TWO

I MET GIOVANNI DURING my second year in Paris, when I had no money. On the morning of the evening that we met I had been turned out of my room. I did not owe an awful lot of money, only around six thousand francs, but Parisian hotel-keepers have a way of smelling poverty and then they do what anybody does who is aware of a bad smell; they throw whatever stinks outside.

My father had money in his account which belonged to me but he was very reluctant to send it because he wanted me to come home—to come home, as he said, and settle down, and whenever he said that I thought of the sediment at the bottom of a stagnant pond. I did not, then, know many people in Paris and Hella was in Spain. Most of the people I knew in Paris were, as Parisians sometimes put it, of *le milieu* and, while this milieu was certainly anxious enough to claim me, I was intent on proving, to them and to myself, that I was not of their company. I did this by being in their company a great deal and manifesting toward all of them a tolerance which placed me, I believed, above suspicion. I had written to friends for money, of course, but the Atlantic Ocean is deep and wide and money doesn't hurry from the other side.

So I went through my address book, sitting over a tepid coffee in a boulevard cafe, and decided to call up an old acquaintance who was always asking me to call, an aging, Belgian-born, American businessman named Jacques. He had a big, comfortable apartment and lots of things to drink and lots of money. He was, as I knew he would be, surprised to hear from me and before the surprise and the charm wore off, giving him time to become wary, he had invited me for supper. He may have been cursing as he hung up, and reaching for his wallet, but it was too late. Jacques is not too bad. Perhaps he is a fool and a coward but almost everybody is one or the other and most people are both. In some ways I liked him. He was silly but he was so lonely; anyway, I understand now that the contempt I felt for him

involved my self-contempt. He could be unbelievably generous, he could be unspeakably stingy. Though he wanted to trust everybody, he was incapable of trusting a living soul; to make up for this, he threw his money away on people; inevitably, then, he was abused. Then he buttoned his wallet, locked his door, and retired into that strong self-pity which was, perhaps, the only thing he had which really belonged to him. I thought for a long while that he, with his big apartment, his well-meant promises, his whiskey, his marijuana, his orgies, had helped to kill Giovanni. As, indeed, perhaps he had. But Jacques' hands are certainly no bloodier than mine.

I saw Jacques, as a matter of fact, just after Giovanni was sentenced. He was sitting bundled up in his greatcoat on the terrace of a cafe, drinking a *vin chaud*. He was alone on the terrace. He called me as I passed.

He did not look well, his face was mottled, his eyes, behind his glasses, were like the eyes of a dying man who looks everywhere for healing.

"You've heard," he whispered, as I joined him, "about Giovanni?"

I nodded yes. I remember the winter sun was shining and I felt as cold and distant as the sun.

"It's terrible, terrible, terrible," Jacques moaned. "Terrible."

"Yes," I said. I could not say anything more.

"I wonder why he did it," Jacques pursued, "why he didn't ask his friends to help him." He looked at me. We both knew that the last time Giovanni had asked Jacques for money, Jacques had refused. I said nothing. "They say he had started taking opium," Jacques said, "that he needed the money for opium. Did you hear that?"

I had heard it. It was a newspaper speculation which, however, I had reasons of my own for believing, remembering the extent of Giovanni's desperation, knowing how far this terror, which was so vast that it had simply become a void, had driven him. "Me, I want to escape," he had told me, "*Je veux m'evader*—this dirty world, this dirty body. I never wish to make love again with anything more than the body."

Jacques waited for me to answer. I stared out into the street. I was beginning to think of Giovanni dying—where Giovanni had been there would be nothing, nothing forever.

"I hope it's not my fault," Jacques said at last. "I didn't give him the money. If I'd known—I would have given him everything I had."

But we both knew this was not true.

"You two together," Jacques suggested, "you weren't happy together?"

“No,” I said. I stood up. “It might have been better,” I said, “if he’d stayed down there in that village of his in Italy and planted his olive trees and had a lot of children and beaten his wife. He used to love to sing,” I remembered suddenly, “maybe he could have stayed down there and sung his life away and died in bed.”

Then Jacques said something that surprised me. People are full of surprises, even for themselves, if they have been stirred enough. “Nobody can stay in the garden of Eden,” Jacques said. And then: “I wonder why.”

I said nothing. I said goodbye and left him. Hella had long since returned from Spain and we were already arranging to rent this house and I had a date to meet her.

I have thought about Jacques’ question since. The question is banal but one of the real troubles with living is that living is so banal. Everyone, after all, goes the same dark road—and the road has a trick of being most dark, most treacherous, when it seems most bright—and it’s true that nobody stays in the garden of Eden. Jacques’ garden was not the same as Giovanni’s, of course. Jacques’ garden was involved with football players and Giovanni’s was involved with maidens—but that seems to have made so little difference. Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don’t know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare.

Jacques had not wanted to have supper in his apartment because his cook had run away. His cooks were always running away. He was always getting young boys from the provinces, God knows how, to come up and be cooks; and they, of course, as soon as they were able to find their way around the capital, decided that cooking was the last thing they wanted to do. They usually ended up going back to the provinces, those, that is, who did not end up on the streets, or in jail, or in Indochina.

I met him at a rather nice restaurant on the rue de Grenelle and arranged to borrow ten thousand francs from him before we had finished our aperitifs. He was in a good mood and I, of course, was in a good mood too, and this

meant that we would end up drinking in Jacques' favorite bar, a noisy, crowded, ill-lit sort of tunnel, of dubious—or perhaps not dubious at all, of rather too emphatic—reputation. Every once in a while it was raided by the police, apparently with the connivance of Guillaume, the *patron*, who always managed, on the particular evening, to warn his favorite customers that if they were not armed with identification papers they might be better off elsewhere.

I remember that the bar, that night, was more than ordinarily crowded and noisy. All of the habitués were there and many strangers, some looking, some just staring. There were three or four very chic Parisian ladies sitting at a table with their gigolos or their lovers or perhaps simply their country cousins, God knows; the ladies seemed extremely animated, their males seemed rather stiff; the ladies seemed to be doing most of the drinking. There were the usual paunchy, bespectacled gentlemen with avid, sometimes despairing eyes, the usual, knife-blade lean, tight-trousered boys. One could never be sure, as concerns these latter, whether they were after money or blood or love. They moved about the bar incessantly, cadging cigarettes and drinks, with something behind their eyes at once terribly vulnerable and terribly hard. There were, of course, *les folles*, always dressed in the most improbable combinations, screaming like parrots the details of their latest love affairs—their love affairs always seemed to be hilarious. Occasionally one would swoop in, quite late in the evening, to convey the news that he—but they always called each other "she"—had just spent time with a celebrated movie star, or boxer. Then all of the others closed in on this newcomer and they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard. I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody, for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them*. Perhaps, indeed, that was why they screamed so loud. There was the boy who worked all day, it was said, in the post office, who came out at night wearing makeup and earrings and with his heavy blond hair piled high. Sometimes he actually wore a skirt and high heels. He usually stood alone unless Guillaume walked over to tease him. People said that he was very nice, but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings.

This bar was practically in my *quartier* and I had many times had breakfast in the nearby workingman's cafe to which all the nightbirds of the neighborhood retired when the bars closed. Sometimes I was with Hella; sometimes I was alone. And I had been in this bar, too, two or three times; once very drunk, I had been accused of causing a minor sensation by flirting with a soldier. My memory of that night was, happily, very dim, and I took the attitude that no matter how drunk I may have been, I could not possibly have done such a thing. But my face was known and I had the feeling that people were taking bets about me. Or, it was as though they were the elders of some strange and austere holy order and were watching me in order to discover, by means of signs I made but which only they could read, whether or not I had a true vocation.

Jacques was aware, I was aware, as we pushed our way to the bar—it was like moving into the field of a magnet or like approaching a small circle of heat—of the presence of a new barman. He stood, insolent and dark and leonine, his elbow leaning on the cash register, his fingers playing with his chin, looking out at the crowd. It was as though his station were a promontory and we were the sea.

Jacques was immediately attracted. I felt him, so to speak, preparing himself for conquest. I felt the necessity for tolerance.

"I'm sure," I said, "that you'll want to get to know the barman. So I'll vanish anytime you like."

There was, in this tolerance of mind, a fund, by no means meagre, of malicious knowledge—I had drawn on it when I called him up to borrow money. I knew that Jacques could only hope to conquer the boy before us if the boy was, in effect, for sale; and if he stood with such arrogance on an auction block he could certainly find bidders richer and more attractive than Jacques. I knew that Jacques knew this. I knew something else: that Jacques' vaunted affection for me was involved with desire, the desire, in fact, to be rid of me, to be able, soon, to despise me as he now despised that army of boys who had come, without love, to his bed. I held my own against this desire by pretending that Jacques and I were friends, by forcing Jacques, on pain of humiliation, to pretend this. I pretended not to see, although I exploited it, the lust not quite sleeping in his bright, bitter eyes and, by means of the rough, male candor with which I conveyed to him his case was hopeless, I compelled him, endlessly, to hope. And I knew, finally, that in bars such as these I was Jacques' protection. As long as I was there the

world could see and he could believe that he was out with me, his friend, he was not there out of desperation, he was not at the mercy of whatever adventurer chance, cruelty, or the laws of actual and emotional poverty might throw his way.

