indisposed’. As in Miss Otis Regrets. Gilbert and Sullivan, is it not? Oh ... sorry! In any case, he won’t be able to meet you today.”

The words intensified the heat, and he thought that had he looked about him, the sharp definitions he had reveled in earlier would have vanished. He lowered his eyes to the now placid contours and ridges of his blanket, former seas and now seas again.

“Or maybe late. I forget exactly. Does that make sense to you, Alex?” The benefactor did not wait for an answer, which seemed strange; for surely he had noticed Alex’s reaction. “Of course, it could have been a mistake, I suppose. Might not

have been for you at all.” He paused, then stood. “Well! This isn’t accomplishing anything. We can go if you wish. I see the food no longer interests you. And I can’t say I’m surprised at that.” The cheerfulness left his voice, replaced by concern.

“Do you still want to go? This early, I mean?”

“Of course,” Alex said decisively. Yes, he would go. “Of course I want to go. Why wouldn’t I?”

“And the message? Was that ...”

Alex waved him off. “Probably nothing. I know nothing about it. Some mistake, as you said.”

“Excellent!” said the benefactor, gathering up the tray. “You ready yourself, and I shall return directly. No more than a minute.”

Alex watched indifferently as the chaos he had made of the tray re-ordered itself under the benefactor’s hand. Neat as on arrival. When complete, tray and benefactor sped from the room. Politesse, Alex mused, a polite but unnecessary speed. He tried to ignore the implications of the note. The suspicions it had aroused depressed him and he busied himself in the bathroom, urinating majestically a foot from the toilet, an embarrassing habit he had recently developed, then paused to look at himself in the mirror. Bare traces of stubble on his chin, but no need to shave again after last night. He regretted he had not bothered to inspect his features earlier, to note the glow the benefactor claimed to see. Or—he looked toward the curtain—had he perhaps merely claimed to see such a look, hoping to counteract the effect of the message? knowing full well the disappointment it would bring? hoping to create a protective buffer? Confusing. It was all so confusing. He inhaled deeply and tried to recover whatever exuberance remained from the energy he had felt earlier. Portions, fractions, but at least, yes, the initial burst had relieved him of

his usual nervousness. At least he felt no fear and he could be grateful for that.

He heard the click of the doorknob and pushed aside the curtain to meet the benefactor, who was puffing slightly, a tribute to his haste, no doubt.

“Well,” he said, catching his breath, “I kept my promise. Who can say as much? Fairly flew, I might say.” He wiped drops of perspiration from his forehead and Alex smiled; he could not have faked those. “Old. Age does that. Lack of exercise, I suppose. I shall rot if I neglect myself so.” He flicked the moisture from his fingertips and stiffened in mock attention. “Ready?”

“Of course.”

He was taken to the auditorium and deposited, he thought, led through the large blue-flanked double-doors and ordered “Stay! Stay!” as if he were a spirited dog prone to disobedience. He watched calmly as the massive doors creaked shut, leaving him between blue and gold columns before the sea of swirling faces.

A mistake, he thought. The message must have been a mistake. Surely, given a crowd this size, the chances that he was the intended recipient of the note, that all had proceeded as directed—these were small. Small indeed. He scanned the swirl, picking through the faces for the one he knew. But he could not find her. Points of familiarity, nothing more. He had not moved since entering; to the central vantage points in the hall, he was framed perfectly by the doorframe, miniaturized by their mass, and he stepped quietly away from them. How silly he must have appeared, standing there, perhaps rocking nervously on his heels and surveying the crowd, as if he were a high official assuring himself that all was well. He laughed.

High official! He barely possessed the courage just to be here, much less offer a pompous critique.

He walked first to the couch, glanced at it as casually as he could, then ambled to the chairs where she had promised to meet him. He sat, then turned to the wall. Subdued green, like the color of his room, and he marveled at it. The sheer mass reduced the clusters of chairs and couches lying against it to insignificance and mocked their vain attempts to struggle up its face with their browns and tans. The eyes were drawn upward away from the chairs and away from the contrasting colors. Acute, blurred, he could not tell as his eyes were pulled up the face. Green, green; it bothered him and he turned back to the swirl.

Gina. That was her name. Gina. And he suddenly wished he had at least seen the note, even if it would have done him little good. He could hardly have identified handwriting he had never seen before, he knew, but perhaps if he had just had the chance to read it, hold it, study it ... Tone, form, her own words, if her words at all. Something. He might have seen something. And surely, if indeed she had written that note ... “Hello?” ... something sealed and private ... “Hello?”

The voice startled him and he turned to face it. Flesh, flesh, he saw flesh before him. Ugly rolls beneath clothing dampened in sweat. Or not dampness at all, he thought. No, he had imagined it. He looked curiously at the familiar and unattractive face. Hands fidgeting, the man forced a smile through his fat cheeks and jowls. Alex had been caught by the graceless movements of the hands and barely noticed. They disappeared behind the back, behind the bulging sides, leaving only the smile. Nervous smile. Touch of formality, incomprehensible. As he considered the artificial smile, he realized that having said nothing, having offered no response

other than scrutiny, he himself was responsible for its nervous shaking. He mumbled a greeting, something to stop that twitch; it was becoming contagious, he thought. "You're ... Do you want to ... sit down?" His words did little to calm the hands, which reappeared in an incomprehensible gesture.

"No. Well, thank you." And the voice. Whining, squeaking. Familiar as well. He recognized him as the man he had seen earlier with Gina. The remembrance annoyed him. The presumption of the man offering himself as a substitute. Suspicious, Alex thought, that the man should be so prompt. The nervousness, the fidgeting.

Although the man was shorter than Alex, he carried a disproportionate amount of weight. A booming voice might better suit him. Why not something to lend him the aura of majesty, rather than these weak, nearly feminine tones? "But you see," he whined, "sitting can be rather awkward and uncomfortable for me." And the hands jerked about as if to spare the voice the ignominy of speech. "You see, I'm ..."

Rather fat! Yes, of course. The man's discomfort and nervousness, the awkward jerks of the swollen hands—all reinforced his obesity. Obviously, his reluctance to sit was well-founded, if he had any self-esteem at all. The mannerisms were so entertaining; and Alex offered him no relief.

"Wouldn't you like to walk?" The man awkwardly stepped to one side and extended his hand toward the swirl, his attempts at grace inept and foolish. As if instinctively, Alex began to rise, but then remembered the note and paused, his weight balanced on the edge of the chair. Walking, walking. Away from the chair? Away from where he was to meet Gina? An assignation, it might have been called, in the days of bad fiction. But the man before him looked so comical in that posture, head bowed slightly over a fatty roll protruding from

his neck, and his arm, extension of the creases in his shirt, pointing toward the swirl, Alex accepted the offer, curiosity and amusement overcoming his objections. A short way, he thought. He could permit that, while keeping the seats in view. She would wait for him. He stood slowly as the man asked, "This way? Or that?" And a nodding of the head. Right. Left.

Alex laughed. Caught in a nod, the man must have interpreted the laugh as a directive. He began to walk rapidly, Alex thought, for a man his size. Whatever awkwardness he might have feared in sitting must have been monumental, for his rolling gait and clumsy, discordant gestures did little to deflect attention from his obesity. Mere embellishments, Alex thought, as he followed him across the wall and the seats to the left. He remembered the note. The seats. Their seats. "If you like. If you like." He stared back at them, empty before the swirl. At his side, there was the obsequious whine of the voice. Familiar servility.

"... expecting someone? Excuse me. Did I intrude?"

He could not have been that obvious, he thought, glaring at the man. But then, this morning, the benefactor, seas and valleys ... No, he shook his head and thought even to offer an apology. Coincidence, at worst. Mere coincidence. "No. I just ... nothing."

The man respected his silence, it seemed, but as they spoke, he had leaned expectantly forward. They were further from the seats. Alex glanced quickly back. The swirl drifted in behind him, consuming the two chairs and they were gone.

"I'm C. Charles C."

Distant, now invisible. The man had stopped, although Alex did not understand why; the pudgy hands twisted before him and another nod, bow perhaps, as much of a bow as the man's corpulence permitted. It was all distracting him from

something. The seats. Empty seats. He saw the hand extended, the offer of a handshake. He took it listlessly and was instantly repulsed. The sweat, imagined on the flesh, lay there in the palm. And he could feel, could actually feel the soft resistance of flesh around the bones. He loathed the limp handgrip, but the man would not let go. Subtle pressures in the weak hand, demanding that he not release it. Alex pulled his hand away regardless, making little effort to conceal from the man his attempt to wipe away the sweat. Again walking, and something was bothering the man; perhaps he had seen Alex's disgust. But no, not humiliation. Not that. More nervousness. The voice struggling to speak, squeaking coughs, hidden by a fat hand. "And ... and you're ... Mr. A?"

He was about to answer but checked himself. Mr. A. He was Mr. A. How had the man known that? What right did he have to the name? Alex glared at him in suspicion, but the man merely asked "Sir?" Then repeated, as if questioning, a formal "Sir?" The meaningless epithet annoyed him. He preferred the name to that, however Charles may have learned it. "Yes," he said quickly. "Alex."

"Then ... Alexander?" Charles asked timidly.

"Alex," he retorted. He could not stand the servility.

Charles began to smile. "Alex, yes. Very good. Very good. You may call me Charles. Everyone calls me Charles." And again there was that hand, this time extended across, or rather *around* the belly jiggling as they walked, and he knew he must again touch it. He did so reluctantly, if for no other reason than to dismiss it as before. They walked clumsily, Charles's awkwardness communicated to him as they joined hands. Stumbling, stumbling, and the sweaty palm. If one should *see* them united like that. Witness the awkward faltering. And laugh! How she might laugh at him!

They had come to the corner and Alex took the opportunity to drop the offensive and offending hand. He wanted to return to the chairs, but instead Charles turned and walked across the far wall. He was babbling now, something high-pitched, whining, largely unintelligible. "Interesting there. Design, satisfying and ... Hello ..." Someone had passed them, unrecognized as all faces in the swirl. "Somewhat ..." Alex gave him a puzzled look and Charles graciously bowed. "Oh, please forgive me, Mr. A. I did not realize you were not listening. I am truly sorry." He paused in the midst of a bow and peered submissively at Alex. "Would you prefer ..."

"No. Go on." He could not endure the bows, the already awkward flesh reduced to his most graceless form. And also, he had inadvertently glanced at the wall, and yes, there was indeed something about the wall. He turned away from it and tried to listen.

"Yes, if you'll permit me. I was saying there is evidence of skill there. The complexities of colors and design. And of course ..." He chuckled stupidly and his entire body, the flesh, responded belatedly, echo of the laugh. Delayed quivers. "... Of course, there are many here ..." Arm quaking toward the swirl. Alex did not follow it. "My friends. I do enjoy them so."

Irritating, the manner. Irritating, the bouncing flesh. "How long?"

"Sir?" Again the word. Formal respect. How much servility was he to tolerate?

"How long, I said!" But of course the question was vague, and Charles could hardly answer him. Alex calmed himself. "I mean how long have you been here?"

"Here?"

Could he understand nothing? "Yes, here, in this place."

"Do you mean today?"

Exasperating! They had reached the corner, far right, far from the entrance, and as they turned—graceless movements of Charles turning!—he finally answered “Oh, I see what you mean. Quite some time, I should say.”

“How much time?” They had not moved.

Charles sighed and seemed about to apologize. “Oh, years, four, I believe.”

Inadequate. “Precisely.”

“Precisely?” His irritating manner of repeating words in questions unnerved Alex and he glared angrily as Charles hastily sputtered, “Oh yes, yes. I can determine that. Let me see.” He looked upward and squinted against the weight of his jowls. He raised his hands, fat fingers, clumsy counters, before his face. Enumeration. Calculation. “Four years, as I said and ...” Then poking at his fingers, “Four months. Yes, four months it has been.” He began to drop his hands, but apparently noted the dissatisfaction in Alex’s eyes; for he quickly added, “And ... and several days beyond, perhaps more than a week. I can’t recall exactly. Or rather, the calculation seems beyond me. Is that close enough?” And the counters clasped submissively beneath the lowered jowls.

Alex said nothing and began to walk across the wall, Charles trailing like a child led to punishment. Malleable. The man’s body and his entire being. Malleable. “And what has it all done for you? Have you accomplished anything? Learned anything?”

“Learned? Well ...” It was an amusing diversion, Alex thought, manipulating Charles this way. He varied his pace, first stepping rapidly as Charles wheezed in an attempt to keep abreast, then nearly stopping; Charles’s voice broke as he tried clumsily to avoid crashing into him. One time their flesh met, the nothingness of loose fat brushing his arm—the contact

dampened by damp clothing. Disgusting. Formless flesh. He must be careful to keep Charles away, to time his maneuvers correctly to avoid further contact. A game. An exercise. Charles the easy foil. Familiar. Something too familiar.

“... very difficult, for some, of course. But ... simple really.” Simple contradiction. That was what Alex heard. “I should say, were explanation necessarily, it would be quite complex. Maybe we could begin ...”

“Begin?” Alex asked in mock innocence. He left the man bewildered.

“Be- ... Yes, well, as you might guess, one must begin somewhere.”

Alex laughed at his simplicity; Charles could understand no more of that laugh than its derision, which led only to more apologies. Alex had not intended that and resented it. The “sirs,” obsequious bows, inept formalities. As they came to the corner and turned left, he saw through the borders of the swirl two empty chairs. Still empty chairs.

“Sir?”

He turned to the face. He had not been paying attention, but what he saw there disgusted him. Flesh hanging from the eyes and cheekbones, falling in weak folds over the chin. Eyes like ... Hair like ... No. It was not like anything. It was singular. Merely disgusting. Each detail and the sum of those details. The head and particulars of the face mere extrapolations of the body, in tenuous balance on the shoulders. A necessary and logical capping of the rolling flesh. “Sir?” Again sir, and how it revolted him coming from Charles. “Mr. A? Are you ...” The name, the name; something had distracted him from that. Confusing, what had it been? And the two empty chairs before him. “How did you know my name?” he asked sharply.

The hands were fidgeting. Alex saw that Charles had suddenly taken the lead, walking quickly across the wall. He hurried to gain the half-step to pass, as if it were of supreme importance. Charles was mumbling, babbling. Alex repeated his question more forcefully. "How did you learn my name?"

Such an infuriatingly slow man. Such a stupid man, stammering and sputtering. "Why ... I was told it ... I believe ..."

They were nearing the two chairs now, empty chairs, forsaken twice. He was angry and without thinking blurted out "Who told you? Did a woman named Gina tell you?" Distracted by the two chairs and still intent on gaining that half-step, Alex realized his mistake too late. Charles fondled the name, defiling it. "Gina. Yes, I know ... Of course I know that name. She is one of us here. Is that who you mean?"

Gina, Gina. Charles knowing the name and assuming a right to the name. Charles hinted at another bow.

"Never mind!" Alex snapped. "I don't ... It's of no importance."

Charles's servile nods repulsed him and he turned away, unable to silence the whining voice. "I'm sorry. I have offended you?"

Alex snorted derisively. Charles could have the names, which were only names. Impotent Charles could not hurt either name; there was no reason to be agitated.

They had neared the chairs, still empty chairs, and he wheeled away from them, cutting toward the far wall with Charles now feebly attempting to keep pace. Alex strode athletically along the wall and the chairs lining the wall. Pure grace. Then he stopped with a smile he widened artificially. He turned to Charles and bowed deeply. "Won't you sit down?" And waited there, arm extended, as Charles looked at

the chair. Tiny chair, thought Alex, now a tiny chair indeed. He answered Charles's barely audible but polite protests with insistence. Charles glanced down at the chair, then clumsily turned his back to it. Slowly and laboriously he began to squat, his hand reaching behind him as he tried to align the small seat with his point of balance. The loose flesh strained against his pant legs, quivered and trembled as the muscles fought to lower the obscene body, obese and ponderous, into the chair. Slight pause, squatting. Sudden collapse, with an expulsion of breath. And Alex, grinning, lowered himself lightly into the facing chair. He was silent as he watched Charles's desperate efforts to achieve what small comfort he could find. The tugs, pick pick pick of fat fingers, at the trousers. Taut creases over the knees and thighs. The roll of flesh of the belly now seemingly resting on his lap. "Most difficult," Alex sneered.

"Yes ... indeed I ..."

"Yet also simple!" Alex said, playfully widening his eyes. "That's what you said, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes ... Yes, I see what you mean." The voice was weak and halting.

Amusing as the game was to him, the sight of Charles was becoming oppressive. Tedious, it was. Where had he learned to do such things? Then he heard a detested phrase and glared again at Charles. To his right, and behind Charles, the wall, green field, was beginning to do something quite interesting. "What did you say?"

"I ... Say? Why I was talking about complexity and inasmuch ..."

"Yes that! That!"

"Well, nothing really."

"'New here!'" snapped Alex. "I'm 'new here'. You just said that, didn't you?"

“Well, I ...” The squirms. “I may have said something to that effect. True enough. And I certainly meant no offence.”

No offence indeed. And that Charles, obsequious fool that he was, expected him to submit to such condescension! The familiarity had returned, this time in the voice, and Alex deafened himself to it. There was something threatening in the tones of the voice. And he saw himself nodding and bowing, his own hands clasped before him; and he heard a distant whine which seemed to be his own. Charles himself he was.

He shook his head. No. No. It was Charles beside him. Charles was a dunce, a transparent fool without the slightest trace of will, without the slightest trace of beauty or intelligence. Despicable. He turned away from the babbling of Charles. The wall maintained its curious interest.

Charles bored him, he thought, bored and disgusted him. And suppose he listened to Charles’s foolishness and suppose he accepted it as legitimate? Or admitted there was anything he could say of value? He laughed. An absurdity. “Very difficult, yet very simple.” Simple contradiction. That was all, the fruits of stupidity. “I have offended you?”

Charles’s feeble babblings and the now strange allure of the wall.

He ignored both and tried to study the swirl, the faces gliding through the auditorium. And were they all like Charles, imposters of Charles? wandering about the auditorium seeking one who would tolerate their pretensions? Their ignorance? And suppose they found such a fool! Ah, what a glorious day that would be, as the celebrants gathered about him like flies feeding on carrion. Ask him his name! We know his name! Ask! Ask him! No, tell him! Tell him! And they would surround him there, laughing, pushing, pressing through the crowd, gesticulating, apologizing, jabbering. And

what would one say to them then? What was worth uttering? Disgusting! A sourness sprang up within him and he turned from the crowd to the circle of chairs, still empty. Like a sickness. Nausea. Inner void. He reflected on his morning feeding. To think he had once enjoyed those poisons. "Bah!" It was his disgust, only that. And he realized that he was now alone. Charles, the simpering fool, at least had the decency not to plague him further. Ironical that he should have left now, just when he might have learned something.

He searched the swirl in contempt, seeking the retreating head among the others. But it was gone. Dissolved, he thought. That was it. Dissolved and now part of the unarticulated whole. The effluvium within him grew and weakened him. He sank deeper into the chair, drained but defiant. And the wall kept coming to him.

They might see him, yes. They might note his contempt and they would do well to note it. He laughed aloud. But he didn't care about that. They could persist; they would persist. He swung his legs from the swirl toward the wall and sat rigidly. Small consolation, the wall. But at least solid, firm. "Simple and difficult," he laughed. Yet the wall made sense, where the others did not. It existed, unchangeable and purposeful, a material barrier, true, functional. When all left, when all scrambled and crawled and slithered from the room, the wall would remain unalterably a wall, reflecting the color now in his eyes. Glare from the lights, he thought. He traced the patterns onto the shimmering wall. Slivers of green, blue green bright, tinged with yellow. Puke-green. That was it. Puke-green images on a puke-green wall.

The wall shimmered and became animate. It was so interesting, the way it moved, so absolutely and utterly compelling. It enlarged and approached him, as if to encircle

and embrace him. He started in sudden fright and the wall pulsed back to a distant and innocent green. But it lay there, it lay there still, with its secrets and truths. He stood and slowly retreated from it. It followed, growing and nearing him as he eased away, trying to escape. "Excuse me!" The hands gripped his shoulders and moved him from an unseen path. "Of course," he muttered. "Of course, of course, of ..." But of course unheard. And the wall, which had receded in deference to the stranger, came at him once more. Quickly now, surrounding him and blocking his retreat. "Excuse me!" This one jarred him; the hands were rougher. He shook free and escaped from the swirl into the empty circle of chairs, back toward the wall which again waited for the stranger to pass. Into the chair, against the wall, facing the swirl; no, the wall could not touch him if he faced the swirl, the chair within the circle within ... But it came at him again, out of the periphery of his vision, still shimmering. "... time ..." He tried to stand to fend it off, but it continued to encircle him, tightening its radius and flowing in on him. "It's time now." Against the wall, the wall encircling ... "Alex? Alex!" The wall, the wall ... He sprang to his feet and felt strong arms about him. "Alex!" And he yielded to the arms, seeking refuge there, and buried his face in the blue. The great field of blue and the broken traces of gold.

A bad time, simply a bad time, the benefactor had told him. Perfectly understandable. He had listened to the reassurances somewhat distractedly. For the entire incident was tainted; his “difficulties,” as the benefactor styled them, had occurred in the presence of Charles, implying a causal relation Alex refused to admit. He had been silent, objecting only to the benefactor’s allusion to the badly delivered message. Denials, denials. Gina remained his secret, for what that was worth, and he was determined not to reveal it.

His decision to return the following day had a stronger base than his indifference might have suggested. To begin with, there seemed no reason to delay his return to the auditorium; he was certainly calm enough, he thought, and whatever threats lay within the wall had patience at least equal to his own. All would be waiting for him, no matter how long he delayed. And second, if they existed at all, what was to prevent such horrors from attacking him in his own room? Surely he was as susceptible lying idly in bed as walking the perimeters of the swirl.

Pride, he thought, simple pride. *Superbia ... Superbia et in- ... Superbia et invidia ira*. A-grammatical perhaps, but at least with elisions it scanned. He would not be defeated by quirks of the wall. He would challenge it openly, and if it were to beat him, then so be it; delay was pointless and cowardly.

He nodded listlessly to the warnings, as the benefactor led him through the white glare of the corridors to the thick double-doors of the auditorium. Something about caution, he heard that, something about patience. Neither concerned him.

As the doors opened, he saw Gina immediately and assumed she had been waiting for him. The transition seemed merely the exchange of hands, her own for the blue and gold arm. Her promptness surprised and annoyed him, as if all conspired to spare him even an instant's solitude. He would have to face her concern and he worried that he might succumb to it. But there was something else in her eyes. "I missed you yesterday," he offered tentatively.

"So you did," she said. "I hear you didn't exalt yourself in my absence. Are you all right now?"

The words seemed innocuous, but the wry smile bothered him, belittling both his difficulties and his decision to return so quickly. He shrugged; she was talking again and he tried to concentrate on her questions. He had just noticed the wall. It lay unmoving now but threatening. Mass, mass, simple mass. Nothing more. "Brood not," he thought; that's what he had been told. Brood not. Brood not.

"I said you did get my message, didn't you?"

"Yes, but ..."

"But what?" She kept leaning into him, thrusting her face before him as if to distract him from the wall.

"Nothing," he answered, turning from her, trying to wave away the face. He stared at the wall, wondering if it would react to him. Nothing. Nothing. A simple material barrier. An architectural fact.

"Are you sure you're all right, Alex?" He looked at her, and she was smiling at him, a mischief in her voice as her eyes narrowed. He did not answer and they walked along the borders of the swirl, away from the jarring hands and Excuse Excuse Excuse. His suspicions of the day before had not died, and her challenging smile reinforced them. Why had she not met him? What had brought about the seemingly fortuitous

arrival of Charles? “Who told you?” he asked. “What do you mean about yesterday?”

He had inadvertently grabbed her shoulder and she brushed his hand away. “Does it matter? I don’t think it matters.”

“Was it ...” But the very name disgusted him; to pronounce it seemed a blasphemy.

“Charles? Do you mean Charles?” Casting a disdainful look at the hand, she smiled and began to walk away. He followed dutifully. “I suppose you won’t be satisfied with a denial, so I confess. It was Charles. Is that so horrible?”

No, he thought, not horrible. Just ... He glanced surreptitiously at the wall, which seemed to move slightly, as if preparing another advance. As before, it beckoned to him and he fell several strides behind her. She had said something and stood waiting for him. “Are you coming?” she repeated, loudly now, and he worried she might attract the attention of the swirl. He could not allow that; that was worse than all else. But he could not draw his eyes away from the wall. There was an image growing there, indistinct and blurred. She dispelled it with her touch, her hand light on his shoulder. The wall fell back, lifeless and static, posing now no threat to him. She laughed, gently chiding him, and led him to the seats beneath the wall. They sat, the wall now behind them, mere material. He turned to look at it once more. “Come on, Alex. Look at me.”

She had power over the wall, he thought. And instead of yesterday’s shimmering, the image of Charles formed itself in the wall, graceless and obese. It bowed to him, pardoned pardoned pardoned itself and vanished. “You sent him,” he said. “Didn’t you?” She said nothing and he continued. “And was that the message? Was that what was in the message?”

“Oh, Alex. Never mind about that. It ...”

“No no, I want to know. It’s important that I know. Did you send him?”

She sighed, exasperated, he supposed. Yet surely his questions were reasonable, and surely she had no grounds for annoyance. “All right,” she said. “If you find that comforting. If you find that to your liking. I’m willing to say so.”

“Then you did ...”

She reached toward him and placed her fingers across his lips. “I’m willing to say I did, Alex.”

He pulled his head away and she lowered her hand. Once confirmed, his suspicions seemed less important to him and her façade of indifference lulled him into acceptance. He fought it, thinking himself now justified in blaming her for everything—Charles, the wall, the perfectly understandable difficulties ... But what was the point of anger? Instead, he merely offered “A poor choice.”

“Poor choice?” She maintained her bland smile, but he was certain she had taken offence. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

The image was still clear, and it kept bowing, bowing. “Why ... just look at him! He disgusts me.”

“Are you talking about Charles? You mean Charles? What is it about Charles?”

He sighed, as if it were all too laborious. As if there were almost no place to begin. He shrugged. “Everything,” he said. “That voice, all that unmastered flesh, the mannerisms ...”

“Commonly known as polite.”

Polite indeed! “And those hands. Those white and useless hands.” He wanted to proceed; he wanted to justify his contempt. Each detail of build and gesture, from the rolling gait to his clumsy efforts to sit. But she interrupted him.

“All right, Alex. Forget all that. I won’t bother to argue. What exactly did he say to you?” He was silent, but she insisted, “Come on, Alex. Obviously you talked. Obviously he said or did something that disturbed you. Now what was it?”

“It was ...”

“And don’t tell me it was his hands or his face or anything like that. What did he tell you?”

But no, no. Couldn’t she understand? It was not Charles at all. Neither his appearance nor his irritating babblings. It was the wall. It had all been the wall! And how could she think him vulnerable to one so weak and inconsequential as Charles? Her eyes had narrowed to two slashes, framed in the ridges of her eyebrows and cheekbones. Exotic and dark, he thought, but could not place the look. He turned from the nicks of the eyes; she had stolen his initiative and he now felt helpless.

“What did he say, Alex?”

“Nothing. Nothing. He said ‘sir’ and that he was afraid he had caused offence, and that ...” His voice trailed off; a warning look from her told him to continue. “And then, what was it, some ridiculous paradox he was trying to formulate.” He mimicked the hesitant squeak, “Dif-f-i-cult, and eas-s-y. Repeated. I don’t really remember.”

“And that was all? That upset you?” He said nothing. “You should listen to Charles. You could learn much from Charles.”

Her persistence annoyed him. That he should take such a person seriously. He wanted to call up the image of the obsequious fool and perhaps share a laugh with her, but her eyes cut through the jovial figure he tried to form between them.

“Did he mention me?”

He shrugged, but she would not let him escape and repeated her question. He was sitting over white tiles, staring at his feet, and he could hear a distant tapping, tapping, the sound of his own nervousness. White tiles, and a ponderous slab. White tiles ... He shook his head. "Are you interrogating me? I've been through that."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Oh Alex! You've been through so much. I am simply in awe. I'll bet you ate an entire box of Screaming Yellow Zonkers when you lost your virginity. Spare me your heroics. Just answer the question."

He was out of his element, tripped up by a careless mistake he would not repeat. To imagine that his experiences surpassed those of others and that in the few weeks he had been here he had learned some noble and yes heroic truth that was somehow unique. "Just be pleasant," the benefactor had said in one of his rambling homilies, "and be yourself," ignoring his suspicions that the two were utterly incompatible. It was her laugh, he realized. Nothing could overcome her laugh. Charles, Charles. Why had he tolerated Charles? He stared into the floor. "Nothing," he said finally. "We talked of nothing."

"That's not what I asked."

He looked up at her, wondering how much she already knew. "Your name," he said quietly. "That's all. In the course of introductions, I guess. An effort to find common ground."

"And that was all? Just the name?"

He squirmed; the seat had become hard and uncomfortable. He detested the implied connection, Charles and Gina. And she was leading him somewhere, despite his resistance. He rubbed an imaginary itch on his chin and felt the stubble. When had he last shaved? Yesterday? Surely not this morning. "That's all," he said, then turned to her,

pleading. “But what is all this for? I don’t want to talk about Charles. He disgusts me.”

“Disgusts you? Really? The disgust is yours, Alex. It has nothing to do with him.” Her eyes relaxed. “Don’t worry. I won’t trouble any longer with him. Although I’m sure you’ll be interested in knowing ...” and then, each word, each syllable enunciated with precision, she said, “Charles was my lover once. And a fine one, if you must know.”

He gaped at her. The vision taunted him. Waves of flesh, ugly disobedient flesh, smothering the struggling girl beneath. Ridiculous. A blasphemous thought. What did she mean by suggesting such a lewd fantasy? What did she hope to gain by this transparent fiction—the image of herself coupled with the despicable Charles? No! It was a joke. Or perhaps a ruse. An attempt on her part to confuse him. The wall grew as before, loomed up before him, breaking from its rationally determined bounds; it danced in his eyes, undulating, like a childhood sea swallowing up color and difference. A comforter, in all senses. Security.

“Stop staring! There’s nothing there.”

Reluctantly, he obeyed, lowering his eyes to his own clasped hands, as he watched the after-images of the wall play over his fingers. They relaxed, as the distinct red and pale from the tourniquet of his grip merged, destroying both.

“You’ll listen now?” she asked. He nodded and parted his hands, letting them rest on his legs. He reached to meet his rising ankle and guided it over his left knee. Curious, he thought, the way men crossed their legs, as if to form an impossible lap. “Good. Now relax. I’m not threatening you.” She waited for him to look at her. “His appearance is deceiving, Alex. Not,” she added sarcastically, “that it masks a sinister and devious complexity of soul, one you would find

worthy of praise.” He accepted the insult indifferently, as she continued. “All the simplicity—that’s part of it. The desire to sooth and comfort rather than antagonize. Quite different from many others, wouldn’t you say?”

Lies, lies, he thought. Exposed in images of Charles. “Pitiful” would be more appropriate. Charles a lover! Blatant and hideous. Consider, by way of comparison, his own deft leap to the bathtub and his self-flattering gaze at his own athletic body. What could Charles see in such a mirror? What tortuous rationalization followed?

“We met as you two did. That is to say, he was sent.” She paused, perhaps for his own benefit, but he could not be certain. “I could forgive him that. He meant well. He always ...”

Tapping. Tapping.

“Which of course doesn’t excuse him in your eyes,” she sneered. “Not to one as socially refined as yourself.” He began to protest but she ignored him. “In any case, his pose was ill-disguised and I let it go. It wasn’t necessary, at least I didn’t consider it necessary, to despise him for it. You’ll forgive my lack of insight, won’t you, Alex? I don’t claim to see things as acutely as you do.”

His hands. His hands. He clenched them, then forced them to relax. To take this seriously was dangerous. So he followed it as a tale, a fiction. A cruel self-caricature on her part. Yes, that was easier, he thought as he tested it. A simple tale. A sordid fantasy.

“We met, as I said, and saw no reason not to become friends. So we began to talk, to sense each other’s ...”

Nonsense! he thought. Something written up in an etiquette manual ...

“... followed what you might call a predictable course. I’m quite certain you would have some other sordid expression ...”

