

One

We stood there in our driveway that sunny spring morning in 1965, my mother, my older sister Rose and me, watching my father back his Rambler station wagon out of the garage. As soon as he had cleared the garage door, my mother climbed into the front seat with my father. My sister Rose climbed in back with me. All four of us were starched, perfumed and filled with varying degrees of expectations, and headed up to see my brother Vincent get married in Santa Barbara later that day.

I immediately slinked down out of sight in the back seat, as much as was humanly possible without actually hitting the floorboard. What a tin can, that Rambler, in total miss-keeping with my father's interminable J.P. Morgan rants. He was always going on and on about money at the dinner table. You kids go out and get yourselves lots of money. That was his mantra, his holy grail, his sole idea on how to succeed in life. Never mind what you really wanted to do with yourself. Just go out and get lots of money.

Then, as if to abuse the very core of his own diatribe, he lived his life like a miser. He worried over every slice of bread. He went out and bought himself a Rambler. Yeah sure. Some big shot.

In contrast, my brother Vincent had actually done something constructive with his penchant for the sweet life, wooing this society gal named Mildred up to the marriage altar. That Mildred was not much of a beauty did not seem to matter all that much to Vincent. That she had a filthy rich old man certainly did.

The last name was Van 'something or other', part of a Dutch shipping dynasty out of Hawaii and Vincent wasted no time in putting Mr. Van something or others' money to good use, arranging the wedding at the Biltmore Hotel in Montecito, which in those days was nestled on a plateau of rolling lawns, sparsely wooded with eucalyptus trees and dotted with private suites, done up nicely in a Spanish revival style. Call it a dogleg par four with a view of the Pacific and you got the picture.

Our family arrived to the Biltmore roughly two hours after we had departed, where a receptionist promptly directed us back out the lobby door and across the rambling grounds. Eucalyptus trees rustled above stone pathways. Manicured lawns rolled off into the distance.

It happened to be one of those glorious days in Southern California when a dry wind blows out from the desert and the sky is china blue and eternity seems to be right there, just a half a mile out to sea. Monarch butterflies were in migration and they too fluttered all about in the arid breeze.

Following a brief search, we located the private suite and walked into a spacious room packed with people, a sizable number of whom already looked well lit from using the wet bar. My mother and sister went in search of Vincent. My father went to find the wet bar. I stood there amidst the din of conversation, hands in my pockets, blonde hair half covering my face, riveted by a beautiful woman at the far end the suite. She had pale skin, a narrow waist and turned up nose, and black hair that rose up from her head like so much fluffy angora. Having just laughed with three middle aged men, her smile settled briefly in my direction.

While I continued to steal glances at this lady, my mother and sister reappeared with Vincent. He had been preparing for the wedding in a separate suite and had gathered the immediate Van something or other clan on his way back through the reception area. Our two families were introduced. Handshakes and hellos followed; the father gray-haired and as rigid as old generals, his wife gay and warm and utterly charming, the son gunning for a version of the old man and Mildred's younger sister seemingly a mixture of the two.

Amidst the usual chit-chatting, I kept stealing glances at the black-haired woman. Whatever was going on with her and those three men, it certainly appeared to have been ribald in nature. Several more times they broke out in raucous laughter. The woman's laugh was particularly infectious.

Eventually, the conversation with the Van something or others grew stale and the old general herded my father off to secure another drink. My mother wandered off somewhere with her counterpart. My sister Rose disappeared with Mildred's younger sister and young Mr. Van something or other went off to practice at being a general.

"Come on," Vincent said and dragged me in the direction of the black-haired woman. "I want you to meet one of my college professors."

I went along, at once thrilled and petrified.

"Well, hello Vincent!" the woman said at seeing my brother.

They hugged and her glorious smile spilled over Vincent's shoulder at me.

“This is Eleanor Sands,” Anthony said, “and her husband Dick. This is my little brother Roger.”

Dick Sands smiled broadly, winked and shook my hand as if he was trying to break it. With his athletic good looks and crew cut, he could have been an astronaut. Dick promptly returned to his previous conversation and Eleanor held out her warm, delicate hand to me.

“Hello, Roger,” she said, bending down a bit at the waist and smiling broadly at me.

“Hi,” I said.

Suddenly, Vincent excused himself and disappeared into the crowd somewhere and I was all alone with Eleanor.

“You know, Vincent has told me all about you,” she said.

I bit my lip and nodded, not knowing what to say. Vincent had never said one word to me about Eleanor.

“So tell me, Roger, what are your interests in school?”

“Journalism and French. I guess those are my two favorite subjects.”

“Oh, that sounds like grand fun. You could live in Paris and dash off posts, like Hemingway.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She smiled even more gloriously.

“So, would you write novels too?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t gotten that far.”

Eleanor laughed and asked me more questions about my life and school and listened intently to all my answers. And since no adult had ever done this before, least of all a beautiful woman, I began to think that the twenty years of age separating us hardly mattered.

We talked and talked that day and I wanted Eleanor desperately and longed to tell her as much but was too terrified to blurt it out and anyway word of the impending wedding ceremony had soon spread through the room. I followed along with Eleanor as the crowd funneled out the door, expecting our conversation to continue, but once outside, she started off without me.

“Oh, Roger,” she said, noticing my forlorn look. “It’s been wonderful talking with you. I’m sure we’ll talk again someday but I suppose I’d better go find my husband.”

She laughed at her own comment, shook my hand again and strode off across the lawn in her high heels.

All attention was now focused on my brother Vincent, who stood beneath a gathering of eucalyptus trees, waiting for his bride to appear. A minister of the peace stood alongside him. A classical guitarist was perched on a stool nearby, playing a sonata by Mozart.

A few minutes later, Mr. Van something or other appeared from an adjoining suite and escorted his daughter down a makeshift aisle. The melodies of Mozart filled the warm day. Monarch butterflies beat their wings and took flight. All the while, a great pain rose up in my chest. There was Eleanor, opposite me in the ceremony, holding hands with her husband.

In short order, the nuptials were consummated. My brother kissed his new bride and the gathering of people drifted off towards a nearby pool area surrounded by stonework and tightly cropped grass. Bartenders uncorked bottles. Drinks were served. A five-piece combo struck up a tune. A feast of Mexican food was spread out on several long tables. People commenced to eat and dance and that lawny crowd of chattering adults collectively grew smashed.

Mostly alone in all this, I lingered in a limbo world that day, little caring about the other young people around me, but not yet privileged to what I truly desired.

Afternoon eventually faded to dusk. The revelers said their goodbyes, dispersing this way and that. The bartenders packed up their supplies and a crew of maids arrived to clear away the mess. Vincent and Mildred were off to Brazil the next day for a two year stint in the Peace Corp, a mysterious air lent to what was already a colorful wedding.

During our long drive back home in the gathering gloom, the memories of my encounter with Eleanor lingered in my heart, but whatever magic spell had been cast that day was soon lost in the daily workings of my young life. In fact, I had completely forgotten about my encounter with Eleanor until Vincent and Mildred suddenly reappeared at my parent's door some two years later.

Two

It was a clear, crisp Saturday morning, and also the first day of Christmas vacation. I lay prone on the family sofa, enjoying the ersatz Greek drama of Rocky and Bullwinkle, having been grounded by my father for borrowing his Rambler station wagon with some friends late one night and wrecking it out on a back country road. It was not the first time I had been in trouble. It would not be the last.

A knock came at my parent's front door and I jumped up to answer it, overjoyed to see Vincent and Mildred standing there under the ashen blue sky but puzzled even more so by their startling new appearance. Vincent had let his curly, russet-colored Italian locks grow out into a giant Afro. He wore bellbottoms and an embroidered vest. Several strands of beads hung around his neck. Mildred was festooned in Quichuan muslin clothing and a peasant hat. I loved my brother greatly and expected his presence would portend a temporary reprieve from bondage for me, but even to a rebellious young kid, it seemed as if these two had arrived from another planet.

Before they came inside, we hugged around several exotic gifts gathered in their arms, among them a beaded sheepskin vest that Vincent had purchased for me in Brazil.

At this point, my mother appeared and nearly fainted. Nothing had prepared her for this moment. She was utterly naïve about the free speech movement that had been brewing up in Berkeley for several years. The mere utterance of the words 'love in' probably would have made her mind stall and go numb. She went about fixing Vincent and Mildred breakfast with repeated looks in their direction.

"Don't you get any ideas," she said with a finger shaken at me.

My father came home from working out at the YMCA a bit later, grouched about how much money they had spent turning their son into a bum and promptly marched off to the other room with the morning paper. The Christmas holiday grew evermore bizarre after that.

Vincent did bully my father into rescinding my restriction and together with Mildred we drove down to the beach, the drive itself a journey through rapidly

changing times. Where once the main drag in town had simply turned into an old dirt road, meandering off for miles and miles through orange groves, that road was now paved and tract developments were popping up alongside it everywhere you looked. The old Revere House Inn was about to become little more than a passing neon sign beside a new freeway. A drive-in near the coast had been closed and the fence around it sat there rotting away in the sun. The suicide lane in front of it was a thing of the past. Some bean fields, the dirigible hangars at the old World War II era airfield and a smattering of orange groves were all that remained of my past.

Down at the shore, we built a fire and warmed ourselves around it on a blustery day. A bottle of Port was passed between us. Tales of my brother's adventures in Brazil went on and on. It appeared that they had involved drinking and dancing with natives in the bars of far flung villages more than anything else. I heard little about teaching these peasants something useful. One could assume they already knew how to drink and dance. Nonetheless, I stared out the sea, swept away by dreams of the great world beyond Orange County.

