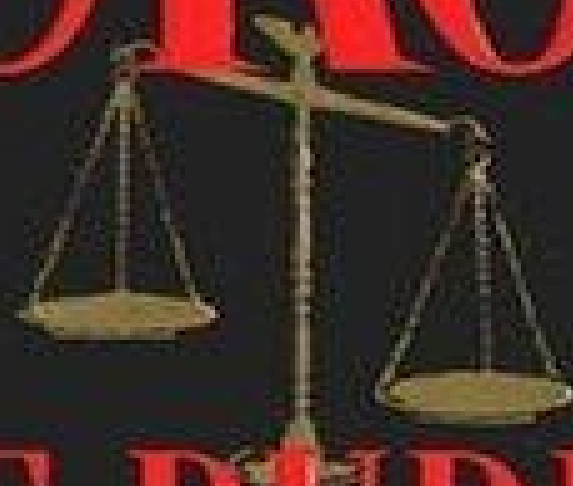


THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

# SCOTT TUROW



## THE BURDEN OF PROOF

"If you liked *Presumed Innocent*, you're going to love  
THE BURDEN OF PROOF."—Jonathan Yardley, *Washington Post*

The Burden of Proof by Scott Turow

Also by Scott Turow

PRESUMED INNOCENT

For Annette

WARNER BOOKS EDITION

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[Our] decisions have respected the private realm of family life which the state cannot enter.

Prince v. Massachusetts, 321 U.S. 158, 166 (1944), an opinion of the United States Supreme Court

I once undertook to improve the marriage relations of a very intelligent man .... He continually occupied himself with the thought of a separation, which he repeatedly rejected because he dearly loved his two small children ....

One day, the man related to me a slight occurrence which had extremely frightened him. He was sporting with the older child, by far his favorite. He tossed it high in the air and repeated this tossing until finally he thrust it so high that its head almost struck the massive gas chandelier .... [The child] became dizzy with fright .... The particular facility of this careless movement ...

suggested to me to look upon this accident as a symbolic action ....

There was indeed a powerful determinant in a memory from the patient's childhood: it referred to the death of a little brother, which the mother laid to the father's negligence, and which led to serious quarrels with threats of separation between the parents. The continued course of my patient's life, as well as the therapeutic success, confirmed my analysis.

SIGMUND FREUD,

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life

## PART ONE

They had been married for thirty-one years, and the following spring, full of resolve and a measure of hope, he would marry again. But that day, on a late afternoon near the end of March, Mr. Alejandro Stern had returned home and, with his attache case and garment bag still in hand, called out somewhat absently from the front entry for Clam, his wife. He was fifty-six years old, stout and bald, and never particularly good-looking, and he found himself in a mood of intense preoccupation.

For two days he had been in Chicago that city of rough souls on behalf of his most difficult client. Dixon Hartnell was callous, self-centered, and generally full of his lawyers' advice; worst of all, representing him was a permanent engagement. Dixon was Stern's brother-in-law, married to Silvia, his sister, Stern's sole living immediate relation and the enduring object of his affections. For Dixon, of course, his feelings were hardly as pure. In the early years, when Stern's practice mounted to little more than the decorous hustling of clients in the hallways of the misdemeanor courts, serving Dixon's unpredictable needs had paid Stern's rent. Now it was one of those imponderable duties, darkly rooted in the hard soil of Stern's own sense of filial and professional obligation.

It was also steady work. The proprietor of a vast commodity-futures trading empire, a brokerage house he had named, in youth, Maison Dixon, and a series of interlocked subsidiaries, all called MD-this and -that, Dixon was routinely in trouble. Exchange officials, federal regulators, the IRS--they'd all had Dixon's number for years. Stern stood up for him in these scrapes.

But the present order of business was of greater concern. A federal grand jury

sitting here in Kindle County had been issuing subpoenas out of town to select MD clients. Word of these subpoenas, served by the usual grim-faced minions of the FBI, had been trailing back to MD for a week now, and Stern, at the conclusion of his most recent trial, had flown at once to Chicago to meet privately with the attorneys representing two of these customers to review the records the government required from them. The lawyers reported that the Assistant United States Attorney assigned to the matter, a young woman named Klonsky, declined to say precisely who was under suspicion, beyond exonerating the customers themselves. But to a practiced eye, this all had an ominous look. The out-of-town subpoenas reflected a contemplated effort at secrecy. The investigators knew what they were seeking and seemed intent on quietly encircling Dixon, or his companies, or someone close to him.

So Stern stood travel-weary and vexed in the slate foyer of the home where Clara and he had lived for nearly two decades. And yet, what was it that wrested his attention so thoroughly, so suddenly? The silence, he would always say.

Not a tap running, a radio mumbling, not one of the household machines in operation. An isolated man, he drew, always, a certain comfort from stillness. But this was not the silence of rest or interruption. He left his bags on the black tiles and stepped smartly through the foyer.

"Clara?" he called again.

He found her in the garage. When he opened the door, the odor of putrefaction overwhelmed him, a powerful high sour smell which dizzied him with the first breath and drove up sickness like a fist. The car, a black Seville, the current model, had been backed in; the driver's door was open. The auto's white dome light remained on, so that in the dark garage she was warmly spotlit. From the doorway he could see her leg extended toward the concrete floor, and the hem of a bright floral shirtwaist dress. He could tell from the glint that she was wearing hosiery.

Slowly, he stepped down. The heat in the garage and the smell which increased revoltingly with each step were overpowering, and in the dark his fear left him weak. When he could see her through the open door of the car, he advanced no farther. She was reclined on the camel-colored leather of the front seat. Her skin, which he noticed first, was burnished with an unnatural

peachish glow, and her eyes were closed. It seemed she had meant to appear neat and composed. Her left hand, faultlessly manicured, was placed almost ceremonially across her abdomen, and the flesh had swollen slightly beneath her wedding rings. She had brought nothing with her. No jacket. No purse. And she had not fallen back completely; her other arm was rigidly extended toward the wheel, and her head was pinned against the seat at a hopeless, impossible angle. Her mouth was open, her tongue extruded, her face dead, motionless, absolutely still. In the whitewashed laundry room adjoining the garage he was immediately sick in one of the porcelain basins, and he washed away all traces before calling in quick order 911 and then his son.

"You must come straightaway," he said to Peter. He had found him at home. "Straightaway." As usual in stress, he heard some faint accentuation of the persistent Hispanic traces in his speech; the accent was always there, an enduring deficit as he thought of it, like a limp:

"Something is wrong with Mother," Peter said. Stern had mentioned nothing like that, but his son's feeling for these things was sure. "What happened in Chicago?"

When Stern answered that she had not been with him, Peter, true to his first instincts, began to quarrel.

"How could she not be with you? I spoke to her the morning you were leaving."

A shot of terrible sympathy for himself tore through Stern.

He was lost, the emotional pathways hopelessly tangled.

Hours later, toward morning, as he was sitting alone beneath a single light, sipping sherry as he revisited, reparsed every solemn moment of the day, he would take in the full significance of Peter's remark. But that eluded him now. He felt only, as ever, a deep central impatience with his son, a suffering, suppressed volcanic force, while somewhere else his heart read the first clues in what Peter had told him, and a sickening unspeakable chasm of regret began to open.

"You must come now, Peter. I have no idea precisely what has occurred. I believe, Peter, that your mother is dead."

His son, a man of thirty, let forth a brief high sound, a cry full of desolation.

"You believe it?"

"Please, Peter. I require your assistance. This is a terrible moment. Come ahead. You may interrogate me later."

'For Chrissake, what in the hell is happening there? What in the hell is this? Where are you?"

"I am home, Peter. I cannot answer your questions now.

Please do as I ask. I cannot attend to this alone." He hung up the phone abruptly. His hands were trembling and he leaned once more against the laundry basin. He had seemed so coldly composed only an instant before. Now some terrible sore element in him was on the rise. He presumed he was about to faint. He removed his tie first, then his jacket. He returned for an instant to the garage door; but he could not push it open. If he waited, just a moment, it seemed he would understand.

The house was soon full of people he did not know'. The police came first, in pairs, parking their cars at haphazard angles in the drive, then the paramedics and the ambulance. Through the windows Stern saw a gaggle of his neighbors gathering on the lawn across the way. They leaned toward the house with the arrival of each vehicle and spoke among themselves, held behind the line of squad cars with their revolving beacons. Within the house, policemen roamed about with their usual regrettable arrogance. Their walkietalkies blared with occasional eruptions of harsh static.

They went in and out of the garage to gawk at the body and talked about events as if he were not there. They studied the Sterns' -rich possessions with an envy that was disconcertingly apparent.

The first cop into the garage had lifted his radio to summon the lieutenant as soon as he emerged.

"She's cooked," the officer told the dispatcher. "Tell him he better come with masks and gloves." Only then did he notice Stern lurking in a fashion in the dark hall outside the laundry room. Abashed, the policeman began at once

'to explain. "Looks like that car run all day. It's on empty now. Catalytic converter gets hotter than a barbecue-six, seven hundred degrees. You run that engine twelve hours in a closed space, you're generating real heat. That didn't do her any good. You the husband?"

He was, said Stern.

"Condolences," said the cop. "Terrible thing." They waited.

"Do you have any idea, Officer, what occurred?" He did not know what he thought just now, except that it would be a kind of treachery to believe the worst too soon. The cop considered Stern in silence. He was ruddy and thick, and his weight probably made him look older than he was.

"Keys in the ignition. On position. Garage door's closed."

Stern nodded.

"It didn't look like any accident to me," the cop said finally. "You can't be sure till the autopsy. You know, could be she had a heart attack or somethin right when she turned the key."

"Maybe it's one of them freak things, too," the cop said.

"Turns the car on and she's thinkin about somethin else, you know, fixin her hair and makeup, whatever. Sometimes you never know. Didn't find a note, right?"

A note. Stern had spent the moments awaiting the various authorities here in this hallway, keeping his stupefied watch beside the door. The thought of a note, some communication, provided, against all reason, a surge of hope.

"You'd just as well stay out of there," the policeman said, gesturing vaguely behind him.

Stern nodded with the instruction, but after an instant he took a single step forward.

"Oncemore," he said.

The policeman waited only a moment before opening the door.

He was known as Sandy, a name he had adopted shortly after his mother and sister and he had arrived here in 1947, driven from Argentina by unending calamities--the death of his older brother, and then his father; the rise of Peren.

It was his mother who had urged him to use this nickname, but he was never wholly at ease with it. There was a jaunty, comic air to the name; it fit him

poorly, like someone else's clothing, and, therefore, seemed to betray all that helpless immigrant yearning for acceptance which he so ardently sought to conceal, and which had been in truth perhaps his most incorrigible passion.

To be an American. Having come of age here in the 1950s, he would always hear the whisper of special obligations in the word. He had never bought a foreign car; and he had forsaken Spanish years ago. Occasionally, in surprise, a few words, a favored expression might escape him, but he had arrived here determined to master the American tongue.

In his parents' home there was no single language--his mother addressed them in Yiddish; with each other, the children used Spanish; his father talked principally to himself in windy high-flown German, which sounded to Stern as a child like some rambling machine. In Argentina, with its deep Anglophile traditions, he had learned to speak the English of an Eton schoolboy. But here the idioms of everyday life flashed in his mind like coins, the currency of real Americans. From the first, he could not bear to use them. Pride and shame, fire and ice, burned away at him always; he could not endure the sniggering that seemed to follow even the slightest accented misuse. But in his dreams he spoke a rich American argot, savory as any jazzman's.

American optimism, on the other hand, he had never absorbed. He could not leave aside the gloomy lessons of foreign experience, of his parents' lives--emigrants, exiles, souls fleeing despots, never at rest. Certain simple propositions he took as articles of faith: things would often turn out badly. Seated in the living room in an overstuffed chair, amid Clara's raiku vases and Chinese tapestries, he accepted this like the coming true of an evil spell. He had the inkling of various tasks that were somehow imperative, but for the time being he had no thought to move; his limbs were weak from shock, and his heart seemed to labor.

Peter arrived not long after the paramedics. They had already rolled their White-sheeted cart into the garage to remove the body. Wiry and always intense, Peter had burst into the house, disregarding the policemen at the front door. Why was it, Stern wondered, that he was so appalled by his son's hysteria, this hyperthyroid look of uncontrollable panic? Peter was immaculately kempt, a bonethin young man with a highly fashionable hairdo. He wore a blousy French shirt with broad turquoise stripes; his pants were



olive, but of a style never worn in any army, ballooning widely near the knee. Stern, even now, could not restrict a critical impulse. It was remarkable, really, that this man whose face was rigid with distress had taken the time to dress.

Rising finally, he encountered his son in the hallway leading from the foyer to the kitchen.

"I just can't believe this." Peter, like Stern, seemed to have no idea how to behave; he moved a single step toward his father, but neither man reached out. "My God," he said, "look at it. It's a carnival outside. Half the neighborhood's there."

"Do they know what happened?"

"I told Fiona Cawley." The Cawleys had lived next door to the Sterns for nineteen years. "She more or less demanded it. You know how she is."

"Ah," Stern said. He battled himself, but he found that a selfish shame, juvenile in its intensity, struck at him.

This terrible fact was out now, news now, known. Stern could see the canny deliberations taking place behind Fiona Cawley's deadly yellow eyes.

"Where is she'?" Peter demanded. "Is she still here?"

As soon as Peter had gone off to the garage, Stern recalled that he had meant to speak with him about calling his sisters.

"Mr. Stern?" The policeman he had gone into the garage was standing there. "Couple of fellas wanted a word, if you don't mind."

They were in Stern's first-floor den, a tiny room that he kept largely to himself. Clara had painted the walls hunter green and the room was crowded with furniture, including a large desk on which certain household papers were carefully laid. It disturbed Stern to see the police stationing themselves in this room which had always been his most private place. Two policemen in uniform, man and a woman, stood, while a plainclothes officer occupied the sofa. This third one, a detective apparently, rose disorderly to offer his hand.

"Nogalski," he said. He gripped Stern's hand tepidly and did not bother to look at him. He was a thick man, wearing a tweed sport coat. A hard type. They all were. The detective motioned to a facing easy chair. Behind Stern,

the female officer mumbled something into her radio: We're talkin' to him now.

"You up to a few questions, Sandy?"

"Of what nature?"

"The usual. You know. We got a report to make. Lieutenant's on the way. Gotta fill him in. This come as a big

surprise to you?" the cop asked.

.Stern waited.

"Very much," he said.

"She the type to get all depressed and unhappy, the missus?"

This survey of Clara's character, to be attempted in a few sentences, was for the moment well beyond him.

"She was a serious person, Detective. You would not describe her as a blithe personality."

"But was she seeing shrinks, you know, anything like that?"

"Not to my knowledge. My wife was not of a complaining nature, Detective. She was very private. " "She wasn't threatening to do this?"

"No."

The detective; mostly bald, looked directly at Stern for

the first time. It was evident he did not believe him. "We haven't found a note yet, you know."

Stern stirred a hand weakly. He could not explain.

"And where have you been?" one of the Cops behind Stern asked.

"Chicago."

"For?"

"Legal business. I met with a number of lawyers." The fact that Dixon might be in very serious difficulties, so sorely troubling only an hour ago, recurred to Stern now with a disconcerting novelty. The urgency of that situation

waved to him like a hand disappearing in the deep, out of reach for the time being.

"How long you gone?" Nogalski asked. "I left very early yesterday."

"You talk to her?"

"I tried last night, but there was no answer. We have a symphony series. I assumed she had gone for coffee afterwards with friends."

"Who spoke to her last, so far as you know?"

Stern deliberated. Peter's shrill manner would quickly antagonize the police.

"My son might have."

"He out there?"

"He is quite emotional at the moment."

Nogalski, for whatever reason, allowed himself a brief, disparaging smile.

"You do that often?" one of the cops behind him asked.

"What is that, Officer?"

"Travel. Out of town?"

"Occasionally it is necessary."

"where'd you stay?" the woman asked. Stern tried not to react to the drift of the questions. The officers, of course, knew by now who he was and reacted accordingly-they despised most criminal defense lawyers, who hindered the police at every turn and were often richly rewarded for their efforts. To the police, this was a natural opportunity chance to pester an adversary and to indulge their customary nasty fancies about foul play and motives.

Maybe the spick was humping his girlfriend in Chi while somebody for hire set this up. You never know unless you ask.

"On this occasion, I was at the Ritz." Stern stood.

"May

I go? My son and I have yet to speak with his sisters."

Nogalski was watching him.

"This doesn't make much sense, It was evident he did not believe him. "We haven't found a note yet, you know."

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I go? My son and I have yet to speak with his sisters."

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"This doesn't make much sense," said the detective. It made no sense, the man said. This was his professional opinion.

Stern looked intently at Nogalski. It was one of the hazards of Stern's calling that he seldom felt grateful to the police.

Coming back down the hall, Stern could hear Peter's voice.

He was carrying on about something. The same ruddy-faced cop who had shown Stern into the garage was listening impassively. Stern took his son by the elbow to draw him away. This was intolerable. Intolerable! Some tough element of resistance within him was wearing away.

"My God, they're going to do an autopsy--did you know that?" asked Peter as soon as they were alone in the corridor. Peter was an M.D. and today apparently he was haunted by his past, the pathological exams he had practiced on the bums turned up in gutters, the gruesome med school humor as six or seven students studied the innards of the deceased. Peter suffered with the thought of his mother as another mound of lifeless anatomy awaiting the coroner's saw. "You're not going to allow that, are you?"

A good deal shorter than his son, Stern observed Peter. Was it only with his father that this craven hysteria occurred?

Stern wondered. The climate of their relations did not seem to have changed for years. Always there was this lamenting hortatory quality, too insistent to be passed off as mere whining. Stern had wondered for so long what it was his son expected him to do.

"It is routine, Peter. The coroner must determine the cause of death."

"The cause of death'? Do they think it was an accident?

Are they going to do a brain scan and figure out what she was thinking? For God sake, we won't have a body left to bury. It's obvious. She killed herself." No one yet had said that aloud. Stern registered Peter's directness as a kind of discourtesy--too coarse, too blunt. But no part of him riled up in shock.

This was not, he said, the moment to cross swords with the police. They were, as usual, being idiotic, conducting some kind of homicide investigation. They might wish to speak next to him.

"Me? About what?"

"Your last conversations with your mother, I assume. I told them you were too distressed at the moment."

In his great misery, Peter broke forth with a brief, childish smile. "Good," he said. Such a remarkably strange man. A peculiar moment passed between Stern and his son, a legion of things not understood. Then he reminded Peter that they needed to call his sisters.

"Right," said Peter. A more sober cast came into his eye.

Whatever his differences with his father, he was a faithful older brother.

Down the hall, Stern heard someone say, "The lieutenant's here." A large man ducked into the corridor, peering toward them. He was somewhere near Stern's age, but time seemed to have had a different effect on him. He was large and broad, and like a farmer or someone who worked outdoors, he appeared to have maintained most of the physical strength of youth. He wore a light brown suit, a rumpled, synthetic garment, and a rayon shirt that hung loosely; when he turned around for a second, Stern could see an edge of shirttail trailing out beneath his jacket. He had a large rosy face and very little hair, a few thick gray clumps drawn across his scalp.

He dropped his chin toward Stern in a knowing fashion.

"Sandy," he said.

"Lieutenant," Stern answered. He had no memory of this man, except having seen him before. Some case. Some time. He was not thinking well at the moment.

"When you get a chance," the lieutenant said. Some confusion rose up between Stern and his son..

"You talk to him. I'll call," said Peter. "You know, Marta and Kate. It's better from me."

With a sudden lucid turn, the kind of epiphanal instant he might have expected at a time of high distress, Stern recognized a traditional family drama taking place. As his children had marched toward adulthood, Peter had assumed a peculiar leadership in the family--he was the one to whom his sisters and mother often turned. He had forged intensive, secret bonds with each of them--Stern did not know how, because the same alliances were never formed with him.

This terrible duty, Stern realized, should be his, but the paths of weakness were well worn.

"Please say I shall speak to them soon."

"Sure." A certain reflective light had come over Peter; he leaned against the wall for an instant, absorbing it all, worn out by his own high emotions. "Life," he observed, "is full of surprises."

In Stern's den, the lieutenant was receiving a report from his officers. Nogalski had come strolling up as Stern emerged from the hallway. The lieutenant wanted to know what the policemen had been doing. Nogalski spoke. The others knew they had no place to answer.

"I was asking a few questions, Lieutenant."

"Think you've asked enough?" Nogalski took a beat on that.

They did not get along, the detective and the lieutenant--you could see that. "Maybe you could lend a hand outside.

There's a real bunch of gawkers."

When the other officers were gone, the lieutenant gestured for Stern. He knocked at the door with the back of his hand so that it closed part way.

"Well, you got a shitpot of troubles here, don't you, Sandy? I'm sorry to see you again, under the circumstances." The lieutenant's name was Radczyk, Stern remembered suddenly. Ray, he thought. "You holdin' up?" he asked.

"For the time being. My son is having some difficulty,

The prospect of an autopsy for some reason upsets him." The cop, shifting around the room, seemed to shrug. "We find a note someplace, we could do without it, I guess. I could probably fix it up with Russell's office." He was referring to the coroner. "They can always measure the C.O. in the blood." The old policeman looked at Stern directly then, aware probably that he was being too graphic. "I owe, you know," he said.

Stern nodded. He had no idea what Radczyk was talking about.

The policeman sat down.

"The fellas go over all the usual with you?" He nodded again. Whatever that was. "They were very thorough," said Stern. The lieutenant understood at once.

"Nogalski's okay. He pushes, he's okay. Rough around the edges." The lieutenant looked out the door. He was the type someone must have called a big oaf when he was younger, Before he had a badge and a gun. "It's a tough thing. I feel terrible for you. Just come home and found her, right?"

The lieutenant was doing it all again. He was just much better at it than Nogalski.

"She sick?" the lieutenant asked.

"Her health was excellent. The usual middle-age complaints.

One of her knees was quite arthritic. She could not garden as much as she liked. Nothing else." From the study window, Stern could see the neighbors parting to let the ambulance pass. It rolled slowly through the crowd. The beacon, Stern noticed, was not turning. No point to that. He watched until the vehicle carrying Clara had disappeared in the fullness of the apple tree, just coming to leaf, at the far corner of the lot, then he brought himself back to the conversation. The left knee, Stern thought.

"You don't know of any reason?"

"Lieutenant, it should be evident that I failed to observe something I should have." He expected to get through this, but he did not. His voice quaked and he closed his eyes.



The thought of actually breaking down before this policeman revolted him, but something in him was bleeding away. He was going to say that he had much to regret right now. But he was sure he could not muster that with any dignity. He said, "I am sorry, I cannot help you."

Radczyk was studying him, trying to decide, in all likelihood, if Stern was telling the truth.

A policeman leaned into the room through the half-open door.

"Lieutenant, Nogalski asked me to tell you they found something. Up in the bedroom. He didn't want to touch it till you seen it."

"What is that?" asked Stern.

The cop looked at Stern, unsure if he should answer. "The note," the officer said at last.

It was them on Stern's highboy, jotted on. a single sheet of her stationery, laid out beside a pile of handkerchiefs which the housekeeper had ironed. Like the grocery list or a reminder to get the cleaning. Unassuming. Harmless. Stern picked up the sheet, overcome by this evidence of her' presence. The lieutenant stood at his shoulder. But there was very little to see. Just one line. No date. No salutation. Only four words.

"Can you forgive me?"

ON the dark early morning the day of the funeral, a dream seized Stern from sleep. He was wandering in a large house.

Clara was there, but she was in a Closet and 8, would not come out. She clung shyly to one Of the hanging garments, a woman in her ruffles whose knees knocked in a pose of childish bashfulness. His mother called him, and his older brother, Jacobo, voices from other rooms. When he moved to answer them, Clara told him they were dead, and his body rushed with panic.

From the bed, he contemplated the illuminated digits on the clock radio. 4:58. He would not sleep again, too frightened by the thronging images of his dream. There had been such a peculiar look on Clara's face when she told him Jacobo was dead, such a sly, calculating gleam."

About him the house, fully occupied, seemed to have taken on an inert, slumbering weight. His older daughter, Marta-twenty-eight, a Legal Aid

lawyer in New York--had flown back the first night and slept now down the hall, in the room which had been hers as a child. His younger daughter, Kate, and her husband, John, 'who lived in a

distant suburb, had also spent the night, rather than fight the unpredictable morning traffic over the river bridges. Silvia, Stern's sister, was in the guest room, come from her country house to minister to her brother and to organize the house of grief. Only the two men, Peter and, of course, Dixon--forever the lone wolf were missing.

Last night, the task of mourning in its grimmest ceremonial aspects had begun. The formal period of visitation' would follow the funeral, but Stern, always ambivalent about religious formalities, had opened the house to various heartsore friends who seemed to need to comfort him-neighbors, two young lawyers from Stern's office, his circle from the courthouse and the synagogue; Clara was an only child, but two separate pairs of her cousins had arrived from Cleveland. Stern received them all with as much grace as he could manage. At these times, one responded according to the most deeply trained impulses. To Stern's mother, gone for decades but still in his dreams, matters of social form had been sacred.

But after the house had emptied and the family had trailed off to sleep, Stern had closed himself up in the bathroom off the bedroom he had shared with Clara, racked for the second time that evening by a wrenching, breathless bout of tears. He sat on the toilet, from which the filled skirting that Clara had placed there decades before still hung, with a towel forced to his mouth, howling actually, uncontrolled, hoping no one would hear him. 'What did I do?' he asked repeatedly in a tiny stillborn voice as a rising storm of grief blew through him. Oh, Clara, Clara, what did I do?

Now, examining himself in the bathroom mirrors, he found his face puffy, his eyes bloodshot and sore. For the moment he had regained some humbled remoteness, but he knew the limits of his strength. What a terrible day this would become. Terrible. He dressed fully, except for his suit coat, and made himself a single boiled egg, then sat alone, watching the glint of the sunrise enlarge on the glossy surface of the mahogany dining table, until he felt some new incision of grief beginning to knife through him.

Desperately--futilely--he tried to calm himself.

'How, he thought again, how could he have failed to notice in the bed beside him a woman who in every figurative sense was screaming in pain? How could he be so dull, his inner ear so deafened? The signs were such, Stern knew, that even in his usual state of feverish distraction he could have taken note. Clara was normally a person of intense privacy. For years, she had made a completely personal study of Japan; he knew nothing about it except the rifles of the books that occasionally showed up on her desk. At other moments, she would read a musical score; the entire symphony would rage along inside her. Barely perceptible, her chin might drop; but not a bar, a note was so much as whispered aloud.

But this was something more. Two or three nights recently he had returned home late, preoccupied with the case he was trying--a messy racketeering conspiracy in to find Clara sitting in the dark; there was no book or magazine, not even 'the TV's vapid flickering. It was her expression that frightened him most. Not vacant. Absent. Removed. Her mouth a solemn line, her eyes hard as agates. It seemed a contemplation beyond words. There had been such spells before.

Between them, they were referred to as moods and allowed to pass. For years, he prided himself on his discretion.

Driven now, he moved restlessly about the house, holding the items she had held, examining them as if for clues. In the powder room, he touched a tortoiseshell comb, a Lilac dish, the dozen cylinders of lipstick that were lined up like shotgun shells beside the sink. My God! He squeezed one of the gold tubes in his hands as if it were an amulet.

On a narrow wig stand in the foyer, three days' mail was piled. Stern fingered the envelopes, neatly stacked. Bills, bills--they were painful to behold. These prosaic acts, visiting the cleaner or department store, humbly bespoke her hopes. On the sixth of March, Clara expected life to continue. What had intervened?

"Westlab Medical Center." Stern considered the envelope. It was directed to Clara Stern at their address. Inside, he found an invoice. The services, identified by a computer code, had been rendered six weeks ago and were described simply as "Test." Stern was still. Then he moved directly to the kitchen, already counseling himself to reason, exerting his will powerfully to contain the shameful outbreak of grateful feelings. But he was certain,

positive, she had made no mention of doctors or of tests. Clara recorded her appointments in a leather book beside the telephone. Luncheons. The inevitable musical occasions. The dinner dates and synagogue and bar affairs of their social life. He had

brought the bill and matched its date against the book.

"9:45 Test." He paged back and forth. On the thirteenth there was another entry. "3:30 Dr." He searched further. On the twenty-first, the same. "Dr."

"Test."

"Dr."

Cancer. Was that it? Something advanced. Had she resolved to make her departure without allowing the family to beg her, for their sake as much as hers, to undergo the oncologist's life-prolonging tortures? That would be like Clara. To declare that zone of ultima sovereignty. Her mark of dignity, decorum, intense belief was here.

Pacing, he had arrived once more in the dining room, and he heard movement on the second floor, above him. With even an instant's distraction, he felt suddenly that, for all the blind willingness with which his heart ran to this solution, he had been caught up in fantasy. There was some explanation of these medical events more mundane, less heroic. Somehow he found the suspicion chilling. Last night, blundering about in their bathroom, searching for tissue, he had come across a bottle of hair coloring hidden in the dark corner of a drawer. He had no idea how long she had concealed this harmless vanity. Months. Or years? It made no difference. But mortification shuddered through him. He had the same thought now: so much he had not noticed, did not know about that person, this woman, his wife.

":Daddy?" Stern's daughter Kate, his youngest Child, was at the foot of the stairs. She was in her nightgown, a tall stalk of a young woman, slender and heartbreakingly beautiful.

"Cara," he answered. He had always used this endearment with the girls at times. Stern was still holding the lab bill, and he pressed the envelope into the back pocket of his trousers. This was not a matter to discuss with the children, not today, at any event, when the thought would foment even greater anguish, and certainly not with Kate.

Beauty, Stern suspected, had made the world too simple for Kate. She seemed to drift along, buffered by her uncommon good looks and a kindly disposition. Perhaps that apportioned blame unfairly. Much must have happened here, at home. Clara had concentrated so on Peter; Stern in turn shared a natural intensity with his older daughter, Marta.

Kate had never been irradiated by the most intense energies of the mysterious family dynamic.

As a youngster, she had displayed the same intellectual talents as her brother and sister; and she had Clara's musical talent. But all of that had withered. In high school she had met John, a sweet, Gentile lunk, an almost laughable prototype, a football player and a paragon of blond male beauty with his apple-pie face and hapless manner. A year after college, in spite of her parents' gentle discouragement, she had married him. John started out in his father's printshop, but it was soon clear the business could not sustain two families, and so Dixon had put him to work at MD, where, after some false starts, John seemed to be making do, one more ex-jock jostling about on the playing field of the markets. Kate herself taught school. She loved her husband with a pitiable tender innocence, but Stern at moments could feel his heart rub itself raw with worry at the prospect of the moment Kate finally learned about the wallops the world could deliver.

Now she touched his hand.

"Daddy, I want you to know something. We weren't going to say anything for another month, but everyone is so sad--" Kate's mouth trembled slightly.

Dear God, thought Stern, she is pregnant.

She lifted her face proudly. Kate said, "We're going to have a baby."

"Oh my," said Stern. He grasped her hand. "My," he said again, smiling bravely and trying to recall exactly how he would be expected to reflect his delight. He kissed her first on the temple, then took her in his arms. He did so only rarely, and here in her thin nightgown he was amazed by the feel of his daughter, her narrowness, the loose movement of her breasts against him. Kate wept with sudden abandon, then drew back.

"We couldn't say anything," she explained to her father.

"It wasn't safe yet. We'd had some problems. And now I keep thinking, What

if Mommy knew?" Once more she became uncontrollable. Once more Stern took his dark, beautiful daughter in his arms. But even as he held Kate, he found there was an abrupt adjustment in his own vision of things.

Clara had abandoned the children, too. He had viewed this last act of hers as aimed exclusively at him. But the children, grown but troubled, were still not past the point where they required occasional assistance. Would it have made a difference, had Clara known Kate's secret? Or had she decided that they too'd had the last of what she could stand to give?

Above them there was stirring. Marta was on the stairs, a smaller woman, also dark, with wire-rimmed glasses and a bosky do of untamed black hair. She regarded the scene

below with a vulnerable look of her own.

"Group cry?" she asked.

Stern awaited Kate's lead. herself taught school. She loved her husband with a pitiable tender innocence, but Stern at moments could feel his heart rub itself raw with worry at the prospect of the moment Kate finally learned about the wallops the world could deliver.

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below with a vulnerable look of her own.

"Group cry?" she asked.

Stern awaited Kate's lead. She squared her shoulders and dabbed her eyes. The entire family was to know. As he prepared for her declaration, entirely unexpected, an arrow of joy shot forth from the leaden-like mass of his interior and he was overcome by a startlingly exact recollection of the abrupt ways a baby's hands and legs would move, random and sudden as life itself.

"I just told Daddy. I'm going to have a baby." Marta's shriek split the household. A self-serious person, she carried on mindlessly. She embraced her sister, hugged her father. The two young women sat together holding hands.

Peter arrived then, coming early to beat the traffic, and was informed. With the commotion John emerged, and everyone rose to hug him. In response to his reticence, they were always excessive. They had labored for years to make John feel accepted in a situation where, for many reasons, he knew he never would be. The group by then had migrated together to the living room. Silvia entered in her housecoat, looking grave; clearly she had taken their hoopla as the noise of one more calamity. Silvia and Dixon had never had a family of their own, much to Silvia's despair, and the news, so unexpected, brought Silvia, too, to tears. It was barely past seven and the family, overcome by all of this, clung to one another. And there in the living room, Stern, at last, longed for Clara. He had been waiting for it. More than the disorder and the loss, at this moment there was the absence.

When he looked up, Marta was watching. It had savaged Stern with sorrow to

see her the night she had arrived. Marta, brave Marta, his boldest child, trod soldier-like up the walk, a canvas bag slung over her shoulder, weeping openly as soon as she climbed from the taxi. Stern embraced her at the door. 'Daddy, I never thought she was a happy person, but--' Throttled by emotion, Marta got no further. Stern held her and suffered privately the unequivocal nature of his daughter's estimate of her mother. She had always held Clara at greater distance than the other two; as a result, perhaps, she had more to regret.

Across the room, his daughter, with her father's tiny close-set eyes, looked at him sadly now.

I miss her, too, she mouthed.

Stern, a frequent morning chef, cooked for the entire group. He fried eggs and flapjacks, and Marta squeezed grapefruit for juice, a family tradition. By nine, an hour before the mortician's limousine was to arrive, they were all fed and dressed, quietly gathered once more in the living room.

"How about bridge?" Marta asked. She prided herself on being unrestrained by convention. In most things, Marta styled herself in the ways of the late sixties. She had been a child then and took it as a time of great romance; she went about in flowing gowns and high-laced boots, with her wind-sprung hair. "Mom liked it when we played."

"Oh, sure," said Peter. "She liked it when we squaredanced, too, while we were kids. We can do-si-do to the chapel."

Marta whispered to her brother, Oh fuck off, but smiled.

Marta had always tempered her rivalry with Peter, and she granted him special liberties now. Kate's tears were constant, but Pete, of the three, seemed the hardest hit, morose, pensive, persistently out of balance. He went off by himself at many moments but returned inevitably to the comfort of his sisters. Close-knit, Stern's children appeared to take strength from each other:

Marta again mentioned bridge. "Daddy, would you mind?"

Stern lifted his palms, not quite an answer.

"Will you play?" Kate asked her father.

Silvia motioned Stern forward, encouraging him.



"I have a few things to look after for later." She was preparing the household for the crush of callers that would follow the funeral.

"I shall help Aunt Silvia. You four play."

"I'll help Aunt Silvia," said John. He was on his feet already, a huge young man, a mountainous blond with a neck thick as a tire rim. He had never mastered the game, like so many other things attached to his in-laws. The Sterns with their quiet intense ways had mystified John for most of a decade.

"Come on," Marta called. She was in the sun room, already looking for cards. Stern understood his daughter's excitement. For an instant, it would be as when she was seventeen and the children were all safe from the world of grownup difficulties. Stern, as ever, found himself chafed and touched by his Marta and her impulses.

"Katy, I will play with you," Stern announced. He was always a partner with one of the girls; usually Kate. He and Peter squabbled when they played together. Stern had spent much of the little time he had at home playing one game or another with his children. Chutes and Ladders.

Monopoly. Word games when they were in the primary grades.

The four of them spent hours around a game table in the sun room. Clara seldom participated. Often she would sit in a fifth chair, with hands and ankles primly crossed, watching or, when necessary, assisting Kate. But she was not obtrusive. This, for better or worse--rules, moves, strategies--was Alejandro's time.

Peter made the cards and handed them to Stern to deal. The sun room--referred to in the old architect's plans, drawn in the twenties, as 'the solarjura'--was a narrow area, rimmed with windows, floored in slate. From here they looked directly at Clara's garden. It was the time of year when she would have begun to turn the soil. The stalks of last year's gladioli, trimmed neatly almost to the soil, rose in rows, survivors of the mild winter.

Stern bid a weak club. He played all conventions. Anything but hand signals, Clara said.

"Are you going back to work after the baby?" Marta asked her sister.

Kate seemed a bit puzzled. Her future, such as it was, was apparently beyond

her. Within, Stern seemed to cringe. This child with a child! By John, no less. Veyiz mir. Kate told Marta that they did not know yet how the money would work out or how she would feel about leaving the baby.

"Oh, it'll be your first," said Peter. "You'll want to give it lots of attention. It will always be special."

The doorbell rang. Through the front panes, Stern saw his brother-in-law. Dixon had returned to town last night. He had been in New York on pressing business and had delayed flying home. Stern had felt slighted--the usual with Dixon--and he was taken aback, therefore, at his relief at seeing Dixon on the threshold with his bags yesterday evening. His brother-in-law, a large, solid man, had thrown his arms about Stern and made a good show of great sorrow. One could seldom be certain how Dixon truly felt. That was part of his genius--he was like a forest, full of many colors. He could greet you at any instant with a salesman's blather or the gruffest truths.

This morning, however, Dixon's attention had returned more typically to himself. As Stern took his coat, Dixon lowered his voice discreetly.

"When you're back at the stand, Stern, I'd like to ask you a question or two."

Dixon always addressed him military fashion, last name only. They had met originally in the service, which had led, by turns, to Dixon's making Silvia's acquaintance and to his becoming in time her suitor, a development to which Stern was still not fully adjusted, three decades after the fact.

"Business questions?" he asked Dixon.

"That kind of item. I don't need to trouble you now. I want to hear about your trip to Chicago."

Ah yes, thought Stern, the paths of ego were deep and the living needed to go on.

"I understand your concern, Dixon. The situation may be somewhat involved, however. It's best that we discuss it another time."

A shadow Passed, predictably, over Dixon. Fifty-five years old, he was tan, trim, and, even with this darkened look, the image of vitality. He was a powerful man; he worked out every day with weight equipment. Dixon worshipped at the same altar as so many others in America: the body and its

uses. His dark brass-colored hair had grown paler and more brittle with age, but was cleverly barbered to give him a mannerly business-like look.

"You didn't like what you heard?" he asked Stern.

In fact, Stern had learned little of substance. The documents he had examined in Chicago account statements and trading records of the clients for an eight- or nine-month period, had been revealing. There was no telling what offense the government was investigating, or even who had suggested to them the prospect of a crime.

"There may be a problem, Dixon. It is too early to become greatly alarmed."

"Sure." Dixon drew a cigarette from an inside pocket. He was smoking heavily again, an old bad habit recently grown worse, which Stern took as a sign of concern. Three years ago the IRS set up a full-scale encampment in Dixon's conference room, with barely a riffle in his breezy style.

This time, however, Dixon was on edge. With word of the first subpoena, he had been on the phone to Stern, demanding that the government be stopped. For the present, however, Stern was loath to contact Ms. Klonsky, the Assistant United States Attorney. At the U.S. Attorney's Office they seldom told you more than they wanted you to know. Moreover, Stern feared that a call from him might somehow focus the government's attention on Dixon, whose name as yet had gone unmentioned. Perhaps the grand jury was looking at a number of brokerage houses. Perhaps something besides MD connected the customers. For the present it was best to tiptoe about, observing the government from cover. "They're always looking for something," Dixon said bravely now, and went off to find Silvia.

In the sun room, Stern's children were still speaking about the baby.

"Will John help out?" Marta asked. "Change diapers and stuff?."

Kate reared back, astonished.

"Of course. He's in heaven. Why wouldn't he?" Marta shrugged. At moments like this, it concerned Stern that she seemed so dumbfounded by men. Her father's daughter, Marta, regrettably, was not a pretty woman. She had Stern's broad nose and small dark eyes. Worse still, she had his figure.

Stern and his daughter were short, with a tendency to gather weight in their

lower parts. Marta submitted herself almost masochistically to the rigors of diet and exercise, but you could never escape what nature had provided. It was not, she was apt to say, the form favored by' fashion magazines. Notwithstanding, Marta had always attracted her admirers--but there seemed an inevitable doom in her' relations. In her conversation there were, by idle reference, a procession of men who carne and went. Older, younger. Things always foundered. Marta, in the meantime, now came to her own defense.

"Daddy didn't change diapers," she said.

"I did not?" asked Stern. Surprisingly, he could not recall precisely.

"How could you have changed diapers?" asked Peter, awakened somewhat by the opportunity to challenge his father. "You were never here. I remember I couldn't figure out what a trial was. I thought it was like a place you went. Another city."

Marta called out for John: "Are you going to change the baby's diapers?"

John, carrying a thirty-cup percolator, entered the sun room for a moment. He looked as bad as everyone else, baffled and grieved. He shrugged gently in response to Marta's question. John was a taciturn fellow. He had few opinions that he was willing to express.

In another room the telephone rang. It had been peeling incessantly for two days now. Stern seldom spoke. The children answered, responding tersely with the time and place of the funeral, promising to share the condolences with their father. Most of these conversations seemed to end the same way, with a labored pause before the instrument was cradled. 'Yes, it's true,' one of them would quickly answer. 'We have no idea why.'

Silvia emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, beckoning to Stern. This call, apparently, he could not avoid. In passing, he touched his sister's hand. A woman with a staff of three at home, Silvia had been here toiling tirelessly for three days, running, organizing, taking care.

"Ah, Sandy. What a sad occasion. My deepest sympathy."

Stern had gone up to their bedroom, still dark and shuttered, to take the phone. He recognized the voice of Cal Hopkinson. Cal was a lawyer. When Sandy's beloved friend Harry Fagel had died two years ago, Cal, Harry's partner, had become the Sterns' personal lawyer. He updated their wills and

each year filed tax returns for the trusts left for Clara. Cal was a practical fellow, amiable if not particularly appealing, and he came rather quickly to the point. Since Marta was in town, he wondered if Stern might want to come down with the children in the next few days to discuss Clara's will.

"Is that necessary, Cal?"

Cal pondered in silence. Perhaps he was somewhat offended.

He was one of those attorneys who lived for details, mowing them down each day in the belief that if they went untended they would overgrow the world.

"It's not necessary, Sandy, but it sometimes helps to prevent questions later. Clara left a large estate, .you know."

Did he know? Yes, it came back to him that he did. If the truth were told, in these moments in which he was too harrowed and weak to avoid it, he could barely see Clara through the glimmer of gold when he had married her. Poor boy weds rich girl. It was a dream as thrilling and illicit as pornography. And in keeping, he had practiced the usual cruel repression. Early on, Stern stilled Henry Mittler's obvious suspicions with a vow to his father-in-law that Clam and he would live solely on his income. Thirty years passed in which Stern feigned not to care about Clara's fortune, in which he left the details of management to her and those he suggested she employ, and at the end, in the sorest irony, the lie was truth.

"Is there some surprise in Clara's affairs of which you wish us to be aware, Cal?"

A lawyer's pause here, the habit of a man who had learned to measure every sentence before he spoke. Cal probably considered it unprofessional to answer.

"Nothing to shock you," he said at last. "I'm sure you have the general picture. There are probably one or two points we should discuss." Cal had laid just enough emphasis on "shock." Surprise but not devastation, in other words. Now what? he thought. A .careful, tidy person always, Clara had left behind her, with no sign of concern, a murky, littered wake. Stern said he would speak to the children and prepared to end the conversation.

"Sandy," said Cal abruptly. Merely from the tone, Stern could tell what was coming. "This is such upsetting news.

You must forgive me for asking, but was there any sign?"

No, he said quickly, no sign. He clapped down the phone in a barely suppressed temper. Cal really was a clod, he thought. Stern closed his eyes and took a further moment of retreat in the dark bedroom, listening to the harsh chorus of mingling voices that rang up the stairwell. He was in his soul too solitary to brook this continuing intrusion.

It was as if there were some large ear pressed to him, attuned to every breath. The thought of the funeral was suddenly unbearable. A death of this nature would stimulate' lurid interest in many. They would be there in teams, in droves, associates and friends and neighbors, come to observe the toll of grief and to eye Stern in a subtle accusatory fashion. Even in those he knew best who had come last night, he could detect that grim curiosity.

What was the story? they all wondered. What exactly had he done to her? Clara's suicide had exposed some dark grisly secret, as if there were a grotesque deformity which previously lay hidden on the body of their married life.

Not certain if it was the loss or simply the humiliation, Stern remained a few more minutes, weeping in the dark.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" Marta was asking as Stern returned to the card table.

Some confusion swam across Kate's fine dark features. This was the first time, of course, that anyone had put the question.

"We both want a healthy baby," said Kate.

"Naturally, you do," Marta said. "But if you could pick, what would it be--a healthy boy or a healthy girl?"

"Marta," Stern said, with his cards fanned before him. He had been counting his points again--it was as if he had never seen the hand. "This is not the kind of question a mother-to-be can always answer."

Kate had been thinking. "I'd like a girl." She smiled at all of them. "Girls are nicer."

"Do they let girls on football teams now?" Peter asked.

"How far have things gone?"

"John would love a girl," Kate responded instantly, "Of course," said Stern.

Peter touched his sister's hand to reassure her--he was merely being himself.

"Mothers always say that girls are harder in the end," Marta volunteered.

"That's not what Mommy said," Kate answered. "That's what she said to me," said Marta. With that utterance, the two sisters stared at one another, some darkling learning looming up between them. For all her brash convictions, Marta was a person of humbling doubts about herself and her place in the world, and she had dwelled more openly than any of them in the last few days on memories of Clara. Much unfinished business, Stern estimated. For the moment, she turned to her father for help. "Isn't that what she said, Dad?"

"Your mother," Stern said, "took the rearing of each of you seriously. Which means that from time to time she felt challenged." Stern smiled diplomatically at Marta. "I believe I said a club."

"Pass," said Marta.

Kate passed.

Peter was quiet, his face closed within the same stormy, anguished look of the last few days. He was wondering, perhaps, what his mother had said about boys. Eventually, he became aware of the three of them watching.

"A heart," he said, when the bidding had been reviewed for him.

"Well, I hear congratulations are in order!" Dixon had emerged from the kitchen, where he had been with Silvia.

His arms were wide and he was full, as usual, of stuff and personal ceremony. He had missed Kate and John last night and now crushed Kate to his side, where she received her uncle's embrace stiffly. "Where's that husband of yours? I didn't think he had it in him." Dixon wandered off, presumably to look for John. Kate shot a starchy look at his back, seemingly unimpressed by her uncle's coarse humor or his jokes at her husband's expense.

The truth, Stern knew, was that he tolerated Dixon more freely than anyone else in the family. Dixon's base side had always impelled in Clara some clear negative response, which, out of loyalty to Silvia, had grown more pointed after the period six or seven years ago when some aspect of Dixon's sportive sexual life--the details were never shared by Silvia--had led Stern's sister

briefly to dismiss him from their household. With Dixon, as in most things, the children had tended to follow Clara's lead. Peter and Marta and most especially Kate had always enjoyed an intimate bond with their aunt, who, childless, had showered them with favor. But that attachment had never run to their uncle.

In response, Dixon adhered to the example of potentates throughout the centuries: he purchased indulgence. Over the years, he had taken every opportunity to employ the members of Stern's family. He had Stern and John on his payroll now, and each of the children had worked as a runner for MD on the floor of the Kindle Countally at Marta. "I believe I said a club."

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"Will you name her for Mommy?" Marta inquired of Kate. She seemed more absorbed than her sister with this baby.

Silvia, passing through the solarium, frowned at Marta's directness, but both young women were accustomed to it.

Marta had always had her way with Kate.

"I suppose," said Kate. "Either a boy or a girl. Unless you would mind, Daddy."

Stern looked up from his cards--but he had not' missed a word.

"It would please me if you chose to do this." He smiled gently at Kate. In his fie, he felt a sudden closeness in the room. Dear God, the turmoil. Things seemed to come at him from all directions. He felt like those paintings he would sometimes see in museums and churches of St.

Sebastian shot full of arrows and holes, bleeding like a leaking hose. To his enormous chagrin and surprise, he found he had started, silently, to cry again. The tears ran down both sides of his nose. Around him, his children watched, but made no comment. The days, he supposed, would go like this. He removed his handkerchief from his back pocket and found the medical laboratory bill he had examined early this morning. He had entirely forgotten it.

"I shall return in a moment." He headed off to find a Kleenex. Better jam his pockets. From the kitchen, he looked back to the sun room, where his Children, grown up but wounded by their grief, awaited him.

Oh, how these children had mattered to Clara! he thought suddenly. What a worshipful passion. She had been raised with servants, by well-intentioned but limited nannies and governesses. She would have none of that with her own.

Again an image: Coming home, One of those occasional evenings when he was here before they were all in bed, to find her on her knees in the kitchen. Peter sat at the table reading; Marta was crying; Kate was having her dress hemmed. The little girl, her shins blotched, stood motionless as her mother fingered the garment. On the stove, a pot was boiling over. Lord, the clamor and the ferment. Clara looked up to greet him and puckered out a lip to blow a stray lock that had fallen down into her eyes. She smiled, smiled. It was miserable, hard work, as it had always been, a numbing routine of humdrum tasks, but Clara found music in the banging and tumult of family life.

Stern, in his simple-minded way, thought little of this.

Only now could he see that she made herself a devoted audience to their sounds in their needs--as a distraction from that dismal bleat that must have always whistled away within her.

"Sender?" Silvia was standing beside him, concerned. His sister wore her hair in her usual upswept hairdo, a person of simple, graceful beauty her entire life, still smoothfaced and radiant at the age of fifty-one. She had always called him by his Yiddish name, as their mother had.

He smiled faintly to reassure her, then cast his eyes down.

The medical invoice, he noticed, was still in his hand and he passed it with little thought to Silvia, addressing her in a circumspect tone. He asked if Clara had ever spoken of this.

Once more, the doorbell rang. Down the long hall, Stern saw Marta admit two young men in sport coats. They waited inside the foyer, as Marta called out for Dixon. One of the two looked familiar. Henchmen or flunkies, Stern estimated.

Dixon had retainers around him like a Mafia don. His business never ceased

and his need to learn what was occurring was constant. The one Stern thought he'd seen before was carrying an envelope and a blue vinyl briefcase. Papers to sign, perhaps? Dixon was going to do a deal on the casket.

Silvia, in the interval, had examined the bill and handed it back. Alone they communicated as they always had, few words.

"Dr. Cawley, Nate, next door would know, no?" she asked.

Of course. Trust Silvia. Nate Cawley, their next-door neighbor, a gynecologist, was Clara's principal physician.

He certainly should have the answer. Stern thought of phoning right now, then recollected that Fiona, Nate's wife, who had been among the visitors last evening, had mentioned, in her usual notable lament, that he was gone for a week on a medical conference. He reminded Silvia.

"Yes, yes." His sister, light-eyed and still striking, studied him earnestly. Apparently, she now shared some of the same thoughts Stern had had earlier.

Through the breakfast-room window, Stern saw the funeral parlor's limousine, dove-gray, swing smoothly into the circular drive before the house, parking behind the dark sedan of Dixon's visitors. Silvia headed off to summon the family. Girding himself, Stern stood.

But down the hall the commotion of angry voices suddenly rose. An alarming scene was taking place near the front door. Dixon was shouting. "What is this?" he yelled at the two men who had arrived only moments before. "What is this!" Above his head, he waved a sheet or two of paper.

Halfway there, Stern realized what had taken place. Now this! He could not manage the sudden ignition of anger; it had waited for days so near at hand, and now his heart felt as if it would fly out of his breast, like some NASA rocket trailing flame.

"You crummy so-andsos!" yelled Dixon. "You couldn't wait?"

Stern rushed to place himself between Dixon and the two men. He had realized where he'd seen the man he recognized-in the federal courthouse, not Dixon's offices. His name was Kyle Horn, and he was a special agent of the FBI.

Dixon was still carrying on. Stern by now had seized the paper from his hand

and bulled Dixon a few steps farther back into the foyer. Then he briefly examined the grand jury subpoena. All as usual: a printed form embossed with the court seal. It was directed to Dixon Hartnell, Chairman MD Holdings, and commanded his appearance before a United States grand jury here, four days from now, at 2 P.M.

Investigation 89-86. Attached was a long list of documents Dixon was to have in hand. The initials of Sonia Klonsky, the Assistant United States Attorney, appeared at the bottom of the page.

"I refuse to allow this to take place," said Stern. Half a foot shorter than the agents, he maintained, in rage, the erect bearing of a martinet. "If you call my office next week, I shall accept service there. But not at this time." I require you to leave. Immediately. You may tell Assistant United States Attorney Klonsky that I deplore these tactics and shall not abide them." Stern opened the front door.

Horn was past forty. He looked like all the other FBI agents, with a cheap sport coat and a carefully trimmed haircut, but there was a weathered, leathery look to the skin about his eyes: too much sun, or alcohol: He had a bad reputation, the wrong type of agent, a petty tyrant full of resentments.

"No, sir," he said, He gestured toward the subpoena, which Stern had returned to its envelope and was now extending toward him. "That sucker is served."

"If you file a return of service with the court, I shall move to have you both held in contempt." It occurred to Stern vaguely that this threat was ludicrous, but he gave no ground. "Have you no idea of the nature of this occasion?"

Horn made no move. For a moment, none of the four men moved. Marta had crept to the edge of the living room and watched in grim amazement."

"We are preparing to depart for a funeral," Stern said at last. He pointed out the front windows to the mortuary limousine and the driver in his dead-black suit. "Of Mr. Hartnell's sister-in-law," said Stern. "My wife."

The second agent, a younger man with blond hair, straightened up.

"I didn't know that," he said, then turned to Horn. "Did you know that?"

Horn stared at Stern.

"I know I can't seem to get a call back from Dixon Harmell.

That's what I know," Horn said. "I know I come by the front door and he's gone out the back."

"I'm .sorry," the younger agent said. He touched his chest.

"All I knew was they said this was where we could find him." The agents, thwarted, had undoubtedly employed their usual techniques. A pretext call, as they referred to it. "This is the Bank of Boston. We have a problem with a million-dollar wire transfer for Mr. Hartnell. Where can we find him?" The courts for decades had allowed the use of this kind of adolescent cunning.

"Hey," said Horn to his colleague, "shit happens." He took the subpoena without looking at Stern. Then Horn tapped the envelope. "-This guy'll be in your office Monday morning, nine sharp."

Stern applied both hands to the front door to close it behind the agents. Peter had drawn Marta away, but Dixon remained

in the foyer. He had lit a cigarette and was grinning. "Got you fired up, didn't they?"

"How long have they been trying to serve you, Dixon?"

Dixon meditatively watched a plume of smoke drift away. He was always disturbed when Stern saw through him.

"Elise says men have been calling for a week or two. I didn't know what it was about," said Dixon. "Honestly., His mouth shifted as Stern looked at him. "I really wasn't sure. That's one of the things I've been meaning to talk with you about."

"Ah, Dixon," said Stern. It was unbelievable. A man who earned \$2 million last year, who called himself a business leader, creeping down the back halls and thinking he could hide from the FBI. Stern put one foot on the stairwell, trying to focus on the enormous task at hand. He needed his coat. It was time, he told himself. Time. He was dizzy and faint at heart.

Family, he thought, with despair.

FOUR days after the funeral, Stern returned to the office.

He wore no tie, a means to signify that he was not formally present. He

would look at the mall, answer questions. What was the term? Touch base. He had occupied this space for nearly a decade and had cultivated it with almost the same attention as his home. Small as it might be, this was Stern's empire, and there was inevitably some tonic effect in the electronic chatter of the telephones and business machines, the energetic movements of the dozen people he employed. Not, of course, today. The office, like everything else, seemed flattened, depleted, less color, less music. Entering through the back door, he stood by the desk of Claudia, his secretary, as he considered his lost universe. He looked for something hopeful in the mail.

"Mr. Hartnell is here."

The agents-, as promised, had arrived with the subpoena yesterday. Over the phone, Stern had dictated a letter to prosecutor Klonsky, stating that he represented Dixon and his company, and directing the government to contact Stern if it wanted to speak with anyone who worked for MD--a request the government would inevitably not follow. Then Stern had summoned Dixon for this meeting. His brother-in-law waited in Stern's office, his feet on the sofa, the Tribune open before him, while he smoked one of Stern's cigars. His sport coat--double-breasted, with its many glittering buttons--had been tossed aside, and his thick forearms, still dark from an island vacation, were revealed. He

rose and welcomed Stern to his own office.

"I made myself at home."

"Of course." Stern apologized for being late, then, removing his sport coat, surveyed. Given his trip to Chicago, it had been more than a week' since he had been here, but it all looked the same. He was not sure if he was comforted or horrified by the constancy. Stern's office was decorated in cream-colored tones. Clara had insisted on hiring someone's favorite interior decorator, and the result, Stern often thought, would have been more appropriate to the bedroom of some sophisticated adolescent. There was a sofa with plush pillows, pull-up chairs in the same nubby .beige material, and drapes to match. Behind his desk was an English cabinet of dark walnut--a recent addition and more Stern's taste but his desk was not a desk at all, rather four chromed standards topped by an inch-thick slab of smoky glass. Stern, years later, was still not accustomed to looking down and seeing the soft expanse of his lap. Now he was at liberty to refurnish. The thought came to

him plainly. and he closed

his eyes and made a small sound. He reached for a pad.

"What is this about, Dixon? Have you any idea?" Dixon shook his large head. "I'm really not sure." Dixon did not say he did not know. Only that he was not certain. Using the intercom, Stern asked Claudia to get Assistant United States Attorney Klonsky on the phone. She had left a number of phone messages, and Stern wanted to arrange an extension of the date when they would have to comply with her subpoena.

"We must answer certain questions at the threshold, Dixon.

What are they investigating? Who is it they seek to prosecute? Is it, in particular, you?"

"Do you think this thing's about me?"

"Probably," said Stern evenly.

Dixon did not flinch, but he took his cigar from his mouth and very carefully removed the ash. He finally made a sound, quiet and mininative.

"This is a subpoena duces tecum, Dixon--a request for records. Ordinarily, the government would not send two agents to serve it. The prosecutors were attempting to deliver a message."

"They want to scare the shit out of me."

"As you would have it." Stern nodded. "I imagine they felt you would soon hear of the investigation. No doubt, had I not intervened, the agents would have sought to interrogate you while you were carrying on."

Dixon mulled. He was so full of himself that one seldom gave full credit to Dixon's subtlety. He studied people largely for his own advantage, but that did not mean he was not observant. Certainly, he was familiar enough with Stern's nuances to realize he was being told again that he had been a fool.

"How bad will this be?" Dixon asked.

"I think that you should not compare this with your prior encounters with the IRS and the CFTC." The Commodities Futures Trading Commission was the federal agency that regulated the futures industry, the equivalent of the SEC.

"They are bureaucrats and their first love is their own rules. Their minds do

not run automatically to prosecution.

Federal grand juries sit to indict. This is a serious business, Dixon."

Dixon mugged up. There was a handsome, weathered look to his eyes.

"Can I ask a dumb question?"

"As many as you like," said Stern.

"What's a grand jury? Really, Besides something that's supposed to make you wet your shorts."

Stern nodded, more or less pleased that Dixon was taking things seriously enough to ask. The grand jury, he explained, was convened by the court to investigate possible federal crimes. In this case, the jurors gathered, by the court's order, every other week, alternating Tuesdays and Thursdays, for eighteen months. They were directed by the United States Attorney's Office, which, in the name of the grand jury, subpoenaed documents and witnesses to be examined at each session. The proceedings were secret. Only the witnesses who testified could reveal what happened. If they chose to. Few individuals, of course, wished to trumpet the fact that they had been haled before a federal grand jury.

"And what kind of chance do I stand with them?" asked Dixon. "This grand jury."

"Very little. Not if the prosecutor decides to indict. It is the U.S. Attorney's Office we must persuade. Inside the grand jury room, the burden of proof on the government is minimal--ey need merely convince a bare majority of the jurors that here is probable cause to believe a crime has taken place. The prosecutors may introduce hearsay, and the target and his lawyer. have no right to learn. what has taken place or to offer any refutation. It is not what you would describe as evenhanded."

"I'd say," answered Dixon. "Whose idea was this?"

"The framers of the Constitution of the United States," answered Stern. "To protect the innocent."

"Oh, sure," said Dixon. All things considered, especially given the havoc of a few days ago, he was taking this with stoical calm. But he was, after all, a person Of considerable strength. There was no point in not admiring Dixon.



He was one of those fellows Americans had always loved. Dixon had come from one of those bleak Illinois coal mining towns near the Kentucky border. Stern had paid his college and law school bills by driving a punchboard route throughout the Middle West, and when he was out on the road in the riffles, Stern had seen these towns--colorless, square, plain as the prairies, the air sooted with coal dust--placed amid the sensuous pink forms of the earth which had been stripped and raised in the search for coal.

Dixon's father was a German immigrant, a Lutheran minister, a spare, unforgiving, tight-fisted type who had died when Dixon was nine. The mother, sweet-natured but easily trod upon, had depended unnaturally on her son. Stern had not learned any of this from Dixon, but only from his relatives, the spinster aunts and one warmhearted cousin who spoke with admiration of Dixon's early sense that he was destined for more than the numb labored slavery of the coal town.

Behind Stern, the intercom buzzed. No answer at the U.S.

Attorney's Office, Claudia announced. It was two in the afternoon, but the prosecutors answered the phone only when they wanted to. Keep trying, Stern told her.

"One other thing we must determine," he said to Dixon, "is how the government came to launch their investigation. We must try to identify the source of whatever allegations they have decided to examine."

"You mean, who fingered me?"

"If you are the target, yes. When we know who spoke against you, we will have some insight into the limitations on the government's information. Have you any idea?"

"Not a clue," said Dixon succinctly, letting his hands flutter up futilely. No doubt he had half a dozen areas in mind where the government might question him, but he would never share any of that with Stern, who would hector him about correcting each infraction. "Probably the compliance people from the Exchange," said Dixon at last. "They're always bitching to someone about me." The suggestion sounded halfhearted, at best.

The telephone rang: Stern's inside line, a different tone, like a cricket. Only his family had this number; it was Clara whom he would generally expect.

That reflex rose in him and foundered while he absorbed the second ring.

"Sender?" asked his sister. A welcome voice. Stern's love for Silvia was like his feelings for no one else--purer,.

less burdened. She had been seventeen when their mother died, and Stern, five years the elder, had assumed that his role toward her would become somewhat parental, but their nods, like everyone's, had been less predictable than that.

They looked after one another; they filled in what was lost. Stern and his sister, by the habit of a lifetime, spoke each day. Their conversations lasted barely a minute.

'So, busy?' 'Yes, of course. You?' They spoke of their health, the children, the whirlwinumb labored slavery of the coal town.

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'So, busy?' 'Yes, of course. You?' They spoke of their health, the children, the whirlwind of life. Today she said immediately, "Back at work. This is good, I believe."

"The best alternative." He covered the receiver and to Dixon mouthed "Silvia." He was not certain if Dixon would want her to know he was here, but his brother-in-law pointed to himself to indicate that he would like to speak with her

when Stern was finished. Stern told her they were together.

"Discussing this stupid business of the other day?"

"Just so."

She emitted a sigh of sorts but made no further inquiry.

His sister and he rarely engaged in any lingering discussions of Dixon, neither the rough and smooth of her marriage nor her husband's complex business affairs. That was more or less the compact of thirty years ago, when Stern had so vehemently opposed their marriage. He had cited religious differences, but only as the best excuse.

How could you tell your sister that this fellow who called himself your friend had the sharp look, with his doublebreasted suits and pomaded hair, of a carnival barker? In those days, Stern would have wagered that Dixon would be gone when the circus left town. But he'd had greater staying power than that. He was brighter than Stern was willing to acknowledge, and more industrious. And perhaps America was a place where virtue was less spontaneously rewarded than Stern--and everyone else--had believed in those

days.

"Matters are well in hand," said Stern simply. They spoke briefly of each of his children, and with that done, he extended the phone to Dixon, who spent a few moments chatting happily with his wife. In his own fashion, Dixon was luxurious. He was covetous of Silvia's beauty and loved to see her pampered and expensively dressed. Roses arrived for her every Friday, and you could not walk down the street with Dixon without him spying some item in a rich store window that he decided would look smashing on Silvia.

He was oddly preoccupied with his wife; if Silvia had a cold, it was on Dixon's mind. He called her four times a day. Yet this same doting husband had hot pants when any female between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five passed by, and he was always in pursuit.

"Now work hard," said Silvia to Stern when Dixon handed back the phone. Her efforts at humor were inevitably awkward. And in this case she was only trying to mask her real concerns. Silvia, for all her occasional anguish, remained enthralled by Dixon, as dazzled as she had been as a sorority girl. His swagger embarrassed her at moments; his wandering broke her heart. But he remained her life's romance, a figure the size of a monument, the man who still seemed to her half a dream.

"Well in hand," said Stern again, but, having Spoken, felt momentarily put out with himself. With work of this kind, it was his practice never to predict favorable outcomes.

The general pattern of results, and the evidence, seldom merited that; and he found clients easier to satisfy if he had dampened their expectations. He replaced the phone in that mood of conflict, reminding himself that this was, after all, his sister, her husband.

Stern found a copy of the grand jury subpoena in the in box on the cabinet behind his desk. He reread it and Dixon came to stand over his shoulder, bringing Stern's humidor with him. In the office, Stern usually lit his first cigar by nine-thirty or ten in the morning, and one was always burning thereafter until he left for the day. Clara had never approved. She complained about the odor in his clothing and on his hands and during an exceptional period of high irritability some years ago had refused to permit cigars inside their home. The humidor had been his father's, inlaid with mother-of-pearl

and lined in velvet; his father, a quiet, proper man of fragile character, had placed great stock in certain objects. Stern looked into the humidor with admiration, but for the moment some freighted sense of obligation toward Clara caused him to decline.

"What does this show you?" Dixon asked., tapping the subpoena.

Stern, still reading, lifted a hand. To the first page of the subpoena was stapled a lengthy attachment describing the documents the government sought. Dixon, on behalf of his company and subsidiaries, was required to produce a variety of records--order tickets, Wading cards, clearing documents--relating to a lengthy list of futures trades.

The transactions, identified by date, commodity, number of contracts, month of delivery, and customer account, seemed to have been listed at random. The columns of figures marched down half the page, but the wades appeared to have been sorted neither chronologically nor by client. Stern counted for a moment. There were thirty-seven transactions.

"Let us start from the beginning, Dixon. Tell me about these documents. How are they generated?"

"You understand my business, Stern."

"Indulge me," he answered. The truth, of course, was that he could keep none of it straight. Other lawyers--a huge finn with offices here and in Chicago--attended to Dixon's regular business affairs. Stern learned what little piece he needed to deal with each problem that came his way and, at its conclusion, let all of it--practices, regulations, terms of art--fly from his mind, as in the aftermath of an exam. Oh, he knew the rudiments, the definitions: a futures contract was a transferable obligation to buy or sell a standard amount of a particular commodity for an agreed price at a fixed date in the future. But the markets had moved well past the point they were at when Dixon had started decades ago, and only farmers sold futures to secure harvest prices. Today the play, as Dixon put it, was in money; the markets sold futures on the markets: on bond and currency prices, on stock indices, options on futures themselves. The talk out in the trading room when Stern visited Dixon's offices was well beyond him, about basis trades and hedging yield curves. For all the arcana, Stern tended to recall Dixon's confession that the first people known to write futures on the stock market's prices were the bookies

in Vegas.

"Take the first trade here, for Chicago Ovens," said Stern, pointing to the subpoena. This client was a huge bakery concern, part of International Provisions, which produced a third of the bread one saw on supermarket shelves. Stern had visited with their lawyers in Chicago. "As I understand it, this is a typical transaction. They wanted to be certain they can buy wheat in December at a favorable price. So they instructed you to buy them ten million bushels of wheat for December delivery. Correct? Now what happens at MD?"

"Okay," said Dixon. "Every order we get, no matter where it comes from, gets written up on our central order desk, which is here in our offices in the Kindle Exchange. Then they transmit the order to our booth on the trading floor at whatever exchange the future is traded on. Grains and financials in Chicago. Food and fibers in New York. Small lots we'll do here. This one obviously went to Chicago. The order goes into the pit and our broker yells it out till he finds traders who want to sell December wheat. Maybe they're selling for farmers, maybe speculators. Doesn't matter. Then at night the exchange clears the trades--you know, matches them to make sure that MD bought ten million Dec. wheat and someone else sold it. Next day we send our confirm to the client and make sure they've got enough margin money on deposit with us to cover the position.

That's the whole story. There're a million variations. But that's the basic. Right? That's the paper trail they're following."

Stern nodded: all quite familiar. He studied the subpoena again, then asked what sense Dixon made of the list of trades, but his brother-in-law merely shook his head. They had been placed by five different institutional customers over a number of months. Stern had spoken last week in Chicago with the lawyers for two of these customers--a large rural bank in Iowa, and the baker, Chicago Ovens. It seemed likely, therefore, that the government had subpoenaed trading records from the other flue customers as well. Stern told Dixon he would have to contact them.

"What for?" he demanded. It did not attract business to tell customers that a federal grand jury was raking through your records.

"To determine what information they provided." One of the perpetual

problems of a grand jury investigation was developing even a rough estimate of what the government knew. Most companies or individuals were not bold enough to disregard the FBI's usual request to keep the agents' questioning secret.

Dixon continued to venture mild objections, but eventually he gave in. His defense of his business was instinctive. He had started extolling futures in the little rural communities, and over three decades had made Maison Dixon a colossus with corporate clients, commodities pools, managed accounts. MD was a clearing member of all the major exchanges in Chicago and New York, and maintained large offices with humming telephone banks in both cities as well as here,

In the meantime, in the late 1960s, Dixon had led a group of local futures merchants in the formation of a small commodities exchange in Kindle County. Dixon's notion was to trade in lot sizes that were more in keeping with the needs of smaller retail customers. The Chicago Exchange would not trade a contract for the future delivery of wheat or soybeans of less than five thousand bushels. In Kindle, you could trade five hundred at prices that followed Chicago's, tick for tick. The Kindle County Futures Exchange--the KCFE had established its 'minimarket' in all the most popular contracts, and Dixon continued to press his fellow directors for innovations. For the last two years, he had been relentlessly courting the approvals needed to trade a future on the Consumer Price Index. Dixon had made not one smart play in his life but half a dozen. He was regarded with the usual mix of awe and distaste in the financial community. A maverick. A shark. Shrewd. Unreliable. But talented. He had fierce enemies and many admirers.

"Who are these customers, Dixon? What do they have in common?"

"Nothing. Nada. Different commodities. Different strategies. The only thing I'd say is, they're probably the five biggest customers I have." He uttered this with considerable resentment. The government was attacking at a vulnerable spot.

"And what have you to do with these accounts Dixon?"

"Not much. Those are big trades they're looking at," said Dixon.

"House rule is that I'm notified on anything that size. But that's it."

"Big trades?" asked Stern.

"Look at 'em," said Dixon. "Everything there is fifteen hundred contracts, two thousand contracts. Pit's gonna jump with those kinds of orders."

"Explain, please."

"You understand this, Stern. Take pork bellies. One car of bellies--one contract--is 40,000 pounds. I get a customer who wants fifteen hundred cars, that's a whole lot of bacon. The price is gonna take off like a rocket. It's supply and demand. You know, we try every gimmick known to man to slow things down. We lay off trades to friendly brokers. We buy the cash commodity and sell the future. But you can't stop it completely. It's like changing nature."

"Ah-ha," said Stern. So they did know something. The government was investigating large trades, trades which MD handled, trades which Dixon knew about, trades which, when placed, had had a significant impact on prices. "And is there nothing else which occurs to you?"

Dixon shook his head gravely. Nope, nothing, he didn't know a thing. Stern laid his thick finger again across his lips.

Even with this news, it remained difficult to assay the government's suspicions. The records called for could relate to a number of schemes, particularly on the futures exchanges where knavery of all kinds was rife. Were Stern to guess, his estimate would be that Ms. Klonsky and her colleagues suspected market manipulation of some kind.

There were all manner of baroque ploys. A month or two ago, the papers had been full of stories about a foreign government with a failing sugar crop which had tried to force down the world sugar-futures price so the government could buy and fulfill upcoming delivery commitments more cheaply. They had circulated authoritative rumors that something tailed 'left-handed sugar,' a no-calorie form of natural sugar, had been perfected. For three days prices plummeted, then the futures commissions merchants across the country had discerned what was occurring and bid prices out of sight. Dixon, perhaps, had found some less obvious-but equally illegal--way to tamper with the markets' responses to these huge transactions he handled for



his customers. Dixon, however, continued to point up signs that he was in the clear.

"That subpoena doesn't even mention my name," he said.

"That has to be good, doesn't it?"

The absence was superficially encouraging. But there would have been little reason for the agents to be so obvious in their pursuit of Dixon last week--or to have gone out of town with their initial subpoenas--unless they believed he would quickly recognize the meaning of these inquiries. His client, Stern decided, was keeping things to himself--not unprecedented in these circumstances, and, Lord knew, the general course with Dixon. Today, however, was probably not the time to press,

On his feet again, Stern, as he often did, took a moment to stare from his window in Morgan Towers, the city's tallest building, down to the Kindle River, whose swift waters ran here, through various tributaries, into the Mississippi.

With its shining, silvery face, the Kindle had been first named La Chandelle, the candle, by the French trader JeanBaptiste DuSable, who had tarried here on his way from New Orleans to what eventually became Chicago. DuSable's trading post, named after him, was now by far the largest part of a consolidated tri-city municipality of almost a million. Just south, where the river branched and rejoined, two other towns, Moreland, settled by the English, who had Anglicized the river's name, and Kewahnee, once an Indian encampment, had grown up from barge ports and had been merged into DuSable in the mid-1930s. In this era of urban sprawl, the entire area, including the tri-cities, was usually referred to by the name of the surrounding county-Kindle--a hodgepodge megalopolis of city and suburb, prosperity and blight, home in total to almost three million people. The willingness of locals to see their city known by the county name had probably not been dampened by the rediscovery during the 1960s that DuSable, traditionally referred to as the first white man in these parts, had been black.

Dixon was speaking behind him. He wanted to know if they were obliged to turn over all the records the government required. Most of the trades, given their size, had been executed in Chicago, and the search for documents would occupy days for Margy Allison, Dixon's executive vice president, who ran the

Chicago office, three hundred miles from here.

"I see no choice," said Stern. "I shall complain to the prosecutor bitterly about the burdens of production. Tell her your business will be brought to a standstill. And I must have some time to look at the records, to see if I can make out what the government suspects. But eventually we must produce. We cannot challenge the subpoena as overbroad --it is quite precise."

"Whatever happened to the Fifth Amendment?" That was Dixon for you, cavalier where other executives would stammer before the words could come from their mouths.

Stern explained that the subpoena sought records which belonged in law to the corporation rather than to Dixon himself. The corporation, not an individual, had no Fifth Amendment rights. Dixon could refuse to testify about the records; but the papers themselves would have to be handed over,

Claudia buzzed. She had Loonsky. Dixon, in the meanwhile, chewed on his cigar and puzzled over the mysterious logic of the law.

"Ms. Loonsky," he said.

"Mr. Stern," she answered. A clear, self-assured voice.

They had never met, but Stern had seen her in the courtroom when she approached the podium for status calls. She was in her late thirties, Stern thought, a robust-appearing woman with broad shoulders, dark hair, strong hands. In court, she had emitted the forbidding persona familiar to many assistants, including a number of the women; eager to prove themselves as tough as their male counterparts, they often came across as humorless and driven, citizens of the late century who saw bmtaiity as a necessary mode in female style. It was largely a pose, but under the circumstances, Stern saw little reason to be refn, ing.

"Two of your storm troopers arrived at my home a few days ago with a subpoena for my client Dixon Harmell."

An instant passed without sound. Storm troopers. Stern himself was surprised by the ruffian edge in his voice. Ordinarily, he prided himself on his civility. In the mehnfime, Dixon, across the desk, was beaming. He had rarely been exposed to Stern when he was so pointed.

"Perhaps I need to explain the circumstances," Stern said.

"I understand the circumstances," Ms. Klonsky shot back.

She was bristling already.

No doubt, everyone understood the circumstances, Stern thought. He had many friends in the prosecuting offices, both the Kindle County Prosecutor's and the United States Attorney's Office, but they were adversaries, too--and human. It was delicious gossip. Did you hear? About Stern's wife? Here again, as he contemplated this, the world seemed to open, and the force of painful emotion rushed up at him out of his own breast. How, how was it possible? It was such an unreasoning mess. He closed his eyes, which were burning, and he could sense Dixon stirring. It was a sad comment that his shame, more than anything else, brought on these moments, and that the same pride carded him through some forward-straggling thing impelled him to go on with dignity. Where, damn it, was his cigar? When he spoke, there was no tremor in his voice.

'If you understood, I must say I find your conduct deplorable. Perhaps I should speak to Mr. Sennett." Stan Sennett, a career prosecutor, had been U.S. Attorney for two or three years now. He was the toughest and most humorless of all, and far from an ally of Stern's. Sennett was unlikely to become exercised with the agents, after all, were just doing their jobs but Klonsky could not say that.

"Look, Mr. Stern, this was an honest mistake. It might even be," she said, "that if you gave me half a chance, I would have apologized. I've been calling you for days now."

Stern, rebuked, still chose not to answer. She had been an Assistant for only a year, following a clerkship in the U.S. court of appeals, and, presumably, a distinguished law school career, and he sensed an advantage in her inexperience. She had acquired a reputation as bright but phlegmatic, even flaky, the kind to blow hot and cold. He did not wish to lend her any reassurance.

"Tell me, Ms. Klonsky," said Stern, shifting the subject,

"what is the nature of your investigation?"

'I'd prefer not to say right now."

"Are other agencies involved besides the FBI?" Stern wanted to know about the IRS in particular. They were always.

trouble. And if the federal regulators were involved the Commodities Futures Trading Commission he might gain some idea of the gossip. Did you hear? About Stern's wife? Here again, as he contemplated this, the world seemed to open, and the force of painful emotion rushed up at him out of his own breast. How, how was it possible? It was such an unreasoning mess. He closed his eyes, which were burning, and he could sense Dixon stirring. It was a sad comment that his shame, more than anything else, brought on these moments, and that the same pride that carded him through some forward-straggling thing impelled him to go on with dignity. Where, damn it, was his cigar? When he spoke, there was no tremor in his voice.

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"I can't answer," said Klonsky.

"What about Mr. Hartnell? Are you willing to say whether or not he is a target?"

She paused, being careful. Klonsky had had her share of bad experiences with the defense bar already.

"I can't tell you he's not."

"I see." Stern thought. "When will you be able to be more precise about his status?"

"Perhaps after we look at the documents we've subpoenaed.

They're due today."

"Well, I am afraid that we shall be a bit late providing them. You are basically asking that Mr. Hartnell and his employees stop running his business and look for records for weeks."

"It's not that bad," said Klonsky.

"I am assured it is."

Klonsky sighed. She was tiring of the conversation. "How long?"

"We need an extension of at least three weeks," he said.

Dixon was looking on approvingly. He had his cigar tucked in his cheek, and a large enthusiastic smile. This was better than TV. "No, I am sorry," said Stern, "I had not consulted Mr. Hartnell. Best make it a full month."

"That's ridiculous. These records are probably in a few cabinets."

"I am informed otherwise, Ms. Klonsky. This is a federal grand jury investigation. I represent both the corp.

rotation and Mr. Hartnell personally. You will not identify your targets. I must be alert to conflicts at the same time that I try to be certain that our compliance with your subpoena is exact. I am required to make at least one trip to Chicago, if not more, to do that. If you wish to limit your requests, or

tell me what is needed first, I would try to oblige." She was silent. If she narrowed her request, she might disclose her interests. "If you think I am being unreasonable, make a motion to compel. I shall be happy to explain all this to Judge Winchell."

Chief Judge Winchell, a former prosecutor, would rule for the government eventually. But no judge in the federal courthouse would set strict deadlines for Sandy Stern this month. His personal circumstances required no mention here.

Ms. Klonsky knew the score.

"No further extensions," she said. She gave him a date--the second of May. "I'll send you a letter."

"Very well," said Stern. "I shall look forward to meeting with you, after you have reviewed what we provide."

"Right," she said.

"And, of course, Ms. Klonsky, I do accept your apology."

Klonsky, pierced, hesitated, but thought better of whatever she had in mind.

"Right," she said again and clapped down the phone. Stern could not restrain his satisfaction. That had gone well.

Ms. Klonsky was high-strung and ill-humored and he had gotten the better of her. When the month was over, they could ask for another week or two, if need be.

Dixon was laughing, delighted to see the government bashed.

He asked what she had told him.

"Very little. Except that she would not rule out the possibility that you are a target of her investigation."

Dixon drew on his cigar. He was instantly far more subdued, but he shrugged gallantly.

"You slowed her down," he said.

Stern listed what he would be doing near-term: the other customers he would contact; his trip to Chicago to look over the records for the subpoena as soon

as they had been gathered.

"In the meantime, you know how these things go, Dixon.

Discuss this with no one but me. Act on the assumption that everyone around you is wearing a tape recorder. It would not be surprising if one of them is."

For the first time today, Dixon briefly sported a look of discomfort: he buttoned up his lips and shook his head. Then he ground out the cigar and stood.

"I'm sorry this comes up now, Stern," Dixon said. "I hate to be the thing that drags you back into the office."

Stern raised a hand. "I suspect I shall be here a good deal." He said this somewhat heroically, but that lost feeling came over him again. He had no notion, really, of the immediate future, or even, for that matter, of what lay further ahead. A few images had stirred themselves: figures of stillness and order. He would mind the office and his clients in a state of settled dotage.

Dixon, of course, had different thoughts in mind.

"Oh, you'll have other distractions eventually." He glanced down at his stubbed cigar with the most minute salaciousness. Stern recoiled a bit, but he knew that Dixon was merely crude enough to say what others were thinking.

Even in tear-stained eyes thick with grief and sympathy, Stern could see he was already differently regarded. A single man. Certain facts were elemental. In his present mood, Stern was persistently repelled by contemplation of this subject. More to the point, he knew that his circumstance was hardly ordinary. What woman of even modest sense would be eager for the company of a man with whom another female had literally found life not worth living?

"I assume this will cost a fortune," Dixon said as he picked his sport coat off the sofa arm.

"It will be expensive," said Stern, barely able to suppress a smile. Dixon was rich. His business was worth millions, and he paid himself a seven-figure salary each year, but he maintained the typical frugality of a man who had struggled. He groused unremittingly about the appalling level of his legal fees. But years ago, in Stern's salad days, during that period when Dixon was still attempting to win Stern back after marrying Silvia, Dixon had obligingly

urged Stern to bill him like any other client, and Stern had never forgotten the instruction. One more peculiar harmonic had been established between them. Dixon paid for Stern's tolerance, and Stern was willing to allow it to be purchased. And always the concern on either side about who was getting the better of the deal. "I can leave some of the documents to the younger lawyers to examine," Stern said, "but we know too little. I must do most of this myself. Ms. Klonsky will take priority over other matters."

"Please," said Dixon. Once more, he looked around the room.

The weight of things had begun to settle on him. He was unhappy. "I don't want to fuck around with this."

Stern considered his brother-in-law with his manifold secrets. Clara's voice, as ever now, came into his mind.

Little as she cared for Dixon, she had never seemed surprised by their alliance. Stern had complained often that he did not know Dixon, was not sure he had ever gotten through to him, found the man at times as elusive as smoke.

'I imagine,' she had answered, 'that he says the same of you.'

In the mock-Chippendale reception room of Barstow Zahn and Hanks, a huge law firm, Stern sat with his children, awaiting Cal Hopkinson, with whom they had an appointment to learn the details of Clara's will. Stern regarded this event with the same maelstrom of contradictory emotions that lingering concentration on Clara's wealth had always prompted, but for the moment most of that was lost in the strong feelings--regretful, fond, salutary--of having his children near at hand.

Tomorrow, Marta would leave. She had stayed a week following the funeral. Work was slow, she said, and Kate and she had planned to sift through Clara's things.

Instead, Marta had spent hours alone, looking dreamily about her own room, poking through the house as if it were a new location. She had already mentioned that she would need to return soon to finish.

With the departure of Marta--the child who liked him best, or, more correctly, feared him least--Stern would be alone.



His children had offered him what comfort they could in the last weeks, but he felt them drawn away by the onrush of their lives and their plain bewilderment at having to deal with him on their own. With all the children, Clara had been his mediator; they had far less direct experience of him. Oh, he had cared. Deeply. But, in his compulsive orderly way, in its place. No matter how late he returned home from the office, in a routine as fixed as prayer, he received from Clara each night news of the children, the disturbances and triumphs, the unfolding of each small life. Somehow, at the time, he thought they would know that a portion of her interest was his own. When they reached their teens, he was baffled and stung as, one by one, they took up attitudes which silently accused him of being aloof, un-involved. The lines of attachment were to their mother. As in old-time law, he saw now, the benefits ran only to those in direct contact, in privacy.

Cal appeared at last. He shook everybody's hand, precise as a clockmaker, and apologized for the wait. Cal was an unremarkable fellow--temperate, genial, a journeyman of sorts. The most impressive thing about him was a single physical feature: an inch or so behind his left ear, just below his hairline, was a round depression that darkened and appeared to head straight into his skull, as if someone had stuck a little finger into a ball of dough. The mark looked for all the world like a bullet hole--and that was what it was, a war wound from Korea, a medical marvel. The shot had passed straight through, with the only damage to Cal's outer skull. Once noticed, it was the kind of thing you could not keep your eyes off of. Stern spent his meetings with Cal awaiting the instant when he would turn away and Stern could stare freely.

Cal ushered the family toward a wainscoted conference room.

Stern was the last to enter, and Cal detained him at the door.

"Before we start, Sandy-- As I told you on the phone last week, there's a question or two I wanted to ask you about Clara's estate some peculiarities I imagine you're aware of."

"Me?" Over the years, his commeme with Clara about her finances was limited to those rare occasions when she raised the subject, and usually he referred her to her bankers or attorneys.

They were interrupted by the arrival of Cal's associate, a young woman with

spectacles and straight brown hair named Van Zandt. Marta poked her head out the door to see what the holdup was, and at Stern's suggestion they all proceeded into the conference room, where they were seated around the long walnut table. Little plate engravings, precious caricatures of various legal scenes, ringed the walls, and there was the usual majestic view of the city--the law firms and the corporate headquarters gobbled up all the best space. Harry Fagel had tried years ago to lure Stern 'into this modern Versailles, but he would have none of it.

"I think," said Cal, "I should just start at the beginning and tell you all about Clara's estate."

Stern nodded. Marta nodded. Everyone agreed this was appropriate. Van Zandt handed Cal a document--a memo, no doubt, summarizing the will--and Cal solemnly began. Like most sophisticated estate plans, Clara's had been composed with the first eye on the tax laws. As the result of her father's providence decades before, and careful advice, since, Clara had been able to dispose of a significant fortune without the payment of a single penny in federal estate tax. Cal disclosed this fact with a refulgent smile of minor triumph.

The great bulk of Clara's wealth had never been' transferred to her directly. Her inheritance from her father, mother, and maiden aunt had been placed in a series of trusts that Henry Mittlet had established at the River National Bank; these trusts would endure for generations, spilling out income and preserving corpus, in the venerated fashion of old money. When he was younger, Stern had believed that Henry had made these elaborate arrangements because he feared that his son-in-law was some kind of bounder. Now Stern knew that Henry's faith was simpler:

any discretion, no matter how constrained, was liable to abuse. This brass-knuckled cynicism had made Henry a formidable attorney, although the same qualities of character also probably contributed to his daughter's lifetime discontent with him. Clara's fiercest internal struggles had been with her father, a clever, domineering, willful man. Now Clara was interred in the synagogue's small cemetery, in the sight of the large monument that Henry Mittlet had erected to himself and Clara's mother, Pauline, by the terms of the same will that had created the trusts. The earth reclaimed them all, and their passions, while their bank accounts survived. Stern, never without an

appreciation for money, nonetheless contemplated these sad facts with amazement.

"According to our notes," said Cal, "when we revised the estate plan after the most recent changes in the tax laws, the trusts were valued at a little over \$7 million. Clara's own estate," he said, referring to the interest spun off to Clara by the trusts over the years which, largely unspent, had been invested for her by the bank, "was in the neighborhood of \$2 million. Of course, there have been changes, with the stock market crash and other financial developments, but you have the general picture." Cal had taken his time getting to this point, and you could see that he enjoyed the effect the numbers had on his listeners. Kate's eyes widened and Peter whistled out loud. It was something of an achievement, Stern determined, to have kept the children in the dark about this. He himself was neither shocked by the figures nor far off in the estimates he had made on the way down today, or periodically over the years, concerning these dollars he had seldom deigned to touch.

Clara's will left simple directions. Stern was named executor. The rights to the trusts' income passed in equal divided portions to the children--"share and share alike," as Cal put it. Out of Clara's own fortune, a number of substantial gifts were made to the children and charities; the rest was left in trust for Stern to use as he saw fit.

Having outlined the will, Cal bored in on the details. As he described the provisions, he used the third person--"spouse Alejandro,"

"children Peter, Marta, and Kate" --and did not bother to translate many of the technical terms.

Nonetheless, the inevitable calculations seemed after an interval to take place around the table, and Kate suddenly began to weep. The children could expect to divide among themselves an annual income of about half a million dollars. To this was added a cash bequest to each of \$200,000, not to mention the prospect of a good deal more when Stern departed the scene. It occurred to Stern that if he could keep Dixon out of trouble long enough, he would probably be a fitting financial adviser for his nieces and nephew. As to himself, Stern, for reasons he could hardly articulate, felt few compunctions about accepting his wife's gift; perhaps, perversely, because his own estate had grown well past the point where he needed it; or because, after all this, he felt it was his due. By Stern's quick estimate, the residue of the estate left in

trust for him--what would remain of Clara's stocks and bonds at the bank--would total about a million dollars.

Going through the details of the trust provision, Cal paused to eye Stern.

"Clara directed specifically that you would remain the beneficiary for life, regardless of any remarriage."

"I see," said Stern.

Cal smiled briefly, delighted by this exacting management of the future, but the children seemed nonplussed by their mother's forethought--a pulse of discomfort traveled the room. None of them had yet raised this subject with Stern.

No question they had thought of it; everyone had. Even Clara. But it was disconcerting to one and all--to Stern, as well--to learn that she had formally resolved any objections:

Cal had gone on, but Stern interrupted.

"Is it this trust for me, Cal, that prompted these concerns you raised in the hall?" On reflection, it occurred to him why Cal wanted to speak one-on-one. There might be some conflict between Clara's desire to provide for him and the restrictions Henry Mittlet had set, down decades ago. "I'm not concerned, Sandy. I have a question."

"But about this trust for my benefit?"

"More or less. Just give me a moment." Cal dandled a hand; he was too fussy to step out of order. He had been discussing Clara's charitable gifts and he returned to the subject. Kate was crying with fervor. Van Zandt, the big firm associate, ever prepared, had come armed with a box of tissue and offered another to Kate, while Cal continued with the details he adored.

"Clara also made a bequest of \$500,000 to the Riverside Reformed Congregation, half of which she asked to be used to support the Inner-City Arts Program."

The children took this in, still dazzled by the fountain of money spilling forth, but Stern--who might otherwise have received the funds--found Clara's charity characteristic and commendable. For Stern, the notion of himself as a

Jew was an absolute and fixed point of reference, the North Pole, as it were, on his personal compass, against which all other issues of identity were judged. Clara and he shared a belief in the importance of the children's religious education, the observance of the High Holy Days.

But her religion was far more institutionalized than his.

To Clara the synagogue which her maternal grandparents had helped found was a significant anchor, and against all reason she was devoted to the rabbi, a smug self-promoter, and to his many community projects. At Rabbi Weigel's urging, Clara had taught music appreciation as a volunteer for three or four years in the Inner-City Arts Program, an interfaith effort to enhance the curricula of DuSable's most impoverished schools. Clara admired the culture and civility of the well-to-do, but not their sense of privilege. She had always been a person of conscience.

"That's more or less it." Cal was done. He put down his memo and looked about the table, as if for applause.

"The problem," said Stern, referring once more to the trust Clara had left for him. Cal already seemed to have forgotten.

"Oh," said Cal. "As I say, just one question, Sandy:

we've been wondering what became of it."

"It?"

"The money. You understand." Cal leaned forward. "Don't you?"

"I had taken it, Cal, from the figures you'd been using that there was another million in the estate." As soon as the words were out he regretted them, particularly the precision with which he seemed to have calculated.

. "Well, not quite," said Cal, mincing as ever. "Clara's holdings haven't made it all the way back from the crash.

But it's the \$850,000 that's gone from her investment account I'm talking about."

No one, for a moment, said anything. "Gone?" asked Stern finally. "Removed," said Cal.

The two men considered each other.

"You're not telling us there has been a defalcation, are you?"