"You stay right here," said Jacques. "I'll look at him from time to time and talk to you and that way I'll save money—and stay happy, too."

"I wonder where Guillaume found him," I said.

For he was so exactly the kind of boy that Guillaume always dreamed of that it scarcely seemed possible that Guillaume could have found him.

"What will you have?" he now asked us. His tone conveyed that, though he spoke no English, he knew that we had been speaking about him and hoped we were through.

"*Une fine à l'eau*," I said; and "*un cognac sec*," said Jacques, both speaking too quickly, so that I blushed and realized by a faint merriment on Giovanni's face as he served us that he had seen it.

Jacques, wilfully misinterpreting Giovanni's nuance of a smile, made of it an opportunity. "You're new here?" he asked in English.

Giovanni almost certainly understood the question, but it suited him better to look blankly from Jacques to me and then back again at Jacques. Jacques translated his question.

Giovanni shrugged. "I have been here a month," he said.

I knew where the conversation was going and I kept my eyes down and sipped my drink.

"It must," Jacques suggested, with a sort of bludgeoning insistence on the light touch, "seem very strange to you."

"Strange?" asked Giovanni. "Why?"

And Jacques giggled. I was suddenly ashamed that I was with him. "All these men"—and I knew that voice, breathless, insinuating, high as no girl's had ever been, and hot, suggesting, somehow, the absolutely motionless, deadly heat which hangs over swamp ground in July—"all these men," he gasped, "and so few women. Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

"Ah," said Giovanni, and turned away to serve another customer, "no doubt the women are waiting at home."

"I'm sure one's waiting for you," insisted Jacques, to which Giovanni did not respond.

"Well. That didn't take long," said Jacques, half to me, half to the space which had just held Giovanni. "Aren't you glad you stayed? You've got me

all to yourself."

"Oh, you're handling it all wrong," I said. "He's mad for you. He just doesn't want to seem too anxious. Order him a drink. Find out where he likes to buy his clothes. Tell him about that cunning little Alfa Romeo you're just dying to give away to some deserving bartender."

"*Very* funny," said Jacques.

"Well," I said, "faint heart never won fair athlete, that's for sure."

"Anyway, I'm sure he sleeps with girls. They always do, you know."

"I've heard about boys who do that. Nasty little beasts."

We stood in silence for awhile.

"Why don't *you* invite him to have a drink with us?" Jacques suggested.

I looked at him.

"Why don't *I?* Well, you may find this hard to believe, but, actually, I'm sort of queer for girls myself. If that was his sister looking so good, I'd invite *her* to have a drink with us. I don't spend money on men."

I could see Jacques struggling not to say that I didn't have any objection to allowing men to spend money on *me;* I watched his brief struggle with a slight smile, for I knew he couldn't say it; then he said, with that cheery, brave smile of his:

"I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment, that"—he paused—"that *immaculate* manhood which is your pride and joy. I only suggested that *you* invite him because he will almost certainly refuse if *I* invite him."

"But man," I said, grinning, "think of the confusion. He'll think that *I'm* the one who's lusting for his body. How do we get out of that?"

"If there should be any confusion," said Jacques, with dignity, "I will be happy to clear it up."

We measured each other for a moment. Then I laughed. "Wait till he comes back this way. I hope he orders a magnum of the most expensive champagne in France."

I turned, leaning on the bar. I felt, somehow, elated. Jacques, beside me, was very quiet, suddenly very frail and old, and I felt a quick, sharp, rather frightened pity for him. Giovanni had been out on the floor, serving the people at tables, and he now returned with a rather grim smile on his face, carrying a loaded tray.

"Maybe," I said, "it would look better if our glasses were empty."

We finished our drinks. I set down my glass.

“Barman?” I called.

“The same?”

“Yes.” He started to turn away. “Barman,” I said, quickly, “we would like to offer you a drink, if we may.”

“*Eh, bien!*” said a voice behind us, “*c’est fort ća! Not* only have you finally—thank heaven!—corrupted this great American football player, you use him now to corrupt *my* barman. *Vraiment*, Jacques! *At your age!*”

It was Guillaume standing behind us, grinning like a movie star, and waving that long white handkerchief which he was never, in the bar at any rate, to be seen without. Jacques turned, hugely delighted to be accused of such rare seductiveness, and he and Guillaume fell into each other arms like old theatrical sisters.

“*Eh bien, ma chérie, comment vas-tu?* I have not seen you for a long time.”

“But I have been awfully busy,” said Jacques.

“I don’t doubt it! Aren’t you ashamed, *vieille folle?*”

“*Et toi?* You certainly don’t seem to have been wasting your time.”

And Jacques threw a delighted look in the direction of Giovanni, rather as though Giovanni were a valuable racehorse or a rare bit of china. Guillaume followed the look and his voice dropped.

“*Ah, ça, mon cher, c’est strictement du business, comprends-tu?*”

They moved a little away. This left me surrounded, abruptly, with an awful silence. At last I raised my eyes and looked at Giovanni, who was watching me.

“I think you offered me a drink,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “I offered you a drink.”

“I drink no alcohol while I work, but I will take a Coca-Cola.” He picked up my glass. “And for you—it is the same?”

“The same.” I realized that I was quite happy to be talking with him and this realization made me shy. And I felt menaced since Jacques was no longer at my side. Then I realized that I would have to pay, for this round anyway; it was impossible to tug Jacques’ sleeve for the money as though I were his ward. I coughed and put my ten thousand franc note on the bar.

“You are rich,” said Giovanni, and set my drink before me.

“But no. No. I simply have no change.”

He grinned. I could not tell whether he grinned because he thought I was lying or because he knew I was telling the truth. In silence he took the bill

and rang it up and carefully counted out my change on the bar before me. Then he filled his glass and went back to his original position at the cash register. I felt a tightening in my chest.

"*À la votre*," he said.

"*À la votre*." We drank.

"You are an American?" he asked at last.

"Yes," I said. "From New York."

"Ah! I am told that New York is very beautiful. Is it more beautiful than Paris?"

"Oh, no," I said, "*no* city is more beautiful than Paris—"

"It seems the very suggestion that one *could* be is enough to make you very angry," grinned Giovanni. "Forgive me. I was not trying to be heretical." Then, more soberly and as though to appease me, "You must like Paris very much."

"I like New York, too," I said, uncomfortably aware that my voice had a defensive ring, "but New York is very beautiful in a very different way."

He frowned. "In what way?"

"No one," I said, "who has never seen it can possibly imagine it. It's very high and new and electric—exciting." I paused. "It's hard to describe. It's very—twentieth century."

"You find that Paris is *not* of this century?" he asked with a smile.

His smile made me feel a little foolish. "Well," I said, "Paris is *old*, is many centuries. You feel, in Paris, all the time gone by. That isn't what you feel in New York—" He was smiling. I stopped.

"What do you feel in New York?" he asked.

"Perhaps you feel," I told him, "all the time to come. There's such power there, everything is in such movement. You can't help wondering—*I* can't help wondering—what it will all be like—many years from now."

"Many years from now? When we are dead and New York is old?"

"Yes," I said. "When everyone is tired, when the world—for Americans—is not so new."

"I don't see why the world is so new for Americans," said Giovanni. "After all, you are all merely emigrants. And you did not leave Europe so very long ago."

"The ocean is very wide," I said. "We have led different lives than you; things have happened to us there which have never happened here. Surely you can understand that this would make us a different people?"

“Ah! If it had only made you a different people!” he laughed. “But it seems to have turned you into another species. You are not, are you, on another planet? For I suppose that would explain everything.”

“I admit,” I said with some heat—for I do not like to be laughed at—“that we may sometimes give the impression that we think we are. But we are not on another planet, no. And neither, my friend, are you.”

He grinned again. “I will not,” he said, “argue that most unlucky fact.”

We were silent for a moment. Giovanni moved to serve several people at either end of the bar. Guillaume and Jacques were still talking. Guillaume seemed to be recounting one of his interminable anecdotes, anecdotes which invariably pivoted on the hazards of business or the hazards of love, and Jacques’ mouth was stretched in a rather painful grin. I knew that he was dying to get back to the bar.

Giovanni placed himself before me again and began wiping the bar with a damp cloth. “The Americans are funny. You have a funny sense of time—or perhaps you have no sense of time at all, I can’t tell. Time always sounds like a parade *chez vous*—a *triumphant* parade, like armies with banners entering a town. As though, with enough time, and that would not need to be so very much for Americans, *n’est-ce pas?*” and he smiled, giving me a mocking look, but I said nothing. “Well then,” he continued, “as though with enough time and all that fearful energy and virtue you people have, everything will be settled, solved, put in its place. And when I say everything,” he added, grimly, “I mean all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love, in which you Americans do not believe.”

“What makes you think we don’t? And what do you believe?”

