

# *Scalded*

a novella by

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If a man has learned to think, no matter what he may think about, he is  
always thinking of  
his own death.

— Tolstoy

## Part I

### Street People

The first sign of the affliction was the appearance of a red stripe on the inner wrist. And this sign now lay in bright bloom on Philip Lang's wrist. He took a brass letter opener and drew the point across it, two lines crossing in an X, to see if it would bleed.

What was odd about the stripe was how suddenly it would come and go. He would discover it always fully developed in size, shape and color -- elliptical, covering the whole width of the wrist, and crimson -- painless -- and neither smoother nor rougher than the rest of his skin. And an hour later, or a day, at the most a week later he would discover that it was gone. It was either there or not. He never observed it in the process of growing or fading. His first act was always to draw the X to test for the propensity to bleed, because at the time of his affliction, when he was a young man, the bleeding had been the chief horror -- the oozing of blood and serum. Yet the appearance of the stripe was not horrifying now because it had appeared so often in the last decade without any serious consequences. He ceased almost to regard it as "the sign" of years ago and tried to think of it as merely a peculiarity, a mystery from somewhere beyond the realm of medical science. It flashed on his wrist sometimes for as little as half an hour, and received the X as if it were inanimate, without pain or blood.

He traced again the slanted lines, applying no more pressure than he would to a pencil on paper, then put the letter opener on his desk and jerked down his cuff. For the next several minutes he was occupied in a phone conversation, and when he hung up the receiver he pulled the cuff away. The stripe was there, deep crimson, the X invisible. Not in twenty years had it bled.

He buzzed for Miss Rickner and in a minute the door connecting their offices opened and she was crossing the carpet. At just that moment as never before she struck him as a woman instead of a secretary, a functionary -- not as Miss Rickner but potentially as Cynthia. It occurred to him that she might be alone in the world -- or too much visited, possibly, and he knew not which -- a tall woman with a sturdy, shapely figure, yet somehow raw; she had large eyes and he didn't know what color they were.

He asked: "Would you take a few letters, Miss Rickner?"

She smiled a secretary's smile and sat in her chair, crossing her legs, and wrote what he said. He dictated four letters into the silence of her notebook and in the course of it he never once saw her eyes. He talked to the ceiling, the walls, the blotter, to the top of her head where the brown hair parted, to her working hand and pencil. The hand was decidedly bony and beknuckled, for she was neither delicate nor beautiful. She inevitably wore long sleeves fastened with miniature cufflinks, a silver hair clip which doubtless dated from her college days, plain dark skirts and black shoes. She wore her skirts long. There was something quaint about her.

In the coldest weather, as now, she would come to the office in calf-high boots and woolen knee sox like a college girl's, and she would go straight to her desk, where she apparently removed the knee sox, which she wore over stockings, and changed to high heels. Then if he happened to see her as she left in the evening she'd be wearing the boots and knee sox again under her long skirt.

Lang had noticed that she was inclined to get extremely red in the face during cold, windy weather and to remain so for a long time after coming inside, and she was somewhat red even now, and intent, but patient through his pauses, motionless while he searched for language, except that her crossed legs and her foot in its polished shoe swung in a beating swing with never a pause. So much of her calf as he could see was sleek, well formed, and the ankle was slender and graceful -- and yet she was regarded as the ugly girl of the office.

She looked up. "Now that's 'your client being in this instance' what?"

"Incompetent. Make it 'your client being mentally incompetent.'"

"All right."

"No, make it 'your client having been judged incompetent by the court.'"

"Yes," she agreed approvingly.

Lang found that he didn't accept the general verdict on Miss Rickner's looks. In her indifference to the best way to dress he could see neither anything ugly or beautiful, only individual. And if she wore long sleeves with cufflinks or a long black skirt and black knee sox she only seemed more feminine to him, he didn't know just why. And he couldn't agree that she was awkward or "horsey," as he had heard one of his partners say. It was true she didn't just enter a room but inflicted herself on it somehow, and she seemed to be covering something hard inside. He scarcely saw that. He saw a woman thirty-five years old who had sleek calves and glistening combed hair and breasts smaller than one would expect to see, given the rest of her

figure -- breasts that seemed drained from within as if she had needs of her own; yet the quality of womanhood was in her and it was this quality he recognized without knowing what it was. He sensed the elements of her. It was as if a large and voluptuously sculpted woman resembling her had been macerated down, the essence surviving.

This “surviving” woman lifted her eyes, and, leaning over his desk, he saw that they were fixed on him. Green eyes. He resumed dictating and she bent over her notebook, writing intently, waiting out his pauses but sometimes now straightening her back and looking up, out the window or at him; but the foot in its shiny black shoe kept up its beating swinging and she flipped pages now with a crack. The dictation was beginning to bore her.

He said, “That’s all, I think,” and heard a new kindness in his own voice. There was something disturbing him this morning -- to discover the woman in Miss Rickner.

She smiled another office smile and closed the notebook. He watched her crossing the room and heard her footfalls on the carpet, and when she had closed the door he drew back the cuff.

The sign had come to life. It had broken out of its more or less regular boundaries, the boundaries he had come to accept, and spread over his inner wrist to the size of a rose. The sweeping creases of his palm leapt down upon the wrist and disappeared into the rose, but the other creases there, the generally parallel sidewise creases of the wrist, were deepened and the wrist, all of it, was turning red; the creases were deepening.

It was the old brilliance returning after twenty years, the old vivid red. Philip Lang took the brass letter opener carefully in his left hand and drew a slanted line across the rose. Blood. Quickly, as though it were flowing from the brass point, the liquid filled the creases and lay there glittering, not quite overflowing. He watched to see if it would breach the walls and it did not.

At this stage it was easy to be detached about this evidence and to progress from one phase of the inquiry to the next without either fear or hope, so he was quite undisturbed as he put down the letter opener and drew the sleeve back from his other wrist. It was clear -- but he unbuckled the leather strap of his watch and removed it, and there like a rope burn lay the circling red scall.

He next unbuttoned his left cuff and pulled it up past the elbow and found the skin still clear. But on the inside of his right elbow he found it, the inflammation filling the creases not

with blood but with color, like red sand in river bottoms, etching for the moment on his skin a reticular pattern of great delicacy and even beauty, the program for a musical prelude.

Noting the time -- eleven o'clock -- he stood up, put the watch in his pocket, buttoned his cuffs and put on his suitcoat. He did all this with care and regard for economy of movement. He crossed to Miss Rickner's door.

"Miss Rickner," he said and opened the door, and the clatter of her typing ceased.

She was sitting straight-backed in her armless secretary chair, turning to face him, and he was astonished by her rounded hips and the soft curve of her back, by the shine of her long sweep of hair caught in the sun, and by the pleasure he took when her eyes met his.

"Yes sir," she said.

"Please, Miss Rickner, don't sir me."

"All right," she agreed with a little nod.

He went to her desk, she turning in the chair to follow his movement, and spun around the appointment book. He scanned it and asked,

"Can we cancel this?"

"Which?"

"All of it."

"You don't mean all of it!"

"All of today."

She cast a neutral glance at him and replied, "I don't see how we can cancel Mr. McIntyre at eleven-fifteen. I could try."

"No," he said, "but cancel the whole afternoon, please."

"Shall I give a reason?"

"Yes," he said.

When had this new stress of beauty come upon her? When had her eyes taken on that new depth and interest?

"Yes," he repeated, "say that I ...". He hesitated, observing a faint shake of doubt or fear in her eyes -- fear? Why? He decided it wasn't fear. -- "Miss Rickner, I'm sorry to put this on you."

"Put what?"

“Lying. Do you mind? Tell them there’s illness in my family and I’ve left town, I don’t know for how many days. Don’t reschedule these appointments since I don’t know when I’m coming back.” He smiled and she began to return the smile uncomprehendingly. “Lies, of course,” he concluded pleasantly.

“I don’t mind,” she assented.

“Good, then.”

Mr. McIntyre at eleven-fifteen was a steamy fat man full of avarice and spleen who was trying to prevent other McIntyres from taking big pieces of the family fortune; and the other McIntyres, two of his brothers and two nephews, were trying to screw him. “They’re gonna screw me, Mr. Lang,” he asserted hoarsely. He sat fat in a leather chair poking his short forefinger. He poked it into his own chest, then poked the arm of the chair, then rolled forward and poked Lang’s desk. Talking on, he poked the air in Lang’s direction, aiming between Lang’s eyes, stabbing. His finger was like a bulging sausage tied twice with string. Lang expected distortions from his own brain, such as the one that invested Miss Rickner with her strange new appeal, but instead he perceived McIntyre, he thought, quite clearly. McIntyre was nothing but his aggressive finger, and if you cut it off it would be like cutting off his head. McIntyre slightly unnerved Philip Lang with the vehement stabbing and the waving of his sausage finger; and furthermore the finger gave no facts, it only issued threats, so that after ten minutes Lang still didn’t know the essentials of the case.

“Mr. McIntyre,” Lang interrupted.

The sausage halted suspended in the air, still pointing toward Lang, and the man’s mouth gaped.

“Mr. McIntyre, let me ask a questions or two.”

“Gods,” breathed the fat man, “what in the hell happened to your face?”

When Lang was alone again he removed his suitcoat, attention to the economy of his movements, and as he draped it over his chair he saw the blood spot inside the right elbow. He paused for a second and his heartbeat quickened in the presence of the ferocity of the affliction, and strangely enough he felt like smiling, though he took no pleasure in the sight of his blood --

but, if not pleasure, perhaps some kind of perverse satisfaction. The immensity of the affliction, of which the blood spoke as in a whisper, was vaguely exhilarating, especially since there was no pain yet. He undid the cuff and pulled up the sleeve. The reticular beauty of the lines was gone, the fineness of the lines lost, drowned in the onrush of the red scall which now burned on his arm.

It was just this violence of the advent that he had forgotten in twenty years, living as he did with vivid pictures of the worst time and forgetting entirely the rhapsodic advent; but now the evidence of this coming, this red echo, waved out on his arm, and he observed it with his mentality alone as proof of the unseen. He left no space in his mind for fear or any tolerance of quavering -- though it was true he was unprepared, because who could prepare for this? There was only waiting -- no, not even that, for the thing was already upon him, or within him. He could only watch it, for it was fascinating. Having lived through it once before, and yet knowing also that he wasn't equal to it, he felt himself both hoary and young, too young -- for he had taken it once and yet it was a thing that couldn't be taken, and even should he *take it* again he believed he could never evolve any real equality to it -- to withstand it. But this whole business of whether he could "take it" was a piece of relativism he could not allow himself; he couldn't allow any all-tolerant "from this angle" and "from that angle" -- there were no angles, only the onslaught, and you don't take it, it takes you. You were strong such and such a day but -- see -- wretched and pitiful another day. Regarding its power Lang was an absolutist. There was no relative, only the absolute.

Without bothering to inspect his other arm he rolled down the sleeve, buttoned it, and put on his suitcoat again, restoring to himself a normal look, of a man with money and self-confidence; normal. He was becoming acutely conscious of himself, appearance and reality, gathering in deliberately a full awareness of himself and his limits, of his father's son, of the man who had traveled here and there, worked, studied, fought in the war, studied again, endured this and that thing in his lifetime -- indeed, endured *this*.

He wrote the old numbers on a sheet of paper -- "356654, 356655, 356656." He didn't believe they had ever proved effective but he would do what little he could. So little was possible, almost nothing.

He pressed the buzzer calling Miss Rickner.

On the same sheet he wrote the name and address of the drugstore, and the doctor's name. in case the pharmacist had to renew the prescriptions after so many years. Seeing the name written out he was carried back to his youth, so he was unconscious at first of the woman standing close by and waiting.

She too was staring off into space, groggy from typing and hungry for lunch. When she was hungry Miss Rickner wanted only her lunch and didn't care about anything else, not even Mr. Lang.

As he glanced up she dropped her gaze to meet his. Lang saw her eyes contract with a flicker of shock.

"You're ill!" she cried.

"Really?"

"Yes, don't you know it?"

Lang paused, wishing he didn't have to force the sight of himself on her.

But already she was coming around the desk with her hand stretched out to him in a curious way, as if to touch his face. Stopping, letting her hand fall, she said, "Yes. Your forehead is bleeding. Does it hurt?"

"No," answered Lang. "I don't feel --"

"Oh don't touch it! Do you have a handkerchief?"

She took the handkerchief and skillfully wiped his brows, and he submitted to her in complete stillness and some amusement -- but he was conscious of her scent.

"I feel it now," he said.

"Pain?"

"No, just the wetness of the blood. My skin burns but the blood is cool."

"Yes. But there's only a little."

"Well then, I won't bleed to death."

She drew back and showed him the blood on the white handkerchief, then said: "Yes, there's a moisture -- under the blood -- serum."

His forehead had turned raw and streaked, plaguy, wild, and it crossed above his eyes like a war wound, darkening his eyes and vexing his features, so that his nose and cheekbones and jaw thrust more forward. His mouth was level and closed in a narrow bar, his ears looked more prominent and complicated, his ash-colored hair, that had once been blond, seemed shaggier.

His face had a compelling and somehow fierce look, and under the bloody brow his eyes grew dark and more convex.

“Here. Please,” said Miss Rickner, and she placed her hand on his hair, turning his face to the light of the window, and he felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on his temple.

“See,” she said displaying the handkerchief, “it’s here too.”

He looked, nodded and smiled.

“So sudden,” she whispered. Her voice came like a chant as she repeated the word “sudden” three or four times. “It’s frightening -- frightening.” In a whisper.

She refolded the handkerchief neatly, into a square with different surfaces exposed, turned his head again and narrowed her eyes, drawing closer so that the scent of her presence again touched him.

“How hot it looks. It burns?”

“A little,” said Lang, fascinated by her fascination with a scall he could not see.

The woman seemed filled with wonder. He was bemused at her transformation from secretary to nurse.

She went on: “It *must* spare your eyes. It would hurt if it reached your eyes.”

“I don’t know how you can stand it, Miss Rickner,” Lang said evenly. “You shouldn’t do any more.” He gently pushed her hand, smiling at her, and she replied:

“There really isn’t anything I can do.”

He asked: “Will you run an errand for me?” He was a little uneasy proposing that she resume a secretary’s duties.

She withdrew slightly and the look of intense fascination left her eyes, which were now those of an employee, and she replied: “Of course.”

“Would you pick up this medicine on your way back from lunch? Here’s the address.”

“I’d be glad to,” she said exchanging the bloody handkerchief for the paper.

Lang telephoned for lunch to be brought up, which completed his arrangement of an afternoon in which he would have to see nobody but Miss Rickner. When the boy arrived with lunch Lang turned to the windows.

But the affliction advanced and he knew it would drive him out of the office. As he ate he tried to read an opinion and could not keep his mind on it, then he tried the morning paper and it too eluded him. He kept checking his wrists, running his fingertips over his forehead and

looking at the mix of blood and serum. But the focus of his most intense curiosity was his hands, chiefly their backs, which was the old route of advance of the affliction.

His broad hands with their scant blond hair -- veined, boned, muscled hands -- were still clear. When a half-hour later he stood alone in the descending elevator car looking down at them they had been breached, both of them, one almost symmetrically with the other. This proved without his looking that the scall now circled both wrists. He preferred not to look. Why look? He pulled on his sheepskin gloves and crossed the lobby without raising his eyes to a single face.

Lang held in dark contempt the three old futile numbers he had given to Miss Rickner, he despised them and all they represented, and his leaving the office before she returned with the medicine fed his hate; he hated the medicine more than the affliction itself. It didn't work. But he was not ashamed of ordering it. He didn't care whether the pharmacist refused to fill prescriptions this old or the doctor to reissue them. Because he felt an illogical sense of completion. Tomorrow he would come to work however severe the attack might prove and however his appearance might shock his colleagues. He could imagine no attack so crippling as to keep him from work. He could get the medicine tomorrow if he wanted it. But now. He didn't care.

This "now" thrilled him, for he had a feeling that this moment was pivotal. He felt like a man who believes he had found a way to express the meaning of his life -- except that at the critical moment the words fly away.

Lang, being a lawyer, spent his life in the midst of other people's crises, scarcely ever seeing a client who was not tangled in some mess, and it wore him down, it sharpened his wits but dulled his feelings. This put him in a kind of anguish. But now that anguish, which was nothing but despair over his fate, was gone; all his worries were gone, all the doubt, the hope and hopelessness -- gone. He felt suddenly stronger than the affliction, clean, raw, worthy of the battle. He felt a keenness of fruitful beauty in his life and he cared nothing for the affliction or its effects on his body.

He was walking north on Michigan Avenue. A cold searing wind rolled in from the lake and spread through the streets the same numbed desiccation as the windowed-rowed ice to the north and east, and the noontime crowds were bundled up against the cold, watery-eyed and rushed by the cold.

The hand of a stooped figure in black reached out at him, waving, from the side, and Lang turned.

“O young man, young man!” creaked a shrunken old woman, whose frozen hand in its little thin black glove grasped his sleeve.

“O listen, do,” she cried and her shawled head tilted back, and she seemed on the verge of falling over backward yet her eyes were fixed on him. “Heed, heed, heed me, heed me,” she called desperately.

Lang stopped and smiled but her hand fluttered near and her neat false teeth appeared in her parched face as she cried again “Heed,” and her wavering hand touched his overcoat again. “For your soul’s sake,” and her poor old head wagged as she called:

“Fall on your knees, study contrition, beg forgiveness, beg, plead, pledge, fall on your knees. O young man, O my boy, do it, and God, *God*” -- her mouth opened wide and Lang had the crazy idea that he could see part way into her throat -- “God will hear you and heal you, he will cast out this plague of devils -- but never go awhoring again, young man, never.”

Her black glove circled under his eyes and tugged lovingly at his sleeve.

“Never more,” she pleaded. “Fall on our knees, think of your soul, think of it!” She stood amazed at the horror of it, and she would have sung on, but Lang bent to her -- and her yellow eyes were shot through with fear at the sudden approach of his face, but she didn’t retreat.

“Pray,” she said in a tremulous whisper, “yield up your soul to God.”

“I will, sister. Forgive me, sister, I will.”

“Yes!” she cried ecstatically.

“Yes,” Lang responded patting her bony little hand. “Thank you, sister. How can I thank you?”

Her yellow eyes went skyward and she smiled to the sky, with her little frozen hand lifted up, and she sang, “Believe, only believe and all will be well,” and finally waving sadly at his back as he went up the sidewalk and was lost in the crowd, she continued admonishing the departed man, standing alone in the flowing crowds, and gradually her eyes cleared up as she became conscious of the cold. She shuddered in the cold.

Lang was a distress to the crowds. He walked in big lumbering strides and was too potent and large and too afflicted to be ignored, so their eyes which innocently found him glowed shamefully and then fled aside. He was evocative and thrilling to them, he evoked traces of

shame and guilt, fear and an inner leering; he distressed them, impinged on them, causing a friction they recoiled from. If they could do it again they would choose not to see, despite the thrill of seeing. Not one person in fifty saw him at all but this one was enough to create the friction, so he felt himself bringing a pressure against them. He was a tall and heavy-muscled man of forty years, wearing a Russian fur hat and a thick rust-colored overcoat. Until this morning he had been extraordinarily handsome because of his youthful and still-athletic body and his prematurely scored, harrowed face -- his legacy from the first visitation of the affliction.

When he was twenty it had laid down incipient creases on his brow and around his eyes and mouth, and these had cut deep into his face so that it was immensely expressive and strong -- whether in mirth or anger the lines sank themselves deep and intensified his every expression. It was a shifting, readable, awesome face, never in repose, always showing his emotions. The darkness that moved over his face was further darkened by these furrows, and his features were accented with dark strokes of an unseen brush. In this exaggerated prominence of his features there was a brutal self-assertion; it disappeared when he was awake but in his sleep it was there. He did not know it existed.

The affliction while it destroyed his skin gave a fearsome new life to his face, as if he had been burned by an assailant and he was seeking the man who did it. And the color of the trenches above his brows enriched the color of his eyes, whitened the whites and darkened the blue irises, made pits of the black centers. His eyes were alight as he thought of the old woman, her exclamations and her conviction that he'd been whoring. In a few minutes she passed from his thoughts. Her passion, the memory in his hand of her poor brittle bones, all this and the delight of the encounter passed away and left him where he had been, with the affliction, distressed and distressing.

The scall did not encase him or chain him to himself, rather it freed him. His mind and vision leapt. In the open cold he now felt a thin overlay of pain at his forehead and encircling light shackles of pain about his wrists -- but this could not cripple him nor call him back to himself, he was too far outside his self, he was in the place where he walked and in the minute. He was lucky, he saw, that the affliction had struck on such a beautiful cold day when the contrasts were so clean, when the smoke and vapor crystallized to a pure white against the sky and the lake ice glinted silver. He crossed over the Chicago River and continued north. He had no destination. Outside the Tribune building he saw a girl of about ten standing by herself at the

curb, shivering in a worn tweed coat. Her blue lips were parted and her chin was raised, and she was looking up and down the sidewalk, waiting, searching for someone but afraid to move from the spot where she stood. Her eyes rested on Lang but he was not the one she sought. She looked away, searching, caught in her sudden jerking shivers. She had neither hat nor scarf. He could see the rounded white collar of a cotton shirt under her coat. She wore low-cut shoes and white sox, and her bare legs were blue with cold. She looked at Lang again, then she turned and looked the other way and he could see her shoulders rounded against the cold. As he passed Lang caught sight of her clean pale face. Her brows lifted and she rose up on her toes and searched the sidewalk behind him, and he saw a little cloud of breath escape her lips. Then for a third time her eyes met his and she rested on his gaze for an instant, as he passed close by, and Lang almost spoke, almost asked if she were lost. And the girl almost smiled, but she was too frightened and she did not want to hurt Lang's feelings. A second elapsed and he had gone on. From the rear, broad-shouldered and huge, he now looked unapproachable and the girl trembled to think she had nearly spoken to him. Her tiny fists ached in the pockets of her old tweed coat.

