with a high semi-professional finish, but there was no denying that he looked all wrong in the part of Alan Squiers—squat and partly bald and all but unable to see without his glasses, which he'd refused to wear on stage. From the moment of his entrance he had caused the supporting actors to interrupt each other and forget where to stand, and now in the middle of his important first-act speech about his own futility—"*Yes, brains without purpose; noise without sound; shape without substance*—" one of his gesturing hands upset a glass of water that flooded the table. He tried to cover it with a giggle and a series of improvised lines—"*You see? That's how useless I am. Here, let me help you wipe it up*—" but the rest of the speech was ruined. The virus of calamity, dormant and threatening all these weeks, had erupted now and spread from the helplessly vomiting man until it infected everyone in the cast but April Wheeler.

"*Wouldn't you like to be loved by me?*" she was saying.

"*Yes, Gabrielle*," said the director, gleaming with sweat. "*I should like to be loved by you.*"

"*You think I'm attractive?*"

Under the table the director's leg began to jiggle up and down on the spring of its flexed foot. "*There are better words than that for what you are.*"

"*Then why don't we at least make a start at it?*"

She was working alone, and visibly weakening with every line. Before the end of the first act the audience could tell as well as the Players that she'd lost her grip, and soon they were all embarrassed for her. She had begun to alternate between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility; she was carrying her shoulders high and square, and despite her heavy make-up you could see the warmth of humiliation rising in her face and neck.

Then came the bouncing entrance of Shep Campbell,

the burly young red-haired engineer who played the gangster, Duke Mantee. The whole company had worried about Shep from the beginning, but he and his wife Milly, who had helped with the props and the publicity, were such enthusiastic and friendly people that nobody'd had the heart to suggest replacing him. The result of this indulgence now, and of Campbell's own nervous guilt about it, was that he forgot one of his key lines, said others in a voice so quick and faint that it couldn't be heard beyond the sixth row, and handled himself less like an outlaw than an obliging grocery clerk, bobbing head, rolled-up sleeves and all.

At intermission the audience straggled out to smoke and wander in uncomfortable groups around the high-school corridor, examining the high-school bulletin board and wiping damp palms down their slim-cut trousers and their graceful cotton skirts. None of them wanted to go back and go through with the second and final act, but they all did.

And so did the Players, whose one thought now, as plain as the sweat on their faces, was to put the whole sorry business behind them as fast as possible. It seemed to go on for hours, a cruel and protracted endurance test in which April Wheeler's performance was as bad as the others, if not worse. At the climax, where the stage directions call for the poignance of the death scene to be *punctuated with shots from outside and bursts from* DUKE's *Tommy gun*, Shep Campbell timed his bursts so sloppily, and the answering offstage gunfire was so much too loud, that all the lovers' words were lost in a deafening smoky shambles. When the curtain fell at last it was an act of mercy.

The applause, not loud, was conscientiously long enough to permit two curtain calls, one that caught all the Players in motion as they walked to the wings, turned back and col-

lided with one another, and another that revealed the three principals in a brief tableau of human desolation: the director blinking myopically, Shep Campbell looking appropriately fierce for the first time all evening, April Wheeler paralyzed in a formal smile.

Then the house lights came up, and nobody in the auditorium knew how to look or what to say. The uncertain voice of Mrs. Helen Givings, the real-estate broker, could be heard repeating "*Very* nice," over and over again, but most of the people were silent and stiff, fingering packs of cigarettes as they rose and turned to the aisles. An efficient high-school boy, hired for the evening to help with the lights, vaulted up onto the stage with a squeak of his sneakers and began calling instructions to an unseen partner high in the flies. He stood posing self-consciously in the footlights, managing to keep most of his bright pimples in shadow while proudly turning his body to show that the tools of the electrician's trade—knife, pliers, coils of wire—were slung in a professional-looking holster of oiled leather and worn low on one tense buttock of his dungarees. Then the bank of lights clicked off, the boy made a pale exit and the curtain became a dull wall of green velvet, faded and streaked with dust. There was nothing to watch now but the massed faces of the audience as they pressed up the aisles and out the main doors. Anxious, round-eyed, two by two, they looked and moved as if a calm and orderly escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives; as if, in fact, they wouldn't be able to begin to live at all until they were out beyond the rumbling pink billows of exhaust and the crunching gravel of this parking lot, out where the black sky went up and up forever and there were hundreds of thousands of stars.

TWO

FRANKLIN H. WHEELER was among the few who bucked the current. He did so with apologetic slowness and with what he hoped was dignity, making his way in sidling steps down the aisle toward the stage door, saying "Excuse me . . . Excuse me," nodding and smiling to several faces he knew, carrying one hand in his pocket to conceal and dry the knuckles he had sucked and bitten throughout the play.

