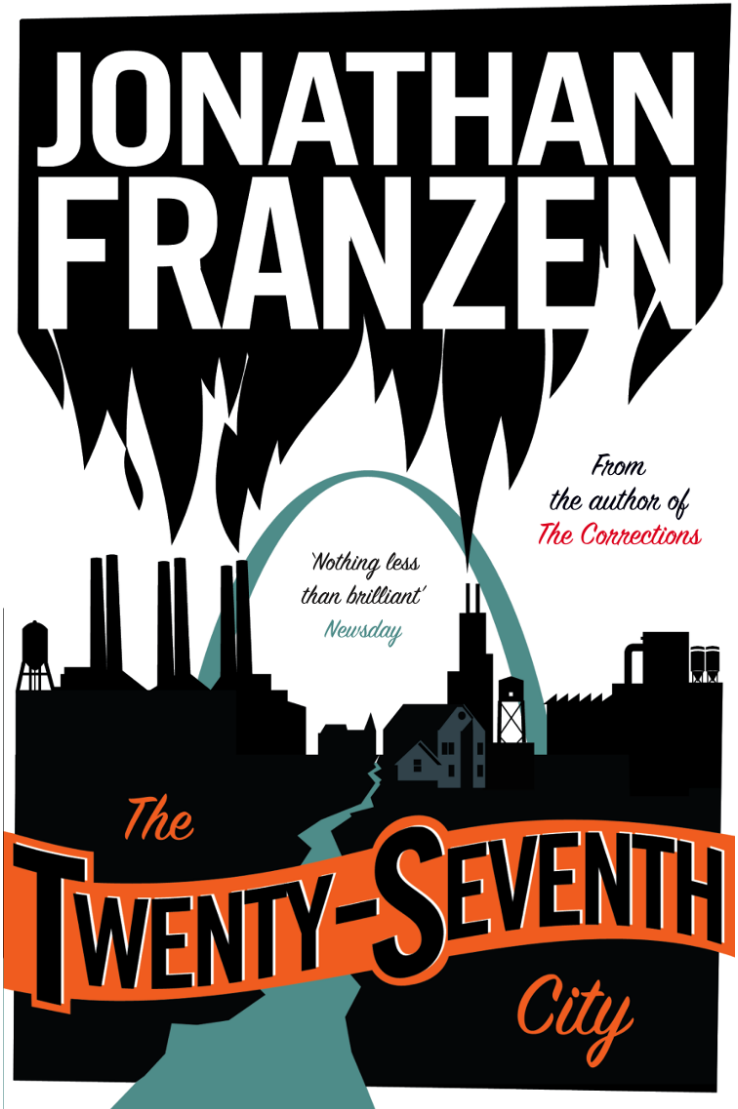
JONATHAN
FRANZEN
From
the author of
The Corrections
'Nothing less
than brilliant'
Newsday
The
TWENTY-SEVENTH
City

Jonathan Franzen
The Twenty-Seventh City

Аннотация

St. Louis, Missouri, is a quietly dying river city until it hires a new police chief: a charismatic young woman from Bombay, India, named S. Jammu. No sooner has Jammu been installed, though, than the city's leading citizens become embroiled in an all-pervasive political conspiracy. A classic of contemporary fiction, 'The Twenty-Seventh City' shows us an ordinary metropolis turned inside out, and the American Dream unraveling into terror and dark comedy.

Содержание

The TWENTY-SEVENTH CITY

Jonathan Franzen

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Praise

'A huge and masterly drama… gripping and surreal and overwhelmingly convincing'

Newsweek

'Permeated with intelligence, beauty, and subversive humor, teeming with life, always on the edge of igniting from its own repressed energy… Franzen is an extravagantly talented writer'

Chicago Tribune

'Franzen's tour de force (to call it a "first novel" is to do it an injustice) is a sinister fun-house-mirror reflection of urban America in the 1980s… There's a lot of reality out there. *The Twenty-Seventh City*, in its larger-than-life way, is a brave and exhilarating attempt to master it'

Seattle Times

'Franzen goes for broke here – he's out to expose the soul of a city and all the bloody details of the way we live… A book of range, pith, intelligence'

Vogue

'Mr Franzen has talent to spare. His is a worthwhile entertainment, this picaresque tale the principal vagabond of which is its own sinuous plot'

Wall Street Journal

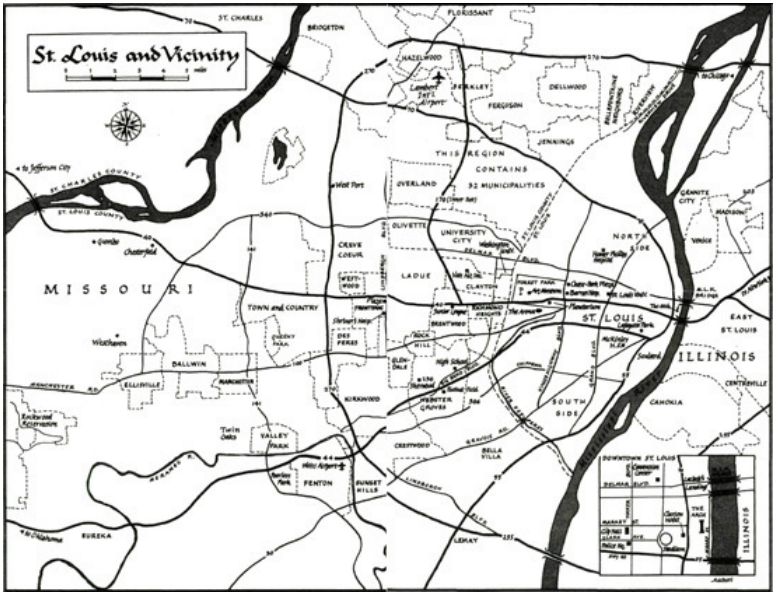
Dedication

To my parents

Contents

This story is set in a year somewhat like 1984 and in a place very much like St. Louis. Many actual public achievements, policies and products have been attributed to various characters and groups; these should not be confused with any actual person or organization. The lives and opinions of the characters are entirely imaginary.

Map


St. Louis and Vicinity
ST. CHARLES
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BERKELEY
FERGUSON
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THIS REGION CONTAINS
32 MUNICIPALITIES
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DALLWIN
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SOUTH SIDE
CAHOKIA
CENTREVILLE
VALLEY PARK
CRESTWOOD
BELLA VILLA
FENTON
SUNSET HILLS
LEMAY
EUREKA
DOWNTOWN ST. LOUIS

1

In early June Chief William O'Connell of the St. Louis Police Department announced his retirement, and the Board of Police Commissioners, passing over the favored candidates of the city political establishment, the black community, the press, the Officers Association and the Missouri governor, selected a woman, formerly with the police in Bombay, India, to begin a five-year term as chief. The city was appalled, but the woman—one S. Jammu—assumed the post before anyone could stop her.

This was on August 1. On August 4, the Subcontinent again made the local news when the most eligible bachelor in St. Louis married a princess from Bombay. The groom was Sidney Hammaker, president of the Hammaker Brewing Company, the city's flagship industry. The bride was rumored to be fabulously wealthy. Newspaper accounts of the wedding confirmed reports that she owned a diamond pendant insured for $11 million, and that she had brought a retinue of eighteen servants to staff the Hammaker estate in suburban Ladue. A fireworks display at the wedding reception rained cinders on lawns up to a mile away.

A week later the sightings began. An Indian family of ten was seen standing on a traffic island one block east of the Cervantes Convention Center. The women wore saris, the men dark business suits, the children gym shorts and T-shirts. All of them wore expressions of controlled annoyance.

By the beginning of September, scenes like this had become a fixture of daily life in the city. Indians were noticed lounging with no evident purpose on the skybridge between Dillard's and the St. Louis Centre. They were observed spreading blankets in the art museum parking lot and preparing a hot lunch on a Primus stove, playing card games on the sidewalk in front of the National Bowling Hall of Fame, viewing houses for sale in Kirkwood and Sunset Hills, taking snapshots outside the Amtrak station downtown, and clustering around the raised hood of a Delta 88 stalled on the Forest Park Parkway. The children invariably appeared well behaved.

Early autumn was also the season of another, more familiar Eastern visitor to St. Louis, the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan. A group of businessmen had conjured up the Prophet in the nineteenth century to help raise funds for worthy causes. Each year He returned and incarnated Himself in a different leading citizen whose identity was always a closely guarded secret, and with His non-denominational mysteries He brought a playful glamour to the city. It had been written:

There on that throne, to which the blind belief Of millions rais'd him, sat the Prophet-Chief, The Great Mokanna. O'er his features hung The Veil, the Silver Veil, which he had flung In mercy there, to hide from mortal sight His dazzling brow, till man could bear its light.

It rained only once in September, on the day of the Veiled Prophet Parade. Water streamed down the tuba bells in the

marching bands, and trumpeters experienced difficulties with their embouchure. Pom-poms wilted, staining the girls' hands with dye, which they smeared on their foreheads when they pushed back their hair. Several of the floats sank.

On the night of the Veiled Prophet Ball, the year's premier society event, high winds knocked down power lines all over the city. In the Khorassan Room of the Chase-Park Plaza Hotel, the debbing had just concluded when the lights went out. Waiters rushed in with candelabras, and when the first of them were lit the ballroom filled with murmurs of surprise and consternation: the Prophet's throne was empty.

On Kingshighway a black Ferrari 275 was speeding past the windowless supermarkets and fortified churches of the city's north side. Observers might have glimpsed a snow-white robe behind the windshield, a crown on the passenger seat. The Prophet was driving to the airport. Parking in a fire lane, He dashed into the lobby of the Marriott Hotel.

"You got some kind of problem there?" a bellhop said.

"I'm the Veiled Prophet, twit."

On the top floor of the hotel He stopped outside a door and knocked. The door was opened by a tall dark woman in a jogging suit. She was very pretty. She burst out laughing.

When the sky began to lighten, low in the east over southern Illinois, the birds were the first to know it. Along the riverfront and in all the downtown parks and plazas, the trees began to chirp and rustle. It was the first Monday morning in October. The birds

downtown were waking up.

North of the business district, where the poorest people lived, an early morning breeze carried smells of used liquor and unnatural perspiration out of alleyways where nothing moved; a slamming door was heard for blocks around. In the railyards of the city's central basin, amid the buzzing of faulty chargers and the sudden ghostly shiverings of Cyclone fences, men with flattops dozed in square-headed towers while rolling stock regrouped below them. Three-star hotels and private hospitals with an abject visibility occupied the higher ground. Farther west, the land grew hilly and healthier trees knit the settlements together, but this was not St. Louis anymore, it was suburb. On the south side there were rows upon rows of cubical brick houses where widows and widowers lay in beds and the blinds in the windows, lowered in a different era, would not be raised all day.

But no part of the city was deader than downtown. Here in the heart of St. Louis, in the lee of the whining all-night traffic on four expressways, was a wealth of parking spaces. Here sparrows bickered and pigeons ate. Here City Hall, a hip-roofed copy of the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, rose in two-dimensional splendor from a flat, vacant block. The air on Market Street, the central thoroughfare, was wholesome. On either side of it you could hear the birds both singly and in chorus—it was like a meadow. It was like a back yard.

The keeper of this peace had been awake all night on Clark Avenue, just south of City Hall. Chief Jammu, on the fifth

floor of police headquarters, was opening the morning paper and spreading it out beneath her desk lamp. It was still dark in her office, and from the neck down, with her hunched, narrow shoulders and her bony knees in knee socks and her restless feet, the Chief looked for all the world like a schoolgirl who'd been cramming.

Her head was older. As she leaned over the newspaper, the lamplight picked out white strands in the silky black hair above her left ear. Like Indira Gandhi, who on this October morning was still alive and the prime minister of India, Jammu showed signs of asymmetric graying. She kept her hair just long enough to pin it up in back. She had a large forehead, a hooked and narrow nose, and wide lips that looked blood-starved, bluish. When she was rested, her dark eyes dominated her face, but this morning they were cloudy and crowded by pouches. Wrinkles cut the smooth skin around her mouth.

Turning a page of the *Post-Dispatch* she found what she wanted, a picture of her taken on a good day. She was smiling, her eyes engaging. The caption—*Jammu: an eye to the personal*—brought the same smile back. The accompanying article, by Joseph Feig, had run under the headline A NEW LEASE ON LIFE. She began to read.

Few people remember it now, but the name Jammu first appeared in American newspapers nearly a decade ago. The year was 1975. The Indian subcontinent was in turmoil following Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's suspension of civil rights and her

crackdown on her political foes.

Amid conflicting, heavily censored reports, a strange story from the city of Bombay began to unfold in the Western press. The reports concerned an operation known as Project Poori, implemented by a police official named Jammu. In Bombay, it seemed, the police department had gone into the wholesale food business.

The operation sounded crazy then; it sounds hardly less crazy today. But now that a twist of fate has brought Jammu to St. Louis in the role of police chief, people here are asking themselves whether Project Poori was really so crazy after all.

In a recent interview in her spacious Clark Avenue office, Jammu spoke of the circumstances that led up to the project.

"Before Mrs. Gandhi dispensed with the constitution the country was like Gertrude's Denmark—rotten to the core. But with the imposition of President's Rule, we in law enforcement had our chance to do something about it. In Bombay alone we were locking up 1,500 lawbreakers a week and impounding 30 million rupees in illegal goods and cash. When we evaluated our efforts after two months, we realized we'd hardly made one speck of progress," Jammu recalled.

President's Rule devolves from a clause in the Indian constitution giving the central government sweeping powers in times of emergency. For this reason, the 19 months of such rule were referred to as the Emergency.

In 1975 a rupee was worth about ten U.S. cents.

"I was an assistant commissioner at the time," Jammu said. "I suggested a different approach. Since threats and arrests weren't working, why not try defeating corruption on its own terms?

"Why not enter a business ourselves and use our resources and influence to achieve a freer market? We chose an essential commodity: food," she said.

It was thus that Project Poori was conceived. A *poori* is a deep-fried puff-bread, popular in India. By the end of 1975, Bombay was known to Western journalists as the one city in India where groceries were plentiful and the prices uninflated.

Naturally, attention centered on Jammu. Her handling of the operation, as detailed in the dailies and in *Time* and *Newsweek*, caught the imagination of police forces in this country. But certainly no one would have guessed that one day she would be in St. Louis wearing the Chief's badge on her blouse and a department revolver on her hip.

Colonel Jammu, however, entering her third month in office, would have it seem the most natural thing in the world. "A good chief stresses personal involvement at all levels of the organization," she said. "Carrying a revolver is one symbol of my commitment.

"Of course, it's also an instrument of lethal force," she continued, leaning back in her office chair.

Jammu's frank, gutsy style of law-enforcement management has earned a reputation that is literally world-wide. When the search for a replacement for former Chief William O'Connell

ended in its deadlock of opposing factions, Jammu's name was among the first mentioned as a compromise candidate. And despite the fact that she had no previous law-enforcement experience in the U.S., the Police Board confirmed her appointment less than a week after she arrived in St. Louis for interviews.

To many here, it came as a surprise that this Indian woman met the citizenship requirements necessary for her job. But Jammu, who was born in Los Angeles and whose father was American, says she went to great lengths to preserve her citizenship. Since she was a child she has dreamed of settling in America.

"I'm terribly patriotic," she said with a smile. "New residents, like myself, often are. I'm looking forward to spending many years in St. Louis. I'm here to stay."

Jammu speaks with slightly British intonations and striking clarity of thought. With her fine features and delicate build, she could hardly be less like the stereotype of the gruff, male American police chief. But her record gives an altogether different impression.

Within five years of entering the Indian Police Service in 1969, she became a deputy to the Inspector-General of Police in Maharashtra Province. Five years later, at the astonishing age of 31, she was named Commissioner of the Bombay police. At 35, she is both the youngest police chief in modern St. Louis history and the first woman to hold the post.

Before joining the Indian police she received a B.A. in electrical science from the University of Srinagar in Kashmir. She also did three semesters of postgraduate work in economics at the University of Chicago.

"I've worked hard," she said. "I've had plenty of luck, too. I doubt I'd have this job had I not received good press from Project Poori. But of course the real problem was always my sex. It wasn't easy to buck five millennia of sexual discrimination.

"Until I became a superintendent I routinely dressed as a man," Jammu reminisced.

Apparently, experiences like this played a key role in the Commissioners' selection of Jammu. In a city still struggling to overcome its image as a "loser," the Board's unorthodox choice makes good public-relations sense. St. Louis is now the largest U.S. city to have a female police chief.

Nelson A. Nelson, president of the Board, believes St. Louis should take credit for its leading role in making city government accessible to women. "It's affirmative action in the truest sense of the word," he commented.

Jammu, however, appeared to discount the issue. "Yes, I'm a woman, all right," she said with a smile.

As one of her primary goals, she names making city streets safer. While not offering to comment on the performances of past chiefs in this area, she did say that she was working closely with City Hall to devise a comprehensive plan for fighting street crime.

"The city needs a new lease on life, a fundamental shake-up. If we can get the business community and citizens' groups to aid us—if we can make people see that this is a *regional* problem – I'm convinced that in a very short time we can make the streets safe again," she said.

Chief Jammu is not afraid of making her ambitions known. One might venture to guess that she will meet with jealous opposition in whatever she attempts. But her accomplishments in India show her to be a formidable adversary, and a political figure well worth keeping an eye on.

"Project Poori is a good illustration," she pointed out. "We applied a new set of terms to a situation that appeared hopeless. We set up bazaars outside every station house. It improved our public image, and it improved morale. For the first time in decades we had no trouble attracting well-qualified recruits. Indian police have a reputation for corruption and brutality which is largely due to the inability to recruit responsible, well-educated constables. Project Poori began to change things."

Some of Jammu's critics have voiced fears that a police chief accustomed to the more authoritarian atmosphere of India might be insensitive to civil-rights issues in St. Louis. Charles Grady, spokesman for the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, has gone even further, urging that Jammu be dismissed before a "constitutional disaster" occurs.

Jammu strenuously rejects these criticisms. "I've been quite surprised by the reactions of the liberal community here," she

said.

"Their concern arises, I believe, from an abiding distrust of the Third World in general. They overlook the fact that India's system of government has been deeply influenced by Western ideals, particularly, of course, by the British. They fail to distinguish between the Indian police rank-and-file, and the national officer corps, of which I was a member.

"We were trained in the British tradition of civil service. Standards were extremely high. We were continually torn between sticking up for our troops and sticking up for our ideals. My critics overlook the fact that it was this very conflict which made a position in the United States attractive to me.

"In fact, what strikes me now about Project Poori is how American our approach was. Into a clogged and bankrupt economy we injected a harsh dose of free enterprise. Soon hoarders found their goods worth half of what they'd paid for them. Profiteers went begging for customers. On a small scale, we achieved a genuine *Wirtschaftswunder,"* Jammu recalled, referring to postwar Germany's "economic miracle."

Can she work similar wonders in St. Louis? Upon taking office, other chiefs in recent memory have stressed loyalty, training, and technical advances. Jammu sees the crucial factors as innovation, hard work, and confidence.

"For too long," she said, "our officers have accepted the idea that their mission is merely to ensure that St. Louis deteriorates in the most orderly possible way.

"This has done wonders for morale," she said sarcastically.

It was perhaps inevitable that many of the officers here, especially the older ones, would react to Jammu's appointment with skepticism. But attitudes have already begun to change. The sentiment most often voiced in the precinct houses these days seems to be: "She's OK."

Five minutes into Joseph Feig's interview, Jammu had smelled sweat from her underarms, a mildewy feral stink. Feig had a nose; he didn't need a polygraph.

"Isn't Jammu the name of a city in Kashmir?" he asked.

"It's the capital during the winter."

"I see." He looked at her fixedly for several long seconds. Then he asked: "What's it like switching countries like this in the middle of your life?"

"I'm terribly patriotic," she said, with a smile. She was surprised he hadn't pursued the question of her past. These profiles were a rite of passage in St. Louis, and Feig, a senior editor, was generally acknowledged to be the dean of local feature writing. When he first walked in the door, in his wrinkled tweed jacket and his week-old beard, fierce and gray, he'd looked so investigative that Jammu had actually blushed. She'd imagined the worst:

FEIG: Colonel Jammu, you claim you wanted to escape the violence of Indian society, the personal and caste conflicts, but the fact remains that you did spend fifteen years in the leadership of a force whose brutality is notorious. We aren't stupid, Colonel.

We've heard about India. The hammered elbows, the tooth extractions, the rifle rapes. The candles, the acid, the lathis, the cattle prods—

JAMMU: The mess was generally cleaned up before I got there.

FEIG: Colonel Jammu, given Mrs. Gandhi's almost obsessive distrust of her subordinates and given your own central involvement in Project Poori, I have to wonder if you're at all related to the Prime Minister. I don't see how else a woman could have made commissioner, especially a woman with an American father—

JAMMU: It isn't clear to me what difference it makes to St. Louis if I'm related to certain people in India.

But the article was in print now, definitive and unretractable. The windows of Jammu's office were beginning to fill with light. She rested her chin on her hands and let the print below her wander out of focus. She was happy with the article but worried about Feig. How could someone so obviously intelligent be a mere transcriber of platitudes? It seemed impossible. Perhaps he was just paying out the rope, "giving" her an interview like a final cigarette at dawn, while behind her back he marshalled his facts into an efficient, deadly squad …

Her head was sinking towards her desk. She reached for the lamp switch and slumped, with a dry splash, onto the newspaper. She closed her eyes and immediately began to dream. In the dream, Joseph Feig was her father. He was interviewing her.

He smiled as she spoke of her triumphs, the delicious aftertaste of lies that people fell for, the escape from airless India. In his eyes she read a sad, shared awareness of the world's credulity. "You're a scrappy girl," he said. She leaned over her desk and nestled her head in the crook of her elbow, thinking: scrappy girl. Then she heard her interviewer tiptoe around behind her chair. She reached around to feel his leg, but her hands swung through empty air. His bristly face pushed aside her hair and brushed her neck. His tongue fell out of his mouth. Heavy, warm, doughlike, it lay against her skin.

She woke up with a shudder.

Jammu's father had been killed in 1974 when a helicopter carrying foreign journalists and some South Vietnamese military personnel was downed near the Cambodian border by a communist rocket. A second helicopter captured the crash on film before escaping to Saigon. Jammu and her mother had learned the news from the Paris edition of the *Herald Tribune*, their sole link with the man. It was from a week-old *Herald Tribune* that Jammu, more than a decade earlier, had first learned his name. Ever since she'd been old enough to ask, her mother had evaded her questions, dismissing the subject brusquely whenever Jammu tried to bring it up. Then, in the spring before she entered the university, her mother spoke. They were at the breakfast table on the veranda, Maman with her *Herald Tribune* and Jammu with her algebra book. Her mother nudged the paper across the table and scraped a long fingernail

across an article at the bottom of the front page:

TENSION MOUNTS ON
SINO-INDIAN BORDER
Peter B. Clancy

Jammu read a few paragraphs, but she didn't know why. She looked up for an explanation.

"That's your father."

The tone was typically matter-of-fact. Maman spoke only English to Jammu, and spoke it with a perverse disdain, as if she didn't accept the language's word for anything. Jammu scanned the article again. Countercharges. Secessionist. Bleak vistas. Peter B. Clancy. "A reporter?" she said.

"Mm."

Her mother wouldn't say what he was like. Having acknowledged his existence, she proceeded to ridicule her daughter's curiosity. There was no story to tell, she said. They'd met in Kashmir. They'd left the country and spent two years in Los Angeles, where Clancy took a degree of some sort. Then Maman had returned, alone, to Bombay, not Srinagar, with her baby, and had lived there ever since. Nowhere in this obituary narrative did she suggest that Clancy was anything more than a second set of luggage. Jammu got the idea—things hadn't worked out. It didn't matter, either. The city was full of bastards, and Maman, in any case, was oblivious to public opinion. The newspapers called her the "laughing jackal of real estate." Laughing all the way to the bank, they meant. She was

a speculator and slumlord, one of the more successful in a town of speculation and slums.

Jammu selected two Tylenols and a Dexedrine from her top drawer and swallowed them with coffee dregs. She'd finished the night's reading sooner than she'd planned. It was only 6:30. In Bombay it was 5:00 in the evening—Indian time was a quaint half hour out of step with the rest of the world—and Maman was probably at home, upstairs, pouring her first drink. Jammu reached for the phone, got the international operator, and gave her the numbers.

The connection hissed with the difficult spanning of half a world. Of course in India even local calls hissed this way. Maman answered.

"It's me," Jammu said.

"Oh, hello."

"Hello. Are there any messages?"

"No. The town seems empty without your friends." Her mother laughed. "Homesick?"

"Not especially."

"Apropos—has the Enlightened Despot called you?"

"Ha ha."

"Seriously. She's in New York. The U.N. General Session opened."

"That's a thousand miles from here."

"Oh, she could afford to call. She chooses not to. Yes. She simply chooses not to. I read this morning—do you still read the

papers?"

"When I have time."

"That's right. When you have time. I read about her mini-summit with American intellectuals is what I was going to say. Front page, column one. Asimov, Sagan—futurists. She's a wonder. Study her and you can learn. Not that she's infallible. I noticed Asimov was eating ribs in the picture they ran. But anyway – How is St. Louis?"

"Temperate. Very dry."

"And you with your sinuses. How is Singh?"

"Singh is Singh. I'm expecting him any minute."

"Just don't let him handle your accounts."

"He's handling my accounts."

"Willful child. I'll have to send Bhandari over later this month to check the arrangements. Singh is not—"

"Here? You're sending Karam here?"

"Only for a few days. Expect him on the twenty-ninth or so."

"Don't send Karam. I don't like him."

"And I don't like Singh." There was a faint sound that Jammu recognized as the rattle of ice in a tumbler. "Listen dear, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"All right. Good-bye."