Lang ceased noticing the cold and he no longer forced his eyes away from shop windows where he might see his image in the glass. Now his eyes roamed freely, now he was truly wandering. His feeling of friction with the crowds left him. His mind kept returning to the little girl's rounded white collar, and he could see her fingers buttoning the top button of her blouse in the morning and trying now in the cold to turn up this frail strip of cotton against the wind, but the fingers were stiff and the collar would not stay up. It fluttered in the wind, right up against her throat, beautiful and permeable and for some reason fascinating -- as if it were an emblem, not a simple collar but a pale necklace.

Lang lived in a house up near the Wisconsin line, a small sturdy stone-and-timber house built at the edge of the bluff over the lake, cut off from any paved road by a belt of young white pines. The trees grew so close together that the lower branches had been smothered as the top branches rose toward the sun, giving a thick overhead cover of green and an impenetrable clutter of intertwined dead smaller branches below. The floor of this pine belt lay deep in brown needles, twigs and fallen branches, and as the belt provided shelter it held the snow overlong. So in the

spring the floor was spongy and fragrant; in the late summer and fall it was tinder, and now in the present frigid weather it was bonded to the remnants of the snowfall of the past week. Here and there the ablated snow parted and the brown floor was visible, very nearly flat, as if trampled. Needles and wisps of green branch blown down by the lake wind lay scattered over the snow. The ungainly trunks pushed through everywhere, without pattern, and all but one were straight. The exception was an older, crooked and multitrunked tree that had grown up in open pasture, many years before the others. Its bark was rough and scored.

A lane barely wider than a car curved for a quarter of a mile through the pines from the paved road to the wide, flat bluff. Here the house stood, just one storey high, unsheltered at the edge of the bluff. Timber, fieldstone, and some brick, tight and solid, it was a house impervious to wind, snow or ice; warm in winter, cool in summer, with maximum glass facing the lake. The roof was pitched low, with projecting eaves, pierced in the center by a fieldstone chimney.

Lang lived here alone. To have the lane plowed after a heavy snowfall cost him thirty-five dollars and his annual real estate tax amounted to more money than he had earned in his first two years practicing law.

He had parked his car at the house and was now walking back along his tire tracks, crossing the open field, toward the green wall of pines. The snow was dry but not silent under his shoes. The wind bore in from behind. He approached the pine wall, then entered it and followed the lane into the midst of the pines, before stopping to listen to the blended whirl of the steady wind passing through the needles. Around him the ground was brown with no red in it, and the dark patches of snow among the trees were flecked with black. The lane itself formed a white passage softly curving around the big multitrunked tree. Lang followed its inviting course to the final curve before the paved road -- listened to a car passing -- and turned around to face toward the lake, which gave no hint of its presence. The wind faltered, then rose again with a stronger sound filtering through the treetops. Gradually it lost its power, and halted. There was a pregnant absence before the wind rose and resumed its whirring in the higher branches.

The bluff dropped nearly sheer to the beach. Lang skidded down the slope and walked on the hard sand, which had no snow on it, along a ragged moraine of ice blocks and panes which the waves had piled up along the surf line. The sand was frozen so he got none in his shoes -- and he thought of the little girl in her low-cut shoes.

Beyond the barricade of ice, in the shallows, the open water rippled passive under the sweep of the wind; and beyond this lay the prevailing ice, smooth to the horizon; and at the horizon he saw the streak of a black “water sky,” a dark band low in the sky signifying open water far out. At this beach in summer he swam every day, sometimes with others but often alone, and in winter he took such solitary walks as this and felt under his soles the frozen ridges of sand.

He entered the house, stripped off his gloves, hat, overcoat, suitcoat and necktie, and stood in shirt sleeves with his hands in his pockets, momentarily in a state of perplexity, glancing around the room. He walked to a mirror. The brilliant scall surrounded his eyes. He withdrew his hands without looking, and slowly raised them, spreading the fingers, and then looked. They were not as bad as he expected. He crossed to the kitchen, then walked down a narrow corridor giving on, first, a utility room, then a guest bedroom, a bathroom, Lang’s own bedroom and finally his study. He went straight to the study. He wrote a short letter to his sister in California, which he had not done in several months, asking after his nephews and telling her that his affliction seemed to be reappearing. Then he wrote to two friends from his Army Air Corps days whose correspondence he wanted to keep alive. The more he wrote the more difficult it became to write legibly. When he had sealed the letters he looked at his watch: four o’clock.

Then, thinking a shower would hurt less now than later, he went to the bathroom. It would be good to feel clean at the start. If the approaching attack were severe he’d be unable to shower for several days, possibly weeks.

He adjusted the water to a moderate stream at a fairly cool temperature, and at first the beating of the water against his chest refreshed him; but soon it became hot, though the temperature was unchanged, and in a minute it was unbearable, like a torch. In reaching down for the faucet he got some water on his head. His scalp seemed to split open in hundreds of fiery fissures. He shut off the water and stood as he was, bent and panting with the pain, trying to breathe deeply and evenly, with his eyes hard shut.

When he came to himself he was lying on the tiles in darkness, stiff with cold. He remembered feeling light-headed and weak in the legs; he remembered leaving the shower stall and sitting on the floor to wait for his body to dry, for the thought of a towel on his skin was not to be borne, but he was surprised to find he had slept or passed out. He still hated the prospect of cloth on his skin yet he was unwilling to stay naked. He got up slowly, bracing against the

wall, felt his way to the door and went slowly down the hall to his bedroom, which was lit by the moon reflecting off the ice of the lake.

This was a sight he loved -- and he turned to see it now. Tonight the silver was enriched with blue. He could see pure silver ice and a nearer belt of open water agitated by the wind. Nearer at hand, just below the bluff where he could not see it, the ice barrier was piled in jagged shards of blue, at rest yet implying by its chaotic arrangement on the silver sand a vast wild energy.

Lang's face in sleep rose out of the pillow with a horrific gauntness. The pallid moonlight mantled the cornice over his eyes, gleamed on his out-thrust nose and chin and searched palely over his lips. But all the dark places of his face were further darkened by the touch of the affliction and finally blackened by the dark of the night, so under his pale lips was a black shadow and under his chin dark gullies in the moon-swathed throat; and his eye sockets were caves, blind; while out of these caves ran the glimmering ridge of his nose, and above, as a shield, crossed the moonlit rim.

All his face was driven to an extreme by the dark, the moon and the scall. His symmetry and handsomeness were gone and he had instead this merciless, assertive sufferer's quality of gauntness. His chest was raw with the scall, as if torched; so were his arms, his male parts and the backs of his knees; and about his neck, as from time to time he turned his head restlessly, there formed a dark ring of watery blood.

In his troubled sleep he saw the little girl trembling in her threadbare coat. Now she was like a daughter to him and he approached her, but she didn't see him. Searching still, she looked beyond him, arching and straining her body, lifting her chin, searching anxiously, jumping up and down painfully on her freezing feet to see over the heads of the crowd. She turned and the wind parted her hair from behind, her shoulders twitched in a brief ague. She turned again toward him and her tormented eyes looked straight through his, searched right through him. The wind ruffled her collar.

Softly, gingerly, lifting his hand as if to calm her, Lang said, "Are you lost?" The girl's face lighted up. "Daddy?" she called over his shoulder. She was straining and jumping happily for a view over the heads. Lang was a yard away. He bent toward her and she stopped moving, she looked intently through him with aching eyes, saying "Daddy, here I am," and little clouds of

breath-smoke escaped from her mouth. "I'm here, darling," Lang said but didn't dare touch her. She narrowed her eyes as if she might have heard. "Oh Daddy!" she called.

Then Lang touched her on the shoulder, kindly. The joy vanished from her face and her sleek little eyebrows bunched together in fear, and the hand she had raised curled and descended slowly. Her eyes took on a look of uncertainty. Lang said, "Dearest child, I am right here." Suddenly her blue lips broke apart in a gasp. "Oh!" she sobbed and covered her face. "Oh oh," she gasped convulsively, sobbing, and when she uncovered her eyes and looked at him she screamed, "No, no, please!"

Lang opened his eyes, hearing a muffled knock somewhere. His collar and shirt clung to his body and his scalp and face burned. He groped for the little girl -- his supposed daughter -- but she was gone and the sidewalk was empty. He nearly wept, he felt his eyes smarting and his throat hardening with grief. Then he spied Miss Rickner lurking in a doorway and he strode down the sidewalk toward her, beckoning angrily. She approached boldly and fell in, pacing him, producing her notebook and pencil, saying nothing at all and walking in such a way that he couldn't hear her footsteps. He began dictating, gesturing as if in court, and they continued down Michigan Avenue for blocks and blocks, and Miss Rickner never once spoke or complained about the pace he was setting. Lang's gestures grew angrier and his voice more shrill. Miss Rickner copied it all down -- whatever it was. All he knew was that it was extremely important --

Walking, dictating, gesturing -- Lang began to suspect Miss Rickner was laughing at him. She thought it was all bombast. Her laughter changed everything in a flash. No longer a mere tool, she was now utterly apart from him, her soul and sex utterly separate from him. This aroused him. He yearned to possess her body, to turn her laughter to a groan of sexual gratification and release.

A lambent flame whirled in his loins. He stopped his "bombast" but she remained poised over her notebook, probably laughing to herself, and he could see, as he had seen that morning, the parting of her brown hair. He took her hand. The pencil dropped and she received his hand hungrily in her own two hands, like an embrace, but she would not lift her face. Slowly and tenderly he passed his other hand under her chin, to turn her face upward, but she resisted, still holding passionately to his hand.

He persisted in his gentle pressure, and then she allowed him slowly to turn her face upward. He big eyes fixed on him just as he turned violently away, shaking with nausea, struggling against the pressure in his throat to vomit all over the street. Miss Rickner's face was raw, curdled, afflicted.

She cried, "You can't stand me," and Lang began to retch. When he had exhausted himself he could still hear the hollow sound of her dying footsteps.

Lang sat up all at once. He was hot. Outside the moonlight whitened the lake ice and touched the snow on the ground near the house with a hard sheen. In the room everything was bathed in dark moonlight. There was a faint thudding somewhere. He got up and switched the lights on, and saw the clock: eight. He walked slowly through the house toward the front door, turning on lights as he went. He was fully clothed but barefoot. As he reached the door the knocking stopped. He opened the door.

He had forgotten the dream but the woman's presence answered to something inside him -- so he was not surprised to see her.

Miss Rickner said: "I'm sorry to keep knocking, but I --"

"Don't apologize. Come in, please."

"No, I can't," she protested. "I've just brought your medicines. I didn't know whether -- I thought you might need them." She held out a package wrapped in paper and string and Lang took it.

He repeated, "Come in, please. You've driven such a long way -- you should have telephoned. I really can get along without this stuff, or I hope I can."

She came in and they went to the kitchen.

She said, "I didn't call because I knew you'd tell me not to bother."

"That's exactly what I would have told you."

Another woman might have expected him, about now, to say thank you; but it didn't occur to Miss Rickner.

She said, "You're neglecting yourself," turning to face him in the full light of the kitchen.

"Really?" he laughed, but he sat down -- because he could no longer stand and he didn't want to do anything so dramatic as falling over.

His shirt was soaked with blood. His face from the nose upward was aflame, including his eyelids, which were thickened and cracked, and the thickening of the lids gave his eyes a dull

and hostile look which did not reflect his state of mind. The Lang of the dream was an angry man but the man facing Miss Rickner was a grateful one.

He said, "I'm not neglecting myself, it isn't that at all." He smiled and added: "What can I do?"

"You are letting it --"

"What?" he asked when her voice trailed off. "Letting it what?"

"Well, you're letting it come right in. Take over. You're doing nothing to stop or hinder it. Are you."

"Good God, Miss Rickner, what do you want me to do?"

"May I take off my coat?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, please do. And have a seat."

She removed her coat and scarf. She was wearing a long-sleeved black jersey dress with a high neckline, and pearls -- the dress of this morning.

"It's not a question," Lang said, "of whether I am letting anything happen. It doesn't obey me. I could hate and curse it all night long, if that's what you'd call a healthy resistance, and in the morning it would have gone on just the same. It has a will of its own."

"Well of course," she conceded.

"Yes, exactly, of course. Or I could swim around in a tub of these medicines for a week. By the way, thank you. Or if you wish, I could consult every doctor in the city for the rest of my life and on the day I died the thing would still be there if it wanted to be there."

She shrugged as if these comments meant nothing to her and she asked: "Have you seen a doctor?"

"I used to go to doctors when this little stripe came along, which is not a stripe any more, and each doctor gave it a different name, all very impressive because in Greek, but if you look up the meaning of it, it comes down to something really inspiring like 'burning skin' or 'inflamed area.' I used to read their medical books." He waved his hand vaguely. "The diagnosis is completely blind and the treatment simply trial and error. There is no theory whatever, Miss Rickner. You have a burning face, a flow of blood and serum, so let's try smearing on a little wood tar or blood of field mice. It's all straight out of Shakespeare."

"Blood of field mice?" she echoed with a smile.

He unwrapped the package. There was an aluminum tube, a large brown bottle and a squat jar. He opened the jar and took a pinch of yellow powder between his fingers. "It might as well be sand," he said, "but sand is cheaper."

The trace of a smile still lingered on the woman's lips.

"Won't you sit down?" Lang said. "Please."

"I would think you ought to use the medicine," Miss Rickner said very cautiously, as if she hadn't heard, "not necessarily as a cure --" She hesitated; the smile faded and she stared at Lang's face as if in pain.

"But to take the edge off it?" Lang asked.

"Yes."

"Miss Rickner, have you ever had anything like this?"

"Such a disease as yours, you mean?" She smiled again as if she were one step ahead of him and lifted her hands in acquiescence. She said: "I'm very sorry. I won't say anything more about it."

"Don't be sorry. You're perfectly right, as far as that goes. The stuff does cool it down a bit, and I'll use it, since you've brought it."

"You will use it?"

"Yes, why not?"

She sat down across from Lang and leaned forward with her hands folded on the table, staring at her hands.

Lang said, "It's odd. It's extraordinarily odd, the way I feel at this moment. I can't express it."

She looked up and found that he was watching her and she accepted the heavy challenge of his eyes and even held his stare, and they were locked together in this intense interpenetration as Lang continued:

"I'm stricken with this -- whatever it is -- with this damned vile excretion of hot fluids, as if I were a smart-aleck and somebody had finally caught me and decided to show me --" He plucked at his crusted shirt. "And it makes me weak, dizzy, I can hardly stand up tonight --"

Miss Rickner interrupted, speaking quickly, "You have opened so much -- those -- cracks-- But why do you call it vile. It isn't vile, it's merely a -- I don't find it vile at all."

"I do."

“No, no, it isn’t at all,” she insisted patiently, almost whispering. “You may think so because you have to endure all the discomfort of it, but to others, at least to me, there is nothing vile or ugly in it. It is awful, yes, horrifying, it frightens me, I admit --”

And Lang smiled.

“I don’t mean I think its contagious,” Miss Rickner protested. “It is frightening in a different way, as if I were witnessing some -- great --” She stopped and concluded: “You’re an educated man, you explain it.”

“You are simply repelled,” he said, half meaning it. Her habit of ignoring certain of his statements excited him, being a form of rebellion.

She resumed: “It’s as if I saw a man in the street with a knife in his chest, and he was walking, staggering down the street and his eyes were wild, but he didn’t say a word, just went along --”

“A striking picture, Miss Rickner.”

“Yes, but not vile. Terrifying, if you identify with the man -- as one human being to another.”

“I should think.”

“And -- I --”

Her voice stopped and her large green eyes were suddenly transformed -- and Lang thought of the word she had used, “wild,” as she stared at him through a long silence.

For a minute he feared she might say something -- terrible -- but all she said was:

“And I would find him --”

“Find him what? Sickening?”

“I would find him compelling. Great.”

“Great? Meaning what?”

In a softer voice, ignoring his question, she said, “Not vile.”

He saw a deep kindness in her eyes and thought she might touch him.

“Oh, the hell with it,” said Lang. “Did you know that a lady prayed over me in the street this afternoon? She was convinced I had syphilis and she sang a prayer for me to stay away from whores.”

“Good idea,” said Miss Rickner as if she meant it.

“Maybe. I told her I’d pray.” He waited for a response and when she said nothing, but only stared patiently at him, he added, “She was a kind-hearted woman but it was almost funny how she recoiled from the sight of me. If you were me, would you pray?” Lang was smiling unguardedly but the swelling about his eyes cast a confusion over his face and made the expression seem menacing. But he did not intend to menace her -- rather to see her in every detail of her intelligent, captivating face.

“If I were you,” said Miss Rickner, “I would do what you would do. Since I am not, I have no way of knowing what that might be. Shall I make coffee? Or do you want to go to bed? You look very tired.”

“You know,” he said as if after serious thought, “it’s a major flaw in society that a woman like you isn’t a millionaire.”

She said, “I’ll make coffee.”

“Yes, but wait a minute,” Lang replied abruptly. “I was starting to tell you about this --” he pointed to his face, as if “this” were himself -- “this feeling in me, this new condition. I can’t describe it. In the first place I am smitten with this damned plague which not only makes me utterly incompatible with the rest of humanity but which is also painful. It really sometimes is just pure pain.”

“Yes,” she said. “It burns.”

“But wait now. I have it, but the thing I’m groping toward is to tell you that somewhere inside I am glad.”

Very slowly a thin smile illuminated her face.

“Deep, deep, deep,” he continued, driving his fingers repeatedly against his chest, “deep inside I am glad. Elsewhere I hate it and it nearly kills me, but deep inside where it counts I am satisfied. Do you think it’s amusing somehow?”

“No, no, Mr. Lang. I am smiling because -- deep down --” She touched her breast and smiled still more openly -- “deep inside me there is something that forces me to smile. But it isn’t that I am amused by your discomfort.”

“Queer of you,” he commented dryly.

“Yes, and queer of you to be so pleased about this.”

“I’m not exactly pleased. I don’t know what it is, really, but, you see, I know what’s ahead, I know I’m going to be driven half out of my mind with the burning, the blood and the

serum, but chiefly the burning -- and I know that if I lift my arm --" and he raised his arm, watching Miss Rickner's transfixed gaze -- "to tie my necktie, I simply know as a matter of pure, cold information that my skin is going to break and bleed. It is just impossible to live a normal life with this god damned mess all over your body."

"Yes," she whispered, leaning somewhat closer.

In the acuteness of his senses Lang perceived her womanly odor, which reached him as a mixture of perfume and of her body her clothing.

"Yes," Miss Rickner repeated, "it is, it must be, humiliating. Slightly, in yourself. But not enough to count."

He continued: "In spite of everything there is this incredible gladness, truly incredible. Very little of it, actually, but what there is is miraculous. Don't you think so? That I should have any gladness at all? I saw such touching beauty everywhere I looked today --" but he did not confess that this included herself -- "such stirring -- harmony --" thinking of the ice on the lake and the deep pines, thinking of Miss Rickner entering his office in a form he had never before seen.

Lang was weak and dizzy and he rested his chin between his fists, staring with fascination at Miss Rickner's hands resting on the table.

She asked quietly: "Have you had dinner?"

She put on an apron she found in the cleaning woman's closet and made a simple meal of fried steak, salad, bread and coffee. As Lang ate she sat opposite sipping the hot coffee and watching him wordlessly, with a certain detachment, as a farm wife watches her husband eat his warmed-up dinner when he has come in late, out of a cold night's chores: except for these two the kitchen is empty, the house quiet, work finished, and she watches while he cuts and eats his food with as much fatigue as appetite, and she observes certain trivial details about his face and hands as if each one confirms her knowledge of him. Her heart evaluates him freely, critically but with acceptance. Thus in a perfect calm Miss Rickner sat with upraised cup and watched Lang, and received with barely a nod his compliment on her cooking.

Lang was strengthened by the food but the attack had entered a new phase of virulence. He had gone to the study and lain down on a leather couch. Miss Rickner drew a bath for him, measuring out the yellow powder and stirring it into the water. She knelt on a folded towel and slowly stirred the warm water with her hand. Her face was full of peace. Her lips opened with a

song that she whispered melodiously, and she was singing thus whisperingly when Lang appeared in the doorway. He listened while she sang unaware, her body curved over the yellow water and her rushy voice and song setting forth from her throat innocently.

She sang: "When we two meet -- in the city -- in the woods -- on a plain -- in violent autumn weather -- when we two meet and --"

She heard him. She stood up, wiped her hands and left the room. When Lang returned to the study after a quarter of an hour wearing pajamas and a robe she was sitting in a black leather chair near the couch with a book in her lap.

"Are you feeling any better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And have you used the other medicines?"

"No. There's no point in pretending they have any effect, they only gum up my clothes."

He did feel better but looked worse. The affliction now covered his face and despite the lubricating effect of the bath there were threads of blood in the laughter lines that streaked back from his eyes. He sat down but after a moment, with a cautious, sliding motion, stretched out to full length with his feet propped on an arm of the couch.

He saw that Miss Rickner was smiling at him in a curiously indirect way.

"You can't keep from smiling, can you? I swear, Miss Rickner, you have the most morbid idea of what's funny."

"No, no," she insisted hurriedly, "I see nothing funny. But it's incredible to me that -- when I see you as you are now -- that you should be glad, even in some small mysterious way."

"Oh hell, I'm not really glad, Miss Rickner."