The next day, Anthony took Mildred up to the airport in LA. She was off to see her family in Hawaii. I tagged along for the ride.

On the way back, Vincent took his sweet time and stopped to buy three of those canned Club cocktails. By the time we arrived back to my parent's place, he was feeling quite painless.

My mother, who was baking pies in the kitchen, immediately dropped her rolling pin and dragged Vincent off to a back room. As I came to understand it later on, a woman had just called from Rio de Janeiro, claiming to be the mother of Vincent's son. My mother wanted to know if this was true. And, if so, what Vincent was going to do about it?

Next thing I knew, Vincent was flying out the front door. I received a hurried wave to join him.

Vincent drove downtown without saying a word. All along the city streets at dusk, shoppers were rushing this way and that, bundled up against the winter cold. Christmas lights had come on. I saw a Salvation Army Santa Claus on the corner. A Currier & Ives feeling was in the air but a dark spot had appeared on America's home movie. I now looked askance at my brother and his over-sized Afro.

Once Vincent had downed a few more of those Club cocktails, and had blown off a sufficient amount of steam, he headed back to our house. The neighborhood was now enveloped in twilight.

At seeing a Volkswagen van parked out in front our house, done up in a thousand wild designs and colors, Vincent said "far out" and hurried to a stop

behind it. Three young men piled out with hair down to their shoulders and dressed even more oddly than my brother. Vincent jumped out and gave each of them a hug. I gleaned between the hugs and giddy laughter that these guys had just pulled in from San Francisco. Following a hushed conversation, Vincent joined them in the van and they drove around the corner to the alley behind our house.

Growing curious, I went back there and saw them passing around a cigarette of some kind. At seeing me, my brother quickly hid the cigarette and waved at the air. Someone handed him a bottle of Port in a brown paper bag and he had a good slug from it. I asked Vincent what was going on and he ruffled my hair.

“Nothing.”

One of the guys lit up an unfiltered Camel and their animated conversation resumed. I drifted off, feeling left out of their camaraderie.

That evening, a number of Vincent’s old high school friends showed up for a party, along with some of his fellow Peace Corp volunteers. My mother and father joined in the revelry for a spell but hit the hay early.

Not long after they had retired, Vincent invited me out onto the back porch and lit up another one of those strange looking cigarettes. Now I understood. I had seen the movie ‘Reefer Madness’ at school and told Vincent as much.

“No,” he told me. "This isn’t marijuana. It’s bush. It’s different."

No longer entirely trusting my brother, I watched him take a puff. The pungent aroma from the cigarette wafted up into the cold, starry winter night. With Vincent’s encouragement, I took a puff of my own. We were out there together for several minutes, inhaling and coughing, but nothing much happened for me, besides the coughing.

Going back in from the cold, Vincent rejoined his companions and I sat off to one side, feeling lost amongst this crowd of young adults.

Then without warning, the room grew smoky. Vincent smiled at me and I had this vision of him as a swashbuckling pirate. He had a sword in his teeth and a parrot on his shoulder. I began to laugh and went running down the corridors of my mind, a fledgling hippie, never to look back.

I got up the following morning to find everything in my life had been turned upside down. I looked with suspicion at the toaster and cupboards. My parents now appeared to be the strangers from a strange land.

Early on, Vincent ran off with his friends in their Volkswagen van. He returned alone in the late afternoon, driving a white Porsche Speedster. It belonged to Eleanor. My father had cut Vincent off from the Rambler and Eleanor had offered up the Porsche as a solution. She had also invited us to a party down at her house in San Clemente that evening.

“You’ll really dig Eleanor’s son, Derek,” Vincent told me. “He’s hip.”

I went off to change, not thinking about Derek in the least.

With the sun setting out over the sea, Vincent wound up into a quiet hillside community. Eventually he parked in the driveway of one of the homes. I climbed out and followed Vincent up to the front door. He rang the doorbell and Eleanor presently appeared. The living room behind her was jam packed with a raucous crowd of people.

I noticed that Eleanor's black hair was showing signs of salt-and-pepper. Otherwise she was as beautiful as ever. She gave Vincent a hug. I received a handshake, a few brief words of hello and a prompt introduction to her son Derek. Given all my expectations, I was crestfallen.

That Derek and I made fast friends was some consolation. The two of us drove up into the adjacent hills in his homemade dune buggy and down through a small housing development still in framing construction. The road came to an end at the edge of a bluff, where Derek parked. The town and the sea spread out below us. Derek turned the stereo down low and pulled out a joint.

"Do you indulge?"

"Sure," I said, not wanting to admit I was a novice, or to admit my surprise at seeing the stuff pop up everywhere all of a sudden.

With the joint reduced to a roach and twilight settling over the town, Derek and I sat there talking of life.

Sometime later, we returned to his house and found three of Derek's friends playing billiards out in his garage. Dick Sands had installed a draft beer dispenser into one side of an old refrigerator and Derek poured us two mugs from the tap. I excused myself to use the bathroom and found the party in full swing inside. Curiously, the guests had divided themselves into two factions; Eleanor's university colleagues over to one side of the living room and her husband Dick's associates in the munitions business over to the other. It was a rumpled collection of tweed coats and mustaches over here and a sea of crew cuts and full regalia military uniforms over there.

Dick was just then touting the relative merits of the new Cobra helicopter, and given the already fractious atmosphere, Eleanor took great umbrage at this war talk at their party. Wearing a tight black dress and high heel sandals, she pretended to grip an imaginary machine gun with both fists and let off a few rounds in Dick's general direction.

"Go get 'em, Cobra," she said to great laughter among her friends.

Not having heard the actual comment, but getting the general drift, Dick muttered something snarky back at Eleanor and herded several of his armed forces buddies out to the garage. Taunts and laughter could be heard from their quarter, followed by the crack of billiard balls.

"Gosh," Eleanor said, "don't you just love all this sentimental Christmas slathering."

To more laughter, Eleanor gathered empty glasses and headed out to the kitchen for a fresh round of drinks. Seeing that Derek and his friends had disappeared from the garage, I settled into a bar stool behind Eleanor. Sensing my movement, she glanced over her shoulder and smiled at me. I smiled back.

Dick, noticing Eleanor with me in the kitchen, glowered and shoved the door shut. Eleanor bit her fingers in mock trepidation. I smiled again, delighted to be alone with Eleanor at last.

"And what do you think of the war?" Eleanor asked over her shoulder.

She had caught me in the act of staring at her figure but went back to making her drinks without a word.

"I don't understand the motivation," I said.

"And what would you do differently?"

"I liked Mailer's idea. Give the military their own island and let them blow each other to hell, if that's what they want...Then maybe we should just let women run the world," I added.

"Oh?" she said with a look of intrigue over her shoulder now.

"Yes, the treaties of men always bear the seeds of the next war," I said, paraphrasing a truism I had read in my sophomore history class that year.

"Gee, now who do you suppose was responsible for that particular quote?"

"I can't remember."

"I can't either," Eleanor said with a finger to her lips, as if blithely ignorant. "But he ought to be shot!"

I smiled at the sound of her resounding laughter.

"But short of this fabled island, or women ruling the world, what else do you propose we can do to prevent wars?"

"I don't know. I think people should just try to live in peace. Though, with the establishment in power, I don't think that will ever happen."

Eleanor smiled at me. Then she was suddenly pensive

"It does seem that your generation has a unique opportunity to change our society, and the dreams to do it. Of course, seeing it through to practical results is another thing altogether."

"Yeah, I used to think we were totally going to change the world but now I don't know."

Eleanor smiled again and went back to concocting her drinks.

"Ah well, perhaps we should just try to keep peace in our little corner of things for one night."

"Sure."

Having finished with her drinks, Eleanor set the tray on the counter between us and again offered me her glorious smile.

"So, what'll you have, old boy?"

"I don't know. I mostly drink it straight from the bottle."

"Well," she said with great flair and reached for a bottle of vodka. "Perhaps it's time to smooth over some of those rough edges. How about a Dirty White Russian?"

"Sure," I said again.

Eleanor poured the vodka over a bit of crushed ice, poured some Kahlúa over that, splashed cream on top of the Kahlúa and stirred it lightly. The Kahlúa had settled to the bottom of the low ball glass in a dark, viscous layer. I took the drink from her and tasted the mixture.

"You see, they're sweet, but with a bit of a bite."

"It's really good," I said and polished it off.

"Well," Eleanor said, laughing. "Perhaps we had better nurse them a bit. Lest your mother has me shot for debauching you."

She fussed playfully over another drink, handed it to me with a wink and started into the living room with her tray. I followed, still high from the marijuana and now beginning to feel a bit of a buzz from the drink.

Eleanor went about dispensing drinks and mingling with her friends. I found a spot against the wall and watched her. At one point she stopped to talk with my brother. Then she noticed me and came over.

"Roger, why don't you mingle?"

I shrugged.

"Come, I'll introduce you to some of my colleagues." I followed her, shook several hands and then stood awkwardly at the edge while a group of professors discussed the relative merits of analytic philosophy.

Soon, I had retreated back to my place against the wall. Eleanor found me a short time later.

"Uncomfortable amongst the academe, are we?"

"No," I said. "I just prefer to stand back and watch like this."

"A sort of Wild Bill Hickok," she said with a wink and a quick check of her pretend poker hand.

Eleanor had pressed the arch of her back against the wall next to me. I glanced down at her feet and the black high-heel sandals. Her legs were bare of nylons. My mind was imagining the world underneath her tight black dress.

Eleanor looked over with a smile.

"So, Roger, tell me, have you given any more thought to what you want to do with your life?"

"I left off at fireman," I said.

She guffawed and then stared with her glorious smile.

"Really, my only thought is to get out on my own. I really don't care how."

