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TWO SEVEN ZERO

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PART I

AFRICA

1857

I

HE WAS LOST IN THE FIRE. HE WAS DRIFTING THROUGH THE FLAMES.

All around were pieces of silence and stillness except for the chattering twisting illumination that shimmered before his eyes. And in spite of, or perhaps because of the damp darkness, he drew closer to the glow in an imperceptible movement.

There was solace there in the attempt to know the contrast between the heat of the night and the heat of the fire, a difference barely discernible. There was motion and images there in the swamp that surrounded their camp. And it was in the mesmerizing contrast of the darkness that slipped between the dozen or so fires that Mbala sought and desired to experience something other than this disquieting moment that had suddenly and inexplicably descended down upon him. The fire brought that, the needed, something.

There was a dance in these flames that whispered to him. He felt a sense, a hope of answers there in the shadows, and here, in the firelight. He stared and thought.

Weariness. This is what he attributed to this restless mood. He was weary from the travel and impatient from the two-day wait. It had taken eight days to reach this point. The rest of the party had turned back at Bonny, the last port of sale for the inland slave traders. There they had picked up waiting supplies and moved west towards the coast and then south to the new secret holding area.

It had been several years since any European had dared to venture this far and almost ten years since Mbala himself had been this way. There remained days of travel ahead and they could go no further until someone came and took them east to the city. East to Calabar.

On the fifth day of travel he had seen the waters of the large river turn to a muddy stream as they turned inland. The swamp closed in upon them. The creatures, indignant at their intrusion angrily made themselves known, in chorus. The birds cried out. The waters closed over the instant they passed as the mangroves hung as a curtained shroud, seemingly on all sides of their existence. All the while, the swamp drew them further, deeper, ever closer toward his home.

As Mbala glanced around the campsite he could observe the figures of the group in the appearance of sleep, all except the three slaves who tended the fires and the four guards. He had brought two of his wives, eight warriors, twelve slaves, including four women, and a European, John Basil.

Europeans knew that they were without protection at any point beyond Bonny. It was not the mosquitoes that brought them peril, there was medicine for that now. And it was not even the yellow death that set these boundaries to the penetration of the whites. They had, in the past, chosen to ignore that possibility. But to venture past Bonny was to enter into a forbidden area of the land of the Mbobos and the land of King Mbata a Ewuare, the great. To enter unbidden, unwelcome, unescorted, was to enter unwanted. Then, one must relinquish one's life at the most, or one's freedom at the least.

Mbala, the king of the large city of Domey, a costal king in his own right, was at this moment powerless. It did not matter that he and Mbata were brothers, identical twin brothers. Of the only importance now was that the warriors of Mbata would see the signs of the fires that surrounded the camp and acknowledge the messages that their drums sent forth throughout the day and well into the night. Mbala knew they were being watched. All who crossed the last maze of creeks just past Old Town were seen. They were further along than that. They had passed Old Town and Creek Town, by a little over one day.

As he sat there before the flames he wanted to see his brother again and yet, deep inside, that thing moved, stretched, and tapped lightly yet insistently at the uneasiness that resided within him.

Nimi, the new wife was also the youngest of Mbala's wives. She had seen him rise and move toward the fire. She watched with a curious and intent interest as he sat in thought. Only seven weeks removed from her own family and familiar surroundings, she was still somewhat hesitant and slightly awed in the presence of Mbala.

Obiriba, the first of his nine wives had insisted that he also bring Nimi along on this journey to the greatest city of the Mbobo people. Obiriba had long ago demonstrated the shrewdness to acquire that which she desired of Mbala. She had learned quite aptly how to take full advantage of her position.

As the first wife of Mbala she wielded a great deal of influence. Although she had grown heavy from the luxurious sedentary life she was able to lead, she was still considered attractive. As a true Mbobos she possessed a deep darkness of color and there was something pleasant in her ready smile and a keen awareness could be seen in her small, bright eyes.

In many ways she was indispensable to Mbala. She ably handled the many domestic issues of Domey and most importantly, she dearly loved him. It had been in fact Obiriba who had initially taken Nimi to Mbala. It was through this introduction that the way was opened for Nimi to become his wife. In her, Obiriba had felt some special affinity. Also, she understood the very practical reasons for their joining.

Nimi was the daughter of the chief of a small yet strategically important area desired by the Mbobos, situated a little over one hundred miles north of Domey. Mbala had been instructed by his brother to acquire these people as allies, without force, and these were the intentions of Mbala. On several occasions he, Obiriba, and their party had traveled to Nimi's village and the two women had shared in festivities after the men had concluded their business. Perhaps Obiriba recognized in Nimi, herself, twelve years earlier when at the same age, she had become the first wife of Mbala. Then again, perhaps she sensed, as many others seemed to experience in this young woman's presence, an unusual strength, and a depth of maturity that was in some way unsettling. There was no doubt as to her beauty, that was obvious, or to the genuineness in the appearance of her innocence. But there was a sublime essence that transcended her beauty, her youth. This that emanated from Nimi Enokye came from deep within her, from her soul. It was arresting and permanent.

Now as Nimi lay here in this strange darkness, the excitement of the previous months still coursed through her. Alternate feelings sometimes attempted to overwhelm her. But in spite of an obvious and natural apprehension within, she felt a sense of protection that came with being the wife of a king of the Mbobos, a great people.

Yet in contrast to all her new and disjointed emotions she felt the pressure of mystery, and confusion. And this disturbed her most. What manner of man was he, who held, possessed a power that encompassed an area of land that she could not even imagine, a number of people she could never count? Who was this power greater than that of her own husband?

Obiriba, on occasions had spoken to her, always in whispers, always when they were alone, about him, who allowed Nimi to summon from her wonder a need to rise at this moment. It was from a burning desire to know, of him, that she approached Mbala. It was this request she uttered softly as he finally acknowledged her when he glanced in her direction.

"May I speak with you?"

"You should sleep Nimi," he said, turning back toward the fire.

She remained standing near his shoulder and even in the heat of this night she felt herself chilled slightly. After several moments more he addressed her.

"What is it that keeps you awake?"

The questions wanted to spring from her. They pushed for expression and yet she could find only a whisper of a voice. "Is it true, the things they say about King Mbata a Ewuare, your brother?"

"And what do they say?" he replied.

She searched for words. "That he is a God. That he sends death on the wind, across the rivers, and over the land, and that he had a thousand wives and that he killed them all. One and then another one and now they are all gone. This is what I have heard." She finished in a rush.

Mbala turned to her. For a moment it was as if he had just seen her, truly, for the first time. As if in his own pressing preoccupations he had somehow ignored her, and she had stolen by. Totally. This bothered him. Quickly that feeling passed, yet he found himself attempting to look closer, deeper into her large brown eyes. He sensed there was something else there behind her slight smile, something new to his experience with women. For an instant he was confused. The image flared, blurred and finally faded, slowly. He could not grasp it. Just as quickly as the rising feeling, the fleeting image passed and he dismissed the moment in the blink of his own eyes.

But the questions lingered. They hovered between them as palpable as the wavering fire and as pressing as the sporadic darkness that encircled them. Mbala felt heavy at the mention of his brother's name. Heavy and angry. An old anger tinged with something painful and vague arose within him. He struggled against these feeling and yet in his effort to deny them he realized behind the echo of his brother's name the mood that covered him this night was sprung from, and soaked in these very emotions he fought. It was this accepted weight that caused him to motion Nimi to a place on his left, beside him and seemingly forced him to speak.

His voice was soft and it deepened.

"No Nimi, no matter what they say or believe, he is no God. If he were why would I not be one also? We are brothers. In blood there is no one closer on this earth to him than I. Born of the same father and mother I followed him by moments into this life. As for his wives, I do not know the number or why they go, but yes, they have all gone.

"It has been ten years since I saw him last." Mbala paused now. He was searching, grasping for words, some structure to these ruminations. It was as if he had never before talked about these personal things. "He has what is a certain ... strangeness. A divine power, it has been called.

"Soon after we were born it was discovered that he was in a fever. A strange fever that my mother also caught and carried from then until it brought death to her almost three years later. I somehow did not catch it. But he did, and it stayed with him until suddenly, when she died, it left him. Everyone hoped, forever. But it came back again and again and now it is believed that he in some way controls this fever.

"Over the years it changed and when he became a man it grew in its strength. It is unlike any other sickness like this. The whites can not fight it with this new quinine medicine they possess. It is different, much different even from that they call yellow fever.

“People, especially the whites began to doubt him. They dismissed the stories as rumors, as false superstition. Just a few years ago he destroyed everyone in a small village southeast of here. It was said they resisted his demands. And in their refusal to be dominated by him he seized that as an opportunity to display his power.”

He was distracted now, listening, as if for some far away sound. And Nimi found herself listening too. And when he turned his head, as if to see the sound, she looked too. Hearing nothing, she turned back to find him staring at her as if in an attempt to recall her, remember her name perhaps. Then abruptly, he began again, his eyes never leaving her.

“When we were young boys he began to break out with this thing almost every year, suddenly, without warning and those near him would get sick. A woman healer would take him off alone to treat him. And to be close to him for too long was a condemning curse. Sometimes he would cause the women to lose their ability to speak words or to hear any sounds. Several went blind. Some lost their minds. They would grow weak until they could not move and when they could not care for him because of their punishments someone else would take their place. Most simply died quickly. Even the strongest died in agony. Then just as mysteriously as it came, this thing would pass, then disappear only to come back. As he grew older it seemed to become mild, much less dangerous. But there was no way to know what it would do or how intense it would become or what type of pain it would inflict.

“Once it left, and when it did not return for several years our people prayed he was healed. Everyone wanted to believe he was well. We believed it was gone forever.

“We joined our father at fourteen years in the battles our people fought. I had been badly wounded here.”

He touched his left thigh and Nimi remembered the scar she had seen.

“I could not go to war against the whites who had joined our enemy, the Shantulu. My father was killed at the battle of Brass River and Mbata was there. He saw the death of my father. This fever came back, surged from within him and everyone near him was killed. Even Mbobo warriors.

“Many of our enemies who thought they had escaped, took this thing back with them. By the time the fever grew weak and finally stopped, thousands had died or suffered in some very strange and extreme way. It became known throughout the land. Before they died, those who had retreated spoke of the horror at Brass River.”

Mbala turned and now staring into the fire, he continued. “I was sent away at fifteen to study in order to govern at Domey, a city we had controlled for many years. Mbata would battle with our enemies and sometimes he would use, sometimes he would not use this fever to kill. Our warriors were proud to fight along side him. It was an honor to die in battle like that, with him, because of him. If the time was right and he brought it out of his body all those who caught it would suffer, a horrible death, and it was said the spirits of our enemies killed by this fever could not find their way to the other life and so they wander in pain forever. But it is believed by

our warriors that to die beside Mbata, on the side of the Mbobo king is to gain passage to the other life immediately. Now those who oppose him who know of, and believe his history, fear most that he will visit them, to walk amongst them. In fever.”

His voice lowered until Nimi found herself leaning close to him. “I heard of these battles at Domey. People saw, and spoke of the violence of Mbata and his warriors. They killed and burned with a frightening vengeance. And he would lead. Always, he leads them. He has been badly wounded many times but he did not die. He only killed.

“Ten years ago I returned home. Mbata and I celebrated. We were becoming a great and powerful people with much land, and riches. We were growing. We spoke of many things and made plans for a kingdom of the Mbobo people that would last for all time. A peaceful kingdom. Back to Domey I went and even when peace came I remained there. Only messages, back and forth. Only messages from the great king of the great city, and goods and slaves, and orders.”

These last words were spoken with a mixture of bitterness and sadness. Nimi remained quiet until at last one soft sound came from her. “Why?” she asked, in a small voice.

“I do not know!” he answered angrily. He paused, and calmed himself as the last of their fire, once swollen, shrunk to embers.

“When I sent to him my desire to come home he would only respond, ‘Not now, the time is not right.’ And now Mosheshwe is dying. He is the Mangovo of our people, in charge of our external relations and the closest to my father. He himself was like a father to us. Finally the message arrived, ‘Come, the time is now.’ And so we leave. Five days to Bonny, three days from there, and here we sit. We wait for guides and protection to return to my own home.” He was growing more and more upset. “They know we are here! Why do they not contact us?”

He posed this last question to himself, as if Nimi was not there. With these last words Mbala rose and began to toss more wood onto the fading fire. As it again grew, Nimi pulled back from the rising heat but she remained sitting, not knowing if he would continue.

As she watched Mbala rebuild the fire she began to recognize alterations within herself. Her parents and Obiriba had tried to impart to her an understanding of insight, a growth of intuition. They had talked to her for days on what it was to be a king’s wife. Before the marriage ceremony there had been an attempt to prepare her. She was told many things. This to do, this not to do. These matters had to a great extent seemed less important to her than to others.

She did not possess a strong feeling for Mbala. In ways he carried the similar, yet unrelated presence of her father, who as a chief held a very prestigious position. Their marriage, she knew was designed to unite her tribe with the Mbobos. For her it meant a chance to leave home which she greatly desired to do. To live at Domey was a dream for her. However, her dreams had never included being the wife of a king. Also, she knew there were

eight other wives with which to contend and an undetermined amount of concubines in addition.

But here, deep in this sweltering swamp of darkness she began to feel and see through the isolated denseness of her own young existence. Now clearly in this man, her husband, there emerged emotions that had passed invisibly beyond her before. She realized that this moment was the first time Mbala became someone distinct for her. Someone that she could say, he is like this, or, he is like that. And what she believed was that there was a truth about these assessments, a strong sense of correctness.

In this instant she thought of Obiriba, her father, her mother, and yes, her younger brother Nsundi. Each, in a flash crystallized as an entity before her. Above all, Mbala flooded her with feelings that had once sharply passed between her and Nsundi. Jealousy, envy and portions of animosity. She had comprehended then, that her brother was really only a child and a love for him, for her family, had extinguished this emotional conflict.

In spite of these thoughts, and an accompanying pang of momentary regret and loneliness, a keen and recognizable impression presented itself to her between and behind Mbala's words. This she could not, would not shake. There existed she believed, between these brothers something wrong, something divisive. This she had not heard in rumor or whispers. This was dissension of which no one spoke.

And here a voice, unsettling in its clarity, drew her home again. She could hear, ringing throughout her, the last words her mother had spoken. "Nimi!" And the urgency of her own name caught her. And when she stopped and looked into her mother's eyes, she saw tears there. Her mother had come close, embraced her and said, "Nimi, you must always remember. It is the child, the living child within man," and here she took Nimi's face into her hands, "and woman, that is most to fear ... now, you must grow up!"

Another voice came closer, slowly bringing Nimi back. Back to the humid wall of darkness that surrounded them. Back to rising heat and smoke that now choked her and stung her eyes.

A leaded veil dropped. A dull glow beat inside. Her face became hot. And Mbala's words, although now very near seemed to emanate from a deep well. He spoke of, time. The lateness. And distance. Something about distance. She tried to focus on his words but it was useless. She was tired, so tired, so sleepy. She was suddenly utterly and completely exhausted. Her head dropped.

Mbala had stepped from the fire for wood and upon his return he saw that Nimi had stretched out close toward the fire, dangerously close. He dropped his bundle of branches and hurried to pick her up. As he carried her to her bedding, he looked down at her. The degree of her youthful beauty impressed him. And he recalled the unique wisdom she had displayed in the few brief conversations they had shared over the past months. There seemed to be within her essence not only innocence but experiences that brought the solemnity of age to her young years. "Perhaps," he mused, "it is as I have been told. There may truly be some exceptional substance behind the quiet,

reserved personality of this fresh, pretty woman. Indeed! Only the passage of time will tell.”

“Nimi,” he sighed aloud. “I have designs for you. You shall bring me a child, a boy, to be a man. Yes! I must be the first to produce the next Mbobo king.” She heard ... nothing. She felt ... nothing.

Obiriba woke Nimi roughly. She was exited and speaking quickly yet quietly. “Wake up, wake up, they are here!”

Nimi tried to clear her head and as she glanced around, a gasp escaped. Warriors, such as she had never seen before stood around the edge of the clearing. As she jumped up she searched for Mbala and when she did not immediately see him she became anxious and she had to push down her rising sense of apprehension. How long they had been there she did not know. But although excited, Obiriba did not seem worried. Nimi moved close beside her. John Basil was walking between the warriors, a curious and fascinated look upon his face.

It was the women who had most affected Nimi. She had heard of the Mbobo women warriors of Calabar but she had never seen one. Now, around her there stood over half a dozen. They carried weapons, long guns and spears, with swords strapped to their sides, just as the men. And on all their faces and on several parts of their bodies there were deliberate markings that had been cut into their flesh and painted brilliant shades. For Nimi these people possessed a fierceness that was unknown to her.

As she tried to take in this scene, voices and movement approached from the direction of the water. Mbala, followed by two male warriors forced their way through the overgrowth. She heard him order food to be prepared for all and then he walked before them. He spoke so everyone could hear.

“We will eat and as soon as the canoes are loaded we will depart. We have another three days of boat travel and then at least six, perhaps seven days over land. There will be horses waiting for us to take us the last four days.”

There came now the time that was the most exciting Nimi had ever experienced. They rode those next three days in a huge war canoe that could carry well over fifty people at once. Large guns were attached that turned in all directions. On several occasions she saw other boats like theirs at different points along the bank. She heard drums beating as they passed.

They pushed on at a relentless pace and each day traveled well into the evening. And the narrow Warri River took them southeast, deeper into the interior. When they could no longer follow the river they camped and the next morning they continued on foot. New warrior guides each day now took them due east.

Once past the great forest, Nimi began to see beautiful plants, unusual trees and a richness of grasslands that would take her breath away. She also observed a troubled Mbala. He seemed preoccupied and subdued. He rarely spoke except to issue terse orders or to pose questions. The warriors would answer these questions and give directions with short replies and points of

their weapons. They were distant and separated from them but they treated Mbala, Obiriba and Nimi with a great deal of respect.

From the point the warriors joined them, an additional eight days of travel now found them just a small amount of miles from their destination. A different mood settled over everyone as they camped in the open for that last night.

Just as the previous nights, after the evening meal, Mbala and John Basil would get together and talk at length. Nimi had noticed these conversations with a growing curiosity. And now, this last night found them together again. Both animated and Mbala unusually agitated.

Nimi watched them as darkness settled in and the two men sat, reflected in the campfire. In moving close to them she had, in the past, been able to hear snatches of their conversations. She had not been able to gain very much from their words, but this much she knew. They spoke constantly of King Mbata, and war.

She watched them from a distance now. This small white man with the balding head, large nose, and watery eyes was very easily excited and on some occasions, when he was upset, he would cross into his own language or forget Mbobo words or struggle for the phrases for which he searched. He rose now to pace as he talked. His shoulders, hunched, always moved as he walked and talked. And he was always breaking out into a large grin that never really showed his teeth, several of which were missing.

They made a strange couple, this small pale man and the heavy, dark Mbala who towered over him. She looked at Mbala now. He had changed much in just the past few months. He had very quickly gained weight, eating his numerous meals with a voracious appetite. The food, along with the large quantity of strong drink he consumed seemed to soothe him. At Domey, Nimi rarely saw him, as he was always busy. But each time she did see him, when they were able to have an occasional meal together, he appeared to have changed, aged. Pieces of grey now, in his short cropped hair. And his distinct marking, the mark from birth that was said to distinguish him from his brother, a small patch of pure-white hair near his right temple, seemed to be spreading. And there were lines around his mouth and dark-brown, deep-set eyes. Now, even when he laughed, which was seldom, it was with sadness, and effort. And she recalled how when he had first come to her village he had appeared to her regal and handsome in his own way. Now his mannerisms and close presence brought to her a mild sense of distaste.

Suddenly, he and Basil parted and calling to Obiriba, he brought her and Nimi together. They were all standing close. He spoke softly. "We will be departing in the morning, earlier than before and by nightfall we will arrive in Calabar. I have been told that the palace of my brother is near the mountains so we will go well past the main city. Tomorrow night, after we rest, there will be a reception and banquet for us. There will be much business for me to attend to in the days we will be there. Remember, at all times, Mosheshwe is sick, and dying. He is a very important Mbobo."

Mbala paused. He looked off, as if he could somehow see his birth home.

“Calabar is a great city now but it is a very long distance from the coast. There are ... things, that will be different there.” He looked back at Obiriba for several moments and then at Nimi. There was a spark of emotion that moved between them. A moment separated them all from this strange land, from this new altered world. And yet they were together in this experience and somehow they all sensed that the very next sunset would change their lives ... forever.

A look was in his eyes. A fleeting glance that in an instant of time attempted to elude Nimi. His voice, although calm and almost emotionless was in fact layered. And around the words, within the sounds, it betrayed him in the shadows.

“Do not ... I say, to you both, do not dishonor me,” he admonished. And there behind this warning was ... fear.

The morning burst out with a brilliance that appeared unreal. The heat, before tolerable, seemed to grow extreme and forced itself upon them all. The temperature of this day for some reason strained in distortion and emphasized that from this point forth all aspects of their lives would reach levels of intensity they had never experienced before. The searing sun that burned down prepared them for the open, raw emotions that were soon to rankle and rise revealingly to the surface of their existence.

In contrast, the late afternoon and early evening rapidly cooled and what was at one time a vague, distant image, moved closer.

The falling darkness began to enhance the fires that flared up in dancing dots across the city. Calabar loomed ever larger in the once indistinct valley before them. People lived in sporadic clusters on these outer edges of the city and as the travelers rode pass, children and adults would wave or just stare curiously. Drums were beating continuously, announcing their progress.

As they came to the crest of the final ridge they stopped, and the view shocked the strangers, in particular, Mbala. The city as he knew it, no longer existed. It had expanded tremendously in size, with a much larger population than he could have imagined and its center had been moved several miles back, toward the east. The low-slung mountains in which he had hunted and played as a young boy served as a backdrop for almost the complete length of the city. They now, by design, provided protection from the rear. From this distance and in the fading light it appeared there had been homes built in the lower parts of the mountains.

As they looked down just below them, land had been cleared for hundreds of yards in each direction. Huge logs had been placed deeply into the ground and protruded upward for nine or ten feet. This imposing stockade had been constructed in a pattern that barely allowed for single file movement through much of this area. This wall of trees had been tied together with vine and openings had been provided so warriors could fire their weapons from strategic points. Mbala knew that the very basic defenses of deep ditches, covered and hidden with dirt and brush would be found throughout these areas.

They descended toward the main area of the city. As they reached this man-made barrier they swung north, to their left, past hundreds of these logs until they reached a large opening. As they turned right, into this clearing, Mbala saw that cannons lined each side of the approach. At this point of entry there were cannons that held three-pound charges. As they moved through this opening there could be seen more cannons, with nine-pound charges. Moving past the last flat land on the right, and sloping hills on the left, several thirty-two pound cannons faced anyone who reached this far. Each cannon was loaded, primed and manned by both men and women.

As they veered south again, having made a semi-circle, the center of the city was to their left. Calabar was lit up and as they turned into the main thoroughfare and reached the first dwellings, the party saw people standing, lining the street. They began to shout and sing and music played from everywhere. Along the street were dozens of large brightly colored canopies and Mbala, having dressed in his finest, and having instructed the same for his wives, led his group through the city. He himself in awe and full of pride, and they in exhilarating excitement.

Soon the main city was behind them and as they came closer and closer to the mountains, Mbala observed with interest what it had been that appeared to be homes. Small buildings, holding manned cannons were placed in the face of the mountains, some as high as twenty feet. And from his own travels Mbala knew there would have been huge amounts of dirt and even large boulders carried to the top of this mountain entrance and positioned to rain down upon enemies or to block this final passage. Through a large winding opening they continued, an opening Mbala did not recall. And as they rounded a sharp bend they entered a clearing.

Illuminated with small lamps, that could not be counted, and almost surrounded by mountains, that could not be climbed, upon this large grassy knoll, extended and rose the immense, and beautiful palace of Mbata a Ewuare. The great Mbobo king.

Mbata stood naked in the center of his secluded courtyard garden. He had stepped from his bedroom into this fantastical flowery world in search of a calming peace, detachment, and familiar pain that was necessary for his survival.

Arms outstretched at his side, palms up, eyes closed, and face lifted toward the sky he stood, at length. Motionless. An endless throbbing reverberated within and throughout him in an unceasing movement toward a non-existing exit from his body. This throbbing began behind his heart, moved into his head and pounded and flashed as a runaway fire to his very fingertips.

At each chance, a stolen glance revealed translucent newborn sightless stars floating above him. A rising moon suspended itself in a hovering repetition that possessed a closeness that demanded a touch. And deep within himself he desired to descend into an unfathomable depth of darkness where love and hope and hate and death did not exist. It was in this pursuit,

upon this stillness, at this moment, that Mbata uncovered again a profound sense of his noble isolation and intense exalted sadness.

The drums pounded and rhythmically surged and receded across the darkening skies. Impulses flew as spears and thrust as swords seeking to sharply define his existence. Aiming. Claiming. Crying out for expression. Instinctual impulses, at the core of all that binds humans to lowly animals sought to rise above this repression.

Controversy raged within this endeavor to transcend the base existence, control the primeval carnal desires and walk as a human being with all impulses being openly acknowledge, accepted, and incorporated into the light of consciousness.

And he, Mbata a Ewuaré, stood as a statue, opposed to this reality. In contention with and in a contradiction to the pure essence of the humankind, in desperate need to reject in ruthless suppression each sensation, every emotion, and all evidence of his living, feeling ... Soul.

It was there! Between each beat of every drum that he fought to exist. Within the deathly silence. It was there! Between each point of every star that he strove to breathe. Within the deathly darkness. It was there! Beyond the mortal reach, behind the lighted moon that he strolled and stumbled through the unseen nothing.

Nothingness! He wanted to step away from this moment again feeling, feeling ... nothing.

And as he lowered his arms and began to prowl his sanctuary this night he was relieved to discover this self-inflicted pain had once again brought the distraction he so desperately needed. Wanted, this time, so quickly and completely.

The drums had stirred him. The excitement of this occasion had caused a fragmented eruption to spark inside his heart and he recognized conflicts. He could not savor the coming night. He could only numb himself by removing all traces of joy lest it swell and burst. And most importantly he must suspend the pulsating anger that had attempted to boil within.

To control himself was to restrain this coiled internal power and force it to remain dormant. It must sleep in the recesses of his being. He knew to relegate it to the unfeeling. He knew to ignore its unknown disguises by rejecting all and banishing all, down to the black abysmal labyrinth of his own soul.

The remote loneliness he experienced these past weeks was boarding on unbearable. This night was somehow different, stronger than all the lonely moments he had ever lived. Never had the distinct difference of his existence been so obvious as now. This sense of isolation had rushed him, flooded him, and he sought to slow his racing heart. He struggled within the reality of his own essence. Only in naked retreat could he touch some potential of freedom, some form of contrast to the unrelenting rigidity and endless boundaries within which he forever crawled. Naked, he was more than a king. He was a man ... possibly.

The pounding in his head subsided. The pain eased and a sense of identity returned. He could not afford to weaken now. Mosheshwe, he knew, would soon leave him and enter the other life and as he turned to cross the garden he reflected on this. There was none closer to him than this man who advised, protected, and understood him like a father. The love of his real father was a hazy memory and his mother's love, an ephemeral dream. And whatever it was that passed between him and Mbala had for some reasons been forced, unnatural, and distorted. And deep inside he truly believed that he would never be able to gaze upon, or hold a child of his own. He recognized in his future only fear. The fear of his own internal existence and the fear he continually evoked in virtually all who entered his presence. With Mosheshwe's death his isolation would soon increase.

Before he entered his room to prepare for his guests a coldness washed across him and chilled his blood. He believed there was treachery entering his kingdom this night and soon perhaps disloyalty would be within his reach. And if that which he suspected revealed itself to be true he would seek to destroy all who betrayed him. No matter who it was.

Suddenly, a riveting vision, intangible, yet alluring touched him. Someone was coming along with his brother who was reaching out to him. A most dangerous presence that confused and disturbed him. As he crossed into his bedroom, seductive voices of warning prepared him for this night that he knew would alter soon the course of his life ... forever.

The sheer richness and absolute statement of power of the palace had overwhelmed everyone. In comparison to the preparations that provided protection to the city itself, this separated area seemed almost tranquil and serene. The three tall circular stone walls that encompassed this huge rectangular shaped building gave the impression they were more to provide mystery and legend to the structure than to represent a fear of attack.

In size it was almost twice as large as Mbala's palace. It appeared larger than the combined fort and complex erected by the Portuguese near Domey, which was one of the largest of that type on the coast. It was constructed both for comfort and coolness from the heat and in addition, particular sections of the palace, ignoring the climate, were built primarily of stone brought from great distances. These huge blocks were each adorned in intricate stonework patterns. Unlike most other large cities this palace was not located in the center. It appeared to have been placed so as to represent strength and peace, and above all, beauty.

Plants and flowers grew in abundance. A swift winding stream passed the northern entrance. Several small huts on the southern side were assembled and illuminated as obvious sacred homes for relics and symbolic treasures that told the history of the Mbobo people. Behind the huts was the burial ground for all royalty and honored people of the tribe.

The Mantuto for the Mbobo people, the minister in charge of internal affairs, greeted the arriving party. After the welcoming rituals and formalities, the visiting group of Mbala, Obiriba, Nimi, and John Basil were escorted to

their rooms for refreshment and rest until the formal reception.

There had been placed in the rooms of the women, sculptured tortoise shell, valuable jewelry pieces, sweet scents, beautiful dyed-cloth materials and fine silks for dresses, wraps or head coverings. They were too excited to rest and were soon dressed and ready for the night's festivities.

The men also received gifts of ivory and gold, animal skins, silks, and bottles of fine gin and rum.

John Basil tried to rest. For the past few days he had begun to feel uncomfortable with the reality of his situation. He was almost four hundred miles from friendly ground and deep in the land of a very powerful people known for its unity, and violence. Few Europeans had been allowed into their country this far east.

He was surprised at not just the richness of this city but also at the planning and resources that had gone into its construction. He was becoming less concerned for the success of his task and more concerned with his own safety. The conversation he had with Mbala the previous night had made him apprehensive. What he had learned was that Mbala's direct influence over his own brother was not as significant as he had been at first led to believe.

Mbala lay down and attempted to rest. Many feeling ran through him this night. Certainly he was glad to be home and he looked forward to seeing familiar people and places. He was most anxious to see his brother and Mosheshwe. And then of course, there was his private business to attend to. This he tried to turn away from his mind. But as he lay upon his bed and looked around at the opulence of his large room he was very troubled by a strong mood that made itself obvious. A sense of dread had been seeping deeper into him for several days. And even now, upon entering the city, a feeling of pride for the accomplishment of his people and yes, envy, even though he himself lived as a king at his Domey palace, was continuously covered by this dread. He had not, in spite of the excitement, been able to ignore it.

He slipped into a light doze.

Music began sounding from somewhere deep in the palace and soon thereafter the Mantuto was announced outside of Mbala's doorway. He stepped into the hallway and waited for John Basil and promptly the women joined them.

After winding their way through what seemed like a maze of passages, past many different rooms, they entered a large banquet hall. Here there were many people singing and clapping to the music. They were led to elevated seats of honor and were informed that Mbata would join them shortly.

As they took their places, a long line of women entered. Upon their heads were baskets of food. Various fish and meats, roasted and stewed. Yams, vegetables and exotic fruits were placed in the center of the dining area along with refreshments, including fruit drinks, gin and rum, and wine and brandy.

Of the people who were there when they entered, Mbala began to recognize and greet several of them and soon he began to feel a growing

excitement. The Mantuto had immediately offered several toasts and Mbala could feel the gin, being of excellent quality, begin to take effect.

Another line of women had brought more food and as the last one departed, the new guests were surprised by the entrance of fully dressed warriors carrying a stretcher chair upon which reclined a very thin, elderly man. Mbala recognized Mosheshwe and stood and moved toward him and as he was moving, nearly everyone in the great hall who had remained sitting suddenly rose as one. All had observed that several paces behind the stretcher, King Mbata himself had entered the hall and paused just beyond the entrance, and looked for his brother.

Dancers had followed Mbata and gliding past him to the sides of the hall, they began to perform in whirling, frenzied movements. Many others joined in the singing. People began to sway and clap to the music. The tempo of the drumbeats increased, their pounding became louder and the dancers moved faster and faster. There was happiness and rejoicing for this reunion.

Mbala stood frozen in his footsteps.

Across the large room stood Mbata. He was dressed in a flowing dark-blue silk robe with a long cape made of animal skins. He wore an elaborate dark-blue silk hat with gold trim and long bright feathers that bent, far down behind his back.

As their eyes locked and Mbata moved toward him, Mbala continued to stand as if transfixed. He tried to smile. With a great effort he began to move. All he could feel was that there was something he could not grasp, something different.

Something ... confusing. Something ... wrong.

Nimi had risen with the others. But at the sight of Mbata her legs had tried to give out on her. Her body flushed and for an instant she grew faint. She sat down again. She had been overcome. Not by just the significance of the moment, but by the presence of an aura. A being that had ... devastated her. All she had thus experienced, all the various emotions, all the excitement paled, receded and finally vanished. For several long moments she forgot where she was, even who she was. And as she stood again, the music and voices began to rush and roar in a cacophony of sounds, past her. All movement blurred except for that of this extraordinary essence that strode forward. As if separated from everyone and everything else, he was apart from the reality of this event, of this life. For her only, he moved forward. Directly toward her. He advanced. Only for ... her. Emerging and becoming that which she had until this moment never truly known. Something, and someone ... real. And then, at the same moment as Mbala she realized there was a strange wrongness that for a moment eluded her. Then it became apparent to her. He was approaching not her, but Mbala and as she stared something else became evident. The resemblance was obvious, but they were no longer identical. Although tall as Mbala, he did not weigh as much. Mbala's face was rounder, his face was thin, almost gaunt. Scarred. They were of the same darkness and possessed the same deep-set, dark-brown eyes except that the eyes of Mbata were unnerving and somehow frightening in

their lack of expression. Designed to conceal a smoldering intensity that did not escape her. Only a slight smile could be seen. And as she glanced back and forth between the brothers she spoke suddenly, aloud. "He appears so ... young."

Mbala moved haltingly, dazed and confused until as if he had crossed through some dense mist that quickly parted, his uncertainty had sharply lifted and he saw clearly. And this abrupt clarity caused him to briefly laugh aloud. His brother, as if time had stood still, years had never passed, looked exactly as he had when he last saw him, ten years ago!

He laughed again and was propelled forward. Each step brought with it a sense of uncontrolled exhilaration and ... fear. And something inimical snatched at him. Then, before Mbala stood a vision of their father. His arms were outstretched and he called to his sons as they raced forward and as Mbala closed toward those arms a searing heat emanating from his stomach sprung up and surrounded the very top of his head. Darkness followed and the heat penetrated this moment and as Mbala heard the voice and felt the arms of his brother, he lost consciousness.

Everything halted as Mbala fell into Mbata's arms. There was silence and then sounds of muffled screams, alarmed cries and frightened murmurs as people began to fade toward the doorways and press themselves against the walls.

Nimi had not moved, even as Obiriba, in panic, had rushed toward her husband. She was oblivious to the circumstances. All she could know was that as Mbala was dropping, collapsing into his arms, Mbata had paralyzed her existence. A moment before Mbala had reached him, as if he had been called, Mbata had looked over the heads of everyone directly into her eyes. He had, like a huge stone, crushed her beneath a blazing glare and she was fastened to her spot, confined within the eyes that were questioning and puzzled. Before he turned his attention to his brother did Mbata ask her, angrily, across the expanse of this great hall, in a look that stopped her heart?

"Who are you? ... Really!"

Many of the guests at the banquet had momentarily believed that Mbata had somehow for some reason killed his brother. But very soon Mbala had opened his eyes and quickly began to insist that he was fine. All were relieved yet left bewildered as to exactly what had transpired.

A man of medicine who was present examined him and proclaimed him to be all right. He explained that Mbala was perhaps overwhelmed by the festive events and excitement of being home and seeing his brother. He just needed to rest. This explanation passed through the hall and brought a nervous sense of relief. As Mbala was being assisted toward his room, laughter, shouts, and clapping erupted. Mbata ordered the banquet and everyone to continue and he accompanied Mbala, saw that he was put to bed after some protest and waited to see that he had fallen asleep immediately.

After several hours Mbala awoke with an abruptness and he was instantly, completely awake. He lay there, not moving, turning his head slowly, trying

not only to adjust his eyes to the patches of darkness but attempting to understand where he was. For an extended moment he felt concerned and vaguely, a sense of danger in these unfamiliar surroundings. And then, in pieces, all came back to him. His confusion now was as to why he had reacted in such a manner.

He sat up and turning, placed his bare feet upon the floor. Head down, he reflected like this for some reason on the textured smoothness of the rug beneath him. On the luxurious covering on his bed that he now pressed tightly in his hands, and how only faintly could he hear the drumming celebration that just a while ago had so hypnotically pounded in his head.

He thought he was alone and then a voice, a presence, a closeness was unexpectedly easing and breaking across his solitary feeling and bringing an interruption to the thick, quiet dimness. It came from the corner ... softly. And even in its softness and attempt to soothe, it caused Mbala to raise his head quickly, startled.

"How is my brother?" asked Mbata, as he emerged from beside the far window and leaving the darkness, strode toward the bed. He crossed through the room past the light the large window allowed the bright moon to provide and silently drew a chair up near the bed. He had removed his hat and cape and in his left hand he carried a small hand-carved wooden box.

Except for the moon the only other illumination was a glowing lamp in the furthest corner behind Mbala. Yet, they could see clearly, in this shadowy moment. Mbala could see from his brother, a look of sharpness and he was forced to involuntarily lower his own eyes to reply. "I am fine now," he answered.

"I thought perhaps, you were ill?"

Mbala looked directly at him now. "No. No I was just tired, and excited. The drink had gone quickly to my head."

"Ah ... " And Mbata nodded his head in agreement. "Yes, it is also strong for me. My mind and body does not allow it."

Mbala glanced around the room. Moments of awkward silence passed between them.

Mbata continued to stare at him intently, studying him, seeming quite at ease. He spoke. "It is good to see you my brother. It has been a long time. You are the only true family I have left." He paused, the remnants of his voice remained, hanging in the warm air.

To Mbala his voice had changed in some ways. He did not remember it like this. It sounded heavier and slightly raspy.

There was silence again.

"Mosheshwe will soon leave us," Mbata said now. These words came quietly, as a matter of fact. They were absent of any real emotion but were obviously spoken with a sincere sense and recognition of an impending loss.

Mbala had begun to look at his brother again and now he could not remove his gaze. Even in the shading he could observe, in accent, the outline of the youthful, slim face, traces of a taut smile that twisted slightly. A thin indented scar ran beneath his right eye across his cheek and touched his ear.

He tried to look into these piercing eyes for something familiar. He found nothing. They were blank. Not dull, just without recognizable emotion. He searched for words. "I would have come sooner. I could have come many times but you would discourage me."

Mbata looked away for the first time. He glanced down at the box he held and turned it over several times. "There was much violence. It was danger always. We needed your presence at Domey. But most important, I was not well. The constant conflicts and my anger at so much death, was for me difficult. I was gone sometimes for many weeks. And for a long time I had little control. It is not easy to explain or to understand but it is necessary for me to be quiet, and calm, within. At those times, it was impossible."

"And how are you now?" Mbala asked.

"I am much stronger. The peace we experienced for these past few years was good for me. And though it appears that peace is breaking down, and I am sad about Mosheshwe, I have grown older and ..."

"Have you?" Mbala interrupted. "Have you grown older?"

Mbata paused a moment, his expression changed slightly. It seemed to soften.

"Yes. I have. It is, the fever, my brother. For some reason my face has changed very little since the battle at Brass River. I seem to age only, inside. I think, inside, I am very old."

Mbata rose and walked to the window.

Mbala followed. He spoke. Signs of urgency seeped into his voice.

"The peace does not have to end," he said. "You do not have to war with these people."

He stood beside Mbata and as he looked at him in this light there seemed to be a mask of sadness upon his face.

"Do you believe that Mbala?" he said, quietly.

"Yes I believe that. It is as if only the Mbobo people want war. Others want peace."

Mbata turned and faced his brother. His eyes flashed and then just as quickly, they were calm again. A cooling breeze entered through the thin window fibers and brought a tingling sensation to the back of Mbala's neck. He could feel his hair there move, rise.

"Is that why you make treaties for our people?" Mbata questioned softly. "Secret treaties with these whites, our enemies. To bring us peace?"

An imperceptible glow was creeping from the east and the earliest birds would soon sing the morning forth. But at this moment all was very still, and very quiet. Mbala thought certainly for a moment he heard a single drum, beating alone in the distance. "What a strangely familiar rhythm," he mused. And then he recognized it as his own, racing heart. And he was sure that not only could Mbata hear it, but it would soon awaken all the people of Calabar.

"I wanted the papers to be a surprise." He hesitated. "I have them with me, as gifts, for you, and Mosheshwe and all the Mbobo people." Now it was his turn to look out of the window.

"Ah yes, speaking of gifts," Mbata reached out his hand. "This is for you

my brother.”

Mbala took the box and stared at it. He was nervous. He spoke again. “They are meaningless papers without your sign of approval. I ...” Mbala stopped.

Mbata had raised his right hand. He moved closer and he spoke, almost in Mbala’s ear as if in bonded confidence. “Not now. I will gather the council in this evening. We will talk everything out. Time is weighted. Mosheshwe will advise us, and you, will tell us all you know. On your return to Domey we must be in complete agreement. Is this true?” He placed his hand on Mbala’s left shoulder. “Is this true?” he asked again, with emphasis.

“Yes,” Mbala quickly answered. “Yes it is true, we will be in agreement.”

“No my brother, is it true you will tell us all there is?”

“Oh, yes, of course. All I know,” responded Mbala.

Mbata patted his shoulder. Then he took Mbala’s face into his hands and there in the morning darkness, peered deeply into his eyes. He embraced Mbala and then, kissed his left cheek. He turned abruptly to leave. As he crossed the room he spoke. “We will have much else to talk about. I have never seen Domey. And what do you think of Calabar? It has grown?” He reached the doorway at this point and he turned back. “I hope you like my simple gifts. They belonged to our father. If there is anything you need, you have only to ask. My home is your home. Rest my brother. Until evening.” And with that, he was gone.

Mbala opened the small box and saw two impressive gold rings. As he looked at them in the expanding light, he realized he felt as if he had been on the edge of some sheer precipice, about to fall into some bottomless pit and had at the last moment been yanked back. He crossed the room to a small table and poured gin into a cup. He took a large drink. He wanted to wash away this uneasiness.

As he felt the warmth of the gin in his stomach he began to relax. He stretched out and his last thoughts were concerning the papers Basil carried. “How could he have known?” he pondered. And he wondered what else he knew. He was left alone, with his thoughts, alone with, himself. Soon he would again sleep.

As Mbata turned toward the far wing and his own rooms, a voice called out to him from behind.

“Is he all right King Mbata?”

The words came, floating softly, imploring yet confident. The voice pricked him and he knew instantly who it was.

Nimi had left her room just past Mbala’s and was walking down the hall in his direction.

He turned back to her. As she came near him he could see again the same beauty and feel easing on him those same unsettling impressions that had struck him earlier at the banquet. She had the deep colored darkness of a true Mbobo woman. The gaze of her large haunting eyes held him and there was an enticing grace in her languid movement. She was rather tall and Mbata

was surprised at her height. But as she approached, the more uneasy he became and the affect she had upon him earlier was again growing and he could not comprehend this feeling. It was new and unusual.

"Yes," he answered. "He is fine and so you, must sleep. It has been a long day for you all." He paused. "Ah, of course, you are Nimi Enokye."

She was for a moment, herself, surprised. Then she understood that he would have of course been told the names of his guests. "Yes," and she stopped and looked up directly into his eyes. "I am Nimi Enokye." And lowering her head just a little she quickly bowed at her waist.

Mbata was impressed and returning to her a slight bow of his head he said, "I welcome you to our family. I am honored." And then words that came from deep inside him forced their way forward until Mbata, sounding strange to himself spoke. "You are very beautiful Nimi."

She was beginning to feel his power again and found it necessary to lower her head. But at his words a thrill had swept through her body. "Thank you," she said. And then she again looked up into his eyes and continued. "I am the one honored. And I am most fortunate King Mbata. The Mbobo people are a great and powerful people with not one but two great and strong kings, and now, I am under their protection."

Mbata intuitively knew that this young woman who stood before him was without equal in many ways. He was able to sense behind her openness and innocence, an immense strength and a limitless soul. This that he sensed, included, and yet was other than, more than, that which the Mbobo women warriors possessed. In spite of his presence she was composed and succeeding in her attempt to remain at ease at this moment. He recognized from her, deference to his position but there were other aspects involved that made this an exceptional moment.

He had held her gaze, and she, his. She saw into him not past him. And most fascinating to him was that she, at this meeting, was unafraid. She was totally without fear of him. And a thought that pleased him, passed. "Here," he realized, "is a courageous queen."

"How old are you Nimi?" he asked.

"In five days I will become eighteen years lived, King Mbata," she answered quickly.

"Um," and he smiled slightly. "Perhaps there will be time to celebrate your birth. Now, you must rest. King Mbata and I will be quite busy in those coming days, but I have arranged much for you and Obiriba to see and do. My Calabar is a wonderful city."

Mbata saw a fleeting look of worry pass across her face. She lowered her head, as if to hide this from him. He reached out and gently lifted her face.

"What is it Nimi?" he asked softly.

As they existed together in this moment, at this place, something so obvious, so transparent, and yet completely invisible passed between them. An intense current forced Mbata to drop his hand and then they both, in amazement, stepped back.

She, for the first time seemed now at a loss for words, and she hesitated.

And then acknowledging his question she answered. "Will I be able to see ... you ... again, King Mbata?"

He was cut loose, wandering lost, and drifting, blind. He returned. Now he felt a strong need to remove himself from this situation. He answered quickly. "But yes Nimi, of course we will see one another, again."

And with that she smiled, bowed slightly, and turned back toward her rooms.

There was something that remained between them, hanging in the air and Mbata could not leave this encounter unfinished in this manner. "Nimi," he called, his voice low. She stopped, but she did not, could not turn around.

He walked up to her, drawing close, and not intending to, they still, both, recognized a sense of insistence, a measure of urgency being conveyed on his words. His voice, resonated in her ear, vibrated throughout her body. "My home is your home. At the end of each passage there will at all times stand a guard, not that you have anything to fear. They are there to provide for you. If you ever, need anything ... anything, you can trust them. Do you understand?"

"Yes King Mbata, I understand."

He turned and in moments, was gone.

And she was left ... enthralled.

Mbata entered his rooms and then began ripping his clothes from his body. In this nakedness he could feel the tenseness, the agitation of his each and every fiber that stood abraded and on edge. His skin was damp and his heart pounded. He began to breathe deeply and soon he was pacing his garden. He was deeply disturbed and he did not like that. There were acts that were occurring inside him that he did not recognize.

For fifteen years he had struggled to master his internal life. He took pride in the awareness he had reached, in the ability he had acquired to live and survive against the odds he faced, the dangers he fought to conquer daily.

Through those years he had gained a tremendous degree of respect for the ebb and flow of the barely perceptible processes that he knew would manifest themselves in all humans, forever. He had developed his innate nature of perception to a level that allowed him to experience vividly, not just his own feelings, but also those who surrounded him.

On many occasions he had been forced to remove from his presence, or destroy an enemy that he respected for truthfully expressing in actions and words an untainted and honest desire to defeat, and thus control. He had also been confronted by the deceptions that existed within false friendships and deceiving alliances and the death he brought to these enemies provided him a greater sense of pleasure than the other. The actions and the words of this most dangerous type of enemy were designed to shield a desire to kill the body and maliciously brutalize and annihilate from the inside ... out!

From his own preternatural knowledge he knew there subsisted within humans no greater pain than that within the turmoil of a troubled soul.

The truth and reality of a most formidable enemy that a human confronts,

lives in and behind the illusive smiles and deceiving words and misleading caresses of fraudulent love. False and deceptive love, painfully, traumatically experienced, breeds self-doubt and mistrust. It destroys the confidence of humans. A valued portion of the humankind's essence requires, desires surety and wants desperately to know, to receive assurance that members of the world will be responsible in treating vulnerable feelings with a soothing honesty.

Humans want to love because a human craves to be loved. To be unable to believe in other humans, to be unsure and afraid of the emotions of others and of one's own emotions, is to be terrified of a human being's essential nature, their own soul. There, where all feelings reside.

Mbata lay down upon his bed. He needed rest desperately. The coming evening was crucial to the very survival of his people. He could handle Mbala and the man Basil. They both, he was certain would be obvious and facile. They would expose themselves. They would not be able, or allowed, to hide their true feelings.

It was Nimi Enokye who disturbed him most. She, he could not see into. Or, perhaps, he could, and was simply confused as to that which was uncovering itself in their brief encounters. What troubled him most was that there was one particular emotion that she evoked within him. Something so powerful, from somewhere very deep inside had begun, twice now, to stir and had attempted to move. It was distinct is some familiar, basic element. Yet it eluded him. Fleeting, it was. Transitory. And it left him feeling ...

II

AS THE SUN WAS BEGINNING TO SET THAT EVENING, Mbala was being led by the Mantuto through the palace to an area he had not seen before.

Upon entering a large room he observed four men sitting at a long table. They all rose at his entrance and the Mantuto immediately brought him refreshment and explained that Mbata was to be there soon. After resuming their seats the men remained silent. There was an obvious heaviness in the room.

Mbata entered with a flourish. Again he was fully dressed in another colorful and impressive draping robe, this time of linen, with a matching cape and elaborate feathered hat. The brightness of his dress was in stark contrast to the clouded look of his youthful, but grim face.

Again all stood, but Mbala, and as it was indicated to everyone to sit, warriors entered, carrying Mosheswe. They placed him next to Mbata at the head of the narrow table directly opposite Mbala.

Mosheshwe Ekomfo was old, approaching eighty, and obviously sick, and dying. He had a full head of grey hair. He was also very thin and struggled at times for his breath. In spite of this, his brown eyes were unusually clear and his mind, from all indications, was still sharp. Only his body had been ravaged by illness and the passing years.

He and King Mbomba a Ewuare, the father of Mbata and Mbala, had been as brothers. They had fought together for the right of existence for the Mbobo people. In Mbobo history Mosheshwe held an important position and possessed a value that could not be measured. His life was a strong link,

not only to a visible past, but also to a distant past.

The constant battles that revolved around the slave trading, and of course, the very trade itself, broke down, through death, separation and distortions, families, traditions, and continuity vital to the survival of large groups of people.

There were always natural levels of aggression between all tribes that often flared into violent strife. Generally, captives from these battles became slaves to the conquerors, but they were exploited usually, for domestic purposes only. European intervention changed that and drastically altered existing rules and thus, destroyed the established structures. Mosheshwe understood this, and not just because of his age. He and King Mbomba were in fact, born the same year. The twins had been conceived when the former king was nearing fifty years old. And without deference to his age King Mbomba, as Mbata, always led his people in battle until the time of his death at Brass River.

The significance of Mosheshwe's age was his entire family was fortunate to live to old ages. His father, who was an elderly man, near sixty, when Mosheshwe was born, lived a long life. His grandfather had lived well past one hundred years. Mosheshwe's understanding was great and his knowledge carried well back into the history of the Mbobo people and their relationship to the world. It was this he passed on, specifically through Mbata.

As he was placed in a position that allowed him to observe everyone in the room, he spotted Mbala and beckoned him to come close. As Mbala bent to him, he spoke quietly. "Mbala, my son, you caused me concern. Are you all right?"

Mbala embraced this beloved man. "Yes Mosheshwe I am all right. It is good to see you. I came when I could." Emotion welled up in him and he found it an effort to speak. "How are you, my friend?"

"I know you came when you could. We have been separated more by circumstances than distances. As for my health?" He made a brief resigned motion that expressed acceptance of his inevitable situation. "We have new business to attend to. Come see me, later, so we may talk."

"Yes Mosheshwe." Mbala touched his friend's hand and returned to his seat.

Mbata spoke. "My brother, these men are my trusted ministers." He gestured to the entrance where the Mantuto stood. "You have of course met the minister in charge of internal relations." They acknowledged one another.

He then began with the two men on his right. "This is our new Mangovo, chosen by Mosheshwe himself as our minister of external relations." The man in the first seat nodded.

"Next to him is our wise Mafuka, responsible for trade. Here," and he began on his left, "is my most capable Makaka, minister of war. And then we have the learned Makimba of the Mbobo people, minister of rivers and forests."

Mbata reached out his left hand to touch Mosheshwe. "You of course know our former Mangovo, trusted friend, and father to all Mbobo people.

We are honored to have Mosheshwe with us.”

Mbata paused and looked intently at each of the men and then rested a steely gaze upon Mbala. “Before we begin, let us clearly understand today, our purpose. We will listen, with our minds open to King Mbala. He will explain to us his situation at Domey and the problems he is having in the coastal area we control, and suggest to us his solutions. We will then hear the man Basil and that which he proposes. Tomorrow, I will meet with my council, here, and in the evening we will gather again and I will pose questions to clear up any confusions or misunderstandings. On the following evening I will express my decisions as to the course of actions to be followed.” He motioned to Mbala to begin.

Mbala looked at these men, at this moment, all, expressionless, and attempted to compose himself. He had gone over these words before but only in his head and he wanted his voice to convey his sincerity and to emphasize the seriousness of the state of affairs. He took a deep breath and began.

“We are all aware, I am sure, of the many circumstances at Domey, but recently they grow worse. The large ships of the British people have blocked the harbor for years now and of course, makes it impossible to ship slaves from that point. We have found it necessary to move shipping points as far north as Abom and south as far as Daho. It is of little help that those from Brazil, Cuba, and the Americans are willing to come to these areas or to chance the journey into the interior to Bonny to acquire cargoes. Because they are growing increasingly fearful of being detected and caught, they thus come less and less.

“We must now hold our captives for long periods of time at concealed intermediate points and we must provide for them basic necessities. This has become quite costly. I am losing men to the battles with the Europeans when they are discovered and also to the captives who continually rise up in their attempts to escape. More and more men are being sent to all areas to disrupt me. As this goes on, Calabar continues to conquer, to capture and to purchase slaves and transport them toward the coast to be sold or traded. We can no longer move this cargo fast enough.

“As this is occurring, other large tribes have signed treaties and contracts with the whites and have turned from the slave trade. They deal in palm oil and other goods and they grow prosperous. The local coastal chiefs under our control complain and are now beginning to cause conflicts. In their alliance with us, our stressing slaving, they are linked to that and are losing income. We are all losing income but it affects them much more. The loss of income brings a decrease of power. Their own people rise up against them. They are being forced to make their own deals with the whites. They trade behind the backs of the Mbobo people.

“At the same time, these whites constantly give weapons to our enemies and will quickly join with anyone who opposes us, in any dispute. I must send men to suppress hostilities constantly. We have recently lost two small northern tribes that have aligned themselves with the Fon. Peace is breaking

down from many directions. We stand in many ways isolated because of our push to maintain slaving and at the same time we lose position, prestige, and thus power to those who are able to deal without restraint in the legal trading that is being allowed.”

Here Mbala paused. He knew that much of this information was known by the council. He had remained in constant contact with Calabar throughout the previous years. They had developed elaborate and quite efficient means of communicating. Many times they knew here, of movements and needs without his contact. He waited.

“What does my brother propose?” asked Mbata, quietly.

This is what Mbala had wanted. His position at Domey was weakening. He was being pressured from all sides. Even with the immense power of Calabar behind him, he felt his enemies were becoming bold and his allies were now suspicious and apprehensive that Calabar could continue to protect them. Many who had sided with the Mbobos now were doubting that they could be provided the required military and financial means necessary to not only survive, but also to expand and prosper.

Mbala continued. “Let us shift our trade to other goods, gold, ivory, iron, copper, pepper. They want skins and the products our people bring from the distant east. They beg for the china and silks and calicoes. The power and reach of the Mbobo people is great, and up to this point it has protected me from the whites. They desire to attack me, to imprison me. I have been negotiating, as you know, for years now, to keep them away. I give up more and more. Now they have taken a stand. Those who I could bribe and pay to look the other way are gone. Let us use our power to open up new trade. This palm oil is in great demand and we can provide it. We must direct our people and those we control to growth, processing, and selling of this yellow grease and we can sustain our power and maintain peace. We must turn from the past and move into the future.”

Mbala looked around the table. All had been silent and appeared to be listening with rapt attention. Mosheshwe seemed to be sleeping. But at Mbala’s last words he had opened his eyes and smiled, slightly.

It had grown darker and the Mantuto had lit several lamps around the room while Mbala was speaking.

After several more moments of silence Mbata spoke. “Let us hear the Basil man now.”

With that the Mantuto departed and very quickly returned with John Basil who had evidently been close by, waiting. He hurriedly entered the room, his small shoulders bobbing. He was clutching a leather pouch beneath his left arm. He glanced around and when he saw Mbala he smiled at him nervously and promptly sat in the seat that had been offered to him, after bowing several times. He was placed near the end of the table, to the left of Mbala. Everyone remained silent and looked directly at him. He found himself clearing his throat. He wiped his eyes with the cloth he pulled from the breast pocket of the suit coat he wore. He was very quickly brought refreshment.

Finally Mbata spoke. "I first welcome you to Calabar, John Basil. Let me assure you that we appreciate your coming such a distance on what must have been an uncomfortable journey. I trust your accommodations are satisfactory?"

"Oh yes, of course King Mbata. You have been very kind."

Mbata continued. "I thank you for the fine gifts you brought."

"And I thank you King Mbata, I will treasure your gifts always."

"I asked that King Mbata bring someone of position and wisdom that can say he speaks the truth and that he represents those who oppose me. They can then know they were allowed to be heard in a truthful manner."

"Now," and there was an edge to his voice, "these men," and he gestured around his end of the table, "are my trusted council ministers and my advisers. King Mbata has spoken and we are all quite anxious to hear what you have to say. Of course, you have knowledge of my brother's feelings, and I am sure, he, of yours. Is that not true?"

Mbata's words were becoming hard, and insistent and John Basil was growing uncomfortable.

"Yes King Mbata. He, uh ... we both want what is best, and good for your people and those I represent."

Mbata stared. His dark-brown eyes bore into him, yet, his expression remained unchanged. "Speak," he said, simply.

John Basil cleared his throat, sipped his drink and began in a somewhat high-pitched rush. "Since 1807 Britain has outlawed and prohibited the trading or selling of any slaves. The British Parliament has abolished all slavery. Now, fifty years later it continues. To a large extent of course, not in the magnitude of the past, but still it continues. It is against the law King Mbata, the legal law, and God's law to enslave people, trade them, and sell them to the highest bidder. We know we were partly to blame and we accept our responsibility. We are now determined to assist in the altering of these issues for the better."

"The British navy will continue to intercept any ship believed to be carrying slaves and arrest and punish those involved. In the coming months we are prepared to increase our patrols. We are under tremendous pressure at home to stop this horrible business. We, of course, also must protect British interests in all legitimate trading and this too, we are determined to do. But these issues need not lead to violence. Other tribes have begun to trade and sell many products other than human beings. We are working in peace with the Butri, the Shama and even the Shantulu are willing to work with us. We have established consuls and appointed Consul Generals to work with these people. Together they have signed treaties and legal, binding contracts for the purchase and selling of goods, specifically, the palm oil they produce. We are willing to assist you so that the Mbobo people can also join in this most profitable and very lucrative business, a legal business I may add."

"We do not want to fight with you over slaves. We have made a concerted effort to disregard the personal slaves King Mbata has, and uses. We have attempted, in what we believe to be a very patient manner, to ignore

most of his small separate transgressions of laws. But we have been receiving reliable information and are therefore keenly aware that Domey and the Mbobo people, at the orders of Calabar, and thus, at your command, are in fact escalating many of their illegal activities and are totally, blatantly, and continuously breaking laws regarding the established treaties of land rights and contractual agreements related to trading of material goods and most importantly those laws that enforce the banishment of slaving that we, that is, those I represent, have agreed upon with other tribes and struggle to uphold. We will not, can not turn away from these successive attempts at wholesale slaving and constant law breaking. We want desperately for slavery to end.

“Let us work together in peace. Here, allow me to show you.” Basil reached carefully into the pouch that now lay before him on the table and extracted several folded pieces of paper. “I have here a treaty for peace that will ensure that you shall not find it necessary to wield your weapons against those for whom I speak.”

Now he opened the papers and ran his hands across them. “And here, contracts. The people I represent want to purchase all the palm oil you can produce. Right now, we purchase all of the oil from the Oil Rivers, at very good prices. Naturally, you would be in competition with other oil producers but the Mbobo people have always been very competitive. King Mbala would like to work with us, and to live at Domey in peace.

“I am sure you are aware of our powerful navy, and the many powerful weapons we have. You and your people are also very strong and known for resourcefulness and courage. We should not fight. The whole world stands opposed to this slave business. Join us in peace. I only ask that you please consider our offers. The choice is so obvious, I must believe that a man of your integrity and intelligence will make the correct one.”

With this, Basil began to wipe his brow with the cloth. His throat was dry and as he drank from his cup he stole glimpses of the men around him. The silence in the room was oppressive.

Again Mbata looked around at this gathering. No one spoke.

Again, Mosheshwe seemed to doze but opened clear and alert eyes to this final statement.

Mbala tried to gauge the mood of the men. He looked at Mbata when he felt his gaze from across the table, but there was nothing to be gleaned from his expression.

Finally Mbata spoke, very softly. Looking at Basil he asked. “Is that all?”

“Yes King Mbata,” came the reply. “I thank you for your time.”

Mbata placed his fingertips together near his chin and gazed for a while intently out of the window, seeming distracted. And then, abruptly, he stood. Everyone rose. He spoke in even, measured tones to both Mbala and Basil.

“Tomorrow evening, after I have met with my ministers and Mosheshwe, we will convene again. At that time I will have questions for you both.” He paused a moment. “Now, let us relax and enjoy the remaining night. For those who wish to attend, there is food and entertainment awaiting you in

the banquet room.”

He nodded to the Mantuto and the bearers were summoned and Mosheshwe was removed. Next, the ministers filed out and the Mantuto escorted Basil out then waited for Mbala.

Mbata and Mbala were left alone ... together.

They looked across the long table at each other.

As if he were stretching, Mbata leaned forward, and in a motion so obvious it appeared extremely elongated and prolonged, he carefully laid his hands upon this flat inanimate barrier.

“Does my brother have anything else to say?”

He asked this so softly that Mbala felt himself lean forward, straining to hear. Suddenly, his mind went blank, and he struggled to remember why he was here at this moment. And, if Mbata had spoken, what did he utter?

He felt a lightness in his head. He felt as if he had returned to the banquet room and had begun to relive that first moment he set eyes upon Mbata. He struggled against the dizziness that touched him and that now seemed to surround him and he tried to steady the room as it began to spin. He closed his eyes and for a moment he lapsed into and then climbed quickly from that which he could only later have described as a fleeting ... dream.

And as his eyes closed, his hands had gone numb and then they grew warm. Next, they flared up, as if in flames and he opened his eyes and looked down to see that he too had placed his hands upon this table and he snatched them up and stared at them, amazed, as if they were some strange, new appendages joining his body.

Now Mbata was speaking again, firmly. “I ask, is there anything else for you to say?”

“No!” Mbala nearly shouted. And the sound of his own voice brought him back and everything seemed clear again. He lowered his hands, astonished. He looked across the table and repeated, this time in a normal voice. “No, there is nothing else, until tomorrow.”

“Good,” Mbata replied. “I myself, have pressing matters to attend to. Later, tonight I will visit you?”

“Yes,” Mbala said. “I will wait for you. I shall go and visit Mosheshwe now.”

Mbata turned toward the rear door. “Yes my brother, he desires to see you. Until later then.”

They parted, Mbata, grim and resolute, Mbala, wanting relief and yet, confused and very apprehensive.

Mbala entered Mosheshwe’s room. An elderly woman attendant sat quietly in the corner. The room was very dim and the quality of death hovered in the warm night air.

As he sat down beside the old man he took his hand and at the touch, Mosheshwe opened his eyes. He did not look at Mbala but only asked in a thick, halting voice. “Is that you Mbala?”

“Yes Mosheshwe. I am here.”

The old man smiled briefly. "I knew you would come, my son." And his eyes fluttered and closed again.

Mbala felt a tremendous sense of sorrow. Not just at this impending passing of someone so close but also because a mood of hopelessness prevailed within him. He saw only a wall of impossibility encompassing his many problems and he could not ignore that deep inside he was beginning to believe he would see crumble all he had accomplished, and lose all he had acquired. It was as if this old man beside him symbolized his own situation. Losing slowly, inexorable, a grip he had fought to maintain.

Mosheshwe had opened his eyes and now looked intently at Mbala. He was alert again. He coughed suddenly, violently, and his body shook in spasms. The attendant had started forth at this, as Mosheshwe indicated he needed a drink. Mbala motioned to her that he would get it. As he supported the dying man's head and helped him drink, tears momentarily blurred his vision. He tried to blink them away and as he lowered Mosheshwe's head to his pillow and returned the cup to its place, words bubbled up and were spilled out in a whisper, nearly choking him.

"What will happen Mosheshwe? What am I to do? Please, help me."

Now the old man patted the younger man's hand. At this moment it was as if he were the stronger of the two, and his voice reflected this. He was certain and precise. Each word was slowly handed to Mbala, as if to give him a chance to look at it, turn it over in examination, to be accepted or tossed, in rejection, aside.

"What will happen, you ask? What will happen is that answers that you can not yet see will one day, in a perfect order reveal themselves to you. But you will not, can not grasp these truths until they have passed you by and you look down upon them from a heightened awareness. That is how life is.

"What you will do, is confront this life, and challenge your existence from the strength of your beliefs. The future stands still, yet advances upon you Mbala." He began coughing again and trying to catch his breath. After sipping the offered drink, he rested a moment. He began again patiently.

"My son, when humans look, whether to peer into the past, or search into the future they can only see as far as they are capable of perceiving. Perceptions may change, but the past is unalterable. Beliefs may change but, the future is inevitable. The past pulls. The future pulls. And we are left, to be stretched painfully thin, in the middle.

"However you choose Mbala, your choices will be made, not because of what has fallen behind, or lies out in front. What you choose is because of who you eventually become. The reality is the same but you shall still select in difference to Mbata because you are, different from Mbata."

"Who is right Mosheshwe?"

"The task is not to search for right or wrong, it is to find reality. To find reality, is to discover truth and it will come over and over again, to the end of time, in circles. Where you joined the circle, is where your ... right, began. So what is right for you may not be right for others. Therefore, right and wrong will always be in dispute. But the truth of reality transcends all."

“But,” and here Mbala hesitated, confused, “where am I to find reality? How am I to acquire the knowledge to recognize it?”

Mosheshwe sighed deeply and appeared to be growing tired. He continued again but now his voice was losing its strength, fading.

“Domey is not real. Calabar, is not real. They are expressions of belief. The knowledge, the answers, the truth is locked away, inside of humans. Humans refuse to see it by denying it. Listen to me Mbala. There is an ultimate reality that touches everyone in this world.”

With a great effort Mosheshwe struggled to rise, to sit, and as Mbala reached for him, he forced his hands away. “Look at me Mbala!” And his voice quivered as his eyes blazed. “Look closely at me! The reality of the humankind embraces ... me! I, and reality are becoming ... one! Death! Yes! It is only death that is real! In that, we are all related! Everything! Everyone is ... related!”

The old man collapsed now upon his pillow and in alarm the attendant rushed over, to wipe his brow and started to fan him in concern. Mbala moved from the bed and began to back toward the door. His head was tight. There was a hollowness in his stomach and yet, feelings were surging within. He was suddenly lost again. He had to stop and strain to hear the dying man whisper.

“Mbala, my son. See? You struggle against, the light. Mbata struggles against, the dark. It does not matter. We are all doomed for we have been born to forever destroy our own.” His eyes fluttered, and closed. “And thus our ... selves.”

Mbala departed, and returned to his room.

Nimi stood alone at the window of her room, immersed deep into her troubling thoughts. She stared at the night sky and marveled at the vivid clearness. The waxing gibbous moon hung low and incomplete and beautiful before her and the blackness surrounding it appeared to oppose the starry incandescence that dotted her view and plotted for her, paths through that blackness into other, distant, lighted worlds.

“I have changed. I am at this very moment changing,” she thought. And although she felt different, there was acceptance of, and pleasure with, this difference. She felt her ... self, to be awakening from a long sleep. Rested, and revived. For the first time in her young life she knew herself to be alive. Not just able to see the world through new eyes but also to feel worldly, through her body.

She moved, to lie across her bed, agitated and restless. Her mind flashed across the scenes that she had observed just a while ago. Differing feelings would rise up, from one to be replaced by another, then one, to another. And as the scenes unfolded in her mind she twisted and turned her thoughts against this pattern. She struggled, trying to allow each emotion to remain suspended, separate, and distinct.

She wanted to experience everything and so she placed her feelings side

by side instead of allowing one to overwhelm the next and become swallowed up and lost in successive waves. And in this new clarity she was choosing. Touching freely.

She and Obiriba had been in the city earlier. Calabar, lively and aglow, was larger and more exciting than anything she had ever imagined. In many aspects it had been given to her and Obiriba. They were guided through the richness, into, and past the many outdoor stands and enclosed shops. Across the marketplace they had strolled. The sounds, the smells, had rushed them and merged and formed, to leave them breathless and exhilarated.

Everywhere they went they saw wondrous new sights. Fine, dyed-cloths, woven raffia and beautiful skins. There was jewelry made from gold, ivory and tortoise shell. They saw silks, china and other goods from the Eastern world that people of the western coast would never know existed.

Calabar thrived, and not only because its trading extended so far in all directions. It exhibited its own particular essence. The people themselves seemed different. There was a unique sense of pride, a self-assured awareness they possessed that Nimi had never known before. They were open, and considerate.

She and Obiriba, as queens from the coastal Domey, had gifts lavished upon them. It was an honor to have their party enter a shop. And anything in which they showed interest was immediately offered, and to refuse was impolite. But the kindness of the people extended beyond that. They made a special effort to treat each other with respect and tolerance.

These reflections brought a smile to Nimi and a degree of warmth. And as she moved this memory over, the scene that she had gently set aside to savor last, emerged. Languidly it eased forth and began to dominate the darkness.

She and Obiriba had been taken away from the main area of Calabar to a narrow side street, here to find the exotic scents they sought. As they stepped from the small shop, Obiriba nudged her and pointed. There, on horses, approaching them was a group of warriors, perhaps a dozen, composed with what appeared to be an equal amount of men and women. At the head of the group, on a huge black horse was Mbata. Dressed not as a king, he wore a black cloth wrap around his waist. A rifle was hung across his back, a long spear extended upward from his right hand and a shiny sword was strapped to his left side. His left arm carried a large colorful oval shield.

As she stood there in the dimness of the doorway her heart began to pound. For a brief instant they rode almost directly toward her, closely by, at this particular point of the short angular street. Their silhouettes receded and merged into the darkness then out again as they passed between the bright, flaming lamps spaced on the street. For a moment Nimi could see him clearly and she almost called out. The look upon his face silenced her. Straight ahead he stared, grim, and angry. His piercing eyes flashed as they rode by and as they quickly rounded the corner they spurred their horses on toward the entrance of the city and disappeared into the dusty night.

As she turned this over in her mind she searched for meaning as to the

origin and strength of the feelings that poured in on her and surged from within, then, and now.

Then, she had wanted to run after him. To beseech him to allow her to ride, dressed as the others, beside him, through the darkness into which they faded. Then. She wanted to be, with him.

Now. She wanted. Him! She desired him, to be, with her.

The molded ferocity upon his face strangely, did not frighten her. The presence of violence that engulfed him, thrilled her, moved her, toward him.

As she was lying in this warm, moist darkness, something stirred deep within her. She felt it, watched it move and rise to the surface of her being. Yes! She wanted him here, beside her. There she wanted him, on top of her.

She closed her eyes and the image she reached for crystallized. She created without obstruction, his form and she, embracing him, feeling his glistening body and experiencing with her fingertips the texture of the scars she had seen revealed in the hot night. Scars. Thick and raised across his chest they ran, on his thigh, jaggedly down his back, accented in the sweat that covered his powerful body.

And as this unraveled from one side of her mind to the other, her hands traveled along the outline of her own breasts, straining, and now on fire beneath her silk dress. She untied this restriction, opening this wrap to allow the soft breeze entering her window to pass, unhindered, across her burning skin. She discovered and explored with her touch, in fascination, firmness, softness, and sensitivity she had never noticed, never knew she possessed. Through this vision of Mbata, she discovered her own ... body.

Now, she felt her stomach, lightly tracing patterns with her fingers that caused her to tremble. Next, she massaged and caressed herself gently. She could feel her own soft hairy wetness. Her eyes tightened. She felt a swirling sensation deep inside. Drawing her. Pulling her. Part of her soul pushing against this and another part, giving in, giving up, and finally surrendering, totally.

She squeezed her hands tightly between her thighs, locking them into submission. Her body lifted, her back arching toward the sky, toward Mbata lingering before her brimming eyes, now widely open and staring wildly and seeing him there above her head and feeling him. There!

She could not ignore it and as this very first explosion she ever experienced seemingly tore apart her insides, stifling a scream, she bit her lip and burst into frustrated, anguished tears.

It was growing late when Mbata returned to his rooms through his private rear entrance. Anyone seeing him would have noticed that he was mildly excited, a boyish enthusiasm upon his face. Apparently the report he had received from his messengers a short distance from the city had been of a positive nature.

He bathed and began to carefully choose the clothes he would wear this night. He rarely kept attendants or slaves around except for duties of absolute necessity. Even as a very young boy he had preferred his solitude

and independence. Much of this of course stemmed from the many periods of time he had spent in isolated sickness.

Once, as a child, he was terrified of darkness. But now he embraced the night, finding a distinct attraction in the superstitious mysteries. Darkness repelled a part of him and darkness also allured a part of him and this contradiction seemed natural, and necessary.

He felt a specific energy in the late hours. Meetings were generally held in the early evening. Banquets and entertainment usually lasted well into the night and often until early morning hours. Calabar had adjusted itself to this aspect of its king. The city would glow vibrantly at night with many types of activities, and yet all necessary day business would still be accomplished. The city functioned, day and night.

Yet regardless of the pressing issues that filled his time or the great amount of actions in progress, Mbata could always search for and ultimately acquire peace and solitude in the calm darkness of his secluded garden. He had taken great interest in its planting and took pleasure in its maintenance. He found meaning there. And ... life.

As he was dressing, he planned his night. First, of grave importance, was a visit to Mosheshwe, to see as to the state of his health and also to share his news. Next, he would make an appearance in the banquet hall. His presence brought added excitement and joy to his people on these occasional visits and he could quickly receive and exchange information and gauge the moods of his people as he moved amongst them at these large festive gatherings. At these special times he could also offer advice, encouragements, and admonishments when necessary. And finally, he would visit Mbala. He felt a need to talk with him.

As he turned toward the doorway he walked to the shield and sword he had just carried. They had belonged to his father and had been with him now since the battle of Brass River. He touched them wistfully, lovingly. It had been several years since he had carried them into battle. Now, all that would soon change.

Mbala had returned to his room, shaken and confused. His talk with Mosheshwe had upset him. For a long time he had simply stood at a window looking out. He was filled with anxiety and apprehension. He found himself moving around his large room, glancing absently at the decorations on the walls and various objects that lay upon the tables and stands. He stared at the several flaming lamps and watched the light that was created and peered into the darkness that remained. He sat on his bed for a long time and then stretched out, trying to relax.

As he lay there he could hear in the distance the drums and music coming from the banquet hall. His state of mind did not allow for rest and so he rose and again began to pace his room. He was feeling shut-in and although earlier he could have gone to the city and joined the others, he knew they had probably returned by now. He thought of the people who attended the palace festivities, he thought of the crowd and their gaiety and he realized he

was in no mood for anything or anyone at this particular time.

Now he sat up and poured himself a drink, gulped it down and then poured another. He reflected on the past few days and the most recent hours. As the alcohol began to take effect, he turned from heavy brooding to a lighter more positive attitude. The direction he had chosen began to look more and more reasonable and correct. He went over and over again the events of the past months and even went back years to find justifications and strengthening opinions for the positions and the actions he had taken.

He very soon became emboldened in a personal realization and singular belief that his situation demanded these specific directions he had gone. He, as a king and leader at Domey was required to place the welfare of his own Mbobo people and in fact, all he governed, first and foremost, above all else. He scoffed at Mosheshwe and his talk of choices. What choice did he have other than to try and maintain the peace that had taken so long to forge, and had become so difficult to keep? No one should want war.

As he reached once again, with some awkwardness now, for the bottle on the small table before him, a voice spoke quietly from the area of the doorway and Mbata stepped from the shadows. "That drink is poison, my brother. You must be careful."

At the sound of this voice Mbala hesitated a moment and then grabbed the bottle. Before he poured, he paused to view, in a sudden mounting anger, his brother cross the room. There was a purpose and deliberation in his stride that dug sharply into him.

Before Mbata settled himself in a large chair against the wall directly opposite Mbala, he untied and removed his cape and laid it carefully on the edge of the chair and then removed and placed his elaborate hat gently on top of it. His movements were unhurried and precise and to Mbala this accented what to him was an unnecessary arrogance.

Mbala poured himself a drink, promptly emptied his cup, poured yet another and set the bottle back. They looked at each other in silence for several long, strained moments. Mbata's hard eyes and expressionless countenance only served to stir up further the emotions that were building inside Mbala.

Mbata could see that his brother was heavily under the influence of the fiery drink. He observed, with a mild degree of fascination, the transparency of the situation. What he had sensed, even in their long separation, was obvious. In the dimness of this room he could see clearly and feel distinctly the hostility Mbala carried for him and at this instant he himself felt completely detached, and indifferent.

Mbata broke the dense, heavy silence. "Mosheshwe is sleeping now. He continues to grow weak."

"He is old, and sick," replied Mbala, with a mixture of harsh sadness. "He has lived a good, long life."

"Yes, he has," agreed Mbata, and then silence again.

Mbala was beginning to feel hemmed in, uncomfortable with this forced closeness. Mbata's eyes made him nervous. It was as if they were seeing past

him, through him, to a point exiting directly behind his head. He needed to move away. He rose and crossed to the window and then back to his bed. Mbata followed him. His gaze fastened tight upon him, refusing to release him.

"Perhaps," he ventured, "if my brother is restless you would like to go to the hall, or into the city? Calabar is interesting, even late at night."

Mbala looked at him now, keenly suspicious. Suspecting some hidden motives behind this calmness, this caring within the uncaring.

"I am in no mood for such things," came the reply, caustically. His words, sharp and biting.

Mbata, examining him, looked off now, into the distance. Listening. Now he was again turning to Mbala, his eyes becoming alert with intent and exhibiting apparent curiosity. "Your wives, I hope are enjoying themselves? Ah yes," he continued. "Women are quick to take proper advantage of a situation. I was somewhat surprised you brought them in spite of the discomfort and possible danger. Then again, Calabar is a very strong attraction. And once one arrives, they, along with everyone here become safe and protected. What is Domey like?"

Mbala found this talk meaningless. The smooth, raspy voice was too low, too irritating and this presence, grating. "It is nothing compared to the great Calabar," Mbala replied mockingly. "Domain of the great King Mbata a Ewuare." His anger spilled forth, and now unharnessed, would be impossible to control.

Mbata seemingly ignored this attitude and went on as if nothing unusual had transpired, his tone unchanging, still soft and measured. "Your young wife, the new one, Nimi, perhaps she is special. I congratulate you for your fortune."

"Yes!" replied Mbala, his voice rising. He stood on unsteady legs. "She is special! She will be the one! The one to bear my child!" He tapped his chest. "My son, a king to be!" he boasted, laughing aloud.

Mbata, observing him, smiled slightly. "I have not been very fortunate with women," he said, without regret, without bitterness. Just direct and frank.

"So I hear." And Mbala laughed again and sat down heavily. Suddenly serious, he stared at Mbata, a malevolent expression appearing and spreading across his face. "I hear they disappear on you. Tell me," and now he whispered as if they conspired together, or were to share some wonderfully horrible secret. "Where do they go Mbata, when they disappear? It seems to me they are the ones that are not fortunate." He erupted in laughter, obviously pleased.

They sat like this. Mbala pitched forward, his shoulders moving slightly now as the last of the convulsive laughter faded from his body. Mbata watched this, unmoving, his eyes fixed on his brother. His face, frozen. He rose and strolled to the large window behind him. He looked out at the unclouded night for a moment. Turning around slowly he observed Mbala pouring another drink, the last of the gin alcohol splashing and spilling, the

bottle, on its return to the table, falling over onto its side, noisily. He leaned back against the edge of the window, his face, his outline, easing into the shadows.

“Where do they go?” he said.

And even under the drugged influence, Mbala, as he gulped the last of his drink, heard the coldness and he looked across the room to where the figure stood, relaxed. He tried to focus, as if to somehow remove the shadows. For a moment he was disturbed by his inability to see Mbata’s face clearly and then he shrugged and setting his cup down, looking away, shook the feeling.

The voice came again, emanating from the dim, moonlit window, dry and empty. “They just ...” and now Mbala looked back to see not a face, but a simple gesture, an arm, move, dismissing as if by some omnipotent power everything, everyone, on the words, “go away.”

This nonchalance instantly infuriated Mbala. He stood quickly. He stumbled and twisted to the side and then whirled towards the window. “They just go away!” he spat. “They do not go away!” His voice was rising again. “You send them away! You kill them!” he shouted. “Just like you kill others! Just like you killed my mother!”

The silence was stunning, deafening. Its thickness parting and closing again around the ephemeral echoes of this fading, tortured statement.

Nothing moved. Nothing sounded. There! It was out ... finally.

After all the years this thing that was not weakened by time or forgotten in distance, this that had always existed, hidden between them, was exposed, revealed at this moment within those words.

Mbata looked at this person glare at him, sneer at him from across the room and he felt the hatred, pure and as palpable as any he had ever known. It was, in its essence so powerful he was caught momentarily off guard by its strength. Yet he grasped in a sudden flash of awareness, a picture, unique and complete and he understood it, and accepted it. How he had missed this virulent emotion he knew now was attributable to the circumstances of their youth.

As a young man he had not yet fully developed his ability to seek out, to perceive disguised emotions. Yet, the two of them had always been at odds. Always opposed to one another. Caught up in their competitive activities and training was always abnormal conflict and animosity.

Mbata understood now that as his own brother had opposed his expressions at life there was an attempt to deny an existence of an interfering life. He had sought to condemn and remove a life. Mbata recalled that as children Mbala had played a game, constantly. In the game Mbala would wave his hands and mutter strange words and wish him to magically disappear. He realized now the meaning of the harmless game. He smiled thinly. Imperceptible in the darkness.

Then he spoke. “And so, this is what you hold against me? This is what stands and has stood between us?” he said, barely audible, as if to himself. “You use fate as a weapon against me. As if I asked for this ... life? You think I enjoy this as a gift or reject it as a curse?”

"Yes you enjoy it!" Mbala said acidly. He turned away. He sat down, clumsily. "You relish doing that which has become your life."

"And what is that?" asked Mbata.

"Why, killing of course," came the reply. "You have been killing ever since you were born and you gloat in it, take pride in it. You are vicious and hateful. There is only evil within you." Mbala's voice was harsh, accusing, and slurred by the alcohol. He was determined to speak. "All you do is take, Mbata. You took my mother! You took her from me! I can not even remember her." He was choked and pained by this lack of memory and he paused now to gather himself. His words slowed, his voice lowered. "Father had nothing for me. He was too busy in his concern for you. It was as if I never existed."

"Perhaps it should have been you that the fever touched?"

Mbala ignored this. "All you do is destroy," he mumbled. "A piece here, a piece there and then, finally, everything. No one cares for you. They are only afraid of you." His shoulders slumped. He sighed.

"Do you fear me?"

He bristled. "No I do not fear you!"

"But you hate me?"

Silence again. Mbala lay back, stretched out on his bed. His feet dangled to the floor.

Mbata remained at the window. Quiet. Pensive. Wrestling now against the mangled feelings trying to come up. He sustained his composure.

Mbala spoke, the bitterness gone now, evaporated in its expression, replaced by a weary, painful sadness. "What was she like Mbata? What was my mother like?"

There was an extended pause. "And what could I possibly remember of three years?" he answered.

"You remember something do you not? Is not there some memory, an impression perhaps? Is not there something you can tell me?" he implored. "Anything?"

Mbata turned to gaze out of the window. It had been years since he had thought of these things such as his childhood with Mbala. And so long, so very long since he had brought up memories of their mother. These questions moved him, deep, deep inside. His mind was drawn into the amorphous impressions of the distant past. Details were flung at him as he crossed them on this painful imaginary return. He searched his mind for something. A clear picture, a vivid scene, or a distinct feeling. But nothing emerged in any unmistakable or firm, comprehensible form, nothing except, "Her ... eyes," he said softly.

"What?" Mbala questioned, rising slightly, not really hearing or understanding. And then he fell back, his head weighted, not caring.

"Her eyes," he repeated. "I seem to remember her eyes, were so very ... beautiful." He was lost in his rushing visions. Very soon he heard the beginnings of heavy breathing. Without turning he knew Mbala was fast asleep. He remained there for several long moments, and turning, crossing to

the chair, he gathered his things. He swung the long cape around his head to his shoulders and tied it quickly. He picked up his hat and looked over, and down at his sleeping brother. Seeing him like this after all these years he acknowledged their separation. He knew there had always existed a gulf between them and now an impenetrable distance had been revealed and this distance had grown, at this instance, into a vast unmanageable chasm.

He wanted to feel something at this moment for this sleeping figure. Anything. Pity. Compassion. Vestiges of love perhaps? And there were particles of these feelings within his being. Small strands of these facets of existence ran as tiny, thin veins through his body. But they lacked substance. Nothing coursed through them. There was no emotional blood to nourish and sustain these basic aspects of humanity.

An almost palpable disturbance touched him, and then passed. Vague yearnings he could not recognize tried to speak, then dissipated. Something was scattered within his soul. Something that had always been there, moving and seeking to join with other fragments of his personality. He was determined they would never meet. Determined to deny them a solid, concrete, whole existence. Yet he pondered upon their source.

He took one last glance at Mbala and then turned and departed the room. As he started down the hallway a force tugged at him. Pulled him at his core and he felt that same unformed semblance of order attempting to arrange itself deep within that had initially flared the first moment he gazed upon Nimi Enokye. He moved toward Nimi's room. He stood outside the curtained entrance, listening. Hearing nothing, he stepped inside and as his eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness he saw her partially covered sleeping body across the room. He remained there for several moments desiring to feel something different, more than that which had arisen from the previous sleeping image.

That difficult thing, that something strange, yet familiar, again pushed for recognition and then faded and disappeared. He turned to leave and at that precise moment Nimi moved in her sleep. Rolling over, a soft sigh escaped her and as her eyes fluttered open for a brief instant she believed she saw a departing, dark figure. Heavy with sleep she tried to rouse herself, but to no avail. And this image became for her a transitory memory, a manifestation of a powerful need, a wish that created for her a fleeting impression of her innermost desires. She would recall this the next day as one of the many dreams of her passionate, restless night.

Mbata returned to his rooms, and after a brief garden stroll he retired to a disturbed sleep and vivid troubling dreams that seemed to begin as soon as the darkness he sought descended upon him. It was only the level of his emotional exhaustion that kept him asleep. The images that came alive behind his eyes this morning would normally have awakened him. But he needed these dreams that came in small snatches, in puzzling pieces and nonsensical rhythms and rhymes. He was drawn into this strange world to

wander confused and lost. He emerged with a treasure chest that upon opening gave him the reward he so desperately required. Awakening from this imaginary existence he held an answer, a revelation that brought him a sense of serenity and at the same time a dangerous, new internal turmoil.

III

MBALA AWOKE IN THE LATE AFTERNOON. His head ached and as he sat up he attempted to pull the late night events into cohesiveness. As he sat there on his bed the throbbing in his head subsided gradually and he began to recall with more clarity his talk with Mbata. But the conclusion was lost and some of the specific issues were somewhat disjointed and out of sequence and this caused him some momentary confusion.

He felt a rift, a feeling of separation. Not from his brother but from a part of himself. Although it disturbed him, the longer he contemplated the circumstances the closer the separation came together.

He believed his assessment of Mbata to be grounded in the truth and actuality of their first fifteen years together. The anger and hatred he had expressed was much more vague and in the light of day his own dark feelings that had boiled over from within him lost intensity and a great degree of their significance, and they became clouded and dull. They were still there but he could not easily find them or readily touch them in some pure, hard form. They became submerged again, fading, as if part of a dream or nightmare. The scene remained but the repressed emotions that had surrounded and been coupled with their confrontational discussion hid themselves, waiting for fresh moments to express their reality. At this time he was simply feeling upset and annoyed with Mbata, his brother.

As his food was being brought in he looked at the gin bottle lying empty on the table, the bottle, now devoid of its distortion creating substance, the alcohol no longer speaking. He lifted the covering on his meal and there was the note for which he had been waiting and on it, the information he sought.

At the same time Mbala was eating his food, Nimi was walking with Obiriba near the palace stream. A guard approached. He instructed Nimi to follow him and she was led to Mosheshwe's room. When she entered she was promptly moved close to his bed and an attendant helped him rise up in order to see her better. He stared at her intently for several long moments, his eyes bright and clear. Then he nodded, smiled slightly and was eased back down again.

She was taken, puzzled, from the room back to where Obiriba awaited her.

And as evening passed and night began to descend, she and Obiriba and their guides once again rode toward the enchantment of Calabar. But her heart was pained and her mind turned back, directed to and captured without resistance or hesitation, by Mbata.

She felt him. She saw him. She whispered to him. "Mbata, can you feel me? Can you hear me? Can I see you? Please, let me see you. Can you come to me ... please?"

Mbata, after having met with his ministers earlier was lying in his curtained room resting. He knew that there would soon be determinations and movements that would allow him to be that which brought him the most pleasure and excitement. He lived for those moments that permitted him to act upon that which extended far beyond the day-to-day decisions and minor, unimportant opportunities that called for him to govern.

He wanted to control and conquer. He wanted to feel the force of the Mbobo people beside him, behind him, around him. And if he could once again discover the power, the fever would burn inside him and speak to the world.

He had come to terms with Mbala. In going over their bitter, emotion-laden scene together, he had extracted from it information to be retained and then dismissed the misrepresentations and exaggerations brought out by the drink. He knew the hatred directed towards him to be real and this he accepted readily, resolutely. He knew also there were no restrictions or limits to hatred. The fact they were brothers was inconsequential. Besides, in actuality he believed he cared very little, if anything, for Mbala. He looked upon him as just another person with which to struggle.

He held on to, and scrutinized more closely Mbala's talk of death and killing. Those statements, like all such contentions, contained levels and degrees of truth. And so he could admit easily that yes, in many ways, and for many reasons, he did enjoy the destruction of the body and killing of the soul of his enemies. Whether it was war or just an isolated ultimate punishment there was always, caught up in the moment before their death, for them, a heightened realization, an exquisite new appreciation of life. He reflected upon this now. Then he rose, restless and suddenly distracted. He tried to focus on the coming night. The evening council meeting was still scheduled for much later but he decided to dress anyway and prepare himself early. He

felt unusually alive, within.

Suddenly! He felt a sharp tug and then, a gentle pull that moved him. He paused to seek its source, ascertain from whence it came. Knowing it was directed to him only. He turned in his room. Stopping abruptly.

Calabar faced him. Feelings reached out to him. A sensuous voice called, questioning him, asking of him. Softly. He was forced to hold his hand out to it. "What is ... this? What do you want? What shall I do?" he whispered into the dusky light. And he knew he must reply to the voice's summoning sounds.

So the answers came back to Mbata.

And the results of all her desirous entreated whispers came back to Nimi.

And those conclusions manifested themselves in the center of the main marketplace that fateful festive evening. And the effects of their wondering inquiries were decisive and final in their enacted expression.

Ultimate in their meaning.

Mbata's four huge white horses reared and their angry eyes rolled as the crowd surged towards them and the stunning beasts snorted and pranced in their majestic equine strength.

Hands reached for the horses, to touch them. To feel through their flesh the unlimited power of the omniscient king who held the white horses in abeyance, as he stood straight, in his exalted essence behind the white beasts that strained against him and yet he ruled them and controlled them. He exerted his own power, his own control over all of them. Each and every person within the throngs that swelled and surged forward had felt him, experienced him as they saw as a vision their king ride, dressed in a full robe with his long bright cape flowing, into their midst.

They were elated at his presence. Awed by the size of the white horses that pulled the golden chariot. And proud they all were as their king reined the beasts to a halt. Fearful they became as he lashed his whips above their wide backs and turned them and they cheered as he quieted them and brought them to a nervous rest.

The beautiful white steeds settled. They pawed the dusty earth as the lovely young Nimi Enokye pushed forcefully through the honoring people, oblivious to them. Seeing only Mbata there before her she walked directly, without hesitation, to the chariot.

Nimi remained poised before him as the noise behind her rose and voices, in spontaneous unison, began to sing and chant and the pounding of the drums increased and she extended her hand and placed into the open palm of the great King Mbata a Ewuare, a flower, a single violet that only reveals its colorful scented blooms in the protection of the blackness of an unlit night.

Then! The whips slashed through the lighted darkness and the beautiful white horses rose as if to take flight on their return to the palace. Mbata exhorted them on. And the crowd, and the lights and the sounds of Calabar faded behind him in the swirling dust.

But Nimi rode with him in his throbbing heart and he felt her as the precious petals of the gifted flower were crushed in his fisted hand.

Nimi Enokye gave to Mbata a Ewuare, surrendered to him, at that moment, her loving heart and everything within her longing soul, as she stood alone amongst the many in the street and watched until he had departed from her sight.

And Mbata knew that Nimi knew he had come because she had demanded his presence. She had summoned him over the wind.

And Nimi knew that Mbata knew that, she had ... called.

All the members of the council were in place and remained silent when Mbala and Basil were escorted in. Mosheshwe was brought in and Mbata, now wearing an elaborate feathered hat, came in behind him. Mbata took his seat and stared across at Mbala intently. He could see in his eyes an effort to wipe away, to disavow the importance of the previous night's events.

Mbala returned his gaze, steady and defiant.

As Mbata looked at Basil he saw again a very agitated person. He wondered about this little white man, about his life. He pondered of the true motives for his being here. Mbata spoke, his voice suddenly cutting through the quiet. "We are most honored to begin with the words of Mosheshwe Ekomfo."

Mosheshwe tried to clear his throat and he coughed. His body was wracked with pain. He continued to cough and everyone waited for him patiently. Then he struggled for air. His physical condition was obviously worsening. After accepting a drink he began to breathe easier.

He looked for long moments at each person who sat at that table and those who turned to him saw him smile. "I will not take up too much of your time but I feel this need to speak. Though I am old and dying, I am momentarily strengthened in the belief that I have some knowledge, perhaps even, some truth to share at this important discussion. It will be for you men to decide what is the best direction of action to pursue and then allow the results of those decisions to be revealed.

"What I am most fearful shall be your strongest and greatest obstacle, is a misconception as to that which you are truly up against. 'This man here,'" and he pointed a frail finger at Basil, "represents people who believe they can institute a new way of life with laws. They want to decree by the use of pen and paper, a change in conditions that have existed, in reality, for hundreds of years. They now hope and so they say, pray, to their God that these conditions can be eliminated and replaced, as if by some powerful godly magic. And we are to believe that force plays no role in these changes. Those are, I am quite sure, very foolish beliefs. And Mbala will one day, at his own time, in his own way, understand this.

"My son here," and now he briefly touched Mbata's left shoulder, "has been taught through his own experiences that life can not remain still. It must move forward or it shall automatically regress to death. He knows that life must progress to exist. Therefore, he firmly believes that his enemies will

expose themselves by those actions that oppose the progress of his people. Those who oppose his people, stand against him, and that, he will not tolerate without acting as he is. He is war. Again, this belief, although clearer than the other one, is, I regret, lacking a total completeness and must ultimately be modified if modification is allowed. The issues are much more complicated than any of you realize.

“Slavery can not ever be stopped, only altered. And the enemies can not ever be destroyed, only replaced.

“My grandfather fought the Portuguese. My father battled the Dutch. King Mbombo, the father of these two kings, and I warred against the French and British. And even today the Mbobo people are ever vigilant, always prepared to engage in mortal combat against foreign domination.

“But, it is not just, us against them. For even before the first foreign human ever touched this soil, we were in conflict with other tribes and throughout the years the foreigners that came to this land have always made war against each other.

“In the beginning the Mbobo people resisted. We have always resisted. We came together as one people to deny the Shantulu and the Fon. They would raid us, to kill and kidnap and if they conquered they would capture and enslave. We in return exacted these activities upon them. We fought over many things, including water, land, and our tribal beliefs, those things that sustain a people. In essence we fought for survival. It was a natural order of conflict that had arranged itself along with extended periods of peace and tranquility. And thus we all progressed.

“After the large boats of the foreigners arrived on our shores the previous order began to be replaced. A new order was born. At first they wanted gold and ivory and many of those things that Mbala speaks of now. And for a while they were satisfied. Then their world changed and so those things were not enough. They needed people to work for them. They wanted human goods. They desired men, women, and children. We received horses, alcohol, and other meaningless, worthless products. The Mbobo people rose up against the unfairness and cruelty of this growing menace. We forbid the exchange of slaves by any of our people and prohibited the transporting of slaves across any of our lands.

“Everyone turned against us. The whites aligned themselves with different tribes. They gave the Shantulu and the Fon, our most hated enemies, guns to attack us. They overwhelmed us and decimated our population. To survive, we were forced to raid the weaker tribes and we ourselves exchanged humans for guns. With these guns we could protect ourselves, protect our women and children. And we could attack and conquer, and so we did, all those within our reach. Our reach grew far and wide and by selling more and more humans we acquired many weapons and thereby ensured that the Mbobo people would not die. We knew, and it was emphasized through our own deaths that, only the strongest live.

“Today, far across the lands, everyone knows of our strength and our willingness to fight. Our power was created through a change that is now to

be replaced with another change. The foreigners armed us and now they attempt, in various ways, to disarm us, to control us, in a futile effort to create an impossible condition, a precarious structure. They do not recognize that they strive, not for a new order, but struggle in their ignorance to restore an order. And that can not be done.”

Mosheshwe paused, his eyes were alive and he had seemed to rise, grow stronger as he spoke. The room was quiet, expectant. “If there is to be progress toward a solution it will come only through a unique compromise. I suggest you Mbobo men try to find a way that Domey and Calabar are allowed to go their separate ways, toward their own destinies. Let the Mbobo people decide between what I believe to be, are different choices, represented in the differences of these two kings. Each choice must be respected. Each choice must be accepted. Everyone must be free, by being free to choose. What the whites think of this,” and now he turned to Basil, “makes no difference. None. This is the Mbobo matter. These foreign people can not act. They can only react. And that is all I have to say.”

The effort of the old man was sustained until the echo of the last word had left the room. And as if the words empowered, their conclusion brought weakness. Mosheshwe sank back and began to cough and his body shook. He was again in pain and as he was given a drink, he indicated he wanted to leave and so he was quickly removed.

Mbata looked around the table. Mosheshwe’s words had obviously affected them all. He had observed Mbala and Basil exchange glances several times and now he directed his words to Basil, pointed and incisive. “What does the treaty guarantee?”

Basil was thinking, searching for the proper Mbobo words. “King Mbata it ensures a peaceful alliance will be created and sustained between those I represent, the British and French, and the Mbobo people.” He stopped and looked around, smiling.

“What are the conditions?”

Basil was warming to his task now, he was gaining confidence. He continued. “The Mbobo people must cease all trading of slaves in any form and we agree to refrain from all military aggression. We must also be allowed to create a consul post at Domey and appoint a Consul General to govern the position.”

“What is the purpose of this, Consul General as you call him?” Mbata asked, his voice taking on an edge.

Basil did not notice this and without hesitation spoke up. “The Consul General will work with those chosen by you and King Mbala to assist in the creation and maintaining of the political structure necessary to support the treaty and promote the trade that will be established by these contracts. In other words, to ensure the laws and thus the treaty are not broken.”

“And what are the contracts?”

“The contracts,” and Basil had again begun laying them out quickly on the table, “quite simply are agreements, legal, binding agreements between the Mbobo people and these companies setting the prices, amounts, timetables

and so forth, on the products we would purchase from you. I know of course you will want to draw up your own contracts for any goods you may want to acquire from us, or trade for. We are truly looking forward to doing business with the Mbobo people.”

As he was finishing his statement he had begun to look from Mbata to Mbala. They were staring at one another. Expressionless. Emotionless. There was energy now in the air that everyone could feel. There were sudden uncomfortable shifts and slight, artificial movements. Basil quickly became anxious and concerned.

Finally Mbata spoke. Softly. Evenly. And although his voice was quiet, and slow, it was charged and filled with intensity. “Yes. And what does my brother ... want?”

Mbala responded automatically, as if the answer was obvious. “We want peace. At Domey we can see in the distance and close to us in the harbor the huge ships of the whites. Their presence is an immediate threat and this concerns us greatly. My city lives in constant fear of reprisals, of attack for the activities that are being imposed upon us by you. We know they hold back from moving against us in force because of the power and influence of Calabar but this restraint will not last much longer. They will eventually attack you and on the way to Calabar, they will pass through us first.”

“And you believe these people will honor these papers?” Mbata asked, his eyes narrow now, calculating.

“I believe we must give this a chance. We must find new means of income. The slave trade, as we know it, is ... over.”

It was done now. They could go no further. There was nothing left to say. Everyone knew this. They were not surprised when Mbata stood and said brusquely, “Until tomorrow.” He turned and departed the room.

Mbata entered the rear hall behind the council chamber. Torn asunder. Tossed as a lost leaf ripped from the reach, removed from the nurturing connection of the life giving limbs of a strong, deep-rooted tree. He was being mercilessly blown across the vast barren dryness of his tormented soul. There was nothing to latch on to, nothing to grasp, to use as an anchor. He tumbled through the violent turbulence.

It was loose inside of him, and free. He had not relinquished control. It had been snatched from him and he knew he must find some way to harness this thing that was grinding in inexorable rapidness throughout his being.

He had sat through the voices of the meeting all the while fighting to focus, compelling himself to listen. It took all means of concentration to remain in the present and devote his attention to the pressing matters at hand. But there, at the end the situation had become impossible.

Sporadic visions would flash across his mind. Jumbled images, blurred scenes were demanding to be recognized. Powerful feelings had begun to slash a burning swath through his body, searing him.

First, extreme anger.

Next, distorted hatred.

A wave of rage was replaced by an immense peace only for the push and pull to begin again. Over and over ... and over.

He was being peeled, stripped layer by layer of all he had constructed. Each rejection, each denial, every defense he had ever appropriated was crumbling into nothingness.

Down, the images dove. Down, the touch searched. Down, those visionary eyes peered into that which he hid, covered, protected. Now, in danger of being exposed was his deepest, deepest ... pain.

Loving surges. Loving feelings, propelled toward their fiery origin, uncovered their florescent center and then were swept beyond their apex and swirled back until each emotion discovered a jagged crystallized expression and every urge coalesced into a jutting monolith of ... lust.

It was lust that wailed now! It was lust that screamed now! Trilled for reality. Lust! Shrilled for light. Blotting out each inhibiting command, erasing every restricting wall and annihilating his will. No longer was he the master of his own soul.

It was ... she who fueled these maddening impulses. It was ... she behind, within, above the visions. It was ... she who stoked this infernal. It was Nimi Enokye who had him turning in confused circles in this dim hallway. It was she he sought as he directed himself toward the banquet hall, the drums, the music, soft chants, calling him ... calling. This night, he knew he could not have Nimi but this night, he knew he would find someone to take, in her place.

He measured his steps, resisting the urge to run.

He was in a daze as he entered the large room. His eyes were glazed, and fixed. His perfunctory greetings and acknowledgements were accepted at a cautious distance. The slight smile etched upon his face could not disguise his turbulence and so they parted before him as he strode past those who dined and moved towards the dancers. He stopped before them, his gaze scanning, searching and as they noticed him the performers increased their energy. The music rose. The drums pounded, relentlessly. Then he saw her. His eyes clamped upon her, momentarily immobilizing her. Flattered, excited at this attention she danced toward him. She moved before him, leaping, turning, her motions sensuous and enticing.

She was caught up in the moment, within the music. Dancing for him now, moving only for him. Her large, full hips rolling. Muscles in her long dark-brown legs carrying her faster and faster. Her body was glistening and glowing from the sweat. There was grace in her sleek neck and strength in those soft arms. Her round, bare, breasts bounced and settled in their own provoking rhythm. She garnered a circle, they gathered around and all stopped, save her. His eyes never left her.

Her gaze returning to his face, from the ceiling, leaving the floor, after every turn she fixed upon him. And as the music swelled to a crescendo she swirled into a final climatic pirouette as the drums pounded to an end and she collapsed in a suppliant bow at Mbata's feet. People clapped and laughed and cheered, themselves caught up in the gaiety and excitement.

She remained, low, before him and when she raised her head their eyes locked and he extended to her his right hand. She took it, and regained her feet smoothly. He turned and again, parting the crowd, left the room. He, in long purposeful strides, the woman, her hand in his, smiling triumphantly.

The music commenced and the clapping and laughter faded behind them.

Toward his rooms he guided her. She hurried. Honored to be following her king, this man. She wanted to go with him, wherever he took her. They entered the hallway to his rooms. They reached the entrance and stepped through his doorway. Crossing the anterior area, past the main rooms, into his bedroom they went. He, not speaking, she dared to and thus remained silent. Now they passed through his bedroom and into his garden they stepped. He removed a lighted lamp from the wall. They did not stop here and she, looking around at this, wondered of their destination, knowing their ultimate purpose.

Through a secure secluded exit, through the circular triad of walls they continued and soon they were outside his private stables. He opened a gate. He spoke now, calling a name. A large black horse appeared from the darkness to stand patiently beside them.

Now he set the lamp down and turned to her. She was breathing heavily. He looked down into her eyes, deeply. His gaze fell upon her breasts rising and subsiding with each draw and exhalation of the night air. He took her face into his hand and she reached out, into the opening of his robe to lightly touch his throat, feel the hair on his chest.

Here, in this illuminating moonlight, for a moment, he struggled. Part of him needing, yet a part not wanting to give all up to her dark beauty, this wicked smile, the tongue, revealed between these gleaming teeth, passing over these lush lips. Then he felt himself grapple with the doubts, misgivings and hesitations. Yes, there were pieces of guilt and elements of regret of this impending act. Remaining vestiges of repentance slowly but not completely dissipated. Still, he ... surrendered.

He reached down and removed from her waist the only covering on her body. He took off his hat and tossed it aside. He unfastened his cape and let it fall. He peeled the robe from his shoulders, removed it completely and gathering it, folding it, he spread it fully across the animal's back. He picked up the lamp and wrapping his right hand in his horse's mane, in one motion he leaped, and was mounted. He held out his arm, she grabbed it and as if she were weightless he pulled her up powerfully behind him.

He urged the horse forward and they rode like this. Toward the bright nearly full moon, toward the mountains that rose into the sky, there in the distance behind the palace.

She held him tightly, her embrace to secure her to not only the galloping horse, but also to tie her to this fantastic, unreal experience. The passing wind momentarily cooled their hot skin. On they rode. He, seeking a destined, desired release, she, to aid him in this search.

Soon they were at the base of the mountains. As he reined in the horse his eyes peered into the darkness, to find ... the cave. Once, long ago the

sacred, healing cave. It had been many years since he had been here. As if to avoid it was to wipe it away forever. He looked now for the cave where he had spent almost all of the first three years of his life, alone, with his mother, the only person to love him truly, in his sickness.

Within a short time of his birth he had been sent here, virtually isolated from the light of the world, banished from the universe of the humankind. Shunned and feared.

As nurse after nurse quickly fell ill, some dying, his mother had demanded to be allowed to care for her baby. She would not, could not tolerate the separation as long as she knew he was sick. Aware of his possible death and believing she could, her love would, save him, she came to him. In this cave they existed. Food and provisions being brought to them and left for her to retrieve. Water from the passing stream to wash his burning body, sustain him and cool his parched, heated throat.

And as he struggled and grew, his world remained limited and constricted. His brother, an unknown entity would exist in name only. His father, forced to keep his distance, reduced to calls and waves from below, dared not touch his son lest he, the Mbobo king, be felled by this mysterious fever. Only his mother became ... real.

Eventually, slowly, she too became ill. Mild at first, she fought, along with her child, against it. But it weakened her and finally took her life. He remembered this now. It had been coming back. From far away he saw it, felt it, the memory moving forward. Beginning the instant he saw Nimi's eyes, it had been emerging, easing into his reality. Progressing indefatigably into clear consciousness. Unknown images had been stirred when he had spoken of his mother with Mbala. And finally it had burst upon him in his recent dream. Mosheshwe, after she had been brought before him, confirmed his suspicions. Nimi, in many ways, but most vividly, in her beautiful, haunting eyes, looked unerringly like his mother. Herself, Nimi's age when he had been born.

He recalled that dream now, and spotting the entrance to the cave they began the short walk. The small lamp held up and out, swayed as they moved and its shifting essence guided them toward this destiny. As they ascended through this shadowy white moonlit night, toward this monument to the past, the dream unfolded.

His mother was dying.

She lay upon the floor of the cave. He sat beside her, sensing something horrible happening and in spite of her smiles and assurances, he cried. He stood and screamed hysterically against this terror. He cried. Then his face was pressed against her and he felt the burning fever. He cried. Exhausted, his cries became mournful whimpers.

And now in this dream he crawled to the entrance of the cave. The last of the fire would soon be gone and he would be plunged into darkness and he, at the entrance, called out, weak and hoarse, for help. Called out, his father's name, his brother's name. Called out, his mother's name. Called out, his own name. All that he knew of the world he begged entreatingly for help.

They called back, the echoes louder and louder, reverberating throughout the cave, ricocheting off the walls, coming from the darkness. He covered his ears and all was quiet except for the voice of his mother, removing all other sound through her whispers. She called his name and now, crying softly, he crawled back to her. She attempted to hide the blood that was forming upon her lips. She coughed, turning her head and when she turned back ... Nimi's eyes, her eyes, looked at him with the reality of her tenderness and the truth of her love for him, her child. It hypnotized him. The innocence, the purity of her soul was revealed within the calmness and eternal beauty of her gaze.

Confused. Amazed. Healed! His tears ceased.

As she withdrew her burning hand from his face, she said, "Goodbye Mbata, my love." Her head rolled to the side, her eyes, remaining open, stared lifelessly into the darkness that descended around him as the last of the fire sank into the earth leaving him only an extinguishing glow to view her form and distinguish her once lovely, alive ... eyes.

He had awakened from the dream in agitation. Deep inside he knew this that had come to him in his sleep was not just some distorted apparition. This, in many ways, was real, a return. He had relived a repressed forgotten memory.

He was in tormented turmoil now as they entered the dim dank cave. He was unlike they had found him twenty-seven years ago, sitting quietly, peacefully alone, for two days, beside his dead mother's body. As they took him from the cave he had turned once to look back, and he had not cried, and from that time he could not cry, again.

The dream receded, the memories faded and these thoughts of the past departed as he was drawn back to the present, to this moment, to this woman advancing toward him, to stand close to him in her nakedness. The lamp placed on the floor cast a soft light and upon the walls of the cave, shadows wavered. Images darted. He was sweating and she was sweating, panting from the climb. He could hear her heart beating. He could smell her, a mixture of salt, exotic scent and heightened passion. As he envisioned Nimi standing here, with him, he was aroused as never before, excited as never before.

This woman ignored the rumors, forgot the whispers and reached down to touch him. He was hard and erect. She wrapped her hands around him and her eyes, a moment ago half closed, flew open in shock. She drew her hands back in terror. He was burning! His body was on fire! She stumbled back to the wall, pressing herself against it. She extended her arms to ward him off. She shook her head in disbelief and unable to cry out, the sound lodged in her throat, she simply, moaned.

He was quickly upon her and she felt herself being pulled roughly to him, lowered forcefully to the moss-covered floor, helplessly pinned. She had shut her eyes at this advance and as she squirmed and writhed she tossed her head to and fro, pleading and begging for release. Then she felt his heat subside. And his voice, husky and thick, spoke quietly to her. In her ear. To her heart.

"Look at me!" he insisted.

The urgency of this command, like a slap, opened her eyes and she was stunned, mystified at this sight, here in this lighted yellow darkness.

He was close to her, and as she slowed her struggle, she saw in his eyes, lust and passion and there was pain there. Tremendous, unlimited, unceasing pain. She looked closer, drawn to, and into this. Understanding the desire but confused by that which was emerging behind it. She had seen something else, faintly flickering to life. He had released her now and she moved on her own, closer, to see better, to confirm. She saw in his face a battle, continued. He fought, against himself. He fought against these ... tears that welled up and filled his eyes. And when they fell, each drop removed pieces of a deceptive façade and reveled his secrets no longer concealed. Love! Love unanswered and love denied. Fear! Fear of this love.

Astonished, she saw him open his arms to her, and dismissing everything, she dived into his burning soul.

They were attached together now. And she danced again, beneath him. She moaned aloud, allowing it to rise from the deepest depths of her own lustful reality. She urged him on. She demanded. She commanded and he responded. Faster. Deeper.

He whispered to her. "Open your eyes," then, again, "open your eyes."

She opened them and amid the energy of this passion there was a peace and quiet that was broken only by her soft, slow screams.

She wrapped her legs around him and tightly gripped his neck. Then she leaned back. Their gaze was locked upon one another, connecting them, and then he abruptly began an effort against her embrace, against the vision he saw behind this look. But she did not, could not recognize or understand this. She only knew that over and beyond her own desire she felt coming the beginnings of the impending rapturous eruption she drove her body towards.

He was reaching now to pull her arms apart, to extract himself. But it was too late. There was no going back. She had brought him too far and so he willingly went along, unable to succeed at this final futile effort to hold it in, keep it off, and spare her life.

Now they were both in total abandon. Moving. Thrusting. Grinding. Her eyes were closed again, pressed shut. And as she cried out, carried away in climatic ecstasy, he exploded inside of her. He moaned, a long ... no, escaping from the recesses of his being.

She lay exhausted and shivering as the passion dissipated and then her eyes opened slowly and instantly began to change, altering in their expression from lingering pleasure to a new awareness of an incipient pain. She frowned. It was moving inside of her. Fire! A white-hot flame in her stomach was extending itself rapidly throughout her body.

He had rolled from her and stood. He observed her stiffen.

Eyes wide, she was momentarily paralyzed, unable to move or speak. Then she squirmed. She twisted. She turned onto her side, grabbing at her throat in terror. Now she pushed at her stomach, trying to force this thing away. She began to jerk in spasms from the excruciating trauma.

It was growing stronger! Running faster and faster through her! She was wrenched over. And now rising quickly to her knees, this woman looked at the form standing calmly at the entrance staring at her. Expressionless. Her eyes pleaded and questioned and as she began to crawl toward him, blood suddenly poured from her nose, her ears, and gushed from her mouth. She screamed now, choking, gagging. She tried to catch the blood, stem the flow of her disappearing existence that was spilling and spreading itself on this damp floor. Disbelieving its reality. Rejecting its meaning. And in the contorted throes of dying, with her final breath leaving her, she reached for him and died at his feet. Her eyes ... open.

For a long time Mbata remained as a statue, motionless, his eyes blank, staring ahead, back into the darkness of the cave. Then abruptly he turned from this horror he had unleashed. Turned from the once lovely woman lying shriveled and chilled. Turned from this reality of his life and proceeded to descend the mountain.

And as he left his devastation behind, he left with it what he, at this moment, believed to be the last minute portion of a need he had in the past struggled to reject, his vague but pressing need to aspire to the sublime heights of his own unknown humanity.

If this murder had not pulled and discarded from him the remnants of his sensitivity, perhaps the jagged rocks and impeding branches could. He met these obstacles as he slid and stumbled haphazardly down the mountain. They ripped at him and tore at his numbed flesh, adding to his scars. He wanted this pain, desired this pain. Not to punish himself but to understand in some displaced structure of realness a truth of his enforced separation from the humankind. "Let me know," he muttered to himself, "what it is like to feel, to hurt, without killing, to bleed without killing. Let me know."

When he reached the bottom of the mountain he looked back at the cave. He could see the reflection from the lamp, barely. He wondered how long it would cast its glowing living element upon the walls, across the floor and over the death that was his, that belonged, to him. He looked away. He called his horse. He did not mount it but walked toward the nearby stream, his horse following closely behind.

He had been emptied again of hope and once again detached from his expectations. There was nothing left, within. Nothing to allow him to believe that in this life there was for him any future, any chance that he could ever be loved by woman without that love lost, or he himself, love woman without him becoming her ruination. It was gone, the hope. It had all been expended. His glorious wishes returned, rejected. He felt again what was there, that which remained above all else, that which had not been snatched from him or discarded from his insides, only ... it ... remained, the moist heat in his throat and that familiar pressure painfully surrounding and squeezing his distorted heart.

He walked into the stream. The water moving around his legs passed his presence on its inevitable path to its final destination. Long removed from its

source it flowed quietly on, lost in the darkness but living in its directed flow, meaningful in its ability to provide, to quench. It was alive in its purpose and so there was solace in this narrow, shallow stream, a momentary peace and a soothing cleansing.

As he went to his knees, the totality of his life revealed itself in both the pebbles that dug into him, sharply imprinting their history in his flesh, and in the wet, grainy sand that he drew tightly between his fingers.

His life ... painful impressions and suffocating constraint.

He stretched completely out now, to allow the passing waters to move across his tormented back. It was only the coolness he sought. He knew his burdens could not be floated away. There was no misconception in this matter. He accepted that he had always been rewarded for each of his deeds.

Now, returning to his knees he dipped his face into the water. And as easily, as naturally as any mortal being, for the second time in twenty-seven years, he cried. On his knees, in this stream, within this darkness, he burst silently into tears. And just as long ago, he did not care and he could not stop. All he wanted now was to be rid of this fiery knot in his chest and to cool his burning throat. He wanted the hurt gone. He wanted finally to be done with the internal fear and devoid of the conflicted emotions these tears represented. And so he cried. Each tear being caught up and swept away, concealed and lost forever in these waters. Never seen, never known by the prying, intruding world. At this moment Mbata felt as lost, as unattached, as insignificant in the universe as a solitary unseen tear that had merged with a vast endless river destined to flow for all eternity.

He cried now for all the misery in the world, all the treachery in the world, all the death in the world. He cried for his loving mother, his violent father, his hateful brother. He cried for the hopelessness, the uselessness of the tremendous love he carried for Nimi Enokye. He cried for the reality of the humankind. Knowing he would eventually become another example of the inability of humans to love themselves unconditionally, the inability of humans to step away from their own hate, transcend their own internal guilt and stand above their own self-inflicted brutality that manifested itself in their brutalizing their fellow humans.

He was caught up in this madness and there was nothing he could do except strive to hold it back. Humans, he believed, would never rise beyond their essential essence. And those who attempted that feat were doomed to reveal themselves clearly and to thus become banished to isolated fear, desolate loneliness or, in their softness and sensitivity, quickly removed from existence.

Finally he cried for himself. For his own agony, his own pain, his own anguished soul and for what he now fully realized was true. From the very beginning, his, had been a tortured life.

As the tears began to ease, and then stop, he angrily pulled himself to the side of the stream, leaving his fearful wishes, and his brief personal shame at this display of a transparently weakened resolve, to move on, and away in the gentle current.

Now lying half in, half out of the water, he gazed up at the luminous moon and hovering incandescent stars. "Ah ... Why?" he asked himself, for there was no one else to ask. Why, he pondered, would he be struck with this power, this curse? To kill, to bring such devastation and destruction to woman at the very moment life should begin to spring forth. "Why?" he whispered aloud, again.

There was no god or devil to ask, no evil spirit or deity to query for he did not believe in their existence. So his question was sent into this warm night air to return unanswered. Still, he listened. Hearing nothing, his effort, his task, was to find his own reasons. So he embraced again that which he had always believed and for the past few days had allowed to slip away. He touched once again his purpose. This, all this, was another facet of the absurd existence of humans.

His purpose? To be mocked and thrust to this extreme to show vividly the ironic cruelties and conflicting, contradicting forces that exist as infinite imperceptible layers within all love, within all birth, within all life.

There was only his personal reality and alone like this, lost in the huge sky, he faced that reality. He was a dying killer, a mangled twist of truth, a living principle, a mirror to all who have lived, live now, and will ever live. There is no exit, no escape from the murderous death we bring with us into life.

There must be an end before there can be a beginning.

It was his own unique destiny to represent clearly an unending conclusion that would be eventually sucked up in the tedious cyclical retrogressive progress of humans, pointed to as an aberration and inevitably set aside in history to be ultimately lost in time. That was what he had to accept, readily.

How many? He wondered now of the number that he had killed like the once lovely woman who waited on the instinctual animals that would disregard the decomposing beauty of her decaying body and strip her of her flesh, render her life to scattered bones and prove it is only the soul that truly has substance. He had sent so many of these forms to dust. From beauty to dust. But what does the body matter? For that varying external form simply individualizes the internal essence. Those carnivorous animals would never devour her soul. That, she had given freely, and fought for tenaciously.

How many more would he kill in war, strike down, trample upon and leave on the battlefields as testaments to that which he could never relinquish? Power! Power to kill! A power that will last till the end of the humankind's time. The power to act or by restraining it, weakening it forever in ineffectual confinement or impotent moderation.

He had killed thousands, and thousands stood before him. As he killed, more appeared to be replaced by still more. But soon it would stop, pause, and gather itself to begin again. And when he died there would be someone to take his place and stand in the reality of life and attempt to control rather than be controlled, seeking freedom as opposed to intolerable restricting dictated conditions. This person must be willing not just to live, but be prepared, to ... die.

Now it was his turn. It was soon to be his place to offer up his life to his

convictions. And so, he rallied his strength, now beginning to surge around this fact that he had, because of Nimi, because of love, momentarily misplaced.

It was the fear he evoked that had protected his land. It was his ability to destroy that had brought life and freedom to his people. And so, kill he would, without self-pity, without shame or guilt. He would destroy as long as it was necessary, as long as he could. This, is what his enemies understood, to respect strength and abuse weakness. He would take to the world what he had always known, what he had always lived. Within the pain of his knotted heart, sickness and death would burn, he believed, until he died.