"I know. You can't explain or express it. If I had such a thing as this I could express precisely how I felt about it." A new tension lighted her face as she gazed at Lang, at the affliction covering his cheeks and circling his eyes, with this ambiguous tension in her gaze.

"I'm sure you could, Miss Rickner. You have a talent."

"I would simply hate it, hate it."

Lang replied in a level voice, "So do I hate it."

"I would endure it if I had to," she continued, with her lucent green eyes now enlarged and fastened on him, "but I wouldn't search it hoping to find some little pearl of happiness."

"Why do you say such a thing?"

“My reaction would be visceral, not philosophical. Mine would be terror, distress, fury, because it is so unjust. I would condemn it and hate it.”

“Why unjust? We are human, we are animals, Miss Rickner.”

“And we deserve it? No, no.”

“So would your fury cure it?”

“I didn’t say it would, and I wouldn’t care. I would get beyond caring very fast.”

“Would you? How do you know that?”

“I just would.”

He said with a light smile: “And you wouldn’t care about the injustice.”

“No.”

Cynthia Rickner sat still in the chair with the book in her lap for a half-hour after Lang fell asleep. His body was motionless as death. His hand near her knee had slipped to the floor long ago and lay there now with the fingers curled and the arm slanted down. With his face scalded, his arm cast down and his cracked hand empty, he was like a soldier struck down in battle and carried home to be washed, for display and earth -- when the women hesitate before him. Miss Rickner felt driven to touch him, her arms suffused with a keen urge to embrace him. She yearned to press her hands on his chest and looked unseen into his face and sink to his mouth.

She put the book aside and lifted his hand (it was heavy) and stretched out his arm at his side on the couch. He did not awaken. She left the room to find a blanket, found one in his bedroom, and came back. The hand and arm had fallen again, slanting down with blood at the wrist. He was sublime and stark, this dead soldier. She flung out the folds of the blanket and drew it religiously over him to his shoulders, then knelt down, sitting on her heels, and took his hand in her hands, holding it in her lap and gazing as she had so often hoped to gaze, unseen, into his face. Still he did not awaken. Presently she lifted the blanket and replaced his hand at his side, and then with her arm still inside the blanket she encircled his chest, then rested her head on his chest and listened to his breathing and heartbeat. She joined him in sleep, sitting on the carpet with her chest and shoulders resting on the edge of the couch, listening till his sounds blended into a strange and peaceful dream.

She felt she must have slept for hours but the room was the same, the balance of its warm light against the blackness at the windows, the silence, her arm on his chest, and his breathing --

all were the same. His hand had again fallen and now lay in the jersey valley between her thighs, where she let it stay. Even in sleep she had been conscious somehow of the hand that had fallen into her lap and she had dreamt of it with a dilation in her loins. Awake, she was turgid in her center for him, she had made ready the portal and path; but as minutes passed she came to her senses and her congestion of readiness subsided as a congestion of sorrow arose in her throat and eyes. She did not weep but she wished she could.

Miss Rickner went quietly through the house turning off lights and let herself out by the front door into the zero cold and blackness of the night. The wind was still up, and she hurried to her car. She experienced a moment of panic and delight when she thought it was frozen, but then the engine started and she swung around the loop of the driveway, passing Lang's car, and drove into the pine belt, into the white sinuating lane. She drove west to the main road and took it south.

A drive on this highway was always an event in her life. She pushed the car to eighty-five and for a short stretch to ninety, but the traffic was too heavy and she was forced to slow down. Thereafter she was relaxed.

In her apartment in town Miss Rickner dropped on the bed without removing her coat and lay with eyes open, contemplating the image of Lang as she had seen him last, feeling again in her hands and in her lap the weight of his warrior hand. She had kept the integrity of her mind, tongue and body, she had neither crawled nor pleaded, she had been her own mistress throughout; but also she had approached him, she had won the voluptuous joy of the approach. She possessed therefore both herself and him, in a way, and she was serene.

She began to undress. She removed her coat, pearls, watch and shoes, opened the zipper on her jersey dress and drew it over her hips and shoulders, then fetched her robe from the closet and went to the bathroom.

Carefully but with efficient skill she unraveled the cotton-strip bandages on her right upper arm, dropping the strips in the sink and throwing into a special bag the used, bloody gauze; she then unwound the cotton strips on her forearm, again throwing away the gauze and putting the strips in the sink to be washed. She did the same with the bandages on her left arm.

Miss Rickner removed her slip and other garments. She untied the cotton tapes which held in place the thigh and midriff bandages, which she herself had made, throwing the bandages into the sink and, as before, discarding the soiled gauze. She then applied medication and a fresh

set of bandages for the night, put on her robe, and washed the old set, which she arrayed on a towel rack to dry. She went to the bedroom, laid out her clothing for the next day, and then for the first time since dinner looked at a clock: one in the morning.

She was nearly always in bed by midnight because her difficulty worsened if she got too little sleep, yet she couldn't go to bed now. She was too happy to sleep.

## Part II

### “Self-inflicted wounds”

At ten the next morning Lang stood naked while the doctor walked around him muttering. Lang had not seen this doctor since the first wave of the affliction twenty years ago, and in those days the man was already covered with tiny, dry wrinkles. He was perfectly bald but otherwise much the same; certainly he appeared no older. He had installed new furnishings and equipment in his office and changed his circular silver-rimmed glasses for a more stylish pair with plastic rims and brown-tinted lenses. He wore a long white coat with deep side pockets where he concealed his hands, and he had a square white mustache. To Lang he looked smaller than before, about five feet high, but upright.

“Drawing blood,” he said using precisely the words he'd used on Lang's first visit.

“I woke up this way,” Lang informed him.

“Yes. It's the old story. You'll never make any progress if this is allowed to happen at night. You must wrap up, Mr. Lang.”

It was while Lang slept that the damage had been done. Throughout the previous day, from the minute he discovered the sign on his wrist until he went to sleep on the couch, he had anticipated this — that the doctor would warn against self-inflicted wounds, as he had done twenty years ago. He listened to the doctor but somehow he was also thinking of Miss Rickner. He had awakened thinking she was here, in his house. She was not.

In sleep he had seen a man he could not recognize threatening him with a knife. The assailant dragged the blade across his chest and left a bleeding line, across his forehead and down both cheeks, and down the center of his chest. When Lang awoke he was bleeding more or

less generally, the blood mixing with serum -- as if this bloody serum were evidence of a power embedded deep in his nature, so deep he could never know it.

Now again -- naked before the doctor with his wounds on display -- marks almost of shame -- the ascetic joy glowed within, merely because he was enduring. He thought: "I'll tell her --" Miss Rickner -- while the doctor stepped around him saying:

"You must avoid as far as possible all artificial irritation of the skin. This is a constant test of your powers of free choice and thus a constantly recurring opportunity to strengthen those powers."

These were just the words he'd used twenty years ago.

He took a hand from his pocket and ran his fingertips over Lang's shoulder, feeling the texture, then squeezed, to see if the skin would yield a discharge under pressure. He wiped his fingers on the sleeve of his coat.

"Your muscles are hard as iron, but your skin is sensitive to all influences physical and psychic."

"I was fine until yesterday."

"All this has come since yesterday?"

"Yes," said Lang.

The doctor sat on the window sill, facing Lang, with his hands back in his coat pockets and a crooked expression of affectionate bafflement on his face. "The behavior of this scall repeatedly amazes me," he said, and Lang cast him an amused glance, which sobered him. He continued: "Your exudation is more profuse and bloodier than most."

He gestured for Lang to dress, and said: "I usually recommend a change of climate -- Arizona, Texas, some sunny, warm place. That is not only because of the chafing of our cold winds but because the heated buildings in which we spend so much of our lives are also dried buildings, their air had been dried as if purposely to rob the skin of moisture. And the sun of the southern climates is good for the skin."

The doctor paused, looking through his brown-tinted glasses, behind which his eyes were visible as in a cloud. He said: "But I suppose you are not free to choose your location."

"My practice is here," Lang responded.

"Practice?"

"My law practice."

“Ah, so you became a lawyer, just as you hoped you would. Do you go into court and argue before juries.”

“Yes, quite often.”

The doctor pursed his lips, which swelled the white mustache a bit, and wagged his head as if shuffling this problem into place. “Well,” he ventured, “We can afford some topical relief to tone down the inflammation, so in a short time it will be far less angry than it is now.”

He left his perch on the window sill and sat at his desk, where he found Lang’s old record on top of a neat stack which his nurse had placed squarely in the center of a hopeless litter of other papers. He began turning pages, and finally wrote out four prescriptions, ripping off the sheets from a little square pad and lining them up at the edge of his desk for Lang to take. Two were medicines he had prescribed twenty years ago and which Lang had at home in the batch Miss Rickner had brought, a third was for a new drug with unpredictable side effects -- Lang kept track of developments -- and the last was something unknown to him.

The doctor capped his pen. “It isn’t as if I understand what is wrong with you,” he said. “You realize, I assume, that I do not. You present with a certain recognizable arrangement of symptoms which has been observed and described more or less frequently, and I know from my experience and reading that certain substances will afford a measure of relief -- sometimes, mind you, total, complete relief; what we would call a cure if we were certain it wasn’t an accident. But most often not.

“Now I cannot tell why Substance A will calm the inflammation, except in the vaguest and most unsatisfactory language. You understand, then, where we are. We are in the dark, Mr. Lang. I prefer to look at the dark and call it dark, you see, rather than leading you by the hand as if I could see where I’m going. This is my version of the scientific method. We are in the empirical realm entirely. If one medicine doesn’t work we cease using it; if another works, we use it even though we don’t know why.

“What we try to do, you see, is to sustain the patient until he can cure himself. That is all we can do; give him some relief and a chance to set himself to rights. We treat symptoms rather than causes. On causes I can say only that your disease must proceed from an alliance of the physical and the psychological, the last being what some doctors still call ‘nerves.’ Doctors will say you have a case of nerves. Well, so do we all. But your nerves somehow have attacked you

quite violently, viciously.” The doctor paused, blinking spasmodically, and very deliberately adjusted his glasses.

“May I ask you,” he continued, “just how -- whether suddenly or gradually -- and as precisely as you can recall it -- just how this thing *disappeared* when you had it last?” There was an attack of blinking behind the tinted lenses and another careful adjustment of the glasses. “Unless you prefer not to discuss it. The memory is perhaps too painful.”

Lang in fact had never spoken of the old cure with anyone but he felt a strong affection for this antique little doctor whose “scientific method” was so congenial. A doctor is such a perfect tyrant once you agree to enter his office. If you harbor any presumption of equality -- even if you are a member of the bar admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court -- he can nevertheless tell you to stand there naked while he walks around issuing thoughtful grunts; and if you still have any conceit left he can advise you with a straight face to “develop your powers of free choice.” So Lang felt good about the doctor now, having risen in the world so swiftly in the last minute merely by putting his clothes back on. Moreover he was free of embarrassment about the old cure because those times were so remote. That past world had perished and the Philip Lang of that time had transformed himself into another man. Therefore he spoke easily of the old cure. And for the same reason the account of it that he gave now did not raise his hopes about the present. His mind as now constituted saw no source of hope in the queer history of the young man he had once been.

“Naturally,” Lang assented, “I’d be happy to tell you.”

“Good,” said the doctor going absolutely still and expectant.

“But I’m afraid it won’t be much help in the present case.”

The doctor motioned to a chair and Lang sat down, catching his trousers at the knees and pulling them gingerly upward.

Lang began: “One day I was as you see me now,” and he paused with hands lifted toward his face.

The doctor nodded and supplied: “Severe distress.”

“I had been worse before I started using your medicines, but it was already clear they could only touch the surface. In any case there I was, cut off from normal life. At the worst, two weeks before, I had been very nearly a bed case from the bleeding and the exaggerated sensitivity over my whole body, but your medicines rather quickly raised me up from that point.

I had the energy and general health of a normal man of twenty but I was blocked by this *thing* which was all over me -- as it is now. And then the thing left me so suddenly I didn't realize at first it was gone, or going."

Lang paused again because he took pleasure in watching the face of his audience, which had now stiffened as if awaiting a needle.

"It's true," Lang asserted quietly.

"How could it be?"

"Of course the effects remained."

"Oh! Well, then, well, well," said the doctor rolling his head.

"But the cause was gone," Lang insisted. "The very thing the medicines cannot touch was gone. It took weeks for the effects to disappear," said Lang, "and indeed the creases in my face never did go away completely; they are still there today under this mess, but as nearly as one can properly use the word *cured*, I was cured. I went to bed like this and got up the next morning knowing it was over."

"Plausible," the doctor conceded. "In cases like this anything is."

"And true," Lang asserted. "I continued to treat myself with the medicines but it was obvious that the wounds were not new, the scall was fading, the scorching heat was moderating, the bleeding had stopped. I could flex my arm without opening cracks in my skin. At that time I was fanatically religious," Lang went on, "passionately and --"

"Fanatically?"

"Almost. Where I walked God walked. God and I were in constant possession of one another, I believed, and God was guiding me and revealing his will to me. I was in a state of endless orison, as a lover is in a state of communion with his beloved. Such was my relation with the almighty, doctor, long long before the time I was hit with this affliction. It had been so from the time I was about sixteen, and I certainly know it was so before I came here to college.

"After I arrived here it really took hold of me -- or I took hold of it -- the passion for God -- God and I seized one another. It -- our relationship sometimes became a little ridiculous. I used to hitch rides downtown to my job and I reached the point where I prayed for cars to stop for me, and if they didn't I found an outlet for my overflowing spirituality. I could be a regular Job over the failure of a car to pick me up."

"You were young," said the doctor in mitigation of Lang's foolishness.

“Yes. Deep in my mind, constant orison; on the surface, will this car pick me up? One day I noticed how ridiculous this was and I ceased praying for myself or giving thanks for trivia. I decided the relation of God to me, and me to him, ought to be grander and greater. Before, I had shone because I prayed so much; now I shone because I prayed so little, as a petitioner. I had quit bothering God with my petty requests. I stopped that nonsense altogether and fell back on the inarticulate prayer of orison, which is an attitude and atmosphere of holy, humble consciousness of God’s majesty and one’s own subordination and love. I was a greater man now. Asking for nothing I received everything. That was God’s way and it was the great miracle of the universe.

“Even so there was something like martyrdom in my life now. Nobody was scorning me for the Lord’s sake, I was not being thrown to the lions and in fact nobody knew -- yet I was breathing the fumes of my own martyr-like silence. It was the happiest period of my life and from that time to this I have never felt so self-realized or so confident that I was on the right track. And I never will again, I’m sure. You probably don’t realize how troubled with excruciating little difficulties the life of a mystical Christian is. No, you probably have no idea. Who does?”

Lang broke off, smiling, and placed the doctor under scrutiny. The doctor neither answered nor moved.

“Well, doctor, if you hate a man even in the slightest, or if you’re impatient or irritated, or if you enjoy the act of forming a low estimate of a man’s character, to you it’s nothing. But to the Christian who is truly caught up it would be potentially an agony, a cause for self reproach and mental flagellation. In the old days I could give myself hours and even days of haunted humiliation and a sense of unworthiness over just such trifles. The goals, the aspiration of the passionate Christian are so high they are by definition unattainable. But his spirit is capricious and weak. He may pass over unnoticed a dozen worse sins but once he notices one single imperfection, an omission or act, woe unto him. You can’t conceive of the trifles for which passionate Christians punish themselves mercilessly. To others they must be infinitely merciful, like the savior, but to themselves they are allowed to be extremely cruel. That paradox is what makes it work.

“It was while I was in this condition of exalted sorrow and bliss that the affliction struck. In fact it came at the very peak of a spiritual ascent I seemed to have been making for some days. It caught me in the fullness of my spirituality.”

Said the doctor: “This narrative is not so strange to me as you seem to think.”

“It seemed perfectly natural to me at the time. I took it as a special favor or as my individual fate, it meant something, it was a sign, a manifestation of my relationship with God, a cloud hovering over the ark of the covenant. In my lowdown way I took it as a proof. If God didn’t exist he couldn’t smite me; if he smote me, he existed.

“Which of course signified a weakness of faith, that I sought proofs and signs -- and this together with the pride I found myself attaching to the event took all the goodness out of it, and in short I was left in a state of pure suffering. Just pure -- suffering. God alone could cure me. I knew that doctors could not.”

“We can help.”

“Yes, you can ameliorate the suffering, and I am grateful. That’s why I’m here. But a cure? No.”

“That’s true.”

“But there was a secret flaw in my faith. I had already begun to doubt the God who I still insisted was my only hope.”

Smiling, as if he expected to see an amusing reaction from the doctor, Lang leaned forward, placed his hand on the cluttered desk, under the doctor’s face, and slowly doubled his fist hard up, and slowly the skin stretched taut and split open in a score of cracks across his knuckles.

“Just like that,” he said smiling, examining the cracks, the blood and shining serum. “That hurts, doctor.”

The doctor cleared his throat and said, “Then why do it?”

“Oh, just -- notifying God, maybe.” He blew on his hand, then resumed: “I was suffering for the sins of others. Well, not really. No, I think rather that I was hoping to hasten the forgiveness and salvation of others or preclude a little suffering somewhere. It was a convoluted chain of reasoning. But I know that the classic examples of vicarious suffering among the saints all seemed negative to me, redemptive, and my own small sufferings were affirmative, as if they would prevent the occurrence of a single horrible event.

“When you take suffering upon yourself in atonement for somebody else’s sin you presume a vengeful God. Once you become conscious of that your faith is on a slippery slope. That was my hair-shirt mentality, doctor. I was mystical, and the affliction came along to deepen the mystery.

“I was in a terrible state, almost incompetent. I had quit my job, because who could work in a restaurant looking like this? I spent an afternoon in bed, and later I got up to take a walk outside when it was too dark for me to scare people, and I saw a car -- a thirty-nine La Salle, black, a sedan, and it skidded --”

Lang raised his hand as if to show where he saw the car. “The street was icy. The La Salle rotated over the ice. There was a little girl just stepping off the curb opposite me and the rear of the car swung around and the bumper caught her and took her away, like a dancing partner. She was still vertical and one of her hands was still in her coat pocket and the other was drawn up to her shoulder. She swung away and appeared to be sinking. She just kept on sinking, and was being dragged under, but the car was always catching up with her and partially supporting her. I think at that point she was unhurt. But before the skid ended she had sunk out of sight with a thudding sound and the car had left her on the ice while it was rotating on down the street. It made a terrific crash when it hit a utility pole -- but the girl made no sound at all.

“I went to her, where she was lying on the ice. She was looking up into the night sky. If she had been killed I think I would have said in my mind, ‘She’s not suffering.’ The trouble was that I saw suffering in her eyes — not physical suffering — it was —”

The focus of Lang’s eyes hardened under the tumid hood of his brows but in a moment, after letting his words hang in the air, he again examined his bleeding hand. The discharge was always a problem -- whether to blot it up, which abraded the cracks and fed the burning, or let it dry naturally, which was best but required insane patience. Regarding his hand, he found it vile; he recoiled from the vileness on his hand and body, of his condition, his breakdown. He knew that man was noble, or could be -- a thing he had forgotten from one attack to the next. He studied his hand.

“I don’t understand what influence, if any, the girl had on me, whether she made a connection somewhere deep inside me where I worked these things out, or not. There was something that propelled me in those days which was not a reasoning process and the girl may have entered into that. Or maybe she was an appeal to me to use my reason -- about God.

Looking back on these things it is really incredible how many times I have thought man is a simple animal driven by lust and greed.”

He looked at the doctor, smiling again. The doctor’s lids lowered behind his tinted glasses but he kept his peace.

“What I know is that the girl was present in my mind for days, and she called up several other unfortunates. One was a girl from my grammar school named Emily Hurst, a farm girl from poor country who wore paper-thin dresses even in winter and always carried a handkerchief balled up in her hand. Another was a woman I’d seen on the street downtown -- light gray-blue eyes, with a -- There were several, several. But mainly I saw the girl staring up into the sky. She seemed to know something I didn’t, which somehow didn’t frighten her, but whatever it was it managed to make me uneasy about life.

“I reached a turning point beyond which I wasn’t suffering for anybody else but myself, by which I mean that the heroics had gone out of it for me, the meaning of it. I don’t say I had concluded that such suffering was futile, that it had no meaning or reward for anybody, but -- I -- got nothing from it and put nothing into it.

“I fell down on my knees and prayed like a whipped dog. God had cured the sick and could cure me if he would, and Jesus had promised that if you ask in his name his Father would give, so I took it literally and asked according to the instructions. You can see how silly that was. But I was at least through with monkishness, I was so sick I couldn’t function as a person in society, and I wanted cured. But in the midst of my desperation the secret flaw was still there.”

“Which flaw?”

“In my faith.”

“Nobody’s faith is perfect, Mr. Lang.”

“Mine certainly wasn’t. Because I had the idea, which I suppressed repeatedly, that if I could be cured then I would re-examine the whole idea of faith, to face its irrationality fearlessly.”

“There is nothing wrong with that,” the doctor argued, sounding as if he spoke of his own judgment on a similar subject in his own life.

“Oh yes there is,” said Lang. “I was asking to be cured by a God I was ready to abandon.”

“If you asked, or ‘begged like a whipped dog,’ you had faith. Why else would you ask?”

“Doctor, that is too simple. Anyway I was kneeling upright, you might say, and praying with a dignity, or what I thought was dignity, petitioning --”

“Like a whipped dog?”

“I don’t pretend to be consistent. I prayed in the name of the Son for something he had seemed to say I had a right to -- and the disease got worse. After two days I was doubled over begging.”

“And you’re going to tell me God cured you,” said the doctor in a low voice.

“Not in the least. I got worse. But I kept on begging, humbling myself to the very bottom. I was sick and afraid and wretched, and I begged to be made whole. But it didn’t work.”