“I don’t believe in this nonsense about time. Time is just common, it’s like water for a fish. Everybody’s in this water, nobody gets out of it, or if he does the same thing happens to him that happens to the fish, he dies. And you know what happens in this water, time? The big fish eat the little fish. That’s all. The big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn’t care.”

“Oh, please,” I said. “I don’t believe *that*. Time’s hot water and we’re not fish and you can choose to be eaten and also not to eat—not to eat,” I added quickly, turning a little red before his delighted and sardonic smile, “the little fish, of course.”

“To choose!” cried Giovanni, turning his face away from me and speaking, it appeared, to an invisible ally who had been eavesdropping on

this conversation all along. “To *choose*!” He turned to me again. “Ah, you are really an American. *J’adore votre enthousiasme!*”

“I adore yours,” I said, politely, “though it seems to be a blacker brand than mine.”

“Anyway,” he said mildly, “I don’t see what you can do with little fish except eat them. What else are they good for?”

“In my country,” I said, feeling a subtle war within me as I said it, “the little fish seem to have gotten together and are nibbling at the body of the whale.”

“That will not make them whales,” said Giovanni. “The only result of all that nibbling will be that there will no longer be any grandeur anywhere, not even at the bottom of the sea.”

“Is *that* what you have against us? That we’re not grand?”

He smiled—smiled like someone who, faced with the total inadequacy of the opposition, is prepared to drop the argument. “*Peut-être.*”

“You people are impossible,” I said. “You’re the ones who killed grandeur off, right here in this city, with paving stones. Talk about little fish—!” He was grinning. I stopped.

“Don’t stop,” he said, still grinning. “I am listening.”

I finished my drink. “You people dumped all this *merde* on us,” I said, sullenly, “and now you say we’re barbaric because we stink.”

My sullenness delighted him. “You’re charming,” he said. “Do you always speak like this?”

“No,” I said, and looked down. “Almost never.”

There was something in him of the coquette. “I am flattered then,” he said, with a sudden, disconcerting gravity, which contained, nevertheless, the very faintest hint of mockery.

“And you,” I said, finally, “have you been here long? Do you like Paris?”

He hesitated a moment and then grinned, suddenly looking rather boyish and shy. “It’s cold in the winter,” he said. “I don’t like that. And Parisians—I do not find them so very friendly, do you?” He did not wait for my answer. “They are not like the people I knew when I was younger. In Italy we are friendly, we dance and sing and make love—but these people,” and he looked out over the bar, and then at me, and finished his Coca-Cola, “these people, they are cold, I do not understand them.”

“But the French say,” I teased, “that the Italians are too fluid, too volatile, have no sense of measure—”

“Measure!” cried Giovanni, “ah, these people and their measure! They measure the gram, the centimeter, these people, and they keep piling all the little scraps they save, one on top of the other, year in and year out, all in the stocking or under the bed—and what do they get out of all this measure? A country which is falling to pieces, measure by measure, before their eyes. Measure. I do not like to offend your ears by saying all the things I am sure these people measure before they permit themselves any act whatever. May I offer you a drink now,” he asked suddenly, “before the old man comes back? Who is he? Is he your uncle?”

I did not know whether the word “uncle” was being used euphemistically or not. I felt a very urgent desire to make my position clear but I did not know how to go about it. I laughed. “No,” I said, “he is not my uncle. He is just somebody I know.”

Giovanni looked at me. And this look made me feel that no one in my life had ever looked at me directly before. “I hope he is not very dear to you,” he said, with a smile, “because I think he is silly. Not a bad man, you understand— just a little silly.”

“Perhaps,” I said, and at once felt like a traitor. “He’s not bad,” I added quickly, “he’s really a pretty nice guy.” That’s not true, either, I thought, he’s far from being a nice guy. “Anyway,” I said, “he’s certainly not very dear to me,” and felt again, at once, this strange tightening in my chest and wondered at the sound of my voice.

Carefully now, Giovanni poured my drink. “*Vive l’Amérique*,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, and lifted my glass, “*vive le vieux continent*.”

We were silent for a moment.

“Do you come in here often?” asked Giovanni suddenly.

“No,” I said, “not very often.”

“But you will come,” he teased, with a wonderful, mocking light on his face, “more often *now*?”

I stammered: “Why?”

“Ah!” cried Giovanni. “Don’t you know when you have made a friend?”

I knew I must look foolish and that my question was foolish too: “So soon?”

“Why no,” he said, reasonably, and looked at his watch, “we can wait another hour if you like. We can become friends then. Or we can wait until closing time. We can become friends *then*. Or we can wait until tomorrow, only that means that you must come in here tomorrow and perhaps you have

something else to do.” He put his watch away and leaned both elbows on the bar. “Tell me,” he said, “what is this thing about time? Why is it better to be late than early? People are always saying, we must wait, we must wait. What are they waiting for?”

“Well,” I said, feeling myself being led by Giovanni into deep and dangerous water, “I guess people wait in order to make sure of what they feel.”

“In order to make *sure*!” He turned again to that invisible ally and laughed again. I was beginning, perhaps, to find his phantom a little unnerving but the sound of his laughter in that airless tunnel was the most incredible sound. “It’s clear that you are a true philosopher.” He pointed a finger at my heart. “And when you have waited—has it made you sure?”

For this I could simply summon no answer. From the dark, crowded center of the bar someone called “*Garçon!*” and he moved away from me, smiling. “You can wait now. And tell me how sure you have become when I return.”

And he took his round metal tray and moved out into the crowd. I watched him as he moved. And then I watched their faces, watching him. And then I was afraid. I knew that they were watching, had been watching both of us. They knew that they had witnessed a beginning and now they would not cease to watch until they saw the end. It had taken some time but the tables had been turned; now I was in the zoo, and they were watching.

I stood at the bar for quite a while alone, for Jacques had escaped from Guillaume but was now involved, poor man, with two of the knife-blade boys. Giovanni came back for an instant and winked.

“Are you sure?”

“You win. You’re the philosopher.”

“Oh, you must wait some more. You do not yet know me well enough to say such a thing.”

And he filled his tray and disappeared again.

Now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death. And it walked, really, like someone who might be sleepwalking or like those figures in slow motion one sometimes sees on the screen. It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness. It seemed to make no sound; this was due to the roar of the bar, which was like the roaring of the sea, heard at night, from far

away. It glittered in the dim light; the thin, black hair was violent with oil, combed forward, hanging in bangs; the eyelids gleamed with mascara, the mouth raged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless with some kind of foundation cream; it stank of powder and a gardenia-like perfume. The shirt, open coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest and a silver crucifix; the shirt was covered with round, paper-thin wafers, red and green and orange and yellow and blue, which stormed in the light and made one feel that the mummy might, at any moment, disappear in flame. A red sash was around the waist, the clinging pants were a surprisingly sombre grey. He wore buckles on his shoes.

I was not sure that he was coming towards me, but I could not take my eyes away. He stopped before me, one hand on his hip, looked me up and down, and smiled. He had been eating garlic and his teeth were very bad. His hands, I noticed, with an unbelieving shock, were very large and strong.

"*Eh bien*," he said, "*il te plaît?*"

"*Comment?*" I said.

I really was not sure I had heard him right, though the bright, bright eyes, looking, it seemed, at something amusing within the recess of my skull, did not leave much room for doubt.

"You like him—the barman?"

I did not know what to do or say. It seemed impossible to hit him; it seemed impossible to get angry. It did not seem real, he did not seem real. Besides—no matter what I said, those eyes would mock me with it. I said, as drily as I could:

"How does that concern you?"

"But it concerns me not at all, darling. *Je m'en fou*."

"Then please get the hell away from me."

He did not move at once, but smiled at me again. "*Il est dangereux, tu sais*. And for a boy like you—he is *very* dangerous."

I looked at him. I almost asked him what he meant. "Go to hell," I said, and turned my back.

"Oh, no," he said—and I looked at him again. He was laughing, showing all his teeth—there were not many. "Oh, no," he said, "I go not to hell," and he clutched his crucifix with one large hand. "But you, my dear friend—I fear that you shall burn in a very hot fire." He laughed again. "Oh, such fire!" He touched his head. "Here." And he writhed, as though in torment. "Every*where*." And he touched his heart. "And here." And he looked at me

with malice and mockery and something else; he looked at me as though I were very far away. “Oh, my poor friend, so young, so strong, so handsome—will you not buy me a drink?”

“*Va te faire foutre*.”

His face crumpled in the sorrow of infants and of very old men—the sorrow, also, of certain, aging actresses who were renowned in their youth for their fragile, childlike beauty. The dark eyes narrowed in spite and fury and the scarlet mouth turned down like the mask of tragedy. “*T’aura du chagrin*,” he said. “You will be very unhappy. Remember that I told you so.”

And he straightened, as though he were a princess and moved, flaming, away through the crowd.

Then Jacques spoke, at my elbow. “Everyone in the bar,” he said, “is talking about how beautifully you and the barman have hit it off.” He gave me a radiant and vindictive smile. “I trust there has been no confusion?”