An obscene thought had occurred to him. As she continued, it grew, and he could not drive it away. In another context, he would repress it, but here, in her preposterous tale, he found it appropriate. She deserved it. He laughed foolishly, as he realized the question he had formed would appear no more than a proposition. His laugh had interrupted her and she paused for an explanation. Calmly—and that was good—he began “I was wondering ...” But he could not find the words. “This ... You’re talking about love. And that, from what I’ve seen here, might involve some difficulties. Privacy, I mean. Unless ... But I guess it’s none of my business.”

She apparently took no offence. “Oh that,” she said dismissively. “Mechanics are never a problem. Do you remember your first?”

“My first?” Did she mean ...

“Yes. It seemed impossible, didn’t it? People everywhere? Parents, priests, and puritans?” She paused. “How erotic could that be? But despite it all, you found a way, didn’t you? You can always find a way.” His question had been ill-formed. “But you weren’t asking that, were you. You wanted more specifics. Just know,” she said, “that it’s really not a problem here at all.” Her eyes danced playfully over his face but he tactfully avoided them. “You’ll see,” she said. “Maybe.”

“That’s not ...”

“Charles and I,” she said, lowering her voice to a monotone, “speak much less now. It’s odd.” She traced formless outlines on the space separating them, then erased the patterns and sat back. “I don’t know. Perhaps I’m just obstinate. Still, I would like you to see ...”

“What?”

She seemed to resent that. “Nothing,” she said.  
“Absolutely nothing.”

Charles, he thought. Charles had done this. Charles was responsible. He was tired of her evasiveness and tired too of his own suspicions. He sighed, as an image of Charles stole across the wall, stalking an invisible quarry. Naked he tiptoed, the flesh hanging, echoing his movements as he shot fearful glances about him. Beneath the folds his penis emerged, grew erect, miniaturized by the bouncing flesh, then fell, limp and flaccid. Then Gina. And Charles was chasing her now, lumbering awkwardly and lunging lunging lunging for her. Alex laughed at the waves of flesh as he felt other waves. Caressing waves. Her own hand on his shoulder. He closed his eyes, embraced in the caress, the slow gentle waves, then felt the kiss on his forehead and drifted back in the waves, seeking rest in the waves, now blind to the phantom images, which perhaps were no longer there at all, and perhaps had never been before him.

The benefactor continued his daily visits with a monotonous regularity, bringing food, a guiding hand to the auditorium, and afterward leaving Alex sealed in his room to lie alone in bed, seeking the security of his solitude. The sea grew distant and calm in the now featureless walls and the pock-marks covering the ceiling. He toyed with the curtain, which tempted him to look once again into the opaque frosted glass. He refused. The porthole was merely a detail in the continuum, broken only by his dreams and Gina. A room. He shook his head cynically. Merely a room. The conversations with the benefactor had degenerated into little more than an exchange of formal platitudes, like banter between waiter and client. Even the mirror became part of a ritual, holding a predictable and familiar image. Lethargy. He flicked at the curtain and it briefly interrupted the inanimate silence. To disturb it seemed not worth the effort.

This was what progress meant, he supposed.

He glanced over the room, hoping there might be a feature he had overlooked that would catch his interest. Some minor obstinacy that broke up the familiar patterns. But all remained stale and unalterable as if self-perpetuated. His eyes scanned the silent walls—flat, perfectly flat, and dead. The ceiling, fixed between the walls, merely an angular reflection, dotted, like buttons in uniforms, uniform buttons. In the corner lining the angle lay evidence of poor workmanship, unimproved of course but strangely less bothersome now, and he followed the molding around his confines to the edge of the ceiling, then around the floor. The wide border broke into the far wall and ran into the doorframe. He paused and studied the door.

The door. He sensed a difference. Something small, but a discernible change in the door. He continued to stare. Flat rectangle. Like a mirror dulled to color. A difference. Tactile impressions, he thought; perhaps a change would disclose itself to touch. He chided himself. Mad mad. Yet in his solitude, he had a right to madness and to all his eccentricities. There were no curious eyes to interfere, no voices to jeer him. He left the bed and tiptoed stealthily toward the door as if to surprise it. Slowly, he reached for it and as he touched it, as his fingers grazed the smooth surface, the difference remained, as if his touch had frozen it. He swept the gloss of the finish, guiding his hands with his eyes, left, right, over the surface of the door in widening ovals. And then the extremities, the limits against the frame. On the left, his hand brushed the cold metal of the doorknob. He studied it. How long had it been? Days? Weeks? How long since he had succumbed to the frustrating impulse to test it? To verify the brute fact that ruled his life here? His fingers curled over it and warmed it.

How long?

Carefully, he positioned his grip; he must not be surprised. He must anticipate and immediately sense any possible reaction of the knob. He must be completely attuned to his muscular movements. And his hand closed slowly, gripping the doorknob steadily, without disturbing its position, without causing any sudden movement that might take him unprepared. He breathed, lost in the resistance of the doorknob. It was unnecessary to justify such childishness, he thought. Here, even the most foolish actions were warranted: they passed the time and that was enough. How else could he have used that time, he thought. What great and noble deeds might he have performed in the countless hours wasted, like this hour, in what must have been his youth? Could he really,

but for those hours, have become the great whore-master of his dreams? “Thus is all permitted!” he exclaimed and twisted the knob. It turned and clicked. Deafening! And as he stepped back, shocked despite his preparation, the door drifted lazily inward and the hissing of the corridor rushed into his room.

He had known it, he thought, as he slumped back onto his bed. He had sensed a difference. Surely that was no coincidence. Testing of the door was no longer a daily ritual for him. He had perceived something and acted on it. Quickly he thought of the benefactor as a possible source: had he said something during the past few days? Was it possible that hidden in the rambling banalities of their recent talks there had been some clue, stimulating his sense of change? He could not remember; he had paid so little attention to the talks that his memory yielded no more than blue and gold, a uniform and a cap. Like *kdbrd* and *brmstx*. No, if there had been such a nuance, it had vanished.

The hissing subsided as he grew accustomed to it and from it emerged a distinct and purposeful pace, easily recognizable. He had heard it countless times when ushered from his room to the auditorium. Anticipating the arrival, he lay back on his bed. The footsteps stopped abruptly and the accompanying whish and squeak of his mobile dinner stopped with it. The door swung further inward as the benefactor steered the tray into the room. The eyes, now dulled beneath the shadows of the brim, glanced idly at the door and the benefactor nudged it with his toe. When it hit the frame, he pushed it shut. He stared at the door briefly, then wheeled the tray aside. He turned to Alex and slowly eased himself into the chair. His position apparently did not suit him and with his feet, he coaxed the chair to a different angle. He leaned back. “So. So you found it.”

A statement, no question, thought Alex, although there appeared to be a question implied within it. "Yes."

"When?"

"Now. A minute ago."

"Not yesterday?"

The benefactor was groping for something, but Alex could not pinpoint it. He shook his head. "No. Just now. I would have told you if I found it earlier."

The benefactor shrugged. "Yes, I suppose you would have." Then he was silent and it was a silence Alex found threatening. He sat up. "That was no accident, then, was it? The open door, I mean. No oversight on your part?"

The benefactor formed his lips into a "no" and shook his head slowly.

"And how long then?" Alex asked. "How long has it been unlocked?"

The benefactor glanced casually over his shoulder. To the door. To the silent door. "Oh ... three days? About that. You were rather late in discovering it."

Alex considered that and thought he understood something from the manner and tone of voice. Something concerning the three-day interval. "Had I discovered it earlier ...?" He waited for the benefactor to return his attention and continued, "I don't generally test it. At least, I haven't done that in a while. Not as I did in the first few days. Had I found that, say, immediately? Right after it was unlocked? What then?" The benefactor said nothing, but Alex had inferred the answer. "An accident, right? I would have been told it was an accident?"

The benefactor pursed his lips. "Yes, in that case. Had you been what we call ..."

"Overeager?" Alex interjected.

“Or whatever. It hardly concerns us now. Speculating on what might have been had ...”

“Then the interval is important,” Alex said. He was considering now what might have happened had he sensed the change earlier or haphazardly tested the door, a casual and meaningless act, perhaps seconds after it had been left unlocked. And then, and then ... How long would he have had to wait for this moment? And what other unwitting actions even now postponed ... delayed ... He could not find the conclusion. “Isn’t it all rather dangerous?” he asked, then answered the benefactor’s quizzical expression. “I mean, suppose I had been what you ... or perhaps what I just called ‘overeager’. What then? Suppose each day I lay here plotting and planning an escape; suppose ...” Overturned trays, chaos in the corridors, horrified uniforms. “I could have created quite a scene.”

The benefactor merely smiled. “Could you? The fact is you didn’t. You had the same opportunity moments ago.”

“Yes yes. Certainly. But suppose ... just imagine for a moment ...”

“No. I won’t imagine. What I see right now is you, lying calmly—well, more or less calmly—on that bed, not wreaking havoc in the hallways. So what is the point of these melodramatic imaginings? What purpose would they serve?”

“But ...” He shook his head. The question was unanswerable and the picture of himself madly dashing through white corridors little more than a diverting fantasy. The benefactor was right; it served no purpose. He turned to the door. Surely it spelled some change. He nodded slowly. “So now,” he said, “given this—the facts, I mean—what does this mean for me?”

“A substantial change, Alex,” the benefactor said. “For us and for you. A significant alteration.”

It was as if he felt a sudden chill. Change, change. Gain and possible loss. Was that part of it? Gina. And he feared his decision to keep her name secret would prove to be a monumental blunder. “How much?” he demanded. The benefactor lifted his head in surprise, as Alex cried, “How much! How much will change?”

The benefactor assured him with a smile. “Don’t worry, Alex. Don’t get upset. The change is positive. Progress. It’s a good day for you, Alex.”

It did not calm him; for what was gain but negative loss? And how could an entity change without losing a ... “No,” he said, shaking his head confidently, as if he had just exposed a subtle fallacy in the benefactor’s reasoning. “That won’t do. Change necessarily entails loss.” It was preposterous, but he had committed himself. “Gain, loss. The two are inseparable.”

The benefactor laughed at what must have seemed to him mere intellectual pretenses. “Very good, Alex. Very profound; and it doesn’t surprise me that you should think that.” He leaned forward. “For you are quite right in some sense; there is of course a loss. But you are wrong in thinking that it is yours. The loss, such as it exists, is more accurately mine.” Traces of fatigue appeared in the benefactor’s eyes, but they were soon gone, repressed, Alex thought; it was unfitting that the benefactor display personal regret of any kind. “It is our relation that suffers, one that you must admit has lost much of its significance lately.” He paused as if for Alex’s concurrence, which he gave reluctantly. “Progress, such as you may experience it, must occur out there, not here.” He waved toward the door. “You are to be moved, Alex. And I will not accompany you.”

Moved. Moved. He considered the word, but it made no sense to him. Moved. Moovooed. Yes. Like a house; or no, not like a house at all. Like its contents. Or no, not like its contents. Rather its occupants. But then ... Moved. Moovooed. No sense. No sense at all, apart from the question of where. To the auditorium perhaps? Would he pitch a tent in the wilderness of the swirl? Create a personal sun by rubbing two sticks together? And where would he find them? To forage food from the dust in the corners? Where would he find that? Or was it all more significant than that? Was he to be cast from the glaring white corridors and the monotonous green of his room into his past? Set adrift on a raft of cardboard and broomsticks? Or into the future? Into another universe entirely, with no corridors, uniforms and ...

There was something pricking his heart. A weak electrode tingling it as if testing for a point of vulnerability. He forced the sensation into a shiver, relaxing relaxing. What was the reality untainted by his fantasies? He looked at the waiting benefactor. How much time? Would he be given an hour to ruminate over possibilities? Or an instant? He chose the instant; all had transpired during the brief second the benefactor had caught his breath. Half a breath. Without pause.

“Now what you will lose ...” Lose? Hadn’t it all been about tents and wilderness? A lonely man adrift on a makeshift raft, reaching into the sea for fish? “... this room, and in some sense myself. Capacities such as those ...” The benefactor pointed toward the steel tray. “They will have nothing to do with me. Or with anyone, for that matter.” Forager, alone and battling starvation as the gales whirled overhead. “And our talks, of course, likewise will cease.”

Talks. Yes, that was the loss. None of this nonsense about makeshift rafts drifting in the currents. He laughed. Moved, change. Yes. That made perfect sense. Was it not a logical outgrowth of his recent boredom? A cure, of sorts? “Nothing more?” he asked. “You, the talks, waiter service—nothing more?”

“Nothing more, Alex. As I told you.” The voice had sharpened now. “The rest of it, the auditorium, the people you may have met—all that will be there for you.”

Alex glanced at the door. The prospects enticed him into a mild excitement. “And the door?”

The benefactor smiled. “Oh that. Of course. The main issue, is it not? That will remain unlocked from now on.”

Open doors. The end of confinement. What was that called? What was it *called*?

“And you will be given a key. It locks from the inside now. The choice will be yours.”

Choice, he thought. Did he mean to remain in his room? To deprive himself of the benefits of change? No, he resolved, he would never lock the door. After weeks of confinement, he would never use the key.

“Now,” said the benefactor, suddenly rising. “I should inform you, although you seem little concerned, that I shall remain available to you should you feel a need of me. I’m not sure how many friends you have made, but in case ...”

“In case of what?” Alex asked as a smile broke over his face. The whirr was so distant.

The benefactor returned the smile. Weakly. Politely, Alex thought. “In case of, well, anything. You may find me if you want. Although I won’t be immediately visible. No need to concern yourself with that. From now on, if you wish, I shall know nothing of you.”

Alex shrugged. He did not so resent the benefactor as to deny him news. Why should change entail their total separation? It would simply be his choice now. Not another's.

"One more thing before I go," the benefactor said, facing Alex squarely. "And I caution you not to take this at all lightly. You have an additional option. The choice, the greater choice, is entirely yours."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I assumed you would welcome the change and thus did not trouble you with the alternative. But none of this is mandatory. You may stay here if you wish and continue on as you have, as we have. That is your option." Postponement, Alex thought. No choice at all. But the benefactor would not accept mere silence. "You must choose, Alex."

"But what?" he asked. "It's obvious. Of course I won't stay here."

"Despite the fact that you can know nothing of what is in store for you beyond the barest outline I just provided? And only that through your trust in me?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Alex answered impatiently.

"All right then. I warn you to remember that, and also this. That there remains always the possibility of retraction. You cannot consider yourself, no matter what happens, bound and fettered by an ill-considered decision. Do you understand that?"

He shrugged and looked away. The questions annoyed him and he sensed in the reiteration an effort to dissuade him.

But the benefactor would not let him so easily escape. "And that each day you do nothing, each day you accept your new situation, represents a renewal of that choice? Its affirmation?"

“Enough!” he cried, angry now. “Yes, I understand. You know perfectly well I cannot refuse.”

“Good, then. Fine,” the benefactor said. “You cannot realize at present how wise such a decision is, nor can I promise that all will become apparent to you in the future. The time for that, however, has passed, has it not? Now I must go.”

He turned toward the door but Alex caught him, “Wait!” He would not let the benefactor dismiss him so casually. “There’s more,” he said sharply. “I have a question.” He glared at the benefactor standing before him. Something was happening to the man. He had changed suddenly; he had grown weary and weak, a feeble man struggling within the confines of a blue and gold suit. Even its fit seemed now imperfect, as the shoulders bunched and the trousers tugged unnaturally at his crotch. And the sleeves, a bit too long perhaps, or too short. But wrong, definitely wrong. A strange metamorphosis or equally strange illusion. It distracted him. “Tell me,” he demanded, trying to ignore the figure which had become nearly unrecognizable. “Tell me all of it. Why I’m being moved. Where. And all the rest.”

The man before him turned away. “Oh Alex. What earthly good would that do? You’ll see. Soon enough. There’s nothing I need to tell you now.”

Another evasion. “Why?” he demanded and thought to rush the man, seize his shoulders and shake the truths out of him. But something about the touch, the necessary contact, checked him and he stood trembling.

The benefactor stared at him. “Look at me, Alex.” The voice was pleading with him, he thought, and it came from an aged throat. “Look at this,” and the hands traced the outlines of blue and gold. “Do you see it? Do you understand it?” Old

grey hands plucking at worn sleeves. “Any bits of brass? Ribbons? Medals? Symbols of stature and authority?” The hands fell as if in exhaustion as the old man hung his head. “It is you who have made the progress. I am unchanged. My purpose has been to help you, not to teach.” He brushed his sleeve lightly. Invisible particles of dust. A meaningless gesture contrived to distract him. When Alex reached for his anger, he found only pity. He tensed in silence. Pity. That was all.

“When I leave,” the benefactor was saying, “someone will come for you. Shortly, Alex.” And the face turned up to him, a sad face that seemed to reveal as much hidden grief as age. An illusion, Alex thought, but so real and powerful he was helpless against it. He wanted to embrace the tired old man before him, but he was unsure of his motives and still feared the touch. He managed a weak nod. “And you?”

“Oh, that’s no concern of yours. Others, Alex. There are always others. For both of us now.” With a slight bow, the figure turned away, then paused briefly. “Moved, Alex. Think of it.” The door opened and the hissing of the corridor seeped into the room, teased him for an instant, and was silent. He was again alone.

He tried to force his thoughts outward toward the future. The moment and the failed question had passed and he could do nothing to recall it. Gina. Gina. Her “mechanics” of privacy and love-making. He laughed. At least one mystery solved. But his thoughts were interrupted by a vision of a fat, naked Charles, now walking, stumbling, and crawling piteously. He shook his head. No, he would not permit that now.

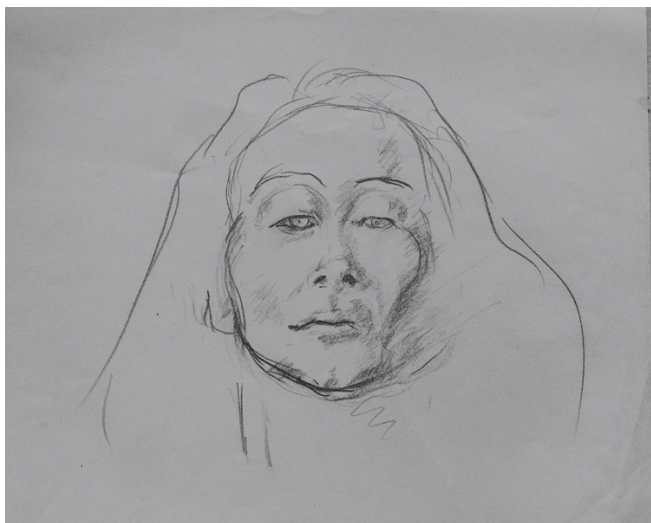
The door was probably unlocked but he refused to test it. It might be a hidden trick or test of some kind, he thought; he need not play actively into it and risk losing what he had been

just told he had gained. Not now. It was all rather adventurous, and he felt childishly giddy. "Someone would come." But who? Fat? Thin? Beautiful? He smirked at the possibilities. He could wager to himself, he thought, yes, guess the form, size, tone of voice ... But then, what had he to wager? What could be the reward? His calculations collapsed. A loss, perhaps, indistinct and undefinable. No, that was ridiculous. What had he lost but the tired old man of his imaginings? The stooped old man clothed in blue, shuffling, as he never had done before, toward the unlocked door.

The tears dampening his eyes seemed more dutiful than real. What were they for? A death? A departure? He let them fall. Strange, his innocence. With no one to observe him, he could let the tears wash his face. There was no need to wipe them away discreetly or obscure them in a burst of anger. Alone they fell, each alone. Even laughing at them seemed purposeless. No one to hear, no one to wonder at the strange man laughing and crying at nothing, no one to sympathize nor condemn, no one even to dismiss him as an idiot.

The laugh was pointless but the solitary tears disgraced him, he thought, and he fought them. Unstimulated and purposeless, they dried obediently, leaving only a gentle sting of the salt dusting his face.

## II



With minor exceptions, the new room was similar to his old. Identical dimensions, colors, or nearly so, and the same barren furniture. Over the doorknob, a small brass bolt assured his privacy, and he had been given a key to the snap lock which he left untouched on the table. As soon as the porter left and politely closed the door behind him, Alex reopened it and set it ajar as evidence of his progress. He had passed several doors on his walk down what was now his corridor and had wondered casually if one might belong to Gina. He imagined himself prancing lightly from door to door; instead, he lay in bed, listening to the now constant rustle of the corridor. For the present, the role of involved spectator would be enough.

Occasionally, an unseen door opened and he heard echoes of conversation and footsteps against the background of the soothing breeze of what would now be white noise. He tried to identify recognizable tones among the voices, but the effort only reminded him of the narrow range of his acquaintances. Gina, the benefactor, Charles—he would easily recognize Charles’s voice—and ... the porter, or Doorman, he might have been? the three interrogators? That they too should be here! Reveling, as he was, in his newfound progress.

A shadow crossed the shaft of light protruding from his door and he leaned toward it, then laughed at his ambivalence. He could have closed the door on his own solitude; he could also have left it wide open. Instead, he seemed to be a reluctant voyeur. A feminine voice spoke quietly; a second voice was a mere muffle. “Yes?” “Tomorrow, I think ... oh!” The exclamation, partially repressed, and the following silence startled him. The door swung inward slightly

and the voice changed in tone, speaking directly to him. “Do you want this closed?”

“No.” But too sharply. “No,” he said. “That’s all right.” There was no answer, merely footsteps. The conversation resumed in the distance, muted by the half-open door. He stepped to the door and pulled it closed. The intrusion irritated him, even though the fault was clearly his own. He, not the voice, had been the first to violate the other’s privacy. He left the door unlocked.

When he returned to his bed, something bothered him. All the material details of the room were similar to those in his old room, but they seemed unfamiliar in some undefined way. He looked about him—curtains, monotonous, poorly worked walls; he raised the curtain over his bed and laughed cynically—even the frosted illusion of a porthole. Yet there was something! His solitude and isolation seemed to have disappeared. It was as if he were being watched. Where? His eyes searched the room. A two-way mirror perhaps. A hidden camera. Then he stared at the curtain draped over the entrance to the bathroom. There. Someone there. He approached cautiously, paused before it, then jerked it aside. There was nothing. All was familiar—the bathroom to his old room, it could have been, transferred here. Or perhaps, he laughed to calm himself, perhaps the porter had marched him round and round the various corridors only to return him to the same room.

Still. Still. A sense of difference. Something more than the lock had been changed during his brief walk through the corridors. His eyes continued to sweep the room, searching for the one detail that so altered his conception of the whole. Across the floors, the same rug or one remarkably similar, the same walls, door, and pock-marked ceiling.

Pock-marked ceiling.

He stared at it; a smile replaced his worried scowl. The ceiling, yes. He closed his eyes and listened. In the distance, he could hear muted hums, rising and falling in the tempo of speech. No one had warned him of this! Why, he thought, it would be enough to drive a man mad! Sudden strangeness! Not strange at all! he thought. The difference was slight but meaningful. The elaborate and (as far as he could tell) perfect soundproofing was gone. Even with the door closed, a muted hum of outside noise drifted in on him. And of course he had noted nothing earlier, he thought; he had not felt entitled to silence until the door was closed.

Progress, he thought. This was all part of it. No denying now the new situation; no reverting to the old. He listened to the hum from the corridor, abstracted it. It eluded him, his concentration hampered by the very noise he was trying to understand, now harsh and distracting as he tried to think. Footsteps broke through the walls now and he could analyze them. Left to right, he thought, yes, down the hall, stop, door, silence. New sense. Magical sense. He awaited the next set of footsteps. In the distance, faintly, then gone. He was not certain he had heard them at all.

How to become accustomed to all this! Each new sound emerging from the hum startled him. How to ignore it! Then he laughed at his own concerns. How could he worry over a barely audible whisper? In the auditorium, he had learned to ignore even the most intrusive chatter. He spun athletically and flopped onto the bed. More footsteps sounded in the corridor and each clump, clump made him almost giddy. He too was now part of the hum. No more frantic enraged shrieks, he mused, that no one but the benefactor could hear. No more outlandish cursing and wailing here! Even though he knew

such outbursts had consisted of no more than a few seconds of moderate invective on days he imagined the benefactor was slightly behind schedule. With his new responsibilities, he thought, he had perhaps earned a bit of harmless hyperbole. “Yes,” he whispered. “I’ll have to watch myself now. None of those tantrums here!”

He stretched fully, lifting his shoulders from the bed and slowly raising his legs from the floor. Balancing confidently on the edge, he forced his limbs outward, outward, until he could feel the pain in his shoulders. Then he stood, and shook the stiffness from his arms. A bath. That would be a fitting celebration for him. Starting to undress, he glanced suspiciously at the door, wondering whether he should now lock it. But no, he thought. No. My promise. My resolution! Let them come if they will. His clothes fell from his body onto the rug and he ran naked through the curtain to draw a bath. “Let them come!” he cried, sure to be heard by all who passed.

“Good morning,” the song said. Dreaming, he wavered between shadow and song, rocking in the song’s rhythm. As he succumbed to the gentle motion, he sensed the images fade; one minute, one minute to retain them. A minute for consciousness. *“It is clear from recent studies that remembrance of dreams, occurring during rapid-eye-movement, is dependent upon awakening during such moments, interrupting the false continuity of the dream itself ...”* New memories, he wondered, or simply different. *“... apparatus triggered to awake subject during moments of REM, that dream-state during which subject ...”* His room, barely recognizable under the surreal blur of sleep, yet clear as the song rocked him more forcefully and glimpses of figures, faces, old, lost, intermingled with new—all lost in the song. “Good morning.” Feminine song. Benefactor in drag, he laughed, as the new light penetrated his eyelids. “Good morning.” Hints of Gina, his last bit of consciousness before sleep, appearing now in dream or ... “Wake up!” the voice demanded and the gentle rocking became a shove.

He looked up into the dreamt face of Gina, hovering over him, smiling, detached, it seemed, from the shove. Two sources of alarm. As he looked across his own form outlined beneath the blanket, the shove reached out to his face, colliding with his shoulder. Awake now, past dreams, he rolled away from sleep, wanting to stretch, but unsure whether he should do that publicly. “What ...” The novelty of her appearance awakened him further. He stared at her, half-expecting her to become the benefactor. But the form slowly became clear and sharply defined. “Gina. What ...” The first conscious utterances are the most unreliable, he thought, the most irrational and thus potentially incriminating. Yesterday

returned to him. The exchange of rooms. The kindly porter's "Here. This way. Down here." Routinized courtesy, official kindness. A ruse, he chuckled; for what if he had refused to follow? What if he had remained, crying for the return of the benefactor and clinging to the monotonous security of locked doors? "Are you awake now?" the song said.

He began to sit up, sliding out from under the blanket, then stopped. A woman, he thought, awakened by a woman. Consequences: embarrassment, semi-nakedness, form and formality, arousal itself perhaps! He glanced as discreetly as he could at his own blanketed form.

"Aren't you hungry?" The same question the benefactor might ask, he thought. But there were likely no steel trays to be wheeled in for him today.

"Yes. I guess so. I'm ..." To get dressed, that was the first thing. He considered again his partial nakedness. Would she spare him that, he wondered, perhaps turn around, as if casually, or pretend to have forgotten something left behind in her room? She remained standing over him, occasionally prodding him, jabbing him, urging him to rise. "I ... I'm embarrassed. I don't know what to do."

She stood back. "All right. I'll accept that. But hurry. I'm getting impatient."

He expected her to leave. Surely, given his admission, she could do that. Instead, she merely turned and faced the unlocked door. "Hurry," she said. He hesitated, then fearing her annoyance, quickly threw off the blankets. Bare thighs, the muscles relaxed and unflattering. Picking up his clothes as casually as he could, he dashed into the bathroom. Behind the curtain, he felt relieved and could imagine she had not seen him. He urinated as an excuse to dress privately, then

summoning as much sleepy confusion as reasonable, he stumbled back through the curtain.

“May I look now?”

“Of course. Sure,” he mumbled and waited as she surveyed him. A specimen, he thought, considered in its life-size before crushed between layers of thin glass and slid under the microscope. “You left the door open last night,” she said, watching him, watching him. “I’m sorry if I ...”

“No no.” No need of that, he decided; no need to suggest that her appearance bothered him nor that the unlocked door was an oversight. All must appear a matter of indifference to him. “I suspected you might oversleep,” she said, “not being used to waking yourself. Did they tell you about breakfast? How you are now supposed to survive?”

“No,” he replied. “Nothing. They just left me here. Or maybe they said some things I didn’t hear.”

She laughed. “Good. I’m glad of that.”

“Glad?”

“Yes,” she said, leading him to the door and then dragging into the hiss of the corridor. A long corridor with a large wooden door at one end, and at the other, a distant white, a corner doubtless. On both sides were doors, his own situated near the middle to the right as they walked. He noted its location, as an unfamiliar figure hurried by them, dodged and excused himself, then disappeared around the corner. They followed slowly. “Yes. Glad. I think. Don’t hold it against me.” He did not understand and raised his eyes to her. “Because now,” she continued, “I’ll be able to teach you myself. For what it’s worth. You can do things the way I like them done.” They turned the corner and Alex found himself facing another corridor, this one short and, like the other,

lined with identical doors, none of them numbered or distinguished from the others. "Where are we going?"

"Don't rush. You'll see." Happy. *Gay*, the word was. So she seemed this morning, more than usual, probably less due to his supposed progress than to her own new role as knowing guide. "I'm so glad you're not back ..." she grimaced, "*there* anymore." He nearly asked a childish "why," but resisted. She meant nothing by it, he thought; in his still semi-rational state, he should take care to draw no unwarranted conclusions. He shrugged. Denigration? Praise? What did it matter. He followed her obediently to the end of the hallway. It formed a "T"; to the left, it ended in another corridor; to the right, it opened into a large room, evidenced by the burst of light and increase in hum, slowly clarifying into a chatter, voices, clanks, ringing, people at work, a crowd, he thought. The sounds were like those of the auditorium but more intense and purposeful. Eating, of course. That was it. So busy. So determined.

The entered the room beneath a high ceiling. It was the same white as the corridors, but broken by beams in black steel and wood. Merely a cafeteria. He felt his progress deserved something grander, less institutional, whatever that might be. He was embarrassed, although he knew he had no reason to feel conspicuous here. Single faces, paired faces, entire groups bent over trays and food, snapping back and forth to one another. Variant of the swirl, he thought, only less aimless. He followed her silently to the front of the dining room and slid a tray along the rail as casually as he could, mimicking what others did, since now, he was one of them. There was no selection and as he followed her into the rows of tables and chairs, he noticed his tray was identical to hers and to all others. "Where?" she asked him stupidly. He forced a smile and shook his head, as if casually. Her choice. She

turned from him to a table near the far wall, opposite the entrance. "Don't be nervous," she said. "No one is threatening you."

They sat together at a large rectangular table facing the dining hall. He poked at the food and realized the benefactor had lied to him earlier when claiming to have prepared his meals himself. The small portions of eggs, fruit, and coffee were all familiar. Gina ate hurriedly in her gaiety, occasionally breaking into food-filled grins which he did his best to return. "Don't worry," she said, placing her hand on his wrist and lowering her voice into unnecessary sympathy. She nodded toward the center of the hall. "Recognize anybody?" He had not yet considered it and followed her gaze into the faces. Like the food, they seemed familiar to him. At times, a clear and recognizable tone fought through the cacophony of voices. But it was never one he could match with a face.

"I just realized ..." he began, then faltered as his eyes swept the faces.

"What?"

"I was saying ..." Faces. Faces. "I realize how few people I know here. Some I recognize, I think. From the auditorium. But most ..." Unwittingly, he was searching for only two faces, the despicable Charles and his benefactor, the latter among the three or four uniformed figures on the outskirts of the room, blue and gold forms; they seemed as uncomfortable as he, glancing absent-mindedly right and left, then at their hidden feet. He focused on a piece of flesh seated at the far side of the dining room. It turned in profile, not Charles. A foolish search. Charles! What could he gain from such a discovery? He turned to his food as Gina began to point out faces for him; he nodded assent mechanically to her various questions. "Him? You recognize him? Remember her?" Five

or six faces. Yes, yes, yes, I remember. Afraid she might locate Charles for him, he interrupted her. "Do you ... No, I was wondering. Are these all the same?"

"Same? Same as what?"

Same as what. Of course. "The same people from the auditorium?"

She looked over the crowd, as if the question had not occurred to her. "The same. Yes, more or less the same. A few exceptions, of course. Like ..."

"Like myself?"

"Not anymore," she answered, looking straight at him. "You're no longer an exception. Remember?"

"Yes yes. But what I meant ..."