“What a strange thing,” observed the doctor. “I should have thought that for a person such as you describe prayer would have some effect, despite your so-called flaw.”

“But the point was I hadn’t gone far enough.”

“How could you go farther?”

“My praying was genuine enough but I was still hanging on to pieces of myself. There was a boundary I hadn’t crossed. Eventually I saw the boundary as clearly as you might see a barbed wire fence, and I trembled before it, but not for long, because I was desperate. It was amazing how quickly I stopped trembling with fear and hesitation and began trembling in a frenzy to cross over. You are aware all the time of what is happening, which is one of the wonders of it. So --” Lang raised his hands, the rest being plain, at least to him.

“So you crossed this boundary?”

“Yes. I found that I was walking to a church, which was empty and nearly dark. I had had neither breakfast nor lunch and could just stagger down the central aisle, seeing the alter ahead. I had an hour of blind, deaf ecstasy, pure transport, union. It’s impossible to describe, and even the mystics like Saint Teresa resort to metaphors to describe it. But in a manner of speaking it’s a rediscovery of yourself and of God, whom you thought you knew. Everything you did and thought to that point is revealed as half-life; life begins with the transport, the union, the blind bliss.

“It consists of opening your hands, which have been grasping tight to pieces of your self, and loosening your grip altogether, letting your whole self go out and submerge into God. It is total surrender. It consists in transforming one’s self into putty in God’s hands, entirely, not

holding back a shred of your soul or personality or body or any other modality of your being. It is total deliverance and it is totally voluntary, or else of course it is nothing. A prayer can be faked and turned to service, you think, as even orison can, I believe, but not this, not conversion. If a whisp of doubt or regret or self-hate blows up, however slight, it isn't conversion. Conversion is pure, extreme and final.

“Either I had suppressed my awareness of the flaw and of my intention to get the goods and run, or that intention had left me at a convenient moment. I believe now that I never abandoned the intention but I also know that I was pulled by my suffering into a genuine conversion. I know this doesn't track logically. If God exists he knew, and he forgave me.

“But I do remember one thing. I clearly remember repeating the words ‘your will’ over and over. It's odd how we attempt to express even the most intensely mystical transports in words; but those words ‘your will’ are the only ones I remember. The next day I discovered that during the night I had been cured. Like that.”

The small bald head and lidded eyes of the doctor were motionless.

“I was lucky in that my affliction was involuntary, a thing visited upon my body from elsewhere, whether from above or within. But in any event it didn't spring from my own will and therefore didn't depend on my willpower for its horrors. It has always struck me that there is something second best about flagellation, self-castration, hair shirts, nail beds, nakedness in a stone cell and all the other self-inflicted mortifications of Christianity, including silence -- because no matter how far you carry them, and even if you finish by killing yourself, they are still something you did to yourself with a plan in mind. There is greatness and mystery in them but they haven't the cosmic perfection of a visitation you can't control.”

When Lang had started talking his voice flowed lazily and with sonorous ease, like brook water, and it continued so for as long as he talked of religion, which was history; but his first mention of the little girl struck by the car made his voice stumble and slow down. Then with relief he went into the physics of the accident, the rotating skid of the car; but inevitably he came to the girl's body on the ice, the eyes looking up as if this calamity was no surprise to her, as if she accepted suffering as her purpose on earth. Lang's voice then grew thin, it almost rattled in his throat. By degrees he regained fluency and tone, the modulated sonorous rhythm carrying it forward. All this time the burning rawness of his face grew darker.

Looking dully at the doctor he said: “I'm sick.”

Spasmodic blinking overcame the doctor's face and his small leathery hand raised to his glasses. He waited for the end to come, then as meticulously as before he adjusted the glasses, the eyes then resting benignly on Lang as he said: "Perhaps, Mr. Lang, what worked on this disorder once may work again."

"This time I'm going to be honest," Lang replied. "I'd die of it first."

"That of course is our major consolation, that you won't die."

Lang knew this, and knew that the thing would sooner or later let him alone. It had gone away twenty years ago, and would do so again, leaving him free of pain, clean, unscalded, unscalded. Like Paul seeing; like Miriam brought again into the camp.

The doctor said, "I may have misled you, Mr. Lang. I spoke as if your affliction were one I encounter often, but the fact is that I have seen very few cases such as yours. And now that I know your history or -- your old history -- but I confess I don't understand why you would say you'd rather die than -- you know --"

"The old cure," Lang offered.

"Yes. You'd rather die? Of course that's a personal decision, I mean, to seek divine -- what do you call it?"

"You were saying," Lang spoke slowly, to bring the doctor back on track, "that my case is not so very common."

"Exactly. A case such as this -- my colleagues and I call them by various names but they come from the mind of the sufferer, or his soul. Science -- even the sciences of psychology and psychiatry -- if you call them sciences --"

"I do not."

"Very well, that's your privilege. Even those sciences can tell us nothing useful about this affliction of yours."

Lang objected: "I thought psychosomatic illnesses were fairly well understood."

"Common, yes. Understood, no. All that's understood is that they proceed from psychic or spiritual sources. This may be different, Mr. Lang. Is God calling to you? You said you'd sooner die. Did he hear?"

"You said it wouldn't kill me."

"No but it's gotten your attention."

“I don’t think this comes from God because I don’t believe God exists, not as a divine being who sends out smoke signals to us mortals.”

“Then what is your explanation?”

“I don’t have one. Do you?”

“No, but I have an idea.”

“Tell me.”

“I think it is a sign, either from God or from deep within your soul.”

“How do you know I have a soul?”

The doctor smiled, lifted his hands and let them fall.

The wind dropped and the cold seized the air. As Lang walked the streets the cold painted him darker and hoarier, setting up a fiery friction between himself and the air. He had intended to go to the office after seeing the doctor but now had had no stomach for work. He walked. Where the elms had been were now craters in the sidewalk.

He drove to his house on the lake bluff. In the afternoon he went to his study and entered that room where the deep folded fragrance of Miss Rickner still adorned the air, or else he imagined that it did -- a fresh strong scent mixed of flower-derived cologne and her natural body -- picked up the phone and dialed.

A girl’s voice spoke his firm’s name and he asked for Miss Rickner.

He heard her dull secretary’s voice: “Mr. Lang’s office.”

“Hello, Miss Rickner.”

“Oh,” she responded calmly, but no longer dully. “Mr. Lang. Hello.”

“I won’t be coming in,” he said.

“We’ve been worried. You said to expect you at one-thirty.”

He replied without more explanation: “I took a little walk.”

“And how are you feeling? Was the doctor optimistic?”

“No more and no less than expected,” he said, but he wasn’t interested in that. “Look, Miss Rickner, I feel like doing a bit of work. Is there much mail?”

“As much as ever, maybe more.”

“Suppose we go over our friend McIntyre’s file and a couple of the others, and you could bring out the mail.”

“You’re at your house?” she asked after a pause to consider.

“Yes. Will you come out?”

In her employee’s voice she answered: “Surely. With the mail, and what files?”

He told her then said, “You’ll find a briefcase in the closet in my office. Just dump whatever’s in it.”

“All right.” Again in the flat voice.

“And I have an idea we might get hungry,” continued Lang. “And I hate to think of you slaving over a stove.”

Lang felt the falsity of his words. He wanted her to come, in the afternoon, and stay into the evening, yet he had not said so forthrightly.

“So do I,” she said. She felt herself propelled, which didn’t please her much, but against his resolution she had only her confusion.

“Stop somewhere, then, and get some fried chicken or something.”

“All right.”

“Good. When will you leave?”

“Well --”

“Leave now, why don’t you.”

“All right.”

As she put down her phone she felt a tremor of the fear that her dream was coming to life.

Philip Lang knew or believed he knew the source of the joy in the affliction, which Miss Rickner professed to find queer but which he insisted privately that she understood. She surely understood, inside; her tongue said nay but surely she had a glimmering. He believed that if she herself were afflicted she would search around in the muck of it for a pearl, that she could not just weep and hate it and be done. And even if she did, her pride would be the pearl. At this moment Lang was ready to declare to Miss Rickner that he had discovered the source of the glow, the light.

Her car arrived in the drive, and Lang opened the door before she could knock.

“Hello -- and thank you. You look cold.”

Her face was whipped red in the ten steps from her car to the door, her hair streamed in the wind, she was tipped sideways against the weight of an accordeon-bottomed briefcase.

He took it and she came in trembling, nervous, but all the secretary despite the fact that her hand was too cold for writing. She refused the brandy he offered, refused tea and coffee. Lang went to work reading the mail, which bored him, and eventually she said her hands were warm enough, she could take dictation. Just then he wasn't ready. So she set the table for dinner and put on a pot of coffee to brew. Later he dictated pages and pages of notes on the files she had brought, plus several letters, taxing her speed, delighting in the work in these novel surroundings and playing his eyes all the while over the beauty of her shining hair.

"Too fast," she said without looking up.

They worked until both were hungry. The work was pleasing, being the quick slick work of the brain which he had been doing every day for years, with greater skill each year and greater reward, the activity which constituted the superficial fiber of his mind; he enjoyed it, even though he knew there was something deeper that he must attend to -- some day -- and during a pause, when she looked up at him, lifting her chin as if signaling that she was ready for more --

During that pause his mind repeated what he'd said to the doctor: "I'm sick." Then he continued dictating.

A few minutes later, conscious of his hunger, he stopped, staring into an open file folder.

"You look worse," she said softly, and was a secretary no more.

"I'm descending into it," Lang said.

"You are in a bad place already."

"Going down farther. I can feel it tightening."

The tightening about his forehead and eyes gave him a headache. His eyelids thickened and he imagined he could feel them splitting, which wouldn't begin for several hours, but already he could perceive the cracking of his lips and the points of fire at the corners of his mouth, the hot salt bands around his neck, the vague burning on his chest and the stiffening of his hands. And he could see the disfiguring of his hands, the swelling.

His senses were acute, as yesterday. He could detect the woman's scent, her body and cologne or perfume mixing -- earthy, floral, distilled, the smell of a forest, the scent of woman's combed hair sprinkled with water -- a deep hybrid odor. He had never before experienced such a reaction to a woman's scent. It was something like turned earth, husky and plant-like, and under

the freshness was a womanly depth and the trace of her sex. The more his senses were flogged by the affliction the sharper they became. And -- he thought he'd never seen a face like hers. The purity of the green in her eyes, the black, the clear white of her eyes, the attenuated transverse shape of her eyes were an example of the beauty he had missed all the time he knew her. Now the sight penetrated him. He thought of actresses like Catherine Deneuve and Greta Garbo whose faces were too perfect; this face was imperfect and it showed her inner nature, her energy and spirit. Her hair, a long lustrous diving billow; her shoulders, starved; her arms, very long and sheathed to the wrists; her face, concealed -- until she looked up, flipping a page in her notebook, and smiled. Her teeth were quite white but uneven, and perhaps her mouth appeared best when closed, for she had graceful-lined lips, soft and ample. Yesterday he had seen her as he saw her now. He had seen so much yesterday.

"I'm reminded of yesterday," he said. "Of last night."

She gazed at him.

Lang continued: "I was dying in some way, until yesterday. I wasn't paying attention."

"To what?"

"Anything essential."

He was still obscure but it was delightful, gratifying to her, whatever he meant, and she drank in this warmth. But a new idea entered her mind. It was not he talking but his affliction; she saw that he spoke this way only in weakness and would certainly speak otherwise if he regained his strength. On that day she would be as near to nothing as ever. If by luck she could help him now in his sickness he would forget her when she finished helping him to remake himself. She was a thing for his weakness, a woman of one use. It was the sickness that came to her, not the man.

"It's this affliction that has awakened me," he said, unconsciously anointing her bitterness.

Turning her head she replied, "How lucky."

"Don't you believe it?"

"Of course I do. I was just thinking the same thing. You are strengthened by adversity."

"I simply had forgotten anything existed in the world except this stuff," he said tossing the file to the floor.

"It is your work," she said. "Your clients need you."

“Clients like McIntyre,” he said. “But I’m not complaining, just saying that this attack has -- reminded me of all I had forgotten, which was really all I should remember.”

“Has opened your eyes,” she suggested.

“Yes.”

“Now nice that you find something good in it.”

But there was a conflict in her, for a part of her was still aflax with joy. He had awakened, she said — to whom? — to her. To the one who had been a secretary and was now the woman he turned to, was now his candle, his need. He began dictating again when she herself had lost all interest, and in duty she collected everything he said into her notebook, but her mind was running away with her. She saw herself as his secretary, saw herself through his eyes as a skinny, even ugly woman who took fast dictation, was taking it now, and would serve dinner besides. She was chilled, withered and silenced by this hard knowledge. His eurythmic voice came to her, she let it come, and she wrote it all down, indifferent to the sense of it and to the fact that his clients “needed” him. Later she refused the drink he offered and throughout dinner kept herself in silence, and forgot her joy.

She cleared away the dishes and brought coffee, and they stayed at the kitchen table to work; but he needed her less now, being absorbed much of the time in reading, so she brought out the book in her purse, stories by Dostoyevsky. If he interrupted her reading with a short burst of dictation she returned the book to her purse, worrying that he would make some comment on it, that he would think she was trying to impress him.

“Well,” he said, “let’s quit.”

“If you wish,” she said in her employee’s voice, and he noticed

He said, “Miss Rickner -- something’s bothering you.”

“Not at all. What did the doctor say? You haven’t told me.”

Lang persisted: “Are you agitated about something? I intend to pay you overtime for your travel and the extra work.”

Her pathetic hands withdrew from the smooth wood top of the table and folded on her skirt, and the bitterness rose in her. She stared at him, waiting.

He stared back, trying to figure her out.

She shifted patiently in her chair and offered him only the stare of her eyes -- silence and this recusant stare.

They watched one another across the table, Lang pitched forward with his head and riven face hovered over his huge riven hands, his eyes half-shrouded with the scall, his cracked lips parted.

“Good God, you are stubborn,” he said in discovery, and Miss Rickner’s stare was unbroken and she repeated:

“What did the doctor say?”

“*Animal* stubborn, like a cat in front of a hole.”

She rose and brought the coffee pot, pouring for him and herself, taking in the fragrance, then sat down to drink as if alone -- blowing softly over the cup like a girl blowing a dandelion.

At length she surprised herself by breaking the silence. “Does he think you belong in a hospital?”

This was not her secretary’s voice but the one he had heard last night, smoky, silky.

He said: “You have a pleasing voice,” and she didn’t respond except inwardly.

She looked aside and then went on softly blowing on her coffee.

“All right!” he exclaimed. “What did he say? Well, let’s see. The heart of the matter of course is beyond him, as it’s beyond me, but he did suggest that I do myself no good by what he called ‘self-inflicted wounds,’ which apparently come when I’m asleep. ripping open these gashes, while I sleep, these bloody gashes.”

A smile spread reluctantly over her features and Lang added:

“Self-control while unconscious, a new concept in medicine.”

“Did he offer any hope?” she asked, sounding as if hope was a good idea.

“Not exactly. He is an honest doctor so he was neither hopeful nor pessimistic, just scientific. He said he was in the dark.”

“Surely he can help you.”

“Oh yes, even if he can’t heal me. He prescribed some new medicines.”

“Have you tried them?”

“No.”

“Where are they?”

“Around here somewhere. He also suggested that I beg the Godhead to intervene against the malevolent forces of nature. Funny, I thought it was God who created nature.”

She smiled her unbeautiful smile and was about to speak but Lang resumed:

“It worked once. I told him about it, at his request more or less, and he said it should be worth trying again.”

“If prayer works for you,” she said blandly, “why not pray?”

“It works for the believing, if it works at all.”

“You said it had worked for you.”

“In the past. Are you joining with the doctor?”

“No. I am asking you a question.”

“Well tell me, do you pray?”

“No.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t go around telling others to do what you don’t.”

“I don’t *go around* telling people anything.”

“Besides,” he went on, “you said last night that if this curse were on you you’d just hate the hell out of it and grind your teeth at it.”

She smiled again and defended herself. “I’m not advising you to do anything, Mr. Lang, except maybe to try the new medicine. I only say that if praying would rid me of this curse, if I had it, I wouldn’t hesitate. If I believed it would work I would believe all that was necessary to set me free to pray.”

“You’re free right now.”

“No I’m not.”

“You’d drop to your knees and pray like a zealot to empty space, is what you’re saying, if only you could deceive yourself into a temporary belief that it works.”

“You are misunderstanding me. I said quite plainly that I do not pray, but that if I believed, as you once did, I would pray, since it worked for you once.”

“Well then tell me, would you pray for the gift of belief, so as to be equipped to pray for a cure? Would you pray for faith so that later you could pray with faith?”

“Mr. Lang,” she said, “why do you persist in missing my point? I do not pray because I do not believe.”

“All right, but Christians pray for faith or for stronger faith all the time. Faith is a gift so why not ask for it?”

“I don’t know or care.”

“Lies, Miss Rickner, lies,” he said. “It is a lie and yet they pray for it.”

“Oh, don’t call it a lie,” she urged him. “Some believe and some do not. I would not condemn either group. The mystery is so tremendous and hope is so powerful within us that --”

“Right, hope. I would rather just hate it, this affliction. You were better last night.”

“Hating will not heal you,” she said calmly.

“Neither will prayer.”

In her smooth cotton blouse Miss Rickner’s wide and fragile shoulders hitched up in the suggestion of a shrug. “You just finished saying --”

“Once, yes,” he cut in, “but not now. Twenty years ago when I was a student and this thing crushed me, but not now, not today, no.”

“Perhaps you’re the one who’s stubborn,” she answered.

“And so are you, with your idea of just hating it, which is apparently O.K. for you but bad for me.”

“Forgive me,” she said, “for trying to advise you.”

“I have nothing to forgive. But I tell you I will die of this damned thing before I go back to the old cure.” But as he spoke he received the consolation of hope; he did not expect to die just yet.

“You are saying things you don’t mean,” she declared.

Letting it go, Lang added: “Even if the old cure were the truth I wouldn’t go back to it.”

Her eyes froze on him for a moment and for that moment she looked dead, an amazed corpse; then she came to life with a gentle smile and another brief shrug of her reedlike shoulders. “That is irrational,” she said. But she knew that Dostoyevksy had created his greatest drama on that very idea.

In the emptiness of their double silence Miss Rickner finally stirred, removing carefully the long silver clip that held the rightward sweep of her hair, and in a manner almost self-appreciative she ran her fingers through her hair -- several times, until she became lost in it, filtering her slender fingers in a rhythm through the compliant brown hair during several minutes of a silence that seemed like a bridge between herself and the man. Eventually she lowered her hand, her hair slipped forward on both sides of her face. The old silver clip lay beside her notebook, and for a time she gazed at it: silver on wood, a kind of austere beauty.

Then out of the stillness she retired deeper into a sphere of acid recollections of the days when she was a seventeen-year-old girl with the hideousness sheathing her entire body, including

especially the parts that could not be concealed, the hands and face. She had prayed then, a child as she saw herself now, begging a clean and shining Jesus in white for one day's relief. He had promised her this, promised that the burning would cease, and the pain, the agony of washing, the impossibility of sleeping -- would all cease.

Later another Jesus, ragged and crowned with thorns, barely articulate, wounded, beaten and scored, told her No, this was her cross and she must bear it. It was hers; very nearly it was her. What a horrifying message this wounded Jesus had delivered, this powerless, victimized Jesus who bade her follow him -- for all her life.

The gall fluid of this message flooded her veins and her girl's brain. It took away her blind courage and hope and gave her instead a vision of ghastly illumination.

She did again her duties of the previous night, drawing Lang's bath and mixing in the medicinal powder, and later she applied an ointment to his back. To her his distress was nothing vile. He was a boxer whose sweat, a warrior whose blood she ached to absorb in her own body, embracing him and in a single act declaring herself and possessing him. So far was he from vile that she wished she could take his head to her breast, kiss his cracked and burning mouth, cooling it with her own, caress his scalled hands with her lips and cheeks. So far was he from vile that she loved even his gashes.

Stretched on his back on the couch Lang spoke gently to her and she came, tranquilly, sitting on the edge of the couch and looking down at him. He began to see love, perhaps only kindness, in her attentive eyes.

His burning hand enclosed her hand and she covered it with her own.

He said, "You are beautiful."

These words echoed within her, wafting in reaffirmation within his silence, over and over again, that she was beautiful. She did not care if it were true, only that he had said it.

### Part III

She drives fast

Her heart throbbed in her breast and her mind repeated his words, and dwelt on their meaning, that she was the source of delight to him. This pulsing center was the source of an intense longing to hear him say it again, so she could watch his lips as they struggled to form the words that echoed in her mind. He did speak, the same three words, in a deep and appreciation that amazed her.

He spoke of her beauty out of the strange clarity and perception of his heart in the midst of his affliction, speaking as if inspired, yet knowing all along that a man in the midst of good health, a man such as he had been, would see no beauty in Cynthia Rickner at all, knowing that what he saw with such brilliant vision was invisible to normal men. He was sick, his body descending while his mind rose. And his mind was rising to the place where her beauty dwelt, his faculties of clarity and vision saw the radiating power of her loveliness and truthfulness, a soft silent power, the integration of her lustrous green eyes and her unspoken thoughts, saw the hidden delicate glory of her person. He heard the song of her soul. He understood her need of song, her singleness, her body, blood, voice, her soul's hunger. Lang perceived this hunger and he longed to fill her need if he could. He said a third time:

“You are beautiful, Cynthia.”

As he spoke she watched. His lips were so scalded they hardly moved, his voice was faint and flat with pain.

Her eyes roamed over his face and she didn't answer, but gradually a fragile smile came to her lips, her full lips glistening with the smile, and then her eyes closed and she freed her hand and covered the hand which covered hers.