He left the water, now refreshed and determined. He had once again experienced triumph. He had overcome his own turmoil, rectified his internal conflicts and found serenity in the belief that his path was the only true direction.

He mounted his horse and as he started towards his palace, he prepared his mind for the onslaught of blinding light. He would steadfastly refuse to be drawn from his reality, from his darkness. It was there, in the blackness that he reigned alone, and supreme.

King until the end of his time!

Mbata stopped on the rise that lay at the rear of his palace. For several long moments he sat and reflected on the secure tranquility of his immense home. On the other side of the palace, through the winding path, was the most powerful city in existence, in his world. Calabar. This he pictured. He was able to garner a sense of pride at these accomplishments and he wanted to savor this scene. Soon, he knew, he would be leaving his home and perhaps when he passed through the city, it would be for the last time.

As he sat there a breeze came to him and brought with it a similar feeling that first touched him as he had anticipated his arriving guests days ago. He knew now that the danger he had felt then had been internal and the confusion and upheaval that followed had all been triggered by Nimi. And so, when this faint gust carried with it a familiar essence, he was no longer disoriented within it. She awaited him now, close. He sensed her there below, in his room and he moved to meet her.

He rode to his stables and returned his horse. Passing through the walls, into his garden to his main bedroom, he entered quietly. He took a wrap and covered his body at his waist. Crossing to the bedroom doorway he stopped in the shadows. There, near the entrance to the main room sat Nimi. He felt his heart swell and he found it necessary to take a deep breath to calm himself. He was determined. He would not, could not continue to be a medium for these strong currents of surging emotions.

He watched her. She sat, a picture of beauty in her lovely bright-colored dress and elaborate jewels. Her head, bound in a silk wrapping was bowed into her hands and she cried quietly, her slender shoulders occasionally lifting and falling slightly. Mbata stood gazing at this and in spite of, perhaps because of all he had just experienced, he was deeply moved. But there was

something altered, unique, in this that now ran through him. He had questioned himself, in pensive moments, as to the essence of his new feelings. Was it love? And by what means could he consider that which he carried for this woman, to be love? Standing here, he knew certainly that he could be, if he allowed it, dominated and consumed by desire, a desire to care for this woman, to provide for her every material need and to protect her from all harm, to surrender to her, for her, his ... life. He recognized at this moment the potential of his own tenderness, an essential element of love.

Hatred, as a stagnant festering pool within the soul, feeds envy, jealousy, anger, disrespect and contempt, breeding conflict and creating enemies. And these emotions, as derivatives of their source, are linked, chaining one to their origin. Always.

Love, as a fount, brings to the surface, admiration, kindness, respect and compassion, creating ties of mutual understanding and bringing forth relationships that can last through all difficult times.

The tremendous sense of tenderness Mbata felt at this moment was fused to his past. He knew this. He knew Nimi united him with his mother, the source of his lost love, his pure love, his possessive love, his innocent love, before it had been covered and buried over the years in painful suppression. For how can a man love woman without loving his mother? And so, as Mbata stood there, he accepted this woman for who she was and this moment for what it was. It was an attempt of his soul to relive, repeat, experience again that which should move life forward. Love. That which he could not own.

He stepped from the dimness. "Why are you shedding your tears Nimi?" he asked gently. "What is wrong?"

It was as if she expected him to find her here, alone in his room crying. She did not seem at all startled. She did not move, but began to control her soft sobs until they ceased. At last she looked up at him standing near the doorway, patiently awaiting her reply.

The remaining unfallen tears in her eyes shone and reflected light and feeling and for a long instant her beauty appeared to him unreal, as if she were a fragile, chiseled, timeless, statuesque, eternal form.

As she wiped at her eyes, her fingers moving in quick delicate motions, he emerged from her blurred vision into a clear image. And just as the first time she saw him, she was again overcome by his powerful presence. She saw distinctly now the handsome strength in his youthful, scarred face. And she saw something new in his dark piercing eyes. He looked at her not just with a keen questioning interest but also with genuine concern and empathy.

She looked at all of him, taking him all in and when her eyes came to his chest, she spoke. "You have been hurt King Mbata," observing the fresh scratches and dried blood.

"It is nothing Nimi, and you need not address me here like this as King. I am," and here he searched for words, "your friend. Now, please, tell me what troubles you." He crossed the room and poured her a drink of water.

"I had the guard bring me," she said, as she stood and turned to him.

He walked to her and as he handed her the cup they looked deeply into each other's eyes. And once again there passed, and this time it seemed and felt as lightning between them, a truth revealed in its acceptance. They loved one another. From somewhere deep inside, they had both, at the very same time, found emotions that engulfed them. Emotions that moved and forced their way up and then reached out, from one to the other, and squandered meaning and essence unless the word love, with all its fleeting mystery and elusive substance and fluctuating pain was used in an attempt to define what blazed between and within them both at this moment.

She accepted the cup and sipped, now composed and relaxed. She walked to the walls and began to study and admire the decorations and pictures and weapons that adorned them. She set the cup down, to trace her fingers along a sword, a gun.

He settled into the large chair against the far wall and observed her, content to allow her whatever time she needed. He gazed at the beauty she possessed. The rich, deep darkness of her color, her large expressive brown eyes that were at once innocent yet could not hide her maturity, her serious intelligence and unusual strength. He observed her fluid movement, her regal carriage, her strong back, the pride with which she held her head. And yet, there was a sensual softness to her. And as she stood facing the wall he could see the ripening florescence of her body express itself in her narrow waist, full hips and long tapered legs. And when she turned he could see clearly the outline of her firm thighs and the pointed edges of her round uplifted breasts as they strained against her dress. He saw a woman, a ... Queen!

But her beauty transcended these obvious physical aspects. There was within her soul an inner essence that had struck him and had cast him into a tumultuous emotional upheaval the first instant he laid eyes upon her. An essence of immortality lived within her. And as he sat, his gaze following her around the room, time seemed to slow and sound dissipated completely save for the wind that invisibly breathed upon the hot night sky and blew lightly against Nimi, rustling the silk she wore as she walked languidly across the room and stood now in the window, facing him, staring at him. Unspeaking and yet imparting to him all he could ever know. Forcing him to feel her.

He embraced this that he had denied in its inception but would not, could not disregard now. It was growing and had slowly become in this dim room palpable, acutely obvious. He believed she was as he was. He sensed her, attuned to him as he was to her. Then she spoke and when the words began to reveal themselves, he knew they had indeed eased reluctantly, inevitably, passionately, into the same world.

"I feel as if the two of us have been together like this, in this place for many wonderful years."

She said this firmly yet in a whispery voice that emanated as a light clear silvery bell from across the room, expansive as an ocean, her breathy sound shrinking to him, to chime in his ear, bringing to him shivers along his body.

She moved to sit down beside him. Close beside him. He could feel her dress, her leg, touching him, her soft shoulder touching his. She placed her

right hand upon his left thigh, leaned her head back on the chair and closed her eyes. She sighed, heavily.

It had come for them, here, to this moment, in this descending silence, to this swiftly passing instance in their lives and they both knew this. He, to agonize and experience some cruel repetition in love lost. And she, to join him in the undraping, unfolding, repeating narration. She, to become the stationary point of reference. She, to bring all that existed in the indefinite desirous imaginary world into the clarity of punishing reality.

He pondered how far back to go, to wonder as to the beginning that would bring her across time and space, here, to this fateful meeting beyond the separating miles, through the great city of Calabar, and through his palace walls. A moment's difference, a changed past and they would not be sitting here together at this time in hopeless love.

Lives embark upon determined courses. Varied outcomes are created in a brief alteration of an instance. For fate is based upon uncontrollable and unharnessed destiny that moves as it wills and where it pleases and need not make any pretense at a divine method or a specific design based upon some cosmic goodness or ultimate justice. Fate, rebellious and obstinate, opposes in its actions any attempt by the humankind to orchestrate order, stating defiantly. "There is none!"

And so they sat, Nimi Enokye and Mbata a Ewuare, victims, or members of infallible fate. Inexorable fate. That which humans place in the hands of gods, myths and magic, creating powers, beliefs, and fears to justify the unknown and support their weaknesses and appease their need to dominate all mental phenomena. For humans make false all that they find disagreeable and reject and refuse that which they do not understand. In a vain attempt to sustain their image of their own existence, humans elevate lies above truths.

They both reached for this, from some fragmented direction, in some imprecise manner. They strove to approve this reality that had been imposed upon their lives and thrown them in this jarring fashion together, to sit here in closeness and yet to be in actuality distant and forced apart by real events far beyond their control. They struggled to accept their position and the powerlessness of it.

He believed that reality was only personal and private. It carried no faithful quality or quantity of itself. It only ... was. It was not, good or bad. Only mercilessly and indefatigably, personally ... true. This was what Nimi was required to know.

But who was he to instruct her in the complexity of life when he himself had only recently discovered the capacity of emotions that rest dormant within his own soul? He had long ago gathered unto himself the hatred that permeated his life. He had long ago come to terms with that, hatred that he felt from others, enervating fear that covered hatred, even vestiges of love that protected hatred. But Nimi had revealed to him that love, true love, pure love could lie concealed and wasted in the soul, driven into a clouded labyrinth to wander aimlessly, misdirected and unfulfilled. There, to become a missing entity, triggered suddenly and unexpectedly by a voice, a scent, a

touch, a gaze. Love, rising to soothe in its obvious expression and depositing debilitating pain in its absence. Until Nimi, except for his mother, he had not known of the permissible existence of real love.

Nimi, beside him, within him, only lived the present moments as they spread themselves and presented themselves to her. Unaware of the sinewy paths that wound themselves and spun their tensile, tendril threads beyond the surface and bore inward past the heart, grasping tightly and clutching deeply, never to relinquish the traumas or the scenes and phantasies that create love and hate and lay down and construct the very foundation of an emotional being that resides, unyielding and unaltered within. Could she know of previous love, recreated hate, preexisting emotions? Perhaps all she knew was this moment, these current feelings.

When she moved her hand from his thigh to brush at her face, she removed much of his hesitant confusion. It was useless, he decided then, to explain such things. To speak of the significance of his own lost mother and how she still lived within him and through Nimi, was to speak of a mystery. Unsolvable. He knew it was futile to talk of the father that lived within her in varying degrees of hate and fear and love and adulation. He would not try. These were untenable images and symbols that pulled her and pushed her towards a fulfilling consummation that could never realize itself in the light. Only in the realm of the impenetrable caldron of the imagination could these desires strive to find brief satisfaction. There, movement follows movement. Both distortion created condensations and displaced mergings brings the momentary cessation of pulsating desires.

Reality lacks. Reality frustrates gratification. Reality burns as the sun, burns the sweltering visions of hopeful phantasy into dry, coarse, powdered particles. Reality scorches, then burns dreams ... away.

And so they sat here in this dim splendor of a palace that opposed all they sought to reach. A palace built on hatred and death. And they, sitting with perceptible love and life holding them and moving around them ceaselessly, felt a force that not only impelled them closer towards one another but also bore an insurmountable barrier that thrust itself jaggedly between them.

Nimi spoke, breaking the oppressive, yet comfortable silence.

"I am deeply troubled because of the many things that are happening within me. I think of you in the day and dream of you at night. You have touched me without touching me and I feel as if I will surely die if I am unable to see you daily. I hurt because I sense we will depart soon and I want to stay here, with you."

She had not looked at him but sat serenely, staring ahead, not sadly, just resolutely. Speaking softly.

There was a movement in this space, a sway and rearrangement that left them alone together in a dull glow that was cast from the only small lamp that illuminated the large room. The walls receded into the outlining darkness and it was as if they, only they, without the world, sat alone together in some vast empty universe. Darkness was surrounding them and the small lamp on which they now focused, projected for just a passing moment, a truncated

path, with a remote possibility a warm guiding light could point them to a resolution of their situation.

But because the reflecting solitary lamp was weak and inefficient, harshly thick in its opacity, they sat not in directed enlightenment but in falling wavering shadows. These were meandering shadows that crawled secretively into the corners of their lives. Dense, smoky shadows stretched across their world, this room, and covered them in chilling dampness. That which was to be resolved would forever remain murky and cool, lacking warmth, lacking completeness, lacking solid form, missing a wholeness because only a tiny portion of this vast, complicated issue would ever know anything other than the deepness of the dark blackness. Unconscious blackness.

They avoided one another's gaze. They knew from the look, which had flashed between them a while ago, that only in their eyes could they love one another, truly. And so they remained like that, not moving, staring over the light, through the window at the shrinking stars, incipient iridescent sky and vanishing dissolving moon.

Night faded, morning came, slowly.

"I too am feeling many things inside, many new things about myself, about you," Mbata began gently. "Some of these things I understand, some I do not. It will not help to talk of them now. There is nothing to be gained in such talk at this time. You must discover for yourself what these things mean, to you. Perhaps one day we will look back and find some reason for all this. For now we must live through it. You must go your way and I must go mine."

He paused. Moments passed. He continued.

"I have lived for many years attempting to avoid a portion of my ... self. I would not wish that existence on anyone, not even my enemies, for it is useless and a painfully slow endeavor, a living death.

"You must allow your emotions to speak, to live. They are an expression of your soul and yours is a beautiful, loving soul. Perhaps we are here simply to awaken one another, to life, to love," and here his voice lowered to a whisper, "to futility." Then his voice rose slightly. "As for your staying here, you and I both realize, that is impossible. For many reasons."

Nimi turned directly to him now, compelling him to look at her. He saw intensity in her eyes and heard passion behind her voice.

"What could my world be without you?" she said. "How can I love without you? Before you I did not exist and I had never loved in the manner I love you. It is as if I can not remember anything before Calabar. It is you who moves my mind, and my body. It is you who makes me feel, and brings me life."

"You will learn from these things you feel," Mbata replied. "You are young and have much yet to see and understand."

"Learn and understand what?" she asked quickly.

"Perhaps, how to love others. What it means and what it is to exist completely," he answered. "By feeling all there is to feel. I am injured and will never know what it is to live, really. But there are so many things that

await you. There is still much for you to know.”

“Without you there is nothing,” she said, angry despair creeping into her voice. And she looked away, tears beginning to form again in her eyes. “Let me remain here,” she whispered plaintively. “Use your powers to make it possible for me, for us.”

Mbata rose and walked to the window. Her closeness, her voice and the painful need she expressed had begun to affect him. He knew that if he had not just left that woman on the mountain he would now be disintegrating inside. He felt yearnings and urges stirring within. He had almost reached out to her, almost taken her into his arms. Not from lust, he had destroyed that in the cave. No, he wanted to hold her out of the love that sought to rise up from the restrained center of his being. This that was new within him strove for expression. He turned, facing her from the dimness, his back to the expanding morning twilight.

“You can not stay,” he said. “Not because of any loyalty to your husband but out of the knowledge that there is nothing with me but pain and death.”

“I am already in pain,” she said. “I love you Mbata, do not make me return to Domey.”

Mbata’s heart jumped at the sound of his own name. To hear his name spoken by this woman, wrapped in this emotion, moved him powerfully.

“The pain will pass,” he said. “Death, as I believe it to be, is forever.”

She rose and began to walk toward him.

“Death would be a welcomed relief to this agony I feel now,” she said, her voice low, and smooth. “You would not harm me.”

Mbata found himself taking a step back. He raised his hand to halt her advance. “You don’t know all there is.”

“Tell me,” she said.

“To explain these things to you will not begin to alter our circumstances. I can not allow you to stay here,” he said firmly, with finality.

They stood there now, looking into each other’s eyes.

Nimi move closer ... closer. She eased her arms around his waist and placed her head against his chest. Hearing, and feeling on her cheek, his pounding heart. And in spite of himself, he held her. She hugged him, tightly. And for these moments nothing else mattered. They were, for some inexplicable reason, content with this. They believed this would be all they could have now, likely, all they would ever have. So they clung desperately to one another and in their acceptance of each other, they had allowed themselves to accept the reality of their situation, and its hopelessness.

“I love you Nimi,” Mbata whispered.

And when she spoke it was so strange, her reply, and yet so natural. Rising on her toes, she put her arms around his neck and placed her lips almost to his ear. “I know you do,” she said. “And I love you.”

There was no hesitation or doubt in their belief. There was no vagueness, only a surety that their love would last beyond their mortal existence. Somehow. Somewhere. Within all the movement of all the time, their love would be ... eternal.

“You must leave now,” he said, softly.

Taking her face into his hands he gently brushed away a tear that had begun to fall.

“Yes, I understand,” she replied, her voice shaking, her arms falling to her sides.

He took her hand but did not lead her to the doorway but to the wall near the entrance. Stopping before a large, hanging gold necklace, he removed it. He turned it over and over in his hands and a wistful expression crossed his face.

“This belonged to my mother,” he said, his voice quiet, yet full. “Ah, it means, so much to me to be able to give this to you.”

He stepped around her and tied the gift to her neck. She turned to him and he saw here in this dimness a wonderful vision and he felt a great sense of joy and peace at seeing this vivid reminder of his mother adorning this lovely young woman.

She looked down at the gift and touched it lovingly. “It is truly beautiful,” she remarked. “I will treasure it always.”

He spoke. “With this let us honor your birthday and the birth of this that we hold for one another. This will both bind us and link us. Not just in the remembrance of this special time we have just spent or in the truth of our feelings that we shared, but because it represents our moments together, in love. But this love we have will reduce time and eliminate distance. Keep this and I will always be close to you.”

“But, what can I give you?” Nimi asked.

“Give me that,” he said, pointing to a ring she wore.

She took it off and handed it to him. “But it is too small for you to wear.”

“I will make a necklace with it,” he replied. “And I shall wear it always. Now, I will have the guard take you back.”

He led her through the anterior rooms. But before they reached the main entrance he stopped and turned to her. “We may not see one another again Nimi. It may be this loving ... memory, and these gifts will be all we can have. But I have seen you move toward being a woman and for this short time with you, I have been able to experience and express some of those things that were lost, and wasted deep within me. I thank you for that. Please, no matter what you may hear of me in the coming future, promise me you will remember these moments, the feeling, the truth, the reality, and promise you will remember me not as a king, but as a man.”

She placed her hand against his cheek. “I promise. My touch feels you as a man and I will never forget you. “Goodbye Mbata, my love.” She turned, parted the curtains, and was gone.

“Goodbye Nimi Enokye,” he whispered after her.

IV

MBALA AWOKE WITH A START. HE AND BASIL HAD GONE into Calabar after the council meeting and had attempted to enjoy the city but he was distracted and quite ill at ease. The festivities, he found boring and the drink had only served to intensify his perceptions. His mood had fluctuated between elation and anger.

There was no way for him to judge the response of Mbata. He considered the issues and searched back through the previous days for some indication, some hint as to the possible decisions Mbata would make. What disturbed him most was that he did not really know the range of those options. He himself felt there was a clear course but what his brother felt, he did not know. Also, the secret actions in which he had been involved had begun to weigh on his mind. He was constantly apprehensive that he would be revealed. He knew Mbata's connections and abilities to acquire information were well developed and extensive.

As he prepared to rise he recalled suddenly that he had opened his eyes as if by command and with a strong accompanying feeling of unease. "My worry is unnecessary," he mumbled to himself.

He had slept fitfully through the morning and it was now early afternoon. It was quiet, so he could not attribute this awakening to some intruding noise or movement. He just knew that for some unexplained reason he was very disturbed. "Perhaps," he mused, "there had been some dream that had upset me." A dream now gone and irretrievable.

But slowly, he began to have imposed upon his senses the reality of this afternoon. It was quiet, too quiet. Silence surrounded him. Always at this time there had been during his stay, sound, however slight, of life. Noise that

was only normal to a palace of this size would float from the hallways or through his window. Now, there was nothing and he found himself straining to hear even the call of birds from the grounds. He heard nothing. It was eerie, the degree of this silence, and unsettling.

He was up now, and washing quickly, he hurriedly began to dress. But before he could finish, Basil was outside his doorway summoning him. "King Mbala, King Mbala, are you awake?" He was calling intently yet quietly, as if to acknowledge and respect the obvious silence, now so perceptible. There was fear beneath his words.

"Yes Basil," Mbala replied. "Come."

As Basil entered the room Mbala could see that he was upset. His face was pale and his watery eyes were large.

"What is it?" Mbala asked.

"I heard something a while ago. Something startled me from my sleep," he said, rushing to the window to peer out and listen. "Something strange, and now it is gone. But there is something wrong. Listen!" He was standing in the middle of the room. He paused to cock his head, his mouth agape, as if he would swallow whatever sound that would come. But there was again, nothing.

"What did you hear?" Mbala asked, now himself becoming slightly alarmed by the actions of Basil. But the frightened man ignored his question. He was at the doorway now, looking down the hallway in both directions. Then he paced the room.

"And the guards are now gone," he continued. "The women are gone also. There is no one here but us." Again he paused, his mouth open, to find again that which he had heard.

"Calm yourself!" Mbala ordered. Now dressed, he moved toward the hallway, Basil following. But as he reached the doorway he heard a sound that stopped him short and caused Basil to bump into him from the rear. A long mournful scream reached them. From somewhere inside this huge palace a scream emanated. Pain and anguish expressed itself in a tormented scream that froze their movement even though it was so far from them only the very last of the sound actually came to them, fading by the time it had touched them, into a low and barely discernible wail.

"Do you hear?" whispered Basil. "Do you hear?" the fear now rising in his throat. "What is it?" he asked.

"I do not know," Mbala replied, fighting to keep the panic away that had begun to grow inside him. This was something foreign to the palace. During their stay there had been drums and music and laughter. Voices conducting business and patches of quiet, but nothing like this. This was pain. There should not have been reason for them to be experiencing this level of fear. It was not as if they were in any immediate danger, but they both knew there was something very wrong.

They entered the passageway running past their rooms and stood, waiting. Soon they were again chilled by the rising and fading cries that seemed to call. They began to follow them. A woman could be heard, suffering, then a

man, again a woman. And still they went forth. Rushing!

They passed the council chamber and now moved into an area of the palace they had not ventured before. Pausing, momentarily lost, the screams, growing louder, drove them on, against their enervating will. The sounds grew closer. Voices united with other voices and Basil had placed his hands over his ears and hurried on behind Mbala.

They entered a long hallway and sensed that from one of the two doorways at the end resided the answer they sought, but did not really want. They hesitated. Suddenly a chorus of sounds exploded from the entrance to their right. Screams, wails, moans, and now drums. Drums, thumping, adding to the crescendo. Not in a rhythm promoting movement but in an ominous pattern. Heavy, ponderous and so intermittent each blow seemed to grow in weight and force until unexpectedly the two men were pushed back and then forcefully propelled forward by this simulated expiring heartbeat and almost simultaneously they parted the curtain that shielded the room and entered.

Basil took one glance at the scene before him and terror-stricken, fell back against the wall and covered his head. Mbala stood shocked and riveted, unable to move, unwilling to utter a sound, and although he had seen such spectacles before in his life, years ago, he found himself bringing his right fist to his mouth. He clamped his teeth hard upon his finger and the pain that followed fought the horror and accepted the reality that was being enacted before him.

Mosheshwe was dead! At the very far end of this large and narrow room Mosheshwe lay on a raised platform. Flowers and gifts surrounded him and the scent of the flowers and burning incense mingled, but could not cover the stench of blood and death that permeated the air.

Along with the flowers and gold and ivory there lay at the foot of the deathbed, heads, severed heads with opened eyes and mangled necks that trickled blood from their stumps. Dead, hollow eyes stared out accusingly, hauntingly, sadly, at Mbala. No one stopped or acknowledged their abrupt entrance as some unwarranted interruption.

Mbala looked around now. He saw from a rear entrance, a man brought in by warriors. The man kneeled, head bent before Mosheshwe and quickly a large, heavy sword came down upon his neck and the head fell. A woman then carefully positioned the head beneath the platform and the bleeding body was removed. Immediately a woman was brought forth to accept the same end. Those who struggled or protested were overpowered and forced to submit. The screams and wails and chants came from the victims to be sacrificed and from the special friends and relatives of Mosheshwe who had come to stand and sit around the walls.

As Mbala turned and moved toward the doorway to exit, he stopped as he observed the frail elderly woman attendant that he knew had lovingly cared for Mosheshwe enter the room. She was dressed in a long black robe and her face was filled with grief. She went to a pitcher and poured herself a large cup of rum and drank it down. She then went to Mosheshwe and placing a piece of gold in his hand she too kneeled beside him and wrapped a silk cloth

once around her neck. A warrior stepped up and quickly tightening the cloth, he strangled her and laid her body at the top of the steps that led to the platform upon which Mosheshwe lay.

Mbala departed the room to find Basil gasping for air against the hallway wall, weakened, with an ashen face. Mbala stood there in the coolness of the hall that opposed the heat and smoke that came from the burning torches that were in the death room. He took several deep breaths, realizing that he had barely breathed for much of the time he had observed the killings. He was suddenly ashamed of himself, for he had not honored Mosheshwe. He had not approached this kindly man who had helped raise him. He had not bid him a respectful, proper farewell.

Just as quickly, he became upset. Why? He did not really know. But the emotional upheaval he had just gone through settled into pointed anger. From apprehension to fear, to shock and horror, he passed his momentary pain and became angry, and then enraged. He looked at Basil, pressed in fear against the wall and contempt welled up against this cringing man. Glancing across the hall, he saw the other doorway and instantly, he knew. He grabbed the cowering John Basil by the arm and shoved him through this curtained doorway and stepped inside to confront his brother.

Mbata sat alone in this room. The windows were covered to omit the intrusion of daylight and all it might reveal. Gloom draped itself over his shoulders and hovered above his head. The room was long and narrow, as was the other one but it was empty of furnishings except for a large elevated golden throne centered and placed at the far end. There he sat, upon this bejeweled throne. Only a dark cloth covered his waist and his face and chest were adorned with bright colored markings. On the floor surrounding him were weapons of all types. Across his lap lay a bloody yet still gleaming sword that he easily caressed with his right hand and at his feet lay half a dozen severed, bleeding heads. Several torches high on the walls burned.

Mbala grabbed Basil who had once again tried to turn and leave. He pulled him forward, eventually coming to a point where they had to step over and around rifles, cannon balls, kegs of gunpowder and assorted knives, swords and spears of all shapes and sizes.

Basil appeared unwilling or unable to walk and when they stopped several feet from the composed sitting figure, he almost collapsed. Mbala glared up at Mbata who had been watching them with a curious intensity since they had brushed through the curtains.

His head lay back and his seemingly comfortable position contrasted greatly with the charged emotion that flashed from his eyes and fell upon the two. He was expressionless except for his eyes, and motionless except for the caressing movements and his left hand that opened and closed slowly. The muscles in his jaw were visible and moved slightly from the pressure of his clenching teeth. Veins could be seen in his legs, in his arms and at his temples.

They stood like this before this menacing figure, amid this death and instruments of death and sounds of dying. They stared at each other. Mbala

in agitated anger, Basil in numbing fear, and Mbata, calmly contemplating them both. Finally Mbala spoke, his voice raised and sharp.

“Why was I not told that Mosheshwe had died?” he said. “And where are Obiriba and Nimi?”

Mbata looked at him for a long moment and when he spoke his voice was low, and even, and devoid of all emotion, as if these questions were unimportant and he was disinterested in their having been posed.

“But Mosheshwe has not died,” he answered. “At least not in the sense as you believe.”

“What do you mean? Mbala yelled. “I just saw him, we just saw him. He is lying there in ...”

“I killed him,” Mbata interrupted, quietly.

A gasp escaped from Basil. Mbala was for a moment stunned and unable to speak. “Why?” he asked finally, obviously confused.

“I took his life because he asked me to,” replied Mbata softly. “He had grown weary of the pain and suffering and he wished to leave here. Because he was my friend, I granted him that wish.” This he said matter-of-factly. “And as for your wives,” he continued, “they await you in Calabar. You will be departing very soon. As I said you are all under my protection, or rather the protection of Mosheshwe, and no harm will befall you here. Not by me. Not now anyway.”

Mbala’s rage was subsiding and he was quickly becoming anxious. The sporadic sounds drifting from the other room seemed to reflect through the hall, into this room and into his head. But what the anger had allowed him to dismiss was now showing itself clearly to him. As he looked at Mbata he realized there was something very different about him, something that was separate from his attire and the display that surrounded him. He had, over the past few days, always appeared quiet and subdued, as he appeared now. But there was a current of emotion that filled this room and that lay there coiled, seeking expression. It was under the sadness of death and beneath the pain of loss. It was deeper than anger.

Mbata lifted his head slowly from his throne and leaned forward slightly. “It is only Mosheshwe Ekomfo that keeps you and your friend alive, my brother. It became my intention to destroy you both and to chop you into pieces to be scattered in all directions. So, even in death he protects your life.” Mbata smiled thinly, a sinister smile that paralyzed Basil and burned into Mbala.

“What do you mean?” Mbala asked, hesitantly.

“After your arrival, after the conversation you had with him he made me promise that I would not harm either of you. As I choked the life from him I was forced to also promise that the Mbobo people would be allowed to choose their own path, their own destiny. And against my better judgment I must honor those sacred vows.”

“But why would you want to harm me? I am your brother. You sent for me. I came in peace.”

“Mosheshwe never knew,” Mbata continued, ignoring the feeble protests.

"It would have increased his pain. Even torn him apart to know that you came into his home, my home, with treachery in your heart and lies on your tongue." He said this as if he admonished a child.

"I have not ..." Mbata began.

"Enough!" Mbata yelled, pitching forward in his seat. The emotion and intensity of his raspy voice bounced off the walls, reverberating in waves throughout the room, into the bodies of the two standing men and finally faded into the air that was now growing hot and thick. "Enough," he repeated. Softly. Simply. He settled back into his seat. "You had your opportunity to speak, to ... repent."

His right hand began to rise. "You!" he said dryly, pointing at Basil.

And Basil saw this finger aimed directly at him and seemingly moving toward him and hovering so close that he found himself shrinking back.

"I have information for you." And lowering his hand he began to again stroke the sword that lay in his lap. "I regret I must reject your kind offer of peaceful treaties and also refuse your profitable contracts," he began easily. "King Pep and King Ja signed papers with you foreigners and joined you in peaceful trade. You very soon after, dictated prices and rates and levels of credit to them. When they opposed you, your Consul Generals arbitrated more rules and laws and then supported these changes with force. As is necessary. Force must stand behind all laws. You brought to them what you call, a right to govern, and now Ja, a great king is dead by foreign hands, and the powerful King Pep has been exiled into ignominy and isolation. A British flag now flies at Lokoa.

"The French, protects, the trading city of Porta Nova by conquering it. The Dutch placed duties on the fish that are caught at Kormata. Now you British have moved over the waters two hundred miles into the interior to spread your trusteeship and ideas of civilization by attacking Elmana and the Emo people. This is what your papers mean to me." His voice remained calm, his position unchanged but harsh bitterness seeped into his words. "Really," he continued, "these are such childish games that you play, but dangerous."

Basil cleared his throat to speak but Mbata held his hand to silence him. "I do not choose to hear what you have to say. This is not a discussion. I am giving you my decisions, and they are final. You see, you take me lightly, both of you. You think I have no knowledge of you, and your deceptions? The world knows. I know!

"And so I will continue to sell and trade slaves. My power stretches north across the great desert and east to the sea. Across that sea they demand slaves. The Arabs and the Germans will do business with me. That," and he pointed to a rifle, "is a German gun. Beautiful is it not?" And he paused to admire it. He continued. "Whether we sign or not sign, trade or not trade, your intentions are the same. To conquer, dominate and enslave, at some time or another, in some way or another. My desire is to conquer ... you, dominate ... you, enslave ... you.

"Perhaps you mean well John Basil, but your type of lies damage the most

because you lie more to yourself than to me. You deceive others easily. They believe you because you believe yourself. You can not correctly do these things you propose. It is impossible for your nature.

“So we will bring this battle into the light. For an enemy must first be seen to exist, and exist in order to be slain. I choose not to battle you over interpretations of words and fragile meaningless pieces of paper. Our fight will not be over currency and goods, these transitory material things. Let our battle be of a noble nature. Let us come together in mortal combat over a worthy cause. Let our war revolve around life and death. The life and death of slavery, self-determination and the existence of the Mbobo people.” He smiled now, his face taut and unyielding. The smile, unnatural. “You are my enemy and I am yours and upon your return you will discover that you are even now at war.”

“We do not want your war!” Mbala spoke now. “We want peace!”

“What do you mean?” Basil said, alarmed, in English.

“And so you shall have your chance at peace, my brother. The Mbobo people will be given a choice. Those who wish to follow your path will join you, or simply stay at Domey. Those who follow me will choose Calabar. I will no longer interfere in your affairs.”

“Why do you speak of war?” Basil asked, now in Mbobo words.

Mbata ignored his question but fixed his gaze upon him. “John Basil what do you think of our savage primitive ways here at Calabar?” And he lightly kicked a head towards them. It rolled over and over, traces of blood leaving its dark redness in broken lines along a spotted trail, staring eyes coming into view and then out again. It came to rest near their feet, face up. Basil stepped back in disgust. “Do you recognize him my brother?”

Mbala looked down and sought to recall where he had seen this face that now held a rigid expression of blank terror. Looking at the other heads it came to him that several of them belonged to the slaves he had given to Mbata upon their arrival. And this one at his feet he suddenly realized once belonged to the man who had been providing him information. Forbidden, secret information.

“You did not have to ask him about our weapons and the amounts of powder we possess or the design of my palace. If you had wanted to know those things I would have told you myself. Passing notes back and forth, another childish game.”

Mbala’s face grew warm and Basil grew perplexed and more suspicious by this talk of things of which he did not know.

Mbata turned his attention back to Basil. “I know you whites have outlawed these sacrificial displays,” he said matter-of-factly. “But Mosheshwe was old and maintained old ways, so we provide him with hallowed rituals from our past. Personally, I believe it still to be honorable and desirable when one kills a powerful, respected enemy to devour all of the desired parts of that one. Consume and savor that venerated, courageous heart. More properly, we should be required to eat also, of those we truly love. What do you think of that John Basil? You, of course would not be eaten. You are

neither courageous nor loved. You would just be ... dead. Today we send along with Mosheshwe respectful companionship and subservient adulation. For those who loved him it is an honor for them to follow him into the other life. For these meaningless strangers," indicating the heads, "they are gone because they are disposable."

Mbata shifted in his seat now. He became animated, almost excited. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "We will throw away your treaties and contracts and still we will be partners. Joined as partners, all of us, in war and trade. You and I will war," and he pointed his sword at Basil, "and you and I will trade."

"We will not trade with you!" Basil said, his voice rising. He was confused and irritated at this performance and tired from standing, and it had become uncomfortably warm. He repeated. "We will never trade with you."

Mbata again ignored him. Now he pointed his sword at Mbala. His eyes flashed and his voice rose. "And you and I will trade. And if you ever discover the courage necessary to wield those weapons that General Livingstone has been supplying you with, perhaps you will rise against me. Then you and I, will war!"

Sweat appeared on the forehead of Mbala. Moisture dripped from the small patch of pure-white hair at his right temple. Basil was staring at Mbala, his eyes wide and his mouth again falling open. His mouth moved as if to speak but no words came. He knew General Beecroft Livingstone was a hated enemy of the Mbobo people. He looked back and forth at these two men. The ferocity on Mbata's face forced him to turn. He wanted to flee but he could not move. He turned back. He forgot himself. He spoke in English. "King Mbata I knew nothing of this. I swear. I swear to God I ..."

Mbata smiled. And for the first time, he spoke in English. "Do not speak of your God here," he said quietly, settling back again into his seat. "Here, your God does not exist. Here, I am your God."

Mbala swallowed hard and swallowed again. His mouth was dry and he felt his heart pounding. His expression was one of puzzled wonder. This was definitely not supposed to be known.

Mbata spoke. Mbobo words came again. "Your face betrays you my brother. And I can smell your fear. I have been aware of this truth for months. It is for me to know this thing and in your duplicity, it is for you to conceal it. In this, you failed. Your use of spies and your devious attempts at deception can only mean you plan to use these hidden weapons against me." All was quiet now. Even the sounds of death and mourning that had punctuated this scene, ceased.

"I ... I need them for protection," stammered Mbala.

"Those I send you are not enough?" Mbata asked.

"I do not know your plans," returned Mbala. "We at Domey want to stand on our own."

"I know that you want to stand on your own. I know also that your increased desire to come here during these past months was due to a secret agreement you have with that general. You were to observe our protective measures, buy information, and estimate for him the extent of my military

strength. Is that not also true?"

Hatred passed between these brothers. This hatred, strong and obvious hung in front of them and enveloped them. It could not be minimized or disguised in any way, any longer. It could be touched, held, even cut with the sword that was now poised at the throat of Mbala.

Mbata had risen, descended from his throne and in several quick strides he had moved close enough to extend his right arm fully. The point of the gleaming bloody sword touched his brother's chest and then his throat. Then it was beneath his chin and slowly it lifted his head. "I am disappointed in you, King Mbala a Ewuare," he said in a low measured tone with a strange emphasis on the name. "But only a little. After all, my brother, you are only human." And he held Mbala like that for a long, tense moment. Finally, lowering the sword, he laughed. It was a sharp, hard laugh that rang hollow and false through the room. His eyes bore into, deep into Mbala. "I say again, Mosheshwe protects you, otherwise you would have by now been dead. You may return with your knowledge, both of you. It matters not, to me. You only know what I allow you to know. We are prepared for what comes."

"I would like to leave now," Mbala said firmly.

"Of course you may leave," Mbata replied. "All is awaiting you in Calabar. Soon you will be home. Rest assured, we will bury Mosheshwe properly. It will be a great and splendid rite of passage. I regret you will not be able to attend."

Mbata called out a name and four guards appeared. As Mbala and Basil proceeded to walk away, Mbata's voice stopped them. "Last things for you to know. Recently I received information that my warriors have successfully attacked the forts at Butra, Shama, and Aboma. They also control the Oil Rivers at this very moment. All palm oil from there, all boats, in fact everyone and everything that departs from or enters there, comes and goes through us. Or, shall I say, comes and goes through ... me. So, we are indeed partners after all."

"We will not stand for that!" Basil sputtered indignantly. "This is an outrage, and a grave mistake." Mbala pulled at his arm. Mbata dismissed them with two soft words. "Go now." And they were escorted out. Mbala did not look back or he would have seen Mbata return to his throne, settle into his seat, lay his head back and close his eyes. Slowly. Peacefully.

V

NIMI AWOKE IN PAIN. THIS PAIN HAD OBLITERATED EACH of the last shimmering lines of her smoky dream and she was left with piercing pieces and oblique images that she sought to retrieve in those final preconscious moments before she was completely awake and fully returned to the pulsating pain of her life.

She had rolled onto her left side in her fitful sleep as she had rolled over in the wet cooling stream that ran past the palace of Calabar. The soothing stream and the palace was all that remained of her dream.

Obiriba was placing a dampened cloth on her forehead, across her slightly swollen left eye, and gently against her puffed lips. She tried to move Nimi onto her back, upset that she had awakened her with these efforts to ease her discomfort.

Mbala, in a drunken rage, had beaten Nimi again as he had done several times in the past six months. She looked at Obiriba now and saw the concern on her face. She smiled a thin crooked smile and patted Obiriba's hand. "What news do you have?" she asked.

"There comes nothing yet new," Obiriba nearly whispered. "The largest battle continues at the Oil Rivers but they say he must soon retreat, that they can not hold out much longer."

Nimi turned now onto her right side to face the wall. "Please, leave me," she said. "I shall be better soon."

"Try to eat. You must eat something," Obiriba insisted.

"I will," Nimi replied. "Let me try to sleep again."

Obiriba left her alone with her thoughts, alone with her pain. Her life had been altered forever by the trip to Calabar. Never would she be the same.

Never could she return in all manner, in all ways to the person she was before that fateful journey. She would only move forward and away and yet she would not, in this progress, be able to relinquish the memories, the emotions, the love that bound her to Mbata, and thus to Calabar. And so, she was spread between here and there, Her heart being pulled by a taut rope. First from there, and now from the battle that raged at the Oil Rivers.

She reflected on that final day now. She summoned up the vision that strengthened her, empowered her, and allowed her to resist and withstand the isolation and brutality that had entered her life. A prisoner in this room she may be. Free in her mind she would remain. Into her mind she now floated, to languish and seek solace.

And there again she stood at the stables of Calabar. She was anxious and frightened. She and Obiriba had been removed forcibly from their rooms, hardly being allowed to quickly gather their possessions. They were taken to this area just past the center of Calabar. They were instructed to pack their hastily gathered things and these were soon loaded onto horses that were to join other horses and men who were obviously preparing themselves to leave. They were informed Mbala would be there soon and told to remain close to this point of departure.

She and Obiriba had talked of the strange appearance of the city and the disturbing sights and sounds. They found themselves huddled together, whispering. Eventually they learned of the death of Mosheshwe and gained some understanding from this news that explained the grief that hung over the city and the solemn preparations they now knew were to be part of the forthcoming ceremonies. Nimi was aware of Mbata's close relationship to Mosheshwe and his death added a deep sadness to her own jumbled feelings.

As the disordered time slowly passed, Nimi found herself growing more frustrated, more agitated. Finally, becoming extremely upset. This was not the way she had envisioned herself leaving. And although Mbata had warned her they might not see one another again, she could not, would not accept that now.

Explaining she had pressing matters of importance to attend to at the palace, she had asked to be taken back. This request was respectfully refused. She again asked, another. She cajoled. She began to plead. Obiriba, becoming puzzled and alarmed had tried to calm this growing disruption. She had never seen the normally reserved Nimi in such a state.

Ultimately Nimi had demanded, as a queen to be taken immediately to the palace and when she was rebuffed, she had attempted to seize a horse. She struggled against the guard, against the Mantuto who had come to oversee an orderly departure. She ignored Obiriba's frightened entreatments.

And this is the scene that appeared to Mbala as he and Basil, accompanied by half a dozen warriors rounded the corner. Nimi, tears streaming down her cheeks, disheveled and dirty from falling in the street, fought determinately for possession of a horse that, terrified by the commotion, was attempting to free itself, kicking dangerously, snorting, and rearing up on its hind legs.

She broke now, releasing the horse and began to run in the direction of

the palace only to be quickly caught and dragged, fighting and screaming, to be restrained before Mbala who had dismounted and moved toward her. "Nimi!" he had shouted, confused and angered at this display. "What is wrong with you? Stop this!"

Seeing him, she shook loose and reaching him she began to explain. She said she must return to the palace. She had left something important. She had something to give King Mbata. She had words for Mosheshwe. And as she rambled wildly, nearly incoherent now, Mbala's eyes had narrowed and a faint gleam of recognition sparked. "No! You can not go back!" He had said. "No!" he had repeated several times, his voice rising.

A growing amount of people had grouped in the street now to observe this spectacle. Embarrassment and anger shot through Mbala. He struck her now in fury and she was knocked to the ground, murmurs rising from the assembling crowd.

The blow had shocked Nimi, calmed her and she rose from her knees to stand before Mbala, collected, cold and defiant. "I do not want to go with you," she had said evenly. "I want to remain here."

He understood now, and all the many conflicting emotions he had held back and struggled with these past few days came together, charged by this disrespect and fueled by this evident betrayal, his hatred was fired into expression through the blow that struck her down in the dusty street, rendering her unconscious.

When she came to, they were prepared to leave. She was placed on her horse, her hands tied before her and in this manner she departed the city. As they entered the final path leading out to the rolling plains, the procession paused momentarily and she turned. There in the distance, on a far hill was Mbata. Alone on his great black horse, he sat as a statue. As the group moved forward she watched him until they rounded the last bend and he disappeared from her sight. That was the last she saw of him.

It was this vision she held on to tightly now, he astride his horse on this verdant hill in the brilliant vanishing sun. And as she drifted into a troubled doze she added to this memory. She imagined his subdued smile, and a wave of his hand that motioned her to him. And she smiled and rode towards him and with her hands now unfettered, she waved back.

When she awoke in a few hours, returning to reality, it was late afternoon. She lay there thinking. Her mind was clear for the first time in days, her resolve focusing and her firmness of purpose steady. Her pain had eased some and she stood, opened her dress and looked at and examined the discoloration in her bruised side. It too was healing.

She experienced a sudden surge of hope and strength. She knew this was partly due to her knowing that Mbala had left Domey and would probably not return for several weeks. She quickly ate the bread, meats, and fruit that Obiriba had brought to her. She was taken to bathe and with a fresh change of clothing she felt better than she had in many days.

On her return she paused to look around at the elaborate curtained walls

that belied the sparseness of her small windowless room. It contained few furnishing but she had all she really required. She had been brought here five months ago when Mbala had discovered she made plans to leave him and somehow return to Calabar, perhaps with the many who were on their way there. She suspected that Obiriba had revealed this but she could hold no animosity toward her. She meant no harm. She was someone who just could not keep words and information to herself. And Nimi also knew now that Obiriba would always be loyal to Mbala. She believed also that Mbala had been told exaggerated stories of her activities at the palace because soon after their arrival at Domey, he had turned totally and violently against her after seemingly forgiving her for the incident in the street.

Now she had little unsupervised movement. There was a certain degree of independence when Mbala was present but when he was away she was restricted and a guard watched her constantly. She found herself spending more and more time alone in her room and she now preferred these moments of peaceful solitude.

Moving to her knees, she reached far beneath her bed and pulled out a tightly wrapped cloth. She undid the large knot and laying the cloth on her bed she spread it open carefully. Picking past smaller pieces of jewelry she came to the necklace Mbata had given her. She looked at it and touched it, lightly, gently, with her fingers. She caressed it and bringing it to her lips, then close to her heart, she fought against the tears that began to come to her eyes. It was in these solitary moments, alone with this necklace in her hands or around her throat that she believed she could withstand anything, or anyone.

She was cautious when she wore it lest Mbala hear of it, see it, surmise its true source and take it from her. She was thankful no one, not even Obiriba knew that she did not really purchase it in Calabar. This was all she had of meaningful substance, her private memories and this beautiful gift.

Pushing the cloth to the side she lay down and placed the necklace upon her stomach and with her fingers tracing the intricate patterns of the smooth, soft gold, she thought of her love. Mbata.

That she loved him had been confirmed within her these past months. It sustained her, this love. Nourished her and she fed from it constantly, as if continuously suffering from hunger and thirst. She would think of him. The ability of his dark eyes to express nothing one moment and then in the next instant turn on her, overflowing with pain and passionate sincerity. She could recall the fierceness his countenance could display and yet believed his volatile anger and savage, firm hatred could be channeled to protect her and shield her from life's persistent harms.

Her love for him soothed her and hastened the process of healing that was necessary after the brutal beatings Mbala administered. And it helped her in the terrible interminable time that encompassed the humiliating assaults that would follow her beatings. Then, the duration seemed endless when Mbala would rip her clothes from her clutching hands, away from her struggling form and fling her body down upon the bed, upon the floor, and

wrench her tightly clenched legs apart and enter her unyielding body painfully, violently, his breath reeking of alcohol and him grunting, his full weight pressing on her, speaking of a man-child, warriors, and Mbobo Kings.

He ignored his other wives and the concubines. Directing his attention wholly unto her. She bore the brunt of his hatred of Mbata. It was as if he punished his brother through her, fought him through her and exacted some extreme displaced revenge upon him through her person. He sought to abuse her mind and destroy her soul and this she resisted with all her tenacious heart.

She drew Mbata to her, looking deeply into those eyes, losing herself. She allowed him to burn away Mbala's footprints etched in the hallway toward her doorway. With those ubiquitous molten eyes he would melt away all traces of Mbala's fingerprints from her thoughts and each devastating instance of the attacks would become puddles of steam and evaporate quickly from her life. The memory of Mbata steeled her against this horrible onslaught, righted her rebellious direction and kept her strong and straight. As long as he lived, she lived.

That something had passed between them in Calabar, Mbala knew. But he could never fathom the scope of their emotional bond. And so she learned to tolerate these indignities quietly but never passively. She would fight him not only with her body but also with her silence and emotional indifference. This insolent detachment infuriated Mbala and drove him into a frenzied rage designed to elicit some feeling, some response. None came, and this he could not accept, this he detested more than anything else.

Her own growing hatred was smoldering and threatening to erupt fully, but was being held in check and overruled by her tremendous love. He would come for her. She believed this. Somehow he would appear and relieve her of this unjust suffering. And so she would seek information of him, the battles, and his progress. Waiting for the instance he would bring his feverish power up and slay his enemies and come ... save her.

Once again she brought the necklace to her lips. She closed her eyes. Saw him. Felt him. And whispering into the night's inevitable darkness, she called him. "Mbata my love, come for me," she implored softly. "I await you. Please come for me," she beseeched. "Come here to me, for I am forever yours."

Mbata lay on the edge of the sultry swamp surrounded by not only his warriors but by damp progressing mist. This foggy mist that would sneak secretively around them and conceal their warm presence was chilling in its mysterious ability to slowly cover and yet reveal reluctantly, stealthy skulking movement or a poised inimical entity.

And yet this shrouded moist veil brought some comfort to him. He welcomed this natural camouflage. It disguised his softening eyes by merging with the slow passing clouds and starless nights such as this one to mask his altering emotions.

Nights such as this, sullen, dark and ominous were quite common at this

junction of the Oil Rivers. The cries of the swamp animals and the absence of light brought harsh reality to their impending mission and all that encompassed them externally, added to, and heightened their internal mood.

They were situated in this humid swamp area to ambush and kill, battle, and perhaps to die, soaked in a blood-red ooze and to breathe with their final breath an acrid gunpowder stench. To be so far removed from home brought a momentary sadness to Mbata.

To picture the Oil Rivers is to visualize an extended hand. The fingers running east and west with their tips directed towards the great ocean and the hand's thumb pointing northwest. Spread open, the other four fingers, representing the four most important rivers, were less than thirty miles apart from each other. The thumb is the Bano River and the main four are called, from the first finger to the little finger, Lamo, Mano, Aro, and Opo. Each, running like veins, converges and finally come together at the wrist. The adjoining arm, the river Nigo, runs hundreds of miles east and turns north to penetrate deep into the interior.

He and his warriors were dug in and very well fortified at the lower palm of this imaginary appendage, determined to impede or regulate for as long as possible all traffic through this area. The attacks at the coastal forts of Butra, Shama and Aboma were diversionary tactics. They were designed to remove as many enemies as possible, capture powder, guns and ammunition and most importantly draw British and French forces, aligned with the Fon and Shantulu, into that region one hundred and fifty miles above Domey.

While the enemies moved there to protect their interests and defend these positions, a little over one hundred miles below Domey, Mbobo warriors had advanced into the Oil Rivers, inflicting heavy losses on the foreigners, eventually destroying their small forces and seizing control of the five rivers.

Along the arm of the larger Nigo River, various tribes lived and used this river to travel and to receive and transport goods including the now precious palm oil the foreigners desired. The Nigo was the river the British had traversed to attack and conquer Elmana, a large and expanding city that lay three hundred and fifty miles southwest of Calabar. Each military thrust took the foreigners deeper into the interior and dangerously closer to Calabar.

Just a few years before the occupation of Elmana the whites were not a direct threat to the far away interior countryside. They dared not venture over the Nigo past the swamps through the forest and across the plains in order to reach a target that distant. For the intrusive foreigners, the unnatural oppressive heat, the deadly mosquitoes, and the yellow death had stood as imposing barriers to their designs for enrichment and power. But now, new medicine and an all-consuming desire for expansion and domination had pushed and shoved and drawn the whites deeper and deeper into land where they were at one time reluctant or forbidden to go.

Mbata fought. He had quickly pulled his attacking forces from the coastal battles at the forts and brought them initially here to the Oil Rivers and then had slowly begun moving small groups covertly along the fringes of the Nigo to gather one hundred miles in seclusion from Elmana.

He planned to attack that city. Able to use the firepower of many large cannons he could eliminate the foreigners and bring the Emos to the side of the Mbobbo people. Here in the swamp, heavy cannons could not be transported and utilized. At Elmana he could unleash his full capabilities. To acquire strong allies he felt was crucial to his ultimate plan. The Emos had resisted the whites virulently and had never completely submitted to their foreign presence. He believed they would not only welcome his intervention but also align themselves with him in his struggle for ... existence.

Existence? What existence? Whose existence? He had begun to wrestle with these persistent questions more and more these past months, soon after he had moved to join the battles at the rivers.

There had been once again, at first, soft, vague doubts as to the choices, the very truths of his directions. He had released these thoughts quickly when they had first attempted to impinge upon his mind but when they had occurred repeatedly, he had allowed them to express themselves so that he could open them up and look at them clearly. Closely. He had eventually reaffirmed his beliefs but it had taken a distracting mental effort that had made him uneasy.

Something was chipping away at the foundation of his essence. He was momentarily shaken by these doubts. He knew that doubt would create hesitancy and to pause, exposed one's self, making one vulnerable to anyone who was driven by a sureness of their own ideals. Whether the tenets of the ideology were true or untrue did not matter. There was strength and power in the construction of an unwavering belief.

His warriors believed in their purpose and destiny. And they believed in him. They believed that when it was necessary and the time and place was right, perhaps at Elmana, he would unleash his power and the fever could once again surge and they would live, or die knowing their people were to be completely victorious.

Mbata knew they awaited this moment. And as he lay here in the muggy heated darkness of this night, he himself searched for a familiar feeling, a recognizable indication that his, gift, still existed. He found diminished properties in the fiery knot that had seemingly always existed in his chest, around his heart. Through some subtle means it had become dull, somehow muted and rounded on its once penetrating, sharp edges. He pondered with concern these delicate alterations.

It had now been several years since the last expression of his power had manifested itself and then a degree of peace had settle into his life and there had been no impetus that summoned up this thing inside of him. It had always taken extreme degrees of emotions to bring the fever out. Anger and fear would grow to rage and terror. And if his unleashed passion could course uncontrolled, his temperature would rise and heat would explode inside his body and singe the air and burn those around him as he walked the scorched earth. Then he himself would be ill and weakened for days. Each surge of the fever tore at his insides and brought to his head an excruciating debilitating pain.

He shuddered now, imperceptibly, and reluctantly admitted to himself that part of what seemed to hold him back was a distant apprehension and an indefinite uneasiness that one more subsequent rise of this internal heat could possibly take his life. But his warriors did not know, his enemies did not know and did not care that he was ... changing.

There had been, he suspected, some drastic alteration in his personality and he became aware of this possibility as he had sat on that hill at Calabar and had seen Nimi depart. At one time he could have latched onto a bitterness that had coalesced stagnantly within him. He would have inveighed silently against his circumstances. He would have turned inwardly and used the structures of his life to sustain the honed edge he knew was required to rule with authority and detachment.

But he had not been, could not be, at that precise moment impartial. He had experienced an overwhelming sense of loneliness and felt a tremendous loss. His love for her had dominated that moment. And later, when he had learned of the actions of Nimi and Mbala in the streets of Calabar, he had not become enraged. He had been fragmented and his emotions lacerated into tiny indiscernible pieces.

His concern for Nimi had dissolved the anger that had attempted to rise for his brother. His desire for her had blocked all else and he had been left numb where ordinarily his hostility and animosity would have lived. Perhaps, he had reasoned, love diffused his violent nature and if that was true, he had, to the detriment of his warriors and his people been damaged and in that sense rendered ineffective.

He had also told himself that had he seen Mbala strike Nimi he surely would have reacted differently. But later, sitting alone in his garden, he had envisioned vividly the scene as it had been reiterated to him and still she had dominated. And Mbala had been reduced to some indistinct, hazy image.

But what did it really matter? He brooded. The power and destructive capabilities of the newer weapons mitigated greatly his strange ability anyway. Fifteen years ago, at Brass River, he was fighting enemies who carried spears and swords and used the muzzle loading rifles, the gas pipes, which lacked accuracy and distance. He could move closely among them, touch them, and infect them. For over a dozen years he enjoyed the personal proximity of his many battles. Now, death was accomplished from greater distances with greater precision. One could kill his enemies without ever seeing the adversaries, without looking into their eyes, without knowing of them.

And so, in this oppressive swamp he anticipated the next advance of the British, the French, the Dutch, the Fon, the Shantulu and the Domey warriors that Mbala had sent to assist in these battles. At this very moment they all marched towards him, sailed towards him and, for the first time in their history, Mbobos were at war with each other.

He would meet them on the water and in the swamp and as the haze drifted away and as the sun rose high and bright he would allow his arrogant enemies to back them up. He would move his men away from the center of the joining rivers, from the bottom of the palm of the hand, back toward the

wrist. Along the arm they would fight and at the arm's elbow, at the city of Elmana, he would amass his courageous warriors. There they would be supplied with weapons and ammunition from Calabar and from the Germans they would receive the modern breech loading rifles and the powder that was at the very moment being brought from the east. He would fortify his growing forces and they would crush their opposition in an ultimate decisive battle. Calabar would remain untouched and the Mboobo people would be reunited and left alone and peace would return to their lands.

Mbata turned his attention to his surroundings. The shrill sounds of the swamp. Speaking. Answering. Warning. The extent of the darkness of this fireless night was as he had forgotten darkness could express itself. The dense haze brought a floating movement to the air. And beyond the moist heat hovered a moon and stars that were invisible to him in this overcast sky. And all that was above was opaque and thick and the reflections of the stars filtered but were unable to exist for these moments and in this darkness it was as if he did not exist. He was removed from this place and as he became drowsy and a light sleep began to descend upon him, he was abruptly suspended above all that lay below.

As he looked down he saw not some thin apparition but the clear and beautiful eyes of Nimi. He reached for her, for the ring that hung from his neck and as he drifted off, into a doze, he heard her voice in his ear, calling him, to her, softly, seductively, insistently.

Then screaming his name!

Mbala paced the floor of his room. He was disturbed and becoming increasingly apprehensive. It was early evening and he had just concluded his twice daily meeting with the foreigners and the Fon and Shantulu military representatives. These two weeks at the British compound he knew, had obviously begun to weigh heavily on his emotions and nerves.

He took a large drink of gin to quell the mounting anxiety that always seemed to come at this time every evening. He set the cup down and then stood in the center of the room and stared at his hands that he held out before him, straight, waiting for their slight shaking to subside. And as the alcohol began to slowly take effect he resumed his pacing.

The past six months had drastically impacted his life. It was as if all routines had been altered. He was unaccustomed to this pressured chaos. Since his return from Calabar there had been from one day to the next, critical decisions that brought actions of far reaching implications.

There had first been movement of thousands of people. Within a month of his arrival back at Domey, Mbobos from Calabar had begun arriving in the city and nearby coastal areas. Adding to this confusion was the exodus of thousands from his city.

There had been clear lines drawn by those who not only decided to stay, but most revealing, by those who chose to leave their respective homes and make the long and arduous trek west to Domey, or east to Calabar.

In the past he had been able to delegate responsibility to his ministers and

advisors concerning most of the city business. But these were crucial, unprecedented circumstances and the significance and magnitude of the events that were unfolding was apparent to all. These matters demanded a king's presence. It was of paramount importance that Mbala show that he was actively involved and in command of the situation. And so, he had been forced to visibly oversee this vast movement and to not only develop new measures of protection for his city but also to direct his security forces to quell continuously the short, but virulent outbursts that accompanied the divisiveness that was tearing the Mbobo people apart.

The peace Domey had known for years had been utterly and irrevocably shattered. But unlike many years ago, the hostility that flared up now was fractiously internal, sporadic, and unusually intense. It represented in most instances unclear ideas and purely emotional reasoning. The enemy was no longer clearly obvious and the necessary historical motivating issues such as expansion, retaliation or self-preservation normally charged by a sense of an inevitable justified purpose or by outrage or fear, did not exist. There had sprung forth numerous factions without clearly defined lines. For them the problems were vague and obscure.

Old and young alike, men and women, divided family members were separated and expressed vehemently their desires as to what they believed to be the proper direction of the Mbobo people and excoriated all opposing views. Each knew that the decisions made now would fall, not only upon the backs of their children but also, all those who descended from them. Would the Mbobo empire, by bending in conciliation to the foreigners, and capitulating now to their long hated enemies bring continued peace to their shoulders or, by remaining resolute and erect would they expose themselves, their future, and the lives of their children openly to sustained violence and exacerbating strife?

So the dissenting movements, the energy of these movements, and the source of the beliefs that supported the people and decided their choices ultimately formed around the two kings. One chose their own direction by choosing a king, and a city.

All this pressed in on Mbala. But the ceaseless, unrelenting pressure came from General Beecroft Livingstone and the other foreigners who had united with old and despised adversaries of the Mbobos to wage war against Mbata. They were themselves opponents who had attempted to lay their differences aside temporarily to fight this common foe.

For the whites, the attacks on the forts were affronts that could not go unpunished. And there was much embarrassment and pointing of fingers when it was discovered that the true objective had been the Oil Rivers. It was these groups, led by the general that had finally forced Mbala, over a month ago, to supply more than token assistance to the war. They wanted Mbobos to join the battles and although Mbala resisted this, he eventually had to make that commitment.

Now each time he would take the dreaded three-day journey to the British headquarters, he was being coerced to become immersed deeper and deeper

into the conflict. He saw no relief, no hope. He was certain Mbata would never give up or deviate from his course.

Now, on this latest trip they had begun to make plans to attack Calabar despite his information, his belief, and his expression of this belief, that Calabar was quite possibly invincible. And even if the fortifications proved to be penetrable, it would be an accomplishment that would cost countless lives and bring an immense degree of pain and suffering to both sides.

Calabar could not be attacked without the largest of cannons and to move them to within range meant transporting them on the river Nigo, now held by Mbata, or to attempt to move them across land. And once within a hundred miles of Calabar from either land or river they would have to fight every step of the way.

Mbala thought of these foreign people he found himself aligned with now, each distrustful of the other and so very naïve. Many of his suggestions and recommendations were ignored or rejected because of this strong distrust that existed among this unlikely coalition.

Their own simple inferences blinded them. They could never understand that the core of the strength that resided within the true Mbobo warrior, those who fought for and alongside Mbata was in the fact that they were willing, without hesitation, to die. Those Mbobos who he sent against Mbata were softened by their coastal existence, weakened in their fighting intensity and wavered in their loyalty. Many opposed this civil war.

Mbata had always maintained a large standing force of men and women warriors. They had continuously, over the years, engaged in minor skirmishes with other tribes and even on occasions with foreigners who had moved against Mbobo allies. Mbala knew that it had always been this violence that emanated from Calabar that had brought a measure of peace to Domey. The threat of war and the reality of these numerous aggressive incidents had for years helped the whites to turn their eyes and ignore the illegal transactions of Domey. Now they were allowing this ability to deny, to also spread and assist in their desire to disregard certain other facts.

Many of these people who fought against Mbata were separated by the quiet of relative peace and lulled by the passage of time. They had misplaced, forgotten the memories of long ago as one is inclined to do with those matters that are unpleasant. And so the violent ferocity and savagery they found themselves up against now, they considered that to be some aberration of intent and ability. They did not, could not know of the unlimited solidarity that Mbata and his followers possessed. Both the Fon and the Shantulu remembered, and this was why they had been so reluctant to join the whites. They only did so out of necessity. They needed the promised weapons and the blockade of the Oil Rivers also affected them adversely.

In addition, all those who knew, and believed in the reality of Mbata's strange power waited, in dread, that it would rise after these years and reveal itself once again.

There was a tight, connected history within this tribal hostility. Animosity had always persisted against the Mbobos, especially against Mbata. He had

personally killed hundreds at Brass River. The brief change had been the few short years of minor conflicts that created a semblance of peace. This war was in fact, consistent with Mbobo history, only it had exploded on a grand scale and Mbala knew it could very conceivably continue for many years.

There was however one point on which he was in total agreement with the whites. If they could somehow quickly kill Mbata, he also believed that the war would lose its driving force and could perhaps be brought to an expeditious conclusion. They all felt that with the elimination of Mbata there could be an orderly transfer of power for the Mbobo people. With foreign support, both militarily and politically, Mbala could be quickly and firmly installed as the sole king. The Consul General and military generals at these meetings held faith that through the acceptance of King Mbala they could eventually unify the Mbobos and all the people could be directed along a path of benign peace and harmony.

And so, in these meetings they debated over tactics and future strategy. They were prepared, yet hesitant to alter their course of action. Up until now they had refrained from advancing on Calabar, not just due to the obstacles, including distance, that would impede their forces, they refrained because wherever Mbata was they felt it most imperative to direct their might in that, and only in that direction.

Mbala pondered these many complicated factors. He wanted more than anything to be the only Mbobo king, to rule unencumbered by his brother. He had thought often what it would be like to govern both Domey and Calabar, to command and control thousands and thousands and to possess a kingdom with unlimited wealth and that encompassed a vastness that stretched and extended itself hundreds and hundreds of miles. Not just east and west, but north and south also.

As he stood now, again sipping a drink, he looked out of his window and his gaze fell again upon a small trail that he had used several times. This winding path connected the main building of the British compound with the building where he stayed. He had noticed an indistinct familiarity on his very first visit as he had taken this path and slowly walked toward his meeting at the larger building but had been unable to grasp its significance. But now as he stood at his window he watched as the gradual dispersing darkness brought to life the first of the lamps in the main structure that sat at the end of this path. Again, he felt as if he was missing something, something important. He searched for some clear recognition of this nagging feeling.

Another lamp was lit and when the light came on he realized this view was in some vague way similar to the view he had seen at night once in Calabar as he had approached the winding path that connected the back edges of the city to the palace grounds.

In riding through the path, he had emerged to observe the many lamps bounce and seemingly twinkle as grounded, dulled stars. And now, as he stared in puzzlement, the flickering glow from another lamp appeared and it came to him in a sudden sharp flash. He understood instantly why he had

not remembered that path as they had come upon it when they approached the palace that very first time. When he was a boy, that entrance did not exist as it does now. It had been widened into a much larger opening. When he had hunted and played on the grassy slopes where the palace now stood, they had entered that clearing from a winding path that was much more narrow.

But there was another memory he recalled, vividly now. A similar path also existed in the mountains that rose in the distance behind the palace, a path of which only he knew. There was an entrance from the other side of those protecting, surrounding mountains.

This he realized.

VI

NIMI EASED CLOSER TO MBATA. HER BARE LEFT LEG WAS touching his warm side. She leaned above him as he lay on his back. The sharp point of the heated knife had dipped close to his body and then stopped its reluctant descent, remaining poised in her hand as the last of his voice faded away into the incipient pink, eastern sky.

The darkness, diminishing high above, still thick and near in the dense jungle, encircled their earth, and them both. Nimi, her eyes cast toward the beautiful approaching morning, allowed Mbata's voice to slip past her and then leave them in pressing silence, permitting herself to hear only the concluding exclamations of the nocturnal animals and the awakening birds first songs. She looked down at the large knife and she heard him distinctly now, speaking again and repeating the same words that part of her fended off and another part clearly understood and accepted.

"You must do this," Mbata said. His voice even, and strong and low. So low she bent her head next to his, to feel these words, to place her cheek against his cheek. Her own sweat falling on him joined the wetness of his face so that she patted a piece of her shredded dress upon his brow with her free hand. And still, she hesitated. "You must cut the lead from my body. Use the knife to cut until you reach it. Bring it out with the knife, use your fingers if you must, but do it. Do you understand?"

"Yes Mbata," Nimi answered, her voice quiet.

"Nimi," Mbata said sharply. "Once you start do not stop until you are done. Cut quickly. Do not be afraid. You can do this. It will be all right," he reassured her.

Mbata placed a wadded piece of cloth into his mouth and clutched with both hands a large branch that extended beneath his legs. Then he nodded.

Nimi shifted slightly, allowing the small fire to illuminate better the task that confronted her. She took a deep breath and began cutting into his body, deep into the front of his left shoulder. He lay there, his teeth clamped onto the cloth, tense, unmoving, with his eyes staring toward the disappearing stars. Expressionless.

In what seemed an eternity yet were only several long moments she had removed the intruding lead and quickly pressed a dampened cloth on the wound in an attempt to staunch the blood that had begun to flow freely.

Mbata had pulled the cloth from his mouth and turned his head away from her. He had then taken several deep breaths. "Yes. You did good," he murmured. Looking at her directly, displaying a brief smile, he nodded. He closed his eyes.

She pressed down hard. When the cloth was soaked she replaced it with another, and another. Soon the flow eased to a trickle and she quickly wrapped the shoulder tightly, using nearly all of her remaining bandages. As Mbata rested, she went to the edge of the secluded stream they had steered into, quickly washed the cloths and spread them on a nearby log to dry. Gathering a bunch of large leaves she moistened these and placed them under his head. She extinguished what remained of the fire and sat down beside him. Her heart was full and pained seeing Mbata like this. She stroked his face gently with a dampened cloth and carefully wiped his chest and legs. Exhausted, she finally lay down and curling up beside him, she fell into a short, troubled doze.

Mbata woke Nimi as the mid-morning began to break clear, across the mangroves and seep between the dense jungle foliage. "We must move, over there." And he indicated an area several yards from them, beneath a cluster of low hanging plants with large leaves.

They had dragged their canoe a distance away from the water and haphazardly covered it. They now took time to conceal it completely and with Nimi gathering their remaining supplies and bandages, and Mbata scattering the last traces of their fire, they crawled into the shaded protection to await the cooling night.

The effort left Mbata weakened and the open wound began to bleed again slightly. Nimi changed the dressing and bound it again. Mbata watched her intently as she worked, recognizing the concern drawn across her face. And as she finished she looked into his eyes and when she saw a slight smile, relief washed through her.

Mbata drew her into his arm and they lay back, hidden against the base of the large tree. "We are safe now," he said. And we are together again."

He dismissed all that stretched before them. He dismissed the pain that snaked through his body with every breath he took. As he looked down on this woman and touched her hair, touched her back, he tried to reject the doubt that gnawed at a faint belief that pricked at his mind. For an instant, with Nimi near him like this, he almost wanted to believe that perhaps all things could be made right.

He closed his eyes and sought to turn his thoughts from that phantasy. Feeling Nimi's face heavy against his chest and hearing her deep breathing, he himself attempted to sleep. But he found brief jumbled scenes from the past days and from the Domey palace spring to life before his half-closed eyes, and he felt again, in a rush, the many emotions that recently dominated his life. Then the memories came, swirling, cascading, bright and real between his pain. The memories came alive as he drifted in and out of sleep.

They had fought the advancing enemy at the Oil Rivers, inflicting damaging losses. Resisting. Yet all the while moving back, slowly. At a prearranged signal, they had suddenly moved all their forces over seventy miles further along the river and several miles inland where they entrenched themselves in an area of rocks and caves. There, they prepared to fight again.

This mass movement had confused their enemies and forced them, fearing a trap, to halt their advance to assess this tactic and evaluate their own situation. It was at this position that Mbata had given all operations to his trusted minister of war and instructing him when to join forces with those amassing outside of Elmana, where he himself planned to meet with them, he left the battle before him and turned toward Domey. Alone.

Moving inland with his supplies and weapons he directed himself to one of the many narrow waterways that could take him to the coast and securing a canoe, in a matter of days he found himself secluded near the edge of the coastal city, waiting for night to fall.

All he heard was the sound of the water as it lapped against his canoe. All he felt was the canoe rise a little and settle and he waited patiently for the repeating calming motion. He sat content, and at ease with his heightened anticipation. He was certain of his decisions that brought him here to Domey. Over the past weeks Nimi had imposed herself unrelentingly upon him. He saw her, heard her, and dreamed of her as he snatched at pieces of sleep. His desire for her grew until he could stand its pressure no longer. Even the battles that erupted around them each day or the night attacks he led behind enemy lines did little to dissipate this wanting energy that flowed within him.

At first he struggled with it, trying to focus his attention on the fighting and the potential death that faced him and the reality of death that collapsed at his feet constantly. This brought no relief. It was all, meaningless without her or without at least knowing of her health and her safety. He had received disturbing, conflicting reports about her that had added to his confusion. He believed her to be in danger. Then he was informed that she was virtually being held captive and he was provided a diagram of where she was and it was explained how he could very possibly enter the palace and reach her.

Finally a tremendous sense of longing and dread united with her voice so real that he found himself stopping and looking for her, and this futile search brought him such discomfort that he decided to go to her. At the first chance he had, at the first lull in the war, he set his determined sights on Domey.

Now, his father's sword lay across his lap and he touched it comfortingly

as the first of the city lamps came on in the distance. His muscles were taut and his body charged. His face grew hard and there was death in his eyes.

"I must succeed," he told himself.

His emotions surged and beyond his perpetual hatred and past the smoldering rage he now experienced for anything or anyone that dared to come between him, resided the true cause of this immense risk he took. His love for Nimi Enokye fanned out, seeking her, reaching out for her. She was so close and yet so far away.

After hiding his canoe he prepared himself. Breaking his long royal spear in two, he wrapped the pointed end, along with his sword, knife, and a strong vine rope in a bundle within pieces of clothing, tying it carefully. He draped a lone, wide, tattered piece of linen across his shoulders and using the other half of his spear as a walking stick, carrying his possessions tightly under his left arm, he bent his back, shielded his muddied face and in the cover of early evening, amid the burgeoning foot traffic that entered and departed the wide streets, a stooped and broken man shuffled into Domey and turned toward the palace that sat in the center of the city.

The city was alive in the early evening but unlike Calabar it quickly grew quiet as the hours passed and the once teeming, noisy walkways slowly became empty as the night wore on. Were it not for the influx of people from Calabar, new and unsettled, the streets would have seemed deserted.

Here the raging war was a distant imposition. A troublesome incursion only when it broke into the world of these inhabitants in conversations over dinner, debates in the public forum and once occasional but now more frequent virulent though short outbursts of disagreements. The reality of death only imposed itself upon those sent away, actually fighting, or those experiencing a loss of a loved one killed in the faraway battles. And so the city, ignoring the disruptions, was to soon fall asleep.

Mbata had moved among cursory glances and when he asked, muttered directions and impatient admonishments. He walked and shuffled slowly from the outskirts, past the shrines and temples interspersed along this route that took him through the shadowy dusty side streets that ran parallel to the main thoroughfare. He stopped at the rear of the central marketplace as the last of the buying and trading ended for the night. From this vantage point he could observe the walled palace that stretched and rose before him in the near distance.

Joining the displaced people who were left to find shelter in doorways and other covered areas, he remained there unnoticed and patient. As the time passed, in the deepening gloom of the street, he observed the many guards who maintained what seemed to be sporadic patrols.

Late night passed and the third quarter moon, luminous above him and floating and emerging from behind the scattered clouds brought a disturbing amount of light to the city that lay flattened and extended around him, increasingly silent and ominous.

Mbata moved gradually at each opportunity. Each time the moon was momentarily swallowed up he eased closer to the palace. Moving suddenly to

the rear stone wall, he pressed himself close and walking slowly, his eyes searched the dimness for the point of entry. He spotted the large tree he had been told about that was adjacent to the wall, almost at the far corner. It grew tall, with strong, low hanging limbs. He untied and opened his bundle and removing his covering, he stood there with only a cloth wrap around his waist. With pieces of vine he secured his knife and sword to his sides and strapped his shortened spear to his back.

Carefully, he tossed his rope, knotted heavily on one end, and missing his target, he gathered it to throw again. He stopped, listening. Then hearing approaching footsteps, he merged into the dense shadows of the wall and four guards passed closely by and strolling slowly, moved off into the night.

Throwing his rope again, the heavy end found its mark and fell to him, the rope hanging over a sturdy limb. Making a loop, he drew it tight. Testing it, satisfied, he climbed rapidly and reaching for the top of the thick wall he pulled himself to it and tossing the rope over, he dropped silently into the side of the dark, empty courtyard.

He moved to the corner of the wall and now facing the huge sprawling palace an instance of anxiety arose that he quickly suppressed. The thought, "Is she there?" had jumped up. Taking several deep breaths, he paused to calm himself. Unstrapping his knife, he moved slowly along the rear wall toward a side doorway. He stopped, waiting, wondering where the guards were that should be stationed at this entrance.

Listening intently, he heard voices now, beside the doorway, almost inaudible, rising and fading softly into the darkness, voices of a woman and man. Suddenly there was an eruption of quiet laughter and a dim light flared as the woman had pulled the curtain back and entered the doorway and Mbata saw clearly for a moment, one guard remained, alone.

Time passed and the guard drifted further from the doorway, strolling aimlessly back and forth. Mbata waited for his chance, easing closer, until finally the guard turned toward the doorway and Mbata moved.

So quick and quiet was his advance that the unsuspecting guard heard nothing and his first indication of danger was the powerful hand crushed across his mouth, stifling any possible loud sounds. Mbata placed the long blade of the knife in view of the man. It wavered menacingly and glinted in the dimmed hazy moonlight before his now wide and fearful eyes.

"Do not resist," Mbata warned, in a near whisper. "Are you the only guard here?" he asked.

The guard barely nodded his head, yes. The strength of the grip allowed only this slight movement.

"Do exactly as I say. Do not sound an alarm when I remove my hand," Mbata said into his ear.

Pulling the guard further into the shadows, he snatched the frightened man around and placing the blade to his throat he took his rifle and leaned it carefully against the palace wall.

The guard stared into these eyes close before him and was drawn down deep into their violent intensity. These eyes froze him, drained him, and were

it not for the sharp steel directly beneath his upraised chin he would have collapsed.

Mbata nearly whispered to him again between clenched teeth. Not a question but a statement. "You know Queen Nimi Enokye."

The guard nodded yes, once.

Again came another statement. "She is guarded"

Again the guard nodded.

"By how many?"

Now the guard struggled to speak, to answer. He swallowed hard. "One," he managed to whisper.

Mbata pondered this and staring into the eyes of this terrified man, he made his decision. Lowering the knife slightly he allowed the man to breathe normally. "Where is she?" Mbata asked. "I have come for her."

The guard, thankful for the respite spoke quietly and rapidly. "She is not far. There is a hallway here," and he motioned with his head toward the nearby doorway. "To the left, down that hall at the end, there to the right, another hall. She is at the last door. There the guard stands. There should be no one else around."

Mbata nodded, pleased. "Good." he said, almost to himself. "We will enter here." But before they moved he suddenly reached with his left hand to the throat of the man and squeezing tightly, choking him, he asked, "Is this deception, is it?"

Tears welled up in the guard's eyes and impossible to speak he struggled to shake his head, to deny somehow that he would risk his life by deceiving this man who terrorized him.

In his reaction, in this attempted response Mbata sensed he spoke the truth. He released the man, turned him, and with the point of the blade against the man's spine and his own hand tightly around the back of the man's neck, he moved him forward and they stepped into the dimly lit hall.

Looking to the right Mbata observed no movement and hearing nothing he prodded the man before him quickly on, to their left. Coming to the end of the hallway they stopped short of the curtained doorway of the connecting passage.

"Call him, motion to him, but get him here," Mbata spoke softly. And breaking the skin with the blade he asked, "Do you understand?"

The guard, holding back a gasp, nodded several times and Mbata urged him forward. The trembling man pulled the curtain open. Fearful that his voice would betray him, he waved. The other guard, standing bored at the end of the long narrow hallway saw him, smiled, and waved back. He waved the second guard forward now, urgently, insistently, and when he saw him become interested and finally begin to walk rapidly down the hall towards them he released the curtain. He stepped back, and whispering, "He comes," he moved to the wall opposite Mbata.

The guard was drenched in sweat and with his eyes pressed shut he heaved a deep, audible sigh of relief. And in the darkness of his shuttered eyes he saw a vision of King Mbata and he believed he knew who this man

was. His expression began to slowly change and he heard a soft raspy voice, distant, close, ghostly.

“Do you know who I am?” came the hollow whisper.

The guard could not answer. He resisted. He strained to keep his eyes closed. But yet they sought, against his will, to see ... Death. Opening his eyes and smiling slightly, his last image was of the scarred king as Mbata moved in a blur towards him.

“I am Mbata a Ewuare.”

And the guard’s last feeling was an instant of a sharp penetrating pain and then nothingness as the long blade noisily entered his chest and plunged completely through his heart. There was only a brief sucking sound as Mbata extracted his knife, allowing the guard to slump down the wall as he eased his descent with his hand again around the man’s throat.

Mbata stepped back, and switching the knife in his hands he tied it to his side and then quickly unstrapped his sword and turned in readiness to face the second guard he could hear approaching. He stood motionless, listening, as the muffled footsteps echoed dully against the floor.

The guard slowed and called a name, hesitating for some reason, to come further. He remained just a few steps on the other side of the curtain. Mbata grunted a reply and moaned and the guard, starting again, strode forward and stepped past the curtain to his death.

Mbata brought the upraised sword down swiftly across the man’s left shoulder and the force of the tremendous blow knocked him to his knees, his head striking the floor, a low cry escaping. Gagged utterances of pain came forth. He was stunned, confused, and he numbly fought with one arm, as a crippled animal, to right himself and remain conscious.

Mbata, after glaring at this useless struggle for a moment, stepped back, and moving forward, in one swift motion he struck the sword at an angle, down upon the back of the neck of this kneeling, writhing figure and his head attempted to leave his body only to be held tenuously by shattered bone and bloody fibers. Blood filled the hallway now, thick and slippery and left several footprints as Mbata turned and ran toward the last door at the end of this long passageway.

Mbata burst through the curtains and there in the reflections of a single small lamp, waiting patiently in the shadowy gloom, Nimi sat. She was dressed, and around her delicate throat she wore Mbata’s gift, his mother’s necklace.

She looked up at him expectantly and for a long moment they just stared at one another, their hearts racing, their souls flaring into passionate joy. Jumping up she ran into his open, outstretched arms.

“I knew you would come! Oh, my love, Mbata, I knew you were here!” she whispered breathlessly, kissing him fervently, her lips on his cheeks, on his lips, her arms wrapped around him.

“We must hurry Nimi,” Mbata spoke softly and she stepped back. He tied his sword to his side and removing the spear from his back they turned to leave.

A clattering suddenly rang from the opposite end of the hallway and screams rose in horror and terror and sprang out in pealing, revealing waves towards them. The woman had returned to visit the first guard, carrying food and drink and had discovered the bodies and now brought the palace to life.

Mbata and Nimi looked at each other. "We can not go that way," Mbata said calmly. "Another way to the courtyard."

Turning to the lamp on the table he grabbed it and hurled it against the wall above her bed and it shattered and fell in burning pieces, igniting the covers. And as the flames raced over the floor and up the curtained walls, they stepped into the hallway and began to run, screams, smoke, fire, and now footsteps somewhere behind them.

Nimi led him down a hall away from the rising commotion. They entered a large room. Across the floor they rushed toward a rear exit and passing into another long hall she took him left towards a faraway exit.

"There should be guards out there," she called as they ran and Mbata moved further in front of her.

They dashed through the doorway into the rear end of the courtyard. Of the two guards stationed there, one had responded to the uproar at the other corner of the palace. The remaining guard heard steps and movement close behind him and spun around and was astonished to see this man and woman emerging in full flight, materializing from the darkness. Raising his rifle, he hesitated to fire on the advancing amorphous forms. He focused on the woman and he vaguely recognized Nimi and this pause allowed Mbata to reach him, knock the exploding rifle upward and thrust his spear deep into this man who impeded their escape. Stepping past the impaled form, they pressed themselves against the side wall and then moved in controlled haste toward the rope that hung unseen over the rear wall, to their right.

"You must climb quickly once we reach that rope, hanging there," Mbata instructed, pointing.

Smoke billowed from the palace, floated into the night sky and people shouted and ran in confusion, converging on the spreading flames. The two were many yards from the palace and in the shadows of the wall, but one glance in their direction and they would be exposed. Reaching the rope, Mbata boosted Nimi up and grabbing it, using all her strength, she scrambled up quickly.

From the back of the palace a guard had entered the courtyard and finding the felled body with the protruding spear, his eyes slowly scanned the area. He sighted the indefinite form of Nimi just as she completed her ascent to crouch and wait.

Mbata, having held the rope quickly followed her to the top and as he began to help her down, his back to the courtyard, the guard took several steps and aimed his rifle. Nimi saw him come forward and warned Mbata as she lowered herself to the ground. Mbata turned and the rifle fired. The guard, past the sights of his rifle saw this dark figure point at him, step back, and disappears from his view, from the wall, into the night.

As Mbata drowsily relieved their escape he reached over and touched Nimi. He was satisfied at her warm soft presence. Outside, the heat rose and in their covering, Mbata slipped, dropped heavily into a painful slumber.

Nimi awoke, a weighted sluggishness upon her, momentarily lost and disoriented. Above her, between the canopy of hanging, covering plants and leaves, she gazed at small azure patches. The beautiful late-afternoon high sky, constant in this pieced pattern, stretched endlessly. And for just an instant after she sat up quickly, she was faint.

It came back now in a dramatic rush, the previous days. And when she looked to her left she was again full of happiness at the sight of Mbata sleeping beside her. She touched him, a deliberate, indiscernible placing of her fingers upon his leg to acknowledge the truth of his existence, the truth of her own existence.

Other feelings swelled inside of her and forced her to lie back down. Her body ached and she was slightly stiff from the exertion of their escape. She was feeling unusually weary and she recognized this as being more from the emotional upheaval she had experienced than from the physical strain or from a lack of rest.

Although sleep had been sporadic the past few days it had actually become unnecessary. She had been too excited to sleep. Somehow, from somewhere deep within her soul, she had known he was coming for her. She had slowly become aware of his presence growing stronger and moving indefatigably closer. Until, upon awakening the previous morning from a rest that seemed so light it was as if she had never closed her eyes, she was certain she would see him soon. So she prepared herself. She ate as if starved and dressed for travel and sat and waited for him, in quiet anticipation.

In the waning moments before he came through her doorway she was deadened, in chills, then hot, in heat and then quite suddenly she had been disconnected. She was split from her self. Her centered soul departing her body and in an agonizing, tedious, elongated step, it rose above her and an unknown apprehension was expanding within the gulf that existed between these two separate and uniquely distinct entities and vital elements of her essence. Her body. Her soul.

Fear rose unexpectedly as she stared down upon her serene human shape joined by a thin, beating, throbbing, vibrating, twisting, sinewy thread that had begun to untangle, unravel, and extend itself precariously as she floated further and further ... away. It was threatening to break now, to snap in two as her disassociated self began to gain momentum. Accelerating. Flying into a black abyss.

Fighting for control. Terrified she would lose her self forever if this, her life was broken apart, rendered into pieces, she held her breath to stave off the moment. Suspend it. Force everything, all things, to cease movement. Her spirit held within this breath. Her life, preserved, within that instant. She lingered, wavered dangerously between being, and ... nothingness.

Mbata burst through her doorway!

Her fragmented self was instantaneously whole again and her present life was complete as she saw, recognized, and reached for her purpose and her body wanted to be forever free as she touched him and felt in his encircling arms her soul become encompassed by him, filled by him, ignited by him, and coupled to him always.

And now they were alone together in the jungle. She looked over at him, in his restless sleep. An intermittent pained expression from his wound upon his otherwise tranquil face and again concern made itself known inside of her. It was much less than the concern she had experienced when the rifle had fired from the palace courtyard and he had raised his arm, stepped back from the top of the wall and landed heavily upon the ground and for a moment nearly gone to his knees.

She was immediately beside him. "Mbata! Mbata!" She had said, gasping for breath. Distress nearly closed her throat as he stood and staggered slightly. She saw blood as she moved even closer to him. It was coming from a wound in his left shoulder.

He had looked down and when he lifted his head there was a puzzled expression upon his face. "I have been struck," he said, in actual disbelief. And touching his shoulder he held his bloodied hand close, to better see, and for an instant he seemed lost in this. Then quickly his eyes cleared, he returned. He reached for his linen covering and grabbing her he said, "We must reach the water. South of here I have a canoe." He turned in the direction he had come.

She pulled back. "I know a shorter way." And together they ran until she turned into the darkness of a secluded side street and then they had turned toward the water's safety.

The street they took moved them rapidly into a sparsely populated area of the city and then out of the city altogether. It fell away behind them, growing smaller in the distance. They reached a rise that allowed them to look down upon the great expanse of water that in the light of day did not disappear in a black line but stretched far beyond mortal sight. As they paused to gaze upon this, the water had shimmered below them and for a long moment, as the clouds passed from the moon, the breaking waves reflected a clear bright night. Briefly they replaced their continuing danger with a wanting, a need, for a resting peace.

"Remember this Nimi," Mbata had said. "This you can not see from Calabar, very soon to be your new home."

Taking her hand, he turned south. Past the edge of several sleeping, small villages they hurried until at last they could turn around and see nothing of Domey. All that remained immediately before them was the journey ahead.

Reaching the hidden canoe they had hastened to put as much distance between them and Domey as they possibly could before daylight. Mbata directed Nimi, and she, recognizing his pain and knowing he was growing weak, paddled furiously. As the sky became increasingly lighter, they had turned and gone far down a narrow nearly closed-end stream. There they pulled in, covered the canoe, attended to his wound, and struggled to rest.

She rose now, contemplating this travel that lay before them. From a pouch she poured water, dampened a cloth and placed it gently upon Mbata's forehead. She felt him and was relieved that his skin was not hot. She wanted to change his bandages but did not want to wake him.

Settling back, she stared at him. She smiled, recalling the exhilaration she had felt as they had raced together through the hallways and the mixture of constraining fear and triumphant freedom as she had ascended the rope. So many things she felt. And now as she leaned her head back and slowly closed her eyes, she held for a moment a surging sense of joy and she felt alive. Never before had she felt so alive. To know this man, his powerful strength and determination, and to know he would die for her brought to her a profound range of worth and added a special meaning to her life. But the reality of this insight came in the fact that she would not hesitate to die with him, for him, and thereby demonstrate an inherent quality of real love. She believed that an essential and wonderful truth of unconditional love would be expressed in that final act of ultimate surrender. This willingness brought to her existence an immense sense of pleasure.

When she opened her eyes, a smile upon her lips, she saw him, looking at her calmly. His gaze riveted on her, penetrated into her and her body flushed and grew warm. His dark-brown eyes sparked brightly. He smiled and as she moved to him, toward his extended hand, they both broke out into soft laughter. It was pure ... and uninhibited.

VII

MBALA RODE FORTH IN THE SHADOWY DARKNESS. THE Calabar mountain range loomed in the distance, jutting and jagged in the cloudless starry sky. The moon, losing its fullness, low and bright, brought a peculiar radiance to him but no measure of contentment. For him there had been nothing pleasing or esthetic about their arduous, uncomfortable trek. As he looked back at the many miles they had traveled he could remember them unwinding seemingly interminably and he was thankful and yet extremely apprehensive at having reached this point.

How ironic that it was his own volunteered information and strident demands that had launched him on this increasingly regrettable clandestine mission. With a wry smile on his face, he shook his head at the uproar he had created that fateful evening at the compound upon revealing what he knew.

It was soon obvious that the news of a possible means of avoiding the frontal fortifications of Calabar had only added to the confusion and dissension of all those present. The issues that confronted them were, what to do with this knowledge, how best to utilize this possible advantage and most importantly, was this in fact, an advantage?

First, Mbala could not know if he would find, after so many years, this rear entrance or if it still existed. Next, it would take many days to travel far to the north, then east, and finally south, to arrive behind the mountain range. For this would be the only logical direction they could approach and hope to avoid detection. And to travel that distance virtually unnoticed meant taking only a small group of men carrying basic, light weapons and bare necessities with which to sustain themselves. This small war party would be able to ride swiftly and for longer periods of time but would be slowed near the end of the journey when they would move primarily at night.

If they could access the mountain entrance, only one, perhaps two men at a time, on foot, could negotiate the tight path. In addition, the entrances he knew existed that would take them through the three walls and into the courtyard garden were quite narrow, built to allow passage for one or two persons at a time. This would force them to be continuously in weakened attacking positions, unable to advance as a group. Also, if they were indeed attempting to remain undetected, they would not be able to strike with the loud exploding weapons that would reveal their presence. Unable to use rifles they would relinquish the benefit of distance that would assist them in their escape and most importantly provide protection from Mbata. Thus it would be necessary for them to move in close and expose themselves to the danger of his fever. This, Mbala did not want but could do nothing about. He needed above all not only to be able to attack quietly, but also to leave himself the opportunity to depart as quietly and quickly as possible. Most crucial were these aspects. If Mbata was not in the city, found at his palace, and somehow trapped alone, the taxing and dangerous undertaking would be futile.

In spite of these considerations the men aligned against Mbata were at first bolstered by this added dimension to their options. For several days they schemed and plotted various new directions of movement and addressed different possibilities. They very soon however, fell into complete disarray. The discussions, once positive, turned acrimonious and eventually broke down as they were all thrown into a mood of angry disappointment. It was at this point they began to believe there was nothing to be gained by this that Mbala had presented to them. Their greatest obstacle was the location of their enemy. Unless he could somehow be attacked at Calabar, perhaps driven there, and once there, caught by surprise, preferably in some unusual, vulnerable position, there was no usefulness to be gained from being able to enter the domain of Mbata secretly and thus, no possibility of success.

Reports reached them of a large movement of enemy troops and that their own forces were slowly, painstakingly moving Mbata's warriors back and that in a matter of a few days they would have regained control of very important portions of the Oil Rivers. And so they returned to previous plans, determined to settle on final, precise courses of actions.

They all entered this next meeting confident yet pressured to resolve their differences. After two weeks they were still divided into two opposing directions. One group favored not only continuing the battle at the rivers but expanding the war by at once moving to attack Calabar, using a force made up predominantly of Mbobo warriors from Domey.

The second group wanted to fight solely on the rivers and they also wanted to simultaneously move as many men and weapons as warranted from Elmana toward the rear flanks of Mbata's forces. Even though that maneuver left Elmana less secure, this group felt it imperative to not only attack from these two directions but also, to shut off the land routes that were being utilized to maintain their enemy with food, munitions and other vital supplies.

Mbala, for obvious reasons, opposed attacking Calabar, but found himself losing support of this position. After another volatile turbulent discussion they adjourned for lunch and a short rest from the heat. A final, deciding vote was to be taken in the early evening.

They were at this juncture when Mbala was informed that his minister of internal affairs had arrived from Domey concerning an important matter. As his minister was ushered into his room Mbala observed that he appeared worried, and quite upset.

Ambu Nuwa was several years older than Mbala and had accompanied him fifteen years earlier from Calabar. He was trusted for both his keen wisdom and cleverness. He had readily taken to his prestigious position as one could judge from the elegant clothes he wore and the abundance of fine food he obviously enjoyed. However, he was at this moment hot and disheveled, having just arrived.

Ambu stood with his back to the window, staring straight ahead, waiting for the attendants who had been dismissed, to depart. He was wiping, in a flourish, his flushed, damp, round face and his large neck. Mbala was growing alarmed now and as soon as the two were alone he immediately asked, "What has brought you here like this? What is the problem?"

"I certainly regret that I must interrupt you King Mbala," began Ambu, looking directly at Mbala now. "But I have disturbing news and I thought it best to bring it to you personally."

"Let me hear it!" Mbala said loudly, his eyes tightening. He had still not become accustomed to these messages that usually seemed to bring him disruptive, unsettling complications.

Ambu glanced around suspiciously and moved closer, in order to keep his own voice low. "There have been, incidents, at Domey. Four days ago someone entered the palace and set a fire that destroyed several rooms. In addition, three of your guards were killed." He paused, hesitating to go on. Again he wiped his face.

Mbala recognized this reluctance and moving close to this short, round man who stood nervously before him he placed his hand on his shoulder and urged him reassuringly to speak.

Ambu's words came in a whispered rush. "Your wife is gone, the youngest one, the new one, Nimi. She is missing and she left willingly with the intruder."

Mbala crossed the room quickly and sat down. He was both angered and confused but as he looked at Ambu he realized there was even more. "Continue," he said.

Ambu moved across the room, to stand closer to Mbala. He cleared his throat, swallowed and began again. "No one is sure but from the description and the information and evidence I have gathered I suspect that the man was your brother, King Mbata. The warriors that I dispatched after them tracked them along the shore and to the southern swamp where they lost their trail, however I am fairly certain it was he. And one other thing, there was blood found. I believe King Mbata was shot, apparently a minor wound.

Mbala was stunned now. He turned this over in his mind, attempting to form some understanding, seek some clarity as to the meaning of it all. "How many know of this? Has it spread into the city?" Mbala finally asked.

"No King Mbala. I have managed to isolate the remaining few who have any damaging knowledge of the matter. The others have been made to suspect a common thief. Obiriba has of course been sworn to secrecy as to the disappearance and the guard who believed he recognized the king died, unexpectedly, after imparting only to me, in confidence, his thoughts."

"Yes! Yes!" Mbala said, in sudden obvious pleasure, rising to pace the room. "Dear Ambu, you know we must take every precaution that the truths of these circumstances are not revealed. My position would be undermined. This must go no further. Obiriba can be trusted. Any others can not be allowed, or able to speak. You understand?" He stopped to stare at Ambu.

"Yes King Mbala, I understand," Ambu replied quickly. "I have already taken the necessary steps and only await your word to act."

"You know what to do," Mbala said. "Rest here tonight and tomorrow, early, return to Domey. When you arrive there, see to it that this matter is handled immediately, and properly." Mbala clapped his hands together several times. "Here, my friend. Let us have a drink, to celebrate this news."

"But I am confused," Ambu said, puzzled at his king's elation. "Is this news good?"

"Yes Ambu," Mbala answered. "It is good."

At the early evening meeting Mbala informed the group that he possessed new, crucial information that Mbata had left the Oil Rivers and he could guarantee that his brother would be returning to his home. If they moved to attack Calabar at this time the forces of their enemy would be alerted and would quickly mobilize there and this would interfere with the secret attack that he should now be allowed to launch. He and a small party of men would leave as soon as possible for Calabar and once there, eliminate Mbata.

He urged them to press the river battle and also begin to move men immediately from Elmana, pushing from the rear, engaging and distracting Mbata's main forces and thus allowing him the opportunity to enact and complete his plan. After all, it was he that was taking the risk. All he was requesting was time.

After another two days of haggling he convinced his opposition of the enhanced possibilities of his success and at last they reached a majority agreement. He departed in haste for Domey. He was sure Mbata himself would take Nimi to Calabar. Not wanting to subject her to unnecessary danger he would protect her life by securing her there, believing she would be safest at his palace.

Mbala was torn in his emotions. He was confused and feeling that he did not know the real motivations as to why his brother would jeopardize so much for Nimi. In addition he was furious at this direct affront to the sanctity of his kingdom in a manner that challenged his honor and stature.

His emotions swelled within him when he considered that this hostile act symbolized much, but most specifically a threat to his very manhood. Yet he

was certain of one thing. For Mbata to go into Domey for Nimi, apparently alone, meant it was a personal issue and he knew his brother would continue to treat it as such and handle the matter himself, to its conclusion. This was an issue that was strong enough to momentarily outweigh all else, even the violent war that raged. But the war that was being fought on the waters and across the lands could not begin to compare in intensity to the bitter hatred he experienced when he thought of Mbata and Nimi together.

Another fleeting thought had crept through his mind. Perhaps Mbata would die somewhere. Perhaps they would die together and his problems would be easily solved. These thoughts passed as he recognized this as an unlikely possibility. He had then turned to the task before him. Two days after his return to Domey he and a dozen of his elite warriors began the race to Calabar.

He again wondered about them both now. He pondered as to where they were. Did they suffer the hardship of travel as he had? His war party had camped before the morning eased in upon them and he was sitting now just a few miles from the site of his birth.

The warmth of the passing night had stood in contrast to the barely tolerable heat he had experienced just days before as they had reached the furthest they would penetrate into the barren northeast. In turning south they moved into relatively comfortable temperatures close to the mountain range that ran behind Calabar. Now they sat in the darkness that remained just before dawn. Being careful to avoid a chance discovery, not only had they moved at night and rested in the day, in addition, for the past three encampments they had not burned any fires and could not burn any from this point on.

Mbata chewed angrily on the dry, tough provisions they consumed for nourishment. With each swallow he strove to push back and away the sour bile that crawled up inside him. He was bitter at having to leave once again the plush and protecting confines of Domey. When he had traveled to Calabar months ago, that had been necessary for several reasons. This journey, even from his own suggestion was a perilous imposition imposed upon him by this war of Mbata and accentuated by the traitorous actions of Nimi, his own wife.

As he peered at the dark silhouette of the ominous mountains, he felt threatened and made unsure by them and all that lay on the other side. And he despised the weakness behind these feelings. Here, he was isolated from the support that he had surrounded himself with at Domey. Here, he felt for the first time since he was a young man, utterly alone. In the past fifteen years there had always been companionship and the ability to achieve fulfillment in the presence of others. He enjoyed being king and coveted the riches and power that accompanied his status. But here in this desolate world he did not feel like he was a king. His feelings continually acknowledged, not just the potential, but also the reality of danger, and the very real possibility that death awaited him.

The plan in which he had once so ardently believed, would align itself, clear and positive, with the light of day. As he looked around at his trusted warriors, inside he was sure and confident. At night this undertaking seemed implausible, his thoughts were disorganized and he believed himself to be delusional. He vacillated in his emotions, confidence giving over to elements of mistrust and incredulity only to return again to an indispensable feeling of arrogance that buttressed him at his lowest moments. And whenever he doubted himself most, whenever a perceptible fear pushed at his being, he would think of Mbata and Nimi together and all the hatred that existed within him would fuse and focus. He could think of them and become emboldened and charged in his desire to see them there, at his feet ... Dead. This drove him forward. This was now for what he lived.

He thought of these things as he rose to stretch and walk several steps idly towards his intended destination. As he stood there, brooding at his plight and the circumstances and issues that he faced, he was surprised at the prevailing idea that had recently begun to occupy and distract his mind. He had begun to ponder on the origin of hatred. This hatred he now felt inside was unique in its power. This hatred, he was most certainly willing to risk all for, and for some reasons this upset him.

He allowed the distinct image of Mbata to rise and again it disturbed him to realize that there was an unfamiliar awareness, a new understanding of his brother that tried to speak to him. He believed he knew how to touch, not ethereally, but in a conscious palpable sense the essence of hatred. He could feel it. It belonged to him and he could experience its ability to reach out. But he wondered now. Whence did it arise? What was its source? Where would it go? When would it cease?

And as this pinkish-blue oceanic sky that strained there above him, endless until it merged with the long dark earthly horizon, imprinted its vastness upon him, he peered up and out across it and was disoriented for a moment. This incipient morning sky seemed to dip, sway, and then rise. Snatching its extensiveness away it lifted a constraining cover and next removed a mental restraint and he contemplated. He pondered for some inexplicable reason of Mbata's feelings for him and he wondered what possibly would have become, had they been, in the true sense of the word ... brothers.

As this fleeting thought surged brightly, it flashed and illuminated the face of Nimi Enokye and evaporated into the warm air of this twilight of the near dawn. He brushed away this disconcerting moment and returned to his makeshift camp. Stepping around the prone and supine sleeping bodies, he found his spot and prepared to retire for some needed rest.

Tomorrow night they would reach the base of the mountains and the following day he would begin his search for the path, the opening that he believed would allow him to bring some significant alterations, perhaps even a cessation to the difficult times that permeated his life. With Mbata gone, he believed his life could only be better.

VIII

MBATA WAS SITTING, DRYING. THE SOFT BREEZE UPON HIS skin cooled his body but not the heat that was expanding within his soul. He sat with his back to their small campfire. He could feel it slightly at this distance, its warmth. And he could hear it, alive, burning, popping and sizzling quietly, expressing its purpose even as it diminished itself into a soon to become splendid, solemn, smoky, orange glow.

He observed Nimi before him. Having emerged from the cleansing, cool element of the nearby stream, she walked in lithe sensual movements towards him. A piece of cloth at her waist covered her otherwise glistening body. The lustrous early-night moon lit her up for his admiring gaze and he was stirred deep inside.

He lay back, to transfer her affecting beauty from his sight, to his mind. And closing his eyes peacefully as she sat down close beside him to dry herself in the warm night air, he stepped her behind his shuttered vision and she melted into his imagination.

He opened his eyes quickly. There was no respite from her there, within his mind. There, no real limitations or self-imposed restrictions truly existed. And in his open-eyed reflections he sought for the stated control they had established. He grasped fervently for the words they had shared, the reasons for their restraint. He reached to fortify the lines he had drawn and she had accepted.

They had wrestled to ignore that which lay behind their passing glances. They fought to disregard the friction of the static current that was present between them when they touched, inadvertently or not, or simply stood near to each other, in the aura of the otherness.

But they both knew all was crumbling down within, and this both alarmed them and excited them, this passionate danger. He became at night, in these past two days, increasingly uneasy with her enticing closeness. But he had relaxed in this emotional turmoil and attempted to garner what satisfaction he could allow himself in this new, aroused awareness he had discovered on this enlightening journey. But there was a disrupting, dissatisfying, growing presentiment that hung heavy and crept steadily into them both. Calabar loomed just a little over three days away.

They had taken a route similar but longer than the one Nimi had traveled on her first trip. They had not gone past Bonny, Creek Town, or Old Town. Initially, because of potential detection, they had moved parallel to these points but had remained for the most time, in more secluded areas.

Mbata's wound had healed quickly, completely, only leaving an indented scar, in an uncanny fashion that he explained was due to some unusual properties of his body, related, as was his youthful appearance to unnatural characteristics of the fever. Because of the wound, they had moved slowly the first four days, mostly in the early morning and early evening. Their progress had been unhurried and at times tedious but Mbata was apparently unconcerned with this. Abandoning their canoe, they moved on foot into the interior, and for the next fifteen days, theirs was an idyllic existence.

There was an impression of peace and a joy in their lives that neither had ever known before. They hunted for the meals they shared. They fished together and gathered fruits and plants and herbs to eat. They talked of many things and laughed together many times. He taught her much about the land. And as they walked along they saw, in many instances, seemingly for the first time and in spite of long stretches of heat and dryness, the breathtaking natural beauty of their world.

It was as if they had been unburdened. No one else existed but them. Nothing mattered but them and unencumbered by the reality they chose to ignore, Domey became a distant hazy nightmare for Nimi and war became a vague phantom for Mbata.

Yet, their mood was disturbed this night and perceptibly altered. Earlier that day they had been met by Mbobo warriors from Calabar, on the alert for intruders. Mbata had gone off with them and they had talked for a long period of time and when he returned he was preoccupied with thoughts of war and of his people. That evening as they camped, he informed Nimi that they would be provided horses in the morning. And upon her inquiry he had answered tersely that the war went as planned and then he had fallen silent. Brooding.

Nimi could feel the difference fluctuating between them now as she changed from her sitting position and stretched out languidly beside him. This mood had descended upon them both and she pushed away a sense of foreboding, only to have it immediately return.

They had both known this, that they had, could not last. It was transitory, this world they had entered. Thus they were between existences, between Domey and Calabar, and as long as their spirits remained suspended there,

somewhere in the middle, they were revolving in hope. To turn their minds back in rejection, or even to continue forward in anticipation, and they glided toward despair.

Yes, it was so fleeting, their world, and they knew that and accepted that. And by not speaking of anything but that which pertained to this temporary, surreal, magnificent grounded scene through which they traversed, they steadfast remained immersed within it. But this night, as the moon swelled and grew larger and brighter and the stars emerged above them to fill the clear eternal sky, they both recognized they would return, re-enter again, reality. They saw that actuality in the impending words that bounced and lingered in the air around them, waiting for expression. And they lay in the dimness, listening to the sounds of the birds and animals, living and dying in their worlds, suppressing the words, staving that reality off. Momentarily.

“What will happen when we reach Calabar?” Nimi asked, finally, breaking quietly through the sounds of the night.

“I will meet a short time with my ministers. Learn of the status of the city. Ensure all is being handled properly. Then as soon as possible I will depart for Elmana.” There was silence now, and distant noises.

Mbata rose, and adding branches to the fading fire, he brought it to modest flames again. Returning to Nimi, he sat beside her and looked down at her. And she looked up with smoldering eyes at him. They were illuminated by the fire and could observe one another clearly.

She reached out her hand and brushed his chest, her fingertips skimming him and her hand opened and coming to rest against him she felt the throbbing of his heart and it pulsed through her arm, reverberated through her heart in abrupt synchronous harmony and tied them in knots, together.

“And what will happen to ... us?” she asked next, in seductive softness.

His head fell back, his eyes closed and he pondered this. But his ideas were confusing and his conceptions were failing him. This night, her heated fingers were drawing him into an emotional caldron that seethed with loving desire and seized him and pulled him spellbound directly and inexorably toward her. And when he managed to open his eyes the celestial stars glimmered and arranged themselves in their perpetual twinkling order, sparkling, and shining beautifully and they were radiantly obvious to them both and the answer to her question stood balanced and also, obvious.

“We will be separated,” he answered, evenly, his voice sounding to his own ears, remote and distant and hollow. “And we will use the precious, vivid impressions of these past days to sustain us. Until we meet again.”

“Will we?” she asked. The question echoed.

“Yes ...” he hesitated, “we must protect our memories because that shall be all we will have.”

“No!” she said, with force. And she sat up and facing him, she moved closer and her left hand was on his throat and she whispered, even in their isolation, she nearly whispered, urgently. “I mean, will we ... meet again?”

Mbata lay down now. He squeezed the bedding beneath them. Squeezed it tightly again. The question remained unanswered. The answer, unknown.

Moments passed and she looked steadily, down at him. It was as if he felt her fastened gaze question him, search him, strip him, ignite him, until finally he turned to those eyes and sighed and began to reply but he stopped. He stared. He spoke, also in a needless near whisper. "Perhaps. Perhaps ... not."

She bent to him and placed her cheek to his. And moving to her knees, she peered deeply into him and he was riveted to her. She bent again and this time placed her lips upon his throat and he felt her tongue, soft and moist and warm. She ran her tongue along his neck and when she felt him reach for her and place his hand lightly upon her back, she stretched out fully upon him and he held her in his arms.

They lay like that, neither speaking. And then with resigned purpose, he shifted, he moved her, and her heart seemingly lost a beat. She knew this night they would be, what they could. Even in their bounded desire they would find within a restricted ecstasy an uninhibited, limitless love for one another.

He turned onto his right side as she rolled onto her back. Rising on his arm beside her, he looked down at her form, beautifully stark in the bright luminescent moonlight and for an instant, he was dizzy.

He placed the back of his left hand against her smooth face, against her delicate throat. And now his fingers were upon her breasts, first one and then the other. Softly. Gently. He was fascinated at the feel of her body, the texture of this dark flesh. And his captivation revealed itself in the extended movements he used to touch her, to experience this as if for the first and perchance ... only time.

He could hear her, breathing heavily now. And he gazed at her round, firm breasts rising and subsiding. He could feel her nipples growing solid in his fingertips. She never closed her eyes. She watched him intently. She watched his hands on her body. She watched, his eyes. And then, reaching her left hand beneath his wrap she touched his thigh and began to stroke his leg slowly, in long tender motions and drawn into this, enjoying this, their passion rising, they continued.

He pulled at her wrap. It loosened easily and he opened it, first one side and then the other. She was naked. He fixed her in a wondering look, her beauty impaling him. Inexplicably, he was calm in his pleasure of this unique moment.

His fingers now were on her stomach and the designs he lightly traced shocked her and she shivered beneath his touch. She brought her knees up slightly and opened her legs willingly to him and he ran his hand along her legs and kneaded and caressed her thighs gently.

She tugged insistently at his wrap, and then again, until it loosened and fell open and then off. And as he touched her heated softness and sticky wetness she took him, erect, into her hand and he too was warm, very warm, and hard, in her supple grip. A low moan rose in her throat as he rubbed her for never ending moments, each instance overwhelming the next. It was as if all the sensitive nerves of their bodies were bared raw and cried and screamed tumultuously through their minds. Ordinary lust reared, then submerged to

lose itself, bury itself in reciprocating, sympathetic, exalted emotions.

She pulled at his hardness carefully, in elongated slowness, again, and again, her hand moving lightly, firmly, easily, rhythmically now. And as their unleashed passion rose and their pleasure agonizingly intensified, time began to slow. Sound came from unrealized depths, and tactile feeling flew to unseen heights and his voice came on an invisible wave and she heard from a domain of his once inaccessible being an almost inaudible gasp and she whispered to him, his ... name.

She placed her right hand upon his hand as it caressed and moved temptingly, maddeningly between her trembling legs. Now she pushed on his hand. And as she guided his fingers she grinded her body against their pointed penetration. Slowly at first, then gradually her pace increased. Her hand that grasped him moved faster and in the darkness she saw his engorged thickened veins threading as ropes throughout his muscled nakedness, glistening from the moisture upon his body.

She heard him clearly now whisper her name, urgently, and on she pushed her tensing body. Her back arched and she rose, lifting herself from the ground. His hand, his fingers driving her to a frenzy. He moved his body now. Thrusting slowly.

“Yes!” She exhorted him on. Then! “Yes Mbata? Now?” she asked. Demanded beseechingly. “Now?”

“Yes!” He said. “Yes Nimi,” he choked. “Now!”

She exploded into furious infinitesimal fiery pieces as he moaned aloud and then shuddered. Shuddered again, powerfully, and again, expending himself and placing a wetted element of his essence within her hand that she used to massage him now as she pulled on him. And he called her. Her name escaping from the deepest darkest recesses with each spasm and she, having lost control, allowed the pools of fire to burst and shower from her soul and surge forth with each “Yes!” that answered, each time he called.

Time left them. It disappeared into the night’s sky and lost itself on the darkened side of the moon. And when time returned, it found them in each other’s arms, stunned, and immobilized from the level of intensity that had seared through their demonstration of passion and desire.

Never had they known anything such as that. Never could they have imagined the existence of the feelings that consumed those moments. And as they lay resting, embracing one another, clinging to each other, they held on tightly, in an attempt to keep in their grasp, that total experience. To capture it somehow, claim it forever. And so, as they searched through their minds for some understanding, it was revealed in the words that came, easily and naturally.

“I love you Nimi.”

“And I love you Mbata.”

And that was it! They had loved one another! Not in some finite physical expression but they loved in an infinite emotional form that transcended all the material substances on earth. Love! True love was brought to the scene,

passed between them, connected them and defined their moment together, their existence together, and constructed in their memory and branded into their souls an unalterable experience. Never to be diminished by time or lost in space.

Each had wanted and needed. And they had not desired something from, the other. Each desired to provide something, for ... the other. And it was in their love that they could never be separated. It was there they would meet again. With that knowledge, in that certainty, they fell asleep, to ... dream.

Deep Mbata fell. So deep was his sleep. So far was his dreamy fall. So black was this turbulent tunnel into which he plunged that as he discovered himself grasping and grabbing and clutching desperately at the endless walls of this engulfing abyss he only felt them as they broke into ragged, punishing pieces between his tearing fingers. Faster he fell.

His wild momentum temporarily slowed when he dug his hands in vain into the suddenly slimy, slippery, muddy earth that passed. And as he looked up he was disoriented and the stars of the sky grew smaller, fainter, as he was hurtled onward in a tight spiral into, and through the bottomless nothing.

He quickly seized at the unmoving yet speeding earth again and he stopped. Everything stopped. And he was blind now because all was black, so black. His eyes, strained wide, saw a black sky and tiny black stars and a tiny black opaque moon.

He crawled now, in heavy laborious movements in a futile attempt to ascend this walled prison and leave this threateningly strange world. He fought to maintain his precarious position, and finally, he simply clung to the unseen surface, now rigid and parched.

Slowly the surface began to turn in oblong circles and there was noise, mysterious vibrations. Where once all was silent there was unexpectedly a rush of dull sound, a mournful murmur passing his head. It grew, and from a distance it came, to move, to pass again, but paused and squeezed his head and encircled his ears and throat. And the walled surface turned faster. And then again, suddenly, it stopped. Everything stopped, except for him.

His hands were wrenched into the thick air and he tumbled over and over within this nothingness and there was wetness in his blinded eyes and in an oozing syrupy torrent it ran, this warm liquid something, into his mouth and then abruptly he plunged onto a grassy hill and spitting this substance from his mouth and wiping the wetness from his eyes, he could miraculously see.

He saw blood on his fingers and could taste his own blood in his mouth. And the once indistinguishable sounds separated and in their inchoate distinctness they were pure screams that were united into blemished painful moans only to break away into screams again, lucid and sonorous. And when he slowly raised his weighted head he looked up, looked around.

War! In its lustrously metallic expression ... lived!

War, surged and raged in fury at Brass River!

He stood now and shook his head, to clear it. The blow across the back of his skull from the heavy truncheon, although a glancing one, had knocked

him stunned to the ground and rolled him over several times, separating him from his protecting weapons. He retrieved his shield, hobbled toward the sword he had dropped and picked it up. His left leg was sliced open across his thigh. Blood flowed from a long gash beneath his right eye and ran into the corner of his mouth. His back bled, his mind ached, and deep inside he was calm and content.

As he grabbed his sword he warded off the thrust of a knife with his shielded left arm and delivered a fatal strike. His eyes searched for his father. In all directions, for as far as he could see, warriors fought hand to hand in pitched mortal combat. Screams and moans filled the scorching air and loud snarls and invective curses of those fighting for the life of their beliefs, for their own lives, joined the final laments of those in the throes of dying.

Blue-white smoke hung thick and heavy over the battlefield and the acrid taste of gunpowder choked them. The stench of death filled their flared nostrils and the echoes from the exploding gas pipes rang in their ears. Dark Death, elated at this conflicted spectacle, danced in glee, sang in euphoric frenzy, called and shrieked in fury to Her disciples and ordered them to follow Her ... home.

Spotting the colorful royal shield of his father, Mbata fought on with controlled savagery toward him. The Mbobos were vastly outnumbered and although superior fighters they were beginning to fall at an alarming rate. The Shantulu and their foreign allies were surrounding his father and those who fought determinedly and desperately beside him. The enemies pressed unrelentingly their advantage.

Mbata and the other Mbobos close to him strove to join their king. From that point they would move across the adjacent shallow point of the river and past the large boulders beside the shore and there they would make their stand.

Mbata was near now. He could see his father clearly, rising above those around him, a grimace of fierce hatred upon his face. The king's shield parried in graceful actions and his bloodied sword whistled as it slashed through the air and the enemy fell at his feet. As Mbata continued forward he saw his father turn, find him with his glazed eyes, smile, and wave him on. Mbata fought to his side. And back-to-back they resisted, staved away the summoning screech and warded the banshee cry of Death ... off.

They had almost reached the water when silence descended, totally. Everything stopped, completely, and blackness covered all, but him, as he stood bathed in a round, yellow light. And from and through the black motionless silence Mbata heard his father's voice clearly, inviting to him. And when he turned, he peered into the blackness and his father emerged into the gloomy, glowing light. The king fell to his knees. Then he stood, with difficulty, stumbled forward and collapsed into Mbata's arms, a spear stuck deeply into his back.

The light expanded in size. Mbata was dragging and carrying his father. He saw they had somehow crossed the river and entered the rocks and as he laid his father down, Mbobo warriors moved to protect their new king and

the battle progressed in soundless slow motion.

"Take it out!" his father commanded. And Mbata pulled the spear from his body. "Turn me over," he said, and his voice was deafening. And as he was turned over, blood ran from his mouth.

As Mbata lifted his father into his arms he heard him speak quietly. "I have died in your arms and thus am I saved. Fight on my son." Mbata eased him down carefully and as this life passed away Mbata kissed these smiling lips and drank from the flowing blood.

He rose now, and smearing his father's blood across his chest he raised his arms into the air and with the essence of his father still pungent in his throat, he screamed from the depths of his shattered soul.

Sound returned. The sun shined again in brilliance and as the last of his tortured anguish was extinguishing itself in the fading scream, the flaming fever was firing in his chest and flashing to his stomach. He turned, and in a daze he strode forth. His body burned now and a deathly heat emanated and extended itself for several yards in all directions. And as he crossed through the water, steam rose in clouds around him and as he moved onward all those he closed upon fell in writhing agony near his feet.

This thing fanned out and when it reached the men it burned them as countless tiny heated needles and punctured and penetrated into countless tiny wounds and from each wound blood spurted out with each beat of their disintegrating hearts and as the blood reached the skin it boiled and seared them and with their sightless eyes bulging and their tongues protruding, they died. All died, save him.

On he walked into the battle, and again he was calm and content, and men died with each step he took. At first they did not comprehend, could not understand and so the enemy would rush toward him, weapons poised to strike and as they stepped into his range, still yards from him, they fell in agony, to die. And on he strolled.

The fever grew, and as his temperature rose its intensity and distance increased. Mbata ordered his men behind him. The enemy began running now and Mbata raised his right arm and pointed and he sent death on the wind. Some attempted to fire their rifles at him, from an impossible distance and the lead would melt and fall harmlessly, like warm raindrops, to the ground. The attackers quickly discarded their useless weapons and fled. Panic set in and the battle turned into carnage as the retreating enemy stumbled and fell and trampled upon themselves in their terrified haste to escape.

Mbata walked faster and faster and then suddenly he stopped. Everything stopped. Silence descended, blackness fell and the illuminating light flared. Down, from the silence, his father summoned. And when he looked at his feet, his father was beckoning for him. And then it was Mosheshwe who was reaching toward him and he was saying clearly, "Kill me! Let me die by your hands my son." And Mbata wanted to run but he could not and now, again, his father called and reached for him. Mbata fell to his knees and taking his father into his arms he brought him close and once again saw that he was truly dead. He embraced the chilled, rigid body and red tears began to fall

from his eyes and disappear as white mist into the black sky.

And when he heard a voice calling him again he lowered the form in confusion and was astonished to see that he held in his own arms, his own body. And the arms, in animated death pulled him close and pressed his face to its chest and he gasped for air. And suddenly he was sucked into his own corpse and as he looked up, paralyzed, his mother held him, rocked him and wiped the burnt blood from beneath his eye and placed a cool moist hand upon his forehead. And now she called his name and her once gentle rocking movement turned rough and she shook him harder and her face contorted and melted and he was burning all over and he could not breathe. He was crying and she wailed and she screamed, her voice coming from the dark, her words unknown and then they came in clarity. "Wake up!" she screamed. "Wake up!" And in the horrible face remained her clear, beautiful eyes and then, the ... dream ended.

He was awake and Nimi's beautiful eyes were above him in frightened concern and she screamed his name and shook him and he could not move. A tremendous heated weight stamped upon him, across his chest, crushing him, suffocating him.

Nimi rose when he opened his eyes and rushed to their water pouch. She came beside him to lift his head, to give him water and when she touched him, his body began to burn her but she held on to him.

"What is it Mbata?" she asked softly. "What is wrong? What can I do?"

Summoning all his remaining strength he pushed her away forcefully and struggled to roll over, to get up. He could not speak. He tried to gain his feet and falling, he began to crawl toward the stream.

Nimi was alert in her terror and composed and seeing his direction and understanding immediately, she bent to tear at their bedding, the power of her love coursed through her and she rendered effortlessly the resilient cloth into strips and wrapping her hands as quickly and as best as possible, she grabbed his arm and dragged him into the stream.