"Yes, Vincent has explained to me about your struggles at home. In fact, he has expressed a great deal of concern about your relationship with your father."

"My father's an asshole. I run away from home every chance I get. Then the police drag me back."

With our eyes locked, I was unable to restrain myself any longer and finally blurted out what I had been dying to say since the first day I had met her.

"I think you're the most beautiful woman in the world, Eleanor."

She stared, still smiling.

"Well, I think you're a very handsome young man. And quite a fascinating one."

With our eyes still locked, feelings of inspiration and nobility stirred inside of me that I longed to express but did not know how.

"Come," Eleanor said, saving me from myself. "Let's have another drink."

I followed her through the passageway and into the kitchen. The din of the party faded behind us. It seemed as if we were entirely alone now.

Eleanor made two more Dirty White Russians and sat with me at the bar. People came and went, some interrupting us with their revelry, but mostly I had Eleanor to myself. The crowd and the music and the other festivities seemed far away. I was lost in Eleanor's beauty and smile and conversation.

"You know," Eleanor said at one point. "I really think you should pursue your original path. That of language and journalism. It will open up a whole new world of travel for you."

I spoke something in French and she smiled.

"It means, no one compares with you."

Eleanor put a hand to her cheek and pretended to blush.

"Have you looked into getting on as a foreign exchange student," she asked.

"Yeah, I wrote my pen pal about it but it's a pretty long and complicated process."

"Well, if I can be of any help to you along the way, please don't hesitate to ask..."

I knew what Eleanor meant by her offer. I knew what I was thinking.

Our conversation continued on, always skirting but never quite engaging in the romantic dialogue I so desired. Did she love me, as I loved her? How I longed to know the answer to that question, yet uncertainty turned in my heart and I never felt comfortable with asking it.

When Eleanor's duties as a hostess again swept her away, I wandered back out to the living room. Soon, it was time to leave and I stood in the driveway with Vincent and Eleanor. Vincent told me to get into the Porsche. I did and

saw him kiss Eleanor. My heart sank, realizing now that they were involved as more than friends.

"See you in two days," Vincent said from the driver's seat. "And thanks again for the car."

"Just don't wreck it. Technically speaking, it is Dick's."

They laughed over their private joke and Vincent backed out into the street. Eleanor waved a final time as we headed down the block. Driving back up the freeway, we were surrounded by darkened hills, with the lights of a few homes scattered among them. Vincent and I talked from time to time but my mind was entirely elsewhere, my every thought with Eleanor. Someday. As hard as it was to imagine, I felt surely someday I would hold that woman in my arms.

Two more years passed and I was finally free to leave home and follow my vagabond dreams. I traveled the world. I saw faraway places. I fell in love and broke hearts. I fell in love and had my heart broken, but amidst all this, the idea of striking up a romance with Eleanor had been entirely forgotten.

That following winter, I returned and came to be living with Eleanor's son Derek down in San Clemente. I thought of Eleanor from time to time but made no conscious effort to see her. I had younger women that interested me and otherwise my thoughts were always over the next hill somewhere. The idea of a romance with Eleanor now seemed far away and absurd.

Derek was then working in an automotive repair shop near Disneyland. I worked as a cook at a nearby restaurant so each weekday morning we drove north up the freeway together and Derek dropped me off at my job. Since his shift ended a few hours later than mine, I usually hitchhiked down to a cottage his family owned on Balboa Island and waited for him there.

One day, I arrived alone to the cottage at sunset. It had rained and the streets were still wet. The streetlights had started to come on. Charcoal clouds drifted along the horizon. I smoked a joint on the back porch with the last blush of light fading to evening around me.

Inside the cottage, I kindled a fire, sat in an easy chair and kicked my feet up on the ottoman. The flames danced in the darkness.

A short while later, I heard noises out front and checked the clock. It was five-thirty, a bit too early to expect Derek. I turned my attention back to the fire, expecting it was nothing.

Then the door flew open and I turned to find Eleanor standing behind me. Her fluffy hair had turned even a bit more salt and pepper, but she was as stunning as ever. All the old feelings flashed through my heart. God how I wanted to seduce that woman. I wondered how in the world I had forgotten

"Well, hello, Roger," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for Derek."

"Oh," she said and sat on the sofa opposite me. Her legs crossed with a high-heel pointed in my direction. "I thought perhaps you were waiting for me."

She smiled blithely and it occurred to me that she had been drinking.

"It's really great to see you," I said.

"Well, that's awfully nice to hear."

"Where's Dick?"

"Oh, probably off with one of his floozies." She flicked one hand in the air.

I stared, aware for the first time of how deeply imprisoned Eleanor must have felt in her marriage and wanting to rescue her. Before, Eleanor had existed in a castle beyond my reach. Now I was a confident young man and ready to gallop across the drawbridge.

"And how about you?" Eleanor asked. "Are you in love?"

"No," I told her. "I can't seem to find what I want."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, it's like the more interesting women in my generation are into free love and all that. And the other ones want to settle down and have children."

"And what do you want?" she asked.

"A woman who is both faithful and adventurous."

"We always want the impossible."

"I guess."

"You can still go off to see the world by yourself."

"I have," I said and explained about my recent travels, and also about my approaching troubles with the draft.

"So, you came back to uncertainty."

"Worse, I guess. I just felt so terribly lonely one day. Now I wish I hadn't come back at all... Well, not now," I added.

As if unaware of me, Eleanor gazed off into the distance, her fingertips pressed together in front of her face and tapping her lips lightly, lost in thought.

"You see," she said, her gaze still off in the distance, "in days past, it was only the wealthy man or woman who could afford to travel. But it was in great measure how they came to be learned."

Her gaze returned to me.

"Was it fascinating for you, Roger? Living outside our culture."

"Yeah. Life was totally different in Europe. I especially remember my first few weeks traveling through France and how the highway would become a cobblestone street as it passed through each town. A café at dusk, the proprietor seating us outside. A bottle of wine. A checkered tablecloth. The lights of cars moving on towards Marseilles or back towards Paris, the owner talking with us

in French as night settled in. People would let us sleep in their barns. I think I had brie and bread and cabernet for breakfast every day."

I stared into the fire.

"I guess I'll always be happiest not knowing where I will be when the sun goes down.

"You are a very unusual young man," Eleanor said.

I looked up and met her gaze.

"I feel unusually lost at the end. That's all I know."

"You have chosen a path outside the mainstream of society. It's a very lonely place. As you said, it would help to have a woman who understood you."

"Like you."

"Well, there," she said with a gesture and a smile.

We stared at each other. The flames from the fire danced upon our faces. My heart beat wildly, and I was prepared finally to speak of my true desire in the deepening shadows, but the sound of a motor came to a halt out in front of the house.

"Ah, saved by the bell," Eleanor said.

The front door opened and Derek came in.

"Hi, Mom," he said and kissed Eleanor on the cheek.

"Ready?" he said to me without taking a seat.

I stood up.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to San Clemente. Tony's to get something to eat. Come on, let's go."

He went out to his car.

"I wish we had more time to talk, Eleanor."

"Ellie," she said.

"Ellie."

"I'll look forward to that someday, Roger."

"Come on, let's go," Derek called out from the car. I smiled a final time and closed the door.

Derek and I quickly passed down through Corona Del Mar and along the dark, empty coastline north of Laguna. We talked from time to time but I was mostly distracted by my secret thoughts about Eleanor.

Half an hour later, Derek and I were at Tony's, a Mexican dive on the inland side of Coast Highway. Sandstone cliffs rose up behind the restaurant, their sheer faces worn into curtain folds by the rain. The highway passed along in front of the restaurant, paralleled by railroad tracks and the adjoining shoreline.

Derek ordered dinner and racked up the billiard balls. I ordered too and grabbed a pitcher of beer.

"You're Mom's really groovy," I said.

"Sometimes," Derek said as he broke the rack. "Sometimes she rides my ass."

"About what?"

"Nothing in particular." That was all he would say.

"What's going on?" he said when I failed to take my shot.

It almost came out. I wanted to tell him I loved his mother, but it was obvious where that would lead. Anyway, he was right. Just take the shot. My feelings for Eleanor were probably just illusions, but illusions I could not seem to get out of my heart.

Derek and I continued our journey down the coast later that night. He dropped me off at our pad and went to see his girlfriend. A young man named Jerry and I smoked joints together until the wee hours of the morning. Jerry had been sleeping on our sofa for several weeks so I made him a deal. You take over my room and the rent payments. I'm leaving for Hawaii. Again, I was feeling far too young and restless to be hanging around town.

Three

For the better part of a year, I bummed down through the South Pacific, slept on deserted beaches and lived beneath the stars and sun. I had little more than a pair of shorts, sandals, the shirt on my back and the Trade Winds as my friend.

I eventually landed in Panama, traveled up the Caribbean coast into Mexico and returned to the place of my youth. Two years had passed since my departure and in place of Dylan, Hendrix and psychedelic posters I found Twiggy, Peter Max and polyester suits. In place of our wild journeys, I found my old friends sitting around watching the Mod Squad in their darkened living room. We were becoming our parents, with a joint and a bottle of Boone's Farm wine thrown in for good measure.

Whatever was the new mantra. Dreams died and you moved on.

Adrift in this changing world, I took the money I had saved from slopping hash in diners from Rarotonga to Limon, rented a cottage on a street of old homes lined with maple trees and went about looking for a job. The idea of going back to college entered my thoughts. With what time I had left, I whiled away the autumn days writing letters and poetry.

Late one night, Eleanor popped into my thoughts.

Why not give her a call?

My ongoing desire to seduce Eleanor aside, it seemed reasonable enough to ask for some scholastic direction from her quarter.