Maman and Indira were blood relations, Kashmiri Brahmans, sharing a great-grandfather on the Nehru side. It was no coincidence that Jammu had been admitted to the Indian Police Service less than a year after Indira became prime minister. Once

she was in the Service, no one had been ordered to promote her, of course, but occasional phone calls from the Ministry would let the pertinent officials know that her career was being watched "with interest." Over the years she herself had received hundreds of calls similar in their vagueness, though more immediate in their concerns. A Maharashtra state legislator would express great interest in a particular prosecution, a Congress Party boss would express great distress over a particular opponent's business dealings. Very seldom did a call originate from higher up than the governor's office; Indira was a great student of detail, but only in curricular subjects. Like any entrenched leader, she made sure to place plenty of buffers between herself and questionable operations, and Jammu's political operations had been questionable at best. The two of them had spoken privately only once—just after Jammu and her mother concocted Project Poori. Jammu flew to Delhi and spent seventy minutes in the garden of Madam's residence on Safdarjang Road. Madam, in a canvas chair, watched Jammu closely, her brown eyes protuberant and her head turned slightly to one side, her lips curled in a smile that now and then made her gums click, a smile in which Jammu saw nothing but machinery. Shifting her gaze a quarter turn, towards a hedge of rosebushes behind which machine-gun muzzles sauntered, Madam spoke. "Please understand that this wholesaling project won't work. You do understand that, you're a sensible young woman. But we're going to fund it anyway."

A shoe squeaked in Jammu's outer office. She sat up straight. "Who's—" She cleared her throat. "Who's there?"

Balwan Singh walked in. He was wearing pleated gray pants, a fitted white shirt, and an azure necktie with fine yellow stripes. His air was so competent and trustworthy that he scarcely needed to show his clearance papers to get upstairs. "It's me," he said. He set a white paper bag on Jammu's desk.

"You were eavesdropping."

"Me? Eavesdropping?" Singh walked to the windows. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and his light skin had received additional sunniness from some Middle Eastern ancestor. Only an old friend and ex-lover like Jammu could detect the moments when the grace of his movements passed over into swishiness. She still admired him as an ornament. For a man who up until July had been living in Dharavi squalor, he would have seemed remarkably—suspiciously—dapper if he hadn't dressed exactly the same way among his so-called comrades in Bombay, whose tastes ran to velour and Dacron and sleazy knits. Singh was a marxist of the aesthetic variety, attracted to the notion of exportable revolution at least partly because Continental stylishness was exported along with it. His haberdasher was located on Marine Drive. Jammu had long suspected he'd forsaken Sikhism as a youth because he considered a beard disfiguring.

Singh nodded at the paper bag on her desk. "There's some breakfast if you want it."

She placed the bag on her lap and opened it. Inside were two chocolate doughnuts and a cup of coffee. “I was listening to some tapes,” she said. “Who put the mikes in the St. Louis Club bathrooms?”

“I did.”

“That’s what I thought. Baxti’s mikes sound like they’re wrapped in chewing gum. Yours do pretty well. I heard some useful exchanges. General Norris, Buzz Wismer—”

“His wife is a terrible bitch,” Singh said absendy.

“Wismer’s?”

“Yes. ‘Bev’ is the name. Of all the women here who will never forgive Asha for marrying Sidney Hammaker, or Hammaker for marrying Asha—and there are a great many of these women—Bev is the nastiest.”

“I’ve been hearing the same complaints on all the tapes,” Jammu said. “At least from the women. The men are more likely to say they’re ‘ambivalent’ about Asha. They keep referring to her intelligence.”

“Meaning her bewitching beauty.”

“And her fabulous wealth.”

“Wismer, at any rate, is one of the ambivalent ones. Bev can’t stand it. She taunts him constantly.”

Jammu dropped the lid from her coffee cup into the wastebasket. “Why does he put up with it?”

“He’s strange. A shy genius.” Singh frowned and sat down on the windowsill. “I started hearing about Wismer jets twenty years

ago. Nobody makes a better one."

"So?"

"So he isn't the man I expected. The voice is all wrong."

"You've been doing a lot of listening."

"A hundred fifty hours maybe. What do you think I do all day?"

Jammu shrugged. She could be certain Singh wasn't exaggerating the amount of time he'd spent on the job. He was studiously beyond reproach. With no distractions (except for an occasional blond boy) and no responsibilities (except to her), he had time to lead an ordered life. A precious life. She, who had a pair of jobs that each took sixty hours a week to perform, was no match for Singh when it came to details. Her foot began to tap of its own accord, which meant the Dexedrine was working. "I'm taking you off the Wismer case," she said.

"Oh yes?"

"I'm putting you in charge of Martin Probst."

"All right."

"So you're going to have to start all over. You can forget Wismer, forget your hundred fifty hours."

"That was just the tapes. Try three hundred."

"Baxti handed in Probst's file. You start immediately."

"Is this something you only just decided?"

"No, it is not. I already *spoke* to Baxti, he already handed *in* his file, that's what you're h*ere* for. To pick it up."

"Fine."

"So pick it up." She nodded at a tea-stained folder by her desk lamp.

Singh walked to the desk and picked it up. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Put the file down."

He put it down.

"Go get me a glass of water and turn up the heat in here."

He left the room.

Martin Probst was the general contractor whose company had built the Gateway Arch. He was also chairman of Municipal Growth Inc., a benevolent organization consisting of the chief executives of the St. Louis area's major corporations and financial institutions. Municipal Growth was a model of efficacy and an object of almost universal reverence. If someone needed sponsors for an urban renewal project, Municipal Growth found them. If a neighborhood opposed the construction of a highway, Municipal Growth paid for an impact study. If Jammu wanted to alter the power structure of metropolitan St. Louis, she had to contend with Municipal Growth.

Singh returned with a Dixie cup. "Baxti is looking for new worlds to conquer?"

"Get a chair and sit down."

He did so.

"Baxti's obviously only marginally competent, so why make an issue of it?"

He shook a clove cigarette from a caramel-colored pack and struck a match, shielding the flame from a hypothetical breeze.

"Because I don't see why we're switching."

"I guess you'll just have to trust me."

"Guess so."

"I assume you know the basics already—Probst's charming wife Barbara, their charming eighteen-year-old daughter Luisa. They live in Webster Groves, which is interesting. It's wealthy but hardly the wealthiest of the suburbs. There's a gardener who lives on the property, though… Baxti terms their home life 'very tranquil.' "

"Mikes?"

"Kitchen and dining room."

"The bedroom would have been more telling."

"We don't have that many frequencies. And there's a TV in the bedroom."

"Fine. What else?"

Jammu opened the Probst file. Baxti's Hindi scrawl made her blink. "First of all, he only uses non-union labor. There was a big legal fight back in the sixties. His chief attorney was Charles Wilson, Barbara's father, now his father-in-law. That's how they met. Probst's employees have never been on strike. Union wages or better. Company insurance, disability, unemployment and retirement plans, some of which are unique in the business. It's paternalism at its best. Probst isn't any Vashni Lai. In fact he has a quote reputation unquote for personal involvement at all levels of the business."

"An eye to the personal."

"Ha ha. He's currently chairman of Municipal Growth, term to run through next June. That's important. Beyond that—Zoo Board member '76 through present. Board member Botanical Gardens, East-West Gateway Coordinating Council. Sustaining membership in Channel 9. That isn't so important. Splits his ticket, as they say. Baxti did some interesting fieldwork. Went through old newspapers, spoke with the man in the street—"

"I wish I'd seen it."

"His English is improving. It seems the Globe-Democrat sees Probst as a saint of the American Way, rags to riches, a nobody in 1950, built the Arch in the sixties, along with the structural work on the stadium, and then quite a list of things. That's also very significant."

"He spreads himself thin."

"Don't we all."

Singh yawned. "And he's really that important."

"Yes." Jammu squinted in the clove smoke. "Don't yawn at me. He's first among equals at Municipal Growth, and they're the people we're working on if we want capital moving downtown. He's nonpartisan and Christ-like in his incorruptibility. He's a symbol. Have you been noticing how this city likes symbols?"

"You mean the Arch?"

"The Arch, the Veiled Prophet, the whole Spirit of St. Louis mythos. And Probst too, apparently. If only for the votes he'll bring, we need him."

"When did you decide all this?"

Jammu shrugged. “I hadn’t given him much thought until I spoke with Baxti last week. He’d just eliminated Probst’s dog, a first step towards putting Probst in the State—”

“The State, yes.”

“—although at this point it’s little more than bald terrorism. For what it’s worth, the operation was very neat.”

“Yes?” Singh removed a speck of cigarette paper from his tongue, looked it over, and flicked it away.

“Probst was out walking the dog. Baxti drove by in a van, and the dog chased him. He’d found a medical supply company that sold him the essence of a bitch in heat. He soaked a rag in the stuff and tied the rag in front of his rear axle.”

“Probst wasn’t suspicious?”

“Apparently not.”

“What’s to stop him from buying another dog?”

“Presumably Baxti would have arranged something for the next one too. You’ll have to rethink the theory here. One reason I’m giving you Probst is he didn’t seem to respond to the accident.”

The phone rang. It was Randy Fitch, the mayor’s budget director, calling because he’d be late for his eight o’clock appointment, due to his having overslept. In a sweet, patient tone, Jammu assured him that she wasn’t inconvenienced. She hung up and said, “I wish you wouldn’t smoke those things in here.”

Singh went to the window, opened it, and tossed the butt into the void. Faint river smells entered the room, and down

below on Tucker Boulevard a bus roared into the Spruce Street intersection. Singh was orange in the sunlight. He seemed to be viewing a titanic explosion, coldly. “You know,” he said, “I was almost enjoying the work with Buzzy and Bevy.”

“I’m sure you were.”

“Buzz considers Probst and his wife good friends of his.”

“Oh?”

“The Probsts put up with Bev. I have the impression they’re ‘nice’ people. Loyal.”

“Good. A pretty challenge for you.” Jammu placed the file in Singh’s hands. “But nothing fancy, you understand?”

Singh nodded. “I understand.”

2

In 1870 St. Louis was America's Fourth City. It was a booming rail center, the country's leading inland port, a wholesaler for half a continent. Only New York, Philadelphia and Brooklyn had larger populations. Granted, there were newspapers in Chicago, a close Fifth, that claimed the 1870 census had counted as many as 90,000 nonexistent St. Louisans, and granted, they were right. But all cities are ideas, ultimately. They create themselves, and the rest of the world apprehends them or ignores them as it chooses.

In 1875, with local prophets casting it as the nation's natural capital, the eventual First City, St. Louis undertook to remove a major obstacle from its path. The obstacle was St. Louis County, the portion of Missouri to which the city nominally belonged. Without the city, St. Louis County was nothing—a broad stretch of farmland and forest in the crook of two rivers. But for decades the county had dominated city affairs by means of an archaic administrative body called the County Court. The Court's seven "judges" were notoriously corrupt and insensitive to urban needs. A county farmer who wanted a new road built to his farm could buy one cheap for cash or votes. But if parks or streetlights were needed for the city's common good, the Court had nothing to offer. To a young frontier town the Court's parochialism had been frustrating; to the Fourth City, it was intolerable.

A group of prominent local businessmen and lawyers persuaded the framers of a new Missouri state constitution to include provisions for civic reform. Despite harassment by the County Court, the group then drafted a scheme for the secession of St. Louis from St. Louis County, to be voted on by all county residents in August 1876.

Pre-election criticism focussed on one element of the scheme in particular: the expansion of the city's landholdings, in a kind of severance payment, from the current twenty-one square miles to sixty-one square miles. Countyites objected to the city's proposed "theft" of county property. The *Globe-Democrat* denounced the unfairness of annexing "divers and sundry cornfields and melon patches and taxing them as city property." But the scheme's proponents insisted that the city needed the extra room for tomorrow's parks and industry.

In an election run by the County Court, voters narrowly rejected the secession scheme. There were cries of fraud. Activists had no trouble convincing a Circuit Court judge (one Louis Gottschalk, who had personally drafted the reform provisions for the 1875 constitution) to appoint a commission to investigate the election. In late December the commissioners reported their findings. The scheme had passed after all, by 1,253 votes. Immediately the city claimed its new land and adopted a new charter, and five months later the County Court, its appeals exhausted, dissolved itself.

Time passed. Sixty-one square miles of land soon proved to be

less ample than the secessionists had supposed. As early as 1900 the city was running out of space, and the county refused to give it more. Old industry fled the messes it had made. New industry settled in the county. In the thirties, poor black families arrived from the rural South, hastening the migration of whites to the suburbs. By 1940 the city's population had begun to plummet, and its tax base to shrink. Stately old neighborhoods became simply old. New housing projects like Pruit-Igoe, begun in the fifties, failed spectacularly in the sixties. Efforts at urban renewal succeeded in attracting affluent county residents to a few select zones but did little to cure the city's ills. Everyone worried about the city's schools, but it was an exercise in hand wringing. The seventies became the Era of the Parking Lot, as acres of asphalt replaced half-vacant office buildings downtown.

By now, of course, most American cities were in trouble. But compared with St. Louis, even Detroit looked like a teeming metropolis, even Cleveland like a safe place to raise a family. Other cities had options, good neighbors, a fighting chance. Philadelphia had land to work with. Pittsburgh could count on help from Allegheny County. Insular and constricted, St. Louis had by 1980 dwindled to America's Twenty-Seventh City. Its population was 450,000, hardly half the 1930 figure.

The local prophets were defensive. Where once they'd expected supremacy, they now took heart at any sign of survival. For forty years they'd been chanting: "St. Louis is going to make it." They pointed to the Gateway Arch. (It was 630 feet tall; you

couldn't miss it.) They pointed to the new convention center, to three tall new buildings and two massive shopping complexes. To slum-clearance projects, to beautification programs, to plans for a Gateway Mall that would rival the mall in Washington.

But cities are ideas. Imagine readers of *The New York Times* trying in 1984 to get a sense of St. Louis from afar. They might have seen the story about a new municipal ordinance that prohibited scavenging in garbage cans in residential neighborhoods. Or the story about the imminent shutdown of the ailing *Globe-Democrat*. Or the one about thieves dismantling old buildings at a rate of one a day, and selling the used bricks to out-of-state builders.

Why us?

Never conceding defeat, the prophets never asked. Nor did the old guiding spirits, whose good intentions had doomed the city; they'd moved their homes and operations to the county long ago. The question, if it arose at all, arose in silence, in the silence of the city's empty streets and, more insistently, in the silence of the century separating a young St. Louis from a dead one. What becomes of a city no living person can remember, of an age whose passing no one survives to regret? Only St. Louis knew. Its fate was sealed within it, its special tragedy special nowhere else.

After his meeting with Jammu, Singh took the heavy Probst file to his West End apartment, read the file's contents, called Baxti eight times for clarifications, and then, the following morning, drove out to Webster Groves for a visit to the scene of

future crimes.

The Probsts lived in a three-story stucco house on a long, broad street called Sherwood Drive. Barbara Probst had driven off punctually. Tuesdays, like Thursdays, she worked in the acquisitions department of the St. Louis University Library, returning home at 5:30. Tuesday was also the gardener's day off. When the beeping in Singh's earphone had faded into static (Baxti had equipped Barbara's BMW with a transmitter that had a range of one kilometer) he checked the two channels from the mikes inside the house and, finding everything quiet, approached on foot. During school hours pedestrians were as scarce on Sherwood Drive as in a cemetery.

Singh was dressed approximately like a gas-meter reader. He carried a black leather shoulder bag. Ready in his pocket were surgical latex gloves for fingerprint protection. He descended the rear stairs and entered the basement with the key Baxti had given him. Looking around, he was impressed by the great quantity of junk. In particular, by the many bald tires, the many plastic flower pots, and the many coffee cans. He went upstairs to the kitchen. Here the air had the smell of recent redecoration, the composite aroma of new wallpaper, new fabrics, new caulking and new paint. A dishwasher throbbed in its drying cycle. Singh removed the screen from the heating register above the stove, replaced the battery in the transmitter, adjusted the gain of the mike (Baxti never failed not to do so), replaced the screen, and repeated the procedure for the transmitter in the dining room.

Baxti had already gone through Probst's study and Barbara's desk and closets, the address books and cancelled checks and old correspondences, so Singh concentrated on the girl's—Luisa's – bedroom. He shot up six feet of microfilm, recording every document of interest. It was noon by the time he finished. He mopped his forehead with his shirtsleeve and opened a bag of M&M's (they didn't leave crumbs). He was chewing the last of them, two yellow ones, when he heard a familiar voice outside the house.

He moved to a front window. Luisa was walking up the driveway with a female friend. Singh entered the nearest spare bedroom, pushed his shoulder bag under the bed, and slid in after it, stilling the dust ruffle just as the girls entered the kitchen below him. He switched channels on his receiver and listened to their movements. Without speaking, they were opening the refrigerator and cabinets, pouring liquids into glasses and handling plastic bags. "Don't eat those," Luisa said.

"Why not?"

"My mother notices things."

"What about these?"

"We'd better not."

They came upstairs, passed the spare bedroom, and settled in Luisa's room. Singh lay very still. Three hours later the girls tired of television and went outside with binoculars. Back at the front window, Singh watched them until they were a block away. Then he returned to the basement and came up the outside stairs

jotting on his meter-reader's pad.

In his second apartment, in Brentwood, he developed and printed the film. He stayed inside this apartment for three nights and two days, reading the documents and working through some of the hundred-odd hours of Probst conversations recorded thus far. He warmed up frozen preprepared dinners. He drank tap water and took occasional naps.

When Luisa went out on Friday night he was waiting on Lockwood Avenue in the green two-door LeSabre he'd leased two months ago. To himself, willfully, he gave the name its French pronunciation: LeSob. Luisa picked up four friends from four houses and drove to Forest Park, where they sat on—and rolled down, and scampered up, and trampled the grass of—a hill called Art. Art Hill. The museum overlooked it. When darkness fell, the youths drove ten miles southwest to a miniature golf course on Highway 366 called Mini-Links. Singh parked the LeSob across the road and studied the youths with his binoculars as they knocked colored balls through the base of a totem pole. The faces of the two boys were as soft and downy as those of the three girls. All of them giggled and swaggered in that happy ascendancy, repellent in any land, of teens on their turf.

The next night, Saturday, Luisa and her school-skipping friend Stacy shared marijuana in a dark park and went to a soft-core pornographic movie, the pleasures of which Singh opted to forgo. On Sunday morning Luisa and a different girl loaded birdwatching equipment into the BMW and drove west. Singh

followed no farther than the county limits. He'd seen enough.

On the no man's land bounded by the sinuous freeway access ramps of East St. Louis, Illinois, stood the storage warehouse in which Singh had a loft, his third and favorite apartment. Princess Asha had found it for him—the building numbered among the Hammaker Corporation's real-estate holdings—and she had paid for the green carpeting in the three rooms, for the kitchen appliances and for the shower added to the bathroom. The loft had no windows, only skylights of frosted glass. The doors were made of steel. The walls were eleven feet high, fireproof and soundproof. Locked in the innermost room, Singh could be anywhere on earth. In other words, not in St. Louis. Hence the attraction of the place.

A dim shadow of a pigeon fell on the skylight, and a second shadow joined it. Singh opened the Probst file, which lay near him on the floor. All week Jammu had been calling him, pressuring him to set in motion a plan to bring Probst into her camp. She was in a terrible hurry. Already, with the help of the mayor and a corrupted alderman, she was designing changes in the city tax laws, changes which the city could not afford to enact unless, in the meantime, some of the county's wealth and population had been lured east again. But the county guarded its resources jealously. Nothing short of reunification with the city could induce it to help the city out. And since voters in the county were adamantly opposed to any form of cooperation, Singh and Jammu agreed that the only way to catalyze a reunification

was to focus on the private individuals who did the shaping of policy in the region, who determined the location and tenor of investment. No more than a dozen catalysts were needed, according to Jammu, if they could all be made to act in unwitting concert. And if her research was to be trusted, she'd identified all twelve. Not surprisingly, all were male, all attended Municipal Growth meetings, and most were chief executives with a strong hold on their stockholders. These were the men she "had to have."

What she would do when she "had" them, when she had cured the city's ills and risen above her role in the police department to become the Madam of the Mound City, she wouldn't say. Right now she was concerned only with the means.

Fighting her enemies in Bombay and furthering the interests of her relatives, Jammu had developed the idea of a "State" in which a subject's everyday consciousness became severely limited. The mildest version of the State, the one most readily managed in Bombay, exploited income-tax anxiety. To the lives of dozens of citizens whose thinking she wished to alter, Jammu had had the Bureau of Revenue bring horribly protracted tax audits. And when the subject had reached a state in which he lived and breathed and dreamed only taxes, she'd move in for the kill. She'd ask a favor the subject would ordinarily never dream of granting, force a blunder the subject six months earlier would not have committed, elicit an investment the subject should have had a hundred reasons not to make … The method couldn't

work miracles, of course. Jammu needed some sort of leverage initially. But often the leverage consisted of little more than the subject's susceptibility to her charm.

The State had two advantages over more conventional forms of coercion. First, it was oblique. It arose in a quarter of the subject's life unrelated to Jammu, to the police, and, often, to the public sphere in general. Second, it was flexible. Any situation could be developed, any weakness on the subject's part. Jammu had transformed the dangerous Jehangir Kumar, a man who liked to drink, into an incorrigible alcoholic. When Mr. Vashni Lai, a man with recurring difficulties with his underpaid welders in Poona, had attempted to have Jammu unseated as commissioner, she'd given him a labor crisis, a bloody uprising which her own forces were called in to help quell. She'd taken liberals and made them guilt-stricken, taken bigots and turned them paranoid. She'd preyed on the worst fears of energetic businessmen by preventing them from sleeping, and on the gluttonous tendencies of one of her rival inspectors by sending him a zealous Bengali chef who cooked up a gallbladder operation and an early retirement. Singh personally had entered the life of a philanderer, a Surat millionaire who died not long after, and rendered him impotent in the service of Jammu's Project Poori.

Given the interchangeability of corporate executives, Jammu insisted that her subjects in St. Louis remain functional. They had to stay in power, but with their faculties impaired. And it was

here—looking for a path to the State, for a means of impairment – that Singh ran into the problem of Martin Probst.

Probst had no weaknesses.

He was viceless, honest, capable, and calm to the point of complacency. For a building contractor, his business record was unbelievably spotless. He bid only on projects for which there was a clear-cut need. He hired independent consultants to review his work. Every July he sent his employees an itemized accounting of company expenditures. The only enemies he had today were the labor unions he'd thwarted back in 1062—and the unions were no longer a factor in St. Louis politics.

Probst's home life also seemed to be in order. Singh had overheard a few domestic tiffs, but they were nothing more than weeds, shallow-rooted, sprouting from seams in solid pavement. The tranquil image of Probst's family was, in fact, what St. Louis seemed to admire most about him. Singh had gleaned an assortment of citations from the library of tapes that R. Gopal had been cataloguing for Jammu. In one, Mayor Pete Wesley was speaking with the treasurer of the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council.

WESLEY (+ R. Crawford, Sat 9/10, 10:15, City Hall)

PW: No, I haven't talked to him yet. But I did see Barbara at the ball game on Thursday and I asked her if he'd given it any thought.

RC: At the ball game.

PW: Isn't that something? If she was any other lady, you'd

think she was nuts.

RC: Going alone, you mean.

PW: I don't see how she pulls it off. Anybody else … Can you imagine seeing somebody like Betty Norris sitting by herself in the box seats?

RC: What did Barbara say?

PW: We talked for quite a while. I never actually found out how Martin feels, but she certainly had *her* mind made up.

RC: Which way?

PW: Oh, for. Definitely for. She's a great little lady. And you know, for a small family, isn't it amazing how often you run into them?

Ripley (Rolf, Audrey, Mon 9/5, 22:15)

AR: Doesn't Luisa seem like one of those children that something could happen to? She was so sweet today. Everything's so perfect about her, isn't it hard not to think something terrible will happen? *(Pause.)* Like a doll you could break. *(Pause.)* Don't you think?

RR: No.

Meisner (Chuck, Bea, Sat 9/10, 01:30)

CM: That was Martin. He wanted to make sure we made it home all right. *(Pause.)* I'm sure he couldn't sleep till he'd called. *(Pause.)* Did I really look that drunk?

BM: We all did, Chuck.

CM: It's funny how you don't notice it so much with them. I mean, they make you comfortable.

BM: They're a very special couple.

CM: They are. A very special couple.

It was unfortunate, Singh thought, that R. Gopal would no longer have time to sort these recorded conversations and put them into such a usable form. "I think we're past that phase," Jammu had said. "I have something else for Gopal."

Murphy (Chester, Jane, Alvin, 9/19, 18:45)

JANE: Know who I saw today, Alvin? Luisa Probst. Remember her?

ALVN: (*chewing*) Sort of.

JANE: She's turned into a very pretty girl.

ALVN: (*chewing*)

JANE: I thought it'd be nice if you called her up sometime. I'm sure she'd be thrilled to hear from you.

ALVN: (*chewing*)

JANE: I'm just saying, it might be a nice thing to do.

ALVN: (*chewing*)

JANE: I remembered her as being a little chubby. I hadn't seen her in, oh, three years. I never get to Webster Groves anymore. I see her mother all the time, though. *(Pause.)* I think it would be very, very nice if you gave her a call.

CHES: Drop it, Jane.

A very pretty girl. A special couple. Singh was careful not to infer that Probst's lovely family contributed to his actual power in the city, but the family was obviously a source of unusual strength. Strength like this could amount to a weakness. Even

Baxti had recognized this. In his summary he'd written:

UnCorrupted in 72, and worse.

(In 1972 someone on the Slum Removal Board had requested a kickback and Probst had gone to the press with the story.)

He is haveing no sins but morality. He will die: every man is moral. This is the key to this. *Death in air*. Step one: dogg. Step two: doghter. Step Three: wife. Patterne of loss. And standing a lone. He loving his dogge. Calling it petname. And no doge …???

This was Baxti's inspirational mode. His informational, in Hindi, was somewhat easier to follow.

Singh closed the folder and glanced at the blurry pigeons on the skylight. Baxti was clumsy, but he wasn't stupid. He'd started in the right direction. As a citizen of the West, Probst was *a priori* sentimental. In order to induce the State in him, it might be necessary only to accelerate the process of bereavement, to compress into three or four months the losses of twenty years. The events would be unconnected accidents, a "fatal streak," as Baxti put it elsewhere. And the process could occur in increments, lasting only as long as it took Probst to endorse Jammu publicly and direct Municipal Growth to do likewise.

Very well then. The daughter was the next step. Filling in the last gap in Baxti's research, Singh had read Luisa's letters and diaries and notebooks, he'd heard the testimony of her possessions, and though he was no expert on American youth he judged her to be quite typical. Her teeth were orthodontically corrected. She had no diseases or parasites. She was blond, more

or less, and five and a half feet tall, and she wore her affluence to good effect. She'd attracted boyfriends and had dropped the most recent one. She owned a TEAC stereo set, 175 phonograph records, no car, no computer, an insect net and cyanide jar, a diaphragm in its original box with a tiny tube of Gynol II, a small television set, 40 + sweaters, 20+ pairs of shoes. She had $3,700 in her personal savings account and, though it didn't matter, nearly $250,000 in joint accounts and trust funds. This ratio —2,500 to 37—was a mathematical expression of her distance from adulthood. She cut school and used intoxicants; she was a sneak.