"Lord, no!" Cal turned to Van Zandt, as if for help. "We get a consolidated statement from the bank each quarter on the trusts and Clara's investment account. When we heard the news, we looked, of course, and I saw that this sum had been withdrawn last month. I assumed, Sandy--I was certain she would have discussed {his with you." Cal paused. "I called."

Stern only now understood.

"You believe Clara spent this money?"

"What else? I took it she'd made an investment on her own, bought a summer home--", Cal's hand trailed off. Marta spoke up.

"What would she do with \$850,000? That's bizarre."

Stern, strongly inclined to agree, began to add his voice to Marta's. But some better instinct saved him. He was-

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rising to a treacherous pass. He had no business predicting What was possible or impossible with Clara in these latter days. Perhaps she was funding a hippie sect. Or feeding a drug habit.

"Cal, I am not certain I understand how this could have occurred."

"I presume Clara went to the bank, dissolved the great bulk of her portfolio, and took the money. It was hers, after all."

".Have you checked with them?" "Sandy, I wanted to speak with you first. That's why I called." Cal was in excruciating discomfort. Probate lawyers dealt with a world of fixed intentions. They were not suited to surprise.

Clearly, he feared that the family might blame him, and had descended already to the sweaty depths of lawyerly justification. "I took it you would know about this. It didn't-occur to me--" Cal cut himself off. He seemed to

recognize that he was merely doing harm by reemphasizing how shocked he was that Clara had acted without consulting her husband. Cal's sudden--and uncharacteristic--sensitivity seemed by some improbable logic to awaken Stern to his own distress. He was, in fact, reeling. Oh, it was absolutely childish, a response greedy as a six-year-old's, but he could not stifle the thought. She had seen to the children; she had fattened the rabbi and his favorite charity. Only he, in her last days, had been deprived.

Shame and anguish, the same venomous mix, rose in him once more.

Cal had gone on talking.

"Now that you tell me you have no idea what this is about, I'll call Jack Wagoner over at the bank at once. We'll track it all down. The probate court will require it."

These vows seemed to do little to comfort Cal himself who sat there worried and deflated, licking his lips. He made it sound as if the money had run away on its own.

"When was this transaction?" asked Marta. "How late in the month?" Cal turned to Van Zandt, who had the date --five days before the afternoon Stern had come home to find Clara. Van Zandt handed a paper, the statement, to Marta; she then offered it to her father, who pushed it aside. The thought of embezzlement, some kind of foul play, occurred to Stern again, but that was unlikely--worse, absurd.

He looked up at a sound: Kate had begun burbling again.

Twenty-six years old, with her face tear-blotted and her makeup washed away, she looked half her age. She lolled back on the arm of her brother, who had been largely silent throughout, still laid low by the contemplation of his mother. Stern, in his present state, found himself easily irritated by Peter's solicitude. How was it, he wondered, that the women always seemed to turn to Peter? None of them would tell you that he was untroubled; but they all seemed to adore his quiet sulkiness. He was available. Reliable. A person you could count on. Peter had undermined his father in the most insidious way by exceeding him. By being what it mattered most that Stern was not. This sudden incisive view into the odd mechanisms of his family did nothing to stem the rising tide of his grief.



He shook hands with Cal and Van Zandt. His children stood, too, but seemed to have no idea how to proceed, whether to stay or go, or even if they ought to move. Stern realized suddenly that he was the-center of attention. They were all watching him--his children, the lawyers--looking for signals. What to do, how to respond. But he had little to offer by way of instruction. Here in these elegant surroundings his soul again plummeted toward misery. Suicide.

Money. Disease. Clara had left behind an unreconstructed mess.

He was accosted, more or less unaccountably, by a memory of her, as he happened to have observed her one day on her way to her teaching assignment in the Inner-City Arts Program.

Stern and the children had long expressed concerns for her safety, but Clara twice a week drove her Seville t the eity's depleted neighborhoods for the morning. Coming by to swap cars so he could take hers to the shop, Stern had caught sight of her marching boldly to the school doors--a determined middle-aged lady with a noble look, .reddish hair, a substantial bosom. She carried no purse. Her hands were jammed into the pockets of her plain coat and her head was erect, as she ignored occasional quarreling glances. In that split-second, he recognized something essential: not that she was fearless, but rather that he had seen the same expression often before and that for Clara every trip beyond her home apparently required the same effort to master her anxieties. There were all those inner demons which she conquered only by persuading herself they were not real. Somehow, at the end, they had come to life, surrounded and devoured her. A taciturn, mannerly, dignified woman, Clara Stern had gotten herself caught in the world's muck, and it had sucked her down, like one of those prehistoric creatures whose bones were found in the tar pits.

He knew that sooner or later he was going to stumble into the very heart of it, too, enduring all the same nightmare horrors she had.

They reached the street before Kate, briefly under control, began crying once more.

How does one give up a life? At night, Stern wandered in the large house, looking for answers. In the closets, much of Clara's clothing still hung. With the doors thrown open, he stared at the garments; they seemed as mystical as relics. The empty hangers, remaining from the items Kate and Marta had

packed away, waited now like the skeletons of birds.

After Marta left, he moved into her room to sleep. His own bedroom seemed disturbed, torn apart; here he felt by some bare margin more at peace. When he entered the master bedroom to gather up an item or two, the stillness was overpowering. With even a few days of disuse, a shrouded, dusty quietude had come over it. It was like examining a photograph: a bounded portion of an unreachable past, inanimate but preserved. He took his socks, his collar stays, and rushed back out the door.

He was shown a ceremonial kindness by neighbors and families from the synagogue. The suicide's spouse was too gruesome for the dinner table--how do you explain to the children? But the women came by with pots of stew, various chicken dishes, for him to consume alone. The freezer was jammed. Most evenings, he would place something in the microwave, open a bottle of wine, eat and drink, and roam about the household.

On the refrigerator was a note to phone Nate Cawley. He had tried a number of times, hoping to dispel the question of Clara's medical bill, but Nate, busy after his week away at the medical conference in Canada, had not yet responded.

Softened by the wine, Stern took calls--friends or Marta or Kate checking into and then resumed his movements. He sat in chairs he had not bothered with for years. He went from room to room, stared at the furnishings, the pictures. This tiny porcelain bird. Where had it come from?

Occasionally he was asked out, generally in groups, and usually by other lawyers, a kind of conventional solicitude that reflected more his stature in the legal community than any particular intimacy. This was the sort of social commerce which the Sterns had always minimized. Clara, with her quiet, firm manner, had no interest in people or occasions that offered little substance. Now free to go on his own, he could not bring himself to the pretense these encounters would demand, an evening of vagrant chatter in which everyone would stare at him with unvoiced questions about his wife.

The only outings which he made willingly were to be with his children. In the first two weeks after Marta's departure, he went to Kate's house twice for dinner, and she and John met him once downtown. But the suburban sprawl of Kindle County meant that they were almost an hour apart, and in the work

week the travel was exhausting, particularly for Kate, who was wearied by the early phases of her pregnancy. And even with her, he sensed that her attentions required some self-conscious effort; Kate, always unreflexively loving, now seemed vaguely frightened to deal with her father on his own.

Peter, no doubt acting at the instruction of his sisters, also called, and at Stern's suggestion they had dinner one evening. "Something quick," as Peter put it, accepting.

They met at a delicatessen downtown, but Clara's absence loomed between them, enormous, agonizing. She had been pained by their estrangement--and for her sake they had always done their best. Now it was suddenly clear that the tie had not survived her; they were both playing roles in a production which had closed. After a few minutes ill at ease they lapsed completely into silence amid the ringing plates and voices of the restaurant.

So for the most part he was alone. One night there was an unexpected interruption. A woman from the neighborhood phoned, claiming to be a friend of Clara's. She went on without a pause to describe her husband's repeated failures in the bedroom:--the man had many problems--and ended their conversation saying, simply, "Call me." Stern, of course, did not. Yet the incident provoked a storm of odd feeling. He had heard the same stories as everyone else, of the unattached females who accosted widowers with striking boldness, but given the circumstances of Clara's passing, he was sure that would not happen to him. Oh, perhaps there had been a card or two, a few calls of sympathy from widows and divorcees of somewhat remote connection. Yet, suddenly, something seemed clarified. People were lonely; women, in particular, were lonely like him. But who knew about all of that--women? Certainly not he. And to what purpose, anyway?

The thought of all this left him feeling worse, baffled and inept, stuck within himself, like something buried.

Whatever the distractions, these evenings in the end always found him roaming. He drank wine, told himself he would work, and wandered about the house. As soon as this routine began, he realized that this, not working, was the primary business of his day. He suffered terribly--at sea with tender recollections and volumes of harsh selfreproach--and yet he receded to these moments almost 'urgently, as the years swam over him.

His memory of the past was of a million pages observed by a single incandescent light, and of doors falling open as he arrived, burdened with heavy cases, in a hundred different courtrooms. In the decades he recalled, it was always late at night or the morning of a trial, his emotions an intense admixture of determined concentration and stilled anxiety.

He puzzled in his hours at home; his children spoke and went unanswered as he nursed motions in his mind, a particular careful tack for cross-examination, and reached forth with a tender hand, meant to hush them, while he thought of something else. Oh, he had achieved. He was in his office with his cigars, his books, his phone, his clients, from seven in the morning until nine or ten at night. He came home then to a quiet house. The children were bedded down, gone. Clara waited with a book on her lap in the quiet living room, the aroma of his warming dinner through the house: an image of order, resourcefulness, sufficiency.

Was he persuaded by that pose? For how many years had he comforted himself with the thought that they did not quarrel, that she seldom voiced the Criticisms of other wives? That would have struck Clara as common. True, he treated her with unsparing courtesy. He rarely disregarded her wishes. But, of course, he had chosen wisely, for she seldom spoke up in her own behalf. Oh, they had had their rough spots. Who didn't? The period when the children had gone off to college was one of intense disruption for Clara. When Kate, the last, departed, there were times when he found her in the dark, in tears. It was there each day, the quiet insinuation, throbbing like a bruise: she did not like her life, no part of it. When he tried to soothe her, she turned

on him openly, livid with decades of previously unspoken complaints. But they had stumbled on, and Clara had eventually reverted to her strict self-control, her taut smile, and her insistence that she was bearing up. She was like some Swedish minister enduring existential torment in silence and low light.

On these evenings when he wandered, the wine made him sleepy--he had never been a drinker. He jolted awake to find himself upright in a chair, dry-mouthed, the lights blazing. One night a particularly vivid dream startled him out of his sleep. He was bathing at Wolf's Point in the Kindle River. Unnoticed, the water grew turbulent, and soon he was kicking and struggling while the white froth seethed about him. On the shore, amid the trees, his

mother, father, and older brother, dressed in heavy dark woolens, watched, each immobile as a statue. Although he was moving backwards, he somehow Caught sight of Clam and the children through the bare branches. They were in a schoolroom. The children were seated at desks while Clara, with a finger raised, offered instruction. Churning his limbs in the powerful waters, he called, but they did not notice him fighting off the current, being driven farther and farther away.

Fiona Cawley, his next-door neighbor, greeted him, highball glass in hand.

"Sandy!" she cried. From the first word, Stern knew she was drunk. Fiona let her front door fly open and stood with her arms thrown wide, backlit by the burning lamps of the living room. Nate, Fiona's husband, also drank more than he should have. Perhaps that was what kept them together. For 'the present, Stern was struck uncannily by a sudden understanding of what motivated Fiona. Loosened by the liquor, she was more attractive; her posture had an alluring pliancy. Clearly, she savored her liberty. She was handsomely dressed as ever in a robin's-egg knit suit that showed off her small figure to advantage. Her hair and makeup were flawless, and she wore jewelry for her evening at home, a large diamond piece between the clavicles. Fiona spent her days caring for herself. She shooed the dog away and pulled Stern into the house by the hand, assuring him, in response to his question, that he was not interrupting dinner. She seemed delighted to see him.

"How are you, Sandy." She touched his face, a drunken, excessive gesture. "We think so much about you." Already he had taken up certain inscrutable mannerisms in response. He had always been good at this, wordless flexing of the brow to suggest complex feelings. Now his look was more pinched, more allusive of pain.

"I am as well as could be expected, Fiona. Is Nate about for just a moment? I was hoping to have a word with him." A personal appearance, Stern had decided, might catch Nate's attention. After hearing from Cal, Stern was determined to be more direct in attempting to unravel Clara's knotted affairs.

"Hasn't he called you? I gave him the message twenty times.

Well, he's out for the evening, Sandy, but stay for a second.-Have a drink with me. There's something I wanted to ask you about. I'm glad you're here."

Without awaiting an answer, she walked halfway down the hall to drive the

dog back to the kitchen. Fiona was one of those people who always got what they wanted. She'd given him no chance to make an excuse.

For nineteen years, the Sterns had lived beside the Cawleys. They had watched the Cawleys' modern ranch go through three separate expansions, so that it now wore a somewhat awkward-looking second story, resembling a small top hat on a large-headed man. They had witnessed the coming of age of 'the Cawley children, both of whom were now in college.

They had enjoyed weekend conversations over the fence; an occasional drink or barbecue; two decades of holding mail and exchanging garden tools--but the Cawleys as a couple, like many others, were treated with reserve. Years before, with the retirement of the obstetrician who had delivered the Sterns' children, Clara had begun to visit Nate as her gynecologist and principal physician. In an emergency--a fall from a tree, a minor infection--he was the unofficial medical adviser to the entire family. Somehow, this professional relationship suited the Sterns well, since it offered a diplomatic means of enjoying Nate without Fiona.

As a doctor, he was knowledgeable, relaxed, and affable; at home, he was apt to be overwhelmed by his wife..Younger, Fiona had no doubt been a great beauty, and she was still a fine-looking woman, handsomely slender, with arresting light eyes that were almost yellow. But she was, in a phrase, hard to take: nervous, high-pitched, forever striving, striving. Fiona nursed a hothouse conservatory of internal competitions and visible resentments. A good person to avoid.

"Highball?" Fiona asked now.

Stern put himself down on a love seat upholstered in a fabric of peonies. The Cawleys' living room was decorated in what Stern took to be Irish modern fashion, a selfconscious upgrading of American colonial style. The rooms were crowded with dark tables and commodes, most of the 'Pieces beset with shawls of lace. Fiona occupied herself in a small adjoining den, where she'd set up a tea cart with booze. She drank in elegance; the liquor was in cutglass snifters, and a large sterling-silver ice bucket had been set down like a centerpiece.

"Some dry sherry, if it is there, Fiona. On a cube of ice.

I really must do some work this evening."

"Work?" she asked. "Already? Sandy, you should give yourself a chance."

This was a frequent comment. But no one mentioned alternatives. Danring? Nightclubs? He must have missed the boat somewhere. What was the etiquette of grieving? To disdain useful labor and watch addleheaded fare on TV?

Really, Stern was tiring already of these conventional efforts to orchestrate his feelings.

As she handed him his drink, he asked if she was well. "Oh, me? I'm just ducky," said Fiona, and looked into her glass.

Stern recalled now that he had determined years ago, without reflection, not to ask Fiona such questions. The dog was pawing about and growling in the kitchen, where he had been shut up; you could hear his claws racing on the tiles. "What is it you wanted with Nate?"

"I merely had a question or two concerning Clara. Tell him I need only a moment. I wanted to know if he was treating her for any ailment."

"There was something," said Fiona. She used her glass and gestured with a rummy lushness.

"Was there?"

"He used to stop over there in the morning. She needed medication or something." Fiona waved her free hand about, suggesting the way Nate, probably, had put her off.

"Ah-ha." As he suspected. Stern held still. Then, fortified to learn he was right, rose to go.

"Oh, you can't leave yet. Remember? I wanted to ask you somethings"

"Just so," said Stern. He had indeed forgotten.

She went into another room and returned with a small package.

"Sandy, you're probably not ready for this yet, but when you are, you have to let me introduce you to Phoebe Brower.

She is charming. And you'd have things in common. Her husband, you know--" Fiona fiddled a hand and wriggled her features. "Sleeping pills."

He could not quite remain silent--some sound escaped him, a noise of sorts. If Fiona were not drunk, or Fiona, he might have actually taken offense. Perhaps she thought he was starting a club. Unbearable Spouses Anonymous. He recognized the wrapper of the local camera store on the package Fiona was holding. Photos, too? There should be a sign up on his house. Decommissioned. Shipwrecked. Out of use.

"As you say, Fiona. It i's much too soon."

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She shrugged. "I would think that's something most men would look forward to. Being on the loose again."

Well, they had done fairly well until now, but Fiona was veering off the road. Stern slapped his thighs, a sign he was ready to be on his way.

"Perhaps you are correct, Fiona. Women always know better about men."

"Don't humor me, Sandy. You do that too much. I have a reason for asking."

She was masterful, no doubt about that. Stern sat silent, watching, as Fiona at last drew herself together.

"Sandy, I want you to look at this. I need to ask you a question." She offered the package.

"What is it, Fiona?"

She shook her head. Just look at it, she said. She had no wish to explain. Somehow he had a powerful sense of Clara's absence. This scene could never have taken place a few weeks ago. Fiona, even drunk,. would have felt less free to prevail upon him.

When he opened the package, he found a videocassette.

"Watch it." She gestured through an arch toward the small adjoining family room. Stern, thinking of resisting further, abandoned the notion. With Fiona, there was no point.

lie found the VCR and pushed the buttons; he was good with machines. The images jerked onto the screen in the midst of some sequence. The picture was of poor quality, homemade.

The skin tones were far too rosy. But they showed enough.

The first frames were of a young woman. She zoomed in and out of focus, but she remained naked as the day of her birth. She was slender and small-breasted--seated on a bed, and smiling at the camera in a harmless way. He was too taken aback at first to understand what consequence this naked woman could be to Fiona. But then he recognized Nate's voice on the sound track; the words were not clear, and Stern, as he stood there, suddenly nipping at his sherry, had no wish to boost the volume and further intrude. He understood enough: Nate was the cameraman.

Strangely, his first impulse was to feel sorry for his neighbor. How could he have done this to himself?. There was nothing particularly salacious about the girl's poses.

She crossed a leg casually at one point; she had on black high-heeled shoes, and as Nate moved the camera about her, the dark pubic triangle was more visible, split with the bright pink lick of her labia. There was something almost innocent about these pictures. Certainly relaxed. Nate and the young lady, whoever she was, were well acquainted. She smiled as if she were on a beach.

Then, as Stern had a finger poised over the stop button, the picture flipped; the screen went black, then raced with fuzz, and finally filled once more with figures. It took him an instant to sort things out, and a sense of disturbance preceded his willingness to name what he was seeing. Nate, it seemed, had turned the camera on himself.

Out of focus, the white shaft of his erect penis was nonetheless recognizable; perspectives were hard to discern, but Nate appeared to be a man of generous proportions. Then, without warning, the image jumped again and settled finally on what Nate likely had been meaning to portray all along. The distances were too short for the camera's focal range, and you saw mostly the

young woman's hair, which, blurred, looked like some matted bathroom rug.

But there was no mistaking her reddened lips fixed over the end of Nate's member. "This is great," Nate said on the tape. "This is great." Stern could understand that much.

Nate's blow job was preserved forever.

"I see," said Stern. He had stopped the recorder.

Fiona had remained by the tea cart, with her back to the screen.

"Pretty nasty, don't you think? The son of a bitch told me he was going to AA at night. How do you like that?"

"Fiona--" he said, but he had no clue as to what else he should add.

"Here's what I want to know, Sandy." She threw cubes quickly into her glass; she still had not faced him. "If I file for divorce, can I use that in court?"

Stern at once turned elusive. He was not about to get caught between his neighbors. His practice did not include matrimonial work, he told her. Different courts often followed different procedures.

She interrupted, making no effort to hide her harsh look.

"Don't give me a song and dance, Sandy. Yes or no? What do you think? I want to know where I stand."

He realized that he was highly alarmed. The tape had upset him. And it bothered him more than he would have expected to find that the Cawleys, one more fixture in his life, were coming apart. Eventually, however, he answered.

"I would think it is likely to be admitted in court." There was really no question. Any lawyer with half a brain could think up a dozen ways to get the tape into evidence.

"Well, he'll be a sorry little bastard that day, won't he?"

"I've told Nate for years he can't afford to divorce me. Now he'll really see what that means." Fiona had her chin erect; defiant. It was hard not to be frightened by her obvious relish in the pain she meant to inflict. "Do you know where I was the first time I saw that, Sandy? At the store. Nate actually asked me to take the camera in to have it fixed. And the boy behind the

counter showed me the cassette in there and said, 'What\*s this?' He played it in the camera --you know how you can do that?--and he gave me this look. This twenty-year-old kid. And you know what I did? You won't believe it. I pretended, Sandy. I couldn't think of anything else. I actually pretended they were pictures of me."

She cried then. Stern was surprised she had held up as long as she had. It struck him that Fiona was right. The young woman looked a good deal like her. The same slender, highcheeked prettiness. Was that a hopeful sign, or something dismal? Or just one more indication that some people always made the same mistake? Certainly there was no wondering now what distractions had kept Nate from returning his calls.

"Fiona, you are upset," said Stern.

"Of course, I'm upset!" she screamed. "Don't patronize me, damn it."

Thinking he might soothe her, he had started to edge forward. But now he held his place.

"Nate doesn't know I've seen this. I couldn't stand to listen to him explain." She looked fiercely at Stern. "And you don't say a thing. I'm still not sure what I'm going to

"No, no, of course not," answered Stern, although it was difficult to think that Nate, who after all had handed her the camera, was innocent at every level. But Fiona was not one to adhere to complicated views of human intention. She had a narrow vantage, a limited rangewher emotions moved only between mild hostility and absolute rage. She was at the point now of flailing, and was likely as a result to do herself serious harm, as she had just now by urging Stern to look at this tape, thinking she would shame Nate before the respectable neighbors, and finding instead that the humiliation was worse than she could bear. It probably was best that she avoid the confrontation with her husband. In humor, Clara and he had promised over the years that they would never disclose their infidelities to one another. A joke, but not without its point. It was hard to imagine a loving explanation of this sort of business. At any rate, he had been lucky enough to limp through his marriage without unfaithfulness--at least, not of the carnal variety.

Stern tried to be solicitous. Couples have gone on, 'he told Fiona, but she was paying no attention. She sat on the corner of a lounge, a few feet from where

he was standing, sobbing into her drink. He could see the spots of rouge on her cheeks, the perfect part in her colored hair.

"You know what I resent the most? That he would do this now. Now. Twenty years ago, there was always some fellow around. I got out of the car and men watched me walk down the street. They ogled me." She pronounced it with a soft o, so that the word rhymed with 'google.'" "I could feel it," said Fiona. "But he has to go looking for the fountain of youth. For what? What does he think is so wonderful?"

What does this do for him? Can you believe that last business? The big goddamn stud." Fiona cried harder. She held the highball glass up to her cheek. "Don't you think I can do that, too? I always thought he wanted me to have some dignity. I can do that. I'll let him take movies. I don't care. Pull your pants down, Sandy, I'll do it to you.

Here."

For the faintest instant, Fiona's look became far more purposeful than the liquor would have seemed to allow, and Stern was convinced that she meant to move toward him.

Perhaps she even started and he faltered. Something happened--the quickest moment, in which he did not observe things clearly, given his sense of alarm.

"Oh, what do you care," she murmured. She had come to her feet, but she sank down now. He was not sure precisely what she meant by the remark--probably that he was without compassion; but there was some strange insinuation in her voice, in her usual domineering tone, an odd suggestion that he was an abject thing with no right to resist. "Fiona," he said.

She waved a hand. "Go home, Sandy. I'm losing my mind."

He waited a moment or two until she had composed herself a bit.

"I'll tell Nate You were looking for him."

"Yes, please," he answered, and they parted on that odd note of propriety.

That night, he could not sleep. Throughout their marriage, Clara had suffered prolonged bouts of insomnia, and often went through the days with a worried look and smarting eyes. Occasionally, in the depth of night, he would muse himself to find her wide-awake beneath the reading lamp on her side of the

bed. In the early years, he had asked what ailed her. Her reply was always reassuring but elliptical, and in time he responded to these episodes only by muttering that she should turn out the light. She complied, but sat upright in the dark. Now and then, when this went on for nights, he had made the mildest suggestions, but Clam was much too circumspect to lay her head, or troubles, on any psychiatrist's couch..She, like Stern, believed that, in the end, one must master these matters on one's own. So be it. Now the troubled nights were his.

He sat up with his pillow propped against the headboard, the single directed beam on his bedside lamp the only light in the house. He took up a Braudel history, and then replaced it on the night table. This episode with Fiona would not pass easily. From his body a mild force field seemed to rise, an almost electrical aura. In the dark he made his way to the sun room for a drink. Vodka and soda, something he had seen a client order in a bar. He pushed aside the curtain, looking to the Cawleys'. Nate's BMW was in the circular drive, and the only light was borrowed from the street lamps and the moon crazing the dark windows. Was Fiona also restless, or did she sleep soundly, spent by ire and impulse?

He roamed back to the bedroom with the drink. With the liquor, the sensations had become stronger and more localized. His genitals were almost singing. With a certain shyness, he reiterated in his mind the tape recording. One image seemed to fascinate him, a peculiar lateral alignment in the camera's eye as it looked down to the woman's head in Nate's lap and caught the white part in her hair, the shining ridge of her nose, and the glistening pale stalk growing out between her lips as she drew back. Slightly drunk, he had no power to resist his own excitement. His organ throbbed, lifting the bedcovers. Three weeks ago, he would have assumed that he was dead forever to such stimulation.

He thought suddenly: What happened there at the end? If anger and despair had emboldened her wildly, would he have stopped her? 'Oh, what do you care?' He still had no idea what Fiona had meant, but recollected, her remark set up a shiver, as if it were a tantalizing message of libertine permission. What did he care?

"Absurd," he said aloud, and tried to sleep, galled to think that he was taken up with half-drunk fantasies of Fiona. Fiona! She was one of those creatures

he had never found appealing. But now, as he crept in and out of a dusky night-town on the borders of sleep, she appeared in his mind alarmingly confused with the young woman for whom Nate had spumed her. Clara had been twenty pounds overweight since Peter's birth, and Stern did not recall wishing even for a second that that were not so. But now he dwelled on the slim body of that much younger woman, transposed in dreaming moments to Fiona. Near five he slept solidly and then bolted awake. He had had the crudest and most direct of dreams that he had supplanted Nate; his penis stood erect, burning with sexual and urinary urgency. What nimble ges-lure, he wondered with sudden languor, would have been utilized to speed his response? He imagined, somehow, the fingering of a flute.

Before six, he drove down to the office. The sky was beginning to be colored, gray and rose, a certain prairie feel to it. The night of sleeplessness left him feeling shattered; he concentrated poorly, while the sensations of his smoky dreams persisted, leaking over him. Behind his desk, he remained stimulated, so that even his fingertips, the hairs atop his knuckles, were quick with sensation. And he heard, remote but insistent, that insinuating voice:

Oh, what do you care?

THREE years ago, Stern had been retained to represent the chief deputy in the Kindle County Prosecutor's Office, who was charged with murdering a female colleague. It had been the tri-cities trial of the decade, revealing tawdry passions and political intrigues, and Stern's role had briefly fiveted attention on him across the nation. In the aftermath, his practice, never insubstantial, had grown significantly. While formerly he'd had one associate, Stern now employed three younger lawyers, all of whom insisted lately that at least one more attorney was needed. One of the lawyers working for Stern, Alec Vestos, dealt exclusively with civil matters and was 'largely on his own; Stern, even three decades along, felt little confidence with the endless rigmarole of civil procedure--depositions, interrogatories, and requests to admit. The other two lawyers--Raphael Moya and Sondra Duhaney--were both former state defenders and had come to Stern about the same time, two years ago. They followed criminal files in the state court, while Stern usually took principal responsibility for the federal criminal work.

Alec, Raphael, and Sondra were capable of handling most matters without guidance, and since Clara's death, they had been piloting the ship. Stern's

hours here were significantly reduced. After his broken nights, he would find himself in the mornings stricken by morose visions from his dreams, often too forbidding to fully recollect.

He would lie in bed, feeling as if he were coated by film, seeing himself in a distant, abstracted way as some figure on air, like one of the dybbuks dancing through the background of a Chagall, or an astronaut barely tethered to his capsule, someone who was nowhere, in no field of gravity, able at any instant to drift off forever into the limitless universe. When he managed to rouse himself, he felt enervated as soon as he passed through the office door.

The dispositions of a lifetime made it impossible for him to treat legal problems with indifference; the law would ever amaze him, the way some children were always fascinated by a certain toy. Even now, his abilities struck him as unimpaired; yet his commitments were lagging.

Clients with their problems, their urgencies--it all seemed beyond his present reserves. There was a limited number of matters to which Stern was inalterably committed. The rest were shifted to the younger lawyers. Each day here he would receive reports from his associates, meet with those clients he was required to see, examine pleadings, make the necessary phone calls or court appearances, and spend the remainder of the day in aimless desultory reflection. He would say he was thinking of Clara, but that was not completely so. He meditated on virtually anything: TV advertisements, graffiti on an alley wall; the children and their miseries; groceries he needed; bills; planting he still had time to do; the four or five occasions he had promised to return with Clara to Japan and had failed to make the trip, or even preparations. Last week he had read brochures on a new word-processing system for an entire day.

He had closed the cover on his case, preparing for his night of wandering at home, when Alec appeared with a telecopy that had just arrived in the mailroom. It was near seven, and the office was still, only the lawyers present, surveying what remained now that the phones had stopped ringing. The message Stern had received--a cover sheet and a letter--identified Dixon as its sender, transmitting from his magnificent stone home in Greenwood County, where his study was replete with gadgets: fax, computers, tickers, modems. A modem executive, Dixon was never out of touch. The phone rang then, Stern's private number. "You get that?" Dixon asked.



"I am studying it now." As promised, Dixon's case was one of the few matters to which Stern had given continuing attention. He had tracked down the three clients of Dixon's mentioned in the government's subpoena whom he had not reached before. Their lawyers contended that each had been contacted by the FBI, but only one was willing to provide Stern with copies of the records the grand jury had subpoenaed. Then, earlier this week, Al Greco, from Dixon's office here in DuSable, had called with the names of two large local customers who had received subpoenas for the same kinds of documents. The government's specific concerns were no more apparent.

The letter Dixon had faxed, however, offered some insight.

It was from his personal banker at First Kindred, who announced that yet another grand jury subpoena had been served on the bank more than a month ago. According to the letter, agents had visited the bank and briefly reviewed the statements for Dixon's checking accounts. Then, pursuant to the subpoena's command, they had required copies of all items Dixon had deposited and the checks he had written over the last year. This was an exhaustive task, requiring clerks to search through reels of microfilm, but the bank was scheduled to finally produce these items next week. The FBI, as usual, had requested confidentiality, yet the banker, after consultation with his lawyers, had determined to advise Dixon should he wish to venture any objection. The letter portrayed this gesture as an act of heroic defiance in behalf of a valued customer, but it was, in truth, routine.

"What does it mean?" asked Dixon.

Many things, Stern knew. Certainly that Dixon was the target of the government's inquiry; and that somehow they had figured out where Dixon banked. At this point, a few months ago, Stern would have lit a cigar as a way to gather a moment to think. His fingers still wandered toward the handsome crystal ashtray on his desk, as if the nerves had some instinct of their own. It was twenty-nine days, by his calculation, since he'd had his last cigar, the day he flew off to Chicago. This was a lugubrious South American notion, he knew, the idea of a penance, moth-eaten Catholic baggage he was still lugging around from his adolescence, and he a Jew at that. It was typical of the entirely unpredictable ways that Argentina would episodically haunt him.

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"It means, I would think," said Stern, "that the government is attempting to trace money. They believe, Dixon, that you somehow unlawfully profited from these enormous

trades they are scrutinizing."

Dixon was quiet.

"It's a bunch of crap," he said finally. "What do they think? I stole all this money and mailed it right into my checking account so I could be sure someone would notice?

How stupid am I supposed to be?"

Stern did not answer. In his indignation Dixon was convincing, but the sequence of events described by the banker--the fact that the agents had reviewed the statements first--gave every indication that they believed they were on the right track. Dixon had admitted last time that the orders the government was investigating were large enough to significantly alter market prices. Perhaps Dixon had been paid off by traders on the market floor for informing them about his customers' plans. That would fit.

The prosecutor would want to examine any personal checks Dixon had received from other members of the exchanges.

"And if they're tracing money I deposit, what do they need my goddamn canceled checks for?" Dixon asked.

"Generally, your checks are desired not for what is on the front but on the back." Dixon did not seem to understand. "By examining the endorsements, Dixon, they are able to identify other accounts, other financial institutions with whom you have dealings. If they do not find what they are seeking in this account, they will move on to the others."

"Great," said Dixon. He went quiet again/Stern, in the interim, scribbled a quick draft of a letter to the bank, asking for copies of the subpoena and whatever they produced to the government. As the bankers' lawyers well knew, there were no grounds to prevent the bank from complying.

"This gal is really a pistol," Dixon said. He was speaking apparently of Klonsky. "She wants everything. Margy told me the records they subpoenaed already take up half a room." A few boxes, is what Margy had said to Stern, but he would see for himself. He was going to Chicago next week to review the documents before turning them over to the government. "You know what they call her, don't you?" Dixon asked. "Klonstadt? Have you heard this? The Titleless Wonder." Dixon laughed. On Friday nights at Gil's, within whose mock-elegant foil walls the federal practitioners gathered to pass information about ongoing trials and the tribulations of practice, Stern had heard the nickname.

That kind of emel humor had never been much to his taste.

Dixon was deeply aggrieved. Aggravated. Hounded. Ms. Klonsky's

resourcefulness exceeded his expectations. And in his gruff effort to insist that this vulgarity was funny, Stern, for the first time, detected a familiar tone. Stern had listened to it for decades. The willies or the creeps.

Call it what you like. It was the sound of incipient internal corrosion, of inner fortifications giving way.

That abandoned edge in Dixon's voice touched Stern himself with the cold trickle of something close to fright.

Clearly, given his new knowledge of the prosecutor's nickname, Dixon had found himself unable to obey Stern's advice not to talk about the investigation. Instead, in the steam bath at the club, or in some corner of the locker room where he usually talked grain prices or the girls on the floor he'd like to screw, Dixon had bellied out his troubles to somebody--a lawyer probably, given the information he had retrieved. One could only hope it was someone discreet.

"Do you know what the latest is?" Dixon asked. "I'm not supposed to have heard this, but two FBI agents have been up at Datatech all week looking over records on one of the MD accounts. I picked that up today."

Stern made a deeper sound. No wonder Dixon was feeling surrounded. Datatech was Dixon's data-processing vender, Which prepared the computer tabulations on all of MD's accounts.

"Which account, Dixon?"

"The house error account."

"What is that, please?"

"Just what it sounds like. Where we clear up mistakes.

Customer wants to buy two cars of herons and we buy him corn instead. When we notice what we've done, we'll buy him beans and move the corn into the house error account, so we end up owning the corn instead of the customer."

"And the government wants the records of this account?"

"Better than that. The jokers asked Datatech to Put together a special computer run. They just want errors made on trades on the KCFE." The Kindle County Futures Exchange.

"Kindle?" asked Stern.

"Right. It doesn't make sense, does it??"

"No," answered Stern simply. The customer trades about which the government had been subpoenaing information previously had all been executed on the Chicago Exchange.

The errors which the government now wished to examine arose, according to Dixon's information, from trades placed on the smaller exchange here. It was like investigating transactions on the New York Stock Exchange by requesting records from the Pacific Stock Exchange in San Francisco.

Baffling. But there was something in Dixon's uneasy tenor which suggested to Stern that the government was on the right trail. "From whom do you hear these things, Dixon?"

About the FBI at Datatech?"

"I got that on the QT. They fouled their britches over at Datatech when they saw the subpoena. I pay those jagoffs three hundred thousand dollars a year, and now they promise to keep this a secret from me."

"Just so," said Stern. "But you have reason to believe in the accuracy of this information?"

"A young lady," said Dixon finally. "I've known her for some time. She wouldn't give me any malarkey. I promised this wouldn't come back on her. I don't want Titless hearing about it."

"Of course." For Dixon, like the others on the exchanges, his word given was exalted. To someone's back a knife could be freely applied, but a deal made eye to eye could not be broken.

"How long is she going to keep this up, anyway," Dixon asked, "what's-her-name, Kronstadt?"

"Klonsky," said Stern. "There is no telling."

"Months?"

"Years, in theory."

"Jesus. And they can just go on sending out one subpoena after another? Even to me?"

"If there is any legitimate investigative purpose, yes."

Across the phone lines, Stern heard the little metal click of Dixon's lighter.

"Do I take it you have a particular concern, Dixon?"

"It's nothing," he said. He emitted a heavy breath.

"Can

they get anything with a subpoena?"

"I am not following, Dixon."

"Suppose I have some personal stuff. Can they subpoena that?"

Stern waited. What was Dixon telling him?

"Where are these private items housed, Dixon?"

Stern could hear his brother-in-law drawing on his cigarette, weighing how much to admit.

"My office. You know. There's a small safe. It fits in the bottom of my credenza."

"And what is in it?"

Dixon made an equivocal sound. "Generally," said Stern.

"Personal," said Dixon. "Stuff."

Stern ran his tongue along his mouth. Dixon needed no education in being less chatty. At times, there was a peculiar fellowship between Stern and his brother-in-law.

Dixon was a clever man with a winning sense of humor; it was easy at moments to enjoy his company. He and Stern attended ball games together; engaged in such athletic competitions as Stern could manage. Both men were lovers of gadgets, and there were two stores on East Charles which they visited only together, one afternoon a year. And yet there had always been absolute boundaries, guarded by some rumbling unspeaking rivalry, disapproval, distrust. Stern was content to let Dixon leave him often in the dark. He did not want a rundown on Dixon's illicit rendezvous or his borderline business practices. Over the years, this relation of lawyer and client had proved more agreeable to both of them than some jovial effort to

feign any kind of filial intimacy. Stern asked only what the law in its rigors and proprieties demanded, and Dixon listened carefully and answered narrowly, and as he liked.

"Are we speaking of truly personal materials, . Dixon?

Items which are yours alone and not the corporation's, which were prepared outside the corporation and to which you do not give corporate personnel access?"

"Right. Can they get that with a subpoena?"

Stern pondered. He never liked providing these kinds of saddleback opinions. The client was always holding on to some detail which changed everything.

"In general, you cannot be compelled to produce personal items, absent a grant of immunity. That is not likely to occur at this point in the investigation. A search warrant,

of course, is another matter."

"A search warrant?"

"These investigations of brokerage houses are sometimes most unpleasant. Depending on what the prosecutors are seeking, they may find it convenient to attempt to grab up all your records at once. If they start in the office and believe items are missing, your home would be next."

"I better move this stuff?. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Only if you're concerned about it falling into the government's hands. If that thought troubles you for some reason, you might think about storing your safe somewhere

less likely to be searched."

"Which is where?"

"How big is it?" Stern asked.

A foot square, Dixon said.

"You could send it here, then. Federal prosecutors are more reluctant, even these days, to search attorneys' offices.

The warrant requires special approval from the Justice Department in

Washington, and the conduct smacks of a violation of the right to counsel. It is very unfdy, from their perspective."

"And how do I get to the safe, if I need something?"

Stern declined to state the obvious. Dixon had already made it clear that he had no wish to share the contents.

"I shall give you a key to the office. Come and look as you like. Or better yet, what about another lawyer Who is not involved in this present matter? Wally Marmon's office would serve excellently." This was the large firm which represented Dixon on the routine business matters that Stern declined to handle, but Dixon grunted at the notion.

"He'll charge me rent," Dixon said, "by the hour. And he'd get too nervous. You know Wally."

On reflection, Dixon was probably correct about that. "If this arrangement makes you uncomfortable, then leave the safe where it is, Dixon. Or take it home. As your lawyer, I prefer to see it here."

It would be best to have Dixon's zone of privacy clearly bounded. Lord only knew where they'd end up if Dixon had continuing access to some black box into which he could stuff any document the government sought whose contents made him uncomfortable. Both the client and the lawyer, could come to substantial grief that way.

Dixon at last said that he would send the safe next week.

"Handle the arrangements yourself," said Stern. "If no one but you knows where the safe is, no one can tell the government where to search for it."

"What does that mean?" asked Dixon.

Stern waited again. He did not want to alarm him. On the other hand.

"Dixon, I must tell you, I am convinced the government has an informant."

"An informant?"

"Someone close to you or the business. The government's information is too precise. The trades. Where you bank. Who your dataprocessing vender is. And there is an odd order to what they are willing to have known. I suspect they are interested in misleading you about their sources of :information."



"I think they're interested in showing how fucking clever they are," said Dixon.

"You must reflect on this matter, Dixon. The identity of this informant could be of great significance to us."

"Forget it, Stern. You don't have the picture.. Every jackal at the Kindle Exchange that's ever wanted to sink his fangs in my hindquarter is probably feeding stuff to those guys." Dixon's tone was bitter as he spoke of his critics and competitors. "And I'll have the last laugh. You mark my words. Just wait," he said. "I'll keep my mouth shut now, because you say I've got to. But when this thing is done, I'll still be standing here. And there'll be some bills coming due."

Dixon was unaccustomed to being vulnerable--or restrained.

The need for both enraged him. He hung on the line a moment longer, with the heavy breath of a bull. His bold promises of triumph and revenge behind him, he seemed to have no more to say. Perhaps he recognized their futility. The government would go on, notwithstanding, demanding his records, scaring his clients, courting his enemies, prying into every worldly connection he valued. Across the distance of two counfles, Dixon seemed to consider his world of dwindling secrets. That was what had always protected him--not his friendships or alliances; he had few--not even his wealth or the power of his personality.

Dixon was like Caliban or God--unknowable. The insult of his present circumstance was profound.

"Just wait," said Dixon once more before he put down the phone.

"DON'T do anything," the woman said at the other end of the line. "I'm bringing you dinner."

"Who is this?" asked Stern. "Helen?"

"Yes, of course, it's Helen. Will that be a bother?"

"I'll just drop it off and go. I have a meeting."

She must have been calling at fifteen-minute intervals, for he had been home only moments.

"You are most kind," said Stern, eyeing the unidenfi-fiable casserole dish

already thawing on the counter. "Come ahead."

So, thought Stern, the female nation heard from, once again. Helen Dudak, of course, probably had no interest in being forward. The Dudaks and the Sterns had been exchanging favors for twenty years. As couples, they had been connected principally by their children. Kate, through most of her life, was the best friend of Helen's oldest, Maxine.

The two families had the same ideas about things that seemed to matter substantially when you were rearing a family: about asking to be excused before leaving the table; the number of sweets allowed in a day; the right age to drive alone or to go out for the evening with a boy. The Dudaks were fine people, principled, with reasonable values, and concern for their children. So the relationship had stood on this solid, if narrow, footing. His knowledge of Helen's inner realm was nodding, at best. Clara had never seemed to regard Miles and Helen as an interesting couple, and in the last few years, in the face of many changes, relations had drifted a bit. Maxine had gone to business school, married, and worked in St. Louis; and Helen had been divorced from Miles Dudak for three years now. She had a wisened-up, funny, independent air, resolved to exceed the bathes and humiliation of the sad circumstance in which her husband of twenty-odd years, the wealthy owner of a box-manufacturing concern, had moved out and, only a few months later, married his thirty-year-old secretary.

From the kitchen window, Stern observed her arriving with a large purse and an armory of aluminum-foil containers. Buy bauxite, Stern thought as he watched her under flag, proceeding to' the front door with the trays pyramided beneath her chin.

"Helen, my Lord, I am one person." Stern unburdened her and showed her to the kitchen. "There's enough here for six.

Sixteen." Peeling the foil wrapper back from a tray of chicken, he was braced by the aroma. Garlic and thyme. Had he been required to wager, he would have bet that Helen Dudak was a good cook. It was part of her image of substance. "You must join me. It would be a pity to see all of this consumed from the freezer. Do you have time for dinner before your meeting? Please stay. I would welcome your company."

Helen faltered, but eventually was persuaded to surrender her coat. Had this

been planned? Stern doubted' it. Helen was not a schemer, although she was clearly pleased to be asked. He took her raincoat to the closet, a fawn-toned garment with a famous label--Miles had not bought his freedom cheaply. She'd already found plates and flatware and was setting the kitchen table when Stern returned. He admired Helen's good sense in not promoting this into a more auspicious encounter in the dining room, but, notwithstanding, there was a certain animated excitement as Helen traveled from the cabinets to the table. Here, they were, people in their middle years. His wife was five weeks dead. But he was single, she was unattached, and because of that, they both seemed strangely, almost painfully enlivened.

And he was interested; there was no concealing that from himself. Since his evening at Fiona's, he was aroused in some measure by every woman he saw. For Stern, it was a disconcerting fixation. As he put it to himself, he had not recently tuned in this channel. Oh, he thought, of course.

He admired a hundred women in a day, just moving about downtown. But he had practiced such deliberate oblivion. He was one of those men glad for middle years, the settled portion of life, when sexual preoccupation could comfortably be left behind without some slur on masculinity. Now he received, almost in spite of himself, an eager, exhilarant message from his own systems. He could not truly envision himself as the companion of another woman--it was much too soon--but he nonetheless cast a somewhat naughty eye on Helen when he went down the corridor to draw a bottle from the wine closet.

She was, all in all, a handsome person--her midriff had given way somewhat, but Stern could hardly be critical on that score--and even if she looked a little rougher/ed by experience, there was something in that which was admittedly attractive. Her hair was reddish, the color of a fox, enhanced somewhat by a coloring agent these days, but drying with age and verging therefore on a kind of unmanageableness. Her legs were well turned; she had no bottom to speak of; her face was large-pored, heavily made up, but in its own way comely. Helen had her well-worn look--humor, anguish, and dignity. Stern's impression was that she had been utterly lost when Miles departed, but she was a strong person, perhaps not an intellect, but well grounded. She had carried on bravely, rightly convinced that she was not deserving of abuse.

"Well, this is an unanticipated pleasure," he said when the meat was set out

before them both. "What did you do to these potatoes, Helen? Really. They are quite remarkable."

Helen described the process. Stern listened carefully. He was fond of potatoes.

She told him about her business. She had been trained. as a travel agent along the way, but longed for something less mundane and had become a convention planner. Large organizations .hired her to arrange sites, hotels, presentations. She worked out of her home, with a fax machine and a telephone console. A rocky start, but now she was well under way. She delivered the tale with good humor,. an entertaining talker and willing to take the lead in maintaining this fragile, convivial air.

The doorbell rang. Glancing through the panes beside the front door, he saw Nate Cawley. Stern seemed to have caught him in a moment of reflection. On the slate stoop, he had turned to look into the wind. He was a smallish man, narrow. His hair was gray and most of it was gone; a few longer hairs stood up straight now in the breeze. Rain was in the offing; late April here was always wet. Nate had mn out without a coat and he jiggled a bit to keep himself warm. He wore a golf cardigan and a pair of blue pd by experience, there was something in that which was admittedly attractive. Her hair was reddish, the color of a fox, enhanced somewhat by a coloring agent these days, but drying with age and verging therefore on a kind of unmanageableness. Her legs were well turned; she had no bottom to speak of; her face was large-pored, heavily made up, but in its own way comely. Helen had her well-worn look--humor, anguish, and dignity. Stern's impression was that she had been utterly lost when Miles departed, but she was a strong person, perhaps not an intellect, but well grounded. She had carried on bravely, rightly convinced that she was not deserving of abuse.

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"Welcome, Nate." Helen had stood up from the table in the breakfast nook, and peered down the hall toward Stern and Nate in the foyer. In spite of the distance, Stern attempted the introduction. "Do you know Helen Dudak?"

asked Stern.

"Certainly." A moment of decided awkwardness occurred. Nate did not move. Clearly, he thought he had interrupted, and Stern had an instant aversire response, old-fashioned but strong, that he was not happy to be seen alone with a woman in his home. This was not the message he wanted Nate to take back to Fiona, who would put it out promptly over the neighborhood wire. Stern swung out a hand magisterially, a hammy bit, to gather some forward momentum

"We are in the midst of a splendid repast Helen has provided, Nate. Do you care for some wonderful Chicken Vesuvio, or may I get you a drink?"

"No, Sandy. I just ran over for a second. Fiona said you were looking for me." Nate apologized for being hard to reach. Much, he said, was going on. Yes, indeed, thought Stern. The Lord only knew what Fiona said they had discussed, but clearly she had offered an edited version.

Preoccupied as he seemed, Nate did not wear the predictable air of a man who knew you and his wife had spent a moment commenting on videos of his erection.

Stern showed him to his study, where he had filed the lab's bill.

"Have you any idea what that might have been for?"

"Huh," said Nate. "Westlab." He studied the invoice at length before handing it back. "I don't use them much."

"Apparently, Clara had visited a physician in the last month."

Nate took a second to absorb that. "Where do you get that idea?"

Stern explained the notations on Clara's calendar.

"Frankly, Nate, I assumed it was you. I found no doctor's bills." Nate, a physician and neighbor in the old tradition, often worked on the cuff, billing Clara episodically, if at all. After the meeting in Cal's office, Stern had been through Clara's checkbook carefully. And, necessarily, he had also sifted through the mail. It had occurred to him, he offered, that Clara might have been ill. "Something grave," said Stern, then added, more quietly, "Unendurable."

Nate, mercifully, picked up the thread. A softer look came over him, the gentle eye of a practiced bedside manner.

"No, no, Sandy, there was nothing like that, nothing I know of."

"I see." They faced one another in the study, under a strangely burdened air. Perhaps Nate found Stern's rummaging through his wife's papers unseemly; or he may have been discomforted by Helen's presence. "I was misled, I suppose, by Fiona's mention that you had brought Clara medication from time to time."

"Fiona," said Nate, and a distinct expression of distaste passed by swiftly. It was an error, Stern saw, to have repeated any of her intoxicated blather. "Clara's knee gave her some trouble this winter, Sandy. I dropped off an antiinflammatory."

"Ah," said Stern. The two men continued to look at one another.

"Sandy, why don't I give Westlab a call for you? I'll find out what's cookin'."

"I can do that, Nate."

"Neh," said Cawley. "Let me. They'd be happier to talk to me than you. Assuming they'll talk to anybody. If it wasn't for you guys--" Nate, in his

gentle, familiar way, was about to assail Stern with a doctor's typical complaints about the legal profession and its recent impact on medical practice, but he cut himself off. "You know," he said, "could be just a mistake. I've seen billings. get awful bol-lixed up. Maybe they crossed one Stern with another."

The idea struck Stern as farfetched. Then, just as quickly, it was all entirely clear.

"Oh, my." Stern covered his mouth with one hand. "I have a thought." Clara had received the bill--but not the test.

That would have been, as Nate's point suggested, for someone else--for Kate. Pre-pregnancy. Pre-something. Kate had said that there had been problems along the way. She had probably shared them with her mother, Who, as she often did, would have insisted on helping with the expenses. That was another reason that Kate was so sabered that Clara had died not knowing there had been a medical success--and why no doctor's bill had arrived here. Something rose, something sank, but it all settled in him with the solidity of a correct answer. "I suspect, Nate, this may have had something to do with Katy's pregnancy."

"Oh, sure," said Nate. He brightened considerably. "That must be it." He headed at once for the door, happy to have the matter resolved.

"Perhaps, Nate, if I have further questions, I might ask you to call the lab nonetheless."

"Sure thing," said Nate. "No problem. Just give me a buzz."

On his way out, Nate turned back to wave briefly to Helen.

She still had one hand raised, with a sad look of her own, as Stern approached. She had sat alone, not eating. She seemed to know that whatever spell had loomed was broken.

The conspicuous presence of Clara's mystery, the many complications were obvious about him. He was a fish in a net. Nothing now would change that.

"I apologize," said Stern. "Questions I was required to ask. He was Clara's doctor."

"Mine, too," said Helen.

"Ah," said Stern, "so that is your acquaintance." Helen began to eat. There was music from the radio, Brahms. He sat in the caned chair with a full sense of his weight, his earthly substance. As so often, grief was here in its essential character.

"Had Clara been sick, Sandy? I didn't know that."

"Apparently not." He explained briefly. The bill. His thoughts. Helen, who had known them both so long, nodded with each word, eyes quick, intent.

"I see," she said. They were both silent.

"I have no idea why this occurred, you know," Stern told her abruptly. To the thousands of other inquiries, tacit and overt, he had maintained a dignified silence which implied, not falsely, that he found the subject too painful for discussion. Helen Dudak, however, was too trustworthy a soul, too familiar, to be dealt with so briefly. "I take it people talk about this?" He had wanted to ask someone that question for some time.

"Would you believe me if I told you they didn't?" He smiled warmly. "And they say what?"

"Dumb things. Nice things. Who knows about anybody's life, Sandy? Really. At the core. People are baffled, naturally.

No one is quite certain they knew Clara. She was very contained."

"Just so," said Stern softly. He allowed himself the traces of a wry expression.

Helen, wisely, took her time with the remark.

"You must be very angry," she said at last.

To the wheel of seething emotion, the bristling anxiety, the dense miserable sensations, Stern had not heretofore put that name. But of course she was correct. Buried deep in his bones, like a dose of radiation, he could feel the burning away of intense high-level emotion, and anger was the right word for it. It was not a feeling with which he had taken much conscious comfort throughout his life. Being the son of his mother, the brother of Jacobo, he had grown up believing that anger was an emotion allotted to others by prior arrangement. He was the steady one. Now a certain

decorousness made him reluctant to fully agree.



"I suppose," he said.

"It would be understandable," Helen continued. Chewing slightly, he shook his head.

"That, however, is not what predominates," he said. "No?"

He shook his head again. The powerful volatility of his emotions, the way they were always at hand, made it impossible to observe his usual reserve.

"I doubt myself," he told her. "I failed," he said and, with the words, and their deadly accuracy, felt as if he had shot himself through with an arrow. "Quite obviously."

"And what about her?" asked Helen. She looked up adroitly, over her fork, but he could see that she was measuring her questions, testing the regions of tenderness to see how far she might probe. It was, Stern decided, an impressive performance.

"Did Clara fall?"

Helen did not answer. She looked on while he considered the question. He understood her suggestion, but he was unable to say aloud the word somehow hanging here like smoke: betrayal. The mystery of it was deeper than that to him, and more complicated. He realized then, for the first time, how much he had dedicated himself to making no judgments in this matter for the present. Again, wordlessly,

he wobbled his head: something not to know or to say. Helen waited an instant.

"You can't let everything rest on the end, Sandy." Stern nodded: That was a thought, too.

"I speak from experience. You accomplished a great deal with one another. And you made a marvelous couple."

"Oh, yes," said Stern. "I loved to speak, and she did not."

Helen smiled, but leaned back to regard him from a distance.

"You're too harsh with yourself." She took his wrist and he reacted, even in this mood, to the sensations of a female touch. "How good a friend am I? May I make a suggestion?"

Her hands were tan and strong, the nails unpolished. "Are you seeing someone, Sandy?"

Lord, again! What was contemporary morality? "Helen, certainly not."

Looking into her plate, Helen Dudak suppressed a smile. "I meant a therapist."

"Ah," he said. His initial impulse was categorical, but he answered simply, "Not for now."

"It might help," she said.

"Is that an informed opinion?"

"Of course. A middleaged divorce is harder than a hockey match."

Her delivery was lighthearted and Stern smiled. He could see that Helen was from the self-improvement school of life. Very much a citizen of the late century. She believed in the power of Will, or, as it was thought of in contemporary

terms, self-determination. Existentialists one and all, we could be whomever we chose, with proper instruction.

Something about yourself that bugs you? Chuck it out. Let the shrink refurnish. A deeply conservative strain in Stern distrusted these conclusions. It was all a good deal harder to bear than that. He could see that Helen and he subscribed to different philosophical services. He chose a joke as a diplomatic exit.

"I shall talk to you, instead."

"Sold," said Helen.

They smiled, celebrating the survival of a difficult instant, but then lingered a few seconds in the gloom.

Helen at last asked about Kate. For the remainder of the meal, they trod reliable ground, speaking of theft children.

At nine, promptly, she stood. She was late for her meeting.

Stern saw her to the door, thanking her lavishly for the meal.

"You are a friend, Helen."

"I mean to be," she answered.

"This was the most pleasant evening I have had in some time." He found, upon saying this, that it was a considerable truth and, out of a sudden swell of gratitude, he added, "We must do it again."

"Let's," responded Helen. They stood looking at one another. He was too new to this business to have realized before he spoke what he had gotten himself into, and now, otherwise at a loss, he took her hand and in the briefest, politest way kissed it.

Helen rolled her eyes as she opened the door,

"Oh, my God," she said. "Charming, charming!" She shook her head and, with her large purse and fawn-colored coat, went off laughing down the walk.

O the distant subdivision where Kate and John had bought a compact suburban home, newly constructed and as weakly made as a child's toy, Stern ventured on occasion for a meal.

This house was so far from the urban center that there were still cornfields about, and the clods ran clear to the front door, as Kate and John had not yet been able to afford sod. In the front lawn, near the parkway, a single skinny sapling stood, its tiny leaves riffling like a fringe whenever there was wind.

Kate scurried about her father, attempting to comfort him, but as ever, the best of her attention went to her husband.

Every now. and then, the newspapers reported on twins so

preoccupied with one another that they developed a language of their own. So, too, Kate and John. They were forever lost in their small sounds: whispers, murmurs, Katy's wispy laugh. A universe of two. Stern had known other couples like this, tuned in to each other's peculiarities like some strange music, and high on it like Opium smoke. They had been together since high school and, so far as Stern could tell, were the only man or woman the other had ever really known. This na'ivete had its own beauty. To one another they were the entire realm of otherness: Adam and Eve. Yin and Yang.

It was difficult to imagine the entry of a child into this world of two dimensions, but Kate's pregnancy, if anything, seemed to have intensified the

thrill of love. John raced behind his wife's chair to help her up, kissed her with abandon as they slid into the kitchen, clearing plates.

Watching his daughter's dark eyes fast upon her husband, Stern felt strangely affected by her love for him. Poor John was a schlepper of the first order. His most important achievement to the world at large would probably remain having been the best tight end in a decade at a high school that traditionally fielded mediocre teams. The higherpowered jocks, with greedy visions of agents, bonuses, and the NFL, had literally run over him at the University of Wisconsin. John, the coaches said, had the size and talent, but not the drive. This was hardly news to Stern, who had come back with his own scouting report years before. But here was an important late addendum: he treated his wife with unfailing kindness. In a hard world, where decency seldom thrived, a realm full of the brutish, the harsh--or even those well-meaning but emotionally landlocked, like Stern himself--John was a standout, a man of gentle disposition and great tenderness. If he had failed to find in himself a killer's ruthlessness, he had discovered something else, which he nurtured with Kate. Who among us might not be willing to trade?

As John trekked through the yard with the evening trash, Stern stood with his daughter in the kitchen. She and John had just finished washing up the dinner dishes and she sopped a cloth.

"Cara, I have been meaning to ask," said Stern. "An item came through in the mail the other day which made me wonder if there was any recent occasion when' your mother went with you to the doctor?"

Kate looked at him uncomprehendingly. Even in sandals, she was an inch or two taller than he, dark and beautiful, with her straight hair and perfect features.

"Recently?"

"Within the last few months."

"No. Of course not. I told you, she had no idea."

"But perhaps--is there no way your mother might have received the bill for one of your tests, some procedure?"

"Daddy, what in the world?" Kate had stepped back from the sink. She

remained tense and emotional at any mention of Clara, and he suddenly thought better of going on. She had provided a sufficient answer.

He touched her on the shoulder to soothe her and stepped into the family room, still furnished with boxes and card chairs, and joined John, who had gone straight to the TV set upon reentering the house. At these instants Stern found himself full of almost religious ratitude for the invention of television sports, which could occupy the few moments he felt obliged to pass with his son-in-law.

Tonight, the Trappers, the tri-cities' traditionally woeful big-league baseball team, were on the air, and Stern and John swapped thoughts about the prospects for the season just under way. The story with the Trappers was always the same: young stars traded away when their salaries increased, pitchers who hit it big as soon as they escaped the Trappers' pocket-sized park. Stern, who had made baseball one of his most passionate studies in learning the American way of life, enjoyed his son-in-law's insights.

John had an athlete's eye for the nuances of physical performance: the shortstop threw off-balance. Tenack, the magnificent right fielder, was trying, as he did each April, to upper-cut the ball. Wearing glasses for his TV viewing, John poked his frames back up on his nose from time to time as the images of the green field floated on his lenses. He appeared transfixed, childlike, still bound heart and soul by the grace and glory of the fields of play; when John watched, you could almost hear the hot roar of the stadium crowd in his ears.

Long moments passed while Stern awaited John's occasional observations, to which he could add some knowing comment of his own. Stern rarely asked John about work; it had become clear long ago that he would never answer honestly, fearing that his responses, which were likely to verge on complaint, would find their way to Dixon. John had had a slow start at MD, passing bewilderedly through the accounting and compliance departments before finding a home on the order desk, where, Stern took it, his performance was still not stellar. They sat on either side of the glowing screen, John's zombie-like attention to the game undoubtedly increased due to the presence of his father-inlaw, while Stern recalled similar dumbstruck reactions, at the same period in his life, to his own imposing father-inlaw, Henry Mittler. In these reflections, he felt for John, especially since at heart Stern always remained

half ready to revile him for not being better, smarter, more adept, more able to rouse in Kate something laudable, rather than, as it seemed, allowing her to drift to rest on the soft seabed of the commonplace.

A sufficient time passed to suit all proprieties, he bade John good night and, ready to be on his way, found Kate in the kitchen. Seeing her, though, it occurred to him once more how vexed his last exchange with her had left him. If the bill from Westlab was not for Kate, then what? He was back to point zero.

"Katy," he said, releasing her from his parting embrace, "are you quite sure there was no bill for you that might have come to your mother?"

"Daddy, there is no way. What's wrong with you?" She looked at him, incredulous, and he shrugged, somewhat defensively.

It had seemed so obvious, so characteristic of Clara that the children were involved.

With the next thought, Stern, halfway across the kitchen, stood absolutely still.

He knew now.

He had blundered past it. But he knew now why Clara had received no doctor's bill; why Peter had been so overwrought that day about the prospect of an autopsy.

Because it was he, Stern's son, who was the physician, Peter who had ordered the lab test, and Peter who remained, even now, resolved to honor some prior commitment of confidence he had made to his mother. Stern understood the need to maintain professional secrets, but he could not help suspecting that his son would enjoy this advantage over his father, having exclusive hold, in the end, of one last scrap of her life. Might the others know as well?

"Katy." She was facing him, her attention evidently drawn by her father's abstracted look. "Do you know anything of your mother receiving medical care from Peter?"

"What?" Her mouth had fallen open a bit and her face was rigid with alarm. She obviously took the suggestion as baroque. The question that rose in her eyes was easily discerned: Was her father derailed, off his trolley, losing

hold? She looked gravely concerned that these ideas, wild and improbable, were coming from him, one after another.

Was he wrong? The kitchen light seemed suddenly intense.

For the first time in his life, he felt a sensation of dislocation, which he knew, way, found Kate in the kitchen. Seeing her, though, it occurred to him once more how vexed his last exchange with her had left him. If the bill from Westlab was not for Kate, then what? He was back to point zero.

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Was he wrong? The kitchen light seemed suddenly intense.

For the first time in his life, he felt a sensation of dislocation, which he knew, instinctively, was typical of the elderly. Kate was correct. Given over to his preoccupations, he had lost his bearings. What had happened to his lifelong habits of caution, tact, discretion? He could not simply mn with this knuckleheaded notion and confront his son. If Peter was wrongly accused by his father of even the most wellzintenfioned manipulations, his predictable response would be outrage; the reverberations would shake what little family structure remained. He would have to hunt down Nate Cawley once again and ask him to make inquiries at the lab. That was the best and most discreet alternative.

"An idle thought," he said to Kate. "Allow it to pass." He took his daughter's hand and kissed her on the temple. He thanked her for dinner and waved off her inquiries about whether he was all right. But he found himself increasingly irritated as he walked into the mild night. Driving along the highway in his Cadillac--this was his car, a Sedan de Ville;

Clara's had been towed away by the dealer in part of that procession of changing scenes and backdrops at the time of her death which he recalled now like a cinema montage--he felt the same rise of difficult emotion. He was tiring of Clara's gruesome surprises, her hidden world, with enormous sums expended and secret illnesses. In his confusion, he had now even begun to suspect his children. This was her fault, Stern thought suddenly, her fault! The declaration almost rang in him.

Still in this mood, he stopped near home at a convenience store. Certain household tasks remained beyond him. Claudia called in his grocery list from the office and the store obligingly delivered the bags to the back door. But there were always items missing: cream cheese, milk. He never had enough orange juice. Waiting in line, he observed with admiration two young black women who were ahead of him, in halter tops despite the chill of spring, talking high-speed bebop slang, disarmingly casual With their obvious sexuality. He felt again the high-voltage transmissions of sensual energy. What was all this? he wondered. Signs of life, he told himself; natural, he thought, but there was something wild and unpredictable in this urgency. He was so deeply stimulated by virtually any female. Was it some racist conceit



to think that he would be as strange as some Martian to these women? He imagined, nonetheless. What really was the look and feel of those heavy brown breasts, smooth-skinned, heavy-nippled? His imagination rushed on to these thoughts. He stood unmoving in the store, his mouth slightly agape, aroused.

Back in the parking lot, he sat in the car, a bit shocked at himself. How could he really? You would think, observing his adolescent eagerness, that he'd had no passionate life with Clara, which was not true. As a young man he had craved her more, in fact, after they were married than before, when so much else seemed to be involved and even as age and time had tempered the pulse of things, that hunger had never been wholly lost. A man and a woman in the end were always that to each other, opposites and mysterious, and in the act, with its joining and exploring, things more magical and solemn than the most ancient ritual forever resided. Certain other couples, his age and older, made allusions to the extinction of these impulses. Dick Harrison, a neighbor, remarked to Stern one night, 'I hold it up, the sunlight passes through.' But three or four times a month Clara and he struck this fundamental compact-creaky, lumpy old bodies as she said, moving toward each other across the bed and, as ten thousand times before, melting together. Lately, he had tried to recall the last occasion and found, almost certainly, that it had been more than a month 'before her death. One more sign of what he should have noticed. But he was on trial, fraught and distracted, and who after the years does not know better than to foment small crises? They move apart and then rejoin. The image is of some X-ray shadow, a form in negative space; opening and breathing, closing, clinging, like the wings of a moth in the dark, the walls of the heart.

Now that same woman had turned him loose in late-century America, where standards for sexual performance were touted on the covers of the magazines sold at the checkout stand right there behind the broad store window. Was he prepared for this? The uncomfortable truth was that he had no past to brag about, no comforting memory of the wild oats sown by young Alejandro Stern. Geography, as he thought of it, had been against him. Argentina, with its gauchos and machos and so forth, probably would have been a more propitious place to pass his adolescence. Male lust was better accepted there, a legacy of the nation's Italian and Spanish forebears. His brother, even at the age of fifteen and sixteen, was an impressive roue. He had many

women, or at least claimed to: whores, Indian girls, older women lusting for youthful energy. Stern could still clearly recollect listening awestruck to Jacobo's account of his initiation, at the age of thirteen, with a very thin young woman attired in a black strapless evening gown, who had met him in the lobby of the Roma, a seedy downtown hotel in B.A. Months later, Jacobo contended he recognized her on the street in a habit, walking with her sunken eyes, amid a row of novices leaving the Convent of Santa Margarita.

Stern, forty-five years after the fact, found the thought of this woman as imagined, with her sunken eyes and small breasts, disturbingly provocative.

But his youth in America in the fifties had contained nothing so exotic. The Puritans reigned once more here, and sexuality seemed to be a particularly unbecoming trait for a dark foreigner, a suspect impulse like fellow traveling.

Lust was one more wild hunger that he willingly constrained for future satisfaction, even with Clara, with whom he would not have slept before their wedding but for her insistence that they were more likely to enjoy the honeymoon if they could leave this particular anxiety behind. And so, two weeks before the ceremony, in Pauline Mitfrier's parlor full of Oriental brocades and Viennese glass, with all the lights still burning for fear that someone in the house might notice, Clara had wriggled from her girdle and her hose, lifted her skirt, and lain back on her mother's red divan. For many reasons, that had struck Stern as an act of astonishing trust. And he? He was terrified and, because of that, also somewhat affronted, angered by the indignity 'of these shabby mechanics.

Thirty-one years later, those emotions remained real to him, near at hand in the dark auto, the peculiar residue of a night of high feeling in which he had been confused and stimulated and put out. But he had proceeded; he remembered that as well. He had fiddled interminably to release his erect penis from the bindings of his trousers, and Clara Mittlet had become the first--the only--woman in his life.

Stern had first seen Chicago when he was thirteen, near the end of the overland passage his mother and Silvia and he had made from Argentina. That journey had been impelled by his mother's involvement with a man named Gruengehl, a lawyer who had been showing her great interest since, it seemed, the moment of his father's death. Gruengehl was a figure in one of the few anti-Peronist unions, and following his jailing, his friends and

colleagues had swept into his mother's house to help them pack, their mute for exile already arranged. In 1947, with displaced persons throughout Europe claretring for entry to the United States, and Argentina's diplomatic ties to the U.S.

questionable after the war, legal immigration was problematic. Instead, they traveled by train to Mexico City, and then were driven across the border, looking like one more family of braceros. In Brownsville they boarded a train North.

Stern even so young, had known that Argentina was not his destiny. His father, a physician, had left Germany in 1928 and forever mourned that the Nazis prevented his return.

Papa always unfavorably compared life in Argentina to what he had known before: the quality of goods, of music, of building materials, of people was sadly lacking in his eyes. Jacobo, whom Stern so admired, had become an ardent Zionist and preached from the time Stern was nine or so the glory of Eretz Israel. When Stern stepped off the train in Chicago, he believed his life had started. They went on to Kindle County, where cousins of his father's were waiting, but Chicago would always be what he thought of as America, with its massive, soot-smeared buildings of brick and stone and granite, full of smokestack arms and sullen, teeming throngs, the land of Gary Cooper, of steel, skyscrapers, automobiles. He recognized in every face that day the striving.children of immigrants.

More than four decades later, Mr. Alejandro Stern returned, a man of prominence with his own troubles. On the fifth floor of the Chicago Exchange, he sat in the walnut conference room at Maison Dixon, thumbing through documents he could not comprehend. Outside, the vast trading room of MD burned on, eighty young men and women, casually dressed, each behind a telephone console blinking with the action on twenty lines, and a pillar of cathode-ray tubes. Across these glowing screens darted figures, flashing by briefly like fish in the sea, a matrix of dollars and cents, beans and oil, fast markets and bulletin items, high, low, open, volume, change. The telephones chirped like crickets, and different voices occasionally gained ascendance. "Anybody here want to buy old bonds at 6 plus? .... It's moving, it's moving."

"I'm going to hedge you up on the D-marks."

Between calls, these young people, working customer and managed accounts, would offer to the entire room a hip, sardonic commentary. One fellow whined in a mock accent of some kind, "Oh, the market, she is just like a woo-man, first she wants you, then she don't, she won't never make up her mind." An attractive young blonde beside him inclined her middle finger in response.

"Got it all figured out?" Margy Allison, Dixon's chief operating officer, had returned for a moment to check on his progress. She had been in this business most of her adult life, almost exclusively for Maison Dixon, and, apparently, still found it thrilling. Nothin' to it, she seemed to suggest, as she motioned to the stacks of paper around Stern--even a silly old Okie gal could git it. Margy loved to do routines like that, for the amusement of her friends up North. An M.B.A., she preferred to come on like an oilfield roughneck. 'Mar-gee,' she would say, when introducing herself. 'Hard g. Hard girl.'

"I believe we shall need an accountant," Stern told her.

Margy made a face. She was the paymaster in these parts and a legend for her tightfistedness. Every time she signed a check, she told you what a dollar used to buy in the country.

"I can put all that stuff together for you."

She was capable, no question, but unlikely to find the time. With the advent of overseas trading, and night sessions of the markets, Maison Dixon was open twenty-four hours a day, and there were problems to solve at every juncture. At her door at any hour, there was usually a line: clerks and secretaries and boys up from the floor in the unstructured jackets with the large square plastic badges on the pockets. Stern, accordingly, told her she could not afford to spend the hours this job would require.

"If you're billin' us your usual hourly rate, Sandy, I can afford a lotta time." She smiled, but her point, of course, was made. "I'm sure you got one of those hotel rooms like you usually do when we're payin, big enough to hold the opera with the elephants. We can take this whole mess there and look it over. Assumin a' course"--Margy hooded her shadowed eyes--"you're willing to chance bein alone with me." She cast herself in a vampy role, a female sexual braggart. It was part of her lov routine, coming on tough and crude, like the kind of woman you imagined finding smoking a cigarette at the bar

of some mid-city lounge.

Stern had no idea where the truth resided, but she had laid it on thick with him over the years, perhaps as a way to flatter him, or simply on the assumption he was harmless.

Now, of course, the mere suggestion inflamed his new libidinal itch. Being himself, he changed the subject.

"Do any of these records, Margy, have anything to do with the house error account?" He had Dixon's recent phone call in mind.

"They want that now, too?" Margy, nearly as irritated as Dixon by the government's persistence, went off at once to find a clerk to gather the records. This was why he traveled to the documents, Stern thought. Something else was always needed.

Stern took it that, sometime in the past twenty years, Margy had been one of Dixon's women. She was far too attractive not to have drawn Dixon's attention. But it had not gone along happily. The amount of surmise and conjecture which Stern had quietly made about this matter surprised even him. Gradually, he had filled in the blanks, tested these guesses against what was observable, and taken them as true. He had long assumed that Margy had waited interminably for Dixon to leave Silvia; that she was somehow the focus of the crisis that had erupted years ago when Silvia briefly ejected Dixon from the household; and that she had declared the struggle lost when Dixon moved back in with his wife. For a year or two, Margy had disappeared to work for another house. But there really was no way to run MD without her. Even Silvia would have recognized that.

Instead, she was offered Chicago as a domain of her own, and the title of president of half a dozen of the subsidiaries, not to mention an enormous annual salary. So she had labored under those terms, devoted to Dixon's business, and probably still to him, the deprived and rejected heroic woman of one of the country ballads she had grown up humming. That was whom Margy reminded you of--those downhome ladies who stood onstage, with their twangy voices, their coiffed hair and stage makeup, sad and glamorous, hard and wise.

Eventually, the clerk arrived. The records of the house error account were laid on the table with the rest. Stern glanced through the papers, but he knew

he was getting nowhere. Every time Stern found himself facing a room full of documents, he cursed the avarice that led him to do what was decorously referred to as white-collar work, and to a clientele of con artists in suits and ties who hid their crimes by laying waste to forests.

Margy reappeared in time, placing her face against a brightly manicured hand and leaning languorously on the metal door-frame. His bemusement was apparent, but Margy smiled indulgently; she had always liked Stern.

"You want me to help you out? I really am willin. We'll do like I said. Get the hell out of here. Gimme fifteen minutes. ' '

It was more than an hour and a half, but eventually one of the messengers had brought down four transfer cases of documents and loaded them into Margy's car. She tore off down the Loop streets for the Ritz. She handled her automobile, a red foreign model, like a stock-car driver. His mother had been high-strong, hysterical. Clara was soft and dignified. That, to Stern, comprised the familiar range for female behavior. This woman, if truth be told, was stronger than he was. She could sprint an obstacle course faster or hold out longer in the face of torture. Watching her behind the wheel, he felt admiring and daunted.

This evidence of Margy's capacities was, Stern suddenly thought, instructive about Dixon. It was a mistake to see him merely as some smutty conquistador seeking notches on his gun, butterflies for his collection. Dixon valued women, trusted them, counted on their counsel. In a woman's presence, his charm and humor, and an enormous, almost electrical human force beset him. Even Stern, whatever his innate sense of rivalry, felt he liked Dixon more. And women responded to Dixon's attention. It was one of the symmetries of nature.

Of course, this interest was not detached. With Dixon, one was always well advised to remember the base elements.

The markets, the pits, tense, fast, trying, were full of coke-heads and types lost in the bottle; Dixon's release was more natural: fucking. The quickest zipper in the West, someone had once called him. Not that Stern was often treated to the details. He was the brother-in-law, Silvia's blood ally, and Dixon had better sense than to test Stern's loyalties. But no one, least of all Dixon, could make a complete secret of so persistent a preoccupation.

Occasionally, his pure delight overcame him, and he confided to Stern, as he did to so many other men. Dixon, for example, engaged in a personal sport in which he kept track of the exact number of women he saw in a day who inspired his most basic fantasies. 'Thirty-one,' he'd say to you, as you were greeted by a hotel clerk. 'Thirty-two,' when he looked out the window to see a woman getting on a bus. At the Rose Bowl one year, amid the coeds and cheerleaders, he claimed to have reached two sixty-three by half-time, despite giving complete attention to the game.

Usually, the extent of Dixon's interest was less amusing.

Stern had been with him at the airport, passing through the metal detector, when Dixon emptied his pockets into the tray meant to receive valuables and tossed in a package of prophylactics as naturally as a pack of gum. This was a few years ago, when such items were still not the subject of polite discussion. From subsequent commentary, Stern took it that in these matters of personal hygiene, as in so many other things, Dixon was a pioneer, meticulous about.

protecting himself long before the current mania. But the security guard, a young woman, reddened noticeably far more horrified than if Dixon had pulled a knife. Even Dixon, walking toward the airport gate, was chagrined. 'I should just have my thing coated in plastic.' Like a membership card or a snapshot. Neither abstinence nor restraint apparently suggested themselves as alternatives.

Witnessing these misadventures, Stern attempted to evince no interest. But he paid attention. Who wouldn't? It 'sometimes seemed as if he could recollect the details of each one of Dixon's randy stories. And Dixon, never one to miss a point of vulnerability, had made note of Stern's penchant long before. Once, when the two of them were traveling in New York, Dixon carried on with special animation with a young waitress, a smooth-featured young Puerto Rican woman of haunting beauty who seemed to be responding to Dixon's sly smiles and lascivious humor. He watched her trail away from the table and caught in Stern a look not much different from his own.

'Do you know what it feels like to touch a woman that age?'

'Dixon, please.' 'It's different,' 'Dixon!'

Stern recollected that he took his knife and fork to what was on his plate with particular vigor, chewing with bovine single-mindedness. But when he

glanced up, Dixon was still watching, shrewd and handsome, made merry by the sight of the disturbance he had caused.

At the hotel, Margy made herself at home. She had kicked off her shoes before the bellman had dropped the cases, and .threw the straw-colored silk jacket to her tailored suit on the bed. Grabbing a menu, she called room service for dinner, then ack of gum. This was a few years ago, when such items were still not the subject of polite discussion. From subsequent commentary, Stern took it that in these matters of personal hygiene, as in so many other things, Dixon was a pioneer, meticulous about.

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she declared. Stern asked for sherry, but they had none, and so he drank Scotch with Margy.

As Stern began emptying the document cases, she took his hand.

"So how you doin, Sandy Stern?" She had a sweet solicitous look, seated on the bed. No mention had been made of Clara's death; Stern had wondered if she even knew. Now, at once, she seemed soft enough to cry on, with the beckoning availability of an open field. He was never quite sure what to make of her. She had an imposing appearance, the kind other women referred to as 'put together.'" Her hair was frosted and curled; she was expensively dressed.

Her eyebrows were penciled so that they extended almost to the corners of her eyes, lending her the mysterious look of a Siamese cat. She was a large, handsome woman, strongly built, with a pleasant, expansive bottom--something happened across Margy's hips that Stern, for whatever reason, had found notable for a number of years, watching her march about in her tweed skirts or bend over a cabinet.

She was bright and ambitious; in her career, she'd moved from secretary to top executive. But she had a look of being written on by life. I am the blank slate. Inscribe.

The message left was sad.

"I am making do, Margy," Stern said. "There have been better times, of course. It seems to be a matter of adjustment. Day by day."

"That's right," said Margy. She nodded. You could tell that she regarded herself as an expert on tragedy, well informed. "You are a sweet fella, Sandy. It's always the ones that don't deserve it that get all of life's troubles. '

This country formulation made Stern smile. He looked at Margy, slumped somewhat and sitting on the bedside in her stocking feet.

"I shall survive," he said. Even this prediction, he recognized, struck some note of improvement.

"Shore," she told him. After a second, she dropped his hand. "Life goes on. You're gonna have all those softhearted old gals just hovefin around pretty soon, so you don't feel so lonely. You know, widows and divorcees just

stopping to say Hi, hope you ain't too blue, on their way home from the beauty parlor."

Margy always thought she had everybody's number. Stern laughed out loud. In spite of himself, he recalled Helen Dudak's visit. Even Margy, it seemed, was more flirtatious than she would have been two months ago. In any event, he was unaccustomed to this kind of attention. Women had always found him solid and charming in a social way, but he had never sensed any allure.

They worked for some time before dinner arrived. Stern stacked the documents on the carpeting in the categories called for by the subpoena and showed them to her. She lay casually on the bed, chin down, shoes off, tossing her legs around girlishly. She had found a can of pistachio nuts in the minibar, and she pried them open with her bright fingernails, the shells making a tinny drumming noise as each hit the bottom of the wastebasket. Arriving with dinner, the room-service waiter rolled in a small cart and lifted the sides to form a table. Margy had ordered wine, too. The waiter attempted to pour Stern a glass, but his head was whirling already from the Scotch.

She threw the documents down and began as soon as the waiter lifted the steel warming top on her dish, eating robustly. People teased her, she said, about how fast she ate, but she had grown up with four older brothers and had learned better than to wait. Done, she threw her napkin down on the bed and pushed herself back.

"So what-all is this thing about?" she asked. "I can't get much out of Dixon."

Stern, with his mouth full, shook his head. He was enjoying his meal, lingering. He seldom of late had anything worth eating at this hour, when he preferred it.

"You think he got his toe in the bear trap? That old boy is too smart to let them catch him." Margy, like anyone else who knew Dixon well, did not presume that he walked straight lines. They all knew better.

"My concern," said Stern, "is not so much with Dixon's discretion as with that of others." Margy cocked her head, not comprehending. "From the recision with which the government is moving, I suspect they have an informant."

"Those Exchange compliance types," said Margy, "they do a lot with their computers."

"That is what Dixon assumes. But they have too much personal information. I would look to someone who once enjoyed Dixon's confidence. A business colleague." As evenly as he could, Stern added, "A friend." A part of him, on guard, watched her for any telltale response; in this sort of matter, no one was ever above suspicion.

"Naw," said Margy. "I don't think you'll find a lot of folks on the street too eager to take out after Mr. Dixon there. They all heard the story. They know better'n that."

"What story is that?" asked Stern.

"Mean you never heard that?" Margy hooted. She poured more wine for both of them. Stern demurred but picked up his glass as soon as it was filled. It seemed to him she had drunk a great deal, three Scotches before dinner and most of the wine, but you would hardly notice. "This is a great one." She laughed again.

"I am the brother-in-law," said Stern. "over the years, I have no doubt missed many stories."

"You can bet on that," said Mar'gy with a knowing, heavilylidded look. She sat up on the bed, legs crossed, seemingly indifferent to her daytime image of the businesswoman vamp, her touseled hair, heavy makeup, and perfume. Instead, she seemed jazzed up, high, inspired, Stern realized, to be speaking confidentially about Dixon. "Let me tell you about Mr. Dixon Hartnell. Old Dixon, he can take care of himself, Sandy. You remember the IRS thing? You were the attorney, right?"

The problem, as Dixon liked to put it, was that his wife had refurnished, as the cost of readmitting Dixon to the household. When Silvia was done, the decorator presented them with a final bill, not counting payments along the way, for \$175,000; according to the financial records of both Dixon and the decorator, this sum was never paid.

Instead, the decorator; an amiable, high-strung fellow who annually spent every sou that passed through his hands, inexplicably took an interest in the currency futures markets and opened a Maison Dixon account in which an astonishing flurry of activity took place. In a ten-day period, he traded sixty times. When the dust settled, \$15,000 equity was now \$190,000 and change, a clear profit of \$175,000, most of it a long-term capital gain, taxed at two-

fifths the rate it would have been' had Dixon simply written the decorator a check. The IRS spent nearly two years trying to unravel the devices they suspected Dixon of employing--the intervening brokers, the offshore trusts--before giving up. Dixon remained cheerful throughout, while Stern was on pins and needles, having discovered, as the IRS had not, that Dixon's Mercedes dealer and the contractor who had added an addition to his home had also gone unpaid, while experiencing great success as traders of futures in heating oil and cotton, respectively.

"You know how that thing got itself started? You ever hear that tale?" asked Margy.

"I did not receive what I would call vivid detail," said Stern. "As I recall, it was Dixon's position that the Service had received information from an employee. A tip.

Brady? Was that his name?"

"Right. You remember Merle. With this little mustache sort of split in two. He ran all our operations for a while. A computer .wizard, hack-off, hacker, whatever that is."

Margy flapped a hand. "Remember?"

Stern shrugged: vaguely. Dixon's people came and went. So far as Stern recalled, Mefie's departure, in a dispute over a raise, had been oddly timed with the start of the IRS inquiry. Apparently, he had fulminated and delivered threats before he left: What I know, what I can do. He was out to scuttle Dixon's ship.

"My assumption," said Stern, "was that Merle must have been the person who received certain critical' instructions. ' '

"No, no," said Margy,.with an evasive smile. "Dixon isn't the kind to hand anyone a rope. But Brady, you know, he'd look at that little o1' cathode-ray tube. He'd figure out all sorts of everything. That's how he got Dixon's number."

Stern uttered a sound. This made sense. Brady knew enough to make trouble, but not to deliver the coup de grace.

"Anyway fast forward two years. The IRS had done its own proctoscopy on

Dixon--"

"His term," she said. They smiled at one another. Dixon, with his quirks and passions, and his well-concealed inner core, was secret terrain they had both explored. They were initiates. Acolytes. In their shared understanding of this phenomenon, there was a strange intimacy.

"This, as they say back home, this is the good part." Port, she said. "One day Dixon's in the Union League Club in DuSable, and guess who's there? Why, it's ol' Brady. You'd think Dixon'd pick up an ashtray or somethin and bang this boy on the head, but no, sir, he's downright friendly.

Dixon shakes his hand. Tells him how glad he is to see him, too, sorry they lost touch, all kinds of buddy-boy sweettalk. And Brady, you know, he's like everybody else, he never knew whether to smile or pee in his pants when Dixon showed up, he's' quite relieved. Dixon takes his business card. Brady's working as a back office consultant, and Dixon starts sending Brady work, I couldn't believe it when I saw the cheeks, I got on the phone, I said, 'Dixon, what the hell are you doin now?' He just says, you know, 'Leave me be, lady, I know my business.' I figure maybe he's had a character transplant or somethin, he's become forgiving, maybe he's been hearin Billy Graham."

She took a drink and Stern lifted his glass with her. He had never seen this side of Margy before. She was a storyteller in the old tradition. She needed a porch and a jug of corn whiskey. He had a sense, listening to her, of the way she had grown up watching men, admiring them, taken in by them in a certain way. That perhaps was the key to her longtime attachment to Dixon and the swashbuckling privateers of the markets.

"Anyway, next thing I hear, Dixon and Brady are quite chummy again. They're goin out, them and the wives. Brady's one of these types married to a skinny little lady who always wants more. You know what I'm talking about? She's got to make up for something. I don't know what it is. But they're at plays, havin dinner. I tell you. Maybe they went out with you and Clara."

"I never heard a word," said Stern.

"No," said Margy, correcting herself, "I wouldn't think.

Then one day I'm talkin to some old boy, I don't remember who, and he says, 'Word is Brady's comin back to MD to run your operations in Kindle.' Dixon

won't answer me, you know how he gets, but I check, everybody's heard it. Sure enough, word comes from the Kindle office, there's gonna be a big announcement. Dixon sets up this fancy luncheon over at Fina's. He gets all his key people around. ! flew my little Oklahoma fanny in there. You know, we're all sittin there havin a nice time. Then Dixon looks at Brady. 'By the way,' he says, right in front of everyone. Cheerful as a chickadee." Margy took a drink and looked straight at Stern with her bright, hard eyes. "'I fucked your wife last night." Just like that. And he had, too. No doubt about that with good-buddy Dixon. Can you imagine this? He's got eight folks around the table to hear this. Lunch was over before they served the soup. I'm not kiddin. Believe me, that made some ripples around here. So that's why I'm tellin you: nobody's sayin diddlydoo about Dixon."

Stern was quiet. He took the bottle and finished off the wine. "Remarkable," he said at last. He meant it. The story filled him with a peculiar sense of alarm. The truth about Dixon was always uglier than Stern could quite conceive of on his own.

"Ain't it, though. Old Dixon, boy, sometimes I think he oughta have himself a peckerectomy. He's got an unusual way of doin things."

Stern chuckled, but Margy passed him a meaningful look, liquor-loosened and reproving, as if to warn him of the amount he did not understand. This woman, he knew, comprehended things about men and women, about carnality, that were remote from him.

"Let's get goin with these boring old papers." She smiled, sat up, smoothed her skirt and blouse. But she was not quite done. She looked lost for a moment, glancing away.

Somewhere along in the telling, much of her own pain about Dixon had emerged from hiding. Distress had reduced her good looks, brought a wincing closeness to her features.

"That son of a bitch," she said suddenly. She was somehow penetrated by her forlorn tone and the thought of glamorous Margy, here in her forties, with her career and life in the shadow of Dixon's mountain.

Stern reached out and briefly held her hand.

"Well, you're a kindly o1' boy, ain't you?" she asked.

Stern knew what was going to happen now. Now that he'd had enough to drink, he realized that he'd known for hours, since she looked at him that way and asked with apparent disinterest about the women hovering around him. Beneath it all perhaps was the polar tug of loneliness, the sore yearning of the isolated soul, but now, adrift on the ether of the alcohol, he was suddenly filled by the hot itch of anticipation. There was a racing tempo in his hands as he waited for the next move.

He did not have to wait long. Margy reverted for a few moments to the papers; she spoke; mumbled; then suddenly peered at him with a drunken intense look of heat, appetite, disorder. If he had been sober, perhaps he might have found it comic, a woman turning a gaze on him hot enough to scale paint. But he wasn't. He simply held his ground and watched as she stood and then leaned down and kissed him as he sat in the brocaded hotel armchair. Her lips were chapped, and, as he would have imagined, somehow erustexl hard. There was a taste of salt from the meal she had eaten.

"How do you like that?" She laid his head against her breast. Dove-soft. The strong sweet smell of her perfume was all around him, and on his cheek he felt a silky undergarment shifting beneath her blouse. He did not move.

He was certain he would receive further instruction.

She kissed him again, then released him and strode off to the bathroom, the water splashed. Stern moved to the edge of the bed, bracing himself. Dear God, he was drunk. The room had not begun to move, but he sensed that it was unglued, starting to become slippery in the peripheral world just beyond the corners of his eyes. What was the old line? A drop of courage. Well, he felt courageous. He was willing.

The lights went out. Margy was poised by the switch. She wore nothing now but her jasmine-colored silk blouse, which was unbuttoned and parted an inch or two over her chest and hung at the length of a negligee. Her legs were bare, her hair was down, and without her fashionable attire and highheeled shoes, she looked far more delicate. Her skirt and a silky flag of lingerie were bundled in her hand. She tilted her head.

"Well, look who's gettin lucky," Margy said.

Stern turned off the lamp behind him. Moving across the room to meet her, Stern kicked through .two or three piles of records. She was much smaller

than she appeared, an inch or two shorter than he, but solid in his arms. Her mouth was raw and smoky.

How strange and friendly this all seemed. She even drew back at one point to laugh. He swept aside her shirt, touched her breast, and then bent gallantly to kiss the small dark button where his years with Clara had taught him to expect more. Drunk as he was, this was awkward, and they rolled almost at once onto the bed. Body to body, there was in the small details--the texture of flesh, the precise location of elbows and knees--the exciting news of contact with a different female structure, but over him swam, surprisingly, the sensation of something familiar; he was more relaxed at this than he would ever have imagined. It was this old mysterious human thing relived, man and woman, nothing larger than that. She worked off his tie, opened his shirt. Her leg was up over him as she embarked on this enterprise, and almost casually his hand came up to the warm slick arena at her bottom. She had washed there and his fingertips slid in a bit, and this, this ancient sweet warm feel, this! sent a spectacular surge through him so that he suddenly groaned.

In a few minutes they were joined. Margy for her part slid into a transport of her own. Her eyes were closed, and as Stern rolled, she made a peculiar internal hum, pulling herself down into him with every stroke. There was something oddly practiced and isolated about it; Margy knew how to look after herself. Near the end, she put one hand on his butt and held him where she wanted him, dove onto him a final time and then approached the peak and reached it with a terrible tremolo whinny, setting both hands and their long red nails groping in his back. The thought of those crimson-tipped hands pressed into the loose pale flesh of his own back--the image reached him as something remarkably tantalizing, and that, as much as Margy's agitation, the rising pace of her breath, set him off finally, so that he momentarily lost track of her, still struggling against him, and then waked to her, this soft, sweet-smelling woman beneath him going still at almost the same second as he did. She pulled him to her in a kind of gratified, comradely hug. "Terrific," she said, a remark which Stern heard as praise of the process really, rather than him. Her eyes were still closed and she smiled faintly; her makeup was messed. Her familiarity with all this, her comfort in a strange man's arms, was a phenomenon. Somewhere long ago she had vowed to take whatever was to be had for herself.