With no small effort, I tracked down Eleanor's phone number, only to have a machine answer my call. I started to hang up but went ahead with the message, then immediately felt vulnerable for having done so.

That was a Saturday afternoon and five days marched by without a word from Eleanor. And my feelings of vulnerability grew exponentially with each passing hour. I imagined Eleanor discerning my true motives and dismissing me.

That Thursday was Thanksgiving and I sat at my desk in the morning with a bottle of Harvey's sherry in front of me, attending to the words of a poem. Maple trees stirred in the wind outside my windows. Children came and went. Autumn leaves fell around them. The holidays and the cold, crisp weather were

a pleasant backdrop to my efforts. I was not making much progress with the poem but I was making splendid progress with that bottle of sherry.

Later that day, I hiked over to my parents' home for Thanksgiving dinner. Vincent and Frank, my two older brothers, were already seated at the dining room table when I walked in. Frank, the unwitting Paisano of the family, got up and placed his arm around my neck. It was his Sicilian version of a hug.

"Jesus, Frank," I said and attempted to pull free but the squeeze of his arm only grew tighter. Finally I had to push him away with a shove.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked with mock disbelief. "Not part of the family anymore?"

"I figure to be fighting with Dad, not you."

Frank made a gesture to Vincent, who winked knowingly at me from the table. Frank had a reputation in the family, even if he was the last one to know it.

"Sit down and have some vino," Frank said.

I bristled at being commanded but did so anyway. Vincent poured me a glass of cabernet and pushed it in my direction. I swiveled my sore neck and drank.

"No need to worry about Dad," Frank said with his levity unperturbed. "Not since he smoked the old jointeroo with Ike."

Frank's eyes got big in the manner of a clown.

"He's the big discover now," Vincent elaborated dryly. "They wouldn't have found the New World without him."

"Where is he?"

"Passed out in the back room."

"Is that Donovan I hear back there?"

"Oh yeah," Frank said. "He's moving up to Haight-Ashbury next week."

My brothers laughed.

A short while later, my sister Rose arrived with her husband and their newborn baby. More family members and friends appeared and two leafs were added to the dinner table. Then my father came out of the back room wearing a wide-lapel floral shirt and sporting a mustache. You had to hand it to him. The times weren't going to pass him by. He took his seat at the head of the table. A big jug of Almaden wine sat on the floor beside him.

"So, the big world traveler comes back," he announced sarcastically. I watched as he went about pouring himself a glass of wine.

"At least he went somewhere," Vincent said.

My brothers and sister laughed at this longstanding joke around the family. My father loved to pontificate about what he would do at some indiscernible point in the future, when everything was perfectly arranged in his life, though

what those necessary arrangements might be, no one had ever been able to figure out. It was out there in the future somewhere. That was all we knew.

Inevitably, my brothers got around to recounting tales of their childhood days growing up in New England, in particular to all the mischief they had stirred up. With equal inevitability towards the end of the meal, my father digressed into his tiresome retinue of quotes and sayings.

"From the tables down at Morey's to the place where Louis dwells..."

"Here we go," Rose said.

"You never mind. I'll be up in Napa-Sonoma someday, making that good wine."

"Right, Dad," Vincent said. "You'll never get out of Orange County."

"Eh, I'll have the pueblo and in the quiet shadows, all the great minds will come to discourse with me."

My father quoted Keats, something about a babbling brook and his chin fell against his chest. He was out.

Some of the family retired to watch a football game in the living room. There was talk of work and raising families. Feeling empty amidst these discussions, I decided to return to my solitude and poetry. My mother wrapped up some leftovers and gave me a kiss at the front door. The sun went down as I walked home.

Back at my desk, I grew completely entranced by the barren trees etched darkly against the twilight sky outside my windows. A bit later, the phone rang. It was Eleanor. I listened while she related the highlights of a just completed trip to Mammoth.

"Otherwise I would have called you sooner."

"Yeah, it's cool."

"So, how are you doing, Roger?"

"Oh, feeling a bit lost, I guess."

"Well, one has to admire your consistency!"

I waited for her laughter to subside.

Apparently sensing my wounded ego, Eleanor held out an olive branch.

"I was delighted hear from you."

I wavered between expressing my amorous feelings and the practical and went with the practical.

"I thought perhaps you could help me find some direction in college."

"Oh. Well I'm certainly willing to try."

"That would be really groovy."

"So, tell me. What have you been doing with yourself these past few years?"

I explained about my most recent journeys, and about my ongoing interest in writing.

“So, what sort of writing are you doing?”

"Poetry, mostly."

"And your idea of majoring in journalism. What happened to that?"

"I don't know. I guess I just want to write what I want to write and not go through all those other hoops."

Eleanor plunged into a dissertation on how various men of letters, like Hemingway, had in fact used journalism as a springboard for their careers, just as I had envisioned seven years earlier. It made perfect sense and I should certainly go through with it.

All the while, my anxiety grew. If Eleanor solved my career dilemmas over the phone, there would remain little grounds for a personal encounter.

On and on she went.

"Maybe we could meet somewhere to talk in person," I said at the first opportunity.

"Oh," she said, "Well I'll have to look at my itinerary."

I heard rustling in the background and looked around my desk, thinking I ought to have one of those.

"Let's see, how about Saturday night?" she said.

I allowed for a short pause.

"Sure, that'll work. I have nothing on my schedule for that day."

"Well then, how did you want to arrange this? Shall we meet in a cheap bar or something?"

She laughed.

"I was thinking maybe just to stop by your place."

Butterflies took flight in the ensuing pause.

"Sure, I suppose that would be fine."

"I mean, we could meet somewhere else if you want."

"No, no, that's fine. It's just that...well...it's probably best if I explain this to you in person."

"Okay," I said, feeling tremendously vulnerable about it all and expecting she would put my youthful fantasies in their place soon enough.

"Shall we say six o'clock?" she said. "I'll throw some dinner together."

"That sounds great," I said, encouraged again. "I'll bring some wine."

"If you'd like, but it really won't be necessary."

"Oh, okay," I said, my hopes plummeting again. "I guess I'll see you on Saturday, then."

"Yes, on Saturday," she confirmed and we rang off after a few final words.

On the assigned day I began my trek towards Eleanor's house two hours early, expecting that would be ample time for me to hitchhike the fifteen miles

from Lincoln Hill to Newport Beach. It was a clear, crisp autumn day after a storm and the sea was visible in the distance, a deep blue line between the earth and the sky.

At roughly five o'clock, someone dropped me off on the road alongside the upper back bay. It was growing dark. A cold wind blew up, rippling the water. I was still roughly five miles from Eleanor's home. A stream of cars rushed by me.

Increasingly impatient, I opened the paper bag, pulled out the two bottles of wine I had with me, chose the cabernet and placed the chardonnay back in the bag. With a key, I cleared away the wax cap, pressed the cork carefully down into the wine and took a long swig. I took another one, hid the opened bottle back in the bag and resumed hitchhiking.

Half an hour later, I had made no progress and began to walk. At a quarter past seven, I was knocking on Eleanor's door. She opened it, looking annoyed.

"Well, better late than never."

A smile followed that only served to accent her sardonic state of mind.

"No one would pick me up," I said.

She took my bag and discovered the mostly empty bottle.

"Well no wonder. You're drunk!"

"I was getting cold. And restless."

She closed the door behind me.

"Well, let's see, a restless lush who doesn't know what he wants to do with his life. You did say you wanted to be a writer, didn't you."

Neither of us laughed.

"Well, come in, come in. Let's see what we can do with cold beef stroganoff."

She shooed me into the dining room.

"I'm really sorry," I said.

"Actually, it's an improvement. I'm accustomed to being stood up all together."

I was stunned. Who in their right mind would stand up Eleanor Sands?

At her suggestion, I sat at the oak dining table and explained my trip down to her place in more detail.

"You know, I would have gladly given you a ride."

"It's not normally such a bummer."

"No. I suspect we're seeing the end of an era."

"Yeah, I've been thinking the same thing lately."

"And the beat goes on," she said.

Wondering if her comment was meant to be hip, and thinking it wasn't, I was at a loss about what else to say. Oblivious to my thoughts, Eleanor went out to

the kitchen, placed my bottle of chardonnay in the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of zinfandel from her wine rack. The pop of a cork followed.

"I guess I should have saved the cabernet," I said.

Eleanor smiled.

"Well, amongst your other uncertainties, you couldn't have known I was making stroganoff."

She poured two crystal goblets half full, clinked her glass against mine and returned to her duties. I smiled to myself, liking Eleanor more when she was simply a sexy woman from another generation, with a different point of view.

She tossed a salad and placed it on the table a few moments later. A covered serving dish followed. A ladle protruded through a notch in the lid. Steam emanated from the dish. There were already egg noodles on our plates, upon which Eleanor ladled the stroganoff, first mine, then hers. I watched her run off again and heard music come on in the background. It was middle-era Sinatra.

"I hope you don't mind the music," she said, sitting down.

"No, I like Sinatra."

"That is an unusual state of affairs."

"What? Liking Sinatra?"

"At your age, yes."

"My parents listened to it when I was young. I think that's why. I like Big Band too."

"Well, here's to a simpler and more romantic era then."

We clinked glasses again, drank and dug into the meal.

"Hmm, very good," I said.

"Thank you." She dabbed at her mouth with a cloth napkin. "You know, I was thinking. Perhaps I should give you a ride home."

"Thanks," I said. "I was rather dreading the trip."

"Yes, my goodness. We're likely to find you passed out in a gutter, given the opportunity."

This time I laughed with her.

"You know," I said, "I had the impression that people were truly afraid to pull over."