I looked down at him. I wanted to do something to his cheerful, hideous, worldly face which would make it impossible for him ever again to smile at anyone the way he was smiling at me. Then I wanted to get out of this bar, out into the air, perhaps to find Hella, my suddenly so sorely menaced girl.

“There’s been no confusion,” I snapped. “Don’t you go getting confused, either.”

“I think I can safely say,” said Jacques, “that I have scarcely ever been less confused than I am at this moment.” He had stopped smiling; he gave me a look which was dry, bitter, and impersonal. “And, at the risk of losing forever your so remarkably candid friendship, let me tell you something. Confusion is a luxury which only the very, very young can possibly afford and you are not that young anymore.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said. “Let’s have another drink.”

I felt that I had better get drunk. Now Giovanni went behind the bar again and winked at me. Jacques’ eyes never left my face. I turned rudely from him and faced the bar again. He followed me.

“The same,” said Jacques.

“Certainly,” said Giovanni, “that’s the way to do it.” He fixed our drinks. Jacques paid. I suppose I did not look too well, for Giovanni shouted at me playfully, “Eh? Are you drunk already?”

I looked up and smiled. “You know how Americans drink,” I said. “I haven’t even started yet.”

“David is far from drunk,” said Jacques. “He is only reflecting bitterly that he must get a new pair of suspenders.”

I could have killed Jacques. Yet it was only with difficulty that I kept myself from laughing. I made a face to signify to Giovanni that the old man was making a private joke, and he disappeared again. That time of evening had come when great batches of people were leaving and great batches were coming in. They would all encounter each other later anyway, in the last bar, all those, that is, unlucky enough to be searching still at such an advanced hour.

I could not look at Jacques—which he knew. He stood beside me, smiling at nothing, humming a tune. There was nothing I could say. I did not dare to mention Hella. I could not even pretend to myself that I was sorry she was in Spain. I was glad. I was utterly, hopelessly, horribly glad. I knew I could do nothing whatever to stop the ferocious excitement which had burst in me like a storm. I could only drink, in the faint hope that the storm might thus spend itself without doing any more damage to my land. But I was glad. I was only sorry that Jacques had been a witness. He made me ashamed. I hated him because he had now seen all that he had waited, often scarcely hoping, so many months to see. We had, in effect, been playing a deadly game and he was the winner. He was the winner in spite of the fact that I had cheated to win.

I wished, nevertheless, standing there at the bar, that I had been able to find in myself the force to turn and walk out—to have gone over to Montparnasse perhaps and picked up a girl. Any girl. I could not do it. I told myself all sorts of lies, standing there at the bar, but I could not move. And this was partly because I knew that it did not really matter anymore; it did not even matter if I never spoke to Giovanni again; for they had become visible, as visible as the wafers on the shirt of the flaming princess, they stormed all over me, my awakening, my insistent possibilities.

That was how I met Giovanni. I think we connected the instant that we met. And remain connected still, in spite of our later *séparation de corps*, despite the fact that Giovanni will be rotting soon in unhallowed ground near Paris. Until I die there will be those moments, moments seeming to rise up out of the ground like Macbeth’s witches, when his face will come before me, that face in all its changes, when the exact timbre of his voice and tricks of his speech will nearly burst my ears, when his smell will overpower my nostrils. Sometimes, in the days which are coming—God grant me the grace

to live them—in the glare of the grey morning, sour-mouthed, eyelids raw and red, hair tangled and damp from my stormy sleep, facing, over coffee and cigarette smoke, last night's impenetrable, meaningless boy who will shortly rise and vanish like the smoke, I will see Giovanni again, as he was that night, so vivid, so winning, all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head.

THREE

AT FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning Guillaume locked the door of the bar behind us. The streets were empty and grey. On a corner near the bar a butcher had already opened his shop and one could see him within, already bloody, hacking at the meat. One of the great, green Paris buses lumbered past, nearly empty, its bright electric flag waving fiercely to indicate a turn. A *garçon de cafe* spilled water on the sidewalk before his establishment and swept it into the gutter. At the end of the long, curving street which faced us were the trees of the boulevard and straw chairs piled high before cafes and the great stone spire of Saint-Germain-des-Prés—the most magnificent spire, as Hella and I believed, in Paris. The street beyond the *place* stretched before us to the river and, hidden beside and behind us, meandered to Montparnasse. It was named for an adventurer who sowed a crop in Europe which is being harvested until today. I had often walked this street, sometimes, with Hella, towards the river, often, without her, towards the girls of Montparnasse. Not very long ago either, though it seemed, that morning, to have occurred in another life.

We were going to Les Halles for breakfast. We piled into a taxi, the four of us, unpleasantly crowded together, a circumstance which elicited from Jacques and Guillaume, a series of lewd speculations. This lewdness was particularly revolting in that it not only failed of wit, it was so clearly an expression of contempt and self-contempt; it bubbled upward out of them like a fountain of black water. It was clear that they were tantalizing themselves with Giovanni and me and this set my teeth on edge. But Giovanni leaned back against the taxi window, allowing his arm to press my shoulder lightly, seeming to say that we should soon be rid of these old men and should not be distressed that their dirty water splashed—we would have no trouble washing it away.

"Look," said Giovanni, as we crossed the river. "This old whore, Paris, as she turns in bed, is very moving."

I looked out, beyond his heavy profile, which was grey—from fatigue and from the light of the sky above us. The river was swollen and yellow. Nothing moved on the river. Barges were tied up along the banks. The island of the city widened away from us, bearing the weight of the cathedral; beyond this, dimly, through speed and mist, one made out the individual roofs of Paris, their myriad, squat chimney stacks very beautiful and varicolored under the pearly sky. Mist clung to the river, softening that army of trees, softening those stones, hiding the city's dreadful corkscrew alleys and dead-end streets, clinging like a curse to the men who slept beneath the bridges—one of whom flashed by beneath us, very black and lone, walking along the river.

"Some rats have gone in," said Giovanni, "and now other rats come out." He smiled bleakly and looked at me; to my surprise, he took my hand and held it. "Have you ever slept under a bridge?" he asked. "Or perhaps they have soft beds with warm blankets under the bridges in your country?"

I did not know what to do about my hand; it seemed better to do nothing. "Not yet," I said, "but I may. My hotel wants to throw me out."

I had said it lightly, with a smile, out of a desire to put myself, in terms of an acquaintance with wintry things, on an equal footing with him. But the fact that I had said it as he held my hand made it sound to me unutterably helpless and soft and coy. But I could not say anything to counteract this impression: to say anything more would confirm it. I pulled my hand away, pretending that I had done so in order to search for a cigarette.

Jacques lit it for me.

"Where do you live?" he asked Giovanni.

"Oh," said Giovanni, "out. Far out. It is almost not Paris."

"He lives in a dreadful street, near *Nation*," said Guillaume, "among all the dreadful bourgeoisie and their piglike children."

"You failed to catch the children at the right age," said Jacques. "They go through a period, all too brief, *hélas!* when a pig is perhaps the *only* animal they do not call to mind." And, again to Giovanni: "In a hotel?"

"No," said Giovanni, and for the first time he seemed slightly uncomfortable. "I live in a maid's room."

"With the maid?"

"No," said Giovanni, and smiled, "the maid is I don't know where. You could certainly tell that there was no maid if you ever saw my room."

"I would love to," said Jacques.

“Then we will give a party for you one day,” said Giovanni.

This, too courteous and too bald to permit any further questioning, nearly forced, nevertheless, a question from my lips. Guillaume looked briefly at Giovanni, who did not look at him but out into the morning, whistling. I had been making resolutions for the last six hours and now I made another one: to have this whole thing “out” with Giovanni as soon as I got him alone at Les Halles. I was going to have to tell him that he had made a mistake but that we could still be friends. But I could not be certain, really, that it might not be I who was making a mistake, blindly misreading everything—and out of necessities, then, too shameful to be uttered. I was in a box for I could see that, no matter how I turned, the hour of confession was upon me and could scarcely be averted; unless, of course, I leaped out of the cab, which would be the most terrible confession of all.