Singh had to decide how to detach her from the family. "Nothing fancy," Jammu insisted. The least fancy technique was violence. But while it was one thing for Baxti to kill Probst's dog, it was quite another to apply trauma to the family as a first resort. Trauma induced grief, cathartic convulsions. Very nice. But it did not induce the State.

Few of the other standard techniques fit Luisa either. Singh couldn't abduct her; abduction involved too much terror and grief. He couldn't use blandishments, couldn't persuade her that she had great talent in some particular field, because she didn't, and she was too sarcastic to be conned. Bribery was also out. Jammu had a Talstrasse banker who'd be happy to open an account, but Luisa hadn't learned the meaning of cash. She was also too young to be persuaded, à la *Mission Impossible*, that a close associate or relative was plotting against her. She wasn't

too young for narcotics, of course, and Singh was an excellent pusher, but drugs were just another form of trauma. Political indoctrination might conceivably have worked, but it took too much time.

He was left with little choice but to seduce the girl. Though a rather fancy technique, seduction was ideal for lusty young targets, targets at the age where they were sneaky and looking for fun or trouble. The only real problem was access. Luisa was never alone except at home, or in the car or in stores or birdwatching or at the library (and Singh already knew enough not to make acquaintances in American public libraries). Where was the opportunity for a strange man to get to know her?

The man would have to be Singh, of course. There was no one else. Imagine Baxti: she'd sooner do it with an alligator. But Singh was clean. He'd modeled neckties in harder times. He projected Clean. People told him it was his teeth. Maybe so. In any event, he was clean. Clean and—not to overstate the point – irresistible. He was an old pro with Americans. Why, just last week …

The problem was access. No matter how he lured her out – mailing her free passes to a bar, free tickets to a concert—she'd bring a friend. Sometimes, it was true, she did go birdwatching by herself, but Singh knew nothing of birds. It would take him weeks to learn the "lore," and the idea of wasting his time on willful squirters of liquid excrement (Singh did not love Nature) was wholly repugnant to him. It was a shame Luisa's hobby wasn't knives. He had some items that seasoned collectors would sell

their sisters for. The Burmese Flayer …

The problem was access. One hour alone with the girl would suffice. The Mystique of the East would take care of the rest. Jade figurines, Moët, a dozen roses. Then debauch; take to New Orleans; feed cocaine.

Singh reclined on the soft green carpeting.

1. An out-of-state friend, for example a pen pal, comes unexpectedly to town. Calls Luisa, asks her to a bar. Is gone when Luisa arrives. She gets to know a courteous stranger.

2. A representative of a popular teen magazine, an intriguing man with good teeth, gives her a call. Would like to interview her. In depth. Would like her to be a stringer for the magazine. Invites her to closed-door editorial sessions.

3. A Nature-lover with some very appealing physical attributes meets her in the field one day when she is alone. Following some innocent badinage, they go for a walk in dense woods.

Singh lay isolated on the floor, in a room that brought him to his senses. His stomach gurgled softly, a hungry sound track for the silent pigeon shadows on the skylight. Of the people he'd come of age with, his comrades in Srinagar, the People's Reading Group, at least ten were in jail. A dozen were dead and another ten were organizers in Madras, Sri Lanka, Bombay. Several lived comfortably in West Bengal. There was one in Angola, three in South Africa, one in Ethiopia, half a dozen still in Moscow, and at least two in Central America, while Balwan Singh, the

brains of the group, the kid who'd bayoneted the vice-governor, had gone farther than anyone else. All the way to East St. Louis, Illinois, where now, on his back, he plotted the most decadent of subversions. The only other member of the old cadre even in the U.S.A. was Jammu. Jammuji, mountain flower, unlikely perfume. And she didn't have to plot. She amassed power and left the soiling details to subordinates, her dignity untarnished. Singh wanted to be in action, in action he'd forget this planning. He wanted Luisa Probst, too, with sudden criminal force. Wanted to break her. He removed a shoe and winged it fiercely at the skylight. The shadows dispersed.

Martin Probst had grown up in St. Louis proper, in an old German neighborhood on the south side. When he was eighteen he started a demolition business, and two years later he began to expand it into a general contracting company. At twenty-seven he shook up the local building establishment by winning the contracts to erect the Gateway Arch. Soon he was the busiest contractor in St. Louis, his low bids preferred by local governments, his high standards of workmanship much in demand among private groups. Newspapers often listed him as a potential candidate for state and local offices—not because he ever showed any inclination to run, but because observers couldn't see him working all his life within the somewhat shabby confines of the contracting world. Unlike many contractors, he was not a "character," not a bony and drawling daredevil, not a red-faced cigar-smoking operator. He was six feet tall, a good

speaker, a Missouri-born executive whose face was memorable only for having appeared all over town for thirty years. Like a medieval mason, essential but aloof, he went wherever the construction was.

At the moment, the construction was mainly in West County, the exurban part of St. Louis County beyond the Interstate outer belt. Within the last five years Probst had built the St. Luke's West Hospital, a junior high school in the Parkway West school district, and an office-entertainment-hotel-shopping-center complex called West Port. He'd built the Ardmore West condominiums, western extensions of five county roads, and extra lanes on U.S. 40 out to the western county limits. Recently he'd begun work on Westhaven, a "comprehensive work and lifestyle environment" whose four million square feet of rental space were specifically intended to put West Port to shame.

On the third Saturday of October, a week after Singh had formulated his plans for Luisa, Probst was driving his little Lincoln home from a Municipal Growth meeting, listening to KSLX-Radio's Saturday-night jazz program. Benny Goodman was playing. The full moon had been rising five hours ago when Probst left home, but the weather had soured in the meantime. Raindrops spattered on the windshield as he drove down Lockwood Avenue. He was speeding, keeping pace with Goodman's racing clarinet.

The Municipal Growth meeting had been a bust. Hoping to build some *esprit de corps*, Probst had had the idea of scheduling

a session on a Saturday night—a dinner meeting, beef Wellington for twenty-five in a private room at the Baseball Star's restaurant. It had been a terrible idea. They didn't even have a quorum until Probst called Rick Crawford and persuaded him to give up an evening at the theater. Everyone drank heavily while they waited for Crawford to arrive. The evening's discussion of city hospital care was confused and interminable. And when Probst was finally about to move for adjournment, General Norris stood up and spoke for a full forty minutes.

General Norris was the chief executive officer at General Synthetics, one of the country's foremost chemical producers and a pillar of industry in St. Louis County. His personal wealth and extreme political views were almost mythical in magnitude. What he wanted to discuss tonight, he said, was *conspiracy*. He said he found it alarming and significant that during the same week in August two women from India had assumed positions of command in St. Louis. He pointed out that India was essentially a Soviet satellite, and he invited Municipal Growth to consider what might happen now that Jammu had control of the city police and the Princess had control of the man who ran the Hammaker Brewing Company and owned many of its assets. (Fortunately for all concerned, Sidney Hammaker was among the absentees tonight.) Norris said there were strong indications that Jammu, with the help of the Princess, was engaging in a conspiracy to subvert the government of St. Louis. He urged Municipal Growth to form a special committee to monitor their actions in the city.

He spoke of the FBI—

Probst suggested that the FBI had better things to do than investigate the chief of police and the wife of Sidney Hammaker.

General Norris said that he had not finished speaking.

Probst said that he had heard enough and believed that everyone else had too. He said that Jammu appeared to be doing a fine job as police chief; it was merely a coincidence that she and the Princess had come on the scene at the same time. He said that furthermore, as a matter of policy, Municipal Growth should avoid taking any action that might jeopardize its effectiveness by polarizing its membership and calling attention to itself as something other than a strictly benevolent group.

General Norris drummed his fingers on the table.

Probst noted that it was Norris himself who had stood behind Rick Jergensen's candidacy for chief of police. He noted that Jergensen's candidacy—or, rather, the strength of his backers—had been a major factor in the stalemate, and that the stalemate had led directly to Jammu's selection—

"I resent that!" General Norris leaped to his feet and pointed at Probst. "I resent that! I resent that inference!"

Probst adjourned the meeting. He knew he'd offended the General and his cronies, but he didn't stick around to patch things up. For one thing, the General had already stalked out ahead of him.

It was raining hard by the time he got home. Reluctantly he left the warm and jazz-filled privacy of his car, shut the garage

door, and hurried across the lawn to the house. Wet dead leaves were in the air.

Upstairs he found Barbara asleep in bed with the latest *New Yorker* drooped over her stomach. The television was on, but the sound was turned down. He avoided the known squeaky boards underneath the carpeting.

In the bathroom, as he brushed his teeth, he noticed some gray hairs behind his right temple, a whole patch of them. They held his eyes like a running sore. Why, he wondered, should he suddenly be going gray? He was ahead of schedule on the Westhaven project, somewhat short of manpower, maybe, concerned about the weather to a certain degree, but definitely ahead of schedule and not worrying about it, not worrying about anything at all, really.

Then again, he was almost fifty.

He relaxed and brushed vigorously, straining to reach the back sides of all four wisdom teeth, danger zones for cavities. Recalling that Luisa wasn't home yet, he padded down the hall to her room, which seemed colder than the rest of the house, and turned on her nightstand light and turned back her covers. He padded out into the hall and down the stairs. He unlocked the front door and switched on the outside light.

"Is that you, honey?" Barbara called from the bedroom.

Probst padded patiently up the stairs before he answered. "Yes."

Barbara had turned up the TV volume by remote control. "Do

I call you 'honey'?"

Forty-second Street may not be the center of the universe but—

"How was the meeting?" she asked.

"A total bust."

And I'd tell you the whole story but we've got censors—

The picture crumpled as Probst turned off the set. Barbara frowned, briefly annoyed, and picked up her magazine. She was wearing her reading glasses and a pale blue nightgown through which he could just make out her breasts, their tangential trajectories, their dense brown aureoles. Her hair, which lately she'd been letting grow a little longer, fell in a broad S-curve across the right side of her face, shading her eyes from the reading lamp.

When he climbed into bed she listed towards the center of the mattress but kept her eyes on the page. He couldn't believe she was really concentrating this hard. Hadn't she been asleep two minutes ago? He fanned a stack of magazines on the nightstand and selected an unread *National Geographic*. On the cover was a smiling stone Buddha with sightless stone eyes. "Your brother-in-law missed the meeting," he told Barbara. "It's the kind of favor I've really come to appreciate."

Barbara shrugged. Her older sister Audrey was married to Rolf Ripley, one of St. Louis's more prominent industrialists. Neither Probst nor Barbara enjoyed Rolf's company (to put it mildly) but Barbara felt a responsibility towards Audrey, who was emotionally disaster-prone, and so Probst, in turn, was

required to be civil to Rolf. They had a weekly tennis date at the old Racquet Club. They'd played this morning and Rolf had slaughtered him. He frowned. If Rolf had time for tennis, then why not Municipal Growth?

"Do you have any idea where he was? Did you talk to Audrey today?"

"Yesterday."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Did they have any plans for tonight?"

Barbara pulled off her glasses and turned to him. "Rolf is seeing another woman. Yet again. Don't ask me any more questions."

Probst looked away. He felt a curious lack of outrage. Barbara always got mad enough at Rolf for the two of them combined; he'd ceased to bother. Rolf ran the Ripleycorp electrical appliances empire (only Wismer Aeronautics had a longer payroll) and was acknowledged to be the grand financial wizard of St. Louis, but he had the habits of an idle playboy and a seedy slenderness to match. About ten years ago he'd begun to speak with a British accent. The accent grew thicker and thicker, as if with each of his affairs. He was too weird to really offend Probst.

"And here we played tennis this morning," he said. "Where's Lu?"

"I'm surprised she isn't here. I told her to be in early. Her cold's

getting worse."

"She's out with Alan?"

"Good grief, Martin."

"Of course, of course, of course," he said. Luisa had terminated her relationship with Alan. "So where is she?"

"I have no idea."

"What do you mean you have no idea?"

"Just that. I don't know."

"Well didn't you *ask* her?"

"I was up here when she left. She said she wouldn't be gone long."

"When was that?"

"Around seven. Not long after you left."

"It's almost midnight."

A page turned. Rain was splashing on the windows and pouring through the gutters.

"I thought it was our policy to know where she is."

"Martin, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. Just let me read for a while, all right?"

"All right. All right. I've got policy coming out of my ears, I'm sorry."

Practically, in appearance, in the verifiable fact of never having sinned much, Probst had an undeniable claim to moral superiority over Rolf Ripley. From the very beginning his ambitions had kept him moving like a freight train, hurried and undeviating. By the time he was twenty, his married friends had

to take steps to make sure he got out for dinner at least once a month. Chief among these early friends was Jack DuChamp, a neighbor of Probst's and a sharer of his loneliness at McKinley High. Jack had been one of those boys who from puberty onwards want nothing more than to be wise older men like their fathers. Marriage and maturity were Jack's gospel, and Probst, inevitably, was one of the first savages he tried to convert. The attempt had begun in earnest on a muggy Friday night in July, in the tiny house that Jack and his wife Elaine were renting. Jack's chest still had its matrimonial swell. All through dinner he smiled at Probst as though awaiting further congratulation. When Elaine began to clear the table, Jack opened fresh Falstaffs and led Probst onto the back porch. The sun had sunk behind the haze above the railyards beyond the DuChamps' back fence. Bugs were rising from the weeds. "Tsk," Jack clucked. "Things can be pretty nice sometimes."

Probst said nothing.

"You're going places, old buddy, I can tell," Jack continued, his voice all history-in-the-making. "Things are happening fast, and I kind of like the way they look. I just hope we can still see some of you once in a while."

"What do you mean?"

"Well." Jack pulled a fatherly smile. "I'll tell you. You've got a lot going for you, and I know for damn sure we're not the only ones who can see that. You're twenty years old, you've finally got a little money to throw around, you've got looks, brains …"

Probst laughed. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I, personally. Jack DuChamp”—-jack pointed at himself—“kind of envy you sometimes.”

Probst glanced at the kitchen window. Dishes plopped in the sink.

“Not like that,” Jack said. “I’m a lucky man, and I know it. It’s just we like to speculate.”

“About what?”

“Well, we like to speculate—you ready?” Jack paused. “We like to speculate about your sex life, Martin.”

Probst felt his face go pale. “You what?”

“Speculate. At parties. It’s kind of a party game whenever you’re not around. You should’ve heard what Dave Hepner said last Saturday. ‘Satin sheets and three at a time.’ Yeah, Elaine was really mad, she thought it was getting kind of dirty—”

“Jack.” Probst was aghast.

A moment passed. Then Jack shook his head and gripped Probst’s arm. He had always been a kidder, a winker, a prankster. “No,” he said, “I’m only teasing. It’s just sometimes we worry you might be workin’ a little *too* hard. And – well. We know a girl you might be interested in meeting. She’s actually a cousin of mine. Her name’s Helen Scott.”

For nearly a month Probst did nothing with the number Jack had given him, but the name Helen Scott slowly gave birth to a vision of feminine splendor so compelling that he had no choice, in the end, but to call her. They made a date. He picked her up on

a Sunday afternoon at the rooming house where she was living (she'd moved to the city to take a job with Bell Telephone) and drove to Sportsman's Park to watch the Browns play the Yankees. There was nothing wrong with Helen Scott. As Probst had hoped, she bore little resemblance of any kind to her cousin Jack. She had a throaty rural voice. Her hair was waved and her skirt high-waisted in accordance with the fashion of the era, which, more democratic than later fashions, at least did not detract from any woman's native looks. Probst's preconceived love kept him from apprehending her any more specifically. They sat in the bleachers. The Browns, whom the Yankees immediately jumped all over, were the perfect team to be watching on a first date, their wobbly pitching and general proneness to error giving them an innocence that the Yankees seemed wholly to lack. Probst, with a pretty girl at his side, felt a charity bordering on joy.

After the game he and Helen went to Crown Candy for sandwiches and milkshakes (here he was able to observe that she had a wide mouth and no appetite) and then they stopped in at his apartment, which was actually the basement of his Uncle George's house. There, on his daybed, with an alacrity that implied she'd been impatient with the long preliminary afternoon, Helen kissed him. As soon as he felt how she moved in his arms he knew he could have her. His head began to pound. She let him take her blouse and bra off. His uncle's footsteps, gouty and halting, depressed the floorboards above them. She unzipped her skirt and Probst kissed her ribs, and pinched her

nipples, which he had heard women found intensely pleasurable.

"Don't do that."

There was pain in her voice. She drew away and they sat up on the bed, panting like swimmers. Probst thought he understood. He thought she meant he'd gone too far. And then she really did change her mind; as he sat there, mortified and uncertain, she put her clothes back on, defending herself (as he saw it) against his hurtful male hands.

He drove her back to the rooming house, where she kissed him on the forehead and ran inside. For a while he waited in the darkness, somehow hoping she might come back out. He found it too cruel that his business accomplishments had counted for nothing on the daybed, that to be a man in the world did not make him a man of the world. And either then, as he sat in the car, or in later years, as he remembered sitting in the car—the location of the moment had the shifting ambiguity, now you see it, now you don't, of a self-deception one is conscious of committing—he resolved to wait until his accomplishments were so great that he no longer needed, as the male, to make the moves. He wanted to be desired and taken. He wanted to be all object, to have that power. He wanted to be that great.

And so it happened that he was a virgin when he met Barbara and had been faithful to her ever since.

Barbara turned out her light.

"You're going to sleep?" Probst asked.

"Yes. You're not?"

He tried to make his voice sound casual. “No, I think I’ll wait up for Luisa.”

She kissed him. “Hope it won’t be long.”

“Good night.”

The bedroom windows rattled in the wind. It was 12:40, but Probst wasn’t worried about whether Luisa could take care of herself. He was all too certain that she could. Her control over her life was almost unnatural; the only thing that exceeded it was her control over other people’s lives, over the lives of boys like Alan. When Alan would come to see her, as he had nearly every day in the spring, she would talk on the phone with other friends for as long as an hour at a time. Alan would sit in the breakfast room smiling and nodding at the funny things he could hear her saying.

Rolf is seeing another woman. Yet again.

Luisa had dropped Alan in June, on her last weekend at home before flying to France. She made the announcement at the dinner table. It had seemed a very industrial decision, as if she’d been running cost/benefit analyses all along, and Alan had finally failed one. Though Probst approved of the decision, he didn’t let on. He believed that virtue grew best in an austere medium, in an atmosphere of challenging disapproval, and in Webster Groves, when one’s father paid himself a comfortable $190,000 annually and employed a full-time gardener and a part-time cleaning woman, austerity and challenges were hard to come by. He therefore took it upon himself to play the role

of hostile environment for Luisa. He refused to give her a car. He said no to private school. He'd made her try Girl Scouts. He did not buy her the best stereo available. He imposed curfews. (She'd already trashed her weekend curfew of midnight to the tune of forty minutes.) She received a weekly allowance, which he sometimes pretended to forget to leave on her dresser. (She would go and complain to Barbara, who always gave her whatever she needed.) He made her cry when she got a B – in social studies. He made her eat beets.

Barbara had begun to snore a little. As if he'd only been waiting for this sort of signal, Probst heaved himself out of bed. He opened his closet and put on his robe and slippers. He was tired, but he was not going to sleep before Luisa got back. She'd gone out at seven and said she'd be home soon. It was nearly one o'clock now. It was the hour of Rolf Ripley, the hour of ugly men for whom strangers unaccountably shed their inhibitions, the hour of getting it.

Was Luisa getting it? Where was she? Her regular friends knew enough not to keep her out much past her curfew, so maybe she'd gone somewhere without them. She had a will of her own. She'd inherited Probst's desires but not his disadvantages. She'd been born a girl—she was desired—and she hadn't had to earn it. She hadn't had to wait.

Downstairs, the air was cold, the weather seeping in at the windows. Mohnwirbel, the gardener, hadn't put the storms on yet. Probst imagined Luisa someplace in the rain beyond the

house's walls, making it easy for some undeserving young man. He imagined himself slapping her in the face when she finally came in. "You're grounded forever." A spray of rain hit the windows in the living room. A hot rod turned off Lockwood Avenue and raced up Sherwood Drive. By the time it passed Probst it was doing at least fifty, and the blap-blap of the cylinders had become a hot moan. He felt a draft.

The front door was open. Luisa was slipping in. Turning back the knob with one hand and pressing on the weather strip with the other, she slowly eased the door shut. A hinge made a soft miaow. He heard a click. She switched off the outside light and took a cautious step towards the stairs.

"Where have you been?" lie said conversationally.

He saw her jump and heard her gasp. I le jumped himself, frightened by her fright.

"Daddy?"

"Who else?"

"You really scared me."

"Where have you been?" He saw himself as she did, in his full-length robe, with his arms crossed, his hair gray and mussed, his pajama cuffs breaking on his flat slippers. He saw himself as a father, and he blamed her for the vision.

"What are you doing up so late?" she said, not answering his question.

"Couldn't sleep."

"I'm sorry I'm—"

"Have a good time?" He got a strong whiff of wet hair. She was wearing black pants, a black jacket and black sneakers, all of them wet. The pants clung to the adolescent curves of her thighs and calves, the intersecting seams gleaming dully in the light from upstairs.

"Yeah." She avoided his eyes. "We went to a movie. We had some ice cream."

"We?"

She turned away and faced the banister. "You know—Stacy and everyone—. I'm going to bed now, OK?"

It was clear that she was lying. He'd made her do it, and he was satisfied. He let her go.

3

The thing was, Luisa had been bored. She'd been bored since she got back from Paris. She'd been bored in Paris, too. In Paris, people kissed on the boulevards. That was how bored they were. She'd participated in the Experiment in International Living. It had produced Negative Results. Her Experiment family, the Girauds, had apparently been specific about requesting a boy, an American boy. Luisa felt like a midlife "mistake" on the part of Mme Giraud. She'd eavesdropped on Mme Giraud in conversation with her neighbors. The neighbors had been expecting a boy.

Mme Giraud sold magazine subscriptions to her neighbors and also to strangers, by telephone. M. Giraud was vice-director of a Saab dealership. They already had two girls, Paulette (she was nineteen) and Gabrielle (she was sixteen). It was for the girls' sake that Luisa was there. She was supposed to be fun. On her second night in France, her fun American Express card had come to the attention of the sisters. Paulette had snatched the card away and held it up before Gabrielle's eyes as if it were a rare and beautiful insect. The girls smiled at each other and then at Luisa, who made goo-goo eyes and smiled back. She was trying to be friendly. When they looked away, she turned and scowled at the audience she often felt behind her.

The next day the three of them went shopping, which in

French meant Luisa plodded in and out of dressing rooms while the sisters pulled item after item off the racks. They were good salespeople. Luisa bought 2,700 francs' worth of clothes. Back at home, Mme Giraud took one look at all the boxes and suggested that Luisa go take a bath. At the top of the stairs, Luisa sniffed her armpits. Did Americans smell bad to the French? She thought she'd locked the bathroom door, but no sooner had she stripped and stepped into the tub than Mme Giraud came bustling in with a towel for her. Luisa cowered. She already had a towel. Mme Giraud told her that usually they didn't fill the tub so full. Then she told her she'd help her return all her purchases tomorrow. Then she asked her how she'd slept the night before. Did she still have zhet leg? Luisa checked her legs. Oh. Jet lag. Then Mme Giraud wanted to know whether Luisa ate liver. It was like the French Inquisition: *manges-tu le foie?* By the time she left, the water was tepid. Luisa scrubbed her pits exhaustively. At supper, over thick slices of liver, M. Giraud asked what business her father was in.

"Mon papa," she said happily, "il est un constructeur. Un grand constructeur, un—"

"Je comprends." M. Giraud pursed his lips with satisfaction. "Un charpentier."

"Non, non, non. Il bâtit ponts et chemins, il bâtit maisons et écoles et monuments—"

"Un entrepreneur!"

"Oui."

She hated France. Her mother had urged her to go. Her father had urged her to go humbly, with the Experiment. She'd got what he paid for. So she was a snob; so what? She was bored with the Girauds. She should have been sitting in cafés with guys and colored drinks. Mme Giraud wouldn't let her go out alone after dark. Paulette and Gabrielle were drafted to show her a good time, and they took her to an empty bar in the Latin Quarter where campy disco played on a jukebox. They watched her with eyes as hard and shiny as stuffed-animal eyes. Fun? Are you having fun? On Sundays the elder Girauds drove her places like St. Denis and Versailles. On weekdays she helped Mme Giraud with the garden and shopping, which was more than her own daughters ever did. Luisa even helped her with her subscriptions until M. Giraud got wind of it. She accompanied the family to a rented house in Brittany for two weeks and gained five pounds, mainly on cheese. She grew pimples in patches, little archipelagos. She missed her parents, her real ones. It rained in Brittany. In a field near the Atlantic, a sheep tried to bite her.

She was bored in August, bored in September, and bored in October now, too. It was another Friday afternoon. She walked out the high-school door into the sunlit dust raised by football practice across the street. The weather was fine because a harvest moon was coming, but Stacy Montefusco, her best friend, had been home for a week with bronchitis. Sara Perkins was getting a cold and was irritable. Marcy Coughlin had sprained her ankle in gymnastics the day before. No one felt like going birdwatching.

No one felt like doing anything at all. Luisa walked home.

The kitchen radio was playing the four o'clock news when she came in. She took her mail from the table and went upstairs. The door to the sundeck was open. Her mother, around the corner on the lounger, cast a shadow across the graying rattan mat. Luisa shut her bedroom door behind her.

In her mail was a postcard of the Statue of Liberty. It was from Paulette Giraud.

LOUISA,
I AM IN THE UNITED-STATES! I AM COMING
I THINK TO ST. LOUIS! OUR GROUP STAYS
ONE NIGHT. ARE YOU HOME ON OCTOBER 20?
I WILL CALL YOU!
ALL MY LOVES,
Paulette

October 20? That was tonight. She threw the card aside. Mme Giraud must have told Paulette to call. Luisa didn't want to see her. She put on some music, did a back-drop onto her bed, tuck and fall, and looked at the rest of her mail. There was another letter from Tufts and a thick packet of material from Purdue. She opened the letter from Tufts, and her mother knocked on the door. Luisa spread her arms like Jesus on the cross and stared at the ceiling. "Come in."