"It's not surprising when you consider this not so distant Manson affair. Sadly, events like that have truly darkened our cultural perceptions."

"Yes, but Manson's a freak."

"The people of your parents' generation don't make that distinction. They just see the long hair and beards and lump it all together."

I acknowledged this insight with a shrug and a sip of my wine.

"You see, the American people have been trying for a generation to distance themselves from the harshness of the Depression. There was this grapes of

wrath seediness about it all. So their revulsion for and towards the free-speech movement has been something of a knee-jerk reaction. Largely because of its appearances. Of course, that's my opinion."

"I thought it was the drugs."

"That's probably true to an extent, but I feel it has been more the disturbing images of long hair and funky clothing. Your parents struggled a lifetime to escape those things."

"I suppose you're right."

"Well," she said, "have you ever heard your parents worry over a nickel?"

I nodded.

"You see? They will never be free of the depression. Not completely, and they abhor anything that reminds them of it."

I nodded again, beginning to feel inadequate in the face of Eleanor's superior education and intellect.

"What have you been reading?" she asked in taking another bite of her stroganoff.

"Jack London. Bukowski. Some Phillip K. Dick. Hofstadter's *American Political Tradition*."

"That's an interesting mix," she said with a curious smile. "I've not read Bukowski."

I explained his place as an icon to the counter-culture movement.

"Personally, I like him because he's so brutally honest."

I went into a wine induced and somewhat scatter brained diatribe about the Pentagon Papers and how our leaders were a bunch of Nazis. Eleanor listened with apparent enjoyment and then went off on her own, far more polished dissertation about the American Revolution and how it related to the current political morass.

Finished, she smiled and had a sip of her wine. I gulped down some of my own. Those feelings of inadequacy were creeping in again.

Eleanor had another bite of stroganoff and dabbed at her mouth.

"How about this, Roger? I'll provide you with a list of books before you leave. The same stuff my students read in preparation for a liberal arts education. Perhaps it will give you a little perspective on the history of Western thought."

"Sure," I said.

She laughed.

"What?"

"Well, obviously you're offended."

I stared at her, further annoyed that she had read my thoughts. Either way, we were getting far afield of my original goal.

I drained what was left in my wine glass and poured some more. Eleanor was staring at me with a smile when I looked back.

"You did say you were looking for guidance. And, of course, due to my involvement with Vincent, I've heard all the stories about your upbringing."

The specter of her relationship with my older brother was now added to my other feelings of inferiority. 'My involvement with Vincent'. That seemed like a rather breezy way of dismissing what I believed had involved a lot of wild screwing. I glanced over at Eleanor as if looking up a glass mountain now.

"By the way, how is Vincent?" she asked.

"He's living in Ohio."

"Really! Ohio?"

I nodded.

"He was out here visiting last week."

"With Mildred?"

"No, they split up about a year after their return from the Peace Corp. You knew about Vincent getting that Brazilian gal pregnant."

"Oh my, no," she said.

"Things weren't too great after that but I guess the final blow came in Santa Cruz, the next year. A group of people had gone off for a hike in the mountains and Vincent came up missing with this gal named Joni. For about an hour. I believe that's what finally did it."

"Alas. I know Vincent cared very deeply about Mildred, but as long as our society makes sexual fidelity the sole benchmark for lasting relationships, I expect we are doomed. We grow so fraught with guilt and deceit. But listen to me."

I assumed she was referring to her own transgressions. My heart burned at the thought.

I came back to the moment to find Eleanor speaking again of my upbringing.

"My parents are peasants," I said. "We had no discussions at the dinner table. There wasn't a book in the house. All they did was fret over crap."

"Those are the calling cards of the bourgeois, Roger. Most peasants are too busy to worry and have little that anyone wants. What do they care what anyone thinks?"

"Yeah, I guess. The peasants I saw in Europe did seem to be pretty content with their lot, if that's what you mean."

"Partly, yes."

"I'm sure we'll ruin them with TV soon enough."

"Turn them into the new bourgeois. Get them fretting over their gross median income and such."

"An old wooden fishing boat in every driveway."

She laughed.

"What I mean to say is, peasants often have the riches of the earth at their fingertips and a tranquil setting. A bit of technology and proper medicine and the pursuit of money becomes more or less insignificant."

"Well, I'm thinking to head back to the country or something. I don't know. Anything but this. I got back here and saw all my friends had sold out to a day job they hate and TV dinners."

"Indeed," Eleanor said. She began to gather the dishes but shooed me away when I tried to help.

"Why don't you turn the album over and I'll join you in a moment."

I did as instructed and sank down into a love seat. A short instrumental interlude concluded with Sinatra's voice. It was the romance of *I've Got You under My Skin*. Eleanor's world surrounded me, warm and casual, but sophisticated. My pad was done up in cement blocks and orange crates.

As I battled my intimidation again, Eleanor reappeared, kicked off her high heels and curled up opposite me.

"So, are you seriously considering college?" she asked.

"If I can get over my aversion to classrooms, yes."

She laughed.

"And what would be your alternatives?"

"Daydreaming."

She laughed again.

"Yes. Well, there you have it. All you lack is a patron."

"I suspect there's something wrong with me. You know, that I lack all motivation and direction."

"Why don't you start college, as you were thinking? I suspect the environment will help you to sort things out."

"There's that thing about classrooms, remember?"

She laughed.

"Ah yes, that."

"My travels have made me a restless man."

In studying me, Eleanor stretched her feet and ankles. Her red toe nail polish was beckoning. It captured all that was feminine about her. I stared into Eleanor's eyes, not wanting to be caught red handed.

"So, Roger. Tell me what you're thinking?"

Caught red handed, I considered various lies but decided to tell the truth.

"I'm wondering what it would be like to kiss you."

I waited for Eleanor to put me in my place. Instead, she quietly studied my face.

"Has this been on your mind for a while?"

"Since the first time I met you."

"At Vincent's wedding!?"

I nodded.

"Well, I'm flattered. That is a long time to wait for an answer."

"You made me feel very special that day."

"You are. To have answers, a man must first ask questions and I recognized you were asking those questions at a very early age."

"And still don't have many."

"So, go back to school. I'll help you every step of the way."

"I don't know."

She continued to stare at me in the silence.

"This was all a setup, wasn't it?"

"Maybe. I just know your beauty inspires me."

Eleanor continued to stare but with a wistful look now. I leaned over and very cautiously kissed her lips. Yet, when I pulled on her body, she backed away, one hand touching my cheek.

"I really need to know where we are going with this," she said.

"You're asking the wrong guy, remember?"

"Well, okay. Did you just want to have sex? I mean, that's always a possibility, but I'd prefer to know up front?"

I blushed.

"There, there," she said. "Not used to this sort of frank discussion. Just turn out the lights and tear off your clothes?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"Well, I find it much better not to have any illusions."

"Okay, I have these noble feelings that go along with this wild impulse to make love to you and I've not thought much beyond that."

"So a romp in the hay isn't all you're after."

"Oh no. I really care about you."

"How sweet."

I kissed her again. But again she pulled away.

"Roger, among our many unresolved issues, I have this ex-husband to contend with. And twins who still live here. I can selectively choose times to insure our total privacy. Otherwise, there's no telling who might show up."

"Are you expecting them now?"

"No, tomorrow. Their father is bringing them back from Mammoth. But you never know with him."

"I was hoping to see you tomorrow night."

"Well, normally I could. They stay with their father on most weekends."

"Is that what you were going to explain on the phone?"

"More or less."

"Then you were thinking too."

"Well," she said and batted her eyelashes playfully.

"You're so beautiful to me."

She touched my face.

"I very much look forward to being alone with you."

"Not Sunday?"

"No, I want it to be in total privacy. Possibly next weekend."

"That seems so far away."

She ruffled my hair.

"Ah, the impulsiveness of youth."

I dug my fingers into her ribs, until she suffered for her humor.

"Okay, okay. Friday night."

"You're sure you don't have to check your itinerary."

"No no. Oh, please stop." I did and she fell back against the sofa smiling.

"Friday's fine," she said.

"Well, I'm glad you could squeeze me in."

With those words lingering between us, I gently pulled her lips to mine. They were as warm and gentle as a summer breeze and we were lost in those kisses until a gust of autumn wind rattled the door.

At the sound of it, I jumped to my feet, thinking her former husband had arrived. It was a giddy moment followed by a decision to withdraw. I followed Eleanor into the kitchen and watched as she placed our wine glasses in the dishwasher with the other dishes.

We kissed again there for some time before I followed Eleanor out to the garage and climbed into her brown Capri. The car was made in her image, sleek and wild and capricious. I was ready to sit there and kiss forever but Eleanor started the car, pressed the garage door opener, adjusted her rear view mirror and backed out onto the street.

In a matter of minutes, we had left her neighborhood behind us and were headed on a back road up into the nearby hills. The adjacent mountains loomed behind the hills. The full moon was out. Eleanor shifted gears and held my hand as she was able. I rubbed her neck and shoulders and thighs when she was otherwise preoccupied.

Near the top of the hills, Eleanor turned onto Skyline Drive and followed it until the city lights came into view far below us. Eleanor parked in a pullout at the side of the road, played with the radio, found a jazz station then opened the sunroof and invited me to tilt my seat back with hers. We held hands. A cold wind stirred in the trees above us. Stars sparkled in the black sky.

My thoughts drifted back to our first encounter and how I had hungered for Eleanor to submit to me then, and over the ensuing years, and now she was rubbing my neck affectionately and it seemed too incredible to believe. The impending conquest was finally near and I was finally free to say those words I had been longing to say.

"I love you, Ellie."