"I know what you meant. I just won't let you confuse things." It was as if her words were praise. As if. "You're here now. Your own room. Your own lock. You have a key, don't you? They gave you a key, didn't they?"

"Yes." He was angry now and certain she sensed it. Yet what had she said to annoy him? "Yes, I have a key."

"Well then," she said brushing aside his anger as if she had not noticed it. He let it die. "Are you through?" She pointed to his half-empty plate, the food now cold and dull. "We'll take these back and then ..." she began to gather up her dishes in a heap on her tray, "then we can ... Oh." She looked at him. "But you have no idea, do you? They told you nothing, you said."

"Nothing," he repeated. "Nothing. I suppose I'm just to follow everybody else."

"You'll find little changed. In routine, that is. Except that nothing is mandatory now. I doubt that will affect you much, since you do what's expected of you regardless."

“What? What won’t affect me?” If not mandatory, then of course subject to his will. How could that be considered of no consequence?

“The routine. You’ll fall into it by choice. There’s little else. Aren’t you bored with your room?”

She was right, of course. Routine, he thought. Its origin hardly mattered, whether imposed or self-inflicted. He would soon fall into it. Obstinacy would gain nothing. Brood not, he had been told. Yes, that much was clear, he thought, following Gina to return his tray. Acceptance, progress, steps.

He lost his thoughts in the process of emptying his tray. Following Gina, first he scraped the uneaten food into the plastic-lined barrel, then dumped the utensils, knife, fork, spoon into hot soapy water. The rest, the tray, the disordered dishes, glass, and steel hemispheres, he left on the counter and a hand whisked them away. “Walk?” He barely heard her. “Come on,” she said, taking his hand; for he had begun to lag behind her. “Come. I’ll show you around. You must learn eventually.”

She led him through a maze of corridors, not yet familiar. His own door, which he left ajar after passing it once, and hers, less easily identifiable, then back, retracing their path, the cafeteria, then the auditorium, where the swirl was taking shape, with several faces he thought he knew and several he did not, then back through the corridors. Slowly, as he wandered, a pattern emerged. The entire complex was a “U,” shaped by three main corridors, his room positioned on the left. At the end of his corridor stood the barrier of a large wooden door, locked, he supposed, although he did not test it, nor ask about it. The bottom segment of the “U” was lined by more doors similar to his own. Gina’s was here on the inside wall; the far corner opened into the cafeteria. The third

corridor, parallel to the first, led to another door, obviously locked, and to the right, a short corridor leading to the auditorium. Along this last corridor were several more passages leading to the left, upward from the “U.” Each, Gina told him, led to more rooms like his first room, and each was barred by a locked wooden door. After gaining the pattern, he was led into the auditorium and straight across it. To the left were the large double-doors of his former entrance, where stood uniforms like that of his benefactor. Mere uniforms, he noted, only uniforms. Beyond the auditorium, across the wall, *his* wall, *Charles’s* wall, was a door leading to several small lounges that he had never seen. Probably they represented a new privilege he had just earned; for he could see no reason why they had been previously closed to him, why he and Gina had conducted their conversations publicly in the hall rather than in the more private setting of the lounges. There were four, two occupied by surprised faces turning toward them as they stood in the entranceways. They returned to the auditorium and he surveyed it. It had occurred to him that the auditorium might be, like his room itself, similar to but not identical with the old. The very thought seemed foolish: was the swirl as easily deceived as he? or was it part of the deception? Ridiculous. He pointed to the two doors, the new entrance for the alley to the lounges. “Why,” he asked, “haven’t I seen those before?”

She shrugged. “They were closed—at least, I think they were—during the times you were here. You weren’t very observant, you recall. And they close them a few hours during the day. A regular schedule with few variations.”

She did not have to tell him the times. He knew them by heart. The closing of the doors coincided with his old routinized time in the auditorium. He would remember that,

he thought; it would be interesting to note the faces arriving through the double-doors—faces replacing his old face. He stared at the guarded doors at the front of the hall. “Do you resent the arrival of others? The ones like ... the ones like I once *was*,” he corrected himself, “when the lounge doors close?”

“No. Not really. They can’t be blamed for that. And we were all there once ourselves. At least, most of us were. The only drawback is that you must decide whether to remain here or leave.”

“What do you mean?”

“All doors are locked,” she said. “It should be obvious. Wherever you are, there you stay. In the lounges, back in your room, in the auditorium itself. You can’t just wander wherever you please until the time is up.”

“My old time,” he said, with a disdain that surprised him.

“That’s right. Your *old* time. Don’t forget.” A buzzer sounded and startled him. “There. That’s the sign or signal. Early today. Do you want to stay?”

He heard a questioning murmur swell through the crowd, then envisioned the opening doors and the fearful and lonely replicas of his former self slowly entering, seeking shelter, pretending vainly to be inconspicuous. “No.” He calmed himself and repeated softly, “No. Not today, I think.”

The lounges?” she asked. “Or back? We can go to my room if you want. I’ve made changes there.” There was something sinister about her tone, a nearly mute suggestiveness, but the imagined faces were far more threatening.

“Yes, yes.” Yes to anything. “I’m sorry. I meant the rooms.”

“OK. Let’s go.” She hurried toward the door as a uniformed man approached, as if to seal off their escape. She gestured to him. The uniform stepped back. Haloed blue bowing in deference to them. As they left through the door, Alex knew he had recognized the face, but whether it had been his benefactor or another official, he could not tell.

There was something strange about her gesture, he thought, as they walked down the corridor. The smile as well, and something strange about his own vague sense of recognition. No, it could not have been the benefactor. The porter perhaps. White walls flowed by him, echoing words he did not understand and which he realized were spoken by Gina. What was she saying now? Something about the walls, something about their purpose, perhaps the function of the oppressive white. He could not tell. Her room. That was what she had said. Her room. And why that? Why had all alternatives included her?

For the first time in what must have been weeks, he wanted to be alone. The day and the new definitions of himself confounded him. He wanted to be in his own room behind a locked door. Yes there, lying on his bed, complaining perhaps, sneering cynically at the benefactor’s kindnesses and seeking sleep. Protective and refreshing sleep. It was just down the corridor. Around the next corner, he thought, and a few doors down on the left. His door, the door now his, and which he could easily imagine was the old. All she had to do was continue walking, lead him to the door, and say goodbye, promising to awaken him with another song. That was all. That was all. And if, if she would only keep walking now ... But she had stopped halfway to the last corner. He remembered from the morning that the door she held for him opened into her room.

Exhausted, exhausted. Couldn't she understand that he was exhausted? Couldn't she see that he was worn out by ... by the very progress he had made?

"You coming?" Repetition of the song. Good morning are you awake? Familiar song.

He stood before the barrier of her body and the open door; her arms seemed now to extend fully across the corridor, forbidding all passage and herding him neatly into the room. "I ... I thought I'd ..." His failing concentration garbled whatever he had meant to say. Something about being tired; something about sleep; something about the restorative powers of rest. Her nod was insistent. "I have something for you," she said. Obediently, he entered the room and for a brief moment took heart, rejoicing in her insight. She had graciously led him to his own room and the security of his own bed. He turned with foolish gratitude, as a wry smile grew on her face in turn, one he did not understand. Not a silent "You're welcome." Not a knowing goodbye, but a strange smile, as if she did not grasp his gratitude or as if it were misplaced.

Instead of closing the door between them, she stepped into the room and drew the door shut behind her. He realized abruptly that the room was not his. The chairs ... he quickly glanced over the furniture. The chairs and tables had been rearranged, clustered together, huddled in the far corner away from the bed. And the hues, something slightly different about the hues. Foolish mistake, he thought, a product of his own exhaustion. His room was around the corner, in a different corridor, and surely he had known that. Surely he had known the door she held open for him was not his own. The smile left his face and he turned his head away from her. Exhausted, exhausted. Isn't that enough? Can that not excuse everything?

She brushed past him; strands of hair brushed his face. She was sitting on the bed now, only not in the middle, as if claiming it all for herself, but slightly to one side as if inviting him to join her there. He looked to the cluster of chairs, but their symmetry seemed inviolable and he chose to stand.

“Do you like it?” The song.

“Like?” he answered as if in refrain. “Yes, I do. Only it seems ...” He studied the ceiling and its familiar pock-marks, then the walls. All the same, the same dimensions, the same textures, the same limits.

“Like yours? Is that it?” She eased back until she sat against the curtain covering the wall, then drew her legs up on the bed. They folded neatly to one side and she dropped her hands to massage her knees. “Well, there are always limits to what one can do. At least it’s not cluttered like the others with chairs strewn all over where no one sits. No offence, of course. I tried to get them to take those out.” She waved toward the neat cluster of furniture. “They refused. I can’t imagine why, unless just to be obstinate. So I made them as inconspicuous as possible. The space seems more expansive this way, don’t you think?”

He didn’t know; he couldn’t think. He nodded.

“You can sit down, you know. You don’t have to stand.”

And he thought he saw her shift slightly to the short side of the bed, inviting him again. Her left hand had fallen from her knee and lay on the blanket, no doubt indicated his appointed spot. “No, I’ll ...” But he had nothing to say and standing seemed ridiculous to him; he stepped quickly toward the wall, then turned and paced the distance across the room. It relaxed him and he turned to retrace his steps. Yes, to ward off fatigue. To stimulate the blood.

She watched him, waiting as his pace became regular and purposeful. One two three ... "What's that for? Exercise? Or are you taking measurements?"

"No, not that." It gave him confidence; as he accustomed himself to the rhythmic approaches of the opposing walls, the very act of pacing gained in importance, as if the reflected movement from wall to wall were the most crucial action he could perform.

"Stop it. It's annoying." The song had said that.

He ignored it. He need not justify his actions nor excuse them, much less cease them because they happened to be bothersome. His strides were now steady, firm and rhythmic. She would again tell him to stop, but he was now prepared; this time a show of indignation would be completely justified: *What business is it of yours? Do not bother me; don't disturb me. I do what I want.* But the song did not respond in anger, only in a condescending laugh.

"All right, Alex. Besides, I think I like you that way. I get to see all facets of you." She began to shift her position, slowly, slowly, straightening her legs and then turning, until she was no longer sitting.

He turned away; he would not witness this. And he paced. Striding firmly and deliberately toward the approaching wall, then wheeling and planting each step strongly into the floor, pushing with one foot while shifting his weight to the other until it supported him. Then raising the trailing foot almost imperceptibly off the floor, gliding it forward with athleticism and grace, and as it reached his first foot, pushing with his toes to move his center of balance forward beyond his feet and, as he began to fall, deftly catching his weight with the once trailing foot, then pushing

off with the other. A firm determined stride. Inexpressibly complex. Left then right. It was all so perfect.

For what did they all intend him to do? Was his progress all an elaborate deception perpetrated by the benefactor and Gina? had he not been told that the transition to a new room implied more responsibility? And if so, how to judge what was happening to him now? Was he not now far more confined and oppressed, perhaps by the song itself, than he had been behind the door to his first room? Left, right, left, right. And then, why was she lying down like that? He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, and noticed a slight movement of the legs, an unmistakable sign ... Left, right, left, right. But it might lie in his eyes. The individual's vision is least reliable on the periphery, the outlying images resting in a shimmering haze, and surely, surely movement could have been as easily imagined as perceived. He did not attempt to confirm that hypothesis. And then he heard the voice, no longer musical, but low and flat, now more demanding.

"Alex. You are boring me. Or worse."

He felt the muscles in his face tighten; they strained against the skin. He could not turn such a visage toward her. He tried to concentrate more intently on the complexities of his shifting body weight, carried across the room through nuances of his toes. As he concentrated on the rhythmic and exacting positioning of his feet, his stride faltered, and he felt he was stumbling, his steps suddenly disjointed, as if, now self-conscious, he were unable to perform the simple act of walking. He veered from his course away from the bed and halted, facing the corner to the right of the door.

"Alex. Alex?" Nearly a song, unmusical but gentle as a song.

Dreaded gentleness. Demanding and frightening. His former exhaustion swept in on him. He should never have stopped pacing, he thought, should never have allowed himself to be thwarted by his own self-consciousness. He was swaying now, as if his body sought the rhythms of the pace but had no way of recovering them. "Alex?" And he stared into the corner. Up, then down. And yes, he noticed. Ha! The workmen had been here also, as they had been in both his rooms, their incompetence masked by wide moldings! He sneered. How could the blue uniforms permit such sloppy work? Did no one think to complain? Did they all simply accept it? He turned suddenly and faced Gina, who had raised herself from the bed and was now staring at him. And he was about to ask if she too had noticed the poor workmanship and were as annoyed with it as he was. But as he opened his mouth, his throat seemed clogged; he could not trust it to form his words. She eased down onto the bed, and then ... He turned away. This time he could not be mistaken. He had seen; he had not merely glimpsed her movement in the border of his vision.

The carpenters. Incompetents! It was a disgrace. Were the few hours of care they would need to make their precise cuts too much for them? Were they unwilling to expend the effort required to make those corners crisp and exact? Or simply incapable of it? Did they lack what little skill and experience was necessary to avoid the blunders clearly revealed in the corners? He stared intently, and the corner fell away from him. As he stood there, staring, it jerked back from him. He felt a blow to his hip, a shudder. He realized he had staggered and broken his fall instinctively with his left foot. Then he saw his own hands slowly rise to his face; they touched his eyes and cheeks, then pressed along his skull,

through his hair, until they met behind his head. He looked quickly for a place to sit; there was a slight whirl and a voice barely audible. He was sitting on the bed now, his fingertips rubbing his eyes and forehead. He must leave. He must leave. He could not remain here. Especially now. Not ... He yawned. The yawn would convince her.

She was laughing, belittling his exhaustion as if it were a mere excuse. As if she were oblivious to the complexities of the act of pacing. He had nearly fainted. Did she not see that? Passed out in full view of her! How could he be judged for that?

“Oh Alex. Poor boy. Poor Alex.” And what did she mean by that? “I’ll take you back. It’s a lot for one day.” It was not what he had hoped for, merely a reasonable surrogate. He stood nonetheless, without comment, into her guiding arms. The room was less threatening and had dulled to monotony. As they entered the corridor, he noticed that its harsh glare had subsided into a mute haze. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep would refresh him. Sleep. And she was leading him toward sleep.

She left him in his room, having whispered only a soft goodbye. Kind and sympathetic, he thought, as he heard the door close quietly to her touch. No condescension there; no irony. He should have said something, he thought; now perhaps and perhaps he should have done something earlier. He might ... But he had been driven into ineptitude instead. He could not clear his mind, nor construct an elaborate rationalization. He collapsed onto the bed; its softness comforted him and he tried to relax into it. A mild shock tingled his limbs and soon enveloped him, as his reason succumbed to fatigue. But the sleep he had so desired seemed all the more elusive. He breathed deeply; for it is said, yes indeed it had been said, that such slow inhale hold exhale

brings about a restorative relaxation. Inhale exhale. His efforts only intensified the mild shocks, charmed his reason from him as if guiding it toward sleep, then hurled it back on him. He sat up with a start, as if an electric charge had fired within him. He tried to relax, but the charge built again, then snapped a second shock in his head. It was the whirr. It was the whirr coming for him.

Fatigue, fatigue; it was all the fatigue, and there were times that one's fatigue grew so great and so thoroughly drained one of energy that sleep was impossible. It was as if sleep could only be reached through effort and not through simple exhaustion. He lay back, wary of the charge that threatened to build again inside him.

Past. Past. The day was now past and the past was a collection of facts and details to be reconstructed by a functioning intellect, he thought, re-ordered into memory. He closed his eyes.

And he tried to recall to the last detail the dress and appearance of the benefactor. About six feet tall, he thought, or so he had once determined. Blue, gold. Buttons trickling from neck to waist in a tiny stream. Stiff collar. Neat. Clean. Meticulous. Slashes. Bands. But his conception of the face had begun to deteriorate and the details he could recall seemed inaccurate. Nothing was clear. Neither the eyes nor the hair. Not the greying tufts once brown. Not the lines beneath the eyes, not the thin smiling lips, not the prominent nose. He sought something beyond and waited for the image to appear. Slowly it formed. And he saw the benefactor huddled over a desk, tears splashing his tiny gold buttons below his hidden face. Over him stood the three interrogators. One "Fine." Another "Fine." While the third wrote mad judgments in the air. Then Gina, laughing; Charles running naked after her,

crying, screaming in terror. Into the sea. All fading into the sea as the waves washed over their dying bodies. No, no. He must not drift like that. He must not allow the charge to build. He fought the hallucinated images with a remembrance of the first day and the face piercing the whirr. Someone was calling his name, “Alex!” Yes. The power of awakening. “Sir!” another had said, in transparent irony.

The charge again built to its limits and fired; and as his eyes focused on the room, he found himself sitting upright and trembling. He tried to concentrate on the gentle hum from the corridor, subdued and aimless. It must still be day, he thought, and his sleep, if he had slept at all, had lasted only a few seconds. He fell back into the blanket and rubbed his face. Confusion. Nothing more than that. A panic attack, it might be called. That was it. The product of the abrupt change in his situation. Sudden transformation—that explained it. Yes surely that explained everything. But his emotions were not subject to rationale, and he twisted away from the oppressive room and buried his face in the coarse wool of the blanket.

All of them! He cursed them all. Her, the benefactor, the porter, the distant interrogators and above all the naive and foolish child who submitted so sheepishly to them. All seemed a plot, a malevolent conspiracy so thoroughly dominating him that he himself had become a part of it.

How thorough, he thought. He glanced to his left and the tiny key snickered at him from the safety of the table. The key, he scoffed and rolled away from its insults. Who was to blame for that? Who was responsible for its tantalizing diminution, so it might be said? “To ease through transitional stages. Merely that.” Yes, likely that was its stated function. “To better enable the individual to ignore the true conditions of his imagined change.” “To blind him to his needs with a bit of mock gold.”

Was it any solace to imagine locking out thieves and lechers? And was he to erect false limits of solitude around himself and deafen himself to the reality of the hum of the world beyond the door? Like the window, he thought, the porthole that still taunted him behind the curtain with its frosted illusion of escape now even more sinister. And he worried now that even his emerging anger and resentment was monitored.

He needed time, he thought, mere time. Time to accustom himself to the rigors of his new privileges. And time to sort through the confusion of his past few weeks and forge his own reality, self-defined, self-created, not subject to the banter of his keepers and the seductions of Gina. Alone, unaided. The key, he thought, a dangerous illusion disguised as a tool. He turned from the curtain to the key, inert now, suddenly exposed and impotent. Control of the door clearly meant nothing. He dove from the bed and grasped it, firmly so that it might not escape his new understanding of it. Useless, the key yielded to him and he strode quickly into the bathroom, opened the drawer beneath the mirror and tossed the key into it. The drawer slammed shut over the protests of the key.

So simple, he thought. Time, time, his own time now. Time to strip away confusion, time to throw out the debilitating security symbolized by the key. They had led him here, whether by chance or intent, but they would lead him no farther. Neither into fear nor into the humiliations of what others wanted from him. All would now be his, he concluded grandly, even though his reasoning might seem untrustworthy.

He paced about the room. It was his room now. One two three ... Nothing. The past belonged to others, but the present could be his own. He spread his arms and wheeled about the room, then stumbled to a halt. So easy. It could be so easy. He

must overcome the confusion, the humiliations, cling to his blameless innocence, whether real or imagined. He shook away his thoughts, a slight flush growing within him of a man embarrassed with himself. Let her loathe him, he thought; it was possible she detested him. The question was now irrelevant. Fondlings and flirtations. Nothing of import or consequence.

He felt a smile grow on his face. A plan, he thought; he had now devised a plan. He laughed and let himself laugh as a part of the hum echoing through the corridors. He quickly undressed. He would be able to sleep now and would not be battered by the self-doubt generated by his *understandable* failures, you might call them, with Gina. Tomorrow. Tomorrow would bring the solution. Tomorrow after the relief of sleep. He leaped onto the bed and let the sleep come to him. Empty, dreamless, it flowed over him and the darkness became his own ...

It was morning when the hum finally awakened him. It was purposeful now, of people hurrying. He yawned and stretched. Morning. He had slept soundly. Alert and eager, he quickly threw off the blanket and began to dress, the memory of his plan still fresh.

It would not be difficult to implement, he thought, given the cooperation of Gina. Surely, she had erred in underestimating the effects of his change in status; surely a day would have been sufficient to make her realize that. She clearly knew by now that he needed time.

For the moment, he thought, he would avoid all suggestive references and even the most innocent of flirtations. Their old relationship had become secure and he would cling to that. Continue their familiar encounters, however sterile, until the future ... the future ... unfolded, he thought ... that

was it. Easy. It was easy. There would hardly be need to discuss it.

Hunger. Yes, he was hungry, he realized. He had not eaten in two days, if one discounted the listless toying with yesterday's breakfast. Strange, he thought. All was in his power now. Gina, his very future. But not hunger. He would have to leave and join the others, despite his obstinate ... What was it? Rebelliousness?—was that his nature? he wondered. He buttoned his shirt and paused briefly, wondering whether his keepers, the many benefactors and interrogators and porters, had considered the force of hunger and whether that too was incorporated into whatever grand plan they had for him. Surely it was powerful, he thought. Far more than comforting platitudes, more compelling than friendship. He shook his head. It did not concern him. He would act on his own initiative. He need not concern himself with theirs.

He hurriedly finished dressing and walked confidently into the corridor, merging with the hum and cloaking himself in it. No one noticed him, he thought, as several faces passed by, hurrying toward the cafeteria. He was invisible. He followed the flow of faces into the cafeteria and took his food as Gina had taught him, then chose a seat like those he invariably chose in the auditorium—away from the clusters of faces. She had not yet arrived; at least, he had not seen her. And as he ate, he grew anxious. Perhaps he had overestimated her kindness and insight. Possibly she regarded his failure as weakness and not the result of his confusion and exhaustion or evidence of some subtle heroism. Or worse, something to be tested daily. Today. Tomorrow, self-sustained ... No, he thought, staring into the tasteless food; he must not permit such thinking. At all costs, he must implement his plan.

And he saw her. He had missed her entrance; she approached him now from his right. A slight spasm teased his left arm and he hid it beneath the table.

“Well hello,” she said, standing over him. “May I sit down?”

It was a sincere request, he realized; for she remained standing, and did not, as he expected, sit prior to his invitation. He smiled. Yes, she too had understood. Had he not feared exposing his plan, he would have thanked her. Instead he merely motioned for her to sit. “Of course,” he said formally and now confidently. “How are you today?”

It worked. It had worked. Having adopted a plan and executed it so perfectly, he had finally wrested from Gina what was once her total control of their relationship. A personal victory, however small, he thought. One worthy of pride.

*Superbi-et invidi-* Of course she had offered no resistance; she had even helped him, it seemed. She realized, apparently, he would need time. And she had granted him that. After a day of testing her, to ensure that she had not concocted some counter-scheme, he began to talk openly and comfortably.

To facilitate his plan, he set up specific times for them to meet. He did not of course state these explicitly. He simply made it clear that he would meet her only in the auditorium at the times of day formerly parceled out to him by the benefactor. He was particularly concerned about this, thinking that of all the unstated conditions it might be the one she would most likely resist. After a few days, he stopped worrying. His room, her room—these were now private spaces; and the lounges and even the cafeteria would not be used as meeting places. He saw her there during breakfast and dinner and often exchanged a greeting with her. But he made no attempt to sit with her, nor she with him. Initially, he was apprehensive and his restrictions tentative; he still feared the presence of Charles and could not forget her taunting suggestion that she had once loved him. Yet Charles seemed not to concern her now; the few times Alex saw them together, they engaged in little more than small talk. Only once, at dinner, did they sit together, and no more than a dozen words seemed to pass between them. No, he need not worry about Charles. Charles was nothing.

When Alex joined her in the auditorium, she respected the implicit barriers he had erected. Their languid and seemingly desultory conversations reminded him of those he had once had with the benefactor. He told her of his past, what few details he believed he remembered; these were mostly dream fragments and sourceless admonitions. He talked indirectly of the whirr, once oppressive whirr, now remote. And he told her of his awakening to the single face out of the whirr and of the days following, before he had met her. She listened attentively, he thought; she too might have a past, one far more extensive and detailed than his own. But in his simple desire to talk to her, to recount his experiences, he found himself using most of their allotted time himself and she easily deflected all his personal questions. He asked then of the swirl, of the corridors, and of the blue uniform who must once have helped her. She resisted, he thought, offering only vague generalities—answers anyone could have given. And after a time, he resigned himself to knowing no more of her past than of his own. At several points, he asked directly of the suicide attempt she had alluded to on the day of her first meeting. It was intriguing. Why do that? What was the purpose of nothingness? And was his very interest a sign of a hidden desire to escape, an escape he avoided due either to cowardice or a stoic bravery? She ignored him. Motives and analysis were subordinate to the bare fact, she said, whatever that meant. When he persisted, she refused to discuss it. Understandable, he supposed; perhaps like his own reticence concerning the whirr. Better leave it alone than to tempt it into existence. Or was the whole thing a mere fiction?

After a few days, he became less suspicious of her. She seemed to have discarded all ulterior motives; their relationship became secure. He could live with what doubtless

was emotional dishonesty. Denial of certain sensualities was purely pragmatic at this point. There were, of course, difficult moments. While he could will away overt allusions, his body seemed less under his control that he would have liked. He remained subject to arousal, and he fought it with great passion and little success, casually swinging his leg over his knee to form a protective lap and proceeding with their discussion as calmly as possible. It was strange, he thought, that he could not control his physical state. That arousal remained quite free of his will, arising when least desired, just as ... As obstinate as Gina herself, he thought, chuckling to himself.

It had been a week now since his transition. A week since the embarrassing encounter in her room, and a week too since he had initiated his protective plan. All seemed so easy and their relationship unencumbered. He waited for her in the auditorium, confident now and calm. He was at ease with himself finally and with her. When he looked up, she was standing over him.

“Hello,” she said. “Are you alone?”

He nodded and offered her the seat beside him. Perhaps, he thought, he could ask more pointedly about her own history today. Had they not thoroughly examined his own? Today he would persist. But her opening words confounded him.

“My, you’re pretty,” she said. “I like your smile today.” He stiffened. “Although it seems a bit weak. Perhaps ...” and she reached out her hand until her fingertips grazed his lips. He had not felt her touch in a week. “Perhaps it’s still there, just under that pout, struggling to get out.” She pushed and molded his lips. “Like that. There it is. I can see it now. Now if

I let go,” she drew back her hand, “slowly and carefully, maybe it will stay.” She squinted at his lips.

He had to stop this, he knew. But he trusted her. “Maybe I can help,” he muttered.

Her jaw fell open in mock astonishment. “They moved! They moved! Are they alive? Can it be they have a will? Apart from my own?” She poked at the obstinate lips until his smile was genuine. “Ah!” she said. “As I suspected. That pout wasn’t real. The smile was real. There! You could see it yourself, but—I mean no offence of course—your eyes are badly positioned for that. Should I bring a mirror?”

It all seemed harmless enough. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“That’s better,” she said and sat back as if to view her work. “Pretty when you smile, even if that word offends you. And ugly when you don’t, which is quite often. I can’t decide, however, ...” she cocked her head, “whether you are actually pretty, essentially, I mean, or ugly. I’ll have to give that some thought, I guess.”

He was beginning to feel suspicious and raised his guard. But there seemed no malice underlying her tones. And the incongruous “pretty.” Why not “beautiful” or “attractive”? Or were these words dangerous for both of them? How could she know what particular words meant to him? Convinced that all was innocent, he let her proceed with whatever game she might be playing.

She bantered on, critiquing his hair and musing over the possibilities of his nose. It was a bit too wide, she said, but then on closer inspection, decided that it was too narrow and only the strange construction of his cheekbones had made it appear large. She suggested comparing it to a typical nose in the crowd but then, no, that would be futile; for only she could be

objective enough to make the comparison and she had already failed to analyze the faults of the isolated nose.

“Perhaps,” he suggested, calm now, “we could simply cut it off, along with those of every one. We could be reasonably objective then. And life would be a lot easier all around.” She thought for a moment. “No. They’re part of you—all of you, I mean.”

“We can steal knives. At dinner. Dull, but sterile ...”

“No.” She shook her head. “How would we know what is typical when we have them all lined up before us? We have no context. All we’d have is deformities—bloody noses and unwarranted conclusions.”

“No use,” he said.

“No use,” she agreed. “We’ll have to accept my judgment. Besides, noses are ugly. At least yours is. Too something—large or small—but obviously atypical. The face as a whole, however, that makes up for it.” Then she caught him studying her own features. “No no, Alex,” she said. “My appearance is completely off limits.”

Now this, he thought, was unfair. But it was all a farce, nothing more than that. “You see, Alex. I have the last word.” She held up her hand. “Seniority. It’s that simple.” The smile vanished and her knees shifted toward him. Then he felt the touch as her hand fell carelessly across his arm. Or was it so careless, he thought, trying valiantly not to stare at it and thus lend it a dangerous legitimacy. Was this the goal of her frivolous game? the silly discussion of noses? The hand. The hand ... It all distracted him and he could not remember exactly what she had said. She seemed to be expecting a response; if he could not address her words, he would have to address the hand. “I’m sorry,” he said clumsily. “I don’t remember ...”

“Sorry?” she said, raising her eyebrows as if surprised.  
“For what?”

“For ... for ...” But he had forgotten even that. The hand moved slightly on his arm. Or perhaps he imagined it.

“Whatever it is,” she said, “forget it.”

He squirmed in his seat, her unexpected touch had aroused him. She must have noticed his discomfort and he suspected a trace of mischief in her eyes. She did not pursue it. He struggled on, “I was ...”

“Yes?” and the mischievous eyes took on a suggestiveness he might have imagined. Her hand ran down his arm to his fingers, lingered playfully for a moment, then fell casually to his knees. Any further shifting of position would only call attention to itself, he decided, and pretended to ignore the hand. “I ...” But the hand moved on his knee and his façade of ignorance was transparent. “I ...” His eyes fell on the hand and it moved gently.

“You what?”

Control. He had vowed to maintain control.

“Pretty Alex.” The voice was gentle, as the hand meandered up his thigh; it brushed his crotch, then started innocently back down to his knee.

He knew he must do something and tried first to gauge his reactions. A defensiveness, yes, traces of that, and a certain excitement beyond the bare physical arousal. But no fear; he had no fear. He cast beyond for emotions that had oppressed him a week earlier, but they too were gone. Just the hand now. Just the hand and the mischief in her eyes.

He opted for containment and casually placed his own arm in the way of the wandering hand, but casually, casually, across his thigh as if innocently. The hand lightly brushed his arm away, then returned up his thigh. It paused.

“Don’t do that,” he hissed, glancing at the swirling faces before them. “Not here. Not ...”

“All right,” she said, removing her hand, slowly, not as if in retreat. She turned to look across the crowd and he saw her eyes settle on the open door. “Come with me,” she said, “if you would. We have something we need to discuss.” She stood and offered her hand to him, the same hand that moments before had so unsettled him. “I ...” He stalled, but she would not permit even that. “Don’t be so noble,” she said. “If you are afraid, then so what?” Then she smiled at him, generating such a consuming whirl of confusion, fear, and embarrassment that he completely forgot his desire. He quickly stood. She looked down over him in mock concern, “will you be all right?”

“Yes,” he snapped. “Just fine.”

And she took his hand and led him through the swirl, occasionally teasing him with what seemed inquisitive looks across his body. He struggled for a reply—witty, sophisticated, memorable. But there was nothing there. He muttered inarticulately. They walked through the door. The corridor drew back, glowing white, and when they reached her door, she stopped and turned to face him. She dropped his hand and her hands drew him to her. The kiss awakened him and he felt her hips press into him. Strength. Warmth. The bones of her hips. She released him and stood back, the former mischief and coyness now gone. She pushed the door open and he followed it, mechanically submitting as if to the vacuum of the open door. He faced the bed and the familiar curtains covering the illusory channel of escape. The door closed softly behind him, clicked in triumph as he felt her arms around his waist, moving over his chest and turning him to her.