Her mother was wearing one of her father's white shirts, with the front tails knotted. She held her place in a book with her finger. "You're home early."

"There's no one to do anything with."

"Come again?"

Luisa raised her voice. "Everybody's sick."

"Who's the postcard from?"

"You didn't read it?"

"It wasn't addressed to me," her mother said. She had disgustingly good manners.

"It's from Paulette Giraud. She's coming to town today."

"Today?"

"That's what she says."

"We should have her over for dinner."

"I thought you and Daddy were going out."

"We were thinking of going to a movie, but it's not important."

"I don't *want* to have her over."

"All right." Her mother's interest in the conversation withered: she seemed to sigh inaudibly, her shoulders going slack. "Suit yourself." From a pile near the closet she snagged two dirty blouses. "I've got to change for tennis. Will you be home till dinner?"

"Maybe." Luisa kicked her calculus book onto the floor. "Does Daddy have any other old shirts like that?"

"Daddy has fifty other shirts like this."

Luisa turned up the stereo and waited for her mother to come back with a shirt or two. Ten minutes later she heard the BMW whirring down the driveway. No shirts. Had her mother forgotten? She went to her parents' bedroom, and there, lying

folded on the bed, were three of the shirts she'd had in mind. She struggled out of her sweater and put a white one on, knotting the tails and rolling up the sleeves. In front of her mother's mirror she unbuttoned the second and third buttons and flipped back the collar. She had a good chest complexion. The shirt worked for her. She spread her hands on her hips and shook her hair back. Then she pulled down her lower eyelids and made blood-rimmed Hungarian eyes. She pulled on the corners and made Chinese eyes. She smiled at the mirror. She had nicer teeth than her mother.

At 7:30, just after her parents had sung their chorus of goodbyes, the telephone rang. A voice, Paulette's, floated above the sounds of a noisy bar or restaurant. "Louisa?"

"Bonjour, Paulette."

"Yes, yes, it is Paulette. Did you—receive my card?"

"Oui, Paulette. Aujourd'hui. *A quatre heures*. Merci beaucoup."

"Yes, yes. Em, I am on Euclid Avenue?"

"You're where?"

"Em, Euclid Avenue? It is close?"

"Um, no, that's not very close. I don't live in the city."

"I am at a bar? Yes?"

"You can speak French," Luisa said.

"This bar is called Deckstair?"

"Well, could you – Do you have any way of getting out of the city?"

"No. No. You would come to the bar, Deckstair? Yes?"

Luisa didn't remember her English being even this good. But then, they'd hardly ever spoken it.

"Yes?" Paulette repeated.

Maybe her mother had made her promise to call. But she still could have broken the promise.

"Oh, all right," Luisa said. She knew where Dexter's was. "Will you be there in twenty minutes?"

"Yes! Yes, right here. Deckstair." Paulette laughed.

Luisa tried to call Marcy Coughlin to see if she wanted to come along, but the line was busy. She tried Edgar Voss and Nancy Butterfield. Their lines were busy, too. The busy signals sounded faint, like the phone was out of order, but it obviously wasn't. She wrote a note for her parents and gave them the name of the bar.

It was almost 8:30 when she reached the Central West End, the home of a variety of up-to-the-decade bars and restaurants and specialty stores. Luisa parked the BMW in the Baskin-Robbins loading zone and crossed the alley towards Euclid Avenue. Dumpsters yawned disagreeably. In the apartment windows above her the shades were drawn down so far that they buckled and gaped.

It was strange that a tour group from Europe would want to see St. Louis. Then again, the people Luisa had met in France hadn't seemed to know what a boring place it was. Even the grownups had thought she must have a great old time living in San Louie

and listening to the blues every night on a riverboat. People in Europe were convinced that St. Louis was a really hot town.

Spilling out along the front window of Dexter's was a crowd of party people, loud people in their early twenties, people who instinct told Luisa weren't professionals or good students. They clutched drinks. They laughed, their hairdos frosted flamingo pink by the glaring neon logo. Luisa looked in through the window. The place was packed. She hesitated, nervous, her hands in her pockets.

A man in a white shirt like hers had stepped out of the crowd. He had a foreign face, she almost guessed Algerian, except he was too decent-looking. He raised his eyebrows as if he knew who she was. She gave him a feeble smile. He spoke. "Are you looking—"

But her heart had jumped and she'd pushed through the doorway, hopping a little to keep her balance in the undergrowth of feet and shins. She squirmed and ducked laterally, listening for French. All she heard was English. Every word was a laugh. In every partying cluster there seemed to be one stocky woman, shorter and more flushed than the rest, who kept joking through her drink and almost spraying it. Near the blunt corner of the bar, where the crowd knotted up tightly, Luisa came to a dead stop. She wasn't tall enough for a good view of the tables and booths, and she couldn't move to reach them. And *somebody* hadn't taken a *shower* this morning. She blocked her nose from inside and inched closer to the bar. Here she recognized a face in profile, but

it wasn't Paulette. It was a boy from high school. Doug? Dave? Duane. Duane Thompson. He'd graduated two years ago. He had both hands on the bar and a beer in front of him. He turned, suddenly, as if he felt her looking, and she gave him a feeble smile. His smile was even feebler.

She stuck her elbow in a fat man's midriff and forged into the sitting area. Now she could see all the tables and still no Paulette. A waitress came careening by. "Excuse me—" Luisa caught her arm. "Is there a group of French people in here?"

The waitress opened her mouth incredulously.

Luisa had that sinking stood-up feeling in her stomach. She figured it was time to go back home, and she would have left if the Algerian hadn't had his face pressed up against the front window. He was still acting like he had something in particular to say to her. As creeps went, he was handsome. She turned back to the tables, and then to the bar. Duane Thompson was staring at her. All this attention! She pushed her way to the bar, ducked under a shoulder, and faced him. "Hi," she shouted. "You're Duane Thompson."

"Yes." He nodded. "You're Luisa Probst."

"Right. I'm looking for some French people in here. Have you seen any French people?"

"I just came in a couple minutes ago."

"Oh," she shouted. She cast a futile glance into the haze. When she was a sophomore, Duane Thompson had been a senior. He'd gone out with a girl named Holly, one of those artsy liberal types

who wore brocaded smocks and no bra and didn't eat lunch in the cafeteria. Duane had been blond, shaggy, thin. He'd had his hair cut since then. He was wearing a jean jacket, a preppy button-down, black Levi's and white sneakers. Luisa also noticed that he had the yellowish remains of a black eye, which made her uneasy. If you didn't see a person every day in the hall or cafeteria, you didn't know what kind of life they had, what kind of problems.

"Is there another room?" she shouted.

Duane spun around, surprised. "You're still here."

"Is there another room downstairs or something?"

"No, this is it."

"Can I stand here with you?"

He looked down his shoulder at her, smiling as he frowned. "What for?"

Insulted and unable to answer, she took a step towards the door. The Algerian was hanging just outside, watching her. She gave him a vomitous look, took a step back, and plunked her elbow down on the bar. A bartender in a shiny shirt stopped in front of her. "I can't serve you," he said.

"What about him?" Luisa cocked her head towards Duane.

"Him? He's a friend."

"You're not twenty-one, are you?" she asked Duane.

"Not exactly."

The bartender moved away. It was time for Luisa to leave. But she didn't want to go home.

"Are you waiting for somebody?" she asked Duane.

"No, not really."

"You want to walk me to my car?"

His expression grew formal. "Sure. I'll be glad to."

Outside, after all the smoke, the air tasted like pure oxygen. The Algerian had left, probably to hide in the back seat of Luisa's car. She and Duane walked in silence down Euclid. She wondered whether he was attached to someone.

"So," she said, "do you, like, live around here?"

"I have an apartment near Wash U. I just moved out of a dorm."

"You go to school there?"

"I did, but I dropped out."

He didn't look like a dropout, but she was cool enough to say only, "Recently?"

"A week ago Tuesday."

"You really dropped out?"

"I barely even matriculated." He was slowing down, perhaps wondering which of the cars parked on Euclid was hers.

"Don't you love that word?" she said.

"Yeah," he said, not sounding like he loved it. "They gave me sophomore standing for my year in Munich—I was in Munich last year."

"I just got back from Paris."

"Was it fun?"

"Oh, non-stop, non-stop." Luisa nodded him into the alley.

"This is your car?"

"Sorry, but. It's my mother's." She stuck her hands in her back pockets and looked into his face. There was a meaningful pause, but it went on too long. Duane was very cute, his eyes deep-set and blackened in the dim light. She remembered the bruise. "What'd you do to your eye?"

He touched his eye and turned away.

"Or shouldn't I ask."

"I ran into a door."

He said this as if it was a joke. Luisa didn't get it. "Well, thanks for walking me here."

"Sure, you bet."

She watched him head back up the alley. What an obtuse person. Luisa would have jumped at the chance to jump in a car with someone like herself. She unlocked the door and got in, started the engine, gunned it. She was quite annoyed. Now she had to drive home and sit around and watch TV and be bored. She hadn't even explained what she was doing down here in the first place. Duane probably thought she'd come looking for a fun time and was going home disappointed. She drove up the alley and turned onto Euclid and pulled up towards the bar.

Duane was on the sidewalk, smoking a cigarette. Luisa pressed the button for the passenger-side window. "You need a ride someplace?" she yelled.

He reacted with such surprise that the cigarette sprang sideways from his hand and hit a building, showering orange sparks.

"You need a ride someplace?" she said again, stretching painfully to keep her foot on the brake while she leaned and opened the door.

Duane hesitated and then got in.

"You scared me," he said.

She stepped on the gas. "What are you, paranoid or something?"

"Yeah. Paranoid." He leaned back in the seat, reached out the open window, and adjusted the extra mirror. "My life's gotten kind of weird lately." He pushed the mirror every which way. "Do you know Thomas Pynchon?"

"No," Luisa said. "Do you know Stacy Montefusco?"

"Who?"

"Edgar Voss?"

"Just the name."

"Sara Perkins?"

"Nope."

"But you knew who I was?"

He stopped playing with the mirror. "I knew your name."

Well then. "I remembered you and what's-her-face." Luisa held her breath.

"Holly Cleland? That was years ago."

"Oh. Hey, where are we going?"

"Take a left at Lindell. I live right off Delmar in U-City."

So she was driving him home. They'd see about that.

"I didn't pay for my beer," Duane said.

She decided to let him live with that remark. She drove augustly, queen of the road, up Lindell. The silence crept along the floor between them. A minute went by.

"So are you still paranoid?" she said.

"Only around doors."

"What?"

"Doors."

"Oh." She wasn't following.

Duane cleared his throat. "What kinds of things are you taking?"

"Taking?" she said coolly. They were in downtown University City now, riding a wave of green lights.

He cleared his throat more strenuously. "At school."

"Are the open windows bothering you?"

"No."

"We can close them."

"No."

"I was kind of mad about the frost last week." She just tossed this out. "It destroyed most of the bugs you can catch with a net. Basically I'm a net person. I mean, when I'm collecting. I had entomology last fall, and if you're good with nets you can really prosper. But Mr. Benson started thinking I was his protégée or something. He came up to me in April and he asked me if I wanted to go collecting larval stages with him. Larvull stages. I'd hardly talked to him since first quarter. He thought it was some kind of treat. He was asking *me* to go collecting larval stages,

because of my special *interest* in bugs."

Duane craned his neck.

She guessed they were passing his street. "So we go out at about six in the morning to this pond near Fenton, and the first thing I think is oh god he's going to molest me and dump me in the pond. He's kind of creepy-looking to begin with. I could just see the headlines, you know, BUGGER BUGGERS BUGGER, DROWNS HER IN LAKE."

She'd thought this up in April. Duane laughed.

"But instead he just gives me these special rubber boots that are about forty sizes too big for me, and then we start wading into this gloop with his special device for collecting larvae. He dips down in the water—I mean, it's absolute *gloop*, I think no wonder it's full of bugs. He dips down and the first thing he drags up is this disgusting little organism, I don't know, some rare gadfly larva, which he shoves in my face and says, 'Would you like to have it?' Special treat, see. I'm about to woof it. I say, *'That?'* I've probably mortally offended him, which is fine with me because it means he'll never invite me again. With larvae and me, it's no thank you. The first thing he'd said was, he'd said, 'I think this will be very interesting for you. To pursue entomology properly you have to collect *all* the stages.' I didn't have the heart to tell him that's exactly why I'll never pursue entomology."

"What about caterpillars?"

"They're larval. They squish."

The frosty glow of a Hammaker Beer sign flashed by on the

right, trailing a liquor store. Luisa pulled over and braked to a hard stop by a hydrant. “Buy some wine?” she said.

Duane looked at her. “What color?”

“Blanc, s’il vous plaît. Something with a screw cap.”

She turned the car around and met him across the street. In a bag in the back seat there were big paper cups. She poured some of the Gallo into two of them and handed one to Duane. He asked where they were going.

“You tell me,” she said. Traffic sounds filled the car, the continuous kiss of tires and asphalt.

“My decision-making apparatus is paralyzed.”

“You talk funny.”

“I’m nervous.”

She didn’t want to hear about it. “What happened, you run into another door?”

“I’m not used to being out with people like you.”

“What kind of people am I?”

“Ones who go to dances.”

She blinked, unsure whether this was meant as a compliment, and put the car in gear. They’d go hit the warehouse site.

“What schools are you applying to?” Duane cleared his throat as though the question had left junk in it.

“Stanford, Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Amherst, and—what? Swarthmore. And Carlton. Carlton’s my safety.”

“Do you know what you’ll study?”

“Biology maybe. I guess I wouldn’t mind being a doctor.”

"Both of my parents are doctors," Duane said. "And my brother's in med school."

"My father built the Arch."

Ulp.

"I know," Duane said.

"Did people talk about it at Webster?"

He turned to her and smiled blandly. "No."

"But you knew."

"I read the paper."

"Is that why you remembered me?"

"You just never let up, do you?"

For a second she didn't breathe. She made a right turn onto Skinker Boulevard, feeling agreeably mortified, like when her mother criticized her.

A cigarette lighter rasped.

"You shouldn't smoke," she said.

"Clearly." Duane flicked sparks out the window. "I haven't been smoking long. Like a month and a half. I came back from Germany and got grossed out by how conceited people are about their health. My family especially. I figure as soon as I've gotten Webster Groves out of my system I'll kick the habit. In the meantime it's kind of entertaining. These keep me company when I'm alone."

"Then what are you smoking one now for?"

He threw it out the window. Luisa followed an Exxon truck onto Manchester Road. To the right, ambiguous amber signals

glowed along railroad tracks on an elevated grade. Four blocks further east she swerved off the road. Gravel flew up and hit the chassis of the car. She drove back between a pair of metal sheds.

"Where are we?" Duane asked.

"Construction site."

"Hey."

She cut the lights. The chalky moonlit whiteness of the area leaped into prominence. On black trailers beyond the chain-link fence, tall red letters spelled out PROBST. Duane took a small camera pouch from his jacket pocket and got out of the car. Luisa followed with her paper cup of wine. "What's the camera for?"

"I'm sort of a photographer."

"Since when?"

"Since, I don't know. Since a few weeks ago. I've been trying to sell some things to the Post-Dispatch."

"Have you had any luck?"

"No."

There was enough slack in the chain on the gate to let them slip through easily. They walked down a set of wooden steps to the warehouse skeleton, which was three hundred feet long and nearly that deep. Vertical steel members punctuated the structure every twenty feet or so, and here and there a prefabricated staircase rose pointlessly to the top plane of beams. Light bulbs were strung on posts above the foundation.

"You can't take pictures here."

"Why not?"

"We're not supposed to be here."

All around them lay hasty piles of plywood pouring forms and bundles of reinforcing rods, knobby and sagging. Duane's sneakers made soft pings on the undamped metal as he ran up a staircase. Luisa thought of her parents at the movies. They'd gone to see *Harold and Maude*. She imagined her mother laughing and her father watching stone-faced.

Through the iron parallelograms above her she could make out the W of Cassiopeia. To the south, two vertical strings of TV-tower lights competed in the night like the stations they belonged to. Trucks rumbled by on Manchester Road, and Luisa swayed in the darkness, and drank her wine, her eyes on Duane.

The next morning she woke up at seven o'clock. Her father was leaving for work and then tennis, his Saturday routine, and she could hear him whistling in the bathroom. The tune was familiar. It was the theme from *I Love Lucy*.

In the kitchen she found her mother reading the stock-market pages of the *Post*, her coffee cup empty. She was chewing her nails as she had every morning for the last nine years in lieu of a cigarette. "You're up early," she said.

Luisa dropped into a chair. "I'm sick."

"You have a cold?"

"What else?" She reached for a waiting glass of orange juice and coughed decrepitly.

"You were out pretty late."

"I was with this guy from school." She explained, in sentence

fragments, what had happened at the bar. She rested her face on her palm, her elbow on the checkered tablecloth.

"Were you drinking?"

"This is not a hangover, Mother. This is the real thing."

"Maybe you should go back to bed."

She didn't want to. Her bed was burning hot.

"Can I make you some breakfast?"

"Yes please."

She was in her room watching *Bullwinkle* when her father returned from the courts. He was still whistling the theme from *I Love Lucy*. His face appeared at her door, pink with tennis. "Your mother tells me you're sick."

She rolled onto her back and made an effort to be friendly. "I'm feeling a little better now."

"Getting up is always the worst." Daddy was sententious.

"Uh huh. Did you win?"

He smiled. "Your uncle's a very good player." His eyes grew distant, his smile false. Uncle Rolf always beat him.

"How was the movie?" she asked.

"Oh, very funny. A good choice. Your mother loved it."

"What about you?"

"I liked the Maude character. She was very well done." He paused. "I'm going to take a shower. Will you be down for lunch?"

Sick of records and TV, she spent the early afternoon simply kneeling by the window, her chin on the cleft between her clasped

fingers. The trees were in motion, and puffy white clouds were in the sky. Mr. LeMaster across the street was doing his best to rake leaves. A man in a blue van threw the weekend *Post-Dispatch* into the driveway. Luisa went down to fetch it.

Her father was on his business line in the study, ordering eighteen beef Wellingtons for some kind of meeting. Her mother was baking in the kitchen. Luisa heard the rolling pin click and the cadences of the three o'clock news.

The air outside was both warm and cold, like fever and chills. Mr. LeMaster, who thought she was spoiled, did not say hello.

She unsheathed the *Post* and left all of it at the foot of the stairs except for the big funnies and the Everyday section, which had the small funnies. These she took back up to her bedroom and lay down with. She started to turn to the small funnies, but a picture on the first page stopped her. It was a picture of a black man giving the photographer the finger. The credit read: *D. Thompson/Post-Dispatch*.

Luisa shivered. How could they print a picture like that? And so quickly? Duane had said he hadn't sold anything.

A FOREST PARK SATURDAY was the page's headline. Other pictures gave glimpses of anonymous revelers, and in the background of Duane's picture some kids were playing football on the field by the Planetarium. The lips of the man in the foreground were parted in derision. His finger was aimed at the unseen photographer. *Shirts and Skins in the Park*, the caption read. *Benjamin Brown, foreground, has been unemployed since*

last November. The man, right, was unidentified.

The man, right, was a hawk-nosed Asian in a turban, a passerby. He was glancing aside so severely that his eyes were all whites. He looked like a blind man.

Eight hours later she and Duane were necking in the rain in Blackburn Park. When the rain got too heavy they went and necked in his mother's silver Audi, which he'd borrowed for the evening. The windows fogged up solid. People walking by on Glendale Road couldn't see a thing inside the car.

Luisa was running a temperature, maybe a hundred or a hundred one, but she didn't feel the least bit sick. It was Duane who kept asking if she had to get home. When she did get home, the house was dark; she was happy she was only an hour late. But as soon as she closed the front door her father ambushed her. First he scared her and then he was horrible to her. She couldn't understand how anyone could get so pissed off about an hour either way. Before she fell asleep she decided to keep Duane to herself for a while, even if she had to lie.

When she woke up in the morning the sun was shining and the air near her bedroom windows was much warmer than it had been the night before. After breakfast she told her mother she was going out birding with Stacy. She told her father she thought his pants were too short. Then she drove over to University City and picked up Duane, and phoned Stacy from a gas station and asked her to cover for her.

In the middle of the big field in Washington State Park she

spread a blanket and lay down. Half a mile away, further up the Big River valley, smoke was uncoiling from dying fires. Campers were pouring water on the coals, packing tents into trunks. For them it was the hour of damp sleeping bags and desolation, their thoughts turning to tomorrow's practicalities while Luisa beamed in the sun. Her new boyfriend's eyes were bright. He'd slept well, he said. He'd brought a camera, a larger one, a Canon.

"Psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh."

"What's that?"

"Birds like it," she said. "Psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh. Psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh-psh."

"What birds?"

"All birds. They get curious. They wonder what it is. Look!" She pointed to a red-and-white flash in the willow grove.

"What?"

"Rufous-sided towhee. It's one of my favorites."

"How many—"

"*Sh*! Sh-shh-shh-shh-shh-shh-shh-shh."

"How many species do you know?" Duane whispered.

"I've seen a hundred twelve this year. I've got about a hundred and fifty on my lifetime list. Which isn't very many, really."

"It sounds like a lot."

"Does it?" She leaned into him and toppled him. "Does it? Does it?" Sickness and medicine made her feel spread out, a warm smothering blanket. "Does it? Does it?" She spread her arms and legs to mirror his. His hard-on pressed on her hipbone.

They lay still for a long time. Luisa could see herself and how she lay and looked from a perspective that would have been impossible if her parents had known who she was with. At this very minute in Webster Groves her mother was working on dinner and her father was watching football. They expected her back before long.

"Listen!" Duane shifted beneath her.

Geese were honking. She rolled over and saw a V of Canadas heading south. She sneezed from the sun and wool dust.

"Sit up for a second," Duane said. He was screwing a stumpier lens onto the camera.

"You mean gesundheit."

He lay on his stomach and took half a dozen pictures. "What kind of geese are those?"

She turned to double-check.

"Don't look. Smile. Wipe that mustache off your face."

She smiled at the receding geese. "Am I going to be in the paper?"

"Smile. You're a dream. At *me."*

"At you?" She stopped smiling and looked at him. "What for?"

"So nobody gets the idea they're looking at anything but a picture. I want there to be an implied photographer."

"I guess you've got it all figured out," she said.

"I guess I do."

"Is that what you told the Post-Dispatch?"

"I didn't tell them anything. I went down there with some

prints and they gave me the runaround. And then yesterday morning, like, you're putting me on the *payroll?* I thought they were going to say they'd lost my pictures."

"You're really lucky."

"I know. You're my lucky star. I can pay the rent now."

Rent? What a bizarre concept. *Pay the rent*. What a boring concept.

"Do you like me?" she said.

"What do you think?"

"Why do you like me?"

"Because you're smart and you're pretty and you came along at the right time."

"Do you want to go back to your apartment?"

"Later maybe."

"Let's go now. I have to be home at six."

4

Behind the first tee of the 18-hole Forest Park golf course, the starter emerged from his hut and called two names.

"Davis and White?"

RC White and his brother-in-law Clarence Davis rose from a bench and retrieved their cards.

"Twosome," the starter said, disapproving. He fixed his eyes on his left shoulder. He had no left arm.

"We play slow," RC averred. "We're patient men."

"Uh huh. Just wait till the kids up there hit again."

"We appreciate it," Clarence said.

Five or six groups milled behind them waiting to tee off. It was Saturday morning, the air already steamy though the sun wouldn't clear the trees for another half an hour. RC popped the tab on a can of Hammaker, sampled the contents, and tucked the can under the strap on his cart. He removed the mitten from his driver and took some colossal warm-up swings.

"You watch that," Clarence said, wiping the spray of dew and grass off his arm. He wore black chinos, a tan sport shirt, and bearded white golf shoes. RC was in jeans and sneaks and a T-shirt. He squinted down the fairway, from the various corners of which the members of a young white foursome were eyeing one another. The first green floated far and uncertain in the par-four distance, like a patch of fog that the foursome was trying to stalk

and pin down.

Clarence was wagging his hips like a pro. He was RC's wife's oldest brother. He'd given RC his old set of golf clubs two Christmases ago. Now RC had to join him in a game every Saturday.

"You go on and hit," RC said.

Clarence addressed his ball and drew his driver back over his head with a studied creakiness. Everything by the book, RC thought. Clarence was like that. When he was fully wound up, he uncoiled all at once. His club whistled. He clobbered the ball and then nodded, accepting the shot like a personal compliment.

RC planted tee and ball, and without a practice swing he took a swipe. He staggered back and looked skyward. "Shit."

"Sucker's a mile high," Clarence said. "You got great elevation, say that for you."

"I got under it. *Under* it is what I got."

The ball landed sixty yards from the tee, so close that they could hear its deadened impact. They slid their drivers into their bags and strode off the tee. It turned out Clarence had caught a bunker. Good with his irons, RC reached the green in three. They had to kick sycamore leaves out of the way before they could putt. Already RC's feet were soaked. When he putted, his ball resisted with the hiss of a wet paint roller, throwing spirals of water droplets off to either side.

On the next hole they played through the kids ahead of them and took bogies. Finding a fivesome camped on the third tee,

they sat down on a bench. The hole, a par three, required a long drive over a creek and up a steep, bald hill. The fivesome was pounding ball after ball into the hazard. Clarence lit a cigar and observed them with a very eloquent suppression of a smile. He had drooping, kindly eyes, skin about the color of pecan shells, and eyebrows and sideburns dusted with gray. RC admired Clarence—which was a way of saying they were different, a way of excusing the difference. Clarence owned a demolition business and had plenty of contracts. He sang in a Baptist choir, he belonged to the Urban League, he organized block parties. His wife's brother was Ronald Strut hers, a city alderman who one day would be mayor; the connection didn't hurt Clarence's business any. His oldest boy, Stanly, was a star high-school halfback. His wife Kate was the prettiest lady RC knew, prettier than his own wife Annie (Clarence's kid sister) though not half as sexy. Annie was only twenty-six. In the three years since RC married her, Clarence had been "making an effort" with him. Sometimes, like when he gave RC his golf clubs, his friendliness seemed premeditated, a little too aware that RC had lost his only real brother in Vietnam. But Annie told RC not to flatter himself, because Kate would have vetoed new clubs if Clarence still had his old ones.

"Hear about Bryant Hooper?" Clarence puffed serenely on his cigar.

"What about him?"

"Got shot in the head," Clarence said. "Thursday morning."

"Aw, Jesus." Hooper was a police detective. Drug squad. "Dead?"