Lang was descending. He had ceased altogether to notice the condition of his skin, yet his senses otherwise were acute -- so that the sound of her steady breathing was perfectly clear to him and the scent of her body remained active in his nostrils, and the infinitesimal aureole of her hair before the light was visible to him. She sat with her eyes closed and her hand over his hand, her smile having faded, and she was total composure and contentment over him, not hovering or

waiting but simply staying. Her forehead, her long light eyebrows, her closed lids, her straight and daintily flared nose, her mouth -- all were totally composed. Her complexion still seemed to feel the effects of the cold weather. Her hands were warm and calm. Together Cynthia Rickner and the affliction aroused in Lang an unreasonable and resistless certainty that nothing is vain or wasted. He had a sense of the beauty that justified -- perhaps -- all life.

His eyelids cracked deeper, thickened and finally closed; and his sense of beauty was driven out by a more intense pain. Yet he lectured himself that this pain was really quite mild and could be endured. The pain around his eyes drove away his certainty that nothing is wasted; his mental clarity and penetration drove out everything including the light, left him changed, alone in the dark with the tumid pain behind and within the thickened eyelids.

Every attempt he made to part them was painful. The woman washed them with a solution and then applied an ointment with her gentle fingertips, and this let him see for a time, so he watched her, but it was with a dull gaze now, carelessly. Then he relaxed, letting the lids rest closed, and could not open his eyes after.

“Shall I wash them again?” he heard her voice.

“No,” he said, “don’t trouble.”

“It is no trouble, Philip.”

“No,” he repeated, conscious that she had called him Philip. “They would only freeze shut again.”

This freeze was in fact a burn. He did not use the energy to comment on that.

The scall spread and went deeper. The shriveling was more horrid because it was thicker, the color was deep, melanic. If Lang moved he disturbed the arrangement of the lines and open creases, cracking out new patterns of thread-thin blood lines and bestowing on himself swift superficial pains which as the evening passed were less superficial, which moved in deeper waves. Where the skin ordinarily was drawn taut, as over his ankles, knees and hands, it was compelled by the affliction to thicken, while in the flat places of his body, such as his chest and inner thighs, it was now drawn -- or so it seemed -- taut and hot, the new creases showing the tension. There was some blood and a lot of serum.

He asked Miss Rickner to leave.

She only replied: “Have you a pair of long johns?”

“Are you trying to make me laugh?”

“No. Please. Do you have any long johns?”

He told her where they could be found and heard her leave the room. She was not a woman who swished when she walked. She made softer noises that he would have missed had he been less alert.

She was gone and the room was quiet; he could hear her rummaging in his dresser. Several drawers opened and closed, then he heard the rapid soft sounds of her approaching down the carpeted hall.

“They are not there,” she said from the doorway. He could picture exactly where she was standing.

He told her another place to look and she went back. He could remember the last time he wore the long johns -- a walk along the shore on frozen sand, on a day when the frigid west wind had driven the ice far out into the lake.

Miss Rickner found the cotton long johns more or less where he said they would be, then went to the kitchen and filled a big pot with hot water. She took the pot and the underclothing to the bathroom where she mixed the contents of a packet from the drugstore into the water, squeezed the long johns into the pot to soak and returned to the study, wiping her hands on a towel. She sat in her place by his legs, with the towel draped over her shoulder, and watched his face.

Lang said, “I wish you would please go home,” speaking through torched lips. “I am so repulsive.”

“How can you expect me to leave you like this?”

“Just go, please. You are very kind, but I can get along alone.” His voice had a strange, parched quality, and when he said “go” his stiff lips could not quite manage the vowel that followed the initial consonant.

“Of course, you could get along, but why? I can help.”

She watched his face, and observed no change; it was immobile, as if the scall had the ability to hide the pain it inflicted.

Miss Rickner asked, “How do you feel now?”

“Well enough.”

“Are you able to stand and undress?”

The mask did not speak.

She said, "It will hurt, I imagine."

"Sure it will."

"But if you can undress I will help you into the long johns. They are soaking in medicine."

He repeated as if incredulously: "Help me into my long johns. Christ, what are you talking about?"

"I've soaked them," she said patiently, "and if you wear them and we cover you up to keep them warm, it will help, I'm sure. Will you try?"

"Damn it, I don't want you to see me like this."

"I won't look."

"I want you to leave the room."

"All right, fine."

He heard her leave, and return; and he heard the dripping of the water as she wrung out the cloth, put the underwear in the pot again and clamped down the lid. He put it together in his mind, that she must have brought a second pot to take the wrung-out water. He imagined her twisting the cloth, placing the lid on the warm pot -- and he reached out his hand and felt the hot metal.

"I'm leaving. Hurry, while it's warm. Pull this blanket over your legs."

She took his hand and guided it to a blanket, then to the pot again.

Returning in a few minutes she found him on the couch, breathing hard, but well settled under the blanket. It was only when she noticed him out of his usual form, in a huge unfamiliar pile, that she realized what a big man he was. He was shivering in convulsive waves; she hastened to the bedroom for another blanket and spread it over him. He lifted his hands free, and rested them on the new blanket, and thanked her.

She told him to sit up straight and buttoned his shirt to the neck while he fumbled under the blanket, fastening his belt. His jaw was gripped shut against the shivers.

"You'll be warm soon," she promised and covered him more securely, tucking the blankets in around his hips and legs, directing him to roll first his right side then his left a little upward, while she folded the blankets close around his body. "Now you'll be warm," she repeated, and if there was the hint of a nurse's attitude in her voice he didn't mind.

He vibrated throughout his length under another fusillade of shivers but kept his jaw tight shut.

His breathing was more like gasping, and his limbs were exhausted. Such fulgerating pain, such bright flashes of pain everywhere over his body, such breathtaking shocks of enveloping torched pain he had not known in twenty years. He had stood up violently to undress, like a swimmer plunging in rather than going in by degrees, and had paid for this violence. Before she came back into the room he had stood swaying, trying to balance himself in his blindness, weak, light-headed -- until he braced himself against the arm of the couch and waited for his balance to return. Then stooping to pull on the long johns, which clung to his legs, wading steadily through the showers of pain as from a flame-thrower, while he dragged the leggings up with one hand, steadying himself with the other -- while all this was going on he thought: "What if she sees me like this?"

He tripped and stepped on the lid of the pot. This alarmed and stopped him, and he stood still for a minute or two, with the leggings half on and half off, caught between pain and embarrassment, thinking rationally: "There is no need for shame!" -- but his stance would be so ridiculous if she saw it. Should he call to her, to stay away? He didn't. He struggled into the long johns and fell to the couch, groping for the blanket, thinking: "She is a generous, kind woman, and I love her voice."

He was burning and salted, so he felt, but as he caught his breath he believed he could handle it, the pain, the giddiness and the "shame." He lay there panting, wanting her to come back, smelling the queer organic odor of the medicine, which had a familiar touch to it that he couldn't identify. Using his fingers he opened one eye, which made him reel, and the eye flooded immediately with tears that blurred his vision of the room. He did not see her.

When he realized she had come back and was helping with the blankets he made no objection. Her closeness cleared his head. He felt less like a grass-eating dog. He allowed her to work at buttoning his shirt and tucking in the blankets.

She bent over him and her smoothing hands roved up and around his shoulders, tucking the blankets down and pulling their edges safely away from his face, and her tresses swayed cheerfully loose -- she gathered them back on both sides. Then she straightened her body, took her loose hair again in both hands and scooped it back, then stood still with her hands lost in her hair, and for that moment she did not watch him or think of him, but was lost in her own mind, in

a state something like happiness. His suffering at that moment did not disturb her, nor his shut eyes and mask of a face startle her.

“Any better?” she asked.

“Yes, much. How long do you suppose it will last?”

“Oh, I should think several hours. The blankets should trap the heat and moisture, which should give you some relief. If you don’t thrash around,” she added.

“It was a good idea. You should be a nurse, so much more useful than working for a lawyer.”

“I am a nurse,” she said with some irony. “For the present.”

Though it was he who introduced the word he found he didn’t like it. “Yes,” he admitted, “you are, and a good one.”

“But you are a bad patient, Mr. Lang.”

“Please, for God’s sake, don’t call me that.”

“What, a patient, or mister?”

“Either, but especially not mister.”

“If I am Miss Rickner you are Mr. Lang.”

“All right, Cynthia.”

“Thank you, Philip.”

After a silent pause in which she felt his presence with a glowing warmth Cynthia said: “Can you open your eyes?”

“Not without trouble. I see ‘darkness, which the blind do see.’”

“Would you like me to read?”

“Yes, what a good idea. “Milton’s poem on his blindness.”

He directed her to the book and she sat and read the poem haltingly -- “his state is kingly” and he needs not us -- after which Lang wondered if Milton had ever lay around in soaked underwear. Cynthia read the poem a second time with more assurance and emphasis, and Lang said:

“I feel better, thanks to you.”

“I’m very glad you do.”

They avoided the use of names. He felt that she was indeed Cynthia but to call her so still rang false.

“You know, I feel inhumanly strong now, I can feel my guts in me again. I feel as if I could lift up this damned thing and throw it off with my own strength, or if it wouldn’t be thrown, I could take it in, and kill it inside me. But it’s just the relief isn’t it? Temporary relief. Without the medicine I’d still be desperate and my will would still be deep away inside me, hiding in its burrow like a frightened fox -- poetry! -- I mean that I know I’m riding a wave, that’s all.”

His voice was hesitant yet he spoke burningly, and she listened, uncertain, with a small twisting in her depths, in her physical center, a small surge of -- an unidentifiable thrill.

He asked, “Does your will ebb and flood, when you are sick? You give it a little respite and it rises up like a standing bear, and during the real onslaught it is stunned away inside you. If it’s working at all, which you can’t know, it’s working on the next wave of --”

“By ‘will’ do you mean courage?”

“I suppose I do. You’ve thought about this more deeply than I have. When I’m doubled up gasping, or terrified that it won’t go away this time, that this is a life sentence -- then I just endure, from one minute to the next, and there’s no courage in that, or will; there isn’t even any knowledge of who I am -- much less why.”

“Meaning -- what do you mean by why?”

“Why we’re here, why survival is an imperative. When I can stand upright again, when the torch isn’t playing all over my body -- as in this minute with you -- then my will rushes back and I realize I have what I need to survive the sickness. Is it anything like that with you? Does your will ebb and flood?”

She said “Yes” as if in confession. This ebb and flood was the essential rhythm of her life -- she, a woman who as a woman lived in rhythms, was conscious of this one rhythm above the rest; and she wondered that he asked her about it.

“Do you ever get sick?” he asked. “I mean everybody does, so --”

“Yes, of course,” she said not wishing to carry the subject any farther.

“It’s so instructive, don’t you think? When you’re a normal man and up to your eyes in the stupidity of your health you get the damndest notions, the most gigantic idea of your powers.”

They said nothing for a moment and Cynthia was thinking that sick and well were terms that did not apply to her. She was gazing at his wrapped body on the couch and at his afflicted face -- seared, eyeless, large.

“Is it bad for you,” asked Lang, “when your monthly -- inconvenience -- hits you?”

She almost told him to mind his business, but in a moment she heard herself answering, her sense of offense turning to an interior, delicate gratification. Maybe she was pleased that he could acknowledge in this way the male-female difference.

She said, “I have never borne a child, and some women believe this makes it harder, yes.”

“Do you take those pills?”

“Which pills?”

“I don’t know the name. Those women’s pills.”

“No,” she said.

“Maybe you should.”

She laughed in long splashing gusts and made no effort to control it -- and the sound of her laughter was so strange that blind Lang was puzzled at first, because he had never before heard her laugh. When he realized it was laughter and that there seemed to be no end of it, he said, breaking in:

“Wait a minute.”

She covered her mouth and subsided.

“Really,” she exclaimed with an effort.

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, you are practically immobilized and you refuse medicine for yourself, but you begin to coerce me into taking Midol pills for something which I survive perfectly well every month of my life.”

“I haven’t refused medicine,” he said. “Just look at me.”

“For a time you refused.”

“Well, but when it got bad enough I took the medicine, didn’t I.”

“And I also take medicine when things get bad enough,” she said. “But I won’t take it for that other -- for the monthly illness, as you call it.”

“But why not?” he persisted.

“Simply because I choose not to.”

Miss Rickner slept that night in the guest room and set the alarm for five. All night long she was overwrought and skittery, jumping (and her heart going wild with apprehension and worry) at each little sound from within the house or without. She was either too cold or too hot and she would sit upright in bed, rising as if in fear and flinging off the blankets, then she would collapse onto the pillows and the back of her hand would slide over her forehead and eyes, hanging momentarily over her eyes, then drop to her side. Later, again, she would grope over the bed for the blankets and drag them up, and stiffened with cold she would pull her body tight up against itself, with her knees drawn to her breast and her hands and arms caught in the warmth between -- and gradually her curved back would relax as she drifted into sleep and a relative comfort. But she slept little, half-slept much.

In the drugged blackness of five o'clock the alarm rang and her hand shot out to silence it. Her body was sluggish but she herself was fearful and awake. She was not adequate to the blackness, to the terrible hour, to the inertia of the morning -- which was no morning, which was black. She got up and tossed around her body a man's robe and went slowly, in a kind of stagger, to the window, from which she looked at the dim snow and the gray lake -- but the sky above, though it were east, was black as coal and without expectancy of dawn. The expectancy was in herself only, and in her it was chilled and barren. She hated to rise before dawn, had always hated it.

She dressed and went to the study.

In the darkness he was only a shadow, but she approached his shadow and come to a full stop near him, intently listening, and heard his breathing. When she switched on a small desk lamp he was there on the couch in the starkness of his trouble -- the covered body and the streaked face. She went to him, went down to her knees and sat on her heels and lifted a hand to touch him.

What would she call him? She hesitated, with her hand still raised, but she lacked the initiative to call him Philip. She touched the shoulder and shook it gently.

"Wake up," she whispered.

He was hard to waken and even harder to convince that he should part with his long johns.

"Are you crazy?"

“No,” she replied, as if he had asked literally. But she was dismal. “Give them to me, please,” she pleaded. “I’ll leave the room and you put them here.”

“You’re crazy, Cynthia. You can’t wake a man in the middle of the night and demand his underwear. How do you do it?”

“I try not to think of it,” she said, truly. “Give them to me. I’ll leave the room.”

She went to the kitchen and put water on for oatmeal, then returned and fetched the surrendered long johns. In the bathroom she rinsed them and mixed a fresh solution of medicine.

Selecting a tube of ointment from his medicine she hastily spread it on her own dressings, then put her skirt and blouse on and carried the kettle to the room where Philip lay.

When he was clothed in the medicinal long johns once again she brought tea and oatmeal and they ate quickly. After their meal she bathed his shut eyes in colloidal solution then applied ointment to his eyes, his face and the riven splotch on his neck.

“You must not lick your lips,” she said. And with the most intense care she applied ointment around his split lips.

“God, I think I’m worse,” said Lang in amazement.

He was losing serum by the constant discharge.

She brought another cup of tea which she placed on a table within his reach, then said goodbye. “Drink a lot, please,” she urged. “Drink as much as you can.” In her purse she had the name of his doctor, which she had copied from a label, but she didn’t mention to him that she planned to telephone the doctor. “I’ll call you before lunchtime,” she said in farewell.

Lang listened to the door closing behind her.

This highway -- how she loved it. How she loved its wintry quality of a desert, its quality at this season of nakedness, with its sides as smooth as a river’s and its course as sinuous; she loved the glacial rise of the land, the alternation between a draftsman’s straight lines and gentle curves dictated by terrain. She believed she saw the sphericity of the earth. She loved the road’s parallelisms, which to her seemed graceful -- for one such roadway across the land was a delight to her eyes, but the union of the two, each never quite perfectly reflecting the other, was a delight to her heart. It was a sunless dawn, weak, and so much the more welcome; for in spite of the

beauty of the road she was exhausted and agitated, holding within the complex vessel of her self the geometry of the road, her visceral exhaustion, her nervousness, and the fear that her own health was running out.

She held also a deep and bodily feeling for the car, or for what the car could do. In response to her pressure it crept upward, ascending, queenly in its calm, and Cynthia wouldn't look at the speedometer. Once she was forced to shift lanes and pass, but even in so doing she preserved the ratio of the ascent, and the ascent continued, upward, higher, as a ribbon growing thinner and more and more tenuous, stretching to the thickness of a thread only, endless. Then began a shimmy throughout the car but she kept accelerating and driving slowly upward through the range of the shimmy, which must be finite (she assumed) and she permitted not the smallest alteration in the rate of the ascent. Then finally the car was through the shimmy and passed away into a new range where it rocked now and again, as if windblown, and was difficult to steer, but the shimmy at least was behind. Her pedal was now hard down. The car then arrived discreetly in the lower border of another shimmy, where the frame itself threatened to fly apart, and though Miss Rickner kept her pedal hard down the car would not and could not pass through, but only shimmied destructively, and she was obliged to ease her pressure. Descending, she felt a certain cleanness in her mind.

When she arrived outside her apartment building it was full daylight but overcast, a morning of blunted lifeless light which touched all the buildings uniformly from all angles at once, giving neither shadow nor color. The buildings stood about her clear enough in outline but leaden in their want of color, and simplistic and blocklike in their want of shadow. It stirred an uneasiness in her and made her hurry out of the lot. In the hallways of her building (the only old building remaining in the neighborhood) the lights still burned and the place seemed darker than in the nighttime; in her apartment she turned on lights in all the rooms to drive out the blunted outer light.

It was an old apartment with big iron radiators and six-foot windows, a marble fireplace that worked (had she any wood), oak and walnut work wherever you looked, white walls, solid red draperies and a deep red carpet. It was very old, very spacious, very clean, and by Cynthia Rickner's standards it was also very expensive, taking a good deal more than a week's salary, and was worth it.

She had a mindless fear trapped within her, prisoned in her belly and breast. It beat against her walls to escape but could not. To confine this thing was an agony to her. But what was it? She feared, or was possessed by fear, and didn't know what of.

She sat for a while in the living room, having undressed to her slip, while her mind roamed and she forgot that her time was short. She couldn't understand her exhaustion. She had spent nearly six hours in bed yet her legs ached and there was a catch at her heart, a sudden quickening which came every few minutes and set her skin prickling. She had slept badly, with a nervous twist in her chest and an unreasonable fear dwelling in her, a fear apparently of nothing; but after six hours in bed she should by no means be so tired. Yet she was worried. The fear. If it was fear, what was its object? Was it fear? She got up and went into the bathroom, declaring to herself that she would not look at the mirror throughout her routine. She was heavy with the certainty that she would find herself worse but when she removed the bandages it wasn't so, her affliction was no graver than before, regardless of her poor sleep and the omission of last night's routine. But she was heavy with pessimism, and throughout the job of medicating herself and changing and washing the bandages she did not lift her face to the glass.

She tied on the bandages and stood in her patchy garb for a minute before forcing herself to move, and then she walked somewhat confused toward the bedroom, where she had forgotten her clothes, wondering how she came to be walking about in only her bandages. This shoddy costume of white patches tied on with tapes was a degradation -- and a joke.

The moment came when she was obliged to look into a mirror.

Sunlight now flooded the rooms, straight light throwing angular shadows and illuminating the white walls of the living room while darkening the red carpet, changing the room entirely just as she was making ready to leave. Her coat lay over a chair. She opened her pocketbook for lipstick and comb, then went to the mirror.

She applied her lipstick and combed her unfashionably long hair, which reached between her shoulder blades, steadily but without her usual concentration, languidly and almost haphazardly. She searched her face and found what she sought, though another might have missed it. And having found it she was absolutely calm and unimpressed, for after all she had known it would be there. Now it was confirmed, so what? Just over the delicately pointed corners of her eyes she saw the subtle first marks -- like light brushings of exotic paint, like

antique beauty marks, the seductive marks of a woman of an archaic culture, eastern, subtle, red; scarcely visible red marks ascending to her brows, like shadows cast by a light from below.

The sunlight being so bright in the rooms, she forgot the electric lights were burning. And when she returned to the building that night at about six she saw from the street that her place was lighted up. She shuddered, imagining that in a kind of madness Lang had left his bed and come here and somehow contrived to get in, and that he was up there now waiting. Momentarily she was paralyzed, looking up at her windows, and her eyes were large with the thought that he might have entered her apartment and might have seen the rack of bandages and the open shelf of medicines. But weren't his eyes still closed? She went into the building and up the two flights to her floor then walked slowly down the hallway, recovering her breath and letting the key dangle on its little chain in her hand as she walked. She inserted the key, gave it a turn, and opened the door. He wasn't there. She walked through all the rooms, seeing the rack, the medicines, the living room mirror, her bed, the lights -- all as she had left it. She hurried through her routine then, hungry and anxious to reach him, but she must do the routine thoroughly or she would pay. She wanted to leave, to get started on the long drive north, but against the day when he would come to this apartment she put all her medicines in a closet and hid the rack away in the kitchen broom closet. It was a very inconvenient place but she must be careful, she must not allow herself any laxity whatever, and if she was silly then she was silly; better silly than exposed. For now, so simply, she had found out the object of her fear.

When she reached Lang she found his condition unspeakably bad, and she was frightened because he seemed so cheerful, as if he didn't understand. He said "Hello, Cynthia" in a cheerful voice but the sound of her name on his tongue gave her no pleasure this time, because of her fear for him. His hands were swollen and showed long parallel gutters of blood and discharge; the splotch on his neck was expanded and also deeper riven, fiercer; and his face glistened all over with blood and was puffed as if he'd been beaten. The eyes were forced closed as before. The hardened lips were cracked as before and the corners of his mouth were wet with bright new blood, for when he talked he tore the skin of the corners. Nevertheless he continued talking.