The cooling water slowed and then halted his descent into a burning death. He knew that was where he was going. His dream possessed a fire that had inexplicably erupted into an inferno and had begun to consume him from the inside, out. But he was relieved now and he felt a preternatural sense of tranquility. It slowly washed over him and floated within him and submerged and saturated itself deep within his soul where loneliness and pain and hatred lived. And when he looked into Nimi's moonlit eyes he was lost in a sensual, serene peace.

She held him gently, caressed his cheek and chest and splashed water over his shaking body. She sung a song in a whisper to him and though he could not hear her words, so low was her voice, he was soothed and he was alive, for she had saved his life. And as Nimi supported his head in the water she continued to push her hands slowly through the wetness and across his cooling skin. His heart eased. His turmoil subsided and then departed, without a trace, into the black nothingness. And the last vestiges of the fever, destroyed by her annihilating redemptive love, virtually dissipated ...

IX

MBALA WAS FRUSTRATED, UTTERLY FRUSTRATED, AND HE was angry. The anger building with every moment of time that passed. But there were other things that he was feeling. He felt helpless, foolish, and betrayed. And there was no one person to direct these emotions against.

As he stood in the shaded, unbral dimness of the mountain, rage wanted to diffuse itself throughout his body and he wished to rail against the earthen entity that was raised above and beyond him and dwarfed him in its immensity and barred in silent insolence his entry. He could not find the aperture he sought, into Calabar.

For two days now he had probed for the opening. It had taken the entirety of the first day just to find what he believed to be the correct area. Only now he doubted this choice. Indeed, now he doubted everything, and everyone, especially himself.

He stepped back a distance in an attempt to regain his bearings. It had been so long ago, so many years since he had been here. But he had known this place so well. Many, many times he had entered the now elusive path after having hunted or fished or just gone walking. He had been able to find the opening even in the shaded twilight or the cover of late evening. But now it was as if it had for him, never existed.

Just yesterday he had been so sure, so confident. The area appeared so familiar. But today, all was strange and foreign and inimical to his presence. He was hot and tired and soon the sun would set. He was extremely anxious. He felt that if he could not find the opening in the light, he certainly could not find it in the thick darkness.

He moved back to the mountain and again resumed his search. He prodded and poked. He crawled, down on his knees, and climbed boulders to peer. He was cut by the jagged rocks and lacerated by the sharp branches he reached between and he was bleeding and sore. Panic began to set in.

He had stumbled over and bumped into his men and finally ordered them to step away. And so they stood back and watched with puzzlement and uncertainty at this hunt that was quickly becoming frantic. And slowly, the sun continued to set.

Now Mbala remained motionless with his back pressed against the thick impregnable fortress. Feelings of defeat and dejection rolled over him. He fought to keep the feelings back. A vision of Nimi and Mbata together emerged, keen and insistent. They were close, he believed. Somewhere on the other side of this mountain he would find them. He could visualize himself walking out of the path and seeing the palace lit up in the distance before, and below him.

Then the hatred amplified itself inside of him and all the energy he had expended as he pushed against this monstrous barrier that towered over him, all the hatred he kept for those who he thought so near, on the other side, all the hatred he sent forth seemed to return from somewhere within this mountain, and mockingly, with a perceptible force, it pushed back.

Mbala felt this something, slide behind him against his shoulders and suddenly, it shoved him. His emotions exploded and he turned, enraged, and as he cursed aloud against this unyielding structure he brought the sword he held, down, in fury upon the face of the mountain and it gave way and his arm disappeared into the sudden collapsing wall and he fell into the opening for which he had so desperately searched.

X

NIMI PACED BESIDE THE CAMPFIRE. SHE CAST OCCASIONAL glances to the direction in which Mbata had walked. She had no way of knowing if he would return this night and this uncertainty upset her. The last time she had really been close and alone with him had been when they lay in the water together. They had remained there in a heavy, comfortable quiet until the sky had begun to slowly grow light and just as dawn broke the warriors had arrived with their horses.

All that day they had ridden at a fairly brisk tempo, only resting when necessary and when the sun began setting they had stopped for the night. Soon after they had made camp Mbata had told her he was going off, to be alone and leaving her with the four warriors, he had disappeared into the fading, early evening dusk and had not returned until morning.

The next day they continued on, and though in many ways he seemed to be himself, she could sense he was confused and troubled. They had talked infrequently as they rode. And once, they had stopped on a hill and as they sat upon their horses they had gazed for a long moment at the land, as it laid stretched flat before them. The heat bringing a wavy movement to the ground and all that lay upon it. Nimi had felt Mbata's gaze and she turned to him. He was close to her and as their eyes met he smiled thinly and she could see displeasure behind the warmth.

They started on and as they headed down the hill Mbata had gestured and spoke. "The mountains you see in the far distance are those that are near Calabar." And she had shivered. A chill had run through her. For a moment her horse had stopped, refused to move and she had to urge it forward.

She remembered that feeling now as she walked impatiently from the edges of the late evening shadows into the reflections from the fire and again she thought of the sharpness of that strange sensation that had disturbed her at the mention of his home, her home. "Perhaps," she pondered, "it is because we are to be separated at Calabar."

She recalled now the many things she had considered the previous night when she was alone, without him. She needed to talk to him. She had things to say. She would tell him she could not stay at Calabar. It was impossible. She had to go to Elmana. He would teach her to fight near him. She would be with him, to protect him, to love him.

Each moment they were together she felt herself thriving, changing, and becoming more and more of a woman. But there was also something else, something greater. It had begun months ago in the streets of Calabar when she had opposed Mbala. It had continued in her fierce struggle against him at Domey. She had resisted his attacks and fought him in those ways accessible to her at that time. And as she had run through the palace, as she and Mbata had fled their pursuers, she had wanted to stop and confront them, to scream out at them, to take up weapons against them and fight for their freedom, for their lives, for their ... love.

This night, she could understand her new strength, her new abilities, this new time in her life. And when she had ripped apart that bedding, shredded it and pulled Mbata into the water, her individual power had been exposed and revealed in its purity, and she was exhilarated by that expression.

She could see herself in the women Mbobo warriors, as she had not been able to envision herself before. Now she understood them. Then, she was awed by them, in fear of them. But in her newfound growth and awareness she realized, in reality she had been frightened of an aspect of herself. There was an essential part of her that needed to resist, to fight, and that was what she had ignored and thus denied. Now she accepted fully the fact that if given the opportunity she would kill Mbala without hesitation before she would allow him to violate and abuse her again. Or, in ultimate defiance, she would destroy herself. She would remove forever the object of his desire and die in protest of him, and his existence.

She would oppose Mbata also. She would resist him through her inability to accept their being torn apart again. She knew she could never stand for him to leave her at Calabar and ride off, and away to his possible death and she remain alone in despair, incessantly worried of his fate. This she could not even imagine, this, was impossible. If he was to die in battle she must die beside him. And as she strolled in agitation, she went over again the things she would say and she began formulating her own plans as to that which she was prepared to do in order to remain near him.

As Nimi turned in her movement she was arrested by an image. There, as a barely discernible motionless outline stood Mbata, staring at her. As he stepped forward she could observe a slight smile on his lips. She stared back, with essences of determination and anger.

He walked past the fire to their water pouch and turning it up he drank

thirstily. She remained there without moving, her eyes never leaving him. When he finished he paused a moment and then walked toward her, and stopping close, they looked into one another's eyes. And then he took her into his arms and hugged her tightly.

"You have things to say?" he asked, as he continued to hold her near.

"Yes, we must talk," she replied. And she hugged him back.

"Good, I have also a great need to speak with you." And he led her, hand in hand, away from the campfires into the descending deepening darkness of the coming night.

They walked for a while and then stopped to sit close, side-by-side upon a large rock. They could see the flames from the campfires in the near distance. Their orange-red burning stood in contrast to the incipient grey-black that began to settle around them and they both permitted the colors of the fires to distract them. They sat quietly, looking past the vapid silhouettes, the undulant shadows, all the while creating in their personal thoughts their private images and fully dimensional mirages. Each including the other in their desirous phantasy.

This moment evoked for them the visions of those special times they had found with one another on this journey. Times of peace in their perfect isolation, great contentment and exquisite joy in being totally alone, together. On more than one occasion they had simply sat or stood for long periods, marveling at the painted sky or peering into the lustrous shrouded darkness. Unspeaking, there being nothing to say.

It was in those moments they had learned to allow their feelings to pass back and forth between one another. They could feel each other's presence and experience a connection within, at their innermost point of life. And so, here in this solitude, they wanted to clear away the disturbance that interfered with them and impaired their intimacy. He knew she was angry. And she knew he was troubled.

"What is it that upsets you?" he asked, quietly.

The sound of his voice, the question, moved her. She stood and began walking in front of him, calming herself and drawing her thoughts together. Finally, she sat beside him again and spoke directly, with an even intensity.

"When we were together before, in Calabar, in your room, I asked, I begged you to let me stay with you. You refused me then. Now, we have shared of the longing and of the pain we both experienced when we were apart, and I know we need not go through that pain again. It was meant for us to be together." She paused, knowing he would not speak, but allow her to finish. Sensing there was more. "We must make our own ways to remain close to one another. It is for us, you and I, to do whatever is necessary. I have nothing without you. It would be cruel of you to leave me alone, with nothing, at Calabar, in agony for you. I know you are not cruel. If I must I will leave Calabar and follow you." Now she was done.

"What is it you want of me?" came his words, in a near whisper. And his voice sounded strange and she looked at him.

"You must leave, I know that. I accept that. But, I must go with you when

you depart. And I believe deep inside you, even though you may try to reject this, you know that is the only way for us.”

Mbata stood and took a few steps and turned to her. “Then you propose to go to Elmana with me?”

“Yes!” she replied quickly. “I will go wherever you go. But I want you to allow that. Let us be in agreement. That is what I most want.”

“You want from me something that is very difficult for me to do. You want me to subject you to discomfort and to risk your life. I did not take you from Domey to place you in such situations. I removed you from there because of my feelings for you. My need to know of your safety. My want to know of your happiness. I have tried, to no avail, to keep away the problems of my people in the personal decisions that involved you, us. I have allowed the privilege of my position to transgress customs and laws that I have sworn to uphold. I used my love of you to disregard Mbala. I have even repressed the reality of my violent existence and the circumstances of this war that now confronts me. In the end, my desire for you has dominated everything and everyone else. Within those decisions, throughout those feelings, whether acknowledged or not, is a consuming need to know that you are safe and protected.”

“Mbata, we both have needs. But what is truly important, what rises above all else and what will stand above all the events that swirl around us is that at the most, more than anything else, and there at the least, along with everything else, we need each other and we need to be together in order to have any possibility at happiness, any chance to really live. This journey, because of its problems, because of its dangers, has proven that, beyond any doubt. I know for both of us, in spite of everything, this has been a most wonderful time. There will always be someone, or something such as this war that attempts to separate us and keep us apart. It is for us to resist. Let us struggle against these things together. Just let me remain somewhere near you.”

Mbata walked to Nimi. He stood for a long moment observing her. Then he turned, bent, and eased to the ground, his back against the rock upon which she sat. He said nothing. Then he pulled gently at her leg, indicating to her to sit with him, and so she slid down close beside him at his left side and they sat like that in the darkness. In silence.

He leaned his head back and gazed at the moon in its incomplete light and watched the stars begin, flicker forth, flare, and continue filling the sky. The night was unusually warm and very clear.

“It is a beautiful sky,” he said softly.

And Nimi put her head against his shoulder and she too admired the quality of it. “Yes it is,” she sighed.

Moments passed. She spoke. “My love, what is it that bothers you? Do I bring you trouble and confusion?”

“No, no,” he answered immediately, reassuringly. “Do not ever think or feel that. Fate is always fan shaped. At each step and between each point of the open and extended fan are the junctures where one either walks on along

blindly or knowingly makes a choice. I have chosen the path over which we travel. That choice, for me was obvious and certain. There is no confusion in my love for you. In that I am sure. I am not now bewildered by that which you have brought to me, only thankful. You bring to me many things. Many good things.”

He paused. He seemed to be waiting for some concealed thoughts or elusive words. “I have been thinking of my father, Mosheshwe and ... my mother, and the dream that tried to destroy me. In the dream there are many things that impress me and it is there, I am confused.

“But what troubles me is that I sense a message or perhaps a warning and I can not see it. I can not discover it, to grasp. But I know it is there because I can feel it. It is as if someone is trying to tell me something, whisper to me and I can not hear their voice. And everyone was there in the dream, but my brother.”

Nimi lifted her head and looked at Mbata. He appeared to her so sensitive, and gentle in this moonlight, and handsome. Yet the scars were a testament to his strife and his pain, evidence of his aging and passing life. He reminded her at this moment, of a lost young man. And she felt saddened by the realization that he, that they, together, faced so many issues. So many people depended upon him to live. So many, sought his death. And here he sat, pondering the meaning of a dream that had brought to him images of the past, present, and perhaps, future.

She spoke as she again placed her head against his shoulder. “Tell me the dream.”

And so they remained like that, in the middle of the semi-isolation. And Nimi was mesmerized by his voice and disturbed by the dreamy nightmare he unfolded. He remembered it vividly and from his rendition she saw it herself, visibly, distinctly, and experienced as he did troubling echoes, and a sense of foreboding.

When he finished it was quiet again. She raised her head to look at him. Then she asked. “Did your father really die in your arms?”

“Yes,” he answered, quickly.

“And did Mosheshwe die by your hands?”

He was silent, and then he said softly, “Yes.” He continued. “You must understand, Mosheshwe asked me, demanded, to leave here through me.” Now he lifted his hands to look at them. “I could not refuse him. I felt for him. I understood his pain. I knew that he suffered.” There came another pause. He lowered his hands slowly and returned his gaze to the sky.

“I miss him. He taught me so much and last night I searched amongst the knowledge he has imparted to me for the answers to my questions.”

He was composed now, and calm. “See the stars?” he asked suddenly. “Observe there the moon.”

“Yes,” she replied. “She turned her gaze upward. “The stars are shining and the moon is bright and growing larger.”

“And they are far away, are they not?”

“Yes, very far away.”

“Feel the earth beneath us.” And he took into his right hand a clump of dirt and squeezed it into tiny pieces and allowed them to crumble between his fingers and they both watched the dirt fall, rejoin the earth and seemingly disappear.

“And in the rainy season when the rain comes we can see it also as it falls from the sky and feel it on our skin and catch it on our tongue, in our hands, and its wetness gives nourishment to the earth and promotes the growth that provides to us all, substances of life.

“Breathe the invisible air Nimi. I can feel it when it moves. Mosheshwe talked of these things many times with me. Because of you I can understand now much of what he tried to explain to me. Before, I could not see it. I could not feel it. I did not believe it. And he would tell me that if I believed it, I would feel it, and then I would see it.”

“What did he want you to believe?”

Mbata moved, he moved Nimi. He stretched out fully and pulled her close. With an elevated soft grassy mound as a pillow they lay like that.

“He said to believe that everything and everyone is connected. And that everything and everyone is a part, a related part of, The Whole Life. That is what he called it, The Whole Life. He said we were each united in this wholeness and when we wantonly destroy what we believe to be separate pieces, we damage The Whole Life. Mosheshwe said there is no reality to a separate existence. There is no truth to individual things or totally distinct human beings. That if we love and respect The Whole Life, we love and respect ourselves as part of that completeness and thus we love and respect everyone and everything else also, as a part of it.

“He said we must nourish that which is around us and especially that which is below us which by design we are required to guard in an order created to maintain growth and sustain the forward movement. The children, the animals, the air, the water, the earth that I touch, close in my hand, all is to be protected by humans. And the stars and moon that only appear to be far away but in fact touch us, through our eyes, all that, can be loved and respected, even if only in our minds.

“When I lay in the swamps at the Oil Rivers and you were at Domey, we were joined. You taught me how to truly love, and we are connected by that love. And we are torn apart by hate. The hatred I have always understood. With your help I have come to understand Mosheshwe’s words from a different direction. I felt. I saw. And now I believe. I believe now, as did he, in the possibilities, of humans.

But Mosheshwe was saddened by a fact, a reality that can not be avoided. He realized, and admitted to me, that at this moment the humankind is, for some unknown reason, severely flawed. Even the animals seem to possess some knowledge inside of them of the things about which he spoke. They destroy only for a purpose, to survive and therefore they maintain balance. Humans survive to destroy and upset the balance. Humans need no reason to kill, but use the belief that, that which they destroy is separate from them and thus they are unaffected because in their own selfish minds they think

that they are unharmed by these acts.

“The Mbobos view the Fon and Shantulu as different. We oppose them and they struggle with us, because of our differences. When the foreign men came here, to this world, they saw only the contrasts, they were unable to see the connections. For them, we were not humans, we were not people, like them. And so we all fight each other from these points of differences. And as we kill each other we slowly damage, break down, and bring suffering pain to The Whole Life.

“Understand this. The Whole Life lives. From there all life emanates. It, breathes the same air that humans breathe. It, drinks of the same water for which humans thirst. It, is warmed and lighted by the same sun. And It, is soothed by the revelations that arise with the contemplation of the values of the beauty within the stars and moon. It, takes pride in the ebb and flow, the rain to the dust and back again. It, exists from the smallest to the largest. And so, It is wounded by the human acts of painful destruction. The wounds fester and a poisonous substance luxuriates in the watery blood and enters the earth deeply and the inhumanity of humans feeds the treacherous and flawed spirits. The evilness grows, inflicts wounds. The wounds become many and The Whole Life becomes ill and then if It, is destroyed, if It... dies there will of course no longer be ... life.”

He had been speaking in a low resigned voice. His words had been softly modulated, slightly raspy and deep in tone and they had spilled into the night air as if from some ancient written parchment. The thoughts having been previously inspected and confirmed, and now, in the darkness, they were being shared. He shifted slightly, and as he settled, they clasped hands. Mbata brought her hand to his cheek and then lowered it and stared at it for a long moment. She spoke.

“If others could care, could love, as we love one another, perhaps ...” Her voice trailed off. And the sounds of these words from this young woman, in love, faded away, into the blackness. They both remained silent.

“And what is to be done? What are we to do?” she finally asked. Feeling now the weight in the complexities of it all.

“There is nothing we can do but continue on, fight on, to resist the total domination of this internal flaw and to sustain one’s life, one’s family, one’s people through all necessary means. You realize that, believe that, do you not? Even our love brings death and demands that we remain prepared to die as an expression of that love. Now only the powers of hatred and destruction are accepted and respected. Because humans are at war with themselves they make war with everything and everyone else. And anyone who ignores that fact ... will be crushed. Death rules, and The Whole Life is threatened.”

He paused. He took a deep breath. He continued. “Perhaps in the distant future, maybe, a hundred years from now humans will have changed and the world will be transformed. A hundred years from now I will have been altered, varied through my lack of substance, eliminated by the movement of time. Am I guilty today? That is for others to judge and then decide. But I am as responsible as the next for each of my acts, in some ways more so. For my

actions have been extreme and my position greater than others. I can not deny, I must acknowledge my responsibility and the part I have played. I have regrets. I do not blame fate. But there was very little I could do Nimi. There were reasons. When I came upon this earth all that was around me was already out of control and progressing of its own menacing power. There must be a halt or at the least, a long, long pause. Possibly the death of all those now living will bring with it exoneration and salvation for those who shall come after.”

All sound ceased between them and around them for a long moment. Then faraway in the distance a lion roared, the last of the vocal warning reaching across the earth to faintly resonate within them and touch their spirits. A soft breeze passed and cooled them slightly. The birds and animals quieted. The essence of this night pressed upon them. He continued.

“Mosheshwe often spoke of dying and its hidden meaning. He spoke of the quality of death. He said we shall know how we have lived by how we die. He believed that his death and thus his life was meaningful and good if I assisted him and helped him oppose the sickness that was slowly, painfully taking his life. For him, the sickness was his enemy and he sought to deny it the power to destroy him directly and by rendering it powerless in that manner he forced it to become ineffectual in its purpose and that was as close as he could come to rejecting its existence.

“I was joined to him. In my own way, at that time, I loved Mosheshwe and so, despite the hateful transgressions of my life he died through love, by my hands, within my arms. And as I lay in the water, in your arms, had I died at that moment, my life, at that instant, regardless of all my suffering and in spite of the evil within me, my life would have fulfilled its purpose. I was put here to rise, to change, to overcome. Living and dying would have become, through you, good and proper and I would have departed this mortal life at peace with my self. For I know there is forgiveness for me in your loving heart. Can you understand that, what I am saying about death, and dying? It is very important that you understand.”

Nimi recalled Mbala, and the thoughts she just a while ago had of him. She remembered in detail her stringent anger and the vision of his death by her own vengeful hands. Now she experienced a stronger affinity with her desires and once vague notions of there being a need of propriety in her own demise. And though her obstinacy seemed virulently strong and peculiar to her then, it was obvious now and she could comprehend it fully. There can be both a want to live and a want to die.

“Yes, I can understand,” and her voice was clear and sure.

Now came his words and they were also plain and certain.

“The fever has left me. I believe it no longer exists within me as it once did.”

With this startling statement Nimi was struck speechless. And she was confused and overwhelmed. She sat up, to look down at him, and he was gazing at her, calmly.

“What are you saying? How do you know?” she finally managed to utter.

He stared at her intently. He scanned her face, enjoying her surprise and the expressiveness that displayed itself behind her loveliness and transmitted to him her encompassing strength, intelligence, and maturity. These timeless aspects were, in each and every facet, an essential part of her being and she was experiencing and passing to him at this most special moment all that ran through her.

"I know," he said. "Surely, I know. I have lived with it all my life. It existed here." And he reached for her and he touched his chest, at his heart, with her hand. "A tight, dull pain, ruled me in its threat to flare up, punish, and even as it destroyed others it attempted to destroy me as I sought in vain to master it. Now it is gone. It left me as we lay in the water together and my love for you has taken its place. There is no room for it now."

"But what does it mean?" she asked, concerned and yet relieved.

"It means many things. In one aspect I feel vulnerable and unprotected. It has been with me, to one degree or another, always. And yet there is joy because I am free from it. And also," he paused and a slight smile came to his lips, "it means, tomorrow night at Calabar, if you are not afraid, I can touch you, and love you without restrictions."

Nimi smiled and went into his arms. "I am not afraid," she whispered. She kissed his cheek, his ear. "I have never been afraid of you."

As he held her in his arms he spoke softly to her. "We will not be separated again. I will not leave you. You will go with me. Wherever I go, you will go. Wherever you are I will be also." He pulled her closer, embraced her tighter. "We will be together. Yes! Only until ... death, will we part. And perhaps then we will come together again, in ... the other life."

His words thrilled her yet brought unease to her. And once again she shivered and he felt pass through this warm body in his arms, an ominous chill.

An omen was stirred in his soul.

XI

MBALA AND HIS MEN GATHERED TOGETHER THEIR required provisions and weapons and prepared to enter the darkening path. It had been an interminable, anxious day for them and now the sun was beginning to set and they wanted to start this trek through the mountain at the proper time.

On the previous evening, after he had fallen into the crevice they had all been stunned. His men had thought he had been severely injured or possibly killed, as he, for several moments was lost to their sight and completely covered by all that which had come down upon him.

They had remained motionless for an instant and then as they had rushed forward he had begun calling out. Quickly they had extracted him from the rubble. And it was not until he had been assisted to his feet and had brushed from his face and hair the dirt and looked at the opening that he realized what had happened and recognized the hidden trail.

Through time, the opening had been filled and sealed from sight with a thin wall of loose earth and branches and small rocks. The force of his frustrated blow had caused this barricade to weaken and crumble apart. Immediately he had ordered his men to clear the rubble from the opening and though they had worked rapidly, it was soon too dark to proceed and so they stopped for the night.

It was an uneasy night for them all. They were excited and yet they were extremely apprehensive. On the other side of the mountain was their goal. A very dangerous goal. And so they spent their time until dawn restlessly trying to sleep.

They took the early part of the next day, until late afternoon, removing

the last of the obstructions and then they ate and tried to relax. Mbala wanted to move into the entrance as the sun was starting its descent. Unless there were unforeseen problems it would not take long to negotiate the pathway. On the other side they would wait at the exit in order to emerge in the early evening shadows and then remain near the mountain until night, before moving forward. Two men would stay behind to guard their horses.

As Mbata and Nimi rode past the last of the frontal fortifications and entered the city of Calabar from the west, Mbala, with five men in front and five behind him, entered from the east, the narrow path.

Nimi sat patiently in Mbata's enclosed garden, alone, waiting on him to come for her. She was dressed in a long, brightly colored silk dress with a matching head wrap. She wore several rings on her fingers and gold bracelets on each arm and every so often she brought her hand to her throat to touch lightly the necklace Mbata had given her.

She glanced around at the strange trees, beautiful native plants and exotic flowers that were illuminated by the few, small glowing lamps interspersed throughout this silhouetted, tranquil, surreal world. She contemplated on the many disturbances that spread within her life and she longed to remain here, in private loving seclusion, with Mbata. Here, there was exquisite peace. Here, there was a wonderful emotional and visual contrast to the scene that confronted them as they rode through the city toward the palace.

The atmosphere at Calabar had changed drastically since her previous stay. Thousands of people had departed for Domey. Thousands more than that had come from Domey. And many, many thousands from Calabar were at this moment directly involved in the horrible physical conflict that in one fashion or another actively imposed upon, influenced, and consumed them all.

A weighted pall hung thickly from the shrinking evening sky and draped itself as an invisible shroud of mourning and coupled itself with a distorted sense of solemnity that blanketed the city and attempted to smother the life from Calabar. Nimi felt an enormous sadness at the tragically fragmented state of the people of this once friendly, vibrant city and her previously heightened excitement was dulled and dampened as poignant reality closed in upon her.

She had noticed a change in Mbata also. His face had become fixed as they rode slowly through the streets. And an intense anger emanated from his piercing eyes. He himself could observe vividly the effects of the war, the extreme toll this violent conflict exacted on his domain and seemingly everything and everyone within it.

Thousands of people from Domey had been displaced and he could see the families that were struggling to secure food and shelter and adapt themselves to their new life. Those who were fearful of attack, who had lived miles from the city, had moved closer and into Calabar to seek protection from that which could possibly come. The Mbobos of the inland area did all

they possibly could to assist their people from the coast but they, and the city itself strained under the vast numbers that had arrived and the emotional pressures that accompanied them. And the city was being drained as each day supplies and munitions were being transported to the Calabar warriors who fought so far away. And each day, all knew, Mbobos were dying. Far away from their homes, their loved ones, they died.

They had stopped and then ridden on through the city and they both had been momentarily heartened by the determination and resolve that lay behind the vocal support expressed by the people they passed along the way. Despite the hardships, they continued to believe in their king and the course he had chosen for them. But for Mbata, this did little to diminish the hatred that had once again begun to rise within him for his disruptive enemies.

As they had passed through the opening and approached the palace Nimi had been surprised and disappointed at how different it also appeared. Once a powerful and impressive monument, it now stood imposingly stark.

There was of course no festive music or pounding drums, which was to be expected. But the heated oppressive stillness in the air that encompassed the walls was unreal. And as they dismounted from their horses she had noticed that all was eerily silent and the countless windows were unnaturally dark. She saw no guards or visitors leaving or movement coming from the city or anyone anywhere on the palace grounds. And from the ensuing conversation she heard, she had discovered that much of this huge edifice was empty and therefore in no need of light.

They were met by two of his remaining ministers and a small contingent of trusted domestic slaves and Mbobo servants who maintained the now reduced critical functions of the palace. Mbata greeted them all gravely, in subdued tones and before he departed he had turned to her.

"I have pressing matters to which I must attend. You will be taken to rooms next to mine. Try to rest a while." He came close to her and looking into her eyes he smiled slightly. "We will not have much time here, together. Let us try to enjoy it. Choose the finest of what attracts you from the garments and jewelry you will be provided and adorn yourself for me. I will come for you and we will share an elaborate meal together, just the two of us."

Then, with his left hand, he had touched her face with his fingers, lightly, for a long pensive moment. "Wait for me in my garden." he had said. "I will try not to take too long." And then he turned from her and was quickly gone. And so she waited. And in spite of everything, her desire for Mbata flared within her and she grew very warm, deep inside.

Nimi rose now and began to step slowly along one of the numerous walkways that had been created throughout the courtyard. These short trails, by design, allowed one to walk unseen, in solitude, amongst the flowers and plants and trees and yet continuously merge into a path that led to the center of the garden where there was a small pond with little fish of various hues and miniature stone and copper statues positioned alongside the places to sit that encircled the placid water.

Nimi reflected as she moved around the garden in the dim light, pausing occasionally to touch or smell a flower, taking moments to gaze wistfully above at the emerging waning crescent moon and the earliest twinkling stars. As she strolled nearer to the side wall she suddenly stopped and then moved close to a small tree. Smiling to herself she rushed from the dimness and crossing to the doorway she entered Mbata's bedroom and continued quickly into the adjoining room and approached the far wall. She searched with her eyes through the many hanging decorative objects and when she saw a large ornate gold knife she removed it and hurried back to the garden. Finding the tree again, she cut from it a small section of the bark and then dug the blade deep into it until a milky substance began to ooze out. Laying the knife down she placed her tongue to the tree and licked several times the thick drops that came forth. She turned from the tree as she heard Mbata call her name and placing the piece of bark into her mouth she swallowed it and suppressing a laugh, she ran to him. Inside she felt happy, and in love.

Mbala and his men crouched in shaded silence near the mountain. They had been able to negotiate the path with relative ease. Picking their way carefully past fallen rocks, they walked slowly, stealthily forward. Above them the sky changed its colors and grew darker as the sun set directly ahead of them.

They had all experienced a moment of panic as they had rounded a sharp bend and came to what appeared to be an impeding barrier. Mbala had moved to the front of the group and pushing his spear into the tightly tangled, thick foliage, he had quickly realized that they had in fact reached their exit, and they were all relieved.

He ordered a warrior to cut an opening and the man had in a short time hacked his way through the overgrowth and following him, they stepped beyond the restraining obstruction and then settled into an area near the mountain.

Just past dusk, as the darkness began to descend around them, Mbala motioned to his men to gather close to him. He spoke. Despite their distance from the palace, despite their distance from anyone else human, he felt compelled to speak in hushed tones.

"We can not see the palace from here." He pointed. "But just around the end of the mountain and below the rise we will see it." Now he picked up a stick. With his left hand he scraped and cleared a spot on the ground and began to draw lines in the dirt.

"Here is the palace." He drew a rectangle. "Here are the rooms of Mbata at the rear of the palace." And he attached a smaller rectangle to the larger one. He next drew a still smaller connecting square shape. "And here is his garden." Then he drew three separate circles completely around his design. "These are the walls that surround the palace." He stopped.

He scanned the faces of these men so close to him, looking excited and peering intently at his eyes, waiting for him to break this prolonged pause. "You," and he nodded to the man directly across from him in the semi-circle,

“will stay and guard our provisions. You,” and he indicated the captain of his warriors, “will take four men and move to the right side of the wall.” He pointed to his drawing. “Here you will find an entrance that takes you through the walls and into the side of the palace. Enter there. You will at that time be standing at the start of a long hallway. Move along it until you come to a doorway on the left side, it is the first one near. That is the entrance to his rooms. Enter there. Those are his anterior rooms and at the rear is his bedroom. It opens to his garden.”

Mbala stopped again, his mind racing. Within his thoughts he sifted amongst the many bits and pieces of information he had gathered and placed away. He smiled to himself, a slight imperceptible smile. His secret activities on the previous visit were indeed worthwhile.

“You should not meet with any resistance,” he continued. “His rooms are quite isolated from the main area of movements through the palace. Guards are usually not around except when guests are present. Here at Calabar they concentrate only on the war.”

He returned to his drawing. “The others, with me, will enter here, through a private entrance that will take us past the walls and to his garden. From there we can see the rear bedroom doorway. We will wait there in the courtyard.”

He looked at his captain. “He may be there, somewhere in those rooms, find him. Kill him!” And now he paused again to stress his next words. “Kill him as quickly and as quietly as possible. Do not let him escape! Strike rapidly! Be absolutely certain he is dead. If we are fortunate, he will be asleep and he will never know. If you can not, for some reason kill him, drive him to us in the garden. We must not give him opportunity to bring that fever up or all will be lost.” He stopped and a new, yet old desire flared within him. An internal direction was altered. “Another thing. If there is a woman with him, spare her. Do not harm her. Bring her to me.

“If he is not in his rooms, look for any signs, any indications at all that will tell us if he has returned to Calabar and the palace. Then, join us in the garden. We will all wait for him. Eventually, he will come there, of that, I am certain.

“We will remain hidden and before dawn if he has not come by then we return here, to the mountain until the next night. We have enough provisions to last six days. Unless something has happened to him I am sure he will arrive within that time. He may or may not have yet reached his home. According to my calculations he had days of a start before us but we have traveled, I believe, faster than he. But there is no way to know.

“Now, let us try to rest. We will wait until late night to move forward when all will be quiet at the rear of the palace.” And he smiled, a broad, hate-filled smile. “Remember,” he said. “He who is responsible for the fatal blow receives extra gold, enough to last a lifetime.” He looked at these grim faces as they murmured softly and nodded their heads in approval.

Mbala stood now and as his men eased back he took a few steps away from them. His heart pounded and his stomach felt empty except for a fist

hardness at its very pit. As he looked above him he was pleased to see the incipient incomplete moon hovering there. For the next few nights the moon would alter toward newness and thus the nightly darkness would add to his advantage. He sat down upon a large rock, to try and relax. His lips curled, into a smirk this time. Inside, he was confident, tense. Deep inside he was more than slightly fearful.

Mbata struggled to remove his gaze from the candle's flame and return his attention to Nimi. The flickering fire mesmerized him. He was drawn to it. He wanted one moment to reach out and touch the pointed flame. The next instant he felt an urging need to ease closer, to better hear it. There was a humming prophetic voice inside the tongue of these flames and it licked at him as it jumped and seemingly sparked from one candle to the next, to hide and tease him with its concealed, summoning utterances.

To his left, placed upon the long narrow table, a golden candelabrum with nine candles, to his right, another one with twelve candles. Across from him was sitting Nimi, composed, observing him. They had completed their quiet, sumptuous meal, neither being very hungry, and now both sat, motionless, in contemplative silence.

Mbata was dressed in his finest silk robe with elaborate gold jewelry on his hands and around his neck. To Nimi he appeared very young and so elegant and serene, with traces of sadness passing fleetingly through his dark, haunted eyes. Yet he was once again a king.

Mbata pulled his descending soul from the dancing flames and reaching near to his throat he touched Nimi's ring and turning his head slowly, his eyes fell upon her and his heart jumped. She was exquisitely beautiful as she sat there in the only light the flaming fingers provided. All around her was darkness and her deep color seemed to glow and radiate and her eyes, now fastened upon him, called him from the little fires, to her, and held him, immobilized him and demanded he allow himself to peer beyond her shining eyes and lose his self deep in her loving, sensuous, essence.

He knew that his minister of external relations and his minister of trade were at this time returning from the far northeast with a caravan of German munitions. He knew they would pass Calabar and move southwest to within one hundred miles of Elmana. He knew four days ago well over seventy thousand men and women Mbobo warriors had departed Calabar to join the nearly thirty thousand warriors already amassed there. He knew his warriors, still more than sixty thousand strong, moved along the Nigo, drawing the enemy deeper into his trap. He knew they would await his, and Nimi's arrival. And he knew at this precise moment, in this dim room, in their suspended world, none of that mattered to him. All he cared about was this woman and these penetrating, seductive eyes that spoke to him across the table, over this cup that had been raised to this woman's enticing lips. That was all he cared about. That, and the voices he heard again, now ... faintly, distractingly, and his eyes searched, first, the darting, wavering flames and next, the lovely flashing eyes. And he was disturbed and disoriented. And he shook his head,

once, and squeezed his eyes shut for an instant in a futile attempt to eliminate the echoing chimes that rang in his ears and gently pricked at his heart ... threateningly. "Are you all right Mbata?" Nimi inquired, softly.

And now his wants and needs were united and directed toward this woman. Her words, her question, had drawn him away from all else and obliterated the mysterious whispering calls. His desire coalesced upon her and he rejected with certainty, everything and everyone except Nimi Enokye and his tremendous love for her. This was all that was for him ... real.

"Yes Nimi," he answered. "I am fine." He paused and briefly, smiled at her. "You look beautiful tonight."

"Thank you," she replied. "And you look very handsome. Seeing you like this reminds me of that instant I first saw you. It seems, as if it was only yesterday."

"You are a vision here before me, as a queen. My queen!" His voice was low, intense. "Nothing will ever change that. We have been through much together. But the process diminishes in importance when it has been placed beside the final outcome. All is good and proper when the end is good and proper. Is that not true?"

Now Nimi smiled and her voice was raised a little and her words were precise. "Yes my love. It is very true."

At the mountain, Mbala rose slowly and reached, extended his hands for his weapons of ... death.

In this room, Mbata rose. Nimi rose. He walked around the table to her and reached for his love, his life. He brought her into his arms and they remained like this for a long, long passionate moment. Holding one another desperately.

"Tonight!" He whispered.

"Yes! Tonight! She whispered.

They moved apart and hand in hand they turned and walked toward the doorway, toward his rooms. He divided the curtains for her and as she stepped through them he paused a moment to glance back at the melting candles. He moved into the hall and as the curtains swirled and closed behind him, the first of the candles expired. It extinguished itself in its own liquid that immediately began to cool and harden. Its demise could be heard in the obvious climactic hissing sound that reverberated and crackled loudly throughout the now, empty room. The last evidence of its burning life could be seen floating wispily ... away, its smoky traces fading and disappearing into the humid black air. Each, one by one extinguished its heated self, alone, for there was no one there to hear or see. There was no one to experience the quitting of the once illuminating flames or to beseech against the beginnings of the suffocating unending darkness that settled, where once the light ... lived.

Mbata and Nimi strolled toward his rooms.

Inside he felt as if he would ... explode!

Mbala and his men moved from their position, rounded the corner of the concealing mountain and slowly, quietly, ascended the nearby rise. They remained motionless there and gazed down upon the palace that lay scarcely visible in the distance. Only the outlines of the massive circular walls and thick sucking shadows of the immense edifice they surrounded stood obvious to them this night.

They were all caught there. Each, nervously shifted, arranged again their weapons. And each was quite disturbed at the extent of the permeating darkness that emanated menacingly from the huge structure. Before them was blackness. Completely encompassing them was stillness, and silence. Then! An animal called. A small bird chattered.

Mbala was puzzled for just a moment and then he was pleased at this indication of lack of any presence and absence of all activity. He was also momentarily disappointed and felt that the apparently forlorn appearance very possibly meant his brother was not yet at Calabar.

As they stared at their destination, an unusually strong breeze gusted around them and threw dust into Mbala's eyes. He blinked and turned his head and as his vision cleared he looked again across the darkness. For an instant he believed he saw a light where there was not one before. But he was not sure, of anything.

Again the wind blew, harder this time and the force, now directly at his back, leaned on him, insistently. He staggered and then he stumbled and began to descend, with reluctance and trepidation, from the rise and now he moved, to pass through the quiet isolation toward the palace garden and the impending destiny that was coiled, poised, awaiting him. His throat was dry and his heart pounded wildly. Inside he was suddenly ... numb.

Mbata and Nimi walked through the entrance of the anterior rooms. They did not stop but continued into the bedroom. One small, dim lamp in the far corner cast a dull gloomy glow that expanded only a short distance and left much of the room in shadows.

Mbata moved near to his bed and lit another small lamp. The soft light brought a widened range, an indefinite distinctness to the many images that faded, lightened, and swayed as if dancing slowly throughout the large room.

He turned to Nimi, who stood motionless near the doorway. He extended his hand to her and she went to him. He led her through his bedroom doorway and into his edenic garden. "We have not been able to enjoy time here together," he said, as they both stopped and surveyed the flowery beauty. "I have always found such peace here, amongst this budding life."

After several long moments she squeezed his hand gently and spoke softly, soothingly to him. "When all this is over we will return here and spend many days, and nights together."

It was as if for him the sound of her voice and the words she expressed, for disturbing reasons hovered in suspension inexplicably between them. Both her voice and the meaning behind her words seemed foreign and felt thin. He attempted to visualize the two of them together, here in this tranquil

paradise some time in the future and he saw ... nothing, only impenetrable blackness. He knew to dwell on this vision of nothingness would distract him and clash with this moment. So, he discharged the uneasy feeling and returned his attention to this night, as Nimi again, squeezed his hand.

He turned, faced her, felt her passionate eyes and lost himself as he was drawn swiftly through the beautiful dark-brown windows of her exalted essence and he knew he had once again crossed over the now broken impeding line, burrowed under the final boundaries and dived into her loving heart.

There was a pleasing silence that fell around them, then urged them, and it was with rising desire that they moved back towards the bedroom. Nimi walked to the large chair beside the bed and removed the wrapping from her head and placed it easily on the chair. She then began to slip the jewelry from her wrists and fingers and place it all on the table nearby.

Mbata stood still, observing her. He felt his body tingle as he removed his own jewelry save her ring that hung from his throat. Her profile was sharply defined to him. Her slow graceful, sensual movements asked that he respond. She turned to him and pulling her dress from her shoulders she allowed it to drop to the floor and there she was, before him, naked and black in this starving light. Only the gifted golden necklace remained on her stirring, exciting body.

He floated to her and halting close, he shed his own robe and sweeping her up, into his arms, he carried her to his bed and placed her, easily, down. He hesitated, standing for a moment to look at her wonderfully rich color as it revealed itself to him in an obvious contrast to the lightness of the bedding she lay upon. There was an accepting, pleasantly annoying ache that hunched within his heart as he looked at her looking at him. And all the while the insignificant lamp poured its meager substance across her lustrous skin.

Nimi slid back and held her arms open to Mbata. She smiled slightly, enticingly. He squeezed his hands into fists. Tight! Tighter! He raised them slowly before his face and opened them as if to salute and emphasize with this release that ran through his fingers a sense of a new freedom and a reality that was becoming distant as he accepted this moment as one that was truly essential to the fulfillment of his life. This singular instance, regardless of, in rejection of all the previous similar symbolic scenes, this most unique moment was in actuality the first time that he would love, righteously. And as this thought passed through his mind, Nimi spoke.

"Mbata, for me this is the first time! All else, anything before you was meaningless, as nothing! Do you believe me? Can you understand that?"

"Yes Nimi," he nearly whispered. "I understand."

He was in the bed, above her. Then, close to her. She reached to him, took him into her hands and he was twisted and rung as washed silk at her touch and then, she guided him into her syrupy wetness, into her heat, into the inmost recesses of her trembling body. He moved, slowly, deeper into her. She moved toward him, wanting his hardened warm flesh to vanish and roam inside of her.

He remained separated from her, suspended above her, looking with inspired wonder at the movement. The realization of this consummate joining inflamed him. He saw this part of his own body as it enlarged and disappeared within her and then emerged, only to enter her again. Again! Again!

Nimi, also in admiring captivation, observed this part of him she wanted so very badly. She felt as if this amazing aspect of his essence that extended itself outside of him, from him, into her was, for ... her and thus belonged only to ... her. And her passion overwhelmed her, as she now needed to see, with her own eyes, this joyous loving miracle that her yielding body was somehow able to experience, not just here, where they touched, but within and throughout every fiber of her now burning existence and beyond and then again far beyond her long ago awakened, aroused, wanting, emotional center.

Then she looked into his eyes, these eyes that spoke to her, that craved for her, that believed in her, that were desperate for her. He stared at her, at her beautiful eyes and he was dazed, astonished, as this entrance to her soul opened and he saw completely through the passion and marveled at the image of true love. Each was seized, to wander within the wonder and pleasure of the gaze, of the other.

She wrapped her legs around him. She put her arms around him and drew his full weight down upon her. And she could feel now the strength of it, the length of it, all of it as she moved with increasing abandon and pulled and pressed herself against him. And he could feel now, with the varying rhythms of his thrusts, all of the hot, sticky, soft, desirous depths of her. And so, they moved like this. Loved, like this. In ... the moist darkness.

Outside! Outside Mbala and his men moved forward, their steps muffled and hesitant. They stopped. Looking. Listening. Then they could hear the bubbling sounds of a stream from somewhere near, run past them and away, into the night. In the secretive darkness they crept closer and ... closer. They stopped. There ahead to their right they could discern the vague shape of Mbata's private stables. Again, they moved forward. Now, they stopped again. Crouching. Waiting. Mbala wanted more time to pass. He wanted the night to be late, very late.

Nimi lay beside Mbata, her head upon his chest. She lightly ran her fingers along his thighs, in circles across his stomach. Her fingertips brushed between his legs, stirring him. The beating of his once unharnessed heart was in her ear, against her cheek and it drowned out the silence that otherwise encompassed them, and his heart brought a throbbing echo into the now quiet room. She luxuriated in the feelings that the two of them shared and revered the momentous act in which they had participated, completely, satisfyingly, together.

Nimi spoke, and Mbata heard her sensuous voice, low and soft and he felt her words as her warm breath blew against his skin and her words and their

intention buried themselves into his heart. "I want your child Mbata." She raised her head and looked at him. A slight smile played upon her lips. An anticipating sparkle was in her eyes. "Did you know you had a Mudzi tree in your garden?" she asked, seductively.

He looked at her, thrilled at the requesting statement, perplexed at this unusual question. He did not speak. She continued. "I have inside of me, the substance of that tree. It will make me fertile and help us make a child together. Your seed will join with me and the magic of the white sap of the Mudzi will bind us and bring forth a new life. That life, possible because of our love, will swell my belly and make a home inside of me for our child, a boy, to be a man who will one day be ... a king."

He did not respond for a long moment. "Yes," he whispered, finally. "Do you believe? Could it be possible? An heir, a king to beget others." Again he was silent. Thinking. Wishing. "That is a wonderful vision. To think that at some time, somewhere in the future a living example of our struggle, our love, could perhaps experience the peace that will one day enter the world. Do you think? Perhaps, he may assist in that change." They looked at each other. Feeling. Believing?

He ran his hand over her back, with easy languid motions. She eased closer to him. Then her tongue was moist along his throat, across his chest. She took him into her hand and caressed him and he grew again now, to a new hardness that expressed his loving desire and acknowledged her tempting, lustful power.

She rolled onto her back, revealed herself, and he was called to her. Their souls surrendered. He was there, erect, at her entrance. Their bodies joined. As a heated piercing rod he eased into her. She lifted her melting body to meet him. Her wet, glowing flesh possessed him. She strained to engulf him. Her legs were around him, tightly. In sudden desperation, she held him and soon she was screaming quietly in his ear, down, into his soul, urging him on. Pleading. Begging for his ... child.

Mbala and his men were near the stables. Then they moved quietly, stealthily forward, pausing to listen. They could smell the horses. They could sense death. They could taste fear. Mbala touched his hatred. They crawled now and quickly reached the first of the three walls. They pressed themselves close to it. Mbala looked to the sky and took several deep breaths. His heart pounded and he placed his sword and shield down and ran his hands along the ground to cover his sweating palms with dirt. The wall, rising behind and above them was hard and solid against his arm. They remained there. Again, waiting for this night to continue on.

Mbata sat up, looked down at Nimi. He touched her throat with the back of his hand. He could feel the beating movement and imagine her fiery blood coursing through her body. He lay back down. Thus they were, side-by-side, hands clasped. Silent. Thinking. And deep within, uneasiness tried to assert itself and although he did not ignore it, he tried to dismiss it, in vain.

Mbala motioned to his captain, nodded, and pointed. Five men moved away, along the wall and were soon out of sight. Mbala closed his eyes for a moment and in his mind he tried to estimate the time it would take for them to reach the side entrance, move past the walls, into the palace and reach Mbats's rooms.

He opened his eyes and saw his four warriors, drawn close to him. Their eyes were wide and anxious. He tried to swallow. His mouth was dry and his mind shouted at him. He knew it was too late. They had come too far. And even though he wanted to, he could not turn back now.

Mbata rose up again and shook his head. There was a strange ringing in his ears. The chimes had returned. And recalling the whispers of the candles at dinner, he turned and sat on the edge of the bed. The floor, its flat rigid properties bringing him bearings to this swirling disoriented moment. Nimi sat up now, puzzled, looking at his back. Unable to see his eyes that now began to change in the dimness and grow cold.

"What is wrong?" he wondered.

And Nimi asked, softly, aloud, "What is wrong?"

He stood now and walked to the tables against the far wall. He searched, for what? He did not know. And now his hands fell, as if willed, upon a lone candle and he picked it up and looked at it for a long moment and the whispering chimes grew louder. Nimi watched him, and she realized, for some reason, she was afraid, terribly afraid.

Outside the far entrance five men crept noiselessly through the first wall at the side of the palace.

Outside the garden, Mbala and his four men moved through the first wall.

Mbata walked to the lamp in the nearby corner and lit the candle. He stared at it as flared, wavered and settled into its brief life.

Outside, Mbala and his men passed through the second wall. The other five men hesitated and then moved again, past the second wall. Mbala and his men were now pressed against the third and final wall. They stopped to listen.

Mbata held the candle in front of him and walked, as if the flame led him, naked, into the garden, finally stopping near the small pond. Nimi stood. Her heart was beating so fast it pained her. And now, somewhere in her mind she heard incomprehensible ringing voices. She moved across the room to the far wall and leaned there against it with both her hands pressed tightly over her ears. She whispered, to herself, to no one. "Mbata what is it? What is it?" She could see him through the doorway, standing as a black statue in the center of the garden, staring at the flickering candle flame.

The captain and his men had passed through the third wall and now stood in the palace at the beginning of the long darkened hallway that ran past Mbata's rooms. They stopped and the captain motioned for the man on his left to move down the hall and find the entrance they sought.

Mbala sent his men through the entrance of the third wall and he followed a few steps behind. Before them was now the rear wall of the courtyard and from this vantage point they could see beyond the narrow doorway and into the very garden itself. There were several lamps on and all was quiet and suspended, seemingly, in ... peace.

Mbala wondered where his other men were. He wondered where Mbata was. He wondered where Nimi was and then, with his hand, he ordered his men forward. In a hurry, they moved, single file toward the dimly lit garden doorway.

Mbata stared at the flame.

There was a time in his life when he would have easily, and as a natural aspect of his once intuitive nature, quickly deciphered the susurrus omen, the mysterious sounds, and been able to hear clearly the voices that whispered to him. But now, he was altered in his essence. He stood there, weakened and vulnerable. He was immersed deep in the throes and confusion of ... love.

Finally, as if sent from some great distance they arrived, the words, and crossed over the edges of his mind and he suddenly heard them, precise and distinct. His mother's voice. His father's voice. Mosheshwe's voice. Nimi's voice. United in chorus they said goodbye to Mbata. Farewell! And then in thunderous, deafening screams they said. Goodbye Mbata! Farewell!

Every facet of Mbata's being was alive now, and raw, and deep inside his soul crystallized and then shattered. He flung the candle into the pond and as the flame disappeared the first Domey warrior, stooping and hesitant, stepped through the doorway, into the beautiful, dim garden.

Mbata saw the intruder before the man saw him. There was no need to retreat. No desire to run away. Taking several quick strides he launched himself into the air. Leaping high, he grabbed a large, low hanging branch in a nearby tree and it broke in his hands from his weight.

The first warrior, having seen the movement, paused, surprised at this immediate encounter with this feared adversary. Then he lifted his spear and moved forward. The second warrior stepped through the doorway.

Nimi ran to the bedroom doorway when Mbata had moved. She had lost sight of him. Now she could see the attack unfolding and she turned and ran through the bedroom and toward the anterior room and the wall that displayed the weapons.

Mbata slipped the initial thrust of the first warrior and swung the heavy branch across the side of his head with a powerful blow. The warrior fell heavily to the ground, stunned. Mbata moved, twisting to avoid the second warrior but he did not move quickly enough. The point of the long spear was pushed deep into his left side.

The third warrior had stopped after walking through the doorway and so the fourth warrior found it necessary to shove him forward, out of his way. Mbala, hearing the battle erupt, stepped through the doorway and when he saw the fierce struggle he pressed himself back against the wall. Fear choked him. The hair on the back of his neck rose and his knees began to shake.

Inside, Nimi reached the weapons and then grabbed the first instrument she could, a heavy truncheon. At this moment, outside in the hallway, the warrior motioned to the captain and the three other men that he had found the entrance and he impatiently and foolishly went to the floor and crawled slowly into the room.

As Nimi turned, she saw the curtains part and looking down she observed this man, pushing his Domey shield, steal quietly into the room. She moved from the darkness, raised the club and brought it down upon his head, three times, crushing his skull. She stepped into the hallway and looking to her left and then her right she saw the four men hesitate and then begin to hurry in her direction. She turned and ran towards the garden.

In the garden, Mbata had grabbed the penetrating spear with his left hand and moving back he had removed its point from his side and gripping the spear he had snatched it toward him, bringing the man that desperately held it to within his grasp. His right hand closed around the man's throat and he lifted him from the ground and moved him as a shield as the third and fourth warriors swarmed at him and tried to reach him with their weapons.

Mbata was calm in the turbulence and violence of this pitched battle. He fought for his life. He fought to banish from his mind the jarring voices that continued to ring and shriek. He fought against this death that would overtake him and smother his love.

Mbata's eyes fell upon his brother, cowering in the shadow of the garden wall, yelling now for his men to kill. And at that moment he slew Mbala, with his only means possible, his eyes, and squeezing the neck of this man who he slung to and fro, he tossed him through the air, ripping his throat open and the writhing, dying body landed on top of the third warrior, knocking him to the ground, pinning him. Mbata's right hand threw the separated flesh of the man to the ground and his left hand now held the man's spear.

The fourth warrior moved forward and his sword flashed through the air and Mbata, moving away, turned his side to him. The sword, barely catching him, sliced him open at his right shoulder and partly down his back. Mbata turned to face his enemy, shifting the spear in his hands. Again the warrior swung and before Mbata could parry it, the blade reached his left arm, cutting it badly, rendering it useless.

Nimi, screaming curses and running, advanced upon this scene as the first warrior, recovered from the blow of the branch and crawled toward Mbata with a knife in his hand. Mbala was paralyzed against the wall. He could hear the moans and snarls, and see this mortal battle as it raged and played itself out before his incredulous eyes. He wanted this man, his brother, dead but he was helpless to assist in the process.

He saw Nimi now, emerging through the darkness, naked. Shouting warnings of the others she ran across the courtyard and into the fight. He saw Mbata stagger and with his remaining strength somehow push the spear he wielded with his right hand, deep into the chest of the fourth warrior at the same moment the first warrior reached him and plunged his knife into Mbata's right thigh. That was his last act as he died in spasmodic agony as Nimi, growling with each blow, beat the man who was on his knees, to death.

Mbata roared now and yanked the protruding knife from his leg. The third warrior struggled to push the dead body away that had immobilized him. As he extracted himself and attempted to retrieve his weapons, Nimi and Mbata fell upon him and as their animal sounds rose in their throats and reverberated throughout this once tranquil paradise, this bloody naked man, and bloody naked woman, clubbed and stabbed the warrior to death. And the enemy died, his body crushed and a knife rising from his stomach.

As they both turned their maniacal eyes on Mbala, the remaining warriors burst through the bedroom doorway and shocked and confused, they stopped. Mbata and Nimi turned to these enemies. Then Mbala saw, in an obvious defiant act, Nimi suddenly stand, throw her weapon at the men in the doorway and then grab Mbata, lift him, and seemingly with unnatural strength, half drag, half carry him across a walkway, through the trees and into the thicker darkness of the garden.

Silence descended around them now. All that could be heard was an occasional rustling as Nimi and Mbata moved further away and then all sounds ceased. Mbala gathered his men. Over half his force was dead and the others visibly shaken. This was not as he planned. And now, the thought of the fever came to their minds. He motioned and then whispered to them to spread out. "Come out Nimi," he called. "You will not be harmed. It is Mbata we want." His voice sounded hollow and weak. He paused, listening. Hearing nothing.

Near the far side wall of the courtyard, Nimi knelt next to Mbata. Hatred and rage and terror surged and receded within her and she sought control, to calm herself. Mbata was bleeding badly and he stared at her. His expression was, strange.

"Mbata. Mbata," she whispered. And she caressed his cheek. "You are hurt but everything will be all right." She cradled his head now and he coughed. A low moan rose in his throat. He shook his head as if to clear it. His eyes refocused on Nimi. "Oh, what should I do? What is this? Why? No! Please do not leave me," she implored. She kissed him on his forehead. She pulled at several large clumps of soft grass and making a small mound, she laid his head upon this.

He stared at her and smiled slightly and winced, in pain. His eyes were now bright and he extended his hand to touch her face. "Nimi. Ah ... Nimi. It has come to this for us, here. This is why we have been brought together."

Mbala's voice rang forth. "Come out Nimi! Send her to me Mbata! It is useless for you! Your power can not help you! You would have released it by now! Nothing can help you!" Mbala was emboldened. "Yes! Yes! It is all

over! I will strike the fatal blow my brother!” he boasted loudly.

Nimi stared deep into Mbata’s eyes. Her throat was hot and her eyes clouded. Mbata saw tears begin to emerge. He saw her eyes, beautiful and shining in the dimness. “Do not weep for me Nimi, or for us. We have been chosen. We have been honored,” he nearly whispered. “All is perfect. This end is good. All is good. It is our destiny, your destiny, to save me. You must be strong.”

“What do you mean? What are you saying?” In spite of all that she felt at this moment, more than a heavy dread, much more than a sense of fear imposed itself above this moment. And just as she had before, she shivered. In the distance they could hear voices and instructions as their attackers prepared to move forward.

“Do not allow the weapon of my enemy to kill me. Do not let me die through the hatred of my brother. My life is yours. Take it with you! Let your hands, let your love bring death to me.”

Nimi rejected this demand and recoiled from the shock and horror of the thoughts as they organized themselves and the image of this act burst out vividly in her mind.

“No Mbata! Please! Please no! I can not ...”

“Yes!” And his voice grew strong. “You can! You must!” And he looked at her calmly.

She shook her head now. “Why? How? I ...”

“Find a way! Quickly! They are coming!”

The warriors began to move along the paths and hack their way into the garden, towards them. Nimi was growing frantic. She could hear the enemy approaching. She could hear Mbata’s voice speaking entreatingly to her. She looked at a large nearby rock. She was looking around, losing control. Suddenly she recognized her surroundings and looking up, and across a patch of bright red flowers that lay asleep and oblivious to the emanating horror, she saw the Mudzi tree and the cut she had made. She crawled to the tree and there, where she had left it was the large bejeweled, golden knife. She grabbed it and crawled back to Mbata and when he saw the knife he smiled a subtle, ironic grimace. “Ah, good. That is my father’s,” he sighed.

Nimi looked at it and caressed it and wiped it against her thigh. She looked at Mbata now. She fell on him and moaned. “No! No Mbata! What will I do? There will be nothing! Nothing! I can not live without you!”

Mbata pushed her up. “Listen to me!” he commanded. “As long as you are, I will be also! Live on! I love you Nimi! Now! Here!” And he pointed to his chest, to his heart.

As the enemy drew close, with both hands, Nimi raised the beautiful knife high above her head. She stared up at the instrument as it hovered in the air. And Mbata called to her. And Mbata whispered to her. And she looked down at him. His brow was creased as he nodded in affirmation and her mind left her and her heart was ignited into pieces and shards and as a choking sob came from her throat she plunged the blade deep into Mbata’s chest, piercing his heart. “Goodby Mbata ... my love!”

He jumped and grabbed her shoulder and his fingers broke through her skin but this she did not feel. Then he moaned loudly, mournfully, and blood flowed around the blade and blood came from his mouth and Nimi bent to his lips and sucked thirstily at the warm, thick liquid. And when she sat back and looked at him, he was dead and his eyes stared at her, open and lifeless.

She screamed. A scream so wounded and so utterly terrible and the anguish so true, it stopped the advancing men and fixed them, motionless. The sound of the scream ran in waves through the dense surreal, colorful world and flowers opened and then shrunk, wilted, to the earth.

The sound would be remembered by all those present this night, recalled, to haunt them, for as long as they lived. All heard and felt this pure, excruciating expression that sprang from the abyss of this tortured woman, all but Nimi. She heard nothing. She felt nothing. She eased her hands into the oozing red substance and as she wiped Mbata's cooling blood across her breasts, over her thighs and between her legs, she turned her face to the stars and the moon. Tears began to fall as a torrent from her eyes and she screamed again. And as the last of her wail left this world and floated beyond the sky she looked down at her love. Her love remained ... still and ... dead.

She reached and pulled the long knife gently from his heart. And moving to his legs, she opened them. In several brief strokes she cut from his body that which she desired of him, from him, that which she would take along the desolate, dismal paths of her lonely, loveless life. She held before her eyes this bloody flesh of him in her bloody hands. Preciously. Tenderly. And then, she ate him, in pieces. She took him into her mouth and chewed him, hungrily. She swallowed him, as if starved and then swallowed him again. She consumed Mbata a Ewuare. He was inside of her.

As she rose, she snatched from his neck her ring that he wore there. And with the bloody gold knife now in her other hand she stumbled out blindly. Past an immobile warrior she moved, toward the center of the courtyard and directly toward Mbala.

He saw her coming through the trees, across the flowers. But he no longer recognized this naked black creature wearing a gold necklace. Blood covered her body and ran from her mouth. A distorted look was as a wooden mask on her face. He teary eyes were glazed, unseeing.

As she staggered forth Mbala called to her, but she did not hear, she did not stop. And he was threatened, frightened, and he stepped back and his foot brushed the branch that Mbata had wielded and he reached down for it and grabbed it and as she continued to advance upon him he lifted it above his head. But now she lurched, in a trance, past him. And he stepped around her. And bringing the branch, with a powerful, hateful force, against the back of her head, he struck her and she was lifted from the ground by the blow and when she touched the earth she went down into the small pond and as the water closed in around her head, unconsciousness descended and silent, unfeeling, deathly, dreamy darkness, mercifully embraced Nimi Enokye.

INTERLUDE

BELTON,
SOUTH CAROLINA
MARCH, 1861

I

THE SMALL WOODEN SHACKS STRETCHED AS A BLEAK AND somber row along the narrow road that had become filled with the thick reddish-orange mud that lay in its appearance silent, yet, seemed to noisily and slowly ooze and push to not only surround the doorsteps but also to flowingly crawl inside and settle its intrusiveness into a familiar tolerated form. There, to turn in its essence and dry in the warming daylight heat and survive on, by becoming colorful dusty particles that were conceived to float, across the rough floors, to the leaky ceilings, against the warped walls. Dust, that lay upon the men women and children. Dust, that choked. Dust, that would blow on the wind to enter at will through the cracks between the boards of these disjointed structures. Dust, that would depart on the ends of the corn husks brooms that were wielded in vain, hopelessly opposing this obvious symbolic repetitious expression of moist succulent life forming, living, passing to dry dusty death to damp life and then back again to ... dust.

But now the rains had subsided to leave mud behind. Mud that lived and rolled across the acres of this plantation. Mud that made the tedious, backbreaking fieldwork even harder. Mud that pulled at the field workers' hands. Mud that grabbed and sucked at the little children's bare feet and made their running movements laborious in motion but cushioned their tumbling falls as they chased fireflies in the night and collapsed, laughing happily in their unadulterated play, oblivious to the shackled, stifling reality of their harsh world. Unaware that soon after their first exhilarated dancing acts they too would join their mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and their steps in the red-orange dust and mud would be gazed upon by men

on horses who carried rifles and whips and all play would slow and then cease on this childish level forever. For they did not yet comprehend that they were slaves. Baby ... slaves.

Darkness fell upon and across this dilapidation this rainy, early spring night. And as the night slowly descended, and as the evening meals were concluded, the last traces of smoke rose from the chimney pipes and wafted into the blackening sky and dissipated within the heavy clouds.

Several slaves could now be seen leaving their shelters and begin to gather around a large old tree with deep roots, that grew upwards, strong and wide behind the shack that stood at the end of the row, at the end of the slave road. From this point they could not see the big house. Looking back in the direction of the first shack of the row they only saw the bended opening that led to the main road. They threw glances to this bend. They waited on words, from the big house.

Soon these few were joined by several more. And regardless of the unusual warmth of this night and in spite of the possibility of more rain they built an illuminating fire and stood huddled close to it even as it flared into a fairly large blaze. Others came. They remained in relative quiet, speaking softly every now and then of insignificant events of the day, in hushed tones. There were looks of concern on their faces and soon they all fell into an oppressive silence.

As time passed, they grew more and more anxious. Finally a tall, older man who had been one of the first of the group, spoke. “i se eff i cuh se er cumin.” And he went off into the darkness, towards the bend and just as he reached there he turned and moved hurriedly, in long strides, back to the group, to the fire.

“i seed her. shee cumin now!” he said, excitedly. Taking caution to keep his voice low.

There was a perceptible change of attitude throughout this gathering of men and women. They knew that this woman brought news that could add more pain and suffering to their troubled existence. And as they observed the short, heavy-set, light-skinned woman moving in haste through the darkness in their direction, they watched the small lamp she held, bounce and swing and they all became fearful of the impending words she carried.

The woman eased ponderously through the gathering as they parted for her. Her hazel-hued eyes were wide with excitement and her large round face glistened with sweat from the exertion of her swift paced walk. She stopped in the middle of them and they all moved around her and waited, expectantly. She took several moments to catch her breath.

“wel?” someone said, impatiently.

“thangs gon bee alrite,” she said. “whew, lat mee git muh win. iye es plum tuckered out.” She handed the lamp to the tall man.

“whut u saa thangs gon bee alrite fo?” A voice came from the back. “dem slave ketchurs aint git dem dat runn did dey?”

“naw,” the heavy-set woman said. “dey aint git naw udder butt dat one dey brung back duh lass tam n hung. butt i heerd duh Massa saa itt bin lon

enuff now n hee aint keer kno mo. hee saa, hee gladd dey gon. spess lee dat gal. hee saa dat gal badd trobl.”

“shee was dat alrite,” said the tall man. And there were several murmurs of agreement. “dey cum baack madd n dee Massa whup us.”

“shee was craa z,” came another voice. And again there were soft words of agreement. The high-pitched voice continued. “ull duh tam taulk bout shee uh queen n shee neva won do nutt n. dey beet dat gal neer deff. ty er upp cus shee run waa tam aft tuh tam. iye es tankfol shee gon.”

“mees tou,” came another voice.

The large woman spoke again. “wal wee uns aint haft tuh lit dat gal cum pass ours mines kno mo. shee gon fuh gudd. iye caint cook dee Massa’s food fuh muh ears bee opin fuh dee news. dem slave hunurs trak n git aft tuh dem run waas upp tuh dee nort n dey chace dem ull neer tuh uh udder lan naim uh, cana. upp der whar it cold n dark ull dee tam.”

“wal maa bee itt ovuh now, sho nuff,” the tall man said quietly. “dat gal brung whuppns n deff tuh us heah. dee Massa git att her thru us. wee wus dee ones dat suffur. ull cus dat craa z gal.”

“der was nuttn badd with her mine!” came a voice now, low and angry. “shee fus ull dee tam bout dee waa wee liv! shee fus bout dee food! shee fus bout dee closes wee ware!”

“shee heer tree yars n shee fus bout evah thang,” came a voice, again from the back of the gathering. And there was a soft ripple of laughter that spread and then quickly subsided as the angry young man with the low voice stepped up and into the center of the circle.

“dats rite, shee fus!” he said, his voice rising and filling with intensity. “shee fus ull dee tam soo loud dat yo Massa chain sum thangs roun heah! Nimi chain thangs fo dee bet ur! wee shood tank er!”

The tall man spoke now. “dem dat wus shot tuh deff n whupped tuh deff cus uh er n dem udders caint tank er. deys ded n gon.”

“yeah,” the large woman said softly. “deys gon butt deys in Jesus’ heaven now.”

“aman,” could be heard now. “aman.”

The young man spoke up. “yall jus skeered n old! yall don layd unduh yo Massa’s fut tou lon! iye es gon leev dis heer place lak dem udders!”

“hush boy!” The large woman whispered. “dee Massa heer dat n hee bee don whupped u n tyed u upp.”

“iff n he heerd it, it bee cus u don toll hem! yah fat old woman!” The young man spat. “jus lak u toll on Nimi! wees kno u toll!”

“i aint toll nutt n! The large woman shouted back. “iff n u won go soo badd how cum u aint leev wit em?”

“cus shee aint tel mee! shee caint beleev n kno bodee aft ur u tel n shee git beet n dey tyed her upp!” The young man glared at the large woman now and she could see the hatred flash in his eyes. This confrontation brought pause to them all. There was tension in the heated night air.

The tall man broke through with his words. “u aint ben lon euff dee boat boy. u gon lern. wee ulls gat itt gudd heer. bet n mos. sides, dem dat run waa

hadd luk wit em. i nos uff udders ben kil dat tri dat. iye es sta n rite heer.”

“mees tou,” came a woman’s voice. “i lak it heer. iye es gon die rite heer, un old woman.”

Now the young man scanned the faces of the group. A sneer was upon his lips. “ull yall nutt n butt fools! ders gon bee uh war one day, its cumin, n iye es gon leev heer n fite n dat war n iffin iye dies fite n iye dies uh free man!” And he turned to force his way through the crowd that had now grown in size, and stalked off into the night.

And as the young man faded into the darkness the large woman called out after him. “aint gon bee kno war! dee Massa saa so n i don toll u dat bee fo! sides aint kno bodee gon giv u kno gun! thro dat ouch yo mine!”

The tall older man shook his head sadly. For months now the large woman had brought news of a possible war, from the big house. Civil War, the rights of states, South against North! The tall man didn’t understand why some of his fellow slaves thought some war would ever help them. He could see others now, men and women, drifted from the fire and slowly followed the angry young man into the night. “aint kno war gon git us nutt n,” he thought to himself.

The large woman spoke again. “dat boy gon git hes sef n trobl. iye es gon go back tuh dee big hous now. fo i go, liss n heer. iye es gon tak dat babe wit me.”

“whut babe?” An older woman standing near her asked.

“dat babe boy dat dee Nimi gal leev.”

“y shee leev dat babe?” A young woman asked.

“shee nevah nurs dat babe. nat one tam. shee saa shee don won hem,” came another older woman.

“i don kno y dat gal do dem thangs shee do. i do bee leev dat gal trulee was titched n dee mine.” The large woman shook her head and continued. “shee saa dat one shee leev aint spose tuh bee. shee saa hee aint er babe.”

“shame dem boy twins be split upp lak dat.”

“aint dee fus tam brudders don stey tuh gedder.”

“dey luk jus dee same tou.”

“yeah butt now dee Massa saa he gon keap dat babe n dee big hous with hem.”

“hee gon whut?”

“keap dat boy with hem. giv hem hes name. hee gon bee uh James.”

“wee ull culled James n ee waa.”

“yeah, butt hee gon mak dis boy lak hes own. raise hem with hes own boys. hee saa hee gon mak hem a Preacher man. name hem Preacher James! Massa saa he gon bee uh God feer n man.”

There now came a man’s incredulous voice. “lawdy! lawdy! i dee clare! whut dee Misses saa bout dat?”

“wen i leev dee hous dey wus fus n fus n butt dee Massa don mayd upp hes mine. hee lak dat boy.”

The gathering began to break up now and amid whispers, murmurs of wonder and sighs of relief, they drifted back towards their homes.

The large woman walked towards a shack that sat near the middle of the long row. The tall man walked along with her. Neither spoke. She went in and nodding to the old woman who sat in the dull light of a lamp, she crossed to a small sleeping figure and scooped the child up into her arms. "dis boy gon wit me tou dee big hous."

She departed and as she turned to the direction of the bend in the road the tall man fell in beside her. "hee uh gudd luk n boy, aint hee?" she said, almost to herself as she gazed down fondly upon the small dark-brown form. "dat udder one was uh gudd luk n babe tou."

She stopped now and as she looked down at the boy she asked the tall man. "y dat Nimi gal hate dis babe?"

The man answered. "don kno."

"y shee luv dat sickly one so? she luv dat udder one wit ull her life. dat one dat kep dat fever ull dee tam. i wonder bout dat. y u rekun?"

The man hunched his shoulders. "don kno."

"sho is strange, dat gal. n dat udder babe, hee strange. fite ull dee tam! hee sho was uh meen litl bittie sucker." She paused. Now she looked up at the tall man hovering close over her as he too looked down at the child. She was speaking now almost in a whisper. "i heerd dee Massa saa dat he wonts dis child. hee say dat dee Mammy uff dis babe got uh heart. dats jus whut hee saa. hee saa maa bee dis child got uh heart lak hes mammy." She stared at the three-year-old boy.

The child smiled slightly, innocently, in its untroubled sleep. Then the baby slave stretched and opened his trusting eyes and stared questioningly at this large, soft woman who held him near to her. And then recognizing the powerful and kind house slave, the housemother, he hugged her and she hugged him back. The woman looked up at the tall man.

"i wunder y hee saa dat bout her heart. u kno, dem tams i bee stil, stan n, i liss n bee hind dee dough, i heer dee Massa taulk bout Nimi. hee taulk lak hee lak dat gal. aint dat ... strange?"

The tall man did not answer.

After traveling over eight hundred miles from Belton, South Carolina, a small group of men, women and children, bundled against the cold and snow, settled their weary forms for the night. They would rise early the next morning and sometime in that evening they would cross the border from America into Canada. They would cross, they believed, into freedom.

And as the house slave looked down at the abandoned child in her arms who would live and grow in the Deep South of this country, Nimi Enokye looked down at this child who would struggle to live and eke out his existence here in the barren North. Nimi placed a dampened cloth on the forehead of the feverish child who slept, wrapped, in her arms. For her this was all she knew, all she truly cared about. This child here was Mbata's child, her only child. This child was ... real.

She looked around at these people who had accompanied her on this flight for freedom. She felt a connection with these people. Although they

came from different tribes, from different lives, they had all been joined as one on this long journey. They had shared an experience, a quest, which would bind them together. She thought of those who had died on this that she hoped would be her final trek.

As her child shifted in his sleep, in her arms, she put her face against his to measure the strength of the fever that ran throughout his little body. She was pleased that he seemed to be cooling. She gazed at him now and her throat became tight. Her heart filled and in spite of her attempt to hold back, for the first time in years, tears came to her eyes. This child looked and acted so very much like Mbata that she was torn between her happiness and grief each time she looked at him.

Pleasant, excited, quiet voices came to her this night from those who remained awake. These voices spoke of a new future. They spoke with hope and determination. They expressed their desire to separate themselves and their children from the brutal, wretched nothingness that had stood before them and dominated them as long as they remained slaves. The voices also spoke of war.

Suddenly, faint laughter broke out across the campfire and Mbata's child opened his eyes and the deep dark-brown of them, the largeness of them, the expression of them as he awakened forced her to squeeze him to her as he stretched and yawned. She placed him down beside her on their bedding and rolling him on to his stomach she caressed his back and sang to him softly as he again fell into a restless sleep. And the song she sang was the one she had whispered and chanted to Mbata as they had lain together in that shallow stream as his dying body had cooled and returned to life and they had uncovered beneath the love they shared for one another, salvation, redemption, and purpose. It was a song of love and life. This child who lay beside her was now her purpose, her reason for living. Without him she would have relinquished her life or taken it by some means long ago.

As she lay back and stared into the overcast sky she sought a bright star on which to focus, but there were none visible. Above her was only a dense, cloudy sky and an incomplete opaque moon that revealed itself on sporadic occasions between the floating clusters of clouds.

She reflected on her companions' talk of freedom and war and she frowned slightly to herself at the irony that was woven within these conversations. Only a year ago she had heard of the pause of a great conflict that had been waged upon the lands of her distant world deep in its interior. An epic war that had taken countless lives and destroyed once beautiful cities and decimated villages and all that lay between. The Mbobo people of Calabar had finally fallen. Torn apart, divided and weakened, they had ultimately been conquered by both the Europeans and natural enemies who had opposed them.

Nimi thought of Mbala and her heart began to pound and she forced herself to unclench her teeth, relax her fisted hands and as she slowed her rushing breath she strove to regain control. Stories that Mbala had been turned upon by the whites, deposed and exiled, did little to ameliorate her

intense hatred. And so she attempted to murder Mbala by banishing him from her mind and thus, from her existence.

There was so much she labored to forget. And yet she believed that there were many things that had happened to her, that on a very real level, she knew nothing about. She could touch vague, ephemeral memories that sometimes seemed so strange and detached she pondered what was true of them and what had become for her, horrible dreamy phantasies.

At first, the actual distance that separated her from her former world simply added to, and seemingly magnified the confusion of her disoriented, deteriorating mind. For as she thought of her family, as she brought up the wonderful memories of Mbata, she would, in a daze, look around and her unfamiliar, inimical new foreign surroundings only heightened her sense of bewilderment.

She was in constant internal turmoil. At once, fighting tenaciously to scan and retain those memories she required to survive and yet, at the same moments striving to disconnect and repress the unwanted accompanying thoughts and scenes and subdue the ensuing disrupting devastating feelings that inevitably sought to latch on to the vestiges of her past.

The horror and suffering was intertwined with the beauty and love and therefore her disjointed recollections mangled her teeming emotions. She desired to discard and leave behind and yet hold, caress, and bring forth instances. But there was only the impossibility, only hopelessness and failure in the futile attempt to choose specific portions of her memories, or only the positive aspects of the particles of her life.

For the validity of the laws that encompass and govern the surreal world of the imagination transcends the light of reality. In the pitch-blackness of the memories of the collapsing mind, all aspects, every particle is real. If it can be recalled it can be controlled and if it moves, lost within the recesses of the soul, then it runs rampant. It pushes for expression and then pulls one into madness.

In the day and night dreams of Nimi, Mbata was real. The garden at Calabar was real. But that last battle in the beautiful paradise had been broken into tiny bits and many of the shattered pieces had not been destroyed but had only dissipated somewhere within her and there they would sink and rise as indestructible jagged burning shards. There, within her being, sections of her life had been driven by the powerful, vicious blow of Mbala that had been struck against her skull.

For days, after she had been snatched from the garden pond, she was unable to function. She staggered when she walked, could only mumble incoherently when she talked and had to be tied to her horse. For Nimi it was as if her mind shunned reality and began to twist and waver slowly between deep darkness, areas of grey and momentary points of light.

A day from Calabar she had come perceptibly close, dangerously close to full consciousness as Mbala was violently raping her in the isolated and dusky shadows. That was real. And as her delirious assaulted gaze moved haltingly past his hunching left shoulder and settled on to the night sky seeking solace

inside the emerging new moon, her vision had been interrupted by Mbata's bulging eyes as his severed decomposing head stood, stark in the warm air of the late evening sky as it perched and swayed gently upon the point of a spear that had been stuck into the earth that suddenly buckled beneath Nimi as she screamed and passed into the emptiness that lay between where she was at that moment and where she desired to be at that moment. And she had gone where the frightful pain could not follow and the terror of that image of her love could not persist. It was lost and forgotten. And yet somehow she vaguely understood that his melting face lived on.

In opposition to the circumstances of her existence she had forced her mind, in wailing, moaning protest to slip and fall into an abyss and for several weeks she hovered unaware of her surroundings or her own presence. For her, even that last reality of Domey was invisible and mute. Her attempts on Mbala's life and her voiced madness could not ring with resonance in her ears for she could not remember her fits and tirades that had so threatened and frightened everyone that quickly after her arrival she was with finality, given up, forced away, and sold for less than nothing, into the bowels of slavery.

The lengthy middle passage across the great ocean stood at many points, for her, vivid and clear. The large boat and the totality of the body of water that had encompassed her wavy floating home for so long a period, was such a contrast to her previous world it seemed that much of this time could be recalled. But it was the launching, the beginning, that had been etched deep into her being.

Never would she forget the immense power of the myriad of emotions that had consumed her as the huge ship eased away from her world, and the land, the earth moved, had backed up, slowly becoming distant, faint, and finally it had disappeared as a dark speck beyond the horizon.

In her shackles she had hobbled to the sides of the ship, to the ends. And in all directions lay only the strangeness within the substance of the pale blue-green ocean and the closeness of the familiar expanse of the endless azure sky that hung heavily above and covered all that lay under it. And with her manacled hands she had waved goodbye to all she had known. Goodbye to her mother, her father, her brother, her family. And she waved, as a prisoner, a final farewell to this ending of these events that had dominated her proud, turbulent, youthful life. But there was no leaving Mbata. He would exist for her as long as she breathed. And turning, she confronted the depravation and cruel horror that now engulfed her.

In the initial days that followed, she fluctuated between living and dying. She stood near the side of the ship and fought against the emotions that urged her to fling herself over into the sea, into the fathomless depths of the rising and subsiding murky waves of water. There she could join the many others who were being thrown over, slipping away and then ... down.

Those were her companions who fell ill and were tossed over the sides. Perhaps those were her leaders who fought and rebelled and were pitched unceremoniously to their restful deaths. Perhaps there was vision in those

who embraced the other life in leaping, by choice, defiantly into their watery grave. But an important part of Nimi's soul desired to continue. For that aspect of her soul, in doubt of the other life, believed that in death, darkness was constant and everything and everyone who remained in the light would cease movement ... forever.

At first it was the screams of misery she could not tolerate. The mournful singing and chanting laments haunted her days and nights and the brutality was unlike anything of which she could have possibly conceived. Yet she hung on. And as she lurched and stumbled as if in a trance back and forth across the slippery, slimy deck, she clung to the love inside her. She grasped the hatred that grew and pondered as to how she could go on.

Mbala's influence had provided her with certain privileges and eventually her feet and hands were unfettered. And as her confused mind recoiled from the shocking pain she witnessed, a part of her essence was drawn inexorably toward the suffering that expressed itself everywhere around her. And each day that passed found her descending into the dark deathly stench of the hold of the slaving ship. Her soul was attracted to the inner sanctum of her new home.

Nimi found personal solace in the comfort she was able to provide the others as she stooped and crawled to assist in the feeding and worked herself into exhaustion as she attempted to help in the care of those who were weakened by illness. And as the days passed and her self-destructive images faded, they were replaced by hardened ideals and once again the tremendous resolve of Nimi Enokye crystallized and asserted itself through her actions.

The floating monotony melded one day into the next. There were for her, no visual differences. There were no points of references and so she had spent longer periods of time below deck. In some way the proximity of the suffering became for her all that was meaningful, all that was true, all that she understood. All else, except for Mbata, shimmered in a haze before her hooded eyes.

The cries and the dying immersed her into the here and now. And one day she had awakened to know, to accept what she had suspected and what would ultimately move her and stretch and pull at her indefatigably. She was no longer allowed to retreat deep into the past or dwell hesitantly on the present. There was life and hope in the future. She was not alone. She was with child and she was ... saved.

Now, as she stared at the heavy sky, just miles from a new country, a new world, she placed the back of her hand on the face of her child. She leaned over and kissed him. She kissed him again. She lay back and now in her thoughts she marveled at the vicissitudes of life and yet she recognized a constancy of existence that fascinated her. And she remembered Mbata's words, his musings of the wisdom of Mosheshwe and she saw the truth of it all in the reality that was being presented.

War! Death! Struggle! Freedom! These were things she comprehended. For here, thousands of miles from her far lost past, they had found it necessary to fight to extract themselves. From what? For what? To travel this

distance and each step along the way hear of impending war. To whisper at night of a North against South conflict. To speak and predict that soon battles would erupt and once again blood would flow into the ground. Thousands would suffer. Thousands would die and bodies would stretch as a carpet across the earth. Civil War reared and flexed the power of its wanton desire and began to move forward. Was it an attempt to progress, or with a need to stave off and hold back?

And so, there, was buried the irony. That even here, in this distant new world, war was conceived as a solution. Death, ushered forth portentously and presumptuously, perceived as a climactic answer. Death, the perfect resolution. Finality within a final expression. Freedom by destruction.

She thought of the angry young slaves she had left behind, both men and women. She, as their leader had explained once, a while ago, that there would come within each of their lives a moment they would have to choose. To fight and perhaps die. Or, most definitely to die without ever having fought. That momentous juncture eased across the separated land and Nimi knew the issue of slavery was a deception and a transitory façade. It was all, very simply an excuse for the humankind to kill and destroy, again.

And as she lay in this darkness she knew she had brought across the rolling water and over the flattened soil an essential inherent connection with her own past. This half moon, even the invisible stars were revealed to all who chose to observe them, from wherever they may be. Once, a while ago, she had looked into the same vast sky with the only man she could, would ever love. She had gazed into the empty dull blackness and eventually seen revealed, then, just as she saw now, not just a sky, or only a moon, but she had known ultimately the truth of brilliant stars whether they shone or not. Still they were there. Still, they were splendid. Still, they were shining and vivid even as they flew ignored and unseen high above the violent earth.

Now she was here. And Mbata was here next to her. He lived on in her mind and through his child and expressed himself in the mild fever that had infected his child intermittently these first few years of his imprisoned life. And she shuddered imperceptibly at the thought that Mbata lived on through the child she left behind.

She had believed for some inexplicable reason, when the twins had been born, that there was something different, something wrong. There was something other than the fever she had been told one of the babies had. And as she lay there, still in pain from the births, they had presented the boys to her, one by one. She had looked at the first one, examined him, to ascertain he was healthy and complete and as she held the child and kissed him, her hands and lips had felt the mild fever and she was concerned, yet proud.

She held the second baby. And as she inspected him she turned his little head and she had screamed and almost dropped, almost flung away that baby as she saw the small pure-white patch of hair near his right temple. These twins who she had given birth to were different, because their fathers had been uniquely different. By abandoning that child she at first tried to accept, but could not, she had attempted to reject anything and everything related to

Mbala and discard the actions he had taken. She sought to destroy him, totally.

But deep inside, Nimi remained troubled. A part of her believed there was nothing truly thorough in destruction or complete in death. There would always be the survival of that which was passed on. That which had been inherited since the inception the humankind's existence lived on inside of each ensuing life. Expressed itself clearly, tenaciously, brutally, through life. Exposed itself in the rigid habitual deathly methods that were continuously used to confront the tasks that became set for each new generation.

The history of the humankind remains alive in the present and moves into the future. History can not be influenced but can be repeated in the today and thus threatens the coming tomorrow. The obstacles that have not been overcome, the questions that have not been answered, the solutions that have not been found, stand in reality and remain in their incompleteness as jarring, condemning testimonies to the failing essence of the humankind and the lack of real progress. An essence that can not be removed.

Just as the heated illuminating sun, the soothing glowing moon, and the incandescent, pointed, celestial stars are inherent qualities of the endless sky. Withering hatred and stagnant death are natural and inseparable attributes of the humankind's bottomless evil soul. There can not exist a starless sky or a soulless human being.

And so, these determined forms that slept fitfully in the cold and snow and hovered around this fading campfire, these people who found Nimi awe inspiring in her outspoken words and courageous in her obstinate actions remained quite uneasy at her constant dour predictions. She had continually presented them with harsh pessimistic contentions until finally she had refrained from sharing her outlook or expressing her beliefs.

Therefore, she would not explain to her group that they would, in fact, never be disconnected or distanced from their past. They were chained to their past and in that sense they would remain helpless slaves, forever. Each brought, in forgotten memories and inveterate repetitious expressions, their past forward. Each handed on through their children, their essence. A tiny part of her hoped that in this group and somewhere in the youthful slaves she left behind that perhaps other facets of a human being would rise through the systematic repression and a human's desire to be free would become coupled with a need to be just and good and they would desire to love their fellow humans and the light of life would ultimately prevail over the dark violence of death. But Nimi had searched through the experiences of her own existence and found this potential, remote.

Of course, just as the others were subservient to their souls, she was submissive to her own. It was her soul that fought and resisted. It was her soul that demanded she speak up for better treatment for the others and herself aboard the slaving ship. Even at the risk of her life. Her innermost being caused her to suffer the beatings and the binds of those who wanted to dominate and control her.

Just as those who fearfully advised her to quiet her words and cease her

actions, those who derided her, those who turned against her, informed on her and believed her struggles to be meaningless and troublesome were afraid to fight, and were doomed. She was afraid to not fight, and was also doomed.

She understood it was absolutely necessary for those she had witnessed rise up in rage aboard the ship. It was inevitable for those on the plantation who had fought and died in rebellious insurrection. They just could not help themselves. They could not, she could not, control but only for so long, only so many, of the impulses that lived within.

Nimi realized Mbata's tortured essence was passed on through this child's infected body and damaged soul. A soul now joined and merged with her own. A King's soul. A Queen's soul.

With Mbata's soul merged with her own, she knew they had given birth to the soul of a conquering warrior and she hoped, wanted to believe, that would not change as long as some essence of Mbata a Ewure and Nimi Enokye lived on in this child and the descendents who would live on until the end of their line.

Nimi reached for her child. She wanted to hold him and she needed to see his eyes, Mbata's eyes. So, she woke him. And as he opened his eyes and began to rub his dream away, she dreamed a conscious dream. She dreamed that all the hatred of the humankind would be consumed and extinguished by that internal love that struggled for existence and expression.

Yes! She knew of love. In spite of all she had been through and regardless of the inhumane madness that had penetrated her life, she still wanted to believe in love. And as she looked deeply into the eyes of her love child, she remembered the love Mbata had felt for her. And her own love reached out through her weary arms and she brought her child close, to feel him, to protect her child. And though she knew she would never know what resided in the distant future for him, she dreamed that he would uncover the love that would always try to spark, glow, and burn inside him and discover that, it also was a power with which to be reckoned.

Yes! She dreamed of love! She knew it was real and could be. Had not she experienced it with this child's father? Had not she seen it grow within Mbata? Had not he died for her, his own love? She believed in her child who now sat and stared with concern at her. In her dream she was certain he would find, with difficulty, the woman who would bring to him that love. True love. Discover easily, the powerful strength and control and the shielding hatred he would require to survive.

He would fight for a balance. He would gain domination of his soul and pass that on and most assuredly, if not his children, then his grandchildren would be free. Free from the fever and free from the shallow restricting confines of a human being. Those boundaries that exist both externally and internally will expand and eventually disappear.

Nimi was exhausted and she felt old. She knew by the thoughts she lost and misplaced and the memories that surged in distortion that her mind was failing her. Her wracked body ached and although she had just reached twenty-two years on this earth, as each day passed she grew more and more

despondent about her health and this troubled her greatly. And as she looked at her child, she wondered how long she would be there for him. But she found consolation in the knowledge that a new world awaited him. On the next evening they would cross the border into Canada. And as she stretched out, she was pleased to know that the next evening brought significant hope.

As her child stared at her in the campfire light she sought sleep and the continuation of her dreams. She drifted away. Then Mbata's voice rang with resonance in her ears. He spoke of love. He spoke of the possibilities ... of the humankind. She suddenly felt as if she could sleep ... forever. Luxuriate in a soft restful serenity.

Her child moved to her and laid his head upon her chest and he could feel the heat from her body. He wrapped his little arms around her neck. And as he whispered to her, called her name to her, called his father's name to her, she fell deeper into the shadows of her unconscious sleep.

Her child held on and sang and chanted softly to her. He sang the song she had taught him, the same song she had given to Mbata as they lay in the stream together. It was a song of love and life.

Nimi's very last dream was of Mbata and her eternal love for him and she dreamed of her son and she dreamed of the three of them, together. And she dreamed of her own ... peace.

INTERLUDE

DETROIT,
MICHIGAN
JUNE, 1943

I

THERE WAS DEATH!
THERE WAS CHAOTIC CRUELTY!
THERE WAS WAR!

Death, and war, modernized and extensive stalked the lands, showered from the high sky, spilled over the chilled waters and gusted continuously on the winds of the earth and permeated the minds of conscious humanity.

A new war! A World War had begun its run and would play itself out as its distant and disconnected instigators sat, crossed their pleated legs and impatiently patted their clawed feet while they observed and enjoyed the marionette participants as the observers themselves, drummed their bloody, serrated fingertips, chewed and swallowed the remains of the living and drank fine, wet, red wine from the dried skulls of the dead.

The moon was high and nearly full, this warring Sunday summer nighttime. And as the invisible sanguine tears of this conscripted mourning moon cascaded upon this assembly line steel city, each falling drop flared and painted in illuminated brightness and guided in spotlighted movement each act of every soul that would seek its compassionless expression this sultry sanctified night.

A gnarled, dark-brown, thick, hardened left hand slowly lifted a tin flask of liquor to greedy, smacking, narrow, reddish lips and tilted it towards the cloudless sky and up in the sky, behind the sucking gurgling sound and between the twinkling brilliant stars, an ejected passing entity lit itself and seared across the picture that presented itself through the framed rear window of this new, green, Ford automobile in which this man sat. And as another gulp of the fiery, clear liquid entered this man's throat and flowed

into his churning stomach, the upturned, bloodshot eyes blinked slowly, drunkenly, and in that instant the moving star was ... gone.

Although he owned this car he never drove it. So he was pushed and slouched into the corner with his legs stretched out fully on the back seat of his shiny new Ford, was this somewhat short, muscled man. And now he removed his straw hat and wiped his creased brow, his frowning face, with his damp handkerchief and fanned himself with his hat.

In the front seat sat two men. One was the recently hired Driver Man. He was thin and light-skinned with ordinary height and he occasionally brushed his long, soft hands through the damp, heavy air and waved delicately at the annoying heat.

The other man next to him was a tall, very large, dark, Burly Man who leaned his big, brown, swollen, round head far out of his window and jabbed his sausage fingers between his dark, bulbous lips and whistled at passing women and insulted any accompanying men as he drank his liquor and sweated profusely.

These men had weeks ago ceased complaining of the heat because the summer, by the calendar still hours away, had sent notice the previous month that it had indeed decided to arrive early and by all indications, planned to stay for an extended length of time and thereby wear out its welcome from the long, harsh winter and dreary, truncated spring.

The three men sat in short sleeves, having removed their snappy sport coats. But these coats had not been cast off in deference to the temperature but to conceal beneath their crumpled arrangement on the front seat and folded placement on the rear seat, beautiful, polished pistols. And wrapped carefully in pretty picnic blankets in the trunk were beautiful, shiny rifles and settled comfortably in their hearts was murder.

It was ten o'clock on the night of June 20 and these men sat on an island that rose as an Edenic protrusion off the eastern edge of this bustling, erupting city. This was the largest city in Michigan. This was Detroit. These three men cared nothing of the distant war. And two of them disregarded the colored and white military men, ignored the colored and white factory workers and even dismissed with perfunctory glances, the bareness of the long-legged colored and white women.

The Driver Man thought of fast, sleek cars, and the Back Seat Man concentrated on revenge. It was only the Burly Man who focused on all those who strolled by. He leered at the pretty forbidden white women. He glared with hate-filled, dull-yellow eyes at the white-skinned sailors, the white-skinned, blue-eyed army men and the white factory workers who paused to stare at this despised darkness that dared to insultingly whistle and call to their own precious, pale, porcelain women.

The Burly Man pursued these people who had left their chosen isolated separation to walk and laugh and seek respite in the intermittent humid breezes that blew gently across the surrounding waters. The Burly Man did not know these whites. They were strangers and enemies. But he knew of the other men and women. He was familiar with those military men of color and

those enticing tempting women of various shaded hues who pranced in their shorts and summer style clothes that scarcely covered and did little to conceal their glistening colored skin. Yes! Those he recognized. In his life they were nourishing game. They were prey. These three fed on those.

There were those who had left the confines of their sweltering homes and apartments that constituted their segregated area of this city. Those who had sought the barely discernible coolness of the beautiful island. Those who needed to escape the smothering drabness of their depredated sunken valley. Most of those people of color had deserted, temporarily, the heat and the stifling restrictions of their oppressively crowded ghetto called, ironically, Paradise Valley. Those people, the Burly Man knew. They were the images and exemplified relations of his brother or sisters or third cousins. And he hated them too.

Yes! There was hatred in this brand new car. There was also anger, and lust, and impatience. The Back Seat Man, once pensive and motionless except for the raising of his arm and the tilting of his flask, sat up and slid forward slightly to catch some light from an overhanging street lamp. Unable to see his watch, he moved again and positioned his arm to receive some reflection from the bright headlights of the cruising cars. The three men were stopped a good distance from the island exit and many of these cars that did not leave would circle several times before parking. Their moving headlights scanned as lighted spots in the darkness as they rounded the nearby curve and came into sight. And as they briefly filled the Back Seat Man's eyes he glimpsed his watch before their illumination passed on. He remarked aloud at the growing lateness. The Driver Man lightly tapped several fingers on the steering wheel to the soft music of the radio. The Burly Man grunted his assent and then they all remained silent.

The Back Seat Man drank his drink and watched the bouncing red taillights of the cruising cars. And as he shook his flask near his ear to listen and measure what remained of his liquor, a few miles away a big beautiful new black Cadillac moved slowly down Woodward Avenue towards them.

Woodward Avenue. The main thoroughfare. The obvious dividing line. The coloreds to the east and the whites to the west. And as the Cadillac rolled south, down this barrier, it came to the Roxy Movie Theatre. The driver of the automobile stopped at the corner, at a red light. He noticed the milling people and he also noticed the length of the lines. The white line. The colored line. Two lines of people who filed in slowly, to sit in separation, coloreds upstairs in the balcony, whites down. All hoping to find a break from the heat and a momentary displacement of the reality of their existence.

Seated in the darkness and lost in the movements of the animated forms on the brightened movie screen they believed this night they would evade the wartime disruption of their lives and submerge themselves in the death and destruction of another war. That war had once raged openly between the Indians and the Cowboys and had long ago been enacted within America, in the hills, across the plains, and over the extensive lands of the free and throughout the homes of the brave.

The Cadillac eased from the light and reaching Jefferson Avenue it turned left, towards Belle Isle. He was considered to be a handsome man, the owner of this automobile that symbolized his ingenuity and wealth. He was tall, with a very smooth, very dark complexion. He was nearing forty now and pieces of grey could be seen in his short hairstyle, if one looked closely. And one could easily see a small patch of pure-white hair near his right temple.

He appeared a little older than his years. He didn't carry his expanding weight very well and he tended to worry a lot lately. His extreme anxiousness had recently begun to surface in the lines around his deep-set, dark-brown eyes and in his constantly creased forehead that accentuated the distortion of his frown. His suspicious hooded eyes never rested, they took in everything. Yes, he was nervous, always nervous, every day and every night and the owner of this big beautiful automobile who continuously flicked ashes from his long Cuban cigar, whether it needed flicking or not, had reasons to be.

The Cigar Man shook his head at that movie business nonsense, tossed his stub of a cigar from his window and eased back further into the plushness of his seat. He increased the speed of his automobile and to himself he smiled, pleased at the powerful sound of the engine and the smoothness of the ride. To no avail he tried to relax. Fifteen minutes later he turned onto the Bell Isle Bridge and crossed to his own business and initiated his own specific destiny.

The Back Seat Man glanced again at the approaching cars. It was getting late, closing in on ten forty-five and his liquor was gone. Now, behind them, a car slowed, lights, large and bright in their closeness moved near and the Cadillac pulled to the side of the Ford and the Cigar Man motioned and the Ford was started up and quickly fell in behind the Cadillac as it moved to a less crowded area of the island.

The Cadillac turned down one of the secluded side roads, pulled into one of the diagonal parking spaces and stopped. The Ford, following closely, moved beside it and both car's lights went out. They were plunged into a darkness that was broken only by the weak glow of a street light nearby and occasional headlights from other cars seeking their own privacy. Lovers and conspirators did not want to be disturbed.

As the Back Seat Man squeezed out past the Burly Man and moved towards the Cadillac, the Driver Man began to question the Burly Man quietly, in his medium-pitched voice. "That's Reverend James ain't it?"

"Yeah," the Burly Man answered, his deep voice slowed by the liquor. He was humming and nodding his head to some music only he could hear. "That's the Rev. alright. The big man!" He turned to the Driver Man now, who was stooping slightly, bending to see. "That's yo' boss right there. The most righteous Reverend Ezra James." And he laughed loudly.

"How come he don't preach no more?" the Driver Man asked.

"Oh he still talks that stuff every now and then. Most times he's too busy making money. Running thangs. Puffing on them big long cigars and messing with the women. You know, living the life."

The Driver Man smiled and nodded and watched as the Cigar Man's door

opened and the Back Seat Man, who had leaned down to the window to speak, stepped back. The Cigar Man stood and before he pushed his door shut he reached into a box on the seat beside his suit coat and drew out one of his cigars. He turned and nodded to the Burly Man. "What d'ya say Clyde?" he called out. He moved towards the Ford. He reached his right hand into his pants pocket and when he extended it to shake the Burly Man's hand, he passed him some money.

"Doing fairly good Reverend. How 'bout ya self?" He eased the money into his shirt pocket.

"Not bad. Not bad." He lowered his voice a little now. "That's a little something extra for last weekend." And as he said this he eyed the Driver Man. Looking directly at him for a long moment and then he nodded, without speaking.

"Thank ya Rev.," he called as the two men began to walk off across the grass. The Burly Man turned to the Driver Man and as he patted his pocket, he winked and laughed again, loudly.

The two men moved away from the cars and walked towards a picnic table that was placed not too far from the road, near a barbecue grill. As they walked, the Cigar Man licked on his cigar, bit off a piece from one end of it, spat it out and then slowed as he searched his pockets for matches. When he found them he stopped and as he lit his cigar he watched as the Back Seat Man moved on unsteadily to the table and sat heavily down. After lighting his cigar, he joined him. Sitting beside him.

He spoke, his voice quiet, but heavy. "Dammit E.V., I told you 'bout drinking when you s'posed to be on the job. I ain't gonna have that now."

"I ain't had much," came the raspy reply. "Sides, I got tired of waiting on you. I wanna do something!"

The Cigar Man puffed on his cigar and the tip flamed orange. He blew smoke out, bluish-white smoke. He flicked his ashes. He pulled at a piece of tobacco on his tongue and then he spat on the ground.

"People out everywhere tonight. The streets all crowed. Took me longer to git here." He leaned and yanked a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his face and neck.

"You know how it is when it gits hot," the Back Seat Man said. "People got to come out. Git away from the heat."

"Yeah, well they git in my way. Slow things up." He puffed on his cigar again. He kicked absently at a small rock. He flicked his ashes.

"Well?" the Back Seat Man finally spoke. "What're ya gonna do 'bout this guy? Ya made up yo' mind?"

"How's the new guy doing?" the Cigar Man asked.

"He'll do fine. He's a little young but he can damn sure drive."

"Can we trust him? That's what I wanna know. Can we trust him?" The Cigar Man's voice had taken on an edge and as he flicked at his non-existing ashes, he paused. He stared at the Back Seat Man. Listening. He was trying to see and hear, in these shadows, how drunk he was.

"Sho we can trust him. He's my first cousin's sister in law's kid. He's just

like family. I've known him all his life."

The Cigar Man stood up and walked a few feet away to stare off into the sky. They could hear laughter floating across the darkness from somewhere far away. Every now and then cars passed slowly behind them and their tires crunched over the gravel road and the music from their blaring radios came through their open windows, reached these two men and then faded as they rode on. Otherwise it seemed quiet and still.

"You know," the Cigar Man began. "I kinda like the guy, you understand. I mean I don't, dislike him. I mean, he reminds me a lot of me. I come up here from Belton, South Carolina with nothing. Nothing but twenty dollars and a paper sack of clothes my momma had left me when she died.

"I never really knew my daddy. White folks and colored folks got together and killed him and burnt down his church when I was six years old. I never found out what he was s'posed to have done or why they did that. Barely knew my momma for that matter. Them white folks worked her so much, worked her to death. So I git up here, fifteen years old, didn't know nobody. But look at me now. I worked hard and learned how to play these games they play in this here life, in this here city. And I got things. I'm a preacher just like my daddy. Preacher James was his name. So if a nigga wants his soul saved I can do that. I'm the biggest, richest colored number man in Detroit. If a nigga wants to gamble, play them numbers, I can do that for him too. He gonna come through me. I learned how to compromise, how to share with them white folks."

The Cigar Man sat down now. He sucked on his cigar, deeply, and blew the smoke into the air and watched it, once a small cloud, dissipate slowly into nothing. They sat in silence for several long moments.

He continued. "But this man here, he won't play the game right. But I understand him. He came over here from Canada, from right over there." He pointed his cigar in the direction of the water. "Hell, I didn't even know they had colored folks like him over there. He come here just like me, with nothing. The man has what it takes to move on, move up. But he ain't got what it takes to stay there. He won't compromise. He never learned how to let go of things."

Now the Cigar Man stood again and began to pace in front of the picnic table. "Look at me. I compromised. When he started running his own numbers and setting up his own houses I took him in as a partner. I wanted to avoid more trouble, stop all that stabbing and shooting he started. And what does he do? He turns on me!"

He flicked his ashes and the Back Seat Man could tell he was angry. He could see it in his movements as he waved his cigar and walked and talked. He could hear it rise in his low, powerful voice. And he could not help but smile. The Cigar Man, for this moment, was becoming a Reverend again. He was beginning to deliver, a sermon.

"I ain't gonna have it you understand? The got damn nigga's starting that shit all over again. Running his own this. Having his own that. I kept telling him. You ain't gonna run shit without the white man's OK. Them white

folks ain't gonna let you have nothing or keep nothing unless you learn how to work with 'em. You got to work with 'em, I told him! I kept telling him that and he don't listen. Every time I looked around I was pulling strings to git him outta jail. I should've put a stop to it last year when he gits in that mess over there in them Sojourner Truth Projects. He's s'posed to be taking care of business booking numbers and picking up money and he's over there fighting with a mob of white folks and the got damn police. He was there in the middle of all that shit."

"I told you to move on him then, but you wouldn't listen to me."

The Cigar Man ignored this. "He's way outta control. That's all there is to it. He's always been like that. It was alright when we was fighting with that gang from Paradise Valley and them boys off John R. Street. Between you and him and Clyde and the boys we was able to keep things tight. But he's worse than you and Clyde put together. And hell, that ain't no compliment. He's crazy. Too much violence in his life. He loves that shit. To me, it draws too much attention. I like peace and quiet."

"And money and women," the Back Seat Man added with a chuckle. The Cigar Man ignored this too.

"So, now he's back to setting up his own damn houses, hiring his own runners. Yeah! And next he'll be giving me orders! And them white folks downtown like that shit. They won't do nothing but try and play us off each other. They think all it means to them is more money. But they don't know, he ain't gonna cut 'em in. He'd rather fight 'em! It runs in his family I heard his daddy was a hardheaded thug and gangster always fighting with the white folks."

The Cigar Man paused. He stuck his chest out. He pulled up at one side of his pants with his fingers. He hooked his left thumb into the top of his pants. He hunched his shoulders, once. He puffed on his cigar. He puffed on it again. He blew out smoke and with his right hand he took the cigar from his mouth. His left hand moved, pointed.

"He's messing with my business and he's making me look bad! Giving other niggas ideas! I want it stopped! I want it over! Now! You got me?"

"Yeah, all that's fine 'cept it ain't gonna be easy. You know how he is. He ain't gonna let me or Clyde no where near him."

The Cigar Man pulled a small piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to the Back Seat Man. "Here's an address and a name." He pointed to the paper. "At eleven thirty you be there and wait for that guy. He's got to make a drop tonight and he swears he can git you inside his house."

As the Back Seat Man bent to try and read the paper, the Cigar Man pointed to it and spoke. "This guy's your way in." His voice rose slightly, and hardened. "Tonight I want that crazy, stubborn, uppity black nigga from Canada, dead! I want his proud, young, pretty, black wife from Georgia, dead! And I want that sickly little kid of his, dead! You hear me? Dead, all of 'em! I wanna send a message out! I'm the man in this here city! I'm running this show! I'm the smartest monkey in this bunch!"

"I understand. You the boss."

“That’s right! Got dammit, I’m the boss!” And he rocked back on his heels. Once again he pointed to the paper, this time with his cigar. “And that guy, take care of him too. He can’t be trusted. Setting up his own boss is dishonest. I don’t like people that can’t be trusted.” And he smiled broadly.

The Back Seat Man grinned. He stood up. “I better git going.”

The Cigar Man stopped him. “Don’t call me tonight unless something goes wrong. I’ve gotta get some rest. My kid’s birthday’s tomorrow. That rascal’ll be four years old and we’re gonna party.”

“Don’t cha worry,” the Back Seat Man said quietly. And he held up the paper. “If this guy’s on the up and up every thang’s gonna be just fine. It’s way past time for me and him to hook up.” A malevolent sneer crossed his lips.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I almost forgot about that ass whupping he put on you. But then I guess you ain’t, huh?” And the Cigar Man chuckled. He flicked the ashes then spat on the ground. He rolled his cigar in his fingers.

The Back Seat Man quickly stomped off towards his Ford and before he squeezed inside he glanced back to see the Cigar Man’s cigar flare reddish-orange once again. The bluish-white smoke was blown out, momentarily hiding this man’s face that stood alone in the night. And as the Back Seat Man settled in and the Ford’s engine was started up, the smoke rose into the sky but did not disappear. It hovered for an instant, as if seeking direction, or awaiting a summons. Then the smoke floated off into the damp night air, not to wander into nothingness but to pull itself directly across the blackness to find its related essence in the smoky fumes that were rising from the fires of the trash cans that had been sparked and then fanned to burst into flames and that were then heaved as fiery projectiles.

There were fires on the other side of the island. From the flames, bluish-white smoke and dark, ominous, acrid smoke rose and joined together in the sky to observe the violent struggle below that had broken out in jubilant hatred. Men of color and men of pale skin turned against one another and fought with sticks and knives and bottles, and guns.

In reality they aligned themselves in this violent, destructive expression with the Germans, Russians, Chinese, Japanese, British, French, Italians, and anyone else who chose to live in the real. And in phantasy, the warriors of the island merged with the American Cowboys and Native American Indians who had somehow miraculously spilled their conflict into the audience of the Roxy Theatre and spurred and rode the viewers onto Woodward Avenue where they screamed out in joyous, riotous voice to all those on the island who wailed back in frenzied ecstasy, their words swelling as a harmonious choir. Kill! They all sang. Murder! The lyrics rang. Let there be death in the streets. Let there be syrupy blood seeping into the ground of the beautiful island. Let there be bloated bodies in the waters that surround Belle Isle. And let the weeping moon ... weep on.

The new green Ford had eased on off into the night and begun to roll towards its rendezvous. After it crossed the bridge it then turned left onto

Jefferson Avenue. The Back Seat Man was tense and erect now, leaning forward. He looked straight ahead intently as the Ford moved to Mount Elliott Street where it turned right. At the corner of Mack Avenue it pulled into the corner gas station. The Burly Man jumped out and moving to the trunk, he opened it and took out a gas can. He had it filled and got back into the car and placed the can on the floor between his feet. The Ford continued on Mount Elliott to East Warren Avenue where it turned right. Twenty minutes later it turned down a dark dead-end street deep on the east side of Detroit and parked. The time was eleven twenty.

The Cigar Man had remained on Belle Isle after the Ford had pulled off. He stayed to reminisce and listen to the last of the religious music on his radio and finish smoking his long cigar from Havana. He had not been to the island in quite a while and he had forgotten how nice the place could be.

Along with the boisterous picnickers and loud summertime revelers, many families came here to relax. There were still areas of this island park where one could find quiet amongst the trees and grass. There was a soft tranquility that sat in a watery isolation that opposed the molten steel and flattened cement that made up the essence of this factory city that prospered during this time of war.

He looked across the grass and up into the silhouetted treetops as they swayed from an abrupt, unexpected but welcomed breeze. And he turned his head to listen. There seemed to be unusual, unfamiliar sounds that had been blown to him through the air. He wondered about this noise and why the people were so loud this Sunday night.

He started his engine. Before driving off he turned on his overhead light. He pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the time. He checked it with the time on the clock on his dashboard. It was fifteen minutes until midnight. He tossed the butt of his cigar out of the window. The automobile glided away and taking a short road directly out, he headed for the bridge.

As he pulled onto the bridge he could see and hear ahead of him, coming in his direction, with lights flashing and sirens wailing, several police cars. As he waited at the red light that halted him at the end of the bridge, he watched in his rearview mirror as the police cars disappeared from his sight. A sense of unease began to creep inside him. The light turned green and he directed his big Cadillac left onto Jefferson Avenue.

The Cigar Man stopped on Jefferson to have his gas tank filled. As the attendant pumped his gas, he stood near the curb lighting another cigar and watching with interest as several more police cars raced along Jefferson towards the beautiful island.

He could not know that all that lurked within humans and smoldered beneath the paved surfaces of this volatile city had fragmented upwards into its natural form and sent into this heated night air a lamenting hymn that wafted past, over, and under the big black automobile and spread out and above, and circled the city. And this piercing dirge was laid across the backs and as a meshed veil it fell around the eyes of these citizens of Detroit. The

soundless, piping music pulsed throughout the veins of the coloreds and whites. The synchronized beat drummed the people on, and on.

The Cigar Man started his engine and turned right towards Woodward Avenue and he began to hear strange words that frightened him, emanate from his radio. As he hastily changed the radio station, the volume of the operatic song increased. His nervous, colored hands steered the Cadillac right, onto Woodward and he twisted the radio off. Yet, the elegiac song rushed on through the car and through his head.

He pulled to the curb now, in panic. He closed his eyes. He covered his ears in an attempt to block away the melodious song that cried directly to him. He tried to blot out the words that now organized themselves into a discernible refrain. There was a choir somewhere, singing. Singing gleefully of ... death. Then, all the rising sounds, ceased.

It was still and quiet and the Ford, deliberately parked away from any lights, sat in darkness on this empty dead-end street. The Driver Man was nervous and his throat was dry. The Burly Man bounced, hummed softly to himself and sipped on his drink. The Back Seat Man sat in motionless anger.

"Let me have some of that," the Driver Man said, as the Burly Man began to recap his flask.

The Burly Man passed the liquor and turned to the man in the rear. "The Rev. gave me a little something extra. He must've been feeling pretty good tonight."

"Pass that back here," the voice in the rear commanded as the Driver Man finished his quick gulp. The Back Seat Man took a drink. "Yeah," he then said. "Maybe he's feeling good 'cause his kid's birthday's tomorrow." He handed the flask back to the front seat.

"I didn't know the Reverend had any kids," the Driver Man said.

"Yeah, he got a kid alright," the Burly Man said. "And get this. He named the little muthafucka, Prophet. Can you believe that? A kid named Prophet James." He laughed loudly.

"Shut the fuck up," the Back Seat Man hissed. He leaned forward to look at his watch.

The Burly Man nearly whispered now. "Here comes somebody." He shifted, reaching for his gun. "Is that him?"

The Back Seat Man looked up and peered across the narrow street. "How the hell am I s'posed to know?" He reached for his gun. He could see a figure emerging from between two houses. A short, stooped, middle-aged man looked up and down the street. "Blink your lights," he ordered.

The lights came on and went off. The little man, who had moved towards the sidewalk, saw the Ford and hurried to it. Stopping near the driver's side he bent slightly to look in the darkened car. He heard a voice come from the back.

"You Erskin?"

"Uh ... yeah The Reverend sent you. Ain't that right?"

No one answered him but the car door opened slowly. He hesitated. The

Burly Man leaned towards him. "What the hell you waiting on? Git in!"

The little man flinched at this low gruff voice and then hurried to slide behind the Driver Man, into the car. He looked at the big man in the front who had turned to glower at him. He swallowed and turned to the man who sat next to him, silent and staring.

He asked again. "You the Reverend's men?" Again there was no answer. "Yeah, sure you are." His words were clipped, and rushed. "You wouldn't be here. Ain't that right?" He chuckled, smiled a gapped, broken-tooth grin and pulled at his long nose with his left hand as the fingers of his right hand wiggled.

He sensed, for some reason, that the stocky man next to him was the leader and so he asked him. "Did the Reverend send the money?" He was looking from the large shiny pistol to the man's cold eyes and back to the pistol. He was growing more nervous with each passing second.

The Back Seat Man eyed the man, with a distasteful frown. He hated this man immediately. He reminded him of a weasel. And the man smelled bad. He turned from the Weasel Man and glanced out of his window for a moment. The window was down. He took a deep breath. Then he turned back to him. "He told me to pay you off after the job is done. Plus you gonna take back that money you s'posed to turn in ain't you? Let's just git on with it."

"Yeah man. Sure, sure," the Weasel Man said. "We ain't got far to go. It's right close. Right near here." He pulled at the tip of his nose again. "I figured that I could let you in the back door. See, after he let's me in I'll go to the kitchen, for a beer or something. It's at the back. If you're waiting there you can come in and you know ... do the job." The Back Seat Man just stared at him.

"It won't be no problem," the Weasel Man continued. "I go in the kitchen all the time. He trusts me."

The Burly Man spoke now, as he too stared. "He don't trust you. He don't trust nobody."

"You better not be wrong about this," the Back Seat Man warned, menacingly.

"Naw man, naw," he whined. "I swear. I know what I'm talking 'bout. Every thang'll be alright. Just be there at the door."

"Let's move," the Back Seat Man told the Driver Man. The Burly Man laughed and turned on the radio. The Ford backed out of the dead-end street and the Weasel Man leaned forward to give his directions.

On Woodward Avenue the Cigar Man slowly removed his hands from his ears. He looked around in apprehensive amazement. Then, he jerked his hands to raise them again in an attempt to silence a growing clamor that rolled up behind and to his left. But he recognized the noise of a streetcar. It pulled up beside him, to stop at the red light and he removed his hands from his steering wheel to stare at them, to rub them together and wonder at their shaking.

The streetcar was packed full with late night colored people. Many of the passengers would be returning to work the next day and for them these were their last hours of enjoyment. There were also young military men and their wives and girlfriends aboard. This night they were all whirling through life.

Voices called out now, to the Cigar Man. And these greetings and remarks brought him back to himself. They yelled out about his automobile, about its beauty. And as the light changed and the streetcar lunged off, clanking and sparking, a woman's voice could be heard above the din. "Mister, let me ride in that big fine car with you." Laughter followed and the Cigar Man heard himself chuckle, nervously.

He looked up now and noticing that he was at the corner of Woodward and Monroe Avenue, on a sudden impulse, he turned right, towards Brush Street. He wanted, needed to see the lights and the finely dressed people who stood and posed and carried on loud conversations on the corners or who simply strolled along, window-shopping. Brush was a popular street for the colored folks, just as busy and lively as Hastings Avenue. He knew many of the people in that area. He felt at ease there and that was what he searched for now, a sense of ease.

He turned left on Brush and drove at a crawl. North he was headed on this one-way street. And not but a few miles in front of him lay his destiny. He flicked his ashes. He spat out of the window and waved his cigar in the air to anyone that happened to glance his way.

The Weasel Man's hands were shaking as he opened the icebox door and pulled out a bottle of beer. "Where's the opener?" he called out.

"Look on the sink," came a deep voice from up the hall, from the living room. "Turn the light on."

"That's alright. I see it," the Weasel Man yelled back.

He crossed the kitchen and moved to the sink. But he did not open the bottle. Instead, he set it down and sliding along the wall, he crept with mounting fear to the back door. And as he turned and began to unlock the door locks, a boy, a child crawled from his bed. And as the man began to slowly twist the knob, with gritted teeth, the child, with a picture book in his little right hand, crawled from his bedroom and in the darkness he passed behind the Weasel Man and reached for the coolness of the icebox door.

The child placed his feverish hands upon the door and then his burning face against it, seeking relief from his rising temperature. The child turned to call out to his daddy for a drink of ice-cold water and he saw from his knees, skulking, elongated shadows pass by. They were tall and strange these dark images. They passed him and moved silently, stealthily, towards the front of the house. Onward, towards the dimly lit living room they went and the child felt as if he were ... dreaming.

He was puzzled by these faceless, slinking entities. And in the darkness, within his expanding delirium he sat back against the chill of the icebox, in confusion and mounting fear. Yet he did not know of what he was afraid. Then, he called out weakly to his daddy and his father turned towards the

kitchen and as the child called out to his momma, lightning charged and thunder exploded throughout the house.

In his parents' bedroom the child's feverish momma tried to lift her head. She tried to move and finally managed to roll from her dampened bed and ease herself to the floor. She crawled towards the kitchen as the child crawled forward to peek up the hallway into the living room.

The daddy had reached his gun that lay on the table near the money he counted and as the bullets slammed into his body he emptied his gun in the direction of his assassins. The child screamed and closed his tearing eyes to the repetitious blinding flashes of light and thunderous echoes reverberated throughout his little body and gunpowder smoke began to float from the living room down the hallway and each breath of the child brought this tingly vapor into his being and he could taste its misty unique flavor in his mouth as it filled his lungs.

Now he heard his momma call and as he opened his eyes he saw one of the mysterious forms stagger from the smoky glow, bump along the walls of the darkened hallway and fall heavily upon the kitchen floor. It was the Burly Man who lay sprawled so close the child could have reached out and touched him. The man was coughing, wounded and he writhed in pain and clutched his bleeding stomach and cursed his luck.

Again the child screamed as the Burly Man's dull-yellow eyes fastened onto him for a brief instant. The Back Seat Man reloaded his pistol. And as the Weasel Man grabbed at the money on the table he heard a click near his left ear that froze him. He turned and he saw a rounded bright flash before his eyes and he felt ... nothing.

Now the Back Seat Man spoke to the Driver Man standing with wide eyes, paralyzed, against the far wall. "Take care of that got damn kid! Shut him up!"

"Where do want me to put him?"

"Put him to sleep! Kill him!"

"Kill the kid, for what? Why?"

"Cause I said so!"

The Back Seat Man walked quickly down the long hallway to the woman who crawled in silence towards her screaming child. He kicked her violently in her side, twice. He stepped back. He kicked her again and she rolled under the kitchen sink. He pointed his gun.

And as the Driver Man snatched up the screaming child and moved towards the bedroom, the child saw the gun flash and heard the thunder that covered the woman's soft pleadings as she begged for the life of her little boy. Again, the sudden light and loud noise. Again! Again!

The Burly Man struggled to gain his feet and was bent over against the kitchen wall, moaning. The Back Seat Man moved quickly back up the hall and was spreading gasoline around the front room and over the daddy's dying body. "Better hurry up," he called to the Driver Man.

In the bedroom the Driver Man was staring at his hands, trying to see in this moonlight that seeped past the shade on the open, screened window if

his fingers had been burned. The skin of the child felt as if it was on fire. He looked down at this child who was staring at him, wide eyed and calm now. The eyes of the child were glazed, expressionless, and yet they seemed all knowing. It was as if through his innocent eyes he could see and understand, and accept ... everything.

The living room flared into light. The Driver Man ran to the bedroom doorway and up the hallway he could now see the wavering reflections of the rising flames. Running back to the child he grabbed a pillow and placing it over the child's face he pointed his gun. He hesitated.