"Oh, dear," she said with a humorous hand to her face.

"It's all right, laugh," I said.

Seeing I was hurt, she leaned over and reassured me with many kisses.

"I like it when you call me Ellie."

"Yeah."

"Oh come." She turned my face to her. "Okay, I love you too."

"Yeah."

"All right. I'm falling madly."

Still wounded, Ellie kissed me until all my wounds were healed. Then we both leaned back to watch the wind in the trees and the stars far, far above.

"Look," I said. "The universe dances at the sight of your beauty."

"You tell all the girls this, don't you?" I turned my face towards her.

"No. I've never felt this way about a woman."

As we stared into each other's eyes, Ellie sighed and placed her head upon my shoulder, just like Ingrid Bergman.

"You will be good to me, won't you, Roger?"

"I will marry you," I said in all seriousness. "I can see us on a summer day in the French countryside."

We were both lost in love then, our lips warm together in the cold night, with Ellie alongside me, like sea grass swaying in the ebb and flow of tides, following my every heartbeat, the sense of it inspiring beyond belief.

"Ellie," I said, "you do something to my heart that I really don't understand. But it is as if I have always wanted to be in this place with you. And I love the feeling of it so much."

I turned to face her.

"I love you, darling. And probably always have."

"Oh lover," she said.

"I'm here." I took her soft hair, her smell of roses and the luxurious feel of her warm lips. I found the warm flesh along her neck and lifted tenderly until her breasts spilled from beneath her bra. With her sweater pulled down over her shoulders, I kissed her soft bones, and again up to her neck and ears. A coo emanated from her parched throat.

"Oh God, Roger. I'm going to have you seduce me right here if you don't stop it."

I gazed into her eyes that were like wings across the beauty of her face. I kissed her turned up nose and supple lips, again and again, adoring her with all my heart.

"We fit together so well, Ellie. Why is that?"

"I don't know, Roger."

"Perhaps it's our astrological signs."

She told me hers. I smiled.

"What?" she said and shook me gently.

"Promise you won't get jealous?"

"I promise. Sort of."

I laughed.

"It's okay. It was just one of my childhood sweethearts. She was the same sign."

"And you suppose that is significant?"

"I don't know. It might be nothing more than coincidence, but I doubt it."

"And what is yours?" she asked.

I told her and we kissed again for a long time, after which I whispered in her ear and held her very close in my arms.

"Did you want to go?" I said finally, looking at her.

"You bastard!" she said playfully. "How dare you abandon me now!"

"That was not my intent. I just thought perhaps it's best to wait until Friday. You know. To make it special."

"Yes, you're probably right. Though under the circumstances, I'm not all that thrilled about being proper."

She rearranged her clothes somewhat absently.

"I love you, Ellie."

She kissed me tenderly, started the engine and pulled onto the road with a crunch of gravel. Trees loomed above us down the empty road. Ellie's headlights followed the centerline. We held hands and looked into each other's eyes from time to time but it was as if the spell had been broken and I feared our Garden of Eden would never come back.

Half an hour later, she was pulling up in front of my cottage.

"Did you want to come in?" I asked her.

"No, I suspect you were right. It's best for us to savor this moment." She reached over to touch my face. "Are you okay with that?"

"I'm not sure any more."

She waited.

"No, go," I told her. "I suppose I'll be glad about it in the end."

She pretended to be a flustered child and I laughed.

"Did you want me to pick you up on Friday?"

"No. I'll just leave earlier."

"I don't mind."

"I'll call you before then."

"Will you?" she said.

"Of course. I'll be thinking of you endlessly."

"You dear heart. Kiss me again." I did.

"Tell me again," she said.

"I love you. I will send you words with my heart. Listen for them on your way home."

"Are there some to take with me now?"

"All the world begins with a kiss."

"What a beautiful thought."

"It's true."

"It seems to be with you."

"Goodbye, sweetheart," I said and stood up. Briefly, our eyes were locked as Ellie pulled away. Then she was gone down the block and around the corner. I went inside and wound a fresh piece of paper into my typewriter. It was near dawn before I was able to push away from the desk and think of sleep. I read the poem once more.

mrs. sands
please do not correctd my mistakes
exchange them for a kiss
i do not ask, I demand
as a babe, fresh from the womb,
does not politely ask for air
mrs sands,
explain all this mystery,
espionage of the heart,
subliminal messages left
seven years hence
and now imprinted in the bells of your voice,
the sound of stars falling
into the deep, black sea
of your eyes,
aroused, yet with propriety,
the moments you left embrace
my mysterious path,
I am a changed man,
only help me, please,

my typewriter veers wildly
careening into the unknown,
is this the golden summer of love,
or only a wintry illusion?
mrs sands
bring back your enchantment,
correctd this pointless solitude,
exchange it for a kiss,
my confusion with more of your time,
the swift return of your voice
for this lonely reverie

I placed the paper down and rubbed my forehead. The words were never good enough.

In the murky light before dawn, I crawled beneath my quilt and fell into slumber.

Four

Shortly after sunset that following Monday, I arrived home, unlocked the front door to my cottage and sat at my desk. The shadows of dusk grew around me. A feeling of hopelessness festered in my heart. I had searched for work all day without success. Compared to my adventures traveling the world, settling down to life in the old town was a depressing slog.

From years of habit, I rolled a joint and partook of the herb and it quietly had its intended effect. The feelings of fear and failure were miraculously lifted. Some form of peace was restored to my heart.

What would mankind do without an anesthetic, I wondered? Go mad, I presumed.

I poured a glass of sherry and watched the ink of twilight settle over the neighborhood. Children played along the street outside my windows. The grand maple trees grew dark. I heard a mother call and saw her come down the block to gather her errant brood.

As dusk turned to night, I thought of Ellie. Reveries of our encounter flooded my mind. I had fantasies of us being married and living together, all of which seemed utterly preposterous and beyond the reach of a man lacking direction or a job.

Assaulted by renewed feelings of uselessness, I noticed a light behind the silhouette of black hills to the east. A contractor developing a new subdivision perhaps? Or a baseball field of which I had been previously unaware?

Then the lip of the full moon cleared the hills and I instantly understood all these overpowering emotions. People had dreamed up werewolves under such circumstances.

Soon, the enormous yellow moon had cleared the hills a vision of prehistoric times came to mind. Smoke issued from volcanoes. Alley Oop was on the loose beyond the far horizon, searching for his errant mate. Completely dedicated to Ellie a moment earlier, I was now ready to screw anything in high heels.

I should have taken her to bed, I thought. How foolish of me to deny my animal instincts. No man was a saint, least of all me. Left alone, I was headed into the abyss. A full moon, a few excess hormones and I was fittingly mad.

In time, the moon had ascended high overhead and became an intense white orb focused brightly on my desk. An incurable restlessness supplanted my prehistoric visions. I washed the dishes. I mopped the floor. I vacuumed. Everywhere I looked there was another distraction.

In this complete state of Zen failure, I went back to my desk and called my friend David.

“I see pterodactyls swooping overhead.”

David laughed.

“Raquel Welsh in a saber-tooth loin cloth.”

David laughed again.

“If you’re restless, let’s meet down at The Strip. They’ve got a great band on Monday nights.”

“All right, I’ll be there in half an hour.”

I changed clothes and started down the block on foot. David was already at the bar when I arrived, his tall, hulking, red-headed form sitting atop a barstool. He was impossible to miss, even with the strobe lights from the dance floor turning the whole scene into a series of still frame snapshots.

I slapped David easily on the back, ordered a drink and took the seat alongside him. The bar was at the opposite end of the club from the band so I swiveled on my barstool and took in the scene. There were half a dozen good looking cocktail waitresses working the tables around the club and more beautiful young women everywhere I looked. Blondes evoked carefree, summer days for me, brunettes the darker side. I loved women who were kittenish, ones with intelligent eyes, their ribald laughter, dark hair with pale skin. I loved most everything about the fairer sex, but I did not like being in a pinball machine, which was where the full moon had left me, prowling with hunger and with only one abiding principal in my pursuit; sex. I was ready to club some woman over the head and drag her back to my cave.

Real intimacy being impossible when you could not hear your own voice over the band, I turned back towards David and yelled in his ear.

“Think I’ll dance and see where the tribal drumbeat leads me!”

David nodded impassively, not being one to kick up his feet.

I set my sights on a petite brunette, playfully engaged with her friends at the tables to the left of the dance floor. The strobe lights from the dance floor made her appear and disappear from the darkness. Her beauty was hard to miss. She had pale skin, eyes that would have beguiled any Persian poet and heart shaped lips that were enchantingly ornamented with red lipstick. When our eyes met, she quickly looked away. Good, I thought. Spirited but unsure of herself. An easy target.

When I stood over her table and waved at the dance floor, she looked to her friends. In flashes, I saw them encouraging her, then her standing up, then our dancing together in more still frames, the young woman consumed with her footwork, then darkness, then her staring at me, then darkness again, then looking off in the distance. When the song ended, I introduced myself.

“Roger.”

“I’m Cerise.”

I held her delicate little hand.

“You’re very beautiful.”

She blushed and started to say something but the band started back up again.

By the end of the second song, I was soaked with sweat.

“I need some fresh air,” I said and excused myself

Cerise went back to her friends. David joined me outside and lit up a cigarette. The full moon was high above us.

“Beautiful lady,” David said.

“Yeah.”

“Did you ask her out?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I looked over into David’s big deer-like eyes.

“I’m seeing this older woman.”

David took a puff from his cigarette, his stared still locked on me.

“What’s that like?”

“It’s definitely different than going out with young chicks. She’s really intelligent. I like talking to her. She teaches college. I’ve known her since I was fourteen.”