He told her of the doctor's visit and his pessimistic prognosis. She did not mention that she had tried and failed to reach the doctor herself. She asked, "Will you need intravenous fluids?"

“He thinks maybe,” said Lang, and added, “but I’m not going to a hospital.”

“You must, if the doctor wants it,” she said.

“No -- I’m sorry. I don’t like hospitals.”

She said no more. She took the list of foods the doctor had left and went to the kitchen.

Lang was striving for the white joy of the ascetic. He strove desperately but with a bleak coldness, he was both toiling and locked, and Cynthia Rickner therefore had very little of him that evening. At first she didn’t understand, she only observed his odd cheerfulness which was so unsettling to her, but later she realized that the man who responded to her was only a social mechanism and that he himself in his depth was elsewhere. union had nothing to teach its exercise.

Lang was in the abyss of his sickness for about three days and during that time Cynthia Rickner lived with him as his nurse, chaste in act through necessity and in heart through the nature of his need. He refused to enter a hospital and refused equally stubbornly to hire a professional nurse; so Cynthia very soon came to believe that he wanted her. The doctor was in a controlled rage at Lang but mainly at her, for whom his rages were the only funny things in her life just then. He would lurch away from the couch and strut out of the study with his white mustache disappearing into his mouth and his eyes narrowing to little black cracks behind his tinted spectacles, and at the door, getting into his coat and looking up at Miss Rickner, who was several inches taller he would vent himself, accusing her of prejudicing Lang against the hospital. But it wasn’t funny when the doctor took her arm one afternoon and said quietly: “So you’ve got it too.”

“Not badly,” she said. “not really.”

“Not really? What is really, tell me. This is *really*, by your eyes, isn’t it?” His medical fingers slid up and down her arm, perceiving the cotton strips under her sleeve. “It’s on this arm too? Who is your doctor?”

“Colleo,” said Miss Rickner.

“Colleo. Dr. Colleo has been dead five years and more.”

“I didn’t know,” she said. “It’s been that long since I’ve seen a doctor.”

“No doubt you’ve been treating yourself then, like your bullheaded Mr. Lang.”

“No. I use what Dr. Colleo gave me.”

Oddly, surprising her, the old man took her arms tightly and administered a little punitive shake. “I will help you,” he said, “if you ask me -- and if I can. We must not allow your face to be spoiled.”

Then he was gone, without a goodbye, and Miss Rickner felt his affection as a clear and open force. He was a strange man, hesitant and guttural, quiet for long periods and then coming on in a burst, and seemingly burning inside while scientific and scolding outside. But he was revealed now and she thought of him from that time forward as an ally.

“You must get him into a hospital,” said the doctor. “*You* must do it.”

“I can’t,” she declared.

The doctor cursed (which he did well) and said she must, and she repeated that she couldn’t, but he stood under her eyes repeating his command like a machine gun.

“You must. You must. I’m sorry but you must. It’s best for him. It’s that simple, and there’s nothing more to be said, young woman. You must, and that’s all.”

But she could not. Lang refused, saying he hated hospitals and unless his life depended on it he wouldn’t enter one. The doctor admitted he could survive outside a hospital but only with needless suffering.

“I’ll stay here,” said Lang. The voice was now weak, stretched, without timbre.

The doctor was furious. “You’re a fool to stay here, Mr. Lang, an irrational stubborn obstinate cock rooster and a complete fool, a young nitwit.”

Lang said again, without force, “I hate hospitals.”

“And I hate stubbornness and lunacy.”

“No,” said Lang, eyeless, nearly voiceless. “Sorry.”

“You’re working this woman to death, do you realize that?”

There was a silence and the doctor hesitated, not from caution but for effect.

Miss Rickner interposed, “I don’t mind it. I’m happy to help him.”

The doctor delivered her a look of outrage.

“No, she doesn’t mind,” said Lang. “We’re having a pretty good time of it, the two of us.”

“You’re an egotist,” said the doctor mildly, as if he had quit caring. “At last I’m finding out the real trouble, Mr. Lang, and it comes down to your ego. And you’re the first lawyer I ever met who didn’t have a gram of ordinary horse sense.”

“Really,” said Cynthia Rickner, venturing to touch the old man’s arm, “I want to help.”

The doctor said, “You’re as stubborn as he is.”

There was a flame in Cynthia’s breast whose presence she loved, whose warmth she could feel and light see. She was now beautiful who had never before been so, and the creator and keeper of the flame was Lang.

Again he told her she was beautiful, and half in vanity she protested:

“If you could see me you wouldn’t think so.”

“You are harmonious and orderly -- and artful, and pleasing, and firm and well made. I can hear your beauty as you walk.”

Once he took her hand in a queer contemplative way and held it close to his face, his closed eyes, while she stood above, confused, not aroused but somewhat frightened -- to see his nearly helpless, discolored, great tortured, burning hands, holding her slender white hand so gently and so near to his face that she felt the warmth of his breath on it. She thought for a second he would kiss her but he didn’t. He relinquished her hand and said: “Your hand is so cool. Are you cold?” She replied no. And he said nothing else about it. But occasionally he would take her hand in a gentle way and just hold it lightly for a short time, never speaking, as if drawing something from it.

As he sank deeper into weakness and torment he ceased to take her hand and ceased almost to speak to her, yet he still kept alive in her breast the flame of her beauty, which she loved. It was a new feeling, almost weird, but warm, rich, and essential: and in one way it was his, it flowed from him to her. It lighted her breast and her mind, and she was revealed to herself in a new way. She cherished the creator and keeper, whom she loved not only for himself but for her own sake, for the flame; yet without the flame she would have cherished and loved him too; and with the flame how much deeper he was, how much more abundant to her.

She believed she would love him even if he thought her ugly and despised her, but that would be exhausting and would starve her, and soon she would stop; but this present love, in which he had ignited the flame of her beauty, sustained her and brought her light.

His condition at the worst was horrible to see and his weakness a source of astonishment -- that such a big, powerful man with the body of an athlete should be so weak. But he would not allow her help in putting on the medicated undergarments; she had to bring them, leave, and wait; and when she returned she would find him collapsed on the couch like a runner fallen in the Marathon, shallow in his breathing, hoarse and faint; she would button up the shirt and straighten-out the wet, clinging cotton, then help him with his blankets. -- She had given up her bed in the guest room. Now she slept beside him. She had never before been in bed with a man.

But mostly she slept in the chair, drawn close to the couch. Her own condition suffered. In the mirror she could clearly see the exotic shadows.

Regardless of these atavistic markings Cynthia was beautiful with a newly created beauty which sometimes she even believed she could see, though predominantly she felt that her beauty was within her and not upon her. Beauty was with her -- she could feel in her breast and her insides that it was with her, and it rested not upon her brow or chin or figure. Beauty was created into her and could neither be located nor described; nor could it be denied her, except by Lang, who had created it. There was no ego in this. I was a gift.

Still she hungered. Caring for him as a nurse so constantly she was drawn subtly to dependence on him because of her love. Before he created her beauty she had been self-sustaining, but now she was new. She was aware that she depended on him. Yet he was weak, and each day he sank deeper into his abyss of affliction so that at the worst he might have been completely unconscious of her presence. And so much the more did she need him then. The weaker Lang the body the more powerful over her Lang the man; the less aware he seemed of her ministrings the more magnetic he became. And the stronger she grew in her role as nurse, as he lost strength, the more critical was her need of him. She gave him everything and his strength grew over her.

At this time Lang was unconscious -- in that he didn't know where he was -- but hypersensitive, in that he recoiled in terror from the mad performances in his mental theater. Some one was being tortured. He heard masculine screams and a desperate choking, he saw a jet of blue flame that reached from one side of his field of vision to the other. He knew fear such as he had never experienced in his conscious life, and most of all he didn't want to die. But his death seemed to be foretold in the sobbing, choking cries of a man he could not see. Sometimes

he could distinguish a word or phrase. The one most repeated was "Not me!" Then the agony would be repeated while the unseen man screamed in terror and disbelief.

Now Cynthia fell into an ignoble fear -- that her happiness would be taken from her by Philip's death. She was tortured by it, dully sometimes, and sometimes in an actual outbreak of fear-sweat. She was afraid the sustainer would not sustain. Either by his death or by his recovery he would cut her off, putting an end to her new life with the same quickness as he started it. He created the flame and could withdraw and let it die, now that she utterly required it.

But even while she harbored this aggressive need for Lang she bore him no hostility of love, she was not voracious and she had no desire to consume him into herself. She did not tell herself, as other women might: I must have him. She was free of the need to remake what she loved -- to recreate in her own image all that she loved, to have and undo, the better to redo, the object of love. She knew nothing of this trinity of having -- the consuming and undoing and the final redoing. Her single thought that way was a vague fear that if she attempted it she would die in the attempt -- she, not Lang. But in her besides this fire of love was also the emptiness which is the fullness of fear. She would help him through the crisis and when he was better she would revert to her status as Miss Richer, secretary.

So again she would be a plain or even a somewhat ugly woman of rather considerable business ability, who had once been intimate with her employer when he was distracted by disease -- and had suffered her hands to be kissed by him.

One morning after the doctor's departure she was sitting on Lang's bed (where he had moved at the doctor's insistence) making ready to bathe his eyes. During breakfast they had spoken very little and with the doctor Lang had answered in monosyllables; he was the same now, silent and abstracted. She worked on his eyes with a ball of cotton soaked in colloidal solution, and she respected his silence, which indeed she enjoyed at this moment; she didn't want to speak but only to work. Outside the vast lake was a single massive flash under the sun and the room was aglow with this light, in which was concealed a pale hue of the blue of the ice. Lang looked improved this morning, she thought, though his face and neck were still blasted, and his eyes were still hard shut. Lang took down her hand which was at work on his eyes and held it in both his hands, in that strange way. It was hypnotizing, the way he held her hand so lightly, as if it were a bird. He had surprised her, and now she watched as he kissed her fingers, her knuckles, the back of her hand, her wrist, and again her fingers. His kisses were almost unbelievable to

her. She watched, and she felt his poor cracked lips on her fingers. Yet there was a detached quality in her perceptions, like a dream. At length in her reason she believed it -- but the goodness of his act was still too great to absorb. Her heart beat on in its regular cadence while he kissed the hand so carefully held, and she watched, expectant. When he released her, without a word, she hesitated for a minute, watching him with the freedom his blindness allowed her, then dipped the cotton again into the solution and went on with her duties. Later in the morning she left the house to fetch the mail from the office, as she did every day, and drove to her apartment to put herself through her medical routine. She had something new from Lang's doctor in which she placed hope.

She was a woman marked with two marks and claimed by two claimants. Above her eyes rode the shadowy red marks of exotic affliction while on her hand and fingers rested the impress of Lang's kisses. Above her eyes, against her will and in spite of her hatred, hovered the smudge of menace, the mark of the intimate alien. But Philip had kissed her.

She was full of hope for two or three days, because of the new medicine. It diminished the marks rising above her eyes. But always she held at the back of her mind the belief that hope was not adventure and bravery, really, but weakness, and so it proved; or if it didn't prove to be weakness it proved at least vain. The marks achieved again their former brightness, because the disorder had only been taking time, as usual, to construct its immunity to a new treatment. This she knew, or should have known, all along.

With the full return of the shadow-marks she formed a new idea which for a time amused her and kept back her fear. It was possible, wasn't it, that Lang would emerge from his momentary blindness and find her shadow-marks beautiful. She could conceive that the red shadows would stir him, that in his eyes these strokes of an unseen brush would enhance her beauty. Rather than marks of chaos and death's hunger, her shadows might be changed under his creating gaze to the final perfecting stroke, the imperfection that vitalizes beauty.

What if he emerged from his sickness to find her -- inexplicable, painted, *imperfect*. Mightn't her form and color and her harmonies please him now, even more than ever, now that she lay under the shadows. Mightn't she stir him. Mightn't the woman of the shadow, thus stroked in her brain and eyes by the unseen, thus marked out, thus flawed, thus red -- mightn't this woman reach deeper in his life than any other. Could this subtle paint brighten her eyes for him and heighten her curving brow and enrich her hair? Could her whole body, her shoulders,

her breast, and all that was concealed, and her long limbs -- could it all gain new savor from the marks? And mightn't her deep belly, where he must go and where she expected him, gain a deeper darkness from the red shadows above.

But this idea was mere hope and she had always found hope to be vicious. So as the days passed and her condition became slightly worse each day, from the break-up of her routines and the exhaustion of caring for Lang, she let hope go; because hope was alien. She preferred pessimism. In black expectation of the worst she dwelt at home, because she had lived for years in such blackness and it had never been cruel to her, it had never twisted around on her. She awaited the worst, cleaving to blackness, she embraced blackness and filled herself to speechlessness with pessimism. She seldom spoke first and when Lang spoke in his strained and weak voice she answered, but little more. Her shadows deepened their red and she could no longer hide them with cosmetics, therefore: Let them be seen.

In this blackness her fear was no longer fear. It was easier now. There were certainties, and there were possibilities of greater and less likelihood, and again there were things certain not to be. Certain to be: affliction, and the ending of his love, the ending of her flame. Certain not to be: his coming, his joining, his perpetuation.

She came to believe that Lang was actually two men, the ordinary man and the afflicted man. The two were dissimilar and even incompatible, so that if she had the love of the afflicted man she was excluded from the love of the ordinary man. Hadn't the ordinary man ignored her, except as a functionary, throughout the months she was working in his office? And in the early days of his sickness, when he still lingered in the plasm of his ordinary self, hadn't Lang thought his own skin was vile? The ordinary man who would emerge when the sickness passed would doubtless find her shadows mildly upsetting, or freakish or even disgusting; while her body -- she dared not imagine how he would react to the uncovering of her body. An ordinary man wouldn't have the nerves for it.

Cynthia Rickner despised ordinary, alert men. They crept away from affliction. They underwent little pants-wetting spasms at the very thought of it, and gave themselves great mouthfuls of humility and shame as their only antidote. She hated their unctuous fatness of shame, their fat tenderness. What she loved was the stricken mouth which had kissed her fingers, and the stricken hands which had taken her hand.

Thus her faithful pessimism projected blackness into her future without denying the brilliance of her present. But she was not perfect in her pessimism even though she belonged only there. She would be perfect when she cleaved unrelentingly to the blackness -- but it took such courage, and often she weakened, and she introduced hope. As her spirit ebbed, as a rhythm of weakness began, she introduced hope, and at once her terrible need for Lang hardened within her, weakening and inspiring her. When hope lived within her then its companion fear lived also; and at such times her intellectual conviction of Lang's future perfidy and his weakness should her body be revealed to him -- the conviction that two Langs existed -- changed from a simple prediction of her mind to a horror in her heart. Thus was she horrified by hope.

She took time one morning to trim her bandages. She sat on the couch in the front room of her apartment, with the sun streaming in onto her lap and the whole collection of bandages folded neatly in stacks on the seat beside her, and she trimmed swiftly and precisely with a scissors, reducing their bulk and shortening the cotton tapes with which she tied them. It meant that if her affliction spread she would have to make new bandages, but there would be less bulk under her clothing and less chance of being noticed. But if he should touch her, if he should take her arm or place his hand on her back as she passed through a doorway -- then he would detect something.

As for the shadow-marks at her eyes, there was nothing she could do.

But her special scent, on which he had remarked once, declaring that he liked it, she must change. She believed that what he noticed was the admixture of pine tar in one of her medications, and this unluckily gave it a smell very similar to that of a medicine he used himself. She began wearing a new and quite heavy perfume -- a languid over-rich scent that he didn't like. But she wore it, having her reason, and told him he was being too subtle. She was curious to see whether he would accept lies from her and come round to believing them, so as to keep peace. But he didn't.

"Look," he said condescendingly, "who is the perfume for? Is it for yourself or for me?"

"Why, it's for you, Philip."

"Then don't use it. I don't like it."

"Well, I can't waste it."

"Of course you can waste it. Throw it out."

"Oh, no. I can't waste a new bottle of perfume."

He was angry, which surprised and pleased her, but she was uneasy that her personal odor had become a topic of conversation.

#### Part IV

##### The Old Cure

The serum which Lang's afflicted body discharged was the basic life-fluid, the liquid element of the blood and nourisher of cell formation, colorless but chemically rich, and to discharge this fluid was a biologic contradiction, a kind of chaos. Very early in the crisis the discharge achieved a rate which exceeded Lang's capacity to make good his losses. He grew weak. For while the bleeding made quite a terrible spectacle and the discharge of serum no spectacle at all, it was the serum and not the blood that his body missed. The bleeding, coming mainly from exterior mechanical irritations, was almost negligible, while the discharge of serum was profuse and increased with the spread of the scall.

Before the affliction began its slow recession in the lysis it covered a third of Lang's body, and it seemed to seize him inwardly -- seemed (which could not be true) to possess depth. It went deep toward its source, which was within Lang himself. And it was always there in the darkness and the untraceable complexity within. Possibly the affliction had its most intense existence during the years of seeming absence. Certainly it had gained strength and was now more violent than twenty years ago. So Lang believed that the old cure had not driven away the disorder but only driven it in.

He ached to be free, for the scall was crippling. He had become so dull in his excellent health for so many years that only a few days ago he could not have conceived of a desire so intense as his present aching for freedom from the scall. He feared that he could do nothing else if he carried this scall, he could only contend with it and there was nothing of him left over. So he ached for freedom, being free now of dullness but encircled with scall, which ennobled him, which breathed life into his brain; yet he sought to break free of this encirclement. He couldn't

lift his arms and he dreamed of the freedom of lifting his arms. He didn't seek dullness again, for he had forgotten all about it now in his torment; he sought freedom.

This "old cure" presented itself as the only freedom he would ever know. He contemplated it by the hour, entranced by the evidence in his life of its mystery, majesty, its demands. Men unmade themselves in their plea to be made, and they were made; they emptied their vessels and were filled, they sowed salt and were enriched, and likewise Lang had been made, filled and enriched, when he was young, and in the process also he was freed of the scall. But regardless of his need he didn't desire the old cure now, and it was well that he didn't want it because he couldn't have it. The old cure was a foreign realm, and if it were offered he would refuse, but it wouldn't be offered. Nevertheless he felt close to the young man of twenty who had unmade himself, for there existed in Lang's veins now the same hard glory of perpetual alertness and the same hard beauty of self-denial, the same ascetic joy he had first learned as a believer. But now, in Lang's perfect singleness, the whiteness of the joy was whiter, the austerity colder and thus more devoutly to be sought because nobler. Should, could he go back?

The quality of Lang's suffering under the affliction was altogether different now because the affliction itself was transformed by the loss of its holy substance. Like the old cure the old affliction had been a thing foreknown, ordained, caused, and finally anointed, a creation alive and infused with a holy substance by virtue of its holy source; and this quality of the holy was in the very blood and serum of the disease twenty years ago. The affliction then arose from the only source and was visited on the boy-man through agencies and for reasons incomprehensible in all but their source -- and of the source there was no question. The source was the Source. "I am that I am." Even after Lang abandoned his mission of blood, his mystical vicarious sufferings for the sake of others, which he presumed to take upon himself, even when this heroism was ended the holy quality of the affliction remained, and possibly brightened -- for unquestionably it came from him who accounts of the falling of a sparrow, who numbers the hairs of the head; and in those days and nights of suffering nothing was lost. Not a single shadow passing across the wall of his room at night was lost. For nothing was lost by "I am." Whatever was, came from him and went to him.

That was an affliction sanctified, sanctifying the sufferer, but he feared that this present affliction was nothing but chemistry, or science. It was pure and direct and its blood was blood. And because the holy essence was gone Lang was compelled to gaze directly at the thing which

the boy had gazed through and beyond, and this was a hard task. It burdened the will, already weakened by the weakening of the body through the loss of serum. The will was awed by the purity of the affliction, by the simple bareness of that which twenty years ago had borne a holy quality. The will ebbed and flooded under the pressures of the disease, and during the crisis he never knew where he would find his will the next minute. When he was abandoned by his will for however long or short a time he could do nothing with his pain but take it, he could not transmute and ennoble it. Nor could he escape in sleep. Sleep was not oblivion, it was pandaemonium. But sometimes he would feel Cynthia's presence and be reassured.

There was a continuous strand woven of three elements -- his pain, the beauty of the woman's voice, and the beauty of his effort to deny, to master his weakness with his will. But weakness was tireless while the will ebbed and flooded, so that he fell, and fell often. But he had the strand of the three elements foremost in his brain, behind his shut lids. Pain, Cynthia, and endurance.

The power with which "I am" had fed the boy-man was not forthcoming to the man, who must therefore get power from another source, and the only source was himself.

Nonetheless the voice of the woman touched his ears and she lived a life in his mind. Her voice coursed like the serum of his thoughts, and her silence -- when he wished she would speak -- was like too long a pause between heartbeats. And when he took her hands, as he sometimes did, she glowed in his mind.

It was inexplicable the way she seemed to know the details of his discomfort and what would help it. She had so far said nothing but simple things, yet her voice had a depth which encouraged him. She asked how he felt, she told him whether or not the sun was out, she told him he looked a little better, she insisted he keep to his routine faithfully. When he wanted to slack the routine her voice went dry -- it was patient still but seemingly bitter -- and she asked him to follow the routine whether or not he thought it useless. And she read him the newspapers and the office correspondence, but what he noticed mainly was that she talked very little, all in all; and he wished she would let herself go. Occasionally she sang to herself in the kitchen and he could hear her song from his couch -- usually he could hear only the stream of the song and not the words; then would fall a silence heavy with his expectation of her voice and finally she would take up her song again and he would listen.