She kissed him beside the ear and rolled away, grabbing the pillows on



her side of the bed. Familiar as any man's wife, she arranged her rump solidly, so that it found some part of his flank, and then she disappeared into sleep, so quickly that Stern somehow recognized that, more than anything which had gone before, it was this moment of refuge which had been the goal for Margy. To her, he was a man she could calmly sleep beside. In her drowse, she murmured. The light, Stern supposed. He leaned closer to the strange, intimate smell of her, to catch her whisper.

"Oh, God," he said when he heard her, and then embraced her, fit himself to her, and, once the lights were out, slept.

Don't bill us, she had whispered. Don't bill us for the time.

Sometime he woke. He bolted upright, staring blindly in the dark. He had no idea, no inkling where he was, until he recognized a chair where his suit hung and remembered the hotel, Chicago, Margy. He could still feel the weight of her form beside him, but he dared not reach for her. There was a distinct line of pain boring inward from his temple.

He groped for his watch on the bedside table, then realized he could read the hieroglyphics of the blue digital numbers on the clock radio: 3:45. That was not what struck him, though. It was the calendar, also there in smaller figures.

He sat at the edge of the bed, calculating as Margy's heavy sounds came to him in the dark.

Forty, he thought. Since the day he came home to find her.

Forty days, exactly.

When he woke, she was sitting on the bratified, comradely hug. "Terrific," she said, a remark which Stern heard as praise of the process really, rather than him. Her eyes were still closed and she smiled faintly; her makeup was messed. Her familiarity with all this, her comfort in a strange man's arms, was a phenomenon. Somewhere long ago she had vowed to take whatever was to be had for herself.

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When he woke, she was sitting on the bed, legs crossed, wearing his shin. Pillars of photocopied records had, slid into a slatternly mess before her.

Margy's head was on one hand.

"Well, I figured it out," she said. "He's a peckerhead, okay."

Stern, naked, found his shorts beside the bed, and narrowly parted the drapes. The sun had only begun to rise in an overcast sky. He went briefly to the bathroom. There was a woolen feeling in his mouth and head. A hangover?

He groped in his jacket pocket for his reading glasses.

"Now, what is this?"

"House error account doesn't look very good." Margy flopped over onto her belly. Her bottom was bare and her position on the bed pressed up

an.appealing d6colletage. Stern for a second tried to take account of events. He was a widower, in his underwear, engaged in a business conference, and his penis was already growing firm. She picked up a copy of the subpoena and penciled check marks beside four trades, large positions, four different dates. "Now, these guys are gonna move the market, right?"

Perhaps because of the distraction, he was momentarily confused. Then he recalled Dixon's explanation last month: large orders, a thousand contracts at a time, would cause a

sharp movement in the price of the future.

"Supply and demand," said Stern.

"Right," she said. "Now, suppose you got a customer's gonna be comin into the pit with a huge buy order that'll run up prices through the roof. And you're a big peckerhead and wanna make a buck or two. What'd you do?"

Stern thought. "Purebase what the customer intends to 'buy?'"

"Dang right."

"Prior to the customer?"

"Dang right."

"And then sell once the market has risen.."

"You betchum. They got all kinds of names for it. 'Front tannin.' 'Tindin ahead of the customer.'" But they been playin this game ever since there was a market." Margy looked up. Ungroomed, her hair was darker, and her eyes seemed bloated a bit by the short night. She remained, however, a pretty sight, this large hearty woman, smart and energetic. Stern noticed that she had never removed her earrings, little berries of gold.

"I would assume that the compliance staff of the Exchange is alert to this?"

"Shore. Exchange catches you at it, you're out on your keester in a big goddamn hurry. And they're always lookin."

"And how, then, were such precautions avoided here?"

"Error account."

"The error account," said Stern, merely for the sake of repetition. Somehow,

as she snaked along on her belly, the shirt had come away completely from one breast, which rested pale and round on the bedclothes. He had momentarily fallen into their discussion, but this new sight revived other inclinations. Libido was like a rusty gate, he decided; finally open, it was difficult to close. He picked up a piece of paper on the bed and casually hid his erection.

"I gotta give it to ole peckerhead. I'd never have figured this one. The house error account is where we clean up mistakes. Right? Sometimes we buy or sell a contract on one commodity, customer wanted another. We buy three cars, customer only asked for two. Any dumb ol' mistake. Account number isn't right or somethin. Soon as somebody notices the error, down on the floor or in accounting or when the customer complains, trade gets moved to the error account.

If we can't get the trade where it belongs, we close out the pOSition--you know, sell what we bought or buy

what we sold. Okay?"

Okay, said Stern.

"Now suppose I'm a real clever peckerhead and I wanna trade ahead of my customers and I don't wanna get caught. I buy a little in Kind of what I know they're gonna buy a lot of in Chicago. Price'll move tick for tick in both places. All I gotta do is wait for the market to jump. And I don't do it in my name. I make a mistake. Deliberately. Wrong account number, say. Then, after the market runs up, I sell out the position."

"Once more, with a wrong account number?"

"Right. Couple days later, when the smoke clears, both trades are sittin over in the house error account. Compliance'll never be lookin at Kind, and even if they do, they won't find anybody buyin ahead of the market. All they see is some dumb ole mistake. But when we close out the two positions, the buy and the sell, we got a hell of a nice little profit in the error account."

Stern wagged his head in amazement. How nice a profit, he wanted to know.

Margy shrugged. "[ haven't finished lookin yet. Four trades here made close to a hundred thousand, though. I'd say you probably got six times that. Not bad, you' know, for a few phone calls while you're scratchin your fanny."

Six hundred thousand, thought Stern. Ms. Klonsky was not pursuing a petty offense.

"Only thing," said Margy, "is this little scheme still doesn't seem much like our friendly peckerhead."

That had been Stern's thought as well, that the rewards were not Worth the risks for a man of Dixon's wealth. But Margy laughed at the idea when Stern said that.

"Oh, he'd screw you in the ground for a buck and a quarter, let alone half a million. Naw, it isn't that. Just doesn't seem like Dixon. Our customers? That's his religion. I can't figure him makin them suckers. He's loyal." Lawl. She grabbed Stern's hands. "But I know he done it," she said.

"Because he must be informed before any large order is traded?" This fact, which Dixon had admitted in Stern's office, had already come to mind.

"That's one thing. But lotsa folks in house know what we're doin. Only, if I stole five, six hundred thousand bucks, am I gonna hide it in your pocket? It's the house error account. And o1' Dixon Hartnell is shore enough the house.

He owns MD Clearing Corp, MD Holding Corp, Maison Dixon.

The whole shootin' match is his. This is probably some dumb old game he was playin, seein' if he could get a laugh or two up his sleeve."

Stern contemplated the notion of Dixon committing crimes for his own amusement. It was not impossible. With Dixon, of course, nothing was.

"And what became of the money?" Stern was thinking about the subpoenas the government was serving at Dixon's bank.

Margy turned onto her back and wobbled her head a bit to indicate that she did not know. Her breasts went loose and splayed against her chest; beneath her chin, where the blush-on ended, a pale rim of flesh was visible, oddly pallid, as if the years of cosmetic treatments had drained her complexion of color. These flaws meant little to Stern; he remained in heat.

"I can't tell without a lot more lokin. But you want my guess about what he did with the money?"

"Please."

"Nothin"

"Nothing?"

"Nothin. Just leaves it there. That's What I'd do. Error account always runs at a deficit. That's because when you .goof on an order and the customer makes money on it, he won't tell you it's an error. He just accepts the trade.

You only hear about the losers. And that's okay. Cost of doin business. But you can lose forty thousand a month, and if you start makin some profits, all of a sudden you're only losin two thousand a month. See? Nobody knows the difference. Except oe peckerhead. Cause, at the end of the year, that six hundred thousand's gonna end up on the bottom line. Sort of like he give himself a bonus."

"Very clever," said Stern of the entire scheme. "And quite adept of you, Margy, to figure all this out." He kissed the back of each of her hands.

"Oh, I am a clever harlot," she said, smiling up at him.

Stern wondered whose phrase that was, who had called her that before; it seemed to be something she was repeating.

He, naturally, might guess. "But I'm not the smartest one."

"No?" asked Stern, sitting beside her now on the bed, where she waited sunny-side up to face him. "Who is that?"

"Ole you-know-who. They won't never catch him. All he had todo was call the order desk to put on these positions that ended up in the error account. He only does that twenty times a day. Nobody's gonna remember him doin it. And there isn't one piece of paper in this mess with so much as his initials on it. He's gonna point to forty other people Shoulda done it instead of him. Phone clerks. Customers' reps. Coulda been me." Margy smiled then. "They may think it's him. They may know it's him. But they ain't gonna prove it's him." Margy had watched television, heard these lines; perhaps she was imitating Stern. She had certainly convinced herself. Dixon was confident too, Stern thought, recalling Dixon's predictions of vindication on the phone.

His client was fortified by his prior successes with the IRS and his knowledge that the government had run off to rangack his checking accounts when the mqney had never really left the company. Stern, however, was hardly as

sanguine. The Assistant U.S. Attorneys were often adroit financial investigators. They might blunder about at first, but if Margy was right in her suspicions about how Dixon had handled his ill-gotten gains, the prosecutors would find them eventually, in his hands, and draw the same conclusions as she had about who was responsible. Dixon remained at substantial risk.

"I should speak to the MD employees in Kindle who received these orders on the desk to be certain their memories are as vague as you suppose," said Stern. It would be wise to remind whoever might have dealt directly with Dixon of how long ago these events occurred, and the confounding volume of orders received. each day; Stern would have to do that promptly, before the FBI unearthed contrary recollections.

Margy promised to recall the order tickets from storage and have them sent to Stern; he could identify the order takers and contact them directly. She would send a memo to Kindle, asking all employees on the desk to cooperate with their lawyer.

"Course, this still isn't what I'd call comical," said Margy. "The Exchange'll bang the bullpucky out of the company. They'll give us a whole bunch of fines and censures and make a big stink. Then they'll hand it over to the CFTC and let them make some stink, too. But ole youknow-who, he'll be okay. He'll be fussin and stinkin along with the rest of them, makin out like how'd this awful thing happen right under my nose. And then he'll turn around and fire someone to cover his hillbilly fanny."

Margy inclined her head slightly so that she was more or less eye to eye with the excited area of Stern's shorts.

Looking back, she gave him a little knowing grin, which he thought was at his expense, but it was not.. She was still thinking about whom Dixon would fire. "Prob'ly me," she said with a sad little buttoned-up smile. "Probably me," she repeated, and laughed then, laughed and raised her arms to Stern again and pulled him down to her for comfort.

parting at the hotel-room door, he promised to call her.

"That'd be nice," Margy answered simply. Clearly, she did not believe him; men said that all the time. As soon as the cab had deposited him at O'Hare, he thumbed through the yellow pages and sent an enormous bouquet, without a card, to her office. Seated in the cramped booth, behind the perforated

stainless-steel partitions, he was visited by images of the night and morning and he almost shivered with the staggering thrill of it all. Had that truly been he, Ale-jandro Stern, gentleman lawyer, child of a Catholic country, humping his brains out a few hours ago? Yes, indeed. His spirit was on alert, his flag unfurled. He had Margy's smoky taste on his lips, the touch of her silks in his palm. When was he returning? He laughed out loud at himself, so that a woman in a booth across the way actually looked straight at him. Slightly shamed, he found suddenly the splinter of something more abiding buried closer to his heart. Gratitude. Oh yes, he was grateful to Margy, to the entire race of women, who, unbelievably, had seen fit to take him in once more. With his hand still on the telephone, he pondered the sheer blessing of another human being's embrace.

At the gate, the attendant announced that the plane for his short flight back to the tri-cities was delayed. "Equipment problems." As usual! Stern, even in his buoyant mood, could not pull free of his hatred for this airport, with its endless corridors and sickly light, its teeming, hurtling bodies and worried faces. He located the airline's executive lounge, all black leather and granite, and telephoned his office.

".Claudia, please call Ms. Klonsky and schedule an appointment for Friday. Tell her I wish to deliver the documents she has subpoenaed from MD." Stern had not spoken with the prosecutor in a month now. Raphael had called to beg an additional week on the return date, and reported that Klonsky sounded on the verge of rage. Stern did not like to beard the Assistants--it was not his style, and more to the point, enmity among lawyers complicated a case.

He would have to make amends somehow with Klonsky. The lawyer's life, he thought, always toadying. Judges.

Prosecutors. Certain clients.

"You want your messages?"

Stern was seated on a sofa; the telephone console was cleverly inserted in the granite top of a cocktail table.

Claudia reported a call from Remo Cavarelli, an old hustler under indictment, who wanted the status date for his next appearance before Judge Winchell. There was also a message from a Ms. Helen Dudak, who wanted to speak to Stern: a personal matter. And Cal Hopkinson had phoned.



Developments, he thought with a sudden surge of something undefined, interest or apprehension, when he heard Cal's name. He had Claudia put him through, but Cal's secretary said he was on another call. Stern held a bit, then decided to call back and punched in the number Helen had left. She had told him she worked at home, with a headset plugged into the phone--connected earpieces and a tiny suspended mike, smaller than a thimble. He imagined her like that.

"I'm picking up on the end of our conversation the other .night," said Helen.

"Yes, of come," he answered, not truly certain what she meant.

"I wanted to invite you to dinner here. Two weeks from Saturday. The two of us."

"Ah," said Stern, and felt his heart palpably squirm. Now what? Helen meant well, he thought. And she was charming.

But could he manage these complications? Yes, said some voice suddenly. Yes, indeed.

Yet, having accepted, he dwelled on Margy and quarreled with himself as he put down the phone. Eating, after all, was not a form of sexual intercourse. But then again, he slyly thought, he was becoming quite a fellow. In the crowded airport lounge, with the stalled travelers murmuring around him, he once more laughed aloud.

This time he got through to Cal.

"Sandy!" Cal cried. "Where are you?" Cal told him the story of his most recent unscheduled layover at O'Hare. Stern eventually asked about the bank.

"That's why I was calling," said Cal. "'Just to let you know the story.'" River National, Cal said, was being perfectly neurotic about this transaction in Clara's investment account. Any time a will was involved, the bank worried over everything: the probate court, the Attorney General's Office. They insisted on retrieving every single piece of paper before they would meet. Cal was pressing for a conference in the next week. He spoke with the selfcongratulatory air that Stern himself often assumed with clients, describing his communications with the bankers and file clerks as if it were mortal combat.

"Really, Cal," said Stern. He did not want to be one more complaining client, and ended the conversation rather than speak his mind. Cal was too fussy to be forceful--he, too, would want to see each paper--and besides, he was probably in no position with the bankers, who in all likelihood sent him business--wealthy customers who needed trusts drawn, wills updated. But it was unfair, Stern decided in a moment, to blame Cal for the complications Clara had made.

Stern had lived decades never wholly knowing what was occurring behind Clara's composed and gracious facade. And still the wondering went on. All that old simmering frustration was boiling up in him again.

He redialed his secretary's number.

"Claudia, did Dr. Cawley return my call?" Following his evening at Kate and John's, Stern had chased Nate about, leaving word at the office, the hospital, at home, asking Nate to call the lab. It was not clear that Nate had even gotten the messages, and Stern remained unsure that he would follow through, in any event. Nate, after all, had other worries.

"Should I try someone at his office?" asked Claudia. Stern drummed his fingers on the tabletop and did not answer. Out the window, the view was obstructed by a 747 which was being washed by workers mounted on a series of movable scaffolds--Stern was reminded of zookeepers and a giraffe.

He certainly could venture to Westlab himself--wherever it might be. As Clara's executor, he had a legal right to inquire. But if the administrators at Westlab were sticklers about privacy, as Nate suspected, Stern would need credentials, which would mean involving Cal. Better patience, Stern thought. Nate would get to it eventually.

But there was a soreness here, more persistent than his curiosity about Clara, which seemed to rise and fall with the tide of his grief. It took Stern an instant to fix upon it: Peter. The suspicion born at Kate and John's that he had been outdone by his son had not proved easy to put aside. Oh, he knew it was unfair, unlikely, unbecoming to believe that Peter in his great anguish had had the presence of mind, or the cunning, to manipulate his father about the autopsy. But Peter, to Stern's memory, had been so insistent--he could still recall his voice resounding down the corridors at its wailing pitch as he upbraided that poor bewildered cop, the frantic glint in Peter's eyes.

Questions lingered. With Peter, Stern supposed, questions always would."

"Claudia, connect me, please, with the general switchboard of the Kindle Municipal Police." As soon as Stern said it, he knew it was probably an error. Throughout his professional career, he had been alert for any opportunity to avoid the police. They always made trouble in the end.

He gave the operator who answered the name and precinct he wanted and comforted himself with the thought that the old policeman was probably not there. As the saying went, they never were.

"Ray Radczyk."

"Alejandro Stern, Lieutenant."

"I'll be damned. How are you, Sandy?"

"Continuing." He heard the beep on the line then, over the usual tumbling of the police station in the background. The old cop sounded positively alight to have heard from him. For the life of him, Stern could still not recall the connection.

He had puzzled on it once or twice, a vagrant thought that came along with many others when he remembered that late afternoon. "Do you still have that file with my name on it, Lieutenant?"

"Hey, come on," said Radczyk, and laughed. "I got a job, just like you. Never was a file. You know that."

"Of course," said Stern. This Radczyk, he recalled, was not really a bad fellow. Minding his profession, naturally.

"Say, where you at? Sounds like we're talkin over two tin cans. ' "

Stern explained: O'Hare. Stuck.

"Oh, sure," said Radczyk.

"Lieutenant, there is a question with which I would probably never bother you were I not waylaid with a moment on my hands."

"No bother," said the cop. "Shoot."

Stern paused.

"I was wondering if of mind, or the cunning, to manipulate his father about

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Stern paused.

"I was wondering if the coroner reported anything unusual in connection with his examination of my wife?"

"Huh," said Radczyk. Listening to himself, Stern realized how extraordinary this question would sound, arriving out of the blue. Radczyk took his time. "I know he ruled it suicide, a' course. I was gonna give you a call, then I thought, hellw"

"Certainly," said Stern. Neither of them, for an instant, spoke. Stern waved off a waiter in white coat who approached to offer him a drink. "I realize this is a peculiar inquiry--"

"No problem. Lemme dig up the case report. Just come back from dictation a week or two ago. Gimme a number.

"I'll be back to you in two shakes." Stern read the number from the console. What would Radczyk do? Perhaps he would motion for someone else to pick up the other extension; or check to be sure the call-taping system was functioning.

A woman passed by, tall, near fifty, dressed entirely in red--she wore a silk suit with a tight straight skirt and a black-welted bolero hat which matched her outfit; her hosiery was black; a handsome figure. She looked vaguely in Stern's direction, then turned away, but even the instant of contact with her dark eyes somehow reminded him of Margy, and he fell back fully into her grasp, as if he suddenly had passed through the doors of a movie and was flooded over by the light and images of the screen: Margy, as she stood by the light switch, bare-legged and heavybottomed, her blouse undone, the black triangle visible below; her bright fingernails roaming to certain of his parts; the way her mouth lolled open, and her hue, in the profuse light of the morning, increased even across the frail skin of her closed eyes as she traveled along the channels of sensation.

A peculiar sound arose, a beeping: the telephone, he realized.

"Here we are," said Radczyk. "Let's see. Now wha'dya need?"

"It is merely curiosity, Lieutenant. I thought there may have been something unusual the coroner remarked on."

"Not much here. No autopsy. That's what you wanted. I told him there was religious objections. Couldn't figure out anything else."

Stern realized then that Radczyk had called back on a private line. No beeping signal; no tape. Supposedly, at any gate. Stern made no response.

"It's short and sweet, Sandy. Blood test with a C.O. level.

And a copy of the note. And the coroner's ruling. Nothin' in the police reports. I looked at them when they come through."

"I see."

Radczyk took a breath. "Mind if I ask what's up?"

"A minor matter, Lieutenant. It's unimportant."

"Sure," said Radczyk. "What kinda matter?" With tbes questions, he assumed a certain authority. He was, after all, a policeman, and this was, after all, his case. Stern cursed himself and then launched into a concerted tidy explanation: a medical-laboratory bill had arrived and could not be accounted for. It was, Stern said again, no doubt unimportant.

"I could go over there and check for ya," Radczyk said.

Stern found the idea startling--particularly its appeal. In theory, medical records were not to be disclosed without a subpoena. But most hearts knocked at the sight of a policeman's star. Records clerks would tell a cop most anything, if not surrender the paper. Radczyk could learn as much as Nate, perhaps more. But Stern was too much on edge with the policeman, especially his peculiar would-be intimacy. "I could not trouble you, Lieutenant."

"No trouble," said Radczyk, then lowered his voice somewhat. "I still owe ya, you know."

Stern hung on the line.

"Westlab, right?" asked Radczyk. "I'll go over there myself, Sandy. Keep it between you and me that way. I'll find out what's doin. Gotta get all the loose ends tied up for the case report, right?"

Stern waited. "Certainly," he said.

"Sure," said Radczyk. "Should have something Friday, Monday latest. I'll call. Good trip back."

Stern cradled the phone gently. There was a sharpness to the objects--ashtrays, lamps--he saw about the lounge. He had the congested feeling he had known all the way back to childhood.

He was certain he had just done something wrong.

The reception area of the U.S. Attorney's Office was shabby. From the looks, one would have thought he was visiting a solo practitioner down on his luck. The shag carpet was reminiscent of an animal afflicted with the mange; the wooden arms of the rectilinear furniture had begun to splinter; and the inhabitants were the usual townsquare gathering. A nut or two sat huddled in the corners, glancing about furtively and writing out lengthy, incomprehensible complaints about various politicians or the FCC's plot to lobotomize them through the airwaves.

Witnesses and prospective defendants, too poor or too untutored to be accompanied by lawyers, sat with grand jury subpoenas in their hands, awaiting the Assistants who would make use of them. Now and then federal agents, or an occasional defense lawyer, looking hangdog and disappointed, would emerge from the offices. And of course today Mr. Alejandro Stern, prominent member of the federal criminal bar, sat here as well, surrounded by two ponderous document cases as he awaited Ms. Klonsky, who the receptionist said was on the phone.

This office had always struck Stern as a happy place. The lawyers were young and inspired, and almost all of them knew they were merely passing through. They did not remain AUSAs for long--five years, six was the average. Enough time to learn to try a jury case, for each to feel she or he had made a sincere effort to improve community wellbeing, before the greener glades of the private sector, of what Stern still thought of as real practice, beckoned. It was a good job, Stern thought. He had lost the best younger lawyer he'd ever had, Jamie Kemp, to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Manhattan, where Kemp had gone to try cases on his own and work on a rock musical which resurrected certain songs Kemp had composed two decades before when he had briefly been some kind of musical star.

Kemp was quite nearly not the only one to join federal employment. Before

the present United States Attorney, Stan Sennett, had been returned here from San Diego by the Justice Department, Stern had been approached about taking the job. The top aide of the state's senior senator had invited Stern to breakfast at one of the downtown clubs.

This young man, who looked something like the singing star Garfunkel, with a head of shocked whitish hair that stood erect like a dandelion gone to seed, had thrown around every corny platitude known to man; it was worse than an obituary. This offer was a compliment to Stern's abilities, the young man insisted, and to the wisdom, Stern knew, of a life in which he had never been politically aligned. While Mayr Bolcarro was not allowed by the senator to reward his retainers with federal appointments, his known enemies were rarely elevated.

For Stern, the prospect of being the federal prosecutor was not easily dismissed. This was an advocate's job of sweeping power. For four years Stern could command the nonuniformed armies of the IRS,, the DEA, the FBI, and deploy them as he saw fit. No more of the drag agents' gruesome shenanigans. An end to the heartless prosecutions of widows and firemen for failing to report the income from part-time jobs or CDs. But, of course, he would have to be a prosecutor. Stern would have to dedicate himself to apprehension, accusation, punishment, that triad of unmentionables that by long-nurtured reflex he despised.

Could Alejandro Stern rise magisterially in court and excite jury's ugly passions, could he beg them to inflict suffering they would quail to bear themselves? He could not. No. Could not. The imagery unloosed in Stern a real feeling of illness. Oh, he did not hate prosecutors. He had gotten over that early in his career. He admired at times the incandescent zeal of these young people as they attempted to smite evil for the sake of life on the straight and narrow. But that was not his role, not his calling. He was Sandy Stern, a proud apologist for deviation. No person Argentine by birth, a Jew alive to hear of the Holocaust could march in the jackboots of authority without intense self-doubt; better to keep his voice among the voices, to speak out daily for these frail liberties, so misunderstood, whose existence, far more than any prosecution, marked us all as decent, civilized, as human. He could not abandon the credo of a lifetime now.

Ms. Klonsky was off the phone. Beyond the single office door, opened



electronically by a solemn guardian behind yellow-tinged bulletproof glass, lay a half block of clatter. Telephones pealed; typewriters, still used in this era of word processing, banged. The Assistant United States Attorneys, distinguished young lawyers with law-review backgrounds, were made into ruffians by the atmosphere and stood in the hallways shouting to one another.

Stern came to this office often, generally with a singular mission: to hinder, to thwart, to delay. On occasions--rare occasions, usually at the very start of an investigation he arrived to offer an openhearted portrayal of what he believed to be the truth. But most often the defense was one of avoidance. It was his goal to learn as much as possible while revealing only what the prosecutor already knew, would never care about, or which might trouble or distract her.

There were those prosecutors who believed in candor, who

would lay their case out as a bare challenge. But, for most, the appeal of secretiveness was irresistible. Stern could merely float notions, ask questions, lighting from fact to fact, like some pest nibbling at fruit.

"My best wishes to you," said Stern to Ms. Klonsky, as he entered her small office. Robust-looking and dark, she had come to her feet to greet him. To Stern's surprise, she wore a maternity dress, a blue cotton jumper of plain finish which as yet hung loosely. Observed in an abstracted way, Ms. Klonsky was quite attractive--large eyes, a straight nose, prominent cheekbones, the sort of routine good looks one would expect to see in a restaurant hostess.

She presented a full figure of peasant proportions, strong legs and arms, and an ample bust, although the latter feature, according to nasty bruited, was somewhat misleading. At Gil's it was said that Ms. Klonsky had undergone a single mastectomy while she was a law student.

Ergo, the Tiff ess Wonder. Stern had never been convinced of the verity of this information--at Gil's the jokes at the prosecutors' expense seemed to grow crueler as the night wore on--and his doubts rose again now. Would a former cancer patient risk pregnancy, with its hormonal surges and vast bodily changes?

"My daughter is also in this wonderful condition," he said.

"Our first grandchild." Stern heard himself say 'our,' but had no will to correct himself. He would have to search some time to know how else to put it.

Klonsky also appeared to take in this odd note. She congratulated Stern, and inquired about Kate's condition-Stern had noticed long ago that the affinity of women for each other was never greater than in the process of childbearing, this circle no man could enter. But then she added, by the unpredictable logic that always brought people to it, "My condolences on your loss."

He nodded without a word. The two document cases, each the size of an accordion, were beside him. They waited, amenities' exhausted, on the outskirts of adversity. He took a seat before her desk.

"You seem, Ms. Klonsky, to have misconceptions about my client."

She summoned a small, sealed smile, meant to reflect poise and fearlessness. As the years had passed, Stern found himself practicing against young men and women close to his children's ages. In general, it was his impression that they found him charming; his accumulated attainments lent him an almost statesman-like stature. The Assistants were often deferential, without abandoning the poses required by conflict. At moments, Stern would find himself wondering how Peter or Marta would react if they could see the naturalness, the virtual honesty he brought to his relations with persons just like them. What would they think? Would this be the stuff of epiphany, or would they seize on the obvious?

These people were not his children.

"In what way, Mr. Stern?"

"I know you suspect him of a crime. Yes?" She seemed to nod. "Tell me, Ms. Klonsky--"

"You can call me Sonia, Mr. Stern."

Stern took her graciousness as a sign that she believed she could hold her own.

"You must do the same, then. Please call me Sandy."

"Thank you."

"Certainly."

She smiled at him so suddenly, with a flash of such remarkable open amusement at their maneuvering, that Stern himself was taken aback.

"You are inclined to tell me nothing?"

"I can't, Sandy."

"Is there an informant? Is that the reason for your hesitation?"

"No comment."

"Because I have already assumed as much."

"If there's an informant, Sandy, I haven't the foggiest idea who it is."

This, Stern knew, was a Clever response. The Assistants were often in the dark about the identity of informants, particularly those who had been promised they would never have to testify. The secret remained with the FBI agents, who would conduct covert meetings with their source and write reports to the U.S. Attorneys identifying the "c/i"-cooperating individual--only by a number assigned at Bureau headquarters in D.C.

"Mr. Hartnell is not a retiring sort," said Stern. "The business landscape is no doubt replete with those he-has offended. Persons fired. Jealous competitors. You are aware, I am sure, that the comments of such persons have to be evaluated carefully."

Ms. Klonsky laid her pretty face daintily upon her fingertips and smiled agreeably. She was taking it all in, watching him work.

"He's had his troubles before," she said. "The CFTC. One of the exchanges, or was it two?" She took a beat. "Not to mention the IRS."

Oh yes, thought Stern, she had developed a thick file. To be expected.

"I represented Dixon on all of those occasions. There are times that he has put business expansion before recordkeeping. Candidly, Ms. Klonsky, the Exchanges and the IRS enforce a punctiliousness that the U.S. Attorney's Office itself would have difficulty adhering to." Stern gestured out the door. At times, in this office, you could learn the gravest grand jury secret simply by moving at deliberate speed in the corridors. The young Assistants stood in their doorways, gossiping about investigations. Names were tossed about. Old files were stacked like refuse, without regard to the confidences they contained. Some years ago Stern had seen two large accordion folders with

the name of Mayor Bolcarro on them, waiting for storage, and felt a painful twinge of regret for the government's apparent lack of success. His observation made Ms. Klonsky laugh.

"You are wonderful. Stan Sennett said you'd walk through the door and just charm the pants off me, and here you are doing it."

"Me?" He maintained a look of humble innocence, but he registered the mention of Sennett's name with some concern.

Stern and the present United States Attorney were not mutual admirers. The relationship went back at least a dozen years, to the period when Sennett was a state court prosecutor and could not seem to win a jury trial when Stern was defending. If anything, the wound had deepened of late. In one of his rare courtroom appearances, Sennett, in January, had prosecuted a case in which Stern represented a local city councilman charged with extorting sexual favors and cash payments from members of his staff. Stern had vilified the government's chief witness, whom he characterized as a professional informant, a so-called private investigator who seemed to find someone prominent to tattle on whenever his own questionable activities brought him to grief. The councilman was convicted only of one count--a tax misdemeanor--and remained in office, while Sennett lamely claimed victory, a boast openly scoffed at in the press.

In passing, they were cordial--Stern was with every-one-but Stan's memory was long and the rancor deep. As meaningful, for present purposes, was Ms. Klonsky's inadvertent admission that the U.S. Attorney had been consulted about this case. With five hundred indictments every year, and three times the number of grand jury investigations, only matters of prime significance reached the front office. All in all, this was a most unwelcome word. Dixon was making the wrong enemies.

Ms. Klonsky asked for the documents she had subpoenaed, and Stern lifted the cases onto the desk one by one. She rose with some awkwardness, apparently no longer able to judge her body's dimensions confidently, and headed to the hallway to retrieve her file. Left by himself, Stern circumspectly examined the possessions in her narrow office. Working the endless hours of a young trial lawyer, she observed no distinction between home and workplace; the passions of her private life spilled out here. Amid the inevitable diplomas and licenses, a large Kandinsky-like oil hung, and a

banner from a world-peace parade was stretched across her bookcases. The books themselves were not merely the usual ponderous legal treatises and casebooks, but also rows of paperbacks. There seemed to be a good deal of Continental fiction and many political works. Stern saw the name of Betty Friedan a number of times; also Carl Jung. The bottom shelf appeared to be the place of honor. On one side was a single photograph of Ms. Klonsky and a broad, curly-headed man, noticeably younger than she. Four books were centered between silver bookends: three slim volumes that had the look of poetry, all by a man named Charles, and a hardcover book called *Illness As Metaphor*. On the other side, in a Lucite frame, was a snapshot of a gap-toothed boy; taped to it was a bright; sloppy child's drawing of a figure, over awkward lettering: S, O, N, N, Y. Both N's were drawn backwards.

"Your son?" asked Stern, gesturing to the boy's picture when Klonsky returned. She lugged a brown expandable file across her body. As Stern feared, it was of considerable bulk.

"Sam is my husband's son. He lives with his mother. This is our first."

Wonderful, said Stern. A special joy. He remained deeply attuned to his desire to move onto a friendly footing with her.

"Wonderful or crazy," she said. "I refer to this as a geriatric pregnancy. My obstetrician is absolutely paralyzed. A forty-one-year-old lawyer with a medical history! He's afraid his malpractice premiums will double."

Stern smiled amiably, but naturally offered no comment. A medical history, he noted. "Sometimes I think I'm nuts getting started at this age."

"Well, you say your husband is experienced."

"Oh, Charlie? I'm not sure he's noticed that I'm pregnant."

She laughed, but her eyes veered away as she measured some private thought, so that Stern knew they had abruptly reached the end of this road.

Instead, she reached for the documents, sorted and rubberbanded, which Stern had piled on the desk. They had been organized trade by trade, and she checked them off the subpoena. As she worked, Stern again began quietly asking questions. He had closely examined the records, he said.

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passing off bad trades to discretionary appeared to be the place of honor. On one side was a single photograph of Ms. Klonsky and a broad, curly-headed man, noticeably younger than she. Four books were centered between silver bookends: three slim volumes that had the look of poetry, all by a man named Charles, and a hardcover book called *Illness As Metaphor*. On the other side, in a Lucite frame, was a snapshot of a gap-toothed boy; taped to it was a bright; sloppy child's drawing of a figure, over awkward lettering: S, O, N, N, Y. Both N's were drawn backwards.

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They disclosed nothing exceptional. No apparent market manipulation, no passing off bad trades to discretionary

accounts, no double-charging of customers, no bucketing, by which the customer would pay a worse price than the house had on the floor.

"It is most difficult from these documents to imagine What your informant is

alleging. You have not subpoenaed records of a single account that Dixon controls. Nothing here is tied to him." There was some flicker, a reflexive contraction within her serious brown eyes. Stern made no mention of the house error account, or the documents that Klonsky was trying to obtain from Dixon's bank. He would never belie the impression that he was as ignorant as the government wished to keep him.

"Can I ask?" she said abruptly.

"Of course."

"Why does it matter whether there's an informant? Assume there is."

Indeed, thought Stern.

"Do you not think your target is entitled to know what wrongdoing this informant is claiming against him? He was about to use her name, but he did not feel comfortable with 'Sonia' and thought it would be too stiff reverting to 'Ms. Klonsky.'" "Is Mr. Harmell obliged to stand by idly while the government determines if it can puzzle together one scrap of paper here, another there, until it has its case and is ready, quite literally, to destroy his livelihood and his life?"

"I don't see how he'll be hurt by waiting now."

"He may' assist. If I understand what your informant says, I might be able to bring pertinent matters to your attention."

"And you might also be able to identify the witnesses in advance, try to influence them, and do YOUr best to control the flow of information."

He stared at her a second.

"Just so," said Stern quietly. He could not prevent a momentary scowl. The barroom wags were right about her. Not that she was incorrect in her estimate of Stern's intentions; hardly. But there was something naive in the way she presumed to inhibit him. Whether Ms. Klonsky knew it or not, she was engaged in a contest, a process, not the search for the Holy Grail. When she brought witnesses quailing into the grand jury room, where their lawyers could not accompany them, where the thought of every indiscretion, every lapse, accosted them like bogeymen, so that these persons were slavish in their eagerness to please the prosecutors, this, per Klonsky, was not

influence. It was the government at work. But if the target's lawyer spoke to the witnesses himself, reviewed their records, and tried to keep their recollections balanced, that bordered on subornation. The problem was simple: she was still new to her job. Poor Sonia Klonsky.

Past forty and still so much to learn. He found himself quite disappointed. "You're angry," she said.

"Not so."

"I wasn't suggesting that you would do anything unethical."

"Nor did I take it that way."

Stern spent a further moment unloading his cases, withdrawing bundles of documents with their blackened edges of copier murk. Ms. Klonsky was still disconcerted by the change of mood.

"I thought we were having"--she waved a hand--and exchange."

"We disagree," said Stern. "Consider it a matter of obligation, of our respective roles." He stood. "Where might I expect you to go next?" She looked at him a moment.

"I don't feel satisfied, Sandy."

How in the world had Stan Sennett hired this woman? Did she want to have sensitivity sessions in the grand jury? What a remarkable person. In spite of his reluctance to admit it, she had some quality of magnetism. Her smile, especially in its sly aspect, was endearing; a deep, serious intelligence glinted in her eyes. But he felt braced by the recognition of a moment before. With Sonia Klonsky, one had the sense that, for all her woman-on-the-go composedness, a fragment of her soul remained on the verge of hysteria. There was something seething, molten, uncontrolled, unknown. That had a touching quality as well--a woman past forty, still on the voyages of a teenager.

"Ms. Klonsky," he said, "we really do not need to engage in hand-wringing. I assure you, we shall remain on cordial terms." He offered his hand. Instead, she sank down in the chair behind her desk, her face still dark and troubled, and rattled open a drawer.



"There's one other thing. Since you represent Mr. Hartnell, we can't agree to serve you when we subpoena other witnesses from MD. The potential for conflict is too great."

Something new was coming, Stern realized. Klonsky was saying, in effect, that she would soon be setting sails for Dixon's employees, attempting to get them to testify against the boss. If the government had its way, each would have a different lawyer. This was the prosecutors' usual stance. Divide and conquer. Under the guise of concern about professional ethics, they tried to ensure that anyone who might have something to blab to them would not be under the influence of the target's lawyer. Stern agreed wholeheartedly about the ethical precepts, but believed that the right to determine conflicts in the first instance was his, not the U.S. Attorney's. He protested now, but Ms. Klonsky reverted to her firm look, forbidding further discussion.

"Anyway," she said, "Stan thought there was one subpoena that should be served on you. As a courtesy." Klonsky opened a manila folder and removed a single sheet of paper, offering it to Stern. "We gave him a long date--almost a month--so you'll have plenty of time to help him arrange for separate counsel." Dumbly, Stern nodded. When he looked back, Klonsky was filling out a return of service on the back of her file copy, recording on whom and when the subpoena had been served.

He had been having such a buoyant spell, Stern thought with sudden fathomness, glibing with this able young woman, assaying her character. Now this. His arms, as he looked at the subpoena, were leaden with alarm. Some primitive curse rose up in him against Dixon and his inevitably tortured courses. From the way this was being handled, the acknowledged special treatment, Stern suspected at once what was afoot.

"Are there other persons from the order desk whom you expect to call?" he asked offhandedly, hoping the import of the question would slip past her, and Klonsky simply shook her head as she wrote. Stern, at once, felt his condition grow worse. The order tickets Margy had promised to request from the Kindle office had not yet reached him, but he knew now what they would show. Dixon had not called just anyone on the order desk to trade ahead, as Margy had speculated; that, apparently, would have entailed too much risk, the chance that someone shrewd and less obedient might speak up, object. Instead, Dixon had conveyed the orders to a single compliant sap, the only

soul on the order desk with whom the government needed to speak. And, of course, his daughter had married him. Stern folded the subpoena into three even parts. "John Granum" had been typed on the dotted lines reserved for name and address. His son-in-law now had a date certain for grand jury testimony. Klonsky's guile, her fear of undue influence on the critical witnesses, was growing more understandable. "Is he a target?" asked Stern.

"Maybe he has something to tell us."

"Immunity is a possibility?"

"I think so." Klonsky once more glanced downward; she was saying too much. "I understand your interest, Sandy. But this would be more appropriate with whoever represents him."

As I say, this is a courtesy to you. Start didn't want another incident like the one at your home."

"Most considerate," said Stern. "My thanks to both of you."

He did not wish to sound particularly curt, but he was experiencing a fading lack of control.

Ms. Klonsky looked at him sadly. He could see who he was to her--a home-wrecked widower with one more enormous family problem. He had her sympathy, which was not at all what he had come here expecting to obtain.

Outside the U.S. Attorney's Office, the elevator arrived, opened, and then refused to move. Stern, still spinning with anger, threw down his empty cases and pounded on all the buttons. Up. Down. Door open. Door close: The new federal building had been completed ten years ago, with every contract sprinkled down on cronies from the fingertips of Mayor Bolcarro like a confectionery topping.

The structure had been intended as a courthouse, but the judges, after a brief period of occupancy, issued various orders and injunctions and moved themselves back into the ancient Federal Square building across the street. Nothing here worked. The elevators. The heat. The windows popped out in high winds or low temperatures and showered glass off the pedestrians below. It had taken six years to complete construction, and the litigation was still ongoing a decade later. The architect, the engineers, the general contractor, and virtually every tradesman who had touched the place were co-

plaintiffs, co-defendants, or crossparties in four or five separate suits. Now and then, Stern would see the herd of lawyers arrive for the various status calls. They would stand before the judge, twenty and thirty abreast, and bicker. In the meantime, the building grew so brisk during the occasional periods of Arctic cold that gripped this city that one federal judge, during the short period when court had been held here, mounted the bench in mittens and instructed the lawyers that they were not required to remove their hats.

At last, the steel box began to move. After the delay, it stopped at every floor. Stern, who had an appointment to meet Lieutenant Radczyk for lunch, simmered at the edge of outburst. Dixon. John. Gevalt. What an ugly mess his brother-in-law had made!

Headed down, with lunch at hand, the tiny space was jammed.

The elevators, naturally, had been stintingly designed, too small for the bu'fiding's population. In his state of high agitation, crashed against the rear partitions, Stern took an instant to react when a woman in front of him, a tall brunette in her thirties, stepped back and made contact.

Indeed, that put matters somewhat delicately, for she had not merely brushed against him or inadvertently driven her spike heel into his toes. Rather, this young woman had laid the cleave of her rear end firmly against his hand. And would the Sandy Stern of a month ago have politely pulled away? No question. Today he remained still; he was certain that she took him for the wall. But at the next stop the elevator stuttered on its cable, minutely rocking. And did she ease back even farther? So it seemed. And did Stern, as the floors went by, find himself, almost involuntarily, inching his hand by the most subtle degree? He did. He did, so that by floor 4, his fingers, two or three, were delicately pressed against the parting of her buttocks and the filmy folds of her green dress and the elastic ridges of her undergarments below. By the natural movement of the car, this arrangement provided the most discreet stroking each time the elevator jolted to a halt.

From behind, Stern tried to study this young woman. Was she one of his casual courthouse acquaintances, another lawyer having fun in an offbeat fashion? He did not recogn'tze her: Her eyes were green; one cheek was blemished. A professional person, he assumed, in an expensive green silk dress, carrying her briefcase. With each stop, she seemed to lean back a little more. Her jaw was set in a largely abstracted manner, but save for paralysis,

there was no way she might not have noticed what was occurring. At the ground level, she let all her weight come back into him, so that for the briefest instant his hand fit snugly inside and--possible?--was vaguely squeezed before she stepped forward to exit. Across the metal threshold, she looked about for hearings, and when her view crossed his, her expression was far too indefinite to be called a smile.

Hiking away, she reached back and gave a quick jerk at her skirt to free it from the rear cleavage where the material was gathered.

Dizzy and aroused, impressed, even inspired by this boldness, Stern followed her from the elevator. So this was the life of men and women in the modern day! It was Cincinnatus who was called back to battle from the plowfield, -rearmored, remounted, and placed in charge of war and strategy. That was Stern--except that Cincinnatus had been a hero and an officer in his youth and Stern was never more than a buck private. He'd had more diverse sexual experience in the last four days than in his entire prior lifetime. And there was no hiding his pleasure from himself. His sweet interlude with Margy had revived him like a dose of water on a thirsting plant--he felt the strength of his own vitality from root to leaf. No wonder people so easily made fools of themselves. If he'd never known, he did now--this was fun. How did one pursue these leads? Coffee. A hotel room? What happened next? Amazed by himself, still toting his cases, he actually followed the young woman for a block before he recalled Radczyk. She never once looked back; apparently, she took her gratification from teasing. And yet, even when he'd stopped, he had no sure knowledge of his own capacities. He did not know what excesses were within him; he might sprout wings and fly, he might dance naked in the intersection. He felt like some soaring bubble, a thin surface containing the exciting weightlessness of freedom.

By the Kindle River, near the docks on the Kewah-nee side, an underground world had grown up. Stern always marched down the iron stairwell from the boulevards above with a sense of significant descent, somehow related to entering darkness in the daytime. These piers where the bargemen would unload their cargoes of fruit, rice, and coal brought up from the South retained an economic importance for Kindle County well into this century. In the 1920s, the local movers and shakers, full of the improbable hope that the tri-cities, like an urban Cinderella, could be made to resemble Paris, decided to pretend the docks were not here.

On concrete pilings driven down into the sandy banks of the Kindle, the downtown section of Ke-wahnee was extended; great roads were built and modest skyscrapers rose.

Beneath, the gritty dockmen and barge hands continued to work in a netherworld barely reached by daylight, while the suit-and-tie crowd rushed about above, dealing, suing, buying and selling the labor and commodities being delivered to the city in the dark below.

These days, Lower River, as this area was known, was eerie with the garish yellow glow of sulfur lamps. Abutting the streets, the docks of the trucking concerns which had located here originally to carry off what the barges brought and which eventually had supplanted them were littered with crates and spoiling produce. The air sang with the racing pitch of fires on the roads above and the windy commotion of that traffic. For many years, this was the locale where bodies were dumped and drug deals done.

The flow of hot merchandise across the tracking piers, by rumor, was still steady. In his early years in practice, Stern was always going about down here to visit one crime scene or another. A thousand people passing by and nobody knew nothin'. The situation was usually far more frustrating to the police than to Stern.

Rather than joust in the noontime traffic, he had walked across the bridge, carrying his two large empty cases. He met Radczyk at a place called Wally's. It was hardly scenic. As with each establishment in Lower River, one entered from the rear. The windows at the back of the restaurant faced the river, which was otherwise inaccessible, looking out to the pilings and the iron underpinnings of the roads. Toward the top of the horizon, a line of daylight broke through and, depending on the angle of the sun, sometimes lit the slaty surface of the water brightly enough to show the floating silt and the industrial debris. Radczyk was at a table smoking a cigarette and, for unknown reasons, studying his shirt when Stern approached.

"Ah, Sandy!" The copper's roddy country-boy 'face was radiant. This warmth, whose source Stern still could not recollect, continued to make him uneasy. Radczyk had phoned this morning, saying he had some results. He suggested Wally's, a policemen's hangout, which suited Stern, who was always just as happy not to walk into the station house.

Here Stern was more impressed by the size of the man than he had been in his home; Radczyk barely fit into his chair, a hulking figure being slowly diminished by age. He wore a tweed sport coat and the bright red golfing shirt he had been examining when Stern arrived. He explained now that it was an Easter gift from his children. "You get the grandkids over and they tear the place apart, makes you glad you can send them home."

Stern smiled obligingly. It occurred to him that he, too, would soon be entitled to these fond complaints. The prospect today seemed considerably less consoling. The thought of John briefly scuffed at Stern's heart.

"So," said Stern. "You had success?" He sought to bring Radczyk to the subject. He was the kind who would chat about anything else.

The old cop reached to the inside pocket of his sport coat and came up with a single grayish page, a copy of something. He put on his reading glasses and considered the paper as if he had never seen it before. Then he removed his eyeglasses and pointed the temple at Stern.

"You give any thought to talkin with her doctors? That's what I'd do in your shoes."

Immediately, Stern felt the same vexation that had overcome him on his way from the U.S. Attorney's Office. Why had he bothered with this policeman? He was old, and probably never terrifically competent. Trust Radczyk to suggest a starting point where Stern had already been. He was not fully able to conceal his irritation.

"Lieutenant, I am afraid I have already attempted that  
Course. ' '

"Mind if I ask what come of it?" asked Radczyk. "What came of it," said Stern, "was that Clara's personal doctor tells me he did not order this test, and I have been unable to determine which physician did."

"Huh." Radczyk looked back down to the sheet he held. "No name here," he said. "Suppose I coulda asked when I was out there." The notion that the name of the treating physician might have been relevant occurred to Radczyk remotely, a far-off idea, like the notion of life on the planets. Stern was finding it increasingly difficult to stifle himself.

"You were at Westlab?"

"Oh, sure, sure. Done just like I told you. Went out-there, got the administrator, you know, showed her my star. Nice gal. Liz something or other. Very professional, you know.

Looked to be a little 'Mexican or Italian gal. I said I was doin routine follow-up, what records did they have? She showed me the whole file right there in her office. Give me a copy of the results." Radczyk hoisted the paper in his hand, and Stern, without invitation, reached across the table and quietly took it.

The hangdog waitress came by with her green pad, saying only "Yours?" to each man. Stern ordered as he studied the copy. It was a half sheet on the letterhead of Westlab. The rest of it contained computer-printed figures. Numbers.

Codes. A meaningless scramble. In his frustration, Stern nearly groaned.

"Did they tell you, Lieutenant, what this test was for?"

"Sure," he said." 'Viral culture." "He took the paper back and with a dirty fingernail showed Stern a tiny box

which had been x'd. "A virus?" Radczyk nodd.S. Attorney's Office. Why had he bothered with this policeman? He was old, and probably never terrifically competent. Trust Radczyk to suggest a starting point where Stern had already been. He was not fully able to conceal his irritation.

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Stern took this in: Clara had seen the doctor for a virus.

So here was the outcome of nearly two months' pursuit. His wife had the sniffles. A persistent cough. No wonder she had bothered only Peter. He smiled faintly. For all the

pain, it had the quality of a burlesque.

"And they had no more to report?"

Radczyk seemed to have settled himself elsewhere. He considered Stern with his pleasant, rosy look and huddled closer.

"Still don't remember me, do you?"

Stern, who would ordinarily go to considerable lengths to avoid admitting something so unflattering, simply shrugged.

He had better sense than to try to fool an old policeman.

"Didn't think so." The cop edged forward. "Marv Jacoby."

It hit Stern like lightning. "The brother," said Stern. The orphan, he thought. "That was some time ago."

Childishly pleased to be recalled, Radczyk sat there smiling. "Hadn't taken the tags off my sergeant's stripes yet."

So this was the orphan. Stern instantly recalled the entire tale. Radczyk had been raised by his grandfather, who ran a paper stand, one of those metal shanties on a street corner; in the winter, they took heat from a fire in an oil drum.

One day two young neighborhood hoods, looking for nickels and dimes, tried to stick up the grandfather, and ended up shooting him dead. The beat cop was Harold Jacoby--Jews did not become lieutenants in those days--and he took the grandson home and raised him with his own. Harold had two natural sons, as Stern remembered, and all three became policemen. Ray was the eldest. Eddie eventually quit the force and went to California, where he'd done well in the security business. It was the youngest son, Marvin, who became Stern's client.

Lord, what a thug he was, Stern thought when he remembered Marvin. Gumbewing,' wisecracking, with little black eyes and, as they said on the street,

an attitude. Marvin was a wrong cop from the day he got his star. And a daily heartache to Ray here, who took over Marvin's guidance when the father passed away.

Almost a dozen years ago, certain police officers, disgruntled by the usual departmental rivalries, had begun to assemble evidence of wrongdoing in the city's North Branch district. This effort required no intrepidity. The North Branch was wide open: cops on the pad; bail bondsmen steering cases; judges on the take. Marvin was not the worst offender, but one of the least popular, and at the time he first met Stern he had a subpoena to appear before a state grand jury that was looking into allegations that Marvin had taken monthly payments from certain narcotics dealers to warn them of ensuing police raids.

"I still owe you for all of that;" said Radczyk.

Stern shook his head. It had not been much. He had simply touched the pressure points. Like someone who knew jujitsu.

Stern had paid discreet visits to certain politicians whose alliances he'd estimated would be disturbed by sudden havoc in the North End. The county prosecutor, Raymond Horgan, who had friends like everybody else, had seen fit to quash the investigation. For these efforts, Radczyk had been unreasonably grateful; he had attended each of Marvin's visits, fretting like a mother; he was as garrulous then as now. Marvin simply sat there in his uniform, cracking his gum, while Ray went on reinterpreting every remark and arguing in behalf of Marvin's exculpation. He seemed determined not to believe the worst, the kind of devoted big brother every man should have. None of it had done any good for Marvin, who was discovered a few years later in the trunk of a car being towed from a parking lot in the North End. As Stern heard it, Marvin was stark naked, with blowtorch holes burned black through his privates.

Stern said that out loud, that he might not have been much help to Marvin in the end.

"Gave him a chance," said Radczyk. "He was three times seven. Can only give a leila a chance." Stern and he both pondered that observation. "I shoulda known he'd never make a cop. Hell," said Radczyk, "I don't even know what kind of cop I made." Radczyk, caught in his own tender reflections, smiled crookedly. There was something unavoidably touching

about this confession--the very plainness of it. Radczyk was pushing retirement but remained in doubt about these fundamental judgments. His woe Stern did not feel; he had no question about his fitness for his calling, no regrets about what he would have done with greater diligence or harder work. It was the costs of that kind of dedication he was now attempting to assess. The thought brought him back to where they had started. Glancing about to find his cases, Stern stood.

"I thank you for all your good work on this matter, Lieutenant. I am in your debt."

Still apparently anchored in the past, Radczyk considered Stern with a tentative, sad&ned look and for the first time had no comment.

"Did my wife have a virus, by the way?" Stern asked. He wondered how remote the glimmer was that he had been chasing.

In answer, Radczyk showed the paper. His thick finger lay in the findings section of the form. Stern squinted across the table: "HSV-2 Positive." When Stern looked to him inquiringly, Radczyk shrugged. Whatever that meant. Medical gibberish.

"Maybe I oughta go back there and get that doc's name for you," said Radczyk.

This time Stern caught it, a, savvy flash that passed through Radczyk's worn cheerful face, sharp and sudden as the reflection off a blade--something you see, then don't.

He had seen this clever gleam in Radczyk before, Stern realized, and let it go by. It amazed him, after all these years, that he could still be taken in by the police.

Stern set down his cases and resumed his seat. He spOke precisely, as he would in court,

"You must excuse me, Lieutenant, but I believe you did not answer my question."

Radczyk's happy mug took on an oafish expression. Caught, he looked both ways and weighed something, probably an impulse to try another feint: What question? He did not do that.

"Yea, verily," said Radczyk at last- "I did not."

"What was this test for?"

"Oh," said Radczyk. He pushed the few clumped strands of hair over his red scalp. "That's what the doctor should

be telling you, Sandy. I'd rather not."

"I see. Are you refusing?"

The policeman looked around, big and unhappy.

"No, I ain't refusin' you, Sandy. You ask, I'll tell ya the truth."

"Well, then?"

Radczyk's old face was soft and drained.

"Herpes," Radczyk said.

"Herpes?"

"I asked the lady. That's what she told me. Herpes."

Radczyk passed his hand over his mouth, wiping it in a fashion, and said, "Genital herpes."

Stern found himself pondering the dirty river, the flecks of wood pulp, disintegrating cardboard, whitish foam that floated by. He had felt just this way recently, he thought with idle precision. When was it? Then he remembered opening the door to the garage. Peering down, he noticed that one of his hands was gripping the dirty gray table by the edge.

"The test was positive?" he asked. Of course, he knew what the paper had said.

"Sandy, you're askin a guy who don't know a thing. I'm repeating what the lady told me. Who knows? Who knows what we're talkin about? I'm goin right back there. I'm gonna get this doc's name, I'll have it for you in no time fast."

"Please do not bother, Lieutenant."

"No bother."

"You have done enough." Of course, it came out the wrong way. stern stood

there, reeling, suffering, unable  
just now to do anything to make amends.

My God, Clara, he thought.

Stern insisted on paying the check. He grabbed the old policeman's rough hand and shook it solemnly, and Rad-czyk, in some kind of conciliatory gesture, took the copied page and placed it in the pocket of Stern's suit. Then Mr. Alejandro Stern, with his empty cases, turned to go, wondering where so early in the day he could find a place to be alone.

PART

TWO

Clara Mittler was already too old when she met him. It was 1956.

Their acquaintance was first struck in the auspicious climate of her father's law office, where Stern had let one room in Henry Mittler's suite. In those years Stern revered Henry; by the end, he saw his father-in-law as a man with too little justice in him to be admired. But in 1956, with his large and sometimes volcanic personality, and, more pertinently, his influence and wealth, Henry Mittler loomed before Stern, fresh from Easton Law School, like some diorama giant, a majestic emblem of the attainments possible in a life at the bar. He was a sizable fellow, with a formidable belly and whitish hair pushed straight back from a widow's peak, distinct as an arrow, and his manner was, by turns, shrewd and scholarly and ruthless. In many ways, Henry was the most refined of gentlemen; he collected stamps, and for many years thereafter Stern would watch with amazement as Henry, with his jeweler's glass and tweezers, studied, stored, and filed. In other moods, he was a person of utter commonness. Whatever his temper, he projected the imposing aura of an orchestral maestro,

This impressive congregation of qualities--and, as Stern learned later, a fortunate marriage to a woman of significant standing--had made him a business counselor whose insight and discretion were prized throughout the city's small but wealthy German Jewish community. Two of the larger independent banks downtown were his clients; so were the Hartzog and Bergstein families, only then conquering the first terrains in their future kingdoms in air travel and hostelry. Henry had come of age in an era when

those he served stood for sweatshops and union busting and heartless home foreclosures--the entire pristine empire of wealth, accepted as being in the Order of Things. It was a different world now; Capital no longer equaled Power in America in the same brute fashion. But Henry, no less than anyone else, was the image of his times, when it was expected that a business lawyer of his eminence be a gentleman to his clients and a son of a bitch to everyone else.

Seven young attorneys worked for Henry in paneled suites in the old LeSueur building, with its Art Deco features of heavy turned brass. Graduating from law school, Stern had responded to an ad in one of the lawyers' gazettes and rented a single room. It was a promising arrangement. Henry did not go to court himself. There would be occasional matters of small consequence that he might refer to Stern.

Collections, liens, attachments. Small divorces, perhaps.

Minor personal-injury matters, or traffic tickets. It made little difference. If the flow was steady enough, Stern could satisfy his rent of \$35 a month.

For this sum, Stern acquired use of Mittler's law library--which had seemed an impressive concession, although the gilt-trimmed treatises on commercial matters contributed nothing to the criminal practice that Stern wished to establish--and Mittler's secretary took his phone messages. In those first months, he could not afford a telephone of his own. Stern's calls were received on Mittler's general number and returned, a dime apiece, from a wooden phone booth in the lobby thirty-two floors below.

This arrangement, comfortable to Stern, was soon unacceptable to Henry. He had no complaints with Stern's handling of the matters he referred. But he did not care for the clientele that Stern brought back from police court, where once or twice a week he would stand in the corridors in the hopes of drumming up some kind of a practice. After two or three barren attempts, he had attracted the attention of a police sergeant named Blonder, and for a fee of \$5 for each success, Blonder had begun carrying on in lyrical fashion about Stern's many triumphs and passing out his card to the detainees being ferried in the police paddy wagon. These clients--gypsies, shoplifters, drinkers who had become embroiled in barroom disputes--would come to the oak-wainscoted offices of Henry Mittler to wait for Mr. Stern, beside Henry's client, Buckner Levy, in pince-nez and fedora, the president of the Cleveland

Street Commercial Bank. There were no incidents, but the sight of these toughs, who sat in their undervests smoking cigarettes and, on one or two occasions, mistaking the ashtrays for spittoons, drove Henry wild. By the time Stern happened to meet Clara, his clients had been relegated to a bench in the hallway, while Henry contemplated a more complete eviction for Stern himself. In fact, in his initial rage, Henry had directed Stern to initiate the search for new quarters, although afterwards no more was said of that.

As for Clara, she was employed in her father's office two or three days a week. Stern's first sight of her was from the hallway as he was passing. She was a slender young woman of erect carriage who sat before Henry Mittler with a green stenographic pad in hand. Stern paused; something was not in place. She had a finished look, expensively dressed in a silk blouse and a brown skirt of fine wool; she wore pearls. Then he noticed that she was seated not on a chair but on the footstool of Mittler's easy chair.

"Yes, Stern." Henry had caught sight of him in the doorway.

Stern, who had not meant to stop, said he would come back later, but Mittler was in an expansive mood and more or less ordered him into the office. "My daughter," he said, with his hand raised, while he looked across his desk for something else.

Her hair, a muted reddish shade like finished cherrywood, was cut an-fashionably short; her complexion, flawed by one or two livid marks near one cheekbone, was generally pallid; and Stern on first impression could not tell if she was pretty or plain. Her expression certainly seemed deadened. She nodded to Stern with no more interest than she would have to a stick of furniture.

It was his pipe Henry had been searching for.

suppose you've made other arrangements by now,"

he said as he shot fire into the .meerschaum bowl.

"Not just yet," said Stern-.

Years later, Stern could still remember the shocking speed with which he had calculated the advantages of winning this young woman's attention. It was Henry, however, not Stern, who had gotten them started.

"Stern is from Argentina," said her father.

She brightened. "From?" she asked.

In 1956 most Americans regarded foreigners of all kinds with apprehension; about Argentina they wished to learn no more than the tango. Stern was grateful for her interest.

"B.A., principally. We lived in different parts. My father was able to turn the practice of medicine into an itinerant trade."

"Your father was a doctor?" asked Henry. "You've always made out like you were some impoverished son of a bitch.

Pardon, Clara."

"Regrettably true," said Stern.

"This is the one who goes down to the lobby to use the telephone," said Henry.

"Ah," said Clara.

The heat of shame rushed up on poor Stern. Clara seized his arm.

"Daddy, you're embarrassing Mr. Stern."

Henry made a face. It was no matter to him.

From these first instants some elements seemed incomprehensible. She was too sophisticated--too rich--a young woman to be a stenographer, but she appeared two or three times a week, typing and answering the phone. When Stern happened by, she would smile idly, a self-contained human being, hard to decipher beyond a heavyhearted stoical exterior.

"You are a student?" he asked her one day, impulsively, when he was in the hallway near the small interior office that she shared with two other women.

"Me? No. I finished college three years ago. Four. Why would you ask?"

"I imagined--" said Stern. He was lost, as usual, for the proper word.

"That I was younger," she said.

"Oh, no." This truly had not entered his mind, but the young woman seemed to shrink from him. She had embarrassed herself by exposing this.



vulnerability. "I wondered simply how you were otherwise engaged, when you were not here."

"You think I have something better to do than my father's typing?"

"Miss," said Stern, but he saw then that she was attempting to be coquettish and was, simply, awkward at it. "I am certain you are capable of many things."

She did not answer. He turned away, morose, Truly, he was doomed with this family. A few days later, however, as he was passing in the hall, she called.

"Mr. Stern?" He looked in, not certain that it was her voice he'd heard. Her eyes were down as she pecked at the typewriter, a substantial mass of black cast iron.

Eventually, she spoke, though it seemed to require considerable deliberation. "Tell me, Mr. Stern, what did you suppose I studied?"

Oh, dear. Now what? He seized on something likely to be inoffensive.

"My estimate, I suppose, is that you were a musician." Her immediate look of pleasure was incandescent. "My father told you."

"No," said Stern, enormously relieved.

"You enjoy music?"

"Very much." This was not really a lie. Who did not like music? She had studied the piano for many years, she said.

She mentioned composers whom Stern knew merely by name.

Vaguely, they agreed to enjoy music together on some future occasion. Yet, as Stern came away from the conversation, he was struck again by how peculiar this young woman seemed.

College educated and half-idle, full of such taut sensitivity. How old was she? Twenty-four or twenty-five, Stern calculated, a year or two older than he. Old for a girl not to be married,. even in the States.

The next week, Henry called him to his office. On his way, Stern feared that his eviction was about to be consummated, but he could tell at once, from the way Henry groused and pawed about, that he had something else on his mind. If Henry were revoking a license at will, he would do it without

hesitation.

"We can't use these," Mittler said. "Pauline and I."

Symphony tickets. He held them forth. "I'm sure Clara would like to go." Stern was too dumbfounded for Mittler to take any chances. "You know," he said, "Clara put me up to this.

She was too bashful to ask herself."

"This is very kind, Mr. Mittler. I am most pleased."

"Sure you are," said Henry. "Look, I have no goddamned judgment about my daughter, Stern. I don't know if this is the right thing to do or not. You may think she's bright, but she has no idea of what she's up to half the time. Believe me. I assured her mother there would be no problem here. I told her you were harmless." Mittler's eyes had a yellowish cast and he fixed Stern directly.

Should he have turned away? Decades later, in the depths of grief, he could pose the question, but he would never damn them both with an affirmative response. He had taken the two tickets from Henry's hand, while answering the assessment of his harmlessness in a murmur. Anyone listening would have thought he had agreed.

As soon as Peter laid eyes on him, Stern could tell that his son was unsettled. It was a familiar look, 1, something not too far from panic, which, in a blink was put aside by the work of adult will. Peter glanced about his reception room seeking to determine who else was present, and then asked quietly, "What's wrong?" Stern had never been to his son's office. While Peter was a resident, Clara and Stern had met him for dinner once or twice in the university hospitalcafeteria. In his green togs, with his stethoscope lumped into a pocket, he seemed vital, smart, remarkably at ease.

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"This is very kind, Mr. Mittler. I am most pleased."

"Sure you are," said Henry. "Look, I have no goddamned judgment about my daughter, Stern. I don't know if this is the right thing to do or not. You may think she's bright, but she has no idea of what she's up to half the time. Believe me. I assured her mother there would be no problem here. I told her you were harmless." Mittler's eyes had a yellowish cast and he fixed Stern directly.

Should he have turned away? Decades later, in the depths of grief, he could pose the question, but he would never damn them both with an affirmative response. He had taken the two tickets from Henry's hand, while answering the assessment of his harmlessness in a murmur. Anyone listening would have thought he had agreed.

As soon as Peter laid eyes on him, Stern could tell that his son was unsettled. It was a familiar look, 1, something not too far from panic, which, in a blink was put aside by the work of adult will. Peter glanced about his reception room seeking to determine who else was present, and then asked quietly, "What's wrong?" Stern had never been to his son's office. While Peter was a resident, Clara and Stern had met him for dinner once or twice in the university hospitalcafeteria. In his green togs, with his stethoscope lumped into a pocket, he seemed vital, smart, remarkably at ease.

Peter's mastery of his place had 'touched Stern; he was happy for his son, who was so often overwrought. But apparently the meetings had not been as comfortable for Peter. In the year and a half he had been in private practice, he had never invited his father to come by.

Clara, certainly, had been here for lunch. But Stern had wandered around the suburban office center today for sometime looking for the place, a smaller HMO, feeling various qualms, certain that at any instant impatience and anxiety would lead him to turn around. They had not.

Unfortunately, there were real needs here, a genuine quandary.

"I require your advice on a matter," Stern told his son.

"Something somewhat delicate."

At a loss, Peter took him back through a warren of garishly painted corridors to a small office, not much bigger than a cubicle. In these surroundings, Peter had largely surrendered to the mundane. His desk was clean, dustless, occupied by only a few odds and ends supplied by the drug companies: an onyx pen set, an octagonal plastic thing which turned out to be a calendar. There was some grass cloth on one wall, an unimpressive silkscreen; his diplomas were lined up typically along one plaster column. On the top bookshelf, Stern saw the only photograph in the office, a small oval-framed picture of Clara taken a few years ago.

A recent addition, probably. Grown men of Peter's generation did not display their mothers' photos, even that discreetly, while they lived.

"So what is this?" Peter asked. "Are you all right?"

"Generally," said Stern.

"Kate said Claudia told her that you don't show up some mornings."

Stern had no idea his daughter and his secretary spoke. It was touching that they took it upon themselves to communicate about his well-being and typical of Peter that their secret would be casually betrayed. Stern had missed the remainder of the day after seeing Radczyk, and yesterday, Monday, as well. Even today, he had not been certain he could rouse himself. But he had not come here seeking sympathy. He said simply that he was as well as could be expected, and Peter nodded. Amenities passed, his son was not obliged to inquire further.

And would he have answered if Peter had? Stern, pointed by his son to a small upholstered chair, settled in it with a certain morose heaviness. No, he would not have. Somewhere in Stern's heart there was a perfect Peter, the son whom every man wanted, full of ready unspeaking sympathies, and inclinations in all matters of consequence exactly like his father's. But this figure was no more than a shadow, so removed from every day that he did not even have an imagined form. Stern dealt with the real man as best he could. He respected Peter's abilities; he was bright--always the star student--and meanly clever. Like the women, Stern was willing to call on Peter when he was in need. But he was unwilling--unable--to yield something in return.

That was the truth. Have it. Peter reacted; Stern sat like a stone. It was all as it would ever be.

"Is it something else with Mom's will?"

"No," said Stern. He could hear the impatience in his voice, but Peter virtually demanded that his father state his business. Here, the dispenser of treatment and knowledge, his son was sovereign. This was clearly an unwelcome invasion.

"There are questions, Peter, which I need to put to someone. I mast your discretion."

"Medical questions, you mean?" As he asked, Peter moved behind his desk, the dashing young doctor, with his centerparted hair and long white coat. Even considering Kate, it was possible that Peter was the best-looking of the children. He appeared to be in peak physical condition, razor-thin and athletic.

"Yes. Medical questions. Technical questions."

"What happened to Nate?"

A reasonable inquiry. Stern himself had spent the weekend phoning Nate, who remained the first choice as medical adviser. But Dr. Cawley's personal life appeared to have rendered him as unreliable as a teenager, and Stern had tired of leaving messages.

"This is a matter with a contemporary flavor, Peter. I presumed that I could bother you. If another time would be preferable--"

Peter waved off the suggestion. "I was just wondering. So what is it?"

Stern felt his mouth drawing, preconsciously. 'Various cycles of discomfort started up in different regions of his body. Yet he was determined to proceed. The fact was he required information, not just to feed a grisly appetite for knowledge, but also because it had dawned on him over the weekend that his own well'being might be in doubt.

There were other physicians he knew. But it was hard to single out just anyone for questions of this nature. And in the end the most villainous side of his character was awakened by his son, especially in regard to his relations with his mother. Rationally, Stern could not brook any real suspicions. Never

mind Clara Stern. He had lost, sometime last Friday, any authority to predict her behavior. But no woman of Clara's social class, of her experience or temperamental reserve, no mother could have turned to her son for treatment of a problem of this nature. But here Stern sat, nonetheless, eager, among other things, to dash any final doubts.

"I wish information."

"For yourself?."

"I am asking the questions."

"I see that."

"Take it that I am inquiring in behalf of someone with a need to know." Peter, as was generally the case with his father, wore his emotions visibly. He puckered up his mouth sourly to indicate he found this delicacy stupid. Stern, as usual, said no more. He meant simply to follow that tack, suggesting that a troubled client needed these answers. Assuming his son was uninvolved, Stern would never mention Clara--for Peter's sake as well as his own. In prospect, he foresaw this meeting very much like the encounter with a critical witness--one of those daring tightrope walks of courtroom life, exposing the witness's ugliest misconduct without giving the remotest hint that his client had shared in the behavior.

"Peter, does your practice make you familiar with the full variety of--" What word? "In my day, the phrase was venereal disease, but I believe that is no longer popular terminology.""

"Sexually transmitted diseases," said Peter. "Just so," said Stern. "Which one?"

"Herpes," said Stern. Somehow, as this discussion had begun, 'Peter's aspect had changed. He had reverted to his role as clinician. He sat up straight in his chair, his brow compressed, his expression somber. Now, with the word, his calculations seemed far more intricate. His hands remained folded with doctorly exactness, but his eyes rolled through changes of color like the sea, so that Stern had the fleeting intuition that his suspicions were well placed, after all. "This is a subject in which you are versed?"

"I'm versed," said Peter. "What's the problem?"

"If one is exposed," said Stern. "Yes," said his son.

"How long before the disease appears?"

:Peter waited.

"Look, Dad. This is not the kind of thing you screw around with. Do you think you have herpes?"

Stern attempted to remain impassive, but within he felt some failing motion--like the fluttering of wings. With his brooding days, his tortured emotions, he had failed to estimate accurately what would transpire here. With Peter staring him down, that was only too obvious now. They knew each other too well. Peter had recognized, naturally, instantly that his father was the party in interest--and like any doctor, any son, had predictable concerns. If he was shocked, it was only because his mother was barely two months dead and the paterfamilias was here, already asking for a full scouting report on the wages of sin. The atmosphere of charged discomfort slowly increased between them, while Stern gradually realized that if worst came to worst he would have no choice but to further his son's misimpressions. Meanwhile, he tried once again to steer the conversation onto more neutral ground.

"The facts which concern me, Peter, are basic. A woman is infected. A man is with her. I merely wish to know what the prospects are that he, too, will contract the disease."

"Look, that's too vague," Peter said, and once more considered his father. "Let's talk about a person, okay?"

This person. How does he know there's a problem?"

"Assume the proof is positive. She has been tested."

"Tested. I see." Peter stopped for quite some time. "And you're informed?" Peter shook his head. "He's informed?"

"Just so."

"By this woman?" From Peter's tone, it was clear that he envisaged some wanton courtesan.

"As I say, assume an authoritative report."

"Right," said Peter. "And she's active at the time of

contact? The virus is shedding?"

"Meaning?"

"Florid signs of the illness. Lesions. Blisters. Ulcers. A rash."

Stern, in spite of himself, recoiled somewhat. He had noticed nothing like that. But by now he had realized it was no accident that he could not recall his last encounters with Clara.

"I am afraid that my information is not that exact, Peter."

"Can you ask?"

"I would think not."

"You would think not?" Peter peered at his father. This imaginary assignation, Stern recognized, was beginning to sound as if it had taken place in an alley. Peter, disquieted, looked down to his folded hands. "The disease is only communicated by direct skin-to-skin contact with someone who is actively infected, or prodromal--that is, about to begin. Onset of the infection is two to twenty days from contact. Far more frequently, within the first week. If you get it. Some people are effectively immune. If you're beyond those periods, without symptoms, you're probably all right. Probably," his son repeated.

"I see," said Stern. Peter was watching carefully to see how this news affected him. "And if one is infected, how long does it last?"

"The initial efflorescence is usually three to six weeks at the outside. But this is one of those viral infections that can come back. I'm sure you've heard that. It's usually seven to ten days on recurrence."

"And how, Peter, does one know if he is infected?"

"Well, the first thing you do is look."

"For what?" asked Stern.

Peter rested his hand on his chin, with his sour expression. At last, he stood up from behind his desk and closed the door. Then he pointed at his father. "Take down your trousers."

"Peter--"



"Fuck this nonsense. Stand up. Let's go." He was far too positive to allow any quarreling. Somehow, Stern was struck, either in irony or longing, by the recollection of the way he had foreseen this meeting, with himself in complete control.

"Peter," he said weakly again.

„Chop-chop." Peter clapped his hands. He was disinterested and positive. His eyes were already lowered to Stern's belt line.

As a moment, it passed without incident. Body things, as he was learning, had an intense factitiousness about them, an irreducibility. Peter dropped to one knee and removed a slender flashlight from his pocket. He gave instructions like a dance instructor. Left, right. Pull this, pull that.

His bedside manner was entirely antiseptic, his look of scrutiny intense and pure.

"Any irritation?"

"No."

"Burning at any time?"

"None."

"Any functional problems of any kind? Urination? Emission?"

Stern decided to forgo remarks about the problems of age.

He answered no.

"Any kind of discharge?"

"None."

' :Swelling."

! wish. "No."

Peter touched him once, precisely and momentarily, in the groin, probing his lymph glands.

The examination ended after Stern stood with his organ extended like a fish by the tail, dorsal side facing, and Peter ran his light the length of the limp column and over the scrotum.

"You look clean," he stated and motioned for Stern to .recover himself. Then he added, "Hold on a sec." He slipped out the door discreetly, then returned with a small

:plastic beaker. "I'd like a specimen," he said.

Stern objected. Was this necessary?

"It's a good idea, Pa. There are occasions, rare ones, where patients, particularly males, can contract HSV-2 without the usual symptoms. You could go walking around with an infection in the prostate or urinary tract, and end .up spreading it." Peter looked at him pointedly, then added that he also wanted to draw blood for something called a serum vital titer test, in which his father's present antibody levels could be compared with those in five or six weeks, to ensure there had been no infection.

"Is all this necessary?" Stern asked again.

Peter simply pointed to the small john down' the hall.

Stern went, as directed. He stood in the tiny room, petting his organ for stimulation, experiencing the usual difficulty -of performing on command. Immediately outside the door, two nurses gabbed about a patient.

Was Peter gay? The question, afamiliar One, struck like lightning, timed to arrive, as usual, so that it would inspire maximum discomfort. Nevertheless, there was no putting off the thought. The young man was thirty years old; and his sisters and mother had always seemed to be the only women in his life. He had never had a live-in girlfriend; indeed, when his parents saw him he rarely, if ever, had a female companion. That did not mean much. Who willingly exposed an outsider to the neurotic fun house of his family? Nonetheless, Stern, at moments, saw what in an amateurish and bigoted fashion he took for signs: Peter's close attachment to his mother. A certain prissiness. Well, even this speculation was vicious. And, if for no one else, inappropriate from a parent. The fact was--and here at last was the truth with its contained explosive effect, like a charge set off in a strongbox--that the thought always managed to please Stern vaguely. It would be a permanent advantage. It would serve Peter right. Stern, with little consciousness, shook his head while this river of resentment poured forth. Today in this smelly closed space the clarity of his ill feelings was bleakly, unremittingly sad.

Back in Peter's consultation room, his son waited with an elastic strap and a syringe. After the beaker was relegated to a nurse, Peter knelt beside his father and inserted the needle. In the meantime, Stern gathered himself for another question he knew was required.

"I take it this is the kind of matter which ought to be shared with partners?"

When Stern looked back, his son's mouth was parted and his eyes were widened. Unable to master his own pretense, Stern had not thought about the impression this question would make. There was woman number one who had the problem. Now he was speaking of other partners--using the plural. It had been quite a couple of months.

"It would probably be advisable," Peter said at last.

"Overall. If the blood work would be quicker, I'd say that you could save yourself the embarrassment. But five, six weeks." Peter shook his head. "You'd better say something, just in case. Ninety-nine out of a hundred, you're

fine. But if something were to show up, you'd want them to know what it is."

"I see." Well, the Lord only knew what Margy had heard in her time, but the thought of informing her still made Stern shudder. He would never explain the true circumstances to her any more than to anyone else. It would appear to her 'to be another example of the bad faith men were always capable of. "And I take it, for the present you recommend abstinence?" he asked almost hopefully. He had resolved over the weekend to revert to ret'nment.

Peter smiled in a quickly fading trace, amused by the thought of his father with a sex life, or, more likely, by the ."fact that he had the right to govern it.

"Well, you're not active. And we'll know soon whether or not you're prodromal. If it's subclinical, a sheath is adequate to protect your parmer. All in all, I'd think that's enough. Assuming you're consistent."

"Yes, of course." Stern fluttered a hand to show that this conversation was purely speculative. Truly, he no longer cared.

Peter withdrew the lavender-topped vial from the syringe.

He shook the blood, eyed it, and went back to his desk to make various notes. While he busied himself, Stern pondered his final inquiry.

"This disease cannot be contracted by accident, can it, Peter?" He could not keep himself from asking, but the question sounded, even to him, lame and pathetic.

"Is that how you're afraid you got it, PaT' Peter's amusement, when he glanced up, was clearly no longer guarded.

Not that this remark seemed particularly rancorous. Peter was always waspish, sarcastic. But Stern realized that there was little chance that his daughters would not hear of some of this. Peter's professional confidence could be expected to reach only so far. This tidbit was far too delicious. Details would be sparing, but something telling would be said. Kate, for example, needed some comfort. 'You know how concerned you were because Pa was coming in late in the -morning?' The tittering, at least, would be fondly inspired--and far from the real problem.

"I was not thinking of myself."

"Your ladyfriend?"

Stern made a noise of assent. His ladyfriend. Peter took a second, intent on labeling the tube.

"I would love to help you harbor illusions, but the odds are pretty slim. If your friend has been tested, that means a vital culture, and if it's HSV type 2 that's been identified, then sexual contact is almost certainly the source. You know, the old toilet-seat thingm" Peter didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he simply made a face.

In spite of himself, Stern sighed. He had been prepared for that verdict. Clara Stern, as he had known her, was a woman of attractive bearing and, as she herself was inclined to acknowledge, looks that had improved with age. As adipose and crow's-feet, all the usual corporeal failings, had overcome others, Clara maintained her pleasant eternal look, dignified and composed. Stern had always admired her because at any age she was a far handsomer person than he.

But certain women, married women, mothers prototypically, became too involved with the dense network of their activities--the nurturing, organizing, doing, and attending--to broadcast any ostensible sexual interest. In thirty-odd years, he could not recall an instant of conscious jealousy, a man whose

attentions, for whatever reason, had seemed to excite her. She was a person who defined by her daily conduct what was not wayward. She was on a higher plane than that.

Thus, even days later, Radczyk's news remained unfathomable. It went, somehow, beyond right and wrong. The idea of a fifty-eight-year-old woman,--this fifty-eight-year-old woman, on the eve of grandmaternity--with a sexually transmitted disease was as horrifying as some freak-show grotesque. Would the antecedent practices erupt only in late middle age? Perhaps he had spent a married lifetime playing the fool. He refused to believe it. It was like the concept of a fourth or fifth dimension. Beyond the capacities of an ordinary mind--or at least of his. Call it machismo or personal limitation, he could not envision his wife, as she clearly had been, with another man.

And it was for this reason that she had done what she had.

In his ravaged state of the last few days--amid the torment, the anger, the reviling and utter disbelief--that fact had not been lost. Her intent had been to spare him.

This was not sentimentality or self-delusntence. Instead, he simply made a face.

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This was not sentimentality or self-delusion. After all the calculations, the conclusion remained the same. There was a lapse here, a monumental breach of faith which in life, perhaps, she might never have lived to see him forgive. She had saved herself great pain as well. But in the end her kindness, her fundamental kindness, remained her lodestar, her guiding light.

Oh, Clara! On the chair, With his sleeve rolled and his blood still vaguely a tingle, Stern teetered for an instant on the verge of tears. With that, his life, what was left of it, the many small illusions, would disappear.

Peter would have to be told, or might even guess. He saw that and, in the sluices of powerful remorse, for a moment did not care. Then his pride, with the grinding precision of a huge laboring machine, engaged once more and brought him fully about. He rolled down his sleeve over the gauze Peter had taped inside his elbow.

"And if this illness were to appear," Stern asked, "there is no treatment?"

"There's a drug called acyclovir. Ointment or pills. It's very successful in reducing the active period, and in many people it even prevents recurrence. Generally, the disease retreats into the nerve ganglia and waits to rear its ugly little head. Sometimes it never does. Sometimes it returns every few months, in ever-weakening episodes. That's the usual course. But there are all kinds of extraordinary clinical histories. Acute cases. Florid recurrences years apart. The most difficult part of it is prodromal--you're in a contagious phase for a

day or two before the visual signs appear, and short of a culture, you can never be completely certain that you won't infect someone else. It can mess up your life pretty well. In addition to being extremely uncomfortable."

"Yes," said Stern. His mind remained on Clara. All told, the weight of events seemed again to have settled on him with all their dead-star density. The facts, the facts. He had always placed his faith in particulars. Well, now he had them, lots of them. Many facts and, he supposed, certain inevitable conclusions.

He stood up and, without allowing time for reaction, touched his son's smooth face. "You are a good doctor, Peter. I appreciate your concern. ' "

Wise and sad, Peter nodded. His eyes did not leave his father. His son seemed to have a gift, a sense for the human nuance, the pathos that trailed along with each disease, mortality's dismal gossamer. Stern was pleased to find him so worldly. In their relationship, there was rarely anything subtle.

"Look, I'm sure you're okay," Peter said. "We'll just watch it. All right?"

"Very good," said Stern. He tossed on his suit coat. "I am grateful. And sorry, Peter, to have involved you in such a disagreeable business."

"Oh, hell," said Peter. "You know what they say."

"What is that?" asked Stern. He was at the door.

"Life is full of surprises." His son was smiling. No doubt, he was thinking already about telling his sisters.

DIXON, predictably, enjoyed competition and for years had utilized every excuse to lure Stern into joining him in various sports. As Stern was apt to say, a business meeting with Dixon generally meant he would sweat. When Stern was younger, and considerably thinner, they had played handball at Dixon's downtown club. Stern was more nimble than his appearance might suggest, but he was no match for his brother-in-law. Larger, stronger, and far more athletic, Dixon never seemed to tire of winning. In season, he would bring Stern out on Lake Fowler to fish. Stern would foul his line and cast into the hushes and lily pads; back on shore, Dixon would describe Stern's ineptness to everyone they met. "The only man who ever went fishing and nearly took a bird. I kid you not. Cardinal up in a tree? Stern missed hooking him by inches." Stern often told Clara that he was the trophy Dixon wanted

stuffed and mounted.

By now, Stern had limited this rivalry to golf. Stern had more feel for this game; he was better on land than sea.

But, as usual, he did not play often enough to offer any serious competition for Dixon, who was virtually a scratch golfer. Dixon was a daring trouble player; he loved the shots where he had to rest one foot in the crotch of a tree or fade the ball around a light pole, and he was particularly reckless here on his home course. The Greenwood Country Club was cut a century before into these rolling hills, nearly forty miles from the city. This was horse country, with hills deep in elm and oak, poplar and pine. Easton University was no more than ten minutes away.

Here, with Lake Fowler, the well-to-do breathed cooler air and pretended that the city that kept them rich was nowhere near. Dixon adored this life, like every other badge of status, and had his principal home nearby, a huge stone house which sat on twenty acres on the lakeshore.

They played from an electric cart, accompanied by a forecaddy.

Dixon usually had one or two favorites, high-school-age boys, hardscrabble types with whom Dixon could josh about their sex lives, offering them his golfing theories after each successful shot. Dixon treated these boys kindly and tipped them shamefully well. Today they were accompanied by a young man named Ralph Peters, a black kid who lived in DuSable and traveled nearly an hour and a half by train to reach the Greenwood Club on the weekends. Next year, Dixon was going to get a golf scholarship for Ralph, who was the caddy champion. With Dixon, this was not just talk. If need be, he would endow the scholarship himself. But he would also expect a chorus of appreciation and various acts of reverence befitting a beneficent king.

Stern waited until the third tee to talk about the investigation.

"I visited with Margy."

"So I heard," said Dixon. He was practicing his swing, but Stern thought he detected something whimsical in Dixon's expression. On the other hand, he could not doubt Margy's discretion.

This hole, like most at Greenwood, was short and narrow, a little dogleg cut into the woods, about 330 yards. The green was set to the right of the



fairway, so that the hole, sketched on the back of the scorecard, looked like a lowercase p. Dixon waggled his driver mightily over the ball, then pulled his shot deeply into the trees.

"Shit. Well, Ralph will find it. There." He pointed the driver toward the hollow below where Ralph had emerged from the woods to indicate that the ball had been located.

Stern took the ground on his drive, but the ball hopped down the fairway. With the angle, Dixon would be away. He floored the cart and they zoomed down the hill together.

Stern, wearing a tam, held it and yelled a bit over the wind.

"I looked at the records the government wanted, before turning them over. And I also examined what I presume the agents assembled at Datatech."

"And?"

"And I am concerned."

Dixon glanced back, very briefly. He drove the cart up to Ralph.

"Right there, Mr. Hartnell. You better punch out." Dixon tromped in and out of the bushes. Stern could not see the lie, but had no urge to follow. He'd seen it before: Dixon making faces, muttering, conferring with Ralph with the gravity of a general.

"I'm going for broke," Dixon yelled.

What else was new? Ralph could be heard quarreling. He was telling Dixon he could never do it. The sun gleamed through the foliage behind the two figures.

The shot, bedded on dried leaves and twigs, sounded cleanly, but a second or two on in its course took a tree with the round musical sound of marimbas. The ball rattled around in the wooded heights, breaking branches, then suddenly fell heavily to earth, like a gift from heaven, only twenty or thirty yards from the green. Dixon came crashing out of the bushes in time to see the ball drop. He turned back to Stern with a magnificent smile.

"Member's bounce."

Ralph followed along, carrying the club and shaking his head.

Watching Dixon march across the fairway toward the cart as he continued congratulating himself, Stern was taken by an intimation, soft as a whisper, of the young soldier he had met decades ago, during basic training in the desert at Fort Grabel. They had encountered one another some-how--in the barracks or the latrines. At this point Stern would have preferred some auspicious recollection of their meeting, but he remembered little, only the predictable bad judgment of youth. He had liked Dixon; worse, he had admired him. Dixon was one of those large commanding figures that Stern could never be--a shrewd country boy, a good talker with a distinct, twangy hill accent, who looked like a million in his uniform, square-shouldered and jutjawed, with wavy dark blond hair. With the advent of war and the death of his mother, Dixon, full of red-hot ambition, had joined up. The service, with its grand traditions, its medals, its legends, was like a cast for an ingot. Dixon saw himself as an American hero in the making.

Stern had enlisted, too, but with ambitions less grand.

When he was honorably discharged, he would automatically become a citizen and thus put to rest the family's perpetual concerns about their outdated visas. He was twenty years old and already a college graduate, having raced through school, a dark sunken-cheeked sort with heavy black hair, much slimmer than today's model. He had done better in the-service than those who knew him now might expect; he had sealed the walls and carried the packs without relish, but he was dull to discomfort of most kinds in those days. His hungers inspired him.

Stern was never certain what there was about him that had drawn Dixon's interest--probably the fact that Stern was college-educated and quickly marked for OCS. It mattered not. The alliances of a soldier's life were easily founded, and in 1953 a hillbilly, or a Jew with a Latin accent, picked from limited entrees on the American social smorgasbord. There was a night when he and Dixon had sat on a bunk, passing back and forth a smuggled bottle of Jack Daniel's and a pack of Camels, talking. About what? The future, Stern believed. They both had plans.

For Stern, the future was nearer than he imagined. One day, at the end of

basic training, as he was readying to ship out for Officer Candidate School, his major announced that Stern was required at home. The officer did not explain, but the orders Stern was handed had a typical military brusqueness. In a blank was written, "Hardship furlough -mother critical."? She had had a stroke. In the hospital, he found her paralyzed and unable to speak. Her dark roaming eyes seemed to search his face meaningfully, but he was never certain that she recognized him. She was dead within a week, and Stern, now Silvia's sole support, was honorably discharged. He never returned to Fort Grambel.

All of it was left behind, his kit and duffel bag, the sadistic sergeants, OCS--and Dixon Hartnell. By now, over thirty years later, Dixon had as many faces to Stern as a totem pole--Silvia's husband, an important client, a local powerhouse in the avenues of commerce, one of the few men Stern knew well whose accomplishments he thought of as markedly overshadowing his own. He seldom remembered that yearning young man who had attached himself to him in that vaguely supplicating fashion.

Dixon hopped back in the cart, still radiant at his miracle shot. He would never willingly return to the subject of the investigation. Like someone who learned in his sleep, however, he expected Stern to force him to listen. They were at the stage now where Dixon--any client--had to recognize he was in mounting jeopardy.

"Dixon, this is a grave matter. These records are very damaging,"

"Maybe I should have taken a look at them before you turned them over," said Dixon. "Some of the problems might have disappeared." He smiled tersely.

"Dixon, I suggest you abandon such thoughts. If you follow that course, you may as well walk straight to the penitentiary and skip the intervening steps. Too many people have seen your business records. The company that put them on microfiche. Margy. Me." Stern let that sink in.

"Not to mention the chatty fellow who told the government to look for them in the first place."

Dixon looked at Stern directly, full face. His eyes were greenish, gray, a color hard to name.

"My thing get there?" Dixon asked. Eventually, Stern realized he was referring to the safe. He decided not to ask

why the present discussion brought it to mind.

"Quite secure," Stern answered.

"I did it the way you said. Handled it myself. I even got Margy to cut a check in Chicago to pay the trucking company." The trucker, characteristically, had refused to take the safe any farther than the very center of Stern's office. Not much more than a foot square, the gunmetal cube must have weighed 150 pounds. After a week, Stern and Claudia had struggled to get the safe as far as it was now, behind his desk. Out of an arch impulse, Stern had begun using it as a footrest.

"Where's my key, by the way? You said you'd send one."

"Shortly," Said Stern. He would have to remind Claudia, in as much as Dixon remained intent on keeping the contents to himself. The dial of chrome and steel on the safe looked as if it could withstand a dynamite charge. At odd moments, Stern had examined it already. Dixon, meanwhile, had floored the cart, racing toward Stern's ball. Stern held his hat again and yelled over the wind, "I warn you, this situation is perilous."

"You've said that about other situations."

"And I was correct. You were fortunate."

"So I'll be fortunate again." Near Stern's ball, they came abruptly to a halt.

"Can't you do something, file something? Make some kind of motion?"

"There are no credible motions to make for the time being, Dixon. Judge Winchell will not put up with delaying tactics. It would be unwise to irritate her, as we may need her patience later."

Dixon dismounted from the cart and lit a cigarette, his back to Stern as he suddenly took to studying the woods.

Stern went on, notwithstanding.

"Dixon, your records give clear indication that someone at MD was trading ahead of your largest customer orders."

Dixon pivoted. With his chin lowered, he looked like a glowering fighter on a

magazine cover, the whites of his eyes showing large and luminous with a smoldering shrewd anger. He never enjoyed being found out, one of many reasons that Stern had avoided any further mention of Margy.

"No kidding," said Dixon.