Now the cabdriver asked us where we wanted to go, for we had arrived at the choked boulevards and impassable sidestreets of Les Halles. Leeks, onions, cabbages, oranges, apples, potatoes, cauliflowers, stood gleaming in mounds all over, on the sidewalks, in the streets, before great metal sheds. The sheds were blocks long and within the sheds were piled more fruit, more vegetables, in some sheds, fish, in some sheds, cheese, in some whole animals, lately slaughtered. It scarcely seemed possible that all of this could ever be eaten. But in a few hours it would all be gone and trucks would be arriving from all corners of France—and making their way, to the great profit of a beehive of middlemen, across the city of Paris—to feed the roaring multitude. Who were roaring now, at once wounding and charming the ear, before and behind, and on either side of our taxi—our taxi driver, and Giovanni, too, roared back. The multitude of Paris seems to be dressed in blue every day but Sunday, when, for the most part, they put on an unbelievably festive black. Here they were now, in blue, disputing, every inch, our passage, with their wagons, handtrucks, camions, their bursting baskets carried at an angle steeply self-confident on the back. A red-faced woman, burdened with fruit, shouted—to Giovanni, the driver, to the world—a particularly vivid *cochonnerie*, to which the driver and Giovanni, at once, at the top of their lungs, responded, though the fruit lady had already passed beyond our sight and perhaps no longer even remembered her precisely obscene conjectures. We crawled along, for no one had yet told the driver where to stop, and Giovanni and the driver, who had, it appeared, immediately upon entering Les Halles, been transformed into brothers,

exchanged speculations, unflattering in the extreme, concerning the hygiene, language, private parts, and habits, of the citizens of Paris. (Jacques and Guillaume were exchanging speculations, unspeakably less good-natured, concerning every passing male.) The pavements were slick with leavings, mainly cast-off, rotten leaves, flowers, fruit, and vegetables which had met with disaster natural and slow, or abrupt. And the walls and corners were combed with *pissoirs*, dull-burning, make-shift braziers, cafes, restaurants, and smoky yellow bistros—of these last, some so small that they were little more than diamond-shaped, enclosed corners holding bottles and a zinc-covered counter. At all these points, men, young, old, middle-aged, powerful, powerful even in the various fashions in which they had met, or were meeting, their various ruin; and women, more than making up in shrewdness and patience, in an ability to count and weigh—and shout—whatever they might lack in muscle; though they did not, really, seem to lack much. Nothing here reminded me of home, though Giovanni recognized, revelled in it all.

"I know a place," he told the driver, "*très bon marché*"—and told the driver where it was. It developed that it was one of the driver's favorite rendezvous.

"Where is this place?" asked Jacques, petulantly. "I thought we were going to"—and he named another place.

"You are joking," said Giovanni, with contempt. "That place is *very* bad and *very* expensive, it is only for tourists. We are not tourists," and he added, to me, "When I first came to Paris I worked in Les Halles—a long time, too. *Nom de Dieu, quel boulot!* I pray always never to do that again." And he regarded the streets through which we passed with a sadness which was not less real for being a little theatrical and self-mocking.

Guillaume said, from his corner of the cab: "Tell him who rescued you."

"Ah, yes," said Giovanni, "behold my savior, my *patron*." He was silent a moment. Then: "You do not regret it, do you? I have not done you any harm? You are pleased with my work?"

"*Mais oui*," said Guillaume.

Giovanni sighed. "*Bien sûr.*" He looked out of the window again, again whistling. We came to a corner remarkably clear. The taxi stopped.

"*Ici*," said the driver.

"*Ici*," Giovanni echoed.

I reached for my wallet but Giovanni sharply caught my hand, conveying to me with an angry flick of his eyelash the intelligence that the least these dirty old men could do was *pay*. He opened the door and stepped out into the street. Guillaume had not reached for his wallet and Jacques paid for the cab.

"Ugh," said Guillaume, staring at the door of the cafe before which we stood, "I am sure this place is infested with vermin. Do you want to poison us?"

"It's not the outside you're going to eat," said Giovanni. "You are in much more danger of being poisoned in those dreadful, chic places you always go to, where they always have the face clean, *mais*, *mon Dieu*, *les fesses!*" He grinned. "*Fais-moi confiance*. Why would I want to poison you? Then I would have no job and I have only just found out that I want to live."

He and Guillaume, Giovanni still smiling, exchanged a look which I would not have been able to read even if I had dared to try; and Jacques, pushing all of us before him as though we were his chickens, said, with that grin: "We can't stand here in the cold and argue. If we can't eat inside, we can drink. Alcohol kills all microbes."

And Guillaume brightened suddenly—he was really remarkable, as though he carried, hidden somewhere on his person, a needle filled with vitamins, which, automatically, at the blackening hour, discharged itself into his veins. "*Il y a les jeunes dedans*," he said, and we went in.

Indeed there were young people, half a dozen at the zinc counter before glasses of red and white wine, along with others not young at all. A pockmarked boy and a very rough-looking girl were playing the pinball machine near the window. There were a few people sitting at the tables in the back, served by an astonishingly clean-looking waiter. In the gloom, the dirty walls, the sawdust-covered floor, his white jacket gleamed like snow. Behind these tables one caught a glimpse of the kitchen and the surly, obese cook. He lumbered about like one of those overloaded trucks outside, wearing one of those high, white hats, and with a dead cigar stuck between his lips.

Behind the counter sat one of those absolutely inimitable and indomitable ladies, produced only in the city of Paris, but produced there in great numbers, who would be as outrageous and unsettling in any other city as a mermaid on a mountaintop. All over Paris they sit behind their counters like a mother bird in a nest and brood over the cash register as though it were an egg. Nothing occurring under the circle of heaven where they sit escapes

their eye, if they have ever been surprised by anything, it was only in a dream—a dream they long ago ceased having. They are neither ill- nor good-natured, though they have their days and styles, and they know, in the way, apparently, that other people know when they have to go to the bathroom, everything about everyone who enters their domain. Though some are white-haired and some not, some fat, some thin, some grandmothers and some but lately virgins, they all have exactly the same, shrewd, vacant, all-registering eye; it is difficult to believe that they ever cried for milk or looked at the sun; it seems they must have come into the world hungry for banknotes, and squinting helplessly, unable to focus their eyes until they came to rest on a cash register.

This one's hair is black and grey, and she has a face which comes from Brittany; and she, like almost everyone else standing at the bar, knows Giovanni and, after her fashion, likes him. She has a big, deep bosom and she clasps Giovanni to it; and a big, deep voice.

"*Ah, mon pote!*" *she* cries. "*Tu es revenu!* You have come back at last! *Salaud!* Now that you are rich and have found rich friends, you never come to see us anymore! *Canaille!*"

And she beams at us, the "rich" friends, with a friendliness deliciously, deliberately vague; she would have no trouble reconstructing every instant of our biographies from the moment we were born until this morning. She knows exactly who is rich—and how rich—and she knows it isn't me. For this reason, perhaps, there was a click of speculation infinitesimally double behind her eyes when she looked at me. In a moment, however, she knows that she will understand it all.

"You know how it is," says Giovanni, extricating himself and throwing back his hair, "when you work, when you become serious, you have no time to play."

"*Tiens*," says she, with mockery. "*Sans blague?*"

"But I assure you," says Giovanni, "even when you are a young man like me, you get very tired"—she laughs—"and you go to sleep early"—she laughs again—"and *alone*," says Giovanni, as though this proved everything, and she clicks her teeth in sympathy and laughs again.

"And now," she says, "are you coming or going? Have you come for breakfast or have you come for a nightcap? *Nom de Dieu*, you do not *look* very serious; I believe you need a drink."

“*Bien sûr*,” says someone at the bar, “after such hard work he needs a bottle of white wine—and perhaps a few dozen oysters.”

Everybody laughs. Everybody, without seeming to, is looking at us and I am beginning to feel like part of a travelling circus. Everybody, also, seems very proud of Giovanni.

Giovanni turns to the voice at the bar. “An excellent idea, friend,” he says, “and exactly what I had in mind.” Now he turns to us. “You have not met my friends,” he says, looking at me, then at the woman. “This is Monsieur Guillaume,” he tells her, and with the most subtle flattening of his voice, “my *patron*. He can tell you if I am serious.”

“Ah,” she dares to say, “but I cannot tell if *he* is,” and covers this daring with a laugh.

Guillaume, raising his eyes with difficulty from the young men at the bar, stretches out his hand and smiles. “But you are right, Madame,” he says. “He is so much more serious than I am that I fear he will own my bar one day.”

He will when lions fly, she is thinking, but professes herself enchanted by him and shakes his hand with energy.

“And Monsieur Jacques,” says Giovanni, “one of our finest customers.”

“*Enchanté*, *Madame*,” says Jacques, with his most dazzling smile, of which she, in responding, produces the most artless parody.

“And this is *monsieur l’américain*,” says Giovanni, “otherwise known as: *Monsieur David. Madame Clothilde.*”

And he stands back slightly. Something is burning in his eyes and it lights up all his face, it is joy and pride.

“*Je suis ravie*, *monsieur*,” she tells me and looks at me and shakes my hand and smiles.

I am smiling too, I scarcely know why; everything in me is jumping up and down. Giovanni carelessly puts an arm around my shoulder. “What have you got good to eat?” he cried. “We are hungry.”

“But we must have a drink first!” cried Jacques.

“But we can drink sitting down,” said Giovanni, “no?”

“No,” said Guillaume, to whom leaving the bar, at the moment, would have seemed like being driven from the promised land, “let us first have a drink, here at the bar, with Madame.”