He was neat and solid, a few days less than thirty years old, with closely cut black hair and the kind of unemphatic good looks that an advertising photographer might use to portray the discerning consumer of well-made but inexpensive merchandise (Why Pay More?). But for all its lack of structural distinction, his face did have an unusual mobility: it was able to suggest wholly different personalities with each flickering change of expression. Smiling, he was a man who knew perfectly well that the failure of an amateur play was nothing much to worry about, a kindly, witty man who would have exactly the right words of comfort for his wife

backstage; but in the intervals between his smiles, when he shouldered ahead through the crowd and you could see the faint chronic fever of bewilderment in his eyes, it seemed more that he himself was in need of comforting.

The trouble was that all afternoon in the city, stultified at what he liked to call "the dullest job you can possibly imagine," he had drawn strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight: himself rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand ("If only I weren't so *nervous*, Frank!"); himself sitting spellbound in pride and then rising to join a thunderous ovation as the curtain fell; himself glowing and disheveled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss ("Was it really good, darling? Was it really good?"); and then the two of them, stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell, holding hands under the table while they talked it all out. Nowhere in these plans had he foreseen the weight and shock of reality; nothing had warned him that he might be overwhelmed by the swaying, shining vision of a girl he hadn't seen in years, a girl whose every glance and gesture could make his throat fill up with longing ("*Wouldn't you like to be loved by me?*"), and that then before his very eyes she would dissolve and change into the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny but whom he knew as well and as painfully as he knew himself, a gaunt constricted woman whose red eyes flashed reproach, whose false smile in the curtain call was as homely as his own sore feet, his own damp climbing underwear and his own sour smell.

At the door he paused to withdraw and examine the pink-blotched hand from his pocket, half expecting to find it torn to a pulp of blood and gristle. Then, pulling his coat straight, he went through the door and up the steps into a high dusty chamber filled with the raw glare and deep shadows cast by naked light bulbs, where the Laurel Players, ablaze with cosmetics, stood talking to their sallow visitors in nervous, widely spaced groups of two and three around the floor. She wasn't there.

"No, I mean seriously," somebody was saying. "Could you hear me, or not?" And somebody else said, "Well, hell, it was a lot of fun anyway." The director, in a scanty cluster of his New York friends, was pulling hungrily on a cigarette and shaking his head. Shep Campbell, pebbled with sweat, still holding his Tommy gun but clearly himself again, was standing near the curtain rope with his free arm around his small, rumpled wife, and they were both demonstrating their decision to laugh the whole thing off.

"Frank?" Milly Campbell had waved and risen on tiptoe to shout his name through cupped hands, as if pretending that the crowd were thicker and noisier than it really was. "Frank! We'll see you and April later, okay? For a drink?"

"Fine!" he called back. "Couple of minutes!" And he winked and nodded as Shep raised his machine gun in a comic salute.

Around the corner he found one of the lesser gangsters talking with a plump girl who had caused a thirty-second rupture in the first act by missing her entrance cue, who had evidently been crying but now was hilariously pounding her temple and saying "God! I could've *killed* myself!" while the gangster, tremulously wiping grease paint from his mouth, said "No, but I mean it was a lot of fun anyway,

you know what I mean? That's the main thing, in a thing like this."

"Excuse me," Frank Wheeler said, squeezing past them to the door of the dressing room that his wife shared with several other women. He knocked and waited, and when he thought he heard her say "Come in," he opened it tentatively and peeked inside.

She was alone, sitting very straight at a mirror and removing her make-up. Her eyes were still red and blinking, but she gave him a small replica of her curtain-call smile before turning back to the mirror. "Hi," she said. "You ready to leave?"

He closed the door and started toward her with the corners of his mouth stretched tight in a look that he hoped would be full of love and humor and compassion; what he planned to do was bend down and kiss her and say "Listen: you were wonderful." But an almost imperceptible recoil of her shoulders told him that she didn't want to be touched, which left him uncertain what to do with his hands, and that was when it occurred to him that "You were wonderful" might be exactly the wrong thing to say—condescending, or at the very least naive and sentimental, and much too serious.

"Well," he said instead. "I guess it wasn't exactly a triumph or anything, was it?" And he stuck a cigarette jauntily in his lips and lit it with a flourish of his clicking Zippo.

"I guess not," she said. "I'll be ready in a minute."

"No, that's okay, take your time."