*When he conquered virginity, a Hero now for the Ages, the multitudes roared with approval. They danced and whirled in joyous envy, composed dithyrambs on wax tablets and spread flowers variegated as life itself in his path. On waves cramped in harbors, captains of fire boats and mates and seamen spewed foamy laudation to the skies, which glistened and rained back to anoint his laureled head. The seas parted, the rivers flowed skyward, and gods and goats with their numinous power gave him stamina surpassing omnipotence. Glory, glory, once there was such glory.*

*And was it true, he had wondered, exhausted now in fact and blushing with new pride, was it true, was it true? Conclusively determined? Did the billions of beings in the world or the mere scores in his world prove irrefutably that others too, that even thousands millions billions trillions living and dead, that mammals and fishes and uni-celled amoeboids, that all shared in such glory? Was it true, could it be true, that the secrets revealed in an act of will-less irresolution were known and practiced, vulgarities shared by countless of whom he, Great Teacher of Things of Passion, was merely one further redundant example?*

*Glorious times. Glorious times. Those were the Days, had there been days at all in those heroic days.*

*And was it true, he thought, slowly awakening. Did the pointed exaltation, did the bare commonality, did the naked banality thus explain the errors, the false steps, the thrust of his extrapolations? Was it thus understandable that the fools of the universe, rapt in chimeric glory, proclaimed love the Greatest Good? Did the blinkered realities excuse the self-aggrandizing self-laudation? The deed was done, or may as well have been. And it was as if he had had nothing to do with it at all!*

*Behold the evidence, he thought, reaching to his left and the sleeping warmth beside him. No wonder they called it spoils. For what had his exhaustive research gained him? And how had his grand and noble schemes served him? What delusive reasoning would convince him that the credit for such ennoblement was his? That the sweet fragrances of night, one*

*might say (and where did that phrase come from?) could in any way be construed as involving him at all?*

*He smiled as she turned to him in sleep and eased into his embrace.*

*And what, if anything, did it all mean in the end? What did it matter? he wondered. Of what value were all his schemes and illusions, or, as he believed he himself once had said, his grand approximations? He brushed her hair ... This, yes this, what was all his spiraled pomp to this?*

He found himself sitting on the corner of the bed while she, holding him determinedly, lay behind him. Unable to break her grip, uncertain whether he even wanted to be rid of it, he let himself be rocked by it. Gently rocked. He was relieved now, his fears, which he might have rationalized away self-consciously, now quieted. Whether he had taken strength from her or simply met a challenge, he did not know. The hours were too confused. They were facts, barren facts. And the fact of their love-making made hash of his reflections, he thought, putting it as coarsely as he could. He closed his eyes and rocked in the arms. Love was a mood, he must have once been told, that overshadowed its participants. All his senses now, he thought docilely, now in her, toward her. A nearly passive and seemingly remote sensuality abstracted from her eyes, framing what must be a distorted reflection of his face, as a poet once must have said.

He let himself drift in the rocking and envisioned a future. "Occasionally loved." Yes, an eternity of that. He could endure it, and half-asleep, such a future satisfied him. Forever tired, forever awake and exhausted, yes, that was how he imagined it, drifting, floating, ever deeper into the arms, rocking arms.

He opened his eyes and gazed down on her. The hands that had so teased away his defenses, that had so embarrassed

him, now clasped him about the waist and the eyes rested idly beneath soft eyelids. He reached for his clothes and she whispered good morning. How brilliant that seemed to him. As he clumsily struggled with his clothes, fumbling for buttons and sleeves, they both laughed, her gentle assistance of no use in helping him into his shirt.

Then she sat up, stretching and inhaling the morning. Her breasts reached up with her arms, became a part of her, then fell back. She pushed back the blanket and he stared into her nakedness, but for an instant, and she too was dressing, standing and public. He watched her, surprised that she seemed so unaware of herself, so indifferent, covering herself casually as if for warmth.

She was in the bathroom now, concealed behind the curtain. He thought he heard her voice through the rushing of water from the sink faucet. It was garbled, then lost in the flow of water spiraling into the drain. The flow stopped and he heard her footsteps. The curtain drew back to reveal her dripping face and she poked at the trickling droplets with a towel. "What?" she said. "Did you say something?"

He was looking at her and the intricate dance of the towel folds. The question, yes, although he had said nothing or thought he had said nothing, the question had formed. "How long do we stay here?" he asked stupidly. "Forever? Do we stay here forever?"

"How would we eat?" The curtain fell over her face and she was gone as the water rushed over her words. In the water, through the water. "What? I'm sorry," he said, raising his voice but trying not to shout. "I didn't hear you." Again the water stopped. There was a pause he did not understand and she drew back the curtain. Dry. Her skin, he thought. The skin on those cheeks, the forehead. Gentle caresses about the eyes.

Smooth. His own hand a defilement. “You’re not serious.”  
And that was the voice but he had no response. “How can you possibly be serious in that foolish state?” He blushed. Men. Bad design. What had the gods been thinking? “Come on, Alex. Get dressed.” And she pushed at him playfully. “Come on now. I’m hungry. And stop staring so moronically.”

As they walked through the swirl, anyone who cared to look could see it was a new swirl. They had not eaten although they had tried; the food like the swirl had been laughable. Tasteless lumps and pools. The faint mist rising, sucked upward as he raised the polished half-globes, dispersing ... Well, he had thought, surely that was not edible, in any sense, whatever *edible* might be or mean. For when reason and habit urged him to place it in his mouth, which he had done good-naturedly (for surely he bore no animosity toward that bland mush) it had all rested there on his tongue, absorbing moisture, he supposed, a pliable ball. Interesting, he thought, that change in consistency. Interesting but hardly edible in any sense, and when they looked at each other through the faint steam, he knew somewhat was to be done with that ball of food. And instead of spitting it out in some civil manner—far too ridiculous and besides *he had come so far!* he swallowed with effort against the rising smile. He made no attempt to control the smile; in times like this, he grandly thought, energy must be conserved for greater things.

Rest. Gaiety. The glory of the auditorium. How reluctantly the passing face he did not recognize returned his smile. Stumbling as it saw the two of them locked in a clumsy embrace and offering its invidious tribute. And Alex vowed silently, noble vow, to become one day the great teacher of his fantasies. The knowing aesthete whose wisdom surpassed experience. But he could not tell her that, nor challenge the role she herself performed with far (perhaps!) greater skill.

When they reached the innocent door to the lounges, half-open, he stopped and gazed at her. Strange features, unremembered, eyes and smile, lips parting slightly to dislodge

the smile. A careful flick of the hand clutching his hip brought the welcome shudder. The clawing at yielding clothing. And through the door, pausing behind it as to discuss its position in silence and leaving it ajar, undisturbed. Reluctant invitation, warning. "Just the curtain? Nothing more?" But with her room so distant blocked by swirl and routine, and with his reaction to his arousal less casual than he expected ... Naked through the swirl? Naked and exposed past the columns of faded blue? Surely the lounge and the thin curtain were preferable to that!

They sat together, staring at what he imagined were each other's dreams and perhaps their own, distorted of course in reflections from their eyes. When he touched her and felt himself embarrassed and frightened once again, he drew his breath to hide his tears, a child crying in comforting arms, face buried, thin clothing, her skin slick with perspiration, the hand pulling his head downward and the soft lips on his forehead. Her cheekbones rubbed him and her hands were strong on his shoulders. Murmurs, wordless; the tears seemed real now, washing him. He raised his face, pushed away the hands, the kiss, and the words themselves, to show her his face and the tears on his cheeks. She laughed, and he imagined her loving them and loving what they said to her.

They lay there silently, as one must be silent, awaiting the inevitable intrusion. Distant creaking on the door and quiet footsteps toward the curtain. It shook as a sail in a soft breeze; it was caught by a hand and drawn back. Alex lay against the wall, his attention fixed on the hand and sensing her turn to it. Her naked shoulders squared to the face, single curtain-draped face, out of the swirl, staring at her unashamed face and those same eyes, thought Alex, those same eyes that had reflected his. And what could it see there? What did the intrusive face

project onto those eyes? What did it see in the naked shoulders? The curtain fell slowly from the hand, leaving only footsteps, more reverent now and hurried. As he cried for them, cried for the echo-less whispers of the footsteps, she kissed him into easy sleep.

Easing into waking. She prodded him gently and teased a rebirth of the smile. "Was it the curtain? Knowing it was just the curtain?" He began to laugh, realizing he had not dared public love-making. They stood, pushed back the curtain, and saw the door to the hallway closed tightly, as the thoughtful intruder, whom they might never see, had left it. Into the swirl. Entrance into the swirl. The brash condescension of his smirk at the aimless movement. Let his own self-assured movements, joined to her, parody its pointlessness.

"If they would just realize ..." Why, it was all so clear! "I mean, if they would only let themselves feel ..." Exasperated, as the obvious words could not be articulated, he released her to wave his hand in frustration, blurting out "Why, look at them! Look!" In light of such obvious albeit inexpressible facts, how was it possible they could move as they did? And his now easy insights dissolved in helpless and condescending laughter.

When he saw Charles stumbling toward them through the swirl, blind victim of chance moving toward collision, he was shaken. The tightening of his arm around her waist, hesitant step, broken gait ... He turned to her and she was smiling, oblivious to the imminent collision or perhaps seeking it. He followed her, reluctantly easing his hold. He watched as the swirl, once formless, slowly took on an obstructive coherence.

He had little choice but to tolerate Charles. He did not risk staring contemptuously at that face, peering perhaps in bewilderment over her shoulder as she embraced him. His

eyes were caught by the hands instead, pudgy useless hands, functionless purposeless awkwardly encircling her, but hesitant as if afraid to touch her. They hovered over her back; Alex watched her body shift slightly, and then they fell on her. The hands; the sweat on those hands. The unwilling fat on those hands now in contact with her back. Alex raised his eyes to the face and met the look of perplexity, a question in the eyes that seemed to have displaced the fear. He spat contemptuously, pretending it was a particle of inedible food lodged in his teeth. Charles understood; Gina could not see it. When she eased away from him, Alex saw on his shirt that place where she had pressed her breasts. Break in the folds and creases of the shirt which could barely contain the flesh. And her hand, gliding down the arm, brushing finally the useless fleshy hand—that was the same hand that had dried his own tears, itself dried irreverently on Charles's clothing. The tears now disgusted him, now defiled by a former ...

“You know Alex. You know Alex,” she said. Charles forced a smile over his face, a politic gesture, hardly polite, but his servility was hindered by the containment of his left arm, which Gina had pinned behind her. He began to bow nonetheless and the right hand he raised across his belly to join the left hung there alone, twitching in earnest as the head nodded, nodded. “Yes. Yes indeed. Mr. A.”

Alex would have returned the greeting or at least acknowledged it, for he did not want to anger Gina; but he was caught in the rhythmic nods of Charles, each seeming to produce a roll of flesh from beneath the chin. Pulsing, like a disfigured heartbeat. Gina's arm swept between them across the pulsing and again met the shoulder. As Alex stared into her back, Charles's quivering hand aligned with her hip. He would not dare! Alex thought. He would not dare soil her

again with that palm. “Oh Charles. How are you? How have ...” A whisper he barely heard. And Charles was looking at her now, no longer ill at ease, it seemed. “Quite well. And today, of course, much better.” When she embraced that flesh a second time,, Alex turned away toward the swirl. There was a sinister murmur in the swirl now that he had never before heard. It seemed a warning he did not fully understand. For what concern was this encounter to the swirl? What did those faces think to tell him with that hum, flat and monotonal as he felt her touch? He looked down at her hand briefly before it disappeared behind him, and in that moment he imagined it was damp. His tears diluted by the sweat from Charles’s shirt. He felt a shudder within him, but repressed it as Gina led them forward.

He kept his eyes lowered, following his feet as they shot outward into his vision. Beside him, Gina was answering stammered fragments. Charles. “Yes, yes. That ... Yes I am quite pleased that ...” He refused to listen and tried also to ignore the caress drifting from his back to his arm. Too gentle, too gentle. An aggravating and condescending challenge in the fingertips. Surely she knew. Surely she knew how he despised that perfunctory touch. But they continued walking, Gina talking, Gina laughing. The wall glided past them behind the juxtaposed heads, Gina’s hair obscuring the faces, leaving only Charles’s forehead glistening with sweat. How thoroughly each detail answered the entirety of his being. Fatty ridges, bouncing, soul-less, even the skull could not keep the skin taut. And behind them, the slowly gliding wall. He thought it might re-animate, shimmer, and steal away his disgust. But it teased him with indifference and allowed even the crisp outlines of tan chairs to lie undisturbed before it. Angles, lines, against the wall, askew and diagonal, a question of perspective. The curve

of the couch gracefully set against the wall. Nothing there. There was nothing. The whirr had died, he thought. It would never get him again.

When the others passed, it was not Alexander they saw. Not Alexander arrogant and invulnerable in his dream, but another, less real. The boy trailing a promiscuous lover, the laughing thief of his virtue, and surely the hand did that, the gentle fingertips; surely that touch was easily comprehensible as the buzzer sounded. Sounded. Surely ... The stammers confused him. "I ... really I ..." Charles had twisted away from her and was bowing, his hands now clasped before the echoed heartbeats of his neck. "I have people ... to see. Busy. I ..." At least that, Alex thought. At least Charles was not hopelessly blind to his unwelcome intrusion. And even Charles could perceive the contempt in Alex's formal nod. Then he was gone, into the swirl, and Alex waited for the irritating sensation on his arm—her hand and its disingenuous apology. But it did not come.

"What was that about? Are you still a child?"

He did not understand the challenge. "That? I don't know what you mean. With Charles?"

She began to walk and took his arm as if in resignation. "Forget it, Alex. Just forget it." And walking, walking, past furtive eyes stealing into corners. And even those frightened eyes seemed more reasonable than her sigh. "Never mind, Alex. Never mind."

Return of the silence. He watched the swirl as it passed; the tantalizing door to the lounges whose invitation they now ignored. And what was he to have done? What could she possibly expect of him? Did she imagine her own friends and acquaintances to be of greater importance than his own? And how would she have reacted to his foolish introduction: "My

benefactor. My benefactor.” Even were she not to laugh, even were the mood, now so distant, enough to generate a façade of civility, could she possibly view the words with anything but the deepest contempt, one likely less concealed than his own? ... “Alex?” Privacy, that was it. It was a matter of personal ... “Alex, stop it. Listen to me, Alex.” She pulled him closer and whispered something. Kind words, however insincere, stripping away his anger. The public kiss embarrassed him.

“I won’t play to it, Alex. But I’ll accept it for now. Next time, you shouldn’t feel compelled to stay. It just makes you stupid.”

He was confused. “You mean last night?”

“Last night? No. I meant now.”

“With him?”

“Just come up with some excuse and leave for a while. I’m never very long. But I loved him once, Alex. Do you really expect me to renounce what little I have of my past for you?”

Her hip against him reduced him to silence. He did not want to discuss it. Portent of disgust, hated portent, neutralized by the prodding of her hips and the eyes staring into him.

So he agreed. It was easier that way, he felt. His needs were simple now. At night, lying beside her, he could relax even into his old dreams. Naked and flushed, his eyes fixed on the pock-marks of the ceiling, he could seize again the emotions stirred by her arm around him. And Alexander, brash aesthete, great teacher of things erotic, died without a trace of resistance in the ensuing days, days which rolled by, as one must once have said, like a row of peas.

When again they saw Charles, Alex offered no challenge, but left her with a mere phrase. “A minute,” he said and walked from her. Through the swirl he walked, slowly and aimlessly. Through faces now dulled, indifferent to him, no

longer in envious awe of his illusions. *Superbi-et-invidi-ira*. He heard the signal and ambled curiously to the front of the auditorium. The double doors opened slowly and the guarding columns of blue turned apprehensively to the entering face, foreign and once his. Blue arm, lined with gold, gentle coaxing and a question unanswered. The doors swung closed behind the figure, leaving him small and doubtless trembling before the swirl.

He could approach that face, he supposed, as he himself had been approached. He had wisdom to convey. He could lead that face through the swirl, along the safe perimeters, away from walls and forbidden and forbidding doorways. "Yes, here is a place for you. You'll find it warm and comforting. Do not fear your posture, the awkward slip as you attempt to sit. No one will mock you or harm you, although one may touch you. You may seek in the swirl the eyes that answer you and will come to you. We have all known this moment. *Et ego ...* I too was once, once was ..." But the anxious eyes had caught him and glared a challenge he dared not accept. Dangerous eyes, warning him away. Quickly Alex retreated into the swirl, falling into its rhythms. This way and that way. The sea is the way, he thought. Drifting until he found her, waiting impatiently, studying him, her arms folded neatly under her breasts. Tapping, tapping, feet tapping. Something he had seen before the double-doors. Interesting, it had been. Strange out there in the slowly unmasked secrets of the swirl. Now experienced, of course he found it easy to convince her nothing had happened. Could you possibly doubt my word that wandering past the open entrances to the swirl I saw nothing? I saw nothing?

But he had seen something. It was in the challenge of those fearful eyes he had seen on the border of the swirl. That

night, as he lay in bed and looked at her, he could not forget those eyes. There was no sun to burn away the rising fog.

If he could sleep, he thought, as easily as she, he would awaken and love her. They would love. Now. Occasionally. Forever. He would walk with her to the cafeteria, through the swirl, yes, even there, and he would greet Charles, suppress his disgust, and talk to him as if there had never been such things as walls and images on those walls. In sleep, he would dream, and his dreams would prove omnipotent. The seas would drown his disgust and he would repel the challenge of the unknown faces. They would walk together, all three of them, and smile at the faces, talk to them, and walk and walk and walk. Yes, his dreams would carry him. There was nothing they could not do.

When he looked over to the rounded outline of her hips and the rhythmic rise and fall of her breath, he knew he could not achieve that peace. Calm, relaxed, so beautifully she slept. He reached for that form and touched it gently so as not to disturb it. She was a child now, he thought, as he lightly stroked her hair, and it was she now who was naked. His touch became a caress and he pulled back his hand. Through the fog rising from the undulating sea surface, he saw two uniformed figures walking at the point of greatest clarity in the haze where their shoulders met.

He would run. He would sprint through the corridors. Through the “U” and all the side corridors and hallways. He would run until he lost consciousness of his limbs and felt them propel him like alien machinery. His legs would be mere heaviness at the extremities of sensation. His arms would swing in defiance of his will. And he would run until only the running defined that weight as his own. His breath would be rapid, his heart furious, protesting the running. And he would

stagger silently through that door opposite an unmoving curtain. He would lie beside her, as now. When the arm moved to rest listlessly across his chest, he would feel nothing; the images of the fog would be gone then. And dreams would refresh him.

But of course, he did not run. And when he opened his eyes to the muted white ceiling, he sensed the curtain slowly undulating in rhythm with Gina's peaceful breathing. Reaching for it, he touched her inadvertently and she twisted away.

The images of the two figures in the fog remained, and he stared at them as long as he dared. They strolled through the water in the fog as a strange sensation built within him. When they emerged, he felt a rush that seemed like awareness, an emotion bursting in a sudden and unexpected shock, leaving only fading outlines, merely abstract, against the curtain. All lost in the inexplicable tremors of his hands.

He propped himself up on his elbows. He wanted to awaken her, cry out to her and feel her arms about his head. Warmth. Warmth. His face pressed into her breasts, the sleepy reassurances as she held him. But as he reached for her now, he saw his hand trembling and lay back, staring upward along the curtain to the mute glow of the ceiling.

Those images had been real, he knew, as real as his dreams. And the growing agitation, the tremors of his hands—those were real. The running too could be real, if he would only permit it. If he only had the courage to confront the faces emerging from half-open doors, gawking at him. If he were only immune to the ignorant laughter ringing about him. If he would suppress his contempt. Briefly, while running. Let himself be that foolish circus performer, running naked through the corridors.

But it was all so irrational. Running was irrational. There were easier ways to seek sleep. Gina had brought him sleep. The bland smile of the benefactor had brought him sleep. And even the whirr had once brought him sleep. He constructed a dream for sleep, the seas and the waves, slow easy waves nudged by a gentle breeze. When the sails were set properly, when the breeze lost its will to the helm, he could sail all night, lying on the deck, gazing upward at the bulging sails, magnifying the force of the unseen air. And he could watch the stars flow by him and hear the water hiss past the wooden hull. He would feel nothing there. Nothing but the glory. Glory glory glory, once there was such glory. “Captain!”

Once there was such glory.

Once the seas were vast.

And once the dreams were omnipotent.

“Alex. Alex.” Gently. “Alex.”

It amused him to discover he had slept. “Alex. Alex.” And it amused him to discover upon awakening, or what he imagined must be awakening, that she was standing next to him. “Alex.” But she, now fully dressed, had an advantage. How could he risk talking to her in semi-consciousness? What idiocies might he babble? Laugh, her laugh, although of course he had said nothing.

“You’re dead, Alex. You look dead.”

Surely that was not serious, he thought, rubbing his eyes. A joke of some sort.

“Come on, Alex. Get up. I can’t wait forever for you.”

No, certainly not. He would not have expected it of her. “All right. All right.” Had he said that? Was it his own voice that crackled and broke so? And would he have to cough away that object—*Foreign object! Beware all foreign objects!*—that now seemed to clog his throat?

“All right, Alex; I’m off to eat. You can stay here. As you wish.”

Merely teasing him, she was, threatening to leave him alone like that, grappling with .... Something from the evening. Something from evening.

She had turned to the door, but he called softly for her to wait. The false urgency of sleep. “Don’t leave. Not yet.” It was the curtain hanging down to him; when she moved, she had disturbed it. Ripples of air had jarred it. “I’m coming. Just a minute.”

He sat up in the bed and yawned a purely formal yawn, then legitimized it with a stretch. His arms reached outward, fists repelling like magnets similarly charged until the skin and muscles were taut across his chest and he felt able to speak to her. He wanted to tell her something from evening, but when he opened his mouth, he heard himself mumbling only. “Just a moment. Just a minute.”

She rested a hand on her hip and waited, tapping a false impatience on the floor. A game, clearly. She had never intended to leave him there alone; she had only meant to hurry him. It should have amused him. But there was something sinister about her. About him.

He got out of bed and turned his back to her while he dressed. Not ashamed, of course. No, he was not ashamed. It was just ... uncivil ... He could feel a weight, as if of oppression, force his eyes downward. He kept his eyes averted. There was still something to explain to her. From evening.

They walked slowly to the cafeteria. He realized he was not hungry. He saw the trays and sensed the identical contents hidden beneath steel hemispheres. He knew the odors. He guided his tray across the rail and breathed in the diffusion of the scents, all familiar to him. When he sat beside her, he

could not eat. A hint of nausea had followed him here and circled as if protectively about the food before him. He dropped his fork and stared at the faces and forms entering the cafeteria. He knew none of them, but he was looking for someone. Must be looking for someone, he thought, or why would that normally undifferentiated movement so intrigue him? Why the break into components? He looked toward the door and saw not uniformed columns but faces, distinguishable beneath blue and gold caps.

“Alex? What’s wrong, Alex?” When he felt the caress on his arm, he cringed rudely and involuntarily.

“Nothing,” he lied, knowing she would not accept it. He looked down at her tray; the food neatly ordered over its surface proved she too had not eaten.

“Do you want to go back?” she asked softly. He started, then realized she only meant back to their room. He nodded, reaching for his tray to carry to the front of the hall. Her firm hand fell on his. “Never mind that,” she said. “Someone will take care of it. We can go.” He let her lead him from the cafeteria. They passed two men in blue uniform. He studied their faces briefly, but did not know them and said nothing.

As she led him through the corridor, he felt alone there and resented the hand guiding him. She pulled a chair from the cluster of furniture in the room, and as her room slowly became his room, she began questioning him. The matter. The matter. What was the matter. *Matter is the resolution of energy when all becomes random and arbitrary.*

“Nothing. It’s all nothing.” But she persisted, and he finally admitted, “I must find him.”

“Who?”

He would not answer. He was vulnerable in the chair and an easy target. He stood to avoid her questions and paced

slowly. Narrow confines necessitating repeated turns and ...  
“Not that again, Alex. Just stop.” And she must have wanted him to say the name. Or the word for the man. “Who, Alex?”

She knew. She knew the uniforms as well as he did, for her sigh was not from ignorance but simple exasperation. She knew, but she could not force him to say anything.

“Alex, Alex. When are you going to give this up?”

The pacing had done no good. He was silent. “When I find him. When he ...”

“When he what?”

“When he ... tells me.”

“And what would that be?” she asked. “Oh Alex. All this. Have you learned nothing? Have you understood nothing?”

He could feel his anger mounting. When she again began to chide him, he let it burst. “Understand? Why, no one had has given me the chance to understand. You’re no different from the others. Like ... like Charles. Like the others, like ...” But he could not say the name.

She did not react as expected. She showed him merely an unnerving calmness. “Do you imagine, Alex, that you are unique in all this? Don’t be so fucking noble.”

“What’s that? What do you mean by that?”

She shrugged and turned away from him. “A warning. One I’m sure you will ignore.”

“I don’t understand” he said.

“Of course you don’t, Alex. I would hardly expect you to.”

But no, no. He would not tolerate that and broke away from her. She too, he thought. No different from the rest. “Occasionally loved,” he sneered. “That’s it, isn’t it? For you, that’s all there is.” She said nothing. “All right, then. I admit it.

I understand nothing. But I can't pretend I can simply accept that."

She turned to him quietly. Her calmness unsettled him and he lowered his eyes. "Do what you must, Alex," she said calmly, then paused for the return of his eyes. "I'll wait for you. Or rather, I'll try. This one time at least."

And he turned away. Tired of it. The false acceptance. The soothing words. Condescension. No more than that. "I don't want you to wait for me," he heard himself say. "It all means nothing if I know you are waiting."

She smiled. "You idiot. You'll know nothing. I've said I'll wait. You have no idea whether I'll keep that promise or not. But you can't stop me, you know. Either way, you cannot stop me." She stepped toward him. "You can perhaps tell me one thing, though. Will I be alone tonight?" He was silent. "Ha! So heroic. But don't flatter yourself. In the end, if you think about it, and I'm sure you will, you'll realize you have no power over that matter either."

It was a weak smile he offered her as he opened the door to the glaring white of the corridor. Alone now, he walked quickly to his room.

### III



Tracing the darkened ridges beneath his eyes in the mirror, he realized the week-long search had consumed him. The effort, the will, the concentration that slowly worked fatigue into those eyes—all warned him away from his reflected face. Tired yes, he thought, but not yet defeated. He would ignore the crescent bruises beneath his eyes and continue. A simple task, he had thought a week ago, but compounded by the ambiguities of a distant promise. “Available.” What had that meant? he wondered.

Although he had not found the benefactor, the search had ancillary rewards. He had eaten little beyond essential nourishment and his senses developed an acuity he had never experienced. When sitting in the cafeteria, he had studied, through mist rising from the coffee, faces arched over the rim of his raised cup. These objects of scrutiny now revealed to him patterns and secrets formerly lost in the seemingly unregulated flow of the swirl. Mr. X, thin, gray-haired, always entered two minutes after Mr. Y, an ebullient robust figure, who pranced into the cafeteria just as Alex finished the last drops of his first cup of coffee. Then another, staid and formal, followed carefully with ill-disguised arrogance that fooled no one. And others. Patterns. Quirks of behavior. Miss Z’s nervous glance about the cafeteria and moment’s hesitation as she entered, as if fearful of predators lurking among her cohorts, then her self-conscious mincing steps to the serving line, her eyes lowered surreptitiously, she must have thought, to her breasts. Juvenile, such public narcissism. She would never know how much he now knew of her.

Amusing, these fruits of perception, he thought, as he considered the now ordered flow, the routines revealed in the

cafeteria and repeated with variants in the auditorium. Some he did not enjoy. He scowled, recalling them, and the mirror scowled back to him. Charles, the greater patterns lost in obscene particulars; he trotted beside others, following their courses, gray and weak to Mr. X, ebullient to Mr. Y. Then lewdly returning Miss Z's nervous glances and reassuring her, no doubt, as to her dangerous allure. "Beautiful, Miss Z, most excellent. And were I not obese and impotent, I too would be worthy of your fear and distrust." And Gina as well, of course. Obstinacy too was routinized, he thought, her own recalcitrance falling into patterns: the jutting of her jaw, the arrogant shake of her head when halfway to the front of the cafeteria, the perfect strides of her ordered march beneath the anarchistic swing of her arms. All was becoming clear to him now and he could no longer adopt a respectful but false naïveté, however civil that might be.

He fumbled in the drawer for his razor, then turned on the water; it slowly grew hot and he let the steam wash his face, softening his skin. In the mirror, his reflection pled for rest. And yes, he had seen others too this past week. Distraught. Worn. Anxious faces entering through double-doors for the first time, gaping at the swirl, gaping at his own face, to them undistinguished from the rest—flow, counterflow, eddies in the swirl. He had offered no assistance. They would deal with what confronted them, he determined, without his help.

He turned to the misty image before him and saw now the tenacity masking the fatigue. Yes, he would find the benefactor. He would find him, despite the crescent bruises, despite the wearied flesh falling from his cheekbones. He picked up his razor, then heard an intruder. He turned to the curtain as the door closed softly. Over the rushing of the water

he cried, "What? Who's there?" He twisted the faucet, stopping the water-flow. The last drops washed the porcelain and trickled toward the drain. "Who's there?" Again, there was no answer. He closely drew back the curtain. Before him, in the chair, with the blue cap resting on his lap, sat the benefactor. His presence was clearly no coincidence; somehow, he had heard. "I wasn't expecting you," he said, knowing it was a lie. Like a statue on display, the benefactor remained framed in the doorway.

"Hello, Alex." There was no customary smile accompanying the greeting. Merely the movement of the arm as the benefactor motioned for him to sit. Like a fool, Alex obeyed, realizing his mistake too late. It was the old pattern emerging, master and slave. "How are you, Alex?"

It was an affront, he thought, yet he found himself reiterating his conditioned reply, "Fine, fine ..." He had been lured and trapped by his old role and struggled to break its hold. "I have things ..." he stammered.

The benefactor began to nod. There was something about that, the implication that all was known. He hated the suspicion that this too was perfectly predictable and perhaps regulated. Like the unlocked door and the three-day interval before he had discovered it. Like the search itself. Perhaps like his brief ... like his sadly ephemeral ... "How did you know I was looking for you?"

The benefactor shrugged. "It was quite obvious. One of the others, a Mr. ..."

"I don't know him," Alex snapped.

"No matter. You were noted as being rather intent on something. Concentrating unnaturally, it seemed, on doorways. That sort of thing."

"Is that forbidden?"

“No, no. And there’s no need to be sarcastic. I can simply leave if you wish.” He paused until the warning took effect, then proceeded. “In any case, we, or I should say he, paid no attention at first. No one’s business but your own, I suppose. But as it continued, and as whoever you seemed to be seeking showed no sign of appearing, despite the fact that you had nearly everyone here at your disposal, why, it got worrisome. He considered speaking to you, but then came to me.”

“And you ...”

“Oh yes. I knew right away, of course, but acted as if it were nothing. Just your way of thinking, I said. No need to bother with it. No one knows I’m here.”

Exposed, Alex thought. He had been too obvious. “I suppose I should thank you for all this.”

The benefactor merely laughed. “Oh come now, Alex. How blind must you insist everyone be? Why all this secrecy?” And there was a teasing quality in the voice that bothered Alex, but he could not decide whether it was real or imagined. “Why didn’t you simply send a message for me? It’s possible, you know. You could have simply ...”

“I could have stood in the auditorium screaming for you, you mean.”

“Well yes. That too, I suppose.”

“I didn’t. That’s all,” he said. “I considered it, but I didn’t want to involve others. I wanted to find you myself. It was a matter of pride.”

The benefactor remained silent for a few seconds, but Alex offered him nothing further. Each waited until the benefactor finally spoke, “So tell me, Alex. What is it?”

It was the whirr, he thought, the whirr, reborn in the benefactor’s compassion. He needed anger, spite, but he felt nothing. No tears of grief or rage. “A dream,” he began. “I

had this dream ...” Faces in the fog, he and the benefactor, walking together in the fog ...

“Dream?”

But no, it was not a dream. What did the benefactor know of dreams? “No, it’s more than that.” He heard a buzzer, muted and distant, and imagined double-doors creaking open. More faces. “I’ve been thinking recently ...” If only he could uncover the hidden pattern to things. “... about all of it,” he said. “My progress, and ... and us too.”

The benefactor looked at him as if in surprise, “Us?”

Alex ignored him. “There were barriers. Always barriers. Doors, hallways ending in cul-de-sacs. And questions. Those too. I knew nothing. Nothing at all.” He faced the benefactor with a strange jubilation, as if some of those barriers had fallen simply by being identified. “And then, all that supposedly changed. The progress—that was real; I was told it was real and I certainly felt it as real. Yet I see no proof of that today. No tangible evidence of that progress. No next step. And that ... that may be why I looked for you. That ...” But his confidence was destroyed in the benefactor’s sigh.