Guillaume’s suggestion had the effect—but subtly, as though a wind had blown over everything or a light been imperceptibly intensified—of creating among the people at the bar, a *troupe*, who would now play various roles in a

play they knew very well. Madame Clothilde would demur, as, indeed, she instantly did, but only for a moment; then she would accept, it would be something expensive; it turned out to be champagne. She would sip it, making the most noncommittal conversation, so that she could vanish out of it a split second before Guillaume had established contact with one of the boys at the bar. As for the boys at the bar, they were each invisibly preening, having already calculated how much money he and his *copain* would need for the next few days, having already appraised Guillaume to within a decimal of that figure, and having already estimated how long Guillaume, as a fountainhead, would last, and also how long they would be able to endure him. The only question left was whether they would be *vache* with him, or *chic*, but they knew that they would probably be *vache*. There was also Jacques, who might turn out to be a bonus, or merely a consolation prize. There was me, of course, another matter altogether, innocent of apartments, soft beds, or food, a candidate, therefore, for affection, but, as Giovanni's *môme*, out of honorable reach. Their only means, practically at least, of conveying their affection for Giovanni and me was to relieve us of these two old men. So that there was added, to the roles they were about to play, a certain jolly aura of conviction and, to self-interest, an altruistic glow.

I ordered black coffee and a cognac, a large one. Giovanni was far from me, drinking *marc* between an old man, who looked like a receptacle of all the world's dirt and disease, and a young boy, a redhead, who would look like that man one day, if one could read, in the dullness of his eye, anything so real as a future. Now, however, he had something of a horse's dreadful beauty; some suggestion, too, of the storm trooper; covertly, he was watching Guillaume; he knew that both Guillaume and Jacques were watching him. Guillaume chatted, meanwhile, with Madame Clothilde; they were agreeing that business was awful, that all standards had been debased by the *nouveau riche*, and that the country needed de Gaulle. Luckily, they had both had this conversation so many times before that it ran, so to speak, all by itself, demanding of them nothing in the way of concentration. Jacques would shortly offer one of the boys a drink but, for the moment, he wished to play uncle to me.

"How do you feel?" he asked me. "This is a very important day for you."

"I feel fine," I said. "How do you feel?"

"Like a man," he said, "who has seen a vision."

"Yes?" I said. "Tell me about this vision."

“I am not joking,” he said. “I am talking about you. *You* were the vision. You should have seen yourself tonight. You should see yourself now.”

I looked at him and said nothing.

“You are—how old? Twenty-six or seven? I am nearly twice that and, let me tell you, you are lucky. You are lucky that what is happening to you now is happening *now* and not when you are forty, or something like that, when there would be no hope for you and you would simply be destroyed.”

“What is happening to me?” I asked. I had meant to sound sardonic, but I did not sound sardonic at all.

He did not answer this, but sighed, looking briefly in the direction of the redhead. Then he turned to me. “Are you going to write to Hella?”

“I very often do,” I said. “I suppose I will again.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“Oh. I was under the impression that you had asked me if I was going to write to Hella.”

“Well. Let’s put it another way. Are you going to write to Hella about this night and this morning?”

“I really don’t see what there is to write about. But what’s it to you if I do or I don’t?”

He gave me a look full of a certain despair which I had not, till that moment, known was in him. It frightened me. “It’s not,” he said, “what it is to *me*. It’s what it is to *you*. And to her. And to that poor boy, yonder, who doesn’t know that when he looks at you the way he does, he is simply putting his head in the lion’s mouth. Are you going to treat them as you’ve treated me?”

“*You?* What have *you* to do with all this? How have I treated *you*?”

“You have been very unfair to me,” he said. “You have been very dishonest.”

This time I did sound sardonic. “I suppose you mean that I would have been fair, I would have been honest if I had—if—”

“I mean you could have been fair to me by despising me a little less.”

“I’m sorry. But I think, since you bring it up, that a lot of your life *is* despicable.”

“I could say the same about yours,” said Jacques. “There are so many ways of being despicable it quite makes one’s head spin. But the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people’s pain. You ought to have some apprehension that the man you see before you was once even

younger than you are now and arrived at his present wretchedness by imperceptible degrees.”

There was silence for a moment, threatened, from a distance, by that laugh of Giovanni’s.

“Tell me,” I said at last, “is there really no other way for you but this? To kneel down forever before an army of boys for just five dirty minutes in the dark?”

“Think,” said Jacques, “of the men who have kneeled before you while you thought of something else and pretended that nothing was happening down there in the dark between your legs.”

I stared at the amber cognac and at the wet rings on the metal. Deep below, trapped in the metal, the outline of my own face looked upward hopelessly at me.

“You think,” he persisted, “that my life is shameful because my encounters are. And they are. But you should ask yourself *why* they are.”

“Why are they—shameful?” I asked him.

“Because there is no affection in them, and no joy. It’s like putting an electric plug in a dead socket. Touch, but no contact. All touch, but no contact and no light.”

I asked him: “Why?”

“That you must ask yourself,” he told me, “and perhaps one day, this morning will not be ashes in your mouth.”

I looked over at Giovanni, who now had one arm around the ruined-looking girl, who could have once been very beautiful but who never would be now.

Jacques followed my look. “He is very fond of you,” he said, “already. But this doesn’t make you happy or proud, as it should. It makes you frightened and ashamed. Why?”

“I don’t understand him,” I said at last. “I don’t know what his friendship means; I don’t know what he means by friendship.”

Jacques laughed. “You don’t know what he means by friendship but you have the feeling it may not be safe. You are afraid it may change you. What kind of friendship have you had?”

I said nothing.

“Or for that matter,” he continued, “what kind of love affairs?”

I was silent for so long that he teased me, saying, “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

And I grinned, feeling chilled.

"Love him," said Jacques, with vehemence, "love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at the best, can it last? since you are both men and still have everywhere to go? Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that, *hélas!* in the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty; you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will *not* be ashamed, if you will only *not* play it safe." He paused, watching me, and then looked down to his cognac. "You play it safe long enough," he said, in a different tone, "and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever—like me." And he finished his cognac, ringing his glass slightly on the bar to attract the attention of Madame Clothilde.

She came at once, beaming; and in that moment Guillaume dared to smile at the redhead. Mme. Clothilde poured Jacques a fresh cognac and looked questioningly at me, the bottle poised over my half full glass. I hesitated.

"*Et pourquoi pas?*" she asked, with a smile.

So I finished my glass and she filled it. Then, for the briefest of seconds, she glanced at Guillaume; who cried, "*Et le rouquin là!* What's the redhead drinking?"

Mme. Clothilde turned with the air of an actress about to deliver the severely restrained last lines of an exhausting and mighty part. "*On t'offre, Pierre*," she said, majestically. "What will you have?"—holding slightly aloft meanwhile the bottle containing the most expensive cognac in the house.

"*Je prendrai un petit cognac*," Pierre mumbled after a moment and, oddly enough, he blushed, which made him, in the light of the pale, just-rising sun, resemble a freshly fallen angel.

Mme. Clothilde filled Pierre's glass and, amid a beautifully resolving tension, as of slowly dimming lights, replaced the bottle on the shelf and walked back to the cash register; offstage, in effect, into the wings, where she began to recover herself by finishing the last of the champagne. She sighed and sipped and looked outward contentedly into the slowly rising morning. Guillaume had murmured a "*Je m'excuse un instant, Madame*," and now passed behind us on his way to the redhead.

I smiled. “Things my father never told me.”

“*Somebody*,” said Jacques, “your father or mine, should have told us that not many people have ever died of love. But multitudes have perished, and are perishing every hour—and in the oddest places!—for the lack of it.” And then: “Here comes your baby. *Sois sage. Sois chic.*”

He moved slightly away and began talking to the boy next to him.

And here my baby came indeed, through all that sunlight, his face flushed and his hair flying, his eyes, unbelievably, like morning stars. “It was not very nice of me to go off for so long,” he said, “I hope you have not been too bored.”

“*You* certainly haven’t been,” I told him. “You look like a kid about five years old waking up on Christmas morning.”

This delighted, even flattered him, as I could see from the way he now humorously pursed his lips. “I am sure I cannot look like that,” he said. “I was always disappointed on Christmas morning.”

“Well, I mean very *early* on Christmas morning, before you saw what was under the tree.” But his eyes have somehow made of my last statement a *double entendre*, and we are both laughing.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Perhaps I would be if I were alive and sober. I don’t know. Are you?”

“I think we should eat,” he said with no conviction whatever, and we began to laugh again.

“Well,” I said, “What shall we eat?”

“I scarcely dare suggest white wine and oysters,” said Giovanni, “but that is really the best thing after such a night.”

“Well, let’s do that,” I said, “while we can still walk to the dining room.” I looked beyond him to Guillaume and the redhead. They had apparently found something to talk about; I could not imagine what it was. And Jacques was deep in conversation with the tall, very young, pockmarked boy, whose turtleneck black sweater made him seem even paler and thinner than he actually was. He had been playing the pinball machine when we came in; his name appeared to be Yves. “Are they going to eat now?” I asked Giovanni.

“Perhaps not now,” said Giovanni, “but they are certainly going to eat. Everyone is very hungry.” I took this to refer more to the boys than to our friends, and we passed into the dining room, which was now empty, the waiter nowhere in sight.

“Mme. Clothilde!” shouted Giovanni, “*On mange ici, non?*”

This shout produced an answering shout from Mme. Clothilde and also produced the waiter, whose jacket was less spotless, seen in closeup, than it had seemed from a distance. It also officially announced our presence in the dining room to Jacques and Guillaume and must have definitely increased, in the eyes of the boys they were talking to, a certain tigerish intensity of affection.