The Back Seat Man was in the kitchen with the Burly Man now and he called out a warning. The Driver Man could see a luminous glow moving down the hallway and hear the chattering flames. He could smell smoke and wood and flesh. Now he turned back to his victim as he felt the feet of the child. Tiny feet, kicking out at him. He felt the tenacious struggle of the child. He jerked the trigger of his beautiful polished pistol. The child heard the muffled thunder. He felt the bullet. But in the soft, smothering, pillowy darkness, saw ... nothing.

The Driver Man left the bedroom. He helped the Back Seat Man drag and carry the Burly Man through the doorway and they moved with him, in haste, to the Ford parked in the alley behind a nearby garage. They helped the Burly Man into the car. The engine started up and they paused to look back at the house that now burned in haloed luster. And as the Ford sped off, the Back Seat Man could see flames rising from the roof at the front of the house. He turned away from his completed job to watch the end of the alley advance towards them as the car quickly gained speed. Its headlights off, the automobile sliced through the darkness of the narrow alley. It left fiery destruction, a charring monument, and a bloody, dusty trail.

The Ford flew from the alley and screeched into the street and the Driver Man turned his headlights on so they could see the path that unfolded in front of them. They could no longer see the flames behind them or their reflections leaping upwards through the stars and to the moon. They could not see the dense black smoke billow and rise to seemingly dissipate into the crowded sky.

They raced around corners towards the colored hospital. They were each oblivious to the deadly smoke that did not evaporate but gathered itself to float high above them, following them, then passing by them, yet leading them. Like a floating, gliding shroud it remained there. And as they careened along, it began to gently fall around them to veil the fate that stood and waited for them at the end of their road. But the dark smoky fog that distorted their view would soon blessedly part for them and reveal to them their impending destiny. The new green Ford tuned and headed west on Madison Avenue. In the distance, Brush Street lay directly ahead.

The Cigar Man cruised north on Brush. The street was alive and vibrant this night. And although he recognized and waved at several people he knew, no one halted him to inform him of the incendiary words that had wrapped

themselves into vivid rumors that had arranged themselves into convoluted stories that had been accepted and believed as true.

Fantastic tales flashed from Belle Isle and flew across the quivering city. Suppressed emotions rose up to be illuminated brightly in the actions that followed. In the streets near the Roxy Theatre, whites and coloreds fought one another. The whites had heard a colored man had raped a white woman on Belle Isle and they believed this. They believed it when they heard shouts and yells of rampaging niggers loose within the city. They broke store windows and looted and while fearful of these strange animals, enraged at their transgressions, they attacked, anyone, everyone of color.

Along Hastings and Adams and skipping onto Brush Street came a rendition of a repetitious play being acted out by the despised oppressor. Brutal, despicable whites had shown the reality of their deviant nature and pale-skinned sailors had thrown unceremoniously, a colored woman and her baby from the Belle Isle Bridge into the Detroit River. Or, perhaps, was it a pregnant colored mother and her baby? It really didn't matter, as long as it was the gospel truth.

When does it ever matter? The humankind requires no reason or incentive to express in actuality its dominating desires. This night, the humankind would illustrate its refined purpose and ultimate intent. Deadly chaos now reigned supreme. Disorganized death, in the historically defined structured form of a spontaneous riot, was underway. Devoid of internal restraint and without external constraint, it was gloriously free.

Yes! It was unencumbered and giddy and loose, Death was. It had moved as an undulating musical wave. It had begun as a rolling tide from the sea to rear Itself as a watery wall from the ocean to wash along unhindered until It flooded upon the city streets. Not to stagnate but to suck down into Its turbulent, violent undertow all those who danced and cavorted in Its wetness in this plagued night air.

They caroused this late night and waltzed along sidewalks and into the disrupted traffic of the slippery streets. They moved in a synchronized three-four beat. Whites and coloreds clutched and held each other, as they turned and spun around rhythmically and slid along as the song of conflict could be heard emanating from the throats of these people.

Murderous words infected everyone. Murderous words passed the lips of all. They sang and bopped along and the voice of Death could be recognized, by those who chose to listen, as It covered all the invective epithets and painful screams. Death's fingertip was felt as a tremendous, crippling blow as She tapped the shoulders of the partying participants and reminded them that the last dance belonged only to Her. Oh! And in the end, they would all shimmy dance in Her arms separate and ... alone.

The Cigar Man drew on his cigar, blew out his smoke, flicked his ashes. Then he honked his horn impatiently. He leaned his head out of his window, spat, and stretched his neck, straining to see ahead. He was stuck in traffic and he wondered what was the cause of the delay. He inched forward and he

saw the outlines of several policemen up ahead of him. There! He could see them clearly now, directing traffic and when he reached them at Vernor Highway they forced him to detour back to Woodward Avenue. At this same moment several miles behind, the green Ford turned onto Brush and began its race north.

The Cigar Man's dark-brown colored hands steered his new beautiful black Cadillac onto Woodward Avenue and one block later he was again stopped in bumper-to-bumper traffic. He tossed his cigar out of the window. He honked his horn again. Long blasts blared from his silver-coated horn. And he summoned to his life, infuriated fury. It moved forward in pale menacing animated patches. In white threatening circles it advanced. Finally, its vicious wanness surrounded him, engulfed him.

Gangs of white people were rampaging! They were chasing coloreds along the streets. They fought the coloreds who attempted to protect themselves and resist the mob's hands that tried and very often succeeded in snatching them from the streetcars, from their automobiles, and to their deaths.

In the street behind him he could now see cars being overturned and then they were quickly set on fire. Cars were being stoned and now, gunshots popped between the cries, the yells, the warnings and screams.

Terror jumped up from his stomach into his throat and gagged him. He pressed on his accelerator, hard, and swung his car onto the sidewalk. Now he was moving and passing other cars and avoiding surging bodies. Yes! Yes! He could see ahead of him a clearing in the street that could possibly allow him to escape this madness.

He glanced, with panic, into his rearview mirror. A group of whites had spotted him. Pointed at him. Singled him out. Attracted to the opulence of his beautiful black Cadillac and the richness of his color, they were lured to him. And as he reached the clearing he sought and moved back into the street, increasing his speed, shots rang out from the side street he was passing and both tires on his right side lost air and now he was moving along crazily. His tires made loud flapping noises and the steering wheel shook in extreme agitation and wildly vibrated in his hands and he lost control and now he was headed back onto the sidewalk, against his will.

The Cadillac ran on. Directed by the whites clenched fists that seemed to wave it forth. It picked up speed and the whites that had run towards the automobile stopped. Now they stepped back. Then they turned to run. But it was too late. The runaway chrome and rubber and leather and steel plowed into them and one went across the hood and over the top. Two others were hit and tossed in different directions. Another man was beneath the car and the flattened tires rolled over him, turned him over, and crushed the bleached white body into a mangled red corpse. The tilted Cadillac curved back towards the street and it hit a mailbox, struck a fireplug and as water gushed high into the sky the Cadillac lurched across the street into a parked car, stalled out and came finally, to a crippled halt.

Bricks and rocks were being thrown at the Cigar Man now. He could see whites coming at him from behind and from the sides. He thought of his big

shiny silver pistol that lay so close to him in splendor and comfort in his carpeted trunk. The hurled objects began to clang against his automobile and a metal bullet pierced his front windshield and he thought fleetingly of his child. He quickly let his windows up, as if the glass would provide a protective barrier and bar them from his presence. The mob swelled and began to rock his car and he thought only of himself.

Now the rabid animals yanked at his locked doors and he laid his soft, colored hands on his horn and called out for help and his pleading voice was lost in the confines of his Cadillac. They shattered his windows, unlocked his doors, opened them and began to pull him from his automobile.

They pried his clutching fingers from the steering wheel. They loosened his grasping hands and his soft hands scraped across the luxurious seat as he clawed to hold on and finally they forced apart his arms and wrenched them from the swinging door. He cursed and flailed out at his assailants. Bricks and rocks pounded against his back, against his skull and he felt blood. He tasted blood.

Now the grabbing hands yanked at him and as they dragged him into the street he kicked and fought and sobbed. He turned in circles and his eyes fell again and again on policemen who stood impassively on the other side of the street. His warm blood began to run into his eyes and blind him and as he weakened and collapsed to his knees, the policemen waved and smiled.

As they beat and stabbed the Cigar Man to death, the righteous Reverend Ezra James died along with him. And the husband died. And the father died. And as the mob turned the beautiful Cadillac over and set it on fire, the new green Ford was being directed from Brush Street, at Vernor Highway, onto Woodward Avenue.

“What’s going on?” the Back Seat Man asked.

“I don’t know,” the Driver Man answered. “Looks like the police up there, directing traffic.”

“Hurry up got dammit!” the Burly Man moaned.

“Hide your guns!” the Back Seat Man ordered.

The Driver Man helped the Burly Man put his gun under the seat and he placed his between his legs. The Back Seat Man put his in the corner, on the floor. But these policemen didn’t care about them. They were only their guides. The destination lay ahead of them. There, where the smoke rose into the sky. There, on Woodward Avenue!

They turned off of Vernor Highway onto Woodward and gunshots began immediately to strike the Ford. The riot was spreading and growing in intensity and the whites lost no time in converging on any coloreds they saw. The whites descended upon this Ford and they were surprised when their gunfire was returned.

They were shocked and confused as the doors of the Ford were flung open and the two men from the front seat emerged with polished pistols blazing and leaden bullets leaving from the burly Man’s calloused hands and from the soft hands of the Driver Man came flashes and their bullets were flying in all directions.

The whites were stunned and then momentarily retreated. Their wounded remained rolling and crawling and crying and screaming in the middle of the street. Their fearful hesitation allowed the two colored men to move towards the trunk of their car. As the Back Seat Man fired his pistol from the rear side window, the Driver Man was able to reach the trunk and open it. And then the Driver Man, the young man, the nearly a cousin by marriage, Etherton Washington, fell dead when a bullet entered the back of his head and exited through his right eye.

The Back Seat Man was out of bullets now and was leaning over the front seat trying to reach into the glove box for more ammunition as the Burly Man grabbed one of the rifles and began to fire wildly. Then the Burly Man was hit and he fell to his knees still firing and several whites charged. The Burly Man crawled to the driver's side of the Ford and tried to climb in. And as the Back Seat Man reloaded his gun, Clyde Wilson, brother, uncle, criminal man, Burly Man, was shot again and he fell dead.

The whites reached the car and surrounded it and two of them were shot and wounded before two others shot the Back Seat Man as he tried to get behind the steering wheel. He was hurt, badly hurt and as he slid weakly to the floor he smelled gasoline. He felt the car begin to rock. He heard the hate-filled voices and as the car burst into flames he felt the heat, he cursed the whites. The fire reached him and he screamed and swatted at the blaze helplessly and railed against life itself as the pungent aroma of his own burning flesh choked him and the smoke rising from his body blinded him. His hair began to burn and he tried to leave the car but he couldn't. And so the widower, E.V. Donaldson, the ruthless gangster man, the Back Seat Man, burned to his death in his new green Ford, in the ... back seat.

The flames and smoke from the Cadillac joined the flames and smoke of the Ford and all the other cars and buildings and trash that burned on Woodward Avenue. On Hastings Street and Adams Street coloreds attacked whites. They broke the windows of stores and looted and set fires. And the fires they stoked, found in smoky solace, a consoling unity with all the other flames that burned and destroyed. Those flames rose and others grew faint in the distance and glowed and shimmered in the nighttime and faded to embers as a lone child moved through darkened shadows and along winding alleys somewhere deep in a colored valley called ... Paradise.

The feverish child had knocked the bloody pillow from his head and lay there for a moment in the illumination of the moonlight, of the blazing firelight, motionless, listening to the heavy footsteps on the back steps and the low voices of the attackers as they faded across the backyard. He had touched the wound under his right eye where the hot lead had passed as a sword through his cheek. He had felt the blood ooze forth, trickle down and immediately congeal and dry to a crust as a scab began to form on his smooth, soft, heated face. And then he had crawled from his bed and eased hesitantly to his bedroom door.

He held on tightly to the glass doorknob and he could see the glow of the advancing flames. He could hear their fiery movements and feel their essence as the walls of the long hallway began to burn. He called for his daddy. He called for his momma. He called again, and even above the roar of the fire he could hear his momma moan his name. From deep within he felt a strength that allowed him to release his grip and he moved quickly into the kitchen to the sink and saw his momma there beneath it, motioning to him.

He knelt to her, reached for her, and his little hands touched her chest and he felt her soaked nightgown and under it, her breasts moving, heaving in spasms and his hands became wet and sticky with the blood that covered her. His naked back was warming, to soon blister. He could smell the wood, the carpet, the bodies burning. The thick smoke choked him and stung his wide, frightened eyes and mingled with the tears that formed there, that now fell from these dark-brown eyes. Tears, falling as steaming rain.

His momma pulled him close and kissed him, held him, crushed him to her for an instant and asked him not to cry. Then, with an urgency that had sliced his heart and descended into the recessed labyrinth of his soul, she had ordered him to depart his home, to leave his daddy, to abandon his momma and take with him only vivid memories to be lost and repressed, of this horrible night.

“Run my love!” she had said. “Run baby! Run fast!” she nearly whispered. “Now!” And she had pushed him forcefully from her.

He had tumbled back, and away. He scrambled to his knees and in defiance, in denial, he crawled back to her. And now in the brightness of the creeping flames he could see her open, staring, once beautiful eyes as they turned to dull marble and he somehow sensed and knew beyond a doubt that his daddy, and his momma who he was pressed upon and who he kissed fervently, had left him. They were both dead.

Reluctantly, he stood. He backed up slowly. Through the open back door he moved. He stopped on the porch and stared back at this scene. He was mesmerized by the animation, transfixed by the colors and the sharp aromas that were blown to him and that climbed down into his stomach, there, to turn over and over.

He saw the flames move forward. Move towards his momma’s body that smoldered now. He moved to the edge of the porch and watched calmly as his momma’s silken nightgown ignited even before the fire reached her. Then her dark-brown body began to burn. At this moment, his tears ceased. He turned, and reaching up, he grasped the porch banister, then the railings and slowly took the steps down.

Back to the crime he turned. Backing up. Oblivious to the soft grass of the yard. Backing up. Ignoring the garage that pressed against his raw shoulders. Backing up. Dismissing the pain, his emotionless eyes were riveted on the burning house. Then he heard his momma’s voice again, deafening in his mind.

“Run!” she commanded. He was near the fence at the alley and he grabbed it with both his bloody hands. “Run!” she screamed.

He turned from the deathly destruction of his nascent human existence and ran, naked, down the alley, through the ominous, inimical darkness. Sirens howled in the distance behind him, towards him and he looked back, once. He never looked back with his eyes again.

As the Cigar Man was dying, this child was furtively crossing an unknown street. As the Back Seat Man was dying, the little child, in feverish delirium, was running down yet another darkened alley, over puncturing rocks and stumbling and falling on cutting, broken glass.

Over the pavement of the streets of Detroit the riot slowly progressed towards its inevitable conclusion. It would take three days to completely stop but as the sun began to rise on Monday morning the last of the clubs, iron pipes, bricks, rocks, knives and guns began to slow their pulsing, punishing expression. The volume of the cries and screams lowered and Hatred and Fear paused to take a deep breath. They were both growing weary and desired to slink away, back to their hovel of darkness. Hatred and Fear began to ease back down into the souls and rest until the trumpeter blew for them again and ... again.

Death, released Her wires from Her colored puppets, from Her white puppets. And Death, gorged and satiated on the flesh and blood of those who once dwelled within this segregated city but had now come together, joined hands, and then separated again, to stand in a line of one to enter the lonely nothingness of the endless eternity of Death's populated, haunted domain was bored, Death was.

Yet Death remained proud of this minute but magnanimous eruption that brought to Death a momentary diversion from the impersonal mechanized war that twisted across the world. Death found immense pleasure in this much more personal, crude expression of the humankind's natural instinct.

Death was always fascinated in the ingenious creative ability of the humankind to needlessly and self-deceivingly attempt to discover some new inventive reasons to enact Death's desire. In the pinching throes of the bidding of Death, the humankind kills and maims and thus flows on in a cycle that requires no novel or complex explanations. It is a cycle that was ever present, will remain everlasting and is pure, innate and inexorable in its movement towards seeking the purity of the humankind's purpose. That purpose being, complete destruction.

And so Death paused to observe, and yawn in distracted disinterest at the cessation of this brief but amusing summertime mayhem. She did not care about the over eighteen hundred who had been arrested or the nearly four hundred and fifty who had been injured. She pointed her bony skeletal finger and counted Her true reward. But as Death added the number of empty bodies, She became disappointed in the actuality of Her influence. Only thirty-four would reach Her, only twenty-five coloreds and only nine whites. And Although Death was very appreciative of the assistance the white police provided by sending Her seventeen coloreds, Death was nevertheless dejected by the count. However, as She perused Her work, She discovered many more who would be hidden away, never known, never acknowledged.

Then there were those who would carry this inflamed night with them and pass the festering wounds on. These humans would embrace a living unconscious blackness. These belonged to Death also. Death checked Her list and She smiled at the names. She owned them all. Coloreds and whites. Good and bad. Innocent and guilty. Young and old. They had met one another, in life, and left life behind, together. And now they belonged to Death ... forever.

The Monday mourning sun replaced the sorrowful moon of shame. It removed the comfortable protection of the dark night. It shined its day light upon the last of the ragged uncivilized spectacle and lit up a little naked bloody child who had crawled into a strange backyard and hidden his ravaged little body between two garbage cans and amongst the rats and flies, he fell, exhausted, into a deep sleep, alone, to dream. The skin of the child was hot. The soul of the child was full, yet cold. And within the child's dark sleep, flew amazing, vivid ... dreams.

PART II

DETROIT

JULY, 1967

There was a familiarity that was again wrapped around the oppressive blackness. He could feel an abnormal perceptible strength this time, in Its return. And as he returned to ... It, there was a soft sense of comfort that pervaded the immediate area. But this vague ease only existed as long as there was no movement, and only so long as his eyes remained tightly closed.

However, he knew that he would look. He always looked. It was impossible, no matter how hard he tried, not to attempt to discover the source of the strange, incomprehensible sounds that seemed to rise lightly from the thick grass beneath his bare feet and move from, and recede into the glazed endless blackness of the walls of this humming, enchanted forest.

There was a fire behind him and he was destined to look at it. And even with his eyes pressed shut, the flames would somehow glow and begin to illuminate all that encompassed him. He tried not to turn around. He knew he would shake his head, no, to the calling sounds. No, to the fire as it forced its way into his mind. No, to the growing light. No, to the expanding urge to see. Yet, each time he stood like this, at this place, at this precise moment, he would turn slowly and open his eyes and a sense of foreboding would creep into his body.

As he stood there motionless, he would peer deep into the fiery blackness, straining to see through it. And it was then the thunder would begin. Tremendous peals of thunder would crash down upon his head and the ground would quake and he would extend his arms to bring himself balance. Then! Brief, brilliant, intense flashes of lightning would begin to discharge themselves across the sky and he would move his gaze to where the sky should forever be and then wait patiently for the revealing flashes.

So, once again there he stood. With arms outstretched, thunder roaring, beautiful jagged bolts bringing light to the black forest, and he, staring up. Now! The call came, came louder, identifying him, naming him as a person he could not recognize. The sounds swelled and moved behind him and swiftly he would bring his gaze back to earth and search in each direction, turning in little circles for ... her. And there was always inside him the sense, the knowledge that that she would come again. And he would be swept up, overwhelmed by a desire to see her.

Then! There she would be. A faceless black woman, blacker than the black forest, with a golden smile would appear. She would stand off from him in the far distance. She would be dressed in a lovely delicate white sheer material. And through the transparency of the gown he could see in totality, in contrast, her exquisite naked black body and she would wave to him. She would call him, that unrecognizable name and order him to her and he would move, in slow motions, towards her.

Then! A bolt of lightning would sear across the sky and strike her chest and she would ignite and burst into flames. He would try to run and he could feel his legs, unmoving as if he were paralyzed. He would flail his arms and they felt weak and they hurt. He felt himself step, move in lurches and then as he fell he could feel the shaking ground and each time he rose, to fall, his knees and his hands would somehow scrape painfully across the moist green

grass and his skin would be opened with tiny holes and he saw blood run and then he saw steam rise as orange clouds into the black sky and his blood formed numbers that lay with pennies and nickels and green money that now covered the green grass. Numbers, there, he had never been able to see before, for the first time ever he could distinguish them and in his head he was counting, counting money. The numbers were pretty and red with his blood. The paper money was soaked and soggy.

The colors? The colors! He stood inside their vividness. And the colors were stretched as rubber as he ran now, towards the flaming body. For some strange reason he was not afraid of her. He longed for her, with all his soul. He desired her, to be with her, to touch her, to feel the dark-red blood that he saw seeping through her gown and through the flames and forming in a pool around her. He wanted to swim with her in the darkness of her red blood and drink it, taste its wetness as if in its essence they both, together, would be cooled and relieved from the heat he had begun to feel around his heart, upon his back, heat that emanated from her burning as he moved closer.

Now! At this moment a man appeared. He always arrived at this instant, there, to his left, always to his left, a tall black man. Faceless. Drums now! Beating! Pounding! The man would wave a long gleaming knife in his right hand. His voice would somehow join with the words of the woman and this black man would point his black, handleless left arm to the woman. And there was a feeling as he was running, falling, trying to run, that he was somehow supposed to help the woman. Save her! The black man wanted him to extinguish the blue and orange flames that consumed the black woman with the gold in her smile. He felt helpless in his inability to reach her. For now, each movement he made grew heavy and hot. Each step he took his legs would throb painfully and he labored to lift them. He fought to drag them through the beautiful green grass.

The lightning came quickly now. And so the black forest became cast in a blinking light. Everything moved from darkness to light in a pulsating repetition. It was as if he opened and closed his now teary eyes slowly. And between the flashes of light, within every moment of blackness, hideous, shimmering silvery animals began to ease from behind the great trees that concealed them and encircled him. Great trees that touched the faraway sky.

They were huge, these animals. Everything appeared large now and he wondered why everything was so large. And the hairy scaly animals reached into the sky and grabbed the bolts of lightning and he screamed out silently as the animals flung the lightning at the faceless black man and the burning woman who now looked directly at him. Her eyes! Her eyes were beautiful and sad and loving and crying. The jagged lightning penetrated their bodies and the black man was burning and the woman was melting and she began disappearing into the earth.

Now! The animals threw lightning at him from all directions and he was stumbling again, crippled in his struggling moves and yet he managed to evade the deadly charges as the animals laughed uproariously and he could

see their sharp, purple teeth. He could see their fiery, gleaming yellow eyes glare at him and as they moved their lumbering bodies towards him he could smell them as they closed in upon him and they reached out scissor hands and he felt the feet of tiny animals running across his back and he could hear the humming, buzzing roar again fly through him and he heard his own voice rise above the noise and call out.

“Daddy! Daddy!” he called. “Help me!”

“Momma! Momma!” he called. “Help me!”

Now the burning faceless black man reached out and placed his arms around the closest tree and all the trees of the forest began to smolder. And as the melting black woman sunk away into the ground the green grass began to smoke. And as the animals reached for his chest and as a bolt of lightning was thrown against his cheek, the forest ignited, the grass ignited, this world ignited. And as the trees collapsed upon him in flames his own naked body ignited and each animal exploded into pieces and darkness descended again.

And he woke up!

Once again ... in fever.

I

THERE WAS AN OBVIOUS HEATED DRYNESS THAT strained across the city. The heat rose from the streets, along the sides of the buildings and glimmered into the cloudless azure sky to hover, seemingly to remain there to cover the city below with its indefatigable relentlessness. It was Detroit. It was July. It was hot! And as always, it was humid.

Lloyd Nelson stood motionless near the glass. Remaining as a statue, he peered out of this portion of this window that fully covered these two corners of the living room of his high-rise apartment that towered above Jefferson Avenue. He looked down, and across the city, from his vantage point of thirty-five stories above the sweltering pavement and all he saw in this direction he stared was unyielding hardness and undulating heat.

And as the rounded white sun eased slowly across the sheeted blue sky, it created grounded shadows that widened and reached and their elongated images began to move across Jefferson and over the painted tops of the automobiles that rolled below as toys and flashed and reflected the gliding sun upwards in reds and blues and greens. And these flashes were caught and held for an instant in the mirrored windows of the countless buildings that had been planted as angular spires of various sizes to grow as cemented trees that jutted to predetermined heights only to become old and useless and made to crumble into the holes of the earth to have resurrected in their places other versions of the grandiose visions of humans. Rise, they shall again, as soulless oblong cylinders and oblique temples of flatted, lustrous, polished sand.

The city below called Lloyd Nelson. The voices of the city spoke to him, of its need for him, of its loneliness for him, of the exciting death and sensual pain it held for him. The city awaited his approval. Detroit whispered to him

and demanded he come out into the darkness, into the streets, into the game to ... play.

Lloyd Nelson turned from the motorized city that lay to the west beneath him and moved, as if dazed, closer to the window that brought the southeast to him and allowed him to momentarily reject the uttered piston demands and enter, in this direction, into another world. He stared down into the cool dark-blue-green water that moved imperceptibly. He searched for the tips of the waves and finding none in the water's calmness, his gaze settled upon a tiny floating boat.

The boat appeared to stand still. Yet, its wake was visible and it spread out and drew lines upon the calm surface and these lines merged with the river and then were gone because they were too small and thus they were swallowed up. He followed the steady movement of the boat and it skimmed on, down the Detroit River until it disappeared. The boat moved beyond the horizon and so its existence ceased. He let it go. And he let go, gradually. He was able to let go of the anger and trepidation that was with him as he was wrenched from his sleep and from the deathly dream that had returned after a hiatus of nearly five years.

He lifted his gaze from the direction the boat had gone and stared now across to the other land. Canada lay across the water. In its presence it offered a soothing contrast, some unique otherness to the harshness that persistently called and tapped him insistently on the back, of his mind.

There had always been for him an unusually strong attraction for this other country. There were soft whispered commands that were issued from this land. But they were each different and seemed old. They felt, protecting. Often he wondered about that, why that was? Why there was such a vast difference away from the attracting movements of the continuous treacheries and constant points of violence that permeated his city existence?

But Canada meant for him a sense of tranquility and the possibility of touching an essence of peace. Across the bridge to Windsor, Ontario to the racetrack and the galloping horses was always a short trip that brought to him a mild feeling of excitement. And on those occasions that he drove, alone, the nearly two hundred and fifty miles to Toronto, he always felt as if he belonged somewhere in this other world. As if his place was here, in this difference, in this relaxed ambient light and not in the vicious inimical dimness of Detroit.

And although he believed he was trying to escape whenever he crossed the Ambassador Bridge into Canada, he knew the city streets would summon him back. Back to the chaotic extremes he hated and yet loved. Deep inside he needed the excitations of the violence. He wanted to turn from, yet he always returned to, that which he knew was his essence. And as he crossed back over the bridge and Detroit lay before him, rising and rolling in its ominous splendor, he resigned himself each time to the fact that there was no escape from the city or that place that seethed within his soul.

On this heated Monday, as his internal turmoil subsided, Lloyd Nelson began to relax slightly in the coolness of his apartment. He settled into a

chair that allowed him to look out across the water. He felt the effects of the night, of the nightmare. He had been unable to sleep again after he had awakened in confusion, sweating and shaking and he had watched the sun rise that morning. He had spent the day staring out and pacing through his large rooms. Apprehensive that his memory could soon begin to fail him, he stopped his agitated walking only to write notes of the things he must do. Then he began to compose letters to those he had things to say. He was trying to quiesce his troubling thoughts and prepare himself for that which was coming. He knew that as the sun set on him this evening it would set on what he believed to be one of his last remaining days and the dark would usher in his final nights.

He reached beside him for one of his phones and for the next hour he made calls until he contacted everyone he needed to talk to. He showered and dressed and then he checked again the items he had previously laid out on his dining room table and that he would require this evening. Satisfied he had everything, he began to place them into a small black bag starting with the papers and thick envelopes, adding two nickel-plated, pearl-handled, Smith & Wesson .38 caliber snub-nosed pistols from his collection of guns and finally ending with several boxes of ammunition. He then strapped a holstered, nickel-plated, pearl-handled, .32 caliber, semi-automatic handgun just above the inside of his left ankle. Next he slid a thin, pearl-handled Case knife with a four-inch blade into his right pocket and moved towards the door.

He paused to look around his apartment. He stared at his many plants and the wall of books. He wanted to focus on, dwell a moment, to reflect upon his comforting, tranquil hideaway high above the teeming city. He needed to see, everything. He believed in the coming days he would feel, everything. And he wondered what he would eventually know. He looked at his gold watch. It was four in the afternoon. The streets lay before him. He opened his door and pulled it closed behind him, gently. He shut off one world and turned to greet the other.

Georgia Reeves lay on her back, naked, upon her bed, in the daylight dimness of her room. The shade was drawn to cover completely the one window in her small, third floor campus apartment. There was a short screen in her window, placed there in a nearly futile attempt to assist any breeze that chose to enter. And on occasions, a soft breeze did enter and the shade would rise slightly and the sunlight would force the shadows into the corners or onto the wall behind her. Then, the breeze would leave. The shade would settle or be sucked against the screen and the shadows would return, to fullness.

She could have opened her door and a stronger breeze would have been able to move through the room. But to open her door would have required her to dress and the noise from the hallway would have disturbed her and she didn't want to do that, put on some clothes, that is. And she didn't desire that, to be disturbed.

What she needed, what she desired, was to remain naked in the humid heat and stare, as if hypnotized, at the unlit light bulb that perched greyish-white beneath the pink, bell-shaped shade of the small lamp on the corner of the neatly arranged desk that had been pulled next to her too soft bed. Several books lay beside her on the narrow bed. One was open, the other two closed, but they had all been discarded, the information of their words, rejected. It was too hot to study for her one boring summer class. It was too exciting outside to be here like this, alone in this cramped room. But she was too distracted to do anything else.

The phone held her mind now. It was as if the brief conversation it had conveyed to her seemed to remain there within it. As though she could still rise, reach on past the lamp, pick it up and hear his voice again. Low and slow and soft and slightly raspy the voice would speak to her. And so precise in its expression and direct in its purpose that this voice would once again soothe her and assuage her agitated loneliness immediately. She attempted to rest until the cooling evening arrived. If only coolness would actually arrive with the setting sun.

But she would not rest. It was her inability to rest her body and relax her mind and temper her words that had done much to send Georgia Reeves from the somewhat small rural college she had attended near Albany, Georgia, to the big city, Detroit, Michigan, and the larger urban campus of Wayne State University.

Albany was a place that seemed too small for her. Or perhaps, she was too large for it, or too young, or maybe too old. It was difficult to ascertain why she did not adjust once she graduated from high school in Newton and had gone to stay with cousins to attend college. Although only seventeen, a teenager, she desperately wanted to be, and determined herself to be, an adult.

Albany was just a little over thirty miles from Newton but still it possessed different manners of an existence and after two years she wanted more. Georgia Reeves had always wanted more. More of life and the knowledge, the opportunity and the excitement it had to offer. And for her she believed it was not to be found anywhere in the southern state for which she was named.

She had grown up fast when it seemed as if all around her was dull and slow. Her voracious appetite for books and the pictures and words they contained had allowed her to enter and enjoy distant worlds and she experienced in her own reality the varied emotions those worlds contained.

She had also grown up spoiled, as an only child. Momma's baby. Daddy's baby. She learned how, very early, to take advantage of her special, privileged position. Yet, she recognized something missing in being often times without others. And she moved from selfishness to sharing, in her need for others. And as she grew up she learned to recognize that range of intentions in her dealings with those who she was thrust around or who approached her. And consequently she grew not just up, but also deep, and rounded.

There was spontaneity in her bright smile of approval or elation. There could be heaviness in her frown and strong anger in her rejections. And there could be seen in her, and she felt within, all the emotions in between these contrasting feelings and she was able to move freely amongst all these human expressions and her personality grew to become unique. Anyone who had ever gotten to be with Georgia Reeves would come to know she was natural, uninhibited, strong, and pure in the sense that she found it very difficult to deceive herself for very long and almost impossible to mislead others.

Georgia had also grown up to be beautiful. There was no ignoring that, even when attempted. And this mattered more to those around her than to her. Before she had left high school she had already reached her full height of five feet eight inches. She had a smooth, rich, dark-brown complexion and large, hypnotizing, expressive, dark-brown colored eyes that seemed to grow lighter when she was happy and darker when angry.

She had a nose that one wanted to pull, or kiss, and small dimples that framed her sensuous full lips that she moistened often with the tip of her candied looking pink tongue. Lips that could smile or pout lusciously in jest and force one to look at them whenever they moved. And her smile would emphasize her prominent cheekbones and flash the gold-capped tooth near the left side at the top of her mouth.

And when she was close and turned her head, her throat asked to be touched, gently, as if one could feel her husky voice. A voice that was thick, and accented in its quality. A voice to be spoken across a quiet room or whispered in its sureness into the darkness to float past one's heart and settle deep into one's soul. A sound, unforgettable. Its substance, unshakeable.

But she was most beautiful when she was serene, slightly melancholy. Then, at those moments one saw something mysterious, something exotic and seemingly ancient. There! An essence that had been handed down for centuries and that would last forever and had not, could not be diluted. Dark. Timeless. Eternally beautiful.

And when she gained weight her first year of college, the young men knew, the young women knew, even the teachers knew. She had the statuesque body of a fully formed woman. And so, Newton and Albany brought Georgia problems and presented her conflicts. For many people found her sharp and abrasive, quiet and aloof or her intelligence intimidated them or they discovered enticement in her manner or brazen sexuality in her movements and all those many other things people find on first impressions.

Aspects of a new entity can remain rigid and false in the minds of the observer or are altered if the one who sees is fortunate to be able to become immersed in the totality of the human personality that exists within the one being observed.

But there was a great degree of accuracy in the opinions of those who found her, in her second year of college, increasingly restless, anxious, and distracted. And after she was given a car and began returning home on the weekends, her parents noticed these changes. They insisted, to no avail, that she could live at home and still attend school now that she was driving. But

she refused to relinquish the level of freedom she had attained.

When she danced alone in her room and sang along with the records, her mother would shake her head and roll her eyes. Her father would knock on her bedroom door and ask her to please turn down the volume. And they both would have fallen ill if they had known the rebellious thoughts that had begun to run through their daughter's mind.

They would have grown faint if they had seen her in the mirror, looking at her body and admiring her breasts in pride as her ideas now turned to the concepts of womanhood. They would have passed out if they knew she was enjoying the explosion of her own sexual feelings and the physical needs that accompanied them. If they had not forgotten, they would have understood her longing and rising desire to satisfy that longing.

And they would have been proud at the maturity their daughter exhibited and the restraint she practiced with the young men who had chased her all throughout high school and sought to corner her, capture her, and mark her in their own attempts to prove that they were, or would be men. But no one was completely successful. She disdained the fumbblings of the awkward young men of her age being pushed on by the goading of their friends, being moved by the rising power of their own internal instinctual needs that they were attempting to master and were struggling to control. They persisted. But she ignored them.

She also rebuffed the older men and deftly slipped their advances and rejected their offers and pretended not to hear their lecherous, mumbling words. And the college students that she did find interesting, or even attractive, would reveal themselves and their true motives very quickly. Their desires lurked behind the smooth words that only asked for what they wanted. She could hear and see those desires. So, those who expressed them, claimed them, became obvious to her in their preoccupied selfish intent.

And even when the progressive young men expressed their hopes and dreams, she found them lacking in vision, for she had dreams and visions of her own. They were grand in scope and well formed in her active, fertile imagination. She was lost in her dreams. And to the dismay of those who hunted her in Newton and stalked her in Albany, for them she was also lost. She doused desires and drenched hearts.

In the dreamy future of Georgia Reeves there was a man awaiting her, a real man. One like her older cousin Della Johnson had told her about. No one could have possibly understood the affect that Della had on her younger cousin. Della did not know. In fact, Georgia could not have known of the extent of the influence. She never actually told herself that she would find a man that fit some image that Della had helped her to create. She never really thought of it like that.

In actuality, in the beginning, she only added to her previous fantasies. She incorporated Della's words and descriptions and used them to embellish her own daydreams and give them substance and add a specific form and strength. And in the darkness of her mind, her fantasies were running wild. Fired by the stories from Della, she was drawn in some unusual way to a

surreal world that existed beneath the surface life of Detroit and expressed its own existence freely, so she believed.

Georgia's aunt on her mother's side, her Aunt Macie, was the oldest of a family of four girls and three boys. She had been the first to marry and she and her husband had moved to Chicago and then to Detroit. There they had settled and begun to raise a family. First came a boy, and then their first girl, Della, followed by two other boys and another girl.

On her mother's side Georgia also had two uncles and two other aunts who had married and moved to Detroit. All of the men worked in the automobile factories and the parents continued to rear their children in their own southern ways.

The families from Detroit began traveling back to Newton once a year and gathering each June for a week. And that was when Georgia met her cousin. Della was eight years older than Georgia and when she first came south it was as if those eight years made for a tremendous difference in their closeness. Georgia was eleven and Della was nineteen and already quite grown. Georgia was instantly attracted to her personality and only heard whispers that Della was, in fact, scandalous. At least that was what the adults said.

But to Georgia she was wonderfully exciting and exceptionally beautiful and at eleven all she wanted was to learn how Della could make her chewing gum pop. And she was devastated the years Della did not come. But she came three years in a row beginning when Georgia was sixteen and it was in those years they grew close.

For Georgia and those of Newton and Albany who had never actually been anywhere else, Della had style. Respectful around her relatives and deferring to her younger cousins, she could be, or at least tried to be patient and quiet and did what was required of her around the house in preparation for their large family barbeque. But her attitude was that she was an adult and she expected to be treated that way, and she was.

As soon as she could, Della would head out with her newfound southern friends and each opportunity she took Georgia along with her. The real Della would emerge. She was loud talking. Calling all the men she met 'baby' and the women 'sugar.' She was fast acting, her movements quick and aggressive. She was sexy. Walking with an obvious sway of her large hips that had men honking and calling to them and stopping as she and Georgia strolled along the dusty road to the nearby store in their shorts.

The men loved the chunky little five foot two inch Della with the skin the color of creamy coffee. She made them laugh with her captivating, enticing attitude. They even seemed to enjoy it when she talked about their backwards country ways.

Della usually wore wigs of different lengths and colors, light makeup, heavy lipstick, nice clothes. She cursed. She smoked. She drank. And she talked to Georgia frankly and honestly about everything and told her wild and funny stories about Detroit. Georgia loved her cousin Della. It did not matter to her that Della was a 'working' girl, as she called herself. Which was

nothing but a whore to Georgia's father and a shameless prostitute to Georgia's disapproving mother. She was always D.J. to her own loving father and mother. To Georgia she was just, Della.

When Georgia was sixteen and seventeen Della found more time for her. On most occasions, when she came in late, she would find Georgia waiting up for her and they would remain awake for hours talking and laughing quietly. Georgia would go to her own room too excited to sleep and she would lie there and recreate the scenes that Della had drawn for her. Whisper to herself the descriptive names of the colorful people and commit to her memory the streets they traveled and the nightclubs and after-hours joints in which they socialized and played their wondrous games. Georgia would fall asleep and dream of these people who lived far away in the 'Motor City.'

By the time Georgia reached eighteen they were as sisters and it was that hot and humid June night as she and Della sat on the back porch in Newton that Georgia decided that she must leave there and that she had to move to Detroit. As they sat there, fanning themselves, brushing away the bugs, sipping lemonade and looking across the darkness of the country night for fireflies, Georgia had questioned Della.

"What's it like, what you do?" she had asked, softly, hesitantly.

"What do you mean, what's it like?"

"I mean, how do you, do it?"

"You mean how do I have sex, fuck men for money?" And Della's question sounded without rancor, without any discernible emotion of any kind, as if there were no feelings in the query or in the answer that followed.

Della sipped her drink. "It's like this," she began. "Nothing is called by its real name. Nothing is spoken of for what it really is. I'm not a prostitute, I'm a working girl. I don't fuck, I turn tricks. I don't deal with men, I deal with what the white folks call johns, what we call tricks. So, I turn a trick with a trick.

"In my world we talk our own language. It's like if we don't say what it really is, what we're really doing, there's nothing wrong with it. It becomes something else, something that's not bad. In the end it's all about the money. I charge for what a lot of bitches do for free, the ones that're called whores, or sluts. Or, maybe they get gifts and clothes and things. They just don't look at it the way I do. But it's still the same. In that world they just use different words when they talk about it."

Georgia was quiet, thinking about what she had just heard. "Then you don't feel anything for the, tricks?"

"Nothing, and I don't cum either. And it ain't because I can't. Most of the time when I've finished washing off their dick or cock, as they call it, and jackin' 'em off at the same time they won't last long anyway. I don't think they really get much out of it. It's like they're chasing some fantasy. I'm not saying the tricks I deal with ain't decent. They're all kinds. Most of 'em are real lonely, even the ones that's got wives. They're out there looking, searching. They're too scared and hung up to talk to a woman straight up, so they talk with their wallets. Like I said, for me it's all about the money.

"Sugar, you know when you're with your boyfriend, and you're fuckin', having sex, making love? Whatever you care to call it. There's a feeling there. Something there for the other person, or at least there should be. Anyway, that's what makes what you're doing right then, special. That's when you enjoy it. Me? Now I'd probably cum if somebody handed me a handful of hundred dollar bills. I'd enjoy that! Then I'd feel something!" She laughed softly.

She paused. She sipped her drink.

"You got a boyfriend don't you?"

"Not right now," Georgia answered.

Della looked at her younger cousin. She could see her dim silhouette, lightened and accented in the kitchen light that shone through the back screen door. She smiled. "Sugar, you a virgin ain't you?" she asked, gently.

Georgia was silent, and then she nearly whispered. "Yes."

Della could sense that Georgia was wrestling with something but she didn't know what. "That certainly ain't nothing to be ashamed of. There ain't very many girls your age that are. Saving yourself for somebody special?"

"Yes," And her voice was stronger.

"Got somebody in mind?"

"No."

"Well I know one thing. The way you're looking, the men down here are having fits. And that's alright. There ain't no rush. Wait on him, that special one. He'll come along."

They sat in the hot night without speaking for a long moment. "Listen Georgia," and Della spoke directly, easily now. "I got turned out when I was seventeen years old. But I got turned out 'cause I wanted to be out. And the man that put me on the streets was doing what he thought he was s'posed to do with me. And I don't have many regrets. It's not as good as people think and it's not as bad as people think. But it can be, both real good and real bad. Usually it's more bad than good. In two, three years I'm done with the game. Right now I own my own home I'm gonna buy me a cleaners and a beauty shop sometime soon and live a normal life. Shit, I wouldn't even mind getting married someday.

"What I'm trying to say is, I did what I wanted to do. But that don't mean I did what I should've been doing. I've been lucky and I'm trying to get away before my luck runs out. Right now I'm a threat. The pimps don't like me 'cause I don't have a pimp. That makes 'em nervous. They think their women might get ideas from me. The women don't necessarily like me, they're jealous. Most of 'em would rather be like me, on their own.

"The average pimp nowadays ain't about nothing. If they could, they'd bogard me, gorilla me and take my money and try to make me work for 'em. They'd try to put the law on me. But they can't do that. First, I don't work off nobody's street. I work strictly out of good hotels and nice bars. Next, I don't trick with no niggas. Most of 'em think they too cool to buy pussy so usually all they really want is to beat you up and not pay. Most of my customers are regulars and all of 'em are white.

"Today I got a man behind me, a real man who's my friend. He's got connections with the white folks so I can work outta nice places and he's my protection. If anybody, and I mean anybody, fucks with me, they got to answer to him. And let me tell you sugar, I'm lucky to have him as my friend. Things have changed. Everything's gotten real dangerous.

"I don't know what's on your mind, but you do what you're s'posed to do. You're the first one in our family to go to college. Everyone's real proud of you. We're counting on you to do what's best. Make sure you finish what you started. You hear me? You understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes Della," Georgia had said. "I hear you. I understand."

Georgia heard and she really did understand. It wasn't as if she wanted to do the things that Della did. More than anything she was curious, and reaching for something. And she really didn't know what it was. But she had made up her mind that moment, that night. At the very moment Della had said "... do what you're s'posed to do." Georgia Reeves knew what she was destined to do. Live! Live fully! And see the world. From that night on she sought a way out.

It was the impetus of the volatile racial issues that were raging in the area and spreading and growing on the Albany campus that assisted in fulfilling her desires to leave home and move to Detroit. By her second year in school Georgia was not only a top student in academics, she had also become a well-known leader on her campus and had helped to start a Black Student Union. She was branded a radical and a troublemaker. For her parents this became a cause of great concern.

It was because of these circumstances that when their daughter told them she had applied for and received a scholarship to Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, they accepted the news with a mixture of emotions. In the end her parents believed that in spite of their own fears and misgivings, it was best for their daughter to leave the South and venture north.

They drew solace in the fact that they trusted their daughter and knew her to be intelligent and levelheaded. In addition, they hoped her aunts and uncles and the numerous cousins she had there would provide for her a foundation and maintain for her a sense of an extended family. So, on September the first, one day after her nineteenth birthday, Georgia Reeves was placed on a bus to Detroit. With a bag of her mom's fried chicken and a cucumber and two tomatoes, and with waves goodbye, words of advice, admonishments and tears following her, she rode from one world, into another. In late summer of 1966, Detroit surrounded the country girl and became her city, and college, her life.

But even though her life expanded, it was restricted in range. She wanted to find her classes challenging. In the beginning she did. She wanted to meet new people, and she did. She wanted to see new things. In a way, she did that also. And her new life was limited to school and campus. And at first that helped her to keep her mind focused so that her thoughts did not wander too often and she would not feel too anxious or lonely. In fact, the initial shock

of her separation did quickly pass and she adjusted to her new environment. And she surprised herself because she lost interest in school and after two months she wasn't lonely. She was distracted and on edge.

She hadn't seen Della but a couple of times since she arrived. She had talked to her several times, the most recent being when her favorite cousin had changed her phone number and called to give her the new one. She had spent two weekends with her Aunt Macie. But other than that, the city consisted of the streets that ran through her campus. She found herself in coffee shops, restaurants and an occasional bar that was within walking distance and that she could go to with her fellow students.

Georgia had to admit to herself that she had come here to discover more than college and she was bored and disappointed in what she had found. She watched as the leaves turned into their various hues of reds and yellows and fell, floating lazily to the ground to await the brisk, chilly winds that would blow them away. She watched Detroit turn drab and grey and dim and settle in for the late fall. She observed the people of the city turn cold as the weather turned and she saw them bundle themselves against the coming winter that would seemingly arrive early that year.

She had time on her hands that she should not have had but came about because she neglected her studies except when it was absolutely necessary to involve herself with them. In actuality she found her classes quite easy and as the days passed, her fellow students and her professors seemed to impose on her, interfere with her rising need to do something more. She wanted to somehow, in some way, be someone else, to move on and forward, out there.

Then, two weeks before Thanksgiving, Della had called and they talked for hours about a lot of things. And right at the end of the conversation Georgia had confided to her that she was discouraged, disappointed, and unhappy. They talked again the next week and Della reminded her that she was to spend Thanksgiving Day with the family. And Della promised her that she would take her out. That she would show her places and things.

Georgia wanted that. She wanted to see more than the neighborhood of the college. She wanted to see the other life. That life she dreamed about, danced within, and embraced in the solitude of the distant South. It was out there! She knew that. It was so close and yet so far away.

And so Della's promise had elated her and she was happy and excited again. And as she rounded the corner of a hallway, hurrying to her last class on the last day before Thanksgiving break, she was halted in her movement. There! Close before her, emerging, strolling into the hallway, followed by her professor, pausing to talk, smile slightly, and shake the professor's hand goodbye, was a man who made her feel so strange that she would laugh about it later that evening.

And that was the first time she gazed upon ... Lloyd Nelson.

Georgia turned onto her stomach. As she glanced at the clock that sat beneath the lamp, as the sun continued to move across the sky, as she closed

her eyes and slipped into a light doze, the man of her thoughts, Lloyd Nelson, slowly drove his beige, convertible Cadillac Coupe DeVille up and down the rows in the parking lot of Franco's Italian Restaurant near the eastern edge of the city.

It brought him unease to venture any further east. He was only a few blocks from the rich white sections of Grosse Pointe and for a black man in a new Cadillac to enter that area meant only unwanted attention. So he had arranged his meeting at this restaurant on the fringes of Grosse Pointe, on Chalmers Street near Chandler Park. As he cruised the rows, his eyes scanned them for a particular automobile. Spotting the black Fleetwood Cadillac for which he searched, he parked. He strode to the entrance and pushed through the large wooden doors and paused a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the dimness.

There were only a few people at the bar and the waiters and kitchen personnel were busy preparing for the dinner crowd. He moved forward and walked down the three steps that led to the bar area. Two men at the bar turned and one nodded his head in the direction of the dining area. Lloyd Nelson turned to his left and as he drew closer to the nearly empty dining room he heard laughter erupt and he stepped through the archway and paused again.

Johnny Russo sat in a rear booth with a blonde woman on each side of him. He had a large napkin around his neck and a glass of red wine in his left hand and with the fork in his right hand he jabbed at the blonde on his left who laughingly scooted out of the way of the playful thrusts. The blonde on his right had noticed Lloyd Nelson when he entered and so she nudged Johnny, whispered something and he stopped and looked up.

He beamed a smile, motioned Lloyd Nelson forward with his fork and with a toss of his head he dismissed the women, sending them to the bar in the next room. As Lloyd Nelson moved forward, the women passed, one on each side and he ignored the one seductive smile and wink. Settling into the booth he slid over so that he sat directly across from Johnny and he watched him as he sipped his wine, pulled the napkin from his throat and grew serious.

Johnny spoke. "Lloyd Nelson. Long time no see." His voice was light, his words, easy. "If not for the phone I wouldn't know if you was dead or alive."

"How you doing Johnny?"

"Can't complain. Can't complain." He shifted against the seat. He pulled his wide shoulders back. His expensive, shiny, summer suit changed subtle colors in the dull light. His dark-brown eyes twinkled but there was an obvious wise viciousness behind the mirth. His slightly pockmarked, olive complexion was tanned and his coal-black hair was slicked to the back. He looked like money. And even though he didn't look dangerous, if one looked twice, he looked illegal.

Lloyd Nelson smiled slightly, "Still the ladies man I see."

"Well you know what they say," and Johnny opened his soft manicured hands and spread them, palms up, and his shoulders moved, lifted just a little.

“All work and no play makes Johnny Russo a foolish boy.”

They paused as the waiter walked up. Eyeing Lloyd Nelson with one raised eyebrow, he asked what he would like.

“You want a bite to eat?” Johnny asked.

“No, just a cold drink.”

Johnny smiled and shook his head, no, and then looked at the waiter. “Bring him a tall glass of grapefruit juice with ice.”

When the waiter frowned slightly and hesitated, Johnny Russo spoke, brusquely. “You heard what I said. And hurry the fuck up.” And the skinny waiter scurried off.

“I figured you was still drinking that sour shit,” Johnny said, and sipped his wine.

“You figured right.”

“I should’ve had some gin or something slipped in there. You know, see what would happen.” They both smiled. “You looking good, my man.”

“You looking pretty healthy yourself Johnny.”

Johnny Russo patted his stomach, twice. His large pinky ring sparkled. He frowned. “Aw, I need to exercise or something. You know, lose some of this. Geeze, you look the same as the day I met you. Hell, I even got some grey in my hair and I won’t be forty till next year.”

The waiter returned, set the drink gingerly on the table and stood there. “That’s all!” Johnny barked at him. “And tell them two I don’t wanna be disturbed.” He nodded toward the men from the bar who had moved to the doorway of the dining area. One was watching the bar area and one was watching the booth.

They were silent in the booth. They both sipped their drinks. Johnny Russo spoke. “Where’s the Red Dog? How’s he doing?”

“He’s around,” came the reply. “Doing fine.”

“Has he stopped growing yet? Geeze, what is that guy? ’Bout six four, two forty, two fifty now?”

“About that.”

Johnny emptied his glass and reached for the bottle of wine. He liked his wine cold so the bottle sat in a bucket of ice. “I need a bodyguard like Red.” He dipped his head toward the two men that paced anxiously now. He poured his wine. “He’d chew those two up and spit ’em out.”

“I knew you when you didn’t need protection.”

“Yeah? Well I knew you back when you could’ve been all the protection I needed. You’ve changed, I’ve changed. Times have changed. Everything’s changed. I bet on a horse at Hazel Park the other day and the nag heads ’round the far turn and I never see the fuckin’ horse again. It disappears. Got damn family’s got its grubby hands in everything and won’t tell me shit.”

Johnny looked at Lloyd Nelson. He nodded his head slowly, as if in affirmation to some unasked question. “You know,” he began. “I spent almost two years at 4000 Cooper Street in Jackson, Michigan. Jacktown! Largest walled prison in the world. I seen a lotta brutal shit there. There was them black militants. The white brotherhood. A white gang from the South.

Even a gang of ex-soldiers. But there was nobody like the Red Dog and his boys. He wasn't a mayor he was a governor. And his boys was the biggest bunch of misfits you'd ever wanna see." He paused. His voice lowered and was tinged with awe. "Red Dog damn near ran that place. Even Giacomo and his people gave him room. He kept everybody outta my ass and I know he did it for you. If it wasn't for him, for you, I don' make it. What can I do for you? You need something?"

And that's what this meeting was about. And they both knew it. Johnny Russo, Mafia member, now of good standing and high rank, once an outcast. Once banished and stripped of protection, left alone in prison, on his own. He knew it was time again to return a favor. A young man who he had gotten to know when they gambled together, someone he had cooked with once, eight years ago, in a high-stakes poker game had been able to reach out and through those prison walls and help save Johnny Russo's manhood, if not his life.

This businessman smiled now, as he recalled how the young man had broken that game and how they had met later and stood in that darkened parking lot. Lloyd Nelson had returned the money he was loaned, handed him his profit and thanked him. After Johnny counted, he spoke. "Kid, maybe you can do me a favor one day." That's the way this worked, these favors. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Lloyd Nelson spoke as both men leaned forward. "Can you still get those guns, the ones you told me about?"

Johnny smiled, just a little. "Sure I can. They come straight off the army base. M-1s and all the ammo you need. What about grenade launchers and grenades, you wanna order something?"

"I don't know yet. I don't know when. But if I do I'll probably want just the rifles and ammunition. How long would it take?"

"Forty eight hours from the time you order."

"If I call and say I wanna order the books we talked about, then that means I want two hundred and fifty of 'em. How much are they?"

"Usually a C-note and a half each, but for you, and for that amount, I'll let you have 'em for ninety apiece. And for you I'll throw in a hundred shots for each rifle." Johnny thought quickly. "That's twenty-five thousand rounds of ammo for another, let's say, four grand. Fair enough?"

Lloyd Nelson pondered these figures for a moment. "Yeah, that's fine." He stared across the table.

Johnny had reached for his wine glass but the riveting gaze had stopped him, held him, and he withdrew his arm. "What else do you need?"

"I need for you to tie up Battaglia."

Johnny Russo swallowed. The color rushed from his tanned face and then quickly returned, barely noticeable. He grabbed his glass and took a large gulp. He whispered, low and sharp. "Geezes! Why don't you just ask me cut my own fuckin' balls off? I can do that, real easy. What the hell you messing with, The Hand, for?" Now he took another drink. "What do you mean tie him up?"

“Have something done to him. Have him put somewhere for three hours between five thirty and eight thirty in the evening.”

“Like fuckin’ how, and where? What makes you think I can do something like that?”

“If anybody can do it, you can. You can get close to him. Or set it up so that somebody can. I can’t. Just keep him away from a phone for three hours.”

“Is that all? Just keep him away from a phone for three hours? Like that’s some simple shit.”

“That’s all, just another scheme. What you do best, so just do what you do.”

“When?” He emptied his glass.

“I don’t know yet.”

Johnny nearly choked on his wine. “What?” His voice rose and he had to stop himself. He nearly whispered. “Let me get this shit straight. You wanna order two hundred and fifty rifles, maybe. But you don’t know when. Not only that, you want me to lock down Battaglia, for three hours somehow, somewhere, but again you don’t know when. Did I get that right?”

“You got it right.” And Lloyd Nelson smiled slightly and sipped his drink. He watched this white man, his friend, sit, with brow creased and stare through the drawn curtains on the window beside him.

This white man was trying to see something. Observe something that lay between them and yet outside of them and was similar in spite of their contrasting colors. This thing he searched for lay high above their differences and fell somewhere back in their past. And Johnny Russo, gangster man, gambling man, con man and friend, was intrigued at the complexity of the challenge.

“Geeze,” he said, softly, shaking his head, no. And then he smiled thinly, his narrow lips tight. He turned back to his bottle. He slowly poured himself a drink. “Damn, I don’t know. Those guns ain’t no problem. Now that other shit,” he paused. “I just can’t promise.”

“I’m not asking you to promise. I’m only asking you to try. To do the best you can.”

There was a long pause. “Okay, I’ll do the best I can.” Johnny pulled a racing form from the breast pocket of his suit coat. He tore a piece from it. “How long will I have to get to him?” He wrote a phone number down.

“Not too long. I can’t trigger the move ‘till about five twenty, maybe ten or fifteen minutes sooner. That’s why you need to have access to him by four thirty, five at the latest. And you gotta lock him down ‘til at least eight thirty. I don’t think anything needs to go down before Wednesday.”

“Here,” Johnny slid a piece of paper across the table. “I’ll be at this number everyday between four and six thirty. If I don’t hear from you between those times I’ll know nothing’s happening. My other number you use if you wanna order them guns. Just leave a message about the books. If you want the ammo too then you’ll want the books and the bookmarkers. This Battaglia thing I gotta handle myself. When does this little game end?”

"I don't have much time. In a few days it'll all be over."

Johnny stared at him. "I don't wanna know what this shit is all about. The less I know the better. But are you alright?"

"I'm alright."

"You look a little tired. You sure you alright?"

"I didn't sleep well last night. Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"I've always worried about you."

"Worry about yourself. You're the big time player, not me."

"Yeah? Well actually I'm trying to grow up and be just like you."

They both smiled now and Lloyd Nelson raised his glass. Johnny Russo raised his and they touched them lightly together. Johnny was serious again now, very serious. "That fuckin' Vietnam thing is nothing but bullshit." Then he looked disturbed, and dejected. "What do you think's gonna happen with all this racial stuff? Seems like we could all get along. You know, just fuck and make money."

"It ain't about color Johnny. But whatever happens in this city is gonna happen in the next seven days."

"Yeah? You think so?"

"Not a thought, just a feeling."

"Hey, your feelings have always been good enough for me. How do you feel about this game you and I are getting ready to play?"

"All's well that ends well."

"Yeah? Well what about the sixth race tonight?" And Johnny picked up his racing form and spread it open.

"You know I don't mess around with the trotters. I like to see 'em run."

"Yeah, I need to leave all them fuckin' nags alone. Listen to this. I'm at the track last week and I'm talking to this guy I know and he tells me he lost over a hundred grand on football and almost seventy grand on the horses. And I say, why don't you bet on basketball or something, or play poker? You know what this asshole says? He says he don't know nothing about them games. Geezes! He don't know that he don't know nothing about nothing! I wish you and me could get on a poker table." Johnny stopped now. Just like that.

They were silent. A prevailing essence of sadness swept over them both and covered the memories of the exciting times they had spent together. Hanging on the rail at the racetracks, cheering. Or closed up together in some cramped, dim, smoke-filled room, scheming over a game of cards. They both felt as if those times were lost, irretrievable.

Lloyd Nelson rose. Johnny Russo rose. They shook hands warmly.

"Take care of yourself Johnny."

"I'm gonna do that. You do the same. And tell the Dog I asked about him."

Johnny watched Lloyd Nelson turn and in his unique purposeful strides he saw him part the two men and disappear through the lobby. A nearly imperceptible frown crossed his face. It was a look of concern. He was able to let it go.

He sat back down. He pointed to the bar. He nodded to his man, wagged his finger. He studied his racing form and the two women slid in, again one on each side. Neither spoke as they watched Johnny Russo and when he reached for his pen the woman on his right grabbed it and handed it to him. He appeared to be concentrating on horses but he was thinking about other things.

Lloyd Nelson sat in the parking lot a while with his door open, engine running, letting the air conditioner blow and cool off his car. He thought about Johnny Russo and how far he had come since he had left Jackson Prison three years ago. He had moved up the ladder quickly. The men at the top had admired his ability to keep his mouth shut and come out of prison unscathed. But what Lloyd Nelson respected most was his continued loyalty, his nerve, and his ability to still enjoy himself in spite of the many new responsibilities and increasing pressures he had acquired.

He ran Johnny's figures through his head again. The price for the guns and ammunition was all about business. Whatever profit was made from that transaction was earned. He knew Johnny had people to pay. They had not talked money on the Battaglia move because they both understood there was no charge for that. Whatever it cost, Johnny would pay. If it could be done, he would do it but he could only risk but so much.

Lloyd Nelson looked at the sky now. It was altering in color. Losing its luminescent blue and being slowly stroked in shades that would eventually, inevitably, merge with the darkness that marched from the east. Soon Detroit would pass through the evening and fall into night and if the inhabitants of the city were fortunate, a breeze would rise and the sweltering, stagnant humidity would move a little, lower slightly and bring them a needed cooling respite.

People would sit on their porches or in the backyards or place chairs on the sidewalks in front of their apartments. They would hang from open windows and fan themselves. This was a working city and the daytime workers would rest their weary bodies and prepare for their new Tuesday morning. The afternoon workers were on their jobs and the midnight shift slept, if they were wise.

It would remain relatively quiet throughout this city on Monday through Wednesday but Thursday night the day shift people went out, disregarding the next Friday morning deadline. The afternoon shift would join them after their eight hours and some on the midnight shift went in late or called in sick.

Friday nights the city was alive. It was vibrant, harsh and intense with the working-class expression of being turned loose. Those who tossed red-hot steel and pushed and lifted the heavy automobile parts emerged from the dimness of the cavernous factories and flung themselves into the streets, the nightclubs, and removed the backbreaking work from their necks. It was on Friday that the eagle flew. The well-paid workers had money to spend and everybody played all the way through the weekend.

Saturday night was crowded chaos. All the energy that had gone into the building of the steel chariots was now turned to the night and released upon that other thing, that something more that was sought from life. Saturday night! Designed to erase the previous week and stave off the coming Monday that always moved inexorably, exhaustingly forward.

Sunday morning those who could, those who survived, those who did not remain on their knees, prayed on their knees or sent someone to church to pray for them, in hopes that their most recent sins would be forgiven, or, ignored. Monday morning it commenced again.

Lloyd Nelson closed his door and glanced at his dashboard clock. It was six forty-five. He pressed the accelerator, eased the car to movement and turned it to the street. As he waited to exit the parking lot, the corner sign on the bank revolved and blinked the temperature. It was still eighty-five degrees, dropping from ninety-two. He moved forward and headed towards John R. Street. He settled into the soft tan leather and twisted the volume knob on his radio and the music rose. He was attracted to these deepening shades of evening and embraced the nascent darkness that slowly followed the dusk and ushered in the night. He hoped he would be soothed by that which accompanied the nighttime. It was the shelter of shadows, along with the concealing blackness that gave to him comfort. Inside he was tense.

Georgia Reeves looked at her clock and tried to focus through her sleep-filled eyes at the time. Outside, twilight was passing. The shade moved. Voices came to her from the hallway and from the courtyard area below her window. She stretched, and anticipation coursed through her body. Now she was completely awake and then alert and it was still minuets before eight o'clock.

By nine she was dressed. She stood straight, in front of the full-length mirror on her closet door and stared transfixed at the image that formed itself back to her. The image wore an off-white summer, somewhat short linen skirt and a long-sleeved silk, off-white blouse with pale-yellow high-heeled shoes that matched the color of her large handbag.

She wanted to make sure she had not applied too much of the reddish lipstick that colored her mouth. She pursed her lips, smiled slightly. The hair of her medium-length blonde wig fell nearly to her shoulders. She brushed at it and it moved into its arranged style. She took into her hand a mirror and turned to check again her form, her back, her reflection. Finally she was satisfied.

She straightened up the small kitchen area and then moved to glance into the bathroom for anything out of place. She never knew when he would come back to her room, to rest, to talk. Everything was in order. She took the shoes she had worn that morning to class and put them under her bed. She went to the closet doors. She paused a moment to admire the clothes that hung there and she smiled at the thought of that which was not in her sight but lay in unopened boxes on the crowded closet floor and unopened boxes beneath her bed. There were school clothes her parents had bought

for her. There were clothes Della had gotten her and the clothes that Lloyd Nelson had bought her.

She said aloud his name, in a private whisper. She licked her lips. Her tongue moved across them lightly and they were moistened and the color of her lipstick was heightened. The sound of his name moved her. Thrilled her. And she accepted within herself that no one knew him the way she did.

The shadows in the room altered their colors. The tall campus lights had been turned on now and the purpleness of their essence shone through the window. There was a disturbing intensity to these thin, elevated lights that were designed to illuminate and therefore discourage crime.

She walked to the window. She raised the shade and looked out across the grass to the cemented area near the library. A few students, some couples, were sprawled on the grass and sitting on the low brick wall that ran around Rose Hall. There weren't very many people out. Summer school meant less students and less noise but tomorrow that area would be nearly full. First, there was scheduled a protest against the Vietnam War and then the Black Student Union would hold a rally to discuss the violence that had erupted in Newark almost a week ago.

Once, these activities would have demanded her attention. Not long before, she could have directed her energy and submerged herself in these causes. But now these issues did not press upon her. Now her energy moved in another direction. The time in her mind was taken, consumed by, him. Only in those moments when she could let him go could she turn to such things as school and studies and the problems of the world. Then only reluctantly did she place her attention on those matters. She was losing interest in everything but him and the existence they shared together.

She looked forward to that world.

She looked forward to this night.

Georgia lowered the shade. She crossed to the closet and closed the doors. She glanced once more around her small, neat room and moving to the door leading out she opened it. She paused. She felt excited, as she always did when she was going out with him. But another feeling passed through her and she frowned at it, unable to recognize it. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out. She pulled the door shut. She locked the door.

She walked down the hall, down the steps and into the heated evening. Across the courtyard she strolled. Her confident, sensual walk and fine clothes and colored hair drew brief looks and stares. The glow on her face and the bounce in her step told all, that she was alive and happy. She turned towards G.O.'s Café down the street on Cass Avenue and she moved on towards her flaring desires.

Georgia entered G.O.'s and purchased a drink of grapefruit juice. Seeing an empty booth near the far corner she moved to it and admiring, jealous, wondering, condemning eyes followed her. She spoke to the few familiar faces she saw and ignored the others. Dressed as she was made her appear out of place, in contrast to the shorts and sandals and blue jeans and gym shoes most of the others wore and a small part of her felt that way but most

of her didn't care.

She settled back into the side booth and looked at her watch. It was now ten minutes after nine. She took a deep breath, to relax. Twenty minutes. He had told her over the phone nine thirty and he would be on time. For her he was always on time. He had told her what to wear. Between that he had told her they would go out. And he had disregarded her attempt to be angry with him. Knowing that even though it had been almost a week since he had called, she would be unable to remain upset with him.

Somewhere deep inside, she believed he knew that over the past six and one half months she had fallen deeply in love with him. And if he didn't know, she would tell him that this night. She stared out of the window. She looked at the door. From this position she would be able to see him immediately. But she could already see him. He stood before her, vividly in her mind.

That first time. Was it only last November? It seemed years ago. She recalled that first time. And she thought how on every occasion she saw him she was touched, deep, deep inside. But for as long as she lived there would always be that first moment.

There could only be one ... first time.

In her mind she was there again in the hallway. Rushing. Then he was standing there. And she slowed. Almost stopped, to look. And she was close. Very close.

He wore a dark-blue wool suit with a blue and white tie and a long-collared white shirt. Over his left arm was folded a dark-blue winter cashmere coat. He moved his dark-blue wide brimmed hat from his right hand to his left, to shake the extended hand and the diamonds on his fingers flashed. He was about the same height as the professor who stood there before him, not real tall, perhaps five feet eleven inches, maybe six feet. And he appeared just a little heavier than slim.

She was almost beside them and as her head dropped, her sight fell upon the polished dark-blue alligator shoes he wore. And then when Professor Dombrowski spoke, "Happy Thanksgiving Miss Reeves," she looked up, into his eyes. And she was lost, and speechless. Overwhelmed. Crushed. She lowered her gaze again and mumbled something she could not now even remember. And she felt those deep-set, dark-brown eyes following her but when she stopped to look back, the professor was patting him on his back, smiling, and waving, as the man, and those eyes, were moving off.

She watched the back of the man as he placed his hat easily on his head, over the hair that was somewhat short and that was waved and that seemed to be pressed down, and that shined. He broke the hat's brim down in front and ran his sparkling fingers along it. He slipped on his coat, pulled at the lapels, tossed his shoulders and as the coat settled into his fluid movement he took a glove from each side pocket and pulled them on and then pushed through the doors, into the fading sunlight and disappeared into the cold, late

afternoon. And after a few moments, she was able to breathe again.

She had drifted, dazed, into her next class. The voices that moved around the room bypassed her. At least did the meanings of the words the voices uttered. And when the shortened class was dismissed for the holiday she spoke her well wishes, waved to her professor, gathered her books and remained in her seat, staring out of the window. She sat like that.

As the sky turned grey with wintry clouds and the very first soft white snowflakes of this day began to fall, she remained there. And she could not only see his hypnotizing eyes but she could feel them piercingly peering and staring with curiosity from the youthful face of this man with dark-chocolate colored skin that was smooth and unblemished except for ... And his nose was well formed and it sat above full, soft looking lips and she paused there in his face to wonder at the long, narrow, gouged scar that ran beneath his right eye and nearly touched his ear. She found the scar ... attractive. She found the processed waves of his hair, different. She found him, whoever he was, different. Different from anything or anyone she had ever known, ever seen that close. She wondered of this man who looked so young and handsome and yet ...

Who could he possibly be? What was he?

He had interrupted her thoughts over the next days. Intruding at the family meal on Thanksgiving Day. Interfering with her night out with Della as she found herself looking for him. But she kept words of him to herself and he lost shape and faded, finally. And by the following Monday morning he had become almost some vague ephemeral image.

He remained somewhere within her and he attempted to return but she pushed him away because she was disturbed by how near he had come to a fantasy she had constructed long before and she felt an unease with the feelings that had emerged with the vision he had presented to her on that fateful day. And she felt foolish and immature in her inability to let him go.

But he returned in pieces and flashes, in the darkness. Then she dreamed of him. It was a vivid dream that seemed to make sense but was distorted in its silence and strong in its lingering feeling. And exactly a week from that passing in the hallway, she found herself hesitating after her political science class, waiting for the other students to leave, allowing the ones who stayed to question Professor Dombrowski to finish and depart, but they didn't, at least not quickly enough for her. So she waited in the hallway until the professor came out, in a rush. And she almost ran to reach him.

"Professor Dombrowski," she called. He had turned, slowing to allow her to catch up but not stopping.

"Yes, what is it Miss Reeves? Is there a problem?" His voice was loud and his words clipped. He always talked that way but he was really quite affable and amusing in his messy way.

"No Professor." She moved beside him, strangely nervous. "I was wondering about that man you were talking with. It was last week. I thought maybe ... I mean ..."

“Man? What man?” His long white hair bounced on his neck as he walked and the rubber galoshes on his big wide feet squeaked and his tight wrinkled clothes scraped and the books in his left arm tried to slip away and jump to the floor.

“That man last Wednesday with the suit on. Is he a student or a teacher?”

The professor stopped and turned to her. There was a puzzled look on his round, ruddy face.

“The man who was dressed up.”

He shook his head, confused.

“The man with the scar.” She ran her finger beneath her right eye.

A smile spread and his light-green eyes sparkled. “Ah yes! You mean Mister Lloyd Nelson. No Miss Reeves he is not a student. Used to be though, about five, maybe four years ago. Brilliant student! Simply brilliant!”

He had resumed his breakneck pace now and Georgia hurried beside him. “Aced all his exams in every single class he took for over a year. Then he dropped out. Vanished. Just like that.” He tried to snap the fingers of his right hand, to no avail, so he waved his arm.

He had reached the doors. He turned to her. “He was my best student. He and I got along famously. He comes by sometimes and we talk about everything. Well, I end up debating mostly. He has become a fascinating man with unusual ideas. But his mind is being wasted.”

“What do you mean wasted Professor?”

“He needs a formal education. Not just self-taught, but a formal structure with rewards at the completion such as degrees. Remember that! You have a bright future ahead of you. Don’t do like Mister Nelson. He could have been a leader. He could have been somebody special. You understand Miss Reeves? You stay in school! Finish what you started!”

He backed through the door with these last words and she watched as he tripped, dropped two of his books, retrieved them and rushed on. His words had interested her and left her, wondering.

The days passed as if each belonged to the previous and would merge indistinctly into the next. The nights were excruciating in their heaviness and seemingly interminable in their duration. It was cold in this city this winter. It was cold in her room. And Georgia would fall into a restless sleep as the radiator hissed in her dreams and she would awaken in a cold sweat after having kicked the constricting covers from her body. Finally, after her final examines for that first school quarter, Christmas break came and she returned home.

Only gone a little less than four months, her parents could easily perceive a difference in their daughter. She was moody. And in spite of her effort and the festive atmosphere of the season, she was on several occasions obviously distracted and emotionally distant.

Immediately after, although she could have stayed longer, she returned to Detroit. Its iced bleakness closed in upon her and for two days she spent hours staring out of her frozen window, blowing her warm breath on the

glass, drawing pictures through the frosty film her breath formed and peering across the empty, desolate looking campus. Lost, she was, in her dissatisfied thoughts and feelings of loneliness and separation from something, from someone.

She knew who that someone was. And she mused that perhaps if she could hear his voice or maybe feel his touch she could complete her dreams that had now forced their way into the light of day. Frustration pushed at her. Hard! Her fantasy was broken and unfinished. Then! On the third day after her return, her favorite cousin called.

Della was animated and talking fast. She asked how Georgia was doing, how her holiday had been, how the family was and then she said she was on the way over. Georgia was lifted in her spirits and she was excited as she walked to the corner of Cass and Forest to meet Della.

As she stood there in the cold with her hands thrust deep into the pockets of her heavy coat, despite the gloves she wore, a new Buick, a burgundy Electra 225 with a black top pulled up and the power window purred down and Della called out. Georgia jumped in.

It was hers she proudly told Georgia. She kissed her hand and rubbed it on the gleaming dashboard. "As long as I make the payments," she added. "My very own deuce and a quarter," and she let out a whoop and laughed loudly. Things were going great she said and she was taking Georgia shopping. A large group of well-to-do conventioners had been in town partying and with tips she had made over three thousand dollars in one week. And they were gonna spend what was left on clothes and she was gonna take Georgia out on New Year's Eve to a couple of nice clubs and to the biggest parties.

And the next night, after leaving two other clubs, as Georgia stood at the bar of the Club Twenty Grand and sipped delicately at her drink of Scotch and soda on the rocks, what Della drank, she looked directly before her into the long mirror behind the bar and the dark man from school, the man she had dreamed about, walked up behind her, stopped and turned from her, oblivious to her presence.

Unable, was he, to know that the flesh of the young woman he stood near was tingling and her heart was rushing and beating as a drum and she was hot beneath her beautiful new dress. And that, was the second time Georgia Reeves laid her eyes upon Lloyd Nelson.

She grabbed her drink and took a gulp and nearly choked as the chilled warmth entered her throat, backed up an instant and then splashed into her stomach. And as Della turned to her, she recognized the dark man who had begun to move off and screamed and jumped towards him, grabbing his arm.

"Got dammit Lloyd Nelson, you just better not walk off without hollering at me!"

He had turned back and smiled and spoke, easily, his voice, low and even, pushed through the din and moved between the music and Georgia could hear him reply, clearly.

"How you doing Della? I didn't see see you there. What's going on?"

You sure are looking good. Happy New Year.”

“Damn baby! You the one looking good! Happy New Year to you! Come over here, I got somebody I want you to meet.” Della reached for his hand and pulled him to the bar.

He stood before Georgia now. He looked directly into her eyes and smiled slightly as Della introduced them. “Sugar I want you to meet Lloyd Nelson. Now this is the one and only. The real deal.” And standing at his side, she hugged him.

She pulled Georgia closer. “Lloyd Nelson, I want you to meet my cousin, my first cousin, Georgia Reeves. Ain’t she beautiful?” Della was excited and as she moved her hands in animation her diamonds sparkled. “These niggas here been sniffing all after her but I’m looking out for her. They ain’t seen nothing like this pretty black country gal before.”

He extended his hand, his diamonds throwing rainbow colors. Georgia took it without hesitation and she was surprised at the softness but could recognize the strength in his firm but gentle grip. He gave her a little smile.

“How are you Georgia Reeves? It’s my pleasure.” He kept her hand.

“I’m fine thank you. I’m pleased to meet you too.” She smiled shyly.

He held her gaze and his dark-brown eyes penetrated down into her and she was momentarily unnerved. He let her hand go but the brown portals to his essence remained on her. Bore down into her. Della had turned and leaned her head as someone had stopped and was whispering in her ear.

“Where you from?” he asked, softly.

“A little place in Georgia called Newton.” She wanted to reach for her glass but she couldn’t move. “My momma named me after the state.”

“I’ve never been there but I’ve always liked that name.” Now he paused for just a beat. “It’s a very, pretty name.”

“Why thank you,” she replied. And as she moistened her lips and smiled, fully now, she looked at his eyes as they fell upon the gold in her mouth and he looked as if a question crossed his face and it was fleeting and it passed, the look. And had she not been so caught up in him she would not have noticed it.

“You visiting?” he asked next.

“No, this is my home now. At least for a while.”

“How long you been here?”

“A few months.”

“How you like Detroit?”

“Well, I really haven’t seen much of it, but, it’s alright. I’m not used to the cold and snow so I’m trying to adjust.”

Neither spoke. He stared at her. Then again he smiled, this time just a little more and looked as if he was somewhat pleased, in agreement with some inner thought.

“Welcome to the Motor City.” He leaned to her, close, and though he did not whisper, what he said was for her only. “Della’s right, you are very beautiful.”

And she was suddenly, slightly ... afraid.

When he straightened it was as if he was deep in thought and then a look of peace moved into his face. He turned his attention now onto Della as she had turned back and ran her arm around his waist. She feigned a whisper but was talking loud as he shifted to accept the drink that was being handed to him through the crowd.

"Sugar, I been trying to give this man some pussy for the longest! Give it to him! You hear what I say? I told him all he had to do was come on over and bust me out and keep on stepping. But he just won't act right!"

He laughed, softly. He shook his head, slowly, no. "I'm just scared of you Della." The music was loud again now and one had to strain to hear him. "I'm afraid I might get hooked." And he bent to her as she stood on her tiptoes to make kissing sounds near his ear.

"That's alright baby. I still love you anyway. You'll always be mine 'cause you a gentleman. You know how to treat a lady and you the baddest motherfucker out here. Baby, you a king! And ain't nothing else left but poop butt shit talkers." Della was happy, feeling good, in her element.

Georgia was awed by this dark presence that stood before her. His calmness and sense of tranquility was revealing itself in defined contrast to the loudness and the push of the crowd that moved in on them, surrounding them. He was able to acknowledge the calls of his name with a nod or a few words and he returned steadily the gazes of the women who pressed close by and paused to speak, moving their envious eyes from Della, from Georgia, and laying them seductively on Lloyd Nelson as he seemed to remain separated from everything and everyone.

Georgia sipped her drink and her eyes dropped as he looked at her again. Then he spoke to Della who was waving at someone in the distance. "You going the joint when you leave here?"

She looked at her watch. "Yeah, it's ten thirty now, we'll try to be there before twelve. You going?" She called out. "What d'ya say Red? Happy New Year!" She waved and yelled. "How you doing Bear?" Happy New Year!"

"Yeah but I'm getting ready to leave, it's too crowded in here for me." He leaned over and bussed Della's cheek lightly. "I'll see you later."

"Alright baby, don't disappoint me now." And she turned as her name was called.

Lloyd Nelson set his drink on the bar. He held his hand out. And for the first time, Georgia noticed the huge red-haired man who had been burned and who had a large discolored shiny-auburn scar that nearly completely covered the right side of his face. This man had moved up behind the dark man and handed him his glass, which he also set on the bar. He nodded to the reddish man and then turned to look into the crowd. Georgia followed his eyes and she saw that he had gained the attention of a man who was taller and larger than the man with red hair. This man was an albino with short, sandy-colored hair and a thin, sandy moustache and light-grey eyes that were surrounded in pink color. Lloyd Nelson nodded to him too and the man moved forward, carrying a folded coat.

Now Lloyd Nelson turned to Georgia. "I'll see you later too," he said.

“You’re with Della, so your night’s just starting. You stay close to her, you’re in good hands.” He started to walk off and then he stopped and turned back to her. Again, he leaned to her. He spoke into her ear.

She felt his warm breath. She could smell him, the scent of his enticing cologne. She could barely hear him but she smiled, she understood.

“Happy New Year to you too,” she replied.

He straightened. He turned, and as he moved forward, the big red-haired man made a path for him and the albino man fell in behind them and they eased off through the crowd.

Quickly Georgia turned back to the bar. She was confused by the feelings that swamped her. Suddenly she felt very hot. She reached into her purse and finding her handkerchief, she dabbed at her forehead and as she took her hand from her face it was suspended in the air for a moment as she paused to look at herself in the mirror. It was as if she waved to herself.

She returned the handkerchief to her purse. She sipped her drink. She stared at the mirror. She touched the bluish-grey pearls that hung around her neck. She could see the dark-brown woman with the large dark-brown eyes and long dark-brown wig gaze solemnly back at her. She smiled. The young woman in the mirror with dimples smiled back.

And Georgia bent her head to hide the laughter that had been pushed through her at the end of the exhilarating feeling that had flashed within her body. She turned towards the dance floor and the dancers who twirled and glided and bounced in the distance. The music surged and the voices swelled and the lights brightened and she looked around at the men and women dressed in their finest and she inhaled, a deep breath and took in the mixture of aromas and no longer lonely or empty, she was filled. And for that instant, she herself, felt her self, above yet inside this crowd and this pulsating scene.

She was with him. They were together. And she, Georgia Reeves, said to herself, a whispered emphatic ...“Yes!” And she embraced the moment, gave herself to it and the energy of this surreal world, encompassed her.

It all came together that New Year’s Eve night, as 1966 relinquished its presence and all its occurrences that could not be carried forth. The passing year took with it the reality of those who lost existence and had then been placed in the memories of those who would only be able to bring them thereafter into substance in their thoughts.

And as this old passing moved over for the approaching new life and love whose time had now come, whose moment could not be denied, whose essence opened itself out and stepped forward, the young woman from the South floated through any remaining hesitating haze and prepared to settle into 1967, the year of Lloyd Nelson and Georgia Reeves.

From the Club Twenty Grand, Della had taken Georgia to a large mansion on Mack Avenue not far from Woodward Avenue. They parked and walked towards the place called The Democratic Club, which was essentially an illegal after-hours place, or joint.

It was cold, bitterly cold by eleven thirty as they reached the steps that led to the large door of the lit up house. But Georgia was warmed by the scotch and feeling light and giddy and before mounting the steps she spun around on the walkway and laughed out loud at the thought of herself as being in some type of fairy tale. But the clothes she wore were not to be returned or would not disappear. The beautiful black tweed coat that opened and twirled out around her and the tight black wool knit dress that clung to her body and the matching black suede boots and black leather purse and gloves and the black mink hat that sat jauntily on her head, were hers, all hers to keep, along with the sights of these events that she felt she would never, ever forget.

Della looked at her and burst out laughing. They fell into each other's arms and screamed out the old and screamed in the new and then nearly ran up the stairs and Della yanked the door open. They stumbled through the doorway and Della slammed the door shut. They turned and when Della pushed on a lighted doorbell, the door behind them locked. The door that was before them had a small square, one-way glass. Della watched Georgia glance around, wondering what was to happen next.

When Georgia looked at Della she saw a frowning, serious look on her face so she matched this solemnity and then from the door as if it came directly through the dark glass, a booming voice.

"Della, is that you?" And Georgia flinched slightly.

Della called back to the unseen owner of the voice. "Open the damn door, you know who it is! There ain't but one of me!" And she laughed. Georgia laughed. The door was pulled open, Della stepped in and Georgia followed.

To their immediate left was a small, coat check room but Della ignored it and brushed past the tall light-skinned bald man with a pink band-aid on the top of his head who had opened the door for them. He whistled at them and eyeing Georgia, he asked who she was and begged Della to introduce him to her friend and then seeing that Della wasn't coming back, he called to her, saying come on, she knew the rules and she came back and opened her purse and he peered in. Della told Georgia to let the man look in her purse and she did. Apparently satisfied, he called out to Della that they could check their coats if they wanted to.

Della moved on. Dismissing him with a wave of her glittering hands she said loudly, "Ain't nobody checking this coat baby!" She tossed back her head upon which sat a round red fox fur hat. And stopping in the middle of the expansive room, she posed. She flung back the sides of her full-length red fox fur coat and showed her short, matching rust-colored suede dress and suede boots. She styled for everybody. And placing her hands on her large hips, she yelled out, "Happy New Year got dammit!"

Several people in the room laughed loudly and there was a whistle and as her name was being called, Della turned in a quick circle and clapped her hands and then raised her arms in the air. Georgia had walked on in and moved off to the side as Della greeted friends. Then Della had quickly called her over and had begun introducing her.

From the area in which they stood could be seen a kitchen that was in the back. Near them were several small tables with two or three chairs placed around each one. Georgia could smell the food cooking. The very special aroma of a traditional southern New Year's meal was quite familiar to her. Chitlins. Collard greens, for money. Black eyed peas, for luck and she knew there would be cornbread for pocket change. And as she moved back to the wall near the entrance she glanced at people dining and she could see there was also ham, and turkey and dressing, and rice and gravy and string beans and peach cobbler and even cake and ice cream.

Above her, from somewhere that seemed far away, she could hear music and she could feel the throbbing bass and the drums thumping as they surged, muffled, down through the ceiling. Then she heard a ringing sound and the doorman to the side of her, loud, as he pulled open the door.

"Well I'll be, if it ain't Lloyd Nelson!" She turned to face the door.

Lloyd Nelson stepped in. He couldn't see her as she was partially hidden by the doorman but she could hear his soft voice, distinctly.

"What's happening big fella? Happy New Year."

"Man I ain't seen you in a month of Sundays! You looking mighty sharp! Happy New Year nigger!" The tall man bent a little, tried to whisper now, but failed. "Uh, look here, everybody's checking their guns tonight. You know, New Year's Eve and all."

"I'm not checking mine. Nobody takes my pistol," came the quiet reply.

The man hunched his shoulders, shifted nervously. "I'm just trying to follow orders. You know, them's the boss's orders."

"Listen Wade. You and I both know you didn't take a gun off everybody here. You take everybody's gun, then I'll think about it."

The doorman sounded almost apologetic now. His hands moved with resignation. "I'm just trying to do my job. Why you wanna make it hard on me?"

Lloyd Nelson tilted his head back, slightly. "I gave my pistol to him." He stepped on in and the red-haired man and the albino man walked in without even glancing at the man's clean band-aided head. The doorman scowled a moment and then shrugged his shoulders and moved back to the door as the bell rang again.

Lloyd Nelson eased, with purpose, further into the room. He wore no hat. The overhead lights reflected off his dark hair. His processed hair was lustrous and in the top the waves were long and moved from the front at an angle to the left and shorter waves ran down the back and his sides were close, pressed down and his hair was tapered at his neck.

On his right hand he wore three large diamond and gold rings and a thick gold bracelet. On his left he wore two smaller rings and a diamond studded gold watch. He raised his right hand a little and twisted it barely as he acknowledged the calls of his name and the well wishes.

He was resplendent in a full-length dark-brown mink coat over a dark-brown wool and mohair suit with a medium collared white on white shirt with a brown and red silk tie and dark-brown lizard shoes.

He strode on into the room and stopped and began to slip the coat from his shoulders and when it was off, the red man took it and folded it neatly and handed it to the albino man. Neither of the big men, in spite of the cold, wore coats, but their suits were obviously expensive and as Lloyd Nelson's, tailor made. And they both wore expensive jewelry that flashed in the lights.

The dark man stepped forward, slowly. As he moved, he ran his right hand briefly along his left lapel and then touched the knot on his tie. He buttoned one button on his suit coat. He stopped, his legs slightly apart. He pulled, in two short successive movements, easily, at each cuff of his shirt and his penetrating eyes scanned the room.

Della came through the crowd towards him and as she approached, she waved Georgia forth and as Georgia walked from the shadows Lloyd Nelson saw her and smiled his reserved smile and nodded his head, yes, as he watched her move to him.

He took her arm and turned her around. "Georgia Reeves I want you to meet my two good friends, Red Dog and Polar Bear. But you can call 'em Red and Bear." They all laughed and greetings were exchanged.

Now he pulled Della to him. He looked at them both He smiled. Again he nodded his head. "Ladies," he said, "give Red and Bear your coats, and let's see what's doing up the stairs."

And with Della under his left arm and Georgia on his right, holding his arm, they ascended the winding stairs, pushed open the heavy door at the top and stepped into a large room with a long horseshoe shaped bar, a loud jukebox and a crowd of people.

Red secured the ladies and himself seats at the bar, coats were hung on the backs and Bear bellowed out for drinks. The silver-haired barmaid saw them and came from behind the bar to hug them all and shake Georgia's hand. She wished them all Happy New Year, told Georgia how pretty she was, found out she was new to Detroit and told her she was with the right group that night and if she needed anything, anything at all, she just had to ask for Silver Top.

Georgia looked around at this scene, enthralled. She watched as people came up to talk to Della and speak to Red and Bear and greeted properly the handsome dark-skinned man who stood regally beside her, close beside her. And everyone addressed him, always, as Lloyd Nelson as if that was one name or a title and had to be spoken as such in order for there to be a response or acknowledgement of any kind. And she was one with them and together they all eased quickly on to midnight.

They counted down. At midnight the room erupted and horns blew and voices sang. People hugged one another. And Lloyd Nelson touched his glass to all their raised glasses and then he leaned to Georgia to speak softly in her ear. "May this New Year bring to you all you desire and all the good you deserve." He kissed her cheek lightly.

She placed her right hand near her lips and then touched his cheek, lightly. She allowed her fingers to linger for a long moment and their eyes held one another. And that was how the year began for her, for them.

They had left The Democratic Club together, the five of them. And all night they celebrated. They moved from one after-hours joint to the next. They ran through Mr. Kelly's, The Players' Club, The Green Door, Stokes' joint, The Barn, The 21 club, and Momma's.

From one house party to the next, they moved, only staying long enough for a drink or a bite to eat. Everywhere they went Georgia recognized she was with people who were both well known and respected. And she could not ignore the unease the men could elicit or the jealousy slyly directed to Della and herself. But the night went smoothly on.

Between their stops, Della and the men recounted outrageous incidents and they all laughed at the madness they had seen or experienced together. And Georgia was mesmerized at the lives they led and mystified that Lloyd Nelson could join in the talk and yet in the end say very little, really, about himself or his own life.

She and Della sat with him in the back seat of Red's big white Fleetwood Cadillac. And she was beside him. And he laughed softly, easily, and spoke quietly and kept telling Red, to no avail, to watch the road as the big man laughed in his deep baritone voice and pounded the steering wheel and twisted to the back to talk.

By four in the morning Bear had to drive. And Bear's already rough voice became hoarse and they all laughed at his frustration, as he was excited and drunk and couldn't talk. By five thirty in the morning Lloyd Nelson had to drive and Georgia sat with him in the front as the three in the back, with Della in the middle and Bear trying to write notes that they couldn't read, partied on.

Georgia met, or Della pointed out everybody who was anybody. And she remembered some of the names from her down south talks with Della. There were men named Texas Slim, Mississippi, Alabama, Blue, Tennessee, Johnny Red, Johnny Black, West Side, East Side Jim, North Side, South Side Bill, Adolph, Marzette, Frank Nitti, Arthur Baby, Pidgeon, Hawk, Trip. And there was Willie C, Macaroni, Schoolboy, Duke, Prince William, Too Much, Spyder T., Baby Ray, Horse Collar, Gallbladder, Pretty Rick, and Delicious.

There were women named, Cat, C.C., Dee Dee, Betty Boop, Red Sadie, Slim Goodie, Chocolate Chip, Baby O., Sugar, Sweetness and Darling. There was Baby Cakes, Queen Ann, Princess, Lady, Peaches, Precious, Gin Gin, Leontyne, Carlotta, Porsche, Sin, Butter, Juicy and of course, Pussy.

Georgia had never seen such fabulous jewels and fine clothes. And in front of the places they stopped were large expensive cars of all colors. And the five of them rode on.

The winter sun seemingly rose late but did not shine. The night ended. Another grey day came, this the first one of the new year. And they arrived safely, back at The Democratic Club at ten the next morning. And as Bear helped Della into her car, Georgia Reeves and Lloyd Nelson exchanged a gloved handshake, goodbye. It was too cold to stand and talk so he said one last Happy New Year, wished her the best and hoped he would see her again sometime. He was looking as she climbed behind the wheel.

Georgia pulled off and began shaking Della to ask directions and she glanced into the rearview mirror and saw the big white Cadillac that was parked on the sidewalk and the two big men lumbering up the stairs of the club. She made a U-turn and as she rode by she saw Lloyd Nelson standing there, watching her. He lifted his right hand when she honked as she passed. He gathered his coat tight against the rising wind and turned towards the club. And at that moment she wished with all her heart that she could have gone along with him, there or ... anywhere. Anywhere!

The next two weeks were days of varying degrees of clarity for Georgia Reeves. Part of her remained with Lloyd Nelson and the celebration of the new year and another part resumed the struggle with the intruding task that presented itself to her when she returned to school and confronted the wavering lines of her schoolbooks and the indistinguishable empty words of her professors.

For her they were two vastly different areas of existence, alternate realities. One was the realness as a dream, or a movie that was filled with characters and color and richness and substance. Exciting and tempting and strange. The other, she found less appealing in its now obvious and growingly frustrating routine and stale dullness.

Once again the dark handsome man with the scar and muted ways disrupted her thoughts of the day and found ingenious methods of expressing himself in her sleeping images of the night.

In those first two weeks of the new year she spoke with Della twice. Finally, on the second occasion she asked of him. No, Della had said. She had not seen him or talked to him. She didn't know when she would. Yes, when she did she would thank him for Georgia for the wonderful time.

She had sighed heavily after she placed the phone down. And with the sigh, a wish had departed from her and a strong sense of anxiousness had taken its place and she noticed a yearning and an unease with that which attempted to express itself within her. She was once again upset with herself for her own feelings and she castigated herself silently, ordering herself to grow up. And through the next week she forced herself to concentrate on her studies.

Friday came and all she had attempted to keep away came to her late that night. And she rose from her bed to dress and take a cab to The Democratic Club. Using Della's name and reminding the doorman who she was, she gained entrance and spent several hours sitting at the end of the bar sipping her drinks and talking with Silver Top, who had been glad to see her.

Saturday night found her there again but it wasn't Silver Top she wanted to see. She felt uncomfortable by the men who came to her to talk, whisper in her ear and offer to buy her drinks and give her other things. She fended them off as best she could and kept her eyes on the door hoping Lloyd Nelson would walk in. Wishing she could see him again.

She struck up a conversation with the woman named Peaches and they left together that night and went, in Peaches' car, to several other joints. The

next Friday night found Georgia sitting at the bar of The Democratic Club and leaving this time in a cab for Stokes' joint. Searching. Longing. Saturday night she was again sitting before Silver Top, excited, strongly attracted to this that revolved around this life and at the same time trying to keep away those who attempted to impose their will, their desires upon her. She asked of him. Silver top had not seen him since New Year's Eve and she told Georgia that he used to come in quite often but in the past year or so he only came in every now and then and didn't stay long.

So as Georgia lay despondent in her bed early Sunday evening, brooding, it became resolved within her to seek him again during the coming weekend in the haunts through which she had just passed. Later that night she fell into a fitful sleep and she slept with so much difficulty that Monday morning, as the sun came up, she was standing at her window feeling saddened and confused. She thought about him, about that world. There was a push and a pull within her and she shook away the vague feeling of deception that pricked at her. She knew that she sought him, out there. And deep inside, a part of her knew she searched for more than him. Was there something else out there awaiting her? She did not think this, she only felt it.

She bundled herself against the cold and faced what was for her a very blue Monday. And that late afternoon she had paused before leaving her last class to stand and stare for a long moment out of the window at a large barren tree and she had visualized the branches of the tree as being full of green leaves and below it, green grass replaced the old dirty grey snow and she heard in this mental projection birds sing again and she saw the flowers bloom and she wanted to be like the spring is to winter. She wanted to be warmed and refreshed and relieved of the cold loneliness of her present life.

As she walked in a quickened pace, head bent, down against the cold and the rising wind she could see as she glanced up, in the distance, the back of a figure standing near the entrance to her dormitory. She ignored it. Head down again, she rushed on. Then as she drew close she looked up again, and now she saw the man turn slowly and she was puzzled. There was something familiar and yet she was able to let it go, almost. But as she moved closer she saw this man looking at her. She slowed her steps.

This man wore a black flattop wool cap and a three-quarter length black pea jacket and black corduroy pants and heavy black polished boots and black gloves with a black a red scarf wrapped once around his neck.

She felt exposed, obvious, stopping like this, staring like this, at the dark sunglasses that this man wore against the slow setting sun that reflected its sharp glare off of the dark lenses of the glasses, off of the crusty snow, off of the patches of ice.

Then! She saw a portion of the scar and he smiled his little half smile and Georgia Reeves gasped and the cold air stung her throat and wound itself around her flaring pounding heart. And she smiled back.

Then! She was confused, bewildered. And she frowned.

"You don't recognize me?" he asked.

She shuddered at the sound of his smooth voice.

“Yes, of course ...but ...” She glanced down, at her boots, her blue jeans. She looked up. “How did ...? Della ...?” Now her gloved right hand pulled awkwardly at her knitted cap that covered her head and revealed the edges of her natural hair. Now she was embarrassed and felt vulnerable.

He moved near to her, close. He removed his glasses and gazed into her wondering eyes and there was an understanding in his look that whisked away her feelings of unease and confusion and suddenly, for an inexplicable reason, she was very calm. All was quiet. The noise from the passing cars in the distance disappeared. The voices of the passing students hurrying to the warmth inside, ceased. All she heard now were his words, low and even. And as he always expressed himself, his words were spaced and drawn out as if there was importance hidden behind each sound he uttered and he was in no rush to speak.

“I had been thinking about you. I realized that somewhere I had seen you, before New Year’s Eve. Somewhere else. I remembered your eyes. And then, I remembered where. And I wanted to see you again. So, here I am.” He said this as he put his glasses in his side pocket and reached for her books. “You’re looking real good Georgia Reeves. How you doing?”

She glanced at the clothes he wore and she understood why she had been able to grasp a sense of calmness. She knew that it was all right for her to be here, like this, in this place with him, for them to be together, in this other world.

She handed her books to him. “Thank you. I’m just, surprised.” She smiled. “But it sure is a nice surprise. And I’m doing pretty good.”

They left her books in her room and walked to G.O.’s. There they drank hot chocolate with a melting marshmallow on top. They talked. As darkness began to progress, and as new white snow began to fall heavily and cover the old, they watched together, through the window as the headlights of the buses and cars illuminated the descending floating flakes. And they could see the element of the lights spread out across the whiteness of the streets. And the greyish-blue smoke that was pushed from the exhausts of the creeping machines rose slowly into the air and dissipated. And as the wind picked up and blew the falling snow sideways, Georgia Reeves was falling, directly, over, down, into ... Love.

They were together throughout each weekend from then until the end of February. He would come to her, to her world, and take her out. But still they remained in an area of normalcy and reality. He taught her about the game of pool at a nearby bar. They rented skates and ice skated at Belle Isle and slid on sleds at Rouge Park. Once they played cards on her couch all Friday night and he let her beat him at blackjack and poker as she learned the rules and strategies of the games.

He disappeared for over three weeks in March. She heard nothing from him. Della, by now knowing she had been seeing him, could offer no information or real advice except that she should be patient and always be

straight with him. Then, after she had taken her final exams for that winter quarter of school, he called one Sunday and wanted to know if she would like to fly kites on the school football field. She was pulled from the despair into which she had plunged. She asked nothing. He gave no explanation. It was as if for him, for them, time had not passed. For her, it was emotionally wrenching and she searched for reasons.

The weather broke early in April. The heavy pall of winter was lifted. And just as she had needed, and wanted to see, the first orange-breasted robins returned. The trees did come to life. Flowers began to bloom. And the harsh drab gloomy colors of winter were replaced with greens and yellows and reds and the various heightened hues of spring.

They attended the opening game of the baseball season. They watched from the bank of the Detroit River as ships passed through the remnants of the winter's once thick ice and sailed from their sight. Sometimes she would drive and he would direct her and he would talk to her or they simply rode around the city listening to the car radio, only speaking occasionally.

He would visit sometimes in late April during the week to sit with her in the evening in the library and read from one of her books as she sought information and researched for her classes. Some of these April nights he would lie on the couch in the dimness and she would sit up in her bed, her back against the wall and in the glow of the desk lamp she would read to him from books that he had brought to her. They would talk and debate on anything, and everything. The war, racial strife, religion, economics, politics and even relationships between men and women. And the discussions would most often leave her frustrated or disconsolate in their inability to agree.

She decided to promote views that were designed to illustrate that whichever path she chose, he would take the opposite but she discovered that was not true. He was steady in his resolve and consistent. She began to understand that there was an unfaltering pessimism and harshness that underlay his vision of not just particular but significant areas of life.

However, he did not force these contentions upon her, only presenting them with a seemingly unfeeling directness and calmness that belied the emotional aspects of the issues. And he could become as eloquent as any professor she had known. Changing from the slang and intonations of the street or vernacular of a hustling gambler, he could sound poetic and visionary and enrapture her with the mystical imagery of his words and raspy softness of his voice.

He was patient with her and always allowed her to speak her mind and he encouraged her to search for specific facts or answers. Implicit in their discussions was the emphasis he placed on the importance of her studies and explicit to her was the problems it would cause between them if she neglected that area of her life. And she challenged him on schooling and questioned his dropping away from that direction. He had told her simply that it wasn't the way for him to go. And he didn't want to talk about it. She knew not to press him on an answer, for she had learned there were subjects that he refused to discuss.

He had abruptly left one night when she had insisted, as his friend, that she should know of his childhood, his parents and family. His parents were dead he told her. An aunt raised him and when she died he went to an orphanage, and from there he was on his own. When she sought details he had attempted to change the subject and finally told her he didn't want to talk about those things. And when she persisted he had said calmly that it was time for him to go and he departed. For several days he did not return and rather than forcing him away, she refrained from talking of that which he did not want to speak.

Thus their days passed. She grew comfortable and accepting of this thing that developed between them. She learned of boundaries and honesty and restricted openness. She came to know patience also. He had not touched her, not really. Except to hold her hand or place his arm on, or around her to assist her in some movement perhaps, not once, in all their private moments together had there emanated from him a want, to alter their relationship from what it was to something else, something more. They had kissed, on occasions. Polite, brief and perfunctory greetings and goodbyes and these she initiated.

Sometimes when she was alone she would think about him and how he looked to her and she also thought about other things. How would he feel to her? Inside her body. What would that feel like? And if she lingered on these thoughts, her desires would rise for him and she would force herself to dismiss the ideas as if they were somehow inimical and therefore dangerous to their relationship. And there, was her patience. She waited on him, for him. Only him.

When it became close to the time of her midterm tests in the middle of May he disappeared. She expected that. She now knew that he was allowing her, helping her in this way, to concentrate on that which was in front of her. But when he returned to her life immediately after the first of June, he had changed. It was perceptible, this change, and it fascinated Georgia Reeves, and thrilled her.

First, he had changed his hairstyle. It was still processed but it was much shorter. He still had waves across the top but no longer at an angle to the side. They went from the front, directly to the back with finger waves down the back. His sides were still short but were swept to the back and it remained tapered and faded at his neck.

For three days they shopped together. He took her to J.L. Hudson's, Saks, Franklin Simon, B. Siegel and Himelhoch's. He bought her a complete summer wardrobe of fine clothes with all accessories. She modeled the outfits for him and he intently watched and quietly decided which of those she liked, he also preferred. If they could not fully agree between two, he purchased them both by calmly pointing his finger or nodding his head in assent. And several of the outfits he purchased she would discover matched, in colors, his own. He bought her three new wigs, a long one of auburn color, another shorter blonde one and a black one of medium length, to be worn upon his request.

He began to wear jewelry again when they went out and he dressed again in his own splendid attire. He gave her beautiful jewelry and left money in her dresser drawer. They moved from one world of reality to another. Now, instead of his older black Thunderbird, he drove his new beige colored Cadillac DeVille. They went to the Detroit Race Course and Hazel Park Raceway often that month of June.

Red and Bear would usually meet them there and she learned in their conversations and actions that there was something very special between the three and an added dimension in that which existed between the dark man and Red Dog. She found out from Lloyd Nelson that Red had, for some unspoken reason, been purposely burned by his mother when he was a child and that they had, the three of them been together in the orphanage and had therefore known each other for many years.

And she was able to look past the horrible scars of Red and see the small freckles in his reddish complexion and a cute, slightly crooked smile. There was, she saw, sensitivity in his light-brown eyes. And she could laugh at him when he would curse at the horses that caused him to lose and incite him to rip up his tickets and toss them high into the air or fling them in mock rage to the ground. And his actions were more amusing in knowing he never bet more than two dollars on any race. And Bear, who never bet a dime, would tease them all.

She was endeared to Red's habit of calling her Miss Reeves or madam, in spite of her protests and no matter how hard he tried he would slip back to addressing her in that manner after calling her Georgia once or twice. And just as Red could be proper and quiet he could also flare up and his face would flush and his color would deepen and even in its clear and precise diction his deep voice would frighten and his size would intimidate.

As Red, Bear would become more than his loud rough voice and pinkish-grey glare, more than the albino whiteness of his skin and huge size. They both became personalities and individuals. They both treated her with a respectful kindness, a special deference. And although Bear was different from Red, in ways they were quite similar, especially in their ability to elicit fear.

But in contrast to Red, Bear was coarse and loud and drank a lot and smoked his weed and he acted mean and he was mean. Turning sullen abruptly and his moods fluctuated not just quickly but intensely. Even when he was calm he looked hostile and was seemingly always on the edge of anger. He talked at people and he commented about people and his tone dared them to respond and when he was very upset he would ask strangers who sought the source of the loud angry voice, what were they looking at?

Red and Lloyd Nelson would often have to suggest to him quietly that he take it easy and that seemed to calm him, but for only a little while. He made Georgia nervous at first. But once, she had caught him staring at her and there was something different in his gaze. He was drunk and his strange colored eyes were tight and he had said to her in a low rasp, "You the best thing that every happened to Lloyd Nelson."

For just a moment he looked as if his eyes would fill and he had blinked several times and then turned from her and she had gone to him and given him a big hug and the incident had passed but its meaning and emotion would always remain between them.

Now when Lloyd Nelson dropped her off from their late afternoons out, it was to change clothes. They would then go to dinner. From there it was the Club Twenty Grand, the Greystone Ballroom, the Chitty Chat Lounge or perhaps to Phelp's Lounge. And alone, in her apartment he had taught her how to dance the Northern dances. And when they were out, together, they would dance sometimes, together.

They would do the Bop. Or they would Chop, and he would stand and move slowly in fluid motions and she would take tiny, quick steps and their hands would be joined and he would pull her close, push her away and turn her around, and around him. And as she turned, the room became a blur and the lights would merge and alter and the music was for them only, and she enjoyed this.

But it was when they danced the Social and they were close, she was in his arms, and the soft words of the love songs emanated above the melody, past the music, that she would lose herself not only in the tempo of the dreamy music but in the reality of his body, his strength, his rhythm. His right arm around her waist, her left arm around his neck. His left hand in the air, at his shoulder and his thumb would move to the music with her right hand in his left. They would be so very close it was as if their bodies were melted together. They were as one, in movement. He would walk her around the dance floor. Forwards. Backwards. Turn. Stop and spin her away and bring her back into his arms.

She could feel his warmth and smell him, not just his cologne but ... him. And she could both touch and breathe in, his powerful essence. And each time they were like this she was aroused, inside. She wanted to be like that, almost dizzy. She would shut her eyes and hold on tightly as she pressed herself against him. And as her desiring eyes were closed and she could see a colorful, lighted, shiny darkness, she would envision, feel and anticipate his moves and wish that the music, the physical, emotional moment, would never end. And Georgia Reeves could not help herself. She loved this!

On several weekends they went to cabarets on the east side at the Local 212 or on the west side at Local 876 and then to the places of after hours. At The Democratic Club, The Green Door and Stokes' joint, Georgia was sometimes left at the bars to sip her drinks as Lloyd Nelson gambled at the dice tables in the back rooms or in the attics.

On occasions they had also gone into the suburbs or driven west to the small city of Ann Arbor and he would gamble in high-stakes games of blackjack and poker with doctors and lawyers and white men who looked and acted as gangsters were supposed to. She would sit quietly in her fine clothes, sometimes exchanging a few words with the other women who were left to entertain themselves as their men gambled. And when they departed from these places never could she ascertain whether he had won, or lost.

On the fourth of July they went to a picnic in the backyard of a large house on Boston Boulevard near Woodward. She was now at ease with these people who had become the predominant part of her life. There she had talked with Della of her last months and Della had hugged her and told her there was lot of responsibility that went with being Lloyd Nelson's woman. Della warned her that wherever she went she would represent them both and advised her that from now on she would be standing for this thing the two of them shared together. She said he would take care of her and look out for her but that she had to always keep her eyes and ears open.

Georgia was stunned by the statement. For she had been so caught up in the events of the recent passing weeks she had not even stopped to consider the possible meanings in the changes of their togetherness. Yet she had understood that, of course they had something, but what? Why? And as she sat in the rising heat of that July afternoon she whispered to herself, aloud that ... title.

"Lloyd Nelson's woman."

In a flash, the different attitudes of the people she had met in this altered life were revealed, in sudden clarity to her. She recognized the distance, the respect, and yes, the fear. The men who eyed her, but except to speak a casual greeting or to wave goodbye or to engage her in benign conversation, left her alone.

The women, although friendly and talkative, they were also wary, and jealous. Searching they were, for information of Georgia Reeves and Lloyd Nelson. They would buy her drinks and tease her for only drinking grapefruit juice. They would offer her marijuana cigarettes or the opportunity to sniff with them, heroin or cocaine in the bathroom. They would make remarks or present veiled questions designed to open her up and then become dismayed and annoyed at her refusals of their discreetly offered gifts. Offended, they were at her silent reserve that meant to them disinterest and thus disrespect. But the women, for the most part, also left her alone.

It was exciting, her life, and a wonderful beginning to the summer. And once, when she was lying alone, naked in the sticky humidity of the night, she pinched herself and smiled at the amount of her Southern dreams that were now coming true. She remembered what Lloyd Nelson had spoken softly to her that New Year's moment. And she say that yes, the fulfillment of all her desires was advancing upon her and good things were indeed within her grasp. For Georgia Reeves all else existed after Lloyd Nelson, herself, and this that was unfolding and that was now revealing itself between them. Within her florescent soul she was being consumed. She knew this. And she was not concerned.

On Tuesday evening, the eleventh of July, Georgia was propped up on her bed in just shorts and a T-shirt reading a schoolbook. Lloyd Nelson was stretched out on the couch with his shirt off and his eyes closed, but he wasn't asleep. They both experienced keenly in the dimness of this small room the thick heat. Her door was closed. Her window was open with a

short screen in it and a rotating fan in the corner blew a soft current of warm air. Sounds wafted to them from outside and from the hallway as they shifted themselves and arranged themselves against the essence of a Detroit summer night.

Georgia placed her book in her lap and looked across the room at Lloyd Nelson. As she stared at him she wondered about this man she believed she loved. She pondered on the aura of mystery that seemed to envelop him. She considered what could reside within his subdued attitude? What levels? What extents? At this moment she thought it would be a rounded, calming amelioration of her sharply widening concern and increasing inquisitiveness if she could rise from her position and walk across the room and lie with him on the couch and softly, moistly kiss the scar on his cheek and pull him close, hold him tightly and feel the soft hair on his chest and feel the long scar that had been cut as a notched bolted running razor line onto his chest, feel him pressed against her breasts. Let him experience her throbbing heart. And as she hugged him, her fingers would glide across his strong back and lightly, tenderly touch the raised bladed marks at which she had shyly glanced. And he would sense her needs. Not just to feel him but to absorb a facet of him through that touch, his hurt, and understand the meanings of these obvious symbols of his past. A past of which she knew very little but assumed contained not just fantastic experiences but the pain that comes with living his life in his world, fully. Someone, something, had injured this handsome dark man. Not just there, where she could see and touch but deep, deep within.

The phone rang, breaking through her imaginary contemplations and Della was on the other end. Georgia talked with her for several minutes and her cousin shared with her, good news. And learning that Lloyd Nelson was there she spoke to him also, for several minutes. When the telephone was returned to its place they fell again into silence.

After a while, Georgia spoke. "Della tell you about hitting the number?"

"Yeah."

"How come you don't play the numbers?"

"It's just not the kind of game I like. There's too much luck involved."

They were silent again.

Lloyd Nelson spoke, quietly, his voice, coming softly from the shadows. The courtyard lights reflected through the shaded window and his words seemed blunted, in contrast to the harshness of the glow from the purple lamps. "You see, gambling for me is like a battle, or a fight. I enjoy most the personal confrontation. The people I gamble against are my opponents, or like, my enemies. We match ourselves directly against one another. Not just our money but our skills. Blackjack takes skill, control. Knowing when to hit or not, what to bet. Poker takes skill, confidence, and a certain degree of courage. I can enjoy shooting pool for money for those reasons.

"When we go to the track, for me it's all about having some fun, being outside in the sun and air. A good horseplayer knows how to handicap, to judge the horses, riders, the condition of the track, and I never wanted to get

into it that far. If a person shoots craps and doesn't know anything about odds, like the odds on seven coming before an eight, or the odds on an eight coming up hard, two fours, as opposed to coming six and two or five and three, then they're in trouble. A real craps player can figure that out in their head. Everybody else is just giving their money away. I play every now and then just to be there. Listen to the talk. Find out what's going on in the streets. Plus it makes the hustlers feel good if they can take some of my money. It keeps some of their hatred away from me. Makes me regular folks. And if I lose, they don't get much 'cause I don't bet much or play for too long.

"The Mafia controls all big time gambling anyway. Remember I told you about how the spread works. That's how they play with the games. Football is fixed by the point spread. Basketball, by the spread. They don't play around much with baseball 'cause they don't have enough ways for a team to fall within a spread. Nobody throws a game. Everybody just knows who's supposed to beat the spread and when. Boxing, horse racing, the easiest things in the world to fix. I don't mess with none of 'em. The Mafia doesn't need my money.

"Gambling crosses from the reality and encompasses the emotional and psychological aspects of men, and women. It moves between reality and fantasy and back again and is able to lose itself somewhere in the middle. People attempt to exchange their real money for the chance to achieve that gratifying return when their imaginary dreams come true. There's richness in their dreams, and wishes and rewards.

"They don't wanna believe that these beloved sporting events are fixed 'cause it would destroy their illusion of the sense of fairness, the better man, or best team wins. See, in their delusions they believe in those things too. The numbers game plays on the dreams of people more than all the other games. It says that the road to wealth and thus happiness in reality, does pass through your dreams. That's why so many pick their numbers from dream books. What did I tell you about the payoff in gambling?"

Georgia spoke. "If you can bet a little and get paid a lot, the higher the odds are against you."

"Right. You know what the payoff is when you play the numbers?"

"I don't know anything about them."

He sat up. "Come over here. Bring me a pen and something to write on."

She did as requested. She turned on another light near the couch and sat beside him and handed him paper and pen. They were close now and bathed in the glow of the nearby light. Georgia could feel his muscled bare left arm as it lay against her right arm. He was warm. She could breathe the scent of the cologne she had bought for him and she wanted to laugh aloud because once again she seemed dizzy for an instant. She forced herself to focus on his voice and not his body or the feelings that rose within her. She looked at his defined profile and found herself smiling as he began to talk.

"Numbers have been around for a long time. In the '20s and '30s black folks were controlling the games in Harlem. Then this mob guy, by the name

of Dutch Schultz and his people started taking over just about all of New York including Harlem. He was one of the first to really organize and make the game big. He understood the value of millions of pieces of change. Mostly colored people played in those days and that's about what everybody could afford, small change. He expanded it. White folks played too.

"Here in Detroit they had a Purple Gang around the same time Chicago had Al Capone and his people. Some of the older members of the Purple Gang probably had something to do with the numbers here and their kids or grandkids are probably still involved in the racket today. However it started here, it's Mafia controlled now and every year they take in millions.

"It starts from the little people who play. The housewives and old folks who play pennies and nickels and dimes a day and moves through the working people who play a few dollars a day all the way to big gamblers who may play a hundred dollars a day or more. But basically it's a game for the little people.

"A numbers runner goes everywhere there's someone who wants to bet. Homes, gas stations, bars, corner stores, wherever, and takes the bets. People write the numbers they pick in small books the runners bring around that have blank sheets and carbon paper so the bettor can keep a copy. Or they write on slips of paper, paper bags, anything and the bettor keeps an initialed or marked copy. I've heard there were runners who could memorize every bet they took, keep all the bets in their heads. If the police stop 'em, there's no real evidence.

"The smaller runners take all their bets to the next man, or woman up. They get a percentage of all the money they take in. Next up are the bookers who take all the bets from the street runners and the larger bets from the workers. And then you have some who book only the biggest bets, less traffic, less hassle. They all get a percentage too. Plus whenever a person wins or what they call hits, or catches a number, they usually kick their numbers man out a little something.

"Everything gets turned into the top, the bank, or what they call houses. It's not really a house it's just the different places they drop all the bets. There's a house in Pontiac, Michigan and one in Detroit. The big houses wanna make sure they take in enough to make their profit and cover their operating expenses, including paying off any hits when the numbers come out or fall, as they say.

"You bet on Monday, during the day. The numbers come out around five in the evening. If you hit the numbers that fell you get paid the next day. The person who plays, bets in Pontiac or Detroit or both. There's a first race and a last race. The numbers that come out are five digits." He began to write. "Let's say its 12345 in Detroit. The numbers for the first race are 123 and the last race is 345. If you've bet that 123 would come out in the first race in Detroit, you win.

"Most times Pontiac and Detroit have different numbers. It's like being in competition. The Detroit house is the oldest and when the Pontiac house first opened up there was a lot of killing until they made peace. They realized

there was enough betting money for the both of 'em. I've been told that if you look in the paper under stocks and bonds that you're looking at the first and last races. Somewhere in there are the numbers. And I've also been told that at some horse track, maybe in Michigan, maybe not, that the numbers come from the first and last races of that day. Me, I believe some white man somewhere just makes up the numbers. It's just another way to gamble, another game.

"Sometimes the numbers that come out means a lot of little bets win. Sometimes a few of the big players hit. Either way somebody wins and shows somebody else that they can win too. If they mess up at the main house and make a mistake on the numbers they took in and stand to lose too much on the numbers they put out for that day, they change 'em. But they don't wanna do that too often. People get mad, won't play. Or people start getting hurt. Like the numbers man himself. The people on top, the Mafia, gets richer. They're the ones getting over. Everybody else is just playing at the game."

Georgia was caught up in the figures now. And she asked. "Della said she won fifteen hundred dollars. How much did she have to bet?"

"That depends. Let's say you wanna catch 967 for one dollar however it falls, wherever it comes. You have to play 967 in both houses, Pontiac and Detroit, in both races, first and last. Then you have to box it." He wrote 967 and drew a box around it. "The box means any way it comes you hit. Since it's a six-way number, it can come 967, 976, 697, 679, 769 and 796." Triple threes comes one way and 332 can come three ways." He had written all the numbers down. "Can you see it?" he asked.

She looked at all he had written. She thought a moment. She could see it. "Yes," she said, fascinated now. "The 332 number can come 332, 323 and 233."

"Right. Now, to hit for that dollar you'd have to play both races, six-way number, six dollars a race. That's twelve dollars. Both houses, it goes to twenty-four dollars everyday you play it like that.

"Do you have to box it?"

"No. You can play it straight. One dollar. Both races, two dollars, one house. Both houses, four dollars. And if you play 967 straight and it comes out 697, you'll be banging your head against the wall."

He looked at her now, a slight amused look upon his face. She looked at him expectantly and when he remained silent she pushed on him gently.

"So what's the odds?"

"For one penny you win five dollars."

"Five dollars? For just one penny?" She figured quickly. "That means for a dollar I'd win five hundred dollars and the payoff is five hundred to one!"

He wrote those figures on the paper. She sat back and shook her head. She looked at the numbers he has written. "So Della hit for three dollars. And that 967 is the number she said she hit."

"Right. That number usually plays for the dead row."

"What do you mean, plays for the dead row?"

“Different numbers play for different things. They stand for different things. People get the numbers from the dream books I mentioned. They dream about something or someone dies in their dream and they look in the book and find out that dead plays for 967. That’s the number for the dead row. The only problem is they’ve got more than one book. I know of The Three Wise Men, The Lucky Star, and there’s The Kansas City Kitty and there may be others. The dead row may play for different numbers in each book. And there can be more than one set of numbers for dead. Then how do you play if they were stabbed or shot? Do you play knife or gun or murder row? Maybe they were just sick or died in a car accident so do you play car or accident? You look at your bet slip and you’ve got a dozen numbers on it just because somebody you know or read about or heard about is dead. And once you start playing a number you’re scared to get up off it ’cause it might come out as soon as you stop playing it.”

She looked at him now as he smiled slightly. Then an expression of sorrow seemed to come as a shadow to his countenance and she could feel what she thought was emotion from him rise as she looked at this sadness move across his youthful face. She could sense something within him and whatever that something was it seemed to pass to her and her own, well defined feelings reached out. He looked at her intently for a long moment and puzzlement came to his eyes and then he looked away and then back down to the paper in his lap. He turned the pen in his fingers.