“You’ve never said anything about her before.”

I explained to David how I had crossed paths with Ellie over the years.

“Anyway, I’m going to spend the night at her place next weekend.”

“So,” David said. “That’s next weekend.”

“I don’t know. I’d just feel funny about lying to her.”

“So, don’t tell her.”

“No, you don’t understand. It’s like she can see through me.”

I stared up at the bright moon. David finished his cigarette and ground it into the asphalt.

“Did you want to go back inside?”

“Sure,” I said and opened the door for him on the way in.

I danced with Cerise again but we talked very little. Later, when Cerise left with her friends, she made certain our eyes met before she went out the door. A few seconds later, a cocktail waitress came by and handed me a napkin. It had

Cerise's name and phone number written on it. She had very nice script. I tucked the napkin into my back pocket and ordered another drink.

David dropped me off at my place around two in the morning. The moon was well behind the cottage now but still glowing in the maple trees. I sat at my desk, restless and vacillating between Cerise and Ellie in my mind. Cerise was youth and easily pliable. Ellie offered experience and wonderfully edifying conversations. But Ellie also had a teenage son and daughter down the hallway. Completely under the sway of my animal instincts in that moment, the idea of romancing Cerise seemed like a far less complicated enterprise.

With both these women in mind, and every woman in the world, for that matter, I rolled a sheet of paper into my typewriter and went to work. Five minutes later, the poem was complete. I read it over several times, surprised at how easily it had poured out of me.

The Bones of Solitude

the soft, pale flesh of your feet
below the tan line
I want to bite these,
finger to your lips,
roses in your glorious smile,
given voice
without words,
tongues and thighs,
what natural design
to be born there,
a river of pleasure
rushing through gentle cries

I had absolutely no impulse to embellish the thing, which was even stranger than the manner in which it had materialized out of my sub-consciousness.

Exhausted, I crawled into bed, anticipating the impending lunar collapse with dread. It never failed. Each time the full moon waned, my emotions went careening into the abyss. Despair overtook me. Self-cannibalization commenced. I would feel as if I had chugged a cup of Drano.

And like clockwork the next day, it happened.

I went in search of work, again found no success and returned home that afternoon feeling useless. I attempted to write something and that seemed

useless. I was an insignificant little man, consumed with his insignificant little poems, fussing over a Chinese puzzle of words about which nobody really cared. Penury was rapidly approaching. Soon I would be typing out in the street.

Then the phone rang. It was Ellie.

“How are you doing, Roger?”

I thought to say ‘fine’ but her question was asked with such sincerity, I felt compelled to answer in kind.

Ellie listened to my lament for several minutes without interrupting me. At one point, I noticed Cerise’s phone number staring up at me from my desk and hid the cocktail napkin under some other papers.

“You see,” Ellie said once I grew silent. “That is why I wanted you to resume your education. You have enormous gifts but lack direction. A college education would provide you with that.”

Turned off again by her meddling in my life, I did not speak.

“Oh Jesus. I’ve touched a nerve again, haven’t I?”

“Perhaps.”

A longer silence ensued.

“All right. How about this? I’ll come by, take you out to dinner and then, you know, do what a woman can do to make a man feel better.”

I smiled.

“Sure. I can always use a good meal.”

“You fucker,” she said after a brief silence.

I laughed, a bit surprised by her candor.

“I like it when you say fucker.”

“You fucker,” she said in a sultrier voice.

“Aw Ellie. I’ve been haunted by it all weekend.”

“Do you suppose you can contain yourself until Friday night?”

“It’s a hell of a long time to wait.”

“Well, you know,” she said, feigning professorial authority. “Planning ahead is precisely what distinguishes mankind from the lower order of animals.”

“Well then, screw mankind.”

I smiled at the great guffaw of laughter that came through the line.

“Well, yes,” Ellie said when she could gather herself. “And isn’t that precisely what we’re talking about here.”

“Is it all right to say it?”

“That you want it real bad?”

“Oh, I want to run my hands through your hair and watch your face when we make love.”

“Oh lover. You’re getting me wet again.”

“I wrote you a poem about it.”

"Did you?"

"I wrote two of them. One of them Friday. One of them last night."

"Let me hear that one."

I reached for the sheet of paper, aware of my lie. The second poem had been written for every woman I longed to ravish along the way, but I read it to Ellie as if it were hers and hers alone.

"I'm going to drive over there right now," she said.

"All right. I'm waiting."

More silence.

"You bastard," she said. "You know I can't."

"I like fucker better."

"Okay, you fucker. I can't."

"You won't."

"You know I have the twins to think about."

"Yes, the twins."

"Don't do this to me, Roger."

"All right."

"I promise I'm going to make Friday night really special. Just you and me and candlelight and love making."

"All right. I'll have to wait until Friday."

"Aw. But please say something sweet to me before we get off."

"I love the way your body goes limp when I kiss you. It makes me feel like a man. It makes me want to pick you up in my arms and protect you."

"Aw," she said again.

"It's true."

"I can hardly wait until Friday, Roger."

"Me too. I'll see you then."

We rang off but I felt little better than before. I grabbed the bottle of hand lotion and went into the bathroom.

That entire week went by as though counting seconds but at last it was Friday at dusk. Someone had dropped me along the back bay again, a few miles from Ellie's place. The salt marshes snaked off like a ribbon of glass in the fading light. Clapper rails and plovers darted in and out of the spreading darkness. I heard their calls, enchanted.

Having lost myself in all this, I failed to notice an aging station wagon had pulled to the side of the road until the car horn honked. I dashed up to find a cheerful old man welcoming me inside. He lived two streets over from Ellie and we were soon lost in conversation.

At the top of Ellie's street, he stopped and wished me good luck. I waved goodbye and watched this inquisitive old engineer drive off into the gathering gloom, grateful for his kindness and enlightenment. Given this upscale neighborhood, and the fractious times, it was the last place I had expected to find an adult interested in my generation.

I started down Ellie's street with a cool wind from the bay tickling my face. The neighborhood was dark and quiet save for the sound of my boots echoing down the block. I passed a living room window with curtains drawn. A graying executive looked up from his martini and evening newspaper. His daughter, a cheerleader, was brushing her silky hair in an upstairs bedroom, preparing for that night's football game. I imagined his wife out in the kitchen making dinner. The memories of everything I had experienced growing up in suburbia flashed through my head. And here I was, a highwayman coming home to ravish someone's mother.

Turning up Ellie's driveway, my excitement grew. I had not been with a woman for over a year. There were past images but nothing visceral.

Then I was knocking at the front door and Ellie opened it, wearing a black gown and high heels, her salt and pepper hair stunning against black. I felt her warm body against mine and tasted her kisses. The living room was darkened, save for a few candles. Jazz played softly in the background.

"Come in, come in, Roger."

I closed the door behind me. Ellie took my coat and hung it in the hall closet. Our kisses resumed on our way out to the kitchen.

"A glass of wine?" she said.

"Sure."

"Red or white?"

"Ha," I said. "What are we having?"

"Steaks and a salad."

I pretended to be perplexed with a finger to my mouth, as she was wont to do and she laughed.

"Red it is, then," she said.

I took a seat at the kitchen bar top and waited while she uncorked a bottle and poured two goblets half full. I took mine and we toasted.

"To us," she said.

"To the loveliest woman in the world," I said in return.

Ellie placed her goblet down and nuzzled her face against my cheek. I felt her breasts against my shoulder. She was wearing nothing beneath the gown. Her face came up. Her eyes explored mine. Her fingers ran through my hair.

"Did you want to read the poems?" I said.

"Did you bring them?"

"Yes."

I pulled the folded pieces of paper from my shirt pocket and opened them. Ellie read each one carefully. I kissed her ears and neck and shoulders while she did. The lights from waterfront homes glistened along the nearby harbor. Others lights sparkled along the crescent coastline, all the way up to San Pedro.

After several moments, Ellie shuffled the papers and returned to the more recent of the two poems.

"You like that one."

"You have captured something animal here, yes."

"And the other?"

She took that sheet from the bottom and looked again.

"It takes more thought, but of course, Roger. A woman likes to be told she is beautiful, regardless of the form."

"You are beautiful. So very, very beautiful. And so very, very easy to adore."

"Well," she said and laughed at her own attempted modesty. We kissed and played.

"The salad is prepared," Ellie said, pulling back to look in my eyes. "Shall I broil the steaks now or...?"

"No," I said, then "yes" acquiescing to decorum. Ellie smiled and with a final kiss commenced to glide about the kitchen with great élan and gracefulness. In a final flurry, candles were lit. Food was placed on the table and Sinatra came to life on the stereo again. Ellie invited me to sit.

The steaks were rare but still sizzling.

"It's delicious," I said with the first bite. Ellie smiled in the glow of candlelight, reminding me of that moment three years earlier, on a rainy night in the cottage on Balboa Island. Only then I was something of a boy and uncertain who I was to Ellie and now I was something of a man, and with an invitation to the impending conquest. A sip of wine, a smile in the flickering shadows, words quietly spoken, all of it infused with our unspoken desires.

After the meal, while Ellie put everything in the dishwasher, I turned the album over. Then she came to dance with me in the candlelight, her body palpable through her black dress. Unable to suppress my desire any longer, I took Ellie by the hand and gently pulled her in the direction of her bedroom.

"But I thought I was the professor," she said in mock protest.

"Oh, Ellie. I've waited seven years. I can't wait another second."

In the bedroom, she made me lie on the bed and crawled on top of me. She kissed my neck and lips and ears and methodically removed my shirt and boots and my pants, my flesh searched by Ellie's lips with the removal of each item.