"We'll eat quickly and go," said Giovanni. "After all, I have to work tonight."

"Did you meet Guillaume here?" I asked him.

He grimaced, looking down. "No. That is a long story." He grinned. "No, I did not meet him here. I met him"—he laughed—"in a cinema!" We both laughed. "*C'était un film du far west, avec Gary Cooper.*" This seemed terribly funny, too; we kept laughing until the waiter came with our bottle of white wine.

"Well," said Giovanni, sipping the wine, his eyes damp, "after the last gun shot had been fired and all the music came up to celebrate the triumph of goodness and I came up the aisle, I bumped into this man—Guillaume—and I excused myself and walked into the lobby. Then here he came, after me, with a long story about leaving his scarf in *my* seat because, it appeared, he had been sitting *behind* me, you understand, with his coat and his scarf on the seat *before* him and when I sat down I pulled his scarf down with me. Well, I told him I didn't work for the cinema and I told him what he could do with his scarf—but I did not really get angry because he made me want to laugh. He said that all the people who worked for the cinema were thieves and he was sure that they would keep it if they so much as laid eyes on it, and it was very expensive, and a gift from his mother and—oh, I assure you, not even Garbo ever gave such a performance. So I went back and of course there was no scarf there and when I told him this it seemed he would fall dead right there in the lobby. And by this time, you understand, everybody thought we were together and I didn't know whether to kick him or the people who were looking at us; but he was very well dressed, of course, and I was not and so I thought, well, we had better get out of this lobby. So we went to a cafe and sat on the terrace and when he had got over his grief about the scarf and what his mother would say and so on and so on, he asked me to have supper with him. Well, naturally, I said no; I had certainly had enough of him by that time, but the only way I could prevent another scene, right there on the terrace, was to promise to have supper with him a few days

later—I did not intend to go," he said, with a shy grin, "but when the day came, I had not eaten for a long time and I was very hungry." He looked at me and I saw in his face again something which I have fleetingly seen there during these hours: under his beauty and his bravado, terror, and a terrible desire to please; dreadfully, dreadfully moving, and it made me want, in anguish, to reach out and comfort him.

Our oysters came and we began to eat. Giovanni sat in the sun, his black hair gathering to itself the yellow glow of the wine and the many dull colors of the oyster where the sun struck it.

"Well"—with his mouth turned down—"dinner was awful, of course, since he can make scenes in his apartment, too. But by this time I knew he owned a bar and was a French citizen. I am not and I had no job and no *carte de travail*. So I saw that he could be useful if I could only find some way to make him keep his hands off me. I did not, I must say"—this with that look at me—"altogether succeed in remaining untouched by him; he has more hands than an octopus, and no dignity whatever, *but*"—grimly throwing down another oyster and refilling our glasses of wine—"I *do* now have a *carte de travail* and I have a job. Which pays very well," he grinned. "It appears that I am good for business. For this reason, he leaves me mostly alone." He looked out into the bar. "He is really not a man at all," he said, with a sorrow and bewilderment at once childlike and ancient, "I do not know what he is, he is horrible. But I will keep my *carte de travail*. The job is another matter, but"—he knocked wood—"we have had no trouble now for nearly three weeks."

"But you think that trouble is coming," I said.

"Oh, yes," said Giovanni, with a quick, startled look at me, as if he were wondering if I had understood a word of what he had said, "we are certainly going to have a little trouble soon again. Not right away, of course; that is not his style. But he will invent something to be angry at me about."

Then we sat in silence for awhile, smoking cigarettes, surrounded by oyster shells, and finishing the wine. I was all at once very tired. I looked out into the narrow street, this strange, crooked corner where we sat, which was brazen now with the sunlight and heavy with people—people I would never understand. I ached abruptly, intolerably, with a longing to go home; not to that hotel, in one of the alleys of Paris, where the concierge barred the way with my unpaid bill; but home, home across the ocean, to things and people I knew and understood; to those things, those places, those people which I

would always, helplessly, and in whatever bitterness of spirit, love above all else. I had never realized such a sentiment in myself before, and it frightened me. I saw myself, sharply, as a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world, unanchored. I looked at Giovanni's face, which did not help me. He belonged to this strange city, which did not belong to me. I began to see that, while what was happening to me was not so strange as it would have comforted me to believe, yet it was strange beyond belief. It was not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For shame! that I should be so abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy; what was strange was that this was but one tiny aspect of the dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever.

"*Viens*," said Giovanni.

We rose and walked back into the bar and Giovanni paid our bill. Another bottle of champagne had been opened and Jacques and Guillaume were now really beginning to be drunk. It was going to be ghastly and I wondered if those poor, patient boys were ever going to get anything to eat. Giovanni talked to Guillaume for a moment, agreeing to open up the bar; Jacques was too busy with the pale tall boy to have much time for me; we said good-morning and left them.

"I must go home," I said to Giovanni when we were in the street. "I must pay my hotel bill."

Giovanni stared. "*Mais tu es fou*," he said mildly. "There is certainly no point in going home now, to face an ugly concierge and then go to sleep in that room all by yourself and then wake up later, with a terrible stomach and a sour mouth, wanting to commit suicide. Come with me; we will rise at a civilized hour and have a gentle aperitif somewhere and then a little dinner. It will be much more cheerful like that," he said with a smile, "you will see."

"But I must get my clothes," I said.

He took my arm. "*Bien sûr*. But you do not have to get them *now.*" I held back. He stopped. "Come. I am sure that I am much prettier than your wallpaper—or your concierge. I will smile at you when you wake up. They will not."

"Ah," I could only say, "*tu es vache.*"

"It is you who are *vache*," he said, "to want to leave me alone in this lonely place when you know that I am far too drunk to reach my home unaided."

We laughed together, both caught up in a stinging, teasing sort of game. We reached the Boulevard de Sébastopol. “But we will not any longer discuss the painful subject of how you desired to desert Giovanni, at so dangerous an hour, in the middle of a hostile city.” I began to realize that he, too, was nervous. Far down the boulevard a cab meandered toward us, and he put up his hand. “I will show you my room,” he said. “It is perfectly clear that you would have to see it one of these days, anyway.” The taxi stopped beside us, and Giovanni, as though he were suddenly afraid that I would really turn and run, pushed me in before him. He got in beside me and told the driver: “*Nation.*”

The street he lived on was wide, respectable rather than elegant, and massive with fairly recent apartment buildings; the street ended in a small park. His room was in the back, on the ground floor of the last building on this street. We passed the vestibule and the elevator into a short, dark corridor which led to his room. The room was small, I only made out the outlines of clutter and disorder, there was the smell of the alcohol he burned in his stove. He locked the door behind us, and then for a moment, in the gloom, we simply stared at each other—with dismay, with relief, and breathing hard. I was trembling. I thought, if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost. But I knew I could not open the door, I knew it was too late; soon it was too late to do anything but moan. He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry, and slowly pulled me down with him to that bed. With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes*.

Here in the south of France it does not often snow; but snowflakes, in the beginning rather gently and now with more force, have been falling for the last half hour. It falls as though it might quite possibly decide to turn into a blizzard. It has been cold down here this winter, though the people of the region seem to take it as a mark of ill-breeding in a foreigner if he makes any reference to this fact. They themselves, even when their faces are burning in that wind which seems to blow from everywhere at once, and which penetrates everything, are as radiantly cheerful as children at the seashore. “*Il fait beau bien?*—throwing their faces toward the lowering sky in which the celebrated southern sun has not made an appearance in days.

I leave the window of the big room and walk through the house. While I am in the kitchen, staring into the mirror—I have decided to shave before all

the water turns cold—I hear a knocking at the door. Some vague, wild hope leaps in me for a second and then I realize that it is only the caretaker from across the road come to make certain that I have not stolen the silver or smashed the dishes or chopped up the furniture for firewood. And, indeed, she rattles the door and I hear her voice out there, cracking, *M'sieu! M'sieu! M'sieu, l'américain!*" I wonder, with annoyance, why on earth she should sound so worried.

But she smiles at once when I open the door, a smile which weds the coquette and the mother. She is quite old and not really French; she came many years ago, "when I was a very young girl, sir," from just across the border, out of Italy. She seems, like most of the women down here, to have gone into mourning directly the last child moved out of childhood. Hella thought that they were all widows, but, it turned out, most of them had husbands living yet. These husbands might have been their sons. They sometimes played *belote* in the sunshine in a flat field near our house, and their eyes, when they looked at Hella, contained the proud watchfulness of a father and the watchful speculation of a man. I sometimes played billiards with them, and drank red wine, in the *tabac*. But they made me tense—with their ribaldries, their good-nature, their fellowship, the life written on their hands and in their faces and in their eyes. They treated me as the son who has but lately been initiated into manhood; but at the same time, with great distance, for I did not really belong to any of them; and they also sensed (or I felt they did) something else about me, something which it was no longer worth their while to pursue. This seemed to be in their eyes when I walked with Hella and they passed us on the road, saying, very respectfully, *Salut, Monsieur-dame*. They might have been the sons of these women in black, come home after a lifetime of storming and conquering the world, home to rest and be scolded and wait for death, home to those breasts, now dry, which had nourished them in their beginnings.