"Indeed, I am not," said Stern. "It was very cleverly done.

Smaller orders were placed on the Kindle Exchange just before you went into the Chicago markets with large orders that would affect prices everywhere. And these Kin-die orders were always written with botched account numbers, so that, after clearing, they would end up being credited in the house error account. Countervailing buys and sells, leaving a profit just a few pennies shy of \$600,000. It was a brilliant scheme."

"Six hundred thousand," said Dixon. He pointed to the ball.

"Your shot."

Ralph was behind the cart a respectful distance with Stern's five iron. Stern's drive had traveled downhill, but it had trailed to the right of the fairway--the wrong place to be on this hole--so that Stern 'was required to play left. He sliced naturally and positioned himself at an angle to the hole.

Dixon credited misfortune to various deities, like wood elves. Losses on the trading floor belonged to the bean god. Here he paid homage to the god of balls.

"Ball god!" screamed Dixon as Stern's shot tore off for the deepest woods. Ralph turned to watch it go, like an outfielder pining after a homer.

Stern took another from his pocket and hit his shot cleanly. The ball faded, not quite sufficiently, toward an area left of the green, hit the uneven ground there, and kicked, as if drawn magnetically, into a sand trap.

"Beach," said Dixon, in case Stern had not noticed. They parked the cart in the left rough while Ralph crashed around in the woods, making a hopeless search for Stern's ball.

"So what happens?" asked Dixon. "With this thing? They want the money back, right?"

"That is merely the starting point, Dixon. If the prosecutors employ the RICO statute, as I expect, the government will attempt to forfeit the racketeering

enterprise--you understand: take it from you as punishment."

"What's the mcketeering enterprise. ,MD,"

"The whole fucking business?"

"Potentially. Not to mention a term in the penitentiary."

"Oh, sure," said Dixon, jumping down from the cart again for his shot, "you couldn't expect them to go easy."

Dixon's bravery was admirable. Stern had actually been ,asked twice in his career by other clients facing the rigors of forfeiture about the legal consequence of suicide: could 'the government still grab their dough if they were dead? Stern avoided answering, fearing the consequences of a truthful response, since all phases of a criminal prosecution were, in fact, terminated by death.

With Dixon, of course, there was no risk of selfdestruction. He probably could not conceive of a world he did not inhabit. But Stern knew nonetheless that he had struck a nerve. To threaten Dixon's business.was to toy with the obsession of a lifetime. He had begun th'my-some years ago, driving all over the Middle West in search of clients, soliciting the small-town ,businessmen whose /velihoods depended on farm prices --the merchants, the feed-lot owners, the rural banks which could use commodity futures to hedge their loan portfolios. Dixon's strategy, he explained to Stern later, was to sign up the fire chief.

The firemen were volunteers, fought flame and death together; the fire chief was the captain of their souls. If he liked something, all would. No trick was too low for Dixon. He carried a fireman's helmet in his think.

Now he flew between the coasts, doing deals, but his first .love remained sitting in the office, plotting strategies for the managed accounts, the commodities pools, the large customer Orders. He made money and lost it with every tick, in each future, but Dixon never lost his interest in the game, a mixture of street savvy and balls poker..Three or four times a year, he would grab his dark jacket and badge and go to the floorSfor part of the day. Even in the chaos of the trading floor, the news would go out that he was there. He stepped into the tiered levels of the pits, shaking hands and tossing greetings like Frank Sinatra onstage, commanding the same reverence, or, in some

quarters, subverted 1oathifig. Dixon did not care. Stern had been in the Kindle office one day when Dixon had lost \$40,000 in less than half an hour and he was still exhilarated by the tumult of the floor, the jumping and shouting of the trading crowd, what he took as an essential moment in life.

Dixon lofted his ball between the extended foliage of two tree boughs. The ball did not bite well and rar about twelve feet past the cup.

"Tough par," said Dixon, thinking of his putt:'

Ralph stood at the edge of the sand trap like a well-armed soldier, Stern's sand wedge in one hand and the rake in the other. Stern trod down dutifully into the pit, then bedded himself in, dog-like, shaking his fanny. These shots, hit an inch behind the ball, were all acts of faith. Stern thought of fluid motion, then swung. Amid an aura of sand, the ball rose from the bunker. It traveled almost sideways when it hit the green, but it camertfolios. Dixon's strategy, he explained to Stern later, was to sign up the fire chief.

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"Making it hard on me," Dixon said. Stern had a stroke on each hole.

Ralph handed them their putters, then drove the cart off toward the next tee.

"They have to prove it's me, don't they?" Dixon asked as the two men stood on the green. "All this crap, taking the business--they don't take my business away because somebody else did this without me knowing. Right?"

"Correct," said Stern. He moved his putter near his shoes.

"If that is what occurred."

"Look, Stern, everybody in the place puts on trades that end up in the error account. There are a hundred, hundred fifty trades a month that go through there." This was the point which Margy had seized on. "Maybe somebody's trying to screw me, make me look like a bad guy."

"I see," said Stern. "The government, Dixon, not to mention a jury, is rarely persuaded that an employee is willing to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars and then

give it to his employer out of spite."

"Me?"

"It is your account, Dixon."

"Oh, bullshit, it's the house account."

"It is your house, Dixon. And it is logical to attribute all of this to you, if the money remains in the account." Dixon suddenly showed a quick, scornful smile.

"Is that what they think?" he asked. He tossed away his cigarette and removed a piece of tobacco from his tongue, while he fixed Stern with a dry look. The message was plain: I am not that dumb. Apparently, Dixon had



exercised more care than Margy had made out. There was another layer of involvement in Dixon's scheme, one that somehow isolated the error account and the unlawful profits. A flash of something, say a smile, passed between the two men before they moved off on either side of the flag.

Dixon putted first, and swore freely as the ball danced around the cup. Stern, with a short putt to halve the whole, shocked himself by making it.

"Goddamn it," said Dixon, not for the first time. They moved onto the next tee and sat on a bench under a tree, holding their drivers, while the foursome ahead approached their second shots. The fairway was long, gleaming under the sun on the par-five hole. There were ten traps--Stern called this hole 'the march across the desert.' Idling there, he briefly reconsidered the government's scrutiny of Dixon's bank account. Perhaps that had to do with the devices Dixon had used to conceal the money. In all likelihood. They were still looking.

"There is another problem," Stern said. "Naturally," his brother-in-law responded. Stern told him that John had been subpoenaed. "Meaning -what?"

"They want to ask him questions about this matter."

"So?"

He's a good kid. Let them ask questions."

"They are suggesting that they may grant him immunity."

Dixon squinted and studied Stern.

"What are you telling me?"

"I'm telling you that they believe he has critical knowledge. They are interested in making him a witness against you."

"And what am I supposed to say?"

"Is that prospect of concern to you?"

Dixon, perpetually cryptic, made a face--a philosopher

could not have done better. Who knows what about whom? "It might be."

"I see." Stern briefly looked away. But he had known this was coming. The tickets from the orders that had been entered in Kindle ahead of the large

Chicago trades had reached his office yesterday, and John's awkward scrawl, even his initials sometimes, were on each form. The prosecutors' hopes for John were obvious: they wanted him to finger Dixon as the man who'd called the Kindle orders in each time. But it was not clear yet that John could oblige. He took hundreds of orders a day. The possibility remained that Dixon had used John regularly because he was as un-impressionable as a stone, the man on the desk most likely to forget, and that there had been nothing memorable or overt in their dealings that would ignite John's recollections now. There was no point in asking Dixon. He could not say what John remembered, and would never answer precisely, in any event.

"Then we had best find him another lawyer," Stern said at last.

"If you think so."

"I do. I cannot represent someone whose best interests may lie in testifying against you. How could I be loyal to John and loyal to you? It would be a hopeless conflict of interests."

For an instant the bleak morass of family difficulties, framed in this way, confronted both men. Even Dixon, Stern thought, had a mildly sheepish look.

"Who will you get for him?"

"The choice is John's. I will suggest some names. Lawyers I am familiar with." Lawyers who would talk to Stern, who would do their best to moderate the danger of John's testimony. This was very delicate. Stern, in spite of everything, smiled at his next thought. "Your employees' manual provides that he will be indemnified for his legal fees."

Dixon rolled his eyes. "Great."

The momentary humor, however, seemed to do nothing to allay the heavy mood between them.

"Look," said Dixon, He was about to explain, but he caught something in Stern's look that stopped him. Suddenly it was obvious to them both how harshly Stern judged him for leading John into this swamp. Dixon endured this reproof another instant before turning away.

Ralph, by the cart, mentioned that they could hit. Dixon strode to the tee,

swung mightily, and hooked his shot miserably, deep into the trees. He walked across the tee, outraged, slamming his club head repeatedly into the sod, and finally flung the wood away.

Stern was standing when he returned.

"Do you have something to say?" Dixon demanded.

There was no pretense he might have been referring to his shot.

"My fee does not include lectures, Dixon."

"You think it was a stupid-ass thing to do, right? The whole fucking idea. Dumb, as bad as anything else. And you'd expect me at least to be smarter."

Stern waited.

"Just so," he answered.

With his driver, he began walking forward on the tee, but Dixon caught his hand with his gloved hand before his brother-in-law could pass. He suddenly seemed too put out for courtesies. He presented his natural self, large, rough, expansive. Since Stern had known it all along, he admitted his nasty secret--in spite of his expensive haircut and Sea Island cotton shirts, Dixon was a vulgarJan. He pointed.

"Stern, do you know why a dog licks his balls?" Stern: considered that a moment. "No, Dixon, I do not."

"Because he can," said Dixon, and looked at his brother-inlaw squarely. Before he headed toward the cart, alone, he repeated it. "Because he can."

SOMEONE had once observed that when a man was wearing a hat it is harder to tell his troubles. Stern found surprising accuracy in this peculiar commonplace. Under a bright straw boater, with a brilliant red, white, and blue band, he proceeded down the avenues toward the River National Bank, where he would meet with Cal Hopkinson and the officer in charge of Clara's trust' accounts. The day was bright, the perfect sweet late May you expected in Kindle County.

The hat was Marta's--from a high-school play a decade ago.

Stern had found it in her room, and during one of the lengthy long-distance conversations they had recently been having late at night, she had urged him

to wear it, hoping it might improve his mood. He was certain he would feel like a clown as soon as he set foot outside the house.

Instead, it proved oddly heating to think that people who knew him well might not recognize him, could believe he was someone else.

Across the marble lobby of River National, Cai Hopkin-son waved. Together, he and Stern found the office of the bank vice president, Jack Wagoner. Wagoner was your usual inoffensive gentleman in banking, immaculately groomed and well mannered. Henry Mittler, long ago, had permanently damaged all bankers in Stern's estimate with his grudging private opinions of the baing clients who had made him rich.

Whatever disparaging bromide Henry might have employed about Jack, he was smart enough to know there was a problem. His mission was to explain to a man what his wife had done, without his knowledge, with most of a million dollars. Furthermore, the man was a lawyer. A suicide was involved. A will was in question. Bad medicine for a banker, or anyone else. The air in Wagoner's office full of antique reproductions and a good Oriental rug was decidedly uneasy. A single file folder lay in the center of Wagoner's otherwise immaculate desk.

"Mrs. Stern issued written instructions to dissolve at least \$850,000 in assets in her investment account on March 20th." With that, Wagoner produced a handwritten letter on Clara's stationery. Cal and Stern looked it over together on the corner of Wagoner's desk, then Stern took up the document himself. The hand was strong and clear. She wrote a one-sentence direction, setting forth the amount and granting the bank the discretion to liquidate those securities it deemed best. Holding the note, he recalled the other piece of correspondence Clara had set herself to a few days after. Many messages left behind, but no long explanatiops. Stern,

without thinking, briefly worried his head.

"May I ask who dealt with her?"

Wagoner knew all the answers. His assistant, Betty Fiori, had received Mrs. Stern's call and told her that written instructions were necessary with an amount of that size.

"And what then became of those funds?" asked Stern.

"They were disbursed," said Jack, "pursuant to Mrs. Stern's directions."

"How?" asked Cal.

"By certified check drawn against her investment account."

Wagoner had obviously spoken to his lawyer and was answering only as questions were asked. He now presented a white slip by which Clara had requested certification; she had wanted to reassure someone that her check would be good. Stern recognized her signature on the form, but the amount, a little over \$850,000, was written in another hand.

"Whose writing?" he asked, pointing.

"Betty's."

"And to whom," asked Stern, "was' this check made payable?"

"We looked for the canceled check." He pushed a button on his telephone console and asked that Ms. Fiofi be summoned.

She appeared at once, another person in a dark blue suit.

She recited the steps she had taken to find the wayward check. Their own check-reconciliation department had searched; their bank; the Fed. The trust officers, who normally received the canceled checks and statements on this account, had looked high and low. It was this tracing process, clearly, which had gone on while the bank had been holding Cal at bay.

"I'm positive it hasn't cleared," Ms. Fiofi said. "Can we stop it?" asked Cal.

"Stop?" asked Wagoner. "It's a certified check. We've guaranteed payment."

"It hasn't been presented."

"How could we stop it?" asked Wagoner.

"It's stale, isn't it?"

Stern spoke up. The question he had asked before had not yet been answered.

"To whom was this check made payable?"

Ms. Fiofi looked to Wagoner.

"We don't ordinarily make a record of that," he said. "We have no reason to."

"You do not know?" Stern spoke to Ms. Fiori. Wagoner might never answer directly.

"We don't know," she said. "Usually, you have the returned check. Sometimes we'll put a note on the requisition. It wasn't made payable to Mrs. Stern, if it helps. I remember that."

"You do?" asked Stern. "Yes."

"Clearly?"

He was in the mode of cross-examination now. Familiar ground. Something, he suspected, had made an impression on her.

"There is a particular reason you recall?" She shrugged.

"Not really."

"You remember the name?"

"I don't, Mr. Stern. I've racked my brain."

"But it was not an entity? A corporation? Partnership?"

"No, I'm sure of that."

"Not a charity or a foundation?"

"No."

"An individual?"

"I believe so."

"I see," said Stern. He knew the rest. It was obvious now why she remembered. "A man's name," said Stern finally.

Ms. Fiori, involuntarily, allowed her teeth to close a bit against her upper lip.

"Yes," she said.

Yes, thought Stern. Of course.

For a moment no one in the room spoke.

"So some fellow is walking around with my wife's check for \$850,000 in his

pocket?"

It was absurd, of course, but the humiliation was unbearable. It raced through him, like acrid fumes, and seemed

to come its way to his eyes. He knew he was flushed. Cal at last said something.

"Jack, there has to be a way to stop that check."

"Cal, it's certified. We'd be buying ourselves a lawsuit for wrongful dishonor. We don't know what kind of transaction was involved here." Wagoner, provoked by Cal, glanced as an afterthought at Stern. He had been indelicate. "I promise you this much. We'll let you know when the check is presented. If you want to get an injunction at that point, God bless you."

Stern was already on his feet. He spoke to Wagoner and Ms. Fiori, thanking them for their assistance, told Cal he would be in touch, then left the office. He was--again--reeling.

Outside the bank's revolving doors, he placed Marta's skimmer on his head and watched as the wind took the hat away and bounced it down the pavement, weaving among the pedestrians. When he turned, Cal was beside him, watching it go.

"It'll chase it," Cal said, but did not move.

Stern gestured that he ought not bother. They walked in the direction of the hat without speaking.

"It'll bet," said Cal at last, "when everything is said and done, we'll still have a chance to unwind that transaction."

She couldn't have had the slightest idea of the tax implications of what she was doing."

Stern barely contained himself. What a numskull Cal was, always congratulating himself at length because he was not even dumber. Who gave a damn about the money? Here at last, three decades along, Clara had found the way to curtail his interest in her wealth. When he turned back, Stern found his eyes fastening on the dark spot behind Cal's ear.

"I am not concerned, Cal. Whatever it was, shah be." He caught sight of the banner on his hat; it was resting against a mesh trash bin a hundred yards

away.

He took a step in that direction, and then stood still while that ugly interrogatory suddenly burned through him: Who? Oh yes, it was time for that again. Who was it? In the first few days, Stern with considerable discipline, and an aversion to pain, had refused to lower himself to this debased parlor game. But eventually the outrage boiled up in him and he could not suppress his dismal curiosity. It would have been more noble to be able to claim that it was vengeance for Clara's sake he was after--to find and punish the heartless scoundrel who'd inflicted what became a mortal disease. But his needs were more basic, and entirely his own. Whether or not it was a lurid interest, he simply had to fill in the picture.

In these moods, he suspected virtually every man who came into his view. Was it the mailman or, as in some filthy story, a salesman trayeYing door-to-door? Today he'd learned that it was someone who needed money--perhaps an impoverished student of hers whom she had fallen for and sought to mother; or a stragglng musician in a garret who wanted a permanent endowment? Perhaps a young man starting out in business. Or an older, married fellow who needed cash to finance his divorce?

Once or twice, at home, he'd picked up Clara's leathercovered address book and had gone through it page by page, weighing prospects with every male's name, no matter how unlikely. Any man would do. How about Cal? Perhaps his surprise at the money's disappearance was only an elaborate act. With a lover's gratitude, Clara had made a gift of what Cal had long superintended. But Ms. Fiori surely could not have failed to recall Cai's name with him seated right there. Perhaps it was Dixon. Of course, Clara's distaste for him seemed so sincere, and Dixon with his plasticcoated penis was, by Peter's evidence, not likely to be spreading---or contracting any such disease. Nor had Dixon the need for anybody else's money. How about Nate CawIcy?

He had the sex life of a chimpanzee. Perhaps all hisslmlking about was a reflection of guilt. Or the pompous rabbi at the temple? He certainly was an object of Clara's esteem and generosity.

Abjectly, unwillingly, Stern on the street corner placed his hand across his heart. Cal was down the avenue waving Stern's hat to show it had been safely recovered. Stern studied the throng of suited men striding the street. Who?



he thought, seething with hatred, weakened by shame. Who?

In MD's offices in the Kindle County Futures Exchange, Stern asked the receptionist for John Oranurn and took a seat. Dixon had a showpiece office a few blocks south of here, a place with exposed brick walls and banners and baffles used for sound deadening that was often pictured in architectural magazines; that was the site of MD's local trading room and central executive offices. But the order desk and back office remained here in a bright, functional-looking space in the KCFE.

After a few moments AI Oreco, Dixon's number-two person in Kindle, affable, half bald, too fat, greeted him. Dreading this 'meeting, Stern had put it off much longer than he should have. Finally, this morning he had left a message that he was coming, but John apparently had been needed on the floor. They would have to go get him. From his desk drawer, AI grabbed his red plastic trading badge, engraved with his initials and MD's clearing number, and pulled his navy-blue ttoor jacket off a hook. Downstairs, at a security desk, Stern was signed onto the floor for fifteen minutes. Two years ago, a fellow in a wig had placed dozens of trades and disappeared without settling the losing transactions. Now, if Stern exceeded his granted time by more than a minute, a cadre of security officers would spill across the floor and pull him out as unceremoniously as a spy.

This was an exciting place. On the Exchange floor, the profusion of color and the volume were exceptional. It was like being on the playing field in a thronged athletic stadium. The huge black tote boards thirty feet overhead flashed in optic shades of orange, red, green, and yellow as their digits fell, while a red band of local and national news raced by below. Young people--runners, traders, order clerks--dashed about in their colored coats and corduroys, each looking purposeful, hyped-up, singleminded. The floor was confettied with discarded orders. In the meantime, in the tiered trading pits, the fundamental business went on, the brokers, the locals, the top stair men, forty and fifty deep, buying and selling in a screaming melee of surging hands. Fingers up and out; beckoning or refusing. From their black wrought-iron observation posts, the pit reporters overhead copied down each fill. For all the electronic circuitry, the phones and faxes and computers that took information to and from this place, at the junction point one still depended on physical skills: visual acuity, strong lungs, and good ears. The din, the fierce voices, rang out incredibly. At the windows three stories above, various

gawkers stood with' their faces pressed to the glass.

In this world, greed had annealed with some kind of benighted manliness, so that there was at times'an atmosphere of savagery. Young men--too many of them Jewish for Stern's comfort--moved about with astonishing swagger.

Twenty-eight years old, thirty. Kids who had barely schook. Downstairs, at a security desk, Stern was signed onto the floor for fifteen minutes. Two years ago, a fellow in a wig had placed dozens of trades and disappeared without settling the losing transactions. Now, if Stern exceeded his granted time by more than a minute, a cadre of security officers would spill across the floor and pull him out as unceremoniously as a spy.

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Twenty-eight years old, thirty. Kids who had barely scraped their way through high school had bought seats on the Exchange and traded for their own accounts, often making millions. Others would lose their shirts or trade away an accumulated fortune in a matter of days. It made no difference. Those who went into the pits wore the macho pride of bullfighters. Like

cavemen they lived on the unpredictable whims of wind and rain, markets, seasons.

This, they believed, made them tough. The risk made them high. Stern had heard stories, amusing if not true, of handjob delivered in the jostling trading pits by certain female clerks. erity was not the point of these tales.

They emphasized the exhilarated air that many believed they breathed here. 'They had it better than ordinary dripspmoney, the blood of life, was always passing through their hands in staggering amounts. Once, years ago, when Dixon was still often on the floor, Stern had met him for lunch and found him conletting with four younger colleagues, all traders.

'I got this one,' a man'had said, moving in front of one of the elevators.

'For what?" a second asked.

'A bill."

'A big bill?"

"Right."

Dixon laughed and dug through his pockets. He stepped before the second elevator.

Eventually, the five of them passed the stakes down to Stern. A thousand dollars a man. In cash. They were betting on which elevator would come first.

A1, a dozen feet ahead of Stern on the floor, pointed to John in the MD trading booth, a narrow gray counter space that looked like a hotel newsstand. Between the pits, the various clearing corps had these tiny preserves where orders and fills could be phoned back and forth from the floor. Every inch down here was precious. Ten people would work in quarters closer than steerage.

John was on the phone now, writing furiously, talking 'back. Upstairs at the other end of the line, Dixon, doing his ugly deeds, had found him. He must have asked for John by name. Was he counting on John's loyalty or his ignorance? Probably both. John was eager to please him.

Dixon had mentioned that John had asked repeatedly to be advanced into the hurly-burly of the trading pits. He was not ready, Dixon said, had not been

around long enough.

He kept John on the order desk, although John filled in down here whenever he could. Luke all the runners, the clerks, this business's perpetual flotsam and jetsam, John apparently shared the common dream: Get experience. Get a seat. Get rich. The pits remained one of the few places left where an unpromising young person, a high-school loser, a kid without an electric guitar or four-three speed could still hit it big. John, Stern took it, wanted one more chance to make it.

John slid out of the booth while AI took his place. His son-in-law greeted Stern with much the same look of dismay Peter had recently. After a futile effort at conversation, they returned to MD's office. The only space John had of his own was a desk in the midst of the tumultuous back office. John stopped there to throw down various papers, then directed Stern to a conference room. A magnificent photo of Kate stood on the desk amid John's piles. His daughter, Stern thought again, was an exceptional beauty.

Even chatting with his father-in-law, John looked childishly uncomfortable. His huge shoulders sloped, and he idly fingered an envelope on the desk. He wore the uniform of the floor, MD's unstructured navy cotton jacket, corduroys, and a knotted tie dragged three or four inches below his open collar. A photo ID hung from his pocket.

What was there about this young man that Stern found so infuriating? He was reminiscent sometimes of a comic-strip oaf, so large and amiable that he deserved a balloon over his head: Duh. He was not dumb. Clara, for years, had been at pains to make that point. He had had no difficulty finishing college, long after his athletic career had ended. But there was a fecklessness about him. Large, apple-cheeked, blond, plumper than in his playing days, he looked like an inflated two-year-old, with as little guile.

Stern was , convinced that the present matter would render him numb. He would have no intuition about how to proceed and few resources with which to manage the strain of the coming months. Stern had seen these situations throughout his professional life: a family member, a business colleague,

wn a rope by a prosecutor, offered freedom in exchange

for testimony. Some tossed it back, with royal indifference. But not many. Most tried to save themselves, bargaining with the truth and appealing to

those they implicated for understanding. They ended up scorned by everyone. It was hard to imagine John having the suppleness to endure this storm.

Stern had stood to close the door and after a 'brief preface came to the point.

"Dixon Harmell is being investigated by a federal grand jury."

"Ooo," said John. He looked like a carpenter who had just walloped his thumb.

"Yes. It is very unpleasant."

"What for?"

"Well, I think I should let someone else explain the details to you. In general, the government seems to suspect some form of improper trading ahead of customer orders. Has anyone from the FBI attempted to speak with you? A chap named Kyle Horn?"

John shook his head. He didn't think so. "What does he look like?"

"Big fellow." Big blond goyishe, looking lunk in a Cheap sport coat, thought Stern. But that would not do.

John again shook his head uncertainly. You would think FBI credentials might make an impression, even on John, but there was never any telling. Stern removed the subpoena from his briefcase and tried to explain what it meant.

"Due to our relationship--yours and mine--the prosecutors were courteous enough to allow me to receive this for you.

However, because I already represent Dixon, you should consult with another lawyer before you answer the government's questions."

What kind of questions?"

"I could speculate, John, but that would probably not be best."

John squinted. He didn't get it, of course. Stern explained that the government believed he had valuable information.

"They want to use me to get him?"

"Exactly."

The large baffled look Stern would have predicted rose up in John's eyes. A deer in the road. He had no idea what to do. The conflicts were between all the simple things that he took as harmonious. Loyalty. Truthfulness. Selfpreservation.

"John, you and your lawyer must decide whether you wish to negotiate with the government for immunity. If that is the case, then your lawyer will give the prosecutors a prediction, a proffer, of what you would say."

"Yeah," said John, "but what if I don't want to talk?"

"Again, John, that is a good question for you to put to your lawyer. But the government can always choose to grant -you immunity without regard to your desires, in which event your choices are between answering questions and jail."

"Jail?" John took this in, too, with continuing ponderous reflection. "I really don't know that much."

As this conversation proceeded, Stern had gradually felt his heart declining, and with this response, it plunged the remaining distance. 'Not that much,' said John. But more than nothing at all. Dixon would be safe only with virtual amnesia on John's part. Even the vaguest memory of who was behind the trades would do for the government, especially if they succeeded in tracing the profits into Dixon's hands. And sitting here, his son-in-law exhibited fi discomfort most telling to a practiced eye. There was no outraged inquiry from John about what this trading ahead had to do with him, or how the prosecutors might have gotten his name. He knew the government's interest in him was well placed.

"What does he say about all this? Dixon? Can you say?"

Stern shook his head. But he felt for an instant like holding his breath. A moment of the most delicate sort had arisen. With somebody else., another employee, Stern would have ventured a comment whose direction was as faint but discernible as an idling wind: 'This is, of course, a critical matter for Dixon, his entire life and business are at stake.' But John was without subtlety. He might ask an impossible question--'You mean I should lie?'---or, even worse, take Stern's comments as a commandment. In all, Dixon and Stern--would have to trust John's lawyer to make the appropriate assessments and to offer the correct guidance.

"Where am I going to get this lawyer from?" John asked. "!

"I have some names I might suggest, if you would like."

"Oh, sure."

"MD will indemnify you--pay your expenses so you need not worry about that."

Stern was working on the list right now, writing on a piece of office stationery, names and phone numbers. George Mason. Raymond Horgan. No one would quite manage to reconcile the diverse needs of John's circumstances as well as he could have, but that was out of the question, and Stern, in any event, saw the wisdom of his not serving as scOUTmaster on this trail. Just these few minutes had changed his estimate of John for good.

John took the list and shrugged. He had better get back to the floor, he said. He continued to wear his usual look, furtive and confused. Watching John hulk off to the elevator, Stern felt a ruthless anger with Dixon gathering again. How could he? How could he have embroiled this boy in the usual piggish market high jinks? But the answer was too obvious. Dixon with his infallible calculation of what was best for himself had no doubt recognized that his greatest protection was in a family member less experienced in the business. Easiest probably to give sotto-voce instructions, knowing they would not be questioned, or, if the time came, willingly recalled. Soon, Stern was going to have to turn his attention to the issue of when and how to get out of the case. If there was an indictment and John was a government witness, Stern could never handle the matter at trial. Cross examining his daughter's husband was unthinkable. Perhaps he should also give a list of lawyers to Dixon and exit post haste. But he recognized his own lack of conviction. Just now, Stern was not eager to sever any other long-term relations. And he had resisted breaking with Dixon for many years.

Part of that, of course, was for Silvia's sake. Nor should one overlook the force of gratitude. Much of Stern's present practice, in which he most often represented lawyers and bankers and corporate officials, could be attributed to the fact that he had become known as Dixon's lawyer. It had been his exit from the grimy world of the police courts into the arena of high-class crime--embezzlements and frauds, tax matters, bribery, and now and then a murder of passion. Dixon--a classy borderline operator--had, by the peculiar logic of

these things, elevated Stern, and it was virtually an instinct in him never to give short shrift to anyone who had helped him in his practice.

Yet he knew that the things that attached him to Dixon.

were not simply .external. After thirty-two years practicing law, though his acquaintances were legion, his admirers many, Stern, in a way he seldom felt inclined to meditate upon, was apt at times to feel somehow abandoned-left to himself. Oh, there were hundreds of persons he cared for, whose lives and ideas interested him, and with whom he felt an eager mutuality. He got on the elevator in the courthouse and there were always half a dozen people to 'greet him. He was well known, likable, eager to. please, and reluctant to give offense. Stern had his circle, mostly men near his age, primarily lawyers and judges, a number of them Yiddish speakers like his mother, subtle, clever people whose talk of books and sports and business gossip he regularly shared over lunch and sincerely valued. Good company- But he had in mind more than that. He meant the kind of unguarded male affinity that young men on teams, in gangs, on street corners had. Did women, domestication, destroy that? Or the fieme struggles of the daily world where every man was your enemy? Who knew? Yet Dixon remained. He was present. Stern could pay him no further compliment. But, like a granite marker beside the road, Dixon seemed to be the man who had always been nearby.

My brother-in-law, thought Stern, alone in the tiny room where John had abandoned him. Brother. In. Law. What kind of peculiar term was that?

TO Kindle County Symphony Hall, with its wedding-cake balconies and ceiling frosted with wreaths of gold, where Clara Mittlet and Alejandro Stern had Passed their initial evening together, Stern now came on his first night out with Helen Dudak. The coincidence did not strike him until Adolph Fronz, the elderly conductor, raised his baton, and then the thought quickly added to Stern's discomfort. He had very nearly broken this engagement; only his kindly, impulses toward Helen and his reluctance to offend her had made him carry through. It was a sad fact, shameful, awful-choose your pejorative ad-jective-but Radczyk's report had taken something from him that even the moment in the garage doorway had not. He had been a larger and more essential failure than he had imagined. Sex mattered. Ever and always. This he was learning, and his feelings now-alternating between vertiginous rage and desolation--left him deeply disinclined toward any female. The notion of



spending an entire night attempting to be the charming, alluring gentleman of a few weeks before was simply out of the question. At the last moment, having spied tonight's tickets for one of Clara's many symphony series thumbtacked to the kitchen bulletin

board, he had phoned Helen to propose this change. 'I cooked,' Helen said simply. Music, then supper later, perhaps?

'All right.' Helen was obliging. He found himself enormously relieved. In the dark hall, while Franz twirled and the players strummed and tooted, he would be alone, free from the need to prattle. Afterwards, the weariness of the work week could overcome him.

"I don't quite know why," Helen told him at intermission, "but I wouldn't have picked you for symphonic music. More quartets," she said, "or a single guitar." They stood in the lobby, blinking in the sudden lights. Couples Clara and he had seen here for years lifted their hands in greeting.

But no one came near. With an entirely unpredictable force, a gust of grief and remorse blew into Stern, as he realized he had started his new life. For Helen, he smiled ruefully.

"I am indiscriminate." Stern touched his ear, "Tone deaf. I cannot tell the difference between the Kindle symphony and the high-school band." He had kept this fact from Clara for thirty-some years, though when it turned out that Marta could not tell one note from another, she must have entertained suspicions.

"Oh, Sandy." Helen held his wrist as they laughed together at his failings. Why was it that he always forgot how much he liked Helen Dudak until he was beside her? She looked marvelous. Her fox-colored hair had a crisp outline that betrayed a trip to the beauty shop, and she wore a simple black dress peeled back from her shoulders. Against all expectation, as the lights went down once more, he found himself pleased to be here.

"So you went to the symphony for all those years and never knew what you were listening to?" asked Helen, as they were driving off afterwards. She was turned fully about to face him, seated girlishly on her knees. It was typical of Helen and her instinct for important nuance that she had returned to this subject. They were headed toward her home for dinner. In the end, there was no way to say no. Besides, Helen's company was soothing. And after all his

laments over the untimeliness of women, he was now full of a more familiar feeling which they had always reliably satisfied: he was extremely hungry.

"Clara enjoyed it."

"I recall. But" Helen said, then stopped.

"Yes?"

"It's nothing."

"Please."

"I guess I was wondering why you would go now."

"Ah," said Stern, hoping to conjure up some tactful response, and vaguely frightened to find her so astute. Out the window, the center city flashed by, uninhabited, ghostly in the isolated pools of mercury light, the doorways dark. Helen, to his relief, continued on her own.

"I suppose I was going to give you advice."

"Feel free."

"No," she said. "There's really no comparison between my circumstance and yours."

"Duly noted," Stern said. "You were thinking?"

"Oh, just that, as awful as it is, there are things to enjoy in being alone again. The liberty of it. Finding what's your own."

As the streetlights flowed across her, Helen turned back to measure his response. "I'm sure this is terribly offensive."

"No, no," said Stern. He was eager to agree, pleased to show that he understood her good intentions, and happy to foster the thought that he had suggested the symphony out of some unthinking reflex. And, in fact, this was a valuable notion. A good solid person of real judgment, Helen had hit on something that he otherwise would have missed. Whatever his misery, parts--large parts of him--had accepted his new bachelorhood with relish. Not just the brief period of cavorting. The moment fight now was one more instance--relaxed, at ease, and able to speak about himself in a way Clara seldom encouraged. Clara had her minute agendas, her quiet steps which she always

danced.

For many years (Too many years! he thought, and felt again the accustomed iron point of guilt) he had recognized in.

some unspoken way that she utilized all this silent plarmingas a means to escape torpor and depression. But the point was that she had done it, he had known it, adjusted to it, and now it was no longer there, like a ticking metronome gone silent. Wounded and reeling, his soul had nonetheless expanded in the recent circumstance, reentering regions closed off for years.

Helen served a splendid supper. She made a salad of shrimp remoulade, and cooked a small piece of blackened fish. She stood over the iron skillet with the smoke rising,.

drinking her wine and chatting, like a cooking-show host.

Rick, her younger child, a sophomore now at Easton, dreamed, like many nineteen-year-olds, of being a criminal defense lawyer. Helen relayed his questions. Did Stern believe most of his clients were innocent? How could he defend them if he didn't? How did he feel when he found out they were guilty?

These were old questions, the puzzles of a lifetime, and Stern enjoyed answering Helen, who listened alertly. Some spoke of the nobility of the law. Stern did not believe in that. Too much of the grubby boneshop, the odor of the abattoir, emanated from every courtroom he had entered. It was often a nasty business. But the law, at least, sought to govern misfortune, the slights and injuries of our social existence that were otherwise wholly random. The law's object was to let the seas engulf only those who had been selected for drowning on an orderly basis. In human affairs, reason would never fully triumph; but there was no better cause to champion. Helen sat back, drinking her wine, attentive.

For dessert, she brought out berries. She lifted the wine bottle toward Stern, but he shook it off. Helen had drank freely; Stern had had a single glass. He was drinking too much lately, which never before had been his habit; his head was sore on many occasions.

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"As usual," he said, "I have done all the talking; and about myself."

"You're wonderful to listen to, Sandy. You know that."

"Do I? Well, I appreciate a receptive audience." Helen looked at him directly.

"You have one here," she said somewhat softly. They were silent, considering one another. "Look," said Helen Dudak.

"You know it. I know it. So I'll say it. I'm available. All right?"

"Why, certainly."

She raised her dark eyebrows. "In all senses."

For an instant, Stern's heart actually seemed to shiver. What was it about Helen? She had a way with facts which could be utterly disarming. She laid out what was on her mind with no more ceremony than a butcher tossing meat onto the scale. But they both knew they had come to an auspicious pass.

"You're not ready," she said immediately. "I understand that." She reached for her wine and quaffed it, her first overtly nervous gesture. "But when you are, you are. We're on our way to the twenty-first century, Sandy.-There are no proprieties left about this kind of thing. Not everyone goes nerve-dead in mourning."

He was not sure what he'd say if she gave him the chance.

Certainly it would not do to explain his circumstances to Helen, that he'd been a vampire he had been out ravishing when he was supposed to be dead, while now he had been laid into his crypt with a stake right through the heart.

Fortunately, however, explanation did not appear necessary.

This was, Stern sensed, well scripted, and Helen had assigned herself all the lines. She had a missionary role.

She was going to heal Stern, sell him on himself. In a second she would be telling him that he was still attractive. He had known Helen for decades now and recognized this forwardness as uncharacteristic. This was not Helen's true nature, but rather the new and improved model, head-shrunk and reorganized. So much of this seemed self-consciously political. The formerly colonized nations should engage in self-determination. Speak your mind. Admit your desires. You were equal and entitled. He was less hopeful than she about the virtues of this revolution. But, for tonight, it was just as well. He would play his part.

Here sits Mr. Alejandro Stern; history's first bald coquette.

"You're quite an attractive man, Sandy."

He could not suppress his smile. Again, she misunderstood.

"Do you think that the only thing women find attractive is a twenty-year-old body?"

Here was one of the five or six highest-order mysteries of life. What did women find attractive? Attention. That he knew. Strength of one kind or another, he had long supposed. But the physical element entered somewhere as well.

"Whatever that might be, Helen, I think I lack some of the essential ingredients."

"I don't think so. I think you have all the essential ingredients. Maybe some of the inessentials--" Her hand trailed off in space and they both laughed merrily.

God knows, there was no sense in pretending he did not enjoy this. He did. Given the frame of mind with which he had started the evening, her honesty, affection, her excitement in his presence seemed a heartening miracle. He took her hand.

"Helen, this is a charming offer. I am sure it will obsess me." As usual, he enjoyed being elusive. He was back to his essential aspect, the foreigner, unknown and hard to figure. His ambiguous look was apparently too much for

her. She shrank back and shook her head. "God, I've made a hash of this."

"Nonsense."

"Oh, Sandy." She covered her face with both hands. "I'm drunk. I can't believe this." She sat, eyes closed, suddenly flushed, suffering intensely. The sight of dear, honest Helen so humiliated moved him terribly. He was beginning to take on the emotional lability of an adolescent. For now, no matter. He stood at once and from behind her chair wrapped his arms around her.

"Helen," he said.

"I'm drunk," she repeated. "I let myself come on like a lush sitting at a bar."

"You appeared the true, kind soul you are. I am positively alight with flattered pride. And," he said, "I am enormously interested."

"You are?" She craned her neck straight back, so that she was looking at him

upside down, a cute maneuver somehow befitting a person half her age. Her smile, too, was girlish.

"I am," said Mr. Alejandro Stern. He cared for her much too much not to embrace her. He leaned down to meet her, full of kind intentions and wholly unprepared for the spectacular jolt that lit him from the first contact.

Helen, too, felt this and actually groaned. He came around the chair, took her in his arms. He touched both her breasts.

"Upstairs," she said, after a moment. She took him by the hand and led him to her bedroom. There he opened Helen's dress, pulled down the bodice, and helped her remove her brassiere. Her breasts were wide-set and flattened somewhat by age and the toils of female experience, but the sight, to Stern, remained deeply exciting. She left him to begin turning down the spread. Helen had loosened his tie and he pulled it from his collar.

It was then that he remembered Peter's caution. Stern remained stock-still. He was without indispensable equipment. This would be terrible.

"Helen," he said. She looked at him, but his mouth seemed merely to grope. "Helen, I find this most embarrassing--" "Ohhh," said Helen. "Aren't you contemporary?" She pointed across the bed to a nightstand. "The top drawer."

Amid the pantyhose there was a package of condoms.

He tried not to start. Helen, who had slipped her arms back into the top of her dress, so that it was languorously draped, smiled faintly.

"I'm not offended, if you're not. To tell you the truth, it's a necessity." He did not understand. "Birth control," she said.

"Why, Helen," said Stern. This news, somehow, pleased him.

"Don't get too excited," she said and tossed aside the bedcover. "I'm in menopause. Like everyone else. Just not as far along."

Stern fingered the package. The economy size. Twenty-four and most of them gone. Dear Lord, modern life was disconcerting. Helen had come back around the bed to him.

She pushed her arms free of each sleeve.

"Where were we?" she asked.

Afterwards, he lay with Helen in her bed. Somehow, though, he had been less adept. He had fumbled with that stupid latex thing, and their nervousness expressed itself as an almost comic courtesy. 'Is that all right?' 'Oh yes, yes, please.' Nonetheless, they lay here, quiet and adhering to one another, fully content. At some point, he thought, he was supposed to leave. But not just now. In an idle way, it occurred to him that he was a truly vile creature, one of those sly, conscienceless mpscallions out of some French bedroom farce, vowing chastity and then throwing himself on the first woman that passed into sight. What was wrong with him?

But he did not feel vile--or wrong. He had supposed from listening to TV and the movies and cocktail talk--from wherever it was these ideas came--that these couplings, called casual, were supposed to be loveless and numb. But here in the soft dark he found himself aswarm with gentle feelings. This woman, like Margy, would be dear to him for life. Was that self-deception? Or had pop mythology just missed the point. Was it intimacy and connection that everyone was seeking? He thought, oddly, of Dixon. Did the master swordsman also experience his thousand interludes this way? Yes. Probably. Even for Dixon there must have been more to his wandering than the chance to brag. He craved acceptance, tenderness, female succor, before returning to the world made harsh by men. So, too, Mr. Alejandro Stern. His life as he had always known it was gone, and the road down which he marched was largely unknown to him. What was ahead? The last months, he recognized quite suddenly, had been rife with fear. But not right now. For the moment, with Helen curled in the crook of his arm, her breathing against him slowing as she dove near sleep, he had stepped aside, taken time out, cooled himself in the refreshed air of night. For today, tonight, for the first fraction of time since it had happened, he was able to declare himself, however briefly, at peace.

For the occasion, Stern borrowed the 1954 Chevy of his law school classmate George Murray. At this time in America, automobiles had only recently ceased being shaped like tea-kettles and Stern regarded this vehicle, which came equipped merely with a heater, as sleek and impressive. He had not made the acquaintance of many girls in the United States; there seemed to be so few opportunities. For years, he had been ahead of himself in school and, accordingly, was of little interest to the young women around him. And since he was seventeen, he had worked each weekend, driving a punchboard



route that took him all about the Middle West in a dilapidated, foul-smelling truck owned by Milkie, his grubby one-eyed boss. Over time, his inexperience seemed to compound itself. Foreign-born, Hispanic-accented, Jewish, he was apt in female company to feel like something set down here from another universe.

So he was grateful for Clara's ease with him. He crossed his feet trying to race her to the car door, but she remained amused and casual. Somehow, he made this dour young woman comfortable. As much as he aspired to her, blindly and instinctively, she perhaps thought he was all that she deserved.

"You know," she said, as soon as he was seated, "this was really my idea. I begged my father to ask you."

"This," said Stern, gesturing to the two of them, "was my idea. You, however, put it into action." .

"Oh, you are smooth." She smiled. "Daddy says that. He thinks you' re very bright."

"Does he?" Stern, unaccustomed to city driving, watched the road in desperation. If this car suffered any injury, he would have to flee the state. Murray had made that clear.

"What do you think of him?" she asked. "My father?"

Stern, in spite of himself, was too distracted to prevent himself from groaning.

Clara laughed out loud. She touched his arm as he moved the gearshift along the column.

"I am terrible, aren' t I? I'm not like this, Mr. Stern.

It's all your fault. Do you know that I am usually so quiet? People will tell you that about me."

"What else would they tell me?" Stern asked. He had fallen into a companionable mood. She smiled, but it was the wrong question.

"Tell me about Argentina," she said after a moment. The concert was Ravel. She spoke to him about the music, making offhand reference to passages that she supposed were as plain to him as if they were words written on the page. At the intermission, he bought orange juice. Only one bottle, for her. His

normal penury had guided him without reflection and he saw at once that he had disconcerted her by making his lack of means so plain. But she refused to be flustered. She offered him the straw that had been punched down through the cardboard bottle cap and made him take a sip. And there something occurred. The concert hall was crowded; the grand acoustics of the building amplified the hubbub, and the lobby lights were stingingly bright after the prior hour in darkness. But the moment to Stern grew more intimate than an embrace. Somehow her character had become as clear to him as the notes which had been played: she was kind. Committedly. Unceasingly. She cared more for kindness than social grace. This vision of her overtook him, and Stern, in a kind of swoon, felt himself suddenly immersed in that warm current and his heart swimming toward her.

"That was wonderful," she told him as they moved along beneath the theater lights after the concert. She had carried her coat out the door, and they stood, buffeted by passersby, as she struggled with one sleeve. Summoning himself, Stern asked her to accompany him to Chinatown for dinner. He had contemplated this moment all week. He would have to take her somewhere. Chinatown, he eventually decided, answered the imperatives of economics and romance, and the thought of the meal--he was thin in those years and always hungry--had tantalized him for days. She refused, however. The money, surely, was on her mind.

"I must tell you, Miss Mittler, that I intend to take a telephone next week." This was true. He had held off only because he was not certain Henry would allow him to keep his office. But the remark, spoken in jest, succeeded in amusing her. This, Stern recognized at once, was a kind of rare power with her. Under the marquee lights, Clara Mittler easily laughed. She was wearing a tiny pink hat, with a trimming of white veil, and she reached up to hold it.

"Next week," she said. "We'll make a separate outing of it. Why rush ourselves tonight?"

Agreed. He offered her his arm and she took it. They strode off together through the symphony crowd, the men in overcoats, the women in fur stoles and jewels. Stern felt a swell of pleasure. He was certain that someone there looked up and thought, What a handsome young American couple.

"This is my responsibility," said Stern. "You should have no doubt about that."

"Why would I have any doubt about it? I'm callin you, ain't I?"

Stern continued to keep his eyes closed. Never in his life had he undergone a moment like this. Never. He had always treasured his honor. One hand crept absently along the desk until he recollected that this furtive search was futile.

He was going to buy cigars today. That was a promise to himself. A sworn oath.

When he did not speak, she said, "I need you to tell me what-all I gotta do."

"Of course."

"How long is this goddamn thang gonna last, anyway?" What was it that Peter had said? Three weeks to a lifetime. He told her simply that one could never be certain. He had no wish to get into details.

"That's great. I suppose I gotta come down there?"

"Here?"

"where else?" She was apparently confused about treatment or diagnosis.

"I would think everything necessary can be done in Chicago."

''

"Well, I'd think so, too," she said, "but it in't gonna be like that."

He had no idea what outraged impulse she was giving vent to now.

when the thought of Helen came to him abruptly, he could not breathe. He sat back in the chair rigidly, dumb.

Surely, there could not be a problem there, too. Peter had virtually promised. And if he was wrong twice? Stern's eyes were now open wide.

Margy asked if he was there.

"I am sorry." He asked her for a moment and pulled himself closer to the desk, gripping the glass by its green edge.

All that control he had exerted, that excessive, ugly compulsive grasp he always had on himself and had always

quietly despised--it had a purpose. He saw that .now. "You know I only got three weeks," Margy said. "Three weeks?" he asked.

"Till I'm supposed to be there. This thing says June 27th."

What thing, he almost said. But he did not. A miracle process of reconstruction was immediately at work. Oh, he was still alive. He understood now: she had been served with a grand jury subpoena. He slapped himself on the chest, where he could feel his heart pounding.

Answering his questions, she provided a short account of events the day before: The subpoena had been served by Chicago FBI agents, local functionaries uninvolved in the investigation, who merely dropped off the paper, telling her she would have to testify on the twenty-seventh about the documents called for.

"You are quite right," said Stern. "You must come here. I was thinking for a moment that they might not require a personal appearance before the grand jury, but since they told you otherwise--" He was lying fabulously now--in an instant he would have the entire conversation retooled. "So you say the .twenty-seventh." He reached for his appointment book, but Claudia had it. He did not bother to retrieve it. "Yes, that is fine. Well, I shall see you here then."

"That's all?" she asked.

"No, no," said Stern, "of course not. I must meet with you, review the documents, determine why they have bothered you."

"But you're my lawyer. It won't be like John. Like you said--you're responsible."

"I must check with the Assistant United States Attorney to be certain. But I must say--" Stop, he told himself. Cease.

He was blathering, still electric with reYef. "Margy, put the subpoena on the fax machine. Right now." For a moment they were on the line together, unspeaking, difficult small things gathering in the hushed whirring. Then Stern announced that Claudia was summoning him to another call, a fiction out of whole cloth, and placed Margy on hold until the subpoena copy was laid on his desk. It sought corporate records and, properly, should have been served on him as the corporation's lawyer. He had not taken Klonsky's

warning to mean they would go this far. But Chief Judge Win-cheil had let the prosecutors get away with this tactic in other cases where they had argued it was necessary to be sure that employees would be exacting in producing documents. And as usual, Stern noted, the government's informant had been on target in identifying who would know MD's records best.

The contents of the subpoena were in most regards predictable. Listed first were approximately two dozen dates; the government wanted every ticket written on the central order desk those days. By asking for records of all of MD's business on each date, the government was continuing its effort to obscure its interests by not focusing on individual transactions. But amid this volume of papers would be the tickets John had written at Dixon's instruction for the orders that had ended up booked to the error account. Once again, the informant was right on the mark.

In the subpoena's second paragraph, the grand jury requested all MD's canceled checks for amounts over \$250 written in the first four months of the year. This, Stern took it, was a continuing step in the government's efforts to trace into Dixon's hands the illegal profits made trading ahead. It was also an encouraging sign; apparently, as Dixon predicted, the subpoena to his bank had been unavailing. Stern had spent an evening or two examining copies of the records the bank had produced and could see nothing more noteworthy than the occasional six-figure personal checks for investments and purchases that were part of Dixon's millionaire life-style. Certainly, there were no large deposits from unexplained sources.

"What is this last item?" Stern asked Margy, as he got back on the line. His pulse had retreated to normal. He read: "All account opening documents, purchase and sale records, confirmations and monthly statements for account 06894412, the Wunderkind Account." Do we know what that might be?"

"I been lookin at that," said Margy.

"And?"

"And he's a clever old dog. You got the error-account statements I gave you?"

Stern put her on hold a moment while Claudia pulled the file..

"Look at Jan 24," she instructed. "You see where the error account's got a buy and a sell of fifty thousand bushels of oats?"

He saw it. Dixon someone, to indulge the formal presumptions--had bracketed these orders around a surge in oat prices caused when Chicago Ovens bought more than two million bushels that day in Chicago.

"Trades make a profit of about forty-s'rx thousand, right?"

He was in no position to follow, let alone challenge her arithmetic. He simply agreed.

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"Now look at the next day. You see where there's a buy of two April 90 silver contracts in the error account?"

"Yes." According to the posting notes in the error account statement, this trade, like the oat transactions the day before, had been made under an account number of which MD had no record. Therefore, all the trades had been set over in the error account.

"Now guess what the cash value of the silver is? Surprise you that it's a little under forty-seven thousand?"

Everything was a surprise at this point, but Stern, recognizing his role, merely said "No."

"Now look down the error account statement," she said. "See the two silver contracts again?"

"Journal transfer to A/C 06894412." Stern read the note from the statement, then looked again at the subpoena. This was the number of the Wunderkind account. As usual, he did not understand.

"See, he used the profit he made in oats on the twentyfourth to buy silver on the twenty-fifth. The cost of the silver gets debited to the error account, and after it's paid for, he makes accounting entries and journals the silver into this other account, Wunderkind. See? He's turned the profit into silver and he's got it in his hot little hand."

"And does anything similar happen on other occasions?"

"Far as I can see, it's every doggone time. Makes some money tradin ahead, then he throws on an error position to

absorb the profit and shifts it over to the same account."

"Wunderkind?"

"You betchum."

Stern explained it to himself to be sure he understood: it was a complicated device to move the profits made by trading ahead out of the error account.

Once the profit was in hand, he would buy new contracts, making some mistake that would also put the new trade in the error account; after the error account paid for the new position, it was transferred to the account of Wunderkindmwhatever or whoever he was. This was why Dixon had given him that sly look on the golf course.

"And what happens to all the positions which this Wunder account holds?"

"Dunno, cause I ain't got the records yet. He probably closed them right out and put the money in his pocket."

"And Wunderkind denotes what?"

"Beats me. Maybe it's the name on the account. Only thing is, I can see from the number it's a corporate account."

Stern nodded. So this race was heading into its home stretch. If the government could show that Dixon controlled this Wunderkind account, they would have the link they needed to blame all this on him. But from his expression on the golf course, it was probably a fair bet that Dixon had some final feint in store, another clever dodge to keep the feds from tracing these dirty dollars to him. A corporate account, Margy said. Perhaps the corporation's stock was held in trust, and the trust was controlled and funded from offshore. In the course of the IRS investigation a few years ago, Stern had seen Dixon utilize ploys like this, cagey maneuvers that would have done the CIA proud. It was John who remained the principal concern--what would he say to the government? If he stonewalled them or went haivesies with the truth, Klonsky and Sennett would threaten to prosecute John--and mean it. Stern shook his head again over the delicacy of his son-in-law's situation.

Stern asked Margy to be sure she had the records pulled together by the Monday before her appearance.

"Shore. I'll just work all weekend. What else is new? Think maybe I'll get in there Sunday night," said Margy in a leisurely way. "Stay over by the Gresham."

"Ah, yes," said Stern. "I See Claudia waving. It must be most urgent. Many thanks," he told Margy, ."many thanks," and put down the phone, feeling queasy and grateful and free.



TWICE in the last week, Stern had gone home in the morning to change for work and to look over the mail from the day before, having spent the night at Helen's. They had been out three times since their evening at the symphony-dinner, the theater--and she demonstrated on each occasion her ability to make him sweep aside the vexing detritus of his wrecked life. With Helen, he tended to hear only her beguiling musical laughter, her clear firm voice, and to feel, of course, the urgent throb of his reinvigorated romantic life. Dear, sweet Helen--she remained intent on improving him.

In yesterday's mail, Stern this morning found another copy of Westlab's bill, a pink form this time, bearing a red block-letter stamp which said OVerDUE. Yes, indeed, he thought at once. His most recent speculation was that, given the nature of the problem, Clara had consulted a female physician; he had gone paging through her phone book once again, looking for a name, even while he felt it would be fruitless. What could this doctor tell him? What could she change? But his curiosity was not all a matter of reason.

He took this overdue notice as a direction from fate, and with Westlab's bill and his checkbook in hand he set out, as soon as he was dressed, to find the place where, in the middle days of February, a specimen from Clara Stern was cultured, examined, and, with clinical exactness, named.

What if it was a mistake? he thought suddenly as he was driving, and then realized, as he had a hundred times before, that diagnosis was not the final issue. Clara had had a reason to suspect a problem. Only in the Bible and the tales of King Arthur did the virtuous have relations in their sleep.

Stern had never recognized the lab's address, but his street guide placed it on a small court tucked between two prominent commercial avenues, no more than five or six blocks from the Sterns' home in the Riverside neighborhood.

And there it was, a low, flat-roofed brick building with casement windows, a construction style of the 1950s. He had been driving by Westlab for twenty years and never noticed.

Within the building's glass doors there was little public space, a small waiting area with four plastic bucket seats bolted to a bar of steel, and a glass partition. At this window, ' he asked for Liz. She was beckoned and came forth, just as Radczyk had described her, dark and small, with short black hair cut into a fringe around her face.

She wore gray slacks and heavy makeup; liner was glopped below her bottom lashes as well. She smiled attractively, accustomed, you could tell, to dealing with the public.

"I am Mr. Stern," he said. "This bill was sent to my wife before she passed away in late March. In the confusion of events, I am afraid I neglected it."

"Oh, that's all right," said Liz emphatically. A hand proffering absolution, casual but complete, passed vaguely by her nose.

He waited just an instant.

"There was probably a doctor's bill as well. Either we never received it or it was misplaced. I would like to contact the doctor to be sure the bill has not been overlooked, but I am not certain who that was. Could you give me the name of the physician who ordered the test? I am the executor of my wife's estate, if there is any concern."

"Oh, no." Liz waved a hand the same way and, with Stern's copy of Westlab's statement was gone at once, receding into the visible office space, illuminated as in most buildings of that era by too much glaring fluorescence. From somewhere farther back came a vague antiseptic smell. Banging through the file drawers, Liz called out to another woman about something else, then returned, paging through a folder.

She had not quite arrived at the window when she spoke.

'Calling,' he thought she had said. "Pardon?"

"Do you know hun? Dr. Nathaniel Cawicy? His office is over on Grove. About three blocks. Here's the address." By now she had laid the folder down before Stern and showed him the test requisition, a long form of small type and boxes which had been filled out in the usual indecipherable doctorly hand. Nate's name and office address were stamped at the top of the form, but there was no question he had been the one to give the orders: he had signed, in a scribble, and had written "Viral culture for HSV-2" in a block for comments at the bottom of the page.

Weak and suddenly chill, Stern glanced up to find Liz looking at him oddly. Perhaps she was reacting to his dumb response or had recollected Radczyk, or had finally noticed what the test was for. His first impulse, however, was that he must continue to pretend, and he removed the gold pen from his inside

suit pocket to write down Nate's address.

There was no paper around, however, and instead, without speaking, he turned away.

"Did you want to pay this?" Liz was holding the bill.

He wrote out the check falteringly. He could not get the numbers right and had to tear up his first effort.

Nate! Outside, Stern fell heavily onto the cherry-colored leather of the front seat of the Cadillac. There was undoubtedly a way to explain. Drinking too much, or overcome by the involvements of his personal life, Nate had allowed this to skip his mind. Nonetheless, Stern was badly shaken.

Nate was fuddled at times but steady. It alarmed him for incomprehensible reasons to think of a doctor as unreliable or inexact. He reached for the car phone; this model had come equipped with one. Stern had no use for it--his daily drive to the office was no more than ten minutes, and he could walk to both courthouses--but out of his love for gizmos and toys, he had let Claudia get him a number and he used the phone on any occasion. Now he flipped

on the ignition, dialed information and then Nate's office.

"He's not in. Can I help you, Mr. Stern?"

"I must speak with him." He had shown Nate courtesy enough; he felt entitled to an immediate response. "It's something of an emergency."

The nurse paused. You could tell what she was thinking: Patients---everything was a eftsis.

"He's at the hospital." She repeatet the number. "Try to page him. He's in the middle of rounds, though. I'm not sure you'll get him."

He left his numbers--office, car, homemthen dialed University Hospital. When he reached the page operator, he described the call as urgent. Behind him, near the doors of Westlab, a mother was dragging a screaming child up the walk toward the building. Stern turned about fully to watch this scene. The little boy apparently knew what was coming, for he was carrying on fiercely, almost lying on the ground. The mother herself was overcome; eventually

Stern noticed that she was crying, too. "This is Dr. CawIcy."

"Nate, Sandy Stern."

"Sandy?" In his voice, there was a catch of something, frustration or disbelief.

"I shall be only a moment. It was important that I speak to you about Clara."

"Clara? Jesus, Sandy, I'm in the middle of grand rounds."

Nate took a second to contain himself. "Sandy, can I talk to you about this later?"

"Look, Sandy, is it on this Westlab thing? Is that why you're calling? I've gotten your messages."

Nate, as he'd anticipated, was going to explain. In a prescient moment, Stern saw how compulsive and foolish he would look.

"I know it is a silly obsession, Nate, but--"

In a rush, Nate interrupted again.

"No, no, Sandy, it's my fault. I'm sorry I've made you chase me around, but I did look into it. Okay? I checked my files, I called Westlab, nobody knows what it's about.

They have no records of any kind over there, and I don't either, so I don't know what to tell you. It's just a mistake; I'm sure. Okay? We've all checked thoroughly. Just let it go. All right?"

Stern found himself looking down at one palm, pink and completely empty. What is it? he thought. What now? But there was already something moving through him in a subdued rumble, so that it was only another instant before he finally made the connection: Nate was lying. He had been lying all along. For just the faintest second, Stern needed to remind himself to breathe as he listened to Nate's words go stumbling on. What more was he missing? he wondered. And then, as 'so often of late, he decided that he had no wish to know.

Afterwards, he was unsure how the conversation had ended.

The receiver, with the lighted touch pad on its back, was rectified and he was looking at his hand on it before he had recovered. He started to redial, but a sage voice urged him to gather himself first. He had learned something

in the courtroom. A Yar, called out, lied about that. Nate would deny misleading him. If confronted, he would tell Stern that, no matter what the form said, it was wrong. He needed to be composed--far more than he was now--to deal with this.

He slowly placed the car in gear and pulled out of the lot.

When he had driven a block or two, under the large stout trees that rose up along the parkways in this part of town, the thought drove through him, sharp and sudden, as if he had been impaled: She had hated him. Despised him. That, somehow, was what animated all this deceit. He could understand what motivated Nate; that had taken only a few minutes' reflection. He was lying out of cowardice--because he did not want to face Stern with the facts. Not merely Clara's unfaithfulness. That was the symptom, not the cause. But the disease, a kind of brutal and unrelenting spousal discontent, was too painful to disclose. And yet it was obvious in every act, in the reeking mess she had left behind for her husband to discover. Never able to speak her mind, she had settled for a graphic demonstration, a life, a home, bespattered and fouled.

And was he to pretend--now that he never knew this? Along River Drive, he was approaching one of many vista points, a space of concrete, with an old Greystone wall bordering the river, and a line of park benches looking out toward the green hills of Moreland and the fashionable suburbs on the western bank.

Abruptly he parked and crossed the street. He leaned over the thick wall, watching the swift waters sluicing by with their hidden, welling currents, twinkling, lambent--La Chandelle--then fell back onto one of the benches.

Only in the years when the children had gone off one by one to college was anything apparent. By the time Kate departed, a brooding desperate quality had come over Clara, a suffering lightlessness that would not yield.

Unflinching, she was regularly out of sorts, and he was unable to soothe her. In the most indirect of approaches, he had suggested counseling, which she instantly rebuffed. Always mute about her discontent, Clara complained now periodically about his unavailability. The office. His trials. His cigars--it was during this time that he was forbidden to smoke at home. The message in retrospect was clear: He still had his life, in which she had

never been included. She had little left. Shocked to be rebuked so directly, Stern had avoided her. He accepted a series of engagements out of town--a lengthy trial in Kansas City, Seminars and demonstrations of courtroom techniques. He had gone flying across America for months, until he had shrewdly suggested the irresistible, a trip together to the Far East. In Japan, with its monstrous cities and mysterious gardens, they came together again.

But before that, during the Kansas City trial, on one of his rare days at home, he had had what he saw now was the opportunity to look into her heart. The trial, concerning a nasty conspiracy of politicians and union officials, had gone on for fourteen weeks. Stern would fly home on Friday nights, leave again midday Sunday. He was present in body only; he spoke on the phone most of the Weekend or worked at the office downtown preparing for the upcoming government witnesses. On one of those Sundays, Clara had asked him to come with her to a showing of Japanese pots, raiku--ceramics fired directly in the blaze, then rolled in straw for markings. Clara was a passionate admirer of all the Japanese arts. Stern did not have time for this outing, but he agreed, hoping to appease her, knowing she would feel free to buy a substantial piece only if he was along.

She pointed at one pot after another. Did he like it? Once or twice, he made the mistake of allowing his impatience to show. When he saw the effect of this, he began to gesture

toward the shelves himself. This one? That? She found his sudden eagerness patronizing and abruptly suggested they leave. 'Certainly there must be one,' he said. She yearned for few physical possessions.

Tersely, Clara shook her head and went ahead of him out the door. A moment, like so many of late, of wholly different aspirations. At the head of the staircase in the dark gallery building, he stumbled and reached back for her hand. The iron newel saved him. When he looked up, Clara had her brow drawn down wearily in irritation, and a rare edge was in her eye. She might as well have proceeded with the pronouncement: He did not please her, in a deep abiding way. The hand he had reached back for, he remembered, had remained at her side.

He had believed that was past. Instead, it seemed now that this was to be Clara's parting look. Guilt had overcome her in the end and she had left behind a message begging forgiveness. But she apologized only for her

conduct. The rest could not be changed. Clara's heart, too, had been set to the fire and inkcribed with this hideous grudge. Better she should have torn apart the house, broken all the china, slashed the pictures on the Walls. Instead, full of rage and despair, she had smashed and destroyed herself, and left him to wound himself whenever he stooped for any of the pieces.

He spoke to her of Argentina.

His father had come from Berlin in 1928 to serve as a doctor in the agricultural settlements of Russian Jews who had arrived in the late 1880s and put down near Santa Fe.

There Bruno Stern had met Marta Walinsky. From subsequent comments, Stern took it that his mother believed she had acquired the sum of life's meaningful attainments by marrying a physician. Jacobo came at once, and four years later Alej."andro ; Silvia five years after that.

In the same way some actors are always on stage, Papa was always a doctor. He wore a full beard and he was wedded by the heat of fierce anxiety to his professional manner. He walked through the streets of Entre Rios in his white coat and brought it home to Mama to launder. He wore three-piece woolen suits in every season. His fingernails were carefully pared and his hands were whitish and bathed at the start of every day in lavender cologne. He hung his stethoscope about his neck, picked up his medical bag, and walked down two streets to his infirmary each morning. Mama told him that Papa was important. He made people better.

They respected him. Papa loved respect. Something about respect--Stern never knew the precise dimension of his father's failure--brought the family when Stern was almost five to Buenos Aires, with its gracious, cosmopolitan air.

One more unfortunate move. The city folk took them for rubes, and Mama's country relatives treated them at once as disagreeable portorios.

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Mama's cousin Ritella recalled from her rocking chair with emphatic flourishes the Seroaria Trtigica, tragic week, when she was in her teens and



roving mobs had entered the Jewish quarter in Buenos Aires with iron bars and barrel staves, beating any Bolshevik they found, which was taken loosely to include virtually any Jew. But for the most part, the years in the late 1880s and put down near Santa Fe.

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Mama's cousin Ritella recalled from her rocking chair with emphatic flourishes the Seroaria Trtigua, tragic week, when she was in her teens and roving mobs had entered the Jewish quarter in Buenos Aires with iron bars and barrel staves, beating any Bolshevik they found, which was taken loosely to include virtually any Jew. But for the most part, the years in B.A. that Stern recalled were not dramatically different from what he might have experienced growing up in Chicago or New York. In the area north and west of Corrientes and Callas, nearly 300,000 Jews--many of them, like his

mother, the children of Russian immigrants who had come to the Littoral provinces late in the nineteenth century maintained a full community life.

There were three Yiddish dailies, kosher butcher shops and bakeries, the tiny storefront synagogues. These were poor people--shop-keepers and factory workers, dockhands and meatpackers --who, as Mama put it, sold their labor to survive.

To Clara, as she sat across from him in the Chinese restaurant in a booth whose sides were magnificently tooled with red-eyed dragons with green tails, the familiar details were not emphasized. He spoke of the Indians who trod barefoot in Entre Ríos; the country's uncouth gauchos. He explained the crazy quilt of Argentine culture, with its diverse European elements of British uprightness, Italian amplitude, and Hispanic bravery and guilt. The excitement of a far-off place and its customs thrilled her; you could see it in her face, but she sat silent as a cat. At times, you would think she was not capable of speaking. He, in the meantime, carried on with animation about what he most often felt inclined to hide.

Her luminous look felt to Stern like a kind of homage.

Afterwards, she accepted his arm and they walked through the park back to George Murray's Chevy.

"You really must stop calling me Mr. Stern."

"Very well. What are you called, then. Alejandro, is it?"

"Most people call me Sandy."

"Very good," she said. "Sandy." Even with her perfect manners, he could tell that she struggled not to react to the inanity of the name. He joked that at last they had been introduced.

"Oh, I knew who you were."

"Pardon?"

"I recognized you. From Easton."

"Did you?" He was quite surprised. By his private calculations, she was too old to have been at the college while he was in law school, and he was certain she had not been a law student. There had been only nine women to enter in his three years and he had decided she was quite attractive and not liable to

be forgotten.

"I'm sure it was you. I saw you in the law school library all the time. You never seemed to leave."

"Ah, yes," he said forlornly, "that certainly was me." He asked what had brought her to the law school.

"A fellow." She looked down at the walk. "He was in your class. He was like you. He'd been in the service." Stern asked his name, but she flapped her hand. No account. "He didn't make it through."

Stern uttered a sympathetic sound. Of his class of three hundred, only about 120 had received degrees. The overheated atmosphere of law school and its occasional terror still returned to him at times in dreams. They had reached the car and Stern held the door.

"I am shocked to find I was so memorable," he remarked inside.

"Oh." She smiled a bit. "You had a GI haircut."

"Ah," said Stern. He could read her thought: he had appeared so terribly out of place. The story of his life. Foreign-born scholarship boy with government haircut. At Easton he would have looked like an arrival straight from the immigration dock. She touched his arm. It did not surprise him that she already recognized the large place occupied in him by pride.

She said merely, "Please."

He tried to save the moment. "I am flattered that I made any impression."

She looked down at her lap. So he saw it for the first time: Clara Mittler biting back her words. She knew a difficult social pass and had an infallible intuition for when to withdraw. He had learned to imitate her at this, in the way married couples will after decades, how to keep his silence when it was best, but he never had the same mastery as she. The subject drifted past; the sting receded. He

started the car and drove, again tensely studying the streets. "Did you enjoy law school?"

"To endure," said Stern, "not to enjoy."

"That's what my father says. I used to study in the law school library when I

was an undergraduate. I wanted to go myself, but he wouldn't hear of it." She labored with the thought. "And what about Easton, Sandy?" She used his name deliberately. "Did you find it a pleasure to be out in the hills?"

Here Stern showed more caution. This was apparently her alma mater. What could he say? There in the rolling countryside, thirty miles from the hub of Kindle County, Easton University had been built in the 1870s as an Episcopal alternative to the land-grant universities. By now, it had a magnificent faculty and a world-class reputation. But it was full of foppish fellows in tweed coats, boys from Brooklyn and Iowa who carried on as if they were princes and dukes. Easton was more Yale than Yale, a palace of pretensions. It had been an astonishing three years to Stern. Some people took him as exotic; others as a waif.

"Easton," said Stern, "I found to be much farther from the city than mere geography might suggest."

"Oh, yes," She nodded heartily. "I used to think the same thing all the time when I was teaching."

"Teaching?" asked Stern. For a few moments, he learned a thing or two about her. It turned out that after college she had been a grade-school teacher at the Prescott

School in DuSable. The students were almost exclusively black--"colored," they said in 1956--poor youngsters

whose poverty surrounded them like a vast gulf between them and the rest of the world. On the coldest mornings, attendance was down substantially because of the number of children who did not own coats.

"Nothing was wasted," she said, "Every moment was worthwhile. Whether you succeeded or failed."

"What caused you to stop?" asked Stern.

"In the dark car, she made a heavy sound. "I quit almost two years ago."

Move to strike as nonresponsive, Stern thought. The nomenclature of the courtroom was always in his mind these days, one more American dialect he wished to faultlessly master.

"For a particular reason?"

"I thought I had something better to do."

In George's car, they both became silent.

When he said good night to her beside the iron standards of the pointed fence that bounded Henry Mittler's handsome Georgian home in Riverside, she shook his hand and smiled against her will, and made him promise to call her about dinner next week. He watched her dash up the stairs, full skirt and petticoats hoisted. She ran through the doors of the house, which were large enough to front a mission, without turning back. Was she close to tears? 'Something had happened. She had been here, then gone, as warm in her own troubles. A fascinating young woman, bright and tenderhearted, and from the eagerness with which she spoke of seeing him again, he was sure that no snub had been intended. But as he stared up in the dark at the other brick and iron flower boxes that hung on Henry Mittler's home, the weight of grim conviction settled on him. He would never really know what lay inside.

With his usual abject look, Remo Cavarelli aided in the marble corridor outside the courtroom of United States District Court Judge Ira Winchell. Stern hung on to Remo like an old tie--one too garish and oddly proportioned to accompany any part of the current wardrobe. With his coarse hands and North End speech, Remo was an embarrassment to the young lawyers in Stern's office, who were accustomed to Stern's current trade--business people and professionals overcome by material appetites or caught up in ambiguous circumstances. But Remo had been a client for nearly three decades, and Stern would not abandon him. He had first approached Stern in the teeming halls of the North End police court and reappeared every few years in the midst of one scrape or another, a tough block of a man with the roughened brown face of a mariner.

Remo was a thief. He stole as a profession, with attitudes not unlike a professional hunter's. He admired what he stole; he enjoyed taking it; he looked forward to doing it again. And he regarded apprehension as part of his calling.

Each time he went to jail, and he had done three stretches 'already--he lamented the effect on his family. On the last occasion, Stern remembered, Remo had wept wildly as he contemplated separation from his young son. But he had come of age among men who made bluff pronouncements about the time they had done. And so, when he was caught, Remo Cavarelli plead

guilty.

That was how he intended to answer the indictment pending against him here for conspiring to loot an interstate shipment. Not today, of course. Like a man with a toothache, the only thing that Remo regarded as worse than his present predicament was its solution. But sooner or later, after Stern had arranged another continuance or two, Remo would approach the bar and publicly admit his culpability.

And this time it would be against the advice of his lawyer.

The government's case was extremely weak--a conspiracy depending entirely on Remo's coincidental appearance at the site where a hijacked refrigerator truck was being unloaded of its cargo of beef sides. Stern had encouraged Remo to go to trial, even offered to adjust his fee, but Remo was not interested. Trials were for people who had a gripe. Remo had none. At this point, with his fourth conviction, Remo was likely to be gone for a number of years. But he remained resolute.

Before the courtroom door, Remo pumped Stern's hand and Stern took a moment to explain what would happen today. The period for pretrial motions was now past, and judge Winchell would set a trial date. Remo was to do nothing more than stand at Stern's side before the bench. His appearance was not required, but Stern urged Remo to attend nonetheless. He would look like a tamed ruffian beside the lawyers as they spoke a language he could not understand.

His coat hung on him with an evident foreignness; his broad tie formed a hue knot and elevated the collar points on Remo's polyester shirt. Remo's head would list slightly throughout, and his large rough hands would cling to his sides pathetically, as if, like awkward sensors, they could feel the cold weight of the bars. Stern had seen Remo perform this routine before, and standing beside Sandy, he would break even the hardest heart.

Today he would get the chance. Moira Winchell had started out as a federal prosecutor, and went on to spend a number of years as a big-firm litigator, one of those lawyers who attended to complex civil lawsuits, trading Himalayan masses of documents and seldom bringing cases to trial. Ten years ago, she had been the first woman named a federal judge in this district; by now, she had been elevated by her colleagues to chief. Moira was

rightfully celebrated as the triumphal conqueror of generations of discrimination.

But, alas, there was a reason Moira had succeeded when others had not. She was a tough cookie. And the bench had made her tougher. Facing the manifold burdens of life as a federal judge--crowded dockets, churlish lawyers, middling pay, and almost unlimited power--some people did not respond well. They came to the bench thrilled by the acclaim of their peers and became, in a short period of time, as temperamental as Caligula. Moira Winchell was one of them --snappish, sarcastic, even, at moments, downright mean. Stern had tried cases against Moira years ago, during the time she was a prosecutor, and forged with her a relationship of mutual regard. More recently, the judge and her husband, Jason, a-law school professor, had passed occasional intermissions with Stern and Clara at the symphony. There, soothed by the music, Moira was amiable, if a little haughty. But in her courtroom she was harder than granite.

"Mr. Stern, where are we going with this matter?" From the substantial height of the dark bench, Judge Winchell addressed him as soon as the clerk called the case for status. She gave no apparent attention to Moses Appleton, the Assistant United States Attorney who stood beside Stern on the shoulder opposite Remo. Moses, a young black man, was a crackerjack lawyer--he figured for great things--but the prosecutors, all of them, were like cigar store Indians to many of the judges: fungible young functionaries routinely clamoring for vengeance.

Stern promptly complained about the prosecution, claiming that they had not provided enough information on the

case for him to determine whether it should be "resolved without trial," an oblique reference to a guilty plea.

Judge Winchell, who had heard it all before, motioned him silent. -In the large old courtroom, lawyers, each awaiting his or her turn at the podium, sat by the dozens on the dark-lacquered benches, attending to the judge like a reverent congregation and all the while registering legal fees in six-minute increments.

"Two weeks for the government to file a Rule 801 statement, supported by 302s and grand jury testimony. We'll set the trial for two weeks thereafter. No

continuances. Give them a date," said Judge Winchell to her minute clerk, who sat almost at ground level, four feet below. The clerk, Wilbur, who took his cues from the judge, called out a date next month like an announcement of doom.

Remo, beside Stern, spoke up for the first time. "So soon?"

he whispered. "Hush," said Stern.

On the bench, Judge Winchell whipped her straight dark hair back over her shoulder.

"Mr. Stern, might I have a word with you?" She started down the stairway beside the bench and, as Stern approached, waved Appleton away. He was unnerved. Stern knew what was coming.

"Sandy," said Moira Winchell, suddenly beside him at his height, "I was terribly sorry to hear about Clara. We all think of you." She placed her long hand on Stern's shoulder and gave him a level look of real sadness. He found himself oddly moved by the judge's sincerity. Here in the strong light of the courtroom, where Moira did not bother with makeup, Stern was impressed by the toll reflected in her features. Her pretty Irish face was deeply lined now; her eyes held no amusement. One tended to forget the earnestness that underlay all her efforts. The world watched

her, she knew, waiting for a serious mistake.

"Your Honor is most kind."

"Call," she said. "We'll have lunch."

Then she drew her black robe around her 'again as she ascended to her superior place. Her face was already wrinkled with its familiar look of irritation. More lawyers. More disputes. More decisions. Onward.

Both Appleton and Remo had waited a few feet away. "Moses," said Stern in the corridor, "I shall speak with you." Then he led Remo into the attorneys' room, a serene chamber with ancient oak desks and black-and-white photos of various judges of the court of decades past, all floured with dust and askew on the wall. Stern quickly summarized what had occurred. The judge would soon demand a final decision about whether Remo would plead guilty. Stern, again, urged him to proceed to trial, but Remo was clearly indifferent to this



advice.

"This here thing," Remo said, "is Friday time. You know what I mean?"

Stern did not. He shook his head.

"What's your religion?" asked Remo. "Catholic, right?"

Stern shook his head once more. With his Latin accent, he had long found that Remo's mistake was often made. After all these years, he was certain that it would shock poor Remo to learn the truth. But Remo made no further inquiry.

He was caught up with what he was saying.

"See, in the Roman Catholic religion, for all the time I was growin up, the priests say, No meat on Friday, don't eat meat on Friday. You know? Fish, that's okay. Jell-O mold, that's okay. But no meat. See, but guys done it.

Lotsa guys. Sometimes you'd slipup or somethin, you know.

You'd be eatin a steak, then you'd think like, Jesus, what

day is this? Sometimes it'd be on purpose. I remember, when I was at St. Viator's, there's a group a us, we'd go for burgers just on Fridays. We'd sit in a booth in the window and wave to the Sisters when they went walkin by.

I'm not kiddin." Remo laughed to himself, and wobbled his large dark face. "Oh, we was bad.

"Then all the sudden the priests change their minds. See?

it's okay now. Have whatever you like, no problem. But what happened to all the guys who's down bumin in hell for eatin meat 'on Fridays, huh? You think they let them out? I asked the Father, you know, cause I'm wonderin. I asked, Those guys get out or what? Oh no, he says. God's ,rules is God's rules. You don't fuck with them. You know. I mean, he don't say you don't fuck with them, but you get what I'm sayin.

"So that's this here thing--it's Friday time. It's bullshit. I didn't do notbin. Honest to God, I cross my heart, it wasn't my job. You know, I heard about this thing, so I shown up and all, I figured could be I'd get a piece.

"But maybe these guys and I, maybe we done some things before. See? So that's how it works out. It's Friday time, on account of what we done before.

So what can you do?"

Remo shifted his large shoulders and raised his hands. He did not control God's universe; he merely understood a few of its rules. In his mild brown eyes the look of conviction was deep. Stern, inclined to quarrel, stifled himself.

Behind Remo he saw Sonia Klonsky, burdened with numerous case files, drifting by. He called after her and quickly shook hands with his client, leaving behind the one man in the courthouse who had no doubts about justice.

"I must have a word with you about Margy Allison," he said, coming abreast of her. Klonsky had apparently spent a typical morning for a trial Assistant: shifting between courtrooms, leaving messages with the clerks and other 'young prosecutors so that her cases, up for status or motions, could be passed while she ran between court calls.

Stern attempted to complain about the government's conduct in not serving him with Margy's subPena,-but she showed no remorse.

"You knew what our position was." Klonsky strolled ahead, intent on her next court appearance. "Who's going to be her lawyer?"

"Is she a subject?"

"Not at present."

"Then I intend to represent her."

Klonsky was prepared for this, too. "Stan thinks there's a risk of conflict."

"Can you explain that?"

"No."

"Then you may thank the United States Attorney for his ethical vigilance on my behalf and inform him that I shall be Ms. Allison's lawyer." His smile was personable; he meant to be firm, not snippy. "May I ask, as Margy's counsel, a few questions?"

"If you insist."

"What do you wish from her?"

"Some documents." Klonsky smiled but did not slow her pace.

"Some questions. I have to go to Pivin." She Pointed to the courtroom of Judge Albert Pivin, seventy-eight years old and still presiding over an active calendar. Stern followed her inside, but the clerk saw her and called her case immediately and Stern went outside to wait across the hall from the courtroom doors. Emerging a few minutes later, she greeted him with a somewhat rankled look. Apparently, she had thought she was free of him.

"Sandy, look. Personally, I don't care what I tell you. But you know how Stan gets. He's running a tight ship."

Stern followed her to the cloakroom, where she retrieved a light raincoat, then proceeded down the central alabaster stairCase of the courthouse. Her business here was apparently concluded.

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"What exactly is it Stan Sennett has told you about me?"

"Oh, don't be like that. He has a great deal of respect for you. Everybody there does. You know that. Frankly, he looked very concerned the first time I told him you were involved in this case. I'm not supposed to admit that, am I?"

"Oh, Mr. Sennett has no fear of me," said Stern. "Old prosecutors merely love to praise their opponents. It adds immeasurably to the thrill of victory." This gallantry, of course, was intended for the U.S. Attorney's consumption.

Like all men lacking self-confidence, Sennett was easily flattered and the South American in Stern was always alert to appease those in power.

Klonsky was laughing out loud.

"Come on," she said. "We're just taking you as seriously as we should." She pushed out the doors of the courthouse.

Spring was in its finale, the winds still sweet and the air light, just before it took on the burdens of summer.

"What you are doing," said Stern, "is limiting the information I receive, in

order to protect your informant."

From her look, he could tell she felt he was trying to bait her. She did not answer.

"Please," said Stern. He took her by the arm momentarily.

"I must ask you one or two more questions about Margy.

Allow me to buy you coffee. I did not eat breakfast." He pointed to a little restaurant on the corner called Duke's,' and to his surprise she came along without complaint. He meant what he said--he was hungry--and he found Ms. Klonsky, in spite of himself, pleasant and challenging company. Primarily, of course, he hoped that in a more amiable atmosphere she might be less resolute about guarding America's secrets. Ms. Klonsky, as she had just demonstrated with her remark about Sennett, was not really equipped to be discreet. She understood the role, but her large, expansive character was still not comfortably confined by lawyerly proprieties. Like many young attorneys, she was imitating the mentor--Sennett, in this case--rather than making allowances for herself.

Duke's was little more than a lunch counter, a greasy spoon with an open grill under a spattered aluminum hood, and a number of old Formica tables. Klonsky set her files down when they were seated and lifted her face to the frying smells.

"Wonderful," she said.

"That is an overstatement. Reliable will suffice. You have never been?"

'She shook her head.

"The proprietor," said Stern, "is the little dark fellow you see in the kitchen. A Rumanian. He is best known for his sausage, which he makes himself and which he aptly refers to on the menu as 'Ruination.'" Will you eat?" Stern already had the menu in hand.

"I shouldn't," she said. "I've put on twelve pounds already." But she picked up the laminated card nonetheless.

"Your son-in-law got a lawyer, you know. I was a little surprised by your referral."

"Oh, well," said Stern, and smiled fleetly. He, on the other hand, was well

practiced in appearing agreeable yet remaining silent; how John chose his lawyer was not the prosecutor's business. He had been troubled not to have heard something from his son-in-law, but Klonsky's remark made it clear that he had followed Stern's advice and retained Raymond Horgan. There were many people in the legal community puzzled by Stern's affinity with Horgan.

They'd had celebrated battles while Raymond was the Kindle County Prosecuting Attorney, culminating in some uncomfortable moments three years ago when Stern had crossexamined Horgan, Who appeared as a prosecution witness at the murder trial of Rusty Sabich, Raymond's former Chief Deputy. But the law, much like politics, made its own strange bedfellows. Horgan's large firm liked to send cases they could not handle due to conflicts to Stern, who could not compete for the other legal work of the big corporate clients, and he naturally reciprocated.

"What's really good?" she asked.

"The sausage, if you have the stomach for it. I am not certain it is suited to your present condition."

"I doubt it," she said. "I've just started eating meat again. For the protein."

"A vegetarian?"

"Oh, I've been very careful for years about what I eat. I was once very sick." She looked directly at Stern, the hinge of some tentativeness clear in her eye. "Cancer," she said.

The waitress came then, saving Stern from a response. Ms. Klonsky had a disconcerting directness, a willingness to proceed past the recognized borders with little thought, a trait which made Stern uneasy. She asked for a single scrambled egg, while he ordered an omelette and tWO servings of the sausage. He promised her a bite.

"What was I saying?" she asked. Stern did not answer, but she remembered herself and said simply, "Oh, yes."

"You appear a picture of health now."

"I think I am. I mean, I wouldn't be in this condition--" She lifted a hand. "But so much of it is outlook. You really never forget about it. You tell yourself you're well. You search for signs that you're not, and when you don't

find them, you rejoice and tell yourself that you can go back to believing that you're infinite, the way you did before."

"How old were you?"

She raised her eyes to remember. "Thirty-five, thirty-six just about."

Stern shook his head. That was young, he said, for that sort of thing.

"Well, you know how it is. You get to the hospital feeling why me, how me, and then there are plenty of people in the same condition, and worse." She had asked for tea and interrupted herself to fish the bag in and out of the cup when the waitress brought it. "It didn't seem so unusual there. But I was a very young thirty-six. My life was in chaos. I was in law school, but it was the fourth postgraduate education I'd started. I had no idea what I was doing. My relationship with Charlie was going through its one millionth crisis--" She raised her hands for emphasis, one wrist today bedecked with a mw of bright plastic bracelets, "It just seemed so unbelievable to me that I was being shown the door, when I didn't even feel I'd arrived."

:The expression made Stern laugh. "What were your other postgraduate programs?"

"Let's see." She raised her hands to count and again lifted her eyes to the grimy acoustical tiles of Duke's ceiling.

"From college, I went out to California for graduate school ,in philosophy, but I wasn't ready for that, so I enrolled in :the Peace Corps--remember that?--and was in the Philippines for two years. When I came back, I started graduate school in English, which is where I met Charlie. I left that because I couldn't imagine actually writing a dissertation. But, of course, I'd finished all the class work before I figured that out. Then I taught for about a year and a half then I went back to the U. as a graduate student in education. Then :I gave up on the educational bureaucracy as hopeless. Naturally, I owed a fortune in student loans at that point. So I began thinking about getting a decent-paying job. Which 'led to law. There were some things in between, but they didn't last long enough to mention."

"I see," said Stern. "It does sound as if you had a hard time getting started."

"Not starting," she said. "That was no problem at all."

Finishing was hard. I always believed that I was not an achievement-oriented person, but when I got sick, I was really unhappy that I didn't have a single thing I could look back to that I'd completed. It was as if I'd passed through and never even left tracks. It was pathetic. I was getting radiation. I was lying there with my hair falling out, recovering from surgery, and I had Charlie bringing me volumes of Hart Crane. I actually started writing my dissertation right there. And, naturally, one morning I vomited all over it. That, needless to say, was a low point." She sat back, gripped by her own story. She picked up a dull steel fork off the table and stared at it. "I'm talking too much," she said.

"You are charming, Sonia," he answered, and immediately felt he had been drawn into her habit of saying more than one should. He rushed on to something more neutral. "So you became a health-food person in the wake of your illness? My daughter, who is a lawyer in New York, comes home with a knapsack full of bags and bottles of such things. I've learned to ask no questions."

"Oh, yes. That's me. Ms. Natural here. We drive around all day on Saturday and shop. Charlie has written poems about it. It really is better for you. But the doctor has been dropping some pretty broad hints about more protein."

"Your husband is a poet?"

"A living, breathing, write-every-day poet. He actually puts it in our tax return: 'Poet.' He has another job, naturally. You have to. Charlie likes to say we have the same employer." She smiled. "He's a postal clerk. He was an instructor in the English Department at the U. for years, but he couldn't hack the politics. And he makes more money this way and gets more time to write. It's an absolutely impossible, impractical life, to which he's completely devoted." She smiled once more, somewhat fitfully this time. Perhaps she felt she was being disloyal. She looked again at the silverware and took a second to praise her husband's

verse.

The eggs came then.

"God," said Klonsky, "what is that black lump?"

"Ruination," he said. "What else?" Stern cut a piece and lifted it toward her,



but she made a horrible face and raised both hands.

"It makes me queasy just to see it. It looks like something excreted."

Stern dropped his fork to the plate."

"Young woman," he said darkly, "this is my breakfast." She began to laugh then, a fine trilling note full of joy and congratulation. He laughed himself and she got caught up in her own amusement and went on until she had to use her napkin to wipe her eyes. She managed to say, "Bon

appetit," and began to laugh again.

He started to eat in spite of her.

"That's right," she said. "Don't let it get cold."

"It happens to be good. And I am quite hungry."

"You must be." She broke down one more time. She tried, with a few false starts, to control herself.

\*'Are you .sure you will not try some?" He lifted his fork in a perfect deadpan, and set her off once more. This time

he laughed himself for quite some time.

She told him he was a good sport.

"I am accustomed," Stern told her. "My daughter in New York lectures me about meat. She has ruined a number of meals."

"What's her name?"

Stern told her.

"Marta. That's beautiful. I'm thinking about names all the time now It seems so important. The first thing. And I don't want my child to feel that I've done what my mother did to me."

"You do not care for Sonia?"

"I hated it as a child. My mother was this very heavy lefty? A big-deal labor type, until her union threw out the Commies. I was named for a Russian revolutionary killed in the revolt of 1905 and I resented being somebody else's symbol. I wanted to be called Sonny. Which threw my mother into a

rage. She thought I was being anti-feminist. Then I got to be forty years old and a lawyer, and all of a sudden I wanted a name that would sound professional. So I'm Sonia in the office. And my old friends still call me Sonny." She laughed at herself. "That's a little like what you do. You say Alejandro in court, but you introduce yourself as Sandy."

Stern smiled in an allusive way, reflecting his own inscrutability, but he was flattered to think he had been so closely observed. It was natural really, he told himself, for her to keep watch on a likely adversary.

"My mother was an obliging sort. She called us by different names, depending on the locale. I had a Yiddish name. A Spanish name. And, of course, she desperately wanted me to fit in here. Even at the age of thirteen, I could recognize that it was not an optimal period for Alejandros in the U.S. I suppose you may take my using Sandy as a sign of weakness on my part." This was very much as he thought of it--that he had yielded. His mother was a powerful person in her home. He seldom spoke of her but she was still with him every day, with her dark shrewd eyes, her teeming social ambitions, and her desperate pained hope that his father would somehow become the man she had envisioned instead of the poor wounded thing he was. Stern tended to remember her as she appeared on the nights she and his father went to the opera. The rich gown made a somewhat opulent display of her large proportions; her reddish hair was held in place by a diamond-studded comb, and her entire figure appeared gripped by her fierce determination to be seen, and remembered. He had always known that every fiber of strength in him derived from her.

"So how did you settle on Marta?" Klonsky asked. "Was it a better world for Alejandros by then?"

"She is named for my mother," said Stern. He laughed at that and shared a look with her, the complexities of these facts seemingly lost on neither of them. Then he lifted his fork. "Last bite," said Stern.

She covered her mouth amid a muffled retching sound and Stern played along.

"I'll have you know, young woman, this is the best breakfast I've had for days." For effect, he rang the tines of the fork against the dish, but the remark, intended in jest, somehow carried a forlorn suggestion of his personal

plight. Ms. Klonsky gave him a sideways look, sweet and sad and lingering, and Stern suddenly was deeply embarrassed.

He had disciplined himself to avoid this approach to anyone: Pity me. Feel for me. He looked down once more at his plate.

"You were going to tell me what you wished with Margy," he said. He heard her sigh. But when he looked up, she had folded her hands and gathered herself.

She corrected him: "You were going to ask some questions. ' "

"I thought you might tell me about the Wunderkind account."

"The number's on the subpoena."

"Why is it, Sonia, that this account is of such interest?"

She shook her head firmly. "No can do, Sandy."

"You expect me to bring this woman to the grand jury without any idea what she may be venturing into?"

"I've told you, she's not a subject. I'll be happy to put that in writing. If she tells us the truth, she has nothing to

worry about. You know the drill, Sandy."