“My aunt played the numbers,” he said, in almost a whisper. “She would wake me up and when I was dressed and sitting at the kitchen table eating my breakfast she would ask me what I had dreamed. I’ve always dreamed, strange dreams. I would tell her what I had seen in my sleep, what I had felt. And she would write numbers down. And she showed me a book and told me she had written down every number that had ever fallen for almost twenty years. The numbers she had hit were written in red with a red circle around them.” He paused. He looked at the lamp. He stared at it. Georgia looked at it also, as if she would discover along with him, something within its soft light.

“She believed in my dreams,” he continued. “She believed in the truth of them. She said I had a gift. And she would hit. She hit a lot of numbers from my dreams. I can remember all the change she had, the shiny quarters and nickels and dimes and pennies. And she believed in me so much she always played ’em straight. She used to say to me, ‘It’s gonna come straight. Straight to you.’ And together we would whisper this little poem. ‘I dreamed a dream in the mist of my slumbers. And fast as I dreamed, it turned into numbers.’ She used to laugh and I would laugh and when she hit we would sing and dance around the room.” He was silent again.

It was as if Georgia was pushed, forced now. With her left hand she turned his face to her. She touched his face lightly. Her fingers were barely on his throat and then they brushed his chest, the hair there. He looked not at her, but through her.

“I still dream,” he almost whispered, as if in a trance.

And she was unnerved. Her hand had stopped on his chest and she could feel his heart. It was racing, his heart was. Her own heart was, hurting, for him. And she could feel his soft words deep inside her being.

"They're so, vivid, the dreams. With beautiful brilliant colors and all these loud clear sounds and I can feel everything that everybody in the dream is feeling. And it seems I can remember every dream I've ever had."

Now he came to himself and there was pain on his face and he reached out and brushed the tear from her cheek that had fallen from her eye. His hand lingered there on her cheek. "You can't possibly know what that's like," he said as he peered directly into her through her teary eyes. "To be able to remember dreams. To be unable to forget. To be touched like that in sleep, by those feelings."

His hand dropped and he took a deep breath. His voice became almost normal, the moment, passed. "That's how little children think you know? Yeah. They think in pictures. And they're able to feel, always feel everything, intensely."

He smiled his smile now but his eyes were blank, without emotion as he stared straight ahead at something, somewhere, in the past. He nodded, yes. "I'm only recalling though, when I speak of real feelings. They're precise memories but vague, distant feelings. But I can almost feel something when I'm with you. I can experience something within me, inside."

Then he turned to her. He pulled her to him slowly and his eyes began to close and he kissed her deeply. For a moment she was hesitant to close her own eyes. But when she did she tried to lose her essential self in the kiss. She desperately wanted to find a loving essence within the taste of his tongue that now probed easily for hers.

It was long, this first true kiss they shared. It scared her. Never had she been kissed like this. It was cold behind the heated passion. It was empty of feeling. Somehow there was stillness behind the life of the kiss. And yet, within the recesses of this physical instant, within his kiss, within his arms she sensed a need. She recognized there was something. Submerged inside him she believed there was a feverish, burning desire. Seeking.

She threw herself into it, the kiss. She wrapped her trembling arms tightly around him and refused to let him go, refused to believe a kiss such as this could really exist. And then he stopped. She stopped. It was done. Over! She leaned from him, unable to understand what had happened. Unable to speak as he rose to look at her as he put on his shirt. And there was a look on his dark face that she could not describe except to use the word tragic. It disappeared, the image. And as he stared down at her, there was nothing remaining in his face. Nothing in his eyes was discernible. He said softly, "I have to go now." There was nothing she could do, but allow him to leave.

And Georgia Reeves was left sitting there in stunned silence.

Georgia let the memory of that event go and brought her mind back to the present. Back to G.O.'s and this summer night. That was the last time she had seen him. She counted the days. It was now Monday, July 17. In just a

short time it would have been six days and in those days she had been, and felt many, many things. She had most of all been lonely, terribly lonely, for him. And in spite of the confusion she had experienced, she had felt her love for him expand and there was tenderness there for him and there was something else, much more. Most importantly, she possessed a craving for him, a hunger to be with him, in order to ... live. A shiver ran through her body.

An hour after he had left Johnny Russo, at seven forty-five, Lloyd Nelson was sitting away in the back, against the wall, in a small booth inside of the dingy Green Onion Bar sipping on his grapefruit juice. The bar was nearly empty this Monday evening. It was quiet, except for the blaring scratchy music from the jukebox and the clicking and rolling of the billiard balls as they seemed to inadvertently come together and then somehow fall into the hole of the pocket and then move inside the table and travel noisily along and join the other balls that had been deposited there.

The uneven, worn pool table sat near the corner, bathed brightly in a wide light that glared harshly from an overhanging unshaded bulb. Occasional teasing or angry sounds rose from the voices of the two men who would hunch over the table and drunkenly play at the game. The unshaded light was in obvious contrast to the otherwise smoky dimness that floated throughout the establishment.

Near the front sat a toothless brown-skinned woman who perhaps was old, perhaps not. An emaciated looking, pale-skinned man who was definitely old hung down his nearly baldhead as the woman fussed quietly at him. Three couples sat at the long bar and the barmaid wiped the top of the bar absently and leaned to listen and laugh with the man who was drinking beer.

Lloyd Nelson observed this scene. He listened to the cars and the sounds that came from the street and through the propped open bar door. His left arm lay across the black bag he had taken from the trunk of his car and that now sat beside him. And after he glanced at his watch and marked the time he looked at the door and Red and Bear walked in. Bear first and Red followed, carrying a small black leather valise.

The barmaid greeted them with loud admonishments for their prolonged absence and Red acknowledged her and walked to the back as Bear paused at the bar and ordered drinks. Everyone in the bar had stopped whatever they were doing to look at the two huge men who had entered.

Red nodded, pulled up two chairs and sat without speaking. When Bear joined them they all raised their glasses and toasted, silently. They were bound together, these three. The man with the smooth chocolate-colored skin, scarred cheek and youthful looks, the red-haired man with the reddish skin and wide horrible burn and the sandy-haired albino with the strange colored eyes were as one in their souls. And once again they had come together to share the experiences of their past, exert their influence on the present and allow the result of all their actions to settle somewhere in their future.

Lloyd Nelson had smiled his smile at the two men who sat across from him. And they smiled back.

"What's the deal?" Red asked.

Bear folded his massive arms and settled back in the chair that hardly held his frame. His eyes were alert and angry.

Lloyd Nelson appeared relaxed and he spoke, quietly. "We're gonna play us some numbers." Unzipping his bag he pulled out a pen and wrote on the napkin that lay before them on the table. "Here they are." He pushed the napkin forward.

Red turned the napkin and brought it across the table, closer so he could see it better. He slid the napkin to his left and Bear looked down at the blue figures on the white napkin.

"Let me have your bag," Lloyd Nelson said to Red. After receiving it he talked as his hands moved beside him. "Those numbers are gonna fall real soon and we're gonna catch 'em. I want the two of you to lay down five hundred dollars in both races until they come."

Red spoke. "Both houses?"

"No, just play 'em in Detroit. They're gonna come in Detroit."

Bear spoke. "That's a six-way. You don't wanna box 'em then?"

"No," he answered. "We're gonna hit 'em the way they fall. Just play 'em straight. Both of you play 'em straight." He leaned back now. He seemed as if he was comfortable, assured. "Spread it around. Get as many of your people involved as you can. A lotta little bets, just a few big ones. Who's handling the bigger bets now besides Snake and Daddy Bell?"

"Horse Collar and Mister Wilson." Red replied.

"Just those four?"

"Just those four taking the real big bets."

Bear spoke. "I got some people on Wilson's run."

Lloyd Nelson sipped his drink and thought for several moments. "We'll have to use all of 'em for the bigger bets," he decided. "I don't trust Snake or Daddy Bell but there's no way we can get around 'em. I don't trust 'em 'cause I don't trust that boss of theirs. But there's no way to get around him either."

Red spoke. "Not unless you gonna bet in Pontiac. In Detroit, Prophet James is the biggest black numbers man. Horse Collar and Mister Wilson ain't nowhere as big as Snake and Daddy Bell but they will take some big bets. In the end just about everything goes through Prophet."

Bear spoke in a low growl. "Yeah, him and then Battaglia. Prophet's got his head so far up Battaglia's ass he can see his tonsils quiver."

"I don't like messing with Prophet or none of his people," Red added. "They done damn near ruined the numbers in Detroit. They done already changed I don't know how many numbers this year. Then they don't wanna pay, or slow when they do."

Prophet's behind that fuckin' with the money," Bear said. "The white folks don't have no problem getting paid. And I'll bet you anything he's the one that presses Battaglia to have those numbers changed."

Lloyd Nelson spoke now. There was a sharpness to his voice that made the big men look at him, hard. "Yeah but when those three numbers fall I'm gonna get all my money, every dime. And if I don't get my money, then I'll get satisfaction. One way or the other they gonna pay. Everything! One way or another, I will be satisfied." He looked toward the front of the bar, through the dirty window. They were all silent.

Red stared across the table at Lloyd Nelson. His eyes searched the dark face. He believed he recognized something old and familiar in the gaze of his close friend, a gaze that seemed to be vacant and yet was focused on some unseen object in the distance.

Bear leaned forward, closer, to look at Lloyd Nelson. He wanted to see him better in the dim light. And he could, barely. He felt something. "What makes you so damn sure these numbers gonna fall?" he asked, quietly.

At this moment Lloyd Nelson's eyes appeared to be glazed, as if he were hypnotized and his voice was intense, yet, empty. "I saw those numbers in a dream I had last night. A dream I haven't had in almost five years." Red and Bear exchanged knowing glances now and a shudder passed between them.

"They've never been clear before, the numbers. And they're not really clear yet. They're just beginning to form. But I can just make 'em all out." He looked at both the men across from him, from one to the other and back again. His eyes were wide and now unusually bright. "They're coming together," he said, as if he was pleased at the numbers joining and their impending arrival. "They've always been there but I couldn't see 'em before. And they'll be here soon." He said each one slowly. Separated by a pause. "Two. Seven. Zero."

They were all silent again. The only sounds came from this dim, dank bar in which they sat and the dry hot street that lay flat and extended itself, close, outside the door. John R. Street was waiting, to lead them into the darkness that was poised for them.

Bear raised his right arm high into the air and very soon the barmaid brought them three full glasses. They sat like that for almost a half an hour, in silence, sipping their drinks. They all knew the meaning of the dream and the implications of its return. And they all realized they only had days left to experience this that they had between them, in this manner, here, in this realm of their world that had for the past few years lacked the pain and loss that would be soon forthcoming. Pain was advancing towards them all in one form or another and there would be loss in the sense that this that existed between them and was only complete when the three of them could come together, would quite possibly, in a matter of days, be totally destroyed. And they could not possibly know the duration of the disintegration. It could be a short while or, perhaps forever. So, they wanted to hold on to this night, this time, and savor it for what it was, one of the last. That's why they sat there in contemplative silence.

Lloyd Nelson looked at his watch. It was going on nine o'clock. He sighed, to himself. "I gotta go now," he said. He lifted the black bag Red had

brought and slid it across the table to him. He addressed them both. "There's twelve grand in there. That's enough to play two grand a day from tomorrow through Saturday. The other two are for your expenses. You both better put some of it on those numbers. Maybe you should box 'em. That way you'll feel better about this thing. You know what they say. If you gonna play 'em, box 'em." They all smiled. "Those pistols you been wanting from my collection are in there too, and some ammunition, just a little gift for you. Don't worry about 'em they can't be traced."

Lloyd Nelson stood and grabbed his bag. The big men rose to tower above him and they shook his hand. "Call me tomorrow," he said. "I'll be home all during the day."

He strode on out and they watched him reach the door and turn left, to his car. Red and Bear sat down and Bear bellowed out for more gin. Then he spoke softly and he was puzzled. "I thought two seven zero played for the gun row."

"It does," Red replied, "in The Three Wise Men. But in The Kansas City Kitty, it plays for ... fever."

Georgia sipped her grapefruit juice and sighed, a long, audible exhalation of her breath. She realized she had held herself, suspended for a moment. She felt the tenseness inside her body. She took her sight from the window and looked down at the beautiful gold watch her love, had given her. For that was who he was to her and she could not deny it or ignore it any longer. She ran her fingertips lightly across the diamonds that encircled the face of the watch. She noticed the time. It was almost nine thirty and she knew he would be there soon, within minutes. And deep inside she grew excited. She waited, her patience failing her.

As she looked at her watch there came a brief hush. The noise paused, just an instant of cessation. She had experienced this as she entered the door and she knew. He, had arrived. She looked up and he stood a step or two past the entrance, at the door. His eyes, locked upon her were expressionless and his face seemed tight, yet calm. They stared at each other for a moment.

He was dressed all in creamy white except for his pale-yellow straw shoes and the pale-yellow band that ran around the crown of his white stingy brim straw hat. As his eyes left her and he turned his head to quickly glance around the room, she could see the small, pretty, red and blue feather that protruded from the band on his hat. For some reason she was hesitant to look at his penetrating eyes that she could feel now again upon her, and so she kept staring at the soft floating feather.

She lowered her sight as he approached, to his visible throat. His shirt was open at the neck and she could focus on the gift she had purchased for him. The thin gold chain around his neck stood in contrast against the deep dark-brown color of his skin. In spite of the heat, he appeared cool, unaffected. The people returned to their own activities and he moved across the room, around the tables, to her, and she thought to herself that he looked, in his eyes, a little tired. Or was it anger she had seen?

He sat down across from her. He held her gaze. He searched for an indication of her mood. She reached out and touched his hand and he grasped her fingers and squeezed slightly. He smiled, his little smile, only perceptible in the corners of his mouth and his eyes softened.

She returned his smile. And every emotion left her except the love she felt and the concern she held for this thing they had for one another.

“You alright?” he asked, softly.

She affirmed she was with a nod of her head and then added. “Now that you’re here.”

He turned his head to the side, and looked out of the window. He seemed to pick up some object in his imagination, as it moved into his vision, somewhere across the city.

“You want me to get you a cold drink?” she asked and pressed his hand.

He returned to her. “Yeah, why don’t you. Thanks.”

She rose to get his drink and when she returned he was again looking through the window.

“It’s cooling off a little bit,” he remarked. He sipped his grapefruit juice.

She believed a thought must have flashed through his mind because he seemed to tense. His jaw was tight. “What about you?” she asked. “Are you alright?” Now he appeared to relax and she was confused by these subtle changes.

“I’ve been better. But I’m not complaining.” He smiled. Then at that moment a black student from one of Georgia’s classes approached.

He spoke. “Say Georgia, do you ...”

Lloyd Nelson immediately stopped him. His voice was low and hostile and its sharpness startled Georgia. “Hey! Can’t you see we’re talking?”

The young man was taken aback by the intensity in the words. He was flustered and didn’t know what to say, whether to answer the question or not. He attempted to apologize and was again cut off and then dismissed.

“Excuse me brother I ...”

“I’m not your brother! Now get lost!”

The young man wrinkled his face in a perplexed frown, the glasses on his nose seemed to tilt. He glanced at Georgia and then he shrugged and turned and walked away.

Lloyd Nelson sipped his drink. “You look good tonight,” he said as he set the glass down. “Real good.” He was nodding his head, yes.

She dismissed her apprehension and wonder at his mood and she spoke and her reply came easily from her and she wasn’t surprised at what she said, just the feeling behind it and the realness of it. “Thanks baby, so do you. You always look good to me.”

They sat in silence. The voices and the noise around them seemed to fade.

She thought of their kiss and she looked at his lips and wanted to try it again. She sipped her drink.

He thought of the beauty in her eyes and he wondered what it would be like to experience a woman again. To touch, to physically love this woman who sat across from him in dark splendid beauty. And as she licked her moist

pink tongue easily out and folded and pressed her sensuous red lips gently upon it and withdrew it from his sight and then smiled at him, he noticed her dimples and then he saw a flash of the gold in her tooth and he was suddenly disturbed.

He glanced at his watch. "Let's go."

He rose and waited for her to gather her purse. He turned and she followed him through the quiet that descended once again onto the café and then they moved together to the door. He pulled it open and they stepped through that doorway together, they did, Lloyd Nelson and Georgia Reeves, and they entered together into the inchoate twilight darkness and the warm night air.

They walked in silence the half block and as they walked she had put her arm through his and grabbed his hand. They reached the car. He opened the door for her, shut it. She settled into the leather. He walked around to his side, eased in. After turning the key he unlatched the drop top. He pressed a button and the convertible top rose and hummed and then buckled and broke down slowly behind them. And as he got out and fastened on the boot covering, Georgia laid her head back, to look into the above.

It was beautiful, this summer night, in spite of the heat and humidity. She could find a few stars very high, very far away. There was little that she could see remaining of the day, as she looked left into the western sky. To her right, far distant in the east, the sun now invisible would once again approach, inexorably. Straight ahead of them, the streets called.

Voices ran in the head of Lloyd Nelson as he moved behind the wheel. He started the car, dropped the shift into drive, pressed the accelerator, leaned his right arm on the arm rest and with his left he steered the beautiful Cadillac into his world.

Voices blew softly and incomprehensibly to Georgia Reeves as she felt herself being forced back against the soft seat as the powerful automobile lowered just a little in the rear and in the front the headlights were pointed and shining in the direction of the voices. She sought through these moving lights, illumination. She wanted to know. And she believed, with all her aching heart that she needed Lloyd Nelson to interpret for her, just what the enticing voices said. And shield her from what the words wanted.

For the next two hours they rode the whispering streets. First, north on Woodward. Down Clairmount. Over to Chicago, Boston, along Dexter and Webb. Then they ventured deep into the east side. Mt. Elliott, Van dyke, Gratiot Avenue and back along Mack Avenue to Woodward. There they rode through the White Castle parking lot. The big cars had gathered this summer night and people milled around and the skaters who had left the Arcadia Skating Rink down the street joined this crowd to see, and be seen.

They had stopped on this journey, often. And Lloyd Nelson had talked to the people and acknowledged those who tooted their horns or yelled out his name. Detroit was stretching, yawning, awakening and opening itself to the

night and the people that traversed this life best at that time of wavering silhouettes and shaded shadows.

Twelfth Street loomed ahead near midnight. This was it, the main stroll of the city! Supplanting Hastings Avenue of long ago and Brush and John R. Street of more recent times, this one-way street running north through the west side of the city, thrived in the year 1967. Even as it turned ugly in its essence, even as it fell deeper into its own unique altered decadence, it still flourished.

There were streets and areas that attempted to claim ownership of some grandiose nefarious reputation. Tried to pull from Twelfth the people and the money and the excitement and the vice that propagated and surged in this popular area. But they faded quickly and their names, unwritten in ink, were erased from the gaming rolls. Twelfth Street, and what it offered seemed indelible, everlasting.

People who came to Detroit from anywhere in the country either knew about, or, if they knew the correct questions to utter, found out about, Twelfth Street. You want good times? You want women? You want drugs? You wanted Twelfth Street.

It was all there inside or outside. There were bars. Jakes, Billy Joe's, Jr's, The Chitty Chat, Mable's, and The Hole. Up one side and down the other. In the space of just a few blocks, strolling distance. It was there for you! And after hours, after two in the morning, everything really came alive. And the reality of Twelfth Street emerged. Hotel rooms by the week, day or hour. Women for a fantastical spell. Drugs that will stay with you for a lifetime. But be careful! Take a guide and protection because Death was also waiting there for you, to stay with you for eternity.

How did the other streets rise for short times to fail and Twelfth rush on in the sixties? The city administration and its authorities were enlightened, and much more tolerant and understanding of this area, much more friendly toward it. The executors of society's laws who encompassed this area were much more, corrupt, than the others. They worked hand in hand with the club owners, the hotel owners, those who ran the gambling in the joints that never closed. Black and white, worked together.

The protecting police knew the pimps and 'working' girls by their names. Everybody knew the police by theirs. And everybody paid, those who were supposed to pay, with one medium of payment or another. And those who were supposed to accept the pay and look the other way, did.

Lloyd Nelson and Georgia Reeves pulled up to the curb and parked in the burgeoning bustle of this night, on this street. It was business as usual. The pimps were pimping. The 'working' girls were working. The hustlers hustled. The players played. The stick-up men and the B&E men rested until their time. The dope fiends acted fiendish and the dope dealers plied their products. In fact, everyone had a product, something to sell or promote, be it their burning flesh or the desirous demanding violence that flared forth from their icy unrestricted souls that were repressed deep within their starving bonded bodies.

Lloyd Nelson and Georgia Reeves sat in the beautiful Cadillac and observed what was for him a natural expression and what was becoming for her an inexplicable beauty. They listened with rapt attention. For this was the place. It was from here the murmuring voices that called them emanated.

Lloyd Nelson got out to stand in front of The Hole and talk with these people, his people, and peer into the thick misty shroud that only he saw, and saw through. Georgia sat and watched, mesmerized, as the movements swayed and danced around her and the bright colorful lights and these exciting, attracting personalities floated within a haze and swirled and broke into tiny jagged pieces and turned themselves from shards back into visible recognizable forms close before her. And each and every moment of this world continuously brought to her, astonishment and the inhabitants of this surreal world stood solid in front of her still innocent eyes and distorted her view. She was unable to see the dangerous shadows or concealing darkness.

Horns honked. Names were passed loudly in the air. The garish women in their hotpants and long wigs, tight short dresses and short wigs, strutted, posed, and yelled. "Hey baby! Hey baby! Whatcha want sugar? Hey! Wanna date? Come on over here daddy! Pull over honey!"

Cars pulled over and the women would bend down, stick their heads close to the windows. Conversations. Arguments. Agreements. The men parked, to ease up the stairs. The women would slide into the cars and ride off down the street, to the hotels, into the alleys. Then they would return to take up their designated spots, claim their area and once again begin to stroll and make their calls. Until, the police rode slowly up the street. Patrol cars, marked. The vice squad in unmarked cars. The Big Four, two in uniform, two detectives, in their black, unmarked Plymouth. The street would change, slow its activity and the women, the pimps, people, would disappear into the bars, move into the darkened doorways and the law would stop to talk, slow their roll and wave and point and then, ride on.

They drank their juice in The Hole, did the man and woman dressed in their pale-yellow and off-white. And when they got back into the Cadillac it was well past twelve on Twelfth Street and traffic was now growing. On a weekend it would become bumper to bumper. And as the Cadillac drove off, the driver tipped his hat. And as they cruised up the street the rich sonorous horn of the brand new beige convertible automobile sounded as a train, in short blasts as the name of Lloyd Nelson was called out with reverence.

They waited at a red light to turn from this world and a big beautiful maroon Fleetwood Cadillac pulled up with a man and three women and Delicious called out from behind his wheel and they held up traffic the Cadillacs did, as the two men exchanged pleasantries and as they moved off, the maroon automobile continuing straight and the beige one turning right, an unknown woman could be heard. Her voice called from the back of the Fleetwood.

"Hey Georgia, how you doing?"

And Georgia Reeves could only wonder who it was.

The sights and sounds of Twelfth Street still reverberated through the mind and body of Georgia as Lloyd Nelson turned the Cadillac right, off of Jefferson Avenue and onto the Belle Isle Bridge. They rode into the darkness of the island and were soon surrounded by green grass and the blackness of the water at night.

They had been silent, the both of them. The only sound had come from the radio. And they had been able to find in the lyrics of the love songs, words that spoke to and for, the both of them. They rode near the rainbow lights of the Belle Isle Fountain and stopped a while to watch as the water cascaded in streams and as a moving wall, down, and changed its colors and splashed and they listened to the sounds that running water makes and watched it separate and spray as it tumbled and fell and its drops and wetness joined and came together in their destined place of meeting as it settled into the pool that lay below its beginning and the chilled water lost its artificial coloring and became dark and wavy.

Driving from there, he stopped the car in a secluded area and he got out. He removed his hat and laid it on the back seat. She got out. He stepped to her and put his arm around her waist and when he turned to move towards a picnic table in the near distance, she stopped at the edge of the grass to bend and remove her high heeled shoes, and he waited, his arm upon her back as she leaned over in her movement. Then they walked, holding one another as they stepped across the soft grass.

They reached the table and he pulled from his back pocket a neatly folded handkerchief. He wiped the seat off for them and he spread the handkerchief out for her to sit on and she sat and he sat and they were now facing the river.

The moon was high and nearly full and bright. Its white reflection could be seen as its lighted self lay upon the surface of the black water. And as the light of the moon was in the dark sky, the essence of its properties was luminous and shiny in the water as an undulating line that drew itself directly to them. They could hear this water, slightly, as it came towards them and washed onto the beach. It made the noise that unhurried, idle waves make that are forced easily onto wet sand. And when the water moved from them they were left in a peaceful silence for just a few moments until the waves returned and it was still hot this night but they were cooled a little by a soft breeze that blew across the water from Canada.

They sat like that for a long moment. Georgia turned towards him. She could see him in the natural glow of the moon and the dull, man-made light that shone down on them from a tall lamp that stood not far away. She could see his scar as he looked across the scene that lay before them and she moved closer to him, to kiss him lightly on his cheek, on his scar. He sighed, his breath leaving him slowly, almost without sound and he nodded his head, barely, yes.

"Everything's changing," he said, his voice low, without real emotion. He seemed weighted and in the state of being melancholy, without feeling. He seemed to be like that.

“We’ve seen this city tonight, together. But it’s nothing like it used to be.” He paused, in contemplation. His voice came again, smooth, with a slight rasp. “When I first came out into the streets ten years ago there was this, beauty and excitement that couldn’t be touched anywhere in this country. And I don’t care what anybody says about any of the other places. Detroit didn’t have the impersonal harshness of New York. We had more sophistication than Chicago and we were fast and moved in a way the people of the South had never seen.

“See, we always had the car industry. Detroit’s the automotive capital of the world and it was the factories that made this place special. The Motor City. The city of the cars with the long hoods. And now, the music of the Motown Sound. But it’s the factories, always was, always will be, until they’re gone.

“People came from all over this country to build cars. And it’s like a different world in those auto plants with their own rules and codes. I never been in the service but I guess it’s kinda like going to war together. And it’s hard work. People lose eyes, get their fingers and hands cut off. People die.

“I worked at Ford Rouge one summer. I gigged in the foundry, what they called the shake out. I wrestled with red-hot steel and the work was so hard and dangerous a man would only work a half an hour at a time. And you know something? I enjoyed it, the physical part. I worked the afternoon shift and when I left there I was so tired I could barely take my clothes off to get in bed. I had stuff that got on me that I didn’t think I’d ever be able to wash off.”

He smiled a little now, Georgia moved her leg, and it was touching his. She placed her hand on him, on his thigh, near his knee. She wanted to be here like this, sitting in this dimness, feeling him, his presence. Hearing him. His voice was moving through her, his words meaningful, this moment together, important. She sensed his need to talk.

He continued. “I learned that there was a way to handle myself there in that world, to make the best of the situation in order to get through it. The older men explained things to me and looked out for me, and it was alright. But it made me realize I didn’t wanna do that for too long. I’ve known men who worked there for years and years. Retired from there. I knew a man who worked there for over twenty-five years, retired and died two weeks later. But it was honest work. And a person could get a sense of accomplishment from his labor. Knowing he helped build the cars that ran all over this country. Knowing he helped to keep this city going.

“Right now a young man can come straight out of high school and with some overtime he can take home almost two hundred a week. He can buy himself a pretty nice car for three grand, a Cadillac for six, get married, buy a house, raise a family and die feeling like he did something with his life and left something for his family, left somebody to keep his memory alive.

“That’s what I’ve wanted to do with my life, accomplish something. And I tried college for a while but that wasn’t my thing. I had to find my own way. I was always attracted to the life, the people, the world you and I just

rode through. I wanted it. It wanted me. It's as if I need that world in order to live. Everybody has to find in their own moments of time, their own place. But my world is changing so much, so fast. Nothing else in this city has changed like that. It's getting bad Georgia, real bad. Soon it'll be all gone and there won't be a place for me anymore.

"Back in the forties Hastings Street was it. They say it was jumping more than Twelfth Street ever has. Today it's disappeared and the Chrysler Freeway is there. Ten, fifteen years ago it was John R. and Brush. The working girls would sit on the corners in rocking chairs and dance in the middle of the streets. On the weekends it would take you a half an hour to drive three blocks along those streets. White people came too. Now there's racial fear and white flight to the suburbs. It was cool in the fifties, when I first stepped out. Now look at John R. and Brush. People can say what they want about Twelfth, but every year I can see a difference. It's not the same. It's going, just like the others.

"At one time it was just like it was supposed to be. There were rules and codes and there was this special pride and honor. Those who knew, pulled my coat and showed me the way. Everybody had their thing, the pimps, the girls, the players, the hustlers, the murphy men. They knew what their game was all about and they played it. They tried to do it right. There were heights to which they aspired. They wanted to be the best and there were those out there they wanted to be like. Even the stick up men knew who to catch. And if they found you in the wrong place, they'd rob you, take your money, their money, give you your wallet back and let you go on about your business.

"There's just no class anymore, no honor, no dignity. Most of those who call themselves pimps abuse their women and mess up the money. All the players and hustlers know how to do is cheat and lie about everything and try to game against everybody. They've lost all understanding of time, place, and difference. The girls don't respect their men anymore so they steal every chance they get. They run off, run from one pimp to another and back again. They don't respect their own business so they abuse the tricks. If a white man comes to Twelfth now he's risking his life.

"In the old days tricks were treated right, as if they were guests or tourists 'cause everybody knew they were there to spend money. Now, before the girl can get him up to the room the B&E boys are jacking open the trunk and stealing anything that's got any value, including the spare tire. They bust out the windows so they can break open the glove box and search the car to try and find the wallet the man's had to hide. Then if the trick doesn't get roughed up in the room he'll probably get beat up on the street and robbed of anything he may have left as he tries to make it to his car that may not be there. And they'll stand around talking about hating whitey and if they can catch one of those they call their brothers, they'll do the same thing to him too."

Lloyd Nelson paused and shook his head, no. He hesitated, as if he was unsure if he would continue or not. Then after a while he began again. "I respected those who came before me, those who deserved it, commanded it.

And I looked at all them who were out there 'cause I didn't know who I was or who and what I wanted to be. But it was always the ones who had the name who had the ability to handle their game. So I watched them and tried to learn what this thing was all about. And when I found my own things and understood better who I was and what I was capable of doing, I worked at it. I tried to conduct myself properly and I rose up and I was able to travel the streets and move amongst the people and within the places of the underworld in which I lived. And there I discovered not just life, but my life.

"I did what I had to do to get the respect I felt I deserved and that's necessary to survive. I didn't mind doing what I had to do. I enjoyed that too, the physical part. And there's not too much that goes on in this city, in my world, that I don't know about and for a few years I able to function in peace. I was able to keep those away who wanted to take advantage of me, to disrespect me. But now, if I don't come into the streets every now and then and punish somebody, hurt someone, and keep the name of Lloyd Nelson out there, spoken, whispered on the lips of the people, I'll be quickly forgotten.

"Both my reality and my image will become faded or distorted and my existence will be threatened. Those at the bottom will find it too easy to misrepresent me in their own minds and they'll tear down and destroy all I've fought to establish and as I'm lost to them they'll forget who they're supposed to be to me. They'll forget who I truly am to them. Their attitudes will change. I go in a bar and when I come out they'll be sitting on my car to test me. Talk crazy to me out of the side of their neck and their words will be designed to portray me as weakening. They'll attempt to take my money, see if they can cheat me at my own games and if they can't they'll try to work up the nerve to rob me and if they're really afraid of me they'll think about shooting me in the back.

"Delicious had to pistol whip one of those little thugs right there in the middle of Twelfth two weeks ago for messing with one of his women. Johnny Red and Johnny Black shot it out and killed each other last weekend. Arguing and feeling disrespected over what would've been allowed to pass just a few years ago. The changes are affecting everybody and everybody's sensitive 'cause those of us who can see what's going on, who's been around a while and managed to make it, know our world is falling apart around us and everything is like a push, a threat to that collapse. They just don't know there's nothing they can do about it."

He looked at Georgia now. Then he turned from her and leaned his head back to stare for a long moment into the darkened sky. "The game as I knew it ... is over," he nearly whispered. He remained like that. Then he lowered his head and leaning, he placed his arms on his knees, he clasped his hands together.

"The dope man is moving to the top now. These young men who are coming back from Vietnam have killed, seen death, come close to dying and they've got violence in their hearts. They're injured and in pain and not just physically but in their minds too and they're getting habits they can't kick.

And they can call it skag or boy or whatever else they choose to call it. It's heroin, it's on the rise and it's deadly. And they can call cocaine, girl or snow or any other nice pretty name. It's deadly.

"Those in control, the white folks, are holding on to the weed right now. But a person can get all the skag they want. They'll hold on to the cocaine next and all those searching for their first real high won't find anything but whatever those in charge want them to find. They'll discover this thing their bodies have to have even after their minds rebel against it.

"Most of the working girls on the street are hooked right now, on one thing or another. It's tearing them down. Destroying them. It used to be cool to be able to show your strength and the type of mind you had by the money you made and the business you were able to take care of. Now those who are strung out are just trying to pay for their habit and maintain and those who can't pay, develop the business of stealing for it, killing for it. The violence is getting worse and spreading out all over the city. They've gone from robbing cab drivers to patients in doctors' offices, to churches and wakes and funerals. Before, a person had to get caught wrong, hang out in the wrong areas, be doing the wrong things to really put themselves where they could be hurt. It's not like that anymore. Right now you're going to school in what they call the Cass Corridor, just about the highest crime area in this city. I think about that and think about your safety. It shouldn't be like that on your campus. It just shouldn't be like that."

He paused. Then he sat up. Georgia could see a tightness in his face and then he seemed to relax.

"Sometime in the future, two years ago will be the good old days. And the mamas and the daddies and the police will wish all they had to deal with was alcohol and marijuana and LSD. They'll wish for the old days and those days will be lost in the past. See, nobody picks up a bottle and takes a drink and says, when that fire hits me in my belly I wanna be a wino, a drunk. Nobody snorts that skag or puts that 'caine in a cigarette and smokes it and says, when I get done with this little bit here I wanna be strung out. It doesn't work like that. But once on that road, there's always that which awaits them at the end of the journey. One drink leads to the next. One snort, one puff leads to another one, leads to something else. Then they start chipping, skin popping and one day they wake up and their hands shake, their nose is running or their back aches and they don't feel quite right until they get a little something in them. And those who say they won't put a needle in their arm, won't, at least not in the beginning. But eventually snorting or chipping won't get it done anymore and it'll be their friend that shoots them up that first time, or the one they're crazy about. In the end they'll die with their hands swollen and their veins used up. I've seen it. I've had people tell me how it went. I listened. I believed it."

He stopped now. The sounds of the night, of this place, came back. For it had all disappeared somewhere behind the softness of his voice. He leaned forward and reached down and picked up a small rock. He held it and then turned it in his fingers and when he had straightened up and leaned his back

against the tabletop, Georgia had again placed her left hand on his thigh and she rubbed him gently, slowly.

He spoke to her now in a near whisper, a question that made her able to feel her own heart. And she was speechless because he had turned to her before he uttered the question and his eyes had reached into her soul and that was why her heart had jumped, seemingly skipping a beat.

“Do you love me?” was the question.

And when she had regained her ability to speak, she answered. It was easy to say, the answer. It was the truth, as she knew it to be. And it passed between them, the feeling of this truth. It was as obvious as if she had reached out and handed it directly to him and he had taken it and finding it unnecessary to see it in the dimness, he had simply held it, close.

“Yes. Yes I do,” was her quiet reply.

Her hand that was on his leg fell as his piercing gaze left her and he stood to toss away, into the night, towards the water, the small rock he had held. Now he reached into his right pocket and as he withdrew his hand, his knife was in it. He had flicked the blade so quickly it was as if it had somehow been sitting open in his pocket.

He turned and slid his legs under the picnic table and sat and rested his arms on the table top. His back was to the water now. And as Georgia faced the moonlit waves, he began to cut with his knife into the table. She could hear this cutting and then she could hear his voice, soft, with compassion. “It’s not good for you, this love that you say you have for me. The world in which I live is dangerous. Everything is distorted. All emotions somehow end up perverted. Caring and loving weakens and makes one vulnerable.

“You can only be hurt by that which you feel for me. You’ve got to protect yourself, save yourself. And the only way you can do that is to let what you feel for me go and lose it. Then find it again with someone else, some other place.”

“I’ll always love you, more than anything or anyone. I’ll love you until the day I die.” This she said to him was uttered quickly, in mild defiance and was pushed into the warm air to skip across the black water and come back to them on the returning waves, for she repeated it. Her southern voice was strong.

“Did you hear me? Baby, I’ll love you until the day I die! I fell in love with you the first time I ever saw you. And nothing can change that!”

He said to her as his hand moved and his knife cut. “Would you have felt like that if you had come around that corner in that hallway and I had been twisted, bent, and leaning on crutches? Or sitting in a wheelchair? Or tapping the red tip of my cane against the rust color of the floor as I moved along, slow, blind? Would you have fallen in love with me then?”

The question was profound and there was just a beat of silence as she began to consider it. But he spoke again. “The question’s unfair because I’m asking you to see something that wasn’t in existence at that time, at that moment our paths crossed. But I ask it because you say you love me. And I believe you. I really do.

"Look at me," he ordered. She turned to him. His attention stayed on the table. "You see my hair?" It was dark and shiny and pressed down. "There's not many left in this city wearing their hair like this. You look at these diamonds?" They flashed as he blew away pieces of wood and brushed his left hand along the tabletop to clear away any pieces that might remain. He resumed his cutting. "That car sitting over there? Everything represents who I am. I stand on front street in this city as Lloyd Nelson. My world's not the enlightened hallways of Wayne State and it doesn't include eight-hour workdays. But what it does include is a level of splendor and excitement and violence that most people have never known and will never experience. And whether you know it or not, that's what really attracted you to me. And if I had been on crutches or in a wheelchair you couldn't have seen that and you wouldn't have felt whatever that thing was you say you felt that first time. Yeah, you saw something alright and that's, what you love about me."

She turned away. It wasn't as if he had struck her but it was as if he had pushed her with tenderness, firmly away. He laid his knife down. He stood and then sat again, with his legs straddling the seat. He moved closer to her, to talk in her ear as she looked straight ahead into the distant Canada lights that now seemed to blur and move and bounce in the air for her. His voice became precise, urgent, as if he desperately wanted to impart to her, something, that would alter things, something, that would last, always.

"Don't you think I know what it's like to not just want to be in that world and around those people, but to have an overwhelming need to be there? Georgia, I tried to stay away from you after we had been together that New Year's Eve. And maybe I would have, even though I really wanted to see you. Even though I kept thinking about you. But back in January when I heard you were at the joints looking for me I couldn't stay away 'cause I didn't want you hanging in those places and I didn't want you looking for me there. It bothered me, thinking about you out there so I came to you and it was good being with you and doing those things we did. The games, the skating, flying the kites and it was like I was trying to recapture and hold on to the past with you. Trying to use you to hold back the change." He paused.

"I was happy with you, when we were doing those things," she nearly whispered.

"I enjoyed myself too," he said quickly. "But I was always being pulled inside. It was like trying to decide between you and somebody else. Choosing between something hard as opposed to something soft." Again he paused.

She knew of what he spoke. She understood from her own experience, of that pull. She had felt it and known. "Like darkness and light." And again she almost whispered.

"Exactly. For years I hardly went out in the daytime. I wouldn't get up until afternoon. Maybe early evening I'd catch the last races at the tracks. Go to the clubs, the joints. Gambling all night. It's as though I was born to do that. Reared to live that kind of life. So with you I became dissatisfied."

She frowned. She flinched, visibly.

"Not with you," he said gently. "With what I was doing with the time.

Part of me enjoyed each and every one of those moments we were together but there's a part of me that seems to rule, attempts to command and that part needs to do, must do, other things."

She looked at him now. "Is that why you would leave and stay away?"

"That was just one reason. Another thing was that I didn't want to take you away from school, to distract you. It was like I was trying to live between two worlds. But it wasn't the same anymore when I went back to mine. I missed you. I missed you a lot. And I struggled against it. I didn't want to bring you into the depths of my way of life. But I brought you far enough. And I hoped that even though I couldn't exist between those two worlds that perhaps you could. But it doesn't work that way, does it? This thing I'm in, this darkness seems to dominate all else."

All the new things that Georgia saw about herself washed through her at that instant and left her with a feeling and an understanding that this man sitting close beside her realized more about her own reality than she did. And she remembered her own dissatisfaction with the books and the words and the people of that existence. Lloyd Nelson and the darkness had nearly obliterated Wayne State University.

"No. But, maybe ... Maybe it doesn't work that way," she answered. Now she looked at him and there was an unusual softness in his eyes. "I don't know if I can live in both worlds," she said. "I just don't know, yet."

She looked down at the gold watch and jewels on her fingers. She looked at him again and smiled slightly. And now she nodded her head, yes. "I came here for this didn't I?" She touched the ends of her wig. "I was searching for you."

"Not me, because for you I didn't exist," he said. "But someone like me, involved in the things I represent. I could see it in your eyes that New Year's Eve. When I looked at you at the Twenty Grand, you were thrilled to be there, with Della, with me, with everybody there. The gamers wanted you. You don't know how beautiful you are, and not just to look at."

"The people in the world I'm in prey on the beauty you possess. It's the beauty of innocence. A pimp would do anything to turn you out. I've seen women look at you with lust in their eyes. They all want from you the same thing. They can tell you're soft, fresh. They want, they need, to steal from you your innocence, your purity. They can feel it. They can smell it. It's in your glance, the way you walk and the way you talk. And they want that innocence because they've lost forever, all of theirs. They have no purity left. But they think, they believe that maybe, if they can take that part of you, they can possess it again and it'll carry them back to before they stepped into the dark world and gave up their souls. Through you they hope to be ... saved."

"Then there's always a moment when they realize that can't happen. They understand they're lost and dying. And as once they wanted to take your essence for themselves, they want it next as a sacrifice to their world, to justify their own hopeless, immoral existence by denying you hope. They want to make you as them. Each wants to be the one, the first one and thus secure their place in the history of your life."

"I know they offered to buy you drinks, to share their drugs with you. That's the way into your soul. So is the money and all the symbolic things I've gotten for you. They want to be the first to begin your destruction. These people take pride in actions that destroy. Somehow they seem to know they can condemn your future and affect all who descend from you. All those who will come after you will struggle against that which you have given to them. And if they can break your mother and father's heart along the way, turn that love against you, that's fine too. Then you would find yourself cast out. Alone. You would only have them, and their world. My world.

"Yes, you were looking, for the life. Like I said, you couldn't have been looking for me because you hadn't seen me. But you had seen, in your imagination, someone like me. See, there's only one of me. There's nobody else like me. And there's only a few left out there who know what they're doing. And when they're gone, when I'm gone, it'll be all over. This that was game, that was cool, will become a part of the history of this city. Oh yeah, fifty years from now of course there'll be people right here in Detroit calling themselves pimps or players. Women will still attempt to profit from their own bodies. But if I were here I wouldn't recognize what they were doing because they'd be making it all up as they went along and it would be some harsh, vicious distortion of all that once existed.

"So, if Georgia Reeves is with someone, who will she be through that one she's with? What will they represent together? If you hang around a pimp you'll be a prostitute, a working girl, a ho. If you choose a hustler, you'll learn how to hustle, to steal and lie. Choose a dope man? Be a dope fiend. Once you come all the way into this, I mean deep into this world, there's no way out.

"That's why I'm trying to tell you that you can get strung out on this life and that I, and what I stand for, become like dope. You try a little and keep coming back. You sit at the bars of those joints until you end up in the bathrooms snorting dope. Through Della and me you were brought to the entrance of this thing. The night we met the Twenty Grand was filled with young women who think they wanna do what's necessary to have the man they want. And if it meant they'd have to sell their souls, they'd eventually have to do that to acquire the power, the prestige that comes with a Delicious or a Marzette. In the beginning they may not wanna walk the streets or shoot dope but that's all part of it."

His voice changed again as he slipped back and forth in the enunciation of his words that came slowly. "Do you know how many women there are in this city who want to be where you are, to be with who they think I am? Do you know how many want to be who you are, with me? Who are you?"

Georgia was thinking. Her head seemed tight from the string of words that had just been tossed to her. And she was attempting to comprehend not just the words but also the hidden ideas behind them. He stood now and sat again with his legs under the table and resumed his cutting. Neither spoke for a long while. Georgia moved with difficulty along the path the words had taken her. Then she paused, as if at a sign.

"I'm Georgia Reeves," she said firmly. "Lloyd Nelson's woman." She understood this in concept. "And that's why people have been treating me the way they have. Your name and who you are and the things you've done for me, bought for me, have protected me from them."

"But I can't protect you from yourself," he said slowly. "Even if you had never met me you would've ventured out into that life. You're drawn to it." He stopped his hand now and looked across the grass. "I just ..." he paused. Then he spoke, his voice a near whisper. "It's just too bad I can't go back to Wayne State and be Mister Nelson, the boyfriend of Miss Reeves."

Georgia turned to him. He had shifted to look directly at her. She spoke, earnestly. "Baby, what's this all about? What are you trying to say to me?"

"You gotta make a choice. Before it's too late. And you better make the right choice. I'm saying go back, into the light and stay there. You can hold off the darkness from there. But if you come into this thing I'm in, you won't be able to get out."

She was adamant as her voice rose slightly. "But I want to be with you! You'd look out for me! We could make it together!"

His gaze never left her. "This is not just some game. It's the game. Those who are in it may laugh and joke, but it's a different kind of play. It's serious. Deadly serious."

She replied. "If I have to choose, I'm choosing to be with you. You've never done anything to hurt me. I've grown a lot through you. What's going on with us? What happened? I don't see why we can't ..." She faltered, her thoughts confused by her emotions. The importance, the strength, the danger of the matters pressed upon her.

He was thinking as he looked at her and then he looked away. He shook his head slowly, no. "I've tried to be straight as I could with you," he said softly. "But there's so much you don't know. So much I haven't told you. But anything I say won't change the reality of who I am, only the image. Maybe that's what I need to do." And this last statement was said as if she were not there. He thought a moment. His voice took on an edge. "You better think about the things I've said. You can't half step with me. You come with me, you go all the way, to the end."

He twisted his legs from beneath the table and he stood and she looked up into his face and it was hard and set and his eyes were cold. She looked away. "Are you trying to scare me?" she said, softly. "Don't. Please. I'm in love with you."

He stared down at her. She could feel his gaze and in spite of her reluctance, she looked up at him again. His right hand was lifted slowly. His left hand followed. And with his left hand he pushed the blade of the knife easily until it disappeared into the pearl handle. He put his right foot on the table seat. He put his right arm across his raised knee and leaned forward, close to her.

"You know what?" he said. He seemed in his eyes, angry with her. And this tone of voice she had not heard from him before. "I might wake up tomorrow and decide I want to pimp. Or maybe, I'll be the dope king. What

are you gonna do? Who will you be then? Who's gonna protect you from, me?"

There was nothing she could say.

He straightened. She knew it was time to go. She lifted her shoes from the seat beside her and stood. She removed the handkerchief from the seat and squeezed it tightly and as she turned, her eyes fell upon the carving in the table. The street lamp illuminated a heart cut deep into the wood. And inside were initials, and a cross. L.N. + G.R.

They rode back to the campus in silence. There was something different between them now. Something had been altered and she knew this was what he wanted. To alter this thing they had. To bring it somehow closer to what he wanted it to be. She could not deny that inside she now felt many new things. And she felt, apprehensive.

He walked her to her door and they stepped into her apartment. He wrote his phone number down for her. The first time he had given her that direct access to him. After he had written the number down he paused and looked at it for a moment. And when he turned to her he had a slight smile on his face. She stood near the window, with her arms folded in front of her body as if she needed to hold herself, shield herself from him.

They looked at each other and then he opened his arms and she moved forward slowly, with hesitation, into them. He held her close, tight, and she found herself hugging him and she clung to him with her eyes closed and she wanted things to be right between them and clear and easy and she wanted something to surround them in this embrace. Some emotion she could recognize and understand and accept. She fought the rising tears. She tried to feel that, something.

"I want you to get in touch with Della," he said. His voice was almost a whisper. "Tell her ..." he paused. "Tell her I said for her to share with you everything. Everything she knows. Everything she's ever heard about me I want her to tell you. Do you understand? Tell her I said that."

"Yes, I understand. I will," she answered. And her voice was even and low and inside she was filling with intensity and it came through in her following words. "I want to know everything. I want you to help me. Give me what I need to know."

He opened his arms and moved back a step from her, to see her, to look at her better. He nodded his head, yes. "Yes. You deserve that," he said. "After you've talked to her, call me." He stared at her now. Then he moved back to her, hugged her briefly and when he leaned back from her he appeared to be pondering his next move. And then he kissed her lightly on her lips.

He released her and walked to the door, stopped and turned. "Tell Della I said the numbers two seven zero are coming out. They're coming out in Detroit. They're coming straight and she should get on 'em." He was going to say something else, she could see that. He was going to say something other than what he said which was, "I'll talk to you later."

He opened the door and stepped into the hallway and she watched the door close slowly and she tried to hear his footsteps as he walked away. But all she heard was her own pounding heart. Inside she was confused. And she was still very much in love.

It was a lonely ride home for Lloyd Nelson, an empty ride. At a time when the after-hours nightlife of Detroit was gaining momentum and he could have easily stepped into its movement, he was headed home. Alone. Again. But it was altered this time, this ride home. And the feelings he carried along with him were being transformed because for the first time in years he was stirred inside, becoming emotionally alive.

He had been disturbed by Georgia and the imploring look in her lovely eyes. But he was determined to attempt in his way to dissuade her from the direction to which she seemed to be drawn. He knew there could be nothing for her in his world but the traumatic travails that accompanied a displaced instinctual existence and that were joined with inseparable aspects of the illegality, immorality and violence that permeated the underlife, in the underworld.

He knew degrees of these facets existed in all areas of life. But he believed she would have a better chance of survival where those expressions were considered an aberration and not the norm. In his world, to be somewhere in a range of what could be considered a normal level of feeling was to be weak and obvious and subject to immediate emotional and physical annihilation. He knew she must decide for herself, and soon, for in a matter of days he would be unable to stand between her soul and those souls that awaited her in the darkness.

He had been upset at himself for the conflict he was bringing to her life. But there was more to his feelings than this mild irritable sensation he was easily able to recognize. There was something else that he could not grasp, could not comprehend, and it brought him confusion and disorder. And he was concerned that he was struggling, with difficulty, at this very moment with this misunderstanding of his own internal processes.

He knew he cared for Georgia Reeves. He cared very much, without a doubt. But when she had sat on that picnic table and looked up at him in the dim light, he had been lost for a moment in her gaze. And vestiges of some long lost intense emotions had risen from the depths of his being for an instant and then submerged themselves again. He had been surprised at this strong expression. For it had been so long since he had felt something significant at all, especially something so soft, something deeply tender, for anything or anyone.

He pulled into his underground parking space beneath his building. He got out and snapped off the top cover and put it in the trunk. He moved behind the wheel, pressed the button and the top rose and began to extend and collapse above him. He folded his arms on his steering wheel and leaned forward and placed his head wearily upon them.

It was coming! He knew this. The other side of the softness, the opposite of the tenderness, the reality of who and what he was inside advanced upon him. He felt it. He recognized it. It had flashed minutely in the café earlier that night when it had leaped out and attempted to settle itself upon that young man. He had snapped at him and that momentary release, that push had brought to him an instant of pleasure. And in a few days he would be trying his best to keep from seriously hurting someone. He raised his head and sighed heavily and he had within him in that movement, embedded within the weighted exhalation of his breath, distaste and unease. He could sense his own heightening anticipation, his own needs for the violence that was near and growing closer.

He fastened the top, reached to take his hat. After he stepped out, he paused a moment to look at his gleaming automobile and he felt a brief sense of pride in this acquisition. And then he thought how senselessly and compulsively human beings strove to possess such transitory, material things that become meaningless in their lack of true permanence or ability to follow one's soul beyond one's mortal life. But then, what could one take anyway, into death? Not even dreams were allowed.

He turned to mount the rising stairs. Thirty-five stories he would walk. Procrastinating was what he was doing. He knew that. But he dreaded to enter his apartment. He did not look forward to sleeping, to dreaming. He knew the dream that awaited him. He knew the purpose it would very soon serve. He moved upwards. The stairs fell behind him. He looked up at the stairs that wound above him and the twisting of the stairs was as the twisting of his heart and the coiling of his soul. Pain and suffering curved above, below, and within him. He stopped a moment, to look at the cemented steps, to feel the metal of the handrail he held. He wanted to allow the echoes of his footsteps to leave from his mind. "Yes," he said, aloud. Then he yelled. "Yes!" He could hear his voice swell in this vertical tunnel and it came back to fall upon his head. He could not only hear, but he could feel the affirmation of his existence.

His call was to acknowledge his own demise and his own impending desire to destroy. He wanted to hear the returning echoes as he could now see again the repetitious patterns of his life. Vividly.

Sleep. Dream. Burn, in fever. Cease to be and relinquish aspects of his living, against his expressive will. Die. Depart. And when he left he would leave death, in life. He resumed his steps.

The light of Tuesday approached.

II

GEORGIA HAD FOUND IT ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO SLEEP after Lloyd Nelson had walked away from her. And when she finally did fall into a heavy doze, her dreams were made up with threatening images. And when her alarm clock rang shrilly, she awoke quickly and she sat up startled. Her heart was racing and she had come from her sleep with a strong feeling of anxiety.

She was carrying just the one summer class that quarter and so after half-heartedly attending it she returned to her room and stood for long periods at her window looking out at the crowd that had gathered to protest the escalating Vietnam war and virulent racial discord. She only left the window to call Della's number several times.

As the afternoon passed, she stood there at that window and listened now to the shrill, angry voices that railed through bullhorns against the oppressive system that waged war and that had brought about the destruction of the black areas of Newark, New Jersey. She stared at the young black, and white people, and yet barely heard their condemnations in snatches as they castigated the structures and institutions of their country and attributed the inherent viciousness of capitalism and racism as primary factors that had stoked a deadly destructive riot that had begun on July 12 and was ending on July 17 as she and Lloyd Nelson sat in the peace and shadowy quiet of Belle Isle Park and talked of much more personal and important matters.

She was at that window listening, watching, thinking, when the phone rang. Della was on the other end. Georgia gave her the message and she said she would be over around eight that evening. When Georgia hung up the phone she looked at her clock. It was almost three fifteen. She lay down. She

was full of emotion yet she was drained.

Suddenly she sat up in her bed and for the first time in months she thought of God and she felt a sense of shame and guilt. Not just because she had forgotten Him but because she was thinking of Him in her own selfish moment of need, of His help. She left her bed to move to her knees. She clasped her hands together and laid her arms upon the bed. She prayed. She prayed hard for Lloyd Nelson, for herself. She asked for answers. She asked for strength. And she asked for forgiveness for the desires that welled up inside her.

She wanted that dark man.

There was laughter in the air. It came around the corner of the building from the area of the playground. It was accompanied by occasional joyous shrieks, screams of excitement and the sounds of bouncing balls. And all the high-pitched voices of the children indicated their pleasure at being released from their seemingly cramped and definitely uncomfortably hot classrooms and set loose to play the games of children.

Father Ethan Hartman paused a moment from his afternoon walk and listened to these noises. The orphans who lived here went to school year round and they felt especially pent up in the hot summer months. He smiled to himself at their expressions of release. And it was only when he smiled and wrinkles appeared around his eyes and around his thin lips that he looked all of his fifty-eight years of age. He was tall and still relatively slim and his hair was cut so short the greying was barely noticeable and his positive, lively attitude brought a sense of youth to his personality.

He waved at the children in the distance and whistling loudly, he strolled on in his normal long strides, across the grass of this orphanage that sat far off the road in the little city of Farmington in Michigan. An orphanage that was nestled on a hill of green grass and that was surrounded by sturdy leafy trees and contained swings and slides and sand and a baseball diamond and a basketball court and several tennis courts and areas to pitch horseshoes and shoot marbles and stood in obvious contrast to the dry, dull-grey steel and cemented city of Detroit that lay a little over twenty miles to the southeast of this idyllic setting. But today, Detroit would reach out to Father Hartman and begin to touch him with its chill even in the humid heat of this bright summer late afternoon.

The Father entered his office and picked up half of the stack of the mail that awaited him. Walking a few steps to the large window that overlooked the playground, he began to sift through the envelopes. He stopped at one, a special delivery, recognizing immediately the large neat handwriting. Laying the others down he opened it with heartfelt anticipation. And as his light-blue eyes scanned quickly the cryptic message, his pale skin blanched and he made the sign of a cross with his right, white hand.

He remained there, staring out of that window, lost in his own thoughts. A sense of profound sadness and rising apprehension washed over him as he stood. And as the last of these feeling passed into a determined resignation,

he looked at the note and read it again, this time aloud, to himself only: Father. The fever is returning. Perhaps you should pray to your God for me. He whispered the signed name: Lloyd Nelson.

He shook his head, no. He moved to sit at his desk, to pray. And he knew he would pick up the phone and call, for there was not much else he could do.

Prophet James was praying in the basement of his church.

At the moment Georgia Reeves was on her knees praying, at the moment Father Hartman closed his eyes and lifted his hands to pray, at the instant Lloyd Nelson stepped from his cold shower and lifted his hands to feel if his heated skin had begun to cool, Prophet James lifted his bejeweled right hand to wipe his creased, perspiring brow, he also prayed.

He was praying that the sister who was on her knees before him, drawing forcefully with her warm wet mouth on his hardened extended appendage that was rhythmically disappearing down her throat would not suck his guts out. He prayed that the lamp he had grabbed with his left hand would support him, as his knees got weak. Then he prayed he wouldn't pass out.

He blessed his sister. He blessed her again, aloud. He cursed at Daddy Bell for knocking on the door, again. And he yelled out angrily to the two who impatiently awaited him in the other room that he would be right there, that he was coming. And he had spoken that hoarsely to the woman on her knees that was making the juicy sounds, that he was cumin'. And he did. But he didn't pass out.

Pulling himself together, he regained his composure. He straightened his clothing, gave some money to the smiling woman, blessed her again, saw her to the back door and whispered he would see her that night at revival and then he carefully locked the heavy door.

He moved to a table in the corner and took out the saucer that he had put in the drawer. A thin card lay on the saucer and when he lifted it a small amount of cocaine was visible. "I gotta remember to call Marzette," he said aloud, in a whisper. He had a habit of talking to himself aloud when there was something important that he wanted to remember. "I'm almost out."

He dipped the corner of the card into the powder. He put it to his nose and sniffed. He repeated the process once again. He stood there a moment and then he shook his head. "Damn that's some good dope," he mumbled.

He turned towards the outer office but took an abrupt detour into the bathroom to check himself in the mirror. He twisted the faucet on and stuck two fingers in the cool running water. He tilted his head back and put the dripping fingers in his nose. He sniffed, hard. Then taking his handkerchief he wiped his nose and looked at it carefully to make sure there was no white powder to be seen.

He lifted his chin and cursed at the traces of lipstick that he could now observe near his neck, bright red and obvious upon his butterscotch-colored skin. He folded his handkerchief and wiped the red off. His diamonds flashed in the reflection of the bathroom light and sparkled in the mirror as

he folded the silk handkerchief again and wiped his brow and then with his other hand he patted the waves at the top of his somewhat long, dark-auburn colored processed styled hair.

He turned his head and looked and stared for a moment at the small patch of pure-white hair near his right temple. He recalled the pictures he had seen of his father and his same white spot. He wondered if the whiteness would spread. He touched the distinctive white mark. He dismissed the thought.

He smiled now in the mirror and his white teeth smiled back and his light-brown-green eyes were wide from the drug that flowed through his body, and yet they were clear. And touching himself near his eyes, his fingers brushed against his flawless, hairless skin. He acknowledged the source of his color and his smooth complexion, thin lips and nicely upturned nose. "Momma's baby boy, the one and only," he said. And he laughed easily, aloud. He was glad his looks took after his mother and her Cherokee Indian ancestry and not after his very dark African featured father. But he was glad to have his father's height. For he was almost six feet two inches tall. He laughed again. He loved that man in the mirror.

He moved back into the room and crossing to a larger desk, he removed another silk handkerchief and tossed the other in the trash basket. He put on the coat to his money-green colored suit. He turned to the outer office now and the men and the business at hand that awaited him.

Prophet swept into the room with his usual flourish and wearing his usual splendid attire. Very few people, when they were out and about, could ever recall seeing him without a suit on and a silk cloth in his hand. And very few had ever seen him in the same suit twice.

He talked loud and fast, all the time. And although he could lower and slow his somewhat high-pitched voice when he wanted to cajole or entice, there was always an edge to his expressiveness. And his hazel-colored eyes were always easy to read, whether angry or pleased. He was pleased now. His two main bankers, Snake and Daddy Bell could see this as he pulled up his plush chair and stretched his long frame out behind his large mahogany desk. He looked from one to the other and smiled. "What's it be like boys?"

Snake, who was in his early forties, was a brown-skinned little man who looked just like his name and was always winking his right, beady eye and nodding his almost bald head as if he was making a private signal or giving his okay for something he had seen, or heard, that had been spoken. With his winking eye and raspy, slow voice, it always seemed as though he lied. "Real good take boss. I got on my run, from all my people," he looked at the paper he held now, "Sixteen thousand eight hundred and forty dollars."

Prophet wrote the figures on a pad. He looked at the other man.

Daddy Bell was a heavy-set, light-skinned man in his late fifties. He wore his almost all grey hair in a medium size natural hairstyle. He had hardly any wrinkles in his round face and therefore didn't look his age but when he was in high school he didn't look his age either. When he was seventeen he looked just about the same as he did when he was fifty, grey hair and all. He

was called Daddy for that reason and also for the fact that by the time he was sixteen he had three children. The first being born when he was fifteen. At almost sixty he still considered himself a ladies man.

Daddy Bell put his glasses on and looked at his paper. He always had a toothpick in his mouth and he would shift it around when he talked or smoked. He would suck on the toothpick and make noises. Chew on it until it became frayed. And finally when he had to keep spitting the pieces out or picking them from his lips or tongue, he would throw the old one away, pull a new one from his shirt pocket, put it in his mouth and start working on that one.

He peered through his glasses, chewed and sucked, scratched his chin, cleared his throat and spoke. "I'm turning in fifteen thousand four hundred."

Prophet wrote those figures down. He nodded his head, yes. "It's a little bit better than yesterday. Things'll be even better the rest of this week. I'll give out some numbers at the next three revival meetings."

Snake blinked, nodded, and spoke. "Yeah, well don't give out two seven zero or nine sixteen. I got almost four hundred dollars bet on those two. Over two hundred and fifty on two seven zero and just about all of it's straight."

Daddy Bell spoke. "I got a lot on two seventeen and that same two seven zero. And they're betting 'em both straight."

Prophet wrote those numbers down. He said them aloud, to remember. "Anything else?" he asked.

Neither of the men spoke. He swiveled his chair quickly towards Snake. "You pay that old lady her money?" His eyes tightened.

Snake changed his position. "Yeah, sure I paid her. I paid her yesterday."

"She hit last Friday. You should've paid her Saturday. You could've gone by there Sunday. I'm telling you Snake for the last time. Quit fuckin' around with them little bits of money!"

"I just got tied up," came the raspy reply. "I had her money. I didn't have time to get by and pay her."

"Yeah, and that meant all she did was get on the phone and bitch about it to everybody!"

"She ain't bet ten dollars at one time in her whole life."

"I don't care!" And Prophet's voice became sharp "You don't handle them little bets anyway! She didn't get paid 'cause you didn't pay your man!"

"My man was sick. I was handling his route the last few days. Sides, a week and a half ago I was short almost three grand in payoffs for two days 'cause you didn't pay me."

Prophet's voice rose and he stood and leaned on his desk and pointed a bejeweled, manicured finger at Snake. "I'm the got damn bank nigga! You understand? All you got to do is keep your end straight and get your cut! If I don't pay you, you don't have to pay!" He lowered his finger and anger leaped from his eyes. "I'm running this show!" He sat down now, leaning forward in his chair. "And when I give you the ends to kick your people down then got dammit you better pay 'em!"

He could go on and on fussing and Snake and Daddy Bell were preparing themselves to listen. Prophet nearly shouted. "Hell, you don't know what I got to do! I been running this shit damn near ten years! Before that my momma ran it and my daddy before her! I got overhead you two don't know nothing about! I got five kids I gotta take care of just to keep their mommas off my back! I gotta take care of my own momma! People depend on me! I got this church I gotta keep going! I got old people to look after! Everybody's got their hands in my pockets! I take in almost eight hundred grand a month and by the time I pay all my bills, pay them greedy fuckin' cops to stay off my ass, your asses, and kick you two down it ain't enough left for me! It ain't never enough! Plus it ain't no telling how much I'm being beat out of!" He paused. He lowered his voice. "Tell me, be honest. How much you two stealing from me?"

They had heard this a thousand times over the years. They ignored it. He continued.

"I don't like it! My momma told me my daddy always said we gotta learn how to work with them white folks. But I don't like it!" He got up to pace now. His words came quick and loud. One arm and then the other moved and waved in the air and his fingers pointed and his diamonds flashed. "I may not agree with those black militants on much, but there's one thing I can say for 'em. They got the right idea about being independent! I need my own thing! I need more money! Nigga get a little money and he gets satisfied! White folks ain't never satisfied! They want it all! My own thing, that's what I need!"

Snake and Daddy Bell looked at each other. "I know you ain't talking 'bout numbers," Daddy Bell said.

"Don't be crazy!" Prophet came back at him angrily. "It takes them white boys about one month to find out somebody's booking without their okay. Less than that if they're taking in any real money. I got the best deal I can get outta the man. I got a flat rate. Long as I pay him off everyday and give him his thing on the side, he leaves me the fuck alone. If I need something done my boys can't handle, they'll take care of it for me. They gotta look after me. There ain't another nigga in this city that can bring 'em the money I can.

"The problem is, it don't last. Every year I got to give him more and more. Hell, if I wasn't giving out them numbers at church and collecting rent on my properties, I wouldn't be able to move forward or put a little away for my old age."

Snake spoke now. "Well I sure hope you keep putting a lot away 'cause if one of these numbers come out that everybody done bet on, you gonna be up shit's creek without a paddle." He blinked as Prophet moved back behind the desk and sat down.

"You ain't even gonna be in a boat." Daddy Bell added. And he shifted his toothpick.

"Don't you two worry about it," Prophet said as he started adding figures on his pad. "I'm taking all the bets, one penny at a time, one grand at a time. I don't care."

He looked up at the two men now and his slightly high-pitched voice rose again. "I want 'em all! Let them other bankers calling themselves big time turn down a bet or scuffle to lay a big one off! Prophet James don't turn nothing back or lay nothing off! You two just keep expanding your routes."

He paused. He looked from one to the other. His gaze was hard. He had a certain amount of trust in these two men. They had both worked with him since he began his own climb, a little over ten years ago when he came out of high school at eighteen years of age. He could be ruthless and he was ambitious and he had taken the family business back to the top. But he grew impatient easily with these men and lately he was always angry with them. He felt he had to constantly push them and this disgusted and irritated him.

He lowered his voice now. But it was rushed, cutting and slightly harsh. "You got a route you want? Let me know. I'll put the boys on it. I got eight good men. They'll fuck a nigga up. Kill anybody I point a finger at. We'll take the competition out. We'll move on those little runs. You take 'em over. We got to keep growing. If we don't grow and move forward we'll back up. Don't ever be satisfied."

Snake spoke. "You got the city damn near wrapped up now. Ain't nobody taking no big bets now but Horse Collar and Mr. Wilson."

Prophet slammed his opened left hand on his desk. "I want it all!" He shouted. The three men were quiet. And then he laughed, loudly. He almost whispered. "Wouldn't you like to be able to say that once in your life? I got it all."

Daddy Bell laughed. "You too greedy Prophet. You can't have it all."

"Yeah. Maybe you right. Tell you what." And now Prophet James leaned forward and talked as if he were sharing a secret plan. "Let's just try to get all the black folks. You know, our sisters and brothers." He laughed again loudly and punched on the button on his intercom. "Come on in," he said, and settled back in his chair.

A little old man and a little old woman came in. The old man locked the door behind them and Snake and Daddy Bell got up and went to a large table in the far corner. They put their brief cases on the table and opened them. They sat down on a nearby sofa and the old man and old woman began taking the money out and counting it and checking the betting slips. They did this just as they had done for thirty-five years, just as they had done for Prophet's father, Reverend Ezra James.

Prophet stood and took his coat off and hung it on the rack behind him. He sat down. He stretched his legs out and looked at his lovely gold watch. It was almost four o'clock and very soon his phone would ring and a voice from the other end would tell him the numbers for the day.

Lloyd Nelson was by his phones at a few minutes after four o'clock. He had showered and now he sat in his large chair with just a towel around his waist looking out of the window. He had talked with Bear and Red a little earlier and given them both a list of things he needed for them to check on. And they had talked about the things he wanted them to acquire that they

would be using over the next few days. He sipped on a glass of iced water and waited for his calls.

After he had mounted the stairs and entered his apartment, quiet and empty of any presence, he had remained restless and disturbed. He paced and watched the sun come up that Tuesday morning as he had left his mind on Georgia Reeves and gone over the conversation they had. He had visualized her, the both of them together. And he had grown frustrated with the thin ephemeral visions that had come to him. He was unable to construct anything of substance to which he could hold on. All he believed was that he would leave and she would leave. They would be wrenched from one another and become in memory as fleeting thoughts and vanishing fantasies. Time would become for them their barrier, separating them and through time they would drift away from one another. This is he tried to accept.

Yet, somewhere inside he questioned the truth of this brooding. Would she forget him? Could one always, for all mortal time remain indelible within the other's living soul? He could not deny he was being affected greatly by her essence. He thought of her beauty, her intelligence, the expressions of her feelings and he chided himself and let those thoughts go. It was, he admitted, useless to draw upon those images. There wasn't anything beyond the next few days. There was no future. Only the nothingness awaited him. That, and the dream that guided him to the black abyss was all he could look forward to.

He had pushed against the sleep that descended upon him. He had wanted to keep it off as long as possible. But, knowing he would need as much rest as he could get, he had finally, reluctantly gone to bed around ten that morning. The dream had returned, as he knew it would and after a little over four hours of sleep he had awakened with a slight fever yet feeling strangely refreshed. And very soon his temperature had returned to normal. Now as he sat here after his cold, cooling shower and sipped his iced water, he went over the dream that was so familiar but was becoming so very different.

He was surprised, apprehensive, and fascinated at its new properties. It seemed to be gradually organizing itself, clarifying its meanings. Sounds were separating and he could hear them not as a roar, or as a mingled cacophony of voices and effects but as each individual noise. Each sound was clear and distinct. The features of everyone and everything that moved in animation were forming themselves as something valid. Impressing upon him that they, each symbolic entity, each featured aspect in the vivid pictures was a hint, a clue, a warning that all had existed at one time, somehow, in reality.

There was a new strength in the dream. The feelings surged powerfully and there was a new mutated distortion to the turbulent violence and he himself was becoming empowered as never before. As if each violent act, each aggressive emotion was being drawn into his body and absorbed deep inside him so that he would ultimately possess the attributes of every particle that contained substance in the nightmarish preconscious illusion.

He would be not just as the blood in the green grass. He would be the earth from which the grass grew. He would be the black man, the burning woman, the tall trees, the huge monstrous animals and he would be the searing lightning that flashed jaggedly through the darkened sky.

As he thought of the expanding nightmare he found himself touching, tracing with his left thumb the scar than ran trenched beneath his right eye. He pondered about it, its cause, its origin. And he heard a soft voice and it said, she said, "Ask!" So he posed questions softly, aloud, and somehow he knew, in the end, before his demise, he would know ... everything. The dream had revealed, in pictures, the answers. It would be his task to interpret and decipher what the pictures truly meant.

One of the phones rang him from his thoughts. He could almost determine by which phone rang, who was calling. He had three phones, changing one number as needed. Only Red, Bear, and Johnny Russo would have all three numbers. As he surmised, it was Della. She apologized for using her emergency number but she wanted to be certain she understood Georgia's instructions. Lloyd Nelson allayed her unease, assured her the request was correct, talked with her about several other matters and reminded her about the numbers he believed would fall. They said their goodbyes and hung up.

Another phone rang. It was Bear. He had gotten the money down. He hadn't heard the numbers yet. He'd call when he did. Finally, he inquired how Lloyd Nelson was doing. He was told everything was all right. Bear's voiced hesitations represented his doubt. They hung up.

The same phone rang. It was Red and he conveyed basically the same message. He asked about his friend's health and grunted when he was told everything was fine. Next, another phone rang. He knew who it was.

"Hello."

"Lloyd Nelson, it's Father Hartman. I got your note." His voice was soft, but strained. Tentative. "How are you?" And the last question was not a perfunctory greeting.

"I'm alright Father."

"How bad is it?"

Lloyd Nelson considered the question. He knew his answer was ambiguous. "Worse that it's ever been, and yet, better."

"But how can that be, my son?"

"It's different."

The Father was confused. "Different how?"

"Stronger. Clearer. Prettier."

There was silence on the other end now. Then. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing I can do, you know that." Lloyd Nelson was gentle with this man. He knew his concern was genuine.

"Maybe you should go to the hospital."

"And tell them what Father, that I'm having a dream and that eventually the dream is going to somehow infect me with some strange fever that no

one knows anything about and it'll perhaps kill me? Or, should I share with the doctors that I might go to sleep for a few weeks and when I wake up, that is, if I wake up, there'll be something wrong with me, something other than or in addition to that which was wrong with me before I went to sleep? They'd think I was crazy."

"There must be something we can do."

"Do as I asked. Pray for me."

"Lloyd Nelson, this is no time for making light of the situation," came a quiet admonishment. "This is serious."

"I know Father. But there's nothing we can do. It's too soon. You and I both know that if I went to the hospital right now, today, they wouldn't find anything. I just have to deal with it."

Father Hartman didn't say anything. He felt helpless in this situation. He wanted to impart something succinct that could convey his jumbled feelings. Finally he uttered what came to him, and regretted immediately his words. "I'm sorry, my son," he whispered, in spite of knowing it was not pity or sympathy that was desired. And he felt regret for feeling that way. But he couldn't apologize for what he had said. And in truth, his sorrow was real.

"Don't be. Everything will be as it's supposed to be, in the end." They were both silent for several moments and then Lloyd Nelson spoke. His words were direct and precise. "I knew you would call. I wanted to talk to you. Yesterday I contacted my lawyer, the one you dealt with before. You need to get in touch with him and set up an appointment as soon as possible. He's got some papers for you to sign. I'm putting the orphanage and the property it's on in your name. I think with the money you've got coming in now from the fund we established and the donations you're receiving you should be able to keep it up, pay your taxes and continue to do what you do. You'll have to look after those four acres adjacent to your property for me. You understand?"

"Perhaps this time will be different. Perhaps ..." The voice of the Father trailed off. He felt an inevitable act approaching. He was unable to say anything more.

"Yes, perhaps. In the meantime let's take care of this business."

"Yes my son. I understand. How can I ... can we, thank you?"

"You were always there when I needed you Father. I'm just glad you got up off of that holier than thou attitude and let me do what I wanted to do for you." Lloyd Nelson paused now. "It's done a lot for me to be able to do what I could. Who knows, maybe you'll have to help me again someday. Soon."

The first phone rang.

"Hold on." He picked up the phone. He answered. It was Bear. He told Bear to hold on. He spoke to Father Hartman. "I've gotta go now. Make sure you get in there and sign those papers."

"If there's anything I can do you'll contact me won't you?"

"Yes. I will."

"Bless you my son. Goodbye."

“Goodbye Father.”

He hung up the phone and returned to Bear. “Yeah.”

“Cinque call you?”

“No. Why?”

“He’s trying to reach you. I just talked to him.”

“He’s got a number to use. I talked to him yesterday. He’ll call here.”

“You sure you alright?”

Lloyd Nelson could hear the worry in his voice. He chuckled. “Don’t ask me that anymore until at least tomorrow.”

“I just ... you know ... I ... ”

“I know Bear.” His voice was even, patient. “Relax. You gonna have to take it easy. You hear? Be strong now.”

“Alright. Alright. I just ... I’ll call you back.” Bear hung up.

Lloyd Nelson was concerned about his friend. Bear was volatile, very emotional. He wondered how the big man was going to handle himself the next few days. He settled back and sipped his water. He would wait on the phones to ring. The phones would bring him news, requests and information. And if Cinque wanted the guns, he would have to call. He didn’t want him to think Lloyd Nelson needed him for anything. He looked at his plants. He watched the sky begin to change in its colors. It was almost four thirty and soon the evening would be there.

At four forty-five the phone of Prophet James rang. It was his special phone. Rarely used, it transmitted through the numbers imparted to him, which hopes and dreams would come true and which ones would have to be carried on to the next day. He wrote the numbers down. Then he told the two men who now stood anxiously in front of his desk. Tearing a sheet from his pad he pushed the paper across the desk for them to see, 14953.

Sometime a little after six Battaglia would call and if there were no problems all would proceed. Battaglia didn’t want Prophet to have any problems and he didn’t want Prophet to cause him any problems either. He wanted to continue to receive his five hundred dollars a day, six days a week that Prophet provided him without his bosses knowing.

The old man and old woman would search through their unique filing method for winning bets. They would set aside all other pieces of paper to be burned immediately.

By nine the next morning a man from Prophet James would meet a man from ‘The Hand.’ Together they would count and verify the amount in a brown paper bag and the Mafia underling would then depart with twenty thousand dollars.

Around ten thirty the next morning, if there was nothing unusual, and if everyone had conducted themselves properly, Snake and Daddy Bell would be paid their percentage of the net and given the money they required to pay off all the winning bets they had accepted. They would also be given the money they needed to pay a percentage to their numerous runners and the money the runners would need to pay all those who had made the smaller

bets and won. Those who had won would try again. Those who did not win would try again. And the numbers' game would begin again. By midnight, Battaglia would have received his extra five hundred dollars.

The numbers flashed across the city this Tuesday evening, July 18, 1967. Lloyd Nelson's phone was ringing at fifteen after five and five twenty. Both Red and Bear called with the same numbers for the Detroit house. They were told to be prepared to come to his apartment at nine thirty that night. He would let them know for sure but he expected to hear from Cinque.

By six thirty that evening, everyone who had played their numbers who really wanted to know, knew what numbers had fallen. They began to pick numbers for the next day. And prepared to dream them that night.

Johnny Russo sat by his phone until six thirty and when it had not sounded by then he relaxed and headed to the racetrack. He had picked his horses to play.

At six thirty in the Pelican Restaurant and Lounge, deep in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, an extremely beautiful six foot two inch tall woman with tanned, olive-colored skin and blonde hair that hung to her shoulders and luscious, juicy looking, pouty red lips, and piercing cobalt-blue eyes, glanced at her gold watch, took one last sip of her cranberry drink and rose from her seat at the bar and strolled gracefully in her silver-colored four inch high heels toward the doorway leading to the exit. She was not only exquisite but she appeared sensual in her short, tight, silver-colored dress and looked expensive with tasteful gold jewelry hanging around her neck and diamonds on her fingers and wrist that sparkled and flashed in the lights. All eyes were upon her, including those of the man in the booth near the far wall in the dining section.

The man in his mid-forties was around five feet nine inches tall. He was soft, overweight at about two hundred and twenty pounds. He had dark, narrow eyes that appeared cunning and mean looking. His complexion was swarthy and his cheeks were blemished and his somewhat long hair was shiny and combed straight to the back. And as he stared at the beautiful woman he sucked at the food between his teeth and using both his large, hairy hands he patted his thick, curled lips with his napkin and his pinky rings flashed. The man was Joseph Battaglia. She made sure to pause as she searched in her small white clutch purse, to look back and smile seductively at 'The Hand,' once more before she departed.

Georgia Reeves ceased her pacing and stood by her window. She could see the wind blowing the scraps of papers, the leaflets, and trying to turn over the discarded cardboard signs that had been left behind from the protest gathering that had ended just a while ago. There were still quite a few people who remained in the area. Some were cleaning up. Others were talking, debating and simply milling around watching. For several moments

she thought of her active student days in Albany. She thought about how significant those days were and how long ago they now seemed. Then, those thoughts passed.

She glanced at her clock. It was nearing eight. It would soon begin to grow dark. She was in turmoil and she knew she would stand here and look out and attempt to see Della come across the courtyard. She needed to see her cousin, desperately. And she needed help and relief from the emotional pain she experienced.

Lloyd Nelson was dressing for the night when a phone sounded out. He could tell by the rings which one it was so he didn't hurry to it. He picked it up on the seventh ring. As he expected, it was Cinque. The voice on the other end was cut off before he could say much of anything. He asked if the voice wanted to see him. The voice said yes. He informed the voice that he would meet him later, at the address he had been provided, at eleven that night. No, he told the voice, he couldn't be there before then. He hung up and called Red and Bear and told them to come on over. In his bedroom he looked at the clock on his wall. It was right at eight fifteen. Then he finished dressing.

At eight thirty Prophet James was praying again. But this time he was praying in front of those who came to fill his huge church on Fourteenth Street, for revival service. People had come from all over Detroit to hear him preach. He was articulate, flamboyant and his charisma was unmatched by any other preacher in the city. They had come to look at and try to get to the handsome Prophet, many of the women had. Most of the men had come because the women were there. And just about all knew that in addition they would be given the blessed numbers that would be coming out soon, that were destined to fall. Prophet was famous for his ability to see into the future and pick the coming numbers. Perhaps you had to play a lot of them and maybe it took a long time for the numbers to come. But those who hit, knew. They knew to stick with the Prophet.

Yes, they came to be close to the rich, handsome Prophet. They wanted to share in his glow. They wanted to know, as he knew. They wanted to be, as he was. They wanted to touch his connections with money, and God. And as the collection plates passed, for the fourth time, all the people who had come, paid to possess what they could, of Prophet James.

There had been many who had been revived by the stirring sermon and moved by the emotional, heartfelt prayer that followed. Some had been brought to tears as they sat with closed eyes and bowed heads and fanned themselves in the packed, sweltering church as Prophet's famous voice rose and flew between and past them. And those who had kept their gaze riveted on Prophet had seen his pretty eyes fill and glisten. They had seen him so overcome by the importance and truth of his own words that those near him had been forced to take him by his robed arms and grasp his bejeweled hands and lead him the few steps he could not take, and assist him into his

large golden painted chair where he sat like a king on his throne.

An elder and a deacon fanned him as the young-adult choir broke into a unique vocal rendition of the Lord's Prayer. The music swelled, clapping began and Prophet James bowed his head and nodded in joyous appreciation of this religious night and he gave silent thanks as he eyed the collection plates that overflowed.

Georgia Reeves' eyes filled. Her heart swelled. She too was overcome and she was moved to tears and as she cried, she looked as she was in this reality. A young woman in blue jeans and light-blue short-sleeved blouse and soft shoes, very little lipstick and natural styled hair. Yet inside she felt the range of her existence and the convoluted levels of her essence.

Della brushed at her long blonde wig and she removed her red high-heeled shoes and her short, red, shiny dress seemed to change colors as she went from the couch to the bed to hold Georgia and listen to her as she cried softly and spoke of her confusion and heartache. And Georgia had touched this sense of frustration as Della had answered, quietly, "I don't know what to tell you sugar." Her answer had been in reply to Georgia's question of, "What should I do?" And the question had come after Georgia had tried to relate as best she could the previous night's events and the conversation that had transpired.

Georgia's tears subsided and she went into the bathroom to compose herself, wipe her eyes and put a dampened, cool washcloth to her face and neck. When she went back to sit on her bed, Della was standing at the window, staring out.

Della went back to the couch after a few moments and sat and she looked at her cousin there in the soft light of the lamp, her head down. She was saddened by her emotional upheaval and for some reason she felt a vague sense of trepidation and as she watched her young cousin, she thought of her own responsibility for this situation.

"I don't know Georgia," she said in almost a whisper. "I really don't believe he would do anything on purpose to hurt you. I know he cares about you. He's done a lot for you. And I know this too. He hasn't moved you outta this place 'cause this is where he believes you should be, at school. And you know my feelings on that don't you?"

"Yes."

"The thing is, where do you wanna be? 'Cause everything he told you about this city, this life, is true. I didn't know what to think or feel about you two being together. But as long as you kept going to school I thought everything would be alright. I felt good for you but I guess a part of what I felt was that I had done something wrong, made a mistake by taking you around him."

"Don't feel like that," and Georgia looked at her. "He was right about me. I came to Detroit looking for excitement. I just needed something else, something more than what was there down south, even something other than school. When you used to come home it seemed like you were coming

out of a different world. And I had something inside of me that wanted to be a part of what you were about. I wanted, needed to see your world. It was my choice. Nobody made me.

“And I’ve seen other men since I’ve been here. I saw other men that first night we were all together. But I believe I fell in love with Lloyd Nelson the first time I saw him standing in that hallway right here at school and you didn’t have anything to do with that. I’d never felt like that before in my life.” She sighed and looked away from Della, at the lighted lamp. “I feel like that every time I’m around him. I get the same feeling every time I think about him. It’s like he’s making my heart feel as if it’s hurting.”

“Damn sugar. You got it bad.”

“Yeah, and he’s trying to make me let him go isn’t he? But if I do, what happens to this thing inside of me that wants him, wants to be with him? Where does it go?”

“You’ll have to get over him.”

“Never!” came the quick response.

For several moments they did not speak.

“You know what Della? I said it last night. It’s like choosing between light,” and she reached over and turned the lamp off, “and the dark. But I wouldn’t be able to see anything in the dark without him. I don’t even know if I’d even want to live without him.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Della said quietly.

Georgia rose and walked with her arms folded across her chest, around the small apartment. She stopped for a long moment in the kitchen area. She turned the light on and then moved to the window. They were bathed in shadows now. The yellowish-white light from the kitchen joined with the glow from the purple lamps that reflected through the window and there Georgia stood. Then she let the shade all the way up. And that’s how the room would remain, in wavy colored shadows.

She moved back to sit on the bed. And they were sitting in silence in the light that transferred itself into a bluish-red essence as it filtered itself through the dusty window and spread itself across the floor and along the walls. Georgia spoke. She nearly whispered, with resignation. “He’s saying stay away from his world. And leave him alone.”

“It’s more to it than that Georgia. I think he’s telling you that if you choose him, you’ve got to be willing to go all the way. If he falls, you got to be able to go down if you have to, with him. As for pimping or selling dope, I don’t believe it. If he had wanted to do those things he would’ve been doing ‘em a long time ago. He could have already and would’ve been damn good at it. But that ain’t never been his thing. As far as I know he don’t even get high no more. He was just trying to make you understand the risks. Everything has its risks, even his gambling. He could go broke. As far as I know ... ”

Georgia cut her off. Her voice was low and anxious. “You say no more. Did he used to get high? How far do you know? Tell me! Those were his words, for you to tell me everything you knew about him.”

Again they were silent. Moments passed. Georgia could see Della in the dimness. Her brow was creased and she pulled with her teeth at her bottom lip. She was thinking, attempting to arrange her thoughts.

She began. "I first met Lloyd Nelson about, a little over ten years ago. Let's see ... " She was counting back. "I was a junior in high school so I must have been almost seventeen. I called myself kinda fast and was already trying to sell a little pussy every now and then but I had stepped away from the man who had turned me out and I had promised my momma I would finish school. So I was trying to act right.

"I'm twenty seven now, almost twenty eight. Yeah, that's right, about eleven years ago. I guess he's about my age 'cause the first time I saw him was in one of my classes, my English class. I'll never forget it. And I swear he looked almost like he does right now. Then, maybe he looked a little older than a lot of us. Now he just looks young. The only thing that's changed is the way he wears his hair in different ways. Back then he wore it real short, in a slicked style, and he's gotten a little taller and heavier.

"When I went to class that day he was sitting in the back of the room. He didn't say anything to anybody and I would turn around and look at him 'cause he was so dark. But it was a pretty dark. And he was so good looking, but his dark-brown eyes were, different, I'd guess you'd say. And it was that look in his eyes that made me curious and I wondered about him, and that scar on his cheek.

"Anyway, it was right after summer vacation and he was just, there one day. We lived on the east side then and I went to Eastern. And let me tell you, Eastern even at that time was becoming a rough school. The boys was just beginning to get up gangs and even some of the girls had a gang. But none of 'em did no whole lot. They'd fight a lot but in those days if a person pulled a knife or a razor, they'd be called a cheater. It was mostly just wrestling and fist fighting.

"Well, for the first few weeks after he showed up, he fought just about everyday after school, but in the hallways too if he had to. I remember those circles. All those kids around him when he was fighting, pressing close and the boys yelling and the girls screaming, the whole crowd moving, running. It was like, a show. And it seemed like he knew who all those who fronted as tough guys were, the so called leaders, the bullies, 'cause he tried to work his way through all of 'em. And everyday after school Red and Bear would be right there. They weren't nowhere near as big as they are now and they drove an old black Chevy then, 'bout a '47 or '48 and they'd wait for Lloyd Nelson and the three of 'em would cruise around school or go to Bill's, the little hamburger stand down the street and usually he'd end up fighting somebody.

"The first weeks people was picking with him, calling him names. Teasing him about his color. One time we was in Bill's and this boy asked him for some money, trying to take it really, and Lloyd Nelson hit him so hard he knocked him out and the boy slid under a table and all he did was sit down and finish eating his hotdog. That was the first time I ever seen somebody knocked out with their leg shaking.

"Sugar let me tell you. Everybody found out real quick why he always carried those black gloves around in his back pocket. And when he took his right one off it was to pull his knife if someone pulled theirs and he could pop that thing open so fast, and twirl it too. And after that first month he didn't have no more problems outta nobody at Eastern.

"He came to school everyday and he'd always be dressed real nice. He would sit in the back of the class, quiet, didn't bother nobody. So I started sitting next to him and he and I got real close. For a minute I thought we was gonna have something together but all the young girls was after him and he just always seemed to be going his own way.

"But you know something else I remember? One time we was in the lunchroom and a bunch of us was in there trying to change the grades on the report cards we had just gotten and he was just watching us with that little smile of his. And after lunch period, on our way to our next class, he pulled me aside and he told me I better not tell anybody 'bout what he was gonna show me. You know what it was? It was his report card. It was strange and I don't know, I guess he liked me and trusted me. It was like he had to show somebody and he held it out for me to see. He had all A's except for a B in chemistry. And it seemed like he was proud of it but I could see it in his face, it was like he was ashamed too.

"Georgia you know something? I can remember so much about him. It's like all the things happened yesterday. He just had that kind of impression on me. Things seem so clear, or, he seems so clear. You know what I mean don't you? 'Bout the way he affects you?" She paused, thinking.

"Yes," Georgia said. "I know just what you mean. Go on."

"I guess," Della continued, "that's why he told me to talk with you. We was always, even then, around the same crowd, going to the same places. Even ten years ago we was living in the same world. I've seen a lot of him off and on he's made me remember a lotta stuff.

"Like I said, he didn't fight those Eastern boys very much after the first month or so. After a while, every now and then, boys from other schools, Central and Northwestern, Southwestern, Chadsey, Mumford, Mackenzie, would come over to fight him. And he didn't refuse nobody but Red and Bear wouldn't let him throw down with anybody that was too big, they'd thump with 'em. Sometimes I'd ride with 'em over to other schools and they'd jump on boys, beat 'em up and that's how he started really getting his reputation.

"See sugar, Detroit is a big city but it's a small city in a lotta ways. People who have lived here for years and years, all their life even, can know what's going on all over. People they went to high school with have moved to different parts of the city, grown up to do different things and a lotta people have stayed in touch.

"Right now those who are called, and call themselves professional people hang out at the Louisiana Grill down there on Lafayette and they sit around and talk about their world and the people in their world. Who's on top, who's trying to get there and how. And most of 'em put down those other

people that ain't like them. There, it's the lawyers and judges and court people who deal with that legal shit. At another club it's the teachers. The police hang out over at a bar on Gratiot. They all may be living in their different worlds but if they've lived in Detroit a long time and went to high school here and are about my age, a little younger, little older, they probably know something 'bout Lloyd Nelson.

"He played sports his junior and senior year, basketball and he ran track. He was good in basketball and he could really run. So he got a rep' in sports too. In those days we used to have city championship games in basketball at U of D College. They were called the Big House Games. People came from all over the city and even other parts of the state so a lotta people got a chance to see him play. And his senior year, after Eastern lost, he got is such a fight after the game that he got kicked outta school. But at the same time a lotta people got a chance to see him fight too 'cause he was right back up there for three straight day and he was kicking ass.

"That was in March and we was graduating that June but I didn't see him no more after, I guess about the first of April. He wasn't going to Eastern anymore and he just quit coming up there. I heard he finished in night school but after that I didn't hear nothing else and I couldn't get in touch with him.

"The next time I saw him was one Friday night about three years later. It was September of '61 and I remember 'cause I was getting ready to turn twenty-two. After the Twenty Grand let out a lotta us would go to the White Castle behind the train station off Michigan Avenue. I don't know why that became the spot, but it did and a whole lotta people would be there, just hanging out, mostly people in their late teens and early twenties. A lotta kids used somebody's I.D. to get in the club on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Monday and Tuesdays was for the young teenagers.

"Well us girls would go down there to the train station and the men would show off their cars and usually a fight would start. It seems silly now when I think about how they was trying to impress us and demand their own respect that way but they were and that's the way it was. And by then I was back in the streets quite a bit and I was used to seeing crazy shit and I loved to see 'em show out like that. And that Friday, there he was. He was sharp as a tack and his hair was long and it was laid. He was wearing a three to side style.

"Red and Bear was there too and Bear jumped on this guy in the parking lot and they fought, but not for long 'cause Bear beat him down and Lloyd Nelson stopped this other boy from getting in it just by moving in front of him and the boy knew not to try and go through him. I had stood on the trunk of a car to watch and when it broke up I yelled out to him and when he came over I fell into his arms from that car and he was glad to see me and we started running together again.

"Sugar let me tell you this. I seen a lotta fights, a lotta men throw down and Lloyd Nelson was one of the best I ever seen. And I seen him fight a lot. And I ain't saying he won all of 'em but I can say in all the times I seen him get it on, I never saw him lose. And street fighting ain't nothing like that shit

you see on TV. It's so quick and violent it's scary and most of 'em end up on the ground. But he was so fast and he hit real hard and he was so strong he was able to stand up, stay on his feet. I saw him take on two men at one time once and I was screaming and shaking so, that when it was over I thought I was the one been fighting.

"We hung out just about all that fall and that's what him and Red and Bear did. Fight. We drunk a lotta wine together, Nature Boy, Wild Irish Rose, Silver Satin, Thunderbird. I think wine barely cost a dollar a fifth back then. And we smoked weed, dropped pills that kept us up and snorted a little cocaine every now and then too. If it was there, we did it, except for heroin, we didn't want nothing that'd slow us down. And we'd all be crazy, go to the Twenty Grand, Greystone, Arcadia, the train station and a lotta basement parties.

"We went to one of those waistline parties in Inkster once and they got in a fight and Bear had to lift me up and push my ass out the window. But it was exciting and that's what we called fun. And they was fun to be around and it was like they was the craziest, baddest motherfuckers in the city. And you know what? They had a lotta game about themselves and a lotta class too, even with all that shit they was doing. And it wasn't like they fought all the time. A lotta times everything was peaceful but there was always that thing there like, something might happen, something violent. And I can remember men making remarks, call themselves fronting one of those three off and I'd be thinking to myself, baby, you just don't know whatcha doing.

"Red was pretty quiet then, but Bear would pick on people a lot. Lloyd Nelson didn't really bother anybody but if there was somebody he wanted to get, he'd find a way to 'em. Sometimes he'd just flirt with their woman. And I asked him once why he fought with certain ones and he said 'cause they had it coming and that it gave him satisfaction to give 'em what they had coming."

Della stopped now. She had a slight smile on her face. And then she shook her head, no. "I gotta get me a drink," she said. She got up and went to the small refrigerator in the corner of the kitchen area and took out an ice tray. She took two glasses from the cupboard and dropped several ice cubes into each one and then ran some water over the ice. She walked over to Georgia and handed her one glass and went over and set the other one on the small end table near where she had sat. She bent to her purse beside the couch and searched through it. Reaching past her pistol she pulled out a small bottle of scotch and unscrewing the top she turned the bottle up and took a large drink and then gulped some water. She thought about offering Georgia some of the scotch and then changed her mind and sat back down.

They had both grown comfortable with the dimness and they felt an obvious ease with the quiet that was only accentuated by the sounds of the night that would occasionally come from the outside. The muffled voices of the students in the hallway coming and going had been ignored, totally. And while those who were headed out for their search of pleasure and relaxation passed by the door or beneath the window and moved on towards their

destinations, Georgia had joined Della in this reliving of the past. She was there with Della. Not only could she see pictures that included those who she knew, she had begun to feel something that had not only been there to push these people in the directions they had gone, but she felt an energy that had forced them to act as they did. And she wondered if she would have been able to be as they had been, in order to be with them.

Della's voice brought Georgia back to the present and then as if being drawn into a vortex, she was pulled and pushed and she plunged back into the past and was flung into 1961.

Said Della. "By the time winter came I had to start leaving those three alone. For one thing I couldn't get no steady man 'cause they all thought I was going with one of the three or all of 'em or something. Really I don't know what people thought. The four of us was tight and we were all just friends and all of 'em had different girls, especially Lloyd Nelson, but I just wanted to be around that good looking dark man.

"Now, I knew they all gambled and Red and Bear was running the numbers for a stretch and then Red controlled this after-hours' joint for a while, so they had money and they wouldn't ever let me pay for anything but you know the saying, momma may have and poppa may have and those three had but bless the child who has her own and I wanted my own and drifted away from 'em.

"I started working more and more in the streets and I fell for this man named Butch and I didn't see none of 'em for a good while. Then one time right after spring, Lloyd Nelson walked up on me on John R. and I was working that night. He was so nice. We talked for a long time and he never said nothing about what I was doing or acted like he felt uncomfortable or anything and I didn't feel shamed or anything but then he had always been the type of person that nothing seemed to really surprise him.

"It had been a few months since I had seen him and it was a new year, '62, and he looked a little different somehow. Like he was tired or sick and I wondered if he was using drugs. And his eyes looked real strange. They was empty but, hard. Other than that he seemed the same and he was damn sure dressed sharp. He looked like money. But it just felt different being there with him. And we had gone into this bar and had a drink and talked and I remember he was only drinking grapefruit juice then but I felt kinda uneasy with him. That was right after Easter, around the middle of April and it was still pretty cold.

"By the summer I was working real regular and I was in the streets a lot. I began to hear Lloyd Nelson's name out there. He was getting a reputation in the game, not for fighting but for the car he drove, the clothes he wore, making money and moving on the inside of the life, knowing what was going on. The men talked about his gambling and the women talked about him too. You can imagine what they was saying 'cause by then he was going around with different kinds of women.

"I began to see him out there every now and then and the women he was with could've been working girls or square girls. But all them bitches I knew

wanted to be with him, to give him some pussy just so they could brag about it, talk shit about it. But he was going his own way and nobody really knew what he was doing other than his gambling and that's why they talked about him. They couldn't pin him down. They couldn't get in his business. Him and Bear and Red was doing their own things. He was moving up and just like those people in the other worlds talk about those they like or don't like, that was up, down, or rising, they talked about Lloyd Nelson.

"Then in late July of that year I heard he had gotten in a fight over some money with four men in a joint off Beaubien. He said they had cheated him in a card game and he had been hit real bad. Stabbed and cut two three times in the back and once or twice in the chest and I remember thinking to myself that was the only way four of 'em could've got out on him. They had to get him from the back.

"They said he jumped through a window in the attic and when they looked out he pointed up at 'em and walked off, bleeding everywhere through his shirt."

Georgia remembered the scars she had seen and it pained her to think of him being hurt like that. But she let the thought go in preparation for Della's continuing words. But Della was silent. It was as if she was done and finished forever. So Georgia rose on one arm from the position she had taken when she lay across the bed. She had stretched out with her feet hanging over the side, her face turned so she could stare through the window, into the starless sky as her head rested upon the pillow she hugged.

Now she moved from this position on her side, to sit up. She looked at Della. There was an unusual countenance added to her frowning face. And Georgia was perplexed and for some reason she did not want to say a word or utter a sound. She leaned to stare at Della and see her clearly as her eyes opened and she heard her strained words come across the room, barely audible in a pushing, near whisper. Behind the words was a pent-up rush.

Della's words moved Georgia back just a little and turned her head slightly, away. "They found 'em all dead over the next two months. First all their cars were burned. Two of their houses were burned down and in the end they were all found dead." She paused.

Now it was Georgia's turn to speak and her words came as if she was frightened, as if something was about to happen. "All who Della?"

"All the men he fought with. Two of 'em were fairly well known pimps. Another was one of the bigger dope men in the game and I didn't know the last one."

"You mean ... ?"

"But that's not all sugar. They found what they found of 'em in pieces."

"I don't understand."

"In pieces. Hands. Arms. Legs. Feet. Pieces of 'em kept turning up around the joint he had been in when he got stabbed and then all over the city. After the second one disappeared the third one hid out and the fourth left town, the one I didn't know."

"Are you saying ... ?"

Della held her right hand up to stop the question and after raising her hand she had reached and grabbed her bottle of scotch. She turned the bottle up and drank. She set the bottle down and picked up her glass of water and sipped. She breathed out, hard. She spoke.

"The last two tried to hide, to run but it didn't do no good. The third one got his just like the first two and the fourth one turned up in little pieces in Alabama. And you know something? They never found the heads. Not one."

Silence fell now. It was heavy and encompassing, this silence. And the sudden laughter that floated from the courtyard through the open window seemed incongruous in its levity that opposed the totality and reality of the horror within the words Della had just uttered.

Georgia shook her head, no, and laughed, a short hollow laugh. It was foreign to her own ears, this sound filled with apprehension and confusion. And she knew it had escaped from her as an attempt to deny the meaning behind what she had just heard. And she had to ask.

"Are you trying to tell me he, Lloyd Nelson, did that?"

"I don't know who did it," Della said softly. "All I know is that it was real, that it happened. And anybody in the streets, in the game, knew it too. I'm talking about it being in all the papers and on TV, and I mean eleven o'clock, sugar."

"See, when the people on the news was talking 'bout it and I mean this shit went on and on, and they was talking 'bout the police didn't have no clues, there was people all over this city sitting in front of their TV's or listening to their radios or reading 'bout it saying they knew who did it. Lloyd Nelson did it! Maybe they even picked him up, questioned him. Hell, I don't know. All I know is, he's known for gambling, making money, driving big cars and wearing fine clothes and beautiful jewelry. And if you take all that away, everybody'll still know the violence, extreme violence. And he don't play. He ain't about no bullshit."

Georgia got up and walked to the window. It was suddenly very warm in the room. She felt hot and closed it. She wanted to fan herself. She wanted to speak but she didn't know what to say.

"Listen sugar. It could've been him or Red or Bear or all three of 'em. Maybe he hired somebody. I'm telling it all to you just like I know it. Now sit down, there's more."

Georgia was not only hot, she was numb and she felt a compulsion to follow Della's words, as if ordered. Part of her was incredulous and another part was curious and drawn to the source of these purported acts. She sat on the couch and watched as Della drank some of her scotch and took a sip of her water.

Della shifted and put one leg up under her and turned to Georgia. She wondered for just a moment about the lack of expression she saw. It appeared as if her younger cousin was almost serene. Pleased?

Della spoke. "You remember hearing about my momma being sick? It was a good little while ago and you might not remember. It was," she thought back now, "October of '62, almost five years. You would've been

what, thirteen, fourteen?”

Georgia was looking at Della and wondering how this that seemed to change the topic was related to that which had just been said. “I remember that. I remember everybody down home was real worried and talked about it a lot.”

“That’s right,” Della said. “Cause she was real sick and for a while they didn’t think she was gonna make it. Well, they moved her to a different hospital for a couple of weeks. And this hospital had this garden area and I was sitting there one day waiting for ’em to take momma back to her room from one of her tests. It was nice in this place, with lots of flowers and plants and running water. Anyway, guess who they brought in? In a wheelchair.”

Georgia pondered this for just a moment. “Lloyd Nelson?” she said, confused.

“You got it. Now this wasn’t long after those men had gotten offed and I couldn’t figure out what he was doing there unless it was because of that fight he had been in but that had been a while ago and I was wondering if he was healed and I was thinking, time, July to October. And if he wasn’t alright then who was doing that killing and stuff? Anyway, I didn’t know what was going on. At first I was a little nervous to talk to him. But as I sat there and looked at him, all I could see and remember was him from high school and those good times we used to have together and he looked sick, sugar, real sick, and almost, helpless, if you can picture that.”

Georgia tried but could not visualize that image.

“Well, I went and stood beside him and I said his name kinda quiet like, and he didn’t hear me. He was just staring at the flowers and the fountain. I said his name again, a little louder and he turned and looked at me and those pretty, dark-brown of eyes of his were sorta, empty looking but they were real clear. He looked at me for a little bit and then he recognized me. You know how he smiles? Well, he smiled at me and asked me what I was doing there and I sat down and we just started talking.

“He said he had been sick but that he was alright, that he was doing good, just a little weak. I told him about my momma and all, and he hoped everything would be alright, you know, he was as nice as always and he asked how I was doing and he began to seem to me just like the old Lloyd Nelson. He still talked real quiet and easy but it was like, I don’t know, like he was sad. Anyway, before I left he grabbed my hand and he asked me not to say anything to anybody that I’d seen him there and I could tell it was real important and I promised I wouldn’t mention it to a soul. And I never did, ’til right now.

“I saw him everyday in that garden for almost two weeks straight. We talked about a lotta things. And he started looking a lot better. And I would talk with the same four people who came to see him just like I did. Red, Bear, a priest named Father Hartman and this man who looked and acted just like he should’ve been in the Mafia, named Johnny Russo. And we all met there like that and just talked everyday, for hours. Then they moved momma to another hospital and I didn’t go by for about three days. When I went back

he was gone. Checked out about a week before Thanksgiving. And I never knew what was wrong, why he was there.

"I started hearing about him again sometime around the first of May in '63. He was back in the streets, in the joints, him and Bear. Red was in jail then. I guess he's been out a few years now. And I heard Lloyd Nelson had a gang that was robbing banks and I heard he was working with the Mafia and I don't know what was real but I didn't see him anywhere. Then it was a little over two years ago, near the end of '64 when Bear rode down on me on the east side late one night and he gave me a number to call and said Lloyd Nelson wanted me to call him. When I caught up with him all he said was that if I ever needed him for anything to call that number. And he gave me numbers on Red and Bear, in case I couldn't reach him."

Della's words had been rushing and she had to pause a moment and she took a sip of her scotch and then her water. She continued. "I called him once right after I left this man I had been with. The man was fuckin' up. He was wasting the money, chasing women, messing around with that dope and doing stupid shit and I wanted to be on my own and he couldn't handle it. He kept trying to beat me up, bogard me and take my money. So I called Lloyd Nelson about him. And believe me sugar I didn't want to 'cause I didn't know what he might do, but I was desperate. Well, I don't know what he did to that man or what he told him, but I never had any problems outta him again. Every time I saw that dude he was just as nice as he could be.

"I called him another time, to help me get outta jail. I felt bad 'cause I was s'posed to have a man for that, but I was trying to make it on my own and he understood what I was doing. I never really talked about him much or mentioned his name when I came down south but I told you I had a man behind me that was my friend, well that was and is Lloyd Nelson.

"He took me outta the streets. He bought me my first little get around car and a few nice outfits so I could work and I ain't looked back. I'll never forget what he did for me 'cause I needed that right then and it ain't nothing like getting something right when you really need it. It wasn't like he had to spend a lotta money on me or anything, I just needed a little help. But the best thing he did was take me outta those streets. And he never asked me for nothing." Della stopped now. She was thinking, remembering.

Then she spoke, softly, slowly. And she looked directly at Georgia. "I called him earlier today. I wanted to know for sure what he wanted me to do, with you. You know what he said?" She waited on an answer.

"No."

"He told me to tell you everything I could think of. He said, 'Della, tell her everything 'cause most of what you'll say she can hear from the streets, whether it's true or not. She deserves to know everything.'" She paused to sip her water and then continued.

"He's right up there. Right there at the top. From what I know he and Red and Bear own at least two car washes, a cleaners, a party store, a couple apartment building and I don't know how many house. I bought my house from him. For all I know he could be rich. But he's right there.

“There’s only a few left. And everybody in my world knows of ’em. Delicious, at the top of his thing, pimping. Marzette, big time cocaine. Dag controls the heroin. Pidgeon, the cons and stickups. Everybody can’t be up on the deal. A lotta square people don’t know what’s behind the pretty light-skinned nigga who preaches but in the underworld, we know. Prophet James? The number one numbers man.

“These are the ones that’s got the brand new rides three months before they even come out. These are the ones the people in the streets, in the game, talk about. These are the ones the women want and the men, that have any sense, wanna be like. And that means everybody’s after ’em in one way or another, including the law. They’re trying to hold on, all of ’em. But sugar, there ain’t but one Lloyd Nelson. We’ll see other dope dealers, pimps, numbers men but I really don’t believe we’ll see another one like that fine black man. They’ll go. The others are gonna go down eventually, in one way or another and some of ’em won’t live to get very old if they don’t get outta the game. But your man’ll be one of the last to go. And I believe he’ll go in his own time, in his own way. At least I hope so.”

Della paused now. She was thinking. She spoke. “He’s told me a whole lotta things. But there’re three things I’ll always remember and that’s ’cause he told me to remember ’em. He said, you gotta ask life and those in this life for what you want. All money ain’t for you. And get right with one thing and don’t ever step outside your game unless you stepping straight.”

Della shifted her position. She slid over towards Georgia and took her hands. She held them. She looked down at them. She rubbed them and squeezed them gently. She spoke as she looked directly at Georgia, into her eyes. “He called me and we had dinner, the two of us, back in January. That was right after you had asked about him, if I had talked to him. He asked me about you. What you were doing. What you were like. He told me he remembered seeing you here at school. And he told me he was gonna come see you and that he heard you was in them joints, alone.

“We was both worried. And he knew I would be talking to you but he asked me not to say anything. That’s if it got to a time when I should talk to you, about him, he’d tell me when that time had come. He told me he didn’t mean you no harm and that he’d look out for you. And I’d never heard anything about him hurting a woman and he had always been straight with me and I trusted him, so I didn’t say nothing.” Della looked down at the hands she still held and once again she squeezed them, this time a little tighter. “I’m scared that I messed you up.”

Now it was Georgia who took Della’s hands into her own and she patted them and rubbed them and squeezed them gently and she tried to smile away the concerned look in Della’s eyes. And Georgia leaned over, and they hugged tightly, briefly, and Georgia moved back and smiled again. “No cuz,” she said. “You didn’t mess me up. I wouldn’t change these past months for anything in the world. I’ve see things, felt things, learned things school could never teach me, about life, about myself. I don’t know what’s happened with us or what he and I really have together. I just have to figure out what I’m

gonna do from here and try to find out what he wants. I mean truly wants. In my soul I believe he wants me, needs me. I know it sounds strange but it's like he's afraid of me." She released Della's hands.

Georgia's voice lowered and she hesitated. "You know, he's never really touched me. I mean ... you know, we haven't done anything together." And there was a positive surety in her next statement. "I want him Della, real bad. I'm waiting on him, saving myself for him because I want him to be the first and only one."

Della frowned at her. "I think I'm gonna take a drink on that." She reached for her bottle and they both laughed quietly. Della spoke as she coughed from the liquor. "I told you he was different."

Georgia continued. "I don't know what to think about all those things you've told me. I mean, you've told me so much but it's not like I really understand him any better because I haven't seen those things, that violence. I've seen him get those looks in his eyes, kind of like he's angry, but, I'm confused. I can only go by the way he's treated me."

"That's all you can ever go by."

"But even if I was able to know what was real and could throw away all the lies, the rumors, I still have no idea who he really is."

"What makes you think you can ever know that? Sugar, you still gonna have to decide who you really are. Are you the type of woman who can go visit her man once a week or once a month in jail for years? Maybe you'll just have to put flowers on his grave every Sunday while you're still a young woman. I'm sure these past months he's tried to keep you safe and on the edge of this thing we're in. But are you willing to go to jail?"

"Or die," Georgia said, evenly.

She and Della stared at each other. But neither said a word. They were silent for several long moments. Looking away. Thinking.

Finally Della spoke. "Well I guess that's all. I've got nothing else to tell you."

"There's still so much I don't know."

"Everything else you'll have to find out from him."

"Some things he just won't talk about."

"He will now."

"What makes you say that?"

"Cause that's what he told me earlier today. He said after I talked to you, anything else you wanted to know he would tell you. All you'd have to do was ask."

Georgia considered that. Questions rushed through her head. She smiled at that thought, what it would be like to know him. Then she frowned as she suddenly wondered how it would feel to know everything, to hear his truths.

"I've got a question for you," she said to Della.

"What?"

"What were the numbers today?"

"Two seven zero didn't fall."

Georgia got up and went to her dresser. She opened a drawer and pulled

out forty dollars. "Here," she said, handing the bills to Della. "Put five dollars on them for me until that's gone. I'll give you some more if I have to. Play them straight."

Della laughed. "Girl, you don't know nothing 'bout numbers. You better box 'em. That's how I'm playing 'em."

"Not me. I'm playing them straight. They're coming out just like he said they would. Play them straight, both races, only the Detroit house."

Della looked at her cousin with feigned shock and burst out laughing. "Your man has been in your ear." She took the money and put it in her purse. Then she finished her drink. And as she put on her shoes she spoke. "Listen sugar, I'm calling tomorrow to have my phone number changed." Now she stood and gathered her things. "I do that every now and then to get rid of the nobodies, so I'll call and give you that new number."

They looked at each other and both smiled and then they hugged, said their goodbyes and Della left. Georgia stood there after closing and locking the door and then she moved to stand in the middle of the room, feeling, momentarily fragmented and she was slightly hesitant and yet mildly excited to pick up the phone and call Lloyd Nelson.

Bear was in the kitchen getting ice for his drink when the phone rang. Red stood at the window looking out and Lloyd Nelson was in the room he had turned into a den, deciding which weapon he would take with him besides the .32 semi-automatic that was always strapped to his left leg and the knife that would always be in his pocket.

The phone rang once again in the living room and it rang synchronously with the extension phone that sat on the desk near where he stood at that moment. He picked it up.

"Hello."

"It seems strange dialing a number and hearing your voice on the other end. This is Georgia."

"How you doing? You alright?" He couldn't help but smile at her voice. It had always moved him in its soft heaviness and the obvious southern accent was beautiful, as always, to hear. And part of this smile was due to the unique sense of nervousness he realized tried to rise for just an instant.

"Baby, I don't know how I am," came the reply.

"I regret the problems I've caused you. I assume you've talked to you cousin?"

"Yes. I have."

"And after all that you still wanna talk to me?"

"Yes."

"Seems like that should've been enough for you."

"But it wasn't and now I need to see you. And you need to help me."

"That's saying I have some kind of influence, some kind of power that can assist you in your own personal decisions and your own personal life."

"You do."

"No I don't. Only you posses that influence and power."

They were silent now, as if they both were attempting to gather their thoughts and then he spoke quietly, slowly, precisely. "Listen, this power, this thing you attribute to me only exists within your own mind. Don't ever give up doing all you can to control your own life, to seek your own destiny. If I tried to exert some control you'd want to assert yourself, express your desire to be free, which I know to be so much of your essence. You would rebel. Turn against me. Leave me."

"Isn't that what you want? For me to leave you alone?"

The black phone felt as an iron rod in his hand, heavy and warm. But it was that word that disturbed him. Alone. How ironic to use that word that was of such significance in his life. Alone.

"I try to want what I can have," he answered after a pause. "Right now I just want you to see if what you say you need from me, to be with me, is really possible. I believe if you see the course you'll make the right decision about what to do, which way to go."

There was silence now. Not even breathing could be heard. Then, Georgia spoke. "Let me tell you something." And there was a soft sensuous element within the sound, and yet there was a strong determination behind the words that came across the line to blow against his ear and enter his soul through his pounding, aching heart. "I'm in love you. You're my first real love and what I want, is you. And I've heard the things you've said and I've thought about what you mean about falling for somebody, seeing them that first time and all. But I love you now for more than what I can see and to me that's what matters 'cause that's the reality. That's the truth. And that can't be changed."

She could not see him shake his head slowly, no, as he spoke. "So very much seems altered. Yet, no one moves. The truth is never stagnant or whole. Love changes and still it remains the same and yet repeats itself over and over again."

"It grows too," she replied. "And that's a change. You're making it seem life our choices, your choice, my choice is just so limited. That you can only do the things you're doing, live the life you're living forever, and that I've got to choose between school and you, between one way of life and your way of life. It's not as simple as picking between one thing and another, and I know you know that. Yes, I can change! Yes, you can change! And our options will be different. Together, much, much more becomes possible."

"There's still so much you don't know about me." And there was an unusual sense of resignation behind this statement.

"That was your decision," Georgia said softly. "I've been ready," and her voice choked. "I've always tried to let you have your way. I've wanted to give you anything you needed from me. Even if what you needed was distance from me, to keep pieces of yourself away from me. And I don't care what you say. I can't believe you'd ask me to do something that could hurt me or do anything to hurt me on purpose but what's causing me pain right now is you trying to break up with me and not telling me why. That's not right. That's not ..."

He cut her off. "I'm asking you again. Even after talking with Della you still wanna see me?"

"Baby, Della told me something once and I'm saying the same thing to you. Just be straight with me. Regardless of what she's said to me tonight I need to see you. And there's something else I need to know and I want you to tell me what that is. I'm asking for what I want from you. Can I have that? Please."

"Write this down," he said. He gave her his address. "Use all of tomorrow to think about those things you've just heard and those things we've just talked about. Think about your future, your life. If after tomorrow you still wanna see me then take a cab over here. Be here at ten o'clock Thursday night. If you don't come that's alright. It'll be for the best. I'll know what's happening and I'll understand." He paused a moment. "I have to go now."

"Hey!" Her voice was low, even, seductive. "Believe this. I love you. And believe I'll be there Thursday night."

"Yeah. Bye Georgia," he said.

She nearly whispered. "Bye."

He held the receiver until he heard a click and then a tone. He wanted to hear this clear indication that they were disconnected. He wanted to be cut off from this distraction, this woman, her voice, her eyes, her lips, her dimpled smile. He needed to be able to banish from his thoughts the vision that dominated his mind at this moment. A vision of her beautiful dark body was suspended before his eyes.

He returned the black phone to its cradle and stared at it and blinked. He blinked again, in vain. Now he closed his eyes and lifted his hand just barely from the phone. And as he stood like that the phone lost its warmth, the echoes of her voice departed from his mind and she was gone. He opened his eyes and turned to the wall of protective, murderous weapons and again he began to choose.

He took a holstered long-barreled .38 caliber revolver from the wall. From the desk against the wall he opened a drawer and found the proper shells he needed and taking a box he pushed the drawer closed with his leg and moved to the living room and the music and voices that rose from there.

Bear was in the middle of the room slow dancing. His big body moved clumsily and his left hand held in the air contained a drink instead of the hand of a woman. And Red was telling him how he never could dance.

They both had taken off their suit coats and Bear still wore his white straw hat. Red wore an opened neck white shirt with his tan suit. Bear had on a light-grey shirt that matched his light-grey suit and both of them had the sub-nosed, nickel-plated .38's Lloyd Nelson had given them, holstered beneath their left arms.

As Lloyd Nelson strode into the room, Bear moved to turn the music down a little. Red sat on the couch, Bear joined him. They were facing this man who sat in a large chair across from them, preparing to load his gun.

Lloyd Nelson addressed Red. "Did you get in contact with those people we might need?"

Red answered. "I got in touch with one. The other two are from my Jacktown days. They move around a lot but I should be able to get to 'em by tomorrow afternoon." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a yellow slip of paper. "Here's those phone numbers and information you wanted me to get."

Lloyd Nelson spun the chamber on his gun. He addressed Bear. "What about that transportation?"

"I got the two cars we'll need. Can't be traced to me. We're riding in one of 'em tonight, the Chevy. The '57 Ford I got parked. I can't get the truck and have the numbers fixed till Thursday morning." He stood and pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket. "Here's the numbers and stuff." He sat back down. He sipped his drink.

Lloyd Nelson was loading his gun. "Don't worry about the truck. If we need it, Thursday morning will be soon enough." He placed the loaded gun down and set aside the bullets that he would carry in his pocket. He moved towards the bar. "Cinque's supposed to want those guns. I told him not to call unless he was ready to purchase them. But you know how he is." He put some ice in a glass and as he went into the kitchen for juice Bear called out to him.

"I don't like that bushy head nigga."

"Who do you like?" Red asked him. And now he rose to go to the bar. He felt a need to drink some gin. The dark man with the long pistol had a look that made him anxious and excited.

"I don't know who I like." Bear's raspy voice almost growled now. "I just know who I don't like. And I don't like no man that's got that much hair on his head. He might be hiding something up there. Or something might be growing in it."

They were all sitting again. Quiet surrounded them except for the low music. They sipped their drinks. Lloyd Nelson spoke. "I don't trust Cinque myself but he's not a fool. We shouldn't have any problems out of him tonight because we're not bringing anything. But I hear he's changing fast. Getting crazy."

Bear spoke. "Where them white folks come from that's running around with him?"

Red spoke. "They're the ones who helped him rob that bank in Dearborn a little while back. From what I understand he shouldn't have any problem coming up with the money for them guns. That's not the only bank they stuck up. And I bet it's them white folks who's making them bombs they used on those police cars."

Lloyd Nelson spoke, to answer Bear's question. "They're coming from the same place those white folks come from who go down south and march. They come from the land of guilt. Trying to find a way to be blessed and redeem themselves and make right their past injustice to black folks." He spoke to Red. "Cinque may have the money. The thing is whether he's gonna get up off of it or not."

"The thing is," Bear said, "whether them nuts are making bombs where

we're going. I don't wanna be around no bombs. They go boom and fuck up all kinds of shit."

Lloyd Nelson was writing in a small pad now. He copied the information he had, and all the numbers and addresses and names he had been given, onto three separate pieces of paper. He lettered them. He spoke when he was done.

"Here." He passed a piece of paper to each of them. "Cinque's numbers and addresses, places we'll be and phone booth numbers we'll be using. Everything's lettered just like we've always done. Both of you make another copy and be sure to keep one on you from now until everything's over."