Flakes of snow have drifted across the shawl which covers her head; and hang on her eyelashes and on the wisps of black and white hair not covered by the shawl. She is very strong yet, though, now, a little bent, a little breathless.

"*Bonsoir, monsieur. Vous n'êtes pas malade?*"

"No," I say, "I have not been sick. Come in."

She comes in, closing the door behind her, and allowing the shawl to fall from her head. I still have my drink in my hand and she notices this, in

silence.

"*Eh bien*," she says. "*Tant mieux*. But we have not seen you for several days. You have been staying in the house?"

And her eyes search my face.

I am embarrassed and resentful; yet it is impossible to rebuff something at once shrewd and gentle in her eyes and voice. "Yes," I say, "the weather has been bad."

"It is not the middle of August, to be sure," says she, "but you do not have the air of an invalid. It is not good to sit in the house alone."

"I am leaving in the morning," I say, desperately. "Did you want to take the inventory?"

"Yes," she says, and produces from one of her pockets the list of household goods I signed upon arrival. "It will not be long. Let me start from the back."

We start toward the kitchen. On the way I put my drink down on the night table in my bedroom.

"It doesn't matter to me if you drink," she says, not turning around. But I leave my drink behind anyway.

We walk into the kitchen. The kitchen is suspiciously clean and neat. "Where have you been eating?" she asks, sharply. "They tell me at the *tabac* you have not been seen for days. Have you been going to town?"

"Yes," I say lamely, "sometimes."

"On foot?" she inquires. "Because the bus driver, he has not seen you, either." All this time she is not looking at me but around the kitchen, checking off the list in her hand with a short, yellow pencil.

I can make no answer to her last, sardonic thrust, having forgotten that in a small village almost every move is made under the village's collective eye and ear.

She looks briefly in the bathroom. "I'm going to clean that tonight," I say.

"I should hope so," she says. "Everything was clean when you moved in." We walk back through the kitchen. She has failed to notice that two glasses are missing, broken by me, and I have not the energy to tell her. I will leave some money in the cupboard. She turns on the light in the guest room. My dirty clothes are lying all over.

"Those go with me," I say, trying to smile.

"You could have come just across the road," she says. "I would have been glad to give you something to eat. A little soup, something nourishing. I

cook every day for my husband; what difference does one more make?”

This touches me, but I do not know how to indicate it, and I cannot say, of course, that eating with her and her husband would have stretched my nerves to the breaking point.

She is examining a decorative pillow. “Are you going to join your fiancée?” she asks.

I know I ought to lie, but somehow I cannot. I am afraid of her eyes. I wish, now, that I had my drink with me. “No,” I say, flatly, “she has gone to America.”

“*Tiens!*” she says. “And you—do you stay in France?” She looks directly at me.

“For awhile,” I say. I am beginning to sweat. It has come to me that this woman, a peasant from Italy, must resemble, in so many ways, the mother of Giovanni. I keep trying not to hear her howls of anguish, I keep trying not to see in her eyes what would surely be there if she knew that her son would be dead by morning, if she knew what I had done to her son.

But, of course, she is not Giovanni’s mother.

“It is not good,” she says, “it is not right for a young man like you to be sitting alone in a great big house with no woman.” She looks, for a moment, very sad; starts to say something more and thinks better of it. I know she wants to say something about Hella, whom neither she nor any of the other women here had liked. But she turns out the light in the guest room and we go into the big bedroom, the master bedroom, which Hella and I had used, not the one in which I have left my drink. This, too, is very clean and orderly. She looks about the room and looks at me, and smiles.

“You have not been using this room lately,” she says.

I feel myself blushing painfully. She laughs.

“But you will be happy again,” she says. “You must go and find yourself another woman, a *good* woman, and get married, and have babies. *Yes*, that is what you ought to do,” she says, as though I had contradicted her, and before I can say anything, “Where is your *maman?*”

“She is dead.”

“Ah!” She clicks her teeth in sympathy. “That is sad. And your Papa—is he dead, too?”

“No. He is in America.”

“*Pauvre bambino!*” She looks at my face. I am really helpless in front of her and if she does not leave soon, she will reduce me to tears or curses.

“But you do not have the intention of just wandering through the world like a sailor? I am sure that would make your mother very unhappy. You will make a home someday?”

“Yes, surely. Someday.”

She puts her strong hand on my arm. “Even if your *maman*, she is dead—that is very sad!—your Papa will be very happy to see bambinos from you.” She pauses, her black eyes soften; she is looking at me, but she is looking beyond me, too. “We had three sons. Two of them were killed in the war. In the war, too, we lost all our money. It is sad, is it not, to have worked so hard all one’s life in order to have a little peace in one’s old age and then to have it all taken away? It almost killed my husband; he has never been the same since.” Then I see that her eyes are not merely shrewd; they are also bitter and very sad. She shrugs her shoulders. “Ah! What can one do? It is better not to think about it.” Then she smiles. “But our last son, he lives in the north; he came to see us two years ago, and he brought with him his little boy. His little boy, he was only four years old then. He was so beautiful! Mario, he is called.” She gestures. “It is my husband’s name. They stayed about ten days and we felt young again.” She smiles again. “Especially my husband.” And she stands there a moment with this smile on her face. Then she asks, abruptly, “Do you pray?”

I wonder if I can stand this another moment. “No,” I stammer. “No. Not often.”

“But you are a believer?”

I smile. It is not even a patronizing smile, though, perhaps, I wish it could be, “Yes.”

But I wonder what my smile could have looked like. It did not reassure her. “You must pray,” she says, very soberly. “I assure you. Even just a little prayer, from time to time. Light a little candle. If it were not for the prayers of the blessed saints, one could not live in this world at all. I speak to you,” she says, drawing herself up slightly, “as though I were your *maman*. Do not be offended.”

“But I am not offended. You are very nice. You are very nice to speak to me this way.”

She smiles a satisfied smile. “Men—not just babies like you, but old men, too—they always need a woman to tell them the truth. *Les hommes, ils sont impossibles*.” And she smiles, and forces me to smile at the cunning of this universal joke, and turns out the light in the master bedroom. We go down

the hall again, thank heaven, to my drink. This bedroom, of course, is quite untidy, the light burning, my bathrobe, books, dirty socks, and a couple of dirty glasses, and a coffee cup half full of stale coffee—lying around, all over the place; and the sheets on the bed a tangled mess.

"I'll fix this up before morning," I say.

"*Bien sûr.*" She sighs. "You really must take my advice, monsieur, and get married." At this, suddenly, we both laugh. Then I finish my drink.

The inventory is almost done. We go into the last room, the big room, where the bottle is, before the window. She looks at the bottle, then at me. "But you will be drunk by morning," she says.

"Oh, no! I'm taking the bottle *with* me."

It is quite clear that she knows this is not true. But she shrugs her shoulders again. Then she becomes, by the act of wrapping the shawl around her head, very formal, even a little shy. Now that I see she is about to leave, I wish I could think of something to make her stay. When she has gone back across the road, the night will be blacker and longer than ever. I have something to say to her—to her?—but of course it will never be said. I feel that I want to be forgiven; I want *her* to forgive me. But I do not know how to state my crime. My crime, in some odd way, is in being a man and she knows all about this already. It is terrible how naked she makes me feel, like a half-grown boy, naked before his mother.

She puts out her hand. I take it, awkwardly.

"*Bon voyage*, *monsieur*. I hope that you were happy while you were here and that, perhaps, one day, you will visit us again." She is smiling and her eyes are kind but now the smile is purely social, it is the graceful termination of a business deal.

"Thank you," I say. "Perhaps I will be back next year." She releases my hand and we walk to the door.

"Oh!" she says, at the door, "please do not wake me up in the morning. Put the keys in my mailbox. I do not, any more, have any reason to get up so early."

"Surely." I smile and open the door. "Good-night, Madame."

"*Bonsoir*, *Monsieur. Adieu!*" She steps out into the darkness. But there is a light coming from my house and from her house across the road. The town lights glimmer beneath us and I hear, briefly, the sea again.

She walks a little away from me, and turns. "*Souvenez-vous*," she tells me. "One must make a little prayer from time to time."

And I close the door.

She has made me realize that I have much to do before morning. I decide to clean the bathroom before I allow myself another drink. And I begin to do this, first scrubbing out the tub, then running water into the pail to mop the floor. The bathroom is tiny and square, with one frosted window. It reminds me of that claustrophobic room in Paris. Giovanni had had great plans for remodelling the room and there was a time, when he had actually begun to do this, when we lived with plaster all over everything and bricks piled on the floor. We took packages of bricks out of the house at night and left them in the streets.

I suppose they will come for him early in the morning, perhaps just before dawn, so that the last thing Giovanni will ever see will be that grey, lightless sky over Paris, beneath which we stumbled homeward together so many desperate and drunken mornings.