"No, he'll make it. Lost a cheek and teeth, ugly ugly wound, but it could've been worse. I was by the hospital last night."

"How'd it happen?"

"Oh, very routine, RC. Very routine. Some dealer dude with a weapon. Some ex-dude."

"Yeah?"

"They slaughtered him." Clarence shut his eyes. "And there was seven others in the building. This a place just north of Columbus Square. An ex-place."

"Yeah?"

"Owner requested a raid, and after Hoop got hit his buddies fired tear gas. Place burned to the ground before anyone quite noticed." Clarence turned to RC. "You wonder what the point is?"

RC shrugged.

"The point is Ronald Struthers owned that building."

"He got insurance?"

"Naturally. Good deal for him. Something for nothing."

"Sounds like an accident," RC said, finishing his beer.

"Sure. It was an accident. But part of a pattern, brother. Part of a pattern."

The group on the tee beckoned to Clarence. He laid the cigar on the bench, picked up his 7-iron, and thanked them. After a few gentle practice swings he lofted a perfect shot up onto the

green.

The image of smooth Alderman Ronald Struthers in a three-piece disturbed RC's control. He shut his eyes on his downswing and—*under it, baby*—hit a line drive. But the ball cleared the hazard and bounded up the hill. Clarence sank his putt for a birdie. RC missed his first putt by a mile. He missed his second putt. He missed his third. Clarence stood with the flag pin clutched to his breast, his expression as sad and abstracted as if he were watching another man drown puppies. Members of the fivesome cleared their throats. RC felt lawless. The rising sun was in his eyes, and his beer buzz made his arms feel about eight feet long. He topped his fourth putt. Once he was on the wrong side of par, once deep in bogey country, he started rushing, pressing, choking, and he cared less and less. When Clarence got in trouble he bore down. RC just said bag it.

His ball was still two feet from the hole when Clarence said, "I'll give you that one." RC kicked it off the green.

No fewer than eight golfers were standing around on the fourth tee. Clarence led RC off behind some overgrown evergreens. "RC, man," he whispered. "You're closing your eyes."

RC closed his eyes. "I know."

"Head down, eye on the ball. That's standard."

RC spat. "I know. I just gotta settle down. You wait." With a tee, he scraped strings of hardened grass pulp out of the grooves on the face of his driver. Shouldn't *be* any grass on a driver.

"Head down. It's worth twenty strokes a round."

"So what about Struthers?" RC said.

Clarence relit his cigar and inspected it professionally. Tiny pearls of sweat hung on his sideburns. "Ronald," he said, "is much changed."

"He'll never change."

"He's changed," Clarence said. "He belongs to our new chief of police."

"Where do you get that from?"

"From the way he talk and the way he be. He's like a *robot*, RC. He's a hollow man. He's got money from somewhere. The little office on Cass? Gone. He rented a whole floor in that place by the Adventists. He's put on nine new employees since the first of October, and he ain't making no secret about it. And I say to him, Hey there, Rondo, you win somebody's lottery? And he get all stiff and say to me, It's just commissions, Clarence, I'n breakin' no laws."

RC nodded.

"That's right," Clarence said. "As if I was accusing him of something. That's OK, though. I got thick enough skin. But then I say, you know, your standard polite question: Who's buying what property? All right? And he give me this look." Clarence, demonstrating the look, squinted meanly. "And he go. Certain parties. Like I'm from the IRS, not from his own extended family. So I go, OK, Rondo, be seeing you, but he go, Wait a minute there, Clarence—and this is not the Ronald Struthers that's trying to save Homer Phillips Hospital—he go: They be

razing buildings something fierce next month. I go: That so? And he go: Yep. And I go: Who's they? And he go: Folks that don't like questions. And I go: I don't like working for that kind. And he go: You'll learn to love 'em before this year is out."

"Tell him to shove it," RC said.

Clarence shut his eyes and licked his lips. "I hesitate, brother. I hesitate. I got four growing kids. And you didn't ask me about Jammu."

"Jammu." RC had had enough of this stuff. He wanted another swat at the golf ball.

"That's right. Jammu. This raid on Thursday where Hooper got it, they wouldn't never done that under Bill O'Connell. Too damned dangerous, and what's the point? But now they're taking that neighborhood lot by lot, cleaning out the junkies and the derelicts and some families too and throwing them on the street. They're fencing it all off. I knocked down some two-fams behind a ten-foot fence last week. A ten-foot fence! And no genius required on my part to see that's where these new clients of Ronald is doing their buying. Same thing's happening in those bad blocks east of Rumbold. Jammu's fighting house to house, and *somebody* is buying up the lots as she goes. Ronald is in on it, I swear to that. And somebody else, somebody named Cleon."

Cleon, RC knew, could only be Cleon Toussaint, an unabashed slumlord, an old enemy of Ronald Struthers. He went around in a wheelchair but nobody felt sorry for him. "Says who?" RC asked, fingering his driver.

"Says the city recorder. Mr. Toussaint is now proud owner of one and a quarter *miles* of frontage south of Easton that wasn't his four weeks ago. A whole neighborhood, RC. He even bought that garbage dump on Easton. And bought it all since the first of October, and doesn't care if the whole world knows."

"Where'd he get the money?"

"I was waiting for you to ask me that. Nobody knows where he got the money, not me, not anybody. What I do know is what his brother do for a living."

RC shivered in his sweat. John Toussaint, brother of the more odious Cleon, was the commander of the seventh police district, except he wasn't the commander anymore; Jammu had promoted him downtown in September.

"Not to mention the way Ronald talk about Jammu. It's almost like she's some kind of religion. She's—"

The head of a golfer appeared from behind the bushes. "You fellas want to play through?"

Clarence turned to the man, astonished. "That's very kind of you." To RC in a whisper, he said, "We'll return to this."

The men on the tee were restively shuffling the clubs in their bags, perhaps regretting their offer. Clarence teed up, spat on his palms, dug in, and whacked a moon shot across Art Hill, the fat first leg of this par five. The pond at the bottom of the hill lay as calm as an uncut jello salad. Leaves speckled it, motionless. At the top of the hill early sunlight inhabited the museum's stonework. Keeping his head down, his eye on the ball, RC hit his

first clean shot of the morning. His ball bounced near Clarence's and rolled up the next hill. "Keep it," Clarence advised.

After Clarence sliced his second shot into some poplars near an arm of the pond, RC hit a blistering fairway wood over the second hill and out of sight. He walked over the crest of the hill, hoping against hope to see his ball in the vicinity of the pin. Instead he saw a multitude of sycamore leaves. They covered the green and the fairway approach. Glossy and whitish, they all looked like golf balls.

He began to search the green. Clarence's third shot sailed over his head and cracked into a sycamore trunk, ricocheting favorably.

"Lost it, huh?" Clarence was cheerful as he crossed the green, his club heads clicking in his bag. "You see mine?"

RC walked in tight circles, kicking leaves and getting dizzy; the green began to tilt. He looked into the sky and saw the negative images of a zillion leaves. Finally he had to drop a new ball in the bunker, take the penalty, and play from there.

Clarence foozled his chip, but he managed to hole out for a bogey. When he pulled the flag pin to retrieve his ball, he froze. "RC, boy." He spoke to something in the hole. "Be honest now. What ball you playing?"

RC thought. "Wilson. Three dots."

"Down in *two*." Clarence was still bent over the hole. "Double eagle. You one hell of a lucky sucker."

Six months after he finished high school, RC had gotten

drafted and sent to Fort Leonard Wood, where sergeants taught him everything he needed to know to become good mortar fodder for gook insurgents. When the rest of his unit was shipping out, though, the higher-ups had transferred him to the uniformed infirmary staff, sparing him a long round trip. Grateful for the break, and by nature a man who left well enough alone, RC reenlisted twice. His war experience consisted of nothing more than typing histories. But when he got back to St. Louis he had a hard time readjusting. Supposedly the Army turned boys into men, but often it turned men into babies, because unlike a monastery or university or profit-making organization, the Army had no ethic. When the pressure let up, you goofed off; it was automatic. RC didn't drink often, but when he did he got plastered. The word "pussy" was major. He giggled and yukked and slept at every opportunity. It was a trash outlook. In St. Louis old friends of his stayed away from him. Potential new ones were skeptical. They'd ask him what his name was, and he'd shrug and say, "Richard, I guess." You guess? They tried Ricky, Rick, Rich, Richie, Dickie, Dick, White and White Man. They tried Ice, because he'd found a job with the Cold Ice Company on North Grand. He wasn't stupid; just uncertain. Eventually he settled on the name RC, short for Richard Craig, his first two names. He became plant manager at Cold Ice. When he was thirty he got to know a young forklift driver named Annie Davis. Four years later he and Annie had a good apartment and a three-year-old son, and then, in July,

in the very month you'd least expect it, Cold Ice went out of business. Clarence quickly offered RC a job, which he quickly refused, because either Clarence would have had to lay off some otherwise OK man to make room for him, or else he would have been paying RC out of profits, out of charity.

So for three months now RC had been working as the parking-lot attendant at the downtown offices of KSLX-TV and KSLX-Radio. It was a joke of a job, but not bad for a stopgap, and not without a certain maddening challenge. KSLX had expanded its workforce by nearly one-third in the last decade without adding any area to its parking lot. RC was required to juggle a lot of cars, and to juggle them fast, especially during the two rush hours. When you parked cars four-deep, getting one out of the back row was like doing one of those sliding plastic puzzles where the object was to arrange the eight little squares among nine little spaces in various orders, but with an important difference: cars couldn't move sideways the way those little squares could. You had to keep track of exactly who wanted exactly what car at exactly what hour. And you had to keep the patterns loose. In August, Mr. Hutchinson, the station's general manager and the network's top man in the Midwest, had asked for his Lincoln four hours after he'd said he was flying to New York for three days, and RC freed the Lincoln in less than (he'd clocked it) fifty seconds by spiriting three four-door yachts into slots that he once might have thought too narrow for a ten-speed.

But on the Monday morning after he'd humbled Clarence

with That Double Eagle, on the morning of the day before Halloween, a VIP asked him to perform the unperformable. This VIP, a dark-skinned foreigner, had sworn up and down that he wouldn't need his Skylark before two in the afternoon; he had business inside with top management. So RC had put him in one of the longish-term deep spaces right up front, and let Cliff Quinlan park his Alfa in front of it. Quinlan, the station's hotshot investigative reporter, had mentioned a ten o'clock rendezvous and taken his keys inside with him. This was fine with RC, seeing as two o'clock was a good four hours later than ten o'clock.

At 9:30 the VIP came out and demanded the car. Suppressing his first impulse, which was to scream, RC urged him to be patient for one half hour.

"No my good man!" The VIP pointed at his Skylark as if it were a stick to be fetched. "You get me the car immediately."

RC rubbed the bristly backside of his head. What with his big eyebrow bones, his long ears and complicated nose, he saw fit to keep his hair short. "You have a problem," he said, "that I can't solve."

It was a gray, sultry morning in St. Louis. Passersby on Olive Street had slowed to inspect the Skylark in question. The VIP waited until they were out of earshot. Then he straightened his necktie, a shiny silver thing tied in a real potato of a knot, and said: "Know that I am from All-India Radio. I am here on a courtesy visit, and courtesy is my expectation." A horizontal palm approached RC. On it lay a fifty-dollar bill.

"Oh man. You got me wrong, man. This ain't economics. This physics."

The palm did not recede or waver.

"Well," RC mumbled, taking charge of the bill. "I ain't saying this be easy now." He squeezed past Cliff Quinlan's Alfa and climbed into the Skylark, rubbing his hands. Fifty! The guy better learn his exchange rates. RC concentrated. If he could rock this baby back and forth and move it two feet to the left, he could rev it and get the front wheels over the parking-stop, angle it around, get the back wheels over the parking-stop, brake hard, and back it down the sidewalk to the VIP.

Starting up, he wrenched the wheels hard to the left and moved forward till he touched the metal guardrail. Easy, easy. He reversed the wheel full to the right, the steering column whimpering protest, and backed up to within a millimeter of the Alfa, then reversed the wheel again and repeated the process. He did this six times, back and forth. Then came the hard part. He had to give the engine gas and, by means of the brake, leap the concrete parking-stop and stop immediately. And now Quinlan's fender, not his bumper, was at stake. RC backed up in tiny jerks, another inch, another half an inch. He was close to that fender, but he took it back a mite further, and then he heard the bump.

The impact was catastrophic.

The ground shook the car shook the building hammered in his skull. He panicked in reverse before he hit the brake. A painful deafness was fading. He heard glass and metal, large fragments,

crashing into cars.

The far corner of the lot was an inferno of black smoke and orange flame. RC threw the door open, scraping it on the parking-stop, and ran to the VIP. The VIP was stretched out flat on the ground with his hands over his head. He was right on top of a grease puddle. The flames crackled and rumbled, some only visible as a wildness of air. RC could see that the inferno was none other than Mr. Hutchinson's Lincoln. The front two-thirds of it was missing. Mr. Strom's Regal lay on its side. Cars all around had lost windshields and windows.

The sirens were already coming. RC looked around. In an agony of helplessness, he jumped up and down.

The VIP stirred. RC knelt. "Man, are you all right?"

The VIP nodded. His eyes were wide open.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," RC said. "What happened?"

"Nothing—"

"*Nothing?*"

"I *saw* nothing. It exploded."

"Jesus." RC paused to consider the man's probable religion and added, "No offense."

The air itself seemed to have generated police radio static. A fire truck pulled up. The firemen began spraying the carnage casually, men watering a giant lawn with giant hoses, before they even climbed off the truck. A squad car pulled off Olive Street and nearly ran over RC and the VIP. It braked urgently. Doors opened.

"Are you in charge here?"

RC looked up. The person who'd spoken was Jammu. "I park cars," he said.

"Is this man hurt?"

"Far's I can tell he isn't."

RC followed Jammu with his eyes as she bent down over the VIP. What a small woman she was. Smaller than she ever looked in pictures. She wore a light gray trench coat. Her hair was loose and tucked behind her ears. Though only a welterweight himself, RC stared. Such a small little woman.

The VIP struggled to his knees. The front of his suit was stamped with a large, creased grease stain.

Jammu turned to RC. "Whose car was that?"

"Mr. Hutchinson's. He's—"

"I know who he is. How did it happen?"

"No idea."

"What do you mean, no idea?"

RC sweated. "I was trying to get this guy's Skylark out of, you know, a tight spot. Next thing I know—"

He told her everything he'd seen. He hadn't seen anything. But she never took her eyes off him. He felt like he was being memorized. When he gave her his name and address she thanked him and, in leaving, brushed his wrist with her fingers. The skin burned. She walked over to the wreck, which was now smoldering and roped off by the cops. RC looked around helplessly again. He still didn't know what to do. He noticed that

the VIP and squad car had disappeared.

The bad thing was, he'd put a dent in Cliff Quinlan's fender. He knew without going to check. As a job, this joke was getting old, and RC wasn't stupid. They were taking applications at the Police Academy.

One-fifteen in the afternoon. Jammu stood at the window of a twenty-second-floor room in the Clarion Hotel and directed a yawn at the Peabody Coal and Continental Grain installations across the Mississippi. On the near side of the river, conventioning Jaycees in paper boaters straggled along the footpaths to the Arch. Jammu looked at the reflection of her guest in the window. Karam Bhandari was sitting on the end of the double bed peeling the foil off the bottle of Mumm's between his legs. Bhandari was Jammu's mother's personal attorney and sometime spiritual advisor. Though he came from a family of Jains, he was all carnivore, his eyes lidded, his skin saurianly faceted. Jammu had never liked him, but she felt obliged to show him a good time in St. Louis. She'd let him detonate a bomb this morning.

The cork popped. Bhandari brought two stemmed plastic glasses fizzing to the window. He'd changed his grease-stained shirt but not the undershirt, and the grease was seeping through onto the pinpoint cloth. He raised his glass and showed his sharp, small teeth. "To your endeavor," he said.

Jammu returned the toast with her eyebrows and drained her glass. Bhandari had a vested interest in her endeavor. If

she was sleepy today (and she was), it was the aftereffect of their meeting in her office last night. Bhandari specialized in intractable silences and bad-tempered sighs. Maman had sent him over to inspect the management of her investments, to confer with Jammu and with Asha Hammaker, and, in her phrase, "to get a sense of the situation." Maman had every right to send him, since she was dumping fourteen and a half million dollars into the St. Louis real-estate market and spending another five hundred thousand in silence money. But Bhandari was being hosted by Jammu, the very person whose judgment he had come to confirm or dispute. This made for tensions.

"It's quite impossible," he'd said at one point. "You simply must have a full-time accountant."

"I've told you," she said. "I have Singh, I have Asha's—"

"I see. May I ask why this—Mr. Singh—is not present this evening?"

"Balwan Singh, Karam. You know Balwan. He's in Illinois tonight."

"Oh. *That* Singh. He isn't to be trusted, Essie. Surely there's someone else."

"There's Asha's accountant and her attorneys, whom unfortunately she considered it unwise for you to meet. But Singh is very capable. And regardless of what Maman may have told you, he's completely trustworthy."

Bhandari had pulled a long, dull donkey face, blinking. "Surely there's someone else."

Returning now with the Mumm's bottle, Bhandari reached around her and refilled her glass. His chin lingered at her shoulder. He was in a better mood today, since she'd let him do the bomb. She gave his cheek a filial pat. "Thanks, Karam." She took a sip of champagne. "You have the transmitter?"

He stepped back and fished in his jacket pocket, produced the transmitter and set it on the windowsill. "Yes. There it is."

A pause. The sky darkened a shade.

"Is the transmitter your own work?"

"The design is."

"And you still have time to be chief of police."

Jammu smiled. "It's an old design. Standard issue."

"And the automobile?"

"It belonged to a man named Hutchinson, the station's general manager."

"And you attempt to extort, em, extort a certain – I take it this is an act of extortion?"

"No. We make no demands."

A veil of rain drifted into view from the west, applying itself to the Arch. "No demands," he repeated.

"That's right. This is senseless."

"But you wished me to make sure no one was hurt."

"We aren't hurting people yet. We want to scare them. In this case, scare Hutchinson. But we'll go as far as we need to."

"I must confess I don't see the point."

Last night, he'd failed to see the point of her strategy with

North Side real estate. It was simple, she'd told him. Since even Maman didn't have enough cash to start a legitimate panic, Asha's men were buying up little lots throughout the area, from the river to the western limits, creating the impression of many parties acting on inside information. And they magnified the impression by buying only property owned by local banks. This left as much land as possible in the hands of local black businessmen—politically, this was vital—while leading the banks to believe the sum of these investments was much greater than the fourteen million dollars it actually was. Because who would suspect that someone would make a point of buying exclusively from banks?

Bhandari's fingertips floated over the stains on his shirt pocket. The real problem was his innate inability to comprehend ideas voiced by a woman; he retreated into a mental closet which seemed to grow the more asphyxiating the longer Jammu spoke. She decided to torment him further. "Formalisms," she said. "You know. Real-estate speculation is a formalism, Karam. Essentially ahistorical. Once it gets going—once we set it in motion—it works by itself and drags politics and economics along after it. Terror works the same way. We want Hutchinson in the State. We want to strip his world of two of its dimensions, develop a situation that overcomes all the repressions that make him think in what the world calls a normal way. Do you hear me, Karam? Do you hear the words I am speaking to you?"

Bhandari refilled her glass. "Drink, drink," he said. His own

glass he brought to his lips awkwardly, as though pouring, not sipping. Seemingly as an afterthought, he raised the glass. "To your endeavor."

Jammu was going to have to speak with Maman. She was sure that if Maman had known how Bhandari would behave she would have sent a more competent spy. Or would have come herself. Jammu raised the cuff of her cardigan. Two o'clock. The day was evaporating. She took a deep breath, and as she let it out, Bhandari, from behind her, inserted his hands beneath her arms and placed them on her breasts. She jumped away.

Bhandari straightened his back, an attorney again, a trusted family advisor. "I assume," he said, "that the proper security measures have been taken vis-à-vis our Negro liaisons."

Jammu turned back to the river with a smile. "Yes," she said. "Boyd and Toussaint weren't any trouble. They had plenty to hide already. But Struthers, as I said, was expensive. He was the obvious choice—a broker and a politician too, a popular alderman, even something of a crusader. But we managed to dig up a dirty secret, a mistress he's been keeping for nearly a decade. It was clear that he'd racked up a number of conflict-of-interest violations on behalf of the woman's family, which is quite well off. So I had some leverage when I approached him, enough to protect me if he wasn't interested. Which he wasn't, until we came to the money part. Maman cleared the bribes personally, by the way. We don't skimp when my own neck's on the line."

Jammu felt Bhandari's breath on her neck. His face was sifting

through her hair, seeking skin. She twisted around in his arms and let him kiss her throat. Over his slicked-back hair she saw the hotel room's "luxurious" bedspread, its "contemporary" art print, the "distinctive" roughcast ceiling. He unbuttoned the top of her blouse, snorting intermittently. Probably the best metaphor for the State was sexual obsession. An absorbing parallel world, a clan-destine organizing principle. Men moved mountains for the sake of a few muscle contractions in the dark.

The phone rang.

Bhandari made no sudden motion. He was unaware that it had rung. Jammu arrested the fingers working at her bra and disengaged herself. She moved to answer the phone, but stopped, reconsidering. "You'd better take it," she said.

Bhandari stretched his neck muscles carefully and seated himself on the bed. "Hello?" He listened. "Why *yes*!"

From his condescending tone, Jammu guessed it was Princess Asha. Another postponement? She buttoned her blouse and fixed her hair. They'd be missing her at the office.

"Was it an *open* coffin?" Bhandari tittered. He'd been tittering for twenty-four hours. Late last night their talk had turned to JK Exports, Maman's wool business and her primary cash conduit between Bombay and Zurich. Bhandari had described a recent incident. "Some *Sikhs* got in one of your mother's warehouses last week." He'd made Sikhs sound like little moths.

He covered the mouthpiece of the phone and said to Jammu: "Asha can't come until this evening. Shall we make a date?"

"I'm busy tonight. Tell her after midnight. Say one o'clock."

KSLX general manager Jim Hutchinson rode home that night with his wife Bunny, who, as chance would have it, was downtown when the bomb went off. She was a comforting presence. When she showed up at his office, an hour after the blast, she was not the bundle of nerves another woman might have been. She looked glum, almost peeved. She wrinkled her nose. She paced. She didn't kiss him. "Good thing you weren't in the car," she said.

"Damn good thing, Bunny."

Having satisfied herself that he was unharmed, she left again to shop, returning only at 5:30 to take him home. He let her drive. As soon as they were tucked into traffic on Highway 40 she said, "Do they know who did it?" She turned on the wipers. Rain was falling from the prematurely dark sky.

"No," he said.

"Good thing we've got a police department we can trust."

"Are you talking about Jammu?"

Bunny shrugged.

"Jammu's all right," he said.

"Is that so?" A band of red lights, a lava flow, flashed on in front of them. Bunny braked.

"You may object to her nationality," Hutchinson said, remembering as he spoke that Jammu was an American, "but she's turned the entire Bomb and Arson Squad loose on the case."

"Isn't that what anybody would do?"

"That's the point, my lovely wife."

"What have they found?"

"There's not much to go on. Somebody tipped off the police at six this morning, but it wasn't much of a tip."

"Mm?"

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Somebody tipped off the police at six this morning but—"

"They didn't know what to make of it. Somebody called up and said: When it happens, that's us. The fellow at the switchboard had the presence of mind not to hang up. He asked who was calling, and the caller said, *Ow!* The fellow asked again. The caller said, *Ow!* And that was the tip."

"Some tip."

"And it's not as if I have enemies. I told the detectives it almost had to be a random thing, except—"

"Except there are a lot of cars parked downtown."

"So why ours?"

Bunny swung the car into the right lane, which seemed a little bit better lubricated. Hutchinson continued: "There were effectively no witnesses, and there was almost nothing left of the bomb. But they did figure out how it was planted. Detective I spoke with after lunch said it was one of those tape decks black kids carry around. A boom box." Now she'll start in on the blacks, he thought. But she didn't. He kept talking. "Said they found pieces of one scattered around the lot. It looks like the thing was hollowed out and filled with explosives, then shoved

under the car and detonated from a distance. It wasn't dynamite, though."

"Mm?"

"It was plastic. Which is strange. It's hardly amateur."

"Oh, huh. Can you run stories on it?"

"It's news, why not? We can do whatever we want."

"Maybe Cliff Quinlan?"

"And turn up foul play in Jammu's administration? Is that the idea?"

"I've just never heard of cars being bombed in St. Louis, that's all."

Half an hour later they escaped Highway 40, exiting onto Clayton Road. Rain continued to fall. Giant plastic jack-o'-lanterns leered from windows in the older stores on Clayton.

At home their youngest daughter, Lee, was chatting in the kitchen with Queenie, their maid and cook. Two television-sized pumpkins awaited slaughter near the door. Lee toyed with a warty gourd from a basket of autumn objects. Bunny and Hutchinson washed their hands and went to sit down in the dining room, but the dinner table wasn't set. Queenie had apparently not yet finished waxing it. She'd set the table in the breakfast room. She sliced the rump roast and doused each serving with béarnaise. There was steamed yellow squash and a salad with red lettuce, scallions, and hearts of palm.

After grace, muttered by Lee, Hutchinson dug into his beef and began telling Lee the bomb story, although she'd already

seen it on TV. Bunny eyed her squash disks dispiritedly. She could hear a helicopter outside. Perhaps the KSLX Trafficopter. It sounded close, though it might have been the rain or wind that carried the sound.

No. It was very close, practically on top of them. They could hear the straining motor as well as the blades. Lee leaned back in her chair and looked out the window. She couldn't see anything.

"Wonder what *this* is all about," Bunny said.

As Hutchinson shrugged, the firing began. The living-room windows went first. They shattered almost quietly beneath the screaming of the copter's metal parts. Bullets banged on the front door. They struck brass and shrieked.

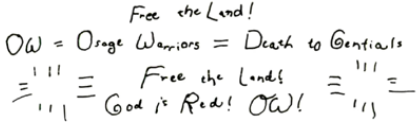
As if following a script, Hutchinson dragged Lee to the floor and huddled with her under the breakfast table. Bunny dropped to her knees and joined them. She was gasping, but she stopped as soon as she threw up. Chop suey she'd eaten in bed with Cliff Quinlan splattered in front of her. She shut her eyes. Queenie was screaming in the pantry.