'But the secretiveness--"

".Doctor's orders," she said. "That's how we're doing it."

She was speaking again of Sennett. Stern, despite himself, made a sound. This had seemed from the inception to ,be too significant a matter for an inexperienced Assistant. Now he could see quite clearly that Stan Sennett was behind the scenes, pulling the strings, pumping the levers, palpitating at the thought of a case that would get his name in The Wall Street Journal and bring a moment of disquiet to that den of thieves in the Exchange, as he saw them; with ,their granite palace along the river.

Sennett was a wiry, humorless little man, with the narrow, bird-boned physique of a runner. He was married to a probate lawyer named Nora, an ascetic type with a fixed jaw. Stern always imagined the two of them in a home with no dust and little furniture, eating carefully and going out for weekend runs. Stan had started out as the Chief Deputy Prosecuting Attorney

in Kindle County under Ray Horgan, but he had gotten a yen for California and joined the Justice Department in San Diego. As the choice for U.S.

Attorney he had been roundly welcomed--Stan was intelligent, experienced, and more or less independent of the mayor and his dark cabal.

It was, however, one of the sad facts of political reform everywhere that incorruptibility was not the sole attribute Of good government. Sennett was the kind of grim bureaucrat, a person of strong discipline and limited vision and courage, who seemed to turn up too often in prosecutors' Offices. Everybody's chief deputy, he never quite seemed to believe he had assumed the mantle himself.

In Stern's judgment, he had a dangerous mixtue of attributes for a man in power: he was vain glorious and insecure, quick to make judgments that were not always correct, and entirely 'beyond persuasion once he had done so. When you sat with him, presenting a problem, pleading for mercy or simply trying to make a point, his small shining eyes would follow you while his expression remained forbidding. 'No,' he. would say the instant you had finished a ten-minute presentation. 'No can do.'" Few words of explanation, little warmth. No argument. He would stand and shake your hand and see you to the door.

Now he was using Klonsky as his cat's-paw. That was for appearances, but the fact was, this was his case. Stern wondered if Klonsky knew how quickly he would push her aside when the lights of the videocams filled the room. In the meantime, a dark, high-density fluid of regret poured through Stern, the stuff of gloom. Sennett would b.e dogged in the hunt; Dixon, whatever his evasive maneuvers, was in for a long, bloody fight. Lost in these reflections, Stern geached forward and picked up the check.

"Oh, no," she said. As they walked to the door, Klonsky insisted on paying her share. Stern eventually recognized that this was a point of propriety and took two dollars from her. Duke, with his fried-up hair, received their money and bade them, with heavy accent, to return.

Outside, he shook her hand and told her that Margy and he would see her the following Tuesday. She faced him with what was already becoming a familiar look of ambiguity and regret.

"Thank you for asking me. I enjoyed our conversation."

"As well." He made a brief, cutaway bow, Mr. Alejandro Stern, the foreign gentleman. She smiled at that and, with her heavy files slung across her body, went off toward the new federal building down the block. Pigeons with their shining gray heads arose fluttering in her path, and a rash of underground air, breathed up through a grate in the walk, ruffled her skirt. As he watched her go, it came to him again, an intimation clear as the arrival of spring, that he was alone. The usual affairs of the day, the courthouse, his children--they did not seem to do. Like nausea or hunger, a deep-sprung bodily response, the sense of his own un-connectedness overcame him, just as it did certain mornings, and to his surprise he stood for some time watching the figure of Sonia Klonsky whittled by distance and the phenomenon of aging vision, until she was no longer distinct amid the dark forms on the street.

At night, he saw Helen more often, each week. The logic seemed irrefutable. Why should he be home in an empty house when Helen, a charming, dinner companion, was available? Various adolescent intuitions told him that he was moving with too much dispatch toward an undesired destination. But she was such pleasant company, and who, reasonably, would choose loneliness? He was fifty-six and going steady.

And, like some teenager, he was also screwing his brains out. In fin de siècle America, it seemed, this was how men and women paid respects. The hell with notes and flowers.

:Let's get it on! One afternoon, Helen met him for lunch at his club in Morgan Towers. In that upright atmosphere, with the waiters in frogged coats and the bankers and business folk waxing genial, Helen grasped his hand and said, "Fuck me, Sandy." She had had a glass of wine and her eyes looked very green.

And did he resist? Not on your life. Mr. Alejandro Stern, at 1:27 in the afternoon, rented a room in his own name across the street away bow, Mr. Alejandro Stern, the foreign gentleman. She smiled at that and, with her heavy files slung across her body, went off toward the new federal building down the block. Pigeons with their shining gray heads arose fluttering in her path, and a rash of underground air, breathed up through a grate in the walk, ruffled her skirt. As he watched her go, it came to him again, an intimation clear as the arrival of spring, that he was alone. The usual affairs of the day, the courthouse, his children--they did not seem to do. Like nausea or hunger,

a deep-sprang bodily response, the sense of his own un-connectedness overcame him, just as it did certain mornings, and to his surprise he stood for some time watching the figure of Sonia Klonsky whittled by distance and the phenomenon of aging vision, until she was no longer distinct amid the dark forms on the street.

At night, he saw Helen rumore often, each week. The 'logic seemed irrefutable. Why should he be home in an empty house when Helen, a channing „m, dinner companion, was available? Various adolescent intuitions told him that he was moving with too much dispatch toward an undesired destination. But she was such pleasant company, and who, reasonably, would choose loneliness? He was fifty-six and going steady.

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And did he resist? Not on your life. Mr. Alejandro Stern, at 1:27 in the afternoon, rented a room in his own name across the street in the Hotel Gresham. They were at the elevator when Stern recollected that he lacked a necessary item. In the hotel's sundry shop, the attendant proved, of course--of course!--to be an older woman, with a heavy tailored suit and a strong German accent. Already giddy from the loss of inhibition and the lunchtime wine, Stern stuck up his courage and was able to clearly pronounce, "Prophylactics."

"Of course." The woman nodded ponderously as she searched through-the warren of old-fashioned cupboards where the rubbers were hidden. Eventually, she offered an entire box of different brands. "Good to use them," she added, in the most cordial hotel style. In the elevator, Stern and Helen had been unable to contain their laughter. There-after, that was their watchword. At the most intimate moment, Helen was apt to drone, "Good to use them."

Making love to Helen was inevitably that kind of goodspirited enterprise, and often highly educational. She had read all the books; she had practiced every maneuver. There was nothing she was going to miss. Some developments that took Stern by surprise were, naturally, the result of thirty years with one lover in which the zones of exploration had been long established. He was mystified the first time Helen had extricated herself from his embrace and nudged him onto his back, then moved below. His first thought was that he was the object of a visual inspection, a prospect which he found far more exciting than he would have imagined, but she was soon otherwise occupied, busy with her mouth and fingertips.

"Did you like that?" she asked afterwards.

He answered slowly. "The wings of a dove."

Yet, even making allowances for his lack of prior experience, he still found in Helen a disconcertingly determined interest in the sexual act. This was not a roundabout complaint concerning Clara. Whatever inadequacies she may have felt--and who could doubt the evidence?--he had never been dissatisfied. But for Helen the actual moment of encounter, the performance, was supreme and seemed to acquire a detached dreamlike rapture that Stern sometimes experienced in museums. They were, both of them, the thing observed, pure phenomenon: her body, his, with their rosy tumescent glow and throbbing veinous parts, the glistening pinkish shaft probing and disappearing. He watched with Helen's bold approval. She slipped her hand down to provide yet one more stimulant.

Like a door prize, there was always something new. One day she tweaked the nipples of his chest while he worked above her. Another time, she lifted her legs and gently moved his hands so that his thumbs kneaded at the delicate little bead which he could reach as he pumped inside her. She presented herself from the rear, the side. She faced him and sat athwart Stern on a dining room chair. Naked, stimulated, he would drag around the furniture as She instructed as a prelude to the latest innovation. He told her afterwards that the combination of sexual exertion and stoop-labor threatened a coronary occlusion.

"You're in good shape," Helen said and reached below to pet him admiringly.

Stern could tell that Helen was immensely proud of her role as pathfinder and

instructor. But occasionally the unlikelihood of these antics would overcome him. In the hotel room the afternoon they had received the peculiar blessings of the German lady in the sundries shop, Helen stood upon two dressers and Stern caught the sight of their forms on the dull slate-green surface of the television tube: a short man, with the tip of his erect penis nipping up just above the bottom of his white belly, which hung on him like a flour sack, his hands dug into the flattened shapes of Helen's buttocks, crouching slightly and pressing face and tongue upward into the wet odoriferous reaches of that mystical passage. It looked like a circus trick or the played-out fantasy of a Cheap pornographer. The image remained with him for hours, lurid, fascinating, but nonetheless disturbing. Was this some more essential self, or a brainless imitation of what others aspired to? Who were they supposed to be?

A part of him remained ill at ease with this emphasis on the physical, not what he'd thought of as his best realm.

But whatever his misgivings after the fact, he enjoyed these encounters as they were occurring. He admired Helen's lack of restraint, and her agility. When he thought of her, it was with appreciation and desire, even while he discouraged himself from pressing for exact answers about the true state

of his feelings for her. His friends and acquaintances welcomed Helen openly. It made for fewer reminders of Clara and her passing, which no one wished to contemplate. The Harthells invited Stern and Helen to a ritzy summer cotillion that Silvia had organized at the Greenwood Club.

At first delighted to be included, Helen became uncomfortable with the pretense of the evening once she had arrived. Whenever backs were turned, she rolled her eyes at Stern and made faces, conduct which upset him, with his lifetime adherence to certain rigid courtesies. "You don't like all this schmaltz," she murmured to him at one point.

Helen's honesty was wonderful and endearing, but he also realized how uncertain it made him. She could set him on edge a dozen times a night with her straightforward observations, particularly of him. Was he brave enough to face Helen and her facts? She wanted to know everything about him and then make it better. At one point, turning away from the bar and looking across the enormous tent that had been pitched for this affair, he observed her in animated conversation with Silvia and found himself alarmed. This was a



mismatch, Stern thought suddenly. His sister was a woman guarded by layers of the most protective refinements, much as the petals lay about the center of a rose. His first impulse was that she was somehow in danger.

He whisked Silvia away to dance.

"So?" asked Stern. His sister had known Helen only remotely over the years, having encountered her principally at family affairs.

"A charming person," Silvia answered, somewhat formally. He would have expected a similar response from Clara, who, no doubt, would have thought a contessa or professor a more fitting companion for Stern. At that point, Helen came whirling by in Dixon's arms, looking happier

than she had all evening. Helen, like most women, enjoyed Dixon's company.

'Is he the one who is in so much trouble?" she asked Stern as they were driving home on the highway cut between the dark hills.

"He is," said Stern simply. With her unfailing sense for what was important to him, Helen listened carefully to everything he told her about his practice, but he could not recall exactly what he'd said which led her to piece this together.

"Well, you'd never know it," Helen said. "He's quite entertaining."

"When he wishes to be," said Stern.

In the dark, she placed her head on his shoulder. Clara, raised in the fading era of rigid female posture, would never have been capable of this gesture, and he drove the hour back to the city with Helen drowsing, a warm, comforting weight upon him.

Two nights later, they had a different kind of evening.

Helen's daughter, Maxine, came to town with Rob Golbus, her husband of only a few months. Maxine had been Kate's childhood friend, and Helen proposed an evening out with all three couples--Kate and John, Maxine and Rob, Stern and her. With the perfect resourcefulness one expected from Helen, she figured out entertainment pleasing to everyone and bought tickets to a Trappers game, Stern was always delighted to spend a night in the handsome old park with its brick outfield walls and cantilevered upper decks, where skied fly balls occasionally came to rest as homers.

But there was soon an irritating undertone. Too much seemed to be assumed. Maxine spoke repeatedly of Helen and him visiting St. Louis, so that he began to feel both put upon and cornered, while Kate seemed coltish and jumpy all evening. When Helen casually--too casually--mentioned a remark Stern had made to her one morning this week at breakfast, Kate burst into the unnerved tittering one would have expected from an early adolescent. When John offered to go downstairs for refreshments, Stern eagerly rose to lend a hand.

With their order placed at the counter beneath the stands, they stood in silence. His son-in-law, laconic as ever, put on his glasses to watch the televised version of the game on the screen above the old fry grill. ,

"How is the matter proceeding?" asked Stern eventually, desperate for some topic of conversation. He thought, perhaps, to ask if Kate was bearing up; it had occurred to him that the stress of John's problems might have contributed to her worn look and high-strung mood.

"The matter?" John looked at him.

"The grand jury business." Stern had lowered his voice slightly.

"Oh." John poked his glasses back up on his nose and reverted to the TV.  
"Okay."

"Klonsky, the Assistant United States Attorney, tells me you have found a lawyer."

"I guess." John hitched a shoulder. It was time for sports; the rest of this was bad news, workaday stuff.

"You are in excellent hands. Raymond is very experienced."

John removed his glasses.

"Oh, I didn't end up with him. I've got a guy named Mel."

"MelT" asked Stern. "Mel Tooley?" It was an article of professional decorum never to speak ill of another lawyer to his client, but Stern could not restrain the note of contempt. Mel TooIcy had not been on the list Stern had given John. The only list of Stern's where TooIcy might appear would be one naming the despised of the earth.

Toolcy, who had been the chief of the Special Investigations Division in the United States Attorney's Office until he entered private practice approximately a year ago, was one of those lawyers who seemed to be attracted to the profession because it legitimized certain forms of deceit. Stern's disagreements with Toolcy over the years were celebrated; legendary. No wonder Klonsky had said she was surprised by the referral. How had John wandered into the clutches of a creature like that?

His son-in-law had already gathered up the box containing the tissue boxes and the beers and was mounting the concrete steps back to the boxes. Fraught with paternal anxieties and lawyerly rules, Stern followed, lecturing himself. It was, in a word, none of his business how John had chosen his counsel--even Mel Toolcy.

Halfway up the stairs he ran into Kate, literally, jostled against her as she was on her way down. They both exclaimed. Stern laughed, but she seemed startled to see him and jumped back. Here in the stairwell, better lit than the stands, he again noticed her appearance. She was nicely turned out in a sort of maternity sailor suit with a large red bow, but she looked drawn and, most shockingly, seemed to lack her childish blush. It was more than pregnancy, Stern suspected. John's situation was taking its toll. He instantly had the thought that this was the face of Kate's true adulthood. Whatever he had long expected was now in

its onset. He touched her hand.

"Katy, are you all right?"

Fine, she answered, just on her way to the ladies' room.

She touched her stomach and added that it was for the third time.

"But is everything else--?"

"You mean John?" When he nodded, she seemed to wince fleetingly and touched her stomach again. She began to speak, then stopped herself. "I shouldn't say anything."

Kate had been briefed, he saw, fully informed. She had the facts, the procedures. In all likelihood, she knew a good deal more than he did.

"I quite agree. I merely wanted to reassure you."

"Daddy--"

"I have seen these situations often, Kate. Trust me. It will turn out all right."

"I only Wish, Daddy."

"You must be patient. It will all probably go on longer than any of Us like. But you should not worry."

"Daddy, please.. You're starting to sound like Mommy. She never wanted me to worry. 'Don't worry, Katy, don't worry.'"

"She had lifted her hands in imitation, quick, bird-Ye shapes. "Sometimes I wonder: Did she think if I worried I was going to break or something?"

He considered this lament, so unlike her, not sure how to respond.

"Daddy, it's not that easy. Believe me." With that, she sighed, a despairing sound, and took another step down. "I have to go to the bathroom," she announced, and moved off in that direction. Stern watched her depart. What was that last bit about? But he thought he could read the portents in her mood clearly. She was worried not merely for her husband--but by him. Kate, not unlike her father, had learned more from John, and about him, than she had cared to know. John lumbered on, he slept nights, but his wife now had her eyes open. To himself, Stern briefly groaned and muttered one of his mother's Yiddish phrases. As he emerged into the open night air, the crowd was roaring over a fabulous catch by the right fielder Tenack. Ascending, Stern had seen the ball go by Yike a shooting star.

By prior arrangement, Rob and Maxine went off to spend the night at Kate and John's--a chance for a more intimate visit. Helen begged Stern to stay with her. "Just to sleep," said Helen, who had barely been able to rouse herself in the car. The large, somewhat secluded house which Miles and she had built only a year or two before the end of their marriage seemed to haunt her at times, especially after one Of the children visited.

In her room, Helen without ceremony shed her clothes, leaving them on the floor in a single heaP, and threw herself down naked on the bed. The intimacy pleased her, he knew: to 'be able to bare herself without reflection or fear of his scrutiny under the strong overhead light. See what you like.

Helen had clearly done her best, but in truth she still looked somewhat

pounded-on by experience--blotched and slackened here and there, her legs varicose-etched right up to her seat. Not that any of these observations were critical. He was hardly a physical example himself, and he had not withstood two pregnancies. He had been oddly troubled of late to find white hairs growing in his pubic region. But he and Helen were approaching the same point-not quite on last legs, but battered, wobbling, losing the battle to the major forces of physics, gravity, and time.

This was one set of facts beyond the power of even Helen's will.

Stern, who had developed his own routine here, covered Helen in bed, shooed out the cat, and locked the doors. Yet for reasons he could not fathom he was not at ease. He was disturbed at moments by the thought of what it might spell for Dixon to have John in the hands of unfriendly counsel; but these were the kinds of worries that for decades he had been able to quell at night. Dozing off, he thought for an instant about Kate, looking transformed by the world of adult woe, then Nate Cawley, still to be cornered. Tomorrow he would catch him. Soon. And yet each time Stern felt himself gentling down to sleep, he rose like some float in the water. Eventually, it became a night of restless dreams. In the one that he remembered, Stern, from ground level, had seen a bird, lifeless in the snow, beneath the needled boughs of an evergreen. This bird, an old ragged thing with plumage of black and white, was gently lifted by a female hand. She stroked the old bird's chest, stated that his wing, which was held erect from his body, was broken but would mend. Her voice struck a note of joy and congratulation. Waking in Helen's room, with the strong morning light haloing the edges of the heavy drapes, Stern recalled nothing of this woman but that encouraging prediction. Helen continued in the shallow breath of sleep.

He reached over to touch her shoulder. But he was certain that the voice he had heard when he was dreaming had not been hers.

Kate had bought Stern an answering machine. For

all his love of gadgets, he'd sworn that this was

he'd never own. He was a slave to the telephone as it was. More to the point, it always

Pained him to listen to his voice on tape; his accent sounded

So much more distinct than he imagined. But he could not

' i Kate most

spurn his daughter s generos ty. On the machine,

days left a bright message or two (lately, as John's problems had deepened, Stern thought he could occasionally detect a lieaden undertone in Kate's greeting); Helen also often re-coried a pleasant word, so that Stern, despite himself, lOOked forward to coming home and fiddling with the buttons. Tonight, however, the first voice he heard was Peter's. "It's time to schedule your blood test." Typically blunt--and indiscreet. Stern, in the empty house, actually reached to the side of the machine to lower the volume.

But the message was a familiar reminder. He lurked by the window, awaiting Nate Cawley. He had spent a number Of evenings working at the dining-room table in the hopes .of spying Nate as he drove up; Stern had given up on reaching him by phone. While he waited, he opened his mail. There was a brief note from Marta reminding him that she would be home in a couple of weeks, over the Fourth of July, to continue sifting through Clara's things.

On paper, Marta was terse, but she had taken to calling late at night, on the verge of sleep, sometimes even waking Stern for long, meditative conversations. Marta had continued to dwell on Clara's death--she recognized it as an enormous passage. And in her casting about, which she willingly shared, Stern, as usual, found much common ground with his older daughter. Sitting up in bed, he listened to her talk, mumbling responses, half-drowsed but intent.

Marta had always been a person of somber character; Stern could not remember her as frolicsome. Even at seven or eight, she seemed perplexed by the fundamental nature of things. Why does a woman marry only one man? Why do we eat animals if it is wrong to treat them cruelly? Can God see inside things or merely their surfaces? Stern, much more than Clara, valued Marta's dark, contemplative side and was, inevitably, moved by her internal struggles. She was the child with whom he felt most in touch. Second in his own family, he understood her occasional mighty battles with Peter, her unrestrained--if momentary--resentment of him.

He had been so pleased when she went to law school, not merely because he was flattered to be imitated, but more because the law, with its substance, its

venerated traditions, and its relentless contemplation of social relations, seemed capable of providing one set of proposed answers to the questions with which Marta had been so long preoccupied. But neither law school nor practice seemed to have lessened her brooding or uncertainty. She took the bar exam in four states before deciding to remain in New York; she'd found three different jobs before accepting the present one, the lowest paying, most tenuous, least promising. She was a single professional in New York, caught up in the usual New York swirl of consumption--the latest restaurants, stores, and events--but late at night there was an unguarded tone of deprivation. She was unsuccessful in her relations ;with men, stalled in her career, baffled by life, and more or less alone. Stern looked down to her note, with strong sensations of her.

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Out the window in the lengthening evening, against a magnificent streaked sky, the BMW at last circled around the Cawleys' drive. Stern was out the door and halfway to the auto before he saw that Fiona was driving. He stopped in his tracks.

"Sandy." She smiled and stepped from the car, carrying a small bright sack from some shop.

Stern stood in the grass. He wore his suit pants and a handmade shirt, monogrammed over the pocket; he had removed his tie. Glancing down, 'he noticed he was still Carrying Marta's note. Stern explained to Fiona that he had mistaken her for Nate.

' : "t took his car today. Mine's conking out whenever I use the air."

"Ah," said Stern, and rocked on his toes. With Fiona :and him, it was always awkward.

"Actually," she said, "there's something I've been meaning to show you. Come in for a minute." Fiona set ioff for the front door, keys in hand, without allowing him

the chance to refuse. Stern moved reluctanfiy in her wake Up the pea-gravel walk. What new treachery of Nate's did

she wish to disclose? Fiona set her package down on a candle :table near the doorway and snapped on some lights.

Stern said he had an appointment shortly, a remark which Fiona, predictably, reigned not to hear.

"This is really the most curious thing," she said.

"Come upstairs. I want you to see this." Fiona stopped to release the collie from the kitchen. Stern declined her offer of a drink, but Fiona paused to pour a bourbon over ice, and quaffed half of it aonce, easy as water. \* "It's so hot," she said. The dog, in the meantime, jumped all over them both, then, rebuked,



followed placidly as they walked toward the staircase.

Upstairs, Fiona opened the door to the bedroom and passed down a hall into the bath. Stern hung back, hesitant to follow. There was a certain stimulating intimacy in being with a woman in her bedroom. It was not the bed so much as the privacy of the scene. The room was clearly Fiona's, finished to her taste in crepe de Chine and ambiguous pinkish shades. The strong scents of powders and colognes, too sweet American smells, rose here. A long umber negligee lay as a sort of inviting preconscious thought, discarded beside the bed on an upholstered chair arm, suggesting a languorous form.

"Here," said Fiona, "this is it. Come here." She was in the bathroom, the door partly closed. When Stern pushed it open, Fiona was studying a tiny paper bag. Her drink had been set down on the counter. "I saw this last week. I couldn't understand why Nate would keep something with Clara's name on it in his medicine cabinet."

In his surprise, he virtually snatched it from her--the small patterned bag from a local chain pharmacy. Two computer-generated prescription receipts, little tags that conveniently assembled all the information required by Medicare or insurers, were stapled to the lip of the bag, overlapping one another. On the top one, Clara's name, address, and phone number were printed. Stern could feel a large vial inside the sack. It was pointless to ask what Fiona was doing roaming in her husband's medicine chest.

Undoubtedly there had been many such expeditions: the pockets of his suits, his daily diary, his wastebasket.

Fiona would have no trouble with the kind of low tactics divorce-court hostilities required.

"Indomethacin," Stern read the tag. "This is for Clara's arthritis, I believe. Nate told me he had brought some to her."

Fiona passed him an odd look.

"If he brought it to her, how come it's still in the bag?"

Stern made a sound. She was right about that. But the answer was obvious. Nate had had two prescriptions filled: that was why there were two tags. When Stern flipped to the lower one, he saw the word "Acyclovir" and his heart skipped. Quickly, he withdrew the clear brown container from the bag.

What in the world would Nate Cawley need with this stuff?.

"What is it?" asked Fiona.

Stern was intent on the label on the bottle. In the blank following the word "Patient,"

"Dr. Nathan Cawley, M.D.," was listed, and Nate's office address and phone were also printed there. 85 ACYCLOVIR 200 MG CAPSULES.

,%VO (2) CAPSULES FIVE TIMES DAILY FOR FIVE DAYS, REMAINDER ONE (1) CAPSULE FIVE TIMES DAILY, IF NEEDED.

When the thought came to him, Stern's face shot around to Fiona.

"Does Nate take these pills?"

She shrugged. "I'd imagine. This is his medicine cabinet.

"What are they?"

"Acyclovir," answered Stern, pronouncing it just as Peter had when he explained that the drug was often successful in reducing the active period of the infection. The herpes infection. Dr. Nate had prescribed for himself.

She reached for the bottle, and Stern, without thinking, pulled it farther away. The prescription was dated two days before Clara's death. He shook the container. Almost empty.

Wrenching off the cap, he spilled the contents onto a piece of tissue and counted six capsules remaining. Seventy-nine consumed. Stern contemplated the numbers: Nate was taking these pills more than a week and a half after Clara's death. He stared down at the little yellow capsules with an unremitting intensity. The brand name of the drug was printed right on them.

Fiona spoke to him again, "Sandy, what is this for?" Oh yes, thought Stern. He had known this, had he not? It was all right here before him. Nate's lying, all his dodging and running--they were classic signs. There was clearly something Nate wanted neither discovered nor discussed. And it was here. Right here. Not simply what had ailed Clara." But the fact that Nate, who went on serenely consuming these capsules after she was laid to rest, had spread the disease. It had taken a real act of will, a high-minded deliberate obdurateness, not to recognize Nate's role.

After all, there had been obvious opportunities for initiation of this dalliance. 'Please remove your clothes and put on the smock. Doctor will be with you in a moment.' A man as wrathfully henpecked as Nate would probably find Clara's quiet, inscrutable bearing irresistible. Yes, and it still seemed, still--if he could claim he knew anything about this woman's nature--that anything of this character with Clara would have required time, exposure, trust, a gradual erosion. It was inevitably someone she knew well.

Oh, yes. Nate had visited Clara in the mornings, Fiona had said long ago.

"Sandy," said Fiona, "for God's sake. What are the pills' for?"

He continued to hold the bottle in his hand and he looked again at the label. The woman, he supposed, was entitled to know'.

"Herpes," he said.

"Her-pes," said Fiona. Her jaw flew open and she stepped six inches back. "Why, that son of a bitch." With a sudden snuffling sound, Fiona, as unpredictably as last time, began to cry.

"Let us sit down a moment." Stern swept up the pills. and replaced the bottle on a shelf within Nate's cabinet. Then Stern steered Fiona around the corner into the bedroom, and sat with her on the edge of the Cawleys' perfectly made bed. The milored spread was of a heavy mauve material, welted on the edges. Fiona was attempting to recover. She dabbed the backs of both hands at the heavy purple shadow over her eyes. Stern extended an arm in comfort, and she laid her narrow body against him for a moment, bringing close the rosy odor of her various perfumes. As soon as his hand was clapped across the thin cap of her shoulder, he had the first inkling. He had no notion from where the idea came. Some vicious instinct, he supposed, although it seemed that the plan had been present, unformed, for some time.

Fiona got up to find a tissue, but sat down again beside him on the bed. "Herpes," she muttered to herself. Stern, from the corner of his eye, could see the barest trace of a smile as the clear thought crossed Fiona's mind: Served him right. Served the bastard right. Then she looked at Stern directly.

"Am I going to catch this?;" "I am afraid that it depends."

"On what?"

"Your contact."

"Contact?" Fiona did not get it and looked at him with irritation.

Stern awaited the fight words. Oh dear, this was difficult.

Divorce lawyers must ask all the time. Probably, they were crude and direct.

"When was the last time you let him plug you, honey?"

"I do not mean to be indelicate--"

"Are you talking about our sex life, Sandy?"

"Just so."

"Not much."

"I see."

"It's not as if I don't like it, Sandy, I do," she added quickly, fearing, as always, the poor judgment of others.

"But you know how that can get. I haven't let him come near me since I saw that thing." She gestured toward the floor, the family room, the television set.

"Not that he seemed to care."

"And when was that, Fiona?"

"March?" She dipped a shoulder. "I don't take notes, Sandy."

"No, of course not."

"Frankly, I think he'd given up trying by then. He gets like that." She smiled again, grimly.

Stern imagined that Nate had given up long before. He had his own predicament. Not that it was much excuse.

Nonetheless, here in Fiona's precise bedroom, Stern was overcome by the mystery of anyone's marriage. It was like culture or prehistory--a billion unwritten understandings, Nate and Fiona. What an unlikely couple, he mild and casual, and she so severe. She was always pretty, however.

Her good looks must have mattered to Nate, been his pride.

His treasure was at home while he went tomcatting all over: the neighborhood, catching infections and fucking everybody's wife--Stern's

wife, too. The recognition brought him to a kind of momentary delirium. Always reluctant to consciously anger, he felt drilled by the urge for revenge, high and mighty, powerful as a prizefighter. The thought of fever. Was he really capable of this? Oh, yes. He felt excited, inspired, and nasty.

"So am I?" asked Fiona. "Going to catch this?"

"I see little chance of that, Fiona, given what you describe."

She pondered. "I suppose I should be grateful he left me alone."

Still seated beside her, Stern slowly said, "I should say he did a great injustice, Fiona."

Her head listed to a dubious angle, as if he had gone loony. Stern smiled bravely.

"A great injustice," he repeated and gradually lifted his hand. He grasped the top button of Fiona's knit dress and leaned over to kiss the brown area at the top of her chest.

She drew back at once. But she was smiling. "San-dy,?' she said..

His own look was intent; he meant serious business. He opened the button he had grasped and pulled the garment back slightly to caress her again.

"Oh, my," said Fiona, and laughed out loud. "I don't believe this." Fiona, it seemed, found it hard to contain herself; this was screamingly funny. The choices here, he knew, were entirely his own. She would not stop him. Fiona was a weak person. Her only resilience was in her brittleness of character, but she had no convictions. Taken by surprise, she would laugh her way along, not knowing what else to do. And he? How did he feel now? Odd, very odd, my American friends. Oh, this was wild and improbable and absurd. But sexual dating was more exciting than flying. He quietly touched her breast and felt blessedly, remarkably, fantastically, that he was no longer himself.

He opened another button and pulled her brassiere down. Her breast, small and white, seemed as startling as a fish darting by in water, and he bent to kiss her on the small button of her nipple-Someone was looking at him!

On the bedside, Stern jolted. He actually found himself standing halfway, his arms raised defensively. The collie, cowed, had also jumped back, dragging its front paws, but did not utter a sound.

When he looked back, Fiona had risen and stood directly before him; her brassiere remained pushed down, so that her white breast looked like a package partly unwrapped. When he met her glance, something happened--perhaps his fear, even momentary, had dissuaded her, or, more simply, time had brought her back to herself. But he saw a point of contraction sharpening in her eyes, and then her hand moved. He knew what was coming but it seemed undignified to defend himself. There was a flash of pain as she struck him open-handed on the side of the face, and he felt instantly that one of his front teeth, which had knocked together, might have chipped.

"You're not any better than he is," said Fiona. "You son of a bitch."

Her back to him, she fiddled with her clothing. He felt obliged to respond, but for the time being was not capable.

He sat on the bedside again, suddenly melting in shame.

"Forgive me," he said. "Jesus," said Fiona.

He was going to tell her she was an attractive woman, but that sounded the wrong note.

"I was overcome," said Stern instead, one of his usual ambiguous formulations. "YOU were taking advantage." This thought, when uttered, caused her, with as little warning as usual, to cry once more. She sat down in a white wicker chair by the window and crushed the ball of tissue to the center of her face. She'd found her drink, and she drained it for comfort, then stood, probably wanting another. She gave Stern a fiery look---one more unspoken curse--but, without further words, departed. The collie loped along behind her as she disappeared down the hall. Listening to her clump down the stairs, he looked up at the Cawleys' bedroom ceiling. Cobwebs hung from the stylish fixture. Oh God, he was full of loathing and self-reproach.

He had that underwater feeling of being very drunk, so that he knew it would be even worse whenever the adrenaline passed and a feeling of normality returned. What in the world could he have been thinking? Oh, he was going to despise himself. He did already.

He walked over to the chair Fiona had sat in. Through the mullioned window, he could see his own house. In the twenty years he had lived here, he had never viewed it from this angle, and he looked down for some time on the

variegated slate roof of the bedroom wing, taken by the sight. When he recognized the gable of his own room, he actually tried to imagine Nate and Clara enwrapped about each other there, but the image, mercifully, refused to flourish.

What about the money? he thought suddenly. What in God's name did Nate need with 850,000 bucks? But Fiona had given him the answer to that weeks ago: for years she had threatened Nate with financial ruin as the cost of a divorce. She would fight like a terrier for every penny, for the sheer sake of vengeance. But with Clara's fortune squirreled away, Nate could afford Fiona's wrath. Did that mean there was a pact between them, Nate and Clara? Were they each to abandon their spouses? Did she mean to leave Stern lonesome, wandering--the way he was?

Downstairs, he heard the front door slam. Fiona was gone--perhaps to take a drunken drive about the city, rattling on to herself about the viciousness of men; or simply to give him a moment to slink off in shame. The collie, deserted by his mistress, trotted back into the room. The animal tilted its head, gazing with luminous greenish eyes. Imagine the dog's life, always on the seeming verge of comprehension.

This time, with the new thought, Stern was unable to move.

This truly was Clara's legacy to him, instants of horror as he made out the hidden forms in the mess she left behind.

In his line of work, he was always attempting to puzzle out precisely what had occurred in the past. The participants, clients or government witnesses, rarely provided reliable accounts. They were knocked off course by winds of fear, blame-shifting, self-justification. But occasionally, as he worked over a case, Stern himself would recognize what had happened. A word, here or there, a piece of paper. The jigsawed pieces fit.

Weak and light-headed, he had the same sensation now. Poor Clara. Now he understood. She had bestowed her enormous gift as the groundwork of whatever plan she and Nate had laid and, only after that, had learned the nature of her new medical predicament. Perhaps it was the first Nate knew of the problem. But in the circumstance he would have had no choice but to admit his other interest--probably the young lady in the video downstairs. Infidelity among the unfaithful. Oh, yes. Stern saw it now. What a drama. It

was as tragic as *Madama Butterfly*. Bilked. Jilted. Diseased.

Shame and loss at every window, every door, the future an endless refraction of ugly events: a husband's wrath, a lover's departure, and the excruciating knowledge of a fortune squandered in order to buy her boyfriend the freedom he intended to spend in other pursuits. What humiliation! L'fice a heroine of myth, Clara had lost everything through pride and desire. Sitting now on Fiona's expensive bedspread, Stern placed one hand over his heart; it felt rough and sore, pumping away within his chest.

He would have to call Cal. At once. What a story this would be to tell. Lawyer Hopkinson would drill another hole in his head. Stern wanted the papers drawn now. With the check, Nate was in a tricky position. His plan from the start must have been to hold it in order to hide the funds from Fiona and her divorce lawyer. But now, with Clara's death, with bankers and executors, with probate, he would have to move, fearing that someone might soon learn of the transaction and attempt to see it undone. The day Nate found the nerve to present his check, Stern would sue.

There would be smoke and fragments everywhere. He would grind Nate Cawley like a seed beneath a stone.

In this burst of vicious impulse, Stern was smitten suddenly, overpoweringly, with the sensation of how preposterous this was. None of this had occurred. He thought that clearly. Any second, groping for the switch, he would find the light and see where he really was. But, when he turned about, the collie was tm!y there, still watching, and the house he had lived in for twenty years was out the window, viewed at this angle from which he had never seen it before. His lip was beginning to thicken and welt from the impact of one of Fiona's rings. He found his way down, closed the dog in the kitchen, and then, feeling that something he could never recall was utterly lost, let himself out the door.

For him, the most evocative memories of their courtship were of the times he sat in the parlor of the Mittler home while Clara played the piano. Her soft reddish hair followed just behind the occasional downward movements of her head; her eyes were fast upon the keyboard, or closed, as she turned herself over to the music. Her high intelligence sang through the instrument. The first time she performed for him, he had no idea what to say. He had come to the door to collect her and she invited him to step inside a moment. Neither



of her parents was home and apparently she felt free to show him about. "My piano," she said. He asked her to play, and instead of demurring as he expected, she set herself free. He sat on the red plush divan in his scarf and overcoat, utterly ignorant of the music, but overcome by the conviction with which she struck the keys. He admired her intensely.

"Magnificent," he said.

She stood shyly beside the instrument, absorbing his praise.

They went then to the show. The movie--he still remembered--was the subject of some excitement. Marty. The story of this lonely, inept man, full of longing, stirred Stern.

That was him, him! Afterwards, walking to George Murray's Chevy, parked far down the block,, he recognized that Cilly, overpoweringly, with the sensation of how preposterous this was. None of this had occurred. He thought that clearly. Any second, groping for the switch, he would find the light and see where he really was. But, when he turned about, the collie was still there, still watching, and the house he had lived in for twenty years was out the window, viewed at this angle from which he had never seen it before. His lip was beginning to thicken and welt from the impact of one of Fiona's rings. He found his way down, closed the dog in the kitchen, and then, feeling that something he could never recall was utterly lost, let himself out the door.

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That was him, him! Afterwards, walking to George Murray's Chevy, parked far down the block,, he recognized that Clara, too, had been sadly moved. She clung to him firmly as they strolled, speaking of certain harrowing moments lived out on the screen.

When they reached the car, Stern could not help himself.

He cried out and doubled over for a moment.

"Oh, George," he said.

Whoever had sideswiped George Murray's car had left a number of victims. The scratches began behind the door, growing in a broadening trail until the point of impact on the front fender. There the metal was cruelly withered and the filament of the front headlamp hung down from a single wire. The auto ahead was worse; the entire trunk was foMed up like a smashed carton.

"Oh, God," she said when she finally saw it. She grabbed his arm. "This isn't your car, is it?"

"Oh, no." The loss seemed incalculable. His mind fumbled ahead futilely for some way it all could be restored. "I'm so sorry."

He shrugged, staring at the wreckage.

"No telephone this month," he said.

He was required to call the police. They walked to a drugstore and the police were there by the time they had returned to the car. George Murray, thankfully, was not home. Somehow Stern felt he couM tolerate all this, except telling him. This girl and her sympathy seemed to give him courage. The cop was an amiable type, an 'older whitehaired man who had been put out to pasture. He asked Stern about his accent in an honest, inquisitive way and then lay in the boulevard hauling on the bumper in order to straighten it out so that Stern did not dirty his suit.

Stern sat behind the wheel, turning it as the policeman pulled on the dimpled sheet metal. i

"Good enough to drive," the cop finally announced. "Save you a penny or two on the tow. Those fellas are pirates."

The policeman, Leary, tipped his hat when they drove away. Stern had no idea where they were going.

"Shall I take you home?" he asked her.

"Oh, not yet," she said, so emphatically that Stern was taken by surprise. The car had no radio, but there was a clock. It was five past midnight. "I have to be certain you're well. Are you?"

He made a sound. He was badly shaken. Yet it was amazing how buoyed he was by female attention. He reminded himself of the cartoons he saw in the theater of Popeye when he ate his spinach. With her, before he faced George and the months of bills, he felt almost invincible.

"Where shall we go, then?" he asked. "Are you hungry?"

"Really, no. I couldn't, not now. I lost whatever appetite I had. I don't take a drink very often, but I could use one now. You, too?"

He answered her again with a sound. "Under the circumstances, I could drink," he said.

"You know 'what might be nice? Why don't you stop at a package store and we can sit out by the river. There's a lovely spot. I'll show you."

So that is what they did. They bought a bottle of Southern Comfort and two cheap tumblers and drove a few blocks to a parking lot on a low bluff over the river. The river was wide here, black and wild with sound beneath them. The moon was up, high in the trees, filling the Kindle with racing light.

As she opened the bottle, he cautioned her..

"George," he said, "expects his car to be returned in mint condition."

She eyed him over the cap, unimpressed on this occasion by his mild humor.

"You're going to suffer terribly over this, aren't you?" He hesitated, then shook his head bravely,

"You wouldn't consider letting me pay for this, would you?"

she asked.

He shook his head again.

"I could, you know. I have quite a bit of money. My mother's sister left a trust. It was available after I was twenty-five and it just sits there."

"And what would your father think of that?"

.... I don't care what my father thinks."

Stern again made his sound. He thought of her as he first saw her, on Henry's footstool.

"Do you care?" she asked. "About him?"

"I am afraid to say I do."

"I do, too," she said, after a moment. 'Td rather say I don't, but I do. I think most girls care more about their mothers, but my mother worships him. Is your family like that?"

Stern laughed, thinking of his father as he came to know him toward the end, an agitated, feckless human being on

the verge of one breakdown or another.

"No," he said.

"Do you like my father?"

Stern contemplated the question. The engine was running, a throaty rumble, so they could have heat.

"I believe I am too afraid of him to know the answer." She laughed out loud

"Do you know what I like about you, Sandy? You don't remind me of anyone."

He was tempted to remark about making virtues out of faults. But he realized that this pleased him. He was who he

was. The car, the disaster, had allowed a remarkable candor between them. Moreover, as was usually true on the rare

occasions when anyone could inspire him to straightforward

response, he learned a good deal about himself.

"And how do you feel about your father?"

"The same as you," she said. "I admire him. When I was a girl, I wanted to be just like him. Before I realized that he wouldn't let me. I resent him, I suppose. It's hard to know. My parents have been quite angry with me for some time."

Stern sat back against the door to look at her. The liquor had begun to make him warm and somewhat drunk.

"What is the story you seem to have to tell? I sense great unhappiness."

"Do you?"

"You must forgive me. I suppose that was rather blunt."

"Rather," she said. In the dark, fear reached up to seize him. He had gone too far. He was on a cliff with this girl.

At any moment this atmosphere of intimacy could fade and she could revert to being the daughter of a wealthy man, well beyond him. He knew that was what she meant before—that she did not know how to regard him. Like any person born to great wealth, she was proficient with an offhanded officiousness; she could instantly push him off to a million-mile distance, if she wanted to.

"I don't think of myself as a happy person," she said. "I'm very shy. Except around you." She smiled. "Are you happy?"

"I enjoy my work. I care for my sister. But no, I do not consider myself a cheerful person by disposition."

"I didn't think so," she said. They were both quiet. "I'm going to tell you everything," Clara Mittler said presently.

He waited a moment in the dark before he said, "All right."

"MEL? Sandy Stern," he said into the telephone.

"San-dy!" cried Mel in return, the usual

trumpet blast: hail fellow well met. Face forward, Tookey had a single expression, a beaming countenance of unlimited goodwill. Turn your back,

however, and the knives came out, the mischief started. An insidious fellow. Toolcy claimed to be Irish--it was in this city, like many others, a political advantage, particularly at the bar--but he had the swarthy look of a more Southerly heritage. Mel wore a wig--profuse, dark, and curly as the coat of a poodlea trait which Stern, in spite of his efforts at tolerance, found shabby and insincere. The man was always sweating and, in consequence, bathed in cologne. And he was overweight--not that Stern was the kind to criticize this fault; but Mel, cut to the dimensions of certain cattle, still favored double-breasted suits and flashy pocket hankies, and refused to accept biology as fate. He squeezed himself into tapered shirts and sat with his dark hairy gut bulging between the buttons, his oily smile suggesting an unambiguous belief that he was suave.

Stern had dealt with Mel for years when Tooley was a prosecutor, a prickly relation marked by many bitter struggles. Mel, in a word, was underhanded, an exception in an office in which most of the lawyers were overly aggressive but generally respectful of rules and rights.

Stern's most serious ran-in with Mel had occurred five years ago, when Stern represented a contractor whom Tooley desperately wanted to testify against two gentlemen whose names ended in vowels. The contractor had been granted immunity, but he persisted in a version of events which even Stern, privately, regarded as improbable. When he and his client showed up for his grand jury appearance, the contractor, a hard-boiled, tight-lipped kind, suddenly paled; the sweat on his scalp looked like rain. He was a Knights of Columbus man, the father of nine, and Tooley had the contractor's former mistress seated primly on the sofa outside the grand jury room. For the sake of his client, Stern, always reluctant to publicly criticize any attorney, had to file a disciplinary complaint with the District Court Executive Committee. The judges had clucked their tongues and chastised Mel, but in the end the contractor testified, and just as Mel liked. Tooley had the last laugh. Face to face, he claimed to bear no grudges and was quick to praise Stern's ability. But in a world where ego mattered so, one knew better than to believe that. Stern wondered again how it was John had wandered into Tooley's hands.

Tooley, now, said he had been about to call, a remark which Stern took as being within striking distance of the truth.

Tooley naturally was interested in making arrangements for MD to pay his

fee. He wanted a \$15,000 retainer--on the high side for a fellow of Tooley's age, but what Stern might have expected. They chatted as best they could about the case. Stern said nothing to Tooley about the house error account; he had to assume that every word would go back to the prosecutors, to be used however Too-ley saw fit, for John's advantage or simply as some way to curry favor for the future. Stern described the customer orders that the government was tracing, said the prosecutors seemed to think that Dixon had made some sort of improper profit;

"I take it that they believe the orders were placed with John," said Stern.

"Were they?" inquired Tooley, as if he did not have a client to ask. "I mean, I don't have any documents to look

at. I wouldn't mind seeing whatever you've turned over.'" Stern made a note and said that he would send them, "Well, of course," said Stern, "he may have received' these orders but might be unable to recall them, given the crash of daily business. I have no idea whether or not that is a possibility, but a reasonable person might understand that." Tooley was very quick--he would not miss the hint-but he did not answer, which Stern regarded as unpromising.

Stern went on: "What exactly is it that Klonsky tells you she wants with him?"

"Actually," said Tooley, "I haven't dealt with Sonny I've talked just a little bit to Stan." Sennett again. Stern: shook his head. "He's got his hand on the throttle on this one. Did you know that?" asked Tooley. He would have' been delighted to one-up Stern with the news.

"I have gotten that drift. I imagine he has his own agenda

"He always does," said Tooley, joining in brotherly fashion in the familiar complaints defense lawyers had with the present United States Attorney. From Tooley, this was mostly show. He had worked for Sennett for more than a year before entering private practice, and in that time Stan had promoted Tooley to chief of the office's Special In-

vestigations Division. Stan had made Mel a big macher.

There was a reason Tooley had chosen him as his point of contact. "So, how you like dealing with Funny Sonny?" Mel asked, obviously skirting. "She's a

piece of work, isn't she?"

"Ms. Klonsky?" asked Stern. "I hadn't heard that name,"

"That's what I call her," said Mel. "Everybody calls her something. She's my fault, you know. I hired her, right before I left the office. I mean, Stan did. But I interviewed her. I thought she had some balls. You know?"

"Yes," said Stern simply. He understood the point. "But I don't think she's a real star there yet. What's the word?"

Ambivalent. They can't get her to decide anything. She's always wringing her hands. You know. Tries a good case, though. Nice-looking woman has got a hell of an advantage in front of a jury, don't you think?"

Stern uttered a sound. Perhaps. Mel went on. Clearly, he had little interest in speaking about John.

"Y'know, I should blame you for hiring her. I say she's my fault, but she's really yours."

"Mine?" asked Stern. "Klonsky?"

"I just remembered this. I asked her why she wanted to be a trial lawyer and she told me this story about when she was in her first year of law school, how she saw every day of the Sabich trial. She loved watching you work. I forgot how she described you. 'Sleight of hand,' I think. I thought it was a cute way to put it."

Indeed, thought Stern. Tooley must have held his sides.

"So you see, you're her idol, Sandy. I bet she gets hot flashes whenever you call."

"There is hardly any sign of that."

"Who knows with her? Very emotional person. She been telling you yet about her goofy husband?"

"Not really," said Stern. He felt, more acutely now, some alliance with Klonsky. Mel was improving his opinion of her the longer he went on.

"She will," said Mel. "She tells everybody. You know about this guy? He's a mailman I'm not kidding. He writes poetry and delivers mail. The guy thinks he's Omar Khayyam or something. Apparently he's nuttier than she is. Every



second day while I was there she was in the head bawling her eyes out, saying she was going to divorce this guy. And now she's p.g. because her biological clock is going dingdong. Oh, well," said Mel, finally tired of the subject.

"Be kind to her, Sandy.""

"More the reverse," said Stern, trying in the mildest way to say something in Klonsky's behalf,

"I'm sure Sennett's watching her like a hawk."

"So it seems," said Stern. "Might I ask what he tells you?"

"Not clear," said Mel. "Not clear. I believe they're looking for immunity. I'm not certain for what."

Stern hung there, feeling for all the-world like a small insect humming its wings in a formidable breeze. There was little more that he could ask. Given pride, and fear of what might go back to the government, he was reluctant to discuss the blank spots in his knowledge of the investigation. And there were few other avenues of inquiry, What John had told Mel, if anything, was out of bounds in this kind of situation. Many defense lawyers blurted out their client's confidences like bits of witless news posted on some local bulletin board, but Stern had never shared that inclination.. In a situation of potential adversity, he neither asked for nor shared his client's private words, his rigidity on this: point of ethics accepted as one more part of Sandy Stern and his formal foreign manner, like the hedgerow and iron fence about certain older homes.

"I'm just getting into this thing," Tooley said. "Maybe I can give you a call next week when I get my bearings."

"Yes, of course," said Stern. He would never hear from Tooley, not until a day or two before the indictment was returned, when Mel would describe vaguely the factors that required John to ax Dixon. Stern had faced similar dilemmas himself when he represented witnesses. But he tried to give his colleagues what little help he could along the way.

Stern prepared to conclude the call, going over the list of things that Tooley wanted from him. Mel, slyly, had put the shoe on the other foot and was the one receiving all the information.

"He's a nice kid," Tooley said in conclusion. "Maybe not a rocket scientist, but he should come out okay."

"One hopes," said Stern, nettled nonetheless by the feeling that Tooley had gone out of his way to provide this dim. assessment of his son-in-law.

"It's crazy how he came to me. You gave him a couple names, I take it."

"A few," said Stern. Neither he nor Tooley harbored' illusions about whether Mel would have been included.

"He called those guys, but nobody was in. Apparently you put the fear of God in him. Felt he just had to get a lawyer lickity-split. So he called everybody he knew and

ended up getting my name from your son."

"From Peter?"

"My brother Alan and Peter were like this in high school.

Remember Alan? I have to give Pete a call and thank him."

Alan was a handsome, wholesome, genial kid. It seemed impossible that the same home could have produced something as viperous as Mel Tooley. Stern held his head while he absorbed the latest news. Peter again! It was as inevitable as the seasons, however, that he would have mixed in if asked. Ignorant or not, his son considered any family problem part of his domain. Meanwhile, Stern imagined Mel across town, in his flashy office, smirking. He had Stern's client paying his fee while John considered laying Dixon low, and Stern's own son was the source of his employment Quite a tickle

Chalk up one more for the government, thought Stern, as he put down the phone. There were lawyers friendly to the target or his counsel, or naturally disinclined to help the prosecution, who would go over the situation with John two or three times and remind him of how large the gaps were in his memory, how unrewarding testimony for the government might be. But that clearly was not Mel's plan. He would offer John up freely to the prosecutors, encouraging him to be forthcoming with the vaguest hunch or suspicion. And John--if Stern could correctly read Tooley's silence and the signs in his own conversations with his son-in-law--apparently had much to tell.

Idly, he contemplated how it must have gone between John and Dixon. It was

not likely that Dixon had announced what he was up to; he was too secretive for that. He issued commands, which John was afraid to countermand. But a certain furtiveness must have accompanied this scheme. Just between me and you. Don't tell. As Clara always said, John was not dumb. Sooner or later, he must have known that these trades were being handled differently from others. So they went on in the usual murky world of collaboration and deceit, each with some unspoken ground of disrespect for the other: You are weak. You are dishonest. His son-in-law was the classic stuff of the government witness, an unquestioning lower-down with the convictions of a noodle. As soon as Toolcy explained the facts of life to him--that his commodities registration and his right to do business on the financial markets in the future hung in the balance--he would reduce his level of actual suspicions to none at all.

By the time he got to the witness stand, he would be one more wanton soul testifying that he had merely followed orders, without a minute for reflection. With his look of childish innocence, and his relative inexperience, John would carry this act off better than most.

Thinking of all this and the way the situation was gradually spinning out of control, Stern felt queasy. For just an instant, he fell beneath a quirky vision of his entire family down at the federal courthouse, testifying, pointing fingers, hopelessly involved. In that scene, he somehow was the victim, not the man accused but the one left out in the cold. Everybody knew more than he did. He shook the notion off, but looked down to the phone, full again of that sense of coming injury which could not be prevented.

MARGY seemed to have done something with her hair. Near her shoulder it sprayed up in a froth of curls, and its blondish tint seemed brighter when she came into the light.

She looked bigger than Stern recalled--a hale, large person full of life. He refused at once to allow recollection or imagination to take him any further.

"Fine," she answered when he inquired again furtiveness must have accompanied this scheme. Just between me and you. Don't tell. As Clara always said, John was not dumb. Sooner or later, he must have known that these trades were being handled differently from others. So they went on in the usual murky world of collaboration and deceit, each with some unspoken ground of disrespect for the other: You are weak. You are dishonest. His son-

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"Fine," she answered when he inquired about her flight, "Nice hotel," she added. "Slept good." A simple declaration utterance ripe in implication: all was forgotten, forgiven, swept aside. Margy was good at this, pretending that nothing had ever occurred; she had done it, Stern sensed, dozens of times. Whatever the writhing inside, the internal outcry, the reverberations would never touch the surface. She sat there all dolled up, wearing a raw-silk suit and an orange blouse with a huge bow. She had come into Stern's office carrying a large briefcase and a garment bag slung from her Shoulder, and had been savvy enough to extend her hand, with its long red nails, while his secretary was still present so that neither of them would be discomfited: by the opportunity for some more intimate hello. The Oklahoma businesswomen, determined and composed. Hi y'all.

Behind his smoky glass desk, Stern spent a moment describing the day's

agenda. He and Margy each drank coffee.

Together, they would scrutinize the documents the government had subpoenaed and attempt to anticipate Ms. Klonsky's questions. Then they would proceed to the U.S. Attorney's Office, where Klonsky would interrogate Margy in preparation for her appearance before the grand jury, which would immediately follow.

"Do I gotta do that," Margy asked, "siddown and have this chat with her?"

"No, but it is routine. It suits both sides. I am not allowed inside the grand jury room, so by submitting to an interview, we learn in advance what the prosecutor has in mind and I will have the chance to help in any troublesome areas. Ms. Klonsky, in turn, finds which questions she would rather not ask you on the record."

"I get it." Margy was satisfied. She asked where he wanted to start, and he pointed to the briefcase.

"The hard part," said Margy with a smile. Hard part. "A problem?" asked Stern. He did not care for the sound of this. He put down the coffee cup and removed the subpoena from the file. Margy unloaded first the checks the government had demanded---,all those written in the first four months of the year for amounts exceeding \$250. She had them literally tied up in string, nine stacks, each the size of a brick, with the severed perforations lending, from

the side, a striated look, like certain fish.

"What-all they gonna do with these?"

"They are looking, I assume, for funds being transferred to Dixon. Is there any evidence of that?"

"Shore," she said. "Lots of it. Salary. Bonus."

"Anything else?"

"Nada."

"Did any companies or accounts you know him to control receive money?"

"Nothin," said Margy.

Good, he thought. He flipped through the stacks, more to get the feel of the

checks than anything else. She had made two copies, a set for Stern and a set for herself, and had a clerk stamp an identification number on each. You did not need to teach Margy anything twice.

Stern referred again to the subpoena. Because many of the records were already here, Stern last week had taken responsibility for assembling the trading records which the prosecutors had asked for. The remaining documents had been delivered to Stern's office, and in preparation for today he had carefully gone into each pile and replaced, just where he had found them, the order tickets the government was surely seeking--the four or five dozen which John had written. The bundle of documents, copied and numbered like the checks, waited now in a white transfer case. He showed them to Margy, then had Claudia summon one of the young men in the office, who would deliver the records to the grand jury room prior to their arrival.

Stern read aloud the government's last request for records of the Wunderkind Associates account,

"The strange part." Margy had her briefcase on her lap and removed a manila folder. Maison Dixon, like many houses, used what was called a consolidated statement, in which purchases and sales, confirmations, margin requirements, and positions were all reported together. The computer spat out a single form, which was mailed to the customer any time there was account activity. The second leaf of that computer form remained at MD and was microfilmed. Opening the folder, Stern was surprised to find the original statements which should have gone to Wunderkind.

"It's strange," she said. "See the address."

The documents said "Wunderkind Associates" at the top, and "[H6LD]." He asked what the notation meant.

"Hold,," she said. "You know. Like 'Don't mail it, I'll pick it up.'"

"Does that occur often?"

"Sometimes. Fella's getting a divorce and don't want his wife counting up everything he owns on her fingers or toes.

Or he thinks the IRS is opening his mail. Or he doesn't think

much of the mailman in his neighborhood. Lotsa reasons."

Stern nodded. "And these were never picked up?"

"They were sittin right in the file;"

"Chicago account?"

"Kindle," she said. "05." She lifted her bottom from one of the cream-colored chairs to point to the account

number. "Greco found them."

"Peculiar," said Stern.

"Oh, that ain't what's strange."

"No?"

"Look through 'em."

He did, and as usual noticed nothing.

"Look at the activity. Look at the balance. Remember? This is where he's puttin all that money he makes tradin ahead.

I thought for sure he'd be cashin out these positions he's transferrin in, havin us cut him one check after another.

You know: take the money and run."

Clearly, however, that was not what had occurred. The statements portrayed frequent trading, two or three movements a day. There was no unusual concentration of positions. T-bonds. Silver. Beans. Sugar. Yen. Those were the favorites, but all were frequently traded, often with multiple moves each day. Stern read to the end in Febmary of that year.

"He lost money?" asked Stern.

"Not just money," said Margy. "Everything. There ain't a red centavo that got stole that didn't end up goin right back into the market. Hell, he didn't just lose all that.

He lost more. Look at the last statement."

Stern turned the pages again. On the final statement, in boldface, there was a deficit balance reflected of slightly more than \$250,000. Trading on marg'm--

borrowing money from the house to put on positions worth more than what you had invested in the account--it was always possible to lose large amounts quickly, and it had happened here to a farethee-well. Everything had been sunk into sugar contracts, which had come to ruin over several days in February when the market ran wild. By the time Mr. Wunderkind had extricated himself, the loss was enormous, a quarter of a million dollars more than the equity he'd had in the account to start with.

"The debit balance was paid off?." he asked.

"That's what the statement says. All 250,000 bucks. I never heard nothin about it."

"Should you have?"

"You betchum," said Margy. She sat uP a little straighter.

"Deficit balance over a hundred grand? Either I hear about it or it goes straight down to Dixon from accounting,"

"Ah," said Stern. He wndered. Dixon could have probably written off a debt to the house like this with a single stroke of the pen, But the statement showed funds received-Wunderkind had paid off the money he owed MD.

Stern stared at the papers and, with the familiar frozen precision of his most single-minded attempts to understand, went over it all aloud. Margy nodded each step of the way.

The man had self-consciously placed orders ahead of customers, a major infraction. In order to hide that, erroneous account numbers were used and the transactions, taken for mistakes, were moved to the house error account,.

where substantial profits of tens of thousands of dollars on every pair of trades accumulated. Then, in order to gain control of these illegal profits, the man had placed additional orders, once again making deliberate errars in the account information. The result was that the error account paid for the trade. Then the new position was moved by various accounting entries to this new account.

"Wunderkind Associates," said Margy. "Wunderkind Associates," said Stern. "And then, instead of simply closing his positions and making off with all these ill-gotten gains, he traded on them. Repeatedly.



And badly."

"Right."

"So that, at the end, the net result of dozens of unlawful' tranSaCtions, all of them wickedly clever, is that they have cost him approximately a quarter of a million dollars."

"That's what the paper says."

"Not right," said Stern resolutely. He knew, with a conviction durable as steel, there was more to it than this.

These shenanigans in the Wunderkind account were one more interim link in the long, twisted chain. Stealing this money had turned into a sport for Dixon, his version of the steeplechase. How many hurdles could he take at a canter?

Stern decided at once that the losses had to be phony.

There was ample precedent for that. From what Stern understood, at the end of every year there were dozens of such transactions on the Exchanges, designed to fool the IRS. In violation of every rule, trades were arranged off the floor and then carried out in the pit as a kind of second-rate pantomime, so that a loss was recorded for tax purposes, while the position, through one device or another, eventually returned to its original owner. No doubt, something like that was involved here. Perhaps there was some record Dixon meant to set: most laws broken in a single theft. Stern sat there shaking his head, convinced he could never work through the final intricacies of this scheme. On the other hand, it was possible the prosecutors would not manage that either.

"I am not certain, Margy," said Stern at last, "that I see this as the problem you do."

"Oh," she said, "this ain't the bad port. This is the strange port."

"Ah," said Stern, and felt his internal elevator descend another floor or two, not as far or as steeply as he might have expected. He was growing accustomed to this. "And what, Margy, is the bad news?"

"This thing"--she hied half out of her seat to indicate the subpoena--"asks for all the account information. You know, the account application, risk disclosure statement, signature documents."

"Yes. They want to prove whose account this is."

"See, that's why we got a little problem here, Buster Brown.

Cause I can't find even an itty-bitty scrap of paper  
to show who these Wunderkinds are."

"No," said Stern simply.

"I'm tellin you," she said. "It's all gone. All those forms go on microfiche. Fiche for the month that account opened last year ain't to be found. Three copies.-Then we got a little computer screen on every customer. You know: name, address, social security. Somebody's gone in on the system and zapped it out. You put in that account number, you get notbin but a blinkin light. And a' course, the hard copy on

all the forms--they been swiped right out of the file."

"And where were those records kept?"

"Depends." Central microfiche is in Chicago, but we got a backup here. Hard copy for this account'd be here. Computer you can get on anywhere. If you know what you're doin."

"And would Dixon have access to these records?" The question, even to Stern's own ear, sounded weak. The answer was obvious. Margy put it her own way.

"Honey, there ain't nothin in three cities that Dixon don't have access to from the receptionist's be-hind to the drawer where I keep my Maalox. It's Maison Dixon. You askin me if somebody saw him piddlin around in a file cabinet they'd say, Hey there, watcha doin? No chance. I told you.

They're all scared a' him."

"You searched thoroughly, Margy?"

"I went through the files here myself last night."

"I see." He flipped up the humidor and looked at the cigars, snug in their brown jackets like military men at ease. Last week, he'd had Claudia fill the box, but he had not yet lit or even pressed his teeth into a cigar. "Of course," said Stern, "there have been times that records have been lost in the process of copying for microfiche, correct?"

"Shore,"

"And accidental erasures of computer information probably occur daily?"

"Maybe," said Margy

"And if you have no microfiche in either city, perhaps you never had one in the first place?"

Margy looked at Stern with outthrust chin and gimlet eye, as he made these efforts in the mode of piercing cross-examination. Her expression was easy to read: No sale.

Stern took a long swallow of his coffee and turned to the window. From here on the thirty-eighth floor of Morgan Towers, the river held a liquid gleam. Some days it was leaden and murky. In high winds, the current increased and the water spit and lashed at the brown standards used to moor barges and other slow-moving hauling craft that sometimes made their way upstream. Over time he'd come to know the meaning of its changing tones. Stern could tell from the density of color if the barometer was dropping, if the cloud cover was heavy or likely soon to lift. That was the value of experience, he supposed, to be able to read the meaning of signs, to know the large impact signaled by small things.

This would go badly with the government. Quite badly. He had been warning Dixon against this for months now, to no apparent avail. Dixon was shrewd enough to recognize that even if the prosecutors could not figure out what he had done with the money, they would have a case if they could prove he had stolen it--and proof that he controlled this Wunderkind account would suffice. But it was a desperate response to destroy the documents. The government could barely avoid proving Dixon was responsible. As Margy said, there was probably no other person in the company who could have gone into the files in two cities with the same impunity. As the government showed Dixon's access to each missing record, the circumstantial web would take on a taut, sinister look. And for that kind of action there was never an innocent explanation. Stern was good. He could refer to error accounts and margin calls and limit drops and make a jury dizzy. But when the prosecutors wheeled the MD shredder into the courtroom, there would be no way to cross-examine the machine. Dixon might as well have jumped inside. You could never save clients from themselves, Stern thought. Never.

So begins the last act in the tableau of Dixon Hartnell, small-town boy made good, gone bad. For Stern, in every case which came to grief there was a moment when his knowledge of a gruesome future fact became firm and thoroughly delineated. Occasionally, it was not until the jury spoke; but more often there was some telling instant along the way when Stern, as the saying went, could see beyond the curve. In the matter of Don Hartnell, husband to his sister, client, compatriot, sporting and military companion, today was the day. Too much was accumulating here--knowledge, motive, opportunity; the error account, John's recollections, the documents gone. Today he knew the end of the story.

Dixon was going to the penitentiary.

He took a few minutes to coach Margy on the basics of dealing with Klonsky: Listen to the question. Answer it narrowly and precisely. Volunteer nothing. Never say no when asked if particular events occurred; answer, rather, I do not recollect, Name, rank, serial number. Hard facts. No opinions. If asked to speculate, decline to. And in the grand jury, remember that Stern literally would be at the door. She had an absolute right to consult with counsel at any time and should ask to speak to her lawyer if there was any question, no matter how trivial, for which she felt remotely unprepared.

He helped her pack the documents back into her briefcase and slipped into his suit coat by the door. He picked up her bag and asked if she was ready. Margy lingered in the chair.

"I was pretty tough on you," she said quietly. She looked at her coffee cup, against which she rested one bright nail.

"When we were talkin a few weeks ago?"

"Not without warrant."

"You know, Sandy, I got lots of callusess" She looked up briefly and smiled almost shyly. "The only thing a gal wants is for you to pretend a little bit."

Stern moved a step or two closer. As usual with Marg, the thought of bet boss was not far away. Dixon was probably very good at pretending, resorting to every corny gesture; he would throw his coat down in a puddle if need be, or croon outside the window. And here was Margy telling him that women liked that sort of thing. Stern waited, sum, moning himself. The best he could

manage was diplomacy.

"Margy, this has been a time of extraordinary turmoil. Many unexpected developments,"

"Shore." Margy smiled stiffly and tilted the cup, garishly rimmed with her lipstick, gazing down with great interest at her cold coffee. "Shore," she said again,

Well, thought Stern, here one could begin to understand her dilemma. Margy wanted her gentlemen friends to pretend--so that she could tell them coldly that she did not believe them. Stern was certain that he had now arrived at an essential vision. He had heard the pitch, found the hook: monics of a perfect composition in the scale of personal pain. Margy's creation was as clever as Chinese handcuffs.

Constrained, however you moved. His heart, as usual, went out to her:

And so, out of some impulse 'of tenderness, he told her what he took to be the truth. "I have lately been seeing a good deal of a woman who was a friend of ours for many years." Very brief. To the point. He was not quite certain.

what he meant to accomplish by this eruption of candor; except the virtue of honesty itself. Indeed, after his bizarre interlude with Fiona, in which Helen had not been so much as a momentary thought, he had no idea whether this fact was any better than convention. But clarification was called for, and Margy, whatever his admiration, was not his destiny. The news had the predictable effect. Her pupils took on the contracted look they might have in strong light. He had cast her again in her inevitable role: once more, the loser; the flop-and-drop gal. She was not pleased. Margy, like everyone else, wanted a better life than the one she had.

"Nice for you," said Margy. She snatched her purse, closed her case, smoothed her skirt as she moved, grazing him with a tight, penetrating smile. What was the poet's phrase? Zero at the bone. She had put on again her blank tough-guy look that she brought to business meetings, once more Dixon Hartnell's hard-ass hired hand.

They walked the three blocks to the courthouse in virtual silence. Stern's only remarks were directions: Just up there we turn. They were escorted back to Klonsky's narrow office at once and Margy settled herself in the old oak

armchair like a rider in the rodeo. She was ready.

"Margy," she said, when Klonsky asked what she liked to be called. "Hard g." Hard g, indeed, thought Stern. Like a diamond drill.

They had arrived late, and Klonsky cast an eye up at the clock. Time before the grand jury was assigned by a deputy court clerk in quarter-hour intervals and was zealously guarded by the Assistants, who were always pressed to get their business done in the period allotted. Klonsky began questioning Margy, even while Stern was reviewing her nonsubject letter. It was signed by the U.S. Attorney himself and assured Margy that she was not suspected of any criminal involvement, assuming she told the truth before the grand jury. Stern put the letter in this eruption of candor; except the virtue of honesty itself. Indeed, after his bizarre interlude with Fiona, in which Helen had not been so much as a momentary thought, he had no idea whether this fact was any better than convention. But clarification was called for, and Margy, whatever his admiration, was not his destiny. The news had the predictable effect. Her pupils took on the contracted look they might have in strong light. He had cast her again in her inevitable role: once more, the loser; the flop-and-drop gal. She was not pleased. Margy, like everyone else, wanted a better life than the one she had.

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even while Stern was reviewing her nonsubject letter. It was signed by the U.S. Attorney himself and assured Margy that she was not suspected of any criminal involvement, assuming she told the truth before the grand jury. Stern put the letter in his case and looked on as Klonsky worked. She asked Margy questions, all of them routine, and wrote down the answers on a yellow pad.

Wearing her prosecutor's hat, Sonia was like most of her colleagues, relentless, humorless, intense. Her pace was sufficiently methodical that Stern actually grew hopeful that the matter of the missing documents might not come up.

That would allow him to have a pointed conversation first with Mr. Hartnell. But with only a few minutes remaining before they were scheduled to appear at the grand jury, Klonsky removed her tissue copy of the subpoena from the file and went through it, item by item. When Margy handed over the statements for the Wunderkind account, she added brightly, "That's it."

"That's it?" asked Klonsky, with an immediate look of apprehension. She glanced back to her papers.

Stern, for the first time, spoke up. Somewhere, he said, there was a misunderstanding. The various account-opening documents--signature forms, applications, et cetera--seemed to have been misplaced and could not presently be located.

A diligent search had been conducted by Ms. Alison and would be continued, Stern stated, under his direction.

"They're gone?" asked Klonsky. "Trashed?"

Margy started to speak, but Stern reached out to grab her wrist where a heavy bracelet lay. It was far too early, said Stern, to assume the documents could not be located.

The subpoena had been served barely three weeks ago, and MD was a substantial company with hundreds of employees and more than one office.

"I don't believe this," Klonsky said. She largely ignored Stern and put a series of questions to Margy, identifying the documents, the copies, the places they were stored. She extracted, in more precision than Stern had, the details.

of Margy's search. Conducting this inquiry, Klonsky was rigid and intent

behind her desk. Whatever her occasional geniality, Ms. Klonsky, when provoked, was quick to anger,

She looked at Stern. "I'm going to have to talk to Stan about this."

"Sonia," said Stern, "again, I think you are leaping unnecessarily—She cut him off with an ill-tempered wave of her hand. Clad in her familiar blue jumper, she bumped her belly a bit against her desk as she climbed out from behind her chair and led the way downstairs to the grand jury.

When the judges had deserted the new federal building, they left the grand jury behind. The defense lawyers protested this propinquity to the United States Attorney's Office, but it was recognized as vain posturing. For all practical purposes, the grand jury belonged to the prosecutors. An unmarked door in the corridor a floor below led into what looked like a doctor's reception room; it held the same inexpensive furniture, with cigarette burns and splintered veneers, as in the U.S. Attorney's Office upstairs. Behind two additional doors lay the grand jury rooms themselves.

Stern had often peeked inside. It did not look like much: a tiny raised bench at the front of the room and rows of tiered seats, like a small classroom. The twenty-three grand jurors, who had been called out of the regular jury pool to help the prosecutors determine whether they had enough evidence to try someone for a crime, tended to be union workers of one kind or another who had no store to mind, or else the retired, women at home who could manage the time, or frequently those out of work who valued the \$30 daily fee.

To Stern, the grand jury, purportedly intended to protect the innocent, remained one of the preeminent fictions of the criminal-justice scheme. Occasionally, the defense bar was warmed by tales of a renegade grand jury that returned a no bill or two, or quarreled with the prosecutors about a case. But usually the jurors deferred, as one would expect, to the diligent young faces of the U.S. Attorney's Office.

By all reports, the grand jurors sat knitting, reading papers, picking at their nails, while a given individual, brought here by the might and majesty of the United States, was grilled at will by the Assistants.

"Remember I am here," he told Margy. She strolled inside, hauling her briefcase, and did not look back. She remained in poor humor with him. Klonsky also was put out, and, perhaps without meaning to, slammed the



door on Stern as she called the session to order.

The proceedings were secret. The room had no windows and a single door. The grand jurors, the prosecutors, the court reporter could not disclose what had occurred, unless there was a trial. When the government was required to reveal the prior testimony of witnesses. In this federal district, commendably, there were seldom leaks of grand jury matters and much went on here that was never heard about again, a comforting fact for those subjected to baseless or even unprovable allegations. But it was the same respectable principle of secrecy that was cited to bar the witness's lawyer from attending; Stern had only the right to wait at the door, in the fashion of a well-trained dog. The witness, under no bans of confidentiality, could leave if need be after every question to ask the lawyer's advice.

But intimidated by the setting, and eager to appease the interrogator, they seldom did so. His clients usually left Stern maintaining his vigil at the door, his case and hat in hand, his stomach grumbling.

Sometimes, particularly with male voices of a certain timbre, Stern found that the seat nearest to the grand jury room enabled him, if he moderated his breathing and others outside were not gabbing, to overhear the proceedings word for word. Today he was not as fortunate. Barney Hill, the deputy court clerk who slotted fame and filled out attendance forms for witnesses, chatted to Stern about the Trappers? and the women's voices did not seem to carry as well through the heavy door. He could hear Klonsky at a certain pitch and the confident tone of Margy's response.

After fifteen minutes, the door banged open and both women.

emerged. They were finished. Predictably, Margy had chosen not to visit with her lawyer.

"I'm still concerned about those documents," said Klonsky from the threshold of the grand jury room, with a number of the grand jurors milling about behind her. "Ms. Allison's

going to be looking for them again."

"Of course," said Stern.

"As far as I'm concerned, we're beginning an investigation for an O.O.J," Obstruction of Justice.

Stern once more attempted to mollify her, but Klonsky, with half a smile at his familiar excuses, waved him off. She repeated again that she was going to talk to the U.S.

Attorney, and headed out, apparently to do just that.

Stern, left with Margy, pointed her to one of the narrow rooms immediately beside the grand jury chamber which were set aside for witnesses' consultations with their counsel.

The room, six by ten, was bare; it contained a worn table and two chairs, and the gray walls were marred and filthy.

Stern's practice, invariable over the decades, was to debrief his clients right here, while their memories were fresh, question by question.

Stern closed the door and Margy sat, frosty with him but otherwise calm. He asked how it had been:

"Fine," she said serenely. "I lied."

Stern stood with his hand on the knob of the door. This happened now and then, of course. Not as often as was commonly imagined. But now and then. A client chUCKs up her chin and frankly admits to committing a felony.

Notwithstanding, he promptly felt feverish, weak.

He sat down, facing her. She remained bitter and cross.

"May I ask," said Stern, "in what manner you provided incorrect information?"

She flipped her white hand, her bracelets and long nails.

"I don't know. She asked if I had any idea where the records went."

Realizing that he was somehow the target of all this, he tried to avoid showing his relief. Barring further stupidity --an outright confession--the government would never make a case for perjury based on the fact that Margy had kept her opinions to herself.

"She asked if I knew anything about this Wunderkind account from any other source."

"You told her no?"

"Right."

"That was untrue?"

"Yep."

Stern had not been bright enough to ask that question in his office. Perhaps Margy might have responded fully then.

Certainly she was not likely to expand now.

"Anything further?"

"She asked if I talked to Dixon about the ,documents.

I

told her no to that, too."

"But you had?"

"Shore."

What made him think he was wily when he had neglected the obvious? Naturally, she talked to Dixon about this. Who else would know where the records had gone? In all probability he had ventured a few suggestions concerning what she ought to say to the government--and to Stern. In truth, he had no desire to learn exactly what Dixon had told her.

It was sure to enrage him--and at any rate, the conflict of interests which the U.S. Attorney had so gratuitously predicted had now come to pass. Margy's lying, from a coarse perspective, almost certainly advanced Dixon's cause; Stern could no longer counsel both clients. He knew he had himself to blame for the predicament. In thirty years, his personal relationships had never interfered with his professional obligations, but one way or another, his widower's priapism had brought him here--if nowhere else, to the point that Margy was furious enough with him to admit what she had done. For the present, however, his humiliation was subordinate to his duties, which were clear.

"Margy, I would like to introduce you to another lawyer, who, I believe, will counsel you to return to the grand jury

at once and recant."

"Recant'?"

"Correct the record. If it is done immediately, no harm will come to you."

"I've been there and I'm gone." She had a terrible sour expression and got to her feet. Anger increased her substance--her hair, her frills, her bright nails, high heels, her smoothly glinting hosiery. Margy was a person of many pieces carefully assembled, but right now every layer was galvanized by her temper. "You don't have any goddamn idea what's goin on here, do you?" The way her eyes fixed on him, as she looked down, was frightening--not just the harshness, but the disrespect. She had made, apparently, certain assumptions that to her chagrin she now recognized were incorrect.

"I should like to know," he said hollowly. At the moment, he found himself gripped strongly by fear--for Margy'S predicament, and more, by the way she took him to task for his ignorance. So much was swimming beyond his knowledge' or control. John. Dixon. Margy herself. They were like bits of matter drifting off into space.

"Nab," she said. She shook her head, its many curls. "Not from here, Jackson. You know who you gotta talk to. I got a plane to catch." She hitched her bag to her shoulder and picked up her purse and her briefcase. "This here thing is a fool contest: who's the biggest fool. You remember you got told that by Margaret Jane Allison of Polk's Cowl, Oklahoma." With bags in both hands, she. used a foot to prop open the door, and without a backward glance went through it.

SOME defense lawyers said the worst moments came after indictment, when you saw the evidence assembled by the state--the mountain you could never climb. But Stern always welcomed that challenge; once you knew the prosecutors' direction, every other angle became a line of escape. It was the times in the midst of an investigation that could be the most unbearable for him. Usually, there were people to interview, records to look at, motions to make. But, on occasion, he was frozen by realization: the government knew something and he knew nothing at all. Lawyer's terror, he called it and at the moment it was as bad as it had ever been. Blind and ignorant, you fear that any move will be wrong, the one to send you tumbling from the cliff. And so woeful, beleaguered--the right word, in all respects, was defenseless--you hang there, immobile, in darkness, awaiting the storm, hearing the winds build, feeling the air growing chill. He sat in the witness room, slumped,

weary, aware of his weight, his age. He was terrified for Dixon.

When he looked up, Klonsky was posed in the doorframe,  
leaning upon it and taking him in

"Sonia."

"Sonny to my friends." She smiled; he must have looked pitiable to have softened her so quickly. But he welcomed her kindness. Sonny, then. She sat down in the card chair where Margy had been. "Start wanted me to see if I could find you?"

"And you succeeded." He smiled cordially. "We may  
speak lawyer to lawyer, Sonny?"

"Of course."

"I was as dismayed as you to learn that those documents were not where they were expected to be."

"I assumed as much, Sandy. But it's a very serious situation for your client."

He smiled gently, in order to indicate that he did not need the pointer.

"That's what I was talking to Stan about," she said. "Ah, yes," said Stern. "The mighty United States Attorney." Just now, in his present mood, he found his feelings much harder to suppress: the thought of Sennett, tight-fisted, rancorous, was the flint against his stone. He cautioned himself to assume a more amiable tone in speaking of her boss.. "What does he tell us?"

"He tells us," said Sonny, "that he believes you can find the documents."

"Does he?" said Stern. "Imagine having fifty-four Assistants to supervise and still taking the time to do my job as well."

She smiled in spite of herself. "He says he has a message."

"Very well."

"Find the safe."

Nothing moved; not a twitch was allowed; perhaps, for some infinitesimal time, the blood did not flow. This was the training of the courtroom: Betray nothing.

"Do you understand this remark?" he asked her finally.

"Do I?" asked Sonny. "Do you think I should answer that?"

She did not have to; it was clear. Sennett was using her as no more than the messenger. Stern knew what that spelled.

iAy, carajo! old words, a curse from childhood. Mr. Sennett and his informant. They seemed to know everything. Perhaps it was not an informant at all? Rather a wiretap. A mike in the wall. A hidden camera. Stern drew a breath. If anything, his fears for Dixon were greater. In

company he smiled, a primitive reflex.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"Oh," he said, "I do not believe that I have handled a matter for some time that has frightened me more."

"Frightened?"

"The correct word." He nodded. "I have never been in an investigation where I have received less information."

"From the government?"

"Certainly from the government. You have never even formally confirmed who is being investigated or for what crime."

"Sandy, there's no

"Rules are not the point. I speak of fairness. Of what is commonplace." Having given himself berth to speak, he could not contain his indignation.

"Do you not believe that some basic accounting of the government's suspicions is appropriate by now? Rather than engnging in these highly selective and minimal disclosures in the hope I can be sent scurrying in one direction, then another? Do you think I cannot recognize that these subpoenas are composed with the obvious intention of hiding any scrap of information about the prosecution's knowledge and interests?"

"Sandy-look, you know Fm not in charge."

"You sit here now. You have been an Assistant long enough to know what is customary--and what is not. Give me just a word or two."

"Sandy, Sennett is really hinky on this thing."

"Please, I do not ask you to breach any rule of secrecy or standard of propriety. I shall settle for whatever information you can comfortably provide. If you would prefer, I shall tell you what I suspect about your investigation, and you need only state whether I am right or I am wrong. No more. There is no special harm in that, no confidences breached. You may do that, no?"

Could she? The uncertainty swam across her face. Sonny's strength would never lie in hiding her feelings.

"Sonny, please. You are a warm individual and I sense a friendship between us. I do not mean to overreach that. But I have no idea any longer where to turn."

"Sandy, maybe I know less than you think."

"Certainly it is more than I."

They considered one another across the table.

"I have a million things to do," she said at last. "I'll think about what you've said."

"I would need ten minutes. Fifteen at the most."

"Look, Sandy, to tell you the truth, I don't have a second to breathe. I've got four cases going to trial in the next two months. Plus this thing. We've had plans since March to take Charlie's son up to his family's place in Dulin and stay there over the Fourth to pick strawberries. Now I have to come back here on Monday, and I had to move heaven and earth just to get the weekend free. So you'll have to forgive me if I tell you that I'm a little bit pressed."

"I see," said Stern, "you have no time to be fair?"

"Oh, come on, Sandy." She was frustrated by him, exasperated. He was plucking every chord. "If it's so important to you to spend fifteen minutes asking me a bunch of questions I'll never answer, you can drive a hundred miles up to Dulin on Saturday. That's the best I can do."

When he asked her for the directions, she laughed out loud.

"You're really going to come?"



"At this point, I must pursue any avenue. Saturday afternoon ?"

"God," Sonny said. It was on County D, six miles north of Route 60. Brace's Cabin. She described it as a glamorized shack.

As he jotted this down, she pointed at him.

"Sandy, I'm not kidding. Maybe I don't agree with everything Stan's done, but it's his show. Don't think I'll get out in the sunshine and do something I wouldn't do

"Of course not. I shall speak. You need only listen. If you wish, you may take notes and repeat every word I say to Sennett."

"It's a long trip for nothing."

"Perhaps not." Most unexpectedly, he had found again a trace of whimsy. He spoke in the greedy whisper of a child.

He was, he said, so very fond of strawberries.

On the phone, Stern could hear Silvia's voice resounding down the long, stone corridors of Dixon's home as she went to summon her husband. Lately, whenever he spoke to his sister, he detected a note of apprehension. But by their long understanding, she would never discuss Dixon's business with Stern. And Silvia, if the truth were told, was one of those women, come of age in a bygone era, who would never willingly set foot in the sphere they saw reserved to

men.

"What's up?" Dixon was not reluctant to be brusque. "I'm on the social fast track. Your sister's got us entertaining half the Museum Board in fifteen minutes." Silvia, her mother's daughter, never tired of the involvements of a high-toned social life: women's auxiliaries, charity committees, the Country club. Dixon mocked her rather than admit out loud that he loved doing what he imagined rich people did, but their nights were absorbed with charity balls and fund-raising occasions, gallery openings, exclusive parties. Stern often caught their picture in the papers, a remarkably handsome couple, looking smooth, stately, carefree. Silvia over the years had become preoccupied-- as Dixon wished her to be--with acting her part, adjourning by limousine to the city for a luncheon, a trunk show at a tony ladies' shop, the typical

fleshtouching exercises with the wives of other very wealthy men who had welcomed the Harmells into ointed at him.

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Were it someone else, Stern would have been inclined to disparage the frivolity of this life-style, but there was no flaw in his sister which he had not wholeheartedly forgiven. In some ways, Silvia reminded him of Kate, with whom, in fact, she was uncommonly close--she had allowed beauty to be her fate. She had been treated to a privileged education and it had led her to Dixon. End of story. Even in the years when Dixon was out tromping in the cornfields to establish his clientele, he had commanded her not to work, and Silvia, with no apparent misgivings, complied.

Yet Silvia was graced--redeemed---by kindness. She remained an extraordinary person whose generosity far outran the customary or typical. Clara, who had little use for empty vessels, loved and valued Silvia. They talked two or three times a week, met for lunch, lectures at the County Art Museum, theater matinees. For decades, they had attended the symphony's Wednesday afternoon performances together.

And whatever motivated others, Stern could voice no complaints. Silvia, as no one else in the world, adored her brother. In certain moods, she sent him brief notes, bought him gifts. She called every day and he continued to speak to her in a way he shared with no others. Difficult to define, but there was a pitch to their exchanges as easy as humming. He remained the moon to her, the stars--galaxies, a universe. How was Stern to describe as deficient a life in which he still played such a stellar part?

"We need to see one another," said Stern to Silvia's husband now. "The sooner, the better."

"Problems?"

"Many."

"Give me a hint."

"I would rather do this in person, Dixon. We have a great deal to discuss."

"I'm on my way to New York on the 5:45 tomorrow morning.

I'll be there the rest of the week." Dixon, again, was hoping for a breakthrough on the Consumer Price Index future, going to meetings in New York or Washington twice each week. "Then Silvia and I are going to the island over the Fourth." He was referring to another of their homes, one in the

Caribbean, a serene /tffside refuge on a taxhaven island; the IRS, during its investigation a few years ago, had been driven to a frenzy by the inability to tnee so much as a penny going down there. Stern, in his office behind his glass desk, drummed his fingers. Dixon, apparently, did not have time to be in trouble.

"I spent the day with Margy and Ms. Klonsky."

"I heard that was happening."

"Yes," said Stern. Of course, Dixon had heard. That was the point. Stern felt at a terrible disadvantage over the

phone."There were a number of disturbing developments."

"Such as?"

"The prosecutors seem to know about your safe, for one. I believe they will be looking for it shortly, if they are not right now."

On the other end of the line, Dixon did not stir. "Where the fuck do they find out about that?"

Where, indeed? Stern had not needed Dixon for that question. There was a certain obvious, if disquieting logic: Margy goes into the grand jury and the records are missing; Margy comes out and the government mentions the safe. In her anger, Margy could have disclosed anything.

Perhaps Dixon had been prudent enough never to mention the safe or its movements to her, but that was doubtful. In his present mood of dark suspicion it had even struck Stern that Margy might have been the government's source of information all along. A ridiculous thought, really, but one that continued

to teemerge. In that scenario, everything today and for many -days--and nights--before had been no more than wellacted melodrama. Highly unlikely, of course. But such chacades had occurred in the past. There were cases where the government had indicted their informants to maintain their cover. Stern at this point ruled out nothing.

"I was hoping, Dixon, you could shed some light."

"Hardly," said Dixon. "Would John--"

"John? John's still lookin for the men's room, Stern. Come on."

Both men breathed into the phone.

"There are also some records, Dixon, that seem to have disappeared."

"Records?" asked Dixon, far less impulsively.

"Concerning the Wunderkind account. Are you aware of that?"

'SAware of what?"

"The account. The documents. Their disappearance?"

"I'm not sure I'm following you. We'll have to talk about this next week."

"Dixon, it is quite clearly the disappearance of these records that is inspiring the government's interest in the safe."

"So?"

"If the records could be located--"

"No chance," Dixon said harshly. For an instant again, both men were silent, equally set back, it seemed, by the many implications of this remark and its tone. Then Dixon went on, making a token effort to be more ambiguous. "I don't think there's much hope that'll happen."

"Dixon, this will go very badly for you. Very badly. I have told you before, it is the absolute zenith of stupidity."

With Dixon's lapse, Stern found himself able to be more direct; he imagined a certain air of affront on the other end, but he continued. "In the current atmosphere, Dixon, if this safe is accurately traced, it will provoke many difficulties. Not to mention that it would be sorely embarrassing to me."

"Embarrassing?"

"Damaging to my Credibility. You understand. And the blame will be laid to you, nevertheless. The prosecutors will know the safe did not fall to its present location from the sky." On the phone, Stern felt obliged to exercise some circumspection. Even with a wiretap, the government was prohibited from overhearing this kind of conversation between an attorney and his client. But you could never tell, particularly in a house as large as Dixon's, who might inadvertently pick up an extension.

"You mean, after telling me to hand the thing over, you want to give it back?"

"Not at all. I am telling you that you are exercising poor judgment and creating a perilous circumstance."

"I'll take it. Send it back."

"Dixon,."

"Listen, I have to put on my flicking tuxedo. I'll be back on the sixth,"

"Dixon, this is not an opportune time for a vacation. I must ask you to return as soon as your business is concluded in New York."

"Come on. To me it sounds like a great time to get away.

It's a few days. This'll hold. Law things always do."

"Dixon, I have many questions and I expect plain answers.

''

"Sure," said Dixon. "Right. Coming," he yelled, as if Silvia was calling, though Stern heard not the faintest echo of his sister's voice.

ARRIVING home late Friday night, Stern stood in the foyer of his empty home. Helen was' out of town, i. jetted off to someplace in Texas to inspect a con,a, .I, vention site; she would not be back until Sunday. With a certain resolve, Stern prepared to undergo the weekend by himself. While a leftover chop warmed, he wandered about the house, read the mail, and hung in the eddies of various dissatisfactions. A trying week.

Before the huge windows of the solarium, he paused. By grace of prior work and fortuitous rain, Clara's garden had flourished. The bulbs that had gone into the ground last fall now rose in glory around peonies, lilies expressly6 as hands. Stern, utterly oblivious all these months, was suddenly struck by the perfect rows and stepped out into the mild evening air. Then in the fading light and rainsweet breeze, he froze, lurching a bit as he came to a complete halt. Across the hedgerow, he caught sight of Fiona Cawley stooping in her yard.

To say that he had avoided Fiona was not correct. He had hidden from her; he sneaked in and out of his own home like a commando. To his present mind, that incident had absolutely not occurred. Only with the prospect of

confrontation did it recur to him with a harrowing pang. What had he done? What grand figure of macho revenge had he thought to imitate? Now, a week later, he was unwilling to accept the image of Alejandro Stern as a reprobate, a boulder making unwelcome passes at the neighborhood wives.

Other men might have been more casual with their honor, but since a few hours afterwards, everything surrounding the episode seemed to have been smashed into storage. He had never phoned Cal. He had stopped searching for Nate, and even felt somewhat relieved of his urge, so great a week ago, to grind Dr. Cawley like pumice. No doubt, he'd have it out with Nate sooner or later. But only when Stern had accepted his own conduct, when he was ready to chat, one card to another; only, frankly, when he had a better grip on himself and the mysterious world of his intentions.

Now he stood stock-still, like some creature in the wild, but something, the scent of fear perhaps, gave him away.

Fiona reared her head, saw him, and with the creel curl of a powerful unpleasant expression advanced on the horny row of privet that marked the property line between the Cawleys' and the Sterns'. She had huge rusty garden shears in hand and was dressed in what she took to be gardening clothes, a monochrome outfit that was the green of an avocado, slacks and a clingy top. Her hair, usually smooth as a helmet, was windblown and hung in clumps, holding a few small brown leaves and twigs. She leaned across the privet, gesturing, hissing actually: Come here.

"Sandy, I need to talk to you." She advanced along the row.

"I don't want you avoiding me."

Stern at last stood his ground. He had no idea who he was, but the person inhabiting the skin of Sandy Stern was going to get it. His smile was appeasing. Fiona, in the meantime, seemed wordstruck. She had him where she wanted, and now had no idea what to say.

"I need to talk to you," she repeated.

Determined to make it easy for her, Stern said, "Of course."

At that moment, behind her, Stern caught sight of Nate. He appeared to have just arrived home; his tie was wrung down from his collar and he was still carrying his case. He peeked about the shingled corner of his house and

stared with a wide look on his pale narrow face. Fiona, following Stern's eye, turned. As soon as she recognized her husband, her face shot about again with a grieving, stricken expression.

"Oh God." She put both hands on her cheeks in a childish way.