When only my briefs remained, I felt the warmth of her mouth through the fabric, the briefs pulled down and my organ spring free. A liquid sense of ecstasy rushed over me as she swallowed my cock.

I groaned and tried to sit up but Ellie gently pushed me down again.

I had considered myself somewhat knowledgeable in these matters but soon realized I knew very little. Ellie gracefully revealed that fact to me over the course of the evening hours. Then and on late into the night, I mostly lay there and took all that Ellie had to give, playing the role of a young, royal subject to Ellie's exotic courtesan.

Five

A sliver of light was visible through Ellie's heavy tapestry curtains. I knew it was morning, but exactly what hour, I had no idea. I reached for the pillow next to me and found it still warm. Images from the previous night rushed through my mind. Then I heard stirrings down the hallway and realized Ellie was out in the kitchen making breakfast. I smelled coffee and the tart scent of bacon frying.

Aware of my full bladder, I got up to relieve myself and crawled back into bed. More dreams of Ellie's sweet lovemaking flashed through my head. Then I remembered that the rent was due in a few days and that as soon as I paid it, I'd be broke. What the hell was I going to do?

While worrying over that, I became aware of my surroundings. Ellie had the same panache for design that she had for everything else. There was purpose combined with beauty in a celebration of life's simple refinements, from the antique armoire to the dried floral arrangements to the tapestries over the windows. Conversely, my place was decorated in early orange-crate. I was a rough approximation of Gertrude Stein's observation; that a man not yet civilized at twenty-five never would be. I attempted to comfort myself with a countering admonition from Yeats—that young men should never worry about money. Well, I hadn't and the results were hardly reassuring. Perhaps Ellie was there to save me from both these fates.

I had been lying there in the darkened room for another minute or so when I heard her high heels coming down the hall. Excitement now percolated into my anxieties. The beautiful, sexy, illustrious Ellie approached, but who was I supposed to be? What was my role?

She entered the room wearing a silk robe and feathered high-heeled shoes and looking as cosmopolitan and sexy as any doll in a Fred Astaire romp.

"Good morning, Roger," she said with a big smile.

Without missing a beat, she let her robe drop from her lean body. Her smallish, well-formed breasts quivered ever so slightly. She crawled under the covers with me, soft and warm. We kissed and I became aroused again.

"I have breakfast almost ready."

She took hold of my swollen member.

“Though we seem to be having other ideas.”

She searched my face.

“Well? Shall I start the eggs?”

“Sure, I can always use a good meal.”

She pretended to be flustered and we laughed. Our laughter led to kisses. I kissed her eyes repeatedly. I loved their Japanese-like quality of soaring upward at the tips. And her gently turned-up nose lent softness to her finely chiseled face.

Soon, she was soaring above me again, as though wanting to leave the bonds of Earth and each time she returned, I took one of her breasts in my mouth, then the other, and the other again. Then we were coming together and world was, for that brief moment, a quite unblemished place.

After lying there enveloped in each other’s arms for some time, I went out to watch Ellie finish making breakfast. Ellie talked with me while she cooked. I sat at the oak dining table and had the breakfast delivered to me. We ate with splashes of the morning sun on our plates. Yellow and green floral wallpaper made the room seem extra cheery. The coastline rolled off in the distance.

All the while, a secret dread grew in me. I did not want to leave the comfort of Ellie’s home. Back at my place, nothing but worries awaited me.

Ellie smiled at me over a bite of her bacon.

“You know, Roger. We have all weekend and you’re welcome to stay.”

I took her hand.

“What?”

“You must have been reading my thoughts.”

“Yes? So would you like to?”

“Yes, very much so.”

I kissed her hand and went back to my eggs. Ellie had the Entertainment section of the morning paper in front of her and turned the page.

“Oh look, here’s an idea for tonight. Big Joe Turner is playing at Hungry Joes.”

“What?” she said at the look on my face. “You don’t like Big Joe Turner?”

“He’s not one of my favorites.”

“Oh, well,” she said with mock seriousness. “Indeed, we’ll just have to call the club and have a word with them about this. I mean, how dare they try to foist off a second tier performer on us.”

“Tsk tsk. Hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm.”

She went on until I tickled her under the table.

“Okay okay,” she begged and we laughed.

“You’re right,” I said. “Seeing Big Joe Turner would be a great idea.”

I explained my partiality for the south side Chicago blues artists, but seeing any of these old titans before they passed away was indeed a treasure.

Ellie and I talked of taking a walk but the day grew gray and cold and windy so we went back to bed. An old movie came and went on the TV without us seeing much of it. We made love and slept and whiled away the day without guilt.

In the late afternoon, I awakened with Ellie in the bathroom. I went out to the kitchen alone. A bank of dark gray clouds straddled the horizon. The sun was behind them but glowing gloriously in the firmament higher up. I sat at the oak table. Lights had begun to twinkle along the harbor. A few minutes later, the sun set in a final sliver of brilliant orange between the gray clouds and the sea.

Ellie appeared with a bottle of Spanish sherry and poured us both a snifter. We kissed, toasted to each other and drank. On her way back to shower, Ellie turned on a Grover Washington album. I thought to change it for some straight ahead jazz but decided not to meddle. A short time later, I went in to shower.

By the time Ellie was maneuvering her Capri out through the winding residential streets, twilight had descended over the neighborhood. We came to a main road and Ellie turned right down a long sloping hill towards the sea. At Coast Highway, she turned right again. To the west, the horizon was still tinted with orange. Headlights approached us from the direction of San Pedro.

We crossed the river mouth and came alongside a public beach, separated from the highway by a wood and chain-link fence. On the opposite side, solitary oil pumps worked tirelessly in the failing light, each pterodactyl-like head moving slowly up and down. We passed a power station, its labyrinth of pipes emitting steam into the cold night. Out ahead, the coastline was visible in a long crescent that terminated into the dark hump of Palos Verde peninsula. The lights of Long Beach and San Pedro were nestled at the base of that dark hump.

Ellie and I talked along the way but in the silences we touched and looked into each other's eyes and were glad to be in love on a Saturday night.

A short distance past the cloister of surf shops around the Huntington Beach pier, Ellie pulled into a gravel parking lot on the inland side of the highway. A square, clapboard structure stood by itself at the far end of the lot. One wall was completely covered with professional graffiti. A tall billboard on the rooftop proclaimed 'Hungry Joes'. A sign over the door said Big Joe Turner.

Ellie parked and we walked across the dirt and gravel lot hand in hand. A hostess greeted us, checked her list and led us inside. Ellie had made reservations for the eight o'clock dinner show. Joe Turner's music was playing over the PA. Delighted with things, Ellie smiled my way.

"You said you liked blues and jazz."

"Yes, thank you. It was very thoughtful of you."

When our drinks arrived, we toasted and drank. I reached one hand under the table and felt Ellie's thigh. She smiled.

"What?"

"Do you always think about it?"

"With you, yes. Until my last dying breath, I'll be thinking about it."

Ellie's hands disappeared under the table too, so that when our waiter arrived, we were both compromised. He did a commendable job of ignoring our mischief, but not our disparate ages. I was a young man planning to take this older woman home later on and do nasty stuff to her and the waiter knew it.

About the time our meals arrived, a black rhythm and blues group opened for Big Joe Turner, and about the time the waiter was clearing away our dishes, the big man made his appearance, like a three hundred pound humpty-dumpty, his pants pulled up about his sternum, a pencil mustache and pomade in his thinning hair. He settled his great girth precariously on a barstool, leaned on his cane and sat passively as the band eased into 'Shake, Rattle and Roll'. Then his tenor voice bellowed into the darkened room.

Big Joe ended his show about nine thirty and a general exodus quickly spilled out into the parking lot. A queue had already lined up for the next show, halfway out to the sidewalk. Laughter and conversation echoed up into the cold night. We climbed into Elli's car. Headlights came on around us. Tires crunched against gravel. We joined a line of cars inching towards the highway. Dust and rock kicked up as Ellie sped out onto the road.

On our way back towards Newport, she glanced over at me.

"Did you want to go back to my place?"

I looked over at her. Lines of light and shadow crisscrossed her face.

"Yes. I'd be very happy just to be alone with you."

"And."

"And make love about a hundred times."

Ellie flashed me a beautiful smile and reached for my hand.

Back at her place, I made myself comfortable in one of the stuffed living room chairs. Ellie disappeared down the hallway and returned in the same gown and shoes she had worn the night before. Candles were lit. Music came on. When Ellie was done, she sat on my lap. We kissed.

"I wonder if you could live with me?" she said and pulled back to look at me.

When I did not answer, she bit her nails in mock fright.

"You know, the twins are going away this summer. We would be entirely alone."

She waited.

"What is it, Roger?"

"Didn't you hear yourself? '...if you could live with me...?'"

“As opposed to...”

“Living together,” I said to complete her sentence.

“My dear lover, it is the same thing.”

“No. In the one instance, we are equals. In the other, I am your vassal, and at your mercy.”

“Did you think I would...?”

“Yes,” I said and fought with her hands.

“Well, at the very least, I think it would be very helpful if you met the twins.”

“Oh Jesus, Ellie. I’m going limp.”

A truly frustrated look came over her face.

“Hey, come on,” I said. “Let’s put all this on the back burner for now. It’s not in the spirit of the moment.”

I gently pulled Ellie’s face around.

“Okay?”

She nodded like a little girl.

“Aw, did you know you’re beautiful when you pout.”

She buried her head on my shoulder, suddenly helpless, and aroused by her seeming frailty, I lifted Ellie up in my arms and carried her down the hall, with me the strong one now, Ellie’s knight, and she my fair damsel. As I laid her on the bed and kissed her ankles and thighs, I very much believed in that role.