The dining-room windows burst. Bullets pounded the walls. The china display in the antique breakfront hit the floor with a mild crash. The Norfolk pine near the kitchen doorway toppled off its trivet. Hutchinson clutched Lee's head.

Within seconds of the attack the first Ladue squad car pulled up. Already the street was teeming with hysterical neighbors, the Fussels, the Millers, the Coxes, the Randalls, the Jaegers, and all of their domestic help. Red lights cut the darkness. A pair of

pumpers arrived, but nothing was burning. An ambulance made a disappointed U-turn and drove off. No one was hurt.

The police found the Hutchinsons' front yard dotted with flyers xeroxed on shiny paper and covered with a childish scrawl. Chief Andrews picked one up.



Andrews assigned two patrolmen the task of picking up all the litter and reminded them not to get their fingerprints on it. Then he radioed the St. Louis police. Chief Jammu, he was told, was already on her way.

Residents in six other communities in and around St. Louis – Rock Hill, Glendale, Webster Groves, Affton, Carondelet, and Lemay—reported hearing a low-flying chopper in the minutes following the attack. The Illinois Highway Patrol was alerted, but it was too late. The chopper had vanished in the steady rain east of the river.

"I'm not especially worried about the FBI. It took them years to catch those Puerto Ricans in Chicago, and even then they bungled it. This is a two-man show, Gopal and Suresh, they have no identities, their actions have no pattern, and they'd already stolen all the supplies six weeks ago. The only person who ever caught Gopal at anything was me. The FBI is out of its element.

They're more in their element when it comes to what I'm doing in the city, but even if they look, which they won't, they won't find much, some transmitters maybe, but you can't trace the destination of their signals. Same with the retransmitting stations, and only a professional would even know what they are. The professionals aren't looking. Sometimes I'm tempted to shut down all the electronics anyway, but the wires do more to prevent discovery than encourage it. The people in the field—Singh, Baxti, Sarada, Usha, Kamala, Devi, Savidri, Sohan, Kashi—they need the information for their work and their own safety. Nice try, but don't bother.

"If someone stumbles onto the pattern in Asha's North Side purchases they'll find the name Hammaker. It's Maman's cash but Hammaker's bank checks. In this city, that's a real red herring. And the media like me. So do the prosecutors, all the DA's young lawyers collecting scalps. We have a rising arrest rate, and convictions bring promotions. And there's no reason to be suspicious of me. The worst police can do supposedly is beat and cheat. We don't beat people, and we don't take bribes, at least not upstairs. Does my mother squeak?

"Yes, land's expensive downtown, the city's cramped and can't annex, but what really scares off the county wealth is crime. It's a fear reinforced by racism. The city-county split is a form of discrimination. Elbow. What's surprising is that the city doesn't want reunification any more than the county does. The blacks are afraid of being outvoted in a more regional government,

especially when they still don't even have control of the city. It's incredible, but St. Louis has never had a black mayor. But it's only a matter of time before it gets one, another election or two, and then no one will ever get the county and city back together.

"The industries are already established in the county, so why move? Ouch. Greed. We have tapes where you'll hear bank board members inform their friends that city land has suddenly become a red-hot commodity. This isn't just courtesy. The banks have a vested interest in land prices, and in the city's prosperity. They own the bulk of the civic bonds. Therefore the banks are already on our side.

"Maman can sell out in April for no less than thirty million. We'll take a quarter of that in taxes, but she'll still have fifty percent. Elbow! There's a law called Missouri 353 that lets the city offer long-term tax abatements to anyone who'll develop a blighted area. Blighted means anything—ten years ago they declared all of downtown blighted, so you can imagine. And our new tax plan will sweeten the deal. Do you hear what I'm saying to you?

"Of course, the police chief has no business dictating city tax policy. But how am I supposed to know that? I'm new here. And the penalty for my political activity is media exposure and personal popularity! It's completely contradictory. The reason I can take liberties with my office is the very same reason no one's afraid of me: I'm a woman, I'm foreign, I'm irrelevant. You know, the Kama Sutra enjoins you to linger."

Bhandari rolled off. The sheet clung to his damp back and followed him, exposing her right shoulder and right arm. She let her hand remain between her legs. For the moment she was a refractory adolescent again, at home with the autoerotic. She stared at the ceiling, on which the bedside lamp cast a conic section of light pierced by odd spokes of shadow, projections of the crossbars of the lampshade.

Stirring in his sleep, Bhandari brushed her flank. She was filled with the unpleasant conviction that when in Maman's house, when called upon, he made talkative and charming love.

But tomorrow Jammu would be free again, and the particles of her past, roused to flame by Bhandari, would grow cool and dim as she made her way back into the darkness, into her scheme, into the distance of St. Louis. Her shuddering came and went unnoticed.

Asha was due at 1:00. Jammu looked at her watch, her only clothing. It was 12:20. She trailed a hand along the floor, found underwear and swung her legs out of bed.

Someone knocked on the door.

She stumbled to her feet and ripped the sheet off Bhandari, who lay like a beached whale, flippers half buried in percale sand. She shoved his head. "*Up*" she said. "She's here."

He rose dreamily, gazing at her chest.

The knocking grew fierce and the doorknob rattled. This didn't sound like Asha. Jammu could hardly turn her blouse right side out. She zipped up her skirt. Bhandari was tentatively

knotting the belt of his robe. “Get the goddamned door,” she hissed, heading into the bathroom. After a moment she heard him shuffling to the door and unlocking it. There was a squeal, his. “What are *you* doing here?”

Jammu turned away from the sink. Singh was standing close to her in the bathroom doorway. He stared at her in blank distress, and she was pleased to see a man whom she was still capable of injuring straightforwardly. She rolled her shoulders, flaunting her dishevelment.

“Indira is dead,” he said. “Shot.”

“What?”

“They shot her.”

“Sikhs!” Bhandari said. He had come up behind Singh, and in an anti-Sikh fury he swung his fist at the younger man. With grace, almost delicacy, Singh threw him against the wall and choked him with his forearm. He let up, and Bhandari looked around vacantly. Then he ran to the phone by the bed.

“Operator. Operator.”

“I thought you’d want to know,” Singh said to Jammu.

“Romesh?” Bhandari’s voice shook. “Romesh, it’s you? Listen to me. Listen. All files, *all* files—you’re listening—*all* files marked C—C as in Chandigarh—all files marked C. Listen to me. All files—”

Something was mechanically wrong with Jammu’s mouth. A hard combination of tongue and palate held it open and kept air from reaching or escaping her lungs. She felt a bullet in her spine

and couldn’t breathe.

5

"Barbie?"

"Hi. I was going to call you."

"Are you in the middle of something?"

"No, I haven't started yet. I have to bake a cake."

"Listen, did the package come?"

"Yeah, on Monday."

"You know, the receipt's in the box."

"She'll like it, Audrey. She saw something similar the other day at Famous that she liked."

"Oh good. Do you have any special plans for tonight?"

"Lu's going over to a friend's after dinner to spend the night."

"On a week night?"

"It's her birthday. Why would she want to stick around here?"

"I just thought. You used to do special things. I just thought – How are you feeling?"

"Well, I'm tired. My cold kept me awake last night. I could hear myself starting to snore—"

"Snore!"

"I've always snored when I've had a cold. It used to drive Martin crazy. That terrible infection I had, whenever it was, the three-month infection, I remember he'd wake me up in the middle of the night with this completely crazed look on his face and he'd say something like IF YOU DON'T STOP SNORING

– Dot dot dot."

"Then what?"

"Then he'd go sleep on the couch."

"That's *funny*"

Dropping the receiver into its stirrup, disposing of Audrey for another couple of days, Barbara rested in a kitchen chair. It was the first of November, and she had a spice cake to bake before Luisa came home. Although she was going out after dinner, Luisa had a keen sense of responsibility for juvenile ritual (a willingness to use hotel swimming pools, to eat the chicken drumsticks) and she might insist on doing something traditional as soon as Martin came home, something like watching home movies of herself (there were no other home movies) or even (conceivably) playing Yahtzee. At the very least she would demand (and receive) a cocktail, and Martin would bring down the gift Barbara had bought for him to give (a typewriter) and add it to the boxes from relatives and to Barbara's own more ordinary (more motherly) contributions (socks, sweaters, tropical-colored stationery, Swiss chocolate, a silk robe, the much-discussed set of birdsong recordings, hardcover Jane Austen and, for the hell of it, softcover Wallace Stevens) which Luisa, demanding a refill (and receiving it) would unwrap. Then the three of them would make formal conversation as if Luisa were the adult which the gifts at her feet, their ready enjoyability, indicated she had not yet become. Grandparents would have helped tonight. But Barbara's parents had just left for a month's vacation in Australia and New

Zealand, and even before Martin's mother died she never left Arizona for anything but funerals. Martin himself would not help tonight. He'd been on the outs with Luisa lately. On Monday night he'd come home deep in thought (about the Westhaven project, he said), and at the dinner table, still thinking, still off in his world of timetables and work crews, he'd begun to grill Luisa on what she wanted to major in at college. The grilling went on for ten minutes. "English? If somebody with a degree in English comes to me looking for a job, I just shake my head." He cut a neat rhombus of veal. "Astronomy? What do you want to do that for?" He speared a bean. Luisa stared hopelessly at the candles. Barbara said:

"Leave her alone, Martin."

He looked up from his plate. "I was just trying to be helpful." He turned to Luisa. "Was I bothering you?"

Luisa threw her napkin in the marsala sauce and ran upstairs. She'd lost her appetite this fall, and lost some pounds with which (in Barbara's opinion) she could ill afford to part. At breakfast this morning she'd looked much older than eighteen. Barbara had just awakened from a dream where Luisa was a skeleton in a stained white gown, and where the hands reaching to comfort her, the mother's hands, were gray bones.

"Can I make you some waffles?"

"Can I have some coffee?"

"Yes. And waffles?"

"All right. Please."

It was painful watching her stuff waffles into her mouth. She obviously wasn't hungry. She had a lingering cold, and though she hadn't stooped to admit it yet, she also seemed to have a new boyfriend, whom she'd apparently met when she'd gone to see the French girl two weeks ago. The French girl had not shown up. The boyfriend had taken the picture that appeared in last Saturday's Everyday section. *D. Thompson*, the credit read, and the caption: *Indian Summer. Luisa Probst of Webster Groves enjoys the fine weather in Washington State Park. Behind her is a flock of Canada geese*. Martin had bought twenty copies of the paper, and Luisa had mentioned, rather belatedly, that Duane had been in the country with her and Stacy. Barbara really didn't mind if Luisa tried to keep her feelings towards Duane a secret for a while. She herself had grown up under surveillance (the surveillance of both her mother and the Roman Catholic Church) and she'd hated it. Besides, with Luisa still spending so much time in Stacy's company, how important could Duane be?

Outside, it was cloudy. Two male cardinals, winter birds, hopped from peg to peg on the feeder by the breakfast-room window. Barbara could hear a slow scraping on the south side of the house as Mohnwirbel raked concrete. He was wearing his red wool jacket today, his winter plumage, his cardinal colors. He lived on the property, in the small apartment above the garage, and seemed a more native resident of Sherwood Drive, or at least a less self-conscious one, than Barbara could ever be.

She swallowed some aspirin with a splash of scotch and put the

glass directly in the dishwasher. She was wearing a full plaid skirt, a dark red silk sweater, slightly dated ankle boots (hand-me-ups from Luisa), a silver bangle on her wrist, and silver hoops. Every day, sick or not, she dressed well. In the spring and fall (retrospective seasons, seasons in which she married different men) she wore makeup.

As she turned on the radio, which was always tuned to KSLX ("Information Radio"), Jack Strom was introducing today's guest on the two-to-three segment of his afternoon talk show. The guest was Dr. Mickey McFarland. Physician. Professor. Disciple of Love … And author of the best-selling *You and Only You*. Barbara put an apron on.

"Doctor," Jack Strom was saying, "in your latest book you describe what you call the Seven Stages of Cynicism—a kind of ladder that a person climbs down on to middle-age depression – and then you discuss ways to reverse the process. Now, I'm sure it's struck many of your readers that all the examples you chose involved middle-aged men. This was obviously intentional on your part, so I wonder if you might tell us how you see women fitting into this pattern of cynicism, which I believe you once called the Challenge of the Eighties."

"Jack," McFarland rasped, "I'm glad you asked me that."

Always, always, they were glad Jack had asked.

"As you may remember, when *A Friend Indeed* came out in '79—as you may remember, it went to number one on the bestseller list—something I'll never forget. Heh. I don't know if

anybody's ever said this, but your first best-seller is like your first kid – you love it to death, you know, it's always going to be your favorite. But anyway, as you may remember, in *A Friend Indeed* (in which, by the way, I spoke to the problem of feminine depression) I spoke there of the special role that women must play in meeting the Challenge of the Eighties."

"And what was that role?"

"Jack, that role was a caring one."

"A caring role."

Jack Strom was hard on best-selling authors, shaming them with his extraordinarily mellifluous voice. He'd been hosting afternoon talk shows for as long as Barbara could remember, for twenty years easily, and his voice never changed. Did one's face ever change?

"… I'm glad you asked me that, too, Jack, because it so happens that I think the Fifth Amendment's protection of religious freedom is this country's most precious resource. I think what we're witnessing in these cults is a cry for love on a mass scale. I don't know if you've ever thought about this before, but at the center of every, and I mean every, religion, there's a doctrine of caring, be it Eastern, be it Western, I don't care. And I think —I truly believe—that there's a middle ground we're all striving to reach together."

Profound silence.

"Dr. Mickey Mc Far land, author of *You and Only You*. We'll get to the phone lines right after this message."

Mohnwirbel had stepped sideways into view in the back yard as he followed the ivy beds with his rake. There was enough ivy, enough property, to keep him raking all day long and the next day too. He'd had his finest hour a week ago, when photographers from *House* magazine had come to take pictures of the lawn and garden. It was the first time in eleven years that Barbara had seen Mohnwirbel agitated. He'd stood in the middle of the back yard like a dog amid angry bees, with an all-encompassing concern, menaced by squirrels that dropped sticks and trees that shed leaves.

"Hello, you're on the air."

Barbara measured butter.

"Dr. McFarland?"

"He's listening. Go right ahead."

"Doctor, my name is Sally."

"… Do you have a question or comment for the doctor?"

"I'm listening, Sally."

She opened the sugar bin. She was struck by the—what?—of white sugar. The futility. She applied the steel scoop.

In an average week, she read four books. At the library she catalogued four hundred of them. She went out once to her exercise class, and three times to play tennis. In an average week she made six breakfasts, packed five lunches, and cooked six dinners. She put a hundred miles on the car. She stared out windows for forty-five minutes. She ate lunch in restaurants three times, once with Audrey and various fractions of twice

with Jill Montgomery, Bea Meisner, Lorri Wulkowicz (her last good college friend), Bev Wismer, Bunny Hutchinson, Marilyn Weber, Biz DeMann, Jane Replogle, sundry librarians and many occasionals. She spent six hours in retail stores, one hour in the shower. She slept fifty-one hours. She watched nine hours of television. She spoke with Betsy LeMaster on the phone two times. She spoke with Audrey 3.5 times. She spoke with other friends fourteen times altogether. The radio played all day long.

"Six three three, forty-nine hundred is our number. If you're calling from Illinois it's eight four two, eleven hundred. Hello, your question or comment for Dr. McFarland?"

With the spatula she shaved smears of creamed butter off the sides of the mixing bowl. She shuttled buttermilk and eggs from the refrigerator to the counter and cracked the eggs into the smallest of the nesting bowls. Tossing the shells in the sink, she thought of Martin. He wouldn't have discarded the shells so quickly. He would have run his index finger around the inside to loosen the last, clinging globs of white. She saw him do it when he scrambled the eggs on Sundays.

In the first weeks of their marriage she'd dropped a twice-read newspaper into a wastebasket and he'd retrieved it. "These are useful," he said.

He never used them. He turned off the hot water while he soaped his hands. He put bricks in the toilet tank. The old house on Algonquin Place was lit largely by 40-watt bulbs. He burned the barbecue charcoal twice. If she threw out old *Time* magazines

he sulked or raged. He pocketed matchbooks from restaurant ashtrays. When he watered the grass, he laid leaky hose joints over shrubs, not concrete, so the shrubs would get a little drink.

He conserved. But his conservatism was personal, perverse almost. When he was trying to keep his workers out of the unions twenty years ago, the city press could hardly believe that Barbara's father had decided to represent him. At the time, everyone from the Teamsters to the roofers was striking Martin, and strikes were spiraling out into sympathetic businesses. Normally her father would never have touched a case like this (one of his specialties was workmen's compensation), but it was difficult to say no to a company president who marched into paneled offices in boondockers and khaki work pants. Martin's issue with the unions was personal, not ideological. He seemed astonished to be the cause of general havoc, and seemed to think it only natural when, with her father's help, he won the suit. And when he turned up at her parents' Fourth of July party, Barbara noticed him.

She'd just graduated from college, and she had a fellowship to study physics at Washington U. In less than a year, though, she'd given it up and married Martin. She didn't need science to set her apart, not when she had Martin Probst. She liked to see him at symphony intermissions chatting with her old Mary Institute acquaintances. ("You see the trombones?" he'd ask. "I love trombones.") She liked to see him rock-and-roll dancing with her college friends. At charity balls he searched

out the practicing engineers and talked about box girders and revetments and concrete piles while chiffon and silk charmeuse swept insubstantially by. She liked to be around him.

One Sunday afternoon about three years after they were married, he took Barbara on a tour of the Arch, which hadn't opened to the public yet. He unlocked two gates, a metal door, another gate, another door, and stopped by a galvanized-iron control box. He was moving with a swagger that Barbara didn't recognize, and casting disdainful glances at the work. He threw switches by the handful. In the receding triangular space above them, lights went up on stairways and cables and the inverted T's that anchored the tram tracks to the walls. Martin didn't look at her. He might have been an antebellum Southern gentleman losing his sweetness in a review of his slaves. Pulling hard on a railing, as if daring it to snap, he started up the stairs. She followed, hating him somewhat. She smelled cold grease, cold welds, thirsty concrete. Echoes lingered, buzzing, in the thin iron steps. When the stairs brought her close to the walls she ran her hand over the hard carbon steel, over drips of set concrete, over code numbers inscribed by hand, and saw a blue luster hiding in the burrs and ripples. Abruptly the stairway veered to the opposite side of the tram tracks, and veered back, adjusting to dreadful alterations of the vertical.

"Do you collect if I fall here?"

"Don't fall," he said curtly. It was an order, but she was happy to comply. Diagonal patterns—the crossties and trusses for the

tracks, the guys and brackets for the stairs—were repeated at one level and then slowly gave way, element by element, to patterns more cramped and twisted. Looking down (accidentally) she could see some of the flights she'd climbed, but not nearly all of them. They zigzagged around like the spoor of a rectilinearity driven crazy by catenary logic. The colors were primitive, the rustproofing orange, the plastic wrappings a baby blue, the wirenuts red and yellow, the conduit green. Farther up, as the pace of the curve increased, she climbed long spiral staircases connected, top to bottom, by narrow gangways with flimsy rods for railings. She might have fallen if she'd stopped to think. She followed Martin. There was metal everywhere, its molten origin apparent in this sealed metallic enclosure, in the literal chill: she could see the steel's enslavement to form. Threaded, it bit itself in a death grip, bit indefinitely. Gussets like the arms of frozen courtiers held up struts, and the struts held up the gangways, and the gangways Martin. In the past his power had been a reputation, a thing for her to play with. Now, at closer range, from a greater remove (the truth is unfamiliar), she loved him very much.

Blue daylight appeared. They stepped out into the sunlit observation room. And after she'd appreciated the view east and west, after she'd selected a car driving by the Old Courthouse, a red station wagon, and followed its progress through the empty downtown streets, watched it popping in and out between buildings, and caught glimpses of it (she believed) on Olive Street all the way out to Grand Avenue; after she'd jumped on the floor

to confirm its solidity; after she'd sat up on the window ledge, her back to the sun and her thighs on warm metal, after she'd kicked off her shoes and Martin had stood between her legs and kissed her: after she'd protested that people could see and he'd assured her that they couldn't, he unbuttoned her jeans and pulled them down. Then he did it to her on the floor. There were rows of chevrons on the cold steel plates. He mashed and maneuvered her while she tried again and again to sit up. Her shoulders, in spasms, resisted touching down. Did she know this man? She was almost ecstatic. The best thing was, he never smiled.

"Mickey McFarland, author of *You and Only You*. Doctor, we're glad you could stop by this afternoon, I'm sure you have a busy schedule—"

"Oh, KSLX has a special place in my heart."

"We appreciate your coming in. I'm Jack Strom. From three to four I'll be talking to Dr. Ernest Quitschak, a seismologist who's going to tell us about three of the biggest earthquakes in American history and the next big earthquake, which could happen any – day—now, right here in Missouri, KSLX-Radio, *Saint* Louis, it's – three o'clock."

Bong.

She slid the three pans onto the top rack of the oven, set the timer, and slumped into a chair. She was bushed. Her ears rang. Mohnwirbel had gone off someplace, leaving the rake in the ivy, tines down.

In New Delhi today Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was

among hundreds of thousands of—

At the news of Mrs. Gandhi's death on Monday Barbara had thought immediately of Jammu, the police chief. Jammu patterned her peremptory glamour so clearly on Mrs. Gandhi's that Barbara was sure the assassination would leave her harrowed. But when Jammu appeared on KSLX-TV last night to discuss ramifications of the murder, she spoke with her usual poise. "It's amazing the woman survived as long as she did. She didn't lack enemies." The cold smile she gave the interviewer disgusted Barbara.

"You can't judge from this," Martin said. "Who knows what she thinks in private."

Yes, there was no denying no one knew. Barbara would even grant the possibility that Martin, in private, now that his hair was turning gray, feared death. But she would never know. The guiding principle of Martin's personality, the sum of his interior existence, was the desire to be left alone. If all those years he'd sought attention, even novelty, and if he still relished them, then that was because attention proved him different and solitude begins in difference.

She remembered the election night party they'd had in their house on Algonquin Place, on the night Humphrey lost. The Animals raging in the living room, the undergraduates dancing in the front hall. Barbara had been upstairs checking on Luisa. At the bottom of the stairs she saw Martin talking with Biz DeMann's young brother-in-law Andrew, a plump law-school

student in blazer and tortoiseshell glasses.

"Harvard," Martin was saying. "… Harvard. Somehow I thought it was a restaurant."

Young DeMann: "I can't believe you haven't heard of it."

"Listen, Andrew." Martin put his arm around Andrew's shoulders and drew him close. "There's something I've always wondered. Maybe you can help me. What does alma mater mean?"

"I don't know exactly. Something like Our Mother."

Martin frowned. "Whose mother?" He was doing his dumb act.

"Metaphorically. Like: Harvard is my alma mater."

"I see. It's your Our Mother."

Andrew smiled indulgently. "Sure. Why not."

"Why not?" Martin took Andrew by the collar and tossed him against the front door. "Because it means *nurturing mother*, you asshole!"

Barbara, turning white, dragged Martin into the dining room. "Martin, Martin, Martin—"

"I ask the kid where he went to school," he told her in a caustic whisper. "I'm pretty sure he went to Harvard, I'm just being polite. He tells me: 'Oh, a little school near Boston.'" He pulled away. "Lemme go kick his head."

"He's a *guest*, Martin."

She dragged him out to the back patio and sat him down. She realized he wasn't drunk at all. "All these people," he said.

"All these people, worrying about the poor. They don't have the faintest idea what it's like to be poor … All these people studying. It makes me uncomfortable. It seems so … so *small*. I mean, how do they justify themselves? All these people. All these people. They've never in their lives had to work a job they didn't like."

All these people were Barbara's people.

If she stopped trying, she and Martin wouldn't see them anymore.

She stopped. The parties stopped. She stayed at home; she got a sinus infection. Men were circling the moon, and she sat and rested in a kitchen chair, wishing she could taste. It was the worst infection of her life. In the shower she licked the soap off her lips and found it sweet, like one of the more congenial poisons. Cooking was a chemistry lab. Heated beef turned gray, heated chicken white. Bread had low tensile strength. A liquid could be extracted from an orange, it was volume in a glass, it was 150 milliliters.

The infection continued out of February and into March, but spring was just a change in the light, a dampening of the cold, nothing more. She saw a doctor, who told her it was only viruses, she needed to sleep a lot and let it run its course. Eventually she could breathe freely, but she still couldn't taste. She started smoking again. The smoke was frosty and almost chewable, and the pain in her throat, divorced from flavor, had an electrical quality, like a leakage of current. Was it possible that people tasted what they spoke? It was possible. Words dwelt in her skull

like hammerheads, falling around on their rigid claws. Martin blamed her. "What's wrong with you?" *Go to bell, I have a cold*. "You should try to get some sleep." *Go to bell*. A steak could be bent. Radishes couldn't. Every morning she licked at the soap, always hoping, and then, in April, something gave and she realized in her closet that she was smelling No-Moth. It was exactly as she remembered it. But now with each taste she rediscovered there came a sense of private ownership. Tastes and smells no longer seemed like communal stocks of which each person partook according to need and predisposition. They seemed like property. She was reading Sartre, and he hit her like a ton of bricks. She felt wild. She had insides, and at the time they weren't lonely places. Ask Martin about those years, and he'd tell you a different story. Hers was simple: she'd started to live for herself, not both of them. She'd noticed that she had a daughter.

"And how is this different from the San Andreas fault?"

"The San Andreas is on the edge of the continental plate – plates, of course, are the rigid pieces of the earth's crust that make up the continents and ocean floors …"

The oven was warming the kitchen, but Barbara didn't smell cake, only the heat of her sinuses. The dishes seemed a creation of the sink, which heaved them onto the counter, weird saucers, wooden spoons. In December more people from *House* magazine, including a writer named John Nissing whom Barbara had so far met only by telephone, would be coming to shoot the house's interior. They should have come today instead, she

thought, and caught the house *au naturel*, caught Barbara in her chair, bowing in confusion and looking at the flour-dusted wrists in her lap. In her dream last night Luisa had had these hands, these rings, these wrinkles.

When Audrey's younger daughter Mara was Luisa's age she'd already run away from home three times. She'd been expelled from Mary Institute and arrested for shoplifting and possession. Concerned relatives, namely Barbara and her father, agreed that the Ripley household was (to say the least) doing Mara little good, and Barbara overrode Martin's objections and offered to take the girl in until she cooled off or got a diploma. Mara had always, to Barbara's discomfiture, looked up to her and liked her, as the token grownup she could stand. She accepted the invitation, and Barbara tried to be understanding and be a good foster mother, and repair some of the damage. But after two months, on a Sunday in March, she and Martin returned from a brunch and found Luisa, who was ten, sitting in the kitchen with a frown on her face. Her indirection was elaborate.