Stern waited to see who would speak. He had once again the sensation of something momentous. And then, through the mild night, he heard the pealing of his telephone, clearly audible to all of them as it carried from the open French door of the solarlure. Stern begged off without words; he threw up his hands futilely--Marcel Marceau could not have done better--and trotted a bit as he went toward the house, delighted, actually thrilled, to have escaped. But some intimation of the likely outcome of the scene he had left behind slowed his pace and eventually the thought came to form: Fiona would tell him. If She had not already. Think of the advantage she'd gain. With her tale of refusal, she could lord a superior moral character, while still punishing Nate by hinting that she, too, was not beyond temptation. With his growing sense of the Cawley marriage--nasty, com-perifive, and pained--Stern knew Fiona could never keep this episode to herself. In the darkness of the house, he stood still while the phone went on ringing, and his spirit gathered blackly about a hard seed of apprehension and shame.

Oh, he thought, this was preposterous. What had he to fear from Nate Cawley? What apology could Nate demand from Stern, of all people---Nate, who had \$htupped his wife and stripped her fortune? He withered in anxiety at the prospect, nonetheless. He saw suddenly that he would look across whatever space he shared with Nate Cawley and confront the very figure of all the failures in his own marriage. He was not sure he was ready for that, even now.

The machine had answered the phone. Through the light-less house Stern heard the amplified voice, made deliberately husky and sinister: "'I want your blood.'" It was Peter.

Stern picked up the extension.

"So you are there," his son said. They waited the usual agitated instant before either spoke again. "Well, are we going to do this or what?"

Stern, who had begun to think the test was unnecessary,



found that he did not have the strength to argue.

"I am at your convenience."

"I've got my average exciting Friday night going, dictat'rag charts. You can come over right now, if you've got the time. Or are you seeing Helen?"

Peter liked Helen. On the few recent occasions when they had all been together, Peter seemed to have imposed some self-conscious restraint on his usual inappropriate or acerbic remarks. Stern explained that she was gone until Sunday and said he would come ahead now. Closing the sunroom door, he paused. The Cawleys were together in their yard, standing close, arguing. When Fiona's hand swept up in the direction of the Sterns' house, he jumped away from the door and waited, pressed against the wall, while he quietly lowered .the blind.

Perhaps it was the effect of Peter's joke on the phone, but there were few places as eerie as a darkened office building on a weekend evening. Stern found both sets of plate-glass doors at the front still open, but inside, he was at once drilled to the core by the sensation of being alone; the large, darkened building hulked about him. The pharmacy on the first floor was black--grated and closed.

He rode the elevator up and, disembarking, found the long, tiled corridor lit in each direction only by a single fluorescent fixture, offering not much more illumination than a child's night-light.

What had Peter said? His average Friday night. As unpredictably as most of his feelings about his son, the stark sadness of this' declaration overcame him. The stylish admiring friends of Peter's college and high-school years seemed to have faded away. There was no one Stern knew of besides Kate who regularly shared Peter's company.

How did he spend his time? Stern had little idea. He had inherited his mother's tastes for music; he cycled; he worked. When he came to visit his parents, as he had done now and then while Clara was living, he liked to go running through the public forests in the Riverside neighborhood.

Afterwards, dripping with sweat, he would sit in the kitchen and read the newspaper aloud to his mother, making various caustic remarks about events. Clara served him soft drinks, puttered with-dinner. Stern witnessed these

scenes largely as an outsider, struck by the very oddness of his son. Peter would be affronted to think he had his father's sympathy; his tightly wound personality also reflected a kind of strength. But approaching the office door, Stern felt the blackish wellspring of Peter's sarcasm, aloofness: his pain.

How, Stern thought to himself, how had it become this way?

He had in mind suddenly not merely Peter but the girls as well. Somehow these children had come into being--energized with that strange agglomeration of talents and temperament he recognized as being essential to each. By three or four years of age, they had left behind the indefiniteness of infancy and were as fully formed as tulips on a stalk, ready to unfold. As a parent, he seemed so often to be no more than a spectator, applauding the expanding capacities, silently concerned by other developments. When Peter was six, his parents began to notice certain traits. Moodiness.

A quietude that seemed to border on despair. Peter, who now fashioned himself a renegade, had the unyielding character of a steel soldier. And in time his sisters manifested, each in her way, discontents of their own. Marta, outwardly engaging, was known to become lost--so much like someone else in impenetrable sulky dreams. Katy, who Clara always privately insisted was the brightest of the three, remained sunny and affable, but almost clinically indisposed to strive for any form of achievement.

Stern to this day found all this shocking. In his childhood, there had been such remarkable disorder born of his father's fragile condition, and the consistent watchful eye the entire family maintained on free-floating Argentine hostilities. But the home that Clara and he created was peaceful, prosperous--normal insofar as Stern understood the word. The children were cared for--and loved. Loved.

Oh, he may have had failings as a parent--at his best, he was undoubtedly too contained with the kids for American tastes--but even in his dimmest, most distracted state his love for his children was genuine, glinting like some fiery gemstone in his breast. And no person would ever be able to measure the bounds of Clara's dedication..Thus, as a younger man, it had stunned him to learn that every good fortune the world could offer wasn't enough: his children suffered, nevertheless. Their difficulties became one more thing over the years to note about each and, with whatever halting efforts, to attempt to embrace. *Geh Gezunderhayt*, as his mother would have put it. Let them go in

health, in peace.

Peter showed him inside with little ceremony. With the office closed, he was free to take his father into an examining room, a tiny tiled space with an antiseptic smell and a leather patient's table, test equipment, and instruments.

"Roll up ze sleeve, bitte," said Peter. Tonight it was accents. Stern complied, and his son precisely, instantly inserted the needle. "You okay?"

Stern nodded. "And you, Peter?"

His son, equivocally, opened his palm: Who knew, who could say. They spoke of Marta, expected in town any day. Stern asked about Kate.

"I thought you went to the ball game with her the other night, Looks great, doesn't she?"

"Actually, her looks concerned me," said Stern. "There is a difficult situation at hand. The circumstances are such that I must be somewhat removed, but I fear it is affecting her."

"I've heard about that," said Peter quiefiy. Stern had come with 'no intention of raising the matter of Tooley. What was done was done, and besides, it would be unprofessional for Stern to complain. Yet they proceeded into disagreement as if commanded by nature. It turned out that Iate in her concern for her husband had involved her brother. The thought that the situation had required her to turn to Peter rather than him wounded Stern unexpectedly:

"John wanted a name, I gave him a name," said Peter. He withdrew the needle and flicked the vial with a certain pesky discontent. "Mel's competent, isn't he? What did I do wrong? You already told John you didn't want to get involved."

How typical, Stern thought. His fault, his shortcomings. A quarreling voice, in which Stern would explain the ethical concerns that had led him to treat John as he had, died unuttered. What was the point? He had already come out second best again wth his family.

He had some thought of suggesting dinner, but Peter showed him out directly, taking Stern past the small consultation room, where the medical charts were heaped on his desk, weighed down by the black-corded

dictaphone handset.

Outside, in the parking lot, Stern was struck by the sight of Peter's office, now the only bright window in the black solid square of the medical center.

As a child, Peter had had a magnificent singing voice-sweet and pure like some perfect liquid. His vocal range was reduced by adolescence, when his sound became rougher and quavering. But at the age of seven or eight Peter often performed in school plays and community theaters. d about Kate.

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That was the past, Peter's past, that time of expression, attention, performance. Through the dark, Stern looked up to the light where his son, hard on the way through his own adulthood, would go on into the night, alone, the only sound his toughened voice mumbling out the details of the medical charts.

BRACE'S cabin was built along a wash. From the roadside, you saw only the roof coated with moss, glowing chartreuse in the brilliant sun, and the tin chimney pipe. Bumping along in his Cadillac in an astonishing fog of dust, Stern would have gone past it, except for the wooden sign knocked at an angle into the yellow ground. He had already been down and up, rapping on the door, nosing to the window, where he saw nothing but darkness. Below, by the house, the over of the trees --oak, pine, cottonwood, birch--was deep, the forest floor dark and moist, barely penetrated by light. As he climbed back up to the road, the sun was intense. In the gravel parking area, Stern searched for other tire tracks. The red flag stood raised on the round aluminum mailbox.

What was he doing here? He had awakened with a hopeful spurt. The thought of driving north through the sloping valleys, beyond the state line and the congested blight of urban life--his urban Ylfe--inspired expansive feelings.

Now in the heat, far more intense here on the plains, he was full of doubts. Had he really driven two hours for a fifteen-minute conversation that in all likelihood would not occur? He would accomplish nothing beyond a

moment's discomfort for both of them. Thinking better of that, Sonny had probably decided not to come. He sat up on the car trunk with his face to the sun--the first lick of scorching summer heat he had felt--and then, when he grew uncomfortably warm, trudged down again and scouted about the cabin.

It could not have been more than three rooms, perhaps only two. Down in the wash, it was bordered on two sides by a deep veranda in which half the punky boards had been replaced; the roof was supported by greenish treated standards. At the farthest corner, where the wild bushes and other growth of the ravine rose against the house, a round contraption had been carved into the porch. Stern bent to inspect the knobs and rubber hoses; there was a canvas cover across it.

He was there when he heard the gravel spurned above. By the time he walked around, Sonny Klonsky was charging down the stairs from the roadside. Her arms were full, with two grocery bags and half a dozen children's books, and seeing Stern, she bothered with no greeting but threw him, rather, a harried conspiratorial look of complete exasperation. The door to the cabin proved to be unlocked and she ran inside.

The ride apparently had been a long one for a woman midterm.

When Stern turned about, a boy was watching him, five or six years old, wearing a striped T-shirt and blue jeans, a dark-eyed, freckle-faced fellow with a bowl-shaped do of perfect silky haft and a look of cheerless curiosity.

"Sam?" asked Stern. He never had any idea how he remembered these things.

The boy toed the dirt and shied away. Stern climbed the ties braced into the earth, which formed the stairway up, prepared to greet Sam's father. The boy had climbed into the front seat of an old yellow Volkswagen, a convertible, where there was no other passenger. Stern asked about his

father and the boy murmured an inaudible response. "Not coming?" asked Stern.

Sam, chin tucked down, waggled his head.

"No." Sonny spoke behind Stern and moved somewhat wearily back into the sun. "The poet's in climacteric, or whatever it is. The grip of inspiration." She pulled Sam by the shoulder from the car and introduced him to Stern, then reached into the back seat. There were two sleeping bags there, more

groceries, and a single large piece of soft-sided

luggage. Stern helped her carry the items down to the cabin. "I hope you did not make this trip simply for me."

"I came for Sam," said Sonny. Entering the stale-smelling dark of the cabin, she faced Stern with a look that did not fully contain the nerve of her lingering anger. "And

his father can go fuck himself."

"Oh, dear," said Stern.

"Oh, dear," said Sonny. She threw the packages down on a worn table. The cabin was a simple affair. The plank floor had been painted; the studs had been paneled over in knotty pine. The central room was occupied by a cable-spool table and painted chairs, and a double bed with a wrought-iron frame and a clean chenille spread. To the left was a bath and another small room. The old stained toilet with its black seat made a tremendous clatter, recovering from recent use.

In a mewling voice, the boy was pestering her about something.

"Yes, all right." She opened a window, then turned without stopping and went back out the door. Stern heard her moving heavily on the porch, then a deep bowel-like Amble beneath the cabin floor. From the rear window, he could look up to the wooded crest of the ravine, the bosks cAwned in light.

When the wind blew, there was a wonderful scent.

"Are those raspberries back there?" Stern asked, when she returned.

"Oh, yes. The strawberry field is back that way, too, another hundred yards. Acres of them. They make the air sweet, don't they?"

"The aroma is splendid."

"I hope you don't mind, but I promised Sam I'd take him picking right after lunch. Some of us have had a few disappointments today." Her eyes drifted off to the boy,

who must have fussed badly about his father.

"Of course," said Stern.

"You're welcome to come. Or you can look around in town."

He made no response, but he had, he realized, not the slightest inclination to depart. Stern did not have what might be called an outdoor wardrobe. He wore a pair of golf slacks and a cotton placket shirt with some animal embroidered at the breast. Casual attire suited him poorly.

Even in the dark colors recommended to the overweight, he cut a figure of awkward proportions and looked a Fattie like a plum. Nonetheless, he was in the out-of-doors, the wilds to him, and ready for adventure.

Sonny stirred among the bags until she found a jar of peanut butter and sat down at the table to prepare the boy's sandwich. She offered Stern lunch, but he had eaten on the road. Watching her move about, you could see the toll of multiple responsibilities: lawyer, caretaker, weekend traveler; pregnant person. The fight with her husbandma bloody one, apparently--had left her drained. Her body seemed to have contracted a bit about her abdomen; she stumbled on, solid-looted, without grace. In the heavy summery air, her cheeks were rosy and her full, pretty face almost radiated heat. She wore shorts and a sleeveless blouse. She lifted her dark hair off her neck at moments to air herself.

Sam, called back in to the table, assailed his food with unwashed hands. He was quiet in a stranger's presence, interrupting his silence only to ask at one point, "Did you?"

"Ye-es," she said, as if she were giving in. Sam was in love With the hot tub, she explained. As the boy ate, Stern asked a bit about the cabin, how often they were here. The property, including the strawberry field, had formerly belonged to Charlie's parents, people of means who used it as a summer retreat. When they moved to Palm Springs, Charlie wanted only this, a shack that had housed migrants before Charlie's father turned it into a refuge for himself.

Charlie, Sonny said, had retained the faith of the sixties and believed that owning things was a pain in the ass.

"There's some kind of covenant. When the Braces sold, everybody agreed their family could always harvest the fields they'd planted for personal consumption. You can be the honorary Charlie for today. I'm sure it will be an improvement," she added, in a heavy sarcastic tone he had not heard from



her before. She cleared Sam's plate and brought out a number of plastic buckets from below the sink. Sam grabbed his at once and begged her to hurry, but Sonny paused, tying a bandanna across her forehead. She extended a bucket to Stern, then took a ragged straw hat from a shelf and without ceremony placed it on his head.

"You'll need this for the sun."

"Shall I look in a mirror?"

"It'S magnificent," she said. "Trust me." She reached up again to angle the brim and gave him a merry look. For a second she seemed, despite her heavy form, winsome as a cheerleader, the kind of girl who would be grabbed and whirled about by some fellow, even though there was probably not a moment in her life when she'd been that sort of woman, and Lord knew, he had never been that kind of man.

Then he followed Sonny and the boy from the dank cabin, and entered blinking into the potent daylight, his heart flopping about with a kind of febrile stirring.

Pregnant, Sonny nonetheless remained far more agile than he; the boy, of course, climbed like a mountain goat. They plunged briefly into the woods and up a steep trail in the ravine. Stern, straining, puffing a bit, followed them back into the sunlight. After a few hundred feet of deep 'weeds, burned yellow already, they came to another graveled road.

It curved, dry and white, beside the Ylmitless acres of the farm, the low plants rising out of their hummocks in perfect ranks, the berries hanging red and luminous, bright as jewels. Sam reached to Sonny and then, by force of habit, extended the other hand, small and grimy, to Stern, who took it as well. So, he thought, st'dl dazzled by the.

light and the overpowering heat. He had no sense of direction. The cabin was somewhere behind them, but he had no inclination to look back. Holding Sam's hand, he crossed the road and began walking with them into the strawberry field.

"When I was twenty," Sonny said, "I wanted to meet somebody who was perfect. Now that I'm past forty, I just wonder if anyone is normal." As they walked into the field, she went on unburdening herself, her gestures

emphatic, speaking in her unguarded way about her husband. She seemed to be at one of those impasses in her marriage where she suddenly viewed her husband as she might a neighbor observed from an undisclosed vantage, say a window or a terrace, seeing him only as a peculiar unfathomable individual who lived nearby.

"His passion for what is actually happening is only to the extent he can reduce it to expression. You know?" She looked back to Stern, wearing her bandanna, squinting in the sun. Down the rows of the strawberry field, Sam ran in gym shoes and jeans, his feet kicking out, the yellow bucket bouncing at his side. His thin voice carded back to them in a swell of wind. "And the point of expression is so that he has things in control. I'm sure that's why he's not here."

"What's that?" Stern was losing her, much as he tried. She was speaking for the most part to herself.

"Pure jealousy. Can you believe it?" Trudging along, she laughed: the notion was ridiculous. Briefly, Stern felt an unidentified twinge. "I think the idea of meeting you was more than he could stand. You know, my adversary--it sounds so professional. He can't conceive of me with a life apart from him, paying attention to anyone but him. I don't know how he'll live with a baby."

"I apologize. This is certainly my fault for being so insistent," said Stern.

"Oh, it's my fault," she said. "It's mine. Believe me. I was up all night, realizing that for the one billionth time. I think my mother made me feel obliged to put up with temperamental people."

Listening to Sonny, who was twisted about by impulse and emotion--beseeching, beleaguered, ironic, angry--it struck Stern that Clara and he had had the benefit of certain good fortune. In his time, the definitions were clearer. Men and women of middle-class upbringing anywhere in the Western world desired to marry, to bear and rear children. Et cetera. Everyone traveled along the same ruts in the road.

But for Sonny, marrying late in life, in the New Era, everything was a matter of choice. She got up in the morning and started from scratch, wondering about relationships, marriage, men, the erratic fellow she'd chosen--who, from her description, still seemed to be half a boy. He was reminded of Marta, who often said she would find a male companion just as soon as she

figured out what she needed one for.

"How long is it you two have known each other, you and your husband?" Stern asked. He was a few feet away from her, kneeling awkwardly to look at the plants.

She gave him instructions on how to harvest the fruit. The overripe berries, dark as blood, looked wonderful but would not hold. "And you may as well roll your pant legs up.

There's no pride out here and a lot of dust and mud. What did you ask me?"

He repeated the question.

"We've only been married a few years, ff that's what you meant, but I've known him forever. It was a doomed relationship right from the start. I was his T.A. in Freshman English. The people in the EngYsh Department were scandalized when I started going out with him. Well, not scandalized. That department wasn't scandalized by anything, but they thought it was pretty odd."

"He was a freshman?"

"An older freshman, in my defense. He'd been in the service. But he was irresistible. He's very dark, very big, very quiet. It was like someone put a mountain down in my classroom." Sonny in the great heat shook her head, apparently overcome by the memory. "Talk about romantic. How could I resist a man who came back from Vietnam with poems hidden in the pockets of his camouflage outfits? I wanted to believe that poetry could transform the world, but Charlie really did. Have you ever known anyone like that?"

"My brother, I would say. He was a poet," said Stern, who had just finished rolling his trousers, exposing a row of pale flesh over his black nylon hose. He must have looked worse than a scarecrow. The straw hat she'd given him was

too large and rested unevenly on his ears.

"Honestly?"

"Oh yes, a young one. He wrote romantic verse in a number of languages. I believe he was quite gifted. My sister still has Jacobo's poems somewhere. I would like to read them again someday, but just now it would be a

melancholy experience." He took on momentarily the stung look he could not avoid from time to time, a close expression of admittexi pain.

"He passed away?"

"Long ago. I seldom speak of him, actually. But he was an extraordinary figuestined for greatness. He was the most remarkable young man. Handsome, bright. He wrote poems. He declaimed in public. He was a prize scholar. And he was also quite a rogue. That was an important aspect of his character. Always in the midst of one misadventure or another. Filching fruit from a stand. For a period when he was sixteen, he would sneak out at night to keep company with the mother of one of his friends."

Sonny. made a lascivious sound: Oo la la. "He sounds as if he was something."

"That he was," said Stern, and repeated the phrase. "He was the child the world adored. I felt this, of course, as a terrible weight, being the younger brother." In his parents' home, his brother as the first-born and a son had assumed a natural centrality, a regal primogeniture.

Handsome, outgoing, willful, Jacobo had in one fashion or another overpowered everyone. Their mother lived under his spell basking in each achievement, and their father was no more capable of confronting Jacobo than anyone else. Even as a child, Jacobo had more or less run the household, his moods and passions governing them all like the tolling grandfather clock in the front hall. At the age of fiftysix Stern Could still recall his jealousy. There was probably no fury in his life like the rush of emotion Jacobo had inspired. Stern, too, was dominated by him, awestruck but also wildly resentful. Jacobo was often cruel. He relished Alejandro's admiration, but he would not allow any equal in his domain. How many times did they enact the same scene, where Alejandro wept in humiliation and.rage, and Jacobo laughed a bit before yielding to comfort him? Che, pibe. "The entire life of my household-my mother's especially--was at an end after he died."

' He stood straight and rubbed his knees. In the heat and wind, he felt a dreamy vagueness. The field of fruit, the irrigated furrows and the plants rising from the hills of straw, stretched in all directions into the dusty haze.

There was not another soul around, not another voice, except for Sam's, and the birds', and the drone of planes approaching a country airfield ten or

twenty miles away.

Argentina, he thought suddenly. Its cruel history, its fateful cycles of hope and repression, pained him like a crushing hold applied to a vital place; it was always that way. He seldom thought of any of this, and when he did, the memories filled him with an ardor, fresh as any lover's, for the United States.

There were cousins left down there who prospered generally, but had also suffered terribly; they wrote once a year, sending money, which Stern invested for them in bank accounts here.

"How old was he then?" Sonny asked of Jacobo. "'Seventeen years four months."

"How horrible. What happened?"

"One of those terrible tales of impulsive youth. He fell in with a Zionist crowd. Wealthy young Jewish people. My mother was thrilled at first by such impressive comradeship. When she eventually realized how strong Jacobo's attachments were, it was too late to retrieve him.

This was in the midst of World War II. Argentina was supposedly neutral, but tilted toward the Axis, and these were politically dangerous views to hold. Jacobo decided that he would go to Palestine fight with Haganah. He could not be dissuaded. He knew, like everyone else, that he was destined to be a hero. There were thirty of them. We went down to see them off and the boat truly looked as if it would sink before it left the harbor. My mother wept; she knew she would never see him again. And she did not. The Germans said the Allies had sunk the boat; the Allies blamed the Germans. Perhaps it was a storm. We never knew."

Here amid the acres, thinking of all of this, spewing of what was lost and so momentous, he saw his present life as vulnerable as a paper construction. In Sonny's company, there was, for whatever reason, less sadness. But it was like letting your fingertips drift along the raised features of a relief--he could feel the textures and recognized again his deepest secret, that without Clara, with the children grown, he had been left with no fundamental alliance. He could sense the desperate struggle every day had been, doing what had been done before with a determined effort to give it no reflection. Far from the city and those routines, he was strongly under the influence of this hearty States.

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"Charlie's not that kind of magnetic personality. He believes in the lives of the poets. A higher essence. He doesn't want to live like everybody else. He's grim and silent and --if you ask his wife--deliberately difficult."

Stern, straddling the row, reared his head to smile at her.

He had moved on quite a distance from their starting point, stirring under the leaves and pulling, and Sonny just now was following him along, eating idly from her bucket. The fruit, baked by the sun, was wild with fragrance and incredibly sweet, gliding and soft on the tongue.

"It's not all that funny. We tried to live together for ten years and it never worked. Somebody was always moving out."

"There was a change eventually, I take it."

"When I got sick. Charlie showed up at the hospital with a bunch of posies and begged me to marry him. Begged--and I hardly needed to be begged at that point." She had a few berries in her hand and she stepped over a row to drop them in Stern's bucket. She made a remark: the stooping killed her back. Across her forehead, the bandanna had been darkened by sweat. Sam appeared at just that moment, as he had from time to time, holding aloft a huge berry. Both Stern and she took an instant to extol the prize. "He was very convincing. And you know how it is--it's a crisis, you think you're looking right to the center of things. I figured I loved Charlie, he loved me. The rest of it was detail." She shook her head. "Nobody promises us we'll be happy, do they?"

"No," said Stern.

"No," she said. "Anyway, it was very complicated by then."

"I imagine," said Stern quietly. He saw that this Charlie was due some commendation, having the heart to beg for the hand of a woman whose life hung in the balance.

"Oh, it wasn't what you'd think." She seemed to be smiling.

"He was married," Sonny said. "I told you: there were details."

"Hmm." Stern took an instant, adjusting. "Sam's mother?"

"That's right. He married her after one of our breakups.

As I said, it's been an up-and-down relationship."

"Well you know the sayings," said Stern. "Which ones?"

"Many. 'True love never did run smooth'?" Sonny shrugged.

The thought was not consoling, "How did you meet your wife?"

"Oh, that." Stern lifted a hand, prepared to consign the story to the ineffable, and then thought better of it, that it would be, in a word, unfair. "I worked for Clara's father.

He let me office space. One thing led to another."

"And what was not smooth?"

"Most everything. You can imagine the complications when a penniless immigrant falls in love with the boss's daughter"

"Her parents objected?"

Stern made a sound, still not quite able, even thirty years

later, to withstand the recollection of the disruption.

"And they never accepted you?"

"On the contrary. After I married Clara, her father offered to take me into his practice. He was quite prominent. I lived in dread of him but envied his success, and was much too callow to refuse."

"So what happened?"

"We learned a bit about each other. Eventually, we had a serious disagreement."

"Over what? Can I ask?"

"Oh, this is a very embarrassing story," said Stern. He stood up to face her, adjusting the hat on his head. The rim was shot round with straw bands that had come loose and scratched his forehead when he moved. "One day my father-in-law called me into his office and told me there was a file he wanted me to steal from the county courthouse. A divorce matter for an important client, in which the husband had managed to sue first. This was th'uy years ago, and the request was not quite as unthinkable as it might be today, but it remained a serious matter."

"You're kidding! And your relationship fell apart when you refused?""

"No, our relationship suffered when I did as he asked. We knew much too much about one another then. He knew how craven I was; I knew that he was



corrupt. I suppose that having the courage to do that convinced me that I could walk out on Henry, too.." Stern glanced over to Klonsky. He had never told that story to another mortal soul, not even to Clara, whose loyalties, so early in their marriage, he could not fully depend on.

Sonny had now sat down with the bucket between her knees, her face bright with the heat, massaging her lowe back. It seemed they had passed the point where he could shock her; if he went marauding naked down the rows, she would nod and accept it with the same placid smile as a further exchange of intimacies.

He bent again--the brightest berries were beneath the leaves, resting just above the straw beddings--but he remained under the charm of his own story. For a short time, his image of Henry with his braces and his white widow's peak was as clear as if he were only a row or two over. He had been as brazen in this request as in so many other things, putting it to Stern right in front of the client, a -looking woman in a tight blond hairdo and a dark green suit. Stera had wondered a bit about Henry's relationship with her. It was well known that Henry was not a man of perfect virtue; but that question, like many others, went unanswered. 'Oh, don't look at me that way,' said Henry. 'This stuff is done all the time. I give Griffin McKenna one hundred dollars every Christmas to make sure no one does it on any of the bank's cases, and half the-goddamn files disappear anyway.' But you have to sign for the file, Stern noted. 'Are they going to look at your dog tags? Write down a name. Jones.

Jablonsky, for Chrissake. Just make damn certain that you don't write down Mittler--or even Stern, for that matter." For some reason, this recollection seemed to have been edging up on him for days. Then he remembered: John. and Dixon. Amid the present amity, the thought was troubling and he immediately put it aside.

"He sounds like he was a pretty tough customer."

"Oh, he was. No question about that. I have not met many men tougher than Henry. He reminded me of certain policemen. In some ways, he seemed to be made of stone.

Resolute. This was how it was. Punkt."

"Did Clara like him?"

"Ah, well. Now that is another question." For a moment, he turned his attention to the plant; this picking, hard on the back and thighs, was satisfying work, quickly rewarding, and tempting in its own way. He found a berry large as a small apple and showed it to her. "Clara had strong feelings for him. She sat by his bed weeping when he died.

At many other times, in earlier years, she reviled him, and probably in stronger terms than most children criticize or rebuke their parents."

"That sounds like my mother and me," said Sonny. A wind, most welcome, came up then and raised dust in a revenant form down the road. When he looked back to Sonny, she had her eyes closed and both hands placed over the full shape in her middle. He was afraid that she was in pain, but it became clear quickly that it was, instead, resolve which gripped her. "God," she said. "God, I am going to do better." She Opened her eyes then and greeted him with a magnificent smile--happy to be here, to have survived it all, to swear her vows and to see him sharing this, their acre of common ground.

LATE in the afternoon, with Stern carrying all the buckets, the three of them returned from the straw, berry field. The wind had turned suddenly, freshened by some northerly impulse. When they reached the cabin, Sonny sat heavily in a chair and laid the backs of her hands across her eyes.

Stern suggested she lie down.

"Would you mind?" she asked. "Just for a few minutes?"

Then you can try to have that talk with me."

"Sam and I shall make do."

"You can wash the strawberries," she said. "Sam enjoys that. And Sam--check the hot tub. Make sure everything is okay."

The kitchen sink was joined unceremoniously to the rear wall, without any cabinetry to hide the plumbing. The boy stood on an old bentwood chair and insisted on holding each berry under the running tap.. Laconic when Stern arrived, he now went on with five-year-old officiousness, issuing an unbreaking string of commands.

"Don't take the green thing out till you eat them."

"I see."

"They get rotting.",

"I see."

"Then get them dry but don't squish them."

"Certainly not."

When the berries were bagged and refrigerated, Sam offered to show Stern his cave in the ravine. Stern called twice to Sonny but she did not respond and they left the cabin quietly.

Sam's cave was in the hollowed trunk of an old oak. The boy had built a nest of sorts out of dried leaves and twigs and in an empty fliptop cigarette box had stored two or three plastic figures with gargoyle faces and muscular bodies of a resilient resin. Sam told Stern their names--each apparently was an important cartoon star--and spent quite some time heavily engaged in the staging of various interplanetary wars, which Stern observed from the safety of a resting place in the crotch of a birch tree about thirty feet away. Cowboys and Indians, the pastime of his children's early years, was now banned on political grounds. Villains these days were alien species, and, rather than six-guns, firearms were lazer-mazers that evaporated all objects with a bright red beam. The game ended abruptly when the boy turned from his pieces.

"I'm hungry," he said.

"After all those strawberries?"

Sam tossed up his hands and repeated that he was hungry.

"I am sure Sonny will make you some dinner. Shall we see if she is awake?"

Inside the cabin, however, no one was stirring. Stern called to her softly and Sam added his voice at more telling volume. Stern hushed him and, after holding the boy back, crept alone to the small rear room where she lay uncovered on a narrow folding cot, still rosy with the heat but solidly asleep. Her hair was dark against her skin and one leg of her shorts had crept far up her thigh, showing some of the soft weight of pregnancy. Sonia Klonsky, his energetic antagonist, slept with the adorable soft innocence of a child, her pink mouth tenderly parted.

Briefly, Stern, without reflection, raised the back of his hand gently to her cheek.

When he turned, Sam was watching from the open doorway.

"I want to be certain she is not sick," Stern whispered. at once. But he felt his heart knocking and he heard an urgent note in his voice. The boy, however, required no explanation.

"I'm hungry," he said again, somewhat pathetically. Stern raised a finger to his lips and ushered Sam out, "Do you know how to make dinner?"

"What is it you wish, Sam?"

"Hot dog and potato chips."

"That may be within my range."

They ate two hot dogs apiece. Sam was a garrulous, free-flow talker except when he ate, an activity he undertook briefly but with great concentration. When he was done, he resumed conversation, relating, in response to questions, that he was five and a half, went to all-day kindergarten at the Brementon School, and could read, although he was not supposed to. He was a remarkable child, full of a warm, seeking intelligence. That brightness lit him up like a candle and gave him a physical radiance which, in a person so young, amounted to beauty.

He considered Stern through a single squinted eye.

"What's your name again?"

"Sandy."

"Sandy, can I go in the hot tub after dinner?" "You must ask Sonny, after she is up."

"I always go."

"Sam, not so loud. You will wake her."

As the light dwindled, Stern and Sam played Battleship.

Sam, most impressively, understood all the rules, although he treated them with occasional indifference. At one point, as Stern marked out the location of one of the boy's destroyers, he erased furiously on his page.

"Sam, I believe your ships must remain where you placed them."

"See, I was really going to put it somewhere else." He pointed to the page.

"I see," said Stern.

"I really was."

"Very well." Peter, Stern recalled, had refused to obey the rules of any game until he was past ten. He cheated with' alarming guile and cried furiously whenever he lost, particularly to his father. After Sam's triumph in Battleship, they played a number of hands of Go Fish. Sam was a canny player, but was interested only in making books of picture

cards. He did not care to hold ace through ten.

"I wanna go in the hot tub," he told Stern.

"When Sonny wakes up." Stern had checked on her again from the doorway only a few minutes before.

"I'll have to go to bed then."

"I see. What is it you do in the hot tub, Sam?"

'Look at the stars."

"Perhaps we can look at the stars, nonetheless."

"All right." He climbed down from his chair at once, ignoring the hand in play.

On the veranda, Stern found two splintered rockers and they sat side by side. The change of wind had pushed off the haze and the country sky was clear and magnificent. The air, after the heat of the day, was almost brisk. Sam had read a number of books about astronomy and at the age of five spoke about "the heavens." He knew the names of a number of constellations and demanded that Stern orient him to each.

"Where' s Cassiopeia?"

Oh dear, thought Stern. Cassiopeia. He had not spent

many evenings in his life studying the night skies. "Over there, I beFeve."

"That one?"

"Yes."

"Sort of blue?"

"Yes."

"That's a planet."

"Ah," said Stern.

The boy accepted this failure without complaint. Stern had forgotten that-- that it was not rivalry or a showdown that Sam was after, just information. ff it was unavailable

here, there would be better sources soon enough.

"I'm cold."

"Would you like your jacket?"

"Can I sit in your lap?"

"Of course." Stern boosted the boy beneath his arms, and he settled in at once, lolling back against his chest and belly. Dear God, the sensation. He had forgotten. To be able to fold yourself about this life in the making. The small limbs; the waxy odor of;his hair after time in the woods. Stern put both arms about the boy and let Sam nestle against him.

"Is the sun a star?" asked Sam. "So they say.""

"Are the stars hot?"

"They must be."

"Could you drive a jet plane through a star if you went real fast?"

"I suspect not, Sam. The stars are hot enough to bum up most anything."

"Anything? Like the whole earth?" Sam now had a troubled look. Stern wondered if he was telling him inore than he should. "What if you poured like jillions and jillions of gallons of water on it?"

"That undoubtedly would work," said Stern.

The boy was still watching him. "Are you joking me?"

"Joking? NO. Is that a joke.9"

"You're joking me," the boy insisted. He pressed his finger in Stern's belly, as often seemingly had been done to him.

"Well, perhaps a little."

Sam turned around and rested again against his chest.

Was it possible? Stern thought in a swift rush of emotion.

Was it truly possible? Could he start again and do it better on this go-through? Oh, but this was mad. With the small boy somehow coursing against him, Stern closed his eyes in the great country darkness and wrestled despair.

How, truly, could this be occurring? He saw more and more clearly how fixed his feelings were, how set he was on a path of absolute lunacy. He could not prevent a brief sound from escaping.

In a moment, Sam turned back.

"Can I go in the hot tub? Please," he said. "Please please please."

"Sam, I know nothing about hot tubs."

"I do. I'll show you. It's easy." He slithered away and ran down the veranda. "It's full and everything."

Stern drifted over. The tub protruded about a foot above the level of the porch. Sam had already eased off the canvas cover. The water temperature was moderate, apparently for Sam's benefit. What, after all, was the harm?

Sam hugged him the instant he agreed and immediately

shed his clothes. Fully naked, he dipped in a toe. "Come on," he said. "Pardon me?"

"Come on. Get your clothes off."

"Thank you, Sam. I do not care to get into the hot tub."

The boy gaped. "You have to. Sonny says I can't go in without a grownup. I'm only five years old, you know."

"Yes," said Stern. He stood a moment and stared at the moon, just rising and visible through the fingerlet branches of the trees of the ravine. He had lost control over most everything sometime ago. In the dark, he kicked off his shoes and loosened his belt.

As life had repeatedly shown him, there was usually something to other

people's pleasures. However suspect it seemed, the hot tub was enchanting. Little foggy wisps rose in the moonlight and the ihin evening air was genre as a breath. His large body felt lighter, submerged in the dark.

Stern sat on a bench inside the tub and Sam crouched beside him to keep his chin above the water's level.

"When is Sonny gonna get up?"

"Soon, Sam. She must have been very tired."

"She's going to have a baby," said Sam. It was the first mention he had made of the subject. "So I understand," said Stern. "Is she sick?"

"No," said Stern.

"You said she was sick."

"No, I said I Wanted to be-sure she was not sick." What would he tell his father of what he observed? Or Sonny, for that matter? For the moment, that concern, like many

others, seemed capable' of passing. "Do you go to Sonny's ,work?"

"In a fashion."

"Sometimes, if someone does something bad, the good people have to tell them they did something bad."

Stern thought of adding a defense perspective but answered finally, "Yes."

Sam suddenly stood straight up, shining like a fish in the moon's light. He hung his head over the edge of the tub.

"Uh-oh," Sam said.

"What?", Stern feared that the tub might be leaking. "No towels."

Together they groaned in the dark.

It was Stern who, after a brief disagreement was appointed to return to the cabin. Wearing only his boxer shorts, he saw in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door that his seat was sopping. He could hear Sonny a few feet



away, grumbling a bit in her sleep.

Sam was wrapped and dried and placed in his pajamas. Before going to sleep, he demanded a story. In his backpack was a comic book depicting a protracted battle between two television characters, a blond hulk and a hooded creature who resembled a skeleton. They were dressed in medieval costumes but were located in outer space in the distant future and traded threats. The blond triumphed; that much had not changed.

The boy lay down, then drew himself up again, full of the familiar curiosity of bedtime.

"Sandy," he said, "does good always win?"

"Excuse me."

"Does good always win?" the boy repeated.

Stern was not certain if this was apropos of the story or their conversation before. He nearly asked what Sam was referring to but restrained himself with the thought that it was unseemly to be evasive with a five-year-old. Marta used to venture questions like this. Peter did as well, probably,

but in his case they were put solely to his mother. "No," Stern said finally. "Not always."

"It does on TV," the boy said. This was offered in part as refutation.

"Well, it should win," said Stern. "That is what the television is showing you."

"Why doesn't it win?"

"It does not always lose. It wins often. But it does not win even if good people have to tell them they did something bad."

Stern thought of adding a defense perspective but answered finally, "Yes."

Sam suddenly stood straight up, shining like a fish in the moon's light. He hung his head over the edge of the tub.

"Uh-oh," Sam said.

"What?", Stern feared that the tub might be leaking. "No towels."

Together they groaned in the dark.

It was Stern who, after a brief disagreement was appointed to return to the cabin. Wearing only his boxer shorts, he saw in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door that his seat was sopping. He could hear Sonny a few feet away, grumbling a bit in her sleep.

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"It does not always lose. It wins often. But it does not win every time."

"Why not?"

"Sometimes the other side is stronger. Sometimes both sides are good in

part." Sometimes neither, Stern thought. In the midst of this, he could not keep himself from thinking of Dixon. He looked at the boy. "Sam, who talks to you about this, about good winning?"

"It's on TV," said Sam innocently. He had no notion that he had engaged in an abstraction. "How much does good win?" he asked. "A lot?"

"A lot," said Stern. He had meant to answer, As often as it loses. But he felt this was inappropriate and perhaps not even correct. There was no place for brutal honesty with a child. Everyone felt that. It was taken in the Western countries as a rule of nature. So we raise our children with love and comfort for a future they can only find disappointing. He told Sam it was time to sleep.

"Thank you for keeping me company, Sam."

"Sure." He lay down and popped up again. "Wait a second."

He clambered from the bed, searched his bag, and came back with a small stuffed bear and a yellow piece of blanket.

Passing by, he kissed Stern as naturally as if he had been doing it forever, and then right before Stern's eyes laid himself down and was instantly asleep.

A child asleep, a woman asleep, and Mr. Alejandro Stern in sole waking possession of a still home. It had been many years since he had felt this particular pleasure. He sat at the cable-spool table and ate a bowl of strawberries, listening to Sam's husky breath and, now and then as a distant counterpoint, a sighing sob from SonnY. Oh, he was pretending. He knew that. Nothing was truly hidden from himself. But he was enjoying it far too much to depart. He again wandered outside to the veranda. His wet underwear had begun to chafe, and after some reflection, he retrieved his towel inside, undressed once more, and hung his shorts on the branch of a tree, hoping the breeze would dry them before the long ride home. Then he resumed his place in the hot tub. The moon had risen fully and loomed over the ravine, full of tricks and magic. All his troubles waited for him in the city, in the daylight. For just this instant, watching the wisps wraith off the water, he was free.

It was only a few minutes before he heard the screen door bang.

"There you are." Her voice in the dark came from somewhere behind him. He

turned in one direction, then the other, and still did not see her. "I thought you'd left until

I saw the car. How long was I asleep?"

About five hours, he told her.

"Oh God." Sonny was at the corner of the porch, keeping her distance in an effort to be discreet. "I'm so sorry. What did you do with Sam all that time? Did you feed him?"

Stern described their activities. "He is a splendid young fellow. Bright as a firecracker."

"His father's son."

"No doubt."

"I don't think much of Rebecca, his mother. But she's done great things with Sam. I don't quite understand it. It seems like you can't predict who the good parents will be: It frightens me."

"You will fare well, Sonny. I am sure of it." Gradually, she had approached. She was now a few feet from the tub and took the last few steps at once. She stooped a bit and her hand lingered in the dark water.

"God, it's nice. Sam helped you figure it out?"

"He was quite insistent on getting in here,"

"We do everything to encourage him. He doesn't seem to recognize yet that it's the same water that's in the bathtub."

"It was only after I had finally agreed to let him do this that he informed me that I was required to join him. But I must say, it is most pleasant. After he was in bed, I could not let the opportunity pass. Here I am on a Saturday night in the woods. The sky is clear, the moon is full. The solitude is magnificent."

She inclined her head to look, as Stern had, at the stars.

She was quiet a second.

"Will you die if I come in there?"

The shock of cold emotion, terror really, went through

him like a bolt of iron. He shook his head before he spoke.

"No, no," he said.

"Because, look. I mean, people have different attitudes.

You can just say it's too embarrassing."

"No, no," Stern said again. He was not sure he was capable of more.

When she began to slide off her shirt, Stern looked away, studying the tremorous movement of certain dark branches in the wind. But even this effort at discretion was not a full success. In the extended half of the cabin's casement window, he noticed a clear reflection and, turning back, caught, even against his will, just the slightest glimpse of her form, licked in the moon's bluish cast. It was no more than her upper torso as she eased into the bath, the smooth swell of the other life, and the lopsided proportions of her chest, where the fine blue light clung to the smoothness of her scarred left side, the visible ribs looking a bit like piano keys; like all things human, the sight was far more bearable than he had imagined. She settled in the bath and shook her hair free.

"Ah, this is great."

"I feared you had heat stroke."

"Just tired."

She reached over and laid her hand very briefly on his

forearm. "It was nice out there."

"Yes."

"I'm glad we've become friends."

"As well."

These things came out of Sonny trippingly; she spoke from the heart as a regular matter. For him, it was all a muddle. He felt, as so often in his life, the important moment, the one of high emotion, deep feeling, sliding beyond him, not merely beyond control but wholly out of reach. He would never stop being himself.

"Can I tell you a story that will embarrass you?" she asked.

"If you believe I can stand it."

"I think you can." She looked off in the darkness. "When I was in law school, I went down to watch you in court. When you were defending Judge Sabich. I was there every day. It was like close-up magic. You know--how it doesn't really matter whether the balls are disappearing, because it truly is magic that human skill can make it look that way? That's how I felt. I didn't care whether he was guilty or innocent. I just wanted to be able to do what you did. What do you think of that?"

"I think you are most kind to tell me." She peered over; he could see she did not understand, and he inched somewhat lower in the tub. "I find it difficult, of late, to think of my professional life as an example to anyone. Given its costs. ' "

"Are you talking about your wife?"

He made a sound.

"Huh," Sonny said. She was quiet. "Is there something you could have done?"

"Paid greater attention."

She did not seem inclined to respond, and he was quickly seized by a fear that she found this morose or, worse, self-pitying. For a second she disappeared, plunging beneath the surface of the water and came up glistening, shedding water

and light, bubbling her lips and smoothing her hair. "You know what I think?" she asked.. "What is that?"

"I think you can only be yourself." She wrung out her hair.

Was this the thought for the night? Stern wondered. "I tell myself that a thousand times a day. Everybody's screwed up.

And things happen that screw you up worse. You get cancer.

Or somebody dies. But you do your best. I would give anything to be a lawyer as good as you are, to think I did something important that well. I mean, look at what you've done."

"I look," he said, "and feel that I could have done better."

"Then do better next time."

"With the next life?"

"With the next part of this one."

That was, he realized, the only answer, the sole sane response. This, too, seemed to be a repetitive theme.

"And remember," she said, "that you're an example to people like me."

"You flatter me."

"I mean it."

He looked over to Sonny. She had laid her arm on the back of the tub and he touched her most briefly, as she had touched him. Then he went on.

"Apparently, I was not example enough, in as much as you chose the wrong side."

She drew back, as he expected. "Is this humor?"

"Of course."

"Oh." She smiled, shirking off the sense of injury. "I always thought I'd become a defense lawyer. But prosecutors have so much power. To do good things, you know--not just bad"

"Of course," he said again. "I admire the rectitude for which prosecutors stand."

"But you wouldn't think-of doing it?"

"I have thoughts. But my view--purely an idiosyncratic one, I stress--is that I would only be doing further damage to what is already smashed and broken. Understand, I truly believe yours is a job that must be done--but better not by me."

"Is the story true, then?"

"What story is that?"

"That you turned down the offer to be U.S. Attorney before they gave the job to Stan?"

He waited, reflecting. "Is that worn-out rumor circulating again?"

She knew she was being put off.

"I'm not asking so I can tell someone else." With all her terrible pride, she was, he saw, somewhat offended. "I have a reason for wanting to know."

He described his meeting with the senator's aide in a few sentences. "I was never told that I was the first choice. I have no idea who would have been selected, even had I been disposed."

"You know it would have been you," she said, "and so does Stun. I think that bothers him. A lot," she added.

Stern privately had long harbored the same view. She was pensive, and then dipped again beneath the water.

"I'm getting out," she said when she emerged. "The o.b.

doesn't like me in here for more than ten minutes."

Stern turned away to stare at the moon and the darkness.

"When you're ready," she said behind him, "we can have that talk." He heard her pad off and, after telling himself not to, turned to watch her go, with her bundled clothes clutched to her chest, her hair dripping, the broadened lower proportions of her form still a becoming sight, wet and shining, as she retreated.

In a minute, he rose. He was on the edge of the tub, in his full naked glory, when Sonny leaned out the window with another towel. "You should see the look on your face," she said, and hung the towel on the window frame. He could hear her laughing inside as she walked away.

When he came in, she was in a white terry-cloth robe, combing out her hair at the cable-spool table. Un-made-up, undone, she remained herself, strong and pretty, confident of her own appeal. She went to the bed to move Sam to the smaller room, but Stern insisted on carrying him and, with Sonny directing, bore the warm, small form to the cot in the adjacent room. Sam remained miles off in the profound grasp of a child's sleep.

"Strawberries? Cottage cheese?" Sonny was eating and the food was on the table. Stern declined. "So how do we do this? You're going to tell me what you know and I'm

going to tell you if you're wrong. Is that the deal?"



"Sonny, I was perhaps too insistent.

"No," she said, seizing a strawberry. "Sennett is screwing you around. I was never sure why before. Your client do"

deserves better treatment. But there's only so much I can .

"I understand."

"All right," she said. "Shoot."

This was a boundary, a line he preferred not to cross.

He went on, merely because he remained grateful for her company, their conversation, for any reason not to depart.

He started with the basics, the large orders, the two ex, changes, the error trades, When he mentioned the use of the house error account, she drew back with a marveling smile.

"Now, how did you figure that out? Sennett is sure you'll never get it." When he hesitated, she turned the back of her hand. It did not matter. "Go on."

"Can the government show, by the way, that market prices were affected by any of these trades, or that someone .was otherwise harmed?" He had been thinking about this point for some time. After indictment, a motion to dismiss on these grounds would be called for, claiming the prosecution could not prove a crime.

"We've looked at the cases," Sonny said. "There's an offense here. If you profit off the customers' information, you're taking something from them, one way or the other.

What do you think the customers would say?"

Stern lifted his hands noncommittally. In the abstract, he probably agreed with her. 'He was more certain a judge would.

"Go on," she told him again.

He described how the accumulating profits, after further/ manipulations, were invested in the Wunderkind account-where over time they were lost, all of them, not to mention a good deal more.

"And you suspect Dixon of controlling this account."

"Go on," she said yet again. She had offered no other comment when he told her what evidence he thought they might have.

"I am certain the government can explain," said Stern dryly, "why someone would steal \$600,000 in order to lose

"That's not an element of the offense." She meant that the government could prove the crime without solving that riddle. The fact that the money was lost might not even come into evidence,

"Nonetheless," said Stern.

"Go on," said Sonny. She had become grave and composed and clearly had no interest in debates.

"Right now, you seem to be energetically seeking the documents which show who established the Wunderkind account. Without that, of course, you will have no way to tie Dixon to the account, to the profits, and to the trading ahead."

For the first time, she was completely quiet. Stern waited until he realized that he was being informed he had missed a step.

"Is that where John comes in?"

"I don't know where he fits, Sandy. Honestly."

That matched what Toolcy had told him; Mel was dealing strictly with Sennett. Stern wondered if that meant that John was being extraordinarily cooperative or more difficult than expected--or simply that Sennett, as usual, was being high-handed and secretive, even with his own staff. Yet even if John had a perfect recollection of Dixon calling in every dishonest trade, the government would want proof that Dixon controlled the Wunderkind account, where the profits briefly rested. Without that, the prosecutors would have difficulty establishing that Dixon was not acting innocently or at the behest of someone else. Stern repeated this thought aloud.

"But you still require the signature forms in order to establish Dixon's relationship to the Wunderkind account."

Again, she made no answer. "I am wrong?" asked Stern.

Sonny reached to the bowl and ate another strawberry, while he tried to concentrate. This was ordinarily his strength, picking out the nuances of the evidence. But he had missed something of consequence. He remained quiet.

"Last year," said Sonny, after a bit, "starting out in the office, I prosecuted a lot of dope cases."

"Yes?" He had no idea where she was leading.

"You know how those cases go. DEA sees suspicious activity.

There's an informant. They get a warrant, knock down the door of a stash house, find ten keys of cocaine and no one inside it. Then they come to the poor Assistant to issue grand jury subpoenas so they can figure out who owns the house--and the dope."

"Yes," he said again.

"When you get the title to the property, or the lease to the apartment, whatever, it's pointless. It's always some little Old lady from the North End with whiskers and a bunch of cats. But we prove it's their house, anyway."

Stern nodded. He was familiar with the government's techniques. They went to the gas company, electric, telephone, and found out who was paying the bills. In one case that Jamie Kemp had handled before moving to New York, the government proved control of the house by showing that their client had purchased the-garbage cans in the alley.

He took it that Klonsky had issued a broad hint but for a moment it was lost on him.

"The deficit," said Stern suddenly.

She smiled.

"Dixon paid for the quarter-million-dollar debit balance left in the Wunderkind account," he told her.

"Go on."

"That is why you subpoenaed his bank records. To find the check he wrote to cover that debit. You were never tracing the funds he'd deposited."

"Go on," said Sonny.

"And you have the check?"

"Go on," said Sonny again.

He waited. Dixon, too, had apparently missed the point of the inquiries at the bank. Protecting its informant, the government with its various subpoenas had made a convincing show of being more interested in the money Dixon received than what he'd paid out.

"So why, then, are you so concerned about the accountopening documents?"

Of course, she would not answer. Stern subsided again to silence. What if Dixon had filched those papers? Why would the government initiate such hot pursuit of what was beside the point?

Unless the prosecutors knew in advance that Dixon had made off with the records. Of course. Their informant had once more led them to the right spot. The prosecutors--Sennett, at least--never expected the Wunderkind records to turn up in Margy's hands. That was why Sonny had recovered her good humor after she had gone to speak with him. She had learned what Sennett had counted on all along, that the prosecution would end up with the best of both worlds: evidence that Dixon controlled the account and proof he was trying to conceal that fact. With that kind of showing--state-of-mind evidence, as it was called--the government could cut off any clever conjectural defenses that might be ventured at trial to suggest a half-sane or innocent motive for Dixon's conduct. Once the prosecution was able to establish that Dixon was covering his tracks, there could be little argument about what he thought of his own activities. John, at this point, remained Dixon's sole hope, and a faint one at that. If John's memory failed in some critical regard about who had instructed him to place the error orders, there might be a minute space in which to turn a sly pirouette. Yet that was not likely. The prosecutors had the critical proof in hand now. The walls were closing in on Dixon, as on some Poe character; the light was growing weak. Here, supercharged by the presence of this young woman, the weight of these developments did not really seem to settle upon Stern fully.

"You really like him, don't you?" Sonny asked, after watching him a moment.

"I care greatly about my sister. Perhaps my feelings for Dixon are merely

force of habit. But I am very sad to hear this."

"This is just between us," Sonny said. "Stan would hang me."

"You have told me nothing." He crossed his heart, a schoolboy habit from Argentina, from a time when Gentile friends demanded the gesture, never understanding his reluctance. "There will be no communication. To anyone. No hint. My promise."

He looked at her across the table. He had exhausted the excuse that brought him here. He rose, slapping his sides.

Sonny yawned.

"Believe it or not," she said, "I think I'm going to sleep."

''

She insisted he take an enormous bag of berries. As they approached the door, he made her promise to say goodbye for him to Sam. Then she grabbed him, applying a quick comradely hug, coming close enough to bump her firm belly against him and sweep her wet hair across his cheek. His arms came together slowly and never reached her before she was gone again. / brief ache of some kind, of deprivation, rose up and subsided.

"You were most kind to have me," he said from the other side of the screen. :

"We'll do it again," she said. As he trudged up the stairs, her voice, full of her own ironic laughter, reached him in the dark. She'd had an afterthought remained Dixon's sole hope, and a faint one at that. If John's memory failed in some critical regard about who had instructed him to place the error orders, there might be a minute space in which to turn a sly pirouette. Yet that was not likely. The prosecutors had the critical proof in hand now. The walls were closing in on Dixon, as on some Poe character; the light was growing weak. Here, supercharged by the presence of this young woman, the weight of these developments did not really seem to settle upon Stern fully.

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"If I'm still married to Charlie."

HE arrived home near one, after traveling down the dark country roads and then the highway, tugged through the night by the beam of his headlights, and the heavy currents of his own thoughts. He had tuned the radio to the mumble of a Trappers game, but after a time snapped it off and drove entirely in silence, dominated by sensation--the heat and scent of the strawberry field, the reverberating charge when she had slid so quietly into the water. At moments, of course, he pondered about Dixon. Soon they would have to seriously consider the alternatives. For a few minutes Stern worked at it all in his mind, probing, tangling and untangling, but he saw no avenues of quick escape. He thought, naturally, of his sister then. Silvia would suffer. Full of high emotion in the dark, he endured that pain anew.

Inside the door of his home, Stern plunged his heavybottomed body down on the antique milking chair in the front foyer, his thick legs poked out before

him. The bag of strawberries, moistened now by their own juice, lay in his lap. Across the hail, he caught a piece of his reflection in the wig-stand mirror and saw how ridiculous he looked; he had been in that tub more than an hour and never let a drop of water touch his head. The little pouches of hair on either side, brittle with the sun, were lifted out like chamois's wings, and two or three dirty streaks of dried sweat ran from his crown to his cheeks.

Licking his lips, he could still taste the dried salt gathered in the hollow beneath his nose.

He was exhausted. But there was no resisting in the safety of his home the measure of his own excitement. Here in this known space, close and his alone, something finally gave way, and riding up in him he felt at last the full expression of what had waited throughout the day. He made a sound out loud as the longing radiated through him and he sat riveted by passion. This was remarkable. His blood carried an electric charge. His heart and male organs were affected by an aura of desire which was not just that deep body-wanting thing, that longing like a stifled moan, but something else, something needier, softer, and more yearning. He wanted, simply, this young woman. To be with her.

To hold her and be held. My God! It passed over him in waves as he marveled at the overpowering, transforming feeling of it all. The rest of life did not exist, not simply the boundary lines of circumstance, but the hobbling limits of personality. Here, for a moment, all limitations could be exceeded. He would croon beneath her window or, more simply, confess to this wild yearning. He had half a mind to go directly to the phone, until he recalled that he had seen none in the cabin. This was what drove grown men to shirk their families and young men to foolish daredevil acts. He sat gripping the arms of his chair.

Oh, it made no sense, but that was hardly the point. The empire of dreams, the region where images preceded words and sensation was supreme, had given up this fixation and there was no logical quarreling with it. How much, really, did we ever understand about this? He'd had prescriptions from everyone, advice from every soul on earth about how to run the remainder of his life. But this was what he had been awaiting--to find what was beyond humdrum propriety or custom and to learn his own true ambition. And it was this young woman, troubled but straggling each instant, no matter how else

she faltered, to be the real thing, her best and most authentic self.

But, of course, nothing would happen.

The thought swung through him like the closing of a heavy door. Not a thing would actually occur. He had proved that convincingly when he sat inches from her, naked as Adam and Eve, and had been powerless, inert. Her troubled talk of leaving her husband was just that--angry idle talk. She was merely becoming accustomed to the fact that the pathways in her life were, finally, marked out, established. At the age of fifty-six, he had now managed to lead the emotional life of a seventeen-year-old, full of moonstruck fantasies that would never be fulfilled. The anguish sang through him for a short time with the perfect reverberations of a high note rung from crystal.

And somehow, then, he thought of Clara. The association was not direct, for his thoughts were actually bittersweet, some admiration of the pure sentience of his present state.

He had been immobile throughout, but now a new shock passed through him, for he recognized, with a precision that passed beyond the realm of any allowable doubt, what it was that Clara had been seeking when she turned away from him.

Just this: the mercy of passion. And here in his chair he was equally certain--sure, if he had learned a thing about her in the decades--sure not merely that she had never found that grace but that she had discovered that for her--in her--it would never be attainable. Never. In this instant, there was not a grain of ill feeling, only comprehension, definite--complete. Eyes wide, he sat, somehow rebuked by the enormous silence of the large home and the harshness of these judgments which he made about himself and his entire life. His blood was coursing; the image of that young woman a hundred miles away still seemed so near, so compelling, that he remained half inclined to lift his hand in greeting. And yet he held that thought of Clara at her ultimate moment, grappling with desperation, as the biblical figures were portrayed in lush oil paintings wrestling God's winged angels of death. Never, she had thought. Never, he thought now. Never.

"I was engaged," said Clara that night as they sat in the dark car over the river, with 'the sweet julep smell of the liquor around them. "We broke it off a year ago last June."



It was nearly December now. The street lamps and scattered light from the sky, vaguely refracted, cast deep shadows; he could see only the movement of her eyes as she looked ahead through the car window. Some spirit of bravery gripped her, though. There was a finer, noble look to her as she spoke; Stern was impressed, as he had been often lately, by her beauty. "His name was Hamilton Kreitzer. Do you remember him? From law school?"

The name meant nothing to Stern. He had the vaguest image of a fellow with a callow, luminescent smile and half head of wiry blondish hair.

"He's older. Than we are. Than I am. He had left Easton before I started. But, well, he was glamorous. You know, he came driving out on the weekends. He had that little English car, whatever it's called. The roadster. He'd come flying onto campus with the topdown in the middle of the winter and his scarf blowing behind him. He went out for some time with Betty Tabourney's sister. He had a terrible reputation. But girls don't ever know what they really like, do they? He's very handsome. You have to give him that. He's got a tiny little mustache like Errol Flynn.

And, of course, he's quite well-to-do. His father is one of Daddy's clients. They make candy. You see it in all the five-and-dimes. Packaged stuff. It's been stale whenever I've bought it. At any rate." She stopped to adjust herself in the seat. She was probably not accustomed to speaking at such length. For a moment, even in the dark, Stern could discern some tentative reflex: she was not certain that she wanted to go on. Then she straightened somewhat and continued, looking again through the front window, raising that fine profile. "They call him Ham. Nice name for a Jewish boy." She laughed. "Of course, my parents liked that. You know how they are. They don't like anything to be 'too Jewish,' which means Jewish at all."

Stern made a sound of acknowledgment, assent. He knew what she was saying.

"At any rate, I saw him one night at a dance, the Grover Hospital Cotillion. He was just out of the service, going to law school. I was with another boy, but we spoke, you know how that is, flirted, and he called me up the next week and asked me to be his date at another of these dances. I knew half a dozen girls who had gone out with him, and not one of them with a decent thing to say, but I was so thrilled. Oh." She closed her eyes, she shook her head, overwhelmed. "I was so delighted to have all my friends, everyone I

knew, see me with Ham Kreitzer."

She found her drink in her hands--she seemed to have forgotten it--and nipped at it briefly. He could see it was not much to her taste.

"I was quite surprised when he called after that. But he honestly seemed to enjoy my company. He told me how I'd blossomed since college." She threw a hand in the air for expression, then regained herself and made a sound that led Stern to believe that in the dark she might have blushed.

"Well, I had grown up a good deal. I suppose he was attracted to 'the side of me that didn't think he was all that important. Which was there, even though you wouldn't know it to listen to me now. He enjoyed the challenge of winning me over. And, of course, I listened to him. He liked to talk about himself. So many men do."

Across the seat from her, Stern smiled, but she was too caught up to find any special meaning in her remark.

"But when you got to know him, he was like everybody else.

He had so many schemes. He hates his father, despises the poor man, and naturally, after he was dismissed from law school, he felt he had no other choice, and so he has to work beside his father every day. He wants to break away so desperately and of course he never will." She turned to Stern. "I felt something for him. And I believe it was mutual. But he was also at the age at which it was expected that he would get married. He'd had his flings or wiM oats, or

whatever you call it. And I'm socially acceptable. My parents are, that is. So we were engaged. I loved to sit and

hold his hand, just watch him. He is such a handsome man. I couldn't believe he wasTnine. It all seemed so magnificent.

My," she said. For the first time in the dark, she touched her eyes, but she drew herself together. She had her own momentum now.

"Of course, that's: not the end of the .story. We were engaged for fourteen months. I had to have a June wedding.

Two weeks before the 'ceremony, I got a phone call. I could tell he was far away. 'Darling,' he said, I'm afraid I can't go through with it." I wasn't

surprised. I'd realized by then that he was really quite a little boy. I knew he would be terrified. He didn't say where he was. It turned out that he was on Catalina Island. And that one of the girls had disappeared from the packaging line--I'm sure she was on Catalina Island, too. I didn't care about that. It was me he didn't want. Whether he preferred someone else was beside the point. And then, of course, there was one more problem." Across the seat, she turned in Stern's direction, while

the heat purred, pouring up thickly from beneath the dash.

"I was pregnant," she said.

He realized she was watching him to see if she could catch some flicker of his reaction in the dark. And she had judged him correctly. Her news instilled not merely shock but something close to panic. But as a child in a home rife with torment he had learned to save all expression and he showed nothing now; not a ripple to the surface.

"Are you shocked?" she asked.

He drew his breath and reflected.

"Yes," he said at last. There was no avenue for diplomacy.

"I was, too. Not at how it had happened, naturally. And I don't want you to think that I was taken advantage of, or that I was left behind like some dirty conquest. We had carried on that way for many months. I think, frankly, that I liked the idea of it better than anything else. The secret. The romance. Wasn't this what the world was supposed to be about?" She stopped. "Well, listen to me." She seemed to consider looking over once more, but even she was not that courageous. Stern fought back the same cold panic. He regretted suddenly that she was telling him all this; but that, he realized, was the point. Somewhere down the bank, voices, a man's and a woman's, were raised, then passed.

"Naturally, I couldn't believe I was in that state. It was only a month. I hoped for a while that something would happen. But it didn't. Then I thought about killing myself.

And I very nearly did. I actually got hold of some sleeping pills. I fell asleep one night holding the bottle in my hands, and I remember' '--she laughed and tossed her head-' 'that after an hour or two I jolted awake and I thought I had

done it, and I actually accepted it, the whole idea, for just that one second, and then was glad I had the chance to think better of it. I was sure that telling my parents would be the worst thing I'd ever done, but it was even more difficult than I'd imagined. Lord," she said suddenly, I never want to do anything like that again."

Again she touched her eyes. "My father was monstrously angry. Monstrously. And of course they wanted me to marry Ham, which was out of the question. We quarreled about that for another week. But finally my father took me to Mexico City. The flight was eleven hours each way. We had to fly through Chicago. And I was so sick coming back, I thought I would die. But it was taken care of.

"And I really have very little now. I know how silly that sounds. I have so much compared to most people. And even compared to what I had before, there's no real difference.

But I feel as if the whole world's changed. I gave up my job before the wedding. Because Ham wanted me to. That's

what brings me around the office. And naturally I'm ashamed I really don't know who's heard about this. I

imagine everyone. I go into a movie theater or a store or the concert hall and I assume that every person knows. That they're whispering. You know how unkind people are.

"So," she said. "That's the story. It's terrible, don't you think?"

"Painful," said Stern.

A breath, almost a sob, rattled through her, and she nodded.

"Do you know what humiliates me most? That I didn't realize what I wanted. That I was almost twenty-five years old and had no idea. I should have known better than to care for the likes of Ham Kreitzer. I did know better. And I Couldn't help myself." She lifted her arm in the dark to see her watch.

They drove largely in silence. At her home, he began to get out of the car to open her door, then stopped.

"This was a very fine evening."

"Oh, certainly." She laughed. "You'll be indentured to George Murray for the

rest of your life and your date turns out to wear a scarlet letter."

Stern looked at her directly.

"I heard the most wonderful 'music played on the piano. ' "

She reverted to the gestures of the rich, and kissed him, French style, on each cheek. Then she left the car by herself and ran up the concrete stoop of her parents' Georgian home. She waved to him from the doorway.

Driving away, he still felt the liquor. But he knew he would never sleep. There was a briefcase full of WORK at home. And the problem of the car to be fully contemplated, waiting like some vexing puzzle he knew it was his responsibility to solve. But he could not make his mind work over those things. Even a few blocks away, he recognized his emotions. He was thrilled. Thrilled. The cool racing beat of high excitement was in his blood. He was thrilled--by her trust, her depth. There was wild, exciting news in her

confession of a carnal side. But what thrilled him most, Mr. Alejandro Stern, immigrant American, refined rascal,

placid scheming soul--what thrilled him most was that he knew now she was truly available to him,

### PART THREE

"GREETING Helen on Sunday night, he was unprepared for his tender feelings: How welcome the

k 'l'scent of her perfume, her very form, as he lifted his hands to embrace her. Ah, Helen. In her doorway, he took her in his arms and lolled her about. They both laughed. Even now, though, the thought, the ache for Sonny was not far away.

"Tell me of your journey," Stern insisted.

She described Texas, hot and desolate. You drive seventyfive on the highways and the city towers loom ahead through the shimmering heat and seem to come no .closer.

"You were bad while I was gone," she said. They were in the kitchen; Helen was tossing a salad and Stern was making a faltering effort at assistance while he drank his wine.

"Me?"

"I called last night and got your machine. At eleven o'clock." She raised an eyebrow.

"I was working," he said. "Dixon's case," he added to enhance his credibility. He had attempted to reach Dixon all day. He wanted the man back in town at once. He phoned the island house directly a number of times, and finally called Elise, Dixon's secretary, at home--she could reach Dixon twenty-four hours a day, like the President. Today, however, Dixon was out of touch, lost under the Caribbean sun. Perhaps he had done the wise thing and decided never to return or, more realistically, wanted to enjoy, unencumbered, the last breath of freedom. Certainly, Dixon knew best how grave his problems were. There was a reason that he felt he had to get 'away.

In the meantime, Stern stood in Helen's kitchen, if not lying to her, then avoiding the truth. To what point? he wondered. He had no idea what to do. Go on? Long? Suffer?

There was at all moments this intense sensation of heat.

Sooner or later his resistance would erode; he would seek out Sonny and perform some lunatic act. Today at home, he had been utterly useless. He came to rest, and sat, mouth agape, eyes caught, replaying all the same images in a heart-bursting swoon. He was hopelessly smitten. But what about the present? The world? Here was Helen, decent, capable, and kind. How should he treat her? He had no plans, except a vague inclination to avoid sleeping with her tonight, for the sake of decency perhaps, or more likely because he could not stand further stimulation.

Helen as usual had prepared a splendid meal, shrimp remoulade, his favorite, with two warm vegetables and potatoes. She wanted this to be a glorious reunion. Just last week, in speaking about Miles, Helen had said in the mildest, most casual fashion that when she divorced she could not imagine marrying again. There was no emphasis, but she clearly intended to describe that state of mind in the past tense. Stern had not missed the point but had pmdenfiy allowed the observation to pass. Now, over time, he would have to maneuver gently for distance.

They ate and chatted. He was grateful, even in his punished, overwrought state, for their constant amiability.

Stern pushed the potatoes aside with his fork.

You like those," Helen told him.

A Stern face: a world of emotions too hard to express. "I am contemplating a diet," he admitted.

"Dieting?" Helen took a bite, chewed once, and eyed him acutely. The intelligence flashed in her eye. He felt his stomach sink. What in the world had led him to conceive of her over the years as not bright? "I was right," she said.

"You're seeing someone younger, Sandy, aren't you?"

Now what? Why is lying so often the truth? Seeing? Oh yes, he was seeing. On the air, in the sky. A holographic

projection. He was seeing someone younger, all the time.

He had been still a few seconds. "Yes," he said.

Helen looked straight at him. She said, "Shit." A moment passed. "Well," said Helen,

He was utterly useless. He came to rest, and sat, mouth agape, eyes caught, replaying all the same images in a heart-bursting swoon. He was hopelessly smitten. But what about the present? The world? Here was Helen, decent, capable, and kind. How should he treat her? He had no plans, except a vague inclination to avoid sleeping with her tonight, for the sake of decency perhaps, or more likely because he could not stand further stimulation.

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Helen looked straight at him. She said, "Shit." A moment passed. "Well," said Helen,

He could not think of a single comforting word.

"I'll live," she told him.

Tongue, speak. He merely watched.

Helen got up from the table.

He found her by the island cutting board in the fancy kitchen Miles had built her before he set himself free.

Chin high, she watched the darkening sky through a broad window, her view partly obscured by an apple tree that had blossomed magnificently only a few weeks ago.

He touched both her elbows as he came up behind her.



"Helen."

She reached around herself to hold his hands."

"I knew this was too soon. I should have let you get over all of it."

"Helen, please do not--" Overreact? "Helen, this is not' "

"Yes, it is," she said. "You're hooked." She looked back at him. "Aren't you?"

He closed his eyes rather than respond.

She turned away and crashed her fist squarely in the middle of her nose. She wanted desperately not to cry.

"I'm really being miserable."

"Of course not," he said.

"You didn't make any promises." She eyed him. "How young?"

He considered avoidance and gave up the thought. "Forty," he said. "Forty-one." Pregnant. One-breasted. Married to someone else. And not interested in me. The utter madness of it, for a moment, almost drove him to the floor with shame.

Helen shrugged. "At least you're sane."

He nearly groaned.

Eventually, they returned to the table. He offered no details of this new interest--how could he?--and Helen courageously refused to ask. She told him that Maxine, after her day with Kate, had remarked on Kate's drawn look; she did not have the glow of some pregnant women. Hearing the remark, he thought at once of Sonny, then was pierced to see how quick he had been to skip beyond his concerns for his daughter.

As soon as he had his coffee, he went to the closet for his hat. At the door, he took Helen in his arms, and she held him for a moment.

"You're not going to mind if I tell you I don't want to see you, are you?" she asked. "Under the circumstances?"

"Of course not." He kissed her briefly and walked into the tender night air, toward his auto, full of the pangs of terrible regret. Truly now, he was losing

his grip. He had given up the best part of his actual life to indulge a high-school fantasy. But through all this immediate anguish, his heart still rose. One tie that bound, now severed. There were a thousand others, but his intent was clear. He was going to surmount all obstacles, each of them. He felt as valiant as a knight. He walked down the suburban avenue with a determined step, full of momentary pain, and the winging feel of freedom, of wild, improbable dreams.

MONDAY was a day of unexpected communications.

The first was awaiting Stern when he reached the office.

Dr. CawIcy had called, Claudia said, and needed to see him.

She had compared schedules and agreed to a meeting at five o'clock at Nate's office. "He said it was personal," said Claudia, "and that he didn't want to see you at home.

That's all."

Personal and not at home. Mano a rnano, in other words-away from Fiona. Nate had tiptoed around Stern for months.

Now he wanted a meet? Stern sorted the possibilities. Had Fiona spoken up, as Stern suspected she would? Were Nate and he about to have a scene? Perhaps Nate was going to clear the air completely--hand Stern the check and declare a lasting peace. His sense of intrigue for once was greater than his anxiety.

Later in the morning, he also heard from Mel TooIcy. Stern was on the phone, attempting one last time to persuade AUSA Moses Appleton to soften his position on Remo, when Claudia laid down a note saying TooIcy was on hold.

Stern ended his conversation with Moses promptly. "None of this goes any further," Tooley said. "Of course."

"Sennett's sneaking around like some spook. He hears I talked, he'll go ballistic. You didn't get this here."

Stern once more assured Mel of his confidence. "My guy is going in the grfind jury next week."

"I see. May I ask the terms?"

"Immunity. Letters. Court orders. I got him everything.

It was a white sale at the U.S. Attorney's Office."

"And the prognosis for my client?"

"Bad."

"Very bad. There's a bunch of papers and tickets my guy wrote and your guy told him how to do it, every i, t, a, d comma."

"I see. And your client recalls this clearly?"

"Like a vision. My guy was new to the business, 'didn't know what was going on, so all this stood out." Mel waited.

"You know that song and dance."

Stern said nothing. John had done the predictable thing.

There was justice in this. Dixon, after all, deserved what he was going to get.

"He really feels like shit about this," They said. "You know, it's family stuff. Very messy. Well, I don't have to tell you."

"No," Stern agreed.

"I keep telling him ho's got to think 'Me first." He doesn't have a long way to wander on this thing. If he fucks around with them, they land on him with both feet."

Tooley meant that MD's records implicated John as well.

Whatever John's protests that all this had been over his head, the prosecutors knew that no one, no matter how naive, could have regarded this maneuvering as wholesome.

But wanting its case to be ironclad, the government preferred to have John's testimony, rather than a woebegone lower-down sharing the charge and defense table with Dixon.

This, too, was an entirely' predictable turn of events.

"He'll look like a whipped dog up there, if that does you any good." Mel was talking about John's trial testimony.

That would be another lawyer's problem, in any event.

"When does he appear before the grand jury, Mel?"

"A week from tomorrow. I don't think the indictment's far away.

They've got it all pretty well organized. I imagine they're going to D.C. for RICO approval right now."

"Yes," said Stern again. The racketeering charge, the one by which the government would divest Dixon of the business in which he'd invested a lifetime, required approval in Washington. Stern would have to request an audience at the Department of Justice. The bureaucrats in D.C. would sometimes act with greater restraint than the U.S.

Attorney, although there were unlikely to be any soft hearts in this case.

TooIcy and he concluded with a vague promise to speak again. It was unlike Mel to be so forthcoming. Usually there was a hidden agenda, two or three of them, in fact.

Was it possible he was actually acting at Sennett's instruction? Yes--but it would be hard to mislead Stern about the testimony of his daughter's husband. That probably accounted for Mel's candor, the fact that Stern would inevitably learn about this. Realizing that, TooIcy wanted credit for being the first with the news. Stern drummed his fingertips on his desk and picked up a cigar.

Of late, he had taken to twirling them between his fingers, unlit, never letting the ends touch his lips. Dixon was going to have to be made to think seriously about a guilty plea. In cases like this, the best that generally could be managed was to agree to a staggering financial penalty in hopes of sharply limiting the time in jail. Whatever was hidden in the islands, many of the visible assets here were in jeopardy the stone house, the chauffeured cars. Dixon would want to save what he could, for Silvia's sake.

Perhaps Stan would accept forfeiture of a discrete sum--millions--and Dixon's resignation from the business in lieu of all the stock.

In the meantime, Stern would have to call Kate--and John--take them to dinner as soon as the grand jury appearance was past. Dixon's wayward path had detoured the life of his family long enough. Stern wanted to be sure that his

daughter, and even his son-in-law, knew that he was prepared to go on with this episode in the past. If Dixon decided to resist the government, Stern would help him search for another lawyer; the time was at hand. That, however, would not be a complete solution. It was difficult to imagine a family gathering with Silvia, whose husband was in prison, occupying one corner and John, who sent him there, the other. Stern let a sound of some distress escape him. They would all remember this year.

Nate's nurse, who showed Stern back to the consultation room, seemed familiar--he had seen her timid smile and slender good looks somewhere before. Stern watched the young woman depart and spent an instant trying to place her, before Nate bade him sit in a gooseneck chair of maroon leather.

They asked, conventionally, about one another's health, then lapsed into silence. Stern had never been here and that fact seemed to underscore the unusual nature of their meeting--right faces, wrong setting. The atmosphere grew tenebrous. The consultation room was far more ample than Peter's, furnished, like the Cawley home, out of Ethan Allen, with an imposing wallpaper of green vertical stripes and a heavy paddle-shaped clock on one wall. Nate sat in his long white coat behind a substantial walnut desk, his certificates arrayed about him, rocking a bit in his tall leather chair. Eventually, he eased forward and came to the point.

"I want you to know, Sandy, that I'm going to ask Fiona for a divorce."

Stern was dumbstruck, not by the news, of course, but by the notion that this was Nate's revelation.

"Are you asking my advice, Nate?"

Not really. If you have some, I'll take it."

"No," said Stern, then added wickedly, "It may be expensive." Nate let the back of his hand drift out in space: no matter. He could afford it. Stern found his jaw setting harshly, as if them had been a graft of iron. "Have you told Fiona?"

"Not exactly. I wanted you to know first."

"Me to know?"

"You," said Nate. He fiddled with the little ornaments on his desktop, an

onyx-bladed letter opener, a matching paperweight; then, eventually, he folded his hands. "Sandy, I don't care," he said. "About what happened between you and Fiona."

"I see," said Stern.

"She told me."

"Apparently." He had his feet on the floor and his hands in his lap. So far, he was holding on better than he might have expected.

"I found a piece of your mail in the john off our bedroom a couple weeks ago. We ended up having it out then."

"My mail?" asked Stern, but he realized then what Nate meant: Marta's note, the one Stern had carried out of the house that night. He had been looking for the letter just the other day, having been unable to reach Marta by phone and wondering when she was due to arrive.

"As I said," said Nate. "I don't care. I really don't. It sounds a little b'tzarre to say I don't care, but I don't."

"Very well."

"You slept with Fiona, so you slept with her." Nate threw up his hands magnanimously.

Stern found that he had hold of both arms of the chair, his fingers gripped down to the studs; perhaps he feared that the furniture was going to fly. Slept with his wife! What had she done? Fiona's killer instinct, he saw, had taken her far from the facts. Did she think that, by setting them even, she could get a new start with Nate? No, Stern decided, probably not. Fiona had just hunkered down, abandoned all caution, and taken her greatest pleasure-retribution: I want to see the look on the dirty bastard's face.

"Am I to respond?". he asked eventually.

"You don't have to."

"Because, to say the least, Nate, you have not received an accurate portrayal." Stern stopped then, recognizing his dilemma. What were his lines? 'It is not true, Nate, that I fucked your wife. I only attempted to do so.' That would not be an especially stirring defense. Nor, for that matter, did Nate seem to

believe him.

"Listen, Sandy, that's not the point of this."

What was the point? Stern studied Nate, who did not quite have the fortitude to look back. He had always taken Nate as a person of little malice--a healer, a caring type, with that easy, quiet manner that many women took for masculine gentleness. All in all, in spite of Stern's moments of dizzy rage, those judgments held. Nate had no real will to do injury. Instead, he muddled about, full-of warm feelings and covert impulse, inadvertently knocking over lives like plates in a china closet. He had grown up in Wyoming and had come to the big city as a medical student. At times, he still liked to play the befuddled cowboy. Over the years, Stern had decided that pose concealed laziness, sloth, a weakness of spirit. That was why he so easily surrendered to female temptation or, more pertinently, maintained his unsatisfying life with Fiona. The same remained true now.

He clearly savored the sheer ease of the solution Fiona's supposed confession presented: You've screwed my wife, and I don't care. Now take her off my hands and let us go on in peace. The matter of Clara was far from his mind--a secret he took to be entombed and thus forgotten. He dealt merely with the present. Fiona could be dismissed and cared for in a single stroke, and at a cheaper price. He would dust off his hands and move on.

Assessing all of this, Stern, amazingly, felt at considerable advantage. Not so much with the facts. That Fiona was lying was almost beside the point. She'd said what she'd said. Go disprove it. But he was much better equipped than Nate to deal with a circumstance of this sort. He saw suddenly, decisively, how this would play out, and knew that Nate, whatever his plans, was about to be badly outflanked. He told him so directly.

"I believe, Nate, you have miscalculated."

Nate pulled a face. He was going to deny any cunning, but thought twice of that and said nothing at all.

"Were I you, Nate, I would proceed to divorce court with caution."

Nate stiffened. Clearly, he had more here than he had bargained for. He flipped hand again, as he had before.

"Sandy, I-- Listen, this isn't a holdup. Or whatever. you think. Don't take it

that way."

"No, of course not," said Stern. "I know you would not mean to threaten me. Nor I you."

"You?" asked Nate.

"I," said Stern. "But let me offer a word of warning, nonetheless. Do not, Nate, attempt to involve me in your bloodbath with Fiona. Do not dare. After all, we both know,

I am not a witness to your good character or your veracity." Nate wound his head about as if he'd been kicked. "Jesus," he said.

"If I am placed under oath, Nate, I shall speak truthfully about all matters. Including those most painful to me. Do not think that pride will prevent me from disclosing the manner in which you and Clara deceived me."

Nate for an instant was absolutely still, his mouth open in a small dark o. Then he took his hand and covered his eyes.

He heaved a bit.

"Look." Nate eyed his desktop, considered his thumb.

"Look," he said again.

"Yes?" said Stern. He had known, instinctively, that Nate would be "As as chosen to speak plainly, Nate, let me do the same: there is a large check which I believe you owe Clara's estate." Nothing--no scruple, no sense of taste, not even the recollection of his own discomfort--could dull Stern's delight in this moment. With a whetted look of absolute malice, he considered Nate, who sat back in his tall chair, his sparse hair in disarray from the sudden pulling at his face and scalp, looking overwhelmed, sorely confounded, scared.

"I was afraid you were going to say that," said Nate. "I have a lawyer looking into this matter."

"I was afraid of that, too."

Stern nodded. He finally understood Nate's plan. He'd held the check, not merely to hide it from Fiona's future attorney, but from Cal now. He wanted to see if the coast was clear or if he'd been discovered.



"I would suggest you do the same, and have the attorneys make contact," said Stern.

Nate absorbed that in silence, but finally looked at Stern.

"I knew you'd find out eventually," said Nate. "I've eaten myself up alive about this whole thing. You may not believe that, but I have. Really. It's on my mind every day. I know you probably think I'm responsible for what she did. At the end."

"I do not blame you solely, Nate. I offer you that solace.

I am sure that the ultimate denouement was a shock to you as well. But I bear you heavy resentment, notwithstanding.

Clara's choice to take a lover was, of course, her own. But as a doctor, Nate, particularly one experienced with this sort of '--Stern waited, then fastened something down in himself and pushed on--"this sort of sexually transmitted disease and its course, I would certainly have expected you to have exercised greater care. And I take it from what I see that you were entirely indifferent to Clara's needs at the end."

"You think I mistreated her?"

"How else am I to feel?"

With an unhappy look, slumped in his chair, Nate nodded, mostly to himself.

"Not to mention the fact that you abused me, Nate, and our friendship. You lied to me. Quite boldly."

Nate again closed his eyes, then licked his lips so he could speak.

"I was afraid of what you would do when you found out. I admit that. But I want you to know something--I followed her lead. At all times. I did what she wanted."

Cornered, coward, Nate took a coward's response. He blamed Clara. He was too weak-perhaps to focus upon the sheer nasty bite of these words. But this meanness, intended or not, hit Stern like a blow. Yes, of course. This was the rebuke he had coming: she liked it. For an instant, he was 'close to responding with gutter obscenities. Even when he recovered, his accent, to his own ear, suddenly seethed peculiarly distinct.

"Nate, you are a scoundrel."

"Jesus," Nate said again.

Stern resumed his feet. This confrontation, long imagined, like so much else, seemed far more difficult in actuality than in prospect. He had no wish to prolong it. But Nate's comment still left a wake of ruthless emotion.

"One last word, Nate," said Stern. "A piece of friendly advice." Nate, who, all in all, looked thoroughly wrecked by this conversation, sat up on alert: he knew something else was coming. And he was certainly correct, for 'Stern had had a flash of the insight that for three decades had 'saved his life in the courtroom, some adrenalized ability of the synapses to suddenly connect, no more explicable than the gift of tongues or flight. "I suggest you fire your nurse before you head off for divorce court. Fiona has some damaging evidence, and the cross-examination will be even nastier if that young woman remains on your payroll."

The nurse was there, fiddling with some charts, when Stern threw open the office door. She had taken a message from his office and handed Stern the slip. He did not bother examining it now. He was in a courtroom mode, playing for appearance, knowing his behavior would be carefully recounted. He looked her up and down, just like that, an entire once-over, which she took in almost innocently, with the same uncertain smile, the same unruffled bland beauty.

Then he showed himself out, having decided, with Fiona's videotape well in mind, that the young woman belonged to that small class of human beings who look worse with their clothes on.

33'

CLAUDIA called---URONT," read the pink message slip the nurse had handed him. He reached her on the car phone, driving back to the office. "They got you," said Claudia.

"I have something somewhat pressing of my own. Please find the number at Dr. and Mrs. Cawley's home and patch me through." They were on the line together while it rang a number of times; Fiona was not in. Stern saw Stern resumed his feet. This confrontation, long imagined, like so much else, seemed far more difficult in actuality than in prospect. He had no wish to

prolong it. But Nate's comment still left a wake of ruthless emotion.

"One last word, Nate," said Stern. "A piece of friendly advice." Nate, who, all in all, looked thoroughly wrecked by this conversation, sat up on alert: he knew something else was coming. And he was certainly correct, for 'Stern had had a flash of the insight that for three decades had 'saved his life in the courtroom, some adrenalized ability of the synapses to suddenly connect, no more explicable than the gift of tongues or flight. "I suggest you fire your nurse before you head off for divorce court. Fiona has some damaging evidence, and the cross-examination will be even nastier if that young woman remains on your payroll."

The nurse was there, fiddling with some charts, when Stern threw open the office door. She had taken a message from his office and handed Stern the slip. He did not bother examining it now. He was in a courtroom mode, playing for appearance, knowing his behavior would be carefully recounted. He looked her up and down, just like that, an entire once-over, which she took in almost innocently, with the same uncertain smile, the same unruffled bland beauty.

Then he showed himself out, having decided, with Fiona's videotape well in mind, that the young woman belonged to that small class of human beings who look worse with their clothes on.

33'

CLAUDIA called---URONT," read the pink message slip the nurse had handed him. He reached her on the car phone, driving back to the office. "They got you," said Claudia.

"I have something somewhat pressing of my own. Please find the number at Dr. and Mrs. Cawley's home and patch me through." They were on the line together while it rang a number of times; Fiona was not in. Stern swore old words in Spanish.

"Did they give you the message about Ms. Klonsky?"

"Klonsky?"

"That's yehat's urgent. She's called here three times in the last hour. She says she has to see you today. Personal business. I wasn't sure where you were going from there, but she said she'd go to Your house and wait for you. I gave

her the address. Is that all right?"

It was nearly six now. Stern slammed on the brakes and jerked the car to the curb. His hands were shaking. He was already turning around.

"Hello?" asked Claudia.

"Yes, yes. How long are you there tonight, Claudia?" Another few hours, she answered, working on a brief for Raphael.

Stern asked her to try Mrs. Cawley every fifteen minutes and to give her this message: Mr. Stern apologized for not reaching her directly, but he was unavailable and thought it important that she know Dr. Cawley and he had met this afternoon and had a very thorough and candid discussion.

"And then tell her," said Stern, "that I want to know, with all respect, if she has lost her mind. You must repeat it just so."

Claudia was mumbling and laughing as she made notes; she always enjoyed Stern,

He put down the phone then and shot off through the traffic. The auto clock said 6:02. Urgent and personal.

Yes! He was flying.

The yellow Volkswagen was in the circular drive of Stern's home. He could see it as he approached, driving too fast down the block. It was an instant before he picked out Sonny. She sat on the slate front steps, her legs spread to make way for her belly, and her face turned to the sun--Ms. Natural, as she had called herself last month. Stern did not bother putting the car in the garage. Instead, he parked behind her and hiked up the drive, exhilarated and self-conscious.

Here he was, he thought, at one of those signal moments in life which come upon you, part of the infinite progression, just like other moments, but with the chance for enormous change. There had been a great deal of that for him lately --but he was prepared. He had probably not felt a thing like this in over thirty years, yet he recognized it at once. A certain border terrain had been crossed, and they waited on the edges of real intimacy--not just social interaction or an exchange of views, but penetration of the most fixed personal boundaries. And here, awaiting that final passage, he felt the full

complexity, mystery of her persona. Oh, he knew nothing about the kinds of things that had made her.

They came from different ends of the earth, different eras.

It would be years before he recognized the imprint of her experience upon her, every layer, like the accumulating

pages of a book. But his heart rose to the assignment; and

he was confident that the required energy still resided within

him. Every corny fatigued metaphor seemed apropos. He

was drunk with the prospect, dizzy.

"What an unexpected pleasure," he said, beaming, as she awkwardly stood, brushing the soil from her seat and blinking off the sun.

He had actually opened his arms to embrace her, when he caught her look, pointed and intense, which stopped him cold; he knew at once that he had blundered. From somewhere she had produced a white envelope and she raised it at arm's length, as if to warn him, or even, perhaps, to fend him off.

"This is not for pleasure, Sandy. I came to give you this."

She continued to extend the envelope. "I wanted to do it myself."

He stood there, mannequin-still. How had she put it?

After forty, she had learned no one was even normal.

"Here."

Eventually he took it. With any reflection, he would have known what it must be, but instead he opened the envelope, fumbling and mindless, and studied the document. It was a grand jury subpoena which she had drafted; her initials were at the foot. Investigation 89-86. He read it over three or four times before the import came home. It was addressed to Stern himself; he had been subpoenaed to appear personally, commanded to attend on Thursday 10 a.m., and then and there produce "a safe transported on or about April 30 from the premises of MD Clearing Corp. and all items in your possession, custody, or control which were contained within said safe as of the time you received it."

She had checked both boxes on the form--he was required to testify and to

produce the object. As he read, there loomed up in him once more the familiar intimation of yet another

disaster t

"I have to tell you," Sonny sad, tha I'm really pissed off."

"Oh, Sonny," he said. "This is a misunderstanding.

Please. Come inside for a moment." He was already walking up the slate stairs to his home.

"Sandy, there's no point."

"A moment," he said again.

They came into the foyer, and around them the house was dark and cool .....

"Sonny, I am constrained, of course, by privilege, he said, meaning that he could not repeat anything Dixon had told him, "but I believe you have a terrible misimpression about this."

"Sandy, I really wouldn't say too much if I were you.

I

don't know where this thing will end up, and I don't want to have to testify. I can't play the game as hard as you guys do. Any of you."

"Sonny, there are no games involved."

"Oh, please! How can you say that? After you sat there telling me you were going to search for those records, when you had them in your office all the time. And I fell for that routine. That's what I really can't believe. Do you know

what I've been wondering all day--what was so important you had to drive a hundred miles to find out about it?

What

would you have done with those documents if I told you the government's whole case depended on em.

His mouth parted vaguely as he realized what she was saying: he was being accused. He sat heavily on the milking chair, which was behind him.

"You misunderstand," he said again.

"I understand fine. I thought you were my fucking friend."

"I am your friend."

"Pardon me, but bullshit. Friends don't do this to each other. No matter who their clients are. Do you want to know how I found out?"

He nodded mildly, afraid that, if he showed greater interest, in her great anger she might refuse to say.

"I walked in this morning," she said, "feeling sort of cheerful, and there's Kyle Horn waiting for me. He had a nice weekend, too--he went through all the checks from MD what's-her-name brought into the grand jury last week. And guess what he found? A check written out of your client's Chicago office to a cartage company here, with a little note on the bottom: 'DH Personal.' Think DH is trying to hide something, maybe?"

Margy again, thought Stern. Had Horn merely been exhaustive, or had someone provided him a clue about what he might find in those stacks of negotiated checks?

"So, naturally, he want a grand jury subpoena, and he's out to the cartage company before noon and comes back with the bill of lading and lays it on my desk. 'Your idol,' he says. 'Shit happens.' I'm not nffive, Sandy. I understand you have a job to do. But you don't seem to care a bit about the position you put me in."

"Oh, Sonny, I care enormously." His tone--soulful, plaintive--took even her aback, and she stared at him a moment, weighing his sincerity. Finally she winced and turned for the door.

"My client," he said to her, "will not return until late on Thursday."

She shook her head at once.

"Don't ask for an extension, because you won't get it from Sennett--or from me. You and the safe and everything in it are in the grand jury on Thursday morning."

"That is not possible without conferring with my client."

"Then you better get a lawyer, Sandy. I mean it. This isn't amusing or cute or anything else. Don't put yourself in a vulnerable position with Sennett." She stopped herself.

"Jesus, I'm doing it again. Look. You need a lawyer."

"A lawyer?" asked Stern.