“No evidence? You’re serious?” The benefactor rubbed his thighs and squinted at the wall. “That’s surprising, Alex.” Then he stood and began to pace as Alex himself had once paced, measuring the dimensions of the room—length, center, turn width, one two three four, one two, one two three, one, one two ... He stopped and faced Alex. “So, Alex. You think you’re entitled to more now? Not just change, but an explanation? Not life, but a grand commentary of some sort?” Alex tried to answer, but the benefactor interrupted him. “And one based, I suppose, on facts or what you imagine to be facts? Hidden now, I suppose, behind those supposed barriers you speak of? Is that accurate?” Alex nodded dumbly. The

benefactor tapped his fingers before him and resumed his pacing, one two three four, one two, one two, perpendicular and parallel to the walls, length and width. "Barriers, as you call them," he said slowly. "You want to overcome them." He stopped directly in front of Alex. It was a threatening stance, but Alex did not acknowledge it and stared down into his feet, tapping tapping. "And what of them, Alex? Do you think they are simply accidents? Secondaries, I mean. To be discarded at will? Do you really think that? Consider for a moment, Alex. Think. What would we be without them? The two of us, I mean." The benefactor stepped away from him and stared toward the door. "Are they not definitions? In all senses of the word, I think."

But no, no. It was a trick, its devious logic designed to deter him. And he finally felt the annoyance and anger he had thus far suppressed. "No." Unwittingly, he took up the benefactor's vacated pathways, one two, one two, one two three four. "No. You've twisted it."

The benefactor sighed and stepped directly across Alex's path. "Listen now, Alex." He stood now centered in the silent walls, facing Alex. "Listen to me. You have made progress of course. And now our former relationship, and others too perhaps, all seem lacking in some way to you. All right. I'll grant you that. But now you're assuming, Alex, that I am inexorably bound up with you, that progress on your part redefines my own functions and powers. Or perhaps elevates me to a role I have never claimed. What you seek, Alex, might well be beyond me."

But no, no. It was still wrong, still warped. The benefactor was missing the main point. This was not about him. "Of course. You've helped me. I'm not asking ... What I mean is that while I've progressed, I'm still no better off than

before. In some sense, I mean. I still know nothing of this place. Nothing of its purpose. Nothing even of myself.” The benefactor had turned away and Alex realized he had perhaps understood more than he had let on. “But you, you do understand. You can still help me, despite what you claim. And that’s why you came here.”

The benefactor raised his eyes to him; they seemed wearied, as if the mere effort to look up had been too much for them. “I imagine you risked something searching for me, did you not?”

It sounded like another evasion, but Alex sensed it was not. “In that I had anything to risk at all, I suppose I have.”

“And what if it all came to nothing? Most things come to nothing in the end. What if the stake, however small, were lost?”

Alex was silent for a few seconds. If all came to nothing ... What of it? “I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. I’d endure that as I’ve endured all else, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said the benefactor, slowly nodding his head as his eyes fell to the floor. “You should simply have to endure it.” He quietly clasped his hands before him, then took several small slow steps until he came to the wall. He stood there, back to Alex, then turned as if to speak. His palms fell apart, the clasp remaining only in the fingertips. His hands encircled an imaginary sphere, which he juggled, released, and caught in his fingertips, rhythmically tapping the invisible curved surfaces. He dropped it; it fell. Then he sat down in the chair, his hands resting on his thighs. When he looked up, his entire face had yielded to the weariness formerly fixed only in his eyes. “It will comfort you, Alex, to know that that won’t be necessary. You do not have to lose your stake, whatever it was.

It will become no more real to you through its loss. And in that sense, Alex, you win.”

The concession brought no relief. The risk, or what he called a risk, had become merely abstract and no longer seemed a danger to him. Words only. Win, lose—these too were barely distinguishable, each vague and dependent on the other. He nodded and let the benefactor continue.

“I will introduce you to someone, who will give you what I cannot. He is called Mr. Henry. And perhaps you have heard of him.” Alex shook his head; the name was new to him. The benefactor did not respond to his denial and continued, “You may see him tonight, if you wish.”

“Who is he?” Alex asked. “The name.” Henry. It was as if something were missing. “I don’t know it.”

The benefactor shrugged. “A name. You will find out. I would not waste energy worrying about it now or preparing for it. Brood not, as we always used to say.”

Alex laughed defensively. No worry. No energy. An easy and pointless admonition. The benefactor continued. “I’m not toying with you, Alex. Nor trying to upset you. And please ...” He paused and breathed deeply, as if refreshed. “No sinister fantasies. Rather, I would recommend you give this no further thought. It is quite resolved.” He took a quick step forward and wrung an apparent stiffness from his arms. “Now, we mentioned some sort of risk.” He turned to Alex, his fatigue now gone, it seemed. “And while we need not delve into particulars, I believe ...”

“I don’t understand,” said Alex cautiously.

“Well!” The benefactor livened, a smile emerging now. “Let us simply say, the risk ... it has been acknowledged. You will not be ennobled by further sacrifice. Whatever you risked, I recommend you retrieve as soon as possible.” There was a

slight animation of the eyes to which Alex nodded silently, as the benefactor become more serious. “Now, that is settled. When it is time, I will come for you. Late tonight. Time enough, Alex, for whatever you need to do.” He paused. “I must leave you now. Each of us has other responsibilities. I won’t question yours, and for the moment, you will not question mine. I caution you again not to brood over this, nor plague yourself with useless conjectures.”

The benefactor turned to leave and Alex smiled politely. There was more, far more, but the gratitude he wished to express, the knowing exchange acknowledging a shared understanding—all was reduced to polite formality. He extended his hand. They had never shaken hands. The benefactor hesitated then reached toward him. Their hands met. Another step, he thought, as he relaxed his grip and the hand fell away. For an instant their eyes met, implying an equality he had never experienced. Then it passed. He sat, clinging to that instant. If he could just retain it, then ... The benefactor reached for the door.

“Wait!” Alex cried, and the hand relaxed on the doorknob. “I had something else. I wanted ...”

“What?” The benefactor released the doorknob.

“I wanted ... to thank you.”

But the respectful acceptance he had expected became a laugh. “For what?”

“For this,” he stammered, “and for everything else. That too.”

The benefactor shook his head and opened the door. He paused in the doorway and looked back. “Accepted, Alex,” he said. “But I wouldn’t brood over that either.” And he was gone.

Pearson DeJohns

*“So you found him.”*

*“Yes.”*

*“What did he tell you?”*

*“Nothing.”*

*“Lies. You’re lying.”*

*“No. Nothing. He said nothing.”*

Nothing.

Matching strides, the two men walked down the corridor. He had waited that evening until the hum in the corridors had hushed as the doors clicked shut. He remained alone, the sole conscious inhabitant of the “U.” In silence the benefactor had come to him, as he had promised, and in silence they left the room and marched through the glaring white corridor. His pride grew with each step and each new observation. It showed in his walk, firm, he thought, and purposeful, as in his manner—the slight elevation of his chin, a newfound habit he thought he might have stolen from Gina or perhaps developed during their few days together. It exalted him, lent him the illusion of stature as his physical height reached its full potential. They turned the first corner and he glanced at Gina’s door, behind which she doubtless lay innocently asleep. In the few steps it took to pass, he thanked her. It was the least he could do.

He had foreseen this moment a week earlier. He glanced quickly to the benefactor for confirmation. And it was there in the walk, as they matched pace step for step. The benefactor, formerly so indifferent to his questions, was now taking him seriously. Evidence of further progress. The clamped jaw, the rigidity in the face—reflecting his own manner and appearance. Those features were his now, no longer borrowed, no longer derived from others. He smiled inwardly as they passed the next corner and the entrance to the cafeteria.

Where they should have turned, the benefactor reached for him and touched his shoulder, as Alex unwittingly followed the angle of the corridor to the auditorium. He froze in the touch. Stupid! he thought, that he still remained subject to the

patterns imposed on him through his daily routines. He needed no elaboration of the look; despite his pride, he was once again effectively lost, his course untrimmed, it might be said. The benefactor stepped toward the thick wooden door at the end of the corridor and reached into his pocket. Alex chided himself for the way he had misconstrued that door and so many others. He had come to view them as fixed limitations, bare facts. Impenetrable and inviolable. But they were merely doors, he thought, as the benefactor fumbled with what must have been a key. Mere material, he thought.

He wondered how many others had been granted as much as he. Few had shown any concern over their assigned world or curiosity over what lay beyond it. No bitterness, no theorizing, much less serious consideration of their states. He had sensed early on that he stood apart from others, including Gina, and perhaps the proof lay in the slowly turning door. It eased inward, opening to another corridor, one less appallingly white. Muted, off-white, it might be said, a welcome dullness, in sharp contrast to the white wrathful glare of the corridors behind him. And suddenly he knew that the risk so minimized by the benefactor was real. Both had dismissed the prospects of loss or even irreversible change as trivial, had they not? but now, those abstracted fears took shape. Behind him, the doors lining the white corridor slept peacefully, indifferent to his agitation and excitement. He might never, he thought, attain that peace again. The urge to run back to the protective shield of his door thus grew, but he confronted it squarely and steeled himself against it. Negation. Merely the extreme limit of the positive, defining it in all senses. Yes. That was it. Only through understanding alternatives clearly and fully, only through acknowledging the negative, did positive choice take on meaning. That was it. He stared down the enticing lure of

the corridor. He needed no further evidence of the importance of his decision. It was there in the corridor, in and behind the doors, and far back in his room, in the soothing warmth of his bed. He turned his back on it. Before him, the benefactor had been waiting patiently, doubtless aware of the nature of Alex's hesitancy and unwilling to intrude on it.

Alex strode through the doorway and waited while the benefactor swung the slab closed and toyed with the lock. They stood still in the off-white, and he was surprised to hear the benefactor speak, surprised, albeit foolishly perhaps, that the moment should be disturbed by speech. "I'll leave this open," the benefactor said. "Simply pull this latch." Alex turned disdainfully. The benefactor pointed to a large brass hoop which hung on the face of the door. "It will lock automatically behind you when you leave. I'll set it that way." Why would he need the door? he grandly thought, although he said nothing; he had come too far to waste time in petty argument. "I won't stay with you; I'll simply take you there. And when you have found what you came here for, whatever you came for, Alex ..." Alex warned him with a look. He had passed the point of dissuasion. The benefactor stopped his moralizing and proceeded officially. "You can return this way. We are only going a short way from here and you cannot get confused."

To return by choice, rather than by official force—that represented a certain level of trust, he supposed. And through that trust, the benefactor had, in a sense, tricked him into compliance. He nodded. He would not have to submit to the indignity of a uniformed guard or guide. And as thanks, he would return by choice. The benefactor looked directly at him now. There could be no mistaking what was implicit in the stare. Alex nodded, accepting all conditions.

The door still puzzled him. He was surprised that the benefactor felt so little compunction about leaving it unlocked. What of the others? He had earned that door and the removal of its ponderous lock. Were others to be permitted the same privilege in a moment of idle curiosity? Through a casual push of the door? He had seen them do it on occasion on the way to the auditorium. Perhaps one had such an action routinized. What if such unnamed person, wandering aimlessly in late evening, found that door ajar and thus won cheap what he, through hazard huge, it might be said, must earn? What then? No. He could not let that pass. He motioned to the door. "What about ...?" He paused, hoping the benefactor would not sense the depth of his resentment. "What about that?" he asked. "What about the others?"

"The others?" the benefactor said, and from his perplexed look, it was clear he understood nothing.

"The door. It's open," said Alex, casually. Yes, his stammering would be attributed to his previous silence. Nothing more. "Anyone might test it."

"Oh, I see." The benefactor turned away. "Don't worry about that. It will be taken care of."

Alex thought to object, but to pursue that line might seem invidious. At least the problem had been considered; so he need not worry about hordes of curious and undeserving faces storming his new domain. "Taken care of." That would have to do.

He followed the benefactor to the end of the corridor, but the blue uniform stopped before him. "Here," it said as the arm extended to rest on a doorframe. "This is the door. Here." Alex walked to the arm and stood before the door; he glanced up, then down, taking in its full scope. It differed negligibly from his own and from all the others; there would

no clues in design, nor did he know exactly what he expected the bare wood to reveal. The arm dropped away, leaving him alone before the door. Behind him, fading now, the voice spoke calmly. "I'll be leaving you now. You may stay as long as you wish." Although he could not see it, he imagined the courteous bow. The steps clicked away in the distance.

He raised his fist awkwardly, then paused. The movement had triggered a shudder and he waited for the excess energy to expend itself. He squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. Slowly inhale, hold, and the air flowed from his lungs. He relaxed. The fist rose confidently now and he brought it down hard upon the wood. Once, twice, then again, giving no thought about disturbing anyone. Mr. Henry would hear; that was all that mattered. Let the entire corridor awaken in fear! They could do nothing now, and if curious faces emerged from behind the doors flanking him, he would smash them back with the contempt they deserved. He brought his fist down more forcefully and the door resounded. Three times he knocked and heard the grey walls echo his knocks, back to him three knocks, repeated, fading, and again. Yes, surely he was not imagining it; surely the echoes continued. Again he raised his fist but a voice from within held it harmless above his shoulder. He relaxed his fingers, mere hand now, and dropped it to his side. The voice returned, likely repeating itself, "Come in." The last unmastered energy left him, all the rest controlled and channeled. His hand clasped the knob, twisted it, and the unlocked door became a mere servant of his will. He pushed it open and stood majestically in the doorway.

"So you are Mr. A."

Before him sat a man he assumed was Mr. Henry, fondling a heavy wooden cane and tapping the floor between his feet. Expecting a uniform, Alex was surprised to see the

man's clothes were like those found in the swirl. He nodded, as the man leaned forward on his cane. An old man, Alex saw, older than he had imagined, although he could not tell whether the furrows in the face and the grey temples colored like the corridor itself spoke of age or weariness. The face broke into a conspiratorial smile and Alex returned it appreciatively, "Mr. Henry?"

"We've met, you think?" He paused. "But yes, you are correct. Indeed. You'll come in, won't you?" Alex stepped into the room and pushed the door closed behind him. It clicked. "Lock it, please," the man said.

The order surprised Alex, but he obeyed and flipped a small bolt to the right. Curious faces, from the "U," confined to the grey corridors, had no business here, he thought. Let them muse over the locked door. As Alex turned, the old man struggled as if against the infirmities of age to stand, slamming the cane down and pushing the floor away from him. He balanced momentarily in the equilibrium between standing and sitting, then willed the chair away from him. He stood unsteadily, supporting his weight on the cane, the legs apparently having long lost their strength. He nodded toward a chair, but Alex remained standing.

The room was not strikingly different from his own. A curtain, much like his, marked the entrance to what he supposed was a bathroom and another covered the far wall over the bed. No doubt behind that curtain was a raised circle; he wondered if the glass, in contrast to his own, was transparent. The walls were like his, with the workmanship only marginally superior. Monotony here served only as background, however, for along the walls were suspended several paintings and sketches, hardly works of genius, he thought, but interesting experiments in construction, form,

and composition. A painstaking organization revealed itself in the lines and slashes cut through each; but beyond the somewhat mechanical exercise of balance and counterpoint, he could see little meaning or value to them. He concluded they were the man's own work and thus said nothing.

"Do you like those?" the man asked.

"Yes. Yes. I find them ... interesting. The form. They are yours?"

"Yes," the man said, lowering his eyes. "They are mine. More recent work, and thus somewhat restrained, I think. Not ingenious, but as you say, interesting." The last word was flicked out to him playfully, but Alex was unsure how it was meant or how he should react. He opted for silence. After a quick survey of the sketches, the man turned to him with a smile. "You know me, Mr. A? I mean 'of me? You have heard much about me?"

"No," Alex said carefully, "but I have of course heard your name mentioned many times."

"In what contexts? Or I should say, with what intent? Kind? Derogatory?"

The old man's tone bothered Alex. Was all of this ironic? Was he being baited into false flattery? "Oh, neutral, I would say," he said, with forced nonchalance. "Just in passing. I know so little ..."

"Well," again the grin, "let us hope we can change all that." Alex nodded uneasily but politely. "I regret," said the man, raising his eyes, "not many come around anymore. At least, I cannot recall many. You are the first in quite some time. That's praiseworthy in itself."

Alex had not expected the compliment. *Superbi-et-invid-* ... He answered with weak thanks.

“The last,” continued the man, “I’m trying to recall the last. It was ...” He rubbed the grey furrows of his chin, the hues of the hand in conformity with the face, as if a mere extension of its sallow and worn features. In addition, he noticed, the hand shook slightly, barely perceptibly, and he wondered if the old man were aware of it. Momentary nervousness, perhaps not symptomatic of a debilitating condition. Mr. Henry had apparently given up his attempts at recollection with a sigh and his features returned to their earlier playfulness. “I’m afraid I can’t recall. Neither the time nor the name. Nor even the man himself. The two are the same for me—the name inseparable from the face.” He laughed. “You needn’t suspect my memory. It is simply that there have been so many, or were at one time. The last is of no more significance than the first. And why do you suppose that is?”

The question startled him, but he said nothing, as the man continued, “No, they send so very few these days. I suppose it is due to my age, for which the young ones can feel no affinity. Or perhaps it is a failing of the institution itself.” A monotone. No regret. No emotion. “Perhaps even a mark of success. Everyone is entitled to their own decisions and opinions, don’t you think?”

Alex was ready this time and answered with a perfunctory yes. There was no point in debating such banalities. The conspiratorial smile he had imagined earlier reappeared; he tried to return it, but the man’s ironic formality became serious. “Now. Shall we simply admit our purposes?” The grey hands tightened their grip on the cane.

“I believe,” Alex began, but could not commit himself. “I assume they are obvious.” It was a feeble attempt.

“Oh,” Mr. Henry said, his hands relaxing. “I see. Well, do you wish to elaborate on that? Obvious to whom?”

Alex said nothing.

“Perhaps you should sit down,” the old man said, pointing with his cane to a chair. It was harsh, like the chairs in his own room. Like the chairs in the auditorium. Alex squirmed in discomfort. “Yes?”

He smiled sheepishly. “I’m not sure ... I’m not certain I can do that. Elaborate, I mean.” The man offered no assistance and began to chuckle softly, as if amused. Alex continued, searching for the small comfort the chair obstinately withheld from him. “I believe, yes, I believe you have ... something for me.”

“Something,” the man repeated. “Yes. I suppose that is true. But what would that be?”

No escape, Alex thought. “Answers,” he finally said and the word brought him some relief. “Answers, yes. You are aware of my situation,” he looked for confirmation and was granted a nod. “You must know I have questions. Questions concerning ...” He paused.

“Yes?” the man encouraged him. “Concerning?”

He fought the harsh surfaces of the chair. “Concerning ... concerning *this!*” he blurted out in exasperation. Then more forcefully, “All of it!” He swept his arms out decisively. The discomfort of the chair vanished. He proceeded now confidently and rapidly. “The doors, the hallways, the routines, the uniforms, and why I ... why we are all here in the first place. I don’t understand everyone’s indifference to it. No one questions. No one ... Why even you. A seer of sorts. Confined to this sterile space.”

“Now now,” the man cautioned, leaning forward on his cane, “do not imagine that you know what others think.” And

again he smiled. “As I said, not many come to see me anymore.” Whether the man’s smile or his own outburst eased his tension, Alex could not tell. The formal protocols were at least behind them; that was all that mattered.

“Explanations,” Alex said calmly and confidently. “Facts, if you will.”

The man did not answer. Supported by his cane, he shuffled slowly to the bed, then bent forward—a difficult maneuver, Alex realized, given the man’s weak legs. Balancing himself on the cane with one hand, he reached under what appeared to be a blanket hanging from the bed and opened a drawer. Like his own, Alex thought; the two rooms were almost identical. The man fumbled about in the drawer and finally withdrew with some difficulty what appeared to be a wide scroll, which he tossed onto the bed. Then braced with one hand on the cane, the other on the mattress, he pushed himself erect. “There!” he muttered, as if in triumph, and leaned forward to pick up the scroll. Awkwardly clutching his cane and scroll, he shuffled back to his chair and nudged it toward the wall. “Room,” he said. “Room. Make room here.” Alex did not understand and remained seated until the old man poked at him with his cane. “Room. Room!” Alex dodged the cane, hardly a serious threat, then stood and pushed his chair away. The old man stood in the middle of the room; he seemed confused or perhaps merely frustrated over something, shifting his weight between his legs and cane and seeming to curse under his breath. Finally, he dropped the scroll to the floor and Alex realized he was merely attempting to sit. He hurried to his side and offered an arm for support; at that, the old man smiled, clutched his arm, and slowly eased himself to the floor. In the process, he dropped his cane and it clattered and rolled beyond reach. “Shall have to retrieve

that,” he said, reaching for it feebly. Alex easily caught it and handed it back to him.

“Thank you,” the man said, taking the cane and fondling it. “Thank you. That was generous of you.” He was still grinning, although now his attention seemed fixed on the scroll. He inched himself clumsily to his right and motioned Alex to sit beside him. The two sat cross-legged before the scroll. “Now,” said Mr. Henry, exchanging his cane for the scroll, “I think you might find this of some interest.” And slowly, carefully, he began to remove the bands which held it closed. He must have noticed the confusion in Alex’s face and quickly added, “Oh, don’t worry. It’s not just another of my creative works. Mine, yes. But unlike those.” He waved toward the wall. “Its value is not aesthetic; so you need not worry about civility.”

Alex could not restrain a childish anticipation as a rubber band reached the end of the roll and flipped lightly away. The man’s slow methodical unbinding of the scroll only added to his impatience. But each time he subtly raised his hand in an offer of help, the man’s hands would just as subtly jerk away. He was not to be denied his small drama and Alex withheld as best he could all signs of eagerness; impatience would only delay things further.

When the bands had been removed, the man unrolled about an inch of the scroll and peeked inside. As if assured in some way—were there other scrolls? was he worried about its orientation?—he positioned it in front of him on the floor and unrolled about three or four inches. The roll itself blocked Alex’s view. All he could make out were a series of what seemed to be notations, too small and distant to be legible, and a dark borderline. He strained to see more, but the roll moved slightly away as he did so. He settled back, vowing to wait until

all was revealed. The man apparently intended to offer an explanatory gloss as he unrolled the scroll; there was little Alex could thus do to hasten the process, and each time he raised his eyes to peer over the roll, it moved, as subtly as the hands, slightly to the right to compensate for his higher vantage.

“Now,” said Mr. Henry, studying the band of revealed scroll, “this is very early work. Years ago, yes; the exact date escapes me. But I might have it ...” His words trailed off, as if he sought an inscription in the nearly illegible notations. Alex grew annoyed—what did dates of composition matter?—but he was helpless. “No, no. I can’t ...” The eyes looked up and down; Alex started as another few inches were exposed. He forced himself to sit still. “Can’t seem to find it here. Bother!” The face slowly, and infuriatingly, turned to him with a smile. “It doesn’t concern us, does it?”

Alex shook his head in an unconvincing show of indifference.

“Now,” said Mr. Henry, as he unrolled another tantalizing strip. Alex saw the apex of two wide dark bands joined at the edge of the roll. As more was revealed, these lines flowed to the edge of the paper and proceeded parallel to it. In the bounded area were many boxes and squares, each with its own illegible label. He concentrated intently on the design, thus far a dark parabolic curve outlining an angular maze. “These,” said Mr. Henry, indicating the wide borders, “are ... well ... Call it what you will. ‘Here be dragons’, it once was said. For the moment we shall consider these limits absolute.” He unrolled another fragment and Alex thought the scroll might be at least half exposed, as the bounding lines began to converge in perfect bilateral symmetry. The old man paused and looked intently at Alex, who studied the lines and enclosed maze, trying to divine its order. “Does any of this seem

familiar to you?” Alex looked up in surprise, but the grey fingers pointed fiercely to the scroll and Alex turned back to it. Then in the middle, in the exact middle of the enclosed maze, something caught his attention. The rambling maze had there coalesced into a clearly defined “U.” He stared at it, then saw, excited now, that on two corners, the “U” opened into large boxes. All along its edges were smaller boxes—rooms! He shot a glance at the man for confirmation, “Is this ...” and saw the nod. He quickly surveyed the entirety of the design, as Mr. Henry unrolled the remainder of the scroll. He had guessed correctly about the symmetry; the left-hand portion of the chart was indistinguishable from the right. He traced the patterns surrounding the “U” and tried to identify openings and slashes in the lines. Clearly, they indicated doors. And yes, in the auditorium, or what he concluded represented the auditorium, there were two telling slashes on the left-hand line, the double-doors in the wall, surely. Why obviously! He could not suppress his glee and turned excitedly to Mr. Henry. “Where?” he cried. “Point us out. Where are we?”

“We?” repeated Mr. Henry, as if taken aback by the reference. Then he bent to the chart, and yes, his eyes focused on the center portion of the maze. “Well,” he said slowly, “I suppose ...”

But Alex could not wait and pointed eagerly to a small narrow passage that flowed out of the corner of the “U.” “There! Right there! That’s it, isn’t? That’s exactly where we are.”

The man rocked himself back and cocked his head at the chart. “Yes ... You ... Well yes, I suppose so. I’ve never really thought about that, but ...”

“Suppose so?” Alex cried. “Why right there!” And he jabbed at the scroll. “It’s obvious. You surely don’t think I

can't recognize it, do you? You can't even pretend to think that. Look! Right there!"

"Then why do you ask?" the man said calmly. "If indeed it is so obvious."

The question stunned him but he manufactured a flustered response. "Why, why, for ... well, for confirmation, that's all. Why, look for yourself." He realized how foolish he must have appeared, pointing excitedly to the chart as if it were he, and not Mr. Henry, who had constructed it. He continued his examination, though more calmly. He ran his hands over the surface; the ink and paper formed a continuum, smooth to his touch. His hand fell on the far right-hand edge of the chart, where the bordering lines converged. "And this?" he asked. "This. Explain this."

But Mr. Henry brushed him aside, reaching to the left under Alex's arm and incredibly! incredibly! he began to roll up the chart. Alex looked on dumbfounded, then shrieked "No! No! You mustn't do that!" He bent protectively over the scroll, blocking the man's efforts to take it from him. "You can't do that!"

But Mr. Henry glared at him with compelling force. Alex yielded to him and, now helpless, watched the chart disappear within the roll, as the grey hands worked slowly and methodically, tapping the edges to ensure their evenness, patting out errors. Soon, it was merely a scroll. "But wait," Alex pleaded. "Wait!"

The man ignored him and looked about the floor, searching for something, Alex thought, perhaps another chart, a text perhaps. He twisted gracelessly, still seated, and his grey quaking hands groped over the carpet. Alex self-consciously took up the search, as if mimicking him, glancing with overt seriousness over the floor as if effort alone might lead to

discovery. But he found nothing and as he turned confused to Mr. Henry, the old man sighed, reached clumsily into his shirt pocket and took out a rubber band, to replace the one that had so maliciously flipped away. He stretched it over his fingers, then cupped his hand over the end of the scroll and released it.

Annoyed at his own ignorant search, Alex reached quickly for the scroll, but the old man pulled it away. "Can't we at least discuss it?"

Keeping the scroll tauntingly just out of reach, Mr. Henry turned to him. "Discuss? Why certainly."

"Then why ..." Alex pointed to the closed scroll.

"Oh that," said the man derisively, his contempt seemingly directed not at Alex, but at what he had claimed to be his own work. "That would merely get in the way. You have seen enough of it."

"But that's ..." he stammered. "How can we discuss it, as you say, without having it in front of us? It's a map. A map of this place."

"Indeed," said the man and tossed the scroll toward the bed. It hit the face of the drawer and dropped to the floor. "Indeed it is. My own. As I said, an early effort. Amateurish at best. But interesting in its own way, don't you think?"

He sat in silence.

The man continued, "And what do you propose we do with it? You mentioned discussion."

"Well, surely," Alex said, but his thoughts were confused. "More than discussion. What I mean is, there it is, all in the chart. The structure, obvious, even to me. And that maze," he blurted in frustration. "How can you just toss it away like that?"

The man shrugged. “Mazes, corridors, rooms ... What of them? As I said, an early effort. I constructed that long ago, from what few observations I could make. I too found it rather compelling, and I too studied it for days, feeling it would reveal something to me if I could simply concentrate on its detail. And certainly, it accounts for much that you have experienced here. It has a rather elegant symmetry and, as you say, its referents are easily recognizable. But ...” he shook his finger “I could see it was not thorough. Even you would be soon dissatisfied with it. Even you would soon tire of the convenient analogues to what you know—the lines, the slashes, the boundaries themselves. Agreed?”

Alex tried to regain his composure. He made a final effort to salvage the chart. “Then what about the notations? You didn’t give me time to read them. What do they say?”

The old man glanced to the chart, rolled and distant against the bed. “I have forgotten,” he said. “Oh, not entirely of course. I remember some of them. But my ability to read even my own handwriting has decreased considerably. In any case, those that I do remember and those that I can still decipher are of little utility.”

“Like what?” Alex demanded. “Give me an example.”

“Well,” he sighed, “there are several dates and several explanations for certain oddities of design—errors, I assume. And several remarks critiquing specific observations; neither the original conjecture nor the critique yield much. For example, in that section you pointed out, there is a date I can no longer read and the words—I still remember!—‘factual observation, surrounding area extrapolated’. You see?” He turned back to Alex. “It’s nothing.”

“Well yes, in that case. But I would still like ...”

“I lent it to others. That was perhaps not wise. You see the results. Aimless commentary. Petty criticisms and corrections. Did you recognize your own? It was ...”

Alex started. “What did you say?”

“Me? Nothing. I was talking about the desultory nature of commentary. I apologize for ...”

“No no. You said ... you asked if ...”

The man sighed. “Whatever it was hardly matters. If it concerned a specific set of notations, I may well have been mistaken. You must understand, there were so many in those days.”

“But wait.”

He was cut off, as the old man suddenly and decisively raised his hand. His face contorted, as if something had occurred to him which he was struggling to articulate. “Yes!” he said. “Now consider this!” He twisted as if trying to reach behind him, then gestured toward the table. “Could you hand me a few things? There. You’ll find pens and paper. Anything will do.”

Alex moved obediently. The old man’s immobility was disconcerting. On the table lay several sheets of blank paper over which a few pens were scattered. He considered the problem and cursed himself for allowing it to become a problem, as the old man rasped impatiently “Quickly, quickly. Anything will do. Any or all of it, if you wish.” It was the first time Alex had noticed any irritation in the man and he hurriedly seized the paper, balanced the pens on top, then watched helplessly as two dropped to the floor. He placed the paper and remaining pens before Mr. Henry and tried to ignore his derisive snort. Best not to press the man too far, he thought. He would keep his childish protests to himself.

Mr. Henry shuffled through the papers and lay the pens to one side. Then, selecting a few sheets at random, he folded them, pressed a crease along the fold, and tore them in half. He then folded the torn sheets, creased them, and tore them again along the crease. Again, and they were now in eighths. "There," he muttered laying them aside. "That will do. That will have to do for now." He picked up the pens and began to arrange them before him, the first one almost at arm's length—a difficult task for him. Several times, he returned to his sitting position to catch his breath. Finally, the pens satisfied him, first one, then below it a row of two, and then below that a row of four. A simple geometric progression, Alex noted, but said nothing; he had already tested the man's patience once. The old man then picked up the sheet of torn paper and slowly arranged a row of eight beneath the pens, then altered the pattern into what was apparently an arithmetic decline, with a row of five and finally two. He studied the pattern and as if as an afterthought, placed the entire remaining pile of torn paper and unused pens directly below the final row. He sat back and studied it. Alex concentrated on the pattern: 1, 2, 4 / 8, 5, 2, then the excess. And again, 1, 2, 4 / 8, 5, 2 / excess. He turned confused to the old man, who maintained his critical gaze on his work. "It is adequate, I suppose. Do you see anything there? Any trace of order?"

Alex tried to relate the pattern to what he had seen in the chart. A hierarchy, he supposed, qualitative and quantitative differences, yes. A progression of sorts—geometric, arithmetic, and then ... Several hypotheses were emerging, but none was convincing.

The man spoke, "You see the development, I assume. Movement. You detect a pattern, an order, but experience no

revelation. Am I correct? You might attempt a method similar to the one used earlier.”