"Sometimes," she said, "I think about rooms we don't use?" She felt sorry for the unused rooms. And all the things in them? Like in the basement. And on the third floor? It was funny how she never went up there? Did Mommy ever go up there? Wasn't there an old sewing machine with pedals? And lots of things of Daddy's? And an old sofa, sort of?

Barbara calmly cored an apple for her and sent Martin up to the third floor, where Mara (who was supposedly "outside

someplace") and a boy her age were hastily dressing. Martin said Mara had to go, and Barbara agreed. She was chastened to discover that only Luisa mattered to her, that a scratch on her daughter's psyche worried her more than a festering hole in Mara's. Did Luisa know the suitcases in the front hall were the direct result of her testimony? Had she made a connection between having sex and getting thrown out? Did she know it was done on her behalf? A very peculiar sort of distrust arose in Barbara: how much are we really keeping from her? A lot, or only a little? She wished she'd been granted a mind unable to perceive so clearly the mathematics of Luisa's growth, or a body that could have given her more than one child, anything to relieve the terrible specificity of her conscience. If only it didn't matter exactly what became of Luisa, and what she became, and how it happened, through what fault and what virtues of Barbara's. If only she were like Audrey, to whom things happened unaccountably. Or like Martin, who didn't seem to care.

Upstairs she heard footsteps. The thump of books. Luisa had come in through the front door and gone straight to her room.

Three weeks passed. It was the day before Thanksgiving, and the high school was in turmoil. After fifth hour the clots of pep, the organizers and combatants, began to rove the halls at will. They carried orange and black threats, threw orange and black confetti, stapled orange and black crepe paper to the ceiling tiles. It was Pep Wednesday, the day before the Statesmen played the

Kirkwood Pioneers. At three o'clock the Rally would be held, and then at eight o'clock the Bonfire, when five hundred of the faithful would gather at Moss Field to witness the burning, in effigy, of Kirk E. Wood. This true Pioneer would be roasted, tossing in a danse macabre, while smoke and cheers drove the school spirit to painful heights for tomorrow. Tomorrow was Turkey Day. Tomorrow was the day.

Mr. Sonnenfeld shut the door. He cast his pinkened eyes on the class before him. He stuck out his lower lip and blew air through the thin hair on his forehead. "Forty-five minutes to go," he said. "Be glad when it's all over."

The class did not look at him. They heard his words in mute boredom, as a humbling judgment on them. Yes, sir, it's just like you say. Fluorescent light filmed their tired hair, tired jeans, tired purses. They were a group as gray as the cold clouds outside. They came because Sonnenfeld would not fail anyone who attended class regularly. The boy next to Luisa in the back row was slouched so low in his seat that his knees butted the underside of his desk. His name was Archie. He was black. He was drawing on his desk with a pencil, expanding a solid gray dot into a larger dot.

Luisa rubbed the back of her hand across her nostrils. Whenever she did this she could smell Duane. Washing masked the smell, but not for long. He came from inside her. More and more his smoky human smell lodged even in her nostrils; in her brain.

Her mother had said: "What do you keep doing that for?"

"Doing what?" She'd dropped her hand, locking it between her legs. She saw how people accidentally develop disgusting nervous habits.

"Smelling your hand like that."

"I'm—not."

Mr. Sonnenfeld moistened his fingertips and walked up and down the aisles distributing copies of poems. "I've selected four poems to introduce you to the work of William Carlos Williams," he said. Luisa took her copies but was careful not to show immediate interest in them. She was only here because this course fit into her unruly schedule this quarter. She felt conspicuous. One row over, in the corner, a girl named Janice Jones was watching her. Janice was wearing loose jeans with no belt, a biker's jacket, and an embroidered Indian shirt with the top four buttons unbuttoned. She had tiny, stoned-looking eyes. Her name was scrawled on lockers and walls around the school, JANIS JONES GIVES GOOD HEAD, JJ = JOBS. Every day she stared at Luisa for no apparent reason; no malice when their eyes met, no smiles, no connection.

"… I think when you look at these poems you'll see a lot of similarities with Ezra Pound and the other imagists we started with." Sonnenfeld's collar bit deeply into the roll of fat around his neck as he handed the mimeographs across two empty desks to Janice Jones. He nearly lost his balance. Archie sniffed. He seemed to have seen it without looking up.

"Now, first of all, has anyone ever read anything by Williams?" Sonnenfeld hopped backwards and sat on his desk. He pulled up his pants legs to relieve the stretch.

White pages turned. No one answered. This was the only class Luisa had in which she hardly knew anyone. People she knew would have said something.

"Does anyone know what Williams did for a living?"

"He's a faggot," Archie muttered.

"Archie?"

Continuing to draw his dot, Archie smiled and did not elaborate. Trouble had been brewing between him and Sonnenfeld since the quarter started two weeks ago, and the mood was dangerous today. Usually Archie was silent in class. He was loud in the halls, though, where all the black kids lost their shyness. They scared Luisa. They didn't like her, and she felt she'd never be able to relax enough to indicate neutrality, to give them even a small sign that she didn't necessarily dislike them.

Sonnenfeld put his hands on his hips and assumed a disappointed tone. "William Carlos Williams was a doctor. He lived all his life in Paterson, New Jersey. As we go on, we'll find that it's not unusual for American poets to have other full-time professions. Many have been teachers. Wallace Stevens, who's perhaps our greatest poet of this century, a very hard poet, worked for an insurance company. He was a vice president when he died. Sylvia Plath, whom I'm sure you've all heard of, was a mother and a housewife."

Vague guilt fluttered in Luisa's stomach. The Wallace Stevens book her mother had given her.

"Archie?"

Archie shook his head patiently. Luisa looked at his long, angular fingers. She thought of Duane's hands. On the palm of her own left hand his name was written in black ballpoint ink. She'd written it in Calculus, half-asleep. She'd hardly slept last night. For the third time in a month, she'd sneaked out to be with Duane. She'd gotten to the sundeck from her bedroom window, and from the sundeck she'd climbed, knees cracking, feet trembling, down the step-like quoins to the front yard. It was amazingly easy, like an open cash register and no one around. Her parents never went into her room after 11:00. The last Lockwood Avenue bus to U-City came at 12:05. She could see Duane any night she wanted to, and she liked it better at night, when she could see herself, a white semi-reflection in the bus window staring into her face and unmoved by the streetlights and neon floating through her. Duane was waiting at the bus stop, his scarf under his chin, a lock of hair above his eyebrows. He shook his head. He could never believe she was actually on the bus.

"… Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound, who were both profound influences on Williams."

"Bow bow bow," said Archie, snatching at an imaginary bug in the air.

"Archie?" Sonnenfeld was getting mad. The pitch of his voice had risen.

Janice Jones had fallen asleep.

Luisa looked down at the copies on her desk, THE RED WHEELBARROW. *So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with water beside the white chickens.* That was easy enough. She liked short poems. She went on to the next one and, finding it just as easy, kept reading. She didn't stop until she sensed an unanswered question hanging in the air. Sonnenfeld had asked them something. She ran the preceding seconds through her memory and heard, from afar, "What was imagism?"

Without raising her hand she called out, "Free verse, strong images that appeal directly to the emotions."

"*What did you say to me?*"

She looked up with a start. Sonnenfeld had gotten down from his desk. He wasn't talking to her. He was talking to Archie. He hadn't even heard her answer. Archie was enlarging the gray dot, smiling.

"What did you say?"

"Fag," Archie said.

"I didn't hear you."

Luisa drove her nails into her palms and stared at her desk, the way everyone else was staring. She tried to force the blush back out of her cheeks. What an *idiot* she was. The halls had grown quiet for a moment. Sonnenfeld was walking down the aisle. She heard the unhurried scratching of Archie's pencil. Then a scuffle, the rumble of a desk's metal feet on linoleum, the plink of a pencil. She stole a glance. Sonnenfeld had grabbed Archie by the

collar and was hauling him towards the door. He pushed him out and followed him. From the hall, the class heard, "What'd you call me?"

There was a murmur from Archie.

"What?"

"Fag."

"What, nigger?"

"Fag."

"Nigger!"

FAG!

NIGGER!

It stopped. It had to. Sonnenfeld was dragging Archie down to the vice-principal's office. Still feeling the pressure of attention on her, Luisa laid her cheek on her desk and shut her eyes. Outside, a pep parade was approaching to the tune of "Old Wisconsin."

On with Webster, on with Webster Fight fight fight fight fight

The trumpeter had to slur and blurt to keep up with the singers. As the group passed the door, Luisa heard footsteps. Some of the class was deserting. She heard a match struck and raised her head. Janice Jones was lighting a cigarette.

Tonight Luisa was supposedly going to the Bonfire and then staying over at Stacy's. Actually she was going out to dinner with Duane and spending the night with him. There had been a lot of this supposedly-actually in the last three weeks. On her birthday it had gotten complicated. Stacy had even called Luisa's mother

for suggestions about what kind of breakfast and what kind of presents. Stacy had a mother like Duane's, the convenient sort of parent who worked full-time and who'd believe there had been a party in her house even if there hadn't been. Luisa wasn't as much afraid of getting caught as she was sure that one of these weeks, in her tiredness, she'd forget which side of the window she was on and do something stupid at home, like French-kissing her mother or calling her father "Baby." She could feel the impatience inside her. Why don't people who like each other kiss all the time? Why do people have to lie? She was feeling more honest and acting less honest. It was a dangerous mixture, like gasoline and wine, like fever and chills. She still had a cold, sort of a permanent cold, the sense that none of the things that used to matter mattered anymore. She could do whatever she wanted. She could just say: "Give me a cigarette."

Janice Jones looked astonished. "They're menthol."

Luisa shrugged. When the match was held she inhaled lightly to keep from coughing. To her relief the smoke was mild, like a breath of mothballs. Janice Jones folded up her poems and stuffed them roughly into her purse. She looked at Luisa. "Bye," she said. It was the friendliest she'd ever been.

"See you." Drawing on the cigarette, Luisa felt almost as cool as Janice. Unfortunately the only two kids left in the room to appreciate her now were Alice Bunyan, who sketched horses during class, and Jenny Brown, who had large sad eyes and a lisp, wore overalls, and never knew the answers. Neither cared

about Luisa. She closed her eyes. She felt a tiny breeze, a feathery impact on her stomach—the ash breaking loose. She opened her eyes.

Sonnenfeld.

He was leaning with both hands on the front desk in her row. He was staring at her. "May I ask what you're doing?"

She didn't answer. She dropped the cigarette and smashed it with her heel. Sonnenfeld laid a green slip on her desk. *Smokig i classmm*. "Sorry," he said coldly. "I'd expected more from you."

She gathered her books and shouldered her purse. Somehow her body couldn't believe it was leaving. The vice-principal could suspend her for three days for smoking, and barring that, a call to her parents was virtually assured. At the door she stopped and looked into the hall. There were ruptured oranges on the floor, and construction-paper artwork on the doors of lockers belonging to members of the football team. The pep club had drawn crude portraits of each member and given him a slogan. #65 WILLY FISHER "DR. MEAN GUY." The lockers looked like tombs. Luisa turned back uncertainly to Sonnenfeld.

He was seated on his desk with a book in his hand. He licked a finger, turned a page, and addressed his two remaining students. "So much—*depends*," he said.

"Just leave those spaces blank, White."

"Done. What do we say? Gateway Arch?" RC's fingers played the keys. *Gateway Arch*. "Address?"

"Forget the address."

"Shot in the leg, right?"

"Very funny. Southern leg, eastern face, hit by automatic fire."

… *automatic fire*. "Means?" RC said.

"High-powered automatic rifle firing steel bullets."

… *steel bullets*.

"Object of attack unknown. Distinctive feature: pattern of dents traced the letters O and W. Rest of that column blank."

… *letters O and W*. "Now, *I* know the suspects," RC said.

"Shut up, White. I'm dictating. Understand? Name unknown, sex male, height five-ten to six-two, everything else unknown."

Unknown. Unknown. Unknown.

"Bottom of the page. Three-sixteen a.m., November et cetera, Donald R. Colfax of Gateway Security Systems, 1360 DeBaliviere, telephone three three six, one one seven one—reported the sound of gunfire near the southern end of the Arch. New paragraph. Three-eighteen a.m., Officers Dominick Luzzi and Robert Driscoll—double *z-i*, White—dispatched to the scene by radio. New paragraph. Three-twenty a.m., Colfax stated that upon hearing the gunfire he hastened in that direction from his desk in the northern underground lobby of the Arch."

"Hastened" RC said, "in the direction of a *machine gun*?"

"Appearing at the location of the shooting, he glimpsed—"

… *lobby of the Arch*.

"—the above-described suspect fleeing through the trees to the south of the Arch. Colfax stated that the suspect was carrying —"

"Luzzi, phone!" Desk Sergeant McClintoch barked.

"Take a break, White. Appreciate the circumstances. My wife's ten months pregnant. Relax, take a break."

RC relaxed. He peered into the lunch bag Annie had filled for him. Egg salad on rye, brownies, and an apple. He was starving, but he wanted to eat late because he had a Legal Procedures class from six to eight at the Academy. Then tomorrow he had the day off. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving. The precinct-house atmosphere was pre-holiday, a little frantic.

The man at the next desk was scowling as he hunted and pecked. RC, who'd typed a million histories in the Army, was a ten-finger man. In the Army he'd trained on a machine gun, too. "*Aim, don't spray. Pick a target, five shots, next target, five shots. Ata-baby.*" But machine guns weren't precision instruments; you'd need damn strong arms to write something with one, even just the initials of your terrorist group. If RC ever got challenged to a duel at dawn, he'd choose a typewriter for his weapon. Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat. The alphabet at ten paces.

He took another look at his lunch. Ten more minutes, he told himself, picking at the rip in the vinyl cushion of his chair. On the green wall two desks to his right was a 12 × 15 glossy of Chief Jammu with Sergeant Luzzi, taken in August on the steps of the precinct house. RC himself had only talked to the Chief that one time after the explosion, before he'd signed up, and he'd only seen her in person one other time, when she gave a talk to the new recruits at the end of their first week. He couldn't remember

a word of what she'd said, but it was good, whatever it was. And he had no problem with how they'd been treating him, aside from some superciliousness on the part of the younger white officers. It was a tight ship, this department, a lot more electrifying than the Cold Ice Company and a lot less dumb-assed than the Army. When they tested his gun skills here and he passed the test, they told him to stop going to the range and assigned him extra hours of office work. He put in thirty hours a week—work-study, the Chief's idea. With all this plus the classes too, he was busy. But in February he'd graduate and things would be a little easier.

Luzzi was still gabbing on the phone. Didn't look like his wife was delivering yet. It would have taken Luzzi nearly an hour (plus however long he spent on the phone) to type this report that RC could do in ten minutes. As far as RC knew he was the fourth-best typist in the whole first precinct. He'd heard officers say: "In a hurry? Take it to White there, if you don't mind his lip."

The only real ragging these days came from Clarence. "I swear to God," he said, "I never thought I'd be sorry to see you moving up. But even ice beats the heat. I hate to see you playing their game." *Their* game was the Chief's game. Lately Clarence had been hitting his golf drives too fat. He wasn't on speaking terms with Alderman Struthers, and his business was hurting. Not hurting *too* bad (this city never ran out of junk to demolish) but still hurting. RC couldn't make Clarence see that this had nothing to do with the Chief.

"Read it back, White?"

Luzzi had returned, and RC turned back to the typewriter. "Colfax," he read, "stated that the suspect was carrying …"

"A weapon," Luzzi said. "A weapon."

"Big surprise," RC said, and waited to be told to shut up.

At company headquarters in South St. Louis, Probst watched Bob Montgomery and Cal Markham, his vice presidents, file into his office and take chairs. They were here to plan Westhaven strategy. "Well?" Probst said.

"We get a day like this," said Cal, "it changes things. This is snow weather."

Outside the window, in an afternoon sky that was almost black, a pigeon spread its wings and decelerated, like a newspaper unfolding in the wind. They always flocked around the precinct house across the street.

"It's not snowing in Ballwin, is it?"

"No," Cal said.

Bob gave Cal a sharp glance. "Flurries."

"How'd we get into this mess?" Probst said.

"We didn't know how big the sucker was. We knew, but we didn't."

"Or how far out it was," Bob added. "Those last three miles."

"I'll tell you what it is, it's we didn't think we'd get the contract."

"Let's think a minute," Probst said.

"I've been thinking all month," Cal said.

"Let's think."

The problem was concrete: how to get 23,000 cubic yards of it mixed, transported to Westhaven and poured for foundations, all in the next four weeks. By Christmas or New Year's snow and ice would make further pouring impossible, and without foundations no further work could be done. But further work had to be done. The contract called for model units to be completed by April, the entire development by next October. And Cal was right. They'd known, but they hadn't known. They'd known it was a huge amount of acreage, they'd known it was too far out in the country (and the last three miles of road were maddeningly roundabout), they'd known they were under time pressure, but no single factor had seemed prohibitive. They'd bid high, padding every figure except the time estimates. They'd won the contract anyway, and now they were in trouble. The obvious solution—

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Probst," said his secretary Carmen on the intercom, "but your wife is on the phone."

"Tell her I'm in conference. I'll call her back."

The obvious solution was to subcontract. But Probst hated to subcontract, hated to spend the money, hated to give up any control over the quality of the work, hated to endanger his reputation for doing complete jobs. There was a cash problem, too. The developer, Harvey Ardmore, wasn't scheduled to pay the second 25 percent of the contract until the foundation was laid, and Ardmore was notorious for refusing to renegotiate. Probst didn't want to pay the subcontractor out of his own cash assets. And worse, it would be hard to find someone willing to buck the

unions. Only Probst could buck with impunity, and not even he, really, because the other solution to the concrete problem was to hire extra shifts for a month and do the work himself. He'd need drivers. Drivers were Teamsters. Even if they did agree to work for him—

"I'm sorry, Mr. Probst," said Carmen on the intercom, "but she says—"

Probst grabbed the phone and took the call. "Is this an emergency?"

"No, not exactly," Barbara said. "Although—"

"I'll call you back, I'm sorry." He hung up. Barbara knew damned well he didn't like to have his train of thought broken, and just this morning he'd told her how tense he was …

The Teamsters. If they did agree to work for him—never before had he had to ask, and they'd probably refuse just to spite him—they would drive a hard bargain. They might demand the right to approach Probst's men again. At the very least, they'd drag their heels. So if Probst didn't subcontract, the only acceptable way of keeping the job in the house would be to use what manpower he had now, spend the eight weeks it would take, and risk getting stung by bad weather. Cal, the daredevil, favored this alternative. Bob preferred to subcontract. Either way, they sacrificed something, either reputation or security. The problem was the very idea of Westhaven, the grandness of the conception. It was too large a project, too far out in the western boondocks, and the market out there was too cutthroat. Harvey Ardmore

set deadlines (not that you could blame him, he was racing his competitors and creditors) that Probst couldn't meet without compromising himself.

"Have you sounded out the Teamsters, Bob?"

"I have."

"And?"

Bob smiled. "I think they'd sooner haul for the devil."

From the black trees along Swon Avenue snowflakes swirled like tiny lovers, meeting and parting, falling, melting. Luisa shivered in her jacket, breathing easily in the cold outdoor air. She'd gone straight from Sonnenfeld's room to the vice-principal's office, but when she got there she found that the vice-principal had already left to supervise the Rally. The vice-principal's secretary sent her to her counselor, and her counselor accepted her ridiculously sincere apologies and said, "We'll let it go this time." She felt rescued; she'd been given special treatment; she felt all right.

She stopped in the plot of land called the Plant Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary (it was dedicated to a man, a Mr. Plant, not a kingdom) and casually looked for birds. She spotted a female cardinal and a woodpecker, but mostly there were jays and starlings. Since she met Duane, she hadn't once gone seriously birding.

A gust of snowflakes flew by. This little park had been the destination of many of the walks she took with her father when she was little. She remembered she was always surprised when

he held out his hand and said, “Would you like to go for a walk with me?” Sure, she would think, but we never go for walks. But apparently they did go for walks. But there was something fake about them. Her father seemed to have some other daughter in mind.

She proceeded up Jefferson Avenue. Around Duane she’d been acting critical of her parents. She had to give him reasons why he couldn’t call her at home or meet the folks, and there weren’t any obvious reasons. So she talked about the way her father had treated her and Alan, his phony respect. For the purposes of mocking her, he’d acted like she and Alan might get married. He made everything seem ridiculous. It was like he couldn’t bear to let Luisa forget that her friends weren’t as important as he was, that nobody but he had built any Arch.

Her mother was the opposite. From the very beginning she’d felt obligated to find Alan even more interesting than Luisa did. Wasn’t Alan cute and funny and sweet? And awfully smart, too? It made Luisa uncomfortable. Her mother was lonely.

With an ache in her throat she crossed Rock Hill Road, which was so deserted that the snowflakes dotted the pavement uniformly, undisturbed by tires. The reasons she came up with for keeping Duane to herself never seemed quite good enough to justify climbing out her window and missing so much sleep. The main thing was, she hadn’t *felt* like sharing Duane. But now she wondered. Maybe when she got home now she should let her mother have a piece of him. Not say she’d been lying, just that

she'd seen Duane a couple of times at Stacy's and really liked him. The ache faded from her throat. She was getting butterflies instead. She wasn't sure she'd have the nerve to tell her mother as soon as she walked in.

A triangle of blue sky had opened in the black clouds above her house. Mr. Mohnwirbel was digging up the brick border along the front walk. "Hi, Mr. Mohnwirbel!"

He looked up. "Hi," he said in his gruff German voice.

"Going to the game tomorrow?" she asked loudly.

He shook his head.

"Going to have a turkey dinner?" she said, even louder.

He shook his head.

"Going to take the day off?"

"I make a vacation."

"You're going to make a vacation? Wow. Where to?"

"Illinois."

"Boy." Luisa rocked on her heels. "I sure hope you have a good time."

He nodded and picked up another brick.

The butterflies were rising higher in her stomach. She marched around to the back door, gathering courage, and crashed inside.

The kitchen was dark and smelled. Her mother had been smoking. It smelled like grade-school afternoons, when she'd smoked all the time. She was sitting at the table and looking bad, all pinched and pasty. This probably wasn't the time to tell her.

"Hi," Luisa said.

Her mother gave her a baleful glance, and brushed some ashes off the table. Had her counselor called about the smoking after all?

"What's up?" Luisa said.

Her mother looked at her again. "I don't understand you."

"What?" Maybe it wasn't the smoking. Maybe – Her stomach fell a mile.

Her mother looked at the sink. "I was picking up the turkey at Straub's," she said, speaking to a nonexistent person. "I was standing in the checkout line. The woman ahead of me was looking at me. She seemed vaguely familiar. She said, You're Barbara Probst, aren't you? I said, Yes, I am. She said, I guess our daughters are good friends. I said—"

Enough. Luisa ran down the hall and locked herself in the bathroom. In the mirror she caught a glimpse of herself smelling her hand and spun away.

"*Luisa!*" Her mother's voice was harsh. "Luisa, what kind of stunt is this?"

"I have to go to the *bathroom*." She hoped the tinkling would drive her mother away. Arguing was out of the question. Anything she said would humiliate her.

She jerked up her pants and flushed the toilet. Under the cover of the rushing water, she cleared her mother's bud vases off the windowsill and parted the curtains. Snow was falling again. From the dark bathroom the sky looked light and unbounded.

The toilet fell silent.

"Luisa, I'm not going to be understanding this time. I'm sorry, but I'm not, because for one thing, I don't understand, and for another, I don't think you want me to. But if you want me to treat you like an adult you'd better come out here and start acting like one. What are you doing in there?"

Luisa hardly heard the words. It was just pathetic bleating to her. She felt evil and she wanted Duane. She was glad she'd lied. She was sorry she'd been caught.

"Imagine how I felt," her mother said. "Imagine me standing there trying to smile and hold up my end of the conversation while this woman *I don't even know* is telling me—"

She flushed the toilet a second time, for noise, and unlatched the window. Fortunately it didn't stick. She raised it and eased up the storm window. The toilet bowl gurgled as it emptied. She planted one foot on the tiled sill, squeezed through the window, and jumped into the yews outside. Her mother was still talking to her.

6

Singh was all smiles; like a boy inventor, he'd used the word "results" a dozen times in half an hour. Blinking the eternal clove smoke from his eyes, he pressed the Rewind button on the tape deck, puffed, and tapped his ash onto Jammu's office carpeting. With a lazy toe he smeared the ash to dust. He had just played, for Jammu, the scene of the arrival of Luisa Probst at the apartment of her boyfriend Duane Thompson, and then the recording of a phone call shortly following her arrival: an exchange between Thompson and Barbara Probst. "Tell her I called," Barbara had said. "She does have our number, I believe. And if you change your mind about tomorrow, just come on over. We'd like to have you."

Jammu had bitten off so much thumbnail that it seemed only a single layer of cells kept the red flesh from bleeding. Though not intense, the pain was like an itch, inviting aggravation. She pressed the rough end of the nail into the exposed flesh and felt the pressure far away, in her anus.

She'd never heard Barbara Probst's voice before, or any local voice that sounded so aware of the wiretap and so contemptuous of its presence. The voice was controlled and dispassionate, its tones unmelodious but pure, as if in the woman's throat there were a low-pass filter that eliminated the overtones, the rasp and tremor, the nasals, flutter, fear. The clarity made Jammu

anxious. Not once in five months had she considered that there might be hidden elements of control in St. Louis, that behind Martin Probst there might stand not a twangy Bunny or a vapid Biz but a woman with a voice like her own. How could a voice like Barbara's restrict itself to speaking only on domestic issues? It was impossible. In the recorded conversation Jammu could hear the workings of an undercover operation dedicated to the preservation of order. The girl wouldn't come to the phone, but the mother assured the boyfriend, in phrases lulling and impersonal, that everything was fine. It was clear that St. Louis had Thought Police, and that Singh, with bizarre blitheness, had flushed out the voice of a master agent.

"Get any sleep last night?" Singh asked.

"Don't ever play that voice for me again."

The tape ran off the take-up reel. "Barbara's? You should have heard her before she—"

"Never again, do you understand?"