He lay on his back in the darkness listening, as if her song were an accompaniment, and gradually he realized that he was looking around the room. A little light entered from the hall and he could see some unfamiliar feminine things which halted him. What he saw was not what he remembered. On the dresser near the bed was a handbag, which was directly in the light from the hallway, and he could see a pair of gloves laid over the bag, and on the back of a chair was a woman's jacket with a hood.

At some cost he lifted his arm to see his wristwatch but it wasn't there; so he rolled a half-turn toward the nightstand and saw the clock: five-thirty. Morning or evening?

His will had ascended out of his chest and he was strong, he was a man who would do what he decided to do. He caught his breath, after rolling toward the clock, and when he felt rested he threw back the blankets, then rested again, then in a smooth movement he swung his feet to the floor and sat up. This necessitated another recovery but he was pleased with his strength. He blinked his eyes, which tended to stick shut, and was ready to stand. He stood. At first he braced himself on the wall, then he stood alone. His first steps were easy but he stopped in the hallway to get his breath so as not to seem desperate when he made his entrance into the kitchen -- where the song continued. Resting in the hallway, he listened to her singing and could now hear the words, however faintly. It was that rushy voice he had heard before, singing as if in a whisper to itself -- "... by and by the harvest, and the labor endeth. We shall come rejoicing ... bringing in the sheaves." -- The song of another time, perhaps the song of an evangelized girlhood. She was sounding very carefree and her song was light, almost gay. He felt dishonest, listening secretly to this strange song, as if he were listening to her sleep-talking in a dream of girlhood. But it was beautiful, tender.

Soon she stopped, and began humming. Lang made his way slowly down the hall, with his gaze intently down, going cautiously as if watching for obstacles.

When he reached the kitchen he was startled by the brightness of the light, which shot deep into his eyes and forced them closed just as he was bringing the woman into focus. She was blurred, and he saw only her form and color. She was dressed in a blue blouse and black pants, and she turned, but then he was blind again, in pain because of the brightness of the light.

"Philip," was all she said. "You scared me."

That was in the evening.

The next morning when he awoke his eyes were shut again but after an hour, and after Cynthia bathed them and applied ointment, they opened. She darkened the room, the curtains sliding together noiselessly, and she came to him.

She sat on the bed.

In her willowy black pants she seemed altogether a different woman and not at all the secretary he knew from the office, whom he had always seen in town clothes, but instead a very tall woman rich in angles and lengths, something athletic, reckless. When she approached she was almost strolling, almost lazy; she looked confident, as if she knew she was making an impression. Her blouse had a Victorian air, with full loose sleeves buttoned tight at the wrists and tiny pearl buttons running right up to her throat; it looked like silk, and was dark red. She had turned up the collar. Her hair reached her shoulders. Lang had transformed and simplified her face during his blindness and now he saw again the true face -- the large bold features which taken together he found beautiful, the great smooth curve of her chin, the full lips (which were colorless this morning), the straight and prettily flared nose, the great eyes, heavy brows and high forehead, the unexpected quickness in her eyes, as if she were always ready to argue. Her color was strange and almost fierce, flushed, as if she had just been in a cold wind, and above her eyes were two crescent-shaped flarings of red whose symmetry was so precise that they seemed painted. It seemed as if she had carefully painted these crescents upon herself during an hour before her mirror. And their redness shone, even with the room darkened by the curtains, for it was a deep, heavy red which lay upon her eyes in complement of the red of her blouse -- ritualistic, lustful.

But she was not lustful. She propped herself almost jauntily on her elbow, gathering her feet with her free hand and drawing them right up to her buttocks, and faced Lang, to appraise him.

She watched him for a time in silence and then said: "You'll be well soon," without any apparent happiness or regret, just flatly, and added: "Another week or two."

Lang had never doubted that he would be well.

He was held in thrall by the crescents above her eyes and his fascination was so plain that Cynthia began to smile at it, but his silence was insufferable and she announced:

"By the way, Philip, I'm quitting my job."

He replied instantly, "No you're not."

“Bosses say, ‘No you’re not, yes you are.’ You are not my boss any more. I won’t be your Miss Rickner again.”

She would cut herself off clean from him, protecting herself from his influence and blinding herself to him who had been blind to her. She couldn’t endure the ordinary Lang now, she would cut herself off from him just in case this ordinary Lang should show up at the office some day and tell her to bring her notebook and take dictation.

To the afflicted man she would be anything he wanted, barring nothing, anything, all; to the ordinary man a stone.

“I want you to stay,” Lang said.

“No, Philip, I won’t stay. I’m sorry.”

For a minute he was silent, trying to understand her motive, but he ended by dismissing it, whatever it might be, and asserting his desire for her. He said: “Why couldn’t you stay?”

“I could. I don’t wish to.”

“But I enjoy your presence,” Lang said.

“And I yours.”

“Then stay.”

She closed her eyes and gave a single sidewise shake of her head. She would be anything else he wanted, and indeed she thought at night what “anything” might be -- but she had washed her soul in blackness and arrayed her body in rags, she had cleaved to her blackness which was so loyal and she cleaved to it still.

In the dreadless ease she waited for him to speak of her eyes, but he didn’t. He went on arguing about her job.

“Cynthia, please. You don’t really want to quit -- really -- do you?”

“No,” she said, “but I quit anyway.”

“On principle you quit. On a theory.”

“No. On a feeling.”

Still he had not spoken of her eyes, and she waited, no longer interested in the argument and merely saying no over and over again, which angered him.

“All right,” he said finally. “I’ll find you another place.”

“No thank you. Just give me a good reference.”

“All right, damn it, if you won’t even let me help you find a place then I’ll give you a reference like nobody ever got before. Though you don’t deserve it.”

“Thank you sir,” she said.

But her suffering just then was from his silence on her eyes, for she was not perfect in her blackness, she could not be.

Lang was staring quite openly at her shadows and she accepted his stare upon her, motionless, and waited. She endeavored to sink herself deeper in the comfort of her blackness. Her eyes drifted from him.

“Cynthia -- you know, you have some red marks above your eyes.”

“Yes, I know.”

“What are they?”

She turned to face him, perfectly at ease again, and replied: “I couldn’t say.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, do you?”

“No,” said Lang.

“You’ll never understand me, I’m a great mystery -- with my painted face.”

"You’re more beautiful now," he said.

“Really?” she asked in mockery.

“Yes,” said Lang.

“How is that possible, Philip, when a few days ago you found it all so vile?”

“You’re infinitely more beautiful now.”

Here was the man she loved, whose genius she cherished together with her own life; but she feared for his survival. His creating eyes would surely go dull, his mind go blank, his tongue dry up, when he was well again. Only now he was with her, and for the present she trusted his discovery of her, trusted even his vision of beauty in her shadows. No doubt her future was bitter but her person was sweet and clean -- sweet with the gift of being near him, clean with the desire in her thighs and in her center, which was not fulfilled.

Cynthia was still more or less necessary as a nurse for two days after Lang’s eyes opened but after that she could no longer justify living in the same house with him, so she packed her things and left, and on the same day began her search for another job. It was difficult because her face was going and any new pair of human eyes upon her was a trial. Late in the afternoon

she found a job with a lawyer who knew Lang. This man left her in his office while he went elsewhere to telephone Lang at his house, and he came back to tell her she was hired. He offered a hundred and twenty dollars a week and bonuses depending on the prosperity of the firm. She took the job. She was amazed to see in her mirror at home that her face was nearly clear, the shadows suddenly faded. This could mean only that she would soon be "sick in her flowers," for at that time her affliction always subsided. But it was galling that Philip had recommended her to another lawyer.

When he first saw the red shadows over Cynthia's eyes Lang was astonished, yet he felt no concern for her because to him they were not signs of disease or disintegration -- not on her. The same marks on himself in days of health would have been the marks of affliction, but on Cynthia's face, in the half dark, as she propped herself so carelessly on his bed and drew up her feet, they were otherwise. They declared her kinship. Raising their crimson color over her eyes they declared a thing he was glad to learn -- that she was given to him, to be with him completely. For they seemed to rise from a place within her body where she had no control and therefore declared her in a way words couldn't; and if she should ever deny with her tongue this kinship between herself and Lang, yet the marks rested crimson on her face to contradict her, speaking truer than her tongue and simpler than her brain. She was given to him.

And Lang saw in the marks, on that first morning, a reflection upon her face of his own soul. He saw in the shadowy red marks her affinity with him, as if the life she had lived in his mind during his blindness had also been a life in her own mind.

That was how he felt at first, when he saw Cynthia's burning crescents, which caused her some little pain. But at that time he was still somewhat ill, he was only just emerging from the abyss of his sickness and his mind wasn't entirely reliable -- because he was weak and at the same time full of fever and exaltation, he was like a saint who has starved himself into the zone where he sees visions, where the Son or the Virgin walks with footfalls the saint can hear, where the air and the saint's eardrums beat with the footfalls, and the eyes of the saint behold the unseen.

A day or two later her shadows had changed and also the eyes with which Lang looked had changed, because he was getting better and was no longer saintlike. As his strength returned his conception of her shadows changed, though he wasn't really conscious of it -- he merely forgot what the shadows had been at first, because he was stunned by what they were now. They were large and brilliant. In shape, color and fire they had evolved.

The day she left his house she was dressed again in those long black paints and in a pale green silk shirt, which was plain but somehow elegant, possibly because of the way she turned up the collar. When she had finished packing her belongings in a suitcase (which she borrowed from Lang, for she had brought her things one or two at a time and they had accumulated in the guest room) she put on her hooded jacket and zipped it up to the chin; but the hood was left at her back, and when she freed her hair it spilled into the hood, glossy and abundant. At the front door she turned to say goodbye, and they shook hands and said some more or less meaningless things, and she stood there in apparent embarrassment for a moment, then she was gone. But Lang retained the vision of her face.

The crescents had gone utterly brilliant in color and weird in shape, stretching upward from her huge eyes over the rim of her brows and back toward her temples -- wing-like paintings, talismanic, wild. Her face was unusually pale as if from shock and the backswept wings thus rode in plainer relief against her features, and she became slightly terrible; yet her eyes were cool, the whites were clear and the irises were a rich and faceted green. The crescents gave her a beauty unspeakable. She was now beautiful almost beyond Lang's endurance. She was ravished. Her grace was violated and her harmony unbalanced by this stroke of an unknown force upon her. It was as if she were all-desirable, claimed by the same force as he, and the wings were the marks of violent claim. She was a sister to him, yet he desired her. Her beauty was like the beauty of a fine face on which a few drops of blood are spilled.

Lang kept her too, in this way: that he held in his mind the vision of her face, her eyes, her wings, and together with these the picture of her hair dropping over the back of her jacket and into her hood.

Part V

## He Goes to Her

As soon as she left his house Cynthia Rickner took up her life in his mind, and there she spoke easily in a smoky voice and she walked with a ripe carriage, losing the angular boniness she had in reality and gaining the ease, the lush longness of limb, which her figure seemed to have when she dressed in her black pants and pale green shirt. Lang didn't see the awkwardness, he saw the grace; he heard the voice he had heard when he was blind, and he saw the uneven smile which set her eyes ablaze, and the bright flow of her hair, the terrific emphasis of her features, and their harmony, and he saw the wings. The richer he became with her presence and the more vivid her wings, the stronger grew his need for her.

The weather turned warm. The air was sunny and still. Far out, the lake remained frozen in great severed sheets, and looking into the sun in the morning he saw the ice as polar blue, but when the sun had climbed and gone to the west the color of the ice turned gentle and white, like a snow-covered prairie. Near in to the beach the open water lay placid between the hand of the ice and that of the land, hardly rippling, while on the beach itself the ice barricade which the surf had beaten up was dwindling, and the sand turned soft underfoot.

His mind sheltered not only Cynthia but also a new presence created by the scall. There now walked with Lang and breathed in his mind a presence called "him who isn't," which lived not feebly but with all the force that once vivified "him who is." This new presence was neither halt nor faint nor dim, though silent; and its message was just this clear silence. It didn't speak even a simple "I am not," but only stood pure in its silence, which resembled that silence which falls in a house deep in the night and is so pure that it makes the eardrums throb, turning the listener in upon himself to hear the beating of his own heart or a humming inside him, in his head; a ringing silence which makes the listener listen to himself.

In these days Lang carried in his mind this presence eloquent in its silence, and as he recovered his strength day by day he was just as conscious of "him who isn't" as he ever had been of the other, who was. The difference was in the silence where affirmation had been.

Such was the companion Lang got from the scall. But there were others. He was a sick man getting well, and such a man is like a sailor returning home, who sees everything again and yet afresh, who sees all that he remembered yet sees it renewed and matured in a way he could never have expected. The hills aren't so high but the trees are thicker and greener, and though the road is narrower yet it is longer, and when he sees the people he left behind he is amazed because their faces are enlivened with a youth he assumed they must have lost, the eyes and smiles are utterly alive and young when he expected they would have got dim and hard. And he sees also what he didn't remember, the things he overlooked for years and years, and now he wonders how it happened. Lang had a liveliness in his brain exactly like this, an aggressiveness and openness, and when he took his first outdoor walk two days after Cynthia's departure he was astonished at the sight of the lake close at hand, as he walked beside the ice barricade. It was early, and the chemical blue was in the outlying ice even though the sky was dull; the ice had this internal inorganic blue which it possesses only when you look toward the sun. It is a blue that contains white and black; it is a negative, polar blue, smoothly shadowed, and it looks as if the ice it has seized would never melt.

Out in the lake where he could only imagine it the ice lay in great slow-moving sheets, as if the lake were giving itself up to a force greater than itself. It was the earth, tilting toward the sun.

His mind roamed in the space between the ice sheet tilting and Cynthia's wings rising, between the physical and the ideal, the cosmic and the human. In this space his recovery advanced, and he knew it was advancing. And when his mind showed Cynthia with her back-swept wings, then he wanted to reach out to her.

The blistering stretched cross his face and splashed his hands, but also it was inside him with the same intimacy as Cynthia and the same force as "him who isn't." And like the woman it was physical, it ran in his blood and it followed the form of his guts; and when his mind brought up the vision of the woman and her backswept wings, and he could feel distinctly this vision upon his eyes, then he could feel the scall too, on his eyes, as if his corneas were scalled.

He had a feeling about his will. Now that the will was returned from its dark ground, intact, he felt again a certain happiness akin to that happiness he had felt in the early stages of the attack. He was happy not because he was getting better but because he had been stricken, or rather because he believed the stroke had arisen from inside himself, where for a long time he

feared nothing was. Then arose the affliction to smite him, and now he walked in this company of presences -- with Cynthia and the vision of her wings, with the white joy of his self-denial, and with the odd happiness which he couldn't fully understand, and with the presence of the scall. And with "him who isn't" -- silent. Lang had come a long road, and his former life now seemed empty while the present was strange yet fitting. It was as if some respected authority had said, "This is the world. You are in it." Yet the "authority" sounded a lot like himself.

He grew restless and hungry for work but couldn't subject the people at the office to the sight of his face, so he called for work to be brought out.

His new secretary was a compact little woman of about twenty-five whose jet black hair was cut short in bangs that fit her head like a cap, and whose hips and bust were getting lost in the rest of her. She thought Lang was a freak, like the phantom of the opera, but he didn't frighten her. Her name was Miss Tistle. She had always looked forward to the approach of Philip Lang through the corridors of the suite of offices. He was what she called craggy. His face was weathered and craggy and also he was like a god bound to a crag, because he was so strongly muscled and well formed and the lines were etched deep in his face. And his blue eyes penetrated. He walked quietly and talked easily and was almost too big for the doorways, but graceful; and she kept noticing that his face was remarkably scored, but not by care, it seemed to Miss Tistle -- rather by the sun and wind. And he was always courteous to her, never overloaded her and frequently praised her work. He seemed to be extremely efficient, like herself, a man who always did things right. She knew, of course, that he was sick and that Miss Rickner had been carrying work to and from his house. And that Miss Rickner had then quit. There was quite a lengthy and detailed speculation over that among the secretaries. It seemed entirely possible that Mr. Lang had made an advance, in which case he must have been half out of his mind -- to make an advance on Miss Rickner of all people. But there was no woman in the office who cared to ask Miss Rickner what happened, except Mrs. Pendleton, who was in charge.

"Cynthia, dear, must you really leave us?" Mrs. Pendleton asked. Miss Tistle was surprised to see that Miss Rickner touched the hand of the old woman. "I'm very sorry," said Miss Rickner, "I'm very very sorry, really, Penny."

Miss Rickner seemed so upset that Miss Tistle and the other women who were within hearing wanted to comfort her and ask questions, but there was no such possibility with Miss

Rickner, who later said goodbye to everybody somewhat coldly. She hadn't ever cared about the other women anyway, except for Penny.

When Miss Tistle saw with her own eyes the disfigurement of Lang's face and hands, and guessed in her warmly sympathetic heart the state of the remainder of his titanic body, she was distressed and a little disturbed, and wished she were back in the office. While she was writing in her notebook or drinking her coffee (the supply of coffee was endless) her face would be its usual pert self, concentrated; but when she looked up at Lang there would come a quick shuffle, which was almost invisible -- her face would alter entirely somehow, and her eyes would recede and turn to stone. The change happened instantly. It was as if a poker were suspended before her nose and she were making herself look beyond it.

"This isn't contagious, Miss Tistle, I assure you," said Lang once.

"Oh certainly not, Mr. Lang. What are you talking about?"

And really she wasn't afraid of contagion. Still when she looked at him, no matter how she might prepare, her eyes instantly receded and her features went click. And however she must talk and smile and agitate her face she couldn't affect her eyes, where there remained a recessed light as if she had taken a step back.

She was determined to uncover any trace of Miss Rickner which might still be in the house and she would sometimes excuse herself and go unnecessarily to the bathroom, where she rummaged carefully while the water ran. But she found nothing. And she obtained hardly a glance into the study and only passing glimpses of the bedrooms, though these were what she wanted most to examine. There was a housecleaning woman who made the coffee and guarded the kitchen. The living room, where they were working at a big table, seemed perfectly sterile.

In the end her eye came across an ashtray not a foot away from her notebook. The ashtray was pencils and all were mildly chewed with Miss Rickner's tooth marks -- so Miss Tistle surmised, since she couldn't imagine Mr. Lang jamming a pencil like a horse's bit sideways in her mouth. Miss Tistle had observed any number of times how the pencil stretched Miss Rickner's lips.

"I see Miss Rickner left her pencils," she said with her eyebrows a little up.

"Oh did she?"

"Yes. Here. In the ashtray."

Her brows were still up -- but Miss Tistle looked at Lang and her eyes stiffened in recession, and she brought a smile to her face.

She continued: "She chews her pencils."

"Bad habit," Lang allowed judiciously.

"Yes," declared Miss Tistle examining one of the pencils. "Yes." She ran her forefinger and thumb over the bite marks, and then held it for Lang to take.

He accepted the pencil, looked at it, and gave it back.

"Maybe Miss Rickner doesn't get enough to eat," Lang said blandly.

"She's nervous. Underneath -- she intensely nervous -- the poor girl."

Daintily she put back the pencil in the ashtray and then raised her black-capped face to Lang, and her eyes violently receded and turned glassy as she said: "I hope she doesn't get it too, the poor thing."

Lang leaned on his fists on the table close to Miss Tistle, who leaned backwards on the couch.

"Get what?"

"Well," said the woman fearlessly, "she had this little rash on her forehead."

"Oh hell, that's nothing."

Later in the day Miss Tistle asked in oblique and excruciatingly complicated terms if Lang would always be as he was now, and he said no.

In the morning the doctor voiced the same opinion.

"Well -- I'd say it's going," declared the doctor, pacing while Lang sat shirtless on a steel table in the examining room. "Don't you think so? It seems to be going completely."

"Possibly," said Lang.

"Yes. More than possibly."

The doctor took his wrinkled little hands, which he used like a blind man's, out of the pockets of his white coat and swept his fingers over Lang's shoulder, like a child finger painting, and felt the depth of the cracks inside Lang's elbows and on his wrists, and propped up the chin to examine the bloody cracks in Lang's neck, leaning forward and cocking himself sideways; and then he stepped back, blinked furiously and hitched up his glasses, and resumed his pacing, giving a flip of his hand to inform his patient that he could dress.

“I’ll keep you on more of the same, Mr. Lang. That’s all I can do -- and it seems to be enough.”

At his desk a few minutes later he sat behind stacks of journals and a heap of papers, file-folders and unopened envelopes of all sizes; there wasn’t even a cleared space for him to write in. He surveyed Lang with his head gently tilted, ruffling up his mustache with a fingertip.

“You know my philosophy, Mr. Lang, or my credo. I think I have already said -- I just ...”

His voice stopped and he shifted in the chair as if he’d been struck with a sharp pain in the back; his hands slid forward along the wooden arm of his chair and dangled away out of Lang’s sight under the desk top.

He continued: “I readily admit that I do not know what I do not know. It loses me patients all the time. What is curing you, for example, I do not know, except that your body is curing itself. We have no substitute for man on which to perform experiments in the laboratory because man is so different from all the animals -- on the surface, on the skin.”

He smiled briefly and then went sober. He asked: “Are you praying this time?”

Lang said that he wasn’t

“I thought you said God pulled you out, the last time, when this thing ...” He made a slashing gesture with his hand.

Lang would have preferred silence but the doctor waited, forcing an answer, and he said: “Yes, I said the last time it was prayer that cured me. And I have no doubt of it.”

The doctor, removing his brown-tinted glasses, emitted a rather high-pitched grunt. He revealed his eyes -- they were old man’s eyes, the only thing about him that looked old. They were shallow, watery, puffed all around, and there was no great contrast between the whites and the irises and pupils -- all had faded, yet they had a pained look.