Attempt a method, Alex thought, then considered the last pile and the apparently disordered excess. Yes, first to position oneself, that was what he meant. And then ... movement. Singularity, expansion, individuation ... The middle row ... His hand began to rise; he was about to indicate the middle row, when the grey arms shot out and scattered both pens and paper; the scraps now lay in complete disorder. “Wait! I was just beginning to make sense of it.”

“Put these back!” the man snapped. Alex docilely gathered up the papers and pens and returned them to the table. It was at this moment he recalled the pamphlets—presumably his pamphlets—in the hands of the interrogators.

“Now,” said the man, “I realize what you are thinking. And that is good. But there is more.” He waited for Alex to sit, then continued. “Consider this. We have thus far dealt with analytic models, by their very nature insufficient, incomplete. You know that yourself, and you have always known it.” There was a hint of contempt in his voice and Alex felt a hidden rebellion growing with him. But the man continued. “These are not enough. Mere diversions. Agreed? Aesthetic, if you will. Nothing more. Of no import whatsoever.” He must have sensed Alex’s unexpressed skepticism, and added as a concession, “Perhaps you would not go so far, but that is perhaps because you have yet to come so far.”

I must calm myself, thought Alex. Surely the man’s words have some meaning or I would not have been led here. I must not allow myself to miss this opportunity. *Superbi-et-invidi-ira Superbi-et-invidi-ira*. He fought his irritation with forced concentration, trying to ignore the paternalistic tone the man seemed to have adopted. “Let us take a more sweeping view.

Obviously, we can construct such systems as you have seen forever, without once proceeding beyond mere mechanical analysis. I am certain you have done so yourself. And perhaps written of it, as I have done. As we all have done. Let us now forget all that, the arbitrary boundaries of the chart and the formal scheme of pens and paper. Now!" He retrieved his cane, which had lain uselessly in his lap, and held it vertically before him. He grasped it near the top, his arms extended, and drove it into the floor. Channeling his strength into the cane, he began to rock back and forth, slowly and rhythmically as the words began to flow. He no longer looked at Alex, no longer indicated that Alex's presence was important to him in any way. Alex tried to concentrate on the words, but the rocking rocking distracted him, and he could only pick out particular words and occasionally a phrase—contextless and thus unintelligible.

But then a phrase. A single phrase.

"Let us ... for the moment ..." And it was just after that. "... at sea!"

"At sea." The image whirled up before him. "Endless sea, unrepeatable waves and fathomless depths. The sea need not be dependent on a shore; the converse rather ..." Alex stared incredulous. The old man had thrown off the identity he had thus far exhibited and had become little other than the mere rocking. His face, the grey features, no longer seemed as they had moments earlier, but had taken on a much more sinister familiarity. "... the shore an illusion. No longer necessary. No longer of value. Like cardboard, Mr. A! Broomsticks. Dried and rotting in the sun. Dust and ashes ..." No, it was impossible, he thought. A coincidence. He recoiled from the blind and indifferent rocking as if in fear. He stood and began to retreat to the door. "... and adrift on those seas ..." Alex

reached for the doorknob and bolt, as the old man cried: "The sea is the way!" At that instant, the rocking ceased and the old man, the once frail and slight old man, suddenly loomed up before him, shot to his feet and seemed to expand to fill the entire room as he shouted: "You, Alexander A! You!"

Mad! Alex thought. The man was mad! A purveyor of inked illusions. He would not be humiliated by this man. The man screamed at him and swung his cane, "Fool! You have seen nothing. Nothing! I have a wilderness of schemes for you and you will listen to all of them. You'll not escape so easily." The man dropped his cane and grabbed Alex, tugging at his hands. So that was it, thought Alex, as he twisted the belligerent fingers from him, then shoved the man away. He staggered backwards, breaking his fall on the table. The pens fell and the papers drifted indifferently into the air, but the man remained on his feet. Supporting himself on the table, he began to laugh hideously.

Alex unlocked the door and backed into the corridor as the laugh built. The man came at him again, staggering and laugh laugh laugh. He braced himself, but the door slammed shut and he heard the bolt slide shut, as the now muffled laugh seemed to mock him.

Enraged, he impulsively banged at the door, locked and now impregnable. Duped! he thought. Yes, that was it. He had again been used, as the others had used him and toyed with him. He slammed his fist into the door then gripped the doorknob with both hands and twisted, cursing first silently then aloud and louder still. A figure passed him in the corridor and he glared at it as it stole furtively away. Like the others, he thought in contempt, and stood back from the door. He drew back his foot and kicked at it, thinking to dent it, but all he saw was the black tribute to his heel. He kicked once more, then

threw his full weight into the door. The black bruises multiplied over its surface. “You!” he screamed, to the door, to the old man within, to the imagined witnesses. All were indifferent. Then he heard it from behind the door and then merged with the door—a laugh slowly building until the door itself reverberated with the laugh. He stepped back and in final desperation hurled himself at the door. It threw him to the floor. He scrambled to his feet, wheeled away, and fled. Running down the corridor. Fear ... But no! he thought. It was not fear. It was contempt. That was it! Contempt. And he heard the words gaining on him, the final jeering taunt: *Your past is cardboard, Mr. A. Can you swim on nothing?*

Through the hall, running through the hall, footsteps echoing through the hall, the sound of his running. He wanted to disintegrate into the echoes to resonate inaudibly through those who passed. The indifferent passers-by; the hurrying passers-by. Excusing themselves. He brushed one aside. A disgusting fly, flitting outside its bounds. Even the touch defiled him, he thought. Let them all march toward Mr. Henry. A hundred Mr. Henrys. Fools! Let them pass ...

His hatred turned on all he met, both those who dared walk past as well as those whose timid eyes were hidden behind half-open doorways. The wide eyes of innocence. A fly’s eyes of innocence. Flitting forms, dodging his touch. Fatal touch! His own now *lethal touch* ...

And he flew toward her. Her foolish resistance ...

The pain surprised him. Her stinging fingers boring into his arms. Venomous, they must have been. “Easy!” *Fatal touch, lethal touch*. Now another’s. His energy stolen by her defiance. He struggled briefly, then yielded to what much have been pain. The sting became a dull discomfort ...

The glare. The whiteness. It was the white that first returned through the shroud of his fantasy, then a murmuring over the silence, which merged into darkness. Lingering darkness, calming, slowly dispersing in the monotonous white of the walls, drab and familiar, leaving him calm and wasted.

His breath returned to him as his own. Around him, the walls took shape and formed a room. Curtains, bed, chairs. His or another's. Through it all came the soothing tones, "Easy." He breathed, inhale and exhale, the involuntary motions of life. "All right?" It was her voice. "Easy, Alex."

Easy Alex, tall and mighty. Easy Alex, athletic, slim, and beautiful. Naked marble, unashamed. Easy Alex, crowned with laurel. Easy Alex was a Great Man! "Alex!" Not now! Easy Alex, running and whirling in an astonishing pirouette. Grace and agility. "Alex!" Invincible. World-renowned ...

"Alex!"

"Yes." The adoration of the multitudes.

"Can I get you something?"

Praise. Get me fame and glory. Laurel wreaths. Dance to dithyrambs as I return in triumph.

"Something to drink? Water?"

Surrogate wine. It would have to do, they said. Ambrosia. Water for heroes. Water for leaping to unbounded heights. And water for running. All hail to his running. No one. No one had seen ...

"Water? Alex?"

Nor heard. No one knew his name. The laurel was dirty twisted hair beneath golden wings pinned amateurishly to his cap. He shuddered, "Yes. Please." Silly Alex. Foolish Alex. Stumbling before the multitudes. Hiding his defeated head with bloody hands, his feet chalk-white and worn from running. The water was brought to him on a hand so steady it

embarrassed him. He became awkward and clumsy, his grace gone, and he laughed as the water splashed over his thighs. “Pissed myself!” How ignominious. To do that before the multitudes. Mocked and unabashed he drank, pouring the swirling liquid into his mouth and of course of course of course predictably all over his chin and into his lap. It chilled him and he shook the stray drops from his face. Like a dog, he thought with amusement. Bathed in the whirr.

He nodded as she offered a refill and this time he managed to keep the water in the cup. He sipped carefully; the water flowed over his tongue, splashed, and for an instant hung from his palate before washing his throat. “Good,” he said stupidly. “Thank you. Thank you.” As his throat dried, he realized it was all merely, merrily, another bad time. Just another bad time.

“Did you see him?” There was a trace of sarcasm in her voice approaching contempt, to which he unreluctantly and passively submitted. “Was it ...” She paused as his obedient and acquiescent nod ticked to a halt. “Mr. Henry. It was Mr. Henry, correct?”

*Mr. Henry. John Henry* to be precise. I too became a legend—*Praise Be To Greater Powers*—and spat out my blackened guts beneath the mountain. “Alex!” The command snapped him back, as he sought the strength to drive the rising ball in his throat back within him. “Alex, it’s pointless.” Exasperation. That was fitting. He should be given no quarter. Hung from the yardarm as bait for vermin. “Alex!” Even his martyrdom should be denied and the death-mask stripped from his face. The shudder, he realized, was not his own. Curiously external. Hands. The *fatal touch*. And he felt her shaking him, pulling him back to her “... yes ...” Not enough!

“Yes!” The shudder stopped; the hands remained clamped on his shoulders. Strongly. Firmly.

They released him. “Here. You dropped your cup. I’m afraid to offer you more.”

He noticed the cup lying between his feet, a ship floating on a wasted sea. It disappeared into the hand and soon returned with another sea, clear and tantalizing. “You trust me, I see,” he said with forced gaiety. “That’s comforting.” He reached for it, once, twice, then clutched it with both hands and guided it to his lips. He saluted the water, “Mr. Henry. To Mr. Henry,” and drank deeply.

“I warned you, Alex.”

Holding the cup in one hand, he wiped imaginary errors from his lips. “Good,” he laughed. Progress. And indeed it was all so good. All so predictably good. And that was why she was talking to him. That was precisely what she meant when she repeated “warned” him. Yes, warned. Indeed warned. He was about to commend her insight when all grew suddenly vague and self-contradictory. “Warned,” he said, the word disappearing into its literal components. The poet’s legerdemain: base, bastard, base ...

He must have garbled his response; for she was bent over him and demanding something he could not comprehend, something to torment him, he feared. No doubt he deserved it, he thought, and when he looked up in stoic acceptance, she began to laugh. Why that? he wondered. He had only meant to be civil.

“You idiot, Alex.”

And yes, yes. He could accept that and he agreed quickly despite certain mazes and papers and pens and pamphlets that kept drifting into view. After watching them float mysteriously

before him, he determined they bored him and asked her politely to remove them. He had no need of them at this time.

“What?” The sting of her voice awakened him. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing. I was drifting.”

Again, she seemed not to understand; when he tried to explain it all to her, she merely laughed. But why? Why? He gradually realized it was his own laughter that so amused her. Self-generated and perpetuated, it crushed his rationality and he was babbling something even he did not understand.

Something about ships and boarders and storms and broomsticks—his captain’s log rendered chaotic by the laughter. The laugh died slowly, stubbornly struggling against the question “What? What are you ranting about, Alex?”

“Ranting. What is ranting?” He grasped at the laugh, trying to revive it; but it had run its vulnerable course and its fire died in her eyes. He waited as the lingering traces lost their glow and became mere ashes. Dirty wet ashes. “I ... it was a dream we once had.”

“What dream? And who is ‘we’?”

But the words seemed inappropriate. Even explanation too arcane for her. He could not describe the complexities without which all would emerge disjointed. “It’s all ... too complicated.”

“Come on. What is it?”

“No,” he insisted. “It’s lunacy.” And when all became ashes, it was exactly that.

“You want to rest?”

He rubbed his eyes. Tired. Familiar fatigue. Yet he did not want to sleep now. “No. I’m fine.”

“All right then.” She was standing next to him. Glimmer of past glory, forgetting, laughter. “Well,” she ambled through

his vision and halted in the periphery. "So now you've seen him."

He tested the image of the distant face. Mr. Henry, John Henry, Henry Henry. Yes, clear and distinct. But growing so remote, he thought, and she too had sensed it. "Yes." He thought a shrug would be suit his feelings, but it came to him too late and he continued without gesture, as a statue weakened by an extended epitaph cut deep into its base. "Yes, I saw him."

"Did he get angry? Did you annoy him?" There was irony in her voice and he wondered where it would lead.

"No, not that," he answered, but he was weak, so weak. "I was violent. I pushed him, and he ..."

"Violent? Really?" She pursed her lips. "You, Alex? I am impressed. Did you hurt him? Did you 'run him through' as pirates do?"

"No, no ... I ..." He saw the pens and papers scattered over the table. "I just pushed him." He laughed cynically. "He stumbled. He didn't even fall."

She nodded and stepped away from him. "Let me see," she began, "let me see if I can reconstruct all of it for you. Would you like that, Alex?" He said nothing. "It doesn't matter, I suppose. It's just that I'd hate you to feel heroic. Or unique." She smiled and he turned away. She stood stiffly before him and raised her arms. "First the knock, Alex. Remember the knock? Assured, demanding. It was confident, wasn't it? You raised yourself to your full height. Yes, I'm sure of that. Then the introductions. The strange old man and you, Alex, exchanging pleasantries and idle flattery." She dropped her arms and bent over him, her eyes raking his face. "Correct my errors, Alex. Accuracy is of the essence." Then she pulled her head away and continued. "Now the confrontation.

Confidently, you proceed. Arrogant and proud.” She paused and gazed toward the curtain. “Brilliant, you were, in the glow of the artificial light.” He had no will to object. “Triumphant finally over the fools of the past. Did you discuss his art? You, the connoisseur of taste?” She paused, grinning at him, “wickedly” one might have said. “But something happens, Alex. The words jumble and drift in on themselves. What you thought would be the final tribute to your noble intellect? Mere drivell!” Corridors and running, running. She turned her back to him. “The rest—the violence, that is—which you find significant enough to mention, becomes also mere nonsense. All that remains ...” she rotated slowly, unveiling the piercing eyes, “well, Alex. Here you are.” She spread her arms out to him as if offering an embrace. “Recovering. Not convincingly. You and your convenient truths.” She let a smile curl upward on her lips. “How’s that, Alex? Reasonably close?” The hero rests from his wandering; his soul-mates burned in a pyre ...

There seemed little point in objecting. It took no seer to come up with this. So he accepted all of it. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “You’re right. Or you may as well be right.”

“I know,” she said. “I don’t need your verification. I could have predicted it all beforehand. But since you wouldn’t have listened, a warning was enough. And I did wait for you, as I promised.”

“I suppose I should thank you.”

“No. You’ve been enough of a fool already. Eventually, Alex. You may learn.”

And then all changed. A shift of her shoulders. There! And in her hips! As the spite in her face retreated behind a sinister gentleness. Did he imagine that? Could he have imagined that?

“No!” he said, shaken by the transformation, the hint of seduction a final insult and humiliation. He would not permit it. But his humiliation became coupled to desire that grew unimpeded by his will. And he recalled their first meeting, her mastery as she forced his eyes over her body. He recalled her taunting references to Charles. That too. And then the rest. The flirtations. The malicious laughter.

“Come on, Alex.” And it was a challenge now.

He struggled free of the eyes. “No!”

And then the mask of surprise, feigned as all was feigned. And he permitted it! That was worse than all! That he submitted both to insult and to protests of innocence. Enraged, he withdrew into his chair, a mere relic of himself and of his will, as she knelt beside him and laid her hands on his knees, as she stroked his legs with rhythmic caresses and the soft repetition of his name. She could annihilate him, he thought, but she denied him even that, and continued stroking him, rocking him, calming him with his whispered name. Merely the repetition, the rocking, the name, to the counterpointed pulse of his heartbeat.

Perturbations. It was all so upsetting. Visions of childhood. Visions of visions, memories of visions and other memories. The past merged into its re-imaginings. This warmth, the insistent prodding of another's breath. Could ease be so generated? And how? How could the comfort taunt him so?

He was trying to focus on the broomsticks locked in cardboard. What had they been for? Surely they had at least an imagined function, but what? Again, the memory became only of another memory: recovering from sleep while awaiting the benefactor and considering the same question. The uniform blotted it all out and he was left waiting.

He allowed his hand to trace the rounded outline of her hips. All night like this, he thought, a span of consciousness interspersed with sleep. A series of awakenings groping toward morning. Badly phrased! he scoffed. And what was it all but routine? At least those lines, he thought, the form his hands traced was real enough, a particle of sense and clarity. He moved his hand upward to the shoulders and let it rest there smothered in her hair. She stirred in dreams at some unseen phantom called forth by the touch. His hand dropped to the sheet between them.

Time to renew his life, he thought grandly. Yet where had such rebirths led him? and the count—what was it now? The emotions were all too familiar. By closing his eyes and disregarding the warmth, he could flee this moment to another, the opaque glass blurring a face “Jaund-hissed view” framed in blue and gold; and other mornings, other faces that he could not clearly recall. When would time construct a final

barrier? He opened his eyes as the flesh beside him rose and fell. Like the sea, he thought.

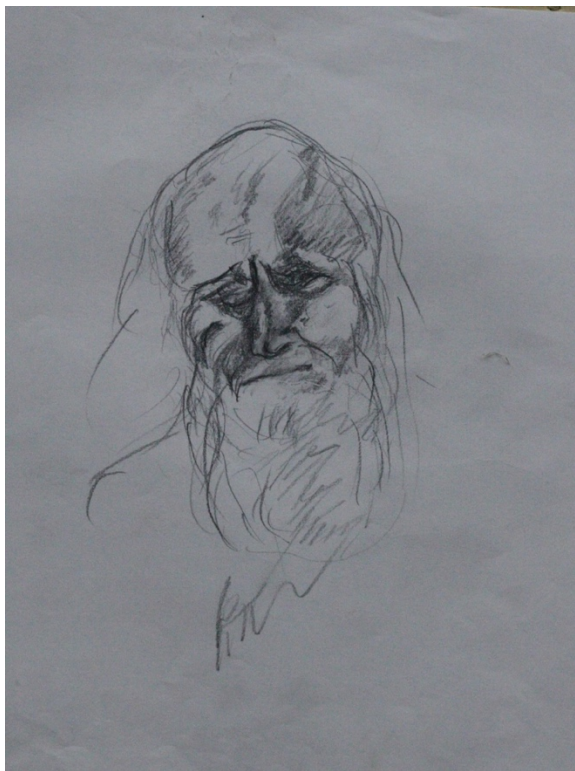
He thought then, stupidly, if he could only arise from the bed without disturbing the rhythmic rise and fall, if he could just slip unnoticed from her sleep-deadened sense, then all would vanish. His failures; the shame of his chivalric quests. Yes. The reasoning was inexplicable, yet the conclusions strangely convincing. He raised the sheet and began to inch his body away from her. Yes, it is said that there exists a precise degree of change animate beings are able to sense. *“And thus, gentlemen, if we raise the temperature surrounding the frog at a steady rate so slow that each degree of change falls below the threshold of perception, we will find that, unable to sense the change in temperature, delta t let us say, the frog makes no attempt to escape the rising heat, even though he will literally boil to death!”* And thus, unmoving, he emerged from under the sheet, placed his feet noiselessly on the rug, and stood. But too soon! Too quickly! He had violated the threshold. Relieved of his weight, the mattress rose and rocked her. She rolled face up and her arm fell on the imprint-warm too, it might be--left by his body. As the arm inspected the surface, her face contorted as if in confusion, or perhaps irritation. Such a foolish game! Such a futile exercise! He heard his name, inaccurately formed on semi-conscious lips, then, clearer now, articulated as a question. She might leap up, he thought, horrified at his absence. Rage at his secret departure and the solitude he had imposed. But not that, not even that, and he could not refrain from a cynical laugh as she looked at him haughtily as though he were nothing more than an impudent child. “What are you doing there? Come to bed.” And she rolled toward the wall. Not a trace of concern had he heard in that voice, but a mere command, not harsh as if expecting opposition or even resistance, but casual, assuming

obedience. Assuming and thus demanding in the strongest sense. In petty defiance he remained standing, naked and foolish beside her. She did not turn back to him nor even express annoyance. So little did his presence mean to her! Incensed, he thought to leave. Yes. He could do that. Dress himself, loudly and carelessly so that she might hear but no, not so loudly that she gained full consciousness. Rather ...

To scream and be truly heard! He opened his mouth. He heard nothing. The silent shriek of a mute dreamer.

He lay down over the blanket as she rolled from the wall and draped a lifeless arm over his chest. His naked chest, he thought, considering the arm. With his head limp, resting on the sheet, he could not see his body over the arm. It frightened him, as if his nakedness might be more vulnerable if invisible, and he raised himself to his elbows. The arm slid down his inclined chest and rested over his hips. His flesh responded dumbly in spite of him. The instinctive mechanics of self-perpetuation. Utility. Nothing more. He pushed the arm away and pulled the blanket over him, then over her body and to her shoulders. He left the arm exposed, aware that even now he desired the empty embrace of the dead weight across his chest. It did not move to him; rather it hung weakly from the shoulder to the blanket, rising as the body rose, falling as the body fell. A passive appendage, a useless wand of flesh, rising and falling to the whims of breath. He turned away and faced the door. The doorknob returned its inanimate version of his gaze.

IV



She was following him, he thought, through the swirl and faces. A lazy shark in the wake of a doomed ship. In the morning, she had been less obvious, her presence less pointed and annoying. All was logical, whirling out of the previous days as inevitably as the night, her soft curves laughing at him and taunting him. It was only natural that she accompany him to breakfast and later join him in the auditorium; and only natural that she suggest a meeting at dinner. But it frightened him nonetheless, perhaps due to its sinister inevitability. As if she were merely a passive agent—oxymoronic though that seemed!—of a greater manipulating power and intelligence. No, that could not be it, he concluded; Gina wrested her own inevitability from her situation. Yet the following, the disquieting ...

And he was bothered by another encroachment, that of Charles. He had noticed him first, before sensing Gina's constant proximity. It was Charles, appearing as if innocently at a nearby table as they ate. Charles, innocuous powerless Charles, crossing his path in the auditorium and predictably pardoning his intrusion. Disingenuous at best. Behind that façade of servility lurked its antithesis, revealed in nuances of the face. But what was it? What was it? He had not brooded over it initially. Yet all had recurred, the inevitable intersecting of non-parallel paths in a two-dimensional space. And then Gina's inexpressive smile that could have been Charles's own. And was that it? he wondered; had it been the smile? Or the so-called accident of the second collision? Charles, Charles. How many of his blunders were more than blunders, and how many sufficed to prove intent?

Charles and Gina. Was it not she who had forced the connection? Was it not Gina, and not he, who had insisted on Charles? Had he himself not protested? What was the point of superfluous friends and acquaintances? And then, why Charles? For there were others who could have served; why Charles?

She would not relent. Charles was part of her “circle,” she might have said. A remnant of her supposed past, and an ugly one. What did she hope to gain by cloaking herself in transparent fantasy? Did she think that by imagining a past sin she might somehow expunge it? Yes, that was it, even though it made no logical or psychological sense. Yes, that must be it.

He stroked the emerging stubble on his cheek. He had come farther than that. He had admitted errors, fallacies and incorporated them into his experience. But his own, only his! He did not need it validated as another’s or by another. He considered his reflection, turning it slightly to the left, his face a mirrored right. At least he had come this far, he thought, to appreciate that face as his own, its aging and even its deterioration. At least that face was his own.

How could she be so stupid? Following him casually as if their relationship were a basic fact. As if the few days they had granted themselves were prelude to anything other than the disaster that followed. As if those days had been real at all. How could she ignore, however she might belittle, his encounter with Mr. Henry? She, after all, had been witness to its effects; did she consider those negligible? That the ruin of himself that he had presented to her, through no initiative of his own, was meaningless? Was it a mere lapse, perhaps—a temporary escape from the fallacious bliss of the preceding days? Or did she deign ... did she arrogantly assume ... There were more sinister possibilities too. Of that he could be sure.

And had she not noticed? As she awakened, did she not notice his new resistance? a trace of contempt? Did she think it directed toward another?

He turned away from the mirror and its reflection, continuing to examine the stubble of his beard. He would not shave it. He would permit himself that small bit of rebelliousness: “We’ll grow beards!” a wastrel couple once had said.

He had no doubt she would keep her routine, arrive late to supper and seat herself beside him. He grinned; yes, he could at least frustrate her opposeless will, steal from her that bit of drama—the staged defiance of her walk, the theatrical strides through the semi-filled room. Would she falter, he wondered; would the shallow self-assurance belie itself in a moment of confusion as she noticed his empty place? He mulled over the consequences, then discounted the plan as pointless. Interesting, but nothing more. She had no secrets to reveal to him. Her audience would remain unmoved by the spectacle.

He buttoned his shirt and stuffed it into his belt. As his eyes fell on the drawer beneath the mirror, an image of the key came to him. He opened the drawer and it glinted at him from the paper lining, mock gold on sterile white. He removed it and held it to the light. He spun the point in his fingers as the various facets and perspectives revolved silhouetted against the glow of the ceiling. Straight, toothed and, as the fingers rotated, narrowing to a bar, then breathing form and mass. Foolish. He tossed the key back into the drawer and banged it shut. The key echoed his petty violence, rattling against the wooden sides then sliding unseen across the paper.

He abandoned the false sanctuary of his room and entered the corridor; the haze he projected onto it muted its

glare, reminding him of another hallway. The benefactor, he thought. How could he have done this? The benefactor, in whom he had placed such trust and who had reaffirmed that trust in the corridor, in that awful grey. How was it possible? He shook his head; it made no sense. Brood not! Brood not! Useless admonitions! Would his mind have created worse than what had been revealed to him? Was there more bewilderment and pain he could have inflicted upon himself? It was inconceivable. And then—he laughed, the laugh his last defense—and then that knowing smirk as the benefactor had discoursed abstractly on the “recovery of risks,” as he had styled it. And that he himself had assented to all this, imagining the danger of no consequence and the risk negligible, like all else. At least the true risks might have been defined for him, he thought, with some resentment. Instead, he had lost both stakes, one unexpectedly and the other, Gina, the known risk, was it not by choice? For what was simple comfort now? ...

Such thinking got him nowhere.

When he entered the cafeteria, the crowd had just begun to fill it and he was caught in the flow, as he let himself be carried toward the front of the hall for his food. More regimentation, he thought, as he took his tray and broke from the flow to seek his usual place, one he had chosen in his ill-fated search for the benefactor. It afforded him an unrestricted view of the entrance and the stumbling and lethargic and exuberant and rhythmic and hideous flow, broken flow, of faces creating flow. Eventually, the currents shifted and Gina replaced the flow, her strong legs propelling her across the wall. It was not grace, no, not at all. Some possessed grace, and the flow was grace, and even he was often caught in the graceful harmonies of the flow. But she ... He had so often

marveled at her contrivances, but he had not intended that tonight. He dropped his eyes to his place and stirred the food over his fork.

He refused to raise his eyes, although he sought her and tried to sense her movements. The moment of greeting, the polite but ironic “May I sit ...” and its dismissal. He sensed the harsh reverberation of her footsteps. She smiled artificially and nodded to the empty seat beside him, as predicted. “Hi,” she said, “you’re pretty, Alex. You know that? Did anyone tell you that? Someone must have told you. You know; perhaps in the distant past?”

The flurry of petty flattery surprised him and what thoughts he had of defense deteriorated. A jumble of protests and politic. A courtier-like bow. To stand, brush the purple plumes from his flowing hair and arc them downward with formal courtliness. A pretty fop, a dandy. “I appreciate it,” he said instead.

“What?” And was that a crumb that slipped from her lips? “What? Oh,” she fought to free her lips. “That. Well, I’m sure you do. You’ve confirmed it by hours in the mirror. But don’t bother.” She stabbed at her plate. “I didn’t mean it. How could I? With that!”

His hand rose to the stubble on his chin.

“See?” she said. “Isn’t it hideous?” And he knew he had lost all initiative. “And you’re hideous, Alex. But don’t thank me, just because I had the courtesy to claim otherwise.”

Sheer volume, he thought. Quantity its own quality, as an ancient warrior must once have said. Incongruous and illogical thrusts and probes; of what value was his sweated logic of defense? the deft parrying of reason, he thought grandiloquently. He suppressed a cynical, self-effacing laugh and said nothing.

She spoke rapidly through bits of food shoved into her mouth, as if the words and insults were too trite and self-evident to require clear expression. “You know, Alex, I think this time,” she chewed in the most infuriating manner he thought possible, “I’ll be more firm with you. You are without question both ugly and pretty, although for the moment, I’m inclined to side with ugliness.”

He considered a retaliatory insult, something about her relationship with the despicable Charles, but her rapid pace left him no opening. “So ...” she said, pausing just long enough to swallow, “I have come to a decision, one that should please you and will require no gratitude. Happy? The decision is: ...” She turned to him and stared intently—and stupidly, he thought; he need not submit to this—“I know your moronic beard will be difficult to ignore, but I’ll manage somehow. In the end, everything will be much easier for both of us. Don’t you agree? It will be so much simpler this way. You see, Alex, after last night, you’re basically nothing. And in view of that, I’ve decided you might as well be pretty, it being now all one to me of course.”

She chattered on, ridiculing all facets of him, the thoughts and ideas he had once shared with her, his aloofness and detachment, his sexual prowess, punctuating all with references to his meeting with Mr. Henry. Only to that did he object; the rest spoke for itself—contrived and routine insults built on nothing. She had no right to use ...

“You know really, Alex, about last night ... Or was it the night before? They all blur together ...” Her words were lost to a sudden reality, a barren fact resolving the strange assault on his attention. A silent figure stealing up on them, the true purpose, he imagined, of her diversionary exuberance. He

stiffened in defense. One table away and slightly to his left—two strides could have spanned that distance!—sat Charles.

“Alex! What ... Alex!” She shoved him roughly, then followed his eyes to the nervous fidgeting of Charles. “Oh Alex. You’re such an ass.”

He glared at the intruder, then back to her contrived contempt. She was eating hurriedly, annoyed, or attempting to seem so. “What?” he demanded.

“Don’t be a complete jerk,” she said, refusing to look at him.

But he would concede her no further ground. “He bothers me. He’s annoying. Ugly and disgusting.”

“You’re making a fool of yourself, Alex.”

“Don’t tell me ...” he jabbed his fork at Charles, ignoring her derision. “Don’t tell me he’s just there. Don’t tell me he just happened to choose that place. Don’t tell me ...” But his anger made chaos of his logic and he trembled in frustration.

Calmly now, she turned to him, a wry smile growing on her lips, an emotionless and malicious sarcasm in her voice, “Then why don’t you simply ask him to leave? You’re a man now, or so you claim. Show some initiative.”

Without a word, he stood, his chair twisting away from him. The two strides he envisioned put him directly at Charles’s elbow. Charles clumsily and hurriedly wiped the fragments of food from his lips and bumbled about in his seat, as if seeking the point of balance that would permit him to rise.

“What are you doing here?” Alex demanded. At least Charles would not dare insult him.

The hands clutched each other over the bulging stomach, disgusting!, as if tugging at invisible gloves or perhaps to wash away all traces of sin. The face struggled to maintain the look

of innocent bewilderment. "Doing?" the whine stammered, "I ... why ... I hope I have caused no offence."

Incredible, Alex that, that even one as weak as Charles could feign such innocence. He spat contemptuously. Charles was unworthy of further exposure; he deserved rather to be brushed aside. "Get out!"

Caught in his transparent ploys, Charles gathered up his tray and assorted plates and utensils. Quickly and thus clumsily, his hands trembling, his lips tripping on the usual apologies. It was impossible. "Get out!" Alex hissed. Then as Charles quickened the jerks of his hands and all sense of efficiency fled him, Alex slammed his fist down on the table; the tray and plates, the metal hemispheres that Charles had tried so desperately to order were reduced to chaos; the glass, so painstakingly positioned on the tray, leaped into the air, bounced lightly on the table edge, shattered. Its translucent shards floated to the floor as if suspended by an unseen force. Charles stood paralyzed.

Alex sneered. The blow and the broken glass had only focused his rage. This is what he was capable of doing. He slowly and methodically advanced on the quaking figure before him. He drew back his fist slowly and carefully, measuring the distance between it and the whitened face, and narrowing that distance to less than an arm's length. All his anger, all the chaos of the last few days, all the indignation and hate, and all his disgust and contempt of that face took focus in his fist. When it met the face, when he felt the warmth of the blood flow over his knuckles, and when he heard that gasp of disbelief from those hated features, when the tables and chairs and tray re-echoed and magnified the blow, a sudden joy seized him, and he relaxed into a calm he seemed never to have known, one he would have considered impossible.