It was Thanksgiving morning. At three o'clock Jammu was due at the mayor's brownstone for dinner, a tête-à-tête for which she'd planned to spend these hours preparing. Already she could see that she wouldn't have time even to brush her teeth beforehand, let alone pick out clothes. No doubt she'd end up going in her stretched cardigan and a drab wool skirt.

Singh cleared his throat. "As I was about to say—"

"What's the Bonfire?"

He sighed. "Not important."

"Who's Stacy?"

"Last name Montefusco. A little friend of Luisa's. She's been lying for her."

"Where does Thompson live?"

"University City."

"How will she get to school if she stays with him?"

"Bus, I guess."

Jammu nodded. "You guess. The director of Bi-State owes me one. If you think she needs a bus line to the high school, just tell me."

"Thanks. There's a good connection. She's been taking a bus at night to sleep with him. Since the twenty-second of October they've had intercourse eleven times. On five of those occasions she was able to spend the night. Once outside during the daytime, the remaining five times in the evening, in his apartment."

"Thank you for counting, Singh. I respect your thoroughness. But why didn't she tell Barbara to begin with? If she'd told her, she wouldn't have had to sneak around, or run away. How did you manage to set it up this way?"

"How did I set it up?"

"Yes."

"The deceptions started slowly," Singh said. "There was a conversation—November eight. Evening. Luisa, and Barbara, who tried to draw her out and overdid the 'cool' bit. I could understand the girl's response."

"Which was?"

"Heavy sigh. As if it were too late to start explaining. So she lied. Only-children sometimes feel oppressed and very often they're duplicitous. They have no sibling rivals. Luisa doesn't have to worry about losing favor, so she goes ahead and takes exactly what she wants. She's also going through a typical adolescent rebellion."

"So the family is less happy than it looked." Jammu smiled wanly. "Who is Duane Thompson?"

"You don't know?"

"You haven't told me, I've been busy, how should I know?"

"But surely you've seen his pictures?"

"Don't treat me like a baby, Singh. I've seen his pictures. But who is he? How well do you know him?"

Singh rolled a chair up against Jammu's desk, sat down, and looked across the papers at her. "Not at all. Never met him. He has no connection with us—'no taint.' Luisa knew him from school. It came as a rude shock, because I'd spent an entire week setting her up to meet me—"

"For you to seduce."

"Correct."

"Good." Jammu liked to see her employees planning in accordance with their capacities. Singh was seductive, and she was glad he knew enough to exploit it.

"I lured her to a bar, and she came alone, which was gratifying. Unfortunately I'd stepped into the bathroom when she arrived. When I came out she was talking to Thompson. They stuck

together. I had no chance. And forty-eight hours later they—"

"Were having intercourse, yes. Why did you step into the bathroom?"

"It was an error."

Interesting. Singh didn't usually make errors like that. He had bladder control. "I ask again," Jammu said. "Who's Thompson?"

"A youth. Unrelated to us, apart from the fact that I got him his photo job."

"When?"

"The same night they met."

"Why?"

"When a man wins a million dollars, he kisses the first person he sees."

"So I take it you weren't opposed to their liaison."

Singh smiled. "I wasn't looking forward to the mechanics. Your dictum, Chief. Nothing fancy. An affair with a local boy was clearly preferable. A matter of verisimilitude. If I take credit for the results, it's only because I did get her to the bar. And she met him there."

"If you didn't know him before that night, how did you know he had pictures to sell the Post?"

"I eavesdropped. Thompson was whining about it. I left, confirmed the story at the Post, and—forged ahead."

"Amazingly quick thinking. Will she go home again?"

"Judge for yourself. To me it sounded as if she was making plans for an extended stay."

"Are there precedents for this? Sociologically?"

"Yes and no. No, it isn't normal for 'better-class' girls, or boys, to move out of their homes while they're still in high school. Certainly Probst thinks it's abnormal. On the other hand, Barbara is at pains to accept it. Her niece—Ripley's daughter—moved out at age fifteen. She had a clinical problem, of course," Singh added, "but there is a precedent in the family."

"She'll be homesick. She'll be back in a week."

"I agree it's difficult to imagine her missing the 'holidays.' But she may very well hold out until then. She has her pride. She's been away before, in France. I'd guess a month. Thirty days. That gives us time."

"Time for what?"

"Well, assuming that the State is developing—"

"You've given me no evidence to suggest that it is."

"Well, naturally, the signs are small. But I assume they're significant, what with Probst having lost both his dog and his daughter. As early as October twenty-four—but not before, not in the September recordings—I picked up a line like this from Barbara: What's wrong with you? You haven't heard a word I've said."

"From Barbara," Jammu repeated grimly.

"And he's begun to sermonize with Luisa. It sounds a bit mad when he does it—speaks of 'opportunity' and 'self-discipline.' Masterpieces of irrelevance. He isn't paying attention. Other men talk about him—they even set him up in opposition to you, as if

already there are, de facto, two camps, yours and his. And I listen to him every day, I listen for an awareness of what you're doing to the city, for a leaning one way or the other, any glimmering of historical consciousness—and there's nothing. Zero. This could be last year, or the year before that. Your name simply isn't spoken, except to tell someone else to forget about you. It isn't unreasonable to believe we're getting results."

Jammu gave Singh a long, hard look. "And how, exactly, are you planning to get him to start working for us? What is the next step you plan to take?"

"We should go for the kill right away," Singh replied. "Someone from your syndicate should approach him. Mayor Wesley, for example. Sometime before Luisa gets homesick—sometime in the next month—Wesley should hit Probst hard. To begin with, Probst is in trouble with Westhaven. Wesley can play on this, if you think he's capable. He should press urban rejuvenation, the forces that lead to new growth, new solidarity. But keep your name out of it, and nothing explicit about the city-county merger either. Let Probst draw that conclusion himself."

"So basically you're saying that Probst is in the State and will be susceptible to our suggestions."

"Basically, yes. It's a situation waiting for him to walk into. He's been sleeping on a train. You wake him up, tell him he's in Warsaw. He'll start speaking Polish."

"Assuming he knows the language." Jammu twisted in her chair to see the wall clock. It was noon. "Prepare an abstract,"

she said. “I’m seeing Wesley at three so I’ll need it by two. Not that I’m certain your plan is even close to being acceptable.” She fed some notes to her shredder, by way of illustration. “You say Probst hardly knows my name. What do you expect me to do, congratulate you for that? You say he’s vague and irrelevant when he talks to his daughter. To me it sounds like he’s an ordinary father. You say that killing his dog and making his daughter run away from home hasn’t bothered him. Well? Perhaps he’s a thick-skinned individual. You say he lacks historical consciousness. May I ask what St. Louisan doesn’t? What you have painted, Singh, is a portrait of a man in *excellent mental health*.”

Singh had assumed an expression of dignified deafness that was reminiscent of Karam Bhandari. Jammu went on.

“You say Probst isn’t on good terms with Barbara. But maybe that’s only on the surface. She sounds like she still must be a force. Maybe she pays attention *for* him. She sounds like a bad person for him to rely on. I want him hearing my voice, the voice of what I’m doing. Not hers.”

“Go see him.”

“No time. Not yet. I’d need a pretext.”

“Well.” From his shirt pocket Singh produced an unusually fat-looking clove cigarette. He inspected it and put it back. “If Probst is by some chance not yet in the State, there’s more that can be done. I can step in and get Barbara any time. The groundwork is laid. But I’d prefer to hold off until we’ve seen how Probst reacts to Wesley. I recommend that you brief Wesley

soon, in case Probst comes to see him of his own accord. Then if he hasn't by the fourteenth, you can ask Wesley to approach him after Municipal Growth."

"All right." Jammu rose from her chair. "Bring me an abstract at home, by two."

Barbara returned to pulling tendons with the pliers. In the stumps of the turkey's legs there were tiny white eyes. She pressed down on the pink tissue surrounding one of them, worked the pliers into an acceptable grip, and began to tug. The phone rang. She lost her grip.

"You son of a bitch."

She took hold of the tendon again and tugged hard as the phone rang a second and third time.

"If that's Audrey …"

Abruptly the tendon ripped loose and slithered out, lavender and rigid like a hard-on, and trailing a maroon feather of flesh. She grabbed a dishtowel, a clean one, and rubbed the grease off her hands. She took the phone.

"Hello," she said.

There was a silence, and she knew right away who it was.

"Oh baby, hi," she said. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Duane's." The voice was very small.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes." The volume surged, as if the line had cleared. "YES. HOW ARE YOU?"

"We're fine. Daddy just left for the football game. I'm putting

together the turkey. It's a big one. You and Duane want to come over?"

After a silence, Luisa said, "No." Her throat clicked.

"That's OK, you don't have to. I just thought—was I that horrible to you?"

"Doe." There was a long sniff. "Yes."

"I'm sorry, then. I'm truly sorry. Will you forgive me sometime?" Barbara listened to her daughter cry. "Oh baby, *what*? Do you want me to come over? I can come right over."

"Doe."

"No, OK. You know I worry about you."

The turkey, which had been propped against the faucet, slid with a slap to the bottom of the sink.

"Is Duane making you a nice dinner?"

"Yes. A chicken. He's stuffing it." Luisa swallowed. "In the kitchen."

"We had a really nice talk last night—"

"That's what he said."

"He was really charming, I'd love to meet him sometime. I had—"

"I'll call you back, OK?"

The line went dead.

Barbara looked around as if awakening, and it was morning, very bright. She hoisted the turkey back up onto its rubbery wings and found another tendon. The phone rang.

"Can I come and get some clothes tomorrow?"

Since parking promised to be a problem, Probst was walking to the football game. From the chimneys of houses on Baker Avenue, smoke rose a few feet and hooked down, as it cooled, to collect in bluish pools above the lawns. There was no light inside the little stores on Big Bend Boulevard—Porter Paints, Kaegel Drug, the sci-fi bookshop—to compete with the bright sunshine on their windows, but Schnucks, the supermarket, was still doing business. Probst stopped in to buy the pint of heavy cream that Barbara had asked for. Then he joined the stream of fans issuing from the bowels of Webster Groves.

There was a throng at the gates of Moss Field. The Visitors bleachers were packed with red-clad Pioneer fans, and the home stands, much larger, were also nearly full. Under the press box sat the Webster Groves Marching Statesmen, their brass bells and silver keys gleaming in the sun. Probst found a cozy seat near the south end of the stands, by the southern end zone, three rows from the top. To his right was a group of girls in tattered blue jeans, smoking cigarettes, and to his left was a rosy-cheeked couple in their forties, wearing orange. He felt anonymous and secure.

"Are you for Webster?" asked the woman on his left. Mrs. Orange.

"Yes." Probst smiled courteously.

"So are we."

He nodded in a manner indicating that he hadn't come to the game to talk with strangers, and let the bag with the heavy cream

in it slide between his hands and knees to the tier of concrete on which the bench rested. Up at the doors to the swimming pool locker rooms, where the teams were suiting up, students swarmed purposefully, as if some quality item were being handed out for free inside. Down by the field the Statesmen cheerleaders, a dozen girls in ivory-colored skirts and sweaters, began a cheer:

The Pi - o - neers Think they're real - ly tall, *But the bigger they are*, *The barder they fall*.

Probst scanned the faces around him in search of Luisa, but he was certain she wasn't here. He wondered if she might be at the Washington U. game, sitting with Duane Thompson. Barbara made much of the fact that Duane went to Washington U.; she liked to inflate the worth of whichever boy Luisa happened at the moment to hold stock in. Probst wasn't fooled. It was clear to him that a girl who jumped out bathroom windows had a vision of her future radically different from the one he himself had entertained. As far as he was concerned, Thompson could be a total dropout.

A great roar greeted the Pioneers as they trundled, like Marines, down the stairs to the playing field. A greater roar erupted when the Statesmen followed. Mr. and Mrs. Orange leaped to their feet, fists clenched and arms outstretched. "All right!" they yelled. Everybody stood up. Probst stood up.

Kirkwood won the toss, and a Pioneer receiver, a loping black youth, took the kickoff at the 10-yard line. At the 35 one of the Statesmen tripped him from behind, sending him in a

cartwheeling somersault to land, gruesomely, on his head. The ball squirted out of bounds.

"All right! All right! All right!" the Oranges yelled. There was a queasy silence in the Kirkwood stands. The trainer and coaches ran to look after the fallen runner, who writhed on his back.

"ALL RIGHT!" the Oranges bellowed. Probst gave them a critical glance. Coarse blond hair clung to their heads like wigs, and the orange Webster jerseys they were wearing heightened the impression of fakeness. The woman's cheeks were scarlet, her lips blue and retracted. The husband's head swiveled back and forth as the Statesmen cheerleaders started up a new chant—

That's all right. That's OK. We're going to beat you Anyway

—an incongruous message, since the Pioneers had just lost one of their better players. The trainer and coaches were carrying him towards the sidelines on a stretcher.

After two losses and an incomplete pass, Kirkwood had to punt. The Statesmen took over at their own 20-yard line, and Probst was happy to immerse himself in the game, to count downs in his head and watch the line of scrimmage ebb and flow. He was happy not to be at home. At home, the night before, Barbara had given him the distinct impression that she expected him to take some kind of action regarding Luisa. *He was an active businessman, wasn't be?* Be firm with her! Be hurt! Go get her! Or at least comfort your wife… But action was impossible. Luisa made him angry like a woman, not a daughter. As he lay awake in bed a single thought monopolized his mind: I have the

strength not to be selfish and deceitful while she, apparently, does not. And it was clear that Barbara, lying next to him, didn't want to hear about this. "She's only known Duane a month," she said. "I'm sure he's OK, though. I can't blame this on him. You know Luisa. She wouldn't be there if she didn't want to be … Oh Martin, this just tears me apart."

Probst did not know Luisa. He began to stroke Barbara's hair.

The Oranges sprang to their feet. "ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT!"

A referee thrust his arms in the air and the Marching Statesmen struck up the school song. A touchdown. How wonderful.

Deducing that he loved her, or overlooking his gall in desiring her if he didn't, Barbara had reached down with her cold, strong fingers and adjusted the angle of his penis, leading him in. "I'll call Lu tomorrow," he lied in a whisper. She turned her head away from him. Her mouth was opening. He increased his pressure, and then, glimpsing her teeth, he remembered a late afternoon in September. A Friday. A van with a bad muffler driving down Sherwood Drive. Dozer, his three-year-old retriever, chasing it. Dozer who never chased things. A thud and a yelp. The driver didn't stop, probably didn't even know he'd hit something. Probst knelt in the street. Dozer was dead, and his teeth, the incisors and canines and molars, were grinning in bitter laughter, and his body was hot and heavy, his splintered ribs sharp, as Probst picked him up. The embrace was terrible. He hurried to get

home, pushing, pushing, pushing, but it was too late: Dozer had become evil, staring in a crazy angle at the ground, which rose up mechanically to meet his feet. He dropped him on the grass. Eventually Barbara lost her patience, shed him roughly, and rolled away.

The Statesmen were lined up for another kickoff. Mrs. Orange clutched her husband's arm and looked around pugnaciously at Probst and the people behind him, as if they didn't deserve to live in Webster if they wouldn't even stand up for a kickoff.

Kirkwood took the touchback and started at the 20-yard line. On the very first play the stands exploded in confetti and streamers. A Statesman safety had picked off a pass and run it all the way back for a touchdown. Mrs. Orange seemed ripped by convulsions. "ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT!"

Probst decided he'd had enough. He rose determinedly. "ALL RIGHT!" He pushed past knees and elbows, hurrying, "ALL RIGHT!" The cry was fainter now. He reached the end of the row and descended to the black cinder track. There he realized, from the lightness of his hands, that he'd left the heavy cream under the bench.

"Hey Martin!"

It was Norm Hoelzer, sitting in the second row. Hoelzer was a local small-timer. Kitchens and bathrooms. "Well hi," Probst said.

"Some game, isn't it?"

"Oh. It's …" He didn't know what it was.

"You here with Barbara?"

How dare Hoelzer know his wife's first name?

He shook his head: no, he wasn't here with Barbara. Hoelzer's wife's name was Bonnie. Grew roses. Probst forced his way through a group of boys in letter jackets.

"Hey Martin!" A hand waved from deep in the stands. Joe Farrell. Here with what looked to be his daughter and son-in-law. "Well hi," Probst said. (At this distance Farrell of course couldn't hear him.) He kept walking. It was a tight squeeze, with the cheerleaders taking up half the track, and fans, mostly kids, lining the cable between the cheerleaders and the Statesman benches. "Hey Martin!" another voice called from the stands. Probst—well hi! – ignored it. *"Martin!"* The noise, after all, was terrific. Cheers came in sheets, like the avalanching calls of katydids. Most of the cheerleaders were idle at the moment, but a few of them did flying dutchmen out of sheer high spirits. How splendidly these girls were built. Probst followed a man in a wool coat slowly, content for once to proceed at the going speed.

"Martin!" A large hand gripped his arm. The man in the wool coat had turned around, and when Probst saw his face his heart sank. It was Jack DuChamp, his old friend from high school. Probst hadn't seen him in a good ten years.

"I *wondered* who was stepping on my heels!" Jack grabbed Probst's other arm and beamed at him.

"Well!" Probst said. He didn't know what else to say.

"I should have guessed you wouldn't miss this game," Jack said.

"I'd missed it for a couple of years in a row, actually."

Jack nodded, not hearing him. "I was going to get a Coke, but the lines were too long. Do you want to come sit with me?"

The invitation closed on Probst like a bear trap on his leg. Sitting in the stands with Jack DuChamp—reminiscing about their South Side youth, comparing their utterly divergent careers—was the last thing in the world he felt like doing.

"Well!" he said again.

"Or are you here with people?"

"No, yes, I—" The look of entreaty on Jack's face was more than Probst could stand. He'd spent too large a part of his life with Jack to be able to lie easily. "No," he said, "I came alone. Where are you sitting?"

Jack pointed towards the north end of the field and laughed. "In the three-dollar seats!"

Probst heard himself chuckle.

"Jesus, Martin, it's been a long time, hasn't it?" Jack held his arm. They were climbing into the stands.

"It must be ten years." Instantly Probst regretted having named the actual figure.

"We keep seeing your name in the paper, though …"

From the field Probst heard the wordless exertions of another play, the accidental grunts, rising cheers and tearing fabric. Jack DuChamp had moved his family to Webster Groves about the

same time Probst and Barbara had moved there. Unfortunately, the house Jack bought was soon condemned to make room for Interstate 44, and the only houses for sale in Webster at the time were well beyond his price range. So he moved his family to Crestwood, a new town, a new school district, and Probst, whose company held the I-44 demolition contracts and did the actual razing of the houses, felt responsible. As a matter of fact, he felt guilty.

"Aren'tcha?" Jack had stopped halfway up the long stairs and was surveying the crowd to their right.

"Beg pardon?" Probst said.

"I said you're just the same."

"No."

"You always did have your head in the clouds."

"What?"

"Excuse us," Jack said. A young family in tartan stood up to let them by. Probst tried to keep his eyes on his feet, but the dark space beneath the bench reminded him uncomfortably of the heavy cream. He wondered how few minutes he could get away with staying before he left again. Would five suffice? Five minutes to atone for a decade of silence?

Jack stopped. "Martin, this is Billy Wonder, friend of mine. Bill-y, this is Martin Probst, a very old friend of mine. He, uh—"

"Sure!" A large-boned man with buck teeth sprang to his feet. "Sure. Sure! This is quite an honor!" He took Probst's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Didn't catch your name," Probst said.

"Sure! Windell, Bill Windell. Glad to know you."

Probst stared at the buck teeth.

"Can we make some room here?" Jack said. Windell pulled Probst into a narrow space on the bench. Jack sat down fussily on his right with an air of mission accomplished. Windell slapped a pocket flask in a leather case against Probst's chest. "Never touch the stuff! A ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" He drove his elbow into Probst's left biceps.

"Bill's my boss," Jack explained.

"You'd never guess it to see us at work," Windell said.

"Don't you believe it." Jack reached across Probst's lap and unscrewed the cap of the pocket flask. "He's done one-forty all by himself."

"Hundred thirty maybe." Windell gave Probst a big, practiced wink, and Probst, not bothering to wonder what in hell the two of them were talking about, was filled with the certainty that Windell was a scoutmaster. His eyes, which were blue, had a milkiness that often showed up in men charged with instilling moral values. Furthermore, he had a crewcut. "So: Martin Probst." Windell sucked his teeth and nodded philosophically.

Probst had no place to put his elbows. He tilted the flask to his lips, intending to take a polite sip. He gagged. It was apricot brandy. Elbows almost knocking on his lap, he passed the flask to Jack, who shook his head. "Thanks. Too early in the day for me."

He tried to return it to Windell, but Windell said, “No, be my guest.”

Probst took a long swig, wiped his mouth, and looked at Jack for the cap to the flask. Jack didn’t seem to have it. Probst noticed it below him at his feet and reached down, but his legs straightened as he bent, pushing it over the edge of their tier and underneath the bleacher in front of them. He dropped into a squat, groping down.

“Don’t. Here—no,” Jack said. “I’ll get it.”

“No, no. Here.” Probst stretched until his fingers reached the ground, then unexpectedly he tipped backwards, landing on his butt in the shade of the fans, who were leaping to their feet in response to something on the field. The cold penetrated his pants, but he was more comfortable down here. His hand traveled far, searching for the cap. It came upon a sneaker and backed away over the coarse, damp concrete, and then ran into something soft – an apple core. Screams rode the chafed air. The space was too narrow for him to see what he was doing. He groped further, sensing Windell’s scoutmasterly gaze. Probst and Jack had been Scouts together, often tentmates, all the way up through Eagledom.

Well hi! The cap. He’d found the cap. His hand closed around it. He struggled up. “I think I’d better be going,” he said.

A forlorn sound creaked out of Jack. “Nih.”

“At least stay for the half,” Windell said.

Probst remembered the peculiar power Jack could wield, the

whirlpool of guilt into which he could drag his more successful friend. “How much time is left?” he asked.

“Four minutes,” Jack said reproachfully.

A messy running play expired in front of them. The score was still 13–0. Probst turned to Windell. “So, uh, where do you live, Bill?” He already knew roughly what Windell did, he being Jack’s boss and Jack being in middle management at Sears.

“We’ve been living in West County for six years.” Windell gave a laugh.

What was so funny about that?

“I see. Whereabouts?”

“Ballwin, Cedar Hill Drive. Not far from whatchamacallit. West—”

“Haven. Westhaven.”

“That’s the place. We’re about a mile east of there. I’m always driving by it. See your name a lot.”

“Yeah.” Probst sighed.

“It looks like some project.”

“The foundations alone are twenty-five acres.”

“Huh.” Windell stared at the field, where penalty flags had been dropped. Jack was sitting on his hands, apparently content to let Probst’s presence speak for itself. His nose was red. Small brushes of straight gray hair sheltered his ears.

“But it must be a long commute for you,” Probst said.

“Hm? Oh. Not too bad. It’s something you get used to.”

“Well, if we keep on building like this in West County,

you'll be sitting pretty. Who knows, maybe Sears will move its headquarters out there."

"Sears?"

"I," Probst said. "I thought you worked for Sears."

"No. I've been with Penney since I was, God, twenty. But Jack worked for Sears. He came over to us five years ago."

Jack sniffed and swallowed. He didn't seem to be listening, but after a few seconds, without looking at them, he said, "That's right," in a loud, deep voice.

"We've—" Probst felt that he was going to pop like a balloon if he had to sit here a minute longer. "We've been pretty out of touch since Jack left Webster—"

"Oh! Way to go!" Windell shouted, interrupting him.

"What a game," Jack agreed.

This was the moment Probst had been waiting for. He stood up quickly. "That's it for me," he said. "Bill, it's nice meeting you. If you're ever by Westhaven, one of my men will be glad to show you around. And Jack, you and I—" Escape was so close he could taste it. He looked down at Jack, who had raised his chin but wouldn't meet his eyes. "We'll have to get together sometime." He clapped Jack lightly on the shoulder and started moving away.

"Martin!" Jack said suddenly. "It looks like I've got an extra ticket to the Big Red game on Sunday. Next week. Bill here's got a camp-out with his Scouts, and—"

Probst turned back, feeling his face light up. "You're a scoutmaster?"

"It's the very least an old sinner can do for the world," said Bill, who was not old, and seemed sinless.

"—the Redskins," Jack was saying. "We could catch up a little, get a bite to eat before—"

"Sure, yes, fine," Probst said, still staring at Bill.

Rolf Ripley liked a girl with pluck, and Devi, his latest acquisition, had it. Last night in her suite at the airport Marriott, she'd told him his nose was redder than a souse's.

"A souse's, luv? Do let's let Rolf give us a good spank."

"And you'll start to cough," she said.

"That won't happen, luv. I don't get coughs."

"No?"

"No," he said. "I've learned from decades of experimentation to sleep with my head *flat* on the *mattress*. That way, the what the devil d'you call it—the *mucus*—stays where it belongs. No cough."

Devi laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"A cold doesn't spread through mucus. It spreads through blood."

"And how do you know that?"

"I heard it on the radio."

"Then why, pray tell, do I not get coughs?"

"Your body must be as stupid as your brain!"

She was a gem, a gem. And when he wanted to change key, he simply pushed a pedal: "Take it back."

"I take it back."

He'd never had another quite like her. All the dishes in his past, the Tricias and Maudes and Amandas, the sex piglets and Dallas snobs and randy undergrads, the mute tarts, corporate wives and gold-digging salesclerks, banquet favors, cynical secretaries and door-to-door sluts: all paled before Devi. Even the few he'd had in London and New York were not the real item, but imports, farm-girls at heart, sinning venally, not mortally. Men from the capitals never shared their finest stock, and though Rolf was in all ways their superior, Fate had consigned him to Saint Louis. Oh, the Saint Louis girls! God knew, Rolf had tried his Pygmalion best to teach them; still they remained porcine and drawling. They couldn't hold a candle to Devi. She was his aesthetic fulfillment, teachable and teaching, as sharp as the glitter city Bombay and, in her docility, older than the Old World, an object to rut on and an angel to frame. In fact, he damn near loved her, and if she weren't an Indian he might have gone further and made himself her fool. But he was at pains to be careful. For not only was Devi in cahoots with S. Jammu and Princess Asha Hammaker but she was dreadfully indiscreet. Among the tidbits she had dropped were the facts that Jammu was angling for the affections of the mayor; that Asha, whose fortune was made now, was pursuing Buzz Wismer as well; and that both these South Asian lovelies were intent upon staging a real-estate panic in the ghetto. Interesting.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.