Sonny seemed to hear the sounds first and bolted about facing the stairwell. It had not occurred to Stern that they were not alone, but he recognized the wind-sprung hairdo and the flowing gown, even before the face, so much like his own, appeared over the banister.

"Who needs a lawyer?" Marta asked.

THE ensuing scene at the bottom of the staircase was brief and confusing. Stern, at the height of emotional turmoil, found himself sorely annoyed with Marta

,1. for her grand entrance and her failure to announce herself earlier. Never one to brook criticism casually, Marta defended herself stoutly, reminded him that she had written and that she had been letting herself into this house with the same set of keys for nearly twenty years.

"I called Kate. She said she left you a message last night.

Don't you even listen to that machine?"

Finally daunted, Stern made no reply. Instead, he noticed Sonny, who seemed awestruck by the unpredicted outbreak of spirited family emotions. He made the introductions, while Marta, in her familiar way, removed the paper from



his hand.

"This is a grand jury subpoena," she said.

"Ms. Klonsky has served me this moment."

"Again!" exclaimed Marta. Clearly she recalled the day of the funeral. "You people are too much. Haven't you

ever heard of an office?" She took one step toward Sonny.

"Get out," Marta said.

"Oh Lord." Stern held his head. He reached despairingly after Sonny, but she was at the door long before him, and was gone with no further remark than "Thursday," as she pointed at Stern.

"My God, Marta. Your tongue!"

"You mean you're happy about this?"

"Marta, this is a most complicated circumstance."

His daughter tipped her head querulously and her face abruptly took on a new light.

"Is that the girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend?" asked Stern. Flummoxed, he managed to ask who had spoken to her about his girlfriends. It was a serial connection, as it turned out. Maxine had called Kate last night, after hearing from her mother; Marta had spoken with Kate this afternoon when she had not met Marta here, as planned. Kate said she was not well, but that Stern would be expecting Marta, since she had left a message last night.

The discussion of last night apparently brought out the rest. "Is she?" Marta asked. "Your girlfriend?"

Deeply troubled by all this, Sonny, the subpoena, the image of a tom-tom network of females wailing over his shortcomings late into the night--Stern could not contain his irritation. Why did his children, in their twenties, extend to themselves an irrevocable privilege to be irreverent, even rude?

"Does she appear to be in any condition to be my girlfriend?"

Marta shrugged. Who knew? Who understood proprieties at the end of the century?

Stern, ready for another subject, asked about Kate.

"She says it's nothing physical. She's tired. But she sounds upset. Is something going on around here?"

"Ay, Marta," answered Stern, who finally took his daughter in his arms. He asked about her flight, whether she was hungry. They decided to go out for dinner.

"What about this?" asked Marta of the subpoena.

"I should call someone now, I imagine."

"I could represent you," Marta said. "I've had a couple clients get grand jury subpoenas, nothing like this but, you know, you could tell me what to do. I don't have a lot of experience in court, but I'd love to try. It. I'm licensed

Indeed, thought Stern, not to mention in three other states. Nonetheless, as a holding action, the idea held some appeal. Stern would never feel completely comfortable as the client of one of his competitors. And criminal lawyers gossiped so freely.

He would hate to read some clever item in the papers about his visit to the grand jury. All in all, this was the sort of thing he would be just as happy to keep in the family

"?ring it along," said Stern

her. Stern. We can speak over dinner. Marta ran upstairs. There were things of Clara's she had discovered during her afternoon. On sifting through the dressers that she wanted Stern to see.

That, said Stern, "is a cameo your grandfather Henry gave her when she was sixteen. I have not seen it in years."

Stern held the pendant above a small silver-stemmed menu light on the table. By the same warm glow, Marta studied

the female silhouette.

"It's beautiful."

"Oh, yes. Henry had a fine eye for such things."

"It's strange she never gave it to one of us. Don't you think?"

Perhaps she could not bear to part with it. Or to think about her father. Perhaps this was marked for the first granddaughter. It piqued him to think that Clara had some plan which had gone unfulfilled. He asked Marta what else she had discovered.

"This is amazing." Marta peered into her enormous bag and withdrew a huge ball of tissue, from which she slowly unwrapped a splendid sapphire ring. The stone was very large, guarded by a row of diamonds on either side, the setting platinum or white gold.

"Dar Lord," said Stern as she handed it over. It was the kind of item, so grand, that these days one could not even afford to insure it. He studied the ring at length. "Where on earth did you find these things?"

"There was a little Japanese black lacquer box at the bottom of her second drawer. I guess it was her private place or something." Marta touched the ring. "You don't know where she got that? It looks old."

Her private place, indeed, thought Stern. 'Could Nate possibly have provided a gift so lavish? Once more, he had that sensation of the earth failing beneath him, as he grappled with Clara's secrets. Then he clenched his eyes, stabbed

built. Oh, he was a shabby, suspicious fellow.

Yes, 'undoubtedly the thing your mother

"This, Sally, 'received the first time she was engaged."

"Engaged!" cried Marta.

Stern smiled a bit. "You did not know that your mother married me on the rebound?"

"God, no," said Marta. "Tell me. This sounds juicy."

She had leaned across the table and the waitress had to shoo her back in order to set her dinner down before her.

The

establishment was called Balzini's, a glamorized neighbor hood place in Riverside, with an Italianate theme and fake

fireplaces and tablecloths of crimson linen. The steaks were

reliable. He would always be enough of a son of Argentina

to enjoy a piece of grilled beef, but it was hardly what he

would have expected Marta to choose. Apparently, however, over the years she had found that they made a generous

chopped salad. . . 's and that the court He told her Hamilton Kreir name,

ship had ended precipitously. But he said no more. If Clara

had not wanted to share this part of the past with her children, it was not his place to do so. Her privacy now remained

Clara's final and most valued treasure.

At the same time, Marta was the least likely of the three to be thrown off by any revelations. Marta, whose relations with Clara were most difficult, in some ways knew her best.

Stern's most telling recollection of the two would remain seeing Marta at ages four and five, dark-eyed, standing beside her mother at the sink and questioning each habit: Why do you peel the carrots? Why do you wash your hands before you touch the food? What if we just went outside and ate vegetables off the ground? How can germs hurt you if you can't even see them? On and on. Clara, a woman of some patience, was inevitably exhausted. 'Marta, please!' This became the signal, as it were, for more intense inquiry.

There were occasions when Marta actually drove Clara from the room.

Having become acquainted early with her mother's vulnerabilities, Marta was less inclined to worship Clara than her brother and sister were; she saw her mother more as others very likely did. These were not, in all measures, pleasant observations; overtime, Stern had acquired a strong flavor of Marta's opinions. Her view of her mother probably came down to a single word: weak. Marta had little use for Clara's homebound realm, her music and her garden, and the occasional synagogue functions and teas. She regarded her mother as inert, with her dignified manner and cultivated habits sheltering her

from turmoil, inner and outer, that she lacked the spirit to address. Marta saw the world by her father's measure: action, achievement. Her mother was not a doer, and was accordingly diminished in her daughter's eyes. Over time, they had come to have a relationship that could be described as proper. Clara was wounded by Marta's reproaches. Still, she remained available to her. In the universe of relational disasters-Peter and his father, for example-Marta and Clara had managed to make do. They recognized and revered, in spite of misgivings, their world of attachments.

"Was this her broken heart?" Marta asked, touching the ring her father held.

"Perhaps. Is that how you saw her, Marta--a person with a broken heart?"

"I don't know. Sometimes." The judgment, like most of Marta's observations, cut him deeply. She went on with no recognition of that. "It's hard for me to think of you guys floundering. Having sad romances. When I was a child, I thought what every kid thinks: that you two were perfectly matched, that you'd just been out there waiting for each other. Silly, huh?" Marta looked up shyly, her small eyes flickering her father's way. No doubt, over time, Marta had also developed an unforgiving view of her parents' marriage. Stern long assumed it had contributed to her ambivalence about men, her shifting attachments. But now, suddenly, her line of sight rose far past Stern, carried off by recollections. "God," she said, "I can remember one night--I must have been eleven or twelve, and I found myself sitting up in bed, in the dark. Kate was sleeping, it was warm and the wind was slapping the blinds, and I thought, Oh, he is out there! This one man, this perfect man. It was so exciting, that thought." She closed her eyes, shook her head, suffering. "Did you ever think like that?"

Stern wondered. His adolescence, as he recalled it, seemed full of other passions: the stalled complex of feelings that arose around the memory of Jacobo; his fiery determination to be American. At night, in bed, he planned: he thought about the clothes he saw he could remember being preoccupied with a pair of red suspenders for weeks--the way the young men dug their hands into their pockets; he mumbled phrases in English, the same words again and again, with the same sublime frustration, feeling each time that he could not quite hear himself for the sound of his accented voice. There was not much romance in him then, yet he knew what Marta meant: that romance of perfect union: heart on heart; each word, each gesture immediately

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smiled weakly at his daughter and said, "I understand."

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to that one\*"

she asked her fatln' in her natural, direct way.

"I fear I am of the wrong generation. I lack experience.

The two women I counted as hue friends were your mother and your aunt. No doubt, that is not a valuable perspective."

"But it's .always there, isn't it?" asked Marta.

"SexY"

"That seems to be the ca," answe

again--fleetingl--of Sonny. rea tern, and thought

His daughter ate her large salad, ruminating.

"Do you still count Mommy as a friendg" Marta asked.

"Even now?"

Well, here certainly was a question for a child to put to a parent. How much hope could he hold out?

"Am I allowed to answer only yes or no?"

For the first time she displayed a look of impatience, displeased by his forensic gambit.

"Marta, we seem to have done a great deal to disappoint you2 ' '

"I'm not asking you guys to apologize for your lives.. I'm really not. I just wonder. It seems so depressing. You know, you spend thirty years and that's what it comes to with. somebody rotting away in a garage. I think about it.

What was she to you at the end? In the beginning? Was she the One? Probably not, huh?"

His first impulse,' of course, was not to answer, but Marta in these moments had a sincerity that was unbearable---for all her worldliness, the prickly hUmor, the boldness, she searched with the same innocent urgency that Sam had mandence Day eve celebration was going on down by the river. After ten, the racket of the fireworks began, a few miles away; from the window in the gable he could see the shuddering glow reflected at instants against the thin clouds. He was one of those imraigrants who still became weak with sentiment--and gratitude--on the Fourth of July.

What an idea this country was! The flourishing of the liberal democracies, with their ideal of equality, remained in his eyes, along with advances in medical care and the invenfon of movable type, humankind's grandest achievement of the millennium. His life in the law--at the criminal bar, in particular--was somehow bound up with those beliefs.

He lay on the bed hoping to slip off. He tried to read, but the turbulence of the day rode with him: his confrontation with Nate; Sonny steaming like some departing ship toward the horizon; the vexing legal complications he was headed for; and the spirits awakened by his conversation with Marta. His daughter asked--demanded--her entire life that her parents speak to her from the soul. It was in some ways the most disturbing event of the day.



At one point he quietly moved downstairs to reexamine the pillbox, but Marta apparently had it with her. Instead, he parted the curtains and stared at the Cawleys'. It was all beyond him now. He would have to speak to Nate once more, but where in God's name did such a conversation even begin?

'Now, Nate, as long as we were on the subject, I had just another question or two about your affair with my wife.' Stern shook his head in the dark.

Then he returned to the bedroom. Even after months, Clara's scent remained here; as much as the unspeaking furnishings, she Was present. Lying in the bed, he expected. Clara to emerge from the bathroom at any instant, a comely middleaged person, flattered by the full lines of her nightgown, hair shining, face creamed, distracted as she often was, humming faintly some musical theme.

Ah! he thought without an instant's preparation, ah, how he loved her! His recollection of her was suddenly overpowering, the most particular details returning to him with painful exactness: the soft wave in which she wore her hair for years; the harmless sweet smell of her French bathwater; her pink gardening hat; the tiny peculiar ridge, flange-like, on each side of her nose. He remembered her slow way of lifting her hands, her slender fingers and the slim wedding band--gestures somehow articulate with intelligence and grace. These memories stormed over him so powerfully that he felt he could embrace her, as if in this urgent heartsore fondness he could clutch her from the air.

The freshness of his love stunned him; it wrung his heart and left him weak. He had no idea what dark crabbed corner of madness she had wandered off to. He could deal solely with the woman he had lived with, the person he knew. That woman, that person, he missed terribly.

There in that moment, close and potent, he waited until at last the ghost was somewhat faded. Here was what he had attempted to communicate to his daughter, this eternal ocean of feeling. Then he lay under the intense beam of his reading light, wrapped in his Paisley robe, unstirring, holding for this particle of time to what little more he could of the presence--mysterious, defined, animate, deep-of Clara Stern.

On Wednesday morning, Marta came down to work

with Stern. Claudia and Luke, one of the office men, who had both been with

Stern more than a decade, marveled at her-how pretty she was., how mature and poised. Then she and Stern occupied themselves drafting a motion to Chief Judge Winchell, asking that the date of Stern's grand jury appearance be continued. Although it ended up less than three pages long, the motion took hours to compose, because the problems presented, as Marta recognized first, were complex. Ordinarily, communications between a lawyer and his client for the purpose of securing legal advice were privileged--the government could not compel either the attorney or the client to disclose them. But was the privilege properly invoked here?

"That's it?" asked Marta. The safe, a cubic foot of gunmetal, still stood behind Stern's desk. "And you've never opened it?"

"I have no combination, and no permission from your uncle."

Marta set a toe against it; she wore pink socks under her huaraches. Her legmas much as showed when her billowy skirt fell away--was, Stern noted, dense with hair.

"Jesus, what is this made of?. Lead? This thing would survive nuclear war."

"Dixon values his privacy," said Stern simply.

"Well, that's a problem, don't you think? How do we say that you received the contents for the purpose of providing legal advice when you've never seen them?"

Stern, who had not focused previously on this dilemma, reached for his unlit cigar.

"But, on the other hand," aid Marta, "doesn't it tend to disclose confidential communications if you admit you've never opened the safe? Doesn't that reveal the client's instructions and show that the client has, in essence, told the lawyer that the contents ar6o sensitive he will not or cannot share them? And what about the Fifth Amendment in Dixon's behalf?"

Marta went on a bit about that. She had a large, subtle mind. Stern, well aware of his daughter's brilliance, was nonetheless impressed by her facility with matters to which she'previously had had little exposure. She had gone to Stern's library and digested the leading Supreme Court case as soon as they arrived, absorbing its difficult distinctions without lengthy study. Marta was wholly at ease in one of those complex areas where the law's abstractions

occasionally became as unavailable as higher mathematics .to Stern himself.

Eventually, as they sat together drafting, they determined that their legal position foi now was simple: given the potential applicability of attorney-client privilege, Stern could not properly proceed without instructions from Dixon.

Accordingly, they asked the court to continue the subpoena briefly to allow Stern to consult with his client when he returned to town. Marta wrote each sentence on a yellow pad, reciting it aloud, and she and Stern edited, trading words. Stern, who by long habit did all such work alone, was delighted by the ease of this collaboration. When the motion was complete, Marta signed it as Stern's lawyer.

"What happens if she orders you to testify tomorrow?"

Marta asked. She was referring to Judge Winchell.

"I have to refuse, no?"

"And the government will move to hold you in contempt. She won't put you in jail, will she?"

"Not tomorrow," said Stern. "I would expect the judge to give me time to reconsider, or at least grant a stay, so we could go to the court of appeals. Eventually, of course, if I persist after being ordered to produce--" His hand drifted off. This happened, on occasion, lawyers jailed for resisting court orders detrimental to their clients. Among the defense .bar, such imprisonments--usually brief--were regarded as a badge of honor, but Stern had no interest in martyting himself, particularly in Dixon's behalf. "I am in your hands," Stern told his daughter.

"No problem," Marta said, and hugged him. "But be sure you bring your toothbrush."

On Thursday morning at ten o'clock, at the precise moment he had been scheduled to appear before the grand jury, Stern and Marta entered the reception area of the chambers of Moira Winchell, chief judge of the federal district court. The allocation of space reflected the proportions Of another century; while the judge's chambers were grand and cavernous, the outer rooms constructed for secretaries, clerks, and criers were stinting, the desks and office equipment wedged together a little like a packed trunk. The narrow

waiting area was bounded by a hinged balustrade of broad spindles. When they arrived, Sonny Klonsky sat on the sole available seat, flushed and pretty in spite of her grim demeanor. Stern's heart spurted at the sight of her, then settled when she fixed him with a baleful look. He reintroduced Marta.

"We're waiting for Stan," said Klonsky, and with that, the United States Attorney pushed through the door, narrow and flawlessly kempt, humorless as a hatchet blade. Even to Stern, who regarded himself as fastidious about his personal appearance--treating himself to custom-made suits and shirts and even, once a year, a pair of shoes from a bootmaker in New York--Stan was impressive. He was the sort of fellow who did not cross his legs for fear of wrinkling his trousers. He greeted Stern properly, shaking his hand, and managed a smile when he was introduced to Marta.

With that, they were ushered into the chambers of the chief judge. Because of the secrecy of grand jury matters, the hearing--much to Stern's good fortune--would be conducted here in private. Although the judge's court reporter arrived through a side door, carrying his stenotype machine, the transcript would be held under seal, unavailable to reporters, the public, even other lawyers.

In the privacy of her chambers, Moira Winchell was personable. She wore a dark dress--no robe--and came out from behind her enormous mahogany desk, larger than certain small automobiles, to venture a cordial word to each of them. She had met Marta more than a decade ago--Stern had no recollection of this--and greeted her warmly. "Are you practicing with your father now? How wonderful for him."

The arrangement, Marta indicated, was temporary. As the greetings went on, Sonny ended up at Stern's shoulder. She was almost exactly his height--he had made no note of that before--and he turned, without a thought of resistance, to stare at her, her strong face and handsome features. Like any good trial lawyer, her attention was entirely on the judge; she took no notice of Stern at first, and when she finally felt his gaze, she provided him with a quick distracted grin and turned away, following the judge's suggestion that they all be seated at the conference table.

The furnishings here were in the ponderous Federal mode, massive pieces of handsome dark woods, ornamented only with deep, many-planed with no European gewgaws. Huge arched windows rose on two sides of the

chambers, but the light remained somehow indirect, as if, in the dark style of the late nineteenth century, the architects had turned the building obliquely to the path of the sun. The judge as usual spoke her mind without inviting comment.

"Now look, Stan, I've read this motion. How can you refuse Sandy time to talk to his client?"

Marta, without expression, caught her father's eye. Sonny, rather than Sennett, answered for the government: The United States Attorney was present merely for emphasis, to let the judge know that the government viewed this as a signal matter. There was a history here, Klonsky said. The government had been seeking the documents it believed were in the safe for many weeks.

"Are you telling the court," asked Marta, "that the grand jury has heard evidence about the contents of the safe?"

This was an adroit question, turning the tables on the government in the hope that they might reveal something about their informant in order to support their position.

But Klonsky veered at once from that course, saying that she was not commenting at all on what the government or grand jury knew.

"Then on what basis do you even issue the subpoena?" The two young women went on contending. Stern, who had accepted his daughter's caution to say nothing, sat back with peculiar detachment. With no speaking part, he did not feel fully himself. Sennett, at the far end of the table, kept his hands crossed primly as he listened; he was customarily a person of few words. The court reporter was taking down nothing, awaiting the judge's instruction to go on the record. Stern after a moment realized he had lost track of the argument. Without looking back, he could not tell which of the young women was speaking; each had the same heated tone and confident timbre. The thought, for reasons he could not fathom, made him dizzy and sick at heart.

"Look. Look," said the judge at last, "let's cut through this. With documents missing, the government clearly has a broad right to inquire. So I'm not going to entertain any motion to quash, if that's what you have in mind next, Marta. But I must say that the privilege questions here are not simple ones--they seldom are when an attorney is subpoenaed. And I cannot conceive of how

Sandy could be forced to answer without being given the opportunity to consult with the client. So that will be my ruling."

She pointed to the court reporter, who began to type now.

The parties identified themselves for the record, and the judge permitted Marta and Klonsky to briefly state their positions. Then she allowed the motion.

"Off the record again," the judge said to the court reporter. "What date do we fix?" She asked Sonny, "When does the grand jury meet again?"

"Next Tuesday, Your Honor," she answered, "but that's a special session called to hear just one witness." She meant John. The government wanted Stern nowhere near when his son-in-law went before the grand jury to implicate Dixon.

Apparently, they contemplated lengthy testimony.

After consulting the grand jury's schedule, Judge Wincheil set the subpoena over two weeks. Klonsky looked down the table to Sennett, who shrugged: nothing to do. Clearly, they had wanted to move more quickly. The indictment, as Tooley had guessed, was not far away.

"On the record," said the judge to the court reporter. "Mr. Stern, you shall appear before the grand jury on July 20.

If there are privileges to be asserted, we'll take them up on a question-by-question basis. I'll make a note of the date and I will be available if you need me. So ordered," concluded the judge. The court reporter folded the tripod on his machine.

"One more thing," said the judge, "for all of you." She waved away the court reporter, who had paused, thinking they were going on the record again. "I don't like to see lawyers in the grand jury. It's a dangerous practice for both sides. I encourage you to resolve this among yourselves. Sandy, you're ably represented. Very ably. The same is true of the government. With all these good lawyers, I find it hard to believe you can't arrive at a proper solution among yourselves. I expect reason to prevail." She flexed her brow and looked about the table at each of them. Hell to pay, in other words, for anyone who was unyielding.

In the hailway, the company parted. Sennerr, outside the judge's presence, abandoned the semblance of a pleasant demeanor and walked off with a stiff look and no comment.

Klonsky tarried only long' enough to tell Marta that she would wait to hear from her. Once more, she said nothing to Stern. As the elevator descended, Stern felt the weight of his troubles. Marta, on the other hand, was exuberant.

"What a gas!" she cried on the way from the courthouse. The judge was right; she had done very well. Stern complimented her at length. "Can I come back if we don't work this out?"

Her plans were to return to New York tonight.

"You are my lawyer," answered Stern. "I cannot proceed without you."

But he intended to allow no repetition of this scene, exciting as it may have been. He had phoned Dixon's office before they left for the courthouse, and Elise, his secretary, had promised that Stern would be his first call.

It was time to play Dixon the music, the short, sad song.

This party was over. Stern kissed Marta in the courthouse square and sent her toward home, where she and Kate were to go through the last of Clara's things. He returned to the office, his mind, with customary dolefulness, on his brother-in-law.

BY five o'clock'he Stern had still not heard from Dixon. He had talked to Elise twice in the interval, and on the last occasion, near 3 P.. she had said that Dixon had a critical problem in New York on the Consumer Price Index future and was flying out again tonight.

"Tell him if he leaves town without making time to see me I shall resign as his lawyer."

Elise, accustomed to trivial banter from Stern, paused, waiting for the punch line, then took the message without comment. Stern called Dixon's home next, but reached only Silvia. They spoke for almost half an hour about the islands, Helen, Marta's arrival. Eventually, Stern asled if Silvia knew where her husband might be. He was due home shortly to pack, she said, and Stern made her promise that Dixon would call.

Late in the day, Stern sat by the telephone, reviewing the FBI reports on

Remo Cavarelli's case, which Moses Appleton had provided at last. As Stern expected, the agents' memoranda reflected little hard evidence against Remo. His three cohorts were, as they said, dead bang--caught in the truck with their hands on the beef sides--and each had pled guilty weeks ago. But they were all tough professionals, old school, and would keep their mouths shut. The only proof against Remo was his dim-witted arrival--the agents stated that he literally had walked up to the truck and looked in at the arrest taking place--and the remark by one of the thieves that "our guy made arrangements." The government would claim this referred to Remo, who supposedly was going to dispose of the loot, a ruse which would account for his late appearance on the scene. So far as Stern could tell, the government had no real basis for their suspicions. Assuming that the prosecutors found no proper excuse to bring out Remo's long criminal record in front of the jury, he stood a reasonable chance of acquittal. The case should be tried. Stern, who had not been to trial in almost four months, since the weeks before Clara's death, welcomed

the prospect. The only problem was convincing Remo. The phone rang. "Stern here,"

"Daddy." It was Marta. She and Kate had finished for the day. They were leaving shortly for the airport and wondered if Stern wanted to meet them for dinner before her flight.

They hoped to receive banter from Stern, paused, waiting for the punch line, then took the message without comment. Stern called Dixon's home next, but reached only Silvia. They spoke for almost half an hour about the islands, Helen, Marta's arrival. Eventually, Stern asked if Silvia knew where her husband might be. He was due home shortly to pack, she said, and Stern made her promise that Dixon would call.

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"Daddy." It was Marta. She and Kate had finished for the day. They were leaving shortly for the airport and wondered if Stern wanted to meet them for dinner before her flight.

They hoped to reach Peter, too. Eager to see Kate in particular, Stern agreed. He went down the hall to terminate if Sondra could assist on Reino's trial, and to solicit a second opinion from her on the strength of the government's case.

When Stern returned to his office, Dixon was sitting on the cream-toned sofa. Wearing a double-breasted blazer and yellow socks, he had his feet up and was smoking a cigarette. He was brown and wholly at ease; the top of his forehead was peeling. Amazed by his entry, Stern only then noticed the leather key case thrown down on the sofa beside him. He'd forgotten having given Dixon a key.

"Silvia says you broke up with your girlfriend. I thought you had better judgment than that, Stern. She's an interesting gal."

Stern had heard similar criticisms often this week, but he did not care to discuss the matter, especially with Dixon, who only meant to divert him.

"Dixon, have I mentioned before that you are my most difficult client?"

"Yes." He flicked his ashes. The crystal tray was on the sofa beside him. "What's up?"

"Many matters."

Dixon turned his wrist. "I've got ten minutes. The car's downstairs. I have a meeting at LaGuardia at 9 p.m. I spend two years working on this thing and it goes to shit in a week. Honest to God," he said.

Stern considered his brother-in-law with a stark humorless look and sat down behind his desk.

"You are going to prison, Dixon."

"No, I'm not. That's wt/y I hired you."

"I cannot remnke the facts. I have no comprehension of your motives. But I understand the proof. It is time we consider the alternatives."

Dixon caught on at once.

"You want me to plead guilty?" He stubbed Out his cigarette, eyeing Stern as he did it--there was a yellow cast to his eyes, a hulking fetal power. He, felt, evidently, he was under attack. "You think I'm guilty?"

This, of course, was one further element of their unspoken compact. Dixon spared Stern the facts; Stern withheld his judgments. He was surprised to find himself even now so reluctant to express himself, but there was o avoiding it.

"Yes," said Stern.

Dixon ran his tongue around inside his mouth. "Dixon, this matter is taking on hopeless proportions. John has been granted immunity and will testify before the grand jury next week." '

Even Dixon was brought up short by that news.

"And he's saying what?"

"That he followed your instructions--each improper order in Kindle came from you. He was a witless sheep led

astray. I am sure you can imagine his testimony."

"Did John tell you this?"

"Dixon, as you know, I may not communicate with John about this matter."

"Where do you get this from? His lawyer? What's his name, Toomey? I thought you said he was a snake. Maybe he's bullshitting you to help out his old cornpadres."

"About the testimony of my own son-in-law? I would think not. No, TooIcy has done what he must in this case. He has persuaded John to follow his own interests. He is a young man. He has a pregnant wife. No one, Dixon, would

tell him to turn his back on immunity. No one," Stern repeated.

"I won't believe it until I hear it from John." Dixon lifted his chin and dragged on his cigarette. "I could have had a million reasons for placing those orders."

Stern knew that if he asked for one or two Dixon would remain silent for some time.

"Besides," said Dixon, "you've been telling me they have to show I made money through this thing. You said that the profits got shifted into that account what's its name?"

"Wunderkind."

"They can't find the records," said Dixon.

"I believe they have located them," said Stern.

Dixon abruptly came to his feet. He hitched his trousers and walked behind Stern's desk to check on the safe, on which Stern out of habit had rested a foot,

"No, they didn't," said Dixon. He wagged his head and displayed a broad wiseass smile.

Stern groped on his desk until he found the subpoena. Dixon took some time reading it. When he was done, he was considerably sobered.

"How'd they find out where it was?"

"They have their own story, but I tend to suspect it was by the same means they have found out everything else: their informant. Perhaps you were careless in discussing this."

"The only person around who even knew it was moved was Margy, because she cut the check to the cartage guys. I told you that before."

Had he? If so, Stern had forgotten. The detail had not seemed significant then. Dixon was reexamining the subpoena.

"This thing was due today," he said.

Stern described the hearing.

"You're not going to let theta get it, are you?"

"I shall follow any instruction you give me, Dixon, assuming Marta and I agree 'it is within the law.'"

"What are you telling me?"

"I can assert the attorney-client privilege."

"And?" ."

"I doubt I shall have to testify about our conversations."

"What about the safe?"

"That is a complex legal question, Dixon."

"But?"

"When all is said and done, Dixon, I suspect we shall have to produce it."

Dixon whistled. He lit another cigarette.

"Look, Stern, you told me, when I sent it here, those bastards woulda't be able to get it"

told you, Dixon, that your personal papers would be more secure."

"Fine," said Dixon. "It's pemonal. It's all personal shit in there."

Stern shook his head.

"If I say it's personal," said Dixon, "where the hell do you get off saying it's not?"

"No," said Stern. He would not pretend he had never practiced law that way, but he had allowed himself the luxury of a clear conscience for many years and he was not about to become Dixon's winking collaborator. "There is no stretch of the imagination, Dixon, under which internal company documents pertaining to the Wunderkind account do not belong to the corporation. They should have been produced by Margy last week."

"Oh, for cry sake," said Dixon. He stood up and threw off his gold-buttoned blazer. He was wearing a shirt of dark vertical stripes, wide open at the throat, with the white hairs of his chest well displayed; his arms were thick, and dark from the sun. "Get the fuck out of my way." Dixon strode around Stern's desk, bent at the knees, and lifted the safe several inches into the air. Then he began to walk with it.

"Dixon, this subpoena is directed to me, not to you, and I must comply with it. You may not remove the safe from these premises."

With the safe slung between his knees, Dixon started toward the door, lumbering like an ape.

"Dixon, you are placing me in an impossible position."

"Ditto," he said.

"Marta is extremely clever, Dixon. Much more so than I.

There are motions to file. With an appeal, we may keep the government at bay for months. I promise you we shall resist by every lawful means."

"You'll lose." He had little breath, but he continued' swinging along. "You've already told me you don't have a leg to stand on,"

"Dixon, for God's sake. This is madness. You are assuming," said Stern, "that the government has no other way to prove you controlled that account."

Dixon, past the desk, eased the safe to the floor and turned back.

"What other way would they have to prove that?"

"There must be other means," Stern offered lamely. For an instant he'd had a thought of mentioning the check Dixon had written to cover the deficit balance in the Wunderkind account. But that impulse was past. On a giddy night in the woods, he had made an irrevocable promise. Whatever may have occurred since he surely would not go back on his word. At best, he could be indirect. Dixon, the account application cannot be the only means to determine who was responsible for the account. Perhaps John knows."

Dixon peered at Stern in determined silence. At length, he shook his head with painstaking slowness, a gesture of absolute refusal.

"No dice," said Dixon. He bent at the knees again and took hold of both sides of the safe.

"Dixon, if I appear without the safe or an explanation for its disappearance, Judge Winchell, I promise you, will remand me to the custody of the marshal."

"Oh, they won't put you in jail. They all think you walk on water." .

Dixon, I insist."

"Me, too."

"I must withdraw, then, as your lawyer."

Dixon took a moment with that.

"So withdraw," he said at last. He adjusted his shoulders

with a practiced groan, hoisted the safe again. Dixon, you are committing a federal offense right before my eyes. And one in which I am implicated. You are forcing me to notify the government."

Dixon, near the door, glanced back over his shoulder with a sullen, challenging darkness.

"Dixon, I mean it." Stern reached for the phone and dialed the U.S. Attorney's Office. At this hour, they were unlikely to answer. "Sonia Klonsky," said Stern into the instrument, while in the earpiece he continued to hear the ring.

By the door, Dixon dropped the safe; he was red-faced, heaving for breath. As Stern replaced the phone, Dixon waved a hand disgustedly. He took a step out, then came back to the sofa and stuffed his cigarettes and his keys into a pocket of his sport coat. He shook a finger at Stern, but he did not yet have enough breath to speak, and left without another word.

STERN had agreed to meet his children at the Bygone, one of those clever chain restaurants plunked

down by their corporate parents at commercially available spots in every major city in America. The

one in Dallas looked just like the one in the tri-cities--the same old cast-iron lampposts, bell jars for bar glasses, and little girls' trading cards with pictures of kittens cutely cemented under the urethane tabletops. The restaurant stood on a bluff overlooking the network of highways near the Greater Kindel County Airfield. Stuck in traffic, Stern could see it miles away.

The airport now was what the river had been to Kindel County a century ago, a point of confluence for the vast urges of commerce. Great office buildings--rhomboid shapes of shining glass--had risen in what were hayfields only fifteen years before; enormous warehouses with corrugated doors and various chain hotels constructed of pre-formed concrete stood at the roadside, and the

highway was heavily posted with signs for other projects that would be under development to the end of the century. The traffic at all hours was thick. Stern, stalled intermittently, snapped off the radio in the Cadillac so he could give vent to various thoughts about Dixon.

Perhaps, Stern thought, tracing the trouble back to its roots, if Silvia had felt more secure in the aftermath of their mother's death, she would have found Dixon less compelling. Stern had done his best, planned carefully for both of them. He sold some of his mother's furniture and two rings to raise capital, and by the following fall, Easton University, the pastoral haven of privileged education in the Middle West, became the refuge of the, orphaned Sterns. Silvia, a gifted student, ahead of herself in school like her brother, enrolled in the college on a full scholarship; he attended law school on the G.I. Bill.

Stern for the sake of economy, and continuity, lived in their mother's apartment in Du-Sable, riding the train down each morning, while Silvia was soon invited to join a sorority.

For financial support, Stern resumed the punchboard route he had driven throughout college. The punchboards were minor attractions utilized by small-town merchants; for a dime a chance, customers poked tiny paper rolls out of the board and read a joke or, far less often, word they had won a washer or a TV. On Friday mornings, Stern loaded new boards and the prizes won a week before into the aging truck his boss Milkie provided him, and rambled in fourth gear along the prairie highways, visiting the small-town stores to make his deliveries and split the fees. By the time he returned to the tri-cities late Sunday, Silvia had taken the train up and was in their mother's apartment preparing dinner. These were rewarding, expansive moments, coming off the road with the dust of several states on his suit, and he looked forward to his sister's company, their hours as a family of two.

One Sunday night he turned the key and found Silvia seated at the dining-room table with Dixon Hartnell, who was still in uniform. Passing through the city on leave, he had searched out Stern's address and Silvia had let him in.

She claimed to have remembered Dixon's name, but there was no way to be sure. Silvia was smitten with all of Stern's law school friends, and from the first moment you could see that these two young, goodlooking people were intent on each other.

Stern was horrified to find Dixon, long consigned to the past, beside his precious sister. Dixon still had the flossy gleam of a cheap suit, and having been shot at in Korea, having served as the commander of other men, he was if anything more brash. Stern treated him correctly, and sent him on his way after dinner, fairly certain they would not see him again.

Dixon's correspondence with Silvia began properly enough with a note thanking his hostess for dinner. It never occurred to Stern to suggest she not answer. Eight months later, when Dixon appeared again, mustered out and enrolled at the U., it had become a romance. Stern had never been Silvia's disciplinarian and he was at a loss as to how to put an end to this disastrous relationship, though he bristled with disapproval whenever the two were together in his presence and barely spoke to Dixon. Finally in Silvia's junior year, a crisis erupted. Stern forbade her to transfer to the U. to be with Dixon. She accepted this edict with typical silent distress, but three months later they announced marriage plans. Silvia and Dixon countered every irate objection Stern raised: Dixon would convert to Judaism; Silvia would not have to leave college; Dixon, indifferent to school anyway, would drop out and take a job with a brokerage house. Stern, longsuffering, denounced Dixon at length: a huckster; a fake; an illusion. They remained resolute. One Sunday night, Dixon appeared at dinner and begged Stern to attend the wedding: he would both give away the bride and be the best man. 'We can't do this without you,' Dixon said. 'We're the only family each of us has got.'

When Dixon completed his conversion course, Silvia and he were married beneath a canopy. Stern stood immediately behind the bride and groom. He began weeping halfway through the ceremony and could not stop. He had not carried on like that in front of others before or since, but his circumstances had overpowered him: he was twenty-four old now and utterly alone. His search for a wife, never a matter of conscious priority, started at that moment.

As for Dixon and Silvia, there was no saying years later who was right and who was wrong. Silvia relished the comforts time provided and Dixon's almost celestial admiration of her; but her pain, particularly with her husband's wandering, was sometimes intense. Given the history, she never dared speak against him to Stern, except during that short period several years ago when Dixon was banished from the household. One evening then, Stern had come home and found Silvia and Clara at the dining table. There was a sherry shifter between them and he could tell from Clara's warning



look that SOMething was amiss. Red-eyed and tipsy, Silvia spoke at once to her brother.

"I always thought it was all because he wanted children so badly," she said, offering her own explanation for Dixon's wanderlust. That barrenness, which the doctors could not explain, was Silvia's heartbreak in those years; she talked of it often to Clara, but only in private, for Dixon was far too humiliated by their failure to bear the thought that anyone else knew. "But he's taking advantage," said Silvia. "He always has..I did not even realize he had been lying to the rabbi until he took off his pants on our wedding night."

This remark seemed entirely mysterious at first, 'and then deeply shocking. The revelations seemed to ripple off, not around Silvia, but about Stern himself. He was being informed of something deeply telling, yet he could not read the message. By then he had engaged in dozens of athletic competitions with Dixon, stood with him time and again in various club locker rooms. Dixon did no fan dance; the fact, as it was, was plainly displayed. He must have assumed that among men, creatures of the here and now, this centuries-old ritual could be disregarded as brutal or pass6.

Who ever knew exactly what Dixon thought? But certainly he would not believe that Stern had simply not noticed that Dixon had never been circumcised.

On a knotty-pine bench by the door--the entire restaurant motif was of a basement tee room--Stern's daughters waited for him, drinking club soda, engrossed in one another.

Stern took Kate in his arms.

As they were seated, Marta offered Peter's apologies. He had been unable to reschedule his late rounds.

"And where is John?"

Kate's dark eyes skated quickly toward her sister. They had struck some agreement.

"He's with his lawyer," said Kate. "You know where. They have him looking at papers all night." Marta, obviously, had encouraged Kate to be plain, but the subject made her quiet and glum.

"This is a hell of a situation," said Marta in a tone that was largely devoid of blame. She had had many of the details from Stern, but clearly had learned more from Kate during the day.

"If there is not a complete resolution shortly, then I shall be stepping out of the case," said Stern. Marta knew this, but he repeated it for Kate's benefit. Seeing her made him more resolute. He took the hand that Kate had laid on the table beside him. Her eyes smarting, she suddenly hugged her father and brought her face to his shoulder in the small booth.

After debating whether Stern or Kate should be the one to take Marta to the airport, they agreed to go down together in Stern's Cadillac. They left Marta at the metal detectors, then Stern swung back to drop Kate at her car.

The parking lot for the Bygone was on the restaurant's roof, and the location offered impressive vistas of the airport, the highways, the hills, and the violet sky being pinched of the last light. Kate kissed her father quickly and was gone, but Stern, sensing he had not said all he meant to, threw open his door and called after her. He trotted a few steps to catch

up and took her hand.

"This business with your uncle, Kate--the blame for it does not fall on John. If it is any consolation, you must tell him I said so."

Kate did not answer. She looked all around, in every direction, and for no apparent reason began tapping her foot. Stern's impression was that she was about to cry. She rooted in her purse. It Was not until the flame rose in the dark that

he realized what she was doing.

"Katy! You smoke?"

"Oh, Daddy." She looked bout again, all ways, as she had just done.

"How long is this?"

"Always, Daddy. Just a few puffs. Since college. Exams. You know: heavy stressr;s terrible for the baby. I have to cut it out," she said, but then inhaled deeply and turned

her face up into the aura of smoke she released.

"Kate, I realize this has been difficult."

She made a Sound, almost laughter, a bit derisive. "Daddy, I wish it weren't so easy for me to shock you." She spoke almost harshly and stopped herself. They were silent. Then she took a last drag; in the dark he saw the cigarette fall, peated it for Kate's benefit. Seeing her made him more resolute. He took the hand that Kate had laid on the table beside him. Her eyes smarting, she suddenly hugged her father and brought her face to his shoulder in the small booth.

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"Look, Daddy, we'll get through this. We have

Inches taller than he, she brought her soft cheek against his, then hiked off toward her car her high heels clacking, her keys jingling in her hand. He stood in the parking lot, poorly lit, watching as she backed her car out quickly, then gunned the Chevy into a turn, leaving behind a ghost of dark smoke.

Who was that, he wondered, that woman? Of all things, the image that remained with him was of the way she had crushed out that cigarette, with her toe pivoting so' harshly on the asphalt. There was a certain fierce purpose in that which he had never been certain existed in her. He thought of her tonight and as he had seen her at the ballpark and suddenly had the clearest intimation of how it was with Kate. Her whispering. Her murmurs with John. She was a person with secrets, with a secret life. And the greatest secret of all, perhaps, was that she was someone else--someone different from the beautiful innocent thing her parents wished her or allowed her to be. Stern's deepest impression, that she was a person very much like her aunt, like Silvia --lovely, capable, kind, but limited by choice--was merely the impression she had found it easiest to leave, so that she could otherwise elude them, with no trace. Who was she? he thought again. Really? He stood in the mild summer night and turned back to where she had been, but even the smoky cloud of exhaust had cleared away.

Stern slowly drove home. Approaching the dark house, he was tense. If he had anywhere else to go, he might not have gone in. The weeks, months really, he had spent overcome by various women and the ether of sexuality were, if not at an end, at least in abeyance for the night. Without that, he felt in some ways more familiarly himself--round, solitary, solid like a stone. As he knew it would be, the large house was as wholly empty as it had been full the night before with that spirit of visitation. Now he was alone. The silence

loomed about him with the power of some wayward force; he felt his own figure somehow dwindling in the unoccupied space. He stood in the slate foyer, where he inevitably seemed to tune in on his own soul, and thought quite distinctly that his life had gone on without Clara.

It was an absurd notion; what he meant was well beyond expression. The fact, such as it was, had been clear at one level from the instant he stood here months ago, white with panic, yet still able to draw breath. But it seemed that it was not until this very moment that he actually had believed it. Yet he felt it now, his own life, that particular strand drawn out of the intricate tangle of mutual things he and his wife had created and shared. It was like electrical work, finding the line that drew power—he could feel the hum of his peculiar, isolated existence, which had continued with the persistent unmusical rhythm of a beating heart—his own heart, lugging on. He was by himself, neither pleased nor embittered, but aware of the fact. His mind lit somehow on Helen .then, and he closed his eyes and worried his head a bit, full of regrets.

He slept again that night in the bed he had shared with Clara—solid dreamless sleep, if brief. He was up by six and, reverting to old habits, was at his desk by seven. He went through piles of mail that had gone unread for weeks.

He felt calm at the core, purposeful. But in the office something was amiss. It took him at least an hour to notice.

The safe was gone.

"In HIS isn't funny," Marta said when he reached her

I 'in New York on Friday. "You've got to get it /back. I don't know how much of this is privileged,

.1. but even if you told the whole story, no one will ever believe he just took the thing without your help. You're going to end up in jail."

Stern, at the end of the line, made a grave sound. Marta's analysis was much the same as his.

"This scares me," she said. "I think you should get a real lawyer."

"You are a real lawyer," said Stern.

"I mean someone who knows what they're doing. With experience."

What kind of experience might that be? asked Stern. There were no defense

attorneys expert, so far as he knew, in explaining the disappearance of critical evidence.

"Tell him he's a big fucking asshole," offered Marta near the end of the call.

"If I can get him on the phone," answered Stern. Dixon avoided Stern until Monday, but when he came on the line, after Stern had made repeated demands of Elise, he was as innocent as a coquette. "I'd file an insurance claim," Dixon suggested. "Notify the cops. There's important stuff in there." With Stern broiling in silence, Stern's brother-in-law pressed on with this shameless routine. "You're not blaming me, are you?"

Stern spoke into the telephone in a mood of absolute violence.

"Dixon, if you insist on convicting yourself with ludiCrous antics, so be it. But it is my livelihood and my reputation at stake. The safe must be returned promptly." He pounded down the phone.

The next morning, he came to the office hopeful. But the safe was not there. The Berber carpet where it had rested for weeks was now permag. ently dimpled with the impress of the four heavy feet.

At moments during the week, he actually indulged the thought that Dixon might not be involved. He had been in New York late that night, Dixon insisted. He had gone to his meeting. How could he have swiped a safe? What about the maintenance people, he asked, the late-night cleaneruppers? They all had keys. Maybe one of them had noticed the safe after it was moved and decided to carry the thing off, hoping it contained real valuables. The notion, although preposterous, was urged by Dixon relentlessly.

Trying to resolve every last doubt, Stern, despite his warnings to himself, offhandedly mentioned the safe to Silvia, in the midst of their daily conversation on Wednesday.

"Oh, that," she said with sudden exasperation. "You would never believe what went on here." She proceeded to describe a scene last week involving Dixon and Rory, theft driver.

Silvia, recovering from jet lag, had apparently been roused from a sound sleep by the two figures who stood at the closet arguing. The driver, with a heavy German accent, had spoken to Dixon severely, warning him that he was out of breath and should leave the lifting to him, while Silvia sat up in

bed, clutching the sheet to her chest, addressing both men, who, she said, ignored her. Dixon was swearing, fuming, carrying on in a violent temper about

Stern. He had gone off to the airport to rent a private jet. "Sender, whatever is going on between you two?" Stern, who always had an easy time putting Silvia off, did so again. A business disagreement, he told her. Upon reflection, he said it would be best if she made no mention to Dixon of his call. His sister hung on the line, troubled and confounded, caught between the North Pole and the South, the two men who dominated her life. Resting the phone, Stern again regretted having acted impulsively. For one thing, he recognized only now that his conversation with his sister was probably not privileged. He sat scolding himself, while he contemplated the law's obliviousness to family affection. In the worst case, Stern would face ugly choices when he was called before the grand jury: implicating Dixon and abusing Silvia's confidence or, on the other hand, disregarding the oath.

What a trial Dixon could have, Stern thought suddenly.

First, his daughter's husband would incriminate Dixon; then the government would call Stern himself. Under the compulsion of a court order to respond, he would describe Dixon's ape-walk with the safe and its disappearance shortly after. Then, for the coup de grace, the prosecutors would try to find an exception to the marital privilege in order to force Silvia to testify about the safe, too. How Stan Sennett would enjoy it. The entire Stern family versus Dixon Hart-nell. Looking down at the phone, Stern shuddered. It would breach the faith of a lifetime to testify against a client, let alone Dixon, whatever he was.

Stern had come of age in the state courts. There in the dim hallways lit with schoolhouse fixtures, with the old wainscoring beating the intaglio of hundreds of teenagers' initials, with the crotchety political retainers, who displayed an almost pathetic craving for any form of gratuity, he felt at ease. That was a scene of royal characters: Zeb Mayal, the bail bondsman and ward committeeman who, late into the 1960s, still sat in open view at a desk in one branch courtroom issuing instructions to everyone present, including many of the judges called to preside; Wally McTavish, the deputy p.a. who would crossexamine the defendants in death-penalty cases by sneaking close to them and whispering, "Bzzz" and of course the rogues, the thieves--Louie De

Vivo, for one, who planted a time bomb in his own car in an effort to distract the judge at his sentencing. Oh God, he loved them, loved them. A staid man, a man of little courage when it came to his own behavior, Stern felt an aesthete's appreciation for the knavishness, the guile, the selfish cleverness of so many of these people who made it possible to embrace human misbehavior for its own miserable creativity.

The federal courts, which were now in a fashion his home, were a more solemn place. This was the forum preferred by the lawyers with fancy law school degrees and prominent clients, and admittedly, it was a more ideal place to practice law. The judges had the time and the inclination to consider the briefs filed before them. Here, unlike the state courts, it was a rarity for lawyers to engage in fistfights in the halls. The clerks and marshals were genial and, in proud contradistinction to their colleagues in the county courthouse, incorruptible. But Stern never left behind the feeling that he was an intruder. He had won his place of prominence across town, watching his backside, avoiding, whenever possible, the questionable dealings in the corridors, proving over time that skill and cleverness could prevail, even in that brass-knuckles arena, and he still felt that he belonged there, where the real lawyers of his definition were--in the Kindle County Courthouse, with its grimy corridors. and pathetic rococo columns.

These thoughts of one more fugitive border crossed came to Stern in the idle moments before the commencement of the afternoon session in Moira Winchell's courtroom. Remo Cavarelli, cowed and silent, sat beside Stern, biting anxiously at his sloppy mustache and upper lip, Notwithstanding Remo's agitation, the indulgent somnolescent air of the early afternoon had fallen over the courtroom. Judge Win-cheil, like her colleagues, allowed an hour and a half for lunch--time enough for wine with the meal, a screw on the sneak, a run for the athletic. Then, without warning, a door flew open and Judge Winchell stalked from her chambers and assumed the bench, as Stern and Appleton and Remo and the few elderly spectators came to their feet.

Wilbur, the sad-faced clerk, called Reino's case for trial.

In spite of Stern's frequent reassurances that nothing would actually transpire today, Stern could feel Remo quaking at his side. Wilbur already knew there would be a motion for a continuance, and no jury had been summoned.

"Defendant is ready for trial," said Stern, for the sake of the record, as soon as



he reached the podium.

Appleton, Stern knew, was not. He was trying a two-pound buy-bust cocaine case before Judge Horka and would need another week or so before he was ready to go on to this case. With an Assistant less cordial than Moses, Stern might have fussed--there were, after all, .fifty other prosecutors down the street who could try this matter--but he listened in silence to Appleton's request, adding merely, "I object," at the conclusion of Moses's presentation, a remark which Judge Winchell ignored with the studied indifference she would have applied to a stray sound from the hall.

"How's next Thursday?" asked the judge. "I have a grand jury matter that may require some attention, but that's all." The judge, marking in her docket book, let her dark eyes find Stern. "Mr. Stern," she said with practiced discretion, "as I recall, you have some involvement with that matter. Have the parties resolved their impasse?"

"Not as yet, Your Honor."

"Oh," said the judge, "how disappointing." The arch mannerisms did not conceal the predictable: Moira was displeased.

Klonsky had called Stern first thing that morning. 'I don't have your daughter's number in New York. I thought we better talk. You're in the grand jury next Thursday.' It was Friday today.

Her voice still stimulated wild feelings. How goes it with your husband? he wanted to ask. How do you feel? He read out Marta's number from his book.

'Has the government reconsidered, perhaps?'

'We'll compromise,' said Sonny. 'You deliver the safe and an affidavit that says that it's in the same condition as when you received it, and you won't have to appear before the grand jury.' .

'I see.' The government, as usual, would get everything it wanted, but their moderated stance would please the judge.

'I think this is fair, Sandy,' said Sonny. 'I really do.'

The fact that you have the safe just isn't privileged. All we want is the safe and to know that we have everything that was in it. We'd be entitled to get the thing if he'd left it at MD, where it belonged. We can't allow someone to

avoid a subpoena duces tecum by conveying what we want to his lawyer."

Even if he had the safe, Stern might not have agreed, but there was no point in quarreling now. Speaking with Sonny, in fact, made him unbearably sad. The whole situation--all aspects--was impossible.

Stern called Marta to pass on this news, and then at her suggestion drafted a motion to withdraw as Dixon's counsel.

It was a simple paper, stating that there were irreconcilable differences between lawyer and client. He sent it to Dixon by messenger just before he left-to meet Remo, along with a note saying that he would file the motion next Tuesday, Unless the point of difference between them was immediately resolved. The motion was not actually required in a grand jury proceeding, but Dixon would not realize that, and Marta believed it would be an appropriate prelude with Judge Winchell.

Considering the judge now, as Appleton went on begging for more time, it was clear that some groundwork was in order.

When Stern rejected the prosecutors' compromise, offered none of his own, and simply refused to produce the safe-his latest plan--Moir's reaction would be severe. Standing here, Stern saw admirable prescience in Marta's prediction of jail.

The judge made Moses plead miserably, but ultimately set Remo's case down for trial the first week in August.

"And work on that other matter, won't you, Mr. Stern?" she said as she rose from the bench. There, from that considerable height, she smiled in her icy, domineering way, a person accustomed to being obeyed.

In the corridor, Remo again began to quarrel with Stern as soon as they were alone. He was still dead-set against a

"How much more is she gonna give me if I take a trial?"

Remo asked. "With this babe," he said, "I could catch a real whack."

Stern again played Remo the music: If he was convicted, he was going to the penitentiary for a lengthy period, in any event, guilty plea or not: The evidence, all factors considered, warranted proceeding to trial.

"Yeahi but what's it cost?" asked Remo. "You don't work for nothin, right?"

That, Stern allowed, was true.

"Sure," said Remo. "Right. No one works for notbin." So what I gotta give you? Five, maybe?" When Stern hesitated, Remo's dark eyes widened. "More? See. Iain' been doin much as it is. You know, few months now, there ain' much." Stern had no idea whether Remo was referring to legitimate endeavors or not, and by long habit was disinclined to ask.

From other remarks, he took it that Remo's routine at present was confined to visiting the neighborhood social clubs, drinking aperitifs from eleven in the morning on, and playing backroom card games, throwing down money with great show and cursing in Italian. "What's the odds in that? I go way," said Remo, "there ain't notbin as there is for the old lady and the kid. And I give you five?" Remo had settled the matter of fee with himself. "I don't see it. Neh," he said, then furtively smiled. He stepped closer to Stern and whispered, the trace of Frangelico or something else still on his breath from his idle morning.

"Course," he said with a lively look of amusement, "if you had a job or somethin, we could maybe work it out. You know."

Stern peered at Remo.

"You know: Do me, I'll do you. You know. No offense or nothin. You probably ain't that kind of guy." Remo was not at all certain what he had otten himself into or how to read Stern's expression of almost brutal concentration. "No offense," said Remo again. "Right?"

ON Saturday night, Stern returned home prepared for another desolate evening. He was beginning to give in to old habits and was once more spending the weekends in the office, trying to swim through the ocean of items neglected for months. He had spoken with Silvia this morning and with spurious innocence asked what their weekend held in store.

As he had predicted to Remo, she and Dixon would spend both days at the country club. He refused the invitation to join them; legal work called. With whatever honor he retained, he declined to be more specific about his plans. Besides, he was still not certain he really had the nerve to carry through.

Alone now, facing his empty house, he thought with considerable regret of the invitations he had spurned in April and May. Many people now believed

Helen had first call on his time. He would have to send up smoke signals or whatever signs were used by a widower willing to sit at dinner beside the aging malden cousin. Disheartening, he thought, but better than lonely solitude. He opened the car door and recalled in a dizzying rash that two weeks ago he had believed he was in love.

With a foot in the drive, he stopped. Nate Cawley was across the smooth of expanse of lawn between the two homes, tending to his garden. Shirtless in the balmy evening. Nate drove a shovel energetically in the beds of his evergreens.

Stern, taken aback, wondered if he truly had the will to deal with this, too. But the moment for decision passed quickly. Nate became aware of his gaze and Stern rose from the auto and the two men faced each other across the short distance. They met a step or two onto the Cawley property.

"Thought maybe I could get you to make me a drink," said Nate. Involuntarily perhaps, he glanced over his shoulder in the direction of his house and, presumably, Fona. He was glazed with sweat: Grass clippings and specks of dirt clung to the patchy gray hair on his upper body; both hands were caked with dried soil. He briefly developed the courage to look at Stern directly. "Fiona and I had quite a conversation a few nights ago. We probably oughta talk."

"Of course," said Stern and, in spite of himself, swallowed. His heart plunged somewhat and then stalled. It--and be--were not going do Remo, she and Dixon would spend both days at the country club. He refused the invitation to join them; legal work called. With whatever honor he retained, he declined to be more specific about his plans. Besides, he was still not certain he really had the nerve to carry through.

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Stern showed Nate through the front door and directed him back to the sun room. He asked for a diet soda.--Stern recalled Fiona's mention of AAmand was standing there, facing the garden, when Stern returned with the glass. Nate was a slight fellow, narrow across the shoulders and back.

His dirty khaki shorts hung down from his seat, and he was sockless in a pair of old loafers. Except for the bald spot, you might have been reminded of a young boy. Perhaps this was what women found so appealing.

Nate raised the glass in salute, and took a great breath.

He began.

"First off, I owe you a heckuvan apology."

In the courtroom, Stern had learned to say as little as possible in uncertain terrain. He dropped his chin now in a fashion that might have passed as a nod.

"After twenty-odd years, I should have known better than to believe Fiona.

She was so full of vinegar. Probably couldn't enjoy the real thing half as much as she liked telling me." Nate smiled a bit. "And boy, was she ticked off that I talked to you. How dare I." Nate tossed his head about in frank wonderment. "There's only one Fiona," he said.

He had taken a seat on one of the white wicker chairs that surrounded the glass-topped table on which Stern and his children had played cards the morning of the funeral. The late light, almost umber, fell through the broad French windows of the solarium.

"I guess it just suited me to think that something was goin' on. Would have made things easier for me a lot of different ways." He laughed, a nervous sound which Stern realized he had heard from him on other occasions. "I know I should have thought better of you, Sandy. If I had, I'd realized why Fiona hauled you over there when I found that letter under the medicine cabinet. Instead of thinking one silly thing or another.

"But frankly, even after we talked, it didn't dawn on me that was how you'd put it together. I figured then--" Nate paused, and held his own thought with a quick smile which seemed to be at his own expense. "Well, I didn't figure that. I take it you found Clara's pills in her stuff and asked somebody what they were for. Then when Fiona showed you that bottle, it was just like two and two. She told me you counted the caps." Nate looked up, seeking confirmation apparently, and, receiving nothing, laughed in the same fashion. "She didn't have the damndest idea what was going on, by the way. She thought you figured I had it." Nate laid his thumb against his chest and smiled at the thought.

Of course, he enjoyed the notion of Fiona being misled.

To this soliloquy Stern listened with only passing comprehension. But somewhere, as Nate went along, Fiona began to enlarge in Stern's estimation. Recanting, she had apparently mentioned nothing of Stern's advances--or the full nature of their conversations. Perhaps that suited her purposes as well. But all in all, Stern believed she had better motives. Having taken his name falsely once, she had decided not to blacken it again, even with the truth. A gesture of decency--from Fiona, no less. People, thought Stern, could always surprise you.

"So the pills Clara had here came from the bottle in your medicine cabinet?"

"Sure," said Nate. He nodded emphatically, "She wouldn't have them in the house on a bet. She figured you'd know what the pills were for or start asking about 'em. I could never talk her out of that." Nate, downcast, shook his head. "I had to do every damn thing but take the pills for her. Get the prescription, keep the bottle, bring her her caps for the day every morning. Hell, I had to promise I'd write the 'scrip in my name." Nate smiled gently, then looked intently at Stern. "Nothing was more important to Clara than being sure you didn't find out." He took a second to allow that to settle in. "Afterwards," said Nate, "after what happened, I thought it was just as well to keep it to myself. But when you showed up asking question about that bill, I panicked,"

"You were protecting her memory," said Stern, "That's a nice way to put it, Sandy. But you and I both know I was trying to save my own ass." Bent over, he looked away. On the table beside him, framed photos of the family were arranged in a row. The faces of the children at younger ages, Clara, Stern gazed out in witness.

"Look," said Nate, glancing up at once, "I don't want to get sued. I've just flat-ass decided to tell you that. I've been practicing medicine for twenty years, and I'm one of the few guys I know who doesn't spend half his week with lawyers and depositions. I guess my feeling was that this would be the worst time. After hitting the rocks with Fiona. It's the last thing I need, to see my malpractice premium double. I can't afford it, with two kids in school, not to mention alimony. And more to the point, the thought bothers the hell out of merebeing an enemy with your patients. I realize that's the world we live in. The patient died, the doctor mistreated her. What's the term you guys have? The thing speaks for itself. I heard what you said the other day: it's a big check for Clara's estate. I followed you, believe me. That's who sues, right?

The estate? I'm sure there's lots of money to be made here.

But I wanted to try to explain this to you, since I did a piss-poor job of that the last time we talked. Maybe you'll reconsider."

Stern, who had lost Nate entirely for a moment, like a plane off the radar, suddenly had it all, everything, clearly in focus. Nate was Clara's doctor. Her physician.

No more. Stern opened his mouth to speak, but Nate, hanging his head down,

remained under way.

"I'm not gonna pretend that I'd handle the situation the same way today. I've looked backwards and I see that there were a hundred different th'ngs I could have done. In retrospect, I should have brought a shrink in. That's obvious.

Maybe I should have involved you, too. But I was trying to keep her faith."

"Nate," said Stern softly, "I was overwrought during our last conversation. There will be no lawsuit concerning your care of Clara."

"No?" Nate took a moment to adjust to the thought. "That's a hell of a relief."

The two men looked at each other. Nate, chilled by the house's air conditioning, rubbed his arms.

"She spoke to you of this impulse, I take it?" asked Stern.

"Ending her life?"

"She did," said Nate. "She had a way of talking about it."

Nate posed, studying the air so he could recall. "She said she wanted to put out the noise. Something like that. You know, she didn't always go on that way, but over seven years, when things got bad, I'd hear it once in a while.

And I can't pretend I didn't take her seriously.""

Nothing, For an instant: no sound; no time, "Seven years," the man had said. Looking down, Stern realized he'd taken a chair;

"Seven years, Nate?"

"God--I'd assumed--" Nate stopped. "Well, how would you know?" he asked himself. "Sandy, this wasn't

a new condition. It was a recurrence."

"A recurrence?."

"You understand: she wasn't newly infected. This disease in some people returns. About two-thirds of all cases.

Usually, it goes on for a couple of years. It gets better and better and finally peters out. But sometimes, pretty rarely, you can have bad episodes a number of years apart.



That's what happened to Clara. I treated her originally about seven years ago. I really thought that what happened now was going to happen then. The only thing that kept her from giving up was the fact that you weren't around.?"

"I was not?" asked Stern. "Where could I have been?"

"Kansas City,. as I recall," said Nate. "Some trial?"

"Ayayay." Oh, it was terrible. It was the most shameful moment of his life, but he sat there, in his wicker chair, with his eyes closed, thanking God. Seven years ago. That at least neared the periphery of comprehension. Then, eventually, he was taken by a new thought: "My Lord, Nate, after all that time, what was there to hide?"

"Sandy, I think in her eyes it was worse. Beeduse she had said nothing for so long. In some ways, she seemed to feel it was kind of an added deception. And being further from it, she was less accepting of her own behavior. Whatever she'd been thinking back then, she couldn't understand it now. It was this old, awful mistake that she couldn't get away from. And I didn't even know what to tell her anymore, ' '

"You mean medically, Nate? There were no answers?"

"You have to understand the whole history." Nate looked into his glass. "She'd been treated for years with acyclovir. It saved her life originally. I mean it. I got things under control, just like that. She took it preventively for six months. But the drug's toxic enough that they warn against taking it longer. Eventually, she had recm'mnces. Two tiny ones, about two, three years apart. But with the drug--" Nate snapped his fingers. "We'd put her back on, and then five days from onset, good as new. I mean, it was always a trouble and a worry as far as she was concerned. The faintest sign, and she was in my office. I must have cultured her three times a year. But, you know, it was under control. All in all. I thought it was." Nate, who had raised both hands, made a face and let them fall.

"About six weeks before she died, it flared up again. She took her pills and they didn't help. She had a full, florid course. We see that all the time with other viruses or bacteria--some kind of auto-mutation, so you end up with a resistant strain. She had a bad couple of weeks. And then it came back again. I consulted everybody I knew, but it was so damn unusual, and the virus is unpredictable to begin with. And by then she was talking pretty seriously

about doing what she did. I could see her giving up. One time, just kind of like thinking out loud, I said something about talking to you, one of us, and I thought she'd jump right out the window. No way." He repeated that and, as many times before in this talk, shook his head.

"Anyway, I'd thought I'd talked her into trying one more course of medication. Double dosage for five days. That was what was recommended to me. But I had that conference in Montreal. And, to make a long story short, I went. That's where I get really critical of myself." Nate was bent again, almost doubled over, studying his soiled hands. Behind him, out the large windows, the sky was pinking over, and the sun, dying in ember radiance, was masked in thin clouds. "I knew she was in crisis. I talked to her about my going. I gave her the chance to tell me not to, but Clara would never say something like that. You know, she promised me nothing would happen, I gave her all the pills she'd need while I was gone--she said she'd just hide them. And I," said Nate, "I had consulted with another doctor who was aware of the situation, and I hoped he could just kind of watch things for me. But it was my responsibility. If I wanted to play confessor, then I had to know what I was doing."

"Nate," said Stern, "I meant what I said to you in your office. There is blame enough to go around. You need not punish yourself. It was a professional judgment."

"No, it wasn't." Nate drained his glass and looked at Stern. "I took G/eta with me. On the sneak. We made our plans. I," said Nate with considerable weight, "was looking forward to that." Greta, Stern realized, was Nate's nurse, the toothsome bland beauty from the videotape.

"Still sure you don't want to sue?"

"Yes," said Stern. "Oh, hell," said Nate. "There I am in Montreal, lying with this girl, when the phone rings and it's Fiona, bawling her eyes out. I thought she was soused for a change, and then suddenly I realize she's talking about Clara. God, what went through my mind. I just figured, if it ever came out - how I left this patient in distress so I could go speak college French and screw my mistress..." Nate looked

at Stern. "I didn't ever want to have to tell you that."

"Now you have," said Stern. "I SURE have."

The two men hung in the silence.

"And what was the outcome with Fiona?" asked Stern. "Can't put that genie back in the bottle. We each went and got a lawyer. We're gonna sell the house. Both live there for the time being and not talk to one another. That whole mess.

"I am truly sorry, Nate."

"Ye, well, I'd say we died a natural death. I think I'm in love with this girl, Sandy. 'Course, I've wanted to be in love with all of them. I'm like the leila in the song.

Lookin' in all the wrong places. But I think it's true now.

So I'll try it again from the top. Can't do any worse."

"How did Fiona react?"

"Well, she's gonna beat me into the ground financially. She always told me she would, and Fiona'll keep her word, I'm sorry to say. She's got the evidence, all right. I appreciate the warning." He glanced up at Stern. "Pretty goddamn embarrassing," he said. "Lawyer said to me if I really wanted out so bad, I could have saved myself a lot of money by just writing a note."

Stern, in response, could manage only one of his Latin shrugs. He felt for Nate, though, at the thought of him watching that tape and witnessing all the harm he had done.

That truly was not in Nate's character, the inflicting of pain. Oddly, Stern felt a bond to him, joined by the embarrassments which they'd unwittingly shared. He knew Nate's shame, and Nate, of course, had known his for years.

"All in all, I'd say Fiona was actually kind of spunky. You want to know what she said? This'll tickle you. She said men still find her very attractive. She's certain that as soon as we're divorced there'll be all kinds of fellas in hot pursuit. She actually mentioned your name. After tellin' me how she'd been making up stories. Can you beat that?" Nate laughed, but something in Stern's look made him cut himself off. "You can do what you want, you know."

"Of course," said Stern. No more. It made for an uneasy moment, but he felt obliged not to join any conspffacies against Fiona. They had their own compact now, and Stern sensed from what Nate had said that Fiona and he

might have matters to sort out. If so, he had only himself to blame.

Stern saw Nate to the door. When he began to castigate himself again, Stern held up a hand.

"I know what it means to maintain a confidence, Nate. Clara had her secret and you were obliged to keep it."

Nate waited. His mind seemed to be working ahead. Stern wondered if there was more that Nate had determined not to tell him out of some vestigial duty to Clara. Nate seemed to read that thought.

"I don't know who it was, Sandy, if that's what you're wondering."

The sound of it was so gross that Stern's impulse was to deny that he had any curiosity. But of course that was not

"She told me years ago that the person, whoever, was aware of the problem. That was the only thing I had the right to be concerned about. The relationship was already over when she came to me." Nate looked at him helplessly. "I assume it was a man. These'days--" He lifted a hand.

"Yes, ofcoume," said Stern. Of course. This possibility, briefly contemplated, Stern rejected.

They shook hands. When Nate was gone, Stern returned to the solarium and the rOW of family photos lined up in their frames on the game table. A picture of Clara as a very young woman was at the end. She was dressed in a white blouse and pleated skirt, posing in her page boy with a hand on the newel of the central staircase of the Mittlet family home. Hdr smile looked coaxed at best, a wrinkle of hope managed against deep currents of resistance. The world was at war then, and even at the age of thirteen or fourteen, Clara Mittler seemed to have her doubts about the future.

IF one thought about it carefully, as Stern had for three days now, this was not a theft. Not legally. The property in question, the safe, was lawfully in his custody, not Dixon s. And the risks of prosecution, in any event, were nil; neither Dixon nor Silvia would ever prefer charges.

This action was simply an expediency. He had taken advantage of Silvia by asking about the safe. Involving her in its return, in light of Dixon's ironheaded determination not to yield to the government, would compromise

her unforgivably with her husband. This solution was dramatic, effective, and, given Dixon's conduct, richly deserved. But in the car with Remo, driving from the highway through the wooded h'dls with their subdevelopments and residuum of baronial estates, Stern was beset with considerable anxiety--he had not made a court appearance in twenty years that had frightened him the same way. His bowels and his bladder both seemed on the verge of becoming unpredictable, and throughout his entire upper body there was a palpable tremor. Suppose the brwnny German driver came in and resorted to violence? What if the police were somehow advised and entered with guns drawn? Stern, on a dozen occasions, had imagined Remo and him bloodied or massacred.

Remo, driving his old Mercury, was cheerful. He loved his work. He had urged Stern to allow him to do this alone, but that was unthinkable. If someone intruded, Stern, whatever the embarrassment, could explain, but Remo alone might come to real grief. As it was, the risks--at least as they could be calculated--were minimal. The Hartnells would be at the club, Dixon shooting a late round of golf, Silvia sunning herself by the P91, ind on a Sunday afternoon no one else would be home. The cook and the house-man were both dismissed at 2 p.m. The driver stayed with the car, cooling his heels behind the clubhouse. As long as the weather was good--and the sky was crystalline as they drove--the plan was fiawles.

Behind the wheel, Remo smoked his cigarette and chatted companionably.

"I din' done houses much," said Remo. "Not since I'm young.

There ain't no good guys to work with. Them burglars, they're all crazy. I'll never forget, I'm eighteen, nineteen, a guy got me on a job, one of them places down near the river. You know, real fancy apartment. Knocked the door right off the hinges. Jesus, the stuff these people had, real nice stuff, beautiful." Remo lifted two fingertips to his lips and made a kiss. "We got what we got, and I come in the living room and this son of a buck, Sangretti his.

name is, he's got hispants down and he's taking a shit, right there on the rug. I says, What the fuck is this? You know, and .since, I heard all the time about burglars do stuff like that. In somebody's house, for Chrissake?"

Stern, too nervous to respond directly, nodded and for whatever reason felt

obliged to explain again that this was not a burglary. The house was his sister's; it was a practical joke of sorts within the family. An ironic glimmer came into Remo's eyes. He needed no excuses; he knew how it was. Everybody wanted things and did what they had to.

Remo was one of those crooks who believe that they are. no worse than anyone else.

Sensing this judgment, Stern nearly spoke up in his own defense. He was not one of those lawyers, the state court shatpies with the razor cuts who worked only for the Boys, and who took payment in cocaine, or hot artwork, or, in one instance Stern had heard of years before, a hit on his wife. As a young lawyer, he had done things for money on occasion, some of them nasty enough that he no longer cared to rec and the house-man were both dismissed at 2 p.m. The driver stayed with the car, cooling his heels behind the clubhouse. As long as the weather was good--and the sky was crystalline as they drove--the plan was flawless.

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Following Stern's directions, Remo proceeded down the narrow wooded road fronting Dixon and Silvia's home. The house itself, erected more than a century ago of stone and heavy joints of mortar, was below them, behind a quarter mile of lawn, which itself was interrupted by a lighted tennis court. Behind the house, Lake Fowler twinkled, dotted with speedboats and small craft under sail

"Nice," Remo said. He turned the car around and parked so that it was partially obscured by the untamed shrubbery that grew up with summer lushness along the roadside. They would walk in, Remo said, down the long gravel drive. After they had the safe, one of them could bring the car down.

Never park, Remo told him, where it was easy to cut you off. Stern absorbed these lessons in silence, noting that Remo accepted none of his reassurances about the safety of the job.

They walked to the rear of the house, Remo appreciatively examining the grounds. A number of large blue spruce rose throughout the sloping lawn, and the air was freshened somehow by the clear water of the lake. Behind the patio, the gardeners this year had laid out a bright patch of small summer flowers, most so exotic that Stern did not know their names. He looked down to the lake. The boathouse was below and, beside it, a waterfront cottage that Dixon had winterized and filled with athletic equipment. Last year, he had also added a lap pool, and the long finger of still, blue water glimmered. Beside a large screened porch, Remo now looked the great house up and

down. Following Remo's eye, Stern saw that it was the power and phone lines, not the architecture, Remo was assessing. He questioned Stern again about the burglar alarm. Remo had a hand on the metal junction box, and he reached to his back pocket for a tool. He worked there awhile, then waved a number of wires that he had pulled free.

"Is that all?" asked Stern; across the yard.

"That's it."

Remo entered through the screen porch. He had a slap hammer with him, inserted like the other tools in various pockets and covered by the tails of a long velour shirt. For his day on Lake Fowler, Remo had worn blue jeans and cowboy boots. Stern thought he looked very much like a burglar, thickset, with bulky arms and bowed legs.

Remo had driven the lock through the barrel of the doorknob by the time Stern had followed him onto the porch. The back door was secured by a chain. Remo asked if he should pull it free or break the glass. Whichever was more authentic, Stern answered. It was important that it look like a burglary, not for Dixon's sake--he would know what had happened--but for everyone else's. After the break-in was discovered, the police would comb the house but find nothing missing. Only Dixon, eventually, would recognize what was gone and he was in no position to file a police report admitting that the safe had ever been here. Stern regretted upsetting his sister--he might let her know somehow that he was involved--but Dixon's consternation he would savor. Done in on his own turf. Dixon would be livid, unhinged with rage. Standing in the shade of the porch, Stern actually chuckled.

Remo, preoccupied, raised one heavy boot, bracing himself against the wall of the porch, and gave the door a tremendous kick. It flew open with an explosion of plaster dust and the breaking of glass. "Shit," said Remo. The back window had shattered from the impact as the door sprang.

back. The first plan, thought Stern in spite of himself gone awry.

Like much of the house, the hallways were stone; the taps on Remo's heels resounded. He looked about freely as Stern showed him to the staircase. The home had been built in the 1870s, with period elegance--twelve-foot ceilings and tiered moldings. In the dining room a circular mosaic of Venetian tiles was laid in the stone floor. The stillness of the unoccupied house set a shiver



in the bottom of Stern's, spine. He thought about using the toilet, but he wanted to get in and out quickly. This was a bad idea, he thought suddenly. Terrible. Something was sure to go wrong.

Remo leaned into a front parlor to admire the French antiques and the pictures on the walls, English watercolors mounted in heavy frames. "Beautiful, beautiful," said Remo. The wealth of the house, perfectly composed here in its unoccupied state, impressed even Stern.

Upstairs, they moved into the enormous master suite. Dixon years ago had combined three or four rooms to get what he wanted, a bedroom area on the palatial scale of Beverly Hills. There were two baths, his and hers. Dixon's, through which they walked, a cavern of travertine, held a Jacuzzi the size of a small swimming pool, and a one-bay wooden sauna attached to the shower. The bedroom itself was not particularly large, but it was lestoned with various gizmos--intercoms, a telescope, an old market ticker, a large projection TV which pivoted on a remote control over the bed. A deck out the French doors provided a commanding view of the lake. On the side of the bed where Dixon slept, the antique night table was stacked with business magazines and a number of thrillers. An ashtray held

the butts of three cigarettes. Stern felt oddly thrilled by the chance to spy.

"Here," Remo called. He had entered the walk-in closet on Dixon's side of the room and cleared away his suits.

"That it?"

The safe was right there, dull gray, the color of seawater under clouds, turned on its back, so that the silver numerical dial was face up. A set of free weights was beside it, the plates haphazardly stacked; a bar, with three dishes on each side; had been rolled to the wall..

"Just so," said Stern.

"Getback," said Remo. Stern moved into the room. "Oh,

my fucking God." Remo swung the safe out the door and set it down promptly. "That's a fuckin ton."

to mb his back. "We He stood up straight shotdrift brOught help."

Both men stared at the safe.

"Thing's open," said Remo. With the safe set on its

bottom again, its small door indeed hung open a dark fin gerbreadth. Dixon, evidently, had checked the contents,

perhaps to be certain that Stern had left them undisturbed.

Or could it be that whatever the government was seeking had been removed? With this thought, that the safe had been emptied, Stern knelt immediately and pulled the door wider. The light was poor, but he could see that there was a wad of papers inside, folded, doubled and tripled over.

There, on his hands and knees, even before he made out the sound, Stern could feel the vibration of the garage door opening.

"Oh, my LOrd." He rose awkwardly and ran a few steps to the doorway to listen. He faced Remo. "Someone is here." Outside, he had heard the gravel crunching, but by the time he reached the bedroom window he could see only the rear fender of a Mercedes as it pulled into the farthest bay of the four-car garage.

"Oh, for Godsake," said Stern. He had not fully imagined how humiliating this was going to be. It was a shocking breach of decorum--inexcusable, inexplicable-breaking into someone's home.

"Hide," said Stern.

"Hide?" asked Remo. "What for?" An eyebrow lowered. "You mean this ain' really your sister's?"

"Of course it is. But I prefer not to be apprehended in this silly exercise."

"I been caught," said Remo. "Lots. I don't never hide. Guys get shot like that. Just siddown. Be quiet. Maybe they ain't comin upstairs." Following his own advice, Remo found one of the eighteenth-century French chairs beside Silvia's writing desk. He crossed his legs and smiled patiently at Stern. He reached to his pocket for a cigarette, then thought better of that.

Remo was right, Stern thought. His own reactions were juvenile. Particularly if it was the houseman or the driver, there would be real danger in some

effort to avoid him. But Stern's skin still' crawled. Dixon would never let him live this down. He would ridicule, threaten--whatever advantage he could wring from having caught Stern in flagrante burglary would be utilized repeatedly. Stern crept into the carpeted corridor, stepping forward with breathtaking precision, like a pantomime character. In some unconscious japcry of this task, he had dressed all in black, in slacks and a cotton golf shirt, and he hung back now in the shadows.

He could hear the steps rapping out in the stone hallways downstairs, an even slapping rather than the sharp clack of a woman's high heels. Would Dixon be violent? His temper with Stern was ordinarily restrained, but this was a much different setting. If someone popped out of the shadows in Stern's home, what would his reaction be? Probably to run.

But that was Stern.

The footfalls drew near the stairs. Stern pushed back into one of the doorways. Whoever was down there lingered, then walked away. With a desperate plunge of his heart, Stern recalled the kitchen. The narrow hall from the garage emerged right beside it; if the person who'd entered noticed the broken glass, he would surely hale the police.

Stern listened intently; if there was a voice on the phone, he was determined to run. He looked about to see where he was--Dixon's den. Fax, computers, three telephones. The old rolltop desk was heaped with papers, and the shades, for whatever reason, were drawn. A pillow and a blanket were on the sofa. Dixon, he took it, was not sleeping well. This room, more than the rest of the house, was rank with the rancid smell of cigarettes.

The footsteps came back. Then nothing. After a short time, he realized the visitor had started up the carpeted stairs.

Stern pushed back farther, so that he could see only the landing. The person was upstairs now, but Stern had not yet caught sight of the figure. Then Silvia, in a graffitipatterned beach cover-up and fiat shoes, passed by, looking about, wholly abstracted, mumbling to herself. She pushed her sunglasses up so they sat atop her upswept hairdo. Like Dixon, she was richly tanned. She was headed for the bedroom where Remo waited.

Stern held his head and, after one more second's faltering, called his sister's name.

She shrieked--not for long, but at a high, hysterical pitch. "Oh, my God," said Silvia. She had laid one hand, with its polished nails, over her heart and the other touched the Wall. She was breathing deeply. "Sender," she said. "You nearly killed me."

"Forgive me."

"What in the world?" she asked.

Stern actually deliberated saying that he had come to go swimming. But enough was enough.

"I am stealing something," he answered.

She took only a second with that. "The safe?"

He nodded. Silvia's expression became cross--power-fully irritated. She spoke to him in Spanish for the first time in probably forty years: What is in the safe?

"¿Qué es lo que contiene la caja de seguridad?"

"No sé." I do not know.

"¿Esto es para ayudarlo?" This is to help him?

Stern shrugged. "I believe so," he answered in English "I must do this, in any event."

"Give me a moment. I want to speak with you about all of this. I came back for a book." She turned again toward her room, but Stern took her hand. There was a man he had brought with him in there, he told her.

"Oh, Alejandro!" She shook her head in severest reproof. "You are like two boys, you and Dixon."

"This is a serious matter."

She made a disgusted sound. She refused to believe it.

Stern led her downstairs to the living room. Silvia, unfailingly polite, offered him a drink, and he asked for soda. She tapped her shoe for a moment on the servant's button, in the carpet beside the sofa, then, recalling it was Sunday, went off by herself. Stern looked about the vast living room. Silvia and her decorator had strived for a crowded, almost Egyptian effect; the colors were

dark, with many eruptions of gold in the fabrics, and there was furniture in all corners--chaises, heavy drapes, twin antimacassars with a whiskery fringe, adorned, for no apparent reason, with voile shawls. On a table was a huge vase of woolly protea, dark desert plants with a primeval look. The far wall of the room was all stone, like the facing walls of the house, with an enormous hearth of double-width beams. An original oil by a well-known Spanish artist--one of his savage women, purchased years ago by Dixon, with his inevitably astute eye--hung fearsomely over the fireplace. In the winter, logs the size of tree trunks burned here all day. They left, even now, a smoky residue, as if the air had been cure&

"What did you do to my kitchen?" demanded Silvia as she returned. She handed her brother the glass but looked at him scoldingly. Stern made one of his expressions and Silvia smiled, though she went on shaking her head.

"Stern," she said, "you must tell me what is occurring."

In her absence, he had pondered how to put this, and he adopted a moderate approach. The government was investigating. They had done so before, but this was a criminal matter and the prosecutors seemed to have hold of evidence of some questionable practices on Dixon's part.

The investigation had grown increasingly complex, but Dixon was attempting to put his head in the sand. The government had' demanded the safe, and Dixon, against Stern's advice, was endeavoring to hide it, a maneuver which would prejudice not only Dixon but Stern. He spoke allusively, hoping his sister would not gather the full impact, but she understood enough

"Is he in danger of prison'?",

"He is," answered Stern. Silvia sat still, a small woman sparely knitted together. She looked tiny, with her bare legs and flat shoes. She clutdher elbows close to her body and drew her face long to maintain her composure.

Stern himself, to his enormous surprise, found himself on the verge of tears in sympathy.

"I have been very concerned for him," Silvia said.

"I as well."

"You have no idea, Stern." She knotted her hands. "He coughs for thirty

minutes When he wakes up in the morning.

His secretary tells me he is terribly forgetful. He does not sleep. He wanders about at all hours. Or leaves in the middle of the night, headed God knows where. For the last week he has not even slept here once." She glanced up at Stern; this was intended to be a significant remark, referring apparently to something other than Dixon's travel schedule..

"I am attempting to help him, but he is resisting,"

"Of course," she said, "but I am afraid he will never survive?"

"He will survive," said Stern. "He is one of those types who always survive and triumph." Spoken, the words struck him as merely cordial. He had not realized until now how deep-seated his own fears for Dixon were, even as he felt some swell of resentment rise when he predicted his glory,

"I had hoped to come and go today without involving you."

"I shall not tell him," said Silvia.

Stern weighed this, but remained convinced that it would be wrong to force Silvia to take sides. Dixon was entitled to the comforts of home.

"That is not necessary."

"Unless he asks," she offered.

"He is certain to ask once he sees the disorder in the kitchen."

"I shall have it repaired. Tomorrow. Today, if possible. I would be very surprised, at any rate, if he spends the night here." She looked down again at the rag. Years ago, before Silvia had evicted him, Dixon would do this, fail to return. He had an apartment in town where he usually claimed to be, and no doubt often was, enjoying one young woman or another. Once he and Silvia were reunited, however, Dixon seemed to maintain a minimal pretense and confined his roaming to business hours or his many trips out of town. "It is very disturbing," she said.

He nearly uttered a word or two in Dixon's behalf, about

the strain recently, but he realized it would be little comfort. "Do you ask where he goes?"

"Work." She smiled tersely. "Of course, there is no answer when I phone."

"I see." Stern at first said nothing. "I must say, I hope this can be endured. It would be a terrible moment for you both to repeat your separation."

Silvia made a face. "There will be no repetition. I am accustomed." She smiled the same way, briefly, bitterly.

"As you know, our difficulty was not only that."

Stern looked at his sister without comprehension.

"Oh, you knew. Clara knew. She told you; I knew she would."

You are gallant, Stern, but there is no need to pretend."

"I am not pretending," said Stern.

"Truly?"

"Truly."

"It is long past," she said, and flipped a dark slender hand. She was ready to give up the subject, but she saw that Stern was still puzzled and she came forth with the truth abruptly to satisfy him. "He had come home with an illness. Which I was afraid he had inflicted on me. It was repulsive.:"

"An illness?"

"A disease. You understand."

His head was tinging now, and his throat and chest felt terribly constricted. He asked, nonetheless, as he knew he

was required to.

"Herpes?""

Her mouth opened somewhat and then, to his amazement, Silvia smiled--in a reluctant fashion, part grimace. She would never see through him, she would never understand him. Only from Stern in the entire world might this be tolerable, but if he insisted, she would find humor in the pain of the past. Older brothers, after all, forever reserved the right to tease,.

"Oh, Stern," she said to him with a girlish wag, "you knew all along."

EVENTUALLY, Remo descended the staircase. He had brought the safe with him, and he took each step sideways, in a straddle, lowering one booted foot,



then the other. It was slow work and he stopped at one point and rested the safe.

He lit a cigarette and eased down the remaining stairs, with the Marlboro tucked in the corner of his mouth and one eye closed to the smoke. From his seat on a living-room settee, Stern could see Remo coming, but he made no move to assist him, nor did he open his mouth to speak. He was capable of movement, no doubt of that; but he was uninterested. Perhaps he would remain here, with his hands folded, for what was left of his life. He did not feel any emotion with particular strength, except that he was no longer himself. His head was still ringing, and his arms were light; but, predominantly, he was beset with the sensation of difference, departure. A new man--not better or worse--but someone else would leave here.

"I heard you talking in the hallway," said Remo when he finally arrived. He knew his presence was no secret.

"Of course," said Stern. "Remo Cavarelli, Silvia Hartnell."

Silvia nodded properly to the man who had broken into her house.

"We goin or what?" asked Remo.

"Stern, are you all right?" asked Silvia. This was not the first time

, 'Quite all right.' Stern managed a smile. His voice, sounded peculiar to him, weak. It was as if his spirit had fled his body and was outside, examining him,

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smiled fleetingly again,

"Oh, yes"

Remo departed for the car. Silvia, too, left the room to make a phone call. Thereforas a local fireman who did work around the house and might even be available on Sunday to repair the kitchen.

Stern was left alone with the safe. Remarkable, really, Stern thought, that he had spoken Spanish to Silvia--he would have wagered a large sum that he could not finish a sentence. Occasionally over the years, certain latino gentlemen appeared in Stern's office, Cubans usually, who needed the assistance of bilingual counsel. And of course, during the 1970s there were the pathetic impoverished Mexicans who were arrested here by the gross for distributing brown heroin, sad, unlettered men, spewing their chingas and

begging Stern to take their case at any price. Stern had always declined 'such representations. It was not the drags that bothered him; it was the old fear of being recognized for what he feared he was, someone else who did not belong here. But he saw very clearly, as he held off more pressing thoughts, that that period and those attitudes were behind him. Those clients would henceforth be welcome. The words, he was sure, would come back to him over time.

He reached for his soft drink and tasted it. Silvia had said he knew all along. She had meant something else, naturally, but alone here he wondered if the unintended meanings were also correct. A part of him remained solidly composed with the truth; his first faith would always be in the facts. But in another region--someplace silent but still known to him--the toll was mounting, the damages were still being assessed. If he had foreseen this, it was only with that inner eye that always envisions the bad dreams--the worst dreams--coming true. It was clear now that it was much more than what that Clara dared not live to tell.

Her choice of a lover was no accident; he would never be persuaded otherwise-- Clara knew her husband too well. Afterwards, even she must have been frightened by the sheer ferocious spite that had moved her. It was that which she trembled to reveal. Well, at least the evidence of his senses had not failed him. Clara indeed had no use for Dixon after he returned to Silvia. She must have been disgusted with him. And herself. What transpired between them? What conversations? He was back here again, a familiar point of arrival, feeling he would probably rather not know.

Stern hunched forward on the settee and brought a toe to the door of the safe. It was still open and Stern with the sole of his shoe wedged the little door wider. The lump of papers was in there. Oh, why not? he thought. He could put up with anything.

There were two full sheets from a microfilm printer, heavy with toner, each folded in four. As he removed them from the safe, various items, about which the records were wrapped, fell out: two checks and a number of the gray celluloid squares which Stern recognized as microfiche cards.

"The phones are not working," said Silvia, coming back to the living room; she was deeply perturbed. "How can I reach him?"

Remo returned at that moment.

"Who's that?" he asked. "Who's comin?" Remo'd had enough time in the closet to noflce the weights and, all things considered, wished to be gone when the man of the house arrived. Silvia explained her difficulty, and they disappeared together so Remo could reconnect the phone lines. In the interval, Stern went through the papers from the safe, studying them for some time. Remo returned first, then Silvia breezed back in.

"He's on his way now," Silvia said. She seemed consoled by the thought that the disorder in her kitchen would be quickly repaired.

"Well, let's get goin," said Remo, a hasty departure still on his mind. He bent over the safe. "Alley-oop," he said.

Stern and his sister followed? he lumbered through the stone hailway. Stern had all the papers from the safe cradled in his hands. Silvia held the screen for Remo, and at his request opened the rear door to the Mercury.

Squinting in the brilliant sunshine, Stern and his sister watched as Remo sank to his knees to lower the safe onto the dirty floor of his spring-shot Cougar. He stood up straight and dusted off his hands while he waited to catch his breath. A fill of sweat had run down his temple.

"On second thought," said Stern suddenly, "we shall leave it."

Remo's jaw fell open, revealing a mouth full of bad teeth.

"If you would, Remo, I shall ask you to replace the safe where we found it."

"No," he said, in disbelief.

"Please," said Stern. He had assumed, without thought, his most commanding manner, and Remo looked. at him uncertainly, reluctant to obey but unwilling to object further. Stern turned to Silvia. "It shall all be as it was. You need say nothing."

She, too, appeared confused, but, like Remo, did not-know how to respond to the change in his manner.

"Very good," said Stern to both of them. He walked back into the house, mining to ask Remo to bring the safe into the living room for a moment. Stern had continued to hold all the items from the safe, and he sat again on the settee and laid them out on the raw-silk fabric so that he could arrange the

papers as he had found them. The two copied pages were first, then the microfiche squares, then, at last, the two checks, one nested inside the other. He studied them again. The first was Dixon's canceled personal check for \$252,646 made payable to MD Clearing Corp. The note in the memo section said "Debit A/c 06894412," which was surely the number of the Wunderkind account. This was the check which the government, according to what Sonny had told him in Dulin, had already obtained a microfilm copy of through the subpoena to Dixon's bank.

The other check, the one Stern examined at greater length, was printed on the long green bank stock of River National and was a certified draft drawn on Clara's investment account and made payable to Dixon Hartnell personally. The amount, inscribed correctly in numbers and figures, was \$851,198. Stern held the check, full of the strong emotion that contact with Clara's possessions continued often to bring over him. Then he refolded both checks and wrapped them and the microfiche cards in the two printed pages, along the same creases on which they had been folded before. These sheets reproduced the first and last pages from the account agreement for Wunderkind Associates where identifying information for the account holder would appear--name, address, social-security number. On the last page, after dozens of paragraphs of warnings and dischireefs, the customer executed the agreement. Before replacing the papers in the safe, which Remo obediently had set at his feet, Stern peeked again at the final line where in her steady fluid hand Katherine Stern had signed her name.

CERTAINLY, he was no happier. Much of what had transpired in the 'last few days had left him more confused than ever.

But somehow an old ability to distract himself with work had revived. Recently, Stern had resumed his habit of being the first person in the office, and in the last week, he had agreed to take on three major new matters--an insider trading ease already under indictment; a defense fraud investigation conducted out of Washington; and a county case in which the owner of a waste dump faced possible manslaughter charges. Beleaguered, Sondra and Raphael pleaded that they were too shorthanded for more work. But Stern himself was ready. In the office, he felt an energy and relish that had been previously lacking. The toil of man in society! The rushing about, the telephone calls the small breaks of light in the tangle of egos and rules. Mr. Alejandro Stern adored the practice of law. His clients, his clients! No siren

song was ever more compelling than a call to Stern from someone in dire straits, as tough in the precinct lockup in his early days, or a businessperson with an IRS agent at the door, as happened more commonly now.