As he looked down at Charles, ridiculously inert among the fallen chairs, he slowly let the air flow from his lungs and now breathed slowly and naturally. Inhale. Exhale. He returned to his seat, for he had not finished eating. Then unexpectedly ... But it was so incongruous! ... he met what seemed a look of horror on Gina's face—replicating, it seemed, the horror and disbelief he had just destroyed. She began to scream, first wordlessly, then with insults and obscenities, drawing the surrounding eyes toward them.

He recovered from his surprise and shock. "Calm down," he said, as patiently as he could; hysteria did not sit well with her. "No need to involve others." Very casual, he thought, yet decisive and final.

She ignored him. "Courage! Alex! What ..."

"Be quiet!" Now more forcefully. It was impossible to ignore the growing number of eyes. "You're making a scene."

"A scene!" she shrieked, and he could see now, very clearly she was moved by the crowd and was playing to it theatrically, drawing its attention and using it as an ally against him. The eyes, suddenly weapons. He would ignore them. They were ineffectual if he simply ignored them. Not a thousand eyes ... And he pitied her and her amateurish tactics. "Just relax," he said, reaching for her. "Sit down!"

She chopped at his hands and flung them back at him. "Fuck you, Alex!" she screamed, and could she not see that even the intrusive eyes were offended by the obscenity? "Take your fucking hands ..." No need to respond, he thought, but she grabbed his hair and twisted his face toward her. "Listen to me!" He threw off her hands but refused to retaliate; he had more dignity than that. Just the stare. The stare would be enough. And she stood trembling, her strength obviously drained. How telling that tear in her eye, one she herself

would have found contemptible. She kicked her chair away, and unlike his, unlike his had done, it toppled and clattered to the floor. Even the uniforms had taken notice now; even the uniforms had had enough of this, apparently, and began to move in their direction. She saw them and let out an ugly laugh that made no sense to him. He shrugged; hysteria, that was all. The uniforms neared and formed a protective circle around the pile of disgusting flesh and now enveloped Gina herself, who had forsaken him for the prostrate form of Charles. And then there was confusion. Alex paid no attention; he would not partake of the general curiosity, and he refused to watch as the circle rose and plodded slowly and clumsily away, as if the awkwardness of Charles, even the inert Charles, were a contagion. They were all finally gone, leaving him in peace.

He was upset, no doubt. To remain unmoved by her obscenities could hardly be expected of him. The approaching uniforms further agitated him. They had no need to bother with him; he resented the eyes they attracted and the way the silence slowly built in the hall, a silence far more sinister than Gina's outburst. A distant voice formed a question, but he waved it away. He was eating. "Nothing." He picked up his fork and fixed his attention on it, dismissing the concerns of the uniforms. "Nothing, nothing." The uniforms retreated, paused momentarily, then left him.

He tried to force the clumps of food into his mouth and swallow them. How bland and tasteless it all seemed. Surely they deserved better than this, and perhaps he could complain in some official way. One loses interest, he thought; and to grow indifferent to food could be dangerous. How could one be expected to obtain proper nourishment? When one considered the number of meals omitted! even the number he

himself had missed. Why, he remembered or had been told of his own great fondness for food, even a taste (wrong word, he thought!) for the very ritual of eating, all profaned here, as it was all reduced to a mass feeding, where one ate, or rather went through the motions of eating, or rather mechanically and will-lessly flowed with the flow which flowed in the service line, and certainly derived no pleasure from it, as even he, even he, preferred to settle for the emptiness of coffee in the morning rather than submit to the tasteless nourishment of the blandest sort of eggs and gruel. Surely, one might not even understand his gradual weakening and deterioration to be due to lack of proper nutrition, and perhaps not even make the connection between the bland food and growing fatigue; for even he recalled thinking nothing of the pure necessity of eating any more than he considered the necessity of shelter; it was all simply something one did or something that was provided, as if security and health were a mere ancillary benefit. So since no one really experienced the necessity, surely there was an obligation on the part of those who had some sort of control over the process to take it upon themselves to ensure that no one died of starvation or exposure which of course was rather a silly exaggeration but at least but at least but at least ...

And yet, it remained so bland!

And in light of such neglect, or abandonment in a stronger sense, yes one must take upon oneself the responsibilities of welfare and protection, which were magnitudinous; for who besides a few isolated barbarians and hermits realized in all its manifestations the extent of bare necessity and who could shoulder that burden given only the conditioned benefits of the world, and how justify such conditioning when it resulted only in frustration and perhaps desertion, if that made

sense! Surely there must be some greater force, or more strongly Justice! even within a universe as restricted as this one perhaps that ensured the defeat of the wicked and maybe in lieu of that which could only be thought of as an impotent rationale or groundless hope such an all-encompassing power was self-awareness itself, the ability to see through the conspiracy of what he had decided was a form of desertion and subsequently defeat it through, oh well, in this instance since there apparently was no concern whatsoever whether one ate or not and no attempt to make that act attractive much less desirable, why then through forcing oneself, even without desire, in deference to some seemingly abstract through radically material need, to eat and not to do as he had done foolishly and unthinkingly skip meals simply because they did not appeal to him aesthetically, ha! as if Necessity were under a moral obligation to be appealing. And there was more! So much more ...

He cleaned his plate as well as he could with his spoon; the utensils they provided proved inadequate, of course, predictably so, and he was reduced to scraping up the last tiny flecks of nourishment with a small piece of bread. It was hardly an accident he had reserved this; for without it, forced to lick his plate like some kind of domestic animal, he supposed, he would have felt the beast he had been publicly proclaimed to be. There was in the end no reasonable alternative. And simply because the others, all those eyes!, were too stupid to consider the possibly fatal effects of lethargy consequent upon half-finished plates, was he obliged to follow them? he thought, wiping his plate and stuffing the bread into his mouth, and then too as they were incapable of any reasonable exercise in self-sufficiency was he to take it upon himself to convince them? Whose life and well-being was he

ultimately responsible for? And what obligation, or more strongly, right did he have to demand that others follow his lead? And beyond that, beyond that, beyond that ... when one viewed all those half-finished plates and the disgusting decay in the garbage pails, why, when one considered the waste! But who has time ... who has time to ...

He stood, licking the crumbs from his lips. He piled the spotless plates and spotless glass on the spotless tray then heaped over them the spotless utensils and spotless metal hemispheres and carried the whole immaculate array to the head of the room and deposited it deftly on the counter, first dropping the spotless utensils into the murky soapiness of the water, and the waste!, then proudly turning from his spotless tray and glasses and plate without, for the first time he realized, scraping the disgusting waste into the garbage pails, he walked through the sea of eyes which turned to him, likely sensing his pride and strength—*Superbi-et invidi- ira*—the last flecks of food had given him and marveling and did they really know what had given him such strength? And would that not be a nice mystery for them, he thought, to determine singly or *en masse* for all he cared, the source of his power, whether it lay externally in the food or was self-generated. And thus let them endure the sleepless and fitful nights of fatigue and bewilderment as these and greater mysteries proved beyond them. And perhaps Necessity herself had concocted a method of solving her riddles for them and maybe ha ha that was death itself for everybody's fucking sake *let them all die* if that was the only way they could learn anything, *for you know what they say! Ha ha ha! Oh it's too funny what they say! I mean given the present context and ignoring whatever thread of seriousness it might have in other contexts, which of course are not to be forgotten, for in their own right they possess similar significance and genuine significance and probably more*

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*significance but that is just the point of a joke, its value does not necessarily rest solely on the significance of its immediate context but also on other contexts, the serious being attendant on other circumstances, don't you see? so while dependent on or rather deriving meaning or value from particulars it paradoxically transcends all contexts through the very fact of its being no more than a joke! And any way regardless of such lucubrations the joke is, as you see I was considering the question of people dying and how that was the only way they were going to learn anything, and the joke is you know what they say: Knowledge or Virtue or Life Itself for that matter Is Its Own Reward! or if you want to take it further Its Own Fucking Reward!*

*So there!*

That night he slept; the old dreams returned to him and soothed him back to rationality. When he awakened, the oppressive immediacy of the past two days was gone. Mr. Henry, Charles, Gina's outburst of the day before—all seemed more distant and less upsetting to him and as he walked to the cafeteria, he felt refreshed and alert. He found the room empty, the tables clean, the chairs arranged in neat symmetry, and he realized he had slept well into the morning. Although he had missed a meal, he knew he needed rest more than nourishment and ignored his hunger. He proceeded confidently to the auditorium, thinking he might meet her there, but when he searched through the crowd, he could not find her and realized, even within the swirl, he was alone.

So he waited for her. Patiently. And waited futilely through the afternoon. On his way to supper, he tried her door but it was locked. He ate alone and when night came, he slept alone. He missed her oddly, and the following day brought no change. He grew irritable in his imposed solitude but calmed himself forcibly. Agitation would only make his actions less controlled and predictable, he thought, and he should not risk that now.

She was angry, he decided, and intentionally avoiding him. It was unfair, he knew, yet despite what he might think, the fact remained that she had disappeared with the cluster that had borne away Charles's unconscious form days earlier. Yes, and no matter how he might judge that, his immediate problem was not to condemn but to turn to the future and decide once and for all whether to re-establish their relationship or to end it entirely. That must be his chief concern. It was strange, he thought as he waited, that he

should have concluded that. He had not believed himself much affected by solitude; his relation to Gina was consequently a mere interlude. Yet when she had finally gone, as he looked into the void hovering in those familiar places she had once occupied, he felt uneasy, even something approaching fear.

He retreated into the routines dictated by the crowd, waiting nervously for her return. Meals, then the auditorium, and the few private minutes in his room. But the void remained, and he watched helplessly as it divided into two distinct voids, threatening areas he dared not violate. The empty spaces, the outlines left behind by Gina and by Charles, followed him and took their natural places. Cafeteria, corridors, auditorium—he could not escape them. They begged for completion and seemed to cry out to him, although the others, eating and laughing, nodding and whispering, ignored those voids as if their dark outlines were invisible. They could do what they wished, he conceded. But that in passing the outlines, walking through the outlines, they could so perfectly adopt their façades of ignorance—that he could not understand. That was unimaginable.

Angry. She must be angry with him. He would have to deal with that. It was a simple fact. To brood idly over its motivation would change nothing.

One must always deal tactfully with an angry subject. One must show neither aggression nor servility, as in such clouded perspective, the subject is prone to misinterpret all as a threat. One must never make the mistake of impugning rational motives to such a person. Forget one's rectitude! any forwardness, gaiety, must be avoided. The resultant outbursts, whether based in hatred or mere envy, will only lead to greater

stubbornness. *Superbi- et invidia* .... Such a person realizes, however imperfectly ... they realize ... all realize ...

The best course is to allow such a person a private buffer and not to provoke them by violating that zone. The subject must remove that buffer alone. And once that buffer is gone, one must still follow all stated rules and principles, neither attempting to renew past bonds abruptly, nor belittling motives, calling undue attention to errors ... Yes, he thought, the method was, if not flawless, at least superior to all alternatives. Although painstakingly slow and frustrating, it was doubtless the best tactic. In sum, *aloof availability*. Yes, neither spiteful nor servile. And thus are all parties served.

And then he saw her; it was in the auditorium where he sat ruminating over his decision, and he saw her. She entered from the corridor leading to their rooms. Doubtless, she had been in her room when he had knocked on the locked door. He recoiled at what he saw; for her walk had changed. Her entire appearance had changed. The former display of arrogance, the jutting defiance of her jaw—all had disappeared. The sharpness of her features had dulled as if smoothed over by fatigue. Beneath the lowered slope of her jaw, he thought he saw faint hints of sagging flesh, as if the facial muscles had suddenly aged or simply collapsed. She walked into the swirl and only walked, as if to accept its lifeless flow, and for several seconds he could not distinguish her. Then she reappeared, if she had been hidden at all. Had his very recollection of her simply rejected the weary dead flow of her movement through the weary dead flow of the swirl?

He shuddered; it was all too horrible. He would remain true to his purposes, no matter how she had changed. He would permit himself no errors or lapses in attention. He tried to blind himself to the dulled figure that had once been Gina.

He tried to imagine that the apparent change was a matter of perspective, of lighting perhaps, or a mere epiphenomenon (the word was) of her anger. Perhaps she recalcitrantly refused to display the animation he associated with her; perhaps that was her measure of revenge. Or another possibility. He had not seen her in the cafeteria and it was possible, yes probable, she had not eaten. The weariness, the lifelessness, the dullness—were these not possible effects of what was effectively a fast? Reasonable enough, he thought; any change was thus temporary and curable.

She left quickly, before he could greet her, and as she hurried back through the door, he noticed the other void left by Charles. Its intrusion unsettled him and he turned away to calm himself. What did the loss of a barren fact matter to him? An ugliness infecting all it touched? It should rather seem a just compensation for the loss of Gina, something he had removed from the swirl and perhaps from himself as well. But he could not convince himself of that now; despite his ratiocinations, he feared the void. And he could not erase the obscene images forming on the wall—the cartoonish version of their coupling. A blasphemy! He shuddered, but all returned to him and plagued him. Charles and Gina! Impossible! Yet when he looked at the wall, he saw the two, Charles and Gina, merged as one.

And it was real; it was real. When she returned through the door, showing herself once more, she did not come alone and haggard as if to announce some death; now she carried with her the symbol of that death. Charles was with her now, but a Charles far more loathsome and despicable than the Charles he had known. The ugliness that had so repulsed him had intensified, as if to conform to his own fantasies. Charles too was dead; they were all dead. And Alex now knew the

cause of Gina's deterioration. It slouched there at her side and sought support in her diminished strength. The awkwardness, the laughable obesity had given way to a vapid inertia. A total dependence. The form stumbled, no longer clumsy, but effectively powerless, and the hands, the once animate and gesticulating hands, now quaked and clutched for support at the image of Gina. He shrank back from them, the one dead, the other nearly so. In her eyes, she carried traces of the old defiance, warning away the other eyes. But it was forced—a wearied broken “no” to an undeniable truth.

He could not help but sense their approach. They were standing motionless now several yards away. The dead face that hung limply from the corpulent shoulders quivered and with effort slowly turned upward. As it emerged from the protective shield of thinning and greying hair, became a slit, grew and faced him squarely, he was overcome with disgust. It was the eyes, the ugliness. He choked the nausea down; even sickness was irrational and pointless, he thought, as the offending eyes fought through the blackness that surrounded them. A sinister bruise consumed the nose and grew outward over the right eye, the left from his vantage, as if to encompass it, isolate it from the face, and seal it closed. The other eye glared outward toward him, channeling whatever hate was within. He turned away; he could not endure the glare and he could not bear the sight of the other eyes that danced to the right of that dead hate. They forced their way into his vision and tore at his face. No, he could not endure that; he could not endure the vision of hate.

But he could not deafen himself. The words came with an alarming clarity and simplicity. “Alex.” So calm and so carefully enunciated. “I detest you.” He glanced up as the monstrous beast before him staggered about its axis, the two

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forms inseparable now, each clinging to the other and dead and dying with the other. In silence, the beast plodded into the swirl. He raised his eyes once, just once, caught in the lure of the spectacle, and pleading with it, if for only an instant, to split and allow each component its singular death. It ignored him, for a moment fixed in the doorway between two indifferent columns of blue. And then it was gone.

A few days were enough to convince him that Gina would not return, neither alone nor with Charles. The small hopes of renewed friendship she had killed and there seemed no further need of proof. He resigned himself to his new solitude. The terrifying voids had vanished with the deformed beast they had become, yet she herself seemed still there, somewhere amid the blue columns, corridors, even in the swirl. Still there, behind that locked door he passed each day on his way to and from his room.

When he thought of them, Charles and Gina, and purged his memory of the last image they had left him with, he did not feel the anger he had expected, nor even a sense of loss. When the real memories came back to him and he considered what she had chosen, he pitied her. So much for revenge, he thought, if that was what she had intended. He braced himself for pain and regret; but in the end he felt nothing.

Determined she was, yes, he thought, recalling the Gina he had known; the very traits that had attracted him and had formerly sustained her, seemed now to destroy her—the stubbornness and willfulness. He shook his head. It was justice, he supposed. And his own grandiose plan, “aloof availability.” “A-loof ... a-vail-a-bil-i-ty.” He enunciated the words aloud, then glanced up, but no one had heard. It was all he could do, he thought. And if she rejected that, what was left? Sentiment, bare sentiment. Valueness.

He turned his attention to the crowd and realized it had taken on a new significance for him. He was alone, completely alone, and it was time to consider that the faces he had so despised in the past might be of some use to him. He had not minded the routines of the cafeteria; he was accustomed to

eating alone and actually enjoyed his private manners and etiquette. His mind did not operate efficiently in the early morning, and he had no need of company then, no need of the idle mealtime chatter which only annoyed him. But here, in the auditorium, it was different, and his solitude oppressed him. Investment in others might have spared him this, he thought. now, he would have to wait passively for another face to emerge from the swirl. That was the risk of a select circle of acquaintances; one was by definition more vulnerable than the gregarious glad-handers, they might be styled, who squandered friendship on all who would accept it.

He surveyed the hall, recalling the fragments of faces and forms he had come to recognize. They seemed to have adopted the cursory qualities he had attributed to them when they were little more than empty forms. One tall, now too tall as if seeking in height a statuesque nobility. Another, the opposite of the first, tiny, “petite” they called it. A return to innocence, he thought, or its facsimile. And others too, identified by a mere detail—an accident—and now acting as if that detail were their entire being. One conscious of breasts, another of eyes, of hair, brushed to accentuate each swing of the arms, and other caught in the sheer dynamic grace of her steps. Too conscious. Contrived. He watched them, the men and women, some broken, some bent, some struggling, much as he had once done, he supposed, to regain what must have been a past confidence. Disconsolate, deluded. There was nothing he could do for them.

They doubtless noted and respected his solitude and if curious about Gina, said nothing. So he submitted to the faces, permitting them their mild eccentricities as he smiled at the smiles, avoided the quickly averted eyes, returned the polite nods and flickers of attention. He realized that this new stance,

though to him one of mere civility, to them might appear a sign of a new ease and even sociability. Or perhaps worse, a concession of sorts. He should thus temper both his interest and indifference with common sense, he thought. He must define a middle ground relative not only to the swirl but to himself. But was that role itself not contrived and almost laughable? A compromise between studied aloofness and artificial politic? Anyone with the slightest interest in him would see right through that!

A rise in the hum of the swirl interrupted his ruminations and he gave over his attention to it, casually, as if reacting out of mere curiosity rather than with genuine interest. Several officials had gathered near the door to the corridor and seemed engaged in pointed conversation. Flanking them were two or three forms he thought he recognized. A man who roomed several doors away from him; they often passed on their way to and from breakfast and exchanged mute nods of recognition. Then another man, this one only a face; they might have spoken once, he thought. Others that began to gather were less distinguishable; no past interactions, he thought. They were mere spectators, relieving their boredom in a passing event of no consequence. Perhaps an impending announcement, he thought, but a uniform disproved that conjecture by breaking into the cluster and waving the gathering crowd away. He patted them into submission, or attempted to do so, likely by assuring them, he supposed, that everything was as always—fine and thoroughly under control. Predictably, the crowd ignored him, still curious. The cluster of officials then dispersed, several hurrying out the door into the corridor, one striding to the huge double-doors, and two standing stiffly at attention, blocking the entrance to the corridor.

Odd, he thought, suppressing the urge to join the crowd; he had a better vantage point here, he thought, should his curiosity overcome him. The crowd's hum evolved into a question; tones began and shot upward, and the words, had he been able to extract them from the white noise behind them, would doubtless have added nothing. Within minutes, several officials returned through the heavy doors and he recognized his benefactor among them. He half-stood, thinking foolishly that this association dignified and distinguished his curiosity. But he forced himself to sit; his contact with officialdom was likely no different from that of everyone else, a conclusion borne out as several members of the crowd rushed to their own imagined "contacts" and were summarily brushed aside. The uniforms disappeared into the corridor, taking with them the two men who had initiated the disturbance. A voice pierced the hum and he turned to find the speaker standing next to him. "Fancy that!" it said. It was a familiar voice, which he could not place immediately. He simply turned to it and mumbled a non-committal "What?"

"Fancy that," the man repeated, seemingly not in response. For a moment, Alex thought the man might not have heard him; for he simply stood there as if by accident. The man rocked slightly forward and backward on his heels, his hands clasped behind him, just another indifferent onlooker maintaining a discrete distance from the now bustling and questioning and gesticulating crowd. His casual manner suggested he knew more of the commotion than the others. Alex watched him and imagined from the quiet self-assurance of his rocking that he ought to be in uniform. He should have noticed such a man in their midst, he thought, or perhaps such a man had not been in their midst at all, but rather on the peripheries, as he himself. Alex traced patterns of

blue and gold around the figure and it was then that he recognized him. It was the porter, or Doorman, as he was sometimes known, the man who had led him from his first room to his second, and yes, he recalled, who had displayed the same serene demeanor then as now. He was not an old man, rather one approaching old age. The process revealed itself only in the slow crumbling of the eyebrows and slight nicks about the eyelids. The face as a whole seemed unconcerned, neither rebellious nor joyful at the impending decay. It smiled at the prospect, as if amused, as if the matter were hardly worth analysis. Alex became consumed by the face and marveled at it. It revealed nothing but seemed to have all to reveal. The voice broke his studied appreciation and it repeated simply, "Fancy that!"

Alex turned from the face, realizing that in his trance of recognition he had completely forgotten the distant disturbance. He stared at the far door but could not focus on it. There was an agitation and excitement of form, but it was blurred and the movement random. The distinction between the ordering blue columns and the swirl had vanished as the two elements converged to become one. He tried to regain the distinctions, but the effort only confounded him and he turned back to the porter. "What happened?" It was a stupid question, ill-formed and banal, he knew, one that placed him squarely amid the crowd he despised. But there seemed no subtlety of expression available to him. It was as if he were suddenly torn from his will and reduced to an undifferentiated element of the swirl.

And the voice repeated calmly "Fancy that."

He shook away his momentary anxiety. "Something ... Out there, I mean. What was it?"

The face turned to him, maintaining its original serenity and Alex knew then that the man had been well aware of his presence all along. The face smiled in acknowledgement, then turned back to the disturbance. "The usual," it said. "Just the usual."

Alex was tired of the mysteries and enigmas and this new one only irritated him, reviving within him a passion that moments ago he thought he had lost. He let the emotion grow, flow over him, and diffuse. When it left him, he was calm. He looked at the far door; apparently, the disturbance had extinguished itself. Several forms flowed across his line of vision; through them, he saw the two distinct blue uniforms framing the door. He turned to the porter. "What was it? What you call 'the usual'?"

"The usual?" He seemed perplexed. The face turned backward and toward him, until it faced the ceiling directly over his head. "Oh, I said that, didn't I." And then it was facing him; the eyes fell on him as their animated twinkle laughed at the aging flesh. "You. You're Alex A, are you not?"

Alex experienced a fleeting suspicion, but only its wake, its slight trailing disturbance of the surface. "And you ..." he said. "You remember me ... from ..."

"Yes. I remember you. I remember all of them. It would be rude to forget, don't you think? Your own moment may have been of far greater significance to you than to me, perhaps, but why should I brood over that?"

The question was lighthearted and Alex took it to be rhetorical. The man's contagious ease comforted him and Alex smiled to acknowledge it. The porter was right, of course; they could not possibly view that moment in the same way. But he was right beyond that as well, for why brood about anything? The porter continued. "But you have not been here

long, have you? I regret I was so flippant.” His face became more serious. “The disturbance, as you call it. It was a death.”

The words unsettled him. “Disturbance.” Had he said that? And “death”—it was the first time he had heard the word spoken aloud.

“None of us is immune to that here, I’m afraid, despite what we may think or hope.”

Yes, that was it. The word, the simple word. He had not heard it uttered; it was as if the subject itself were forbidden as something lying beyond the barriers and heavy wooden slabs. And perhaps, he thought, yes perhaps that fostered a sense of what the porter called immunity. He considered the word and its implications. All became vague. His own death meant little to him; it was too distant and unreal for consideration. But the death of another—what did that mean to him? He thought he felt nothing. It seemed to him that he felt nothing.

“Man named C. Charles C.” The porter continued to rock casually, forward and back, rolling his weight across his feet from heel to toe and back and back.

And that was it. Yes, he started. That was what he was supposed to feel; it was doubtless the civil thing to do. He wrestled with the reaction, seeking not to subdue it but simply to release it. He urged the images to come and fought to sustain them. The sinister bruise, the playful bruise, growing out of the nose and encircling the eyes, yes that was it; he tried to nurture that bruise until it consumed the face. It resisted with a teasing constancy. “I ...” he tried to speak, but the effort only distracted his attention from the bruise and the image faded.

The porter was looking at him. “You were acquainted, I believe. Yes, you know him. Charles. The name and the man. The once man, I should say.”

The witticism frustrated him; it covered the bruise. He felt his heart now; it beat within him as if trying to sustain the elusive emotion. Was it the crudeness of the joke? And where would he place responsibility? Was it the wall, which had taunted him so? That had laughed at him and soothed him? Had that done it? Or was it the simple undulation of the waves, indifferent to what floated upon it? He felt something restraining him, countering the slow undulation and pushing him downward. A force. It was the arms; he saw them now and struggled against them. He fought for the door and the blue columns guarding it. If he could just smash through those columns through the door! But the arms held him and eased him back into his seat. Then he saw the face, its intense features controlling the dumb force of the arms, which were now locked against him. He was sitting and knew himself to be sitting. It was as if he were crying, with tears creating mock seas over his face. But so inappropriate, he thought. And when the seas dried, leaving the sting of salt on his cheeks, he knew he was smiling at the face before him, as if he had heard some joke that he only now began to understand.

“Easy Alex.”

Easy Alex. Tall and mighty. Crowned with surrogate laurel stained with sweat. Borne on the shoulders of the celebrants. The porter was sitting beside him, but there was no consolation in that. The voice droned in the distance; he was unsure how much of its sentiments and assurances he may have missed.

“You are worried, or perhaps ‘concerned’ is a better word,” the voice said and paused as if expecting a response. It continued, distantly, “It is a peculiar thing I have noticed. I am an observer of sorts—I pride myself on that—a serious observer when I am without meaningful work. It is ironic, I think, when

one considers the crowd ..." His arm swept outward and Alex dutifully followed it. Before them, the faces swirled to an unseen formula. "They are discussing it now, those with the least to feel and thus with the least to say. They had no connection; death, at least this particular one, should mean nothing to them. But look!" There was an urgency in the voice and Alex tried to concentrate. He saw nothing. "See how they chatter! Idle gossip. As if somehow a relation to the event might elevate or exalt them. They deny the dead even the small dignity of solitude. Some ..." The urgency faded. "Some will even weep!"

It was to him, Alex thought, that the traces of contempt were directed. But the porter turned to him smiling. "Unlike those who have something genuine to feel and who hold it within. All is profaned out there. Don't you agree? Isn't that what you once claimed?"

Alex nodded. He could not identify the origin of the bitterness he seemed to feel. "Out there," he repeated.

"Incidentally, you should know," said the porter, "that you are of course blameless in this matter. There is a connection, but it is not the one you might suspect."

He looked up and tried to feign disbelief, but it was as contrived as the weepings of the crowd. "But ..."

"No," said the porter. "He merely died. There are no sinners in this place."

He wished he could take the absolution as relief, but he felt nothing. He was to feel nothing, and he did feel nothing. He stared blankly at the door lined in columns of blue. The crowd had dispersed and the disturbance had lent its small energy to the swirl before him. Not to be regenerated, he thought; dead and utterly dead. He turned to the porter. It was a foolish question, but he could not resist asking it.

Curiosity, he supposed. Idle chatter. "Is that all? There is nothing more?"

The porter cocked his head; apparently, he did not understand. "That you are not implicated in any way? Why, yes ..."

Alex shook his head, but felt so weak. "No, no. I meant the death. The connection, I mean. With ..."

"Ah!" the porter said. "I see. You mean the woman?"

He nodded weakly. *Isceyoumeanthewoman ...*

The porter maintained his monotonal ease. "No. We die alone here. Those we wish to drag with us tend to resist. Even she could not accompany him."

Evasive, Alex thought, but asked nothing further. As they said, as they all said, as he himself must have once said, what did it matter? What did anything matter?

"Would you like to stay? Here, I mean. Or your room. You would perhaps prefer that. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"Yes, I would perhaps prefer that." But he felt that his own voice had been mute. He realized he was now staring into the palm of a hand and he took it lethargically. A hand to lead him to his door and he would open that door and he would be led to his bed where he would sleep. Sleep.

"They'll likely be wanting to talk to you," said the porter. "Soon, perhaps. A merely formality. When you are ready."

That amused him. Why would they talk to him? What would he have to say that would be of any interest?

"Yes, you see. There are dangers here. You understand. The risk of morbid preoccupations. You must be careful. We would want none of that."

Oh yes, he thought, oh yes, I will be most careful and obedient. Oh yes, I will take the utmost care to be ever ever ever so most careful. The cynical laugh within him never

materialized. He was too exhausted even to return the smile that turned aside the blue columns and led him through the sterile white of the corridor.

In the end, no one came. Neither to accuse, nor to forgive, nor to steer him away from the porter's "dangerous morbidity." There was no danger of that, he thought. Whatever guilt he experienced was his own, subject neither to reproof nor forgiveness.

He had not left his room except to eat since the day he had learned of Charles's death. Waiting for them to come; waiting for more than that perhaps. He saw no reason to leave, no reason to subject himself to the vulgar truths of the crowd nor need to display his own. What use was purpose or initiative? he thought bitterly. And where had it brought him? To Mr. Henry? To a moment in the cafeteria and a glass bounding lightly from the table to the floor?

He had little left for his keepers to take from him. The invulnerability he had once desired seemed to have been granted him, and should they arrive to cast him back into his old room, cast him back even to the whirr, even to the bump, thump, clump, he would have accepted it. *Superbi-et invid* ... It would be all so amusing; he would offer no resistance. Like Charles, he thought. The role he had so feared and detested was finally his own. "Yes, good sir? To the whirr? To the omnipotent and terrifying whirr? Why of course! How unspeakably *complex*!" And he nodded his head in a mock bow. As his imagined keepers led him through the hallways; he could almost feel the bulges of fat shake obscenely on his neck. In the lead would be Mr. Henry, swinging his cane to clear the corridor of obstruction. Flanking him as escorts would be the benefactor or benefactors, perhaps the interrogators as well. And following him—and surely he turned back to smile, for he

did not wish to cause offense—behind them trotted the scribe, wheezing and scribbling furiously. Why there was so much to say! So much to place on file! How, in the silent and sterile whites of the corridor could he even begin to record it all? Trailing the procession with now silent footsteps, his gentle hand slowly closing the doors behind him, came the porter, talking to himself it seemed or anyone who might overhear.

“To the whirr! To the whirr! Give way to the whirr!”

In unison they chanted.

In unison.

He smiled, wishing it were night now; the days left him only with imaginings, while the night provided him with dreams, invulnerable, or so he had once thought, even to the whirr. The night was too dark for his tormentors; they feared the darkness and would never touch his dreams. He stretched and yawned, hoping to feel enough traces of hunger to justify his walk to the cafeteria. But he felt nothing other than the demands of routine.

Dressing slowly, he noticed something near his door. A blotch of white on the floor. Bad eyes, he thought, morning haze. He squinted at it. A rectangle, paper, a corner hidden beneath the door. He gazed briefly at it, then realized it was a note, apparently delivered during the night. Curious, he thought, that they should only now be writing him. Was this an apology for tardiness or negligence? The suggestion of a clandestine meeting-place? He picked it up between his thumb and forefinger, then turned it. On the back of the envelope in a large and labored hand, he saw his name, “ALEX!” all letters in upper-case and punctuated with an exclamation mark. “ALEX!” He wondered at the strange intensity, but his conjectures died quickly. He had grown less prone to suspicions and regarded enigmas with detachment. Mere

quirks. And this a mere quirk of an unknown author. He bounced the letter in his hand. It seemed heavy and the envelope bulged awkwardly, obviously not intended for the several sheets of paper he guessed must be within. He tapped it on his knuckles. A letter. An amusing distraction, yes, if nothing more, an amusing distraction. He glanced about the room and decided the chair would be a suitable place to sit. Its harshness would at least irritate him into a concentration the bed could not offer him; surely the author deserved some reward for effort, he thought. Writing—what work it must have been. He dropped into the chair and methodically unsealed the envelope, nearly dropping it but catching it before it hit his lap. Clumsy, he thought; he had grown clumsy. He extracted the latter and let the envelope fall to the floor, where his name stared back at him.