He picked up his gun and holstered it. He stood and put the extra bullets in his left pocket. The big men downed their drinks. Lloyd Nelson took another drink of his grapefruit juice and took all the glasses into the kitchen and placed them in the sink. He went into his bedroom and when he returned he wore a wine colored straw hat with a white band. And the deep wine color of the hat matched the suit coat he now wore. In fact, except for the white band, he was dressed completely in this color so dark one had to look closely to see the purplish-red hues. And if one knew where to look they would have seen the color black. There was blackness in the leather holster and long black pistol that rested under his left arm.

Lloyd Nelson stood in the middle of the room and broke the brim down along the front of his hat. "Let's go," he said.

The two big men put on their suit coats, covered their guns and looked at each other. Red chuckled and shook his head, no, to the madness. Bear chuckled and his senses were heightened and he grew excited. Lloyd Nelson looked at them and smiled, his smile. He turned to the wall and checked the angle of his hat, the settling of his coat. And as he looked in the full-length mirror he could see Red and Bear move up behind him and he could see them and he felt them there. They felt the presence of one another, the strength.

They moved to the door, into the hallway, onto the elevator and they rode in silence to the garage. And as they walked along the cemented floor, their steps sounded, echoed, and they focused on the sound. It was for this they searched. Focus. Distraction. They didn't really need the money for which they dealt. But they needed the deal and the excitement that went with it. They required the danger their actions brought and they desired the possibility of death, in order to truly live. And they wanted this diversion to momentarily turn them and briefly take them away from the fever that inexorably approached.

As Lloyd Nelson bent his head to enter the back of the '63 Chevrolet Super Sport in which he would travel, Prophet James bent his head to snort some of the cocaine that had been dumped out in the hundred dollar bill he held in his bejeweled left hand.

He traveled as usual in his white limousine. And as he sat in the darkened back, he used the long manicured nail on the pinky finger of his right hand

to sample the drug. And he used his bejeweled right hand to pull and wipe at his nose. He let his head fall back and as he made sniffing sounds and as the cocaine began to run through his mind, through his body and settle into his loins, the speech to which he listened began to sound clear and good. And the meaning behind the words, the potential within these utterances drew him as the cocaine and felt as a drug and a feeling of richness settled inside, Prophet.

Marzette was in his ear, his left ear. To Prophet it seemed as if his own head was heavy because it kept leaning that way, towards the voice. He turned and looked only with his left eye. His right eye was closed and teary from the strength of the drug and so he blinked at the owner of the voice. He could see the gleaming teeth, the large gleaming baldhead and the slightly pop eyes. And the dope man's beautiful jewels flashed as he waved his hands to refuse the hundred-dollar bill Prophet attempted to hand him.

"Naw, go on. Hit it again," the voice said, loud, over the music that came from the radio speakers behind them. Prophet did, once, and now the voice continued. "I got the best shit in the city, straight from the white boys. I keep trying to tell you. You need to get in with me on this thing here. Quit fuckin' around with this ounce at a time shit. I'm bringing this to you 'cause you my man. Otherwise I don't carrying nothing large. What I keep on me is my personal, what I'm gonna use. And when I buy I don't buy nothing under eight keys at a time. My people can move almost half that in a couple weeks, in little pieces."

Marzette held his left hand out for the drug and Prophet handed it to him and watched as the dope man reached in his shirt pocket for a card that would allow him to snort the drug. Finding his card, Marzette hit it, twice. "Stock up Prophet!" He nearly yelled and he had to lower his voice. "Stock up! I'll show you how to keep it good and you'll be set for the rest of the year. You go in with me and I'll give you enough to last through Christmas, and New Year's Eve. Your dope won't cost you nothing 'cause you get your money back."

"If I put any money up I want dope and that thing that sounds just like my name."

"Now you thinking right. That's what it's all about anyway. Money! And that's cool. You can make a profit. If you put up enough I'll set your dope out, and you can double your money." Now he almost whispered. "In three days you'll have your money back and three months later, double your investment."

"Three days I get my money back and three months to double it? Nigga you like them threes don't you?"

"I guarantee the deal."

"For the last two months every time I get around you, you been talking this same shit. You got money. What do you want me in for?"

"I need someone to take the financial pressure off me. I got overhead just like you. Plus, you ain't into selling dope, that ain't your game so I ain't got to worry about you stepping into my game. But here's the thing Prophet, we

can partner up on this and with this deal I can show you just how it works. Listen here. The white boys been pressing me for a good little while now. They been coming down even harder lately. They wanna put a hundred keys on me on consignment. See, that way they can get in my business. I'll be under their feet, working for them. Always have 'em fuckin' with me about their money, asking me how I'm doing, telling me I'm not moving fast enough. I been through that. Moving too fast causes mistakes. People get careless. I ain't going back to jail. Right now I've got my own thing. I'm my own boss and I can stay like that as long as I buy my product straight out. You go in with me and I buy the product, the whole thing at once. I get a good price and stay independent."

Prophet took the dope and the card that was being offered. He snorted the drug, twice. He looked out of the window at the darkness. The lights of the city flashed by. Their reflections seemed dulled and yet were bright and appeared to blink and were stretched by the movement of the big Cadillac limousine.

"Just get your dope from somebody else," Prophet finally said, using his statements and impending questions to reveal the validity of the proposition.

"These white boys I'm dealing with got the best. I can put a nice whack on it. Cut it one, one and a half times and when I flip it, it's still real good. The people that get it from me can still whack it and even then it's still better than anything else out there. I'm making the money I'm making 'cause the dope is so good. 'Sides, these boys got protection. They got the stuff stacked in warehouses. They ain't gonna never run out. With them I only got to deal with a few people. If I don't get it from them I got to run around and chase dope down, go outta town and shit. Niggas keep running out. Plus, by the time I get it, it ain't no good. I can't do nothing with it. Nobody can keep me supplied. And when it comes down to it, the prices I'm getting are the best."

"You said it takes you time to move eight keys. What's a key?"

"That's a kilo. A little over two pounds two ounces. The whole thing comes to a little over two hundred and twenty pounds. We do this, we get even more."

"Nigga you don't sell that much dope How you gonna get my money back in three days?"

"Cause after I get it I'm gonna wholesale a hundred and fifty pounds to some people outta Chicago and New York. Everything's set up. I just need to buy the dope. The white boys don't wanna sell it to me 'cause if they front it they can charge more. But it's all about business so they can't turn down the money. They trying to say it's too much hassle to keep selling me my little eight at a time so when I start talking 'bout buying more they throw out fronting me this two hundred pounds and I come back at 'em with buying it all. They damn near choked. They figure this nigga can't come up with that kinda paper."

"Why don't you let the Chicago and New York people put in? Get some of these local niggas to go in with you. You may be the biggest dope man in the city but you ain't the only one."

Marzette shook his head. He reached for the dope. He was trying not to get upset or appear impatient. "I'm a businessman. I got competition just like you. I can't be supplying the local competition on no wholesale level. My money comes on the retail end. You know how that is. Every now and then I got to get rid of one of these local motherfuckers just to keep my respectful position and maintain my upper hand. It took me years to get where I'm at."

He snorted the drug, twice. He talked as he pulled at his nose and sniffed. The dope draining into his throat was making him hoarse. "The Chicago and the New York people ain't no threat. I can wholesale it to 'em and not have to worry 'bout it interfering with my thing. But if I have to get their money up front they'll know I need 'em. Then I got to not only wholesale it to 'em but I'll have to give it to 'em like I get it. Uncut. They ain't gonna let me walk with that kinda money without them being with me. I won't have the time I need to unpack, cut, and repackage the shit. With that much product it'll take me and my people almost two days to get it right so I can flip it. In order for me to get it done I need for 'em to deal with me just like they always been dealing. They come to me and buy what they want and leave.

"I get the big weight, put a half on a hundred of it, leave it real good, charge more. They take their hundred and fifty and do whatever the fuck they wanna do with it. Me, I got what's left to stretch out damn near a year if I want to. I make my money off the street and outta my dope houses. I don't wanna wholesale but so much anyway."

Prophet took the drug and snorted some, once. "Is that what you been doing, cutting up this shit I been buying from you?"

"Prophet if I gave it to you like I get it, you'd blow your fuckin' nose off, or bust your heart."

"If I go in, mine's straight. Uncut." He passed the dope back.

Marzette laughed, loudly. "See how it is, a nigga gets in up front and he starts demanding shit." He snorted the dope, four times. "Sure," he said, when he could finally talk. "I'll give you some Benita or Dextrose. Show you how to put a little something on it so you don't kill yourself."

Prophet's left leg was bouncing, twitching slightly now and the fingers on his right hand tapped on his right leg. For just a moment he felt like he was going to open the door, jump out, and start running. Then he took a deep breath and attempted to calm himself as his heart kept on racing.

"What kinda money you talking about?" Prophet asked.

"Six hundred and eighty apiece," came the answer, quickly. "Right down the middle. Fifty fifty."

Prophet never flinched, at least not visibly. He ran the figures through his head. He turned to Marzette as the man leaned his baldhead over the dope, to hit it again.

Marzette could feel the eyes boring into him. He paused and then snorted the dope, once. And when he was done he looked at Prophet, returning his steady gaze.

They stared at each other like that. The only sound came from the radio.

Prophet spoke softly. "I'm not tying up six hundred and eighty thousand dollars for no three days."

Marzette came back at him, reminding him, as he passed Prophet the dope. "You doubling your money."

"Yeah, in three months. You the one like them threes, not me. Come up with something better."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But one thing you gonna have to do is get that three days down to two. Then we can talk about that three on the months. I'm looking at that first six eighty. You and I both know you can't cover mine if anything goes wrong. And killing you wouldn't get my money back."

Marzette looked out of the window. He could see they were one block from his car. He turned to Prophet. "Let me think about it. See what I can come up with."

"You do that."

"With the right proposition, you in?"

"You come right. I'm in. And that means I'll have my own people along to look out for my interests. Remember, I'm the numbers man not the dope man."

The big limousine came to a slow halt next to Marzette's automobile. He moved over on the seat and opened his door. "I'll call you by Thursday," he said. Prophet didn't speak. He just nodded. Marzette stepped out and pushed the door shut and watched as the big white Cadillac pulled off. He eased behind the wheel of his own black Fleetwood Cadillac and before he started his engine he turned on the overhead light and looked in the mirror to check for white powder anywhere on his brown face. He took a handkerchief from the seat beside him and wiped his nose, blew it and then switched the light off. And as he turned his key and prepared to pull away he shook his head and chuckled when he realized Prophet had left with his hundred-dollar bill.

Prophet James reached to the knob on the door beside him and turned his radio up. He let his window down halfway and took a deep breath. He spoke, loudly. "Go on downtown so I can pick that woman up," he told his driver. He sat in agitation and stared out as they sped along I-94. He thought about this thing he had been considering for several weeks. He didn't want to appear too anxious. He didn't want Marzette to know how badly he wanted that deal.

He looked down at the cocaine and smiled at the sparkling whiteness of it and he noticed how remarkable it appeared as it lay there within the green money. And he thought how well they went together. Then his thoughts turned to the woman who awaited him. He shifted the drug in his hands. He looked at his gold watch. It was almost eleven o'clock.

There were places to be early, people to meet on time and occasions to arrive late. The three men sat quietly, patiently, in the '63 Chevy and looked down the darkened street at the house two of them would soon enter. The

house was in dim shadows as it sat between the yellowish-white streetlights. They could barely see it but this point allowed them to watch any movement at the house and up and down the street. They looked for anything unusual. For over forty-five minutes they had sat there. They had arrived at twenty minutes before eleven and now it was twenty-five after and time to go in.

They synchronized the time on their watches. Red got out and from the trunk he took two custom-made, fully loaded, semi-automatic, sawed-off shotguns. Getting back in, he put one on the front seat beside him and handed another to the back seat where it was placed on the floor.

Lloyd Nelson spoke. "Give us five minutes to get all the way in and if we're not out forty-five minutes later come in and get us." Red nodded and his jaw tightened.

Bear spoke. "If anybody's with us and my hat's off, there's something wrong." Red nodded again. Bear was clear-eyed and smiling slightly. It was times such as these that he sought. And he was proud to know that always in the past in situations such as this, he went with Lloyd Nelson. They went together. He pulled his gun out and checked it, put it back in its holster and opened the door. He turned his big frame out and when he stood he put on the white straw hat he couldn't wear in the car because of his size. He pulled the seat back and Lloyd Nelson spoke as he began to step out.

"Time starts now," he said. It was eleven thirty. The two men moved off down the street.

Red watched them until they turned up the walkway leading to the house and when they mounted the stairs he lost sight of them. He was excited and anxious and then he smiled to himself. He liked to feel the way he was feeling right then.

As a car turned behind him and began to move down the street he watched the lights in his sideview mirror as their illumination moved brightly towards him. He strained to hear above the sounds of the approaching, then passing automobile, to hear anything from the house down the street.

The house was a large two-family flat and Cinque had rented both the upstairs and down. The two men knew that they would be going to the downstairs flat. They had their people check out the place several times two weeks earlier when Cinque had first inquired about the weapons. Then the three of them had checked the place out one night themselves.

The house served as one of the meeting places for Cinque and his group of militants but this house was only used by the very top echelon of the group and was therefore relatively quiet and did not usually have much traffic. Lloyd Nelson's main concern at this point was not Cinque but anybody, including the police that might be watching him or after him. Very few people knew at this time that Cinque had graduated into violent activities. From all indications and after asking numerous sources of information, they had been able to ascertain that this house should be safe for the purpose of this short meeting.

Bear had gone up the stairs first and it was he who knocked on the door. They waited for several moments and then they could hear a voice call out

that they were coming. It was a woman's voice and Lloyd Nelson could see the woman pull a curtain back just a little on the window near the porch and peep out. Then he heard the voices of children and he relaxed just a little, believing there wouldn't be any incident, at least from those inside, that would jeopardize the women and children.

The voice called out. "Who is it?"

Bear responded with the signal. "Herbert."

As the locks on the door were unfastened Lloyd Nelson could see Bear stiffen. "Take it easy," he said in a near whisper to him. "Take it easy."

Bear squeezed his hands together and then wiped them on his coat sleeves. His tension eased.

A woman opened the door and moved back and Bear pulled the screen door open and when he stepped in, the woman looked up at him and she was so short she almost had to step backwards as her eyes rose to his white straw hat.

Bear stopped after he entered and looked around and holding the screen door open he nodded to Lloyd Nelson, who moved into the small foyer. The brown-skinned, middle-aged woman was smiling and as she began to lock the door again she was talking. "Come on in, come on in. Everything's fine. Can I get you anything, something cold to drink?"

"No thanks," Bear replied.

She was looking at Lloyd Nelson, waiting for him to speak. He was silent. And the way he looked at her made her nervous. She seemed to forget what she wanted to say. "Um ... oh yeah, Cinque's in the basement. It's cooler down there. You know, we have to keep the doors closed and locked. It's so bad in this neighborhood we can't even sit on the porch at night in the summer anymore."

Two little children, a boy and a girl, came around the corner in their pajamas. They looked first at the dark man and their mouths opened wide at the huge albino man and they shrieked and giggled and turned and ran.

"Just right this way," the short woman said. And she led them through the dining room, through the kitchen and down a flight of stairs to the basement. Bear went first.

It was significantly cooler in the basement. And it was somewhat dim, and quiet. There were six people down there, four men and two women, including a white man and white woman. All but one rather thick, black man of medium height, were sitting around a large table and they all looked intently as first the woman and then Bear descended the stairs and continued to stare as Lloyd Nelson followed.

The two men who came down the stairs immediately sized up the awaiting group and looked for exits and checked the windows. Ordinarily they wouldn't have gone into a basement but they had observed the occupants upstairs and they sensed no imminent threat.

Cinque nodded to the short woman, she went back up the stairs and he rose to greet the two men. The light-skinned man with several freckles on his cheeks, was tall, almost as tall as Bear but rather slim. He was dressed, as

were all those in his group, in blue jeans and T-shirts except he wore a black beret that was pulled on his head in such a way that his large natural hairstyle stuck out on all sides.

He was smiling broadly as he spoke. "Alright, what's going on? How y'all doing?" He reached out his hand to Bear as he moved towards them. Bear stared at him and he lowered his hand and changed his mind about extending it to the dark man who he had always known as Lloyd Nelson. He spoke directly to him.

"My man, what's happening?" he said loudly. "I knew you'd show. My people here was starting to doubt you, doubt me. But I told 'em you was a man of your word."

He seemed nervous and Lloyd Nelson didn't like the number of people who were present. In particular he didn't want the white people there, the tall, heavysset, long-blond-haired white man, staring, the thin, short-auburn-haired young white woman, smiling. He had no information on them.

Cinque motioned with his left hand. "Come on over and have a seat. Meet my people."

"I'm not here to socialize or meet people," Lloyd Nelson said, evenly. "I'm Herbert," and he pointed to Bear, "and that's Herbert." Yet he knew they were aware of their names. He watched Cinque stand there, frowning.

Bear strode across the room and took an empty chair from the table. He set it down separated from the table, from the people, near a small end table and ashtray not far from the steps. Lloyd Nelson sat down in the chair, slowly, deliberately, and Bear moved back near the wall, near the steps. They both stared, unspeaking, at the tall man who stood in the middle of the floor. There was a palpable silence in the basement. And Lloyd Nelson was not to be the one to initiate the conversation.

Cinque spoke in a rush. "You told me to call. You the one ... "

Lloyd Nelson cut him off. "I came here to talk to you. Nobody else." His voice was low and cold and it bothered Cinque in its tone and he turned, hunched his shoulders. He looked back at the chair, at the stairs. He stepped one way and then the other and dipped a little. He turned and pulled at his beret and looked at his people. He gathered himself. Turned back now. Determined to uphold his position as decision-maker and leader of his group. And as he moved like that in the floor, in confusion, Lloyd Nelson recalled when he had seen this man, this revolutionary, move like this before.

It was three years ago on the corner of McGraw and Warren Avenue that he had seen this man who now called himself Cinque. This tall slim man with the head full of hair had sold a young man a bad bag of heroin and the young man had put a gun to his bushy head and Cinque had ducked and danced just as he did now. But his name was not Cinque then. Lloyd Nelson wanted to see more.

"But that's alright," he said now, dismissing the impropriety with a quick raise of his bare, unadorned, right hand. He lowered his hand, place it on his right leg as he crossed it and leaned back in his little folding chair. "Go ahead, what were you saying?"

He smiled slightly. And when he looked at the people around the table who sat in the weak glow of the light that hung above their heads, several shifted their positions. He stared at the white woman until the smile on her face dissolved and her eyes lowered as she reached for the can of beer that was before her and as he was staring at these people, Cinque was talking.

"We want those guns you said you could get. Can you still get 'em?"

"Sure."

"How long would it take?"

"That depends."

"On what man?" He sounded annoyed.

Lloyd Nelson looked directly at Cinque. He himself sat in the reflection of the light that beamed from the top of the stairs they had just descended and a standing, shaded light that stood behind him in the corner. He wore only a black-banded watch on his left wrist and so nothing flashed as he used it to remove his hat.

From where they sat at the table, he was in semi-darkness and his voice seemed to come from that darkness. They felt as if they were forced to lean to him to hear him speak, as if his words pulled them forward.

"On when you decide to order," came the soft reply, as if from the question came the axiomatic answer.

Cinque seemed to find in the answer, deference to him and his group. He left the center of the room to move back around the table to his seat. He faced the steps, surrounded by his cohorts. Both women were to his right. Two men were to his left and the one stood behind him with his arms folded, glaring from Lloyd Nelson to Bear, and back to the dark man who seemed to lounge in his seat as his right foot moved, barely, up and down.

There was cigarette smoke in the air. The smoke was bluish-white and it rose from several ashtrays and the fingers of one man and it hovered in the air and seemed to be drawn slowly upwards to surround the light bulb until it moved on to the ceiling and then floated out of an open, screened, barred window at the back wall.

There were beer cans and several glasses of liquid on the table. And Lloyd Nelson knew there were guns somewhere at that table. For a moment it seemed he was preparing to play cards and the name of the game was poker, five-card stud.

"Let's talk price," Cinque said.

"Two hundred fifty M-1 rifles, brand new, at one hundred eighty dollars apiece," came the quiet voice.

The black woman wrote the figures down. The white woman turned to look as she wrote. She wrote the total price. When she was done she slid the pad over to Cinque so he could see what she had written.

Cinque leaned back in his chair. "I can only go one twenty-five apiece."

Lloyd Nelson appeared to be deep in thought. "We're talking good street weapons here, short, easy to conceal, accurate. Lots of people want these guns." He paused. "I'll tell you what, I'll come down to a hundred sixty, but that's the best I can do. Otherwise it's not worth my trouble."

“Come on man!” Cinque said, a slight angry whine creeping into his voice. “Why you wanna be like that?” He looked at the new figures the woman wrote. “The best I can do in one forty apiece. I need these guns man, to help my people, to help you. I’m getting my army together. I got ex ’Nam vets waiting for those rifles. I know you know I got to have ’em but that don’t mean you got to squeeze me. Do something for the cause my man, the new Black cause!”

Lloyd Nelson smiled slightly. He shook his head, no. He looked at the time. It was almost eleven forty-three. “First of all, I don’t need your help. Next, I’m not coming down from one sixty, Willie,” And he emphasized the name.

“It’s Cinque now man! You know that!” He sat up. Moved forward.

Lloyd Nelson seemed to ignore him. He ran his hand along the brim of his hat as he looked down at it. He quickly touched his face, his cheek. He ran his right thumb along his scar. He stared at Cinque. Then he spoke. “I’ll throw in twenty-five thousand rounds of ammunition for another six grand if you promise me one thing.”

Everybody in the group was immediately interested at this surprising prospect of acquiring that much ammunition. It meant they wouldn’t have to purchase any, or if needed, very little through other channels. They could better keep their presence, their size and their strength hidden. But Cinque was perplexed at the request of a promise.

Cinque spoke, with hesitation. “Twenty-five thousand rounds for six grand huh? Whatcha talking ’bout, promise?”

Lloyd Nelson fanned himself with his hat, three times. “Promise me you won’t talk that revolutionary talk to me. It always gives me a headache.”

The mood of those in the group altered. They all felt themselves to be motivated by a serious intent, a worthy endeavor. And here this man made light of their purpose. It was a direct affront to that for which they stood. Yet, their acquiring of arms and ammunition was of paramount importance.

The white woman spoke. She was angry, insulted. “Obviously Mr. Herbert, you don’t believe in lifting the oppressive establishment off your neck and those of your people. We’re fighting for the masses and you sit here and gouge us for your own personal gain, a typical capitalist attitude. Just how much profit are you making off of us, Mr. Herbert?”

Lloyd Nelson moved his gaze to her. He held her and where before she withered under its intensity, her emotion now allowed her to stare back, defiantly.

He spoke to her. “Miss, I think it’s rude of you to try and count my money. I tried to refrain from counting the amount of your withdrawal you and your partners made from Dearborn a while back.”

They were stunned now. They felt exposed and threatened. The man behind Cinque dropped his folded arms, shifted his weight.

“Tell your boy behind you to relax Willie.”

“I told you brother my name’s ... ”

Lloyd Nelson cut him off, again. “Let’s get one thing straight before we

go any further. I am not, your brother.” And the voice was low yet sharp and challenging. He moved his gaze back to the white woman. “But you’re right Miss, I don’t believe in your cause. Most certainly I don’t believe in the success of your movement, especially through violence.”

Cinque spoke. His voice was raised. “Her cause is the same as mine! The same people who exploit the poor whites, the Indians, are the same ones who dealt in slavery and help keep down right now my brothers and sisters in Africa! They’re the same ones who put us in their jails and keep us all locked up in ghettos! Keep us poor, living in poverty, dying early! They’ve stolen everything from us while my ancestors broke their backs building this motherfuckin’ country! They’ve abused us, stolen our history! They’ve hung us for no other reason than the color of our skin!

“Right now in the South my people are struggling to vote, putting their lives on the line! My brothers and sisters in Newark, even as we speak, are trying to count their dead and fight on as warriors in the streets! Harlem in ’64, Watts in ’65, and it’ll be here soon, believe you me! We’re not gonna stand for this shit anymore! While I’m in ’Nam trying to save my ass you’re here brutalizing your own people, getting over! I come back here and I can’t even get a fuckin’ job! I know you! You got a lotta got damn nerve talking ’bout violence ain’t the way! In the history of the world the real changes have come through violent revolution! It’s the only way!” Cinque pounded the table. “People are tired of living like slaves over a hundred years after slavery was s’pposed to be over!” The people at the table nodded and mumbled in agreement. The white woman smiled again.

“You’ve grown eloquent in the delivery of your rhetoric,” Lloyd Nelson began. “And obviously you believe in your own words. But I know you too. I knew you when you were dope selling Willie Cotton, pushing heroin and half B’s and matchboxes of weed on Warren Avenue.”

Cinque’s eyes flashed. “I’ve changed,” he said, his voice low.

“Yes, I’m sure. Just like you believe your words, you believe you’ve changed. Perhaps you have. If nothing else your methods have changed. But the end will always be the same. You’ll die.” And he said this matter-of-factly. He looked at the white woman. “And so will you.

“I admire your food distribution and your breakfast programs and after-school care for the kids. Who knows how much it will help but at least it does have a sense of integrity to it. But you can’t beat the man, not in a war. And you know that. You’re all just trying to find some noble way to kill yourselves, to bring some meaning to your lives through your deaths. And I admire that too. And in that I’m quite willing to help you, for a price.”

He settled back now, the dark man did, and his voice came as if from the shadow of the wall behind him soft, even and clear. “What I don’t admire is your ignorance and your attempts to deny reality. From the beginning of humans’ time there’s been slaves. Even before humans stood up straight the strongest ruled. Forever on earth the strongest will oppress and dominate the weak.

“From the results of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C., came slaves and

oppression. When the Spartans defeated Athens, from the times of Philip and Alexander the Great, when Rome annexed Egypt, after the death of Cleopatra and after the Roman Empire fell, there were slaves.” He paused to look at the white woman, then the white man. He returned his gaze to the white woman. “You’re Jewish aren’t you?”

“Yes! She answered quickly, in agitation.

“Then surely you’re aware that when the Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., and when Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and when the Babylonian Kingdom fell to Cyrus in 537 B.C., there was oppression and domination.

“When the Christians persecuted Jews during the pogroms of the Crusades they weren’t using bibles and prayers as weapons. And those who were defeated and who were allowed to live, were held down. In the seventh century A.D. Syria, Egypt, and North Africa were conquered. Spain fell in the eighth. The Moors of Spain had slaves.

“In the medieval period from the years 400 A.D. to 1400 A.D., which included both the dark ages and the middle ages, came the extinction of the Western Empire and then those they called barbarians rose to dominate and enslave. The Byzantine and Lombard Wars destroyed Italy. The Arabs dominated the Eastern Empire. They ruled Africa and Spain, moved on France and ran through Rome once. The Danes and Normans marched into Sicily and England and destroyed all they could.” He looked at the white man. “You probably go all the way back to England don’t you?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

“In the fifteenth century Louis the XI of France and Edward the IV of England, your old county, did just as you’re attempting to do and armed themselves. They got their hands on some gunpowder, only they were aligned with the rich and they abused the rest.

“What was the so-called modern world saw the Renaissance and there was the same brutality, oppression and slavery. And Machiavelli understood that. The Germans and the people of Spain warred in the name of religion and killed and enslaved.

“Through the Thirty Years’ War, the defeat of Napoleon, the English Revolution of 1688, the French Revolution, the German Revolution, the Romantic Movement, each inch of history, each step saw war and death. And within the first factories of the new mechanized England, children were slaves and only those who were the strongest survived. But as time passed where are the steps forward? Is your way a step forward?

“Schopenhauer recognized the internal will of humans. Nietzsche understood the brutal essence of humans and the Germans used his philosophy to their ideological advantage and they brought forth two world wars.

“But perhaps Nietzsche and Hitler aren’t your style. Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hodgskin and Robert Owen are perhaps more attractive to you since they gave way not just to Darwinism and the theory of the strongest surviving, which I happen to like, but also to Socialism and

Karl Marx. And I'm sure you've heard of him since you seem to espouse the tenets of Socialism or Communism. But then I really don't know, do I? I have no idea with what you, as egalitarian thinking people, would decide to replace what now exists that is, when you gain power.

"The world has experienced oligarchy, monarchy, tyranny, fascism, democracy and other forms of government that have existed without names. They all seem to have their problems don't they? They seem to break down into derivatives of anarchy and then we're back to might makes right and violence and slavery. Aren't we?

"And you mentioned the Indians so let's not forget their near total destruction by white America. And let's not forget that Indians killed their own and dominated and enslaved other Indians. America takes its place in history, America of 1776, America of 1861, America against France, Mexico, and on and on, from its inception. America has its own legacy of violence, oppression and brutality, those on top and the slaves on the bottom. And no matter what you do that's not gonna change."

Lloyd Nelson stopped now. There was silence. He moved his steady gaze from one to the other. No one spoke. No one moved. They wanted to respond, to say something. But nothing came to their thoughts. As they attempted to sift through this information they had just been handed, they could not speak.

During this pause Lloyd Nelson's riveting gaze had come to rest upon the leader of the group. He spoke to him now, directly to him. And his voice was on edge in its quietness, and it was hard. "Hold on now," he said to Cinque. "I'm not gonna take up too much more of your time but I too have rhetoric and I'm sure it's making your head hurt but I don't wanna forget something important. Let's not forget you and the fallacy into which you have gotten caught up.

"Europe came in contact with Africa almost five hundred years ago. That was over nineteen hundred years after the Iron Age. A very important age that promoted the historical development of Africa. And there were slaves in the Iron Age.

"While Western Europe was living in the dark ages and feudalism, Africa subjugated in mass. The whole of one people dominated and brutalized the whole of another. But in an attempt to look back and minimize and distort the reality and alter history, this that existed then is called domestic slavery now, as if that makes it less than, different than what it truly was. The feudal vassals of Europe and the slaves of Africa might as well have been one in the same, at the same time.

"Fifty years before Columbus was supposed to have crossed the Atlantic, Portuguese people stole Moorish Africans and they were banished into slavery. The Portuguese would war for their captives. They would march along the coastal African lands and take their cargo by force. So why aren't you upset with Portugal and the Portuguese? Why do you dismiss the Dutch, the French, the Germans, the Spanish, the Danes and Swedes? Arabia, India and China had African slaves. Make everyone who was involved, pay!

“In the 1530s the Englishman, William Hawkins didn’t even want slaves from West Africa. He wanted ivory. In 1623 it was an African Mandinka trader who tried to sell slaves to an Englishman. He was trying to sell women slaves and the white man didn’t want them. He had no use for them.

“You try to focus your attention on the whites here in America because it allows you to deny the truth. How many Cinque?” The name came forth with venom and sarcasm. And his voice rose slightly. “How many slaves left Africa? And let’s not even count how many of them died fighting for their freedom, for their lives, in the lands of Africa. Let’s not count how many people died on the boats and were thrown overboard. Let’s not count how many human beings died on the foreign soils including the West Indies and Central America, where they were deposited and never counted, never given a number. How many?”

Cinque thought of numbers. His eyes looked at the numbers on the paper that lay before him. He wondered if he was supposed to answer and when he looked up and Lloyd Nelson was gazing at him patiently, Cinque realized he waited, everyone waited, for an answer.

Cinque wanted to get indignant. He wanted to bristle at this lecture and he struggled against the feelings that pushed at him. And the feelings made him say, in almost a whisper. “I don’t know. Nobody knows. Could be as many as fifteen, twenty million.”

Lloyd Nelson shook his head, slowly, no. “Go to the sixteenth century and let’s say, forty million.” He checked the time on his watch. “Forty million men, women and children were not captured, were not stolen from Africa. Oh, at first, in the beginning many were taken like that. But the truth is, the reality is that your African ancestors ran the slave trade, within Africa. They stole people. They captured human beings. They killed men, women and children. And then your long-lost African relatives sold and gave away those who survived. They traded your great, great grandmother, and your great, great, great grandfather for beads and liquor and horses and pigs, and of course, guns and ammunition.

“The stronger brutalized and dominated those who were weaker than they were and then gave them up to someone else so they could do the same thing. Slavery could not have grown, could not have existed as it did without the assistance of those you call today your African brothers and sisters. But nobody speaks of that.

“Two thousand years ago in Africa there were slaves and brutality. At this very moment in Africa, while I speak, whites kill blacks, blacks kill whites and black Africans kill, brutalize and oppress other black Africans. Five hundred years ago, today, tomorrow, until the end of this world it will continue. From the start of my life until the end I have to live with the onus of slavery on my neck, if I choose to. And if I choose to I can lift to my back not just the burden of subjugation but the power and powerful guilt of the subjugator, as your white partners here have done.

“I could live my life in acceptance of my African heritage and my part in the slave trade but I refuse to live as you do, in the past. Living there to sift

through the records of those you decide to acknowledge while you ignore the reality of the viciousness of colored men and colored women of the collective world and you're left to find for yourself false strengths and vague feelings of pride in the images of dead African heroes who are dredged up from hundreds of years ago and thousands of miles away. And in that regressive activity you attempt to snatch from something or someone else, and place within yourself some precarious pieces of worth.

"Today, students march for African studies, people are wearing their hair and clothes in a manner to affirm their connection with Africa. My dark color is admired now and was jeered and shunned just a while ago. Am I black or Negro or colored or just a typical nigga? I follow no one, accept no labels other than those I choose and I understand that regardless of the color of my skin, I'm human. And so I embrace my aggressive essence and the violent hatred within my soul as you do, obviously, in the violent path you've chosen.

"I don't want to go back to Africa. And if you were to go back there you would discover what they truly feel for their lost American brother." He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward slightly. His right hand went out to the metal ashtray that stood near. He grasped it, as if for balance. His voice rose and his words were rushing from the dimness. "They hate you! Just like your Twelfth Street brother, your John R. brother, Mack Avenue sister, or your brother who put his gun to your head and had to be stopped from blowing your brains out. They hate you!

"The white man is doing just what he's supposed to do, must do. Dominate, abuse and oppress. It's his nature and duty as a human being to express that essence as best he can. And in his obvious whiteness and my extreme dark difference he's afraid of me, and his hatred and fear of me is correct and understandable and I accept it. And there's nothing deviant in the black on black brutality and murder for it's there we see the truth of the humankind and yet the truth, the reality is concealed behind uses of color and common heritage and distorted by those who would call me brother and attempt to draw close to me with their disarming words and colored disguise and they try to soften me so they can kill me. And as you see a black man, a white man, I see man and I see the humankind in totality and when I look at that I see the hatred that is inherent within the human soul."

He seemed to relax a little. He resumed his former position. Crossing his leg and leaning back. But his voice remained, angry. "Buy those guns and take them and go into the ghettos and protect the elderly black men and elderly black women who have worked all their lives and who are now being robbed and murdered by their own. Fight the ones they're afraid of. Ask them who they fear most. Ask them if it's the distant white man, or is it the immediate human blackness that surrounds them that touches them the quickest, the deepest?

"And when the order has been altered and the humans of color rise, and they will, in maybe a thousand years, then those colored humans will abuse, dominate and oppress the masses just as those who came before them. Right

here in racist Michigan, after you've fought and struggled to overcome this city organization and moved into Dearborn and Grosse Pointe and your brothers and sisters become mayors and congresswomen and governors, they too will begin to succumb to the perversion of their power and instead of robbing and stealing and getting high in the streets they'll be doing that while they sit in their fine offices and lounge in their soft chairs.

"There's nothing innately good that comes with the color of the skin. And the fact that one has once been oppressed doesn't mean they've gained any special kindness or unique understanding from that oppression. And Cinque the modern day guerrilla, the new warrior, will remain deep inside Willie Cotton. Forever! Until the end of his slave life!"

Lloyd Nelson put his hat on. "No I don't believe in your direction or those who let dogs bite 'em or police beat 'em while they sing about they gonna overcome."

"What do you believe in?" the white woman asked. And her voice was calm, her anger dissipated.

"I believe in this money we're discussing now. Money is very powerful. Money, in one form or another has also been very constant in human history. In the last two thousand years there's been the political man, the religious man, the economic man, and also the psychological man. I'm the economic one. Cinque," and he emphasized the name. "Write this number down."

Lloyd Nelson pulled the phone number he wanted from his memory of the ones he had written down earlier. He gave him the number. "If you and your people decide to make the purchase, call that number. If you want the guns, ask for Mr. Herbert. If you want the guns and ammunition ask for Mr. Herbert Smith. That's all you have to say to whoever answers. They'll tell you you've got the wrong number and the deal will be on. Those other numbers you've used to reach me are no longer any good. I'll contact you through the number I have on you. Any questions?"

"Naw, I got it. But if we order them guns we gotta have those bullets. If we order, we want it all."

Lloyd Nelson stood up. "You've got until Thursday, midnight. Now I want you to get one thing real clear. If you call and I contract for your order, it's on. There's no changing your mind."

Cinque stood. He called out a name, loudly. He was somber, frowning and obviously he remained angry at what had transpired. "Hey, I'm just like you. I'm a man of my word."

Lloyd Nelson nodded his head, yes. "Yeah, OK. If I don't hear from you I'll know nothing's happening and everybody can just get on with their business. Well, we gotta go now. I hate to rush, but it's been a pleasure."

The woman was standing at the top of the stairs. Bear started up and then stopped as Lloyd Nelson took a step and then turned back to Cinque. "One more thing. You better not play any games with this." He stared, hard, at Cinque a moment. Then he looked at each person in the room. And each person felt something, different. Then the dark man turned, moved towards the stairs and followed Bear up.

The people in the basement were left to talk business, settle their nerves and attempt to assess what had actually just happened because they really didn't know. As Cinque talked and cursed bitterly, he rose and went to retrieve the chair Bear had moved and as he bent for the chair he saw the heavy metal ashtray that stood beside it. He bent lower to look in amazement at the metal, to better see that the ashtray had been squeezed by a hand and crushed.

Four minutes later the three men were leaving the darkened side street deep on the east side and heading back towards Van Dyke Street where they would merge into the nighttime traffic and the movements of life.

Prophet James lay in the darkness of the bedroom trying to recover from both the physical exertion in which he had just participated and the drug that surged through his body. He focused on his heart. He wanted to reach inside his chest and caress his heart or pat it and assure it that everything would be all right. He wanted to feel his heart beating normally again. He wanted it to slow, ease its racing thumps.

He shifted his attention to the presence on the bed beside him. He could feel the woman next to him roll over and sit up and then slide over to sit on the edge of the bed. Now he could see her naked brown back curving at her waist. He long brown hair hung well past her shoulders and in the dimness that was all he could see of her. He could hear the air conditioner that sat in the window humming and he could hear the woman's voice.

"Damn baby, what kinda dope is that? That shit's too strong for me."

He felt the bed rise slightly as she stood to move into the bathroom. He heard the water of the shower and he heard now the numbers that first did a slow shuffle and then broke into a tap dance in his head. The numbers tapped as his heart beat. Quickly.

Six hundred and eighty thousand, double that, one million three hundred and sixty thousand. He figured. Three ounces he bought a month at eight hundred an ounce. He could save over twelve thousand on dope alone by the end of the year. Then he smiled to himself. "Shit," he whispered aloud. "I might even sell a little bit of mine."

He thought about the deal, who he would get to look after his money. He thought about what he would have to do to come up with the amount he needed. He thought of a lot of things. And he believed everything would be all right because his heart had slowed a little.

He moved and sat on the side of the bed. He was like that when the woman emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her. She lay on the bed and opened the towel. As he moved to the bathroom he glanced down at her and she smiled and raised her left leg and pointed her foot at him and wiggled her toes. She was still glistening from her shower and he paused a moment to stare at her naked body.

When he came from the shower the woman was sitting up. She placed her wine glass down. She licked the tip of her finger and stuck it into the drug. She put her finger into her mouth and sucked it, loudly. And as Prophet

moved towards her she eased back further onto the large bed, onto her back and opened her legs, wide, exposing herself to him. He reached down and grabbed himself as he stood there. He stared at her. She began to rub herself between her legs with her right hand, her fingers disappearing within her body. With her left hand she kneaded her breasts. Her eyes were closed and low moans of lustful pleasure rose from her throat.

He looked at the dope. He looked at the clock next to the dope. It was three in the morning. His ride would be there in four hours. He went to the drug. He snorted it, three times. He moved from there to stand close beside the bed. The woman lay beneath him now and he could feel her soft hand, massaging him. He heard her whispering his name. And then she rolled to him and he felt her warm darting tongue, as a serpent. Next, her mouth was drawing him as a heated, wet hole. She was making noises, sounds, and as he grew erect fire flashed through his body and he shivered. He wrapped his hands in her hair and pushed her head slowly away and pulled back. Again. Again. And then he held her, stopped her. She looked up questioningly at him and he yanked her head back, twisting it. He stared into her eyes. He whispered between clenched teeth. "Turn over and get up on your knees."

Wednesday eased to him but he knew the morning light would find him awake. For look at what was there before him. He wondered what manner of man sought sleep at a time like this.

Lloyd Nelson placed his now unloaded gun back on the wall. He unbuckled the gun that was strapped to his leg and placed it on the desk. He glanced at this watch. It was almost three thirty in the morning. He knew Red and Bear would probably return to a joint before they went home. He himself had been bored the hour and a half they had spent at the Chitty Chat and an hour at Stokes' place was enough for him. The big men were excited and full of unexpended energy from the earlier part of the night and would continue on. He had told them to bring him home.

He paced through his apartment now, from one end to the other, over and over. He straightened things, washed glasses and cared for the plants that needed watering. He stood for a while looking at, touching some of the many books that covered completely one wall in his den. Next, he stood motionless before the wall of books in his living room. He thought of all the words he had read and he thought of the words he would not read and the things he would never have the opportunity to try and understand.

He showered. Then he stood naked with a glass of iced water in his hand and looked at the last lights of the early morning as they began to turn off, and disappear. Day was coming. The sky in the east was brightening. The western sky was letting go of its darkness and he was alone ... again.

And as he settled into his chair to await the sleep that crawled into him he decided to embrace it, and its accompanying dream, here in this chair. He felt tired and he did not want to sleep and yet he desired to know. He wondered for a moment and smiled at the thought that maybe here in this room, in this soft spot, the dream could not find him and he would sleep, in peace.

He whispered aloud. "I'm drowsy."

The echo of his whisper came back, through the window, from the sky and it said as a false echo. "I'm lonely."

Lloyd Nelson felt lonely. And in this state of somnolence he wondered why he would begin to feel again, now, after all these years of numbness. He thought of Georgia Reeves and he shook his head slowly, no. He whispered. "No."

The echo returned. "Yes."

"It's too late."

From the window, "It's too late."

He whispered her name and her name came back to him. He smiled and closed his eyes and reflected upon her. He thought of the impression she had forced upon him that first time in the hallway at school and how easily he had been able to ignore it, dismiss her.

Then! That New Year's Eve night he had been drawn to her. Her eyes, her dark color, her lips, her smile and the gold of her tooth had actually affected him. And when he had seen her body, its grace and sensuous movement he had made himself look away.

He opened his eyes now, for she was forming in his mind. He could see her clearly, her dark-brown colored beauty. But his eyes were heavy and as the morning swept across the sky, he closed his eyes again and he could hear her husky voice. The thick southern sweetness of it came to him, her laughter, her questions rang softly in his head. He whispered, with his eyes closed, the word, as she had said it, "... love."

It came back "Yes! Love!"

He seemed to feel from somewhere deep inside, from some inner place, from a black area that receded into the nothingness of his being, a yearning, a vague sense of wanting, seeking more than hate, there was an incipient belief that he also needed to love. And he wondered. If he would want to love now, could he, in these last days? "Who?" He whispered aloud. "When? Do I love now? Somewhere? Lost inside?"

He knew what the answers would be, if he felt emotions as a human being. If he could feel, properly, he would experience not only hatred but also possess the possibility to counter that feeling with love. Not just through words and elaborate ruminations and memories, but in the here and now, in the real, in the future.

He shook his head slowly, no, to the future. He pondered on what lay for him on the other side of the dull emptiness of his now opening constricted soul. From the iridescence of the early morning sky came a name, "Georgia Reeves."

As he drifted once again into the familiar abysmal blackness and relaxed in the comfort of the dream, his right hand clutched the icy glass and he plunged into the sounds of the colors. He slept. He dreamed. And just as he had done as a three-year-old child, twenty-four years ago, he crawled, naked, into a strange backyard and hid himself between two garbage cans and the pit-a-pat of hungry rats' little feet skipped across his back and the hum of the

hungry flies reverberated in his ears and he arched his back against the rats and lifted his hand to brush away the filthy flies and the icy glass that had turned warm from the rising heat of his hand fell to the thick carpet. And as the contents of the glass spilled and spread out in small broken circles and sunk into the soft covering of the hard floor, the soul of this man was beginning to burn.

III

LLOYD NELSON AWOKE AT ONE O'CLOCK AND HE WAS dying but he was born again in his dying and he was able to feel the importance of this indefatigable progression and he also felt in totality the ramifications of his demise and he was devastated and he desired to hurt, to punish someone for the suffering of his feverish life.

It was an obvious beauty within the early afternoon of that Wednesday, July 19 in the year 1967. It was a beauty that pushed its way below the overcast sky, a beauty that slipped between the puffy pores of the opaque clouds. And the uniqueness of this day was in spite of the impending rain that threatened the city of Detroit.

When the brief but hard shower came, it did very little to dampen the enthusiasm of those who schemed and plotted away the afternoon and did nothing to stop the subtle movements of those who played the game of life. The mail was delivered. The buses ran. The workers came from work and went to work in the summer shower. The children ran and skipped and jumped in the puddles the rains created and hurried home to watch cartoons on TV.

And those in the underworld of darkness waited for the falling water to cease. Just before it was too late, the sun came back and shone briefly and then began departing for Wednesday. The late afternoon seemed to come early. The humidity was perceptibly lessened by the shower. The temperature fell slightly and as four forty-five came, everyone and everything was in its respective place.

Lloyd Nelson stood and stared out of his window over towards Canada

and attempted to pull his way through the dream. He thought of Georgia Reeves.

Georgia Reeves stood at her window looking out. She thought of her own confusion and she felt surge above that sense of bewilderment, the desires of her agitated mind as they manifested themselves in her tingling body and throbbing heart and she could feel, Lloyd Nelson.

Red cleaned and oiled his guns and thought of Lloyd Nelson and watched from the dining room of the home he had bought for his woman as she cooked their meal and he listened for the awakening sounds of their sleeping baby boy.

Bear cried softly on the shoulder of his woman and bemoaned the fact that his best friend was sick and he struggled against his own rage and sense of helplessness.

Della rolled over in her bed and looked at her clock and seeing the time, she drew her pillow over her head and before she went back to sleep she thought of Georgia and Lloyd Nelson and the numbers he had told her to play.

Johnny Russo relaxed beside the phone and thought of the schemes he had enacted, the deals he needed, the horses on which he would bet and he thought of Lloyd Nelson and how he would always bet on him.

Father Hartman thought of Lloyd Nelson and he lowered his head to pray for the man. He prayed the man would not hurt anyone today and he prayed the man would live to grow old and that he would somehow find peace with God before he died.

Prophet James pulled open his desk drawer and searched for a card to snort his blow. He needed to wake up from the brief nap he had taken. He hit the drug, twice, and he thought of the money he drew together for the deal he had decided to join. He thought of the two women he would see after the nighttime revival meeting. And he hoped Snake and Daddy Bell would bring more money than the day before.

Marzette counted money, stacked money and bundled money. He looked at his clock and determined when he would call and order over two hundred pounds of cocaine. And he wondered if he could really get Prophet's money back in two days and double it in two and a half months.

Cinque had dressed and he prepared to call the phone number that was on the piece of paper that was beside his polished pistol on his nightstand. He would order the guns and ammunition he required to fight his war.

Joseph, 'The Hand,' Battaglia was thinking as he ate his same meal at his regular time. He thought about the beautiful blonde who smiled at him over the shoulder of the man she was sitting behind. He wondered how tall she was and what it would be like to see her naked. And he liked that she flirted with him while she was supposed to be with someone else. And his wine tasted good and his food tasted good and he felt good.

It was a peaceful late afternoon on that Wednesday. But there was also tremendous anticipation as five o'clock came close and the numbers for the day were to be released. Hope would swell and by the time darkness descended, disappointment would come and replace hope for those who had made the incorrect choice and they would turn to other things, including deciding which numbers they would choose for the morrow.

The numbers came. A little after five, they fell. An eight, with threes and nines fell. 89339.

By six, Lloyd Nelson was calling to set up the purchase of the weapons and ammunition.

At six thirty, Prophet was counting again his money from the numbers and counting his blessings and preparing to preach.

Georgia was lying across her bed, thinking.

Red was lying on his sofa, snoring.

Bear was lying in his bed, snoring.

Della was rising to dress.

Cinque was counting money.

Marzette was snorting dope, counting money, and lying with his words as he talked on his phone.

Johnny was heading to the track.

Father Hartman was standing and staring out of his window.

Battaglia was watching as the blonde, who had gotten rid of her date and joined him at his meal, and squeezed his thigh beneath the table, walked her tempting body out of the restaurant door and disappeared around the corner. He shrugged her off. He had business to attend to. Besides, he would see her the next day, she promised that, among other things.

By nine o'clock that night Lloyd Nelson was prowling his apartment, restless but determined to remain inside.

Georgia Reeves was whispering his name and professing her undying love for him.

Red was awaiting Bear, prepared for the business of the night that was before them.

Della was driving into the night.

Cinque was talking of the ills of the world and his solutions for those problems.

Marzette was in his Cadillac and in the streets.

Father Harman was watching the television with his thirty-nine children.

Johnny Russo was on his way back home to arrange for the sale of guns and ammunition.

Joseph Battaglia was meeting with his bosses and listening intently as they discussed and devised ways to put the huge amount of heroin they possessed, into the streets. It would be his job to implement their plans and carry out their decisions.

Prophet was preaching as the clock struck nine and those who were present would say the Prophet had never preached better. They would say that he was inspired that Wednesday night and that his body had been filled with the Holy Spirit.

He began with words that were as an ominous omen. And those words were designed to express the fact that in the end, when their own individual bell would toll its last, and the final ringing sound would leave the earth forever, it would have announced to each person that they were human beings. And he said they would all be summoned through the valley of death and it was up to them to do what was necessary to rise through the gates of Heaven.

His voice soared and lowered and he cajoled and pleaded for all those there in this place of worship to heed the truth of his words that he had been told by God to utter. He spoke of the rioting in Newark and prayed for the nearly thirty people who had died. He condemned that violence that wasted precious lives and destroyed valuable property.

He spoke of how black people must stand for something good. Stand for something righteous. He told those who urged him on and called out, Aman, that they must stand for not just the legal rights of black people, or the moral issues that concerned black people, but they must stand for the human right to life for all people regardless of color. And if they couldn't stand for this basic aspect of life they would stumble on the calls of violence and join the haters and looters and rioters and succumb to the desires of the Devil on earth and fall into the inevitable darkness of death and they would burn forever for their sins, in Hell.

He spoke of racism as a sickness and how they would all have to struggle to relieve their wonderful land of this deadly disease. And he spoke out fervently against those who walked the streets of Detroit and talked of killing and fighting and expressed their murderous intentions for their white brothers and sisters. He preached of God's consciousness and God's will that they all live together in harmony as the children of God.

He moved from behind his pulpit and he stalked back and forth on his stage, before his people. He waved his arms and raised and lowered them and he would lean forward and lean back and when he shook his head his long hair came loose and strands fell down upon his perspiring forehead. His pretty light-brown eyes flashed and his diamonds sparkled and he touched those and moved those who called out to him.

He told those who sat at that moment in peaceful safety in the house of the Lord and yet in secret, in their hearts, they believed in violent force as a means for change that they must learn to use the force of their holy soul. He

told his black people that they must love white people or they would all perish. He said they must love those who killed their black grandmothers and black grandfathers. Love those who killed their black aunts and uncles. Love those who brutalized their black sisters and black brothers. Love those who beat them, burned their homes and bombed their churches. He told those who rejected his words that they must have faith in the power of God and that God had always been and would forever be ... love.

He stopped in the middle of the stage. He lowered his voice and the words that came seemed to be almost whispered and the congregation was hushed and leaned as one to hear him. And his words were soft and quiet and yet even those in the farthest reaches of this huge church that was filled and overflowed could hear them.

"So we must love the white race. Even when they speak of us as lewd, immoral animals, unworthy of their presence, undeserving of their trust or respect, we must love them anyway. We must love them until they are able to love us and see not just us but themselves also, in a new light."

He moved now and again his voice soared. "Yes!" he shouted, and his words rushed out of him. "We must love white people until their conscience calls out to them that they must acknowledge our love and their cold hearts warm and receive our love and then at that moment, when they learn of the love of all humanity they will accept the black body that has held out to them that love as their equal, as their brothers and sisters. And white people will see at that moment only the pure, burning, incandescent, heavenly love and they will rise above the earthly colorings of their racist minds and they will be free from hatred and we as a people will be free from their racism as it leaves this earth never to return."

The people were cheering now. Some were standing and Prophet paused to catch his breath and wipe his brow with his long red silk handkerchief.

"I know," he shouted again, "that you may ask! You may ask yourselves, you may ask me, and it is your right to ask, to question me, and because you doubt, you question how can we love those racist whites of Dearborn, those racist whites of Grosse Pointe! You ask how can we love those racist whites of Grosse Isle and those of the lily-white suburban enclaves that surround us blacks here in Detroit! How, you ask me, can we love those racist whites who we work beside and never hear them speak to us as fellow human beings? How? You ask me. And I say to you tonight that the question is not, how! The real question is not, how, because we black people have always had a strong capacity to love! We have an abundance of love! Throughout history we have been a forgiving people! And to forgive takes love! We as a people must not let these changing times blind us to the fact that we are a very loving people! Let us not now listen to those who talk of hate because the truth is, we would really rather love than hate! Wouldn't we?"

"Yes!" his people shouted.

"I love you!" he yelled. "You know that don't you?"

"Yes!" they shouted again.

"Do you love me?"

“Yes!” they screamed.

He paused. And as his eyes scanned the crowd they fell upon a woman he was to see later that night and she licked her long, pink tongue seductively over her red lips and he momentarily lost his train of thought. But when he turned from her, he saw the departing train and he grabbed it, jumped on it and found again his thoughts.

He lowered his voice. He slowed its cadence and each ensuing word was clear and intense. “So, I say to you tonight that it is not, for you to ask, how? You already know how, to love.” His voice rose and now spilled out. “Love them as your wayward brothers and sisters who have wandered far from home and who have lost their direction and cry out silently for you to show them, the way!” Now he nearly whispered. “Love them as you would, me.”

He shouted now. “The question you should ask, you must ask, is why? Why should we love them? Why? And the answer is, now, and will forever be the same. Because that’s the only way! You hear me?” He pleaded. “Listen to the truth my brothers and sisters! God would not lie to you! I would not lie to you! Love is the light that illuminates the path through darkness!”

Now he was angry. “Through love there is hope, there is a future and there will always remain in the essence of love a wondrous strength and the possibility of peace, serenity, everlasting happiness and eternal life.”

Prophet suddenly seemed weary. He spoke as he moved back behind his pulpit. “I’m sick and tired of hatred and violence. There’s nothing through hatred but death and destruction. And to live like that, filled with that poison is to live in Hell, right here on earth.”

Now he spoke of his weariness and his desire to see, before he died, an end to the suffering and strife. And he wanted Detroit to be spared of that pain. His voice quivered. He paused. He lowered his head and when he looked up at his people they could see that his pretty eyes glistened from tears. And several people that observed him were moved to tears even though they could only guess as to his reasons for his weeping.

He looked upwards, far away somewhere, perhaps into the heavens and then he wiped his eyes with his silk handkerchief and he confided in his people. He told them why he cried. He told them of his late father, Reverend Ezra James and how white people had killed him on Woodward Avenue during the race riot of 1943. Many in the congregation had known of the horrible, tragic, unpunished murder.

He explained how he had not had a chance to really know his father, but he knew his father was a peace-loving man and that was because his father believed in the word of God. Prophet asked that those present remember his father as he did. He asked that they keep the Reverend in their prayers.

He said how his mother had told him that his father loved, regardless of the color of the skin. That he always had said that black people must learn how to work with the whites. And as his tears fell he urged everyone to be as his departed father and go forth and spread the word of peace and remain cool in the coming heated days and nights of summer. And he asked them to believe in love, in the name of ... Jesus.

At that point he turned and signaled the young-adult choir and they stood as one. The conductor took them into their rendition of, 'His Eye Is On The Sparrow.' The voices of the choir rose and three women were touched by the Spirit and they began to jerk and scream and dance in euphoria and as one danced, she thought of Prophet and how she would dance later in her bed, in his arms. Two young women in the choir saw the Holy Ghost and they had to be led out.

The Holy Spirit swept through the congregation and it was an emotional time for all. And they all waited in expectation because after this song, Prophet would give out the numbers that were coming, maybe, soon, maybe.

As the collection plates were being passed around, Prophet sat in his large, raised chair and with his head back and his eyes closed, he listened to the beautiful singing voices and pondered how he would see both the women he wanted to see this night. He had the strength. It lay sparkling in his desk drawer. The difficulty would be in finding the time.

He wiped his eyes. For the tears that had fallen had been real and there were elements of truth in the intense feelings he experienced for his dead father. For the father lived on through the turbulent essence of his son. And Prophet reached at that moment for the ephemeral, loving images of his father. Short lived they were, those incidents in reality. Yet, the memories he had created were elaborate and thick and deep. In the real of his unique, amazing life he knew almost nothing of the love of his father. But the father survived in his imagination and he could feel him there, sometimes, just a little.

That which he had inherited was distorted. And that which had been passed on to him through verbal presentations was distorted. And that which had been constructed in his mind and that had remained vibrant and that lived, was also distorted. And so the tears he shed in reality were in their own wet substance, distorted.

He embraced fully, without hesitation, the pure essence of human beings. In his very own way Prophet James, was real. Yet he was separated, through his own realness, within his own imagination, from his other self. This division created a huge rift between the disconnected parts and thus an immense abysmal hole.

His mother's love could not fill the specific blackness of the fathomless pit with light. But as woman she had shown him a way. The power he had acquired was lacking something. The money he possessed was not enough. His God could not, or would not sufficiently build a walkway across the disjointed entities of his inner being.

But the people who stood now before him and shouted and sang and called out his name, came so very close to providing him with that elusive something. These people, he desperately wanted to believe, loved him. And he needed that. But the women he controlled, that he mastered, that touched him and loved him physically, satisfied much more than a want. He sought them more than anything else in the world. He required them constantly in order to live. It was in those purely physical moments that he could ignore

the feeling that thrived in that empty chasm of darkness that contained his tremendous sense of unrecognized loss.

The women would lay their naked bodies down and cling to one another and stretch themselves out beneath him and sacrifice themselves and become a human access, a bridge, an emotional, physical structure of substance upon which he would crawl, then rise, to step and each step would lead to another step until he walked and from the walk he would run across his separated self and leave the side he feared and join with that fragmented entity of his soul that he in actuality wanted to meet.

Prophet James only sensed this in some indefinite form. The piece of his essence, which had broken away, to float freely had discovered a means with which to rush the process of connection and healing and intensify the emotions that lay along the sexual path that had been constructed.

This method screamed in his ear now as he sat on his ... throne, and again he closed his pretty eyes. He could see vividly his desk drawer. He could open the drawer with his mind and he could taste the drain from his nose as the drug entered his throat and he could feel the numbness as the burning snow froze his throat. And he swallowed.

He longed for this reality that moved and sounded before him to cease. He longed above and beyond this reality for that white powdery girl to apply the properties of her powerful attributes and exert her essence so that all she contained, everything she possessed would surge through his body, drug his aching mind, stoke his desires and fill his seeking, lustful soul with a soothing fire.

Lloyd Nelson sat in his chair and looked through his window into the black moonless, starless sky. He longed desperately for the woman he could now feel. And he knew she wanted him, called him. He wanted to see her, to hear her and know again the reality of another being. He wanted to know again the sense of belonging he had experienced when he was with her. With her he was not alone.

There was a beauty within her that had allowed him to see something else instead of the otherness of his own existence. She had meant so much. She represented the hope of his life, the possibility of goodness entering his life. She was the completeness a man desired. She was, woman. She was, love. He knew of his own lack of wholeness and he wanted her help, her presence, as his own incomplete soul was yanked through the brutal, broken world. And as he sat there and stared through the glass up into the endlessness, he accepted his belief that she was also all he could never have and was all he had lost, forever.

Her eyes appeared now before him and they peered at him through the window. They were the same eyes as the woman in his dream. He knew now, his questions were slowly being answered, just as he had for so long suspected, that the woman in his dream was his mother. And he understood the unsettling effect of the gold in the smile of Georgia Reeves, and the alluring loveliness of her dark color.

He wanted to, and yet he feared seeing all the fully formed characteristics of the face of the woman who manifested in his sleep. And he was upset with himself that he was afraid of his own mother and he knew he was angry with her for leaving without him.

It was his father, the man in the dream, he believed this and he tightened his fists at the thought that he was angry with his father. But the contraction of his hands and the surging tenseness of his body eased as he realized how much he must have loved them, how much they loved him, how much he had missed them throughout the years and how much their absence had truly affected his life. And he wondered what could have happened to them.

He could not reconstruct anything from the locked, repressed areas of his own mind. But he could interpret now. He could feel things as he began to again voice aloud, possible scenarios that would explain not only their actions in the dream but their disappearance from his life. And aloud he associated various words with each unmistakable aspect of the dream, each color, every sound. He also wondered of the jagged lightning and the animals.

As he moved closer to the bolted door that shut him off from traumatic portions of his own self he could hear, with the awakenings of his emotions, whether any of these words he spoke, or the questions he posed were moving him closer to the truth or not. And in this way the reality of his first three years of life began to return, in bits and pieces and the picturesque puzzle that filled his mind and that lay scattered within his being, was coming together. But at the present moment he believed himself to be too close to the mosaic reconstruction. He could only see the pieces in a broken form and between each piece was empty blackness. But soon the pieces would fit, join tightly, and he would step from the confusion of the fragmented design and at last he would finally be able to see clearly, everything.

He left it there, for now, where it was. He knew it had not yet shaped itself. He knew he was not yet ready, to see. He would not be able to handle or control that which awaited his discovery. He could glance across his own life and recognize pain and suffering and above all, violence. Behind that, the answers lay. And even in his rush towards the fever and as the fever swirled towards him, he was patient. He would hold off the ending and experience the irony of his hopeless love.

He let his mind turn onto that, which relaxed him just a while ago. He thought of the reality of the love that was in his dream, which was other than the turbulence and he remembered how he wanted so very badly to reach the burning black woman with the golden smile. He wanted to save all that she was to him, to embrace in his arms, his first love.

He heard again a woman call. This night he knew he would not sleep.

It was midnight. Wednesday faded into history. Thursday came slowly from the future. He attempted to ignore the demanding screams from the streets and he turned away from the tempting whispers of the sensuous, silent voice.

IV

THURSDAY BROKE BRILLIANT IN ITS SUMMERY BEAUTY and warm, very warm. There was nothing to be seen that indicated anything of the rains of the previous day. The wet reflecting puddles were gone, evaporated. All was dry and dusty once again. The sky was light blue and cloudless and as nine thirty passed and ten o'clock in the morning arrived, the heat had increased and it was eighty degrees and humid and the air was already thick and moist and weighted and the temperature climbed slowly, easily towards the forecast of over one hundred. The 'Motor City' prepared for the Thursday night that would come and bellow out in glee the coming arrival of the weekend.

However, the loud gleeful announcement failed to mention in any way the momentous events that would be ushered forth and laid carefully down in a place of permanence and importance both in the festering city of Detroit and the darkening unalterable madness of the world.

Windows. Sashless. Paneless. Dirty and dull and hiding all that lies behind, within. Windows. Broken and jagged and pointed and lacking of the fullness of their glassy essence. And in that shattered existence they attest to their fragile potential. Windows. Clear. Protecting and shielding from the external elements and holding internal warmth within. Shiny and so close to mirrors and yet so different in their ability to open themselves to the world or allow life and death, to be observed. Windows.

Many the hours Lloyd Nelson had stood and gazed out of windows. The hours would add up to days and the weeks would become months if the time had been counted. Always, for as long as he could remember he had been

fascinated by windows that allowed him to look out and provided him with the opportunity to observe, to see and thereby ameliorate his solitary, painful feelings and alter his isolated existence by looking at life and the things and the people of that life and picturing himself as a member of and thus among that which passed before his saddened, hardened, lonesome eyes.

It was the window of Benny Jenkins before which Lloyd Nelson stood. Benny owned a salon on Twelfth Street. And as Lloyd Nelson gazed out at colors and the cars and the people moving by, he could hear Benny's high-pitched voice as he sat in the far corner and manicured nails as his own light-skinned hands moved expertly and rapidly and his voice mingled with the other voices that were sounding through the salon.

It was already crowded. All eight chairs were occupied and it wasn't quite noon. But it was Thursday and those few who still wore their hair in a processed style wanted to look fresh for the weekend. And the salon of Benny Jenkins was known not just for cutting and shaping the Afro styles but had become widely known first for doing processed hair properly. People who carried a name in the city came to this shop and entertainers and celebrities from out of town frequented the place also. So the conversations here varied in subject and information from the local to the far away. And the clientele was also known from near and far.

Lloyd Nelson watched the daytime movement of the street and listened to these organized verbalizations that floated around the room. He picked words and voices upon which to focus and each time he became distracted and lost his concentration his mind would wander to one of the many aspects of his life that demanded his attention. And although his hair was done, having arrived at the shop as it opened, he lingered a while there to listen and allow himself to be caught up in the boisterous, conniving talk.

Pictures were being spun in his head as he followed the animated words and he could feel the emotions in the pictures. And here in this place, at this moment, he was enjoying the deceit, the anger, the humor, the fear, and all the myriad emotions that came to him as subtle intuitions and vague, layered impressions that were disguised as they translated themselves through this symbolic method of communication.

He smiled slightly as the words came into the air as sounds and turned themselves into something visual that could be seen and from that they became shared experiences and he was able to know for the first time in nearly five years something other than those emotions of his dreams, fully, completely. He was to know again of the reality of the existence of invisible, inaudible rising and receding impulses and he was surprised at the depth and intensity and the rapidity with which he was changing since early Monday morning when he had once again began to dream ... that dream.

Lloyd Nelson stood without moving. He was as a statue with his left leg placed just a small step before him and his hands clasped behind his back. Dressed totally in a powder-blue color, he was as a powder-blue statue with dark-brown skin and piercing staring eyes that had not seen the colorful blackness of sleep for almost twenty-four hours. But he was rested and calm

and determined. He would see as much as he could of the next few days and he would avoid as best he could, for as long as possible the sleep of man. For him, sleep was not restful or relieving.

Then! He felt a surge of energy so unique and specific that he was puzzled. He could almost touch it as it came as an arc from a great distance, from a tremendous internal remoteness that he could not gauge. Then, it was palpable and it moved and he wondered what it could be.

He wanted to attribute this thing to his own evolving state. He wanted to understand. So he pondered of what essence it could contain that its aspects could elude his scrutiny even as he examined it. His brow creased. And outside the window he could see now the long white Cadillac limousine of Prophet James.

The beautiful new automobile pulled up and stopped. The driver exited and moved quickly to the rear side door to open it. Prophet emerged from the car and stepped onto the sidewalk. He wore all white. Dark sunglasses concealed his light-brown-green colored eyes and his head was tied up with a bright pink silk cloth to cover his disheveled hair that needed to be combed out and set. He walked briskly to the door of the salon and as he entered he removed his sunglasses, paused, and surveyed the people and allowed the people to observe him.

He turned his head to the right to speak to the dark man who stood there. The eyes, the riveting gaze and that which lay behind and beneath these windows to this man's soul, impaled Prophet. And in some mysterious way for a brief instant the dark-brown eyes became mirrors and he saw himself reflected there and in a most unusual manner for him, he lost his voice. He lost himself.

Lloyd Nelson knew this man. In the past they had on occasion crossed the presence of one another in their movement through the city. But they in actuality traversed different areas of their common world and so he knew of him but he did not really know him. He was perplexed now as to why he experienced something acute pass between them that was totally foreign to his comprehension. He was mildly surprised at the keen feeling that this that was not only alien to his experience was seemingly inimical to his existence.

And when Prophet spoke to him, Lloyd Nelson felt the strange feeling flash through him as a dulled bolt of lightning. He sought to control the unsettling moment. He wanted to dismiss it. Just as it flashed, it passed, and the words of Prophet James were gone except for the hollow echo that hung in the air and was left in his thoughts.

"What's happening my brother?" Prophet had said.

To Prophet, his own voice sounded altered. He moved on into the noise of the salon. He greeted the men and women loudly as his brothers and sisters. And when he turned back to the window, the dark man was gone. He looked outside and he could see the man cross the street and open the door to the beautiful beige convertible Cadillac he had noticed upon his arrival.

Prophet was drawn to the window as if called and he was there to observe the big new Cadillac pull from the curb and ease on off into the afternoon

traffic. He watched it slowly disappear up the street and he was thinking as Benny Jenkins moved to stand close behind him, to his right. And as if he could read Prophet's mind he repeated Prophet's precise thought. "That's Lloyd Nelson," he said.

"Yeah. Yeah I know," Prophet said, almost in a whisper. "I've seen him, before." And suddenly he thought not just of Lloyd Nelson but also of bodies, pieces of bodies. He remembered what that dark man meant to the city, to the underworld, to the game. And in spite of the noontime heat and the stifling air of the salon, he felt a chill as he said to himself the name again, quietly. "Lloyd Nelson."

He saw the scarred face and the riveting eyes and when he turned back to the scenes of the salon he saw the fans blowing, he could hear all the voices rising, seemingly as one, yelling at him. The colors were bright and he could smell the chemicals and the burning cigarettes, the burning hair, and his stomach flipped, once. He held his breath and swallowed, twice, and he shivered. He fought to manage this thing that was happening inside him and as he began to compose himself, he thought of himself only and he let all else within those moments go away.

The two men may have believed they had banished their chance meeting into a distant realm of nowhere. But an inaccessible part of them knew that between them there was ... something.

The early day and late afternoon came and flopped over into history as indistinct and mundane. But to those who were involved in the two most important aspects of the humankind, life and death, Thursday, July 20, 1967 would become memorable and unforgettable.

Those who were born and cried out to the world the unfolding presence of their nascent souls, were acknowledging the suffering that perhaps, awaited them between the joys and loves they would find. Perhaps.

Those who died, whether they moaned and cried in the alleys off B Street or in the plush confines of their office in the prestigious General Motors' Building on West Grand Boulevard, whether their demise was due to an implacable substance inherent within that which is found in the filth of narrow, dank alleys, or due to an attack upon the heart of the one who worried in the boundary of luxury, whether their dying cries went unspoken and therefore unheard or were given voice on the evening news and the morrows' paper, they acknowledged through their own death the end of their living joy, the loss of their loving happiness and the finality of their torture or pleasure.

And wherever they died, whenever they sucked that last breath, they departed ... alone, from this earth. And even to leave their imprint as a deep sliced notch, a twisted gashed mark in the mortal coil of life was to be in the end ... meaningless, a nothing to the consciousness of Death.

For as a connecting linked chain to all, Death was dismissed in that form to the consciousness of the humankind. Coupling Death remains denied and rejected as long as It remains invisible.

But when Death reveals Itself in Its splendid glory, It is pure in Its form and beautiful in Its ability to avoid distinctions or prejudice and to be as nothing or as anything or as anyone else can ever, ever be.

Unending! Endless! Infinite!

Eternal and ... Everlasting. Is ... It.

In that attribute Death totally dominates, overrules and overwhelms the transitory reality of Life.

Life! So brief!

So beautiful! So alive!

So painful! So ... brief!

The numbers fell that heated late afternoon. Sixes, with a four and a five and a nine. It was 64569 that came. Thursday evening departed and by eight that night Lloyd Nelson had talked on his phone with Bear and Red and finalized in code the details of the transaction with Cinque.

Prophet had passed six hundred and eighty thousand dollars to Marzette and watched his money leave with two of his best men.

Marzette had turned to assure Prophet that all would go well and that by Saturday night he would have his money back and his supply of drugs.

Johnny Russo waited for a call as guns and ammunition were counted and boxed in a warehouse in Toledo, Ohio.

Joseph Battaglia tried to concentrate, not on the big blonde woman who was now making him angry in her elusive actions, but on the voices of his superiors who spoke of heroin and cocaine and cash flow and supply and demand and retail and wholesale and control and violence.

Battaglia looked absently at the short, skinny, brown-skinned colored man named Dag as terms were being stipulated. And one way or another, he knew they were going to dry up most of the hard drugs in Detroit except for the heroin from their stockpile in their warehouse around the corner from the downtown police precinct. Very soon that heroin would be properly released into the streets, flooded into the veins of the city. 'The Hand' let the blonde go and she came back to ease beneath his fingers that lay in his lap and become a serrated grind in his soft, treacherous body.

Della slept.

Father Hartman prayed.

Georgia Reeves stood looking into her closet and tried to decide what to wear to her rendezvous with her love. Inside she was nervous and excited.

At nine that Thursday night as Prophet James prayed at the last night of revival meeting, Lloyd Nelson prepared for the arrival of the woman he loved. Inside he felt broken and scattered.

As three minutes before ten o'clock came, Georgia stood in front of the elevator that would take her to the thirty-fifth floor. And when she pushed the button, the door opened immediately. She was tense and hesitant but she stepped in. The door closed and she caught herself holding her breath and she forced herself to breathe. And her face was tight and her body was hot and she looked up at the numbers as they lit themselves with the ascent of

the rising, moving enclosure and she watch as the numbers succeeded one another.

Three gave way to seven and seven was quickly doubling itself and the speed of her climb seemed to accelerate until it exceeded her preparation for this joining and she wanted this movement to stop for just a moment until she could slow her racing heart. It was as if this meeting that was before her was coming too quickly and then the numbered lights halted at thirty-five and before the door could open and before the chime that filled her mind could leave, she reached for the love that was there within her.

She grasped that love, tightly, and it steadied her. The door opened slowly and she was ready and she wanted to run to him. And she was strengthened as never before. She believed in her own love now. For within her own love there was no longer fear, there was no longer hesitancy. All that had once emanated as reluctance and trepidation, as a wave, was washed from her when she saw the dark man dressed in silky black standing at the end of the hallway, waiting for her.

He came from her right as a peripheral vision and as she turned to him and began to walk towards him, she knew for the first time in her existence what it was to desire someone more than one desired anything or anyone else.

Lloyd Nelson saw this image of beauty dressed in black move in its seductiveness and sensuality down the long hallway in his direction. He was unable to slow his own heart and he wished to be numb again, to feel nothing again. And as she drew near she smiled and he thought he felt, for a moment, dizzy and disoriented and he attempted to turn away from his own mind and the doorway of the labyrinth that stretched before him. The door had yawned and opened itself and shown a black internal composition and he knew behind the entrance was the path that would lead him beyond the ultimate punishment of the humankind.

Hell on earth was to be alive and invisible and alone and unloved. But below the floors of this worldly Hell lay the remnants of the souls of those who had been grated through the tightly meshed net of agony and relegated to the substratum of abuse where the greatest and truly sublime absurdity of human existence reigned supreme and confident. There! In that unrelenting excruciating pain were those who would live on earth not just lonely but forever alone, in hopeless love.

Georgia moved close to him and as she leaned against him in the doorway there in the empty hallway, Lloyd Nelson was forced by his need and by her hands upon his arms, to hug her. And her hair, natural in its style, was soft against his cheek. He closed his eyes for an instant and for some inexplicable reason the touch of her hair took him somewhere to someone he could not recall. Then she moved and her movement brought him back to this time, his moment, this place.

And as his arms felt the silk of her dress and the scent of the perfume tore through him, in opposition to his willful intent, his mind stripped her of all that which was between her dark, soft flesh and his own body. He held

her there in the hallway and he felt his desire manifest itself as an incipient fullness rose somewhere within his body and sought to settle itself between his legs. And as he wrestled with his desires she pressed herself to him and deep inside he reached for her but his arms that were wrapped around her fell to his sides and from there they rose to push gently and ease her away and he looked into her eyes and he found his own purpose and his own necessary strength in the knowledge of that which truly lay behind his rising unfolding love.

It was useless, his love. Therefore his love rendered her love useless and he was pained by this reality. He was amazed at this pain and as he turned this woman into his apartment he thought about how his pain seemed to stretch across the years and over the miles and find the origin of human suffering in its original and pure form wherever it began. And for the first time in his life he understood that his life was not just one of agony and violence and loss but of ubiquitous horror and he knew this was the truth and reality within the words that he would soon impart to this lovely woman who stood in stark splendor before his longing eyes.

He ushered her into the living room and they stopped and gazed upon one another. There were lights on throughout the room but several glowed weakly and the room was large and so in some corners there was dimness and shadows.

"I'm sorry you came and yet I'm glad you came," he said, softly.

"I had to be here with you," she said, softly.

"You look beautiful." He smiled a little.

"Thank you," she said. "And you look handsome, as always."

"Have you eaten? Are you hungry?"

"I'm not hungry," she replied.

"Would you like a cold drink?"

"Yes, something cold. Some juice would be fine."

He went into the kitchen and she moved around the room looking at the plants, the pictures, the statues. It was a well-furnished and attractive room and she felt the furnishings expressed in various ways the diversity of his complex personality. She was intrigued by the wall of books and it was there he found her as he emerged from the kitchen with a tray on which sat a pitcher of grapefruit juice and glasses and a silver bucket of ice.

She turned and watched as he put ice in the glasses and poured the juice. She was thinking that there was something greatly changed in this man and when he went back to the kitchen to turn on a small light and turn off the ceiling light she believed she knew what it was and she wondered if it was only in her imagination.

Each time he moved towards her or away from her she seemed to feel emotions emanate from him. She had been seeking this transference from the inception of their relationship. She had always tried to feel something from this man and she would wonder if he could feel her varying surging emotions, her desires, her occasional anger, her fears, her happiness, her need for him as it grew and expanded into love.

Now at this time she believed she could feel him. His emotions were obvious and seemingly of a permanent substance and they were strong and they came to her as if they flared from him as heat and were pushed around the room by the movement of his body, the motions of his hands.

Then she turned back to the books and shook her head, no, just a little, to try and dismiss this that could only be any aberration of her mind. "Perhaps," she thought to herself, "I'm only creating this because this is what I want so badly."

He moved towards her and she turned back to him and he handed her a glass of juice and their eyes locked and she said, "Yes!" to herself as she could see in his eyes what she thought she felt. Emotions. To her, his eyes were of the deepest brown and they were pretty and his smooth clear complexion seemed radiant. And as she sipped her drink she could see things in his eyes show themselves to her as he stared at her with a curious expression and she realized his face was becoming tense.

She took a step towards him to see better the looks that flashed. She saw concern, a look of resignation, and she thought she saw tenderness and compassion reach for her. They stood like this in silence and communicated with one another. And the air was filled with low, slow music and there was nothing else except the inaudible voices that moved from within them and came out into the open to seek the light of sound. All that was left were words.

He postponed them as he turned from her, as she spoke.

"You have a very nice apartment," she said, easily.

"Thank you," he replied. "Why don't you look around? Please, feel at home."

She did look around. She wanted to take it all in. She wanted to see for herself the places and things she had often attempted to visualize. His kitchen was neat and clean and painted in bright, green colors. She passed into the den and was amazed at the assortment of fascinating shiny weapons that hung on the light-blue walls. There were rifles and pistols and swords and knives and clubs. And she found herself drawn to them and she paused a moment to look at them closely, to briefly touch several of them. She felt a sense of dread and so she turned to the books. Again there were many books and plants and paintings. Figurines stood on the shelves and plush rugs lay on the floor and thick, soft towels hung in his yellow bathroom.

Then she stood in the doorway of his main bedroom. The tan color of the walls and the deep, soft, tan carpet was soothing and she relaxed in that doorway. She could see the large made-up bed. It was here she had observed him in her mind most. Sleeping, naked. The bedroom. There he was, walking, or standing with his dark, defined muscled body glistening from the water of his shower. She wiped his body in her fantasies and oiled his body and held him next to her own oiled nakedness.

She stared at the bed. They were suddenly there together and where once she had never before this moment seen this room, her images had been hazy and indistinct. But now her thoughts were no longer vague and the vision of

them together was of dimension and warmth flowed over her and her desires for him rose and she pictured him standing behind her. She could feel his eyes on her back and she turned to him. But he was not there. And she hurried away from this frustration.

She returned to the cream-colored living room. He had moved past the bookcase near to the window and he was looking in her direction until she drew close and then he turned to look out of the glass. She stopped close beside him. She was taken aback now by her first real, long notice of the breathtaking, expansive view. She could see the lighted city and the lights across the shiny black water. The beauty and extent of their reflections held her as they stretched in all directions as colorful grounded stars. But the lights could not compare in brightness to the many real stars that blinked in the sky above and as she looked into the blackness that lay between the spaced lights in the sky it seemed very thick and deep, the blackness did.

"There's Canada," and he nodded.

She recalled his words about, and fondness for Canada and their visits there.

"It's beautiful, the view," she nearly whispered.

He spoke. "Yes it is beautiful. Is this as you expected?"

"It's more. Much more."

"What of my place here, where I live, alone?" And there was an emphasis on the last word.

She looked at him. "It's more than I expected also. So many different things to see. So many books. I've thought about being here, alone with you and yet the two of us together." And she emphasized the last word.

He turned to her. He looked at her for a long moment and then he smiled, slightly. "And I've thought many times about you being here. Making my home your home also. For more than just the nights. But only recently, the past few days could I feel you here. Feel what it would be like if I could stop what I was doing and listen and hear you or look up, or open my eyes, and see you. And I've felt you call me. You have called, haven't you?"

"Yes. I have. In my mind, softly aloud, often."

"But when you called, you summoned the one you know and have imagined me to be. But you would have brought to your existence all that I am and have been. You would have brought the potential of harm and the possibility of pain to your life."

She looked as if she would speak and he stopped her with his words.

"Yes," he said. "In harm's way in your attempt to give me something I am unable to accept. My refusal threatens your emotional life. My continued presence jeopardizes your well being."

A look of resolve crossed her face and she shook her head, slowly, no. But she did not speak. The glass grew cold in her hand and she walked over and set it on the tray, on the table near the couch.

"Please," he said, and extended his hand. "Have a seat. Try to make yourself comfortable."

She sat down and inside she was excited and she felt strange.

He stared at her. "A part of me wanted you to come here tonight. Not just so we could talk but also because I have a need to tell you as much as I can about myself. Or at least as much as I am able to remember that is meaningful to me, to us."

Inside he felt calm and an impending sense of relief. He knew more than anything else in the world, at this moment, he wanted, desired desperately to tell his story. So many times as a boy he had wondered where his thoughts went, if perhaps they could be heard by someone, somewhere. Now as a grown man he would give his most private thoughts, his memories, sound. And through this beautiful young woman who was now here before him, his life would live on in the only form that was left to him.

He would impart to her, through his words, what he had seen and felt. And that which she retained would be that of him which would survive and she would be saved from him and she would save a part of him in her memory. As long as she lived he wanted to believe that he would live on, in the imaginary world of existence.

She watched as he sat down in a large chair opposite her and placed his drink on a small table next to his right hand. Music came from her right side from somewhere near the bar. Behind him to her right she could see the wall of books. The window directly behind him faced the buildings and lights of Detroit. To his right side and to her left was the window that allowed Canada to enter this home thirty-five stories above the city. Outside the windows was the night and the rich unending blackness of the night was the preeminent aspect of night's essence.

Inside the window they sat in ambient, dulled light and the lack of brightness brought with it a type of dimness and the accompanying grey shadows were derived from the same essential darkness of the black external night, of all black nights. And lights, both outside and inside were designed to signify the opposite of, the otherness of black and guide one through the dominating shade of nothingness.

They sat there and the nearly full moon was revealed as the last of the clouds in the sky floated away. The moon was sending light. The voice of Lloyd Nelson was low and even and his words were to be as the moon, for they would cast light. They would illuminate and bring revelations, to them both.

"Where should I begin?" he mused, as if he spoke to himself. He fell silent, thinking.

Georgia settled back and her movement from him caused his face to nearly fall into a thin shadow but she could still see him, clearly. He looked mysteriously handsome in this setting. His black silk had a soft sheen that waved as he shifted in his large chair to reach his hand out to grasp his glass and sip his drink. And as he moved, the diamonds on the bracelet he wore, passing through the light, produced sparkling colors. As he returned his drink to the table she stared at the small light near the wall at the bookcase and she waited patiently.

She stared so hard at the light that when she returned her gaze to him, her

eyes had to adjust to his dark-brown skin that seemed to glow now. The silk moved and she blinked. He sat as a youthful looking black king before her. Then she blinked again and there the image remained and she thought of the word ... king and the word ... queen, followed and she smiled just a bit at the thoughts and scenes that wrapped themselves around king and queen and she felt special at that moment, to be with this man. She believed there was nothing he could possibly say that could deter her from her quest to give herself to him. She was confident that he would accept her, wholly, and all that she gave, completely, and through him, with him, she would become a woman and she would have him, for she must possess him as her man. She would not receive in any form a denial and she reminded herself. "I'm not afraid." And in this pause she was walking with him. They were together. Then. His voice brought her back.

"It's always best to commence from the beginning. But the beginning is lost to me, at least lost to my conscious memory. However, in that I am as all other human beings and am not unique in this, inability to remember.

"I've always found it fascinating that those experiences, those very first impressions that are so important and often so intense are forgotten so completely from conscious thought. And unusual is the person who can remember back past their fourth or third year of their life. And even then much of what they recall, if it could be verified, they would discover was distorted from that which occurred in actuality.

"Yet, so much of me was formed in that early period. So much of my personality was put into place those first years. I learned of love and who to love. I learned the frightening aspects of dependency. Frightening in the sense of how children understand and react to the absence of the presence of those upon which their very life depends.

"I'm sure at three or four years I was lively and was able to express pain and joy and jealousy and all the other human emotions that surged within me at that time of my formation. And even at that young age I probably could verbalize certain things that may have been considered amusing or profound.

"Children notice and respond first to movement and so I would have investigated actions and sought answers that would show a normal childish level of curiosity and insight. And the answers and instructions I received would have, hopefully, been designed to assist me in developing my ability to make correct and responsible judgments.

"So when I was around fifteen years of age and had begun searching for some understanding of my existence and the patterns I could see repeating themselves in my life, I went back to my childhood and was barred at a point that was normal. But all that lay beyond that point had been banished so completely from my memories, even as I strained to recollect, that I thought I was different in that aspect and so I turned as if directed, to another area of my existence and that was my dreams.

"As I shared with you, I've always dreamed very vivid dreams that were full of beautiful colors and intense emotions and pure sounds. And I could remember my dreams. Not as something vague and hazy that one attempts,

if they choose, to retain upon awakening for some trivial reasons. That was not the manner in which I dealt with my dreams.

“They would not leave me as the day wore on, or lose their realness. They were as a picture that I could stand before and examine the smallest, most minute details. And I could see indistinct aspects that were attempting to form themselves. And sometimes the dreams were as a slow movie that came in parts, like a serial. The story, the actions, would be carried over from one sleep to the next, resuming where the previous dream had stopped. But again, I was not alone, everyone dreams.

“Peoples of classical antiquity believed dreams were joined to a world of superhuman beings and that what was revealed was from gods and demons and they believed that dreams served a purpose, usually to foretell the future. But throughout time, dreams were accepted as of a divine nature and therefore truthful and valuable in a positive sense or they were evil dreams, worthless dreams designed to mislead and destroy all who believed in their validity.

“Of course as a young boy I didn’t know or really care about these things even though people I was around talked about dreams a lot and were always very interested in what I had dreamed. It was only when I became a teenager and wanted to know why, when I dreamed one particular dream every night for days, sometimes weeks, I would become sick, very sick, that I began to study my dreams. And what I learned and attempted to control was another means of remembering the past, and that’s dreaming. But it was that part of my missing childhood and my illness with which I was concerned, and only that.”

He paused to sip his drink and he looked to his right, out of the window for a moment. He gathered himself.

“I remember nothing, nothing before the moment I was lying in a large bed. I had awakened from a sleep. A sleep so deep there had been within it nothingness, no dreams, only silence and blackness, a sleep that was a distance, a depth beyond a coma. It was as if I had returned from death and I had parted the unconscious realm and was not only awake but suddenly, newly, alive.

“And I was slowly looking around, attempting to understand, to recognize my surroundings. There was a woman sitting beside me and I did not know her name or where I was or who I was. My own previous identity was lost to me. All was lost except that very moment I opened my eyes.

“Since that instant I have not only dreamed and sustained in my memory my dreams, but I have also been able to keep in my mind and draw upon the minutes, hours, nearly all of every day throughout the years. And I can retain not only what I see and hear but also all of the words I have ever read.

“The only times I have really lost my memory was when I had fallen into that first coma like state and when I once took such an amount of alcohol and drugs that I lost awareness of everything. And when I came to myself I was choking this young man and it shocked me. Not that I was choking someone, but that I had absolutely no knowledge of the previous hours or

any understanding of why I had my hands around the throat of this stranger. And I never used alcohol or drugs again.

“You see, for me, memory was an inextricable aspect of living, of existing. I valued greatly my memory. And I felt to lose forever any part of it was to relinquish a part of me. Not just a piece of my mind, but a portion of my life. To forget in such a manner was to move for a period of time into death. I chose not to take a chance to die like that, in some drug-induced stupor, even if only for a few hours because I believed I had already lost from my mind entirely too much significant time.

“Coming out of that drugged state was similar to the way I came to myself in that bed with that strange woman sitting there in that chair. But you would have to experience that to understand. When one awakes, one usually knows that sleep preceded the awakening because they can probably remember that they went to sleep because it was their time to sleep or they recall the process of growing tired and that they had perhaps yawned and begun falling into sleep through this normal procedure. Not passing out or coming to, but preparing for bed or lying on a couch or just by choice, closing one’s eyes to induce sleep. And from the awakening there is the knowledge of having been asleep.

“But as I was in that bed, and as I came to, I was suddenly and inexplicably there. It was amazing. It bothered me. Yet I was not afraid and I remember the first words I spoke. I looked at the woman and I said, “Who are you?” I looked at my surroundings and I was bewildered and I can recall right now that sense of confusion. Then other sounds came slowly to me from somewhere far away. Music and muted voices and muffled laughter and all the sounds that would rise and move through a house such as the one in which I awoke.

“It was a house of gambling and bootleg liquor and women who briefly sold a part of themselves to the many men who came and went with them to small rooms upstairs. But I didn’t know those things at that moment. All I knew was that I was somewhere strange, that I felt lost, and that my question was unanswered. So I posed it again as I tried to sit up. “Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m your Aunt Charlena,” I was told.

“I laid back down to think about that. And as I was thinking, my thoughts felt so unusual because I didn’t know about what I should be thinking. I felt that there was something I needed to know, something I was not being told, could not be told until I asked the proper question. But most of all I felt disoriented and I must have looked like that because my Aunt Charlena began to talk to me, explain to me, assure me. She whispered. ‘You’re Lloyd Nelson. You’re Lloyd Nelson, baby. You’ve been sick. But you’re alright now. Everything’s gonna be alright.’ And for me it was at that moment in time, immediately following my being made aware of the existence of an Aunt Charlena, that to my conscious knowledge, Lloyd Nelson came into being.”

Georgia had eased forward and reached for her drink and as she sipped it

she noticed the ice had almost melted and she put ice in her glass from the ice bucket and poured herself more juice from the pitcher. She rose to take his glass and she put ice in his glass and poured him juice and as she went back and set his glass down beside him she looked at him but his eyes stared once again out of the window. His voice followed her as she returned to the couch and as she sat down, he was speaking.

“I’m sure it’s difficult to listen to this that I’m saying and see and understand what’s really so different about that particular period of my life. It’s not at all easy for me to explain it, so I won’t go into great detail. But what was happening was that I was experiencing everything as a feeling, an immediate feeling. I was not as a baby at its first moments of life. It was as if I had never truly been a child who progressed through small sequences of time until it becomes of an age and mental development that was a natural move forward.

“I was almost four years old when I came to from that long sleep. At least that’s the age that was soon decided upon. Yet as I said, I knew nothing of my existence before that moment in terms of specifics. But I retained those basic abilities that I had already learned and incorporated into my life.

“I could perform all the functions a normal child of that age would have mastered. I did these things automatically, without being taught. I had knowledge of being, and of being there as I was. There was an internal presence of a pre-existing knowledge of realities there within my being. I had a feeling of the essence of the life I had lived to that point but no memory of it. That’s the best way I can put it.

“One of the first things I requested was a book. And I asked my Aunt to read to me, explain the words and pictures to me. So as I attempted to regain my strength from the illness that I had been under, she would read daily to me for long lengths of time as I lay in bed too weak to really do much except for brief periods.

“I asked. At each point I would not understand I asked and it helped me greatly to have the concepts I lacked, to come to me quickly through the many stories to which I was exposed in the wonderful books she brought to read. She would show me things in the pictures. And when she would leave me alone, and I was alone a good deal of time, I would spend hours pouring through the books that surrounded me. I would look at them and find the letters I knew, that I had been taught somewhere in my forgotten past and I found new words and I formed new questions that I would pose each time my Aunt returned.

“She knew I had no memory of my previous life so she spent much of that time using my questions to construct a past for me. Years later I would ponder on those first months when I was coming to myself, learning, and she would answer me patiently with elaborate replies, as if all about which I wondered was proper and important.

“I had no way of knowing for certain where there was deceit and truth within that time. But as I was given truths, I was also handed lies. When I asked about my mother, my father, and I learned of the concept of mother,

father, parents, from the stories I heard, I was told mine had been killed in a car accident. I had to learn of death. I began to draw other concepts together as I got older. And although much of what my Aunt Charlena said, much of what she read I couldn't understand, still I could see pictures form from behind her voice and I would dream of the things she gave me and so I became this amalgamation of fact and fantasy, pictures and words, lies and truths. I formulated myself in this manner and brought forth those most important aspects of my existence on a basis of what I was told and what I created.

"I dismissed my parents through deaths. I dismissed brothers and sisters through lack of birth. Uncles disappeared. Grandparents went to heaven. I learned to construct all that I needed, all that I desired, through arrangement of characters as if within stories. And at the same time I let go of all that I believed did not belong to me and therefore was not mine. That's how I lived. That's how I grew.

"My life was an acceptance of that which encompassed me as being life as it was designed to be, supposed to be, for me. Of course others lived differently. The books told me that. But it wasn't as though I was exposed to stories about normal people doing normal things, whatever that means, to be normal.

"My existence was of the house in which I was, in a very real sense, born, and where I lived. I saw or interacted with very few children. And when on occasion when children were brought around me I found them peculiar, difficult to comprehend. So my existence only extended as far as I could act and react in the confines of the immediate reality that was around me.

"But as children, indeed as all human beings, I extended my reality and spread it into the imaginary. For in the order of existence that is known as the imaginary, the fantasy of life is as real, especially for a child, as is reality.

"I did not know then as I know now of symbolic representations. But I lived in the symbolic world also. My Aunt of course symbolized my mother, my lost mother, and provided me the love of the mother, as every child must have.

"The men who came to my house, the regulars, that I grew close to, were uncles and big brothers although they could not have known that. But I would take from all that existed in my world, all that entered my world and push and pull everything and everyone across the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. The women who lived and worked in my house, who came to my house, were mothers in the absence of my Aunt Charlena and older sisters and even lovers. But I was not provided the law.

"Throughout the history of humans, society has been established and maintained and passed on through the rules, the laws that are instituted and given over to the child by the father. All children must understand and come to respect the laws and receive restrictions and the word, no, as it comes from the father, even if the father is symbolic, he must live, influence, and control.

"Oh, I learned of rules. I learned that the person who always tried to

cheat when they gambled would try to cheat their way through life. I learned how to look people in their eyes, to see inside them, to judge them. I learned whether or not to hit sixteen when playing blackjack and the possibilities of drawing to an inside straight in poker. How to palm and set dice in my little hands and that without money, without power, there was no life.

“It was a fascinating world in which I lived. And as I said, it was to me perfectly normal. Yet, it was distorted. The house I traveled through was everything, all things all the time. It was a huge house. Even as I recall it as an adult it was large and of course as a child it was even more so.

“There was a large, full basement, a furnished attic and at least ten rooms, not including my room and my Aunt’s room. As I said, liquor was sold. There was gambling, music, food and people, all kinds of people. Every now and then even white people were there, white men and women. It was during the last of World War II and I can still see the men in their uniforms. I can still hear the blues music and the fast music that was played on the big 78 records. I would watch them dance and I would dance.

“The women wore their colors and put colors on their lips. I would get close to them and they would hug me and I could smell the scents of their perfumes. I could feel everything. I could feel the shades of their bodies as if there were differences in textures to the various colors of their soft, warm flesh.

“I would hide in the upstairs closets to watch them, the men and women together. And there was a young girl who took it upon herself to show me, teach me all that a man would seek from a woman and I knew of these things before I reached seven years of age.

“I loved my life. I was free. I didn’t go to school and so my days, my schedules, my times, were the times of an after-hours joint. I was somebody because I belonged to my Aunt Charlena and she was somebody. She ran a real house properly and I can say that even after all these years.

“We were rich. Not because she made lots of money but because we were rewarded with all that makes life exciting when one lives comfortably in a different world. In a world that is their own and that they rule. Yet, the house was as a figment of an imagination, a dream. And everyone who came there was attempting to satisfy their personal fantasies.

“I lived as the only true child there amongst the adult children. That’s what just about all of them were, large-sized children. In some ways I was older than many who came there. And I was spoiled by that life that moved at night and slowed in the daylight and as best I could figure when I looked back, I spent around four years there and to a child, four years can pass quickly and can last forever.

“I could not really judge weeks and months but we would celebrate my birthday at Christmas of each year so I know I had my fourth birthday in 1943 and a seventh on Christmas Day, 1946. But before I turned eight my world was altered drastically, and then forever.

“I know now fairly well what probably happened but at that time I noticed that something was wrong first through changes in routines and then

hushed words and attempts to hide actions. When I asked, they told me what had occurred but still, at my age I just couldn't understand the far-reaching ramifications. A man had gotten killed in a knife fight in the backyard and I had seen other fights but this was different not just because someone had been killed but because the dead man was white and his killer was black. The police had been called and I'm sure they had known about the many dealings of the house but the death changed their attitudes or maybe they were forced to act. Our lives began to crumble.

"I was taught how to hide in the basement in the coal bin when the police came. And they started coming often. They would arrest everyone there. They would take the girls away again and again. The war was over so the mood of the people had changed from that of wartime when everyone lived as if there was no tomorrow. People turned to other activities. I also heard talk of new nightclubs and even other illegal houses where those who did want to, could go in much more safety.

"Finally, they threatened to take me from my Aunt and she stopped everything and our lives as they had been previously, ended. My Aunt and I lived in that big house then, just the two of us. I would play records for her and talk to her and read to her. And she would drink gin, smoke her little cigars and rock in her rocking chair and she was wasting away, and I didn't know that in my own way I was also leaving. We were both going away.

"My Aunt Charlena was beautiful to me. She had light skin with beautiful hazel-colored eyes with gold flecks and she had long black hair that had streaks of grey in it. She smiled a lot and she was loud and she danced and sang and she could get real stern with the people who came to our house and she could be so gentle and she would make me laugh at things. Everybody liked her. And I looked back and realized she must have been in her late fifties.

"We lived alone like that for what I can only guess to be were a few months. The numbers' man would come and this woman brought us groceries and sometimes other people would stop by and many times she wouldn't even answer the door. The only things that brought her pleasure was when she played the numbers and listened to me read. We would just sit and talk or sit in the dark without talking and the music would go on and on.

"It was the September before my eighth birthday when I began having this strange dream. And when I would sit at the kitchen table and tell it to her she would just shake her head and open her numbers' books and try to figure out what to play. But she couldn't hit anything from that dream like she could from my other ones. I didn't dream anything but that same dream over and over.

"Then I began to get sick. I would wake up in the middle of the night in a sweat, running a fever. And I can still see the look in my Aunt's eyes as she sat there beside me because she knew I had this fever before, almost four years earlier. The doctor who kept seeing me gave her some medicine that I took, but it didn't help. And he didn't know what was wrong. He said he had never seen a fever like this, the way it would come and go.

"I don't know how long it was before I began to sleep a lot. And it was then my Aunt began to say she had things to tell me. There were things I should know and as soon as I got well we would have a party, just the two of us with cake and ice cream and we would talk and she would tell me things. She begged me to get well and she would kneel beside me as I lay in bed and pray for me. I would tell her over and over again that I would be alright. And when she cried about what I should know I was silent because I believed I knew already.

"You see, she could never tell me in such a way about my parents that I could believe her. By my sixth year I understood that as my real Aunt she should be the sister of my mother or father. But she could not give me her specific connections to my family. She had always tried to be as truthful as she could with me. There was nothing I could not ask her that she would not explain to me as best she could, I mean nothing. And today I appreciate that.

"Children have a strong curiosity and some also have a strong innate ability to sense not just the truth but also the lies behind denials, false words, and deceiving emotions. They seem to know the lies that come too fast in answers or come too slow. Children will always seek to know the truth unless continually frustrated in that endeavor and then they will make up their own truths.

"I was always able to leave many issues and move on to other things because I accepted them, felt them as true and so they would not concern me as something forbidden or mysterious. Babies, the naked body and sex, drinking, cursing, anger, gambling, everything was natural, like eating, and therefore I treated all those things as something natural. And I learned to handle them in what was for me a natural way. When I was given these things openly, honestly, I received them easily. I found no need to dwell on those issues just as I didn't dwell too long over my peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"I always got the impression that I could know everything, eventually. She tried not to lie to me and she found it difficult to deceive me because she was so uninhibited. If I asked, she told me. And if I couldn't comprehend, she would tell me I would understand later. She would remind me how I couldn't understand certain words a while ago but now I could and that's the way all things would happen. They would come in their time and they would come when I was ready and able to understand them. I was satisfied with that.

"But all that revolved around my mother and father was different. It was not only confusing, it seemed to vary in details and I never felt comfortable with the words of the stories. It was as if my parents were not really gone forever. I could not conceive of forever so I never really accepted their disappearance. I rejected their ending.

"Aunt Charlena would pass to me feelings that she was uneasy with my questions. She struggled to remain patient. She sought to change the subject. She would hold me in her arms so that I could not see into her eyes. I knew she was lying to me, and she knew that I knew. And since it caused her pain I had ceased to ask those questions. I didn't want to hear the answers. It didn't

matter. I loved my Aunt and at that time that's what I cared about most.

"So as I lay in my bed, in fever, she prayed for me and promised to tell me everything. I told her it was alright. I told her how much I loved her. And I drifted off to sleep. It was a deep sleep, a long sleep, a sleep of nothingness. And when I woke up my Aunt Charlena was gone forever. She was dead and I would never see her again."

He stopped. Then he looked through the window.

It was quiet in the room. The music ceased and the absence of sound became acute. As the record album changed, the arm of the stereo made noise, and Georgia jumped, inside. And the album made noise as it dropped down and the arm moved back in a clicking noise and it lowered with a click and the music resumed.

She was waiting for his voice. She reached for her glass, sipped her drink, returned the glass to the table and she thought she could hear her own movement, her dress rustle. And it was only that, along with the low, slow music, that sounded.

He had talked to her on other occasions like this, in her apartment, as they rode together in his car. He had spoken of things pertaining to her schooling or to certain aspects of contemporary life. They had discussed people of the past, events of history and he had sounded just as he did now. Detached, separated from his own words. As if he was observing something of mild interest and describing it as it passed by.

Yet, this story, these scenes were filled with importance and emotions and she wondered how he could sound like this, so calm, so empty. And she thought of the feelings she believed she had seen just a while ago in his eyes. She stared at him.

He looked at her now.

"I want you to realize something," he said. "I'm not telling you these things to elicit sympathy from you, so you'll experience sorrow for me. And there's a lot I'm not sharing. But I am trying to give you enough so that you'll have a chance to know much of who I am, who I will be, and what that means to you, to us."

"Yes," she said softly. "I understand."

He took a drink. He took a deep breath. He continued.

"When my Aunt died I believe a lot died with her. Not only would I be shut off from her knowledge, her spirit, her love, but I would also lose all the information she held for me, about me. I'm sure there were things she could have told me that would have answered some of the questions that in later years became significant for me.

"Who knows who she really was to me, where my name came from, if I'll really be twenty-eight on my next birthday? With the connections she had is my birth certificate valid? Maybe I'll be twenty-seven or thirty. These were things that for many reasons, years later I would often wonder about.

"And what of my parents? Who were they? Did she know? What happened to them? Did she know that? Eventually those issues pushed incessantly at me. But back then I had other things to deal with.

“It was in late September of 1947 when my Aunt died and I was sick. Days and dates later became important to me, very necessary to me and I was able to figure back to these months and that year.

“I must have been asleep for two, maybe even three weeks. And when I came to I was very weak. But I could recall clearly those last moments before I went to sleep. I could hear my Aunt Charlena, her voice, talking to me. I could remember her feeling my forehead and when she put her face close to mine the thing I thought was that her face felt warm and I wondered if she was sick like me and I could feel her tears on my face and that was all.

“And when I came to, the first thing I thought of, after her, was the coal bin in the basement of my house. I had never known blackness like that which seemed to live in that little room. When I was hiding in there and the door was closed I would sit there and peer towards the wall and there was nothing to see, absolutely nothing. I knew the wall was there. I knew there was coal piled against the wall but I saw nothing but the deepest black.

“I would open my eyes wide and strain against that blackness and I would hold my hand out in front of my face and I could feel it there but I couldn’t see it. I would wave my hand and try to stir that black up, to swirl it around and try to move it, to part it and find some light within it, behind it, but there was none. It was too thick. I could feel it, the thickness.

“That’s what I did when I came out of that sleep. I tried to move the blackness with my hands and I thought of the coal bin and I was thinking and I was wondering. And I was blind.”

Georgia’s heart jumped now and she drew a sharp breath. She put her hands together in her lap, tightly together, to hold on.

“And in that coal bin always I could hear music or voices or sounds from upstairs. The sounds would be faint, coming from far away. I would hold my breath and turn my head to the side as if that would help me hear better and always I could hear something, even in silence there seems to be sounds.

“But as I was waving my hands in the black air I was stopped by a silence that was endless and when my hands fell to the bed, still there was nothing. I kicked my feet against the covers and I pounded the bed and I heard nothing. I was deaf.

“And then I screamed. Into the blackness, into the air, in my mind, I screamed. I was no longer wondering or thinking. I was crying out and I was terrified and I tried to roll over, to turn from the blackness but it followed me. The silence followed me and I slapped the sheets but again I heard nothing. But I could feel the bed beneath my open, flailing hands. Not only could I not recognize my own screams because I couldn’t hear them, but I could not feel my cries rise in my throat. My throat was numb, empty of vibration, devoid of sound. I was a mute. I could not talk.”

“No!” Georgia said. “No!” she whispered.

“Oh yes,” he replied. And a slight, ironic smile played upon his lips. “But I didn’t know. I thought I was again dreaming and I was struggling within the dream. I thought of death. What was it like? Was I dead? If I was dreaming let me wake up. If I was dead let me experience a renaissance and live again.

"I'll never forget my terror. I fought not only against this thing I was within, but also against this terrorizing thing that was within me. I rolled in that bed. I thrashed and I fell against the sides and there were bars there. On both sides of me there were bars and I pulled myself up, to reach the top, to find a way out and as I touched the top of the barrier, strange, rough hands grabbed me and pulled me, pushed me down and then other hands grabbed me and I kicked out against them. I fought them and they were stronger than me and they pinned me down and put a needle in my arm and soon I was again asleep.

"The next time I woke up I was strapped to the bed, unable to move. My mind was racing and I was confused and it would be several weeks before I understood I was in a hospital. I would find out the bars I felt were those that come with those beds that have sides that go up and down and are designed to keep one in. But I couldn't go anywhere. Even if I could, I had nowhere to go. Eventually I would come to know that I was in Children's Hospital on the eastside of Detroit.

"Soon after I woke up that next time I felt hands on me. But they were soft hands, a woman's hands, caring hands. Hands that I would later understand belonged to the night nurse. She tried to show me through her touch that I was safe and that I was alright. But of course, I wasn't alright and very quickly they comprehended that I couldn't see or hear or talk.

"I didn't know until much later that I had been brought to the hospital emergency area by a man who told the people there that my aunt, my only family, had died. She had been dead for days when they found me, alone, with her body. He told them my name and gave them a suitcase with some of my belongings and papers that identified me. They had taken me to be treated and when they came back, the man was gone. Who he was, I'll never know.

"When the doctors and nurses determined my condition they didn't know if the fever I had, had caused the symptoms or if I had always been like that and they had no way of finding out at that time. I was in the hospital for about six months, from around October of 1947 through Christmas and the new year of 1948 until I think, about the first week of April. And for the first four of those months I experienced nothing but a tremendous sense of fear.

"I'm sure as a child you've walked into a dark room before and felt afraid between those moments you enter the room and step and reach the light switch. And I know you've had someone playfully sneak up behind you or leap out at you and grab you or perhaps yell out and your heart has jumped and there's this rush of fear as it surges through your body and it takes several seconds before you're calm again. You know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

"I was feeling like that almost all the time. But it was much more than anything I had ever experienced before. I was heightened in my anticipation and on edge and raw. I tried to handle it. I thought about the first few times I walked down the basement steps to put coal in the furnace in the wintertime

and how I was afraid something or someone could be hiding in that room and when I stepped into the pitch black room I had to reach quickly for where the long string on the light bulb should be and if I didn't feel it my fear would rise and then the string would brush against my hand or arm and I would yank it and I could feel relief at the glowing of the light. And because I didn't like the feeling of fear I had forced myself to negotiate the steps slowly and to take my time as I walked and to relax as I groped for the string. I had begun learning to control my feelings.

"So as I lay there in my blindness I would repeat to myself something one of the soldiers who came to the house had told me over and over until I had memorized it. He said that courage was not the absence of fear but the ability to master fear, not be made a prisoner of fear but to continue on in the face of fear and when he would head to the door to leave he would always point at me and tell me to continue on. So I fought against the terror within me.

"I fought against the thoughts that I was bad and was being punished for some wrong I had done. I struggled against an overwhelming sense of guilt. I would push those thoughts away, somewhere inside of me. I tried to tell myself that I had done nothing to have this happen. I told myself that I would be alright again. Soon. I would be alright.

"I continually turned to my internal essence to calm myself, to seek relief. I would visualize my Aunt, my house, the people who had been there, the things I had done. At first everything and everyone was just there, still, unmoving. Then slowly I could move them and they would walk and dance. Then I could hear voices and music. I could see colors. And I made everything vivid. The colors seemed so very real in their brightness. I began to understand what it would be like to have never seen reds and blues and yellows and to be unable to understand their visual essence.

"I would count and read and in my mind I saw numbers and words. In my mind I could see. And I found pleasure in that. I could understand there would be no music without sound and I could hear the songs of my life in my head. And because I could not speak I would see myself singing in these images I created and in this way I could once again hear my own voice.

"My thinking began to ease my fear. I was able to turn my mind to my external world. I extended my techniques and conceptually I began to live. I used all I had left to me, my ability to feel through my hands and to smell and taste. The food I ate and the times of my meals told me the times of day. I learned the touches of the day nurse, the afternoon nurse, the night nurse and arranged the slowly passing days through them and the activities that accompanied them.

"Groups of doctors would come by in the day. They would poke at me, examine me and I was sure, talk about me. I would be placed around other children in the daytime. Given toys to play with and tests to measure my abilities and intelligence.

"Afternoon was similar yet changed from early daytime. Night varied from all else in movement but of course, appeared the same to me. I began to develop the ability to smell the differences in people. And from that I

would ponder if those around me were angry or happy or sad. I would judge people by their scent or the way they touched me and I could like or dislike them for those reasons. I even knew of the sexual activities of one of the night nurses and the doctor on duty. I could smell them and remember the men and women of the house where I once lived.

“Eventually I could see in my mind the large room where we were taken to play and I began to move around it and as my strength continued to grow I gained more and more confidence. But changes of routine upset me. A nurse would not be there when she was supposed to and I would try to figure the period of time she would be gone and decided it would normally be two days. Children would come and then go and I wondered where they had gone. And just as I was becoming accustomed to my surroundings I was taken from the hospital and placed in a Catholic orphanage in Farmington, Michigan.

“I was afraid again after I had been moved. The concepts I had developed at the hospital that allowed me to function had to be discarded and replaced. At least those did that involved my immediate external surroundings. My world had been quite limited in the hospital. It consisted of the room where I slept with all the other children, the play area and the hallways. And I traveled a great deal in a wheelchair.

“The people I had been around had some understanding of my level of intelligence. We found ways to communicate with our hands and they knew me as a human being with a particular personality. And in that unique place I believe they had come to know me as the little boy who carried books and yet could not see. In the world of the hospital there was sickness and pain and death and it was a world that had a special sense of tolerance and compassion and its own reality.

“The first time I had really been in the presence of children was in the hospital. The second time was in the orphanage and it was there I learned of the nature of the humankind. In the orphanage I was placed around children who had been abandoned, discarded in one form or another for one reason or another. Put there perhaps out of necessity or forced there by fate. Regardless of their situation or the circumstances that defined their lives they all had their own personal stories and traumas.

“They were different ages, different colors. And of the thirty or so of us there, I was the only one who was blind and who could not hear or speak. I was the only one of my type. The nuns were trying to teach me to read in Braille and to use my hands to express myself and I received a great deal of attention from the adults.

“Perhaps from the other children there were elements of jealousy and fear but they were bothered by me in ways they didn’t understand. They used my differences, my handicaps as weapons against me and they attacked me from the very beginning. They came up with unique ways to cause me problems and increase my discomfort. They would hide my possessions from me. Move things from their normal places. Pull chairs from under me. Trip me. Beat me. And I could feel them talking about me, laughing at me. I could feel

and smell their fear of me, their hatred of me. And I know hatred is a strong word but that's exactly what it was.

"Children don't know how to become angry or how to dislike. They become enraged and throw violent tantrums over things that seem trivial to adults. Their pain can be acute, as if they cannot endure it. They hate with a vengeance that would be frightening in a supposedly grown person and all these emotions are pure and uncontrolled in their intensity and obvious in their expression.

"Of course children can love also. And their love is also very intense and depending on their age it can be so overly demanding and command such exclusivity that the object of that love will not know peace. And the jealousy and envy of a child can be extreme and demonstrated easily through acts of violence.

"There's really no need for me to go too far into the child in terms of the necessity to instruct that child to control their emotions. That's always been the job of society and the guardians of the morality of society, in our case western morality. That responsibility falls initially to the parents, the ones who are supposed to be the first to love the child and protect and guide that child. Then there are those of the extended family and the formal teachers that must control the child and force the child to suppress and modify their emotions. And when that fails, the rebellious ones, the misfits will find themselves under the power of the law and the police and the judges will ultimately uphold the laws of society and extract demanded punishment designed to deter them and others from their nonconforming, lawless ways. Everyone must be tamed, civilized and made into responsible adults and that's why I say I learned of the true internal essence of the humankind right there in that orphanage.

"The madness of this world will always have a lack of control and lack of structure except in the fact that it's a structured madness. Within all the vicious brutality of humans, within all the hatred, the jealousy, if it breaks down into violence and the violence is unusually cruel and extreme, and most importantly if it seems senseless, it will always have the quality of childishness about it. The perpetrators will be emotionally infantile.

"Humans have never grown up and thus it will always be the unrestricted, uneducated child within who will in the end destroy them and everything and everyone around them because humans will never grow up. And just as a child, a human is unable to be intelligent with their love, whatever that word, love, means. That's why a human being is able to inflict pain and destroy in the name of love. Whether it's love of God or country or the love of some vague, unintelligible, indistinct principle. But let me not go any further in that direction.

"The children of the orphanage, all boys, ranging in ages from three and four years old to twelve or thirteen, developed and lived within their own world. They had leaders and followers and the order was based quite simply on the stronger dominating the weaker, or, the older, attempting to control the younger. But because I was so dependent on others, due to my condition,

it wasn't just the bigger boys, even the smaller, younger children attacked me. The five and six year olds were able to get to someone bigger than them and use me to express their hatred of the older boys.

"At first their little tricks were harmless in the sense that they only caused me problems that I could eventually overcome. And they would, at first, on rare occasions put their hands on me to strike me because the nuns tried their best to keep their attention on everyone as much as possible. But there were too many of us and kids will find a way. And even though I tried not to provoke them and kept to myself, their attacks increased in number and intensity.

"The adults would see me with a swollen eye or busted lip and know someone had gotten to me, perhaps at night. But if no one else told, there was no way for them to know who was responsible because of course I usually had no idea. And once when I knew who had struck me by their scent, the nuns could not understand when I tried to demonstrate that I could find my attacker. They weren't about to let me go around and sniff everyone and then accept my blind accusation.

"Father Hartman would come and sit with me for long periods of time and we would try to communicate and he helped me to pass the days. And I knew he was observing me and I could feel his quality of peace. And I would think of him and my thoughts were of many different things and I lived in my internal world and that's how those first four months at the orphanage passed.

"I was living in a strange world where I was constantly on guard. The senses I retained were sharpened and were attuned to the slightest changes in my environment. And that which I had lost, wanted to be, again. Throughout the days I would strain to make sounds, trying to speak. It was as if every moment, each instant, I was straining to see, listening for sounds. And it was in this state that I would hallucinate and believe my abilities had returned. I would dream and my dreams were of wishes. I wanted to exist as Lloyd Nelson again, in the way he was at a time that seemed like years ago, a lifetime ago.

"I cried a lot. And I disliked myself for that. I shed my silent tears at night, in my bed, so no one would see me. I didn't want anyone to know. Many nights I cried myself to sleep and it had not yet been ten months and I was afraid of the future and afraid of those around me and confused by what I believed to be, cruel treatment of me.

"Then, near the first of August of 1948, Red came into my world and in ways he helped me in my life and in ways I helped him in his. He had been in the orphanage before. He was first brought there when he was two years old. He never knew his father. He had been taken from his mother after she had begun to hear voices and the voices had told her to burn the devil out of her child and she had set him on fire.

"From the age of two until he turned eleven he lived in the orphanage. Then, about seven months before I came, he had been placed in a home, with a family. But after almost a year he had still been unable to adjust and he

would become violent and so they sent him back to Father Hartman.

“He took to me immediately and he became my protector and my eyes. He would watch out for me. We began to develop our own language with our hands and after just a couple of months we were inseparable. Bear was put in the orphanage in late September and he quickly joined Red and myself, and it became the three of us against everybody else. At least that’s the way we felt about it.

“Bear’s father had left him as a baby with his grandparents and never came back. He had been moved from one family member to another until finally he was placed in the orphanage. He and Red are about the same age so he must have been a little over twelve years old at the time. Whereas Red had to be teased or goaded to fight, Bear was different, he fought all the time for any reason. And soon after he arrived, I began fighting.

“Kids who teased me or attacked me would find themselves being caught and held by Red or Bear or the both of them and I would beat those I was angry with. Sometimes they would push a kid into me who I was after and I would be able to get my hands on him and wrestle with him and fight him on the ground. And I got good at fighting. And I enjoyed it.

“My emotions began to alter. Where once I was hurt and felt pain by the actions of the other kids and felt as if I was being punished for some unknown reasons, new feelings were created. I began to feel rage and I wanted to hurt the others, punish them. My life was changing and by Thanksgiving I could hear again.” Lloyd Nelson stopped.

Georgia smiled. “That must have been something,” she said, “to be able to hear again. How long was it that you were deaf?”

“Yes,” he answered. “It was something quite special. And it was strange. It had been a little over fourteen months, as best as I could later estimate.”

“How did it happen?”

He smiled a bit. He nodded his head, yes. “Slowly,” he said. “At first I thought I was imagining things, the faint sounds as they came to me. In my mind I had heard sounds before but they were of my own construction. They were sounds that were appropriate to the scenes I was creating. But around a week before Thanksgiving, I began to hear unusual noises, intrusive sounds that would distract me and that would interfere with the thoughts that flew through my head.

“I would stop, just as I had done everyday for the past months, to listen, and after a few days I was certain I was really hearing sounds. I indicated this to Red and he told Bear and for the next week we stayed excited as little by little I began to hear more and more. Sounds became clearer and louder. And as we ate our turkey slices and cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving dinner, no one else knew but Red and Bear, that I could hear again. And it would be several weeks before I would allow Father Hartman to know.

“Those first days in late November were wonderful, even though I found it difficult to sleep because I was afraid I would wake up without sound again. But that passing time was unique in that the others didn’t know I could hear them and so they talked freely about things I should not have ever

heard, about me, and my two friends, and other things that were best kept secret. But it wasn't just that. It was the beauty I was discovering as sound gradually returned to me. It was as if in its absence it had intensified and was coming back to me in some exceptional form that was only for me.

"Before I was sick, I could hear hidden things in the voices of others. But it was as if I dealt with these things as a vague, unsure feeling, an intuition. But as my hearing returned, every noise was dull and soft and yet each sound was sharper, clearer. All that was behind the voice, and that was concealed within the nuances of the words, was distinct, keen. I felt positive I could detect the emotions that were submerged there. It was different than before. It was as if I were no longer a child. I was someone or something else.

"In the adults I could feel the truths, the deceptions, as solid and heavy. In the children I could hear the hatred behind their loud verbal expressions as they called themselves playing and making harmless jokes, saying things for fun, just kidding, as they would say. I could hear their loneliness and fears. Their desires were revealed to me in sounds.

"There were things hidden behind the voices of the nuns and beneath the smell of coffee on the breath of Father Hartman. And I knew that regardless of how they spoke, what they truly meant could be heard if one knew how to listen.

"I could hear color in voices. I knew the nuns were white. Father Hartman was white. I could hear whiteness and blackness in the speech of the kids around me. I couldn't see them but I could feel them. I learned that hatred and brutality is colorless. And that those who attacked me were both black and white. I would never be able to hate a person simply because of their color. I had been exposed to white people, doctors and nurses, who cared for me and attempted to love me in their own way and before I could hear their voices I knew the soft touch of the nuns and the serenity in the essence of the Father.

"I would be able to understand later that racism is taught. The little four and five year olds didn't care about color. And the battles of the older boys were fought for different reasons. But behind our fights was that which is not necessary to teach an adult or child and that's inherent hatred and aggression. When that unrepressed, uncontrolled hatred is pointed at a different group or a person of a different color, it is revealed and labeled as what it has become. If all the black people in this world were removed from this earth, if all the different races suddenly disappeared and only white people remained, the whites would kill each other. If there were only black people on this earth, they, we, would destroy each. It's the nature of being human.