“I pray,” said the doctor smiling faintly. He was attacked again by the spasmodic blinking and covered the attack by putting his glasses back on and quite accurately adjusting them, raising his face a little until the attack passed. Then he added: “I pray frequently now. Particularly at night I find it absolutely necessary. In my half-sleep I used to discover whole colonies of monstrous thoughts in my brain and I displace them by prayer now. -- Uhh ...” He waived his hands in the air, searching, then left his thought unexpressed -- and he said, as though it were his last word: “I pray to the old God. I’ll have none of these new gods which these

people invent and put in the chair of God and call it God. I pray to the God who sent his son down to be crucified.”

He threw Lang a challenging glance and tossed his glasses into the clutter of his desk as if he would never need them again. He said finally: “And I don’t give a damn who knows it.”

When Lang was gone, and for some time after, the doctor kept trying to capture the thought he couldn’t express. He groped all around it as though it were a cloud of gas and he couldn’t determine the borders of it. It was one of those monstrosities which visited his mind sometimes at night, a live thing, ugly, valid, insatiable, his. But what it was he didn’t know.

Leaving the doctor’s office Lang had to pass through the waiting room. A young woman patient looked at him and seeing his face she was choked breathless with fear, for herself; and a boy of eighteen looked at him with kindred eyes, with a different sort of fear, as a boy would look at his father who has been beaten by a mob. And in the street on his way to his office Lang felt the friction of himself against the people he passed.

One day in the street while he was returning alone from lunch he saw an extraordinary thing. A red-haired woman with a spotted face was walking rapidly along the sidewalk on an uncrowded street, with her high raincoat collar turned up and her splotched hand holding one corner of it over the side of her mouth, concealing something -- but she was expensively dressed in a slouching hat of bold masculine cut and a new raincoat and alligator boots, and she held a glittering blue Weimaraner in check on a slim leash. She was quite a freak, considering everything. A child approaching with his mother cried out for the mother to look, at the dog, and the mother looked, at the face of the woman, but composed her eyes remarkably fast and let them drift casually down the leash until she could exclaim to her child about the dog. The eyes of the spotted woman were downcast, or rather were fixed rigidly on the shoulders of the dog, and she proceeded hurriedly down the walk at the guidance of her glittery dog. She had a nubile figure and from the rear she was striking, with the cloth belt of her raincoat biting into her slender waist and her calves in their sheer stockings flashing pure brown above her boots.

At odd moments in his work Lang found himself wondering about this woman. Where did she get her money? She certainly paraded in monied clothes. Was she somebody’s wife or whore? Or was she the whore of many? Whose could she be? -- what kind of man would keep her as his kitten and puss? Or was she the daughter of a well-off man? Did she have a job? And

if she talked, would she speak English? And what lay concealed behind her hand and the collar of her coat -- and how did she manage it (whatever it was) in the summertime?

Lang never saw the woman again, but often in the first days after the sight of her he walked along that street on the chance of seeing her -- because he felt in his heart a tenderness for her. But he never saw her again. He walked too by the corner where the old woman had plucked his sleeve and prayed at him, hoping to see her again. Where had she gone? For he had sensed on the day of their encounter that the corner was a kind of station for her; it was her place on the line, and here she fought for souls, leaping out in prayer, opening her mouth and quickening her old tongue for the sake of men -- a fighter, a toiler.

Somewhat against his will (but not entirely against it) Lang was judging the people at his office on their response to him. He distilled in himself a poisonous contempt for those who were too weak to take in unflinchingly the sight of his affliction. He kicked out Miss Tistle to a subordinate job because he so detested the *click* of her features when she first saw him in the morning, and he took as his personal secretary a less talented woman but one who seemed never to have observed that he had been absent from work, much less that he had returned changed. This woman did her work well enough, caring nothing at all about it, and if she looked at Lang's face sometimes, inevitably, it made no difference to her that it had a something on it. He was Mr. Lang, a boss, he told her what to do in the daytime and in the evening she forgot. So Lang promoted her and rid himself of Miss Tistle and her talents, her speed and competence and her click and her receding glance. It was the same with the partners and associates. Lang began to enjoy the company of one of the stuffiest boobs in the office merely because the man quite obviously cared not a whit about his face. And another of the partners, who was brilliant but always suffered a little on the sight of Lang, when his condition was still bad, he now detested. This man previously had been his friend but now Lang's face was too much for him, so Lang despised him. One day Mr. McIntyre came inquiring about the progress of his efforts to get his family's money, and he sat fat in the chair making a brave effort to treat Lang like anybody else, but the task was too much for him. His lips seemed to rise ever so slowly toward his nose and his brows crouched together in a peak, and his sausage of a finger stayed curled away in his fist.

After his return to work Lang recovered swiftly and within a very few days resembled his former self, though under his clothing he kept the traces of the affliction. Under his shirt, on his arms and chest he burned, and his legs constantly burned. But his face and hands were nearly

clear. His face was the same face, but it was now proven, for in the fire it had been recreated. And this recreated face had all the features of the old made radical. The lines riving the forehead and sweeping down and away from the nostrils were deep and heavy, the mouth was thin, wide, and the nose and jaw were aggressive. The eyes had a glint. The hair wanted cutting and couldn't be kept neat. Of the scall on his face there remained only a slight darkening which most people didn't see, so that he was now greeted by strangers as if he were a normal man.

Lang and Cynthia were at a table spread with a white cloth and set with white napkins, silverware and an unnecessary little lamp, over which Cynthia stared at him in defiance. She was black toward him -- her soul was diseased with hatred — not of him, but — of hope — and she had washed herself and pierced herself with Never.

And this fell stare of hers surprised him, pained him. He didn't understand it. He'd been aching — downright aching — to see her. And now this! Her scent, her figure, her mouth, even her wings — all the same. He realized that he was gaping at her breasts, the slimness of her waist as she took her seat. He had dared to hope they'd be looking into each other's eyes, one step away from love. But those eyes were punishing, hard as glass. And she was new, more alluring than ever, and more remote. "No," he realized, "not remote." Her eyes were punishing, repelling, angry. He made a decision, a discovery, and in his mind he said it: "I love her. I'll ask her" — meaning, what's wrong?

She seemed larger, her scent stronger and deeper, and her shoulders and her long hands more pathetic than he remembered. Her hands on the table were distinctly boned, extended. She did not smile except faintly, and finally they talked a little, but he was forced to carry the conversation. Her shadows, her wings, were dim -- he could scarcely see them. Finally he was taken over by a new idea attended by guilt, as if he'd given her a vote of no confidence. He thought his affliction might sicken her. She might be a queer and twisted creature who would care for him in the worst of his sickness but when he began to grow normal again, when he showed by his vigor that very soon he would come to her in the fullness of strength, then she would collapse in revulsion. She could possibly be too weak now, who had been strong when he was down. And what then? During their hour together she was relentless in her blackness, her

remoteness and recoil, and Lang's venomous idea sank its roots. He disturbed her. She was repelled.

That same evening after work Lang went to his athletic club in town, where he had few friends and wanted fewer than he had. The lower floors were crowded for a squash tournament but he found that the loft was dark and locked, so after he had dressed in his sweat-suit he asked a janitor to unlock the doorway leading to the loft and to switch on the loft lights. He ran a few laps on the board track, tilting his axis neatly in line with the curve, then did light calisthenics on the hardwood boards of the infield, under the weak yellow floodlights, in the midst of the empty stands -- shadowed. Then he put himself back on the track and it became very hard to keep his pace. He was still weak. Soon the light grew weaker, it seemed, and his wind and legs failed him, and as the light weakened the sounds magnified in his ears -- his pace thudding against the boards, a terminal sound without reverberation, regular and dead, yet like a pulse.

In the locker room he stripped and went to the showers. There he was a spectacle, and men would see and then turn, while the scall burned intensely on him because the exertion and the salt of sweat and the shower had insulted it. As he came back along the aisle between the rows of lockers the eyes he met receded and the faces he knew shifted, and then from these faces he would meet cordiality and possibly an inquiry. His contempt began to melt. He felt good after the exercise, though he was a bit dizzy.

The next day at noon Cynthia talked freely and even laughed, for she was utterly harmonized now with the Never she had injected in her heart and she believed she had nothing to guard against and nothing to defend; she felt free with Lang now.

"I did the right thing, quitting you, Philip. Now I'm sure of it."

"Are you."

"Yes."

"What I think is that you made a federal case of it -- and I still wish you hadn't. But I won't try to get you back."

"Ah, no," she agreed smiling and slightly lifting her face. "Don't."

Before they parted her wings were quite aflame.

Several nights consecutively Lang went to the loft, and there on the dull resounding boards he implanted in himself as if spiritually the oscillating rhythm of his reconstruction -- each night systematically destroying his strength, throttling fiercely whatever strength he had;

and on the next night it was always greater. This greater he destroyed in its turn and awaited yet another night when strength even greater should appear and he could destroy it. Thus over the course of these solitary trials of physical anguish he destroyed and built himself. In the afternoons he feared the approach of the evening but once in the loft he turned his fear into passion, so that he acted with a mind ablaze and he drove himself irrationally. In this way he waxed strong but all the while his skin worsened, because there was too much salt and because the daily showers hurt him. He arranged to see the doctor again, but one afternoon during a pause at his desk he followed a vicious instinct, an impetus mingled of anger and pride, and canceled his appointment with the doctor. Now in his mind he abandoned the doctor altogether, and whereas it had once looked foolish to him to shirk medical advice it now looked weak to seek it. Lang continued to use the proven medicines but he had seen the last of the doctor, who knew nothing more about the affliction than he himself and probably less.

The loft became his place. He used it so regularly (and nobody else did) that the janitor had a key cut specially for him, and he kept this key in his locker with his sweat gear, dangling from a hook by a light chain, and when he ran on the boards the same chain was around his neck. The dim yellow floodlights were the sun under which he labored and the thudding boards were the earth on which he toiled -- and the empty shadowy grandstand waiting all around, small but obscure in its depths, was his audience. He tried himself and built himself, at high cost. But he must be careful because his skin disintegrated so quickly under the mechanical stress of the daily toil, and he must strive now for a rather critical balance of powers: the power of his body against that of the affliction. If the affliction overswept him again his strength would be lost in the loss of the serum; therefore he strove for the delicate balance, and though his affliction was rising again yet his strength was rising too, and he seemed to himself to be achieving the balance. To others he looked bad. In the shower, with the scall burning brilliant on him, he looked like a human calamity. He was stricken, and knew it, but he was strong also, and knew that. Thus he went every evening to the loft. He had played football and baseball in school but had never been a runner, and now he found the running bitter and difficult.

His whole desire each day was to be with the woman but she gave no sign of any such desire. As he approached the table where she sat she would glance quickly up and smile and say, "Hello, Philip," and her greeting would be their single point of contact. Thereafter she was adrift. She was careless, her hostility gone and nothing in its place but a deliberate vacancy.

Was it deliberate? And though she came every day wherever and whenever he wished, she did not come. In all their meetings Lang never touched her, not even on her hand, because he scorned to trifle with her. And could not reach her.

Two days passed, a Saturday and Sunday, in which he didn't see her. On Monday at noon she seemed to have fallen back toward hostility, for she spoke but little and there was a pale light in her eyes which he couldn't understand.

He decided to remain late in town.

He went to the athletic club with the intention of visiting the loft but he was challenged and played handball instead, enjoying having an adversary and glad of his reprieve from the act of destruction. He had a late dinner alone and then returned to his office. The suite was dismal, private, it possessed a will, and the person who would enter it must invade it. Turning on lights as he went, Lang walked through the reception room, down a corridor and into his secretary's office, then into his own, where he worked under a single lamp, hearing sometimes the echoes of the cleaning women's buckets in the terrazzo corridors outside, and the slap of mops against the slabs, and an isolated cackle of laughter. Hearing the noise of sliding buckets, the ribald laughter of the cleaning women, he thought: "Be more like them," the cleaning women. Immediately he opened his address book. He drove to Cynthia's

building. He knocked -- and in another moment he would have raised his hand to knock again but the door gave silently away. She was wrapped in a dark crimson robe with narrow black stripes spaced wide apart and a black edge tracing the collar and belt, and she was barefoot.

He asked, "Have I wakened you?"

"Oh no no, of course not -- I was just ... Come in, Philip, please."

She stood aside and Lang entered, and she closed the door as quietly as she had opened it, and they faced one another in the same silence for a time before she asked for his coat. It was smooth, heavy, the color of rust. Cynthia lay the coat across her arm as she left the room, going to the hall where the closet was. The coat was so heavy. When had she last carried a coat so heavy?

Still in the semi-dark hall she glanced back and saw that he was watching her, and without trying to explain herself she turned away and walked father into the darkness, then opened a door which flooded her body and the hall with light. Then she disappeared and the hall went dark again.

She stood in the bathroom viewing the chaos she had left at the sound of his knocking -- the unwashed bandages in a pile in the sink, the opened medicine, the gauze box, the fresh white bandages. In only a minute it was all out of sight and she was prepared to go out, but she hesitated. She had no need of the mirror, knowing that everything was well with her hair and that anyway she couldn't change the rest. She paused. Oh, stupid -- her feet -- and she slid her feet into the cloth slippers on the rug, without having to move a single step, and remained in the same place with the same foreboding of a thing undone. But she must go out, there being nothing undone here. Yet she hesitated still. She wasn't afraid, yet she craved another minute here alone.

Lang waited, and when she entered (it seemed to him) she was ritualistic, or nearly so, for her body was closely wrapped and the robe severely belted, and her black slippers moved in a restrained gait, each swing distinct, and her carriage was likewise checked; and her face was discernibly uplifted so that the eyes which searched him, green eyes, were cast somewhat down. Her wings glowed and her lips had a tint of pink.

She smiled and said in embarrassment, "Please sit down -- please -- I'm sorry."

Lang, whose hands were in his pockets, merely shrugged.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No."

"May I get you a drink?"

"I don't care, really -- if you wish."

She crossed the room to a low cabinet and, gathering in the skirt of the robe behind her, knelt, then rested on her heels. She began nervously moving things around in the cabinet, exclaiming "Why didn't you warn me? I don't know what I have -- except this spaghetti wine --" and turning her torso she extended a bottle. When he took it from her hand she returned to her search, despairing all the time. "I have so little here, and it's all shoved to the back, I use it so seldom." She was moving dishes and cracker boxes and other junk out of her way.

She could find nothing else to drink, which seemed to upset her very much.

"Don't bother, Cynthia. We'll have this."

"But it's so cheap."

"It'll be fine."

She yielded, and left the room again and returned with a tray and two glasses. She poured, and there being only a little wine left in the bottle they got just a half a glass each.

Her hands folded in her lap. So little did she care about the wine that it was placed beyond her reach on a table to the right, while she sat in the middle of the high-backed couch with her knees fast together and her outstretched legs crossed at the ankle. There was a vague, sleepy look about her eyes and a distinct smile on her lips as she listened.

“You know,” Lang said, “I understand now -- why ...” and he too smiled.

“Yes?”

“Why I thought it was so fine, when this thing hit me.”

Her smile took form and she said; “You’ll tell me you’re insane, then. That’s the only explanation.”

“No,” he said.

And Cynthia vaguely shook her head in sympathy. “No,” she repeated, “not insane?”

“Perfectly sane,” said Lang. “I had just about decided I was empty, you see, when I discovered I had this thing in me.”

“Ah, how lucky.”

“Exactly.”

“You were so pleased not to be empty that you were delighted to be poisoned,” she interpreted “Didn’t you think it was -- a grave misfortune?”

Lang’s former life lay all in shadow, and to him it seemed miraculous that out of the sleep of the shadow had arisen the burning lustral scall, and though the scall was terrible the only “grave misfortune” was the sleep in the rain-gray shadow. Therefore he said no, and she responded:

“You men love torture. You’re just like my father, loving to brood and mystify yourself over ideas that lead nowhere. Philosophers. That was my father from top to bottom.”

Lang thought it needless to answer and Cynthia said no more. In the ensuing silence, as it lengthened, he turned away from the barbarous simplifications of speech, and though the woman wished he would speak she herself did not, so they were counterpoised in silence.

He saw the encircling white of the walls, dimmed in the night, and the untainted light of the lamps, in white shades, overspreading the dark red carpet; and the lamplight full on the breast of her robe -- a kindred red, a crimson so deep it approached black, and on the black border

which traced her collar. He saw the telluric green of her irises, strange green-infused crystalline lights; and the lush brown of her lashes. For she was lush and great, there was nothing dainty about her; not even her scent, which was manifold and strong, but with an edge of freshness, like pine yet duller.

When his fingers touched her face she was already in a trance of despair, for surely the hour of her unmasking had come, and seeing the trancelike glow of her eyes Lang thought she was afraid, with a basal childlike fear that he could release her of. He came to her therefore immeasurably gentle, in perfect peace, with a mission to unlock her heart and expel fear and to let revelation flood in, for while fear invested her she was not herself, and it was she he sought, in herself pure. He must first with utmost gentleness unlock her heart, to transmit peace and cast out her fear, and she must be returned to herself; and when she existed again pure and free, reft of speech and fear and all that is ordinary, then he could go in unto her, for until then she was captive and not her own. So he sought gently to unlock her heart and give her release, seeking thus to retrieve her out of her fear, for the sake of revelation -- his own and hers -- for their twin and single discovery.

But she was in her trance far and deep, scarcely aware any longer of why, for without a thought of fleeing she had fled and without a tremor she had surpassed fear, and now as if in the sea she was both isolated and covered over. She sensed his caress on her cheek but it was meaningless. She sensed his hand on her throat and it was warm. She felt his kiss on her eyes but the kiss seemed distant, while the darkness the kiss brought as it closed her eyes was near. She felt with a strange dimension of surprise that her mouth was open to him, but the taste on her tongue wasn't him. This taste assailing her tongue, what bitter alien taste? She was false and this was the taste of her falseness. She was a lie in his arms, a slut of lie, hateful, duplicitous, an odious cheat, if she allowed him to hold her and know not what he held. She was incomplete, the hour of revelation had come and she hadn't yet consummated the hour, she would go on and on, she would take every kiss, as false as she was, for how could she stop his kisses? Who could stop him? He was so incredibly gentle, who could bear to cast him off? His hand was so warm and his lips so hot, who could withstand him? Like a sea-wind a free force was sailing magnificent and fine -- with the trembling of her chest at each heartbeat, with his cradling hand at the nape of her neck, his guiding hand at her chin -- and who could arrest this wind or turn it? If this hand cradled and this mouth blessed her, could she flee?

He kissed her wings.

The trance utterly cracked when he kissed her affliction and she was standing again at the gulf of her unconsummated hour, but who was she now? Such a strange and mystical kindness he displayed, kissing her brow -- she was moved in her loins. But whose loins were these which stirred so near to her own heart, and whose mouth was this accepting the mouth of her beloved?

Cynthia's eyes opened and Lang smiled at her as if she had awakened from a nap, but she gave him a light push on the chest, for she was crowded, and then she parted the lapels of her robe. She took down one shoulder of the robe and freed her arm, then slipped free her other shoulder and arm and the robe fell at her back, leaving her naked down to her belt, which still gathered the crimson robe close at her waist. She glanced at him, a glance which he didn't see, and then she fell back against the couch, staring ahead blindly. In a moment her eyes closed and her head fell backward, resting on the glittering carpet of her hair. Her breathing was long and tremulous.

How bitter, how black, this state in which she lived, this heinous pessimism -- this self-eating starvation; this Never. Clean, yes it was clean, it was nothing foul; clean as never, pure as nada, stainless, it was the very ink of purity. And it would never deceive her. Eternally it would clothe her, and no rain of salt could beat upon her breast nor any fire leap at her knees if only she kept blackness. Blackness, true and perfect, her sanctuary -- and how her heart recoiled and her belly pleaded against this barrenness. For she was like a barren woman, who guarded herself with perfect foresight against bearing children lest she should suffer to see the children suffer, who preserved herself from the sadness of outliving her children -- barren of woe, whose children could never suffer harm nor bring down harm on her; a forehanded woman. Such was Cynthia -- her throat stiffened, her heart desolated and her belly anguished by her forehandedness, her keen brainy foresight. But resist. She told herself Resist -- O do not weaken. And within her stiffened throat by the power of her black mind she resisted hope because she knew hope: more barren even than Never, and bitterer, because first it enticed and entwined malignantly, caressing with putrid hand the quivering and the stupid, who swooned; and while they swooned they got their reward, direct from the blade in the hand of hope. But she scorned the caress and refused the hand. She was complete. She possessed already the thing she lacked but a minute ago, for now she was shriven, unmasked. I am here. I am this.

Her disrobing struck Lang with a violent shock of joy so sharp that his heart was paralyzed, and for a second he drifted on the wave of this shock. To him she was beauty and beauty's surpasser. She beatified beauty, she was beauty incarnate, imperfect, intemperate, burning with the life of beauty afflicted, waving and flame-like; she was a flame in the night. Now indeed he was gentle and he kissed her where he believed she most needed his kiss, on her implacable lips, and received no response save a deathly stillness. The affliction had spread to her thin shoulders, and though it lay near her breasts it didn't touch them. Her breasts were shapely and heavily nipped, and they bespoke her to him -- eloquent white breasts with indelicate brown nipples. Elsewhere, on her tapering white sides and her long arms, she was afflicted, without pattern or mercy. He kissed her lips again and met the same lifeless response. But he would inform her, and gradually he did so, though it was painful and took long; and after a long informing he brought to pass that span of minutes in which the face of a woman is transformed, when her eyes after long intervals of generous deliverance and mild amaze close, and in closing make their most precious declaration -- when the dark brows, lashes and nostrils go dim and the white features are luminous in shadow, and all is reduced to a luminous simplicity -- when her face turns slightly aside and the very throat speaks, the very ear speaks, the moisture on her temple speaks; and her face is a dream which blurs and comes again luminous out of the shadow, a dream and a vision.

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