The writing was cramped and clearly unpracticed, barely legible. He shuffled through the pages, counting them unwittingly. There were four and he was briefly annoyed that their author had required so much of him. Better justify all that, he thought with mild contempt. But he had now turned to the last page and his eyes were seized by the final word, the signature, each letter capitalized and emphasized like his own: “GINA!” It revived something—an emotion distant and appealing that had nearly spent itself. But too elusive. He flipped the pages back into what he assumed was their proper order, then arranged them neatly on his lap until the corners were all even. Satisfied, he picked up the neatly aligned papers and began to read.

*“Dear Alex ...”*

Quaint, he thought, and purely conventional. But he suddenly looked up. He had remembered something even more distant than the now inaccessible emotion. His

pamphlets. Yes. And he recalled the interrogation, when he had so exuberantly pointed out the identifying notation in the margins. And then too, the illegible scrawls on what he had at the time imagined was a map of the place. His own too! Other than those, he had seen nothing, or so he had come to believe—no messages, no printed injunctions and directions, no writing at all. Entrance and Exit. This way and that way. Nothing whatsoever. It was curious, he thought, but he had no will to pursue the implications. He returned to the letter.

*Dear Alex,*

*Excuse my presumption, Alex. Excuse this letter and excuse my demands on your time. But I have made a decision recently. One that concerns you. You are a burden to me, Alex, a burden easily lifted. And in these few pages I will rid myself of you. Rid myself of remembrance, rid myself of concern, and rid myself of whatever small passion I may still have for you.*

But of course, the letter was not as well put as that. The spelling, even the spacing between words, was bad; the phrasing clumsy and often incoherent. What he read was a corrected version of the embarrassing prose she wrote. All misspellings, errors of grammar, and infelicities of expression silently removed.

*You do not understand; obviously you do not understand but that makes no difference to me. I am sick of your ignorance and will not try to fix it. If you find the length too much for you, if you consider the reading too difficult—perhaps there are stylistic matters not to your taste!—if you choose to throw this down in disgust, I can tell you I am far more concerned with the writing than with your own amateurish critique and whatever insult you offer in retaliation for my audacity means nothing to me.*

He smiled. This devious ruse on her part was one he might have anticipated. By goading him, she ensured that he would

read on. It was all so obvious and trite! he knew exactly where this would end. The most fitting response, he thought, would be to call her transparent bluff, toss down the note and trample it. But that would take passion and emotion; and he had so little left.

*That is ridiculous, isn't it, Alex? You will read on. I am certain you will in spite of my insults. While lacking the passion of a masochist, you are at least sufficiently bored with your daily rituals to welcome any change, however unpleasant. And then too, Alex, you were always so ... curious.*

She was trying to upset him and did not realize it was impossible. It was merely embarrassing.

The handwriting became more crabbed and he became less diligent with his corrections.

*There is the matter of the future, Alex, which I cannot avoid. You may have noticed my absence, and likely wonder offhandedly what has become of me. Why I have not groveled back to you seeking forgiveness for an imagined slight. But I cannot endure the sight of you, nor your pestering inquisitiveness.*

*You will not see me again, Alex. Or I should say, if you do, you will not know me. I remain here, as I have always remained. But if you happen to see me, you will recognize no more than my traces of contempt. You should be grateful for that, but even your thanks mean nothing to me. I am done teaching you ...*

He paused, confused. What he could hear in the tone was familiar—it was definitely her own! But the diction was preposterous, even in his version. He reread the paragraph. It still made little sense to him. “Here.” “The future.” So vague and ambiguous. “Not see me again.” Better, he thought. Yes, that made sense; that was comprehensible, and he sat back in his chair, considering the implications. Alone. Alone. Who was

left for him now? The benefactor? The porter and his serene indifference? A swirl? But the emotion he sought, the fear of solitude, was ephemeral and quickly passed. He returned to the letter to find where he had left off, but discovered himself reading and silently revising the preceding paragraph again, and still it was not right. He came to the final phrase and proceeded.

*There are difficulties that I cannot avoid. You deserve neither my honesty nor my sentiment, yet both are sadly necessary. There remains a lingering fondness for you, Alex, and I wish it were not mine. Walking with you, touching you—that satisfied me. Can you possibly understand why? That satisfied me. And had you any insight whatsoever, you might have accepted it. The emotions of those days are dwindling and will not long plague me. But you are fixed within them and I need to dispose of them. Take them. They are yours now. ...*

It was a crime really, how badly she wrote. How little the institution had done to correct that. Even the simplest of referents—“they”!—were ambiguous. Days. What days? Kindling something nearly cold. Nearly ashes. He lowered the pages to his lap and gazed at the wall. It was merely green, subdued and now devoid of images or reference. Those days and all days seemed so distant. He had nearly forgotten them. When he dropped his eyes to the pages, he noticed them trembling slightly, and it must have been the nervous twitches of his hands. He shuffled through the pages, counting one to four until the page he had been reading returned to the top of the stack. “Take them. Take them.”

*You idiot, Alex! All your struggles—all those innocents you tried to browbeat into concocting some risible tale that would satisfy you! Think of those you rejected. You rejected me, which was stupid. And you rejected Charles, which was contemptible.*

*Simple, affable Charles. No, Charles was not noble enough for you. Not beautiful enough, and his lies not monstrous enough.*

*But I suppose it's late for that, isn't it?*

Charles was dead. Charles had died. He squinted at the pages. There ought to be something in his eyes, he thought, making it difficult for him to read. But his vision was clear. He flipped through the pages to see if her handwriting continued to deteriorate. He rubbed his eyes.

*Charles, Alex. Charles is dead. How about that! You are guiltless, almost uninvolved. The damage you inflicted was mere pain, Alex, and your blows could no more have destroyed him than your foolish contempt. Cling to that, Alex; it is sure to lead you astray.*

Something in his eyes. The air ...

*There remains a small confession. I believe I told you Charles was my lover or perhaps I said he was never my lover and never desired to be ...*

But this part was badly phrased, the handwriting now atrocious, and Alex skimmed over it.

*... All was a lie, as you perhaps recognized, both confession and retraction. He was, as you would have it, a mediocre fuck at best. But much better than you. And I won't miss ...*

The scrawl had become completely illegible, the expression and even the syntax tortured. In exasperation, he turned to the final page, or what he thought was the final page—a conclusion of sorts.

*And so there it is, Alex. All or nearly all of it. Calm yourself, for there is one thing more. In case you did not know, sentiment is a luxury I allow myself and I could not resist the opportunity to have the final word. In an instant I will be rid of you.*

*Goodbye, Alex.*

*Pretty Alex.*

*I loved you.*

*GINA!*

He stared dumbly. The papers, he thought, should dramatically slip from his hands. They might then fittingly drift lazily into the air, sway back and forth, left and right. They might hang lightly, as if weightless, for an instant. Then fall disordered to the floor.

A letter, he thought. How inane. She must have imagined he would feel something, that it mattered, he scoffed, aloud now, as if hoping someone might hear him. But no one would hear him now.

The name itself was dying. The image stood alone now, generated from the ceiling and hovering over him against its monotonal background. And then he waited; for he knew the pattern. The blurred image slowly clarified; she floated over him, weightless, expressionless, holding out to him an envelope with his name printed in bold letters. Helpless, he watched. He slowly reached for the letter, and she let it drop to him. It hung over him, weightless as her hand. And as his own hand reached upward, all vanished. He lay back on the bed; for he knew all would return, the same image, the same offer, and his own calm and futile acceptance.

The real letter, the one she had written with all its faults of expression, lay where it had dropped days before, its pages scattered around the chair, which stood in their midst like a golden throne awaiting an errant god. He laughed at the preposterous simile; it was as if her own skill-less composition had infected him.

He had considered rereading it, to submit again to its taunts, or perhaps discover those he had not perceived on first reading. But that would take time and concentration. Why should he trust a second reading, one conditioned by the first? Better, he thought, to feel nothing, although he imagined a time when he thought otherwise. Better to feel nothing, he concluded, and rolled away from the letter. The scattered pages would wait. When he turned back, they would still be there.

Charles, he thought. Buried at sea, buried in the air, buried in the black earth. It did not matter. He was guiltless. He stated it aloud: "Guiltless," he whispered. Guilt, guild, gilt ... The word died in the mere sounds of it. The force of his own laugh startled him, as if emanating from an unseen source. Unlike her (*oh I see you mean the woman*), Charles had taken his images with him. The ugliness. The obesity. Even the obscene nakedness. Only the abstractions remained: Charles as the man he hated; Charles as the man he found so abhorrent. And Charles as one he once struck in fury. Strange, he thought, that despite the horror and disgust, he still sought those images. Like Charles himself, the real material man, the images had become a part of him and he missed them, despite how dangerous that thought might be. *Justice justice. I am the Good and Just, and therefore I have sent unto thee ...* He glanced over his shoulder to the always offending chair. He smiled. It was empty: another small recompense.

He dug into the bed, seeking its warmth which of course was only his warmth, but it held none for him. Only in the movement did he find relief. As he shifted his weight first to his left then to his right, he found that the effort exhausted him, and he lay still, submitting to the plaguing discomfort of the mattress.

The crowd, he thought. He had imagined he could use it as an escape. Foolish. It was all so futile; he had known it would be futile when the pages of the letter settled onto the floor. He could not mask his contempt for all of them, and he had seemed, as he smiled and nodded and politicked, an automaton, obeying the commands of a demented master. *Yes, turn this way, yes that is good, that is fine, now elevate the chin, not so much as to appear arrogant and aloof, but enough to avoid the impression*

*of servility. You are striving, idiot!, for a certain gregarious self-sufficiency! Can you not understand? Has all my genius been wasted on you?*

In desperation, he had sought out the uniforms. He had reached out and clutched at a blue and gold sleeve, but the face had slowly turned to him, and the features that might have been the benefactor's slowly disintegrated into a phantom outline, as the uniform was emptied of all vitality and stood before him as a mere shell, the cap balanced on the void above the shoulders.

He braced himself against the charge that built slowly within him. He pressed his face into the mattress to feel the resistant pressure on his forehead. Reassuring, nearly pain. Charles the fool, the actual automaton, controlled and manipulated equally by the contempt and kindness of others. Charles was not real; he had never been real. Even the allegation was indifferent, emotionless. Charles had died. Charles had never existed.

Did she not understand? Or was it he himself who had not understood? It was all too exhausting and he contorted himself to reform the blanket and mattress beneath him, their folds and undulations more soothing enigmas. Where she had gone, how she had gone—mere blasphemies. Anything and nothing, he thought. This way or that way. The sea is the way ...

He squirmed and fought the imperfections of the bed. What alternative did it offer to the harsh indifference of the chairs or the false softness of the rug? He sat up, but could not force himself to stand. He would return here in any case, he thought, and he would find no rest. He lay back, enduring the discomfort. If he could sleep, he thought, if he could only sleep, the questions would vanish in dreams and illusions; they could then all laugh together. But for that, he would have to

sleep. Sleep for a night and a following day. Sleep until numbed and anesthetized. The eyelids, as they closed, blocked only the crass concretions of walls and furniture. All else remained. And he looked about the room, lost himself in those materialities—the bland indifference of walls and curtains, the pock-marked ceiling gathering strength to produce another image and illusion. None of this had changed, he thought. None of it.

He heard footsteps outside his door and laughed. For they passed an echoing diminuendo through the corridor. *“The universe, gentlemen is in constant flux, and in that flux strives inevitably toward resolution, toward a final stasis. This by necessity. For, gentlemen, if we take two containers and fill them with unequal numbers of diversely charged pellets and commence transferring them arbitrarily left to right and right to left, at random between the two, eventually inequity will be overcome through equilibrium and ALL MOVEMENT WILL CEASE!”* The footsteps passed his door. When a second set paused and became a knock, he was merely curious.

The doorknob turned, then stopped; the knock was repeated. How odd, that someone should be so intent on entering. Only his hissed name reminded him of the tiny bolt above the doorknob. The knock continued and the tone of voice, familiar to him, took on an urgency of sorts. He knew that voice, had heard it countless times. And now, not allowing him to forget it, the voice had returned. “Alex! Alex!”

“Yes,” he muttered, then louder; he knew he could not silence the knock. He rose from bed and started for the door. The key lay on the table, as the voice outside whispered, “Alex! Alex!” He shrugged; even the key was useless. He stepped toward the door and slid the bolt open. The door quickly opened and his benefactor greeted him, “Hello, Alex.”

He could not return the greeting. He could not pretend to have forgotten their last meeting and its results. He had been betrayed, although he could no longer recall why that was important. He fell on the bed, then crawled and pulled himself over it until he was curled up against the wall and the curtain over the wall.

The benefactor closed the door behind him and reached for the bolt. When he looked for direction from Alex, there was none. He locked the door, then stepped carefully around the papers scattered on the floor to the chair. He could read the letter, if he wanted to, Alex thought; it was pointless to invite him to do so. He remained silent as the benefactor carefully sat down. He removed the familiar blue and winged gold of his cap, then placed it on the table where it covered the key. "I thought you might be asleep."

"No, I just ..." He faltered; the words seemed too difficult to form and not worth the effort. "No."

The benefactor smoothed his sleeves. "Were you expecting me?"

"I thought you might come," Alex said. "Or ... that someone would. But I wasn't really ... 'prepared' is the word, I guess. Not tonight."

"I might have come sooner."

It was a question, Alex realized, or perhaps a plea for forgiveness, and he shook his head. "No, it wouldn't have made any difference."

The benefactor waited, but Alex added nothing. "How do you feel, Alex?"

The perfunctory attempts to put him at ease were ridiculous, Alex thought. He felt fine; felt fine. It was simply that he did not care. "Don't be polite," he muttered. "I know why you're here."

The benefactor shifted his weight in the chair and moved his feet cautiously around the papers. "Do you, Alex?"

The evasion irritated him, but strangely did not anger him. It was more a nuisance than an affront. "It's about ... It's about Charles, I suppose."

"Partially Charles."

He looked up. Partially Charles? What else need concern them? "He's dead. Or so I hear."

"Yes. He's dead. How do you feel about that?"

"Nothing. I feel nothing."

The benefactor leaned back in the chair, paused a moment, and then said, "Well, you killed him, didn't you? In some sense, that is."

Accusation? Or simple statement of fact? Alex stared vacantly at the benefactor, then dropped his eyes. "No," he said quietly. "No, I merely struck him. And he died." He recalled the sinister bruise he had seen on the nose, slowly encircling the eye, but the image had no impact on him. "There was a week."

"Time, you mean? Time absolves you?"

"No, no. Not the week." He breathed heavily; it was draining what little strength he possessed. "*I* struck him; *he* died."

"You believe that?"

"There are no criminals in this place. So I was told."

"And you believe that as well?"

"Yes," he said. "I believe it." Then he repeated "Yes, yes. I believe all of it."

"Perhaps you do," the benefactor said. "I cannot imagine why you would lie to me."

Alex looked up at him. There was a hint of anxiety in the benefactor's face, perhaps distrust, despite what he claimed.

Needless. "You're worried about ..." Alex began, but neither protest nor reassurance seemed appropriate. "We, I mean not just you and I," he continued, "we're beyond that, are we not?"

The benefactor nodded. "Yes. Beyond that. I believe we are, if I understand you. It doesn't concern us here."

No vengeance. No past. "I never could despair over Charles," he said. "I thought perhaps I should or that it was at least expected of me. There are times when I imagined I should feel responsible. Yet all I feel ..." he paused, trying to pinpoint it, "all I feel ... I just don't view his death as a relief, as I perhaps might have. I detested him, and I should welcome his absence, but it seems ... It seems like nothing. Like nothing at all. As if he never had existed in the first place."

"And the woman?"

The reference startled him, but he tried not to react. "The woman," he said, looking down to the undisturbed papers circling the benefactor's feet. "She's the connection, I guess. If I feel nothing, even if I feel something ... maybe she is responsible. Tell me ..." he hesitated, but knew he must ask, "is she ... Where is she?" He knew also the question would remain unanswered. "I suppose that doesn't matter either."

The benefactor shook his head, "No."

It was all so strange, he thought, but none of it was unexpected. Grief, regret, even hate—all that might be thought appropriate to feel, all that he might have felt compelled to feel—all had vanished. Gone with Charles, with the woman, leaving only traces at the benefactor's feet. He nearly laughed but could not summon the energy. He gestured weakly to the papers. "She wrote that," he said, then added, "badly, I think."

The benefactor glanced at the papers he had taken such care to avoid. "Do you want those?" he asked.

"No. I just didn't think they should be disturbed, that's all. Or rather, I can't find the will to disturb them myself." He stared at the papers then added "When you go, you can take them with you. Just don't ..." He felt how fitting grief might be, even an indication of it, say, in the breaking of his voice. He choked it down, and it died there. "Don't bother with them now," he said.

"We have much to discuss, Alex."

He nodded. More progress perhaps, he thought, feeling hardly a part of it. All flowed by him and carried him, but no longer was it his, he thought. Even the resistance was no longer his. He breathed deeply and eased himself into the curtain. The harshness of the angle between the bed and wall had alleviated now and he felt comfortable in the half-embrace. Somewhere in the room, the benefactor was still talking, "... much to discuss. But there is no urgency." The voice paused and lingered and Alex came back to it. Only the voice concerned him. The voice alone. He leaned into the comfort of the bed and wall, then rolled away from it. He stood and stretched. He was stiff; even to walk was difficult. He stepped slowly to the door and twisted the doorknob, right then left. "No urgency," he repeated, trying to concentrate on the new voice he heard.

"I have faith in you, Alex. I always had that, much as you tried to frustrate it." The voice was so soothing and free of malice. "And I felt that the present circumstances ..."

Alex stopped him. There was nothing he needed to hear. "I know," he said. "But that too does not concern us any longer, does it?"

The benefactor began to nod and Alex picked up the nod, incorporating it as his own and magnifying it. If he could only experience conviction, he thought, rather than simple understanding. He let the benefactor's eyes fall on him and stood quietly in the now mere innocent scrutiny. He was no longer afraid. So this is where it all leads, he thought, standing mutely in his gaze. "Results," he said simply.

The benefactor began to smile.

"Results," Alex repeated as he returned to his bed and eased back into its comfort.

The voice came soothingly to him, "How much do you believe you understand, Alex?"

"No," he said, with a self-assurance that surprised him. "No, not now. Come tomorrow. We can discuss all this tomorrow." His accompanying smile was equivocal, he knew, but he could not control it; he might appear to be a man giddy with joy or simply the worst of cynics. "Tomorrow."

They sat in silence. The benefactor reached for him and the soft gentle caress brushed his arm. Alex considered the once infuriating softness of the touch; today, it did not disturb him. He let the hand stroke his arm and for a brief moment tried to recall the hatred that gentleness had once generated. That too was gone, not to be retrieved. The hand fell away and the benefactor bent down to gather the scattered papers. He arranged them neatly, folded them once and tucked them into his jacket. He had made no attempt to order them.

"Sibylline," he muttered, and they were gone. The two men faced each other and exchanged a single look. Then taking up his cap, the benefactor slowly turned to the door. It would remain unlocked when he left, Alex thought. He did not see the benefactor's exit; he heard only the soft click of the door

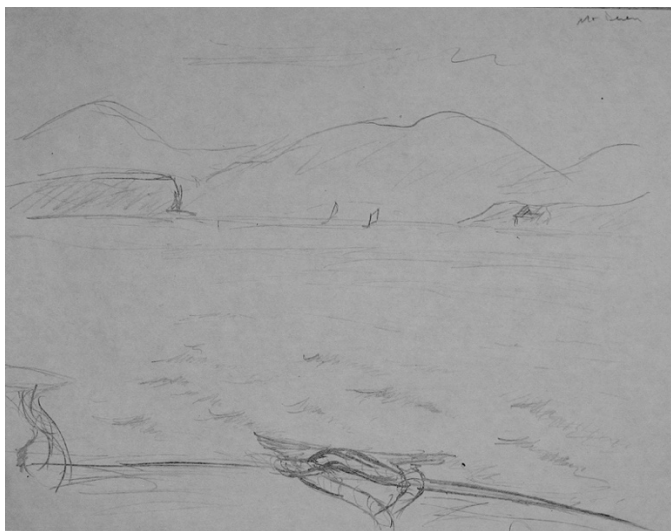
hitting the doorframe. The muted footsteps then echoed in the corridor.

He did not want to sleep but knew he must and lay down over the blanket. He studied the indifferent and motionless curtain suspended over him, then slapped it gently. It swayed, first left, then right. And Alex watched the waves take shape as if answering unseen breezes. As he closed his eyes to sleep in the waves, he saw the captain there, adrift on those gentle rhythmic waves. No, it would not be a storm; he had known the dreams would not perish in a storm. There was a gallows on the shore, barely visible in the distance, and from its arm, struggling, the last of the crew. Hanged in the sun, his feet kicking futilely. The laborious computations, the very genius of the executioner—all proved inadequate as the feet danced on invisible firmament. He heard the captain cry out in the calming waves of the sea, and he heard his own name muffled by the seafoam.

A drying sea, a burning sea, and he closed his eyes finally over it, for he knew that too was dying. As the sun threw its heat at the impotent waves, the sea dried to sand and ashes. And he heard his name too dying in sand and ashes. Dirty sand and ashes. Dusted with salt.



## Reprise



“And you there, please note this accurately. We cannot afford the errors and inaccuracies of your previous minutes. Legibly and concisely, concentrate on facts and less on the idle secondaries of style and manner.”

“Yes yes scribble.”

“Thank you. And now to return to you, sir. You will of course pardon the interruption. You realize the importance of precision and will forgive the inconvenience. Surely the gist remains, apart from the superfluous detail.”

A. “No, no. I have not lost the gist. The details are mere details—paradoxically, a matter of form alone. They do not affect my argument.”

“Good, good. A long way, if you will permit a reminiscence. Do you not agree?”

“Yes.”

“And you?”

A. “Yes, most certainly. But that too is detail.”

“Indeed. But pointed. You seem far less ...”

A. “The comparison is unfair.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I have no objection to that observation. Age perhaps excuses what might be indiscretion. I assure you I intended no offence.”

A. “Inoffensive. Yet no less unfair.”

“Agreed. Or conceded. I continue despite your just protest. I cannot forget, although I shall soon, no doubt, your hesitancy and confusion. Your absolute reliance ... but I should not put it that way. Let us say, your amusing preoccupation with the recollected facts. Why, we had

difficulty maintaining our somber expressions, despite the demands of officialdom! Do you not agree?"

"Most definitely. Why I, for one, nearly twice broke through ..."

"Yes, yes. Bother with that. And you there, stick to your tasks."

"Scribble scribble scribble"

"I confess I had little faith in you then, for I saw you as I now recollect you. There seemed no basis for hope, nor for convictions that, even when confirmed, of course dissolve."

A. "That is reasonable."

"Reasonable enough, we might say. But on the whole, unfair, and I believe accusatory. Foolish and idle thoughts. Mere attributes. I return to my questions. Are you comfortable now, seated before me?"

A. "Quite comfortable."

"Good. Now you there, you may strike the preceding. Turn your attention to what follows."

"Scribble scribble scribble"

"He is hurried."

"Rather he is hurrying. Now be silent. And you, sir, forgive my colleague's grand garrulity."

A. "Excused."

"Noted. Now to matters of greater import. Can you answer the question? The question concerning dreams?"

A. "Does it matter?"

"For our records."

A. "I meant no objection. I dream of the sea. As I have always dreamed of the sea. A purified sea. The prolific waves now calm, no longer perilous."

"And the rest? The detail, if you will? Apart from the flow?"

- A. "The detail is a secondary. An attribute of the mere periphery. Undefined."
- "Note that! Note that! Quite good!"
- "Scribble scribble scribble"
- "We continue with matters of substance. Definition: the ship."
- "Yes, yes. The ship!"
- "Be silent! The ship?"
- A. "Cardboard. Illusory, lost in the sea. Fragments of wooden beams, bereft of life. Mere pulp. Rags and pulp.
- "Forming?"
- A. "Mere cardboard. The waste of the paper mills."
- "And the ship?"
- A. "Defined."
- "Note that! Definition: the sails."
- A. "Imagined. Unreal."
- "Forming?"
- A. "More imaginings."
- "Note that. Definition: the support."
- A. "For the sails?"
- "Quite good. And correct. You have caught my drift, however inexplicit my expression."
- A. "Not so. You have made yourself clear. More wood. Strips and wands of wasted wood. Without function. Barren of purpose."
- "Reduced to?"
- A. "Broomsticks."
- "Note that. Definition: the others."
- A. "Mere phantasms. Never real. Combatants to amuse me. I remember the boarders, the doom-propheying boarders, their flashing eyes and fearful visages. Daggers gripped in their teeth. Welcomed as comrades and departing in portents. 'May

you lose yourself to the waves', I cried, 'die the deaths you most fear and become the fulfillment of your fatal prophecies'."

"Of interest?"

A. "Unnecessary. More secondaries. A mutinous diversion."

"Note that. Definition: the other, the one apart from the others."

A. "I do not understand. Excuse my failing intellect."

"Note that. Definition, then: the captain."

A. "The captain?"

"He cannot answer!"

"You pause?"

A. "It is surprising. I had forgotten. The sea is the way. And we died in the sea. The captain, the other, both died in the sea."

"Interesting."

A. "Juvenile, at best."

"All died?"

A. "Slowly. I remember it now. The sea last, concealing itself in the firmament. Burned by the sun until no longer sea but a lingering dampness on victorious shores."

"Again, amusing."

A. "Perhaps. I must thank you for the reminder."

"And today. The dreams of the present?"

A. "A burning sun ruling grains of sand. The rest is imagined. The rest is not real."

"And what do you dream?"

A. "There are no dreams. The sea is mere salt dusted on sand and ashes."

"And what do you dream?"

"And what do you dream!"

A. "There are no dreams. There never were dreams."

“You have come so far?”

A. “I have been brought so far. And farther. Even this is otiose detail. Even you are a secondary.”

“Note that! Note that! And end your scribblings. End the interview, for all is unnecessary. But one question more ...”

“You need not answer.”

“...an unnecessary question, I hope you’ll forgive me. I am old and thus entitled ...”

“You need not answer.”

“... to indelicacy. Do you regret the calamity? The death of the crew?”

“You need not answer!”

“The death of the sea? Its residue of salt? Do you regret the sand and ashes? Or the dreamless nights.”

“You need not answer! Assure him he need not answer!”

And Alex looked at the interrogator. And Alex laughed.

There was a knock on the door. At his command, the door opened. A face appeared and he turned to it. It was an old and familiar face. Time, he thought, the time. He smiled and nodded, and the face said, "Ten minutes."

"Yes."

"Ten minutes." The face vanished behind the door. The display of concern was unnecessary, he thought, but understandable. Ten minutes. Ten minutes. Allowing him nine to prepare himself. Sufficient, he thought. It was sufficient. He would not be rushed and for that, he was grateful. The face had appeared punctually, at five-minute intervals, mildly embarrassed over its own apprehension.

He leaned far back in the chair and stretched his legs until his feet pressed the wall beneath his desk. It was good, so relaxing and so good. He stared at the ceiling's familiar pockmarks onto which he could now project whatever design he wished, abstract or representational. Letting the chair rock back on its rear legs, he stared across the ceiling at the dots, connecting lines, and constellations. He reached the far wall, took a brief glance at the door, then eased the chair back to the floor. Numerous papers lay before him—outlines, reassurances, procedures, explanations; all was there should he care to read it. He lifted a few sheets, let them fall, and they floated to the desk, the papers sliding back and forth on invisible cushions of air. For an instant, they were other papers, but too distant to identify. Then themselves.

He had not yet studied the papers closely and felt no need to do so. He had perused them quickly and found nothing glaring or novel within them. Like the interview, mere formalities. A reminder, a confirmation, and nothing more. In

disuse, they might lie here forever, he thought; after the benefactors, after he himself had gone, the papers would remain, foxing on the desk, proclaiming their obsolete truths to deaf atmospheres. He stacked them neatly and tapped the edges to even them. He then placed the pile so that each sheet nestled closely into the corner. Blank sheets pled for attention and he slid them to the empty surface before him. He positioned the sides parallel to the sides of the desk, then turned them a few degrees. He frowned at the angle. It was not enough. He increased it, then took up his pen. The exercise would be difficult. It had been so long.

In the upper right-hand corner of the top sheet, he placed his name; a few inches below that, in the center of the page, he wrote in large letters, "No. 1." He studied his work; it was not perfect. It had been far too long, and his penmanship was not exacting. Merely legible. He underlined the "1" and moved the page to one side. It would be adequate, he thought, quite adequate. He smoothed the second page, positioned it at a slightly sharper angle and numbered the left-hand edge carefully, 1 2 3 4 5 6, then placed a dot after each. He sat back and surveyed it. The spacing dissatisfied him, but it was adequate. He would recopy it later, he thought, tonight or tomorrow.

After the "1." he carefully printed "Name." Then a dash leading to a subdued and careful "Mr. X." He considered his work. Then shook his head.

"2." then another small space, equal to that between "1." and "Name." "Time." Another dash, parallel to and perfectly aligned beneath the first. "1 day." He lay the pen down. There was so much work to be done.

There was another knock on his door. He turned politely to the concerned face. "Five minutes." "Yes." Then the

repetition, "Five minutes." He nodded and was again alone. Five minutes. There was little time left. He wrote more hurriedly now, for he did not want to use up those few remaining minutes in the perfunctory exercise of his penmanship. After the "3." he scribbled the word "Necessity"; a second dash, hastily positioned, destroyed the perfect alignment he had so painstakingly achieved. He left the space blank; he would fill in the details later.

"4." "Responsibility," he wrote, then a dash followed by a scribbled "None. External source; personal role non-causal." "5." He wrote quickly and his hand was barely legible. "Predictions/Expectations." Another dash; another blank space. But the blank space would not be ignored. Predictions, expectations. None, he thought; he had no reason to expect anything out of the ordinary, and he wrote, "Normal." Then "6." "Developments." His scribbles were reduced to a scrawl, and this time, the blank space following the dash did not concern him. He flipped the page over the first and headed the third page "Day No. 1," underlining the "1." It was enough for now. He stood. The efforts had tired him, but he welcomed fatigue as a good alternative to nervousness.

It was now time.

It was now time and he pushed himself away from the scattered papers on the desk. He inhaled deeply to strengthen the confidence he knew he possessed and to ward off the final traces of nerves. Surprising, he thought, that he felt so much at ease. He slowly expelled the air from his lungs and relaxed. All would be well, he thought; all would be well. He turned and faced the floor-length mirror on the far wall. The image was as he liked, tall and athletic; he straightened a few small creases in his cuffs. He had imagined them.

The bare head! He corrected his oversight and covered the carefully combed hair with his cap, which lay on the table beside the mirror. Familiar, he mused, still familiar. The gold ring encircling it and the bit of brass shining over the brim. He tugged at his cuffs and pinched each button of the jacket. All fit securely. The knock came again and again the face appeared, "Now," it said. "Now."

He raised himself to full stature and turned from the mirror. "Yes." The door opened further and the silent figure stood aside to let him pass. He strode out the door, his heels clicking the even rhythm of his pace. One, two, one, two. Left and right, and down the corridor to the right. A familiar face passed him in the hall and he nodded to a murmured salutation. The face had smiled, he thought, and he was grateful.

He stopped before the door, now alone in the corridor. Last tug at cuffs, straightening of the collar, pat of cap. He reached deep into his pocket and withdrew a small key. He placed it noiselessly into the lock. So utterly simple, he thought. He turned it slowly and heard the pins click into position; he then removed the key and placed it safely in his pocket. So small and utterly simple. A single tooth at the end, and that was all. He sensed an impending wave of nervousness and breathed deeply to repel it. It was gone.

He reached for the doorknob, turned it, and slowly and silently eased the door open. He lingered momentarily in the corridor. All had been familiar. All was familiar. All would be familiar. A passing figure might notice his hesitancy and might consider it a form of reluctance. He must not permit that. He entered quickly and closed the door quietly behind him. On the bed beneath the curtain, the man slept fitfully and pitifully,

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his chest rising and falling in jerks to silent commands, defiant of his will.

Forces. Symptoms.

He smiled.

Obstinate obedience.