"I decided that all the kids weren't bad. There were white and black kids who wanted to be, tried to be, decent. But I recognized also that they treated me as they felt about me and I understood that it was best for them to fear me. Their childish hatred would never leave them so I had to put a level of fear along with it in order for them to consider their actions against me. I had to help them control their animosity and aggression.

“The return of my hearing allowed me to have imparted to me through sound, dislikes and angers and joy and pride and love and all the things a human being experiences. The adults spoke and the children spoke and they were similar in their concealed expressions. I understood that no matter what a person said, it was their actions that would be in the end all that was really important. And that would become all that was meaningful to me.

“Did they say one thing and do something else? Did they remember they were supposed to do something, had made a promise, or did they forget? Could I believe what I heard from them? No, I could believe what they did, to me, for me. It was because of my lack of sight that I could see things, clearly. How did they touch me? It’s as if the ability to see in one manner has made humans blind in another.

“Christmas came, and on my ninth birthday everyone, of course by then, knew I could hear normally. There had been subtle changes in their attitudes towards me. They became careful in their expressions and hesitant in their speech. They had to adjust to my being able to hear the things they said. But they couldn’t know I sensed the reality behind their words.

“I spent the next months listening and enjoying the essence of sounds and all I could discover behind them. Red and Bear would read to me and talk to me and I would stand at the window and from the noises that came to me I could visualize the outside. I had hope that I would see and speak again. I began to will this. I no longer wished or hoped. And even though I could now hear the prayers of the nuns and the Father, I ignored their words. I believed that I could will through my determination and my desire, those changes I sought.

“In April of 1949, I was sitting on my bed with my two friends and Bear made a remark that I thought was funny and I felt something in my throat and I heard a sound that came from inside me, like a chuckle and I put my finger to my lips to stop them from saying anything. They led me outside and we went behind the tool shed near the playground and I made noises and they laughed and laughed and by late May I was able to talk.

“We were very close, the three of us. The actions of Red and Bear had convinced me of their reality. They treated me as a friend or brother and I mean brother in the true and proper sense of that word. I could hear their sincerity in their voices and feel it in their attitudes towards me. And that summer we could talk together of friendship and future and all the things that concerned boys of nine, which I was, and thirteen, which they were.

“I knew of their differences. I was able to hear the things the other kids said about the burns of Red and the color of Bear’s skin and eyes. And the two had told me their stories. But they were my friends long before I knew of those things that made them who they were to others. They were different from much of the world and I understood that we were drawn together by our differences and we were separated from the others for those same reasons.

“They were able, they wanted to protect me from the others because their lives had already been exposed to the abuse that comes with being perceived

as unusual and thus treated as being some different, thing, and not some related someone. For us, the teasing from the other kids and the sympathy from adults was one in the same. It made us feel bad, wrong, guilty.

"They had been shunned and banished from the community of the humankind just as the others we were around. We had all been cast aside but we could not all come together as a united group. Someone had to be punished. Someone had to be kept on the bottom. Out of all those kids who were there, we were so obviously different and we knew that at some point in time the others would be able to step into the world and possibly hide their internal selves and attempt an external deception. But when we three came together we believed our external selves would always go with us as a burden, obvious and distinct and we would always suffer, inside and out. And even if all my abilities returned I knew, and they knew I knew, what it was like to live as they lived. For me the scar on my cheek that had never really bothered me began to represent the damage that was going on inside me. I would touch my scar, wonder about it, where it had come from and think of my friends. My friends could feel what I was going through because they had been through it. What we had confronted separately and accepted together, would bind us as one from that point until now, and from now on, until we part through death.

"Each of the other kids brought to their situation their own individual essence. Because of what they had inherited and because of the their unique dispositions, they dealt with life as best they could. I was fortunate in that I met two people who had found a sense of integrity within their lives. They opposed the insensitive actions of those they were around and that was because deep inside they had, along with their hatred and anger, sensitive souls. I knew them. And I was able to observe the truth that resided inside them because I could not, see them. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Georgia said quickly. "After I got to know them, I could see something other than the way they appeared."

"Exactly. You met them through me. As you learned to care for me you were able to see those I cared for in an altered light. But now you also can understand why I asked you if you would have loved me if I had been blind or crippled. That would have depended a great deal on how you were exposed to me. But there wouldn't have been any such thing as love at first sight. You could have seen only my handicaps, my weaknesses."

He looked at her for a long moment.

She did not drop her eyes or glance away, but she could feel what he had just said as a truth.

"Your reaction to me would have been normal. You could not have seen inside of me unless you had been brought up within some very special, perhaps similar circumstances. Then you would have needed the proper time and the necessary closeness to get to know me and not just see me in a different way but also to comprehend what you saw.

"Inside Red and Bear was a sense of honesty and compassion that rose up and transcended all they had been through and everything they appeared to

be. I knew that then and I know that now. They are who they are not because, of what they have been through, but in spite of what they have been through. I've met other people who have experienced some physical, external wounding that scarred them inside and made them mean and evil within. They had been damaged and could not recover. In many ways I'm like that."

He paused, his gaze, piercing.

She lowered her eyes until he spoke again.

"Red Dog is also James Thompson. Polar Bear is also William Collins. To my knowledge they've never lied to me. I can count on them. And I've tried to be for them as they've been for me. Red went to jail for someone else because he refused to tell on them. He refused to tell the truth. So I'm not saying they never lie. I am saying they have something about them that allows them to very quickly know when to lie, when to tell the truth and even more important, who to lie to.

"They protected me and taught me to fight those who were against me for no other reason than how I appeared because they didn't know any other way to be. And so I can overlook their violence because in its inception it had an honesty and necessity about it that I can respect. Today I can easily understand and accept all the expressions of violence that are going on throughout the world and close around me as long as they're not directed and focused on me, or those I care about.

"When I was blind I couldn't see Red or Bear and that meant from the very beginning I was able to treat them both as friends. I needed them. I cared about them and received them in such a way that they were able to know and learn, for almost the first time in their lives an acceptance of their selves from me and then from, their selves.

"In their own way they had always been able to sense the feelings of unease and fear and disgust they would elicit from those around them because they looked for it and they found it, from everyone, including some of the adults we were around. Those feelings are only natural. The lack of love and protection from their mother and father was something they would never overcome completely. They would look at themselves in the mirror and see and believe that the feelings of loss they experienced and the sense of something lacking, was also natural.

"I didn't see them and so I didn't feel that way towards them. From me they were able to know of sincere, positive emotions and genuine respect and so they discovered and touched pieces of self-respect, portions of self-esteem and an essence of self-love came to their lives. They wanted that. They could not change the way they appeared to the world but they both wanted to alter the way they appeared to themselves. And in that way we were also joined. The three of us wanted to be other than who we were at the moment we came together. To be, who we were not. To not be, who we were. We were one within the struggle to conquer, ourselves.

"Truthfully, I don't know how I would have felt about them if I had been able to see them with my eyes the first time we met. I would like to be able to say we could have somehow become friends anyway but that I'll never know,

maybe not. At my Aunt Charlena's I was just like anyone else, attracted to beauty, or at least to that which I considered to be beautiful women and handsome men. Perhaps I would have rejected them and been unable to peer past the burns and albino coloring. But I can say today that I've been able, through them and my lack of sight, to find an otherness in all those I come in contact with. I saw your internal strength and the beauty inside you that exists beyond the dark shade of your skin and the shape of your body.

"Men and women search for physical beauty first and then they become hurt and angry and feel betrayed when they discover the ugliness of the soul. But then most have no way of looking except with their eyes."

"Or with their hearts," Georgia interjected.

"Yes," he smiled. "And that's the most deceiving way of all, assuming when you say with their heart you mean with their feelings."

"But why?" she asked. "You said yourself that you can feel things. That you can feel the truth and lies and emotions."

"Yes I did say that. But because I saw things in pictures and because I can study my dreams I was able to learn that behind what I thought I felt, lay other things, layers of emotions and deeply placed feelings that were often times different from what I thought should be there. They would live in opposition to all I believed I truly felt.

"And I was only able to search for and find those things because of that dark period of my life and the silence of my life. I had the opportunity to confront myself without my internal impulses being altered by common external stimuli and I had the will to challenge myself and admit to the existence of my own evil soul because that's all I had for so many days and nights, my ... self, my loneliness, my ... soul.

"So behind my own thoughts and feelings of love I've found hatred. There was anger within my fears and lustful desires and selfish egotistic motives wrapped up in my most benign altruistic endeavors. But those things took me years to uncover and understand and accept. Those things are so easy to ignore, to dismiss, because they're disguised in such ways that they become virtually impossible to detect, to observe, and difficult to feel in their pure form.

"From the very beginning humans are taught not just to repress the truths of their selves but also to disguise, distort, displace, condense and therefore alter their internal reality. Then when it comes out into the external reality of their existence, into their world, it has, for them, some horrible essence and unusual strength and there again it must be denied and disowned. There are no checks, there is no negation in the soul of a human, only desire. And I believe there must first be a desire to kill, a desire to hate, to dominate, or humans would perish, in stagnant love."

He stopped. He reached for his glass. He sipped his drink.

She wanted to move from this he had just said. To turn her back on the words that she did not want to hear but seemed to hover in the air. His voice sounded in her ear as an echo.

"... stagnant love."

She rose and walked to the window and stood and stared out, thinking. She heard him rise, move, and she turned to watch him as he took the ice bucket and walked toward the kitchen. Was that the refrigerator door? Then she could hear the sounds of ice cubes. She turned back to look at the lights through the window. The room was suddenly silent.

His voice came from the kitchen. "Play some records."

She moved across the room and flipping quickly through a group of albums she found several that were appropriate, that would sustain the mood that she now found difficult to describe to herself. Her thoughts took her back over the things he had been through, the things he had said. She turned to watch as he walked back to the small table near his chair and with silver tongs he took ice from the silver bucket and dropped cubes in their tall glasses. He poured more juice for them both. She gazed at him and tried to see him as a child, as a young blind boy. It was impossible and she was frustrated at her inability to construct this picture and she smiled at the fact that she was recognizing her frustration not just as a feeling but naming it and when she called it out to herself, it departed, and she retained a feeling of a piece of pleasure in the absence of no longer being annoyed.

She moved back to the couch. She sat down.

He sat down in his chair. He stared at her. Alert. Intense.

She spoke. "So everyone feels, right."

"Of course."

"And you're saying everyone has feelings that are distorted?"

"Modified perhaps is a better word. But yes, latent and changed originally and then constantly, through various ingenious imperceptible processes."

"So this love I feel for you is distorted?"

"In ways, yes. But like I said before, modified is a better description. From someone, something, somewhere in your past, you learned of love. Over the years it's changed into its present form. It allows you to feel the way you do, now."

"But even if it's, distorted, the distortion is real to me isn't it?"

"Evidently it's real to you. But everything that's real is not true. Yet, everything that's true is real. But we're talking about love, an emotion. Who can say what is true of love? Some people must inflict pain to show their love. Some people must experience pain in order to believe they feel love. Love modifies itself from one person to the next. The vicissitudes of love are endless. But we're getting off the subject."

"How? I thought you were talking about distorted emotions."

"No," and he smiled. "Distorted Lloyd Nelson."

She frowned. "So, you can see and hear and feel things, more things, other things because you were once blind and couldn't hear or talk?"

"Yes," he replied. "Those were factors, parts of the reality of my life. Each person would react to their blindness or their inability to hear or speak, differently. Each person also has the abilities to sense things, to interpret. Sometimes it's called intuition or premonition. Whatever it's called it doesn't really matter. I've been extreme and that was due not just to what I went

through, in other words, my circumstances but also because of who I am. Each child is born with a unique disposition and brings to the world aspects of their family that have been passed down from one to the next. I don't know of my father or mother, my grandparents, my great grandfather, who they were, what they were like. I wish I knew. But to wish for something I can't know, can't have, is both childish, and useless.

There was silence now.

"Let me give you an example," he continued. "I was standing at an open window in late August of 1949, still enjoying my four months old ability to speak. And I was trying to whistle like the singing of this bird that was in a nearby tree. Suddenly I wanted to see that bird and as I thought of seeing, I could hear voices behind me from a group of kids who laughed loudly and I could hear the laughter of one particular boy that I disliked, separate itself from all the other laughing and I could feel my own anger and hatred rise and suddenly I was upset because I couldn't see the singing bird and at that moment the bird stopped singing and I wondered, just a fleeting thought, if the bird had died and I felt an instant of sorrow for the bird.

"But I had not wondered if it had flown away or paused briefly in its singing, but, if it was perhaps dead. And it was in that fleeting thought that I was able to find the reality of my feelings and I was forced to acknowledge my hatred for that boy laughing behind me and my rage at my own blindness as it manifested itself as a question of the death of a beautiful innocent bird and there were wishes within the question.

"I wished that boy silent and dead and thus blind and in blackness, as I was. I wished the world to be punished by losing the song of the bird. I wished the bird dead and blind. And I tried not to feel my own self-pity by attempting to feel sorry the bird had died. And then the bird began to sing again and was joined in its song by another bird.

"I sat on my bed and went back over the successions of my feelings and put words with them and understood how I had hidden my true emotions and thus hidden my ... self, from myself. It was all there as swiftly passing emotions, quick flashing images, so very easy to miss. But I believed the conclusions I had reached were accurate because they felt true to me, without dissonance. And as I admitted them they became more than just vague feelings or innocuous ideas. They became real, conscious to me and I can only use the power of my conscious will on that which is conscious.

"So as I began to bounce upon that bed, I was thinking, accepting. I could clearly observe my thoughts and as long as I could recognize them as they really were, I could control, if I chose to do so, the actions that should come on the end of all thoughts that require, demand, actions. And when those thoughts are not acted upon, the energy behind them builds up and pushes as a compulsion to be released and ultimately becomes a symptom of my personality as a way to express itself.

"Perhaps if I could have had placed in my hands a gun or a rock I would have blindly attempted to kill the bird, let my emotions go and spared the boy. I'm sure society would have frowned upon the attempt at the bird's life

but would rather I try to kill little birds than little boys. Maybe the hunters of the world that blast deer with high-powered rifles are doing us a favor and sparing you and I. Anyway, I couldn't see the bird and I liked the song it sang and I decided I wanted it to live. But later that evening I was forced by that thing inside of me to beat up the boy. That's what I really wanted to do I killed the boy, in a symbolic act."

He laughed now, short and soft. And Georgia was puzzled. Then she realized it was unusual hearing his laughter, he did so, rarely. Now his voice changed. It lowered, almost into a whisper. "A week later I woke up and was blinded by the brilliance of the day. Everything was bright and my eyes hurt because I could see again. Almost two years after I had gone blind, I could see again."

"Almost two years," she whispered.

"Yes," he whispered. He looked to his right, out of the window. He thought of light and sight. He saw the blackness of long ago.

She moved her body, as if to relax, to let her head fall back upon the couch and she closed her eyes, to visualize what it was like, the blackness.

His voice came to her in a low, modulated tone that seemed to float on the air and through the blackness she perceived. And as her eyes remained closed she rolled her head slowly from side to side and his voice was on top of the soft background music and his next words entered her blackness and she could touch them, see them.

"I saw everything differently. It was if the world had been altered in some drastic way over that dark period that seemed, as its time unfolded, so long, so endless. Colors were bright. Brighter than I had ever remembered them being, could ever envision them in my mind. I discovered a spectrum of shades I never knew existed. Even the dull hues, the greys, the dusty browns and washed out greens were beautiful to me.

"I was enthralled, hypnotized, and I stared at this new world and found myself touching the colors, to feel them. Even today I find the colors attract me in a special way and I find myself stopping as I walk to look for a moment or I'll linger and stare out of the windows at the sky as it changes, at the slow clouds passing. And I've seen soft clouds fill the sky and break up and dissipate and become invisible. I've seen the forms and colors, move. I've stood for many hours watching them stretch themselves in movement and trying to see the depth and width of their essence merge into the surroundings and vary from the beginning of the movement of the color until it ends, fades away, and departs from my sight.

"I would walk and touch and close my eyes and see. And the leaves were changing and never will I forget that fall of 1949. It was my first true autumn. The first time I really saw leaves change colors, smelled them burning, tasted them in the chilling air. And I could even look forward to winter and its approaching drabness because I knew I would find something pretty there, something else there, other colors existing in the whiteness of the snow.

"Each day was the beginning of my life. Each night I thought of it ending in its new form and I could not fall asleep without a struggle because once

again I was afraid of sleeping. I rebelled against that slow descending darkness. At first I would wake up as if startled and immediately search for indications that I could still see, which meant light. Then I would listen, for sounds and I would listen, to hear myself, humming. And there would be such a joy that would run through me. I was almost ten years old and I was alive.”

Georgia opened her eyes wide now. She smiled. “Yes! Alive,” she said, aloud.

He smiled at her. He nodded his head, slowly, yes, at her understanding. He continued. “When my hearing returned the previous November I had been taken to the hospital to be examined. There was nothing that had been discovered that had indicated my voice and sight would return but I was told later that everyone had been optimistic that all that was missing would in fact come back to me. By then of course they knew I had at one time possessed all my abilities and so when my sight finally returned it was as if I had only been sick, for a long time.

“We all went to school in the orphanage so even though I had never been to school before, I was able to move, from the very start of my education, almost into my correct grade. They had tested me and found me lacking in some areas and well advanced in others. So within three years I was actually a grade ahead of where I normally would have been.

“It was three years that passed quickly for me. The orphanage was in many ways the extent of my world. The nuns and Father Hartman were really the only adults I was around for any length of time. Adults would come to visit our world on occasions, sometimes to look at the kids, sometimes to adopt a child, or accept a child into their homes.

“We would go out to museums, on field trips and a movie every now and then. But I knew at that time we were really very poor. We subsisted on donations of money and food and clothing. And after living at my Aunt Charlena’s and receiving just about anything I wanted, I was aware of the difference. But even at my Aunt’s all I ever found important were books to read and there were plenty of those around the orphanage. So I didn’t speak of my past as something that was not only different, but better. For me, I tended to remain closer to the period of time I had been sick. All else backed up. Even my Aunt became a memory that I had to reach for and pull out. I lived for the moment and continued to look into the future.

“Like I said, the orphanage was my world and the nuns were my mothers and the Father was just that, my mentor, my father, and the kids that came and left were my companions and adversaries and of course Red and Bear were there as my friends. And we lived in ways not just as orphans but also as young boys and we played the games and participated in the sports that young boys play.

“But always the future loomed before us. And as I turned thirteen in December of 1952, my thoughts and the talk of my friends became of cars and girls and a life other than school and the world in which we lived. Red and Bear were being bused to a public high school in Detroit and they were

having problems there and they spoke of dropping out and running away. They were both nearing seventeen and had grown quite a bit and were the largest of all the kids and the oldest and they felt more and more that they didn't belong. Father Hartman heard of their plans and made them promise they would finish school and he made a promise to them that they could go to summer school that summer and that way they would graduate in January of 1954 and they would be allowed to go on their own, with his blessings.

"We all had something to look forward to. They planned to get jobs and find a place to live and with a car, drive out into the world. In many ways we were teenagers but the serious reality of our situation forced us to confront our perceptions and attitudes about a lot of things. Still, they were anxious to get on with their lives and since I would be included when I finished school, I was anxious for time to pass.

"But even then we were drawn to other things that were outside of the usual for most young boys. We had always found places to be alone together and we would play cards and shoot dice and read stories of cowboys and gangsters. I would tell them of my Aunt and the house in which I had lived and the money she made. We planned bank robberies and stickups and muggings and con games.

"Red and Bear found new freedom in high school and were exposed to new activities and opportunities, including beating up students and taking their money. And when the summer came they not only went to summer school but they got part-time jobs after school bagging groceries and they met new people and they would come back with these tales of a world I knew nothing of except through books. I wanted to see that world, to live in that life. And as I began to grow more and more dissatisfied with my existence I would daydream about all that awaited me. At night I would dream of other places. And then a week before Christmas and my fourteenth birthday in 1953, the dream that I had dreamed in the fall of 1947, returned.

"Of course I remembered that dream. It was unlike any other one. There were amazing colors and sounds and feelings. And it came back every night and I told Red and Bear and Father Hartman about it. But at that time I didn't know its significance. Then I felt everything in some extreme form and I was in a violent rage all the time and came close to fighting with my two best friends and they had to protect the other boys from me, and the Father threatened to send me away somewhere. But I didn't care. I didn't care about anything or anyone.

"There was something inside of me that was so strong I could feel it at all times, even in my sleep. It seemed to wrap itself as a grinding ache around my heart. I could feel it growing and I couldn't control it. For two weeks I dreamed that same dream, over and over. And on the first of January 1954, I began to get sick. I was running a fever and deep within me I finally understood that the dream and the fever were somehow connected. But I wasn't scared. I wasn't despondent. I was bitter. And I was filled with hatred for that which awaited me, whatever it was. And I knew I would once again have to fight against it.

"I was taken to the hospital. They found nothing. Over the next week the fever would come and go and after it was gone for two days they sent me back to the orphanage. I was put in a room, alone and only the Father and one of the nuns were supposed to come there to me. But late at night Red and Bear would sneak in and talk with me. After a few days the fever returned, flared and burned as fire and then it left and I was chilled and shivering. I grew weak and I was taken back to the hospital.

"They were afraid of me in that hospital, that I would infect them. They thought I could possibly have a disease that was contagious so they took me away to my own room and everyone tried to stay away from me. The doctors and nurses found it difficult to stay around me, to touch me. No one from outside was allowed to visit, not even Father Hartman. They thought it was rheumatic fever and then I began to lose my ability to move and they said I possibly had polio. Finally I fell into a deep sleep, for almost a month and when I woke up I was paralyzed, totally."

He stopped. He looked at her. He smiled, slightly. There was an extended pause.

She spoke. "I don't know what to say."

"What is there to say?" he replied. "We both know it wasn't forever. Don't we?" And he was not being sarcastic. It was spoken as a soft fact.

"But ... " and she hesitated, searching for words. " ... I know that but, how long, I mean what did you have to go through?"

He reached for his glass. He lifted it. He drank. And when he set his glass down he allowed his arm to remain extended. He looked at it as it was there in the air. Then he brought his hand up, in a slow, slow movement, to peer at it closely, to stare at it. He lifted his other hand. He made fists. He raised his eyes from his hands to look at Georgia.

"Such simple movements," he said softly. "So easy to take them for granted." His hands were lowered gently into his lap. "I think ... " and he paused. "I think what's really important is what I learned about myself and people and life. How long and what I went through was a necessary, inescapable process, something to get caught up within. To be paralyzed like that was merely something else to overcome. And because of what had occurred the previous episode, this time I approached it with a different understanding, an attitude that had evolved and brought with it a new belief, in myself.

"When I awoke I opened my eyes and I could see and I could hear sounds and my throat was dry and it hurt but I could feel sound as I swallowed, cleared my throat, and called out. And I knew where I was and who I was. But I experienced a tingling numbness on my body, within my body, and a heaviness, and I couldn't turn my head. I couldn't really feel my arms or legs or hands as separate parts of me or connected to me and when I tried to move them, I felt nothing, no movement. And I knew instantly. I was paralyzed. And because I could sense the heavy nothingness throughout my body, I knew the paralysis was complete.

"I remember I did not think first, why, or what? The same question you

posed came to me, as a silent scream in my throbbing head and I said it aloud so I could feel it in my throat. And then I said it louder because there was no one around me. I was alone. How long? I yelled. How long?”

Again he paused a moment. He took a deep breath.

“They never found out what had happened to me. They discovered no evidence of rheumatic fever such as swollen joints and my heart was not inflamed. And they couldn’t understand how I could be totally paralyzed and yet be able to breathe on my own. Polio victims who could not move such as myself were in iron lungs, usually forever, awaiting death. It was all a mystery to the doctors. Why did I not lose weight? How did I survive barely needing nourishment? They tested me. Doctors came from other parts of the country to examine me. Then after three months they gave a list of exercises for me, to Father Hartman and sent me back to the orphanage. In April they sent me home.

“By early May I could move my head a little and almost make a fist with my right hand. I had to depend on others for everything and in the end it was the Father who was there for me, always. He helped me and never made me feel as if I was a burden. His compassion and patience was endless. He would read to me and put books on this special stand so I could read and I would turn the pages with this pencil I could reach and grasp in my mouth.

“Red and Bear had visited me in the hospital often. And in March of 1954 they had both moved from the orphanage. When I went home they would take three buses from Detroit to see me once or twice a week. And the days slowly passed.

“I would lie in my bed and see myself walking and see my arms moving, my legs moving and I wanted these things to happen. I wanted it like I had wanted to see, needed to talk, tried to hear. I exerted my will. I would look at the wheelchair near my bed and see myself pushing the wheels and rolling along. There was no pain in my body, only the heavy numbness and by June I was in that chair and gaining strength in my arms.

“Then I wanted crutches so I could get to where I couldn’t go in a wheelchair. When I started special rehab school in September of that year I was on those crutches, dragging my useless legs. And I wondered why they made me wear the ugly shoes I had to wear that had steel rods on both sides of each shoe.

“By Christmas I wanted to be rid of the crutches and walking only with the braces I wore. I would exercise. Daily I would exercise. The Father would hold my legs as I did sit-ups and push down on my arms and legs as I tried to lift them against his resistance. He would count for me and talk to me and urge me on, and two days after my fifteenth birthday in December of 1954, I was able to put my crutches away and walk with my braces. And my round-toed, scruffy, brown, second-hand shoes didn’t look so ugly then.

“I was repulsed by and yet attracted to my weakened body. When the sun was out just right I could see my crippled shadow, if I chose to look. In the windows I passed I could see myself limp by, if I chose to look. And if I didn’t want to see, I would blink at just the right time as I moved along and

the limp would disappear in that blink of my eyes.

“Some days I would see myself in a full-length mirror from only the waist up. Other days I saw only my legs, my braces. I struggled to overcome myself, to accept myself as I was but to always envision myself as I wanted to be. I grew not only through it. I grew up. I didn’t care my clothes were handed down. They were clean. I didn’t care my shoes were handed down. They were, my braces, and they allowed me to walk, and braces were too expensive to buy new and so mine were too small and they were too tight on my feet but that was alright.

“I had long ago ceased crying. And just as my body had once been without feeling, I could numb my heart, deaden my mind. I cared. Yet I didn’t care that the kids who were slow in their minds and couldn’t think properly but were able to run and jump, abused those who could barely walk. It didn’t matter to me that those on crutches would punch on the ones in wheelchairs or that those in wheelchairs would run into those who were blind. I heard the things they said about the children who were deaf. I heard the noises they made to the ones who struggled to talk.

“Those who could, teased me and ran by and pushed me down and laughed when I tried to play ball. They pointed at my shoes and mocked the way I walked but it didn’t really bother me. I expected that. That, to me was normal. My focus was on getting my hands on them, any of them, all of them, and I did, often. And the teachers couldn’t understand why I would beat kids in wheelchairs or snatch a boy’s crutch and beat him with it. But they didn’t know, couldn’t know the things I saw and felt.

“I would hold on to the schoolyard fence with one hand and fight my schoolmates with the other. I choked them and threw things until they made the Father take me from that school and put me in another, and then another. And the violence was there too because the hatred and vicious contempt was there from them, for me, and from me, for them. Only those who treated me with respect and who treated others decently were spared.

“All the others were my enemies and I wanted to believe they were brutal and insensitive and that’s why they were my enemies. But it was them, not what they did, but what they were, who they were, within their souls. And by then I enjoyed the violence for any reason, any cause. The violence followed me because it was, me, within me. I thrived in it and would receive strength from my sense of impairment and the banishment that was linked to it.

“I drew strength from the pain of my loneliness, the pain of the blows that struck me nourished me and I would feel a power surge through me when I saw blood, vivid and red and beautiful and I sought the smell of the blood of others and the taste, the wetness of my own blood and I lived only for books, and pain and violence, and ... blood.”

Lloyd Nelson stopped. His eyes flashed. He stared at Georgia with an intense look.

His gaze forced her to move and she pressed her back against the couch. She could feel tenseness in her shoulders. She had been sitting almost rigid, leaning forward slightly and seemingly holding her breath. The obvious and

strong emotion within his voice had pulled her and then grabbed her and then pushed her and she knew he was no longer detached and separated from his story, his life. He was in it. Living it. She was there with him, experiencing it, in feelings. Seeing colors. Hearing sounds. And now she could hear his breath coming quickly and then his breathing was slowing and her own heart was slowing.

His next words came with an edge. "When I was paralyzed I would lie in my bed and think. All I wanted was to be able to get out of that bed and into that wheelchair. From that wheelchair I wanted crutches. From the crutches I learned to want only shoes, with braces. I would drag myself from the school bus and hobble into my classes, and if I chose to, if I really wanted to, I could tolerate the staring eyes. I would not see them. I could ignore the verbal taunts. I would not hear them. The physical attacks were as nothing in my mind because my mind was filled, at those times of internal peace, with a vision, a daydream. Above that vision, beyond that dream was a reality that called me and that I moved towards. I knew of myself without braces. Running. Jumping. Fighting. I wanted to once again be whole.

"When I was blind and could not hear or talk, I struggle and fought first within the confines of my own mind and then moved outside of that. It began as a mental war. To overcome my paralysis I struggled initially, more in a physical sense. But I learned how the mind and body are inextricably joined. And transcending that, I learned of not just the souls of human beings, but of my own soul, my own dark, feverish essence.

"In looking back, I must, with difficulty, sift through my experiences to find the kindness that was expressed, the goodness, the concern, the respect. True, those things were there but I, because of who I am, can place those things in the background, in the realm of weak transitory manifestations and grasp easily what I have placed in front of that.

"Always there will be fear, mine, and those I attempt to control through their fear of me. Along with that, there is pain and suffering. These things are important for me, essential for me and obviously inherent within me. These aspects will always and forever remain in their unalterable position of prominence, and in the area where they live and exist as a permanent reality in my life. I don't know anything else because that's all I see. That's all I want to see because that's all there is, for me."

He stopped now. He took a long drink from his glass. He looked out of the window. She turned her head slightly so she also could see through the other window. She heard his voice, echo. "... that's all there is, for me."

They were both thinking. Their convoluted thoughts were spun as a sphere, a forward tumbling line. Neither moved, nor spoke. From the early 1940s through the mid 1950s they had been back, and through time. Now they paused, together.

"Are you tired?" he asked, finally.

"No. No not at all," she replied, and turned back to look at him. She shifted her legs. She frowned. "I was just thinking."

"Yes?"

“Well ... It just seems I can see and understand you better. Things make more sense, what we’ve been doing together, and why. And I was thinking if it’s really true that, that’s all there is for you, for us. I believe there’s more. There’s love. There’s disbelief and fear of a love that’s real and that can be a permanent reality of life and that can be stronger than hate. That’s what I was thinking.”

He stared at her. She stared at him. They remained silent.

As the record changed she again heard the sounds of the stereo. She thought she heard a clock, somewhere ticking. She spoke as she reached for her glass and her voice was sure, even. “Don’t stop. I know there’s more. Tell me everything.”

He stretched his legs out. He put both his arms on the arms of the chair. His right hand moved. Each finger touched his thumb, as if he was counting, over and over again, as if he was nervous. But he appeared in contrast, relaxed, content.

He sighed. He spoke. “There’s not much more of that time, at least not of importance. It took me almost two and a half years to recover completely. But by early summer of 1956 I was stronger than I had ever been and that fall I left the orphanage, against Father Hartman’s wishes. I was sixteen and a half years old.

“Red and Bear had an apartment on the east side of Detroit and I moved in with them and slept on the couch. The Father said he would call the police on me and I told him if he did I’d leave the city, move to another state. Besides, at eighteen there would be nothing he could do anyway. I promised, swore to him I would complete high school and he let me go my way. I started Eastern High that fall and that’s when I met your Della.

“Red and Bear and myself were out in the world and very quickly in the streets of Detroit. I went to school and did what I had to do on the side. I spoke with you once before of my attraction to gambling, the personal battles. Obviously the time I spent at my Aunt Charlena’s was a large influence on me. But, I also brought to that situation a direction, an internal choice.

“There were those subtle things I enjoyed about the illegal activities. There’s always so much going on behind the actions. All the emotions are there, high levels of fear, anger, the ebb, the flow, all the nuances. And I received pleasure in trying to feel these things being passed and yet hidden within the card games.

“I especially enjoyed poker and my attempts at control and the attempts of others to bluff, to deceive, and the strain of holding a winning hand or receiving the right card and looking at it and then looking up into the eyes of my, enemies, and masking my elation and feeling nothing and thereby showing nothing in my eyes. And shooting dice was loud and aggressive and I was young and at that time I liked the movements of that game. And the three of us did alright. We made a little money.

“I had some problems and had to finish high school at night. I kept my promise to the Father and then I broke on loose. We learned. We learned

that we had what it took to make it in that world we were drawn to. We fought to rise above ourselves and we fought to rise above those around us and our advantage was in our ability to fight harder, to struggle longer, because of what we had already been through.

"Della's told you other things. What she's seen when she and I hung together and what she's heard and there's no reason to go any further into that. Those were things I did or was supposed to have done that were just parts of who I was, who I am, and what people wanted me to be. Just things that are required. Necessary images I had to have or were created and that assisted me in my survival in the streets.

"The past never left me. It never leaves anyone. I kept my attention on it and I was constantly on guard for it. I wasn't concerned about my past as I lived in the present except as I watched for it in my dreams. And it was there my past found me again. In late fall of 1962, the dream came back, the one that brings the fever. It had been almost nine years.

One week after I started dreaming it I was in the hospital. My temperature went so high, so fast, they packed my body in ice and my heart stopped twice and they had to shock me back to life. I died twice."

Georgia's hands were at her lips now and she was shaking her head, no, and she could feel tears, forming in her eyes and she felt a sense of distress and even though he spoke in an even, low monotone, she could hear the emotion behind his words. He could not mislead her. He was in pain now. And she was in pain.

"But I died more than twice," he said. "And more than my body died. My soul was annihilated. All that a human feels, exists in their soul and mine was dead within my body and separated from my mind. I had known of the coupling of mind to body, body to mind. I understood of the life of my own soul and in 1962, my soul ceased to function, to exist."

Georgia lowered her hands from her face. She placed them on the couch at her sides as if she was prepared to push herself up. "No!" she said, wanted to shout, but did not. And she was sliding forward, almost rising from her seat. "What are you saying? I don't understand."

"I couldn't feel anything," he said easily, as if the answer was obvious.

"What do you mean?" she asked, demanded. Confused.

"Since the moment I woke up in that hospital where Della saw me, I haven't been able to really feel anything. Everything has been dulled, and softened into things so slight I could not perceive them. Even the emotions within my dreams were very nearly gone.

"It took me weeks to understand what had happened. At first I just felt tired, listless. All my abilities were intact but I felt different in ways. And I looked for what was wrong with me and I couldn't find anything but I knew there was something because I was familiar with the feeling of wrongness.

"Then I began to comprehend. I wasn't glad to see Red or Bear or the Father or my friend Johnny. I wasn't glad to be alive. But I wasn't sad either. There was nothing inside of me. I was nothing inside. Anger didn't exist, truly. My natural hatred I could not find. I didn't care. I just didn't, care. But

I couldn't care. Even when I tried."

His voice changed and began to fill again with emotion, obvious emotion. And Georgia felt she would not be able to withstand whatever was coming. Not the words. It wasn't the words. It was the feelings that began to come from him, to her. Now! And the meanings within the feelings, she could understand, in totality.

"You can't know," he said. "You can't know what that's like. I could fight all I had been through because I could feel a need to fight. I felt a desire to fight. There was that, want, to overcome that which I was up against. My anger and hatred sustained me, pushed me. I took pride in my special abilities to feel, not just my own submerged emotions, but those of everyone who came to me. And that was all gone, disappeared somehow, somewhere.

"And maybe I couldn't love, but I had liked things. I had enjoyed things, yet then, no longer. I felt no joy. I felt no humor. If I laughed, it seemed faked, empty. It did not have its true motivation. It was absent of its essence.

"My desires for the otherness of my being, for my other half, for my own completeness, for woman, were also gone. The physical expression of my manhood was non-existent. As if paralyzed, I was numbed and ineffective. Unable. Impotent.

"I couldn't even hurt for my self, my lost self. There was no sorrow, only an abyss within me. I felt a hole, an emptiness unlike anything I had ever experienced. There was a nothingness that was in me that was so palpable, so constant. And I would wonder how, if I could not feel, how was it possible I could experience and understand my sense of internal nothingness as an emotion. It was as the blackness of my blindness. Yet it was something beyond that. And it took me months to grasp it properly.

"I was, lonely. That was all I knew. Loneliness. A loneliness so powerfully sharp that had I felt emotional pain it would have perhaps been strong enough to cut me in two. And it settled here." He touched his chest with both hands. "Behind my heart.

"It was a fascinating loneliness, more than I could imagine and that's all I had, my imagination and my dreams that unfolded as a series of movies. And in my dreams my loneliness was more than I could remember I had ever felt for my lost parents or my deceased Aunt. The loneliness was greater than anything that had existed when I was blind and could not hear or talk. It was greater, much greater than the lonely hours I spent paralyzed. It was greater than all of my isolated moments combined and was magnified into some unfathomable size that was so close to me it blocked everything in my sight and stood outside and above all things and everyone.

"As the months passed my understanding grew, as I watched the people of my dark world and the other world and all the worlds around me as so very many of them sought to soothe their own loneliness in futile actions. Around the presence, through the essence of other people, within the distance of other places, in the substance of other things, they were all, seeking. Yet, still so very many of them remained lonely, and unhappy.

"Then one night I dreamed a beautiful dream of flowers and plants and

candles. I could see them, smell the sweetness of the perfumed blossoms, touch the brilliant green of the plants, breathe the smoke from the burning candles as incense from the earth, fresh and close. The flowers talked to me, sang to me. And when I woke up I knew. All was clear. I understood perfectly of the separation and the internal division within the humankind and the eternal nothingness in between. The mystery of my own loneliness was solved.

"The flowers had been singing my name and a name that I could not hear clearly. It sounded foreign, African, perhaps. Over and over, as the flowers opened and seemingly rose toward the sun they sang Lloyd Nelson and that unclear name. 'Goodbye, Lloyd Nelson. Farewell.'" He stopped.

Georgia thought she could see a slight smile on his lips. Then she saw a questioning look on his face. "What?" she almost yelled. "What? I don't understand." And she sounded bewildered.

"Don't you see?" he asked gently. "I was lonely for me. I was lonely for my own lost soul."

She shook her head, no. And one tear fell from both eyes.

He could see in the semi-dimness the tears on her cheeks just as before he had seen the tears glimmer in her beautiful eyes and he was pained by her tears, but he knew they were proper and real because she could experience within her self the things he was saying. He knew everyone who was alive, had been at least once, not just alone, but lonely.

They were both silent for a while, neither moved. Then Georgia slumped back against the couch and his voice followed her. "That's all that's really important from my past. I tried to change, to leave behind parts of my world. I went to Wayne State in '63 and part of '64. But school bored me and in the end I only went so I could debate with the professors and pick their brains for information and suggestions on which books I should read in the subjects I had begun to study.

"The subjects I approached were an attempt to find the new answers I sought, about the mind of a man, about the internal essence of human beings, about life. I wanted answers that pertained to my ... self. And the more I read, the more I studied, the more unsettling my life seemed, in different ways.

"With each answer I believed I had found I would then discover more questions. And when I thought I had something to share, because of who I was, what I had been through, I tried to talk to people. The professors. The students. And I quickly realized it was futile. I only saw things my way because of who I was. Truth began to break down in front of me and then reformulate itself and grow. But it was only my truth and therefore it was incomplete. When I spoke truth, as I knew it, it made people uncomfortable, scared them, and they turned from me, from that truth, from their selves. And I no longer could believe that there was value in the pursuit of truth or anything really meaningful in the possession of truth. I gave up. It was very easy to give up. I didn't care anyway. I returned to the gambling, the joints, the streets, the violence. My people had waited for me. I returned to my

world, the world I could never really leave because not only was I in it, but it was in me. I went back to where I belonged, back to the game.”

He stared at her now and his eyes were riveted on her and then they changed. She felt herself forced further back against the couch. She wiped her eyes, her face, quickly, with her fingers. She wanted to reach for her glass to drink, to cool her heated, drying throat, but she could not move. She could not break from his gaze. His voice dove into her. She was impaled.

“I had even become accustomed to being empty inside, feeling nothing. Then, you came into my life. With your dark beauty and lovely haunting eyes. I knew you, your golden smile. And there was something familiar in the soft southern accent of your voice, the way you lingered over certain words, the way you pronounced your name.

“Then your laugh affected me. Yes, the joy, affected me and I realized I was beginning to feel again. Slowly, very slowly, I began to believe that perhaps my soul still existed, that perhaps it was not destroyed, just banished. And you, Georgia Reeves, demanded it back into existence, where it, where I could live again.

“I wondered why this was happening to me, why you moved me the way you did. Why, at the beginning of this year things that had been one way, for over four years, would suddenly, gradually begin to change. I thought about how I wanted to be with you, to do things for you, to provide for you, to protect you, to give myself to you. I fantasized about that, letting myself go, to you. I could visualize you in my arms. I could taste you on my lips. I began to need you, your soft body, your heat. I desired, you!

“And I wanted to move beyond who I was, who I am and the violence of my life, the pain of my life, the suffering. And please, Georgia, as I said, don’t feel sorry for me. I wouldn’t change my past for anything, for anyone. I have regrets but I’m no longer filled with shame or guilt. I set that free a long time ago. I’m not sorry! I’ve felt the reality of life, the expression of life. I’ve known the depths and it’s because of that, that I’ve experienced that which resides within the heights of triumph. I know what it means to overcome. I’ve touched the power that was there as I rose above the destined attempts to destroy me.

“And I know there’s nothing to be gained by wallowing in self-pity, accusing the world, blaming the color of skins, condemning fate, or misfortune. There’s nothing in a constant struggle but the state of conflict, strife, and effort. I know what it is to conquer, to defeat both the external and internal. I have lived!”

His voice rose now and she knew, without a doubt, that the question he asked was to be answered.

“I’ve lived! Don’t feel sorry for me! You hear?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I hear you.”

“I wanted to live again, with you, for you. And when my feelings began to return I had hope. I wanted to believe there was a chance for me, for us.”

“There is!” She said. “There is!”

“No! There isn’t. And I would think about you, how I would embrace

you, without the numbness of my soul. I wanted to kiss you so you would know of the warmth that could, because of you, exist within me. I was going to reveal to you those desires I possessed for you. The ... ” he hesitated, he faltered. “... the love,” he nearly whispered.

“Yes,” she said softly.

“Yes,” and his voice began to lower, fade. “That’s the word. Love, for you.”

What he uttered next she could barely hear.

“Hopeless. It’s too late.” His left hand went to his forehead. His fingers covered his eyes.

“There’s one more thing,” she thought she heard him whisper as his voice broke on nearly inaudible words.

And where once he was leaning forward slightly, he slumped back in his chair and he took a deep breath and he turned from her and she thought she saw his eyes glisten and she began to rise to go to him and her legs failed her and she tried again and as she gained her feet she was dizzy and she could feel something frightening swell inside her. She knew there was something coming that would cover and blot out everything he had said. She knew this because she knew nothing he had said had diminished her love for him. She loved him now more than when she had walked into this room. She loved him now more than she had ever imagined. Yet, something else was encompassing her. Something so heavy it wanted to crush her. It was what he held and would wield to drive her away, to leave her, alone. She had to ignore it. Repel it! Then it was in her chest and as she moved to him it was in her throat, choking her, upon her face, suffocating her. She was around the table and she stumbled and as she fell to her knees she was in his lap and she reached for him, for his face that was turned from her. She took his face into her hands and turned him to her and his eyes were, dry, and empty. Yet, they spoke to her. His eyes screamed at her. They were blank, and behind that was the answer. His eyes told her ... everything.

“No,” she whispered to him. “No!”

“Yes.” he whispered back, to her. He nodded his head in her hands. “Yes.”

Georgia burst into tears. And her face was on his chest and she didn’t want her tears to fall upon his beautiful silk shirt but she couldn’t stop, she couldn’t move. She couldn’t help herself. And when she tried to lift her head his arms came around her and he held her firmly, yet gently to his chest. Then he held her tighter. He caressed her back. His lips brushed against her ear. She cried. And she could never, ever have guessed the words he would whisper next. A statement. A fact.

“I haven’t really touched, or truly been touched, in years. So much of my life alone.”

It was too much for Georgia Reeves. She wrenched herself from him. And as she rose she looked at him through her tears and then he faded and disappeared before her eyes into nothingness, blackness. Her eyes were closed.

She turned, in circles, to run. Where? And as she spun in the dulled light of the living room he would come blurred into her vision as she twisted in agony, as if she danced to the slow music with her teary eyes open. She was in terror of this truth and shocked at his composure as he sat observing her. His eyes were emotionless now. His face, vacant. And she was overwhelmed by the strength of the feelings she knew she could find behind his frozen countenance. She fled.

And she heard herself screaming in her flight.

“No! No! No!”

Who was she fleeing from?

What? What? Where?

She was going to run out of the apartment door but she turned towards the bathroom to lock the door. Keep it away! But she ran on. She turned into the bedroom and as she flung herself onto the bed, pain filled her body, sobs filled her throat and tears spilled as a torrent from her eyes. She cried in rage against fate, against the world. She cried. There on Lloyd Nelson’s bed she cried, for him, for her ... self.

She could feel the bed move as he sat beside her and she could feel his hand on her back. He pushed a handkerchief into the anguished movements of her hands as she wrung them, clasped them and tried not to let go. She cried until she was drained and she felt devoid, finally, momentarily, of everything. All that seemed to remain was the fearful pointed pain within her love for him. And she knew. She knew he really believed that her love was hopeless. He truly believed that it was disappearing down into blackness, nothingness and ... death. And she fought against the possibilities, of the truth of his belief.

It was dim in the bedroom. The only light came from the hallway. The curtains were drawn on the window and the two of them were together in quietness. For a long time neither spoke. Finally she rolled over and he pulled a pillow beneath her head. She squeezed the moist cloth in her left hand. Her right arm was across her forehead, almost covering her reddened eyes, yet she could see him, looking at her. He turned to lean his arms on his knees, to look at his fingers, to look up at the window and the closed curtains.

He looked from her eyes because they both knew she would cry again if she could see those portals into his tormented soul. There was so much she wanted to say. Questions came to her. Why? How long? And as she thought of the questions her throat became hot again. Her chest pained her again.

“When?” was all she could manage to say, aloud, in a near whisper.

“Late Sunday night. Monday morning,” he answered. Silence again.

He continued. “It was always there. Waiting, for some reason. I thought of it often. Wondered when it would come back. And it did. And it was more than it’s ever been. Beautiful. Loud. Beyond a dream.” He stopped. He sighed.

She sighed. She reached her hand out to touch his arm. “What can we do?” she asked.

"There's nothing to be done, right now," he answered, and then he added. "I'm sorry Georgia."

"Why? For what?" she said, and in response to this apology she rose up, leaning on her left arm.

He looked at her. "For bringing this, thing into your life. I never intended to hurt you." He turned away. "I never wanted to make you cry."

Now she sat up and slid over, close to him and put both her arms around him. She hugged him. "Don't be sorry. I was crying for a lot of reasons. I feel like you. I wouldn't change anything. I've experienced freedom like I never have before. With you I've been alive, growing up, and I'm thankful for that, for you, for everything." She paused. "I just don't know what to say. I ... I just ... " Her voice trailed off. She lay back down. It was quiet again. She looked at him, imploringly.

"You've got to live your own life now." He looked directly at her. "I hope you stay away from what we've seen together, been in together, that dark world. I can't be there with you, for you, to protect you. And that's gonna be up to you. But I know this, you've got to let me go."

She grabbed his arm. "Don't say that! Please! No!"

"Yes!" he said. "There's nothing with me. Nothing! And you've got to understand that and act on that, 'cause that's the reality."

She was up again. Her arms were around him again. "You don't know," she choked. "You don't know what's gonna happen!"

"No, I may not know what, but I know something's gonna happen. Soon, and this time ... "

"Stop it! Stop it!" she beseeched now. "Oh please, I don't know if I can stand anymore right now."

He put his arms around her. He held her, close, tight. They clung to each other. He whispered in her ear. "Baby, love's not supposed to hurt. It's not supposed to cause pain. And it shouldn't be threatening or dangerous. This is just something, and I'm just somebody to go through so you can make it to the next phase of your life. Ten years from now you'll be about my age and I'll be a memory and that'll be alright because that'll be the way it's supposed to be. Don't ever be afraid of the truth. You can't ignore the reality of the world or the reality of yourself." He eased her away so he could look at her, into her eyes. "So we don't ask, why. This just, is. And it's not good or bad. It just, is."

He was going to say something else and then he changed his mind as he saw her eyes begin to fill again. She touched his chest. "My tears have dried on your shirt," she whispered.

He smiled. And as they gazed at one another his smile faded.

"Let me say here tonight," she said, softly.

He looked away. She turned his face back so she could look into his eyes. Her fingertips brushed against his face, touching his scar. "Please. I don't wanna go home. I don't wanna be alone right now. Please."

He stared at her a long moment. Finally he nodded his head, slowly, yes. "Alright," he said. "Yes. Stay here with me, tonight."

So they lay down together, did Georgia Reeves and Lloyd Nelson. And each saw, in pleased admiration, the other's dark, naked body in the dimness of the bedroom as they climbed into bed.

They were there, uncovered, in silence. Both stared at the shadowy ceiling.

And as Georgia heard Lloyd Nelson's breathing slow, and become low and then heavy, she moved to him, close to him.

He was drawn from his deep drowsiness to the edge of consciousness at her movement. His eyes blinked half open as her left arm went gently across his chest and as she placed her head softly on his shoulder, his eyes closed.

She felt his left arm come around her, pull her, closer. She breathed again.

Their bodies were against one another.

He was between awake and slumber. He could feel her not only beside him, but inside, his expanding soul.

Each listened, in the dark silence, and heard, and felt the beating of the other's heart.

He was not afraid to sleep.

She was afraid that she would, sleep. For she wanted the intimate nearness of this special moment to never end. She wanted this aspect of this night to last forever.

And she wanted this man, her love, to live.

"I'll die," she thought. "If he doesn't live, I'll die."

And so she beseeched over and over, silently. "Please! Please! Make him alright!"

And as she begged for his health and his life, he dreamed of fire, and death.

V

GEORGIA REEVES FINALLY FELL INTO A TROUBLED SLEEP as the sun was coming up on what would be, in temperature, a blistering day and what would surely be in the movement of reality, unalterable and unforgettable events.

The sun rose that morning. Just as one could surmise it had done two thousand years ago, two hundred years ago, one hundred and ten years ago, and could only imagine and hope for those of the future that it would rise and shine for them also.

Yes! It rose this morning. And as it began to express itself on the streets of Detroit, other parts of the world were dark and could not bask in the sun's warming light. But it would find them, the sun would. It was inexorable, the sun was. And it would shine on all parts of the earth, deep into the ground, beneath the ocean waves, eventually, whether it was felt or seen or not. For the sun would measure and then move forward the passing days and the days would pass as long as the world was in existence.

The same sun would shine on the swamps and plains and mountains and those who lived and those who lay as dust in the earth of Africa. It would shine on the reddish-orange dirt of South Carolina. The same sun that would shine on the lands of Canada would cross the river and spread itself, its heat, its light, on all those who lived in Detroit, Michigan on this glorious Friday morning of July 21, 1967. And those who died in the warm light of day or the cooling darkness of night would not ever see the next repetitious illumination or feel the ensuing heat of the very next day that followed their personal, singular death.

Lloyd Nelson awoke and opened his eyes and immediately wondered why his dream had progressed yet changed. It had slowed and its intensity pushed but did not expand. He heard soft sounds and then Georgia walked into the room and when he looked at her hands he believed he knew why. And he understood, the inevitable was only being held off, momentarily.

She was returning from the kitchen. She was dressed in one of his robes and she had a towel in her hands. And when she placed it against his cheek, upon his throat, his chest, he could feel the coldness of ice come through the towel. She smiled and her eyes showed concern.

“Was I hot?” he asked.

“Yes. Are you alright?”

He took a breath. He rolled his head to the left and stared at the curtains now brightened and opaque yet phosphorescent from the lighted essence of daytime. He assessed the state of his body. He searched for internal heat, for pain. His head hurt. An excruciatingly tight, burning band was wrapped around the top of head. He turned to her.

“Yeah,” he nearly whispered. “I’m alright.” He closed his eyes. The towel was on his stomach, then near his heart. She placed it on his forehead. She left it there.

“Bring me some water with ice,” he said after a moment.

She departed. He glanced at the clock on his wall. It was a little past eleven thirty. “I almost slept ’till noon,” he thought to himself. He was surprised he could sleep that long. It wasn’t supposed to be time yet, to sleep like that, that long.

Georgia returned with the glass. He sat up and taking the glass he drank the water down, thirstily. His throat was slightly sore and parched. He looked at this woman gazing at him. She noticed his eyes change. It was as if he looked at her and then past her, through her. She couldn’t know he was thinking, looking at the pictures in his head, lost, in the dream. There were things there, new things and he wanted to investigate them, alone.

He looked directly at her. “How long you been awake?” he asked.

“Not long.”

“You must be hungry?”

“A little.”

“Why don’t you fix us something to eat?”

She smiled. “What would you like?”

“It doesn’t matter. Whatever’s in there that you want is fine.” He eased back on his pillow. “I’m gonna lie here for a little while longer.”

She was looking at him. The question, “You sure you alright?” came to her mind, the tip of her tongue. She didn’t ask it. She looked at him lying there with his eyes closed. Her gaze scanned his naked body. He put the towel back on his forehead. She put her hand on his chest, to see if his skin was cooling, to feel that beating there from the inside for a moment, as if to affirm his living life. She rose and departed the room.

He listened to, focused on her, and the sounds she made in the kitchen. He thought of her in there, like that. He could visualize her at the stove. He

could see her again as she had a while ago appeared naked before his eyes as they had gotten into bed. He began to go over again in his mind, the dream.

There was something perceptibly tense that eased into the air by two thirty that Friday afternoon. Prophet paced the office in the basement of his church. He worried about his money that Marzette had, the amount, its return. He wanted Saturday night to bring back his money and his drugs.

He tried to relax. He was tired from his long night and he struggled to keep his mind off his desk drawer. He was determined to withstand the tempting call from the drawer that he could hear, clearly. He had some food coming and he wanted to eat something. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten a decent meal. The drug increased one appetite and took another one away. He had firmly decided to leave the cocaine alone until the sun went down. "Later. Tonight," he said to himself, aloud.

Johnny Russo returned to his home and tried to relax. The pressure was building in this business with Lloyd Nelson and Battaglia. Each day that passed, he knew, brought the action closer. He wasn't concerned about the matter with the guns. In fact, he planned to see Lloyd Nelson himself later that night. He wanted to be there when the deal went down and he had information he wanted to share with his friend.

Bear had placed the money on the numbers and he had secured the truck they would need and he felt good that for now he had completed all he was supposed to do. But he also felt on edge. Later this night when they met Cinque there was supposed to be an exchange of guns and money. He felt his dislike for Cinque translate into a strong feeling of distrust and danger. He wondered how Lloyd Nelson would set up the transaction. He worried about the deal. He counted days. Five. Five nights now the dream had been back. And he tried to use the assurances of his best friend to calm his jumpy insides. Just an hour ago he had been told everything was fine. "Take it easy," Lloyd Nelson had told him. Bear sat in front of the television and stared at it. But he didn't really see the moving pictures.

Red was on the phone at two thirty that afternoon. He wanted to make sure the men they needed had their times and places correct. He didn't want anyone to be confused. He paused to wonder about the gun deal. He decided to make a few more calls, to see if there was any new information in the streets on Cinque. He thought about the numbers he had put down the money on earlier that day and he thought about Lloyd Nelson and wanted to feel relieved that his best friend had told him a short time ago that everything was cool. But Red was wound up, and tight. And for some reason he was very angry.

Joseph 'The Hand' Battaglia waited on a phone call. He would be told which way the big drug deal scheduled for that night would go. One way or

the other. It really didn't matter to him. He looked at his watch. It was almost three o'clock. He wanted the call to come. He wanted to go to dinner. He wanted to eat his regular meal. And he wanted the big blonde woman, badly. She did matter. He wanted her, that evening. His phone rang.

Cinque's phone rang. The naked white woman lying next to him reached to answer it. The ringing woke him from his afternoon nap. He was sweating even though the shades were drawn and he could feel the breeze from the fan. He was hot, and the breeze was warm and he realized that he had been dreaming, a nightmare. He assumed that's why he had awakened with a sense of unease. And he figured he felt so bad because he had a hangover. He had a headache and he attempted to ignore those feelings of apprehension. Then he remembered about the guns and he recalled he was supposed to decide from three different plans how he and his people were going to rob Lloyd Nelson and beat him out of the guns and ammunition. He thought about the dark man with the scar. He thought of the man's reputation. He remembered Lloyd Nelson from years ago, from recent years and suddenly the ashtray from the basement below him, came up, and jumped into his mind. He rolled over. His revolutionary woman talked on the phone in hushed tones while he tried to return to his sleep. He didn't want to think about guns and robbery and the potential of death.

Della fell across her bed. She was tired. Her night had been long but profitable and she thought to herself, "A few more months, just a few more months. By Thanksgiving, January at the latest, I'm leaving this got damn business." She held up the piece of paper that was in her hand. It was a numbers' slip and as she lay on her back and looked at it, it moved slightly from the blowing of her air conditioner that had been turned all the way up and directed to her bed as she had tried to sleep through the afternoon heat.

Her hand fell to the bed. If she hadn't had to pick up some food and go bet on the numbers she wouldn't have moved. She held the paper up again. She cursed herself for betting so much. She added up her total again. "Got damn seventy-two dollars," she said, aloud. And then she shook her head, no. She wondered why she would bet twenty dollars for Georgia and herself on those three numbers, ten apiece, first race, last race. Georgia didn't want but five dollars on them. She'd have to cover the bet tomorrow. Plus she had bet her own money on the numbers to fall straight. "Hell," she thought. "I never bet straight."

She stood up and started taking her clothes off and tossing them on the nearby chair. "That's alright," she thought. "If those three numbers come out today, straight, I'll walk away from this got damn game." She stretched her naked body across the bed. She opened one eye at the clock. It was almost three twenty-five. By three thirty she was asleep.

At three thirty Father Hartman was on the playground at the orphanage. He was umpiring a baseball game and several of the kids were yelling at him,

questioning him. Safe? Out? He turned his mind away from Lloyd Nelson and back to the ballgame. He knew it had been five days and he was very concerned and he decided he wouldn't wait on his special friend, his son, to call. Later, that night he would call him.

At three forty-five the big blonde walked into the Pelican Lounge. Her cobalt-blue eyes scanned the dining area and she was immediately concerned. Battaglia wasn't in his usual spot. She walked to the bar and took a seat and as the bartender poured her cranberry drink she opened her purse. She thought of a phone number. She would have to call Johnny. She reached past her small handgun for a twenty-dollar bill. As the bartender placed her drink before her on the bar she looked up and handed him the bill and over his shoulder, through the window, she saw two new black Lincoln Continentals enter the parking lot.

Battaglia arrived with his customary four bodyguards, one driving, one riding and two following. She relaxed, just a little, outwardly. But inside she was on edge. "Fuck 'em!" she said to herself almost aloud. She was building her anger. She worked better when she was angry. She was within her world. This was her game. She preyed on people like these men. She went over her plan in her head. Now! She would deal with, 'The Hand.'

She smiled, a sly smile, a smirk played upon her juicy red lips.

"He's a pussy," she thought, with contempt.

Georgia lay across her own bed. She was dressed. She felt disoriented here in her apartment, alone. It was as if she had departed one altered domain to enter another. She thought of the night and the early afternoon she had spent with Lloyd Nelson. It was almost four o'clock now, and the way she felt, she didn't see how she could last until late night. "How late?" she wondered.

She went over the dream as he had told it to her as they sat across from one another in their robes and tried to eat the food she had prepared. But neither of them was really hungry. When they had finished, she had cleaned up the kitchen and when she looked into the living room he was on the phone.

She had walked into the bedroom and was surprised at the clothes and perfumes and the toiletry items that were there for her. As she looked at the clothes and herself in the full-length mirror, she had seen him appear behind her. He explained how he had gotten those things for her and that he was going to bring them to her but now she could take them. He had indicated to her a suitcase that sat in the corner and she knew she was to leave and she could feel her heart. She had turned so he couldn't see her eyes. She had wanted to say something but she didn't know what. And as she hesitated, a phone had rung and he had turned immediately and walked from the room.

She had showered and dressed herself from several of the items he had provided her and when she left the bedroom he stood near the bookcase. He had observed her as she came across the room towards him.

She set the suitcase down and walked to him. He stood with both hands in the pockets of his robe. She wanted to touch him, to hug him, but he stopped her advance as he pulled his right hand up and held keys out to her.

"That outfit looks nice on you," he had said, and then, "Here. I want you to take the Thunderbird."

She had started to protest. He cut her off. "Listen. Take the elevator down to the garage. Take the car. It's in spot 23. Park it where I usually park. I'll pick it up tonight. I'm coming by to see you. It'll be late but I'll be by and I won't be driving. Anything else you need to ask, anything else you have to say, we'll deal with then. What you decide is to do is up to you. Whatever comes to me, just comes. You understand?"

She remembered his eyes now. She sat up on her bed to look out of her window even though her shade was drawn. His eyes had seemed cold. His voice had seemed cold. "Yes," she had replied. "I understand." Then his eyes had softened and he held his arms out and they hugged.

"Everything's gonna work out," he had said, softly. "Just be strong." And he had released her from his embrace and put his hands back into his pockets. She had let him go and briefly placed her right hand against his chest. She had smiled, slightly, turned, and as she walked away she had felt his gaze on her as she moved across the room and stooped to pick up the suitcase. She had paused at the opened door, to turn back to him. He remained, still.

"I'll see you tonight," she had said. He had not spoken but simply nodded his head, once. And she had eased through the doorway. She didn't want to leave. She didn't want to close that door, but she did.

Now she was at her own window raising the shade. The view was vastly different and she thought of the lights she had been able to see and night's dark water and the blue-green water of daylight. A breeze came through the screen on her open window. She walked over and switched on her fan and as the blades slowly began to rotate, she focused on them. Each silvery blade was distinct and then they turned faster and seemed to become one blade. They were merged, no longer separated because she stared at them so hard she only saw, as if hypnotized, blurred, twirling movement.

Her emotions were as the blades of the fan, turning, turning, too fast. Merging. She seemed to feel again the rush of the elevator as she had descended from his apartment. And when she had been in the falling box alone, she had tried to remember how she had felt when she was on her way up to see him. Her feelings, her life, had been altered between the rise and fall, between when she had entered his presence and the apartment door had closed behind her and when she had departed from him and left him standing there, alone.

She felt queasy in her stomach and she walked back to her bed and sat down and searched through her feelings as she looked through the clothes she had taken from the suitcase and spread out. The elevator had carried her in opposite directions and her feelings had of course been changed, but not in opposing movements. They had become scattered, fragmented, and she

tried to find them, pull them back together. But now they continued to whirl in circles as the blades on the fan. She was dizzy. The delicate sheer pink blouse she had placed on her lap fell to the floor as she stood to seek relief in a cold drink. But she had to cover her eyes, grab her head. And as the blouse fell it appeared to slow in the air, hover, and then it opened as it reached the floor and a lovely diamond necklace sparkled there in the center of the pinkness.

The large diamonds glittered and colors came from them as she bent to pick the necklace up. It seemed as fiery sparks to her as she clasped it to her neck. Then she stood before her mirror. Her fingers traced the pattern of the diamonds. From the design there came the sensation of being burned, branded, with dry ice. And in desperate despair she threw herself back, onto her bed, upon the given clothes and the exquisite gifted necklace pressed into her heated flesh and she burst into tears and her heart ached in anguish and the beautiful flashing stones were hanging near her tormented heart and the colored gems, shaped as a heart with the diamond initials L.N. + G.R., were luminous inside, the heart.

Lloyd Nelson paced his apartment. He had been walking like this since he had finished dressing. He was unable to sit for any length of time. His long conversation with Georgia Reeves had charged his memories and her sensuous presence had stirred his emotions that were now once again springing to life within him. He was having difficulty assessing them. There were too many. He could not observe them all. And many were so strong he could not harness them. They were hot in his blood and they were electric and his body tingled and all he felt, bordered on the last edge of a thin precipice that was the last stop before he would be sucked into a bottomless black abyss. It was as if they all ran unchecked within him.

He was angry and it was rising, growing to rage. He felt strong and invincible and vulnerable and he wanted to do something, to somebody. He experienced extremeness. Inside he was now being torn into shards. His love for Georgia rendered him into pieces and his hatred for this curse that had once again manifested itself in his life was boiling and would soon overflow into the world.

The dream was actually becoming a believable movie in its unbelievable presentation. Yes, his mother and father were dead. But they had been killed. Murdered! He knew now why, in his real life, he had not been frightened by lightning. The jagged bolts of his dream were as harmless to his body as those that flashed high and far away in the sky on the other side of the world. They were lead bullets. He had changed flying bullets to bolted lightning. His mind could accept that transposition.

But now as he walked in agitation through his apartment, his mind was racing. He believed his parents had been shot to death. And he wondered why he would find such pleasure in guns and the noise they made, the way he did. He enjoyed so much the sounds at the firing range. He thought of all the times he had gone away from the city to shoot, out in the open, for hours, at

cans and rocks and targets he had set up. And when night would fall into the fields, in the darkness he could see the muzzle of the guns charge, clearly, and he would watch, stare at the bright sparking of his rifles and pistols. Shouldn't he have feared them? Wouldn't they have reminded him of the murders? Had they lost their affect because they had been changed into something else? What else had been changed?

He was pleased, thrilled at the roar of guns and the flash was pretty to his eyes. Fire! Smoke! He could smell smoke now. He could see fire burning. He thought of the ignited bodies in his dream and as he felt heat, he shivered in the middle of his den as he stared at his menacing weapons. They were beautiful and they were polished and he wanted to smell gunpowder. He closed his eyes and he heard a muffled noise in his head and it was there. He could feel the truth. He held his arms out in the air, as if for balance. And he saw, he saw the hidden figure behind the tree that pointed and fire came from the finger and then his face felt as if it had been sliced. His cheek burned and he touched his face. His eyes flew open. The pictures halted. He slowed his heart.

"I was shot?" he whispered, he questioned. He shook his head to clear it.

He needed something cold to drink. And as he moved towards the kitchen he wondered why an image of Prophet James passed through his mind. Then he looked at his watch. It was almost four thirty. The numbers. He believed it was the numbers that brought Prophet to his thoughts. He walked with purpose into the kitchen. He felt inside as if he would burst.

At four forty-five Prophet, dressed in his all dark-yellow, was standing motionless with his eyes closed in the middle of his back room in his church basement. He could hear Snake and Daddy Bell talking. Their voices came almost as blunt echoes to him through the door and faded away as the cocaine he had snorted hit him, hard. He heard a distant high-pitched ringing in his head. His forehead grew hot. He wiped it with his dark-yellow silk handkerchief. His throat was numb and he began to grit his teeth. He swallowed and cleared his throat.

"Whew," he said aloud. He took a deep breath. "I did a little too much." He was talking more and more to himself aloud but he hadn't noticed this. His heart began to pick up its pace. He closed the desk drawer.

"Fuck it!" he said. And he dismissed his sundown edict on the use of drugs. He turned towards the bathroom to check himself. His nose was raw and sore inside and he had begun to find traces of blood when he blew it or tried to clean it out. He put some cold water in his nose and stuck some tissue in and twisted it around and before he threw the tissue away he looked at it and frowned at the bright-red specks. He wiped his face with a towel. He stared for a moment at his own image. "I bought the shit," he said, as he observed himself in the mirror.

He wanted to ignore the growing hollowness in his gaze and the darkness beneath his eyes so he quickly turned off the light and moved to join the men in the other room. Now he was mumbling again, aloud. "I'll do what I wanna

do with it. I'll throw the shit away if I want to." His mind left the process of business that awaited him and he paused, as he began to unlock his door, to think of which woman he wanted to see that night. A phone rang and he could tell by the sound it was his special phone that was calling him. He fumbled at the locked door and when he got it open he had to hurry to pick it up. A voice told him the numbers for the day and he wrote them down. He eased into his chair and leaned back and looked at the paper he held in his sparkling left hand. He lost his thought and Snake brought him back to the moment.

"Well?" the blinking man said. "What are they?"

Prophet placed the paper on his desk and thumped it across to the two men and the paper lifted a little and then settled and he thought about his desk drawer. He smiled. He spoke absently. "Triple twos fellows and a seven and a zero."

Daddy Bell jumped up and snatched the paper. His mouth came open. His toothpick fell out. Prophet looked at him. He wondered why Daddy Bell looked the way he did. He found it amusing when black people went pale. He smiled at Snake. He watched the blinking eye and the small long head that was shaking, no, at the paper that had been handed to him.

Prophet said the numbers aloud. "222 and 27..." He stumbled on the last number. "... 0." He jumped up and leaned across the desk, he stretched, almost falling, he grabbed the paper back. "It's that number ain't it? Got damn, two seven zero!"

"Shit!" said Daddy Bell. He sat down heavily and slumped in his chair.

"I told you. I told you," Snake was saying, almost whispering.

"How much?" he shouted. "Have they been betting those numbers all week?"

"Hell yeah!" Daddy Bell yelled as he leaned forward, his eyes wide and angry. "Got dammit we been telling you that everyday. I took in at least a couple hundred on it, just like it came! Straight!"

Prophet punched twice, hard, on his intercom button. "Get in here! Now!" he snapped.

The old woman rushed in followed by the old man who locked the door. Prophet was loud. "Find out how much they got on that 270!" He was sweating and not just from the dope that ran through his body. The old man and woman began to quickly search through the betting slips Daddy Bell and Snake had put on the large table in the corner.

The Prophet was pacing. Inside he was growing anxious and he struggled to maintain his composure. His mind was racing. He knew this wasn't the first time this had happened. Maybe it hadn't been for this amount but it would work out he told himself. He looked at the time on his watch. It was three minutes to five.

"Don't you worry about it!" he yelled. "I'm gonna have those got damn numbers changed! They'll never stand! Watch and see! Watch me!" Everyone stopped and looked at him.

He looked from one face to the other. He pointed. His eyes flashed and

his voice was raised. "Battaglia's gonna call and I'm gonna have those motherfuckin' numbers changed!" He stomped into the other room and slammed the door shut. They could hear the lock click. Now they all looked at each other. Snake blinked. Daddy Bell shook his head, no. He reached in his pocket for another toothpick.

Inside the office Prophet snatched the desk drawer open. He took his saucer out. Before he reached for the card that covered his drug he looked at his gold watch again. It was one minute to five. And as he stared at the hands on the watch, they moved. Five o'clock came.

Once again as they had done for over thirty years, the numbers flashed across the city. At ten minutes after five Lloyd Nelson's phone rang. Red was excited but he nearly whispered. "Two Seven Zero. Straight, in the last race. Detroit. It came. Just like you said it would. If they don't change the numbers we'll be sitting pretty."

Lloyd Nelson smiled slightly. He took a deep breath. "Call Bear. Tell him you've already talked to me and to wait at home. I'll call him later." He hung up. He dialed a number. Johnny Russo answered after the first ring. "It's on." Lloyd Nelson said, easily. "Now."

Johnny spoke two quiet words. "Got it." He hung up. He dialed a number. "Go!" he told the soft voice that answered. It was thirteen after five.

At eighteen minutes after five a nondescript middle-aged woman with dark hair walked into the Pelican Lounge and sat at the bar. The blonde saw her. This was her signal. Inside she was excited and she was glad she had been given four days to play.

She eased over close to Battaglia. She reached her right hand under the table and began stroking his thigh as she had done before only this time she found that thing there between his legs. This she hadn't done before and the Mafia man had to clear his throat and drink some of his wine.

Now the blonde leaned over and whispered in his ear. She stopped his movement and her words made him cough and he had to set his glass down and pat his lips with his napkin. His rings flashed and his eyes flashed and then they glazed over and half closed at the words and the desires they contained.

"Listen," and her breath was in his ear, her voice was low but he could hear her heavy New York accent clearly. "Let's cut out all the games. I wanted some the first time I saw you." She kissed his ear. Then he could feel her warm tongue. "If you're really hungry I've got something wet for you between my legs you can eat. Better yet, I'm thirsty, let me suck this dry." And she squeezed his expanding member. And she squeezed hard.

He flinched. And the pain brought him pleasure. Two days of talking about what they liked and what they would eventually do to one another cut through any hesitation he might have had. He tossed his napkin on the table. He looked at her a moment. He could see her pink tongue as it came from between her juicy red lips and licked them seductively "Let's go," he said.

He had anger for this woman for teasing him these past days. He wanted to punish her, hurt her. He smiled and his smile was sinister and full of lust. He stood up. He motioned to the three bodyguards who had begun to rise from a nearby table to remain sitting. He told them he wasn't going far and that he'd be back in an hour or so.

The men exchanged knowing glances and smiled. They looked at the blonde who was now standing a few feet away putting lipstick on as she held a small mirror in front of her face. As Battaglia turned to her he looked at his watch. It was almost five thirty. He usually called Prophet around six. "I'll call from her room," he thought to himself. He looked at the big beautiful woman who waited impatiently for him. "Geezes," he thought. "What a lucky day this is."

The bodyguard who drove them could barely keep his eyes on the road as he could see that the woman in his rearview mirror was all over his boss. He was sorry he only had to drive two blocks. A little further and he might have been able to see everything.

The driver parked and watched as Battaglia and the woman entered the plush motel, went through the lobby and disappeared. He settled in and wished he could go along too. He turned the radio up, put his head back and closed his eyes. He was used to these waits.

The blonde opened the door for Battaglia. He stepped in and quickly glanced around at the room and he was impressed. It was a fairly large suite and as he wondered what it cost a day, his eyes fell upon the bottle of scotch on the table. It was his favorite brand.

The blonde locked the door and put the chain on. "Why don't you fix us a drink," she purred as she walked past him to the other side of the room and tossed her purse on the sofa.

"Sure," he said. "How do want it?"

"Straight. No ice."

He arranged the glasses. He took some of the ice from the bucket for his glass. He twisted the cap of the bottle off. He poured two large drinks. And when he turned to her she had already unbuttoned her blouse, opened it, pulled up her skirt, and pulled her black panties down to her knees. He could see not only her tanned skin but also the wispy blonde hair between her legs and her large thighs. She wore no bra and his eyes almost bulged as he looked at her huge pointed breasts.

"How do ... you want it?" She nearly whispered.

He gulped his drink down and poured another as he watched her kick her shoes away. Wiggle. Kick her panties away. He was stunned at this display. He was excited. He began to loosen his tie but his hands stopped as he watched her sit in a chair in the far corner and spread her legs for him.

"Come on Joey." She liked to call him Joey. "Come on, stick it in me. Right here in the chair. I want it in the chair!" She showed him everything and she put a finger inside her body. "Hurry up," she said softly. "Look. See, I'm ready."

"Geeze," he said. And his eyes were wide and he looked around as if to

see if there was anybody else in the room watching this. Then he was going to reach for the glasses but he changed his mind and walked over to the chair near the door and quickly took off his suit coat and dropped it. The coat fell to the floor but he never noticed. His eyes never left the woman who was staring at him and was now moving in the chair, arching herself as if she were having slow sex.

“Damn!” he said, in a whisper. He started to walk over to her but for some reason he went back to get their drinks and as he picked up the glasses she made moaning noises and his face was hot and he gulped his drink down again. And as he took a step towards her, she hissed at him.

“I don’t want that fuckin’ drink! I want you inside my pussy!”

He set her glass down and almost in a daze he went to her and he undid his pants as he walked. And when he got to her she pulled them down to his ankles. Then she pulled his baggy underwear down. She was getting wild now and he was confused at the degree of this sexual emotion. She had been so reserved in the restaurant and now she could barely contain herself. His own desire was rising and he wanted this woman and he wondered why he was so confused.

She was stroking him, rapidly. “Oh, damn Joey,” she growled. “I wanted this the first time I saw you. Oh, look it’s getting hard! Look at it!”

He was feeling the liquor. His stomach was warm. His head was warm. And this was like a fantasy. The big beautiful woman was almost in a frenzy and everything inside him was heightened and glowing. As he undid his tie, she stroked him. As he ripped his shirt off, she stroked him.

“You want I should suck it? Huh Joey? Yeah?”

“Yeah. Suck it bitch!”

“Naw naw.” And she stood up, and she towered over him.

He didn’t understand. “Huh? What?” And as he looked up at her she turned him around.

He watched her, dumbfounded, as her naked ass moved across the room and she was pulling her skirt up higher and then she was on the large bed on her knees and her ass was in the air and she patted it and called him.

“Give it to me from behind! Fuck me from behind Joey!”

He began to walk towards her. He almost forgot about his pants being down and he stopped to lean to look past his belly at his pants, his underwear. And he started to take them off but that meant taking off his shoes and he glanced back at the chair as he thought he would have to sit down to take his shoes off and then she called him again and slapped her ass, hard.

He turned back. He took little steps towards her. And as he shuffled to the bed his pants made flapping noises. But before he could reach the bed she had rolled over on her back and opened her legs again, wide. “Come on Joey. Please, just a little. Suck my pussy! Eat me! Please,” she moaned. “Just a little ...”

“Geezes bitch, wait a minute,” he said. And now his own voice sounded strange. He was dizzy and she was still talking.

“ ... and then I'll suck you and you can stick it in me after that OK? Anything baby! What d'ya want?”

He couldn't talk. His mouth was dry and his tongue was thick. He wanted to tell her what he wanted but he couldn't think straight. He wanted it all. She had offered it all and they hadn't been in the room ten minutes. He was at the bed. He was on his knees on the floor. As he moved his head towards her his tongue hung out. He licked at her. Then she was out of focus and she seemed to be sliding from him. He stopped. He shook his head, to clear it. Something was wrong. He looked at her as she was smiling at him. And he saw death in her eyes and he knew. His drink! His drink was bad!

He lunged forward desperately and somehow he was able to grab her left ankle with his left hand. She pulled herself from him and he tried to hold on. And as he looked at her he saw the emptiness of her calm gaze. He would always remember the coldness of that look. He had seen that look before. The Mafia man mumbled. “Setup!”

He felt panic rise and it removed all traces of his lustful desire. He thought of his own death. And he desired to live. Then his vision blurred and he yanked her. He was called ‘The Hand’ because he could crush fingers, break an arm or choke a person to death with just the squeeze of his powerful right hand. As he pulled, she resisted and then he groped for her left arm with his right hand. But she moved it in a circle and he missed it. Now he leaned his weight back and then suddenly all of the beautiful blonde came to him of her own will, her own movement.

She was moving like a big cat. She pushed and slid and leaped directly to him. The shift in weight first threw him back but his left hand still held her left leg. She jerked that leg and now he was off balance, coming towards her. His right hand was raised, as if in salute, or to wave at her. Then her left hand was tight underneath his right wrist and she gripped him now. And as she pushed his arm higher into the air she fired a punch with her fisted right hand that caught him flush on his turned head, on his temple. And even in his dulled state he could feel that punch and he would recall it as being as hard as any he had ever received. Another blow followed immediately on the side of his throat, an open handed chopping blow. But he didn't feel that one. She halted the third strike that was poised. The drugged liquor had taken its full effect and he lost consciousness.

Battaglia slumped forward into the woman's naked lap. She looked at him in disgust. She lifted his heavy, greasy-haired head from her and pushed him back and turned him and let him fall to the floor. His head thumped on the thick carpet. She stepped over him and away. She looked down at him. He was on his knees and his fat naked pale white ass protruded into the air. His left arm was twisted back at his side and his notorious right hand was lying out in front of him, twitching. His face, pressed against the carpet was turned on its left side and his mouth was open. Deep snoring noises were beginning to sound.

The blonde moved quickly now. She pulled her skirt down and as she buttoned her blouse she went to the door that led into an adjoining room

and tapped on it lightly. Locks were undone and a woman entered. The middle-aged woman from the restaurant was now younger with lighter hair. As the blonde gathered her shoes and panties the other woman began quickly packing all the other few possessions and clothes and clearing the bathroom.

The big woman went to the sofa and removed a handgun with a silencer on it from between one of the cushions. She then went to the bed and leaned and from beneath two pillows on the far side she removed a large handgun with a silencer on it. She looked at Battaglia with his behind stuck up in the air and as she stuffed the guns into a bag she thought how she was glad she didn't have to use either of them. She stepped past 'The Hand,' and although he couldn't hear her she spoke teasingly to him, "This was your lucky day."

The liquor was poured out and the bottle and glasses were taken from the room. The two women, in meticulous fashion, assured there was nothing left to be found and within minutes they had moved into the adjoining room and locked the door. Less than ten minutes later three people left that room. Out a back entrance and down a ramp a grey-haired man pushed a wheelchair. In the chair rode a dark-haired woman who was slouched down and leaning slightly forward. From the back patio doors they passed the side entrance and entered a side street where the woman in the wheelchair was assisted into a waiting car that immediately pulled off.

The New York accent was gone as the blonde woman in the dark wig explained everything and how all had gone well. She was thanked and handed a thick envelope of money. She thought about Battaglia. How he had drunk two large gulps of the liquor. The beauty of the drug she had used was that he would wake up almost instantly in three to four hours and he would have only those two marks she had put on him and a really bad headache. She smiled as she wondered what he would say if he was found like that.

She sighed and closed her blue eyes for a few moments. She was glad it was over. She wanted to see her family. It would be late when her plane got in, they would have had their dinner but she would be able to cook breakfast for her husband and two children in the morning.

As the car headed towards the airport she stared at the passing scenery. Soon it would be the time of dusk in this hot, hard city. She looked forward to getting back to her little farm in Idaho.

"Tell Johnny bye for me," she told the driver. She glanced at her watch. It was almost six forty-five.

It was seven o'clock and Prophet was frantic. He was calling around, trying to find Battaglia. The Mafia man always called no later than six thirty. Prophet knew they only had but so long to change the numbers. Pontiac's numbers had been out for over an hour. Many of the people in Detroit knew what numbers had fallen by six o'clock.

He dialed another number he had on Battaglia. He was sweating. "It has to be done quick," he kept thinking. "Can't wait hours." He knew how it was. People would be getting drunk, celebrating, borrowing money on the

morrow's payoff. Soon it would be too late.

He got up to pace the room. Daddy Bell and Snake and the old woman and old man watched him silently. He felt their eyes on him. He went into the other room and slammed the door and locked it. He went to his drawer. He hit his cocaine, twice. He went into the bathroom. He checked his face in the mirror.

"I still got time," he said, aloud, to himself in the mirror. "Seven thirty, eight even and he can still change those numbers. He'll understand."

He thought he heard a phone ring so he unlocked the door and rushed back into the room where the eyes would stare at him again. There wasn't any ringing, except in his head, so he snatched up a phone to dial. He turned his back to them as he tried to call Marzette. He wanted to stop the dope deal. He wanted out. He couldn't afford it if Battaglia wouldn't change the numbers. Even if the numbers were changed he wanted his money back. He thought of his money, six hundred and eighty thousand to Marzette, almost three hundred thousand on those numbers. He shook his head, no. He banged the phone down. He couldn't reach Battaglia. He couldn't reach Marzette. And his special phone wouldn't ring.

Father Hartman let the phone ring two more times and then reluctantly he hung it up. He hadn't been able to reach Lloyd Nelson and his concern had grown past worry to a heavy sense of foreboding. He wanted to talk to his friend, his son. He wanted to see him. And he felt saddened that perhaps they would not be able to sit together again and drink lemonade in the summer night's time and look into the sky for falling stars.

He wanted to see him come again at Christmas with his bags of gifts for the children and the nuns of the orphanage. He wanted to know that as Christmas arrived, Lloyd Nelson would again become another year older. Yet he had seen the suffering of the man and he had seen him struggle to live. And he had seen the extensiveness of his youthful violence. Inexplicably, he felt an ending, near. He wondered now, if there was an answer to the question the young boy had asked him, as he lay paralyzed in his bed many years ago. "Why?" the boy asked him. "Father, why is this happening to me?" And when he had told the boy who was unable to move that he didn't know the answer to that. The boy had asked him to please find out from his God. Why?

The Father walked down the long hallway to the television room to help the nuns gather the younger boys for bed. He paused a moment to look at the boys frown and complain that there was no school the next day. It was as if it was years ago and he was watching the dark boy, the red-haired boy and the albino boy. He could hear their voices and see them here in their home.

He clapped his hands. "Come on now. It's already past nine. You need your rest so you can grow up to be big and strong." As the boys scrambled noisily past him, pushing and shoving and running, several looked up at him. He could see in their eyes familiar things. He said a slow prayer. For these here, he prayed. And for those who were somewhere, out there, also.

Darkness had nearly settled in completely by nine thirty this hot Friday night. From all appearances it would be a normal darkness and the heat and humidity would be, as it should for a July night. But for certain people in the city, the darkness of this night was deeper and the heat enclosed itself around a series of fiery emotions and actions that made its essence so hot, it was unusual, even for a time such as this.

Daddy Bell and Snake, both having moved their cars and parked on the side street, stood sweating in the thick air of the summer night in the far corner of the church parking lot and talked in hushed tones. They couldn't hear Prophet screaming at Battaglia over the phone that finally rang. They couldn't hear him curse and condemn and bemoan the circumstances that pressed upon him. He demanded the numbers be changed.

Battaglia had calmly told Prophet that he hadn't called because he had been busy and that those things really weren't his business anyway. He reminded Prophet that he had warned him before about taking those large bets without laying them off. He told Prophet that it was too late to change the numbers. And he had also told him that the last time he had changed them was just that, the last time. Prophet knew it was bad for business and besides, Battaglia added, he had bosses he had to answer to.

Prophet had screamed that he wondered what answers Battaglia would have if his bosses found out he was getting an extra three grand a week.

Silence had fallen across the phone line. Battaglia could hear Prophet breathing, hard.

Prophet could hear Battaglia thinking, hard.

Battaglia had suggested they forget about his extra five hundred a day for a few weeks until Prophet could get his business straight. And he told Prophet he better have the other twenty thousand or there would be real problems for everybody on his end. And when Prophet heard the phone click in the middle of his screaming reply he had flung the phone across the room.

By the time he had gathered his coat and stuffed his drug and his gun in his pockets, the phone was making noises and Prophet slammed and locked the thick back door on the whining phone and as Prophet moved through the darkness towards the parking lot, the phone went silent.

Daddy Bell and Snake couldn't hear Prophet mumbling aloud but they could hear the back door slam and they could see him in the distance as he came from the darkness at the side of his church and hurried to his brand new canary-yellow convertible Pontiac Bonneville that was parked near the fence. They could hear that door slam as he closed it. They could hear the engine roar to life and the tires squeal as he sped from the empty parking lot.

As they stood there beneath a tree and watched the dust follow the car and rise and spread and sink back slowly onto the driveway, Daddy Bell quit chewing his toothpick to light a cigarette and his angry face was illuminated by the flame of the lighter. He drew deeply and the tip of the cigarette glowed and as he blew out the smoke through his nose, he spoke. "That boy done lost his got damn mind."

Snake agreed. "Them women and that dope is running him crazy."

"He's going down," Daddy Bell said. "And I ain't gonna let him take me down with him."

Snake shook his head. "We gave him almost forty thousand and I bet nobody gets paid but the white boys."

Daddy Bell drew on his cigarette again. "I been telling you. We should've started looking out more for ourselves months ago. That little money we been beating him out of ain't gonna last long once this shit dries up."

Snake stuck both his hands in his pants pockets. His blinking eye blinked faster. He took three steps away and then turned and walked back. "I sure hate to deal with them niggas tomorrow without their money."

Daddy Bell looked back at the empty church. "I don't know about you but I'm taking care of myself. If I have to, I'm telling everybody Prophet's behind this bullshit. I ain't standing on front street for him no more. If he don't come up with some serious money tomorrow it's gonna be more than a rumor in this here city that he's the numbers man."

"Ain't nobody gonna bet on our runs no more." Snake blinked his eye in the darkness and nodded his head in agreement of his own statement.

"Listen here," Daddy Bell said. And although they were alone and their voices were already low, he almost whispered, as Snake moved closer to him. "The only good money we made lately was with Dag. He says he's got a big deal he can turn if you and me go in with him. He can work it by tomorrow night. I don't know what you gonna do, but I'm getting in on it. I got a little money put away and I'm just gonna have to take the chance and get up off of it. There's big money in them drugs and it's time we branched out. There's one thing I agree with Prophet on and it's that I need money for my old age."

Snake blinked and shook his head, no. "I don't know. I don't like messing with them drugs."

"You ain't gotta mess with shit nigga. All you gotta do is put up some money. Just like you been doing. Dag said he needed another hundred grand or he couldn't turn the deal. We got 'till ten thirty tonight, after that it's too late. I'm calling him and telling him I'm in. What're you gonna do?" Daddy Bell drew deeply on his cigarette. And as he blew out his smoke he stared at Snake. "Tell you what," he added. "I'll put up sixty of it."

Snake was thinking. Hesitating.

Daddy Bell thumped his cigarette away. His voice rose a little. "Either you go with Dag or you stay with Prophet."

"I'm in," Snake said quickly. "Call him."

At eleven thirty Lloyd Nelson, Red, and Bear were pulling into a large warehouse in River Rouge, Michigan, a little over twenty minutes from Detroit. They had talked as they rode, about the prospects of having collected a little under five hundred thousand dollars by this time the next night. But their enthusiasm had been tempered by the problems they believed they faced in actually getting the money.

The bets had been placed by almost two dozen people. And Red and Bear didn't think they would have any trouble picking up their winnings from these people and they didn't mind paying them their cut for placing the bets. But they all knew the big bankers were going to be very reluctant to get up off of what they owed. They also knew the numbers had stood. And it was their business to pay. It was in their best interest for different reasons. But that didn't mean they would pay. They mentioned several times the names of Prophet James and the two men who worked for him, Daddy Bell and Snake.

As they had neared their destination the car had grown quiet and Red and Bear had been thinking. They both knew if they didn't collect all that they had coming by tomorrow night, things were gonna break loose and things were going to happen, actions would be taken. They also understood this move on the guns was just something to do. Help Johnny Russo flip some merchandise and keep the three of them in, and yet on the edge of the game and make some money at the same time. This is what they did. But those numbers were special and the amount of money involved was an altogether different matter.

As they drove further into the warehouse the doors were closed behind them and at the end of the long aisle Johnny Russo stepped into the illumination of their headlights and began walking towards them. The three men got out and Johnny smiled at them. He appeared to measure the height and girth of Red and Bear as they walked towards him with their arms straining against the short sleeve shirts they wore. He looked at Lloyd Nelson dressed neatly in his dark-brown pants and pale-tone-brown long sleeved shirt and he was glad to see these men.

He grabbed Red's extended hand and they exchanged warm greetings. He shook hands with Bear and they crouched in boxing poses and feinted a couple of punches and then they both laughed. He grabbed Lloyd Nelson and gave him a big hug. He was obviously feeling good. And they were all reminded of the many times over the years they had transacted moneymaking deals together. He pulled his friend away a few steps, off to the side.

"You satisfied?" he said, his voice tight. "Did I work it for you or not?"

"You worked it Johnny. But I knew you would." Now Lloyd Nelson stared at him. Then he smiled, a little. He nodded his head, yes. "Thanks."

Johnny dismissed the subject. "Let's get down to business."

They turned back to the others. Johnny had four of his own men there and at his signal three of them began opening boxes. Bear went to examine the rifles. Red went to the trunk and pulled out a briefcase. Johnny motioned to the other man and Red and that man moved to a large desk to count the money. Johnny turned to Lloyd Nelson. "I got some information for you."

Lloyd Nelson knew Johnny would share with him things that would keep him up on the moves that were going on in his mobster world that may somehow affect him and the dark world of Detroit. Johnny lowered his voice a bit. "There was big cocaine deal scheduled to go down. But about an hour and a half ago everything changed. Giacomo's gonna shut down the cocaine as best he can. He's got at least fifty million worth of China White heroin

stashed all over that he can't move the way he wants so he's gonna flood the city with the stuff."

Lloyd Nelson nodded, yes. "Through Dag."

"You got it. Giacomo made him come up with half a million that he just pulled together. Plus he's gonna be fronted I don't know how much. And the shit they're putting out there's gonna be better than it's ever been before. Top grade. The junkies'll be ODin' all over the place. You know, that's always good for business. Then after a while they'll start cutting it down more and more. They got enough of that shit to last for years. And more's coming in. So, Dag is in. Marzette's out. But listen to this. They gonna take over a million three off Marzette. You got any idea how he could come up with that kinda money?"

Lloyd Nelson shook his head, no. "Far as I know Marzette doesn't have that kinda bank. He's got to have some people in with him. Who? How many? I have no idea. But when he goes down you better believe somebody else is going too."

Johnny Russo looked puzzled. He was thinking. "You'll probably hear something in the next day or so. Let me know." He was shaking his head, no. "That ain't my area. Me, I got the loan sharking and I'm seeing good return on the construction thing. I got some city contracts coming soon. That dope is bad business. From what I hear, your boy Battaglia and his men are gonna do the move. The big fellows are thinking about letting somebody else handle the numbers and giving the drugs to The Hand. He's got the personality for it. You know. Murderous."

Johnny paused. He looked directly at Lloyd Nelson. "You not mixed up in any of this are you?" He was serious, very serious. He needed to know why his friend would be involved somehow with Battaglia at the same time drug deals and murders were going down.

Lloyd Nelson was staring at Johnny. They looked deep into each other's eyes. One transmitting true concern for the other and each passing the honesty that was the foundation of their friendship and remained a crucial aspect.

"I got nothing to do with that stuff Johnny."

"You swear?"

"I swear. That ain't my game."

That was enough for Johnny Russo. He smiled. "Good! Good! That shit ain't nothing but trouble. Brings too much heat. Gambling, prostitution, a little extortion, we can get by with that. But here we are trying to go legit. We got the unions, construction and all this other legal shit and those assholes wanna fuck around with those drugs. You watch. It's gonna cause problems. But hey, it's too much money for 'em to pass up, especially when they're greedy bastards anyway."

A horn honked, once, outside the doors. They were opened and a truck with Red's two men pulled in. As they moved to observe the loading, Johnny spoke. "Marzette's history. He won't make it through the night." The four men stood and talked about old times as their business was being completed.

At twelve fifteen Lloyd Nelson and Bear prepared to leave and Johnny motioned and a man handed Lloyd Nelson a long canvas bag that he put in the trunk. They backed past the truck and into the street. Johnny nodded goodbye to them. Red would ride in the truck and he would be leaving a few minutes later and so he stood beside Johnny as the car pulled off into the night.

"Can you trust this Cinque guy?" Johnny asked Red as they walked back into the warehouse.

"Naw, we don't trust him. But he better be on the up and up." Red touched Johnny's arm, to stop him.

And when Johnny turned to look up at Red he could see clearly a strange expression on the big man's face. "What?" he asked.

Red spoke hesitantly, he almost whispered. "Did he tell you he was gonna be sick again?"

"You mean like before?"

Red nodded, yes. Johnny was stunned, and saddened. "He never said anything," and he shook his head, no. "Damn!" he said, in exasperation. "How long does he have?"

"Any day, the way I figure it."

Johnny Russo said something that would worry Red.

"Then you better keep your eye on him. You know how he gets. That bag I gave him has one of those rifles in it. And he's got three thirty shot magazines and a whole lotta ammunition." They both turned to stare at the closed doors.

And as they stood in that warehouse in River Rouge, a little over twenty minutes away, in Inkster, Marzette and two men who worked for Prophet were driving into a warehouse. Marzette had a suitcase. One of the other men had a suitcase. Marzette was smiling and excited. He had done this many times before. He would give them the money and the white boys would give him what he had coming.

Battaglia watched the men as they pulled slowly in and he tried to focus on the business in front of him but he was distracted. He touched the small knot at his temple and he pulled at the upturned collar on his shirt that he used as best he could to conceal the purplish bruise at the bottom side of his neck. He thought about the big beautiful blonde woman and the late afternoon incident that left him confused and very ill at ease.

When he had come to consciousness in the darkened room he thought he had woke up dead. Except his head hurt so bad he knew he could still feel, so he was alive. But the way his head felt, he didn't know if that was a blessing or not. He had woke up a little after nine and it had taken him almost fifteen minutes just to get up off the floor. He was stiff and sore from lying in an awkward position and both arms and both legs had fallen asleep and he was in a tingling pain throughout his body.

After turning over he lay on the floor on his back for a while. He squeezed his hands and shook his arms and tried to kick his legs. Finally he

was able to stand and pull his pants up and after fastening his belt he checked his pockets. He hadn't been robbed but who would want to go through all that just to rob him? He tried as quickly and as best he could to gather himself. But he kept pausing, to try and figure out why he was still alive and he had to keep stamping his feet and shaking his arms. What had happened? What was it about?

He had a ten thirty meeting and he had to hurry but he took time to make the call he should have made earlier. And when Prophet had been screaming at him, almost incoherently, about his problems, he tried to tie the blonde woman into the numbers. But he didn't pick the numbers. And if Prophet had been hit big, who laid the big bet down? Was it somebody who knew what numbers were coming out? He didn't even know what numbers were coming. It was his own bosses who controlled the numbers that fell. What did it benefit them to let the numbers stand? Were they in on it somehow? Maybe they changed the numbers every now and then for him but ...

Nothing added up. He was angry. He was thankful that if it was a contract on him, it had been called off or canceled or ... Maybe something had gone wrong. Or ... ? Later he had grown very anxious when he had been told that Monday someone else would work the numbers and he would control the heroin they would put in the streets. His first job was to handle the deal that was getting ready to go down.

But Battaglia knew he couldn't trust anyone in his world and he began to assume there was more to these changes than he was aware of. He believed there was a connection between the blonde and the drugs or the numbers or maybe one of the other schemes he was involved in and he just couldn't see that link. Maybe, she as like, a warning.

He watched Marzette exit the car. He thought of Prophet. He would have to deal with him tomorrow. He wiped his forehead. He knew that if it got out he was taking that extra money he wouldn't last two days. As crazy as Prophet was acting there would be nothing to stop him from talking, especially when he found out he was going to be required to get up off of another four thousand a week to the big boys.

Battaglia smiled at Marzette. And he smiled at the thought that Prophet wouldn't be able to pay his hits and so when he turned up dead nobody would be surprised. He smiled also because he knew he had a couple of real professional black boys who would take care of Prophet James. 'The Hand' looked at the watch on his arm. It was almost twelve thirty. By this time tomorrow night, he wanted Prophet dead and gone from this life.

Cinque and a large part of his group, including some people from out of town, had moved to a different house on the east side, a secret hideout. They all waited impatiently for the promised phone call. They were supposed to receive a call at one fifteen at the new number that had been provided. When exactly one fifteen came the phone rang and the ring seemed loud and Cinque jumped. As he reached out for the phone his hand seemed to shake just a little and his palm was moist and he was upset with himself for feeling

nervous like that. Then he was surprised and upset at the instructions he received.

The big man, Bear, was on the other end and he told him Mr. Herbert was waiting for him at Mamie's Soul Food Restaurant on Gratiot Avenue, to talk. He wasn't supposed to bring any money and he was told, and the voice emphasized that he was to come alone. No one else was to be with him. Then he heard the phone hang up.

Cinque turned to the men and women who sat and looked at him. He was confused. They hadn't figured on this. They wanted to make an exchange and then take their money back, by violent deadly force if necessary. They figured with that amount of rifles and ammunition it would take three or four people to move everything, there would be boxes and containers. They had a truck waiting and extra cars. They had this idea of how things would be set up. But now they would have to play it as it unfolded.

They quickly decided to put one man in the trunk of the car. Cinque would drive. They had used this car before and the man would be able to open the trunk from the inside and perhaps he would be able to gain some advantage from this.

Six other men would station themselves around the restaurant and a man and a woman would go in as a couple, to eat. All this was to allow them to place themselves in a position to get their money back. But Cinque wasn't supposed to bring any money so they really didn't know what to do. Under the circumstances the hastily arranged plan was the best they could come up with. The rest of the men and women would wait there at the house with the money.

The six men left in pairs and the couple followed immediately. Those two would be allowed to go in first. They figured it would take about twenty minutes for everyone to get in place and Cinque would take thirty minutes before he went in. They synchronized their watches. Their leader grabbed a jacket, stuffed his gun in his waist and headed for the meeting.

When Cinque entered Mamie's he made it a point to ignore the man and woman from his group who were looking at menus as he walked in. The place was not very large and it was crowded and noisy and the music was loud and he figured nothing could go down in here.

He looked around. He saw Lloyd Nelson sitting at the side near the far corner staring at him. He didn't see the big man, Bear, or the red-haired man he knew about. He walked over and slid in the high-backed booth. He looked over into the dark man's eyes and knew that was all that mattered. These eyes. He really didn't see the slight smile that slowly appeared.

"My man," Cinque said. "I'm ready. How we gonna do this? Where we gotta go?"

Before Lloyd Nelson could answer, a waitress brought him a menu. He opened it. He studied it.

She asked Cinque if he wanted a menu. He told her no. He was anxious and impatient. He waited for the waitress to leave and he had no idea that the

man who sat across from him was reading a note that had been placed inside.

"Come on man," Cinque said. "Let's get this thing moving."

Lloyd Nelson smiled just a little. "Take it easy Willie." Then he quickly apologized. "My mistake. I'm gonna do my best to remember to call you Cinque. But relax." He laid the closed menu down and quite deliberately opened one side of the suit coat he now wore and reached into the inside pocket.

Cinque could see the gun he carried and almost by instinct his right hand moved towards his own gun but his eyes widened as Lloyd Nelson withdrew his hand and pushed a small clear envelope to him.

"You do a little blow don't you?" the dark man asked.

Cinque was surprised. He was disarmed by this offering. He looked at the envelope and he glanced quickly around to see if anyone was watching. Then he looked closely at the package. It had chunks of cocaine that seemed to sparkle. The powder at the bottom not only sparkled but winked at him and Cinque lowered his head to look a little closer and he cleared his throat.

"Yeah man," he said. "I do a little every now and then."

"Go ahead, everything's cool, hit on that and then we'll talk business."

Cinque palmed the cocaine. He looked around. He saw Lloyd Nelson shift his head back and with a discreet gesture point to the door behind him in the corner with the word 'men' on it. He smiled and nodded his head, yes. "I'll get me a little one and one and I'll be right back," he nearly whispered. And he slid out of the booth and moved quickly to the room door.

When he pulled open the door it was dark inside and he stepped in and held the door partly open. The light from the restaurant barely shone in and he looked and felt to his left on the wall for the light switch. Finding none he moved two steps further and he looked to his right and using both hands, Bear snatched him on into the room by his throat and the door closed.

Cinque wanted to cry out in the dimness but he couldn't. He was choking. Then the light from the restaurant flared in the room again as Lloyd Nelson stepped in, the door closed and the room grew dim again. As the dark man stepped in a third man in the far corner turned a light on and Cinque was turned around. Bear had released his throat, pulled and showed him his gun with a silencer on it and whispered to him to be quiet. Cinque could see he wasn't in a bathroom but a utility room cluttered with old chairs and tables and he saw an old dusty jukebox. And he was afraid. Lloyd Nelson locked the door as Bear pulled Cinque back toward the corner and made him sit on a chair beneath the overhanging, unshaded light bulb.

On the other side of the door Cinque's people could see a man sitting near the wall, rise, turn and pull the sign that said 'men' from the door and sit back down to his food. They didn't know what to do so they did nothing, but wonder.

Cinque watched with surprised eyes as the man, Lloyd Nelson, walked slowly from the shadows of the door into the reflection of the light. The dark face came into the glow. The man was smiling, a strange smile. And his eyes flashed. He was shaking his head, no. Cinque could feel the muzzle of Bear's

gun at the back of his head.

"Willie, Willie," Lloyd Nelson said. And he patted the sitting man as he made tsk tsk sounds and when he found his gun he took it and handed it to the third man. He snatched the packet of cocaine from Cinque's trembling hand and eased it into his side pocket.

"I told you Willie. I didn't wanna play any games with you."

"But I ..." Cinque began to speak.

He was stopped as Lloyd Nelson slapped him with the right hand so quickly, so hard against his ear, Bear had to grab him by the back of his collar to keep him from falling out of the chair onto his face. Cinque's head was ringing and it seemed as if he had partially lost his hearing.

"Don't talk. Don't talk." Lloyd Nelson nearly whispered. And he put a finger to his lips. "Just listen." He joined his hands behind him and walked back near the door as if he was thinking and as he returned to the light it was as if he had made up his mind and he reached, with an elaborate motion, with his right hand, inside his coat, under his left arm and slowly pulled out a long black pistol that also had a silencer and Cinque started to beg.

"Please man ..."

Lloyd moved, reached, and struck him again. This time with his opened left hand. The slap sounded, loudly, and his beret almost came off. Again Bear had to pull his head up. And when Bear had straightened him up Lloyd Nelson put the gun against Cinque's left eye and pushed.

"I told you not to talk. Just listen. Step away Bear. If I have to pull this trigger I don't want you to get hit." Bear moved to the side. Lloyd Nelson stepped back but the muzzle remained pressed against the eye. "And I don't wanna get blood on me."

Cinque's mouth was already open but he closed it to swallow but his mouth was too dry and it appeared his mouth was going to move but it didn't and his eyes began to blur with moisture. Then they filled with terror. His left eye was already closed and now he closed his right. In this darkness the face of his First Lieutenant flashed into his mind. Just the two of them had been drinking gin, smoking weed and snorting cocaine and Cinque had said he was going to rob, kill if he had to for the guns and ammunition. His Lieutenant had told him to rethink that shit. Not to fuck with this man and reminded him who he was. "That's Lloyd Nelson," the man had said.

Cinque had snorted the dope, twice and as he pulled at his nose he had said, his voice rising. "I don't give a shit who he is! Fuck that motherfucker! I ain't getting up off that kinda bread! I need them guns and bullets! I got to have 'em and I'm taking 'em and we gonna do what we gotta do to get 'em!" He had gulped some gin and slammed his hand on the table. "That black motherfucker can't talk to me in front of my people like that!" Now, with his eyes closed, Cinque could see his man shaking his head, no, and the worried look on his face.

Lloyd Nelson was speaking between clenched teeth as he stood back with the long gun extended in his right hand. "If you say one word I'm gonna squeeze this trigger. All I want you to do is move your head yes or no to my

questions. You understand?”

Cinque wanted to nod yes but he was afraid to move. He opened his right eye.

“Nod your head yes if you understand. Shake your head no if you don’t, but not too fast. Do you understand what I want?”

Cinque nodded, barely. Yes.

“Now,” Lloyd Nelson said. “If you lie to me, you’re dead. The only way you gonna get out of this alive is if you tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Do you understand?”

Cinque nodded, yes.

“You was gonna rob me weren’t you ... Willie?”

Sweat was running from his hair now. He got faint. The question made him lightheaded. If he told the truth he believed he would die. If he lied he believed he would die. Cinque had been shot once before and it was as if he could now feel that bullet again. He heard Bear chuckle. He looked up at this man with his right eye and he saw a dark-brown skin, scarred man staring at him, completely expressionless. He couldn’t answer. He couldn’t move his head.

“I’ll tell you what,” Lloyd Nelson said. “We’ll come back to that one. How ’bout this one. You got a man and a woman sitting out there in the restaurant don’t you?”

Cinque nodded slowly, yes.

“And you got people outside too, don’t you?”

Cinque nodded, yes.

“Were you told to come alone?” Another slow nod, yes.

“I’m gonna ask you again. You was gonna rob me weren’t you?”

Cinque nodded yes and closed his one opened eye. After a few moments he felt the gun move away and when he opened both his eyes he saw Lloyd Nelson holster his gun. He was shaking his head, no.

“I thought we could do this straight. But I guess you just don’t know how to act. If I kill you or let you go I’ve got two hundred and fifty rifles and a bunch of bullets I don’t want. Or, we can finish this up right and go on about our business. What do you wanna do? Talk to me.”

Cinque swallowed, finally. He found his voice, a near whisper. “Let’s do this right man.”

“You do have the money don’t you?”

“Yeah I got it.”

Lloyd Nelson seemed pleased. His mood changed, lightened. “Alright. Let’s go back to our seats and I’m gonna tell you how it’s gonna be done. And Willie, when we get back out there wipe your face off, you look bad man. And remember one thing. I’ll kill you right there in that restaurant in front of all those people. It don’t matter to me. And nobody out there can stop me. You got that?”

Cinque nodded, yes.

Lloyd Nelson turned and began walking towards the door. Bear snatched Cinque up by the back of his neck and pushed him forward. Cinque felt

Bear's pistol at his spine as he walked. When the door was opened and Lloyd Nelson had stepped back into the restaurant he was shoved out of the room and the door closed. And when he glanced back, the closed door hid the closeness of death he had just felt. But he could still feel it inside his body and he could feel it in his knees and he was glad to sit down again.

"Wave at your friends." Lloyd Nelson told him.

Cinque turned and raised his hand slightly to them and they were confused.

Moments after they sat down the waitress brought two plates of food. "I held your seats baby," she said to Lloyd Nelson and smiled.

Cinque looked at the food. He was in no mood to eat. He took a napkin and started mopping his brow. He sipped some of his water and took a deep breath. He wanted to forget that back room. He touched his face, first one side and then the other. His face felt warm and his ears weren't ringing but he still heard chimes from the slaps. Again he looked at the food, this time with disgust, and his stomach flipped over.

Lloyd Nelson was staring at him. "Yeah," he said. "I'm not hungry either. But I figured it'd look better this way. See Willie, I got people in here and outside just like you, watching out for me."

He settled back. "Now this is the way we gonna do it. I'm gonna give you an address. Parked in the parking lot beside the address is a truck. Inside the truck in the ashtray are the keys. In the back of the truck are your guns and ammunition. Everything you ordered. All you have to do is call up your people and tell 'em where to go. They can take the truck anywhere they want and then check out your merchandise. When they're satisfied, they'll call you back and let you know and you'll tell 'em to bring my money right here. You keep the truck, it's yours. You can leave. I can leave. And everybody'll be happy and I'll forget all about your playing around. Fair enough?"

"Yeah man. Yeah."

Lloyd Nelson bent low beside him and as he watched Cinque he reached and when he straightened up he had a phone in his hand. He set it on the table and pushed it to Cinque. He went in his side pocket, pulled out a small slip of paper, eased it across the table. "That's the address. Make your call."

Cinque dialed and when he heard a voice on the other end he started talking, quickly, nearly whispering. "It's me. Yeah, everything's cool. Shut the fuck up and listen!" He gave the instructions and the last words he said before hanging up were, "Hurry up got dammit!"

When he had put the phone down Lloyd Nelson spoke to him and he had to take the loosened, tilted beret from his head and place it on the table. He looked away, then down, at the plate of food and swallowed at the words.

"For your sake I hope your people don't mess up. Otherwise you gonna be another dead black militant."

The dark man settled back again. He poured himself some ice-cold water from the pitcher that was beside him. He sipped from his glass. He appeared content. And he stared across the room out of the window. Life passed them by on Gratiot Avenue. It was ten minutes after two in the morning.

Georgia Reeves lay on her couch. She resisted the sleep that crept into her. But she was able to observe and feel the power of sleep, the necessity of sleep, as her eyes closed against her will and a soft sense of serenity came over her body. And in spite of the many emotions that rushed through her, she relaxed. Sleep was slowing that which existed within her. Sleep was bringing pause to the conscious desires of her existence and she would soon allow the wishes of her dreams to live, to speak.

She sat up and shook her head. She admitted to herself that she was tired and she began to reason that perhaps it would be best if she took a nap. He would call and she would wake up for him. Her thoughts were becoming merged and the past days overlapped and the recent hours became hazy as she drowsily tried to keep the events in order.

She rose and walked over to the window and stood there to look down across the empty courtyard. She saw a man and woman coming through the darkness, passing within the glow of the purple lights. Their arms were around one another as they strolled slowly along and she could see the man turn to the woman. They stopped and there beneath the bluish-red essence of a light they hugged and kissed and the scene brought envy and pain to her as she watched them as they faded on into the darkness. She wondered where her man was, what was he was doing at this very moment?

She pulled the shade down and moved to her bed. She saw Della's new phone number there on a small yellow piece of paper beside her lighted lamp. She turned the lamp off. She stretched out and she thought of Della and how excited she was when she called with the news that the numbers had come out, straight, just like he said they would. Della had been yelling and laughing and cursing and making plans for their future. And when she kept mentioning Lloyd Nelson's name, Georgia would experience, as if pricked with a tiny pin, a sharpness in her heart.

Della spoke of the things they could do with the money. How she had bet more than she was supposed to and they would get almost five thousand apiece. She had said how lucky she was, how lucky Georgia was. And Georgia was happy for Della but as quickly as her mood had risen, it had come back and sunk into the reality of her own situation. In the end she had concluded her conversation with Della without really saying very much.

She tried now to turn from the internal hopeless, helpless strains that coursed through her. And she was surprised at the strong current of anger that continued to manifest itself in such an obviously intense manner. And when she pulled herself past that feeling she was confronted with fate and she wanted to rail against fate and she wanted, with all within her, for destiny to be altered. She wanted for there to be hope in her love. And she wanted possibilities in the life, for the life, of the man she adored.

She rolled over on her side and her eyes fluttered and then closed. And on this soft border of unconscious sleep her fantasies of love and marriage and a home and children and a future, didn't seem quite so foolish, not quite so hopeless. There was within dreams, always the chance for one to realize fulfillment.

She sighed deeply. She had believed there was nothing he could say to force her from him. And that had been true. She wanted him, to be with him. But ... She yawned. Again, she sighed. She forced her eyes open. She would not, could not leave him. But he believed he would be leaving her, soon. When? Soon. What would happen? He did not know. All he believed was that, something, would happen. Soon.

It would be there, they would differ. She knew she could not, at this time, accept as reality that he would be struck down as he had in the past. In spite of all he had told her she believed this time would be different. This time she would be there with him, for him. And somehow her love for him, and yes, his love for her, would make that difference.

She loved him. And he had admitted he loved her. And she knew he spoke the truth. And she knew, not just in an innocent belief, but with a certainty that left no room for doubt that they would join their loves, tie themselves together with binds that could not be broken and would not be torn. And there, where their loves lived, within their souls, they would never become separated. They would seize their opportunity, hold on to one another and the love that flowed between them would protect him, protect her, and they would be saved from ... the fever.

There was darkness in her room. There was darkness that eased behind her closing eyes. But the soul of Georgia Reeves was alive and bright and full. She had an unwavering faith that her love was not only real but also powerful. Redemptive! Eternal!

She whispered his name. She wanted to look at her clock. But before she could, she had fallen into sleep. But had she seen the time she would have known it was early, yet it was late.

It was two thirty in the morning.

Prophet rolled over in the bed and looked at the clock on the nearby nightstand. It was two thirty in the morning.

"I gotta go," he mumbled.

The naked woman who had been pacing before the bed stopped to glare at him now. All of her five foot one inch body was tingling and the anger and disrespect flared. She drew on her cigarette and as she blew out the smoke she walked quickly to the opposite side of the large bed from where Prophet was slowly sitting up.

She stubbed out her cigarette then pulled another one from the pack, moistened the filter and dipped it into the sparkling cocaine that lay on the paper beneath the darkened lamp. She put the cigarette into her mouth and sucked on it a little before the flame from her lighter reached the tobacco. Then, the cigarette was lit and as she blew out the smoke she resumed the tirade she had begun minutes ago.

"You ain't the only one with some dope nigga! I'm sick of your shit Prophet! You think you can come over here and fuck me anytime you get good and got damn ready but I'm gonna tell you something, it ain't gonna work like that no more!"

The voice was harsh and grating to Prophet. He turned to put his bare feet on the soft rug. He paused, with his head down. He tried to shut the woman's voice, out. He attempted to ignore the words. He fought to control the thing that stretched within him.

"There a lotta men in this city would do anything to be right where you at!" She started pacing again.

Prophet took a slow, deep breath. The cocaine streaked as a burning liquid through his naked body. His heart was beating and skipping and his head ached and as he grit his teeth he thought how much he regretted coming to this woman. He realized he should have gone home after he left the other woman. At this moment he felt like he had deposited all he contained within him, inside her anyway. He cursed himself in a low, nearly inaudible mumble. He knew. It was that dope that told him to come here.

The woman paused a moment to shake her head disdainfully at this man who mumbled to himself. She paced again.

And as the naked woman walked beside Prophet, past him, his head was down and he could see in the dimness her brown shapely legs. He raised his head to look at her body. She moved past the shaded window and he could see her silhouette. He could see her breasts, the curve of her full hips as she turned to face him. She pulled deeply on her cigarette and the orange glow danced before his eyes. She was lovely. And he felt, nothing, absolutely nothing ... but that ... thing, move inside him again. This thing was there, within his emptiness.

His mind wandered, drifted to his own problems. Her voice faded. Her body became indistinct in the darkness and within him his own anger and frustration rose to join, that thing. He was ignoring her.

She was looking at him as she walked and fussed and she knew he was ignoring her. His disregard incited her.

"I gotta go," he mumbled again, over her sentences. She suddenly ceased her movement. The abrupt absence of her voice emphasized the quiet of the room. From somewhere, seemingly far away, voices and music came from the stereo. And it was as if they both paused to listen to the singing. But there were other voices they both also heard. Their own inner voices chattered, insistently.

The woman stared at Prophet as she began to pay heed and fall into agreement with the words in her head. Prophet began to listen to the echoes in his own mind and he felt a unique, boost. He felt a charge. He looked directly into the naked woman's eyes and he knew he had to hurry.

This woman wanted to argue and fuss and curse. She always wanted, needed, threats and pieces of violence to reach fully her enjoyment when they had been together in these lustful, desirous encounters. But Prophet was in no mood to play that game this time. He was mumbling to himself. Telling himself not to let this heated little woman get to him. "Let her go," he said.

The woman heard clearly only the word, go. "Take your ass on then Prophet! But you just remember what I said. You can't come over here just 'cause you wanna slide through. I ain't got to hold this pussy for you. On top

of that, you come over here late, s'posed to be over here hours ago and you can't even fuck!" She started back to her side of the bed. Now she mumbled. "Here I am full of this got damn dope and nigga's dick won't even get hard."

"I'm tired," Prophet said, softly. "I got a lot on my mind."

The woman chuckled now. Taunted. "Tired my ass. Just get on Prophet! You know you ain't 'bout shit anyway. Jive nigga!" She turned up her glass of cognac and drank it down.

Prophet's voice took on an edge. "You better watch your mouth." And he could hear her behind him, sniffing the dope.

"Fuck you Prophet!" she said, again bending over the cocaine. And she laughed after she had sniffed, twice. "Or maybe I can't say that since you ain't fuckin'." She sniffed the drug again. "Go to hell," she said. "Just go on to hell!" She reached across the bed and pushed the back of his head.

Prophet stood and turned to her. He was angry and she could see that. That was what she wanted.

"Bitch, I'm telling you ..."

She snatched up one of the pillows and flung it at him. "You can't tell me nothing!"

He knocked the pillow from the air and lunged across the bed at her. She backed up and laughed at him. "All you ever had good was some dope anyway, nigga." She watched with a gleam in her eyes as he crawled across the bed. His eyes never left her as he moved slowly towards her.

She moved back near the wall and in the direction of the foot of the bed. She was grinning as he advanced. "You know," she said. "I always wondered 'bout you, pretty boy." She kept backing up "I heard you had a little sissy in you. I guess it was true. Ain't that right, Prophet? What's your real name anyway?" She laughed and turned from him as he reached his feet and once again lunged for her.

He had her left arm and he pulled her to him and slapped her with his right hand. She turned and slapped him back and as she tried to wiggle from his grasp she felt his hand on the back of her neck. She struggled and she kicked at him and then he pushed her onto the bed, face down. And she rolled over quickly and was sliding back as he moved towards her. She was breathing hard and grinning. "OK baby," she said. Then she looked between his legs and saw he was becoming full, rising.

He grabbed her leg and pulled her to him and he brought his right fist against her jaw. She was stunned and she turned from him and held her face. "Shit Prophet! You know I was just kidding. Don't be hitting me like that! You hurt me!"

"That's the way you like it ain't it?" he almost whispered.

She heard something in his voice and she could see his eyes as they flashed. And she saw something float pass, behind his eyes. She moved towards him, to hug him, to caress him, to assist his erection. He struck her again, near her left eye and knocked her back and she turned onto her knees. She crawled. She tried to leave the bed. But again he had her leg. He snatched her back. He released her.

“OK Prophet. OK. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean nothing.” She turned over. And she saw he was fully erect. She opened her legs. “Don’t hit me no more baby. Just fuck me! That’s what I want! For you to fuck me!”

He was over her now, between her. He jammed himself deep into her. She wrapped her legs around him. She closed her eyes. She rose to him. She rose again to meet his movement.

“That’s it,” she moaned. “Like that! Hard! Hurt me Prophet! You know how I like it! Hurt this pussy baby!”

“I’m gonna kill you bitch,” he nearly whispered. “I’m gonna fuck you to death.” He pushed. He grabbed both her breasts as he moved her back, to the head of the bed, to the wall. He squeezed her so hard she was in pain and her eyes flew open. She jerked beneath him and pulled from him and tried to get him from inside her. And he thrust so hard she felt pain, as if he was tearing her, ripping her, inside.