Either way, it excited him to a kind of heat: 'Speak to no one. I shall be there momeaWhat was it? What was this mad devotion to people who balked at paying fees, who scorned him the moment a case was lost, lied to him routinely, withheld critical information, and ignored his instructions? They needed him.

Needed him! These weak, injured, even buffoonish characters required the assistance of Alejandro Stern to make their way. Disaster loomed. Life destruction. They wept in his office and swore to murder their turncoat comrades. When sanity returned, they dried their eyes and waited, pathetically, for Stern to tell them what to do. He drew on his cigar. 'Now,' he would say quietly.

In the afternoon on Monday, he found a moment to call Cal.

"Just to let you know," said Stern, "that the matter of the elusive check has been resolved."

"Oh, really?" asked Cal. He waited.

"So, if you would be so kind, Cal, let our friends at River National know that all is well and thank them for their cooperation."

"I will," said Cal, "I will." He cleared his throat. "May I ask?"

"Quite a complicated matter," Stern said..

"The beneficiary, I meant. The payee,"

"It is difficult to say," said Stern, striving for a frank tone, "just at the moment. But the matter is well in hand,."

Cal. Have no doubt. My deepest thanks to you,"

"I see," said Cal. He was hurt, of course. He expected greater veneration and confidence from Stern, as a matter of professional courtesy, if nothing else

Returning home that evening, he found an enormous hanging case in the foyer. He bent to examine the luggage tag.

Marta was back. She usually traveled with a backpack and a briefcase, the

baggage of her diversified life.

She was not in the house. Instead, after circling the first floor and calling, he spied her out the solarium windows,

leaning across the hedge in animated conversation with Fiona. Marta was listening, with far more interest than she generally showed their neighbor. Stern ventured out. When Marta saw him, she broke off to embrace him, and Stern, by some peculiar logic, then reached over the hedge, took Fiona's tanned hand, and kissed her as well. She was in her gardening attire, a few leaves in her hair with stray vegetation, and she seemed to blush at Stern's enthusiasm.

"Doesn't she look wonderful!" Fiona declared, motioning to Marta, who was in the usual formless floor-length frock.

Fiona undoubtedly held the private belief that Marta was dressed like one of the women who had walked behind the wagon trains across the prairie. "I was just giving Marta the news," said Fiona.

"Oh, yes?" asked Stern, with some foreboding. "About Nate and me," said Fiona more definitely.

"Ah, yes. Nate mentioned that. I am sad to hear it, Fiona."

"We're probably both better off." Like many people on the other side of a dread event, Fiona appeared, as she said, better off--more resilient than one might have expected.

Marta was beginning to slip away toward the house. Stern made a remark about stumbling over her suitcase.

"I'm planning to stay for a while," she told him. "I quit my job."

"You did?" asked her father. "Just like that?"

"A month's notice, but I have some vacation coming. I'll go back for a few days next month to clean up. But last time I was here, I was looking at Katy, how tired she was, and it just sort of dawned on me, she's having a baby and I'm going to be eight hundred miles away for no good reason. Why did I bother taking the bar exam in four states if I don't go where I want to? I'll find a job here. Do you mind?"

"I should say not."

Fiona chimed in: Wonderful, wonderful how nice for all of them. Stern found his head bobbing in agreement.

"I have to call Kate," Marta said. "I'm supposed to go see John and her later. Do you want to come?"

"Not tonight," said Stern promptly. "Please tell Kate, however, that I wish to have dinner with John and her later this week.?"

"God," said Marta, "you sound so serious.?"

He supposed he did. Stern did not answer, and Marta galloped into the house. Both Fiona and he watched her go

"Did you take it she is planning to live here?" asked Stern

"It sounds like it.?"

"Dear me." The thought of Marta and her vitamins and minerals in permanent residence provoked a moment of consternation. Fiona, in the meantime, had crept a bit closer to the hedge.

"I suppose that you're madder than hell at me," she said quietly.

"Hardly, Fiona. In truth, I received what I deserve&."

"I was trying to warn you that night. When Nate came home.

Honestly." She tested Stern with a glance. "After all, Sandy, I had to say something when he found that letter.

You put me in a helluva position. And I couldn't stand to tell the little bastard that I'd had some respect for our marriage, when he didn't have a bit. But do you know the worst part? When I told him that ridiculous story I could see he was actually happy. Do you believe that?" Fiona shook her head gravely. "Why am I always so dumb?" she asked Stern, and looked at him momentarily as if she expected an answer. She stood in her garden, just over the property line, hopelessly lost to the misery of being herself, of making so often, like everyone else, the same mistakes

"He swears up and down, by the way, that those pills weren't his," Fiona said. "He kept saying they were for a patient. Finally, he told me if I didn't believe him I could call the other doctor who worked on the case. Guess who that was."



Stern lifted his hands: no idea. "Peter."

"Peter?"

,Your son. Isn't that a coincidence?"

The night was thick. The bugs were out now in mid-July, buzzing and biting, and Stern swung at something close to his ear while he thought of the look Nate had given him the other evening when they were parting. It was obvious what Nate had held back. Stern realized he had been right all along. At the thought of yet another showdown, he nearly

groaned. Perhaps with Peter it was unnecessary. "Anyway, I'm sorry," said Fiona.

"Fiona, the apologies are all mine. As you say, I put you in a difficult position: And you more than made up for it. I appreciate your discretion with Nate when you spoke again."

"Oh hell, I figm'ed what's the point. I couldn't give him any more satisfaction." She remained glum, and continued shaking her head, overwhelmed by divorce, herself, the varied but momentous concessions of defeat that life just now was requiring.

"Nonetheless," said Stern, "I am sorry to have made you the victim of my state of disruption."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad." She looked up then, shyly, teasingly, beneath her penciled brows, a pretty fifty-year-old woman in her avocado gardening outfit, practicing the elusive, winsome look she used to give the boys. "Kind of gave me a boost." Disconcerted by her prior remarks about Peter, Stern nevertheless could not keep himself from laughing aloud.

"You have been very generous, Fiona."

"Oh, sure," she said once more. She considered him pensively, some deliberation evident in the striking yellowish eyes. But he could see they had made their ways.

His ship and Fiona's were each headed off for their own channels. His tact, for once of late, had not failed him-truly, he was more and more himself. Moved by all this, he reached out and took Fiona's dirty hand, which rested on the bushes, and kissed her palm.

"Here we go again," said Fiona. She rolled her eyes and walked away. Stern called after her: let him know any way he might help. She waved bravely, then paused by the gray steps to her back porch. "Do you know that little son of a bitch has actually stopped drinking?" she asked Stern across the short distance and then, with the strength of challenge, resentment, her entire complicated persona, shook her head fiercely once more and pulled open the door.

In his kitchen, Marta was replacing the phone,

"How is your sister?" asked Stern.

"Uneasy. There seems to be a lot of strain. She said John testified in the grand jury last week."

"So I understand. I spoke to Tooley today"

Marta asked for a description of John's testimony. She had been reluctant to ask Kate.

"My conversation was as one would expect with Mel. Very evasive. He made it a point to tell me that he had not been in the grand jury room--as if I thought he might have been.

It seems, though, that it went very much as we would have thought. John blamed your uncle: Dixon gave all the orders; John carried them out, with no appreciation of their significance."

"Ugh," said Marta.

"Yes, indeed."

"And what about the safe?"

"I do not have it," said Stern simply. "Have you heard from Uncle Dixon?"  
"Not a word."

"Can you figure out what he's up to?"

"At moments I have an idea. Then, again, I am mystified."

"You let him know you'd file that motion tomorrow, didn't you? To withdraw?"

Stern said he had.

"You better go through with it. You have to put some distance between yourself and him, That woman, Sonia, whatever her name is, she's going to be screaming for your scalp. And Judge Winchell may give it to her."

"Yes," said Stern. He had considered that too. "So?" asked Marta.

"So we shall see." Stern walked across the kitchen and took his daughter in his arms. "Go meet Kate. Tell her about your change of residence. I am sure she will be delighted."

"What about you? You really don't mind having your nutty daughter come back?"

Stern kissed her. He thought of Peter, of John and Kate. Of Dixon. Clara.

"You will be at home,;" he said to her.

It was not quite seven when Stern arrived at the office on Tuesday morning. He had left Marta a note suggesting she come downtown this afternoon to plan as , best they could for his grand jury appearance two days from now. He had heard her return late last night, but he had not risen to greet her. Another day could pass without heating the latest of Kate and John.

Inside the outer door, Stern waited. A sound? Some sense of disturbance. He paused at the door to his office, which was ordinarily locked but now stood barely ajar. From the threshold, he pushed it wider. Across the rooms on Stern's cream-colored sofa, Dixon was asleep. He had stunk up the space with his cigarettes and the effluvium of his slumbers.

Beside him, on the carpeting, stood the safe. 'Quietly, Stern slipped behind his desk. He worked there for about fifteen minutes, until a client called, the defendant in the waste-dump investigation, a heavy-bellied fellow named Alvin Blumberg. Alvin was one of those types guilty as sin and paralyzed with fear; he wanted what he would never hear--a promise he would go free. Stern listened as Alvin ventilated, complaining about the prosecutors, his business partners, the intolerance of his wife. After some time, he broke off the call. He would have to introduce Alvin to Sondra. When he replaced the phone, Dixon was just sitting up, stretching out, yawning, rubbing his eyes. He was wearing a simple cotton camp shirt and a pair of pleated trousers; a heavy gold chain was around his neck, and he immediately pounded at his shirt pockets looking for his cigarettes.

"What time is it?"

Stern told him..

"I have to call Silvia. You rind?"

Stern pushed the phone to the corner of the desk and watched as Dixon spoke with his wife: He had come down to Sandy's., there were papers.to look at, he had been hou will be at home,'; he said to her.

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with his wife: He had come down to Sandy's., there were papers.to look at, he had been here all night. "He"s sitting righthere. He found me asleep. Ask him. You found me asleep, right?" Dixon turned the phone around. Stern, reluctant to be Dixon's prop and his excuse for a night spent God knows where, murmured in the direction of the mouthpiece that Dixon had been asleep. "You see?" Dixon then ran through his schedule for the day with her, every meeting, each person he expected to see. "I love you," said Dixon near the end of the call. Stern watched him, tanned, whiskcry, the flesh beneath his jaw slackening, His wavy hair was beginning to thin. Age was overcoming him, but Dixon still brought to his conversation with Silvia all earthly interest. In their waning years, as they .slipped into dotage, Dixon and Silvia would maintain their happy fixation on one another, aided, no doubt, by some inevitable dwindling of Dixon's interest in other pursuits. The recognition, as usual, affected Stern: however thwarted or immature Dixon's emotional life, it was no lie when Dixon told Silvia he loved her. After his discoveries on Sunday Stern would have expected that witnessing this exchange,. as he had so often over the years, would have driven him to rage, but his immediate sensation was of absence, pining the sting of real envy-his own wife was gone,,.

"You want to go get some breakfast?" Dixon asked him. He had cradled the phone.

"What is it you have brought me, Dixon?"

"You wanted the fucking safe? There's the fucking safe. Am you happy now? Problems all solved?"

"The government also wishes an affidavit from me stating that the contents have not been disturbed." ',So give them the affidavit."

"How am I able to do that?"

"You want to see what's in there?"

"On the contrary. I am simply making a point."

"I want you to look." The safe was facing him and Dixon spun the dial. After reaching in, he threw a single piece of paper down on the glass of the desk. It was Dixon's check, folded in four, the one he had written to cover the debit balance on the Wunderkind account. Stern found his glasses

and made a considerable show of studying the document. ' 'No more?"

"You know what the fuck you're looking at?" Dixon had given up all sign of his civilized manners. He was his true self now, agitated and profane.

"I believe I understand the significance of the check to the government." If they turned over only this, Sonny Klonsky would accuse Stern of more bad faith, of conforming the contents of the safe to the contours of the government's knowledge. Of course, that would remain one more private grief between them--she would never be able to tell Sennett what she had revealed. "The prosecutors seem to believe that there are account documents somewhere."

"Are?" asked Dixon, with one of his roguish smiles, He was stressing the present tense.

"That would be most foolish, Dixon."

"Well, I kind of agree," he said. "I was having a little bonfire, and then I had second thoughts, but that's MI I could save." He pointed to the check. "They won't complain, They'll have my head on a platter, anyway, if they ever get hold of that."

"Assuming they' have not obtained this check already," said Stern.

"Where would they get it?" "It is possible, of course, that this was what they were llooking for with their subpoenas to your bank."

Absorbing that thought, Dixon proceeded to the obvious: Why bother with the safe if they could already establish Dixon's control of the Wunderkind account? Tactics, Stern explained. Proof that Dixon was withholding documents would provide compelling evidence of his guilty frame of mind.

"You mean I've fallen into their trap?" Dixon asked. "In all likelihood,, said Stern. He had his hands folded: He was relentlessly composed. He had never given a better performance. Dixon, in the meantime, stroked his chin thoughtfully. He sighed, pulled his nose; he shook his head."

"You think I should plead guilty, don't you? That's what you said last time."

"If one is guilty, that is always an alternative that merits serious consideration,..."

"So what'll happen to me? What kind of deal can you cut?""

"The usual wisdom is to attempt to buy freedom. Negotiate for a heavy financial penalty and a lesser prison

"How much time?"

"These days? With the federal sentencing guidelines, probably three years."

"And when do I get paroled?"

"There is no longer parole in the federal systems' ' 'Jesus.,' ' "Very harsh,"

"And I voted Republican," said Dixon. He smiled stiffly.

"How much do I have to give them to get this three-year bargain?"

"One can only estimate, Dixon. Certainly millions. God only knows how much Stan Sennett will want you to forfeit.

Probably some large portion of the value of your interest in MD. It will be very costly."

"Hmm." Again he gripped his chin and, unpredictably, smiled. "They can't forfeit whatthey can't find, can they?"

This thought, of what was hidden in the Caribbean, seemed to fortify Dixon for a moment. Silvia would be well provided

for. Stern saw his logic.

Dixon lit a cigarette.

"If you do not mind, Dixon, it would give me a better sense of our negotiating position if I had an idea of what actually transpired."

"You already know," he said, but ran through it quickly: how he was informed of large orders to be executed in Chicago and immediately called the central order desk to place front-running trades in Kindle. He described his use of the house error and Wunderkind accounts to gather and shelter the profits. "Pretty fucking clever," concluded Dixon, "if I do say so myself."

"What about that account, Dixon--Wunderkind? What was that?"

"Just a corporate account. I'd had it set up for this."

"And what was John's role in all of this?"

"John? John is a lunkhead. He did what I told him. John would think it was

raining if you pissed in his eyes."

Dixon looked at his cigarette and tapped his foot; he was wearing smooth Italian shoes of taupe-colored leather. He seemed at ease.

"A man of your wealth, Dixon. It is--"

"Oh, don't start moralizing, Stern. That's the markets, okay? Down there, we eat our young. Everybody does it.

Shit, the customers do it--the ones who know what's up.

It's humanity in the jungle. I got caught with my hand in the cookie jar, that's all. I want to move on. I want to get this fucking thing over with." He slapped his knees and looked at his brother-in-law directly--ruddy, vital, still handsome, Dixon Harmell, colossus of the marketplace. "I want to plead guilty," he said.

Stern did not answer,

"Okay?" asked Dixon. "What time is it? Give those assholes a call, will you? While I still have my nerve. I want to hear the sound of Sennett, that pompous son of a bitch, falling over from shock."

"I believe, Dixon," said Stern, "that you seek to deceive

Dixon jolted visibly. 'Me?'"\* "Just so,," "You're crazy. ' "I believe no}"

Dixon's mouth hung open a bi?

"You've been talking to that girl, haven't you? What's her name? Krumke."

"Alas, Dixon, your antics have cost me the confidence of the government. I have not been speaking with Ms. Klonsky."

Dixon stood up. He walked around the office, waving his cigarette.

"YOu want me to bleed, don't you?"

"I would welcome the truth, Dixon. If you care to tell

Wandering, Dixon paused at Stern's spot by the window and looked down to the river, spangled and living in the moru[ng sum

""There are some things about that account." "Which account is that?" Stern asked. "Wunderkind, Inc. Whatever we called it.?"": "Yes?"



"That was John's account. Or it was supposed to be. I didn't want to move money into an account that would trace to me. So I asked him to open one. You know, a corporate account, because of exchange compliance. It can't be in his name. The KCFE has a rule that member employees can't have their own accounts."

"So whose name did you use, Dixon?"

Dixon turned around. He was in extreme discomfort. "Kate.

She signed the account papers. In her maiden name. I'm sure she didn't know a damn thing about what was going on.

Goofball just told her to sign by the x."

"And what did John obtain by accommodating you in this fashion?"

"Oh, he's the village idiot. I ask him to jump, he says, How high. He wants to be a floor trader. He was waiting for me to promote him. Look, he's a kid. He's a noodle. You bend him in whatever shape you want. I told him to do things, he did them."

"You did not promise him even a penny in profit?"

"I never talked to him about it. Frankly, I think he's too dimwitted to ask. And there never was any profit, anyway.

Not for long."

"Yes, Dixon, explain that to me. You stole money and then lost it?"

"It was Las Vegas. Who cared? I lost, I got more. It was a fucking amusement, Stern."

"In which you embroiled my daughter and my son-in-lawmy niece and nephew. A crime of curiosity in which you proposed to hide behind children-my children?"

Dixon did not answer. He returned to the sofa and fired his lighter for another cigarette.

"Did you not estimate, Dixon, that John would tell the government about that account and how it was established?"

"Yeah, I estimated," he said. "I just wasn't real eager to tell you." Dixon lay

back and extended his feet. "I have the records at home. I'll bring them in."

"Did you fear, Dixon, that I would lose respect for you?"

He delivered the remark perfectly--a rapier thrust; cold steel.

"Oh, go fuck yourself, Stern. I'm sorry--I did it, I'm guilty, and I'm pleading guilty. I'll have a long time to repent. So call the goddamned prosecutors and let's get this over with."

With one arm over the sofa back, Dixon blew smoke rings in the air.

"You are guilty of a great deal, Dixon. But, regrettably, not this crime."

Dixon sat up straight.

"Are you frigging out of your mind?"

"I believe not. You are innocent, Dixon."

"Oh, please."

"Dixon, you are telling me precisely what you believe the government thinks."

"You're right about that."

"Which you know to be a lie.."

Dixon, brought up abruptly, did not answer at first. "A lie?"

"Let us leave aside, Dixon, the question of motive. You insist that a rich man might' steal as willingly as a poor one, and that is often the case. But explain this, please.

You tell me that you inveigled John into establishing this account so that, if the day ever came, blame might fall on someone other than yourself. And yet, when the government became aware of the account, you hid the records from them."

"So? I'm not quite as big an asshole as I thought I was.

Besides, I told you: I wasn't real interested in explaining that one to you."

"I feel, Dixon, that you had other motives."

"You're smoking dope, Stern."

"Tell me, Dixon, according to your explanation, how is it that the government learned of any of this in' the first place? Who is the informant, Dixon?"

Dixon shook his head no. As if he had never even pondered the question.

"who do you think it is?" he asked.

"After a great deal of reflection, I have concluded that it is Margy, and that you have known that all along, perhaps even directed her activity."

Dixon was absolutely still. His eyes, a lighter shade tending toward gray or green, moved first.

"You've lost your fucking mind. Completely."

"I believe not."

"You really are a piece of work," Dixon said. "Do you know that? You badger me for months to tell you about this. You cross-examine me. You send me frigging mofion. You threaten my secretary. And now, when I finally suck it up and let you know what's going on, you call me a liar and make some wild-ass accusation that came to you in a hailucination. Go fuck yourself, Stern."

"A wonderful speech." Stern raised both hands and  
, clapped once.

"I'm pleading guilty."

"To an offense you did not commit?"

"Look, I'm not taking any more of this crap. You're my lawyer, right?"

"At the moment."

"Well, I want to plead guilty. Make a deal. Those are  
your orders. InstrUctionsWhatever you call it."

"I am sorry, Dixon. I cannot do that."

"Then I'll fire you."

"Very well."

"You think I won't do this? I'll do it without you. The city is full of lawyers.

They all work for pay. It's like blood  
on the water. I'll have six by the end of the day."

"You are not guilty, Dixon."

Dixon wrenched his face and his voice tore from him at top volume.

"Goddamn you, Stern!"

It was like a cannon blast. Somewhere in the still building Stern could hear movements. Down the hall, a door opened.

"You smug, insufferable little son of a bitch. Has there ever been a minute in your life when you didn't think you were smarter or better than I am?" Dixon had a wild look.

He had come within a few feet of Stern, and Stern was afraid for an instant that Dixon might strike him. But at last Dixon turned away and bent toward the safe.

"Leave it be, Dixon. I remain under subpoena. The safe is my responsibility."

Hot rage, nuclear in its intensity, radiated from Dixon's look, but he stepped away.

"Can you fucking imagine?" he asked before he left.

"Stern here."

"It's Sonny."

He greeted her warmly, asked how she felt. With her voice there was still, if more distantly, the same storm of feeling. Far-off thunder. He looked at the clock built into the telephone. Another of these gadgets. It was well past five.

"Listen," she said. "I just got the most bizarre call. Your client. Mr. Hartnell. He told me he wants to come in to have a meeting with me."

"Ignore him," said Stern at once.

"I tried. I told him I couldn't talk to him, because he had a lawyer. He said he fired you. Is that right?"

After a pause, he told her he was not certain precisely where they stood, that Dixon was extremely emotional at the moment, feeling the stress. "If I

withdraw, however, I shall not do so before he has substitute counsel. I must insist, Sonny, that the government not deal with him directly."

"Well, Sandy, I don't know. I mean--"

"I am not criticizing you."

"I understand."

Most judges would react adversely if the 'government proceeded. With Stern professing that the client was in turmoil, the court would feel that the prosecution had taken unfair advantage. Even Sennett would not take the chance. His case was strong. Why put it in jeopardy? Sonny, no doubt, was making the same calculations.

"I'll talk to Stan," she said at last. The usual exit from a difficult pass. "Do I take it Mr. Hartnell might be interested in a plea?"

"I would advise him against that," said Stern. "Most emphatically."

"You're bluffing," she said. He could hear the tricks in her voice, the humor. She could not keep herself from a certain bonhomie. She relished being on the same footing with him, proving herself. She was kind enough, however, not to press further. "What about the safe?" she asked.

"Have you and Marta talked about our proposal?"

"What is it you want?" Stern asked. He remembered, of course. It was merely a lawyer's device, one of a thousand, hoping the terms might somehow improve when they were repeated. They did not. She offered the same deal: produce the safe and an affidavit that its contents were undisturbed. So here was that moment again, the everyday of the lawyer's life. It was, after all, only a signature. Who besides Stern would know?

"I believe, Sonny, that I shall not be able to comply."

"Look," she said. "I understand."

"I don't think you do. Stan has very strong feelings."

"Of course."

"Oh, man," she said. She pondered. "I don't Yke where this is going, Sandy. I really don't. Is your client aware that we can prove he controlled that account? You know, Wunderkind?"

"I cannot tell you what I discussed with my client, Sonny, but I have not breached your trust. I hope you would not assume otherwise."

"I know that. I meant--" she said. "Listen, I have to think this through-- If I can see my way clear to let you tell him, do you think that would make a difference?"

"You are very kind, Sonny. But it would make no difference at all."

She hesitated, deliberating. From her silence, he was sure she was lost.

"Sandy, this is nuts. If you think that someone in this building is going to be afraid to put Sandy Stern in jail."

"I harbor no such illusions. I assure you."

"And there's nothing else anybody can do?"

He waited with the thought, unwilling to prevail upon her again. He had done that in Dulin, and in the end there

had been considerable emotional cost to them both.. "What?"

she asked. "No matter."

"What?"

He sighed. "The informant." ....

She made some sound with her tongue. "What about it?"

"I take it you still do not know the identity."

"I couldn't tell you if I did."

"Of course not."

"So?"

"I believe the United States Attorney has taken particular delight in duping me. I suspect you will find that your source is someone with whom the government knows I have a relationship, one that naturally tends to place that person above my suspicion." He weighed saying "a client," or even giving her Margy's name, but the more specific he was, the more difficult this would become. As she said, she could never confirm an identity. "If my suspicions are misplaced, I would very much like to know that."

"And that's important to you? In connection with this? The subpoena?"

"Critical," he said.

"I'm not making any promises," she said. "If I find out, I find out. I don't know what I'd do."

They waited on the line. It amazed him again--she was such a strong, fine person.

"How is your life?" he asked. He dared not be more precise. Your marriage. your husband. "Better," she said.

"Good," he told her.

"Yeah," said Sonny, and waited. "But the law sucks," she told him before she put down the phone.

"S TATE your name, please, and spell your last name for the record,"

"My name is Alejandro M. Stern. The first name is A, l, e, j, a, n, d, r, o. The last name is S, t, e, r, n.""

"M?" asked Klonsky. She would perhaps never wholly resolve her curiosity about him.

"Mordecai.""

"Ah." She absorbed that stoically and went back to her notes.

Sonny ran through the usual preamble, one Stern had read in dozens of transcripts. She told him that he was before the Special March 1989 Grand Jury--March being when they had been impaneled--and provided a one-line description of investigation 89-86, which, she said, concerned "alleged violations of Title 18, United States Code, Section, 1962." She also mentioned that Stern was not a target and

that his lawyer was outside, available to consult with him.

"And her name is Marta Stern, same spelling?" "Yes," said Stern. He spoke to the court reporter seated before him, Shirley Floss, who formerly had worked in Judge Horka's courtroom: "M, a, r, t, a." Shirley smiled as she typed.

Proper spellings were the moon and stars of a court reporter's life.

Stern sat in the witness chair, inside the grand jury at last--thirty years of curiosity finally satisfied. Beside him, behind the facade of the raised walnut bench, were the grand jury foreperson and the secretary, two middle-aged women selected from among the grand jurors for this largely ministerial function. A small desk, shared by the court reporter and Klonsky, was immediately before him, and arrayed beyond in the small, tiered room sat the remaining grand jurors: the League him again--she was such a strong, fine person.

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Two older men slept; a young thuggish man, with heavy sideburns and long, greasy hair, read the paper. Some listened abjectly. A slender, attractive, middle-aged woman sat with a pad, taking notes for her own benefit. There was no window, no natural light.

"Where do you reside, Mr. Stern?"

He gave his home address, and in response to the next question answered that he was an attorney. Sonny moved to the table.

"Mr. Stern, I show you what the court reporter has marked as G.J. 89-86 Exhibit 192. Do you recognize it?"

It was the subpoena she'd served on him. One hundred ninety-two exhibits, Stern thought. John had been a busy fellow. No question, the investigation was nearly complete, indictment was near. Klonsky established Stern's receipt of the subpoena and had him read the text aloud.

"Now, Mr. Stern, do you have in your possession, custody, or control the safe referred to?"

"I decline to answer."

"On what grounds?"

"The attorney-client privilege."

Klonsky, who expected this, turned to the grand jury foreperson, a gray-haired woman with glasses.

"Ms. Foreperson, please direct the witness to answer."

Abashed by the thought of a speaking Part in the drama that occurred routinely before her, the foreperson barely

glanced at Stern and said simply, "Answer."

"I decline," said Stern.

"On what grounds?" asked Klonsky.

"As stated."

Sonny, who up until now had been proficient and formidable, appeared to have second thoughts. Her pregnancy had progressed to the point that it had wholly erased her usual solid grace. She waited before him, with her own thoughts and a rankled look. "Mr. Stern, I advise you that

I shall have to ask the chief judge to hold you in contempt."

"I intend contempt for no one," said Stern,

Klonsky asked the grand jurors to recess so that Stern and she could proceed to Chief Judge Winchell's chambers. The grand jurors were more or less familiar with this trip, since they strolled down the block en masse and appeared before Judge Winchell each week to return indictments.

Stern, now and then, had seen them coming, a covey of happy executioners. It was a function to them, \$30 a day, part of the customs of the law as arcane as the habits of the Chinese. For the defendant, it was often the end of a respectable life.

Sonny threw open the jury room door, and Marta, dressed

in a dark suit and nylons--nylons!--peered inside.. "What's up?" she asked her father.

"We are on our way to see the chief judge."

On her face, Stern saw his own reflective Latin expression, accepting the inevitable.

The group--Sonny, Sandy, Marta, and Shirley, the court reporter, who was also required--waited silently in the corridor for the tardy elevators of the new federal building, "I called Stan," said Sonny. "He'll meet us there." The U.S. Attorney was going to smite his staff and call for justicel It was evident that to a degree Stern had never fully appreciated Sennett hated his guts. Shame, spite, humiliation; the bitter yearning for self-respect. Human beings, thought Stern, were such pitifully predictable creatures.

The small Party walked down the teeming avenue in the summery heat. Shirley had packed her machine and notes in a small case, and toted it along on one of the little wheeled carrying racks that airline stewardesses use for their luggage. She talked to Stern about her children. The youngest, in college at the U., hoped for a career in radio and TV. Sonny and Marta, in spite of themselves, got along admirably. They had finished law school at virtually the same time and had mutual acquaintances. A fellow named Jake, a law school friend of Marta's, had clerked with Sonny in the Court of appeals.

Sennett, in his flawless blue suit and perfect shirt, waited for them in the judge's anteroom. As they walked through the door, the U.S. Attorney was, literally, studying his nails. He shook Marta's hand, and Stern's.

Feeling somewhat surly, Stern did not return his greeting.

. After a minute, Moira Winchell's door opened and the chief Judge swept a hand to usher them in. She was in a straight skirt, and her hair, more and more visibly shot through with gray, was held back by a headband today, so that she looked a bit schoolgirlish.

"Well, I can't say I'm happy to see any of you." She called out the side door for her own court reporter.

The group was seated again at the judge's conference table, solid as a fortress. The light of the day fell through the heavy windows, long parallelograms of brilliance that gave the rest of the room a kind of prison gloom by contrast.

Pure metaphor, thought Stern of the association.

"On the record," Judge Winchell said to her court reporter.

"Mr. Sennett, I take it you have a motion?"

Stan raised a hand to Sonny, who drew out of a manila folder a short written motion which had been prepared in advance. It asked that Stern be ordered to reappear before the grand jury and to respond to the questions he had refused to answer. Reappearance was required because the grand jury had no power of its own to compel him to respond. It was only for violating the judge's order to answer that Stern could be found in contempt--and jailed.

Moira put the motion aside.

"All right, let's hear what happened. This is the court reporter?"

Shirley was sworn, and read from the narrow stenotype pad in a singsong voice, stumbling at moments as she interpreted the symbols. The judge's court reporter, Bob, sat beside Shirley, taking it all down on a machine of his own

"Answer by Mr. Stern," she read at the conclusion, " !

intend contempt for no one,"

Stern saw Sennett, at the foot of the table, frown. Stan was not buying any.

"All right, Ms. Stern," said the judge, careful with her record, "What do you say to the motion?"

"We object, Your Honor." Marta said that whether Stern had received or retained the safe were both questions that implicated communications with his client. She asked for a week to present a brief in support of that position, and Sennett, speaking for the government today, objected in his usual tone of suppressed vehemence. Briefs were unnecessary on this issue, he said, and would unfairly delay the grand jury's final action. Marta fought back bravely, but the judge eventually sided with the government. She would never tolerate briefing each question Stern was asked.

"If you have cases, I'll read them right now," the judge said.

Marta did. From her briefcase, she removed photocopies of various judicial opinions speaking to the breadth of the attorney-client privilege, and passed copies to the judge and the prosecutors. The company, including the two court reporters, sat silently while the judge and the lawyers read.

Stan clearly remained intent on indicting quickly.

Yesterday morning, Stern had received a letter from the Department of Justice granting him an appointment with the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section at 9 A.M. next Tuesday in Washington, D.C. If it went as usual, the meeting would be brief, polite, and entirely perfunctory. By two weeks from today at most, prosecution would be approved and Dixon Hartnell would be a former powerhouse, become instead the carcass for a three- or four-day media feeding.

That Thursday morning the business pages would banner the rumor of his imminent indictment, as the result of a leak from the man at the end of the

table. Then, following return of the charges that day, Stan would hold a news conference and read his press release with a still-eyed intensity that would make him appear properly tough when his sound bite flickered up on the evening news. On Friday morning the indictment would command the front page here, and probably an item in the Journal and The New York Times. Following that, the weekend papers would run a lengthy rehash, comparing Sennett's initiative in combating corruption on the Kindle County Futures Exchange with others around the nation, or, even worse recounting the tragic rise and fall of Dixon Hartnell.

And while his reputation was devastated, the actual bricks and mortar of Dixon's business life would begin to collapse. Competitors would vigorously woo Dixon's stunned clients, and key employees would start freshening their resumes. In light of the RICO charges, a restraining order would be entered at once, tying up all of Dixon's visible assets, so that Stern would have to call Klonsky for permission before Dixon could cash a check for spending money. The reporters would lurk outside Dixon's home and call him on his private line at work. And Dixon, everywhere, would see some reflection of aversion or harsh judgment pass behind the eyes of each person he met. To Stern, this remained unfathomable--it was impossible to think of Dixon brought so low or, more pertinently, being able to soldier on in the face of such disgrace.

"Here's what I think," said the judge. She had finished reading Marta's cases and apparently was not even going to allow argument. "I think these opinions are not on point.

In this circuit, under decisions like Feldman and Walsh, an attorney must make a specific showing in support as to each question asked or item sought for which the privilege is claimed. The privilege must actually, not potentially, apply. From this I conclude that the privilege does not protect Mr. Stern or any other witness from answering whether he has a subpoenaed item in his possession. Otherwise, the court and counsel might become embroiled in lengthy proceedings that are, in reality, pointless. Accordingly, Ms. Stern, I am going to overrule your objection and order your client to answer. Now." The judge laid her long hands on the tabletop. She wore no jewelry other than a slim wedding band, and her nails were unpolished. "I would like to know whether or not your client intends to respond, since I'd rather have some time to reflect before dealing with any contempt. Why don't you use my

study to confer?"

"I think she's right," said Maa as soon as she had closed the door to the study.

"Of course, she is," said Stern. The room was compact probably the quarters for a scrivener when the building was first erected. There was a wall of books, and various photos of Jason Winchell, and also a dog, an Irish setter, in the phases of its life from puppyhood to mothering a litter. The dog's eyes were green and eerie in the light of the flash as her pups suckled beneath her. "Your desire is that I answer this question?"

"That's my advice," said his daughter.

They returned to the table. Marta said that Stern would answer. The prosecutors showed nothing, but the judge nodded. She was pleased.

"All right, now," said the judge. "What's the next question going to be? I'd like to avoid wasting the grand jurors' time--I don't want all of you trooping back and forth repeatedly."

"Well, what's the answer to the question?" asked Sennett.

The judge looked at Stern, and Marta raised a hand to prevent her father from speaking.

"I believe my client will indicate that he has the safe in his possession." Marta knew this much, having seen the safe in the office again. But Stern had kept to himself what had further transpired between Dixon and him, and Marta, to her credit, had not inquired. She took seriously her father's obligation to maintain Dixon's confidences.

With the news that Stern had the safe, Sennett wheeled about and gave Klonsky a look. Perhaps he had been betting against that. Sonny did not respond. In the grand jury, she was businesslike, but now, confronting the consequences she was considerably less animated and seemed increasingly withdrawn from the proceedings, which Sennett was conducting more or less on his own. She was paler, showing less of her usual rosy glow. Stern could not help thinking of Kate or taking small comfort from what he viewed as signs of Sonny's sympathy.

"Next question," said the judge again.

"The next question," said Sennett, "is whether the safe, including its contents,

is in the same condition as when Mr. Stern received it or whether, to his knowledge, anything has been removed."

Marta started to object; but the judge was already shaking her head. One question at a time, she told Sennett. He whispered to Klonsky, who somewhat listlessly shrugged.

"The question," he said, "is whether, to the best of Mr. Stern's knowledge, anything has been removed from the safe since the time the subpoena was served."

This, regrettably, was a clever improvement. As re framed, the question followed the lines of the judge's prior ruling and went no further than asking whether Stern had maintained possession of what had been subpoenaed from him.

Sennett was working in increments. If Stern answered that nothing had been removed since Sonny served him, Sennett would attempt to move back to the time Stern had received the safe. That might be more objectionable. Of course, Stern realized, he was never going to answer the first question.

"All right now, Ms. Stern, any objection to that question?"

"Asking him if he knows," said Marta, "doesn't distinguish between what his client might have told him and what he has learned on his own."

"We'll limit the question to exclude any communications with his client," interjected Sennett.

"So the question, then," said the judge, "is, leaving aside client communications, does Mr. Stern know of anything removed from the safe since the time the subpoena was first served upon him?"

Sennett nodded. That was the question.

"Any further objections?" asked the judge.

Stern whispered to Marta: Assert privilege. She did, stating that the question still called upon knowledge gained in the attorney-client relationship and might reveal the attorney's own mental impressions.

"Very well," said the judge, "I'll overrule those objections. This question, no less than the one before it, simply deals with what is and is not in respondent's possession, without regard to client communications."

Therefore, I'll order Mr. Stern to answer. Again, I'd prefer to know now whether he intends to respond." The judge once more gestured grandly to her study.

"No," said Stern when they were alone.

"Daddy!"

"I shall not answer."

"Why not?"

"I cannot respond."" There was a small sofa, a love seat of heavy brown tweed, and Stern fell down upon it. He suddenly felt quite tired. Marta remained on her feet. "You told me before he took the safe that he'd never let you open it."

"True," said Stern.

"So you don't know if anything has been removed,"

Marta stared at her father. "How could you know?" He shook his head--he would not answer, "Come on," she said.

Stern glanced up at the walls--the judge had various citations there, a medal from a woman's group. As Stern would have guessed, she kept a cluttered desk here in her private space..

"If I were to answer," said Stern, "that to my knowledge the contents of the safe are not the same, what would transpire?" \*

"They'd ask you what's missing, how you know it's gone, who had access to the safe, where it was located, whether you know who's got what was taken." Marta was counting off the questions on her fingers.

"And would our privilege' objections to such questions be sustained?"

"Maybe. To some of them. It depends how you know."

"Perhaps to some. But certainly Judge Winchell would require that I state who had access to the safe or where it may have been located."

"That's a reasonable guess," Marta said. "Are you really' telling me that he took something out of there and you know it?"

Once more, he refused to answer her,.



"Dad--"

"Marta, if I testify that Dixon took the safe, that Dixon returned the safe, and that some item is missing, what inference will the prosecutors and the grand jury draw?"

"That's obvious."

"Just so," said Stern. "And thus I cannot indulge this line of inquiry. I shall not give answers that imply wrongdoing by my client. Nor, frankly, have I any intention of responding to questions from anyone about the safe's contents."

"On what grounds?"

Stern, baffled, thought an instant. "The right to privacy.."

There was no such thing in criminal proceedings. They both understood that. Marta studied her father. Stern knew the internal race taking place, the mind dashing ahead of the emotions. Somewhere, if she was nimble enough, there was an argument to be made that would persuade him, save him from himself. Her small dark eyes were intent.

"You're not being asked any of those questions now," she said. "All they want to know is whether the contents of the safe are the same. Yes or no. If you have a problem later, we'll deal with it then."

"I refuse. Once we start down that road, there is no logical stopping point."

Marta groaned. "What was in the safe?" Stern shook his head. "How do you know?" He shook his head again.

Marta watched him with the same driven concentration.

"Aunt Silvia," she said at last. "She told you. You're protecting her."

"You are brilliant, Marta, but not 'correct.'"

"I don't understand this," Marta said. "I don't understand what you think you know..And I don't understand your loyalty to him. Don't you hate him? After all the stuff he's pulled?"

Stern hesitated.

"Come on," said his daughter.

"I have a duty to Dixon. The government can seek evidence against him in every other corner of the world, and seems to have done so. He is entitled to know that his lawyer will not join the melee."

"You don't have a duty to violate court orders. This is a matter of personal philosophy, not law."

"So far as I am concerned, Marta, this is not discretionary. And if it were, I would not use the legal system to settle my differences with Dixon."

Frustrated, Marta threw down her hand.

"What about the Fifth?" she asked suddenly.

"No," said Stern. "In my judgment, Dixon has no Fifth Amendment rights in these circumstances."

"No, no. What about you? You can be innocent and assert the Fifth. If you disclose that something was taken while you were under subpoena, you might be incriminating yourself.

You've got a Fifth." Marta was excited. She had convinced herself this was the solution.

Resolutely, Stern differed. If he did as Marta wanted, the prosecutors would promptly obtain a use immunity order dissolving his Fifth Amendment rights. Nothing would have been gained and the judge would feel taunted by the desperate tactics.

Defeated, Marta sat down beside him.

"I don't understand this. How can you do this to yourself, just to suit him?"

"If I were to suit your uncle, I would commit perjury and solve all my problems. Perhaps I am simply too much of a coward to adopt that approach"

"Daddy, please. If you confront her in an area like this, where we have no legitimate grounds to resist, she'll put you in jail,"

"Then that is what will occur."

His daughter looked at him for some time.

"Jesus Christ," said Marta. "And you complain about him as a client. What was in the goddamn safe?"

He shook his head again.

They returned to the table. The judge and the Court reporters were chatting about movies.

"All right, on the record," said the judge.

Marta folded her hands, placed them squarely on the table before her, and announced that Stern would refuse to answer the question posed, on the grounds of the attorney-client privilege and the Sixth Amendment's guarantee of the right to counsel. The ter of personal philosophy, not law."

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"Move contempt," said Sennett at last.

"My client believes that the government is attempting to use him as a witness against his client," added Marta.

"Whether that is true or not," said Judge Winchell, whose eyes were cast to the floor, "he must answer. Neither the attorney-client privilege nor the Constitution allows him a basis to refuse."

"He will not respond," said Marta. She leaned toward the judge with erect posture and an implacable look. She betrayed not an iota of doubt. Marvelous, Stern thought, in spite of everything else.

The judge covered her eyes with one hand.

"Well," she said at last. "I will reflect on how this contempt should be addressed, assuming it takes place. And I'll listen carefully to arguments.": She straightened up.

"But I want you to know, Mr. Stern, if you Persist, my present intention is to remand you to the custody of the marshal, and I will leave it to the court of appeals to determine whether my order should be stayed while they consider the matter. And I also caution you that I will not terminate your grand jury appearance. You will have to go on answering the prosecutors' questions, or refusing, as the case may be."

Judge Winchell had fixed him with her icy tOugh-guy look.

No friendship. No bullshit. No symphony intermissions. They were now in the heartland of Moira Winchell's judicial existence--her rightful authority. Sharing this look with considerable apprehension, Stern' managed to nod.

In silence, the party proceeded back down the street to the new federal building. A block away, Stan broke off. He had a luncheon speech tO deliver. No doubt it disappointed him not to be there to see the marshals clap on the cuffs, but there were at least forty-five minutes more and Stan, always precise, did not have the time. He said a word or two to Klonsky and left them tO proceed ensemble in the noontime heat, the sounds of downtown construction and traffic banging about them.

Outside the grand jury room, the jUrors were lounging, drinking coffee, gabbing, smoking their cigarettes. Sonny raised a hand to round them up.

She stood with Stern and Marta before the door.

"I know this is a matter of principle for you," she said to Stern. She put her hand on his, a mildly shocking gesture in the surroundings. "But I think this is a mistake. Please reconsider."

'In the grand jury room, Stern resumed his seat. Klonsky read the first question from her notes: Was he in possession of the safe?

She studied her pad again.

"Leaving aside client communications, does Mr. Stern -strike that--do you know of anything .removed from the safe since the time the sub pom, G.J. 89-86 Exhibit 192,

was first served upon you?"

"I decline to answer."

Sonny peered at him, pale, grim.

"State the grounds."

They were quickly finished. The grand jUrors groaned when Klonsky called another recess.

Marta was standing immediately outside the door. "Shit," she said as it opened.

Klonsky asked Barney Hill the grand jury clerk, to Call Judge Winebell's secretary to tell her they were on the way back. The four of them headed out onto the street. Marta lagged behind with Stern, and spoke to him heatedly.

"Now I'm going to beg and plead. I'll use everyihing-thirty years of service in this court, Mornroy's death, everything. And I don't want any back talk. Do you hear me?"

He nodded to her, smiling a bit, and marched down the street, shockingly free of apprehension or doubt.

The judge's staff knew what was transpiring and went quiet as soon as they entered. The secretary called in to the judge to announce their return, but the door to the chambers remained closed, and the foUr of them Stern and his daughter, Klonsky and the court repOrter--waited in the judge's anteroom. Sonny, if anything, appeared paler. She took the lone seat across from Stern, her lips drawn into her mouth, her jaw gripped firmly, while she stared into space. She was, Stern thought to himself, in a kind of remote observation, so terribly pretty. Then Bud Bailey, one of the deputy marshals, blundered through the door, a sweet bald headed oaf, with his gun and uniform and jangling keys. His arrival jarred Stern, like a note of music misplayed.

Bailey greeted both Stern and Klonsky by name, then looked at the judge's secretar7. "She rang?" Sonny had sat up tensely with Bailey's appearance.

The secretary sent Bailey in first. He would be getting instructions about taking Stern into custody. Stern had imagined all this and felt well girded. He would be escorted to the marshal's lockup, a mesh-fenced holding pen on the third floor which looked much like a birdcage for human beings. He would sit there for an hour or two. If the motion judge in the court of appeals did not role promptly, he would be transported by jail van to the federal correctional center. There he would be asked to disrobe completely, then searched from head to toe and made to bend over while the guard examined his anus with the beam of a flashlight, Afterwards, he would be given a blue jumpsuit.

He would not be inside long. They had drafted the petition for a stay last night; Marta had it with her and would go at once to the twelfth floor to file it. Marta and he had contacted George Mason, president of the county bar association, a figure of prominence, who promised to attempt to get his Board of Governors to file an amicus brief. In any event, Mason would organize

dozens of lawyers who would join in a petition to the court of appeals. The court, most surely, would order Stern's release and set an expedited schedule for briefing and arguments. To proceed with the appeal, Marta had already insisted on deferring to Mason, a decision with which Stern agreed. The question, of course--the real question--was what he would do once the court of appeals ruled against him and he was required to respond in the grand jury or return to jail.

Klonsky suddenly spoke up in the silent office.

"You still want to write a brief for Judge Winchell?"

she asked Marta.

"Sure."

'q think you should write a brief," said Sonny. "I think our discussions have persuaded me that there are serious issues."

Marta blinked once. "Sure," she said again.

Stern began to speak. What discussions, he was going to say, but his daughter dug her hand into his sleeve and spun about with a harsh look that bordered on violence. She mouthed the words distinctly: Shut Up.

Stern turned from her. "Sennett will fire you," he told Sonny .....

"God damn it!" said Marta.

"This whole thing is sick," Sonny said. The remark was directed to no one in particular: a final conclusion. Stern had no idea who it was that she meant to condemn, but her judgment was firm. She focused on Stern. "You were right, you know. Do you understand meT"

He did not at first. Then it came to him: the informant.

That was what had upset her--seeing SenneWs duplicity, his mean, clever game.

The door to the judge's chambers opened then. Bud Bailey was standing behind Moira Winchell.

"Sandy," she said, even before the company was over the threshold, "Bud will go with you to the grand jury. When you're done, he'll keep you in custody in his office until the court of appeals rules on your petition for a

stay.

"That's the best I can do." Even Moira Winchell, firm and unflappable, was somewhat undone. Her head moved about in the loose wobble of an old lady as she told him she could do no more.

Marta spoke up then. She and Klonsky, after discussion, had agreed there were serious issues. The government now would agree to a week's adjournment in order to allow Stern to file a brief.

"Oh, really?" said Judge Winchell. She turned to Klonsky.

"Mr. Sennett had seemed so intent.."

"He may not agree with me," said Sonny. "If he doesn't, I won't be here next week." She smiled vaguely at her own irony,

"Do you want to speak with him?" asked the judge. "He can't be reached," she said.

"I see," said the judge. Moira knew she was getting a message of some kind. "Off the record," she said. "What's the deal?"

Stern, his daughter, Sonny exchanged looks among themselves. No one answered the judge.

"Your brief Monday, response Wednesday, a reply if you wish when you appear Thursday morning, 10 A.M.," said the judge, pointing at Marta, Sonny, then Marta again. She looked once more at the three silent lawyers, they shrugged at Bailey, (he the marshal, "It's a secret," she said).

As a child, Peter was a sleepwalker. These were horrifying occasions. Because Clara tended to turn in early, it was usually Stern who had to deal with the situation. Once, Stern found him about to head out wearing his hat and mittens, although they were in the steamy depths of summer.

Another night, Peter came down and practiced the clarinet.

One other time, Stern heard the bathwater running. Assuming it was Clara, he only happened to peek in to find Peter lying in the tub in his pajamas. He remained fully asleep, the water a shining frame about his dark, serene face. The advice in those years probably still today was not to rouse him. Stern pulled him from the water gently, stripped off his clothes, and dried the lean young body, then dressed his son again. In these states, Peter responded to



instruction like a magician's assistant in a trance. Walk.

Turn left. Turn right. He was, however, incapable of speech. It was a disturbing sight. Like waking the dead.

The private theater of dream and sleep were not stage enough to relieve Peter's inner forces. They needed, literally, to be acted out. After the bathtub episode, Peter reported he had dreamed he was dirty.

It was the thought that Peter ought to be allowed to share.

his burdens which had brought Stern, late Thursday afternoon, to the rehab'd apartment building where his son lived. After his adventures in the grand jury, he found himself too distracted for work. He was concerned about Klonsky, who, in her dismay over Sennett's high-handed tactics, might have placed a black mark on a promising career, while emotionally Stern felt some need to take advantage of his reprieve. Eventually, his mind turned to Peter. Near three, he had called his son's office, where the staff reminded Stern that Peter had no hours on Thursdays. Next he tried him at home. He was there apparently--the line was busy--and after failing to get through on a number of tries, Stern decided to go ahead while his courage remained high. He wanted no confrontation. No fussing. His manifest assumption was to be that Peter was well-meaning and bound by professional obligations. But Stern had decided it was best to get this out in the open. He preferred to have no other distractions when he proceeded to the calamitous show. down that he was headed for sooner or later with John and Kate. That one, he feared, might blow the Stern family to smithereens; they would float through space like an asteroid belt, pieces of the same matter, within the same orbit, but no longer attached. Only Marta might see things her father's way in the end, and even she would be somewhat divided.

Stern stood in the lobby's dim light, attempting to correlate the name with a button. "4B P. Stern." There. In Stern's opinion, this was a desolate part of town, south along the river. It had been formerly the habitat of skidrow bums and mission houses, until the developers had arrived here in force about five years ago. The old churches, the printing plants, even the unused former train station were turned into loft apartments, but the area did not quite catch on. The streets were empty; there was little planting, no children. A few of the reprobate bums would get soused and return here out of habit or confusion and lie in the sandblasted doorways, their grimy heads against the shining

brass kickplates of the refinished doors. Apparently, the denizens here were all like Peter, young and childless, happy to trade the convenience of a location adjoining the Center City for other amenities.

A pretty young woman came into the lobby. She carried her cleaning and was dressed in full urban regalia--a blue suit, aerobic shoes for the walk from the office, and yellow headphones. The inner lobby door was activated by some electronic-card pass which she drew out of her handbag. Stern pressed the button for Peter's apartment and, as the young woman held the door, entered. Climbing the stairs --none of these buildings had elevators--he once more prepared himself. No scenes, he promised himself. He knocked on his son's door; After a moment, Peter's face appeared in the seam allowed by the chain lock between the frame and the paneled door.

"Dad." All the usual emotions swam across Peter's face:

discomfiture, surprise. Oh God, this--this eternal nuisance. "May I come in?"

Peter did not answer. Instead, he closed the door to sweep aside the chain. Was there the sound of movement inside?

There was no one else when Peter threw the door wide. The young man himself was dressed in a spandex cycling outfit--a garish top and black knickers, with lime blocks of reflective material running down his flanks, and little low shoes. Peter's-blondish hair was rumpled after his ride.

His bike, with the black headgear strung along the handlebars, was propped near the doorway, as much a part of the furnishings as anything else.

"Jesus, Dad, why didn't you call?"

He explained that he could not get through. "There are matters," said- Stern, "that I wish to discuss."

"Matters?" asked Peter. They were still standing near the doorway and Stern looked into the apartment hopefully and actually took a step farther inside. It was only a little better than a studio. The kitchen and dining room and living area were merged, with a single bedroom and bath behind the companion wall. The decoration was modest--opera posters and bright furniture filled with polyfoam, inexpensive modern stuff. Peter still did not invite him to sit.

"What kind of matters?"

"Concerning your mother," said Stern. "I am hoping to have a candid discussion with you."

Peter virtually winced. Perhaps it was the subject--or more likely the notion of an open exchange with his father.

Ignoring his son's lack of hospitality, Stern wandered farther into the living room, looking about. "Very nice," he said. He had been here only once, after the closing, When the place was empty and entirely white.

"Look, Dad," said Peter, "I'm kind of into something right now."

"I do not anticipate a lengthy discussion, Peter. I suspect I shall have rather more to say than you, and that is not very much "

"What about T"

Stern, at last, helped himself to a seat on the foam sofa.

"Peter, I have long suspected that you were concerned for more than your own emotional well-being when you urged me not to allow an autopsy of your mother."

Peter stared straight at him, his blue eyes and gaunt face still.

"Frankly, I was thrown off when I visited you at your office," said Stern. "You seemed so easily convinced that I had come there because a new partner of mine had this problem. I realize now that your theory was that I had been infected before, subclinically, and was the one who had actually passed this on to my new acquaintance. That was why you insisted on such a rigorous course of testing. '

Watching with a frantic, disbelieving look, Peter suddenly held up both hands.

"Dad, not now."

"I am not here to criticize you. On the contrary, I believe--"

Peter leaned down to his father and spoke with a determined clarity.

"Dad, there's somebody here. I have a guest."

With that, on cue, a distinct cough was emitted from the bedroom. There was no mistaking the sound, either.

It was a man.

"I see," said Stern: He stood up at once. As resolved as he was to resist this, a response of dizziness, sickness gripped him. This lifestyle, choice--whatever it was called--remained beyond him. Not the acts, but the very philosophy. Stern, in truth, did not care much for men.

They were rough, sometimes vicious, and generally unreliable. Women were far better, except, of course, they frightened him. "Well, we must speak soon," said Stern. He attempted to look at his son, but failed by a fair margin and instead let his eyes fall to the toe of his shoe. There he saw a briefcase, the visitor's no doubt, resting against the block of laminate that passed for the coffee table. The case was zippered, blue vinyl, with a large brass tag hanging from it. Stern had seen the case before. With that realization, he felt an outbreak of something else--panic, riot, emotion

out of control: the man was someone he knew. "Look, we'll have dinner," said Peter. "This evening?"

"Not tonight. But I'll call." Peter rested a hand on his elbow.

It was, of course, weak and sick. There were secrets he could live without knowing, were there not? Life's compulsions were hopeless. Obliquely, Stern glanced back at the briefcase. The tag was an enlargement of the man's business card--Stern had seen these items before but it was not visible from here. He let Peter lead him two steps to the door.

"Sometime this week," said Stern. "Soon after, I may be in jail."

"Jail?"

"An interesting story."

Peter at once waved a hand. He did not want to know--or to have his visitor hear it. With that, that clue, there was a sudden pulse of alarm. Stern let his eyes shift to the case again. With the gift of farsightedness, the tag might be legible.

And it was. Not the name, actually. He recognized the crest. When he did, Stern pulled his arm free from Peter's

grasp and bent to be sure he had made no mistake. "Oh, shit," said Peter behind him.

Stern stood up and covertly pulled on the hem to straighten his jacket? a courtroom gesture that he used before confronting a difficult witness.

"Agent Horn," said Stern loudly. "Show yourself."

"Oh, shit," Peter said again, more despairingly:

Stern did not bother to look back at his son. He was watching the bedroom door.

"How do you say it, Agent? 'Don't make me come in there to get you'?"

Kyle Horn, in his sport coat and white shoes, stepped into the living room. He was chewing gum, trying to smile.

"Hey, Sandy," he said.

When Stern finally glanced about, Peter had taken a seat on his sofa and was looking out the window toward the far distance, where he no doubt he wished to be. Horn, shameless, had continued smiling. Stern was erect as a soldier.

"Please tell the distinguished United States Attorney for me that it will be a most interesting set of motions." Horn at once shook his head.

"We didn't do anything wrong. Nobody's rights got violated.

You can just cool it." "I shall not 'cool it." Any person of decent sensibility will be deeply offended. To use counsel's son--the target's nephew--as an informant?"

"It was all done right," said Horn. He approached Stern briefly and snatched his case from near Stern's shoes.

"You'll see."

"I shall never see," said Stern.

Horn was near the door. He pointed to Peter, a form of goodbye.

"Stay in touch," he told Peter.

"What can I say, Kyle? 'Shit happens'?"

"Hey," said Horn as he opened the door. He actually winked.

"Life," he told Peter, "is full of surprises."

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right thing to do. So don't give me your disdainful look."

Peter held his father's eye a second, then moved away. From his refrigerator, he removed a bottle of soda, pulled off the cap, and sat alone at the small butcher-block table, where he drank down the contents. When he belched he covered his mouth, then appeared to concentrate on the wall.

Stern eventually followed him into the kitchen, a narrow white-washed space built with typical late-century efficiency, the toaster and microwave slotted beneath the cabinets. Stern swung his dark suit jacket over the back of the wire-mesh chair opposite Peter's and sat. His son glanced at him once or twice.

"Peter, I believe I am representing an innocent man."

Peter removed something from his tongue and stared, at his fingers.

"He hasn't told you ,anything, has he?"

Stern reflected. "Very little."

"That figures. I couldn't imagine you were hold'rag back for tactical reasons." He was still not looking at his father. "I was pretty sure you didn't know."

"I know enough, Peter, to believe you have been spread-irlg lies."

Peter turned to him then.

"Don't make judgments," he said. "You don't understand how it happened."

Neither spoke. The compressor clicked on in the refrigerator and a bus wheezed by down in the street. Peter flexed his jaw about ruminatively.

"About five or six weeks before More died," said Peter, "Kate come to see me. One morning, before school. She's forty-five minutes in traffic and as soon as she gets here she does a beeline for the John and I hear her retching. So the great diagnostician says-'You know, maybe you're pregnant.'" And she answers, 'I am. That's why I came. I need the name of a decent place to get an abortion.'"

"I'm like, what? And so she tells me this long, involved story. About John. How he thinks he'll never be anything that matters. How inferior he feels in this family. You know, everything we've all thought to ourselves a million times. And how, because of that, and because of her, too, he's done something really stupid at work. Really, really stupid.

"He had his heart set on becoming a floor trader. I guess his idea was that if he could show some ability, he was going to ask you and More to put up the money so he could rent a seat. But Uncle Dixon wouldn't really let him near the pits. John kept asking. But Dixon thought the same thing about him as everybody else: dumb as a post. And he's not. He really is not."

"Apparently not," said Stern. Peter, absorbing his father's dry tone, actually smiled.

Kate, Peter said, believed no one would take John seriously until he could demonstrate that he had made money trading.

So she suggested they open an account at MD. He was right there on the central desk. He could put in his own orders.

It would be almost as if he were in the pits. Kate signed the forms. They both knew that employees of member firms weren't supposed to trade, but it was a minor infraction, Peter said. Everyone did it.

"And they call it Wunderkind because that's what he is, you know, in their heads, that's who they figure he'll be."

Peter dwelled on the thought. "I guess he'd promised her he could scrape together \$5,000 to get started, but neither one of them is making much money, and so, eventually, he got another idea."



The idea was trading ahead. He'd put in small orders here when he knew that big orders were going to be executed in Chicago or New York. And he'd learned enough when he'd working in MD's operational areas to know how to use the house error and Wunderkind accounts to/hide the profits.

"He promised himself that he was only going to do it once or twice, just to get himself starteA. Famous last words from the' penal colony, right.?" Peter asked.

"Those," said Stern, "and 'Just one more time.'"

"Right."

Peter actually laughed for a second. Then he sobered himself and went on. "Obviously, the front-running worked.

But when he traded, the morgy was gon like that." Peter snapped his fingers. "He decided he didn't have enough capital to handle the ups and downs in the market. What he needed was real money. So he traded ahead again, say thirty times, and picked up \$300,000 in a month."

"And why did he simply not buy his sat on the Exchange at this point?" asked Stern.

"Why didn't he do a lot of things?" Peter smiled, in a way.

"I think basically he was afraid to. He couldn't explain to anybody where the money came from. And, frankly, he still didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground as a trader.

He'd have lost the seat in a week. He wanted to try to stay even for a couple of months."

"And how much, may I ask, did YOur sister know about this?"

"Kate?" Peter leveled a hand. "Obviously, she knew about the Wunderkind account. But she didn't know where the initial money came from. Not yet."

"Not yet," said Stern, mostly to himself.

Peter removed two more bottles of soda from the refrigerator, and plunked one, uncapped, in front of his father.

It was French mineral water, a brand Stern had never heard

of, savored with a rose-petal aroma. Stern asked for a glass. "I take it John lost the \$00,000?"

"Right. He did a little better, but eventually it was gone."

"And so he stole again."

"If that's what you call it."

"That is what I call it," said Stern. "That is what a prosecutor would call it. And that is what a judge would

call it when he or she committed John to the penitentiary."

Peter, in front of the white cabinets, turned about. "Look, Dad, I spent summers down there. I'm not making excuses for him, but it's like nothing really exists. It's all numbers on a scoreboard. That's all. You trade ahead of customers, in ten or twenty lots, you don't hurt a soul. Not really.

It's against the rules because if everybody did it the customers would get maimed. But one guy? No harm. It was found money. And it's money that a lot of people down there have found. You think Dixon never traded ahead of a customer?"

"No one has ever cited Dixon as a moral exemplar."

"That's for sure," said Peter with a flash of the same

hard light he had shown when he said he wasn't sorry. Stern told his son to go on.

It was at this point, Peter said, that Kate found out.

There was a confession, said Peter, lots of tears.

"She makes him promise that he won't do it again. He's ripped off another 275 K by now, and he reassures her. No way. No chance. He'll never have to do it again. And promptly goes right into the dumper in the market. So he's down to his last twenty, thirty thousand, and he makes The Big Mistake. He hears all these rumors about left-handed

sugar. You know about that?"

"Enough," said Stern.

"John thinks he's got inside dope--he bets the ranch that the world sugar

market is going to collapse. And he gets creamed. Destroyed. The market goes up so fast he can't even get out. When the smoke clears, not only has he lost every penny in the Wunderkind account he now owes MD \$250,000 to pay for the losses in the value of the positions over and above his equity."

"Enter Dixon?" asked Stern.

"Almost," said Peter. "First, John panics. You can say anything you want to about what he did, but it was low risk. Different Exchanges? And the best bean counter in America couldn't follow the paper trail between the error account and the Wunderkind account without someone to help him. But now, with a quarter-million-dollar deficit, he's in deep. Obviously, they have no money. And he can't like come to the family for a loan. So he takes what seems to be the only alternative. He starts trashing all the records that show who owns the account--you know, the idea is that way they can't find him. He zaps the computer system, he cleans out the files here. He fries up the microfiche.

Unfortunately, the duplicate fiche is in Chicago. John had actually called a clerk there with some bullshit and had him ready to send the dupes, but the clerk asked what'shername first. Who's in charge there?"

"Margy Allison."

"That's it." Margy, Peter said, called Dixon, who by then had heard from MD's accounting department about the Wunderkind account and its sizable deficit balance. Dixon told Margy to send him the records John had requested. When he summoned John to his office two days later, Dixon had the pages he'd printed' out off the fiche and the account statements spread across his desk.

"He had John sit down in one of those Corbusier chairs he's got, the deep square ones with the stainless-steel frames?

Then he gets hold of John by the tie, puts his knee in his chest, and beats the living crap out of him. Quite a scene, apparently. Dixon's big,' but he's not John's size. But John lies there like a lump, bleed'me and crying, just sort of begging."

Peter grabbed a bit at his rumpled hair. Dixon by then had written his own check for the deficit in the Wunderkind account. He preferred that to

admitting to his best customers, the ones who had placed the large orders John had traded ahead of, that no one noticed while an employee--worse yet, a relation--had stolen them blind. And he couldn't simply write off the debit without drawing a great deal of attention from his in-house accountants. It was all one pocket or the other, anywi, and to cover himself with the customers, Dixon preferred to keep this quiet.

"But, of course," said Peter, "Uncle Dixon was tear-ass.

John's fouled his nest, put the whole business in jeopardy, and Uncle Dixon announces that John's going to pay for it, Dixon-style. Big speech. 'You are now my fucking slave.'

"Peter thrust his elbows out in imitation of Dixon and rumbled on; he was an able mimic.

"'You've seen your last raise or bonus in this century, and you'll do anything I decide you'll do, whenever I want.

you'll be a floor runner or a window washer or the guy who cleans the latrines, if that's what I say. And if you ever think about leaving, or so much as crap crooked, I'll ruin you. I'll take the hit with the customers, and I'll call the CFTC, the FBI, George Bush, anybody I can think of, and I'll tell them this has been laying heavy on my soul, and I'll beg them to fry your ass.'" And to back it up, Dixon makes a big show of taking all the account records and throwing them in his personal safe and telling John that they're always going to be there."

"John believed Dixon would carry through?"

"You bet your life."

Stern thought about Margy's story and the legend of Dixon's wrath murmured among his employees. Dixon, no doubt, was convincing when he bragged about his own cruelty.

"In fact, Uncle Dixon says, on second thought, he will turn John in. He's going to turn him in tomorrow. Tomorrow comes and he says it'll be the day after that. Then he's back on the fence. And so this is John's life. He works on the order desk. Then, when everybody's gone, Dixon finds something humiliating for him to do, like sort the, trash.

And then every other day Dixon says he's thought it over, the best course for him is just to drop the dime on John.

One day he calls John to his office, while he phones the CFtC Enforcement Division and has this long chat about error accounts. He gets hold of a photo of John and draws bars across it. He even gives John the draft of a letter that Dixon says he's sent to the U.S. Attorney. Every day, it's something else. My beloved uncle is practicing extreme

mental cruelty. Hard to believe of him, of course." Stern, tempted to comment, said nothing at all.

"So that's where this thing is when Kate comes to see me.

John is in Uncle Dixon's prison, which by now, he figures, is ten times worse than the real thing. At this point, Kate and he have decided the only thing John can do is bite the bullet: John will call the FBI and confess and go to prison, and Kate will terminate her pregnancy. This is their life plan. And riobody's kidding. All right?"

Peter finished his soda and burped again. He nodded to his father.

"Did you think perhaps," said Stern after a moment, "that I might be helpful in an arena in which I have worked for most of my life?"

"First of all, Dixon was your client, which means he was an object of religious worship. And second, what the hell would you do?"

"Obviously, I would speak with Dixon."

"And how would you prevent him from going to the law?

That's what he said he'd 'do. That would leave John without even the benny of having turned himself in."

"I ould ask Dixon not to do so.?"

"And he's always done just what you w '

anted; fight

His son had lifted his face to a haughty angle. Peter was an angry young man, no doubt about that. Life deeply dissatisfied him--people failed him in all respects. He was not gay, Stern suddenly thought. He was, rather, oddly misanthropic. He rendered help out of some sense of superiority or noble

duty, but he expected--perhaps even enjoyed--disappointment, time and again. He had full faith in no one. In this, Stern realized, to a greater measure than he wished, Peter was his son.

"I thought about this for a long time. I went to dinner out there and I talked to Kate and John all night. I took Dixon's little letter to the U.S. Attorney home with me, where he'd laid out the whole seam. I kept going over the details. And then, of course, I figured out the answer. The obvious fucking answer: John should go to the FBI.

But..." Peter, maestro-like, had lifted both hands. "Yes?"

"But blame Dixon. Say it was all Dixon's show. John was minorly involved, just the flunky." They looked intently at one another, "Very clever," said his father at last.

"I thought so." Peter smiled stiffly, for effect. "Of course, there were a few problems. For one thing, John could never carry this off. Not on his own. He didn't have the nerve left to walk down the street by himself, let alone bullshit the FBI."

"So you volunteered?"

"Yes."

"You became his representative."

"Right."

"His defense lawyer," said Stern.

Peter did not answer; it was clear, however, that he had never thought of it this way.

"Is that truly, Peter, how you imagine this business is conducted?"

"Oh, spare me," he said. "I sat at your dinner table too long. How many people have you gotten immunity for who were lying their asses off and blaming whoever the government wanted to hear about?"

"Far fewer than you apparently imagine, Peter. And in any event, whatever fictions were spoken I had not created,"

"No? Were they 'fictions' you really believed? I know.

You're just the lawyer. If the client has the balls or the brains--not to tell you he's lying, you pass him along without comment. And how many of those little fairy tales have you helped shape?"

Peter was the son. He knew his father's life well. "There are distinctions, Peter. I think as little of your presumption in this matter as you would, were I to perform open-heart surgery."

"Look," said Peter. "It was my sister." He resumed once more his aspect of inspired anger. The challenge was

there: my sister. Your child. They stared again at each other. "So you called the FBI," said Stern.

Peter met Kyle Horn in the lobby of a downtown hotel. They adjourned to the men's room and searched one another for electronic devices. Then Peter made his proposal. He was uninvolved himself, but he knew a man. The man had a boss who was one of the biggest names at the KCFE. There was a seam. The man was involved--at the bottom, not the top--and he was scared. He would tell all--but only for immunity and a promise that Peter's part in arranging this would never be revealed. Take it or leave it, Peter told him...

"And the government agreed?"

"Not at first. I had to meet Sennett. They made me go over the whole thing about four times. Finally, I let them interview John in person. All hush-hush, since they wanted John to be able to stay undercover. But I could see they would go for it from the day I gave them Dixon's name.

They actually made jokes about RICO'ing the place and calling it Maison Stan."

Maison Stan, thought Stern.

"Did they know you were my son?"

"I told them."

"They must have been very amused.""

"I suppose. Mostly, they were concerned. None of us knew for sure who Dixon would use as his lawyer, but once you showed up I got all kinds of bulletins and memos and guidelines and crap about never discussing the case with you. Which I've followed. For the last three weeks they've been telling

me I've got to stay away from Marta, too, and I have.

"We all sort of panicked when what's-her-name, Margy, sent out that memo saying you were going to talk to the people on the order desk." But Sennett had figured for a while that they were going to have to subpoena John to keep his cover, so they did it then and told you that you couldn't represent him. Pretty cute, huh?" Peter smiled faintly.

Stern did as well. All deserved. They had run rings around him.

"I take it that Mr. Tooley was another player in your farce?"

"More or less. I suggested him and Sennett thought that was great. I think at one point Stan told Mel not to ask too many questions, which was fine with him. He's not your biggest fan."

"Indeed not," said Stern. Peter had located all his father's foremost antagonists and joined league with them.

In the midst of everything else, Stern was stung by the thought, and he stood, walking across the tiny kitchen to the counter. For some reason he found himself recalling the early years, when the children were piled with pillows and blankets into the back of the current sedan and the entire family went to the drive-in for a movie: Only Peter of the three children remained awake. Even at the age of six or seven, he would watch the entire show, entertaining his parents with his curiosity about the world of adults, while the girls pressed their tiny hands to their faces and slept.

"You know you have inflicted terrible misery on your uncle.

''

Peter's eyes lighted on him briefly, holding the same hard gleam.

"I told you I wasn't sorry."

"You believe Dixon deserved this? For what--his treatment of John?" ',,,

"For lots of things. He's lived a piggish life." ',

"I see," said Stern. "For what other grave sins of Dixon's were you attempting to deliver retribution?"

Peter was silent. Eventually, he looked away.



"Help me with the chronology, Peter. When, exactly, did Nate Cawley tell you about your mother's condition?"

Clearly, it was near the time of these events."

Peter, using his thumb, peeled the paper wrapper off his soda bottle. He was worrying his head somewhat, disappointed about something.

"Nate told me last week he talked to you about Mom. He swore he kept me out of it."

"He did not mention your name," said Stern. "As I said when I arrived, I have been mulling over the circumstances."

Peter shrugged indifferently. He was not certain he believed his father, but that was beside the point.

"He felt someone in the family had to know, because of the state she was in. He figured I was another doctor, you know. He wanted me to keep an eye out and my mouth shut.

Needless to mention," said Peter, glancing fleetingly at his father, "he thinks he made a rather serious error."

"Nate has been hardest on himself, Peter. He even believed that I might sue him. Did you know that?"

"I knew." Peter nodded. "I thought it was possible, frankly. If you got the whole story. I figured you'd regard it as the height of irresponsibility that the drive-in for a movie: Only Peter of the three children remained awake. Even at the age of six or seven, he would watch the entire show, entertaining his parents with his curiosity about the world of adults, while the girls pressed their tiny hands to their faces and slept.

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Stern meditated an instant on Peter's dim hopes for him.

They expected, inalterably, the worst of each other.

"On the contrary, I believe it was prudent. I am certain you did your utmost. You were a devoted son, Peter, to your mother."

Peter puckered his lips a bit at the final words, but said no more.

"And how had you divined what Dixon's role was in your mother's illness?"

Peter looked up. "I'd taken a medical history from him.

Remember? I was his doctor. After I talked to Nate, I checked my notes. The dates matched. He had gonorrhea, too, in Korea, did you know that?"

It had not come up in discussion, said Stern.

"He thinks it made him sterile," Peter said. It was a thought, a professional observation. With it, he walked into the other room and sat down on the blue foam sofa. His bravery, his moral certitude seemed to be flagging. His look was turning abject.

"So, when you heard about John's dilemma, it was not entirely accidental that you began to consider how this might be turned back against Dixon." Peter did not answer.

Stern approached from the kitchen. "It was gallant of you, Peter, to fight your mother's battles. Not to mention mine." Stern, standing, took a moment to turn a dark countenance on his son, then moved to the window. Evening was coming

. through a great rosy sky. The last of the near-town commuters were in the street now, a stream of isolated persons carrying home, from various fancy shops, dinners which they would eat in silence, alone. "And may I now demand

the last piece, Peter?"

"Which is?"

"How was it that your mother came to learn of this scheme to accuse Dixon?"

In his surprise, Peter let forth a brief sound--part laughter, part groan.

"You're smart," Peter said to him. "I'll always give you that."

Stern dipped his head in appreciation. "And the answer?"

"She could see how distraught Kate was. She knew something was wrong. Finally, she pried some of it out of her. Kate told her what John had done at MD. And that I was trying to work it out. No details."

"And of her pregnancy Kate said what?"

"Nothing. Not a word. She still wasn't, positive she wouldn't have to

terminate."

Slowly, Stern nodded. That would fit.

"Anyway, so Morn came to see me, to find out what was going on. I told her she shouldn't worry about it. But naturally that didn't satisfy her."

"And so you informed her what you had done?"

"Yeah.

Eventually."

"Thinking what? That she would be delighted? That she, of all people, Would share your desire for vengeance on Dixon?"

"You don't have to try tO make it sound so ludicrous."

"Oh, I see your logic, Peter. You carried in Dixon I've a cat out mousing and laid him at your mother's feet. And her reaction--shall I guess?--was horror."

"Horror," said Peter. "I tried to explain it to her. You know. That it was the best thing for everybody in the end, but she wouldn't hear it."

"And how far along had your plan proceeded by then?"

"Pretty far. Sennett'd met John. It was just abouta done deal. I'd refused to let him take a lie detector, but we'd agreed that he'd stay undercover at MD and wear a hidden tape recorder--what do they call it? Wear a wire. ' '

"On Dixon?" By the window, Stern was still. "And what was to happen when your uncle was tape-recorded denying any role in the scheme?"

Peter looked at him at length. "You still don't get it, do you?"

Weary of being derided, Stern closed his eyes for an instant and searched in himself for restraint.

"I had to explain it to Mom, too. The idea wasn't to get Uncle Dixon for what John did. I mean, he didn't do it, after all. I knew he would deny it. He'd say it was all John's doing. And John would say Dixon was scared and was trying to save his skin by blaming the whole thing on him.

It would be a pissing contest in the end, a flatfooted fucking tie. There'd be nobody to prosecute because the government would never know which version was true.

Everybody'd just go on. With no jail. And no torture. It was a decent solution for both of them."

"But?"

"But he kept his mouth shut. Uncle Dixon did."

"Why?"

Peter threw both hands in the air.

"You ask me? You're his lawyer. I don't know what's going on. I sit awake at night. I just can't believe it's gone

as far as it has. Have you got any idea?"

Stern pondered, reluctant to speak.

"I have suspected for a few days now that he is assuming blame that properly lies with John and Kate. I cannot imagine what would move him to do that, particularly given what you tell me." He turned back to the old double-hung window, the frame lumpy with generations of paint. "And what happened to this plan to tape-record Dixon?"

"That's why they were trying to subpoena him.. In March?"

They were sure he'd go running for John as soon as he was served. It was a setup. John was wearing the equipment for two weeks. But the agents could never find Dixon. And once they did, he wouldn't talk to John. I mean, not even hello or goodbye. There hasn't been word one between them in months. Uncle Dixon just gives him his killer look--John is still terrified. Sennett figures you'd warned Dixon not to go near him.""

"Need I ask, Peter, how Agent Horn was finally able to find your uncle to serve him that day?"

"No, you needn't ask. They were supposed to catch up with him outside, as he came in."

Stern shook his head. How pitiful it was. He returned to the kitchen for his suit coat.

"You've placed yourself in enormous jeopardy, Peter. If the government is ever able to piece this together, you will join your brother-in-law in prison."

"Oh, I was scared at first. But the three of us talked about what would happen if it all went to shit." Peter smiled warmly. "How do they prove I knew John was lying?"

Peter had learned a good deal in those years sitting at his father's dinner table with his bored, superior look. When his children were young, Stern would look at them, arrayed at that table, with such gratitude--they were all clever, all healthy, all pleasing to the eye. They had every good fortune, he thought.

"They were never really skeptical," said Peter. "After they went out to the bank and confirmed that Dixon had written the check to cover the debit on the Wunderkind account.

They never seemed to figure there could be any other reason he might do it. And, of course, Dixon had the records that showed who owned the account, and was hiding them. And what's-her-name even lied for him in the grand jury. It looked pretty convincing," said Peter.

"You are referring to Margy?"

"Yeah. Kyle says that after the indictment they'll give her a chance to 'refresh her recollection.'" "He made the quotation marks in the air.

Stern straightened the sleeves on his coat. His son, re considering everything, sat with his head in his hands. Occasionally, Stern was called upon to represent young people--sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, children really--who had taken part in events so heinous that they would be tried as adults. The most recent example was Robert Fouret, a sulky college freshman who, stoned on something, had put his father's Porsche in drive rather than reverse and crashed his waiting girlfriend against the garage wall, killing her. In these circumstances Stern always felt for the parents, wealthy people who had retained him in the hope that he could repair all damage, and who discovered in time that not even a favorable sentence would still the reverberations of great wrongs. It was the parents who saw clearly, helplessly, the way the excesses and impulses of youth, stupid empty-headed acts, childish compulsions acted out in an instant, could burden and even extinguish the opportunities of a young life.

Stern saw this, too. But he spared himself, at least for the moment, that anguish,

For the moment, all that made itself clear was that his son and he had reached a point of termination. Within, in his own emotional theater, some final curtain had come splashing down. No doubt he had responsibilities here; he would suffer intensely when it came time to assess blame.

But for now he knew that the years--the virtual half of an adult lifetime--of recriminations, of ambivalent efforts with Peter were past. He would greet his son always with absolute cordiality--he owed his mother's memory that much and he knew that they would forever regard one another with pain. But something essential was over; he was done, he saw, awaiting improvement, acceptance, or change.

He was ready to leave now, but he had learned in the law that the pronouncement of judgments mattered, perhaps more than anything else.

"Peter, I shall say this once. What you have done is unforgivable. It is wholly immoral. And, as important; you have risked unlimited misery for everyone in this family."

Peter took this in quietly, but finally made a sound to himself and once or twice bobbed his head.

"That's what Mom thought. She was terrified. It was the dumbest move of my life, telling her." Peter looked up.

"I'm sure it was the last straw." His face was divided by a visible palsy, a tremor of contained emotion. It came to Stern then, a clear realization that, whatever the impact of the awful judgments which Peter applied to others, he afflicted them most severely on himself. He had bid his mother, the dearest soul in his life, farewell for eternity, with her parting expression One of withered hope and dashed beliefs. There was no denying biology. Stern found himself

terribly moved by his son and his now interminable anguish.

He stepped toward the door.

"What are you going to do, Dad? What's going to happen?"

Peter, like sons always, still wanted to believe that his father was a man of infinite resources, perfect solutions, Just now, however, Stern had no ideas at all.

MARTA returned home sometime after ten. From his recliner in the solarium, Stern heard her enter, humming faintly, off-key. Alone among the ., ' ,I. Stern family, Marta had had a good day. She came back from the courthouse ebullient. 'Even she couldn't stand it,' said Marta about Klonsky. She was thrilled to think she had converted a prosecutor. Back at the office, she had called George Mason with the news, then dictated their brief to Judge Winchell.

Finished with that, Marta asked, offhandedly, if there were cases around the office on which she could lend a hand while she was looking for a job. Pay by the hour. Stern, after a moment's reflection, decided his thought was too hopeful and referred her to Sondra.

By the afternoon Marta had set herself up in the one empty office and was examining the flood of files recently received in connection with the new government fraud case, writing longhand or chatting happily on the telephone whenever Stern wandered by. Marta seemed to live her life like, an appliance. Plug her in anywhere and she operated on full current. His daughter amazed him, but his soul still soared at the thought of having her company. They would continue this way for some weeks. He would be himself, and hold his breath. And would this prospect even have been possible had Clara lived? No, he decided after an instant, not really.

There were many reasons Marta suddenly found the tri-cities attractive, and not the least of them, in all likelihood, was the fact that her mother was gone. So, he thought, goes the heartsore arithmetic of human events. Loss and gain.

Now, in the solarium, he closed his eyes when he heard her approach. "Are you asleep?" she whispered. He could feel her creep close, but did not stir. Tonight he was not prepared for any further commerce with his children, even Marta. He remained inert, listening as she trod the stairs.

He had no thought of sleep, no inclination. Around one, he moved to the kitchen and sat under the green glass shade over the breakfast table, sipping sherry, as he had the night Clara was discovered. He was past judgments for the time being. Nor was he absorbed yet with the trigonometries of possible solutions. Instead, he sat, deliberating, taking stock, mourning again, up to his chin in the heavy glop of something like heartbreak, which held him fast as quicksand.



Near 5:30 a.m., he crept upstairs, showered, and dressed.

He percolated coffee and warmed a roll from the freezer.

Then he headed downtown, to the refuge of work and the office. He entered through the back door and stood still.

There was, once more, some faint sign of disturbance. Dixon was back.

He was on the sofa in Stern's office, upright this time, but asleep. His fancy loafers were off, carefully paired, not far from where the safe still remained, and he had slept with his legs crossed at the ankle. He wore a rawsilk sport coat--the air conditioning had apparently been left on high overnight and the room was ch'dled--and his arms were thrown out wide along the top of the nubby offwhite fabric of the sofa cushions. His chin rested on the bold paRera of his tropical shin.

Stern stood' before the dark glass of his desk, silently lifting the stacks of papers from his attache case.

"You must have thought that was pretty goddamn funny the other day." Dixon spoke clearly, but he had not moved.

"That bullshit with the safe? 'You deceive me, Dixon.'" He opened his eyes. "Like you're some fucking oracle." Putting a hand to his neck, he craned his head about. "You must have been laughing your ass off. Since you'd already ' pawed through the thing."

"Ah," said Stern. Silvia. A breach of security.

"I got a bill from the guy who fixed the back door. You should have heard your sister. 'Oh, that's from Alejandro.' La di da." He had briefly adopted a falsetto. "Like, Oh, didn't I mention that my brother hired a goon to kick the door in. Four hundred bucks, by the way. I expect you to pay."

Dixon had his fearsome, lightless look and a haggard appearance. He was unshaven and visibly weary; his eyes seemed shrunken within the dark orbits. Reminded, he asked Stern to dial his home. Stern pressed a button on the speed dial and handed him the phone, while he left to put up coffee in the small kitchen down the hall. When he returned, Dixon was just bidding Silvia goodbye.

"Your sister say you and I have to stop meeting like this."

Dixon laughed, Silvia's humor was awkward, but Dixon adored it. "I see you're not in jail."

Stern lifted both hands to show off his entire large form.

"I called Marta," said Dixon. "She said your girlfriend there, what's-her-name, saved your ass."

"For the tune being," said Stern. "Festivities will resume next week. Will you come to visit me?"

"Visit you," muttered Dixon. "What's your game, Stern?"

"My game?" He revolved fully to consider his brother-in-law, a courtroom turn. "Have you found another lawyer, Dixon?"

"I don't want another lawyer. I changed my mind."

"You need another attorney, Dixon. A lawyer and client must have confidence' in one another."

"I have confidence in you."

"But I, Dixon, have no confidence in you or your character or your motives. You are a vain, disloyal, deceitful man.

You are a terrible client and, if you care, a wretched friend." ',,

Dixon blinked a bit and rubbed his eyes'

"I'm not .a friend," said Dixon finally. He still had no idea what was going on, and he smiled weakly. "I'm a relation. You can't get rid of me."

"On the contrary. I am exhausted by the mysteries of your affairs. And your disdain for me."

"Disdain?"

"Among the legion of resentments I bear you, Dixon, I believe that none is greater than this: there is no person in the world who has better insight into Clara's death than you. And you have kept those details to yourself.

Undoubtedly for your own good, to serve some misbegotten and bewildering personal agenda."

"You're jerked off because I didn't mention that check she gave me."

Stern did not answer.

"And there's really a simple explanation."

"Dixon, you are about to lie to me again." "No," he said, with his frozen innocent look. "Yes."

"Stern," he said.

"You owe me some regard, Dixon."

"I have a lot of regard for you."

"Dixon, I may be befuddled for the remainder of my lifetime about your motivations, but I have no doubts about Clara's.

I am one of those Jews who can do arithmetic. Almost \$600,000 stolen by trading ahead and \$250,000 plus lost in the deficit in the Wunderkind account equal somewhat more than \$850,000, which is the amount of the check Clara wrote against her investment account at River National. My wife was paying the debts her son-in-law incurred in the brokerage account her daughter had opened. And I would be pleased if you would not affront me by denying what is obvious."

"All right." He nodded once and began to pace, his mind clearly racing. "She knew John and I were both involved.

She thought maybe I'd be willing to take all the heat myself. And she offered to pay the costs."

"A lie?" Stern slammed shut his case. Long-suffering, pusilanimous, he was suddenly on the rim of a smoking volcanic rage with Dixon. "Dixon, you may have convinced Margy long ago with that folderol about how you and John were secret conspirators and that you deserved all the blame, but I am well aware that you were never involved in this

"Margy?" Dixon stopped. "I thought she was high on your shit-list."

"I have reevaluated." Stern was tempted to add a further word in her defense, having spoken in error about her when he and Dixon last met, but he remained convinced that somewhere along she had agreed to follow Dixon's bidding in what she told Stern. "Leave the kid out." He could hear Dixon

saying it. „you may as well know, Dixon, that I have heard the entire tale: how you decided to spare your business and impose punishment yourself, and how you were informed against as a result."

Dixon waited, stood still, then finally retreated to the sofa to assess this new development. He removed his sport coat and threw it down there and, after further reflection, sat down beside it himself.

"As you conceived of matters originally, Dixon, how long was John intended to remain in your purgatory?"

Dixon juggled a hand, as if something were in it. He was still manifestly uncertain about telling the truth.

"No time limits," he said at last. "As a matter of fact, I told him straight out that two or three years from now I'd

probably go to the government and burn him, anyway."

"Apparently, he believed you."

"He should have," said Dixon. He gave his brother-in-law another direct and lightless look, the smoke of the conflagration still darkening his expression until he broke it off in order to reach for a cigarette. He tamped the filter repeatedly on the glass of the desk. "Of course, the big jerk never told me his wife was pregnant."

"Would that have made a difference?"

Dixon shifted his shoulders, not certain. "Probably. I might have thought a little more about the corner I was painting him into."

"And Clara?" asked Stern. "I would like to hear about your last meeting with her. How long before she died did it occur?"

"Three days? Four?" Dixon looked at his cigarette. "There's nothing special to tell. She showed up with that check.

Like you say, she wanted to pay his debts. I told her not t'o bother. I wasn't having any. I wanted his ass, not a check. That's all. She insisted on leaving it. onvinced that somewhere along she had agreed to follow Dixon's bidding in what she told Stern. 'Leave the kid out.' He could hear Dixon saying it. „you may as well know, Dixon, that I have heard the entire tale: how you

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Like you say, she wanted to pay his debts. I told her not t'o bother. I wasn't having any. I wanted his ass, not a check. That's all. She insisted on leaving it. So I threw it in the safe. That's the whole story."

"That's hardly the whole story, Dixon."

"Yes, it is."

"No, Dixon. You were tempted to surrender John to the prosecutors. And not only lost your nerve but stood mute while his freedom was traded for yours. A remarkable transition."

Dixon Harmell had come of age in the regions where the pressure of the earth had transformed organic wastes into something black and shining and nearly hard as stone. He had taken that lesson to heart--he had his look in place now, as dark and adamant as if he derived his power to persist from the center of the earth. Transported from the coal lands to the heart of the markets, he had learned that his will was vast, and it was all imposed now. He had no more to say.

"Tell me about your hearing this morning. You really going to the pokey for my sake?"

"If need be. There are enough members of my family bearing Witness against you." Dixon absorbed the remark with the same unyielding expression. "Do I take it correctly

that Clara informed you of Peter's role in all this?" Dixon smoked his cigarette without comment. "Another lawyer, D'Lxon, might help you mount an excellent motion directed against the grand jury proceedings and the government's conduct since Peter. You would not even have to comment on the veracity of the information he's given them."

A flare of some interest arose in Dixon's face. "Would I win?"

"In my judgment? No, You Would be granted a hearing to determine that there had been no infringement of your right to counsel. Certainly, you could delay Mr. Sennett's steamroller. But I doubt a court would find outrageous governmental conduct or a violation of your rights. The government is more or less constrained to take its witnesses and informants where it finds them. It simply found this one in a rather inconvenient locale."

Dixon shrugged. He was not surprised. Stern again urged him to seek another lawyer's opinion, but Dixon waved a hand.

"I'll take your word for it." He stood then and roamed to the English cabinets. On one shelf, there were pictures photographs of the family. Clara. The children. If the truth were told--and today once again the truth was required--Stern seldom examined these portraits. They were obligatory items,

appropriate decoration. But Dixon paused to consider each photograph, holding them up, one by one, by their frames. Stern gave him the moment, until he was ready himself.

"And now, Dixon, if you please, I should like to know what happened when you met last with Clara. You may be brief. I shall settle for the high points. There is no need," said Stern, with sudden glottal thickness, "for you to dwell on that which you least wish to tell or which I frankly least wish to know."

Dixon wheeled about, maintaining considerable poise, to his credit, but Stern could see that he was wide-awake now. His eyes were larger, his posture almost militarily correct. If Dixon were to accept these rules, this terrain would always remain unexplored between them. After great reflection, Stern had decided he preferred that accord. But Dixon, alas, was who he was, a guts player to the end. He blinked and looked at Stern straight on.

"Whatta you mean?" he asked.

"What do I mean?" Stern teetered an instant, and then toppled down into the smoking heart of his rage. He picked up his attaché case and slammed it back down on the desktop. "Shall I draw you pictures, Dixon! Shall we engage in a dispassionate colloquy about the mortal hazards of sexually transmitted disease? I refer, Dixon, to your relations with my wife,"

Dixon's grayish eyes did not move. When Stern glanced to the desktop, he saw that it had cracked, a bullet-like impression at the point of impact and a single silver line that streaked from there all the way across the smoky surface to the green beveled edge. The desk, of course, had never been his taste.

"Do you expect me to explain?" Dixon asked. He had moved behind his brother-in-law, and Stern chose not to

face him.

"No."

"Because I can't. I really am a no-good son of a bitch."

"Are you trying to charm me, Dixon?"

"No," he said. "It was a long time ago, Stern."

"I am aware."

"It was an accident."

"Oh, please!"

"Wrong word." He heard Dixon's fingers snap. "Unintended."

When Stern pivoted, Dixon had come close and with an eager, servile look had the humidor extended. "Cigar?"

Stern grabbed the whole box from him at once.

"Keep your hands off, Dixon!" The humidor ended caught up in his arms. Stern removed a cigar and lit it, then snapped down the lid with a round clap somewhat deadened by the felt liner. He glowered at his brother-in-law while Dixon retreated to the sofa, where he brought his lighter to another cigarette.

"It was all my fault, you know," he said. "You don't need me to tell you that. I pestered her for years," he said.

"Years." Some image offered itself, of Dixon at a family gathering emerging from shadows in the kitchen or the hall and placing his hands suggestively on Clara's hips. Repalled. Rebuked. Something clear and uncompromising, so that he would have feared disclosure. But with her silence, Dixon, being himself, would have been emboldened. He knew there was some small shining point of interest he had ignited. Step by step, gesture, nod, and touch, year by year, he had kindled the firepoint, knowing that this possibility of passion was one more treasure to Clara, one more secret. Stern, inclined to imagine more, called a halt. Enough, he told himself. Enough. "I admired her," said Dixon. For the first time, he dared to look at Stern.

"She was a woman to admire."

"Dixon. You have no conscience."

"No." He shook his head. "I'm curious. I've always wanted to do what other people wouldn't."

"I believe that is called evil, Dixon."