He pocketed both hands and curled the tired toes inside his shoes, looking down at them. Would "You were wonderful" have been a better thing to say, after all? Almost anything, it now seemed, would have been a better thing to

say than what he'd said. But he would have to think of better things to say later; right now it was all he could do to stand here and think about the double bourbon he would have when they stopped on the way home with the Campbells. He looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look, the face he had given himself in mirrors since boyhood and which no photograph had ever quite achieved, until with a start he found that she was watching him. Her own eyes were there in the mirror, trained on his for an uncomfortable moment before she lowered them to stare at the middle button of his coat.

"Listen," she said. "Will you do me a favor? The thing is—" It seemed that all the slender strength of her back was needed to keep her voice from wavering. "The thing is, Milly and Shep wanted us to go out with them afterwards. Will you say we can't? Say it's because of the baby sitter, or something?"

He moved well away and stood stiff-legged and hump-shouldered, hands in his pockets, like a stage lawyer considering a fine point of ethics. "Well," he said, "the thing is, I already said we could. I mean I just saw them out there and I said we would."

"Oh. Then would you mind going out again and saying you were mistaken? That should be simple enough."

"Look," he said. "Don't start getting this way. The point is I thought it might be fun, is all. Besides, it's going to look kind of rude, isn't it? I mean isn't it?"

"You mean you won't." She closed her eyes. "All right, I will, then. Thanks a lot." Her face in the mirror, nude and shining with cold cream, looked forty years old and as haggard as if it were set to endure a physical pain.

"Wait a second," he told her. "Take it easy, will you

please? I didn't say that. I just said they're going to think it's damn rude, that's all. And they are. I can't help that."

"All right. You go along with them, if you want to, and give me the car keys."

"Oh, Jesus, don't start this business about the car keys. Why do you always have to—"

"Look, Frank." Her eyes were still shut. "I'm not going out with those people. I don't happen to feel very well, and I—"

"Okay." He was backing away, holding out both stiff trembling hands like a man intently describing the length of a short fish. "Okay. Okay. I'm sorry. I'll tell them. I'll be right back. I'm sorry."

The floor rode under his feet like the deck of a moving ship as he made his way back to the wings, where a man was taking pictures with a miniature flash camera ("Hold it now—that's fine. That's fine") and the actor who played Gabrielle's father was telling the plump girl, who looked ready to cry again, that the only thing to do was write the whole thing off to experience.

"You folks about ready?" Shep Campbell demanded.

"Well," Frank said, "actually, I'm afraid we'll have to cut out. April promised this baby sitter we'd be home early, you see, and we really—"

Both their faces sagged in hurt and disappointment. Milly drew a section of her lower lip between her teeth and slowly released it. "Gee," she said. "I guess April feels awful about this whole thing, doesn't she? Poor kid."

"No, no, she's okay," he told them. "Really, it's not that. She's okay. It's just this business of the baby sitter, you see." It was the first lie of its kind in the two years of their friendship, and it caused them all three to look at the floor as they labored through a halting ritual of smiles and goodnights; but it couldn't be helped.

She was waiting for him in the dressing room, ready with a pleasant social face for any of the Laurel Players they might happen to meet on the way out, but they managed to avoid them all. She led him through a side door that opened onto fifty yards of empty, echoing high-school corridor and they walked without touching each other and without speaking, moving in and out of the oblongs of moonlight that lay on the marble floor.

The smell of school in the darkness, pencils and apples and library paste, brought a sweet nostalgic pain to his eyes and he was fourteen again, and it was the year he'd lived in Chester, Pennsylvania—no, in Englewood, New Jersey—and spent all his free time in a plan for riding the rails to the West Coast. He had traced several alternate routes on a railroad map, he had rehearsed many times the way he would handle himself (politely, but with fist fights if necessary) in the hobo jungles along the way, and he'd chosen all the items of his wardrobe from the window of an Army and Navy store: Levi jacket and pants, an army-type khaki shirt with shoulder tabs, high-cut work shoes with steel caps at heel and toe. An old felt hat of his father's, which could be made to fit with a wad of newspaper folded into its sweatband, would lend the right note of honest poverty to the outfit, and he could take whatever else he needed in his Boy Scout knapsack, artfully reinforced with adhesive tape to conceal the Boy Scout emblem. The best thing about the plan was its absolute secrecy, until the day in the school corridor when he impulsively asked a fat boy named Krebs, who was the closest thing to a best friend he had that year, to go along with him. Krebs was dumfounded—"On a *freight* train, you mean?"—and soon he was laughing aloud. "Jeez, you kill me, Wheeler. How far do you think *you'd* get on a freight train? Where do you get these weird ideas, any-