She could feel the wall at her head. “Prophet!” she said. “Prophet!” she moaned. The wall stopped her squirming movement. But he continued to thrust, to push and she was bent and turned at the waist. Twisted. His left hand went to her throat. He squeezed. And she jerked and bucked and he thrust. Harder! She flailed at him with her hands and he leaned back from her futile blows and the hand around her throat squeezed. Tighter! She kicked the air. And as she tried to speak, to scream, she made gurgling, choking sounds. She dug her long nails into his arms and she could feel his blood in her hands. He brought his right fist down into her face. Again, with all his power, into her left eye. And that thing inside him was loose and running in small crazy circles. His fist struck her nose, breaking it, his fist, above her eye, splitting open her flesh, his fist against her mouth. And she could taste her own blood, feel her own blood as she brought her hands up in front of her as she tried to protect he once lovely face from the blows that continued and then she tried to pry open his gripping fingers and his left hand tightened around her throat and she felt herself growing weak. And she no longer felt the pain. She couldn’t feel him inside her body. She only felt a desire to live. And with the last of her strength she jerked her body against the Prophet but the man would not stop. The darkness would not part. The darkness was swirling around her head and sound was becoming faint and his curses and growls and moans were leaving the room and passing by her. But the woman knew by the noises she could still hear that Prophet was going to cum inside her body. He was ready to expend himself within her and she tried to hold on to her life in the hopes he would let her live. In the belief his desire to murder her would be satisfied in the climax he was now attaining in spasms between her legs. Her eyes opened and through the thick sticky blood she begged him with her glazing eyes and her hand was gentle on his arm as she caressed him. But it was too late. He was much too far gone. It ...was too far gone. Now both his hands were around her throat and he jammed her again and with his hardness he stabbed her again, and again, and the last thing she could barely hear was his rising sounds of lustful pleasure and his passionate expressions of ecstasy. And she gasped for breath and her breathing was

suspended and then it began, and then it slowed and as she was leaving this life, Prophet was cuming and was cuming, again, and again. And with his back arched and his eyes closed he squeezed the last drops of his creamy essence into her, as he choked the last drops of life, from her. And he collapsed in satiated exhaustion upon the little woman's dead body and he could not see her open, staring, pleading, glassy, marbled eyes.

Prophet's body tingled. And his softening, shrinking self remained inside the dead body. And as he lay there he felt he would be able to sleep just like that. He felt he could lie there in the oozing blood and allow the soft body to grow cold and stiff and he would feel in his arms the process of death. He wanted to touch that, a prolonged process of death. He sighed. He slowly closed his pretty light-colored eyes.

It was three fifty-five when two of Cinque's men walked into Mamie's with a leather briefcase. One of the men was the First Lieutenant. He had that same worried look. The guns had been checked and the return call made. They brought the briefcase over to the corner booth and as they handed it to Cinque they looked at the dark man who leaned forward slightly with both hands beneath the table and they had no doubt that this man had a gun. They didn't see the man in the corner near the door with the covered sawed-off shotgun on his lap, staring at them.

Cinque told them to leave and he told them to take the couple that sat near the window with them. Lloyd Nelson told him they had just five minutes to move everybody that was outside, away. Cinque told his two men to see to it that everybody outside leaves right now. Cinque's people left and he pushed the briefcase across the table.

Lloyd Nelson stared at him. He spoke. "Is all my money here?" He opened the briefcase and glanced inside. He thumbed through parts of it.

"Yeah, it's all there, I swear. I counted it twice myself earlier today."

"How much did you count?"

"Forty-six grand. Look man I ... "

"I don't wanna hear it. And I'm not even gonna check it." He eased his gun under his coat and back into its holster. He spoke lightly to Cinque. "I'm glad we was able to take care of this little business. Now, I don't think I'm gonna have any trouble leaving. In fact, I better not have any problems out of anybody anytime soon. If I hear anything or find out in any way that you or any of your people are looking for me, then you better believe I'll be looking for you. And in this city there won't be no place you can hide. Right now I know which house you're at over there on Holcomb. And I know about that little storefront on the west side too."

Cinque went pale.

"So, you got your guns and I got my money. And I hope they come in handy for you. I really do. And something tells me you gonna need 'em, real soon." Lloyd Nelson slid from the booth and stood. He picked up the briefcase. He looked down at Cinque and smiled slightly. "Willie you be careful now. Remember, war is hell."

He turned and walked towards the utility room. And as he neared the door the man in the corner rose to pull it open for him. Cinque could see the shotgun. Lloyd Nelson stepped from sight and the other man, glaring at Cinque and moving into the room, pulled the door shut and disappeared. The bolt slid noisily into place and the door was locked. Cinque threw up and the warm sour contents of his stomach splattered onto his beret.

Lloyd Nelson, Bear, and the two other men walked quickly across the utility room through a doorway, locking the door behind them. They passed through the empty building that adjoined the restaurant. They walked into a garage where Red, armed with a shotgun, and another armed man stood and again the door was closed and locked behind them. Red stepped through a doorway into the dark alley that ran past the rear of the garage. Seeing nothing, he nodded and the garage doors were opened and two cars pulled out. The doors were closed and the cars drove away, into the night.

As the two cars were driving off, Prophet James prepared to depart. He had showered and when he dressed he had pulled on his shirt and he could feel and was reminded of the fresh deep scratches on his arms. But this was dismissed as he began to think, and experience, other things. He felt not only refreshed but he felt relieved. He was thinking maybe his problems weren't so bad after all.

He put on his suit coat while counting in his head the money he could come up with by ten o'clock this Saturday morning. He reached the bedroom door and he thought of Marzette. By midnight Saturday he would have his six hundred and eighty grand back. He figured right this moment Marzette was making money.

He pulled the bedroom door shut. Then the door opened and he stepped back into the room. He bent to the table by the bed and folded the paper around the cocaine. He looked down at the bloody dead woman who lay twisted and naked with her knees slightly in the air and her legs spread open. She stared past him. He looked around. He wondered what she was seeing. He moved to the door. "Bitch you won't be needing this dope." And he eased the cocaine into his pocket and pulled the door shut behind him.

Prophet waited until his car had rounded the corner before he put on his headlights. He was glad now he had parked in an alley a block from the woman's house. It was a little past four o'clock. He pushed the radio on and turned the dial. He wanted to hear some good rousing gospel music.

Red and Bear were drinking in the Democratic Club as the sun was coming up. Bear was cursing and complaining. Red had been forced to stop him twice from jumping on someone. Bear was worried about Lloyd Nelson and he was fired up and struggling against his own suppressed rage. He wanted the OK to go after Cinque. He wanted to kill the bushy-haired man for his attempt at betrayal. But Lloyd Nelson had said no to that.

Bear had said they should kill him because he might come after them. Lloyd Nelson had quietly explained that Cinque and Willie were basically cowards and that he was just glad to be alive and that he would let it go and turn his attention to other matters. He had calmed Bear down, temporarily.

Bear stood at the bar in the joint, gulped his drink and grew quiet and morose. He turned to Red. "What d'ya think he's gonna do?"

"Who?"

"Lloyd Nelson."

"Bout what?"

"Bout everything! What's gonna happen?"

"Hell, I don't know what's gonna happen." Red sipped on his drink. He pondered that question a moment. And he sighed. "I wish I did." They both thought about their friend and that bag with the rifle and bullets.

He had told them to take him to Georgia. As they rode he had passed the briefcase to the front seat and given them instructions on paying everyone and what to do with his share. They had agreed to talk at six that evening after Red and Bear had collected the numbers money. When they had pulled up on Cass Avenue he had stared for a long time out of the car window. Then he told them to take him to the Ford that Bear had gotten.

They had rode in silence. The only sounds coming from the music on the radio. They came up beside the car and when he got out Bear passed him the keys and he asked for the keys to the Chevy. He had gone to the trunk and taken out the bag Johnny Russo had given him. And when he walked back and handed the keys to Red, Bear had jumped out and said he was going with him. Lloyd Nelson had looked at his friend across the top of the car and shook his head, no. Then he had reached into the car and briefly touched Red's shoulder, this, to acknowledge their parting and also the coming day. He had stared into his eyes for a long moment.

Then he had looked up and smiled just a little. "You can't go where I'm going Bear," he had said, softly.

He had walked around the car and he stared at Bear in such a way that the big man kept the words he wanted to say. The dark man had reached out and put his hand on Bear's arm and left it there. "Be careful. You and Red need to take somebody with you today. I'll talk to you this evening," he had said as he turned and walked away.

They had watched him as he had put the bag in the trunk and then he got into the black '57 Ford and the souped-up engine had fired to life in a low growl and they could hear the glass-packed mufflers and he had blinked the lights once and they could hear the gears being shifted as he sped off. And they had watched the round red taillights disappear into the darkness.

Now as they sat upstairs in the dimness of the windowless Democratic Club, they couldn't observe the sky as it lightened and became a bluish-pink far away in the east. But they could feel the morning coming. They pondered on what the night would bring? They both wondered where Lloyd Nelson had gone? What was he going to do? And they wondered how he was feeling, inside?

VI

FATHER HARTMAN WAS DREAMING. IT WAS A DISTURBING dream. It was a beautiful dream. And he tried to hold on to it as he began to ascend from the dark images of his sleep. He wanted to pull the dream with him, in order to look at it. He wanted to ascertain how it could bring him such unease and yet contain such soothing beauty.

The dream slipped and slid silently from his grasp as he moved closer to consciousness. It began to break up into fragments and as he plucked at the pieces they would dissolve in his hands and then dissipate into the sky. And there was darkness near the solid earth. But as he climbed from sleep, from the dream, he looked up and saw that the floating sky, once so high above him, was changing colors, becoming lighter, so slowly as to be almost imperceptible. And as he opened his eyes this Saturday morning, the dream was drifting, passing, fading, gradually becoming irretrievable and finally he lost it and it disappeared, perhaps forever.

But he was not fully awake. He knew this. He looked to his right at the shade drawn to the bottom of his window. At the sides of the shade he could see, just as in the dream, the incipient light of very early morning. And he sighed deeply and prepared to close his eyes, turn over and return to sleep, perchance, to dream again. And his heart jumped as a voice came, low and even in modulation, from his left, near the table, near the far wall.

“It was a beautiful dream Father,” had said the voice.

The Father rose up quickly, blinked, and peered across the room and he recognized the voice and in the absence of light he barely saw Lloyd Nelson sitting in a large chair calmly observing him. The Father felt within himself varied emotions come up and he was immediately concerned and for some reason he grew tense.

“My son I ... ”

The dark man spoke again, interrupting, and he said the same thing. “It was a beautiful dream Father.” Then he added. “But just as you have awakened, the world will awaken sometime in the distant future, look back on the distant past and wonder how humans of now, today, could have been so foolish, so very childish to believe in ghosts and ... Gods.”

Father Hartman sat up and moved until his back rested against the pillow at the headboard of his bed. He looked through the dimness at the dark man. He wondered what was the meaning of this visit. He wondered what lay behind these soft words. And yet he understood they would sit like this in this heavy gloom and talk and wait on the approaching light.

“Are you alright my son?”

“No Father. I’m not. But what does it matter to the world? What does it matter?” he almost whispered. He looked to his right, at the other shaded window.

The Father heard the near whisper. “It matters to me.”

They were silent. Then the Black man turned to the White man, stared at him. Fixed him with a penetrating gaze that cut through the shadowy film of the room and dived deep into the Father. And Father Hartman found himself moving his own vision past the dark man’s right shoulder to the large stained-glass window in the corner. The window would brighten and become colorful as the sun came up and the Father was thinking how Lloyd Nelson had bought the window for him and that the images and the colors of the window were in the expanding light, coming alive.

“I wanted to see my woman Father. To see the woman I love for one last time. Georgia. That’s her name, Georgia Reeves. She’s intelligent and sweet and beautiful, with soft smooth dark skin and a golden smile with dimples. And now I know she looks like my mother and sounds like my mother and when Georgia laughs, my mother laughs. I wanted to hug her and to let her hug me and let her pass to me her love. But I couldn’t make myself see her, to take this madness, this pain of mine to her. I remembered that you love me. In your own Godly way you love me don’t you Father? And it would have been my Godlessness I would have been taking to her, isn’t that right?”

“Of course I love you, but I ... I don’t understand ... ”

“It’s because I don’t believe, in your dream, in your God, that I’m being punished. Isn’t it? Isn’t that really the truth?”

“God is not seeking punishment through you.”

“Then what is His role in this?”

“God has given you strength and protected you and God will see you and remain with you in this that you’re going through. Trust in God my son. Everything, in the end, will be alright.” Father Hartman was trying hard to understand. Was this man turning now to God? He hoped so. With all his heart he wanted this man, his friend, to place himself in the hands of God.

“Then it’s the Devil? It’s not my lack of God. It’s not that I don’t have god within me but I have the Devil within me and the Devil is stronger. Is that it?”

Now Father Hartman was confused. He could not tell from the quiet words of this man if he was serious. Yet, he knew the situation was grave. He sat up a little more to look at the features of this man, at his face that was becoming clearer, more distinct as the morning light seeped past the shaded windows and eased into the room. Both windows were open, contained small screens, a breeze blew. The shades lifted slightly and settled. The shadows were releasing their denseness. Outside, the early birds began to sing.

"Lloyd Nelson, why are you asking these questions now? What is it? What can I do for you?"

"I'm asking because I want to know. Tell me why this is happening. You're my Father. Tell me. That's what I want you to do." His voice was taking on an edge.

Father Hartman remembered this question from years ago. And as it was posed once again, once again he was pained. He was silent. Then he spoke. "God moves in mysterious ways." And both his answer, and his voice sounded hollow.

The man in the chair shook his head, no. He spoke. "What a dream you've lived, but a beautiful dream, and a beautiful lie. There is no God. Somewhere, something inside of you knows that."

"You're wrong my son. God lives in and through all of us. God exists. You must believe. If you could believe you would experience in a real sense His presence. Do not mistake my moments of hesitancy or frustration for doubt or disbelief. I've always known of the truth of God. It is ... "

The dark man interrupted him. "You know the truth of lies. And you must live your lie forever because if you ever fully step into reality your dream will be destroyed. Father I remember how you used to pray for me. How you tried to make me close my eyes and pray and I felt so childish. And when I would think of someone, somewhere in the sky, or deep within the earth, when I would envision a heaven, a Devil with horns and fire and Angels with wings, I would think how fantastic these images were. I would wonder how a grown man like you could believe in fairy tales. You were submerged in your belief and you were passing that on to me, your feeling that you weren't deceiving me. But even then I knew you were deceiving yourself.

"When I grew up I pondered on the origin of this deceit. I wondered how these fantastic incomprehensible illogical lies could come to be? How do they survive for thousands of years? But as I learned of the evil of humans and the weakness of humans and the fears of humans I came to understand why humans need Gods. But because I understand that need does not mean I accept these constructions. You're able to believe because your fantasy, your dream, is incomplete. Yet it is, for you, a complete thing because you and those like you refuse to add to it, to alter its foundation. The years have changed circumstances but there at the bottom of your convictions resides a timeless essential element.

"Those who were called savages needed Gods to protect them from the powerful forces of nature. From there the Gods were afforded some control

over fate. And thus that allowed humans to come to some acceptable terms with the senselessness of death that was undeserved and unjust. Then humans handed to the Gods control of the sufferings and privations that tumbled mercilessly and endlessly through their lives. And humans' evil souls gave credence to the existence of the Devil they created.

"As humans became stronger and were able to protect against nature they eliminated death by giving eternal life to their own spirit. Their Gods assumed the tasks and directed their powers into controlling the morality of humans, slowing the viciousness of humans. The Gods dealt with the inequities, the defects of life and attempted to guard and save humans from other humans."

The dark man paused. The Father could hear emotion. He could hear anger seep into his voice.

"No Father, you may not have lied but you did not tell me everything. By design you neglected to provide me with information that could have allowed me to decide for myself of the nonexistence of your God. Everything you handed me was to promote that which had latched on to you, that which you held close."

The Father shifted. He cleared his throat. "We teach of the existence of God because we believe in God. But it is more than our belief that gives life to the reality of the spirit of God. He has revealed Himself in one way or another, in one form or another to those who believe. Devils and Angels and other such things represent symbolic entities and illustrate actions of forces and spirits that truly exist, in expression.

"But we have been handed down proofs. Proof has been passed to us, just as you say, for hundreds and hundreds of years. Those who came long before me, who possessed more knowledge than me, believed. Where you see lies I see evidence, confirmation and I of course have accepted the words. And I understand there is a certain interpretation that must be applied and I accepted the form of the parables of the word. And if what has been passed to us cannot authenticate for you the existence of God, and with the assistance of that which religion teaches, you still cannot look around you and observe the power of Him, then it is because you don't believe. Don't you understand? You must believe in order to see and feel Him."

The dark man slowly shook his head, no. "I understand that in your dream it has always been necessary to believe first in order to see. It is only religion that demands such a thing. In all other areas one would see, observe, examine, test, touch, and then, believe. Yet, you suggest I believe because belief has been passed down, passed on. Proofs have existed for these many years. The great thinkers have also acknowledged and accepted that which you deem to be truth.

"Yet you fail to mention that four hundred years before Jesus there can be found in Plato, in his philosophy, within his cosmogony, all that has somehow become known as, important and inherent within and throughout your Christianity. In Plato we see the beginnings of the concepts of immortality, the body and soul, heaven after earth.

“There is suspicion that perhaps these things you talk about didn’t just, through some miracle, come into being, but evolved. And so what you hand me in the nineteen fifties as truth perhaps has passed through degrees and variations of truth. And when I looked at that which is considered the progress of humans, the growth of humans and their attempts at civilization I see parallels in the process of religion.

“In that process I found Jewish elements in Christianity. There’s the creation. The Chosen People of the Jews are the elected Christians. There’s the righteousness. The Law. The Messiah. The Kingdom of Heaven. But some of these great thinkers you speak of began thinking that all religions but one are evil. All but the one in which they believe, are evil. And only their God exists and is real.

“Saint Paul bypassed circumcision and Mosaic Law, and Christianity rose and thus you hand me Jesus. But you don’t tell me of Mahomet and Allah and Islam. And Zoroaster and Jehovah are not mentioned and you forget of Buddha and Buddhism and therefore cannot suggest that instead of Heaven I might choose to seek Nirvana.

“And you never talked of the fourth century, the fifth century and how Christianity expanded as the wealth and power of the Church expanded. There within the Church were the bishops and their practice of almsgiving. And the destitute mobs that formed behind those bishops, that believed in those men, were purchased.

“You ignore the influence of Saint Ambrose, Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine and Pope Gregory the Great except for your own purpose of promotion. And I had to search to find that Saint Augustine was a native of Africa and if I choose to, I wonder, on my own, of the color of his skin. And my own bewilderment in regards to these Saints is just an indication of the complexities of your religious teachings.

“And I am not alone in my confusion as to the different Gods and their origins, their separation, their powers. For even within your own Church sixteen hundred years ago the wise men wrestled with the issue of the relation of Christ’s divinity to His humanity. You don’t speak about the conflict at the Council of Ephesus in 431 or the influence of Pope Leo at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. To speak of all that which has been ignored shows what dwells within that which is necessary in religion and that’s the distortions, the alterations, all the omissions, the superficial changes, and the concealed process of religion. I see uncertainty and dissention within your beliefs. But is that progress?”

Lloyd Nelson paused to stare across the room.

The Father spoke. “We don’t deny that the history of religion shows a process. But it was, and you may question, most certainly progress, through a need for clarification. There has been conflict and debate but the basic precepts and thus the foundation of belief has remained constant and unshaken.”

The dark man crossed his legs. “Of course the necessity of belief has remained constant. That’s all you have. But that belief is focused on all that is

divine. It must remain there. You must believe in a higher God or your convictions will sink down into the human element. Those men who believed as you believe yet argued over God, debated about God and wrote of God and His powerful actions, in reality, created for themselves, to control the masses, to define their enemies, to eliminate all those who opposed them ... God.

"If you ever looked there, to that which is human, you would be forced to acknowledge the humanness of religion and if you do that, the reality of that which is inhuman would be forced upon you. And your belief in God will remain merged with the need to disbelieve that humans can ever function without God. For without God what is a human other than a murderous animal? But what has the humankind become with God?

"You can't believe that a human being would deceive in their written words about God. Yet the Bible was the product of humans and altered by humans who decided through councils and decrees just what would be passed to me, through you.

"And you recline there before me celibate. Not because it's some truth or inherent aspect of religion and your position, but because it has become a requirement. What can you know of man without knowing of woman? And this is because in Egypt in the beginning of the fourth century Saint Anthony was in fear of his own natural instinctual impulses, his own sexuality, and decided to become a hermit and spend his life resisting the temptations and thus the sins of the flesh.

"Pachomius gives up everything, becomes a monk, establishes a monastery and Saint Athanasius reconciles the ecclesiastics to the monastic movement and it becomes a rule that monks should be priests. And these are the people you speak of who have passed such greatness to you. But all they passed was some aberration of their own personal existence. There are vows of poverty, obedience and chastity that someone who is no longer even spoke of and who's been dead for hundreds of years, demands. The Father is controlled by dead men and a dead religion."

"My son, you are in possession of a distorted view of religion and its purpose. Don't let your own painful existence blind you to the truth of God. God is not dead! God lives!"

"No Father! All the Gods are dead. And all the religions are dead. Yours began dying from the moment it was formed into ultimate purity, some divine height. Humans killed the dream. The popes and the emperors were humans and they claimed the possession of God to further their own designs, to sustain in comfort and splendor their own mortal lives. They didn't care anything of the other life. No one could be emperor unless crowned by the Pope and yet for centuries the strongest emperors appointed or deposed the popes. And they struggled for supremacy until the Pope won the battle but lost his moral authority. And the unity of Christianity that had been maintained was eventually destroyed by the might of the French, the Spanish, and the English in the secular world. And then the Reformation destroyed the religious world as it was, at that time.

“Anyone who searches through history, if they choose to, can find anarchy in the Church, greed in the Church, lust and perversions, sexual abuse and murder. All human depravities are there within the Church.”

They fell silent. They were both thinking. And both were looking to, and wanted to stave off, that which lay at the end of this conversation. For as long as they talked, there was hope. But the cessation of their words would mean a return to the reality that awaited the dark man with the scarred face. That ... thing, was poised between them and yet was being denied as they talked and thought of, God.

Lloyd Nelson began again. “It’s been futile, your dream. The Reform Movement directed by supposedly moral motives was really to separate the clergy from the common human being. But the popes, priests, the reverends, the preachers, the prophets, have never, can never, be separated from the internal essence of a human being or parted from their own infantile souls. Not until they discover the ultimate truth, will it be revealed, that we are all related, and we will all come together within the ultimate reality of all humans and that’s death. And all the childish wishes of heaven for the good and a hell for the bad will not change that. No one shall escape death. And there is only the nothingness after death.

“It was the papacy behind the brutality of the religious Crusades. It was the papacy that became powerful again and brought Christian religion to the forefront by mass atrocities. So history has the Inquisitions and we see the politics of religion. We see the brutality and persecutions in the wars in the name of God and you hand out beauty and peace and heaven and the afterlife. And I know that Christianity took advantage of the conditions of hell, here on earth, to rise, as the masses could find nothing to live for in their own time. No hope! Nothing but pain and suffering surrounded them and so they turned to the promise of something better, even if it meant the embrace of death to attain happiness. But at least the happiness was to be, everlasting.

“And so as you are there in that soft bed you are a product of a system that you say I should believe in simply because it’s been around so long. You want me to believe in a God who can heal the lame and bring sight to the blind and the most extravagant claim of all, bring the dead back to life. And you suggest I take as truth the written words of people who believed in these ridiculous events. Miracles! Lies! You want me to believe in men who were ignorant of many of the basic truths of life. Believe, you say, in men who knew the earth was flat and wanted to kill Galileo because he said the earth revolved around the sun.”

The dark man uncrossed his legs. His hands were clenched, tight on the chair. His voice was rising. He was beyond angry. “I reject your God who has given up His position, misused His purported powers and relinquished any possibility of His existence by failing to exercise His authority in a more pronounced and obvious fashion! I deny Him! What do I need your God for if He’s going to allow the chaos and madness of this world to continue unabated? He, allows the innocent babies and those who attempt to live by

His precepts to be brutalized and murdered in His, sight! Yes! It is your God who allows the wanton destruction in the wars that are unleashed, in His name! And all you can say is, He moves in mysterious ways!

“Where is He Father?” Lloyd Nelson’s voice grew louder. “Call Him! You’re close to Him! You live for Him! Call Him! Make Him show Himself Now!” He yelled.

“My son,” and the Father moved to sit on the side of the bed. “It is the will of God that moves through this life. You have seen His power. Yet you deny it. You, of all people should be able to attest to His presence. What do you think restored your hearing, your sight, returned your speech? It was the power of God that allowed you to walk again. My prayers, the prayers of all those who felt for you, cared for you, brought your heart to life again as you lay in that hospital a few years ago. How can you deny His existence when you are ... here ... ?” His voice faltered. He suddenly became aware of the purpose of this conversation. He understood now. He knew what was coming. He heard the words before they were uttered. And when they were spoken, nearly whispered, they were as a soft echo.

“Why, Father?”

Father Hartman felt an ache in his chest.

“Is this the humor of your God?”

The Father could hear pain, now.

“Is this His idea of a joke?” Lloyd Nelson rose from his seat. “What is it? What purpose is there in this to take from me and give back to me only to take something else? Again and again! Yes!” he yelled. “I’m here dying! I’m in love,” he roared. “And I’m dying!”

He began to move in the room as if was searching for something, someone, on the floor, on the walls, upon the ceiling. “And you talk about God and goodness and purpose.”

Father Hartman stood and he wanted to go to him. To somehow help the tortured soul who moved in agony before his eyes. He wanted to go but he was, afraid. And he was ashamed of his own fear. But he could see not just anguish but twisted hatred. He could see a glow on the dark man’s face and he could see the moisture of his face and he knew. Lloyd Nelson was in fever.

The Father held out his arms and shuffled in halting steps towards the man who was stalking in agitation, as if lost, around the room, behind the table, past the chairs, moving across the shadows and into the growing light. Then a shade was lifting from an abrupt breeze and the shade was to the east, to the advancing sun and the shade was becoming a bright rusty-orange.

“Call Him Father!” And again he yelled. “Now! Bring Him here and make Him tell us! Make Him tell me! Why?”

Trembling, loving hands reached out. “Here. Let me help you. Let me take you ... ”

“No!” The dark man eluded the Father. “No! Pray for me!”

Father Hartman stepped back. He recoiled in fascinated terror as this man, his friend, his son, put his hands on the wide table and swung himself

easily across it. He turned towards the Father and the Father stumbled and fell back, upon the floor near his bed. And the large chair was between them and then the heavy chair that the Father had to strain to push and slide to sweep beneath was in the air. High above the dark man's head it hovered.

Lloyd Nelson flung the chair into the air, across the room, through the beautiful stained-glass window in the far corner. And the explosion of the sunlit window seemed so, slow, and it sounded so ... so quiet. The colored glass floated into the yard, onto the green grass and Ethan Hartman could suddenly hear the songs of birds and the little birds were loud.

The scarred man did not hesitate. He followed the flying glass. He leaped high and he was majestic as he passed through the glassless window frame. He returned in a crunching noise, to earth and the sounds of his slow walking footsteps on the broken glass were ... deafening.

Ethan Hartman closed his eyes. And in that darkness his mind went blank. In the near distance he heard the low rumble of a car. The Father began to pray for his son. "Dear God ... "

Georgia Reeves seemed to be able to feel her heart. She touched her chest. She wanted to assist her heart in its slowing. She needed to help it, with its pain. But she could not. She sat on her bed and clutched at herself. She massaged there where her heart had begun breaking up into tiny pieces, as shattered glass.

The jagged shards were drawn into the bright-red liquid of life that ran through her body. She could feel the pieces as they flipped and tore as pointed fire through her. And as she reached her feet she felt the coursing of this through and within every facet of her being. She felt the pulsating, throbbing hurt. She knew without a doubt, of the wrongness of this morning moment. She knew Lloyd Nelson, her love, was in pain.

She had awakened in a startled fright. She saw the daylight outside her window, turned to look at her clock and she had begun to feel all she now sought to ease. As she regained a measure of composure she had immediately thought of what she could possibly do. She knew she had to do something. It was almost seven o'clock in this morning and his absence told her nothing and yet it somehow imparted to her, everything.

She called his apartment. No answer. She placed the phone down. She was thinking. Then she was running, down the hallway, down the steps, along the street, around the corner. There, his car was parked just as she had left it. And she returned to her room, dazed, confused.

Time passed and she sat and walked and stared out of the window. She hoped. She prayed. Ten o'clock came. She was again on the phone to talk to someone about him.

Daddy Bell and Snake entered the church a few minutes past ten o'clock and they greeted the few people who were present as they strolled through the large upper area. Descending the stairs, before they moved past the outer office, they stopped at the opened door and spoke to the old man and old

woman and the old woman nodded her head towards the back room and the old man rolled his eyes and shook his head and the two men kept walking.

As they opened the door to the next room they could hear Prophet in his private area. He was singing and talking. They paused to listen. They could hear him laugh and then there was silence. They strained to hear another voice, expecting the sound of a woman. They heard nothing. They were surprised Prophet was in such a good mood. And they were going to be confused when they would realize he was in the back room alone.

Alone, he was, with the other aspects of his self. Those other parts of him were asserting themselves, demanding Prophet's attention, making a nuisance of their selves and causing Prophet to listen and pay attention to their problems.

Daddy Bell and Snake looked at each other and shrugged. Daddy Bell knocked on the door, called out their arrival and the two men sat down to await the man they could now hear talking loudly again.

He appeared in burnt-orange slacks and matching long sleeved opened neck shirt and white straw shoes. In his right hand he carried an orange silk handkerchief and in his left he carried a large paper bag.

There was nothing to be gained in looking at his eyes because they were covered in dark shades. Snake was distracted and thinking. Daddy Bell assumed Prophet had not been asleep. And if he had gone home at all it was to change his attire. But since, in the past few months, he had brought so many of his things to the church and now practically lived from that back room, as they both now stared at him, the two men knew that the man who covered his eyes may not have been home in days. They wondered about Prophet James as he carefully unfolded the top of the bag and sat down. They wondered what he had been doing since they last saw him.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Prophet greeted them. He looked from one to the other. "It was a bad day yesterday. We took a big hit. But you know, they say into each life some rain must fall. So I had to dig down into that rainy day money. Now you know how it is, the white boys have to get theirs."

The two men glanced at each other knowingly.

"So I'm gonna need a day, maybe two, three at the most, before I can kick you both down."

Daddy Bell straightened up. He cleared his throat. He took his toothpick from his mouth. Prophet had been speaking quickly. He was obviously tense and agitated. He raised his hand before Daddy Bell could speak. "Look, I'm short. But I did the best I could and we got to put everything on the hits. I got a couple other things going and I'll have the rest of the money in a day or so. By Monday it'll be business as usual. That's what we got to do is keep the business right.

"All together the payoff came to a little over two hundred and eighty thousand." He pointed to the bag. "There's a hundred and seventy thousand here. You got to tighten up as many of your bankers and as many of your betting regulars as possible. All of this is for the business. I'll pay you two by tomorrow night, Monday morning."

The two men were again surprised, slightly, not that the man in the dark glasses had come up with this amount of money but was willing to get up off of it. Snake was blinking and shaking his head, no. Daddy Bell was shaking his head, no. He was ready to speak, to protest. Prophet could see their displeasure.

"I told you ... " Snake began.

Prophet erupted and the intensity of his rage stopped the two men, silenced them. He leaped up. With his left arm he swept the phone and a calendar and paper and pens from the desk. He was banging on the desk with his right fist. "Got dammit I don't wanna hear no more about what you told me!" He pointed his right index finger. His diamonds glittered. "Don't you think I know what the fuck it going on?" They both wondered what he knew about what was going on. "Everybody's gonna get theirs and those that got to wait just got to wait! Don't say nothing! Just do what the fuck I tell you to do and keep your got damn mouths shut!" He was livid and he trembled and sweat popped onto his forehead. He sat down.

Daddy Bell spoke. "OK Prophet, just take it easy. I can take my ends later."

"You motherfuckin' right you can!" He yelled. "You know and I know your players are gonna kick you down something anyway!"

Snake spoke, in a complaining, near whisper. "Ain't nobody gonna give us nothing and we ain't paying 'em all they got coming. 'Sides, you know how them niggas are. Even if they get half they gonna be mad. We the ones got to deal with 'em. Shit, you ain't never had to ... " His voice trailed off as he saw Daddy Bell staring at him. Then he looked at Prophet.

Snake was shaking his head and blinking. He got up to retrieve the phone that was making a sharp beeping noise. He left the other things on the floor. He hung the phone up and put it on the desk and sat back down. Prophet's head was moving slowly. He was looking from one to the other and then back again and though they couldn't see his eyes they could feel them and they could hear him breathing.

He removed his glasses and settled back in his chair. His light-brown-green eyes flashed. Even though they were sunken, hollow and his butter-scotch-colored skin that surrounded them appeared darkened, they still flashed. His gaze penetrated behind the veil that had been recently drawn between these partners of many years. He spoke and his voice was low, menacing. "You two ain't getting ideas, are you? Thinking 'bout turning on me maybe?" He stared at the two men.

Snake swallowed and lowered his head.

Daddy Bell looked directly at Prophet and then his eyes fell on the blood that now seeped through Prophet's shirt, from his left forearm. And he noticed the bruised knuckles on his right hand.

Snake spoke. "Naw Prophet. It's just ... "

Daddy Bell eyed Prophet. Then he spoke to silence Snake. "Everything's gonna be alright. This ain't the first time we been short. You know, we talking 'bout big money here but, we'll handle it."

There was something in the air, in this room, between these men. They all knew this. This thing eased away but did not dissipate. It hovered throughout the church, into the basement as they counted and then divided the money.

Prophet gave them final instructions and by eleven forty-five they were leaving that downstairs dimness. And when they stepped into the sunlight they had to pause and squint. It was a bright day. It was quickly becoming heated as noontime neared. They thought about the man in the basement. They thought about the money they carried. Within, they were apprehensive and suspicious. Schemes began to form in their minds.

Neither said goodbye to the other.

In the basement Prophet was pacing. He went into the back room. He locked the door. He snorted his cocaine, twice. His mind was racing, plotting movements. He was hearing things, vaguely. He could feel things, distinctly. Disorder was loose within him and he embraced that. He wanted his internal impulses to represent the chaos in his external life.

The drug was surging through him and he was charged up. He thought about all he dealt with and he strove to remain in sync with all aspects of his existence. Inside, his life was breaking down. Outside this room his life was breaking down.

He thought about Marzette. He thought about his own promised dope. He thought about Snake and Daddy Bell. He began to talk aloud in that closed back room and he asked questions and this time he heard clearly, answers. Those other parts of him sounded. "Treachery! Suspect that!" He heard those three words, in his mind.

He unlocked the door and went into the other room. He couldn't call his number One or Two man because they were on the dope deal. So he called his number Three man and told him to be at their meeting spot at two thirty. He hung up the phone. He saw the blood on his shirt. Now he would have to change. He cursed. He started to call, on the phone, the little woman. He remembered. He couldn't call. So he cursed, into the air, aloud, the dead woman. He was angry at her for scratching his arms.

It was an ominous Saturday afternoon on July 22, in the year 1967. There was something deeply submerged and tremendously inimical behind the heat of this afternoon. Dogs barked at nothing. Cats hid. Squirrels ceased their scampering and rose upon their little hind legs to sniff the air and then sought the shelter of tall trees. The birds and bees ... disappeared.

At the parks and backyard picnics people were listless and weighted, so they thought, by the thick humidity and the heat as the temperatures rose past ninety-one degrees. The unusual silence of the city was eerie. The elderly people spoke of this. They mentioned the calm and the strange dirty-blue color of the sky.

Around the city the police were puzzled by the quiet and pleased by the lack of illegal actions being revealed and they wondered about this. And the detectives in the homicide division paused to ponder. Friday night had been

busy and they hoped Saturday night would allow them some rest, some time off. But they knew their hopes would most likely be in vain. So they returned to their business of murdered women and murdered men who had been killed in horrible fashions.

Death rode into Detroit on Her train at two forty-eight that afternoon. Death was strong, and excited. And Death had brought many of Her first cousins and even a few distant relatives joined Her on this journey back to the 'Motor City.' And the train that Death rode, that followed and rumbled behind Death, was long and black with a powerful engine and many windowless cars and the whistle sounded, long, quick, shrill, sonorous, silent blasts and there was no little red caboose to signify the end of this train.

Death and her party were invisible and yet in their formal adornment they were beautiful and obvious, to those who could see, and feel ... Death. And they had all arrived in splendor to observe a magnanimous, historic spectacle. And within the sheerness of her clinging long black gown, Death was lovely and horribly ugly and Her pointed, gnashing smile expressed Her glee and the twisting of Her dripping skeletal hands gave indication of Her heightened anticipation. And Death and all who were related to Death sang and danced and watched and waited for the sun to begin setting.

The revelers turned to Darkness and paid homage to Darkness and praised Hatred and Fear and toasted Madness and Deceit and saluted and cheered as Brutality and Violence waltzed together as Frustration and Rage and Injustice and Retribution, watched quietly, pleased.

Then they all turned their glowing red eyes to Death. They grew quiet in their awe of their Queen. Each knew of their own rise and fall, ebb and flow. Each understood their individual limitations and strengths. But Death was omnipotent and ... eternal. And as the evening came, Death would be alive in the streets of Detroit.

Joseph, 'The Hand,' Battaglia passed envelopes to the Dillard brothers, Melvin and Calvin. He told them they would receive the other half of their money when Prophet James was dead. Battaglia watched the two black men leave and he smiled and looked at the gold watch on his white wrist. It was three o'clock.

At three fifteen Prophet was being driven in his limousine back to his church. The bag of money on the floor beside him for the men he would need did little to ease his frantic feelings. He disliked borrowing money from anybody and he tried to calm himself. He tried to think of positive things. He wanted to hear from Marzette. He wanted to see Marzette. The limousine pulled slowly up to a red light and stopped. He looked to his right and he saw, Marzette.

There was no mistaking that frown and those pop eyes were staring at Prophet, angrily, as he was grabbing at the handle to open the door. The red light changed to green and horns began to honk as Prophet left his beautiful

white limousine in the street and the door remained open in the street as he moved in a rushing stagger to the sidewalk. He snatched the special edition newspaper from the stand and there was Marzette on the front page. And for some inexplicable reason he remembered that the dope man had laughingly told him that his pictures looked bad in the papers because the police always woke him up to arrest him and they never let him comb his hair. That was why he started shaving his ... It was the word, head, that Prophet focused on. He had passed the words of, three men found dead. He had passed the name Marzette Wells and the reputed drug lord description and for an instant he struggled with the word, severed. He fought against severed hands, severed heads and he thought of his money and he thought of his drugs and he spoke aloud. "Lloyd Nelson."

"I gotta see Lloyd Nelson!"

Della tried to calm her cousin, to reassure her, to no avail.

Georgia had yelled it again. "I gotta see Lloyd Nelson! I gotta know!"

Della could hear the pain and anger. She could hear clearly, the fear. Della said she would try to call Red and Bear and for Georgia to wait there. Della hung the phone up and looked at the numbers' money on her bed and she wanted to use the money to relieve the anguish of her cousin. She wanted to help and as she was searching for phone numbers she was wishing she could take that money she had won on those three numbers, 270, and buy some moments of serenity for Georgia.

Della started calling Red and Bear at three thirty.

At three thirty Daddy Bell was sitting and talking with Dag. The television was on in the cool air-conditioned basement of the heroin king. But Daddy Bell didn't see the pictures on the screen. He was distracted. He was nervous, very nervous. And he was thinking about the money he still had in the trunk of his car that was parked in the alley, near the garage, behind the house. All the numbers' money was there and each green paper bill called him.

When Dag looked sideways at the grey-haired man he could see that the numbers' man was worried and Dag smiled slightly and focused on the television. He wondered if the man was going to worry himself to death, so he told Daddy Bell, "Man, fuck Prophet! I'm telling you, fuck that nigga!" He said he had people to protect Daddy Bell, for a price. And Dag was trying to get some more money out of this man. He was wondering how much money he had stolen and where the money was. He told the nervous man that their plan would work. Dag told Daddy Bell that all he needed was a little knot on his head and a story that he had been robbed.

To Daddy Bell the more he thought about it the more it didn't sound too bad at all. He started thinking about that again, the possibilities.

At three thirty Snake was sweating and his hands were shaking. He knew he was supposed to be heading to the church soon. He reached for the phone and then withdrew his hand. He looked once again at the money he

had spread on the bed of this motel room in Highland Park. He was hiding out in this room. But he couldn't escape from his desire for all this money that was resting so pretty and green there beside him.

He sipped on his bottle of rum. He thought how he had more money coming from Dag. That he could be rich like Dag and have things like Prophet James. He wondered how much money Prophet really had. He was thinking about a lot of things.

Snake took a deep breath and reached over again for the phone. "Shit," he thought. "I'll just say, this is the first time this has happened in years. Hell, I been lucky. These kinda things happened all the time." He hung the phone up. He wanted to go over his speech one more time. He wanted it to sound right when he told the Prophet how he, the Snake, had been robbed of all the numbers' money.

It was right at three forty-five when Prophet stormed into his church. He promptly sent everyone upstairs, away. He told his driver to watch the side door and send the man he expected, down to him as soon as he arrived. Down the steps he went. He hurried past the old man and the old woman without speaking and went directly to his back room and locked the door. He went to a tall safe in the corner and unlocked it. He took out a container, went to his desk and dumped out his cocaine and looked at it. He wondered how much it was. He wanted to divide it up into daily amounts but he didn't have time. He snorted some, quickly, four times. He looked at the drug. He wanted to give some to the man who was coming and then again he didn't want to give him anything so he didn't know what to do. He finally scooped up part of the cocaine and put it on some paper and wrapped it up.

He went to his safe, put part of the cocaine in and took out two guns and a box of bullets. He put some of the money he had in the bag into the safe and locked it. There was something else he wanted to do. He was asking himself aloud what it was he wanted to do. He was walking in short quick steps around the room, snapping his fingers. When he stopped, Marzette and Lloyd Nelson and money swarmed his mind and he turned in a circle and then he snatched a picture from the wall and smashed it on the floor and then he took another picture from the table and threw it against the wall. Then he moved to a small table in the corner and lifted a lamp and shattered the lamp on the table and he kicked the table to pieces. Then he stopped.

He was breathing hard trying to catch his breath and he thought and he said aloud, "I'll get my money back." He was sure that somehow he would get all his money back, pay off the people he owed on 270 and everything would be alright. And that's all he wanted. He said that aloud. "Everything's gonna be alright."

A part of him believed that. That part was calmed by that thought. A part of him rejected that idea and laughed and jeered at him. And he knew he would have to keep that laughter away or he would lose his mind. He stood in the middle of the room and he wondered of the meaning of 270. He wondered what it played for?

He went into the other room. He was thinking about so many things and his mind focused again on his business. Daddy Bell and Snake would be there soon. He needed to get them straight. They was gonna be made to reaffirm their loyalty. The three had been together too long and had made too much money for there to be any doubts. They should be ready to stick with him when things got hard. Instead they acted shaky.

He thought about those two as he slowly loaded one of his guns. Then he returned to Marzette and his dope and Lloyd Nelson. He had called out his man because of his suspicions of Daddy Bell and Snake. He needed to know if they were up to something. But he would have to deal with those two quickly. He didn't have time to play around too long with that stuff. His number Three man was gonna have to get the other men together so they could get after that dark man and those two who ran with him. Then he thought again, of Monday and how things would be straight by then. He said it again aloud. "I'm gonna get my money back."

Battaglia crossed his mind and he cursed the Mafia man. He thought how badly he needed to hold on to all the money that was being brought to him right now. Saturday was his biggest day. He thought about 270. He cursed those three numbers. In his mind he suddenly saw Lloyd Nelson and that scar. He had to find him and he was trying to work that out, trying to figure out a plan when the phone rang. He snatched it up.

A voice was on the other end and it was whispering. There was something senseless, almost inaudible, about Daddy Bell? Snatched? Money? And Prophet was thinking of other things, hearing other voices. On the phone there was something mumbled softly about wanting more money. Prophet was ignoring this game. He dismissed the voice. He didn't hear about Daddy Bell being made dead. Prophet could barely hear any words and he yelled at the voice to speak up and when it didn't he started screaming in rage and that laughing part of him laughed and another part of him cursed the whispering voice. Prophet slammed the phone down and his mind returned to his money and Lloyd Nelson and Benny Jenkins' shop.

On the other end, the man who had been whispering was surprised. He hung up the phone and Daddy Bell and Dag were standing in front of the desk looking down at him, and he looked up at them.

"Well?" Daddy Bell said, anxiously.

"What'd the nigga say?" Dag asked.

"He told me to suck his dick," the whispering man answered.

Prophet couldn't come up with a way to get his money back. And he was wondering what that phone call was about. He was thinking about another hit on that dope. He was listening to the footsteps on the stairs and the phone rang again. He stood to pull the receiver up and he was cursing loudly again. The he recognized Snake's voice and he began to listen. And as he was listening, the Three man walked into the room.

The man could see Prophet standing behind his desk with a gun in his right hand, the phone in his left and knew by the look on his face there was

somebody other than Prophet, who was in real serious trouble.

“Wait a second. Say that again. Say the whole thing again.” Prophet’s eyes were tight and his left eyebrow went up. The muscles in his jaw moved and a vein stood out on the side of his sweating forehead. After a while he spoke in low, even tones. “This happened when?” He listened. “So you ain’t took care of no business?” He was quiet again. “And they got it all huh?” Another pause. Prophet sat down. “Well Snake, you know, you was lucky they locked you in that trunk. They could’ve killed you.” Prophet looked at the man watching him. “No,” he said, almost whispered. “You come on over here and we’ll figure out what we can do and you can get the rest of this money I picked up. You can call as many of your runners as you can from here. You know we gotta keep the business going.” Prophet closed his eyes. “Yeah, I’ll be here. Waiting on you. It’s like Daddy Bell said, everything’s gonna be alright.”

Prophet hung the phone up. He was thinking. He looked at the gun in his hand. It was heavy and he hefted it. He understood the whispered call now. But he was puzzled by this stupidity that was revealing itself.

The Three man told Prophet nobody had seen Daddy Bell or Snake. Nobody had been paid on the 270 hit. All the big betters were scrambling, trying to find some place to play, chasing down Mister Wilson and Horse Collar. The smaller runners were trying to book as usual and lay the bets off but the word was out that nobody had gotten theirs. He figured Prophet wanted to get the boys together so he had called ’em and they was on the way over.

He spoke of Marzette. And he was angry. He bemoaned the demise of the number One man, his own first cousin, who had been murdered with Marzette. He wanted to know if Prophet knew anything about who could have killed the men? And he told Prophet something, some news. He told him the dead men had been poisoned. They had been killed with poisoned cocaine. They were burned, like with acid, on their faces under their noses, in their noses, down their throats. They were all burned. And after they had died in poisoned agony the cocaine had been sprinkled all over them, like seasoning. And they had been cut into pieces with a saw and axe and plastic baggies full of bad cocaine were put in their chopped off hands. And the Three man wondered what Prophet thought about all this.

Prophet stared at the Three man, blankly. He almost laughed at the story, instead, he frowned. Then the story of the murders was lost to him because he was lost, in his own mind. He rose from his seat. He stepped into the outer office and instructed the old man and old woman to leave. He told them they could go home and to come back Monday morning. He told them to send the driver home. They could see not to ask any questions.

Prophet came back into the room. He stood and looked at his special phone. He walked over to it and snatched it from the wall and flung it across the room. He turned to the man sitting at the desk. “We gotta wait on everybody to come. We’ll talk about everything then. Knock on my door when they’re all here.”

The son of Reverend Ezra James went into his private room deep in the basement of his holy, sanctified church. He locked the door to that room. He paused there and leaned back against the door. He shook his head, no, at the madness that unfolded and he chuckled to himself.

He went to his desk and looked at the sparkling snow and as he looked down at it he thought of poison and acid. With his tongue he moistened his right fingertip and placed it slowly upon the powdery, beautiful white lady, slowly, upon ... her. He put his finger in his mouth and sucked it.

He walked into the bathroom and when he switched the light on, his eyes hurt for a moment and he blinked, and blinked again. He stared at himself in the mirror and tried to figure out the last time he had been asleep. He couldn't remember. Suddenly, he couldn't remember much of anything beyond the past few hours. His head ached. His heart rushed, and hurt.

He splashed cold water onto his face and he allowed his head to remain like that for a while, hanging down, dripping. He thought of the many things that stood before him as obstacles to his progress. But all those things were too many and his mind went, somewhere. And it was when he once again felt the running cold wetness in his hands that he returned to the moment, to the reality he knew. What he knew was lacking in details but he wouldn't have understood that.

Prophet slowly removed all his clothes. Standing at the sink, he washed his body carefully. He touched his neck with his best, most expensive cologne. And as he dressed he paused to wonder of the deep scratches on his arms, where they had come from. He put on his most beautiful jewelry.

And when he moved to look at himself in the full-length mirror, he smiled, pleased. "Momma's baby boy, the one and only," he said, aloud, softly. He always felt he looked good in black. The color seemed right for his butter-scotch-colored skin. And black seemed perfect for this approaching night.

He walked across the room to sit down. He folded his arms and put his head upon them on the desk. He closed his pretty eyes. He was weary and yet he wasn't. His head was down like that when the numbers came out for that Saturday. The people couldn't remember the last time the same numbers had come like that in both houses, in both races.

The dead row fell. In both Detroit and Pontiac, it came. 96769. The dead row.

When Prophet heard the knock on the door he opened his eyes and lifted his head and he didn't know if he had been asleep or not. And when he looked at his gold watch he knew time had passed. Yet he knew although time had passed, his problems had stood still. They waited patiently on him. They called him, behind the laughter in his mind.

He stood and reached across the desk for his drug. He sniffed, twice. He wiped his nose with his handkerchief and got another silk one, a black one. He dumped some of his cocaine onto a piece of paper and unlocked the door and stepped out to the six awaiting men, and when the men turned to look at him, he smiled, broadly.

"Gentleman, gentlemen," he greeted them, loudly. "We all ain't been together like this in a while."

Now the men noticed the white paper in his right hand and the green paper, the money, in his left, because he held his hands out for them to see. His jewelry flashed colors.

He tossed the money on his desk and walked to the far wall and pulled out an album cover. He poured the cocaine on the cover and handed it to the Three man. He spoke. "Crush them rocks up and pass that shit around."

Prophet sat behind his desk. He looked at each man. "We got a long night if front of us." He was loud, confident. "We gotta figure out a way to get our hands on that black nigga Lloyd Nelson. He's the one who killed Marzette," and he pointed at the Three man who was hunched over the album cover, "and chopped up your cousin. That's his style. And he's got something that belongs to me. And somebody here's gonna make some good money by offing Snake and Daddy Bell." Prophet James laughed, cursed, and he started counting money. Preparing to play at the ... game.

It was six o'clock.

Red and Bear were sitting by the phone at Red's house at six o'clock. When it rang they looked at each other. Red picked it up. "Yeah." He recognized the soft voice of Lloyd Nelson but he was unnerved by its altered sound. It was tight, and sharp.

"How much money did you get?"

Red hesitated. "Horse Collar and Mister Wilson paid everybody. And we paid the people for placing the bets. Me and Bear made money and you got some back from the original bank you gave us. You gave us enough for five days and they fell in four. Altogether we got a little over two hundred and forty thousand." Red stopped. He listened.

"Go ahead," came the quiet voice.

"Ain't nobody seen or heard anything from Daddy Bell or Snake." He paused. Then, "They ain't picked up no numbers and they ain't paid nobody off either." Again he listened. Then he looked over at Bear who was watching anxiously.

Lloyd Nelson spoke. "See if you can find that Snake. Get everybody on it. Don't do anything, just find out where he is." There was an instant of a pause and the next words were spoken almost in pleasure and they chilled Red. "I know where Daddy Bell is."

Red began to speak but he was stopped "Why don't ... "

"Don't move. Just stay where you are. I'll call you at ten o'clock."

"Wait a minute," Red said. "Why don't we give Prophet and his people a couple of days. They probably just gonna be late again."

"You heard about Marzette didn't you?"

"Yeah, everybody's talking about it."

"The two who were with him were Prophet's men."

"Really?" Red was confused and then the situation was cleared up for him by Lloyd Nelson's response.

“Prophet stepped outside his game. Now, is that all?”

“No, Della called and left a message. Georgia’s trying to catch up with you and she wants you to call her.” Red was distracted. Bear wanted to say something and he was making gestures. “Bear wants to talk to you.” He passed the phone.

Bear was excited. “Della called me too. Where are you? Let me go with you!”

“Stay with Red. You two stay together.”

“But where are you? Are you alright?” Bear heard the phone disconnect. He hung the receiver up.

The two big men looked at each other. Red was worried. Bear was worried and angry. He wanted to be with his friend.

“Did you hear how he sounded?” Red asked.

“What?”

“I don’t know. He just didn’t sound right.” Red reached for the phone. “We gotta find Snake.”

Bear reached for the other phone.

Georgia hung her phone up. Della had just told her she had left word for Bear and Red and that Red had called her back and told her he had just talked to Lloyd Nelson and he had given him the message to call Georgia. Della told her to wait by the phone.

It was six thirty.

At seven o’clock Snake was drunk. He was afraid. And he knew he couldn’t go to Prophet now. It was too late. And he couldn’t find Daddy Bell. When he had called around, looking for him, no one had seen him. He wondered what was going on. He figured Daddy Bell and Prophet were together at the church. But maybe they weren’t together because he knew that Daddy Bell had not picked up any numbers or paid any money out. Snake was thinking. And he was hearing things.

He picked up his pistol and again made sure it was fully loaded. He peeped out of the window. For some reason he wanted it to get dark. Then again, he didn’t. He felt closed in here in this little room and he was out of rum. As he looked around this drab place, he decided to leave. Grabbing his bag of money, he tossed his key on the bed and departed.

His mind was slowed by the alcohol and he had to stand outside the door for a few moments to remember exactly what it was he wanted to do first. He blinked and nodded his head, yes. He would buy some more rum, enough to last a while and maybe something to eat. He would check into another place and call until he could find Daddy Bell. He thought about Dag but he didn’t have a phone number on him.

Snake bought some rum and a bag of ice and some fried chicken. He parked his Cadillac on a side street. And with a bag in his left hand and the bag of money under his right arm, he walked quickly down the alley into the back of another motel.

It was almost seven thirty when Snake checked in. This time he was on Woodward Avenue, at the Algiers Motel, and Gloria, the girl who checked him in, knew Snake from somewhere, and she knew Earl and Earl knew Wilt and Wilt knew Pearl and Pearl knew Red.

At seven thirty, Prophet sent his men out. He kept the Three and Five man with him. Three would stay on the phone and try to get a line on Lloyd Nelson and be there in case Daddy Bell and Snake showed up. Five would be stationed, concealed, near the side door. The front door had been locked.

The other four men would try to find out where the man they sought, lived. And they would try to find something on the two big men they knew to be his partners. Prophet and his men didn't have much to go on. They had all shared what information they had. They knew the dark man drove a beige convertible Cadillac and a black Thunderbird. They knew the cars the red man and the albino man usually drove. They knew some places to check. They knew some people to question. They knew little else.

All six men wondered if the money they had been given, and the amount promised was enough for them to get involved in this mess. Poisoned cocaine and cut up bodies made them all very nervous. Snake and Daddy Bell was one thing. The other three men was another matter, altogether.

Daddy Bell looked down at his watch. It was seven forty. He was wondering if he should call Prophet again or just do as Dag suggested. His mind was racing. He figured by now Snake had already been to the church and turned his money in. He wondered what the numbers were. He also wondered what Snake was gonna say when he heard what had happened to him. He started to call around and find out some things. He changed his mind. He gulped his gin. He chewed his toothpick.

He decided to listen to Dag. He trusted Dag. He believed Dag was right. It would sound better if he said the people who held him just kept the money they had already taken from him and let him go. He and Dag figured it wasn't no sense in being greedy.

Daddy Bell thought about Prophet's men. And he recalled how violent they could be because he had seen them in action. Daddy Bell poured some more gin. He was gonna make sure he stayed close to Dag. He was thinking maybe he better give the heroin man some more money and buy the protection that had been offered.

Daddy Bell thought about Prophet and he didn't feel right, like maybe he was gonna be sick. Then he was talking to himself in his own mind and thinking about all the years he had worked for the man, all the years he had been forced to deal with his outbursts and inconsistencies and put up with his shit. He thought of all the money he had turned over to that man. He thought about how stingy that man was. He thought of the small amounts he had stolen. He thought of the money he had stolen now. "I got to have it!" he whispered, to himself. He thought about how he was gonna make money with Dag. He felt better. He decided to call around midnight.

The large church on Fourteenth Street was busy. And outside the church, down just a ways on Blaine, the side street that ran beside the church, the Dillard brothers had parked their black van. The front entrance of Prophet's sanctuary faced Fourteenth. The side entrance was on Blaine and around the corner of the side entrance was the rear of the church and the steps down to the door that led into Prophet's private room.

They could see the parking lot and the rear of the church as they crouched in the back of the van, out of sight. Now as people came from the side entrance of the building and entered cars, Melvin watched them through his binoculars. He wondered aloud about the men and the cars. He wondered about the cars that were still parked there, near the rear of the church, beside the white limousine and yellow Pontiac. He wondered when Prophet was gonna leave. Calvin told him to relax, as he moved to sit on a mat with his back against the side of the van. He told Melvin they knew Prophet was in there and they knew he would have to come out eventually. He was checking the pistols and rifles with scopes as they settled in, to wait.

It was a beautiful summer setting sun. It seemed late in its descent, and slow. Twilight passed and the night was at first incipient in its progress then night fell, hard, and it was thick in its essence because Darkness was in town.

The people of this city prepared themselves for this special night. It was Saturday and it was time. And as the people moved into the streets and headed for the gatherings and the pleasures they sought, the sky altered its essence. The nighttime temperature lowered, a little, and then held steady. The humidity remained constant and heavy.

Where there was once a shroud of loud silence there became now a cacophony of silent noise as the mourning moon materialized into the sky. And the moon was bright. Wavy iridescent colors surrounded the hovering moon. And the moon was full of tears.

The phone rang at Red's house at exactly ten o'clock and Bear was closest to it and so he snatched it up. "Yeah!"

Lloyd Nelson spoke. "You find Snake?"

"He's at the Algiers! I'll meet you there!"

"No," came the quiet reply. "Stay there."

Bear was yelling. "Fuck that! I'm not staying here while you out there by yourself!"

"Listen Bear. Those numbers that fell belong to me. This is my thing. It's personal and I got the play all set up. I need you and Red to stay right where you are. If you come out now, you jeopardize my action. You understand? I'll call you at twelve and tell you where to meet me. I'll want you two to come get me. I got something for you both to do for me. Alright?"

"Got dammit ... " Bear was frustrated. He was looking at Red. "Alright," he agreed. "We'll be here. Did you ... ?" Lloyd Nelson hung up.

Bear slammed the phone down. "He said to stay here. He said he'd call back at twelve."

Bear could hardly contain himself. He wanted to be out there in the streets, with him. He stood and began to stalk the room. With each step he grew more upset, more excited. And even in the coolness of Red's air-conditioned basement his shirt was damp and clung to him. He went to the bar and poured a drink and drank it down.

Red was watching him. Bear turned to Red. "You're right," he said. "He don't sound so good. And I don't like this shit! I don't like it!"

The phone rang again and Red snatched it up. "Yeah." He was listening. He stood. He grew warm.

Bear could see his friend change, flush and stiffen. He walked towards Red. "What is it?" he asked. "What?" He nearly whispered.

Red hung the phone up. He thought a moment. He looked at Bear. "Somebody's looking for Lloyd Nelson. And it ain't the law. They been on John R. and Twelfth asking about him. They wanted to know where he lived." He paused. "And they was asking about us too." The big men stared at each other. They were thinking. All that they were involved in, ran through their minds.

"Gimme the bag," Bear ordered, quietly. And he reached for his coat and gun.

Red moved to the closet and pulled out a long canvas bag and he turned. He looked at Bear, at his outstretched arm as he held it, for the bag. "You gotta stay here Red. If I can't find him you gotta be here to tell him what's going on when he calls. If I ain't run across him by eleven thirty I'll call and tell you where I am."

Red wanted to go too, but he knew Bear was right. Somebody had to stay by the phones. He knew it would be his job to do that. He handed Bear the bag. In it was gloves and shotguns and pistols and ammunition. They stared at each other. They both knew. Something was happening. But they didn't know what. They didn't know why they both understood, it was something, different this time. Their thoughts were turning. Red looked at the stacks of money they had.

"I wonder who it is?" Red asked, quietly. His hands tightened. He could feel his emotions rising. For some reason he thought of Jackson Prison, and the men he had fought there and he recognized the surge of fear and rage.

"I don't know who it is," Bear responded in a low raspy growl. He was excited now, alive, and angry, very angry. He turned to the steps that led up to the side door. "See if you can find out. I'm going to the Algiers."

Bear stepped through the doorway, into the new darkness. He moved in a hurry through the back yard and into the alley. He moved to the nearby side street and stood beside the corner garage to look around. His gun was in his right hand, down, near his leg. He stepped onto the sidewalk and walked in controlled haste one block and at ten after ten he was in the Chevy. He turned it around and pointed it towards Woodward Avenue.

Inside he was, churning.

Georgia had watched the night come creeping, slowly, as a dark misty fog,

on this Saturday. She acknowledged to herself, the beauty of the change from day to night, light to dark. And she had watched this change occur as she stood and stared, transfixed, out of the window of Lloyd Nelson's apartment. She was there in his apartment. She wondered.

She had waited to hear from him after Della had called back. The wait had seemed interminable. And she was pained. It was as if she suffered needlessly in that waiting and she felt all she was experiencing was unfair and intolerable. She was thinking of him. "Why didn't you come? Why didn't you call? Where are you? Are you alright?"

The phone had rung in her apartment and it was Della. She was listening to Della and her gaze had fallen on the car keys on her desk and she saw the other keys on the key ring. His apartment keys? She had told Della that things were fine, that she expected him. That he was coming for her.

Della had said she wasn't working that night and that she would be home all night and if Georgia needed anything or wanted her to bring the money, to just call. Georgia had said to her, "Monday." She had nearly whispered, "Monday, everything will be alright." And they planned to talk later. She hung up and stood there with her hand resting on the phone and made up her mind.

She had turned to stare at the young woman who looked back with curiosity at her from the mirror. The young woman in the mirror was dressed in jeans and a navy-blue blouse and tennis shoes. The young woman's hair was soft and rounded and natural and all of her was natural and in agreement except for the beautiful diamonds that flashed from her neck. So she removed the lovely necklace from the throat of that proud, pretty, dark-skinned southern woman in the mirror and turned and placed the necklace carefully, lovingly, in her dresser drawer. Georgia Reeves walked from her apartment. And as she left that place and all it contained behind, at that point, she was prepared to face that which was in front of her. She was prepared, to overcome, everything.

When she had arrived at his door she knocked and then knocked again, harder. She waited. She tried the keys and the keys fit and she opened the door slowly and when she walked hesitantly into the room she had been tense. Worried he was there and in need of help. Apprehensive he would not be there.

The apartment was empty of him. And he was there. Everywhere!

Now as she eased again through this place he lived and existed, she called him, whispered his name, and gently touched the things she passed. And she knew she would not sleep again until she saw him ... again.

She was alone here in this large apartment, in love, and she was lonely as she stood in his den and looked at his wall of weapons. She was pushed, drawn to this wall, to these instruments of death and, protection. She moved closer to the wall to touch and caress the guns, the knives. A phone rang in the other room and she paused, her right hand upon a large, beautiful gold knife. And she thought she heard chimes but only the phone rang. She knew the ringing phone was asking, seeking. She sought Lloyd Nelson. She wanted

him. As that phone rang, she listened to its calling bells. And she wished it was him, summoning her.

She looked at the clock on the wall. It was ten fifteen.

It was ten twenty-five when the phone in Snake's room rang. The ringing woke him up. The ring seemed loud and shrill and it frightened him and he jumped. No one knew he was there. He didn't use his name to sign in. It had only rung three times and then it had stopped, so he ignored it.

He rolled over and moved to sit on the side of the bed. He looked over at the bag of money on his pillow. He had been sleeping with the bag in his arms. He smiled. He blinked, OK. Rising to walk to the bathroom sink he picked up a paper cup and reached in the bag of ice that melted there and as he dropped ice into the cup, the phone rang again, three times.

As Snake poured some rum he walked back to stare curiously at the phone, frown at the phone and ponder about it. He set the bottle down near the unlit lamp and he put the cup to his lips. He turned the cup, up. He drank the rum, down. He gulped. He sucked the ice. He emptied that cup. He extended his hand for the bottle and the phone rang. He snatched it up.

"Yeah!" he said, loudly.

No one spoke. He heard from the other end, what he thought was a soft chuckle. Then he heard the phone being hung up and now he was frightened, again. He tried to figure this out. He wanted to dismiss this, but he couldn't.

As he wondered about the calling, he poured rum. He picked up a cold piece of chicken and bit into it. He chewed, slowly. He drank some rum. He paused to listen, his mouth open. Then! There was soft tapping on his door. Three times, came the tap. Snake put the chicken down. He put the rum down. He picked up his gun and looked quickly around the room. Only the bathroom light was on and the small room was dim and he decided to leave that light on.

He eased to the window and pulled the curtain back, just a little. He peeped out. There was no one at the door and he wondered if he was hearing things. He opened his mouth. He cocked his head. He listened. The air conditioner hummed and he listened to the humming and he was confused. He shook his head, no. He blinked.

He went back to the bed and put the gun down and picked up his chicken, his cup. The phone rang. Three times. The Snake was sweating now. He gulped some rum. He put the chicken down and picked up his gun. He was staring at the phone when it rang again. He set the rum down and moved to the bathroom and turned the light off. He was in darkness and now he was beyond frightened, he was scared. He stood like that, in the darkness. And he wanted to say, "Who is it? What d'ya want?" But there was no one to say that to. So he only thought it. He thought about Prophet, Daddy Bell and Dag.

He crept to the back window to peep out. The tapping! The tapping was at his door! Three times. It came. He raised his gun and hurried to the door and stepped to the side of it, his back pressed against the wall and he spoke,

he almost choked as he nearly whispered the questions he had wanted to say.

“Who is it? What d’ya want?” He asked again, louder. Then he peeped out and there was no one there.

He went to the bed and he was on his knees groping for his shoes beneath the bed. He found them and put them on and his heart was beating hard and his hands were moist and he tried to stop them from shaking. He grabbed his suit coat and put it on. He picked up his bag of money and stuffed his gun into his outside suit coat pocket.

He pulled a chair to the back of the room and opened the window, quietly. And as he hesitated, the tapping returned, a little heavier than a tap, a knock. And Snake jumped on the chair and he prepared to leave that room, through this window but he couldn’t decide what to do with his precious bag. Then he tossed the bag out and quickly climbed out behind it. He picked up his money, Prophet’s money, and took his gun out.

It was dark in this alley behind this motel. But at the corners of the building, high up, were bright, lighted flood lamps. He eased his gun to his side and moved to his right, close to the building. He stopped beneath the illumination of a light.

He peered around the corner of the motel. He could see Woodward Avenue and traffic moving past, life moving past, the front of the building. He didn’t see anyone and so he started walking in a hurry, down the alley, towards the nearby side street. But he wanted to run. And as he looked around at the shadows that surrounded him, he began to run.

He stopped at the end of the alley. He looked back, to his right, then to his left, in the direction his car was parked. He could just about see where his car should be but from his angle he couldn’t actually see it. He wanted badly to be in it, riding, somewhere, anywhere.

Again he wanted to run, but he didn’t.

He was breathing hard and he was trying to catch his breath. And as he looked behind him again he thought he saw someone and now he did run. He looked back in fear as he ran and he looked to each side and it was dark on this street and he didn’t remember it being this dark.

Then he could see his car and he started to laugh and he squeezed his bag. And when he reached his car he looked around and stuck his gun into his waist and as he fumbled for his keys he gradually began to realize there was something wrong. And he stepped back to look at his car and his Cadillac was lopsided, leaning. He looked down and saw his nearly flattened rear tire. And he whirled around and continued to turn as a cracking sound came and a bullet entered his shoulder. He screamed. He jumped. And Snake could hear a gun. It fired again, and again and again. And with each crack he heard, he was hit, in his chest. Three times.

He dropped his bag as he was forced against the car. He was stood up there against it. Three more shots came quickly, from somewhere, bullets he did not really feel and each pierced his body. He was knocked down, turned over as four more shots came. Snake was dead. And Heywood White died with him.

Porch lights came on and people peeped out. But no one came into the dark street. And so, they couldn't see the man, dead beside his Cadillac. They couldn't see him bleeding out. And the blood ran into the street, oozed into the brown paper bag, onto the green money. And the green was stained a pretty, bright red.

This dead Snake would not make the eleven o'clock news. He was too late. It was already ten fifty.

It was eleven twenty when a phone in Lloyd Nelson's apartment rang again. Georgia wanted to answer it, but she was hesitant. She wasn't even supposed to be there. What would he think, what would he say about her answering his phone? But that, came back to her. That! Something was very wrong. She stood and looked at the phone. She listened to its ringing. The ringing was insistent, imploring and suddenly Georgia could hear something behind the ringing. She was nearing the pain she had felt earlier that morning and it was that which she heard within, between, the rings of the phone, express itself, clearly. She snatched the phone up.

"Hello," she almost whispered.

The voice was hesitant on the other end.

"Oh, uh ... I'm sorry. Do I have the wrong number? I'm trying to reach Lloyd Nelson." There was at the end, impatience within this voice.

Georgia spoke. "You've reached the right number, but he isn't here."

The voice was quiet. Then it came in a rush.

"This is Father Hartman and it's most important that I contact him. Do you happen to know how I can reach him? Do you know where he is? Is he alright? Please ... I ... " The voice faltered.

Georgia knew of this man. She heard concern and she could recognize elements of fear. Now she was anxious, again. She had been holding back, holding in and she was full of emotion but she steadied herself.

"No Father. I don't know where he is and I'm worried about him. I need to see him. What's wrong?"

The Father could hear things in this woman's voice. Many things. But he focused on the audible love.

"Is this Georgia?"

"Yes. Yes ... but ... "

"Yes! Yes! He spoke of you when I saw him this morning!"

"You've seen him? How? Where?"

"He was here, at the orphanage, early this morning! I've tried to call him over and over again. You haven't seen him today?"

"No. He was supposed to come by my place last night but he never came. And I haven't seen him and he won't call me and ... " Georgia stopped. Her thoughts were flying now but she was calm, and again, determined. She demanded. "Father! Tell me what's wrong!"

"He's sick my child."

"What do you mean?" And for some reason Georgia was angry, very angry.

There was a sense of urgency in the Father's voice that pushed at her. "Georgia, has he told you about his illness?"

"Yes, I know. I know everything. His fever is coming back."

"Not coming back! It is back!" And the Father almost shouted that. He composed himself. "It's back. Right now. Wherever he is, he's sick, in fever. And he's extremely violent. He was sick when I saw him and that was early this morning and he's not in jail or in the hospital. I've called around. Each hour he gets worse and ..."

Georgia stopped him. "Father what should I do?" Her voice was precise, even.

He was thinking. "Can you contact Jim, or Bill?"

"Who?"

"Red, or Bear."

"I can try."

"They must not know yet. They must not have seen him. I don't know how to reach them but they would have called me if they knew, I'm sure. Tell them! Tell them the fever is back and that they must find him. They'll know what to do. Lloyd Nelson must be taken to the hospital. Immediately!"

"I understand."

"Write my number down."

Georgia reached for a pen. She wrote down the number.

The Father paused. Then he spoke, quietly. "He loves you Georgia, very much. And he needs you."

"And I love him Father. I'll find him. And I'll call you back."

"Good luck my child. Be careful. And may God bless you and keep you safe." They hung up.

Georgia was thinking. She looked at the time. Then she thought of Della and remembered Della had said she was going to stay home this night. She reached for a phone and she was stopped. Della had changed her number. Now Georgia tried to recall the new number. She said numbers to herself. She said numbers aloud. She closed her eyes and tried to visualize the piece of paper on her desk beneath her lamp. She couldn't see the written numbers.

She picked up the keys and turned and hurried to the door. She twisted the knob and a feeling passed through her. She opened the door and stepped out. She closed it. She locked it. And as she moved towards the elevator she attempted to ascertain the essence of the feeling. When the elevator doors opened she walked into the metal box and the doors closed and she began her descent and she could feel that thing in her stomach, in her heart. "Danger," she thought.

Georgia never saw the car that made a U-turn behind her on Jefferson Avenue as she neared Woodward. She didn't notice the car follow her down Cass and stop a short distance from her after she turned left on a side street and pulled in and parked. She jumped from the car and turned to move in the direction from which she had come. And she noticed a tall man casually

leaving his car. She dismissed him. And she was going to veer and cut across the grass and another man came from the car in a hurry. And Georgia saw this and she stopped. But it was too late. They were too close. And she could see their big shiny pistols.

It was eleven thirty and Daddy Bell was nodding. His head was back and after a while it was down and then it bounced a little and his mouth was open and his toothpick dangled from between his lips. He was coming in and out of sleep and he could hear Dag on one of his phones taking care of business, talking, cursing, and laughing.

Daddy Bell could hear the side screen door slam shut and the voice of one of Dag's men yelling from the top of the basement stairs.

"Hey Dag! There's a fire out there in the alley behind your garage!"

Daddy Bell was fully awake.

"That car that's parked out there is burning!"

Daddy Bell was up.

"It looks like your garage is gonna catch!"

Daddy Bell was running to the stairs and Dag was behind him.

Up those stairs they both rushed. Then through the doorway. Into the backyard. Across the grass. They were running and they could see the reflection of the pretty fire. Those flames! Their essence was rising above the top of the garage.

The flames, their glow, illuminated the dark alley.

The two men reached the fence. They peered over it, to their right and there the Cadillac burned. And the flames were growing, leaping. Making noises. Daddy Bell was yelling, cursing. He pushed past Dag and the other man and began to fumble with the latch on the gate. He was trying to get to the burning automobile.

Dag yelled at him. "Nigga you crazy? That car'll blow your ass up! Buy another one!" Dag turned and hollered out to his man. "Call the fire department!" The man turned and ran. Daddy Bell had opened the gate and Dag grabbed him.

Daddy Bell shook from him. He yelled. "My money's in the trunk! I gotta get my money!"

Dag let him go. He wanted to help so he pushed him towards the car.

Daddy Bell was in the middle of the alley. He raised his right arm, to shield his face from the heat. He was trying to move around the burning front and to the rear. And the flames were lovely and they were sounding as music and Daddy Bell was dancing in that alley, bending, rising, and turning, hands up, in the glow of the flames.

Dag stared at this, his mouth open, eyes wide, fascinated. Then he could hear the cracking sounds and now he heard Daddy Bell, singing, yelling, and screaming. He could see the painful, astonished look on Daddy Bell's face and he could see the bright red blood now, on the man's white shirt. Then he looked to his left, down the alley, between the garages. And when he looked back, Daddy Bell was backing up. He was being shot into the flames and he

fell back onto the hood of his car and he was burning as he collapsed to the ground. Daddy Bell was ... dead. And Carson Jordan died with him.

"Got damn," Dag almost whispered. And the window in his garage not far from him was shot out and glass ricocheted off his head

"Got damn!" Dag yelled. He turned and flung himself onto the ground and began to crawl back towards his house. Bullets followed him as he crawled and then they were in front of him and he was crawling backwards and then above him and he didn't know what to do, which way to go. Bullets tore into his garage behind him again and Dag was cursing as he crawled. He was cursing Prophet and condemning him for this madness as he slithered and crawled and the car exploded and Dag was pissing as he rose up and crouched and ran.

There were beautiful flames in the alley. There was Death in that alley. And in the air, sirens wailed.

At eleven thirty-five Red's phone sounded. He got it after the first ring.

"Yeah!"

Bear spoke. "Did you pick up on anything?"

Red was excited. "You know Wimp don't you?"

"He's one of Prophet's boys ain't he?"

"Right! And he's one of the ones asking around about us. You didn't find Lloyd Nelson?"

"No, but he found Snake. By the time I got down here the cops had two of the streets blocked off. I had to walk down a ways but I saw Snake's car."

They were quiet for a moment.

Red spoke. "What's Prophet's men doing looking for us?"

They were both thinking. They thought of 270. They thought of Marzette and Prophet hooked up together. They thought of Snake. Nothing added up for them. The numbers fell and they had hit. They stood, and people were paid. They didn't have anything to do with Marzette and Prophet's boys were asking about them long before Snake got his. They both decided they couldn't figure it out. And anyway it really didn't matter.

Bear spoke. "Shit, I don't know and I don't care. But I'll bet you this Daddy Bell's next."

"Where are you?" Red asked.

"I'm on Woodward down from the bar, the Oasis."

"What're you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna catch up with that got damn punk ass Wimp and them other motherfuckers."

Red decided. He spoke. "Listen. Lloyd Nelson's supposed to call at twelve. I'll tell him what's up and then I'll meet you at that ice cream place on Twelfth. You know the one I'm talking about?"

"Yeah I know. For what?"

"Let's find Prophet. His turn's coming anyway ain't it? You know Lloyd Nelson's gonna go after him too. The three of us can meet up there."

Bear was silent. Then. "Yeah! You know, I never did like that dirty nigga."

Red looked at his watch. "I'll be there at twelve thirty, no matter what."

"Alright."

"And remember Bear. There're people out there looking for you."

"Yeah? Well they looking for you too. But you know something? I'm looking for them." They hung up.

It was twenty minutes after twelve this early Sunday morning when Lloyd Nelson began his ascent of the fire escape stairs that ran down the side of the darkened building. The metal he touched with his black-gloved hands was rounded and strong and seemed cool even through his gloves. His hands were warm, very warm. And the metal was thick and supportive and flattened beneath his feet, as he moved silently towards the top of the building.

When he reached the top he swung himself over and he could feel the sticky tar beneath his feet, as he was moving across the roof in his soft black shoes. The dull-black color in which he was dressed was illuminated by the beams of the bright full moon and the rays of the blinking stars and his face was glowing and he was damp from the feverish sweat that came from his heated body. And his long black silenced pistol hung, holstered beneath his left arm.

He walked towards the opposite side. He reached the edge of the roof and bent and placed his hands on the bumpy cemented barrier that bordered the roof. He looked across. He leaned to look down. He measured. He moved back, back, and then he stopped and then he began to run forward. And leaping to the top of the low barrier he launched himself into the darkened air and he flew across the separation of the buildings and he came down, down out of the firmament. And when he landed quietly he went nearly to his knees and his hands were placed for balance and he could feel beneath his fingers the roof of Prophet James' church.

He stayed that way for a long moment. Crouched. Head down. Preparing to rise. As if he were a runner in his last moment before the starting shot was fired that would signal the beginning of his final race. He could smell cold sickness and taste warm blood and sense the Prophet below him.

Now he slowly raised his head. He stood, slowly. His dark-brown eyes were clear and wide and empty, hollow portents of death. His nostrils were flared and his hair was loose and glistening and several strands partially fell, straightened, upon his creased forehead.

He stared across the roof. He walked to the edge. He turned, he looked, and he could see over the houses, past the darkness, Twelfth Street, the reflected lights, the neon signs. And he felt something now deep down, within. Then it was up and away and moving towards him, coming from a direction he could not ascertain. He walked to the front and this thing that came to him, shifted, and turned and he walked to the side and again he felt an altered direction and he experienced a vague, rising recognition of the essence of this that moved to him.

He could see Blaine Street and he saw headlights of a car moving in his direction from the west. He moved quickly to the side, near the back of the

church and the car turned into the parking lot and pulled immediately to the fence next to Prophet's limousine. And a moment before the doors opened, Lloyd Nelson was shaking his head, no. He whispered, no, as the car doors flew open and he was looking upon this as two men stepped out. The man on the passenger side, the Seven man, leaned back in, reached, and pulled Georgia Reeves from the car.

The driver, the Eight man, came around the car and he had a gun in his hand, down, beside his leg. Each man grabbed an arm and steered her towards the side door. The dark man above moved to the side, at the door, and looked down as they greeted the Five man and paused to talk. Their voices floated to the roof, their plans, expressed.

The two men turned to move up the steps and the Seven man pushed Georgia and she stumbled and nearly fell. Above them the dark man clenched his fists. He closed his eyes to this and everything came loose inside of him. Never had he felt this rise from his soul, never in this manner, never in this intensity. And everything came together in the form of pain, hatred, and overwhelming rage.

He stepped back from the side of the building and tried to catch his breath. He struggled to control himself. But he couldn't. Inside he exploded. His tremendous repressed love was unleashed and it was coupled with his bitter hatred and his weakening heart fluttered and he was dizzy. He was turning in circles. He stopped to bend and clutch his chest and he whispered aloud. "No! No!" he said. He beseeched. And his words were placed into the air and they rose into the black starry sky. "Not now! I must live a while longer!"

He felt something there outside of him. He suddenly knew of others, much more than himself. There were entities both outside and within the sanctum of his burning distorted soul. And he called upon all those who had come before him and who existed somehow inside of him and they touched him, then absorbed him and he became as one with them and he suddenly experienced them in the recesses of his being.

He heard soft whispery singing and he felt cooling water flush through him and he heard the strange unknown name from his dream echo in his mind and he was calmed. He slowed his breath. He suppressed his wailing throbbing heart.

He turned to confront and embrace his ... destiny.

Red was pulling on his gloves and telling Bear that Lloyd Nelson had not called. Bear looked through the front windshield, into the street. He started the Chevy up and turned, with gloved hands, the steering wheel and the car rolled north, up Twelfth Street, towards the church of Prophet James. They had less than two miles to go. They were silent as they rode and they stuffed bullets and shotgun shells into their pockets.

The dark man rushed to the door that led down into the top of the church. He stared at the knob and when he reached out to it, his power

surged and he was focused on all that lay ahead of him, below. He could hear Georgia Reeves, his love, down there saying his name. He could feel her summoning him.

He pulled the knob and he knew the lock strained and then the knob was crushed and twisted and he turned it and it broke and came off in his hand. He dropped it. He stepped back and placed his left foot forward and he drove his black hand into the door, above broken knob, through the wood. He put his hand through the hole and grabbed the door and with a quick movement he yanked it open.

And as he stepped in, into the darkness, and began to ease down the winding stairs, Georgia had walked, with footsteps sounding, across the wide wooden floor of the dim empty church, descended the enclosed narrow dim staircase, reached the bottom of the seventeen stairs, passed by an office area, entered another smaller room and stood, impassively there before the Three man as he eyed her with interest as the other two men talked about her with excitement.

The Three man then rose and knocked on the door behind him. He called out. "Prophet, come look at this!"

The door was unlocked and Prophet James stepped out. He looked at Georgia. He wiped his damp forehead. He sniffed. He cleared his frozen throat. "Got damn, who's this fine black bitch here?"

The Seven man spoke. "This is Lloyd Nelson's woman. I seen 'em together before, around town and hanging at the joints. She was driving his Thunderbird when we snatched her."

Prophet was looking at the two men, from one to the other. He was thinking. He looked at Georgia. His eyes went down and up her body and he smiled and nodded his head, yes. But when he looked into her eyes, his smile faded and he was momentarily unsettled as the hatred he saw, jumped out across the room, to him. He had never seen hatred like this in a woman's eyes. He gathered himself.

Above them the dark man moved to the side door and quietly turned the lock and locked the door on the Five man. He locked him out.

Prophet spoke. "So you Lloyd Nelson's woman huh? Yeah, I guess that black nigga likes black women."

Georgia looked at this man who stood arrogantly before her. Her gaze was attached to him. She was straight and serene. When the two men had grabbed her she had begun to struggle but they had shown her their guns and quickly told her that they wanted her man, Lloyd Nelson and that she would die if she hollered or resisted. Then they had walked her to their car and shoved her in, between them.

She was stunned and didn't want to believe this was happening. Her mind was confused and she was thinking, trying to organize her thoughts. And as they rode, the men talked about the man she loved. They expressed their desires to get him, to hurt him and Georgia had returned to the moment. All

became so clear. And once again she was flooded with resolve. These strange men wanted to bring pain to her love. She was determined that would not happen. And she was prepared to die.

As they rode along the darkened streets she thought of her man and she drew strength from him. She whispered his name, silently, and she could envision him, hear him. His voice was clear and soft in her ear. And whatever trepidation she had, was ripped into shreds and was tossed aside and it was replaced by the love she possessed for him and her hatred for these men, for anyone who would attempt to harm him, swelled. She was filled with this love and hate and these two emotions merged, united, and created an entity that empowered her and she relaxed, she waited. For she knew at that moment, without a doubt, that she would see her love again because he would come for her. He would protect her. Save ... her.

Prophet spoke again. He yelled. "Bitch I asked you a question! Are you Lloyd Nelson's woman?"

"Yes I am," came the quiet, even reply.

Prophet was silent. Thinking.

The Eight man moved past the pretty black woman to the pretty white girl on the desk and awaited his opportunity as the Three man bent his head to sniff from the card. The Seven man watched the two and as he started to move to the desk, there was a muffled pounding from above, across the church, on the side door, as the Five man let it be known he wanted in. He knew they had the snowy sparkling cocaine and the beautiful black woman down in the basement. He wanted to be there and they had locked him out.

Prophet looked over at the Eight man. "What the hell you do, lock the door? Somebody go up there and open it! See what he wants! And tell him I said to keep his ass out there."

The Eight man nodded to the Three man. "Why don't you go man? Let me get a hit on that thang!"

The Three man stood up reluctantly. He looked down at the shiny snow. Then he looked back at the dark-skinned woman, and he moved to mount the stairs.

Prophet roughly grabbed Georgia's arm and he pulled and then pushed her into his room and closed and locked the door. And the two men who were hunched over the drug looked at each other and smiled, knowingly.

The Three man bounded up the stairs. And when he reached the top and took a step, he was yanked by his hair, hard, to the side, into the dimness. He yelped as his head was pushed down and before he could yell out his head was brought up and a fist driven into his stomach and his breath left him and he collapsed to his knees gasping for air. He attempted to breathe and he felt a hand fall heavily upon the back of his neck and the fingers were as a vise.

The Three man was bent over by the suffocating grip on his neck. He began to speak, to protest, to resist. The grip tightened and he almost passed out and his forehead was banged forcefully, down against the floor, three times, and it was split open and his blood began to flow. And then he was snatched up and pressed against the wall and the left hand that slowly closed

around the front of his throat, choked him. He was in pain, confused, terrified. And through his dripping red wetness he stared deep into clear, hate-filled eyes. He blinked and blinked again. He could see the dark face come into focus and he saw the scar and the man before him moved back, extended his arm and squeezed his throat. His own arms were useless, limp.

The Three man could see this man who immobilized him, reach under his left arm and he could see a long black gun emerge and he could see the round silencer on the end.

The dark man eyed this that was on the end of his arm. He knew this was not one of the men who had just entered the church. "How many men are down there with Prophet?" he asked, nearly whispered through clenched teeth. And he squeezed. Harder!

The Three man's eyes glistened, with moisture. Filled with blood. He gagged. He gurgled. "Two."

"Do you know who I am?" The dark man asked.

The Three man could not begin to answer. He could not move. There was pounding again, on the front door this time. But Prophet couldn't hear. He was snorting cocaine and cursing loudly about his misfortune.

The other two men bent their heads. They ignored the pounding.

The dark man spoke, quietly. "You get somebody up here." And he moved his left hand to the back of the man's neck and turned him and walked him four steps to the basement stairs' doorway.

The Three man called down to the Seven man.

"What d'ya want?" came the irritated reply from below.

"Come here, come here!"

"For what? What d'ya want?"

The dark man slapped the Three man sharply against the side of his head with the gun. "Now!"

The Three man became frantic. He yelled. "Nigga get on up here got dammit! Now!"

The Seven man moved with reluctance and began to mount the stairs, slowly.

Prophet snorted from his cocaine pile, twice. "Gimme the motherfucker's phone number," he said, and sniffed and pulled at his nose.

"I don't know it."

"Bitch you lying! He's got something of mine and I'm gonna get it back! And you gonna give me his phone number and address!"

Silence from the woman with hate in her eyes.

The Seven man took the thirteenth step.

The dark man had put the Three man back against the wall. He stepped away from him. "I'm Lloyd Nelson," he said, almost whispered. His black hand came up in a blur and he shot the Three man through his forehead. And the soft spitting sound of the quieted muzzle of the long polished black pistol, was pleasant, familiar.

The Three man jerked back and up and slumped sideways and down and his brains and blood on the wall marked his twisted slide and his drugged eyes were open and he was ... dead.

Prophet was rising from his seat. A gun was near his right hand. "That man of yours kills people and chops 'em into pieces! Did you know that?"

And just as the Seven man reached the top of the stairs, the woman in the locked room below, smiled, slightly, slowly. She said, smoothly, as if pleased. "Yes I know."

The Prophet frowned at this.

The Seven man stepped into the church and was caught on the right side of his head near his temple with a fisted blow that stunned him, knocked him left and he stumbled, almost to his knees. But before he could fall he was lifted by the back of his neck to his feet, from his feet. He was dazed and everything before him swirled and he was being carried down the stairs by his neck and he was in pain and he knew his head would soon leave his body because his neck was making noises. Cracking! Breaking!

Prophet was moving to the lovely dark woman who sat calmly in the chair near the wall across from him and glared at him. And when he reached the woman, with his right hand he slapped her and she was turned from him.

She looked back at him and there was blood now in the corner of her mouth and she wiped it delicately off with her fingers, glanced down at the blood, looked up at Prophet, and again, just a little, smiled.

Prophet pointed and yelled. "Got dammit this ain't no motherfuckin' play game! This is the real game and I'm gonna kill that nigga of yours! I'm gonna get my dope, my money and I'm gonna kill him, and chop him up! And I'm gonna kill you too bitch!" He struck Georgia again.

Outside! The Eight man heard descending footsteps on the stairs and he heard the faraway pounding on the door again.

"Why don't somebody open the door?" he yelled towards the stairs. Now he could hear the footsteps begin to hurry. He rose and moved nearer the stairs and he could see coming into his view, the dangling legs of the Seven man.

The legs moved as if they were running but they appeared to float above the stairs as they came down. The Eight man bent to peer up and he saw the bulging eyes and protruding tongue and then he saw someone behind the Seven man but he couldn't understand what was happening.

The dark man reached the bottom of the stairs in a rush and he placed two bullets into the chest of the Eight man and the man was surprised as he was knocked back and he fell across the desk, flipping the album cover and the cocaine into the air and onto him as he rolled against a chair and it broke

noisily and the Eight man moaned, crawled, coughed blood and stopped. The Eight man was ... dead.

Prophet had paused, with his hand in the air to strike another blow, as he heard the commotion from the other room. He lowered his hand.

As the dark man shot the Eight man he threw the Seven man into the air and as Prophet turned and moved towards the other room, the body of the Seven man crashed through his door.

Lloyd Nelson kicked the shattered door fully open, from its hinges and stepped into the room and as he moved over and past the prone struggling body of the Seven man, his gun spit and a bullet entered the back of the Seven man's head, departed through the front, from his nose, and the Seven man was ... dead.

The black gun was raised and leveled and Prophet was stopped in his movement. He was stilled, in his place.

The dark man's eyes were wild and he glared at Prophet for a moment. Then, he glanced at Georgia and his eyes changed as relief flashed through him. And when he saw the blood on Georgia's lip, rage flared inside him. Spilled up. Then settled.

He moved to the desk and stopped and there was silence in the room. Everyone seemed to be able to hear the breathing of everyone else. Prophet stared at the dark man, at these obvious changes. He sensed these emanating altering emotions. He could feel acutely his own heart pounding, racing. He looked down at his gun on the desk. He looked at his cocaine beside the gun. He looked up, back into the dark man's eyes. He straightened and stepped twice, away.

The two men dressed in black stood there motionless. And their eyes were riveted upon one another. The colors in Prophet's diamonds fanned as he slowly raised his left hand to casually wipe at the loose strands of his hair and pat his brow with his black silk handkerchief. He sniffed, once.

Lloyd Nelson, with his left hand, picked up a ring of keys from the desk. He tossed them to Georgia. "Open that back door," he said, softly. He picked up Prophet's gun and with it he swept the cocaine onto the floor.

Prophet flinched as he watched its whiteness sprinkle in the air and it was sparkly on the carpet. He wanted to fling himself upon that carpet and he forgot everything, all that surrounded him, all that was for him, and he lowered his gaze and stared at the powdery rug.

Lloyd Nelson watched Prophet's eyes.

Prophet was brought back to this moment when the keys jangled as Georgia searched for the right ones and the locks made noise, as they were unlatched. He raised his eyes to the dark man, his enemy, and he saw him as a vision as he came to him, reached out, and Prophet felt the gun, his own shiny gun, on the right side of his head and he was lifted up, knocked away, into the corner, face down. He quickly rolled over. And when he looked up

he focused first on the black gun then the man who held it. He saw Death.

The back door was now unlocked. Pushed open. The two men stared with hatred at one another. And the beautiful dark-colored woman looked, with love, at the handsome man with the skin the shade of dark chocolate. She looked, with hatred, at the light-eyed man with the skin that appeared as a butterscotch color. She saw the dark man step forward and she saw the gun rise as he bent. And the gun, Prophet's gun was at Prophet's forehead. And Prophet was pushed back, against the wall with the gun. And she saw a slight smile come to the dark man's lips. And Prophet smiled, just a little.

She could not see that something erupted between these two men who had been born into existence through the same great grandmother. That aged, internal thing they had experienced in Benny Jenkins' hair salon, returned to these two men who were related in being human and thus they were related to all those who had existed who had been human and would be joined to all those not yet existing who would be human. These two men possessed and were filled with the same blood that had been passed to them for hundreds of years and across thousands of miles. These two men, who were in fact cousins, were encompassed by that thing. And it was stronger than before, and much clearer.

And Lloyd Nelson knew!

Prophet James wanted to die. Deep inside, he wanted to die at this time, by the hands, through the desire of Lloyd Nelson. He wanted to be, needed to be, relieved of all that awaited him in the reality of his life. Yes! He longed to be ... saved.

The dark man pulled the trigger.

But an instant before he pulled the trigger, he moved his hand to the left. The pistol was loud. And as it charged, Lloyd Nelson began to break again, from inside. His heart skipped. He shook his head, to clear it. And he stepped back as Prophet cowered in the corner. Head covered. Eyes closed. Ears ringing.

The dark man fired again. And as he stepped back, he fired again. And he was watching the flash. He breathed the gunpowder smoke and his heart settled. He shot three more times into the wall, around Prophet's head. Then he flung the gun into the glass case beside Prophet's head and the broken glass fell onto Prophet's neck. The dark man reached his left hand out and grasped the tall lamp and he brought it with him as he moved back and the cord stretched. And as the cord came to its full length it tightened and Lloyd Nelson snatched the lamp from the wall and now only the light from the other room shone. And they were all in dark shadows and the lamp was hurled against the wall and Prophet peeped out and he heard a voice, float to him, in the air, across the room, from the darkness.

"You take it easy ... my brother."

Prophet heard other voices, echoes. He wanted to laugh but he didn't. Not until the woman stepped outside the door, not until the man in black stepped outside the door and the door closed, then he laughed. And all the voices within him laughed as he crawled on the carpet.

Outside!

Lloyd Nelson took Georgia Reeves by her hand. They moved, with the wall of the church on their left and the fence near on their right. They stopped at the end of the building. He looked left, around the corner of the church and into the parking lot. It was lit up with a bright flood lamp high on the wall of the building and by a streetlight that was on their right, near the side street. He pulled at his holster until the straps broke and tossed it aside. He opened his gun, turned it over, emptied it and reached in his pocket for bullets and reloaded. He looked at Georgia. They were close and he suddenly felt his heart.

She could see a painful expression pass across his face and she stared into his eyes and then reached out to touch his face and she could feel his heated skin. She took a deep breath. She smiled slightly and nodded her head, yes. Inside, she was excited. Unafraid.

He turned and with his gun down at his side he stepped into the parking lot. She followed, close. They moved between the parked cars and the fence and they had taken nine steps when a car swung into the lot. Dust rose. The headlights of the car illuminated the chain-linked fence and lit up the man and woman.

The Four and Six man had returned to the church. They glimpsed the two moving figures and the car was backed up, moved left, and the lights remained on them. The Five man had quit his pounding on the front door and had walked around the corner of the building into the lot when he saw the other men return.

Lloyd Nelson pulled Georgia down beside him. They crouched. The car sped up, towards them. The dark man rose slightly between the parked cars to shoot out the headlights of the approaching car, with three shots. He swung around. He took careful aim, squeezed the trigger once, and shot out the streetlight above them. With two shots the lamp high on the church was out. He grabbed Georgia's hand and now they ran.

The driver of the car had backed up as the dark man pointed at them. But the quiet of his gun confused him and so he started forward and then he stopped as their car was hit and he backed up again and then the other lights went out and they were plunged into darkness. The Five man had thrown himself onto the ground as glass shattered and when he rose up he could barely see the two running figures reach the side street and turn right.

Prophet's men pulled their guns and jumped from the car and headed towards the running man and woman. The Five man followed. As the three men reached the short alley that ran behind the church and businesses that were facing Fourteenth Street, they saw their prey turn left, into the long alley that ran behind the houses on Blaine.

The Four man told the Five man to go down Blaine and he and the Six man moved quickly towards the long alley. The men rushed after Lloyd Nelson and Georgia Reeves. They knew they were supposed to capture them but they figured Prophet was dead and so they wanted to kill the man and woman.

The Dillard brothers watched all this with a keen interest and confusion. They wondered where Prophet James was.

Two cars pulled up and parked on the other side of Fourteenth. Dag's men had just arrived. They were looking at the church. They wondered where Prophet James was.

Lloyd Nelson and Georgia Reeves were together and they were running down the darkened alley.

Now the men who closed behind them fired, twice. The dark man passed the garages of the houses and he saw creatures moving slowly. Huge hairy scaly animals reached for him and he focused on the soft hand of the woman he loved and he came back to himself, to this he was against and that opposed him.

Then! There! The black man in his dream waved his long gleaming knife and Lloyd Nelson turned into a yard. The garage was scorched, a burnt-out hull and the large house had been burned and sat in the night, charred and empty, a blackened skeleton. And the old shadowy memories of this house wavered and shimmered forlornly. Soft voices emanated from this place.

He pulled Georgia past him and pressed himself against the garage and he opened his gun, emptied the spent shells, and reloaded. He turned to look into the eyes of this woman. Her eyes were they eyes of the woman in his dream. His mother's eyes looked back at him. And they were not crying. They were beautiful and loving but they were not frightened eyes. And he was not afraid. And they were both calm.

Lloyd Nelson was again returned to this moment, in this time. It was his time. He listened to the running footsteps as they came closer, closer. His enemies were looking, peeping and peering into the back yards. Running again. Passing through the dull glow of the tall alley lights. The dark man stepped into the alley. He saw. He fired, three quiet times.

The man, who had been seen, fired wildly into the air and hollered and he rolled in the alley and moaned and yelled for help and then he was on his knees and the other man fired, again and again. The Six man crawled and bled in the dirty unpaved alley and after he whimpered for help he cursed and then he collapsed and he was ... dead.

The dark man fired again, twice. He stepped back to the garage. Then he moved past Georgia and took her hand and pulled her, led her through the yard and up the broken back stairs and into the rear of the house.

The Four man was yelling. He called to the Five man and told him to come from the front of the house and he crept along the burnt garage to move from the rear.

Lloyd Nelson went to his knees. He pulled Georgia down to the kitchen floor beside him. He almost whispered to her as he dumped out a handful of bullets in front of him. "Everything's gonna be alright," he said. He loaded his gun and the Five man fired from the front porch and the Four man fired and bullets tore through the walls, through the house.

Lloyd Nelson moved. He was close against the wall, beside the long hallway that led to the front, to the living room. He fired in one direction and then the other and when his gun was empty he opened it, emptied the shells, slid it to Georgia and told her to load it. And as she quickly eased bullets into the warm gun Prophet's men moved closer. The dark man pulled his gun from the holster on his left leg and he fired to the front and then through the glass of the rear window. The Five man fired through the glassless front window.

The Four man fired and ran further along to the side of the house.

As the dark man fired the smaller gun, he crawled towards Georgia and then that gun was without bullets and now he heard voices and he looked to his left as he was there on his hands and knees and he saw a woman beneath the sink. Lloyd Nelson was lost again. And Georgia held the long black gun out to him but he did not take it. He was looking, staring.

The Five man was through the doorless front entrance, into the house and he fired.

Georgia could hear the bullets pass through the room. The Four man was firing through the burnt walls and pieces of wood were spraying loose and falling around them and both men started yelling and cursing and now Lloyd Nelson had the silenced gun and he rose up a little but he was still staring, transfixed, at the black woman in the white gown and he could see her bleeding and he could feel her thick wet red blood on his hands and he dropped his gun and brought his hands up close to his face to look at them and Georgia was saying, nearly whispering, "Baby what is it? What's wrong?"

The Five man loaded his gun again. The Four man loaded his gun again. And everything was quiet.

Lloyd Nelson could smell the gunpowder and he turned slowly towards the front of the house, to the living room. Georgia crawled over beside him.

The Five man jumped out into the hallway and fired and jumped back into the room.

The flash of the muzzle was as lightning and it was beautiful to the dark man. The bullet whined as it passed.

Now the Five man stepped out and fired and he began to run down the long hallway and his gun was raised.

Lloyd Nelson could see the outline of the man running.

Georgia could see the man coming.

Then thunder roared and the running man buckled and was lifted from his feet and driven forward and down and the shotgun blast that hit him forced him to slide into the back room. And he was limp and twisted and his dying body made noises.

Lloyd Nelson could see the dulled yellow eyes of the dying man, and he heard this man choking, coughing and he saw the blood flowing from his nose, from his mouth and he looked at his own hands again and he stood up. He was no longer lost. He was there, in his kitchen! Twenty-four years ago.

The left hand of the Five man moved, grabbed slowly, and then it stopped and he was ... dead.

The Four man had paused at the roar of the shotgun and then he came from the side of the house and prepared himself to mount the stairs.

Outside Red was near the front, on the side of the house, moving to the back, cautiously running.

Inside Bear was moving quickly from the front and his shotgun was smoking and he wanted it to roar, to smoke again. He could see the silhouette of Lloyd Nelson, standing in the middle of the room. And Bear had seen the Four man pass the rear window and he could see he had reached the steps. But he couldn't fire. Lloyd Nelson was in his way. Outside, Red was not at the rear yet and the Four man saw the back of the dark man and he pointed his gun to shoot.

Georgia Reeves, from her knees, put four quiet bullets from Lloyd Nelson's gun, into the body of the Four man.

And as he was driven back from the porch, he turned and jumped and his hollering was cut short as Red's shotgun blast blew him sideways, between the bushes and onto the dirty grassless ground.

And the Four man was ... dead.

Lloyd Nelson backed up from the room onto the porch. Bear pulled Georgia to her feet. He pried the gun from her clutching hands. Red moved to the man in the yard to assure he was dead.

Then, they all watched Lloyd Nelson.

He was backing down the steps. And as they saw him, he saw his mother's burning body. He backed up. And they followed him

Georgia moved towards him. "Baby? Baby?"

And he heard his lost loving mother's dying voice. "Run my love! Run baby! Run fast! Now!"

He felt his mother's hand, her push, and he hurried to the edge of the garage. The three moved forward. But he did not see them. He saw the flames in the sky. He saw his house burning.

Georgia spoke, in agony. "My love! My love!"

And he heard, screaming in his ear, "Run! Run!" And he ran as best he could.

Down the alley he went. He reeled. He walked. He tottered. He moved as a three-year-old sick child. And as he turned a corner, sirens wailed in the distance behind him, behind them. And the dark man, the dark feverish child, moved on, with Georgia at his side.

He was nearing Twelfth Street now. Bear and Red had tossed away their rifles and the long black silenced pistol. They had removed their gloves and beneath their coats were the beautiful guns they had been given. The two big men watched, protected, Red in front, Bear behind but he did not see them.

They could see their friend stumble drunkenly along the sidewalks and down the middle of the streets. And the big men stopped the nighttime traffic as the dark man, dressed in black, was oblivious to this world, this time. And he paused and then turned onto Twelfth, heading south, and five blocks away the street was lit up.

Red reached out for his friend, held him, and the dark man pushed him, easily, away.

Bear told him to go get his car and Red turned and ran. Bear wrapped his arms around Lloyd Nelson and his arms were wrenched apart and he was pushed aside. And he watched his friend stagger on.

Georgia was speaking to him. "I'm here with you. You don't have to run. Everything's alright."

He stumbled and fell. And regaining his feet he extended his arms before him, for balance. He lurched forward and there was pain on his face as he looked around, back, and into the sky. He knew no one and he knew nothing but that long ago night.

"I love you," she said. And she moved in front of him, to face him. Close to him. She was backing up. "I'll always love you! I won't leave you! I'll never leave you!" She turned and she could see the cars rushing along the next side street and the headlights of the cars were shining, moving. They loomed closer.

Georgia jumped against Lloyd Nelson. She put her arms around his neck and fervently kissed his cheeks, his lips. "Please?" she implored. "Oh, please. Please stop! Come back to me!"

Lloyd Nelson was slipping to the side, from her loving arms. She helped him, eased him to the ground.

The man, crawled into a darkened doorway.

And the little child crawled into the backyard, between the garbage cans. And the body rolled over and Georgia held her love in her arms and she looked up at Bear and Red was in the street, at the curb, with the car door open and she looked at Red. And when she looked down at her love, his eyes were wide and clear and bright. He was there with her. They were together.

"Georgia?" he whispered. And he took a deep breath.

He departed from this moment. Then he spoke, slowly, softly, with intensity. "The fire! The fire is burning! See it? It's hot! The pretty fire is ... everywhere!"

Georgia kissed him. "Yes baby. Yes, I'm here." She wiped his forehead. And her lips were hot and her hands felt as if they were burning as she touched him. His skin seemed to be on fire. And she placed her hand on his chest and she felt his heart and it was pounding and then it fluttered and paused and she screamed for Bear, for Red. And they moved to him.

Lloyd Nelson was back. And he spoke with surety, a confirmation, an affirmation. "I love you Georgia Reeves." And he smiled, a real smile.

"I know you do baby." And she smiled back at him.

He looked at her golden smile.

"I remember. I remember ... everything."

These were the last words Lloyd Nelson would say.

Indeed! On Twelfth Street the fires would burn.
Yes! The flames of the fires would be ... everywhere.

As the men and women sat deep in dimness, in the underworld, upstairs in Jimmy's joint on Twelfth at three o'clock that morning, they talked of Death.

They spoke of Marzette and they toasted to the dead cocaine king and snorted and injected cocaine, in his honor.

They spoke of Daddy Bell and Snake and those dead bodies that were being removed at that time from the church and the alley and the empty home on Blaine Street, just blocks away.

And when they talked of Prophet James their words were of wonder and puzzlement.

Over on Fourteenth, and on Blaine, Cinque and his people passed out leaflets to the growing crowd and some of the militants headed towards Twelfth in an attempt to educate and inform their wayward brothers and sisters. And they yelled out "Unite! It's time to take a stand!" They raised their black-gloved fists in the air and hollered, "Black Power! Death to the pigs!"

But not just in Jimmy's were they speaking of these people and their lives and deaths. And not only did they utter words of reverence. Not all paid homage. Some cursed the dead and were glad they were gone.

In the Democratic Club, The Green Door, The Player's Club, Mr. Kelly's, The Barn, The 21 Club, Momma's, and Stokes' joint, laughter rose and they whispered and they loud talked and threw forth the names of those they knew from the streets who had played at the game in the dark world.

And those in that world drank, used their drugs and got high in the bathrooms and at the bars of these places and they all partied as the light of July 23, eased upon them.

And Death's train began to rumble and smoke and move in wide circles.

It was almost four in the morning when the police raided Jimmy's. They had been paid their regular money but they wanted more, so they raided the joint. They gathered up a little over eighty people. They marched them downstairs, onto the sidewalk and into the paddy wagons and the people in the street began to yell and curse the pigs.

It was time!

The people of the dark world were enraged. And it was hot. They needed, required some way to express their internal selves and they grasped these external reasons. They held on tightly.

It was time!

Rocks were tossed, along with angry epithets. Bricks were hurled with virulent invective condemnations. One of Cinque's people threw a brick through a police cruiser's window. And Death and all those aboard the train, cheered.

It was time! The riot was on!

Police moved into the area as the crowd swelled. The police watched as garbage was spilled into the street and set on fire. Bricks were smashed through store windows. Looting began. Firebombs began to explode. The wind rose and the flames were fanned. The souls of the people were sparking, stoked. And all within them ignited.

Frustration and Injustice and Retribution were acknowledged. But it was Hatred and Madness that stood to take a bow. And it was Death that clapped Her bloody hands.

And the mourning moon was leaving this spectacle, behind.

By six thirty in the morning, beautiful, huge fires raged on Twelfth Street. Looters ran in glee through nearby streets and the riot spread. The fires spread. And the fires were ... everywhere!

Orange-red-blue flames and thick grey-black smoke rose into the sky that Sunday morning. Shots rang out at the firemen who struggled in vain to control the expanding expression and so the firemen pulled back and blocks of houses began to burn, unchecked.

Those in charge were indecisive and unable to react. The police watched. And when the four thousand upholders of laws began to move, it was beyond their time.

And as the day passed, Death and Her group sipped warm red blood and observed.

That Sunday evening a nine p.m. curfew was decreed. State Troopers were then called in. The first of seven thousand three hundred National Guardsmen arrived.

But it was too late for those who were dead. Too late for those who had been burned out. Too late for those who had lost all to looters. Their time to be saved, had passed.

But it wasn't too late for Death.

The police started killing. The guardsmen started killing. And Death was proud.

An M-48 tank came to Twelfth Street and started shooting at invisible snipers. And people were killed.

The Algiers Motel was fired on by the police and guardsmen. The law went into the motel. And people were killed.

Bullets flew at the law. Policemen and guardsmen were wounded. The firing was heavy, and organized and several criminal insurrectionists who were killed were carrying army issued M-1 rifles and pouches filled with ammunition.

Paratroopers were sent into Detroit. Four thousand seven hundred men arrived from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Fort Campbell, Kentucky. And when they arrived at Selfridge Air Force Base, operation "Task Force Detroit," was on.

Huey helicopters flew. Patton tanks rumbled and crawled through the streets and fired their machine guns and the army moved onto the east side to put this that had risen up, down. The snipers moved back west. Police stations were under siege. Fire stations were under siege.

Death and Her cohorts found this display fascinating and enjoyable and, unique. It was different from 1943. It was something more than Harlem, or Watts, or Newark. This was prettier. Stronger!

Detroit reached out around itself and other Michigan cities felt the fiery, steel touch. Pontiac, Saginaw, Flint, Grand Rapids, Albion and Kalamazoo, all saw the beautiful fires.

Within the city, fourteen square miles knew of the tremendous strength of the uncontrolled, vicious insanity. Across the adjacent cities of Hamtramck and Highland Park, Madness danced.

Downtown Detroit! It was there also. The warring bands played and as the scorching music swelled and the participants swirled closer to lily white Grosse Pointe, those in power really became worried.

The bright hot fires leaped. The dense smoke floated and darkened the daytime sky. Gunpowder and tear gas wafted through the summer air and blood ran as flooding water in the cemented streets and left its stains forever.

The inhabitants of this city had once again expressed the essence of the humankind. And in the actions, all that had been pushed down, suppressed, and held back, came forth. And kept behind the distinct actions were the concealed but truthful, unalterable desires. Those of the humankind desired not to rise above their internal selves, but to come back into their selves.

Be their selves. Be ... human.

Remain ... lost.

By Saturday, July 29, Death prepared to depart the torched, blistered, charred city of Detroit. All her friends were elated at the outcome of the party. Now there was nothing left to be done but clean up, straighten up, discard.

But Death was once again dejected. She was always disappointed. She was never satisfied, completely.

But Hatred and Madness and Brutality and Violence were grinning, quite pleased.

There was almost one hundred and fifty million dollars in property loss. There were almost two thousand injuries. There were over seven thousand arrests. And over fifteen hundred fires had burned during the week, destroying more than four hundred buildings along with residential homes.

And as Death strolled through Her train, She counted bodies, and souls. And she smiled at the official count of forty-three, ten whites and thirty-three blacks. She shook Her head, no, at that lie. She counted more, quite a few more than that.

She paused, to listen. She heard Her everlasting name being called from the distance and she turned Her endless train around and departed Detroit, Michigan.

And as She rode away, She looked back and smiled and waved. She had a special affinity for the steely 'Motor City.' For Her it was always such a remarkable place. And she sang out, "I'll be back!"

PART III

DETROIT

DECEMBER, 1967

I

SNOW FELL, SO SOFTLY, IT FELL. SILENTLY. SO WHITE. SO COLD. And the early darkness of a winter's night had preceded the frozen white rains.

The beautiful glistening snow covered as a white fluffy sheet the old snow. Covered the dirty grey, yellow-stained, hardened essence of winter that had previously rested upon the icy ground and slippery, cemented streets. The new covered, the old.

And the new snow was welcomed by many.

Those who believed in, and awaited the arrival of Santa Claus wanted this symbolic seasonal enhancement. They wanted this pure representation to fall from the sky. They wanted twelve inches of it to come down and thickly settle upon the city as a blanket.

They wanted Santa to be able to bring his magic flying reindeer with him. They didn't want the jolly fat man to have to pilot his airplane or helicopter or rocket ship. And they wanted a dense foggy night so Rudolph's red nose would shine and its brightness would guide and lead the way and the wonderful gifts would arrive as anticipated for those who had been nice.

And those who were poor, along with those who had been naughty or who were dead, got nothing.

This descending snow ensured Christmas would be as it should be for this ending of 1967. Yes, for many there had been dreams of a white Christmas.

The brown-gloved soft hands turned the beautiful, brand new, rust-brown 1968 Fleetwood Cadillac onto Twelfth Street. Pretty, dark-brown eyes looked right, and then left, as the automobile eased along. The young eyes saw, between the scraping blades of the windshield wipers, the stark desolation that was absent of light. The aging eyes saw through ... the darkness.

Georgia Reeves looked at this reality that surrounded her. It reminded her of an extending, expanding disease. And she thought of the spreading heroin epidemic that ravaged the city. Her face tightened. She shook her head no. She was saddened. She drove on.

Charred remains stood as obvious bleak testimonies to the essential needs of the humankind. And before these monuments were seared into existence there had been life. Vibrant! Exciting! Violent! And behind the bloody burnt remains there was a new order, a different vibrancy. There were altered excitations and new distorted violence.

Now there were many empty fields of weeds, blackened brick and wasted wood. Block after block of boarded up buildings. Now there existed a new nothingness, a new life. The new blotted out the old.

And there were people on Twelfth Street, but not many.

Georgia could observe on her right, several women, separate, alone, waiting in the snow. Three were huddled in the dark doorways of darkened buildings. Looking out with hollow eyes and seeing. What?

She could see two men standing on separate corners. Two men were standing close. Watching. Waiting. For what?

On her left she passed The Hole, one of the few bars that remained. The door came open as a man and woman came out. Each held the other for support as they drunkenly staggered down the sidewalk. To where?

Soon it would be, in a matter of hours, Christmas day. And Santa Claus was coming to town.

Georgia turned the radio up. She speeded up. And as she crossed Blaine Street she glanced in the direction of the Church and wondered about Prophet James. She wondered what had become of him. No one she knew had seen him or heard anything about him. No one, including the police, had any idea what had happened to him.

And Georgia wondered if he was alive, or ... dead.

The snow fell harder, sideways. She turned and pointed the long hood of the big beautiful Fleetwood automobile towards Farmington, Michigan, towards the orphanage.

It was almost nine thirty that Christmas Eve night when Georgia let herself in through a rear door of the orphanage. And as she mounted the winding stairs to the top, she could hear voices, far away. She paused to listen to laughter and carol singing. These children, allowed to stay up later this special night, awaited the morrow light. Their future was before them. The future of the city would be a part of them.

She reached the top floor and turned towards what had once been an unused wing of this large building and walked quickly down the long hallway. She opened the only door and stepped into the wide shadowy room. The nun was rocking in her chair slowly, knitting. The nurse was dozing, a book in her lap.

A rising fire from the fireplace sizzled and popped and the glowing flames dipped and waved and jumped and caused all the images upon the walls to

move and the fire reflected and illuminated and was light. And there was warmth in this room.

The nun looked up at Georgia and smiled. The nurse woke up and smiled, stretched. The room smelled of pine and the Christmas tree lights bubbled and came in different colors from the far corner of the room.

And Lloyd Nelson reclined in his king-sized bed.

The back of the bed was lifted and the dark man lounged there, uncovered. His left arm was lying in his lap, resting upon the burgundy silk pajamas he wore. Plastic tubes of liquid nourishment ran into his right arm.

His hair was somewhat long, and freshly done. His smooth chocolate-brown complexion was painted by the shimmering rainbow lights. And the diamonds on his left hand flashed as the lights shifted and changed. And the gold watch around his left wrist ticked. The golden hands revolved, slowly. And time circled. Passed.

His eyes were open, fully. He stared out of the window to his right. At the snow?

Georgia smiled and nodded at the two women. They gathered their belongings and the three women stepped outside the door. They talked for a few minutes, quietly. Georgia had several instructions for the nurse. They shared information in hushed tones and then they all hugged and each wished the other a merry Christmas.

Georgia stepped back into the room. She went to Lloyd Nelson, her love, and leaned over to kiss him on his left cheek.

“How you doing baby? You’re looking good. I like your new hair style.”

And as Georgia removed her long brown leather coat and brown woolen knit cap and hung them in the closet, she spoke, softly. And her southern accent was soothing.

“Della said for me to be sure and tell you hello. She’s working pretty hard. Both the cleaners and salon are doing really well. We’re thinking about buying another cleaners. Maybe in the spring when the weather breaks.”

She was in the full-length mirror now. And the woman in the mirror wore a brown wool sweater and brown wool pants and brown leather boots that she now removed. Her skin was radiant and she was colored a rich deep brown and she was young, with her own life before her. She was lovely. And there in the mirror she fluffed up and styled her natural-styled black hair.

“Della’s in love again. He seems like a nice guy. But he’s a square with a good job so we know how that goes. Baby it’s getting cold out.” She sat on the bed beside him. “Red and Bear will be here tomorrow afternoon and Johnny and Della said they’ll be by in the evening.

“Red helped me put the gifts in the car.” And she remembered. She went back and reaching past her pistol, she pulled a small gift-wrapped box from her coat pocket. She returned to the bed and when she sat down she slid over close to him. She gave him a big hug. She held him like that and her heart was filled and she took a deep breath. She kissed his neck, his cheek.

“I’m gonna give you your gift right now.” She unwrapped the box, opened it, and removed a thick gold necklace with big beautiful sparkling

diamonds. She clasped it around his neck. She leaned back so she could see him better. Then, with her hand upon his cheek, she changed the position of his head, just enough so she could look directly into his eyes. She smiled, a golden smile.

His eyes were expressionless but they were not empty. And they were bright and clear and they seemed to speak but they did not move. He did not blink. His face was set, but not drawn. His brow was slightly creased, as if he had been asked a question or prepared himself to pose one. And at the proper times, in varied depths of light, emotion passed across his handsome youthful looking face.

He appeared quite relaxed, serene. And there was only the appearance. There was nothing else.

He did not move.

He did not speak.

Could he hear?

He could not see?

His body was supple and could be moved easily and he breathed so slowly, and very lightly. All the doctors were mystified at his otherwise good health. And they were confused by this suspended state, this pause in life, and bewildered by this hovering there, between the light of consciousness and unconscious darkness. There was nothing they could do.

It was the fever. It was the fever. It was the fever.

Yet everyone who cared for him, everyone who cared about him, everyone who loved him believed Lloyd Nelson was there, and his spirit within his soul was alive, inside, the dark body. Georgia reached out to gently touch his cheek. Her fingers lingered there. Then she placed her hand upon his chest. She sighed, deeply.

She stood and took a book from the bookcase. She opened it at the bookmark. And by the light of the small blue lamp on the desk near the bed, for the next hour, while sitting in a chair beside him, she read to him. And the Christmas tree lights and the heat and light from the diminishing fire, was there with them.

And Lloyd Nelson and Georgia Reeves were together.

When she was done, she rose and prepared herself for bed. Then she placed logs on the dying embers and the new flames came to life and the still shadows in the room wavered again. She shed her clothing and then she turned off the lamp. She paused to look at her love, her man. And she stared so hard she thought, in the chiaroscuro of the flames ... he moved. She bit her lip.

She was naked and she crawled into bed beside him, beneath the covers she now pulled up. She shivered. She shifted closer. The snow continued to fall. The temperature dropped. She turned onto her side. She put her left leg upon him and her left arm was across his waist and she kissed his neck, his cheek, his lips, for long, long tender moments. And his eyes were open and her eyes closed as she tasted him and she envisioned his arms around her and she could see his naked body. She needed, wanted to feel him deep inside her

and she was aroused. She reached within the silk. She caressed his chest, down, to his thighs. Slowly. She touched him ... there! She pulled lightly, this that she wanted from him, that she believed belonged to her. She squeezed this essence of his manhood, gently. She pressed herself against him, his leg between her legs. And as they were there like that, all time stopped. And then, she stopped. Her breathing slowed. Her heart eased its beating. Her rising desires subsided. And she was patient, again.

She moved his head so he could look out of the window. So he could see the long dark finger-like limbs of the barren trees, the soft white snow and the dense black sky from where the flakes materialized. She placed her head on his shoulder. She grew sleepy as she looked out of the window, with him.

And she wondered what her love was thinking, feeling?

She spoke, softly. "I needed this holiday break from school. But you know, I'll be glad to get back. And I'm looking forward to graduating."

Then she fell into silence. The fire was noisy as it strove to extinguish itself. The room was otherwise quiet. She yawned.

"I'm twenty now," she whispered. "Tomorrow we'll celebrate your birthday. And you'll be twenty-eight. And we're young and we've got our whole lives ahead of us. Everybody's gonna stop by to be with you, with us, and when everybody leaves I'll be here. And when I leave I'll come back to you. And we'll spend our nights together. I'm waiting on you baby. I'm waiting on you to come back to me. And we're gonna have us a nice house and lots of kids and I'm gonna show you, help you find the power of love." Her eyes closed. Drowsiness encompassed her now. Her body was weightless.

"It always has been love. The answer. Always will be. I'll prove it to you. And our love will overcome ... everything."

And as Georgia Reeves was slipping slowly into her sleep, these thoughts would give impetus to her dreams. And she would dream of Lloyd Nelson and she would be with him and they would be not only together, but they would be surrounded by the possibilities within a life ... together.

She was asleep when the first tear fell from the dark man's eye. The tear was warm and wet and it was down his cheek, across his scar. And no one would see that lone falling tear or the few that joined to follow or that very last one that dropped from his glistening, staring, unblinking eyes.

But the dried tracks from those wet tears would remain and the stains would point and speak and the teary marks would acknowledge the processes within the conditions of being human and the internal essence of his own feverish existence.

Inside, he was alive.

Inside, he was in love.

Inside, he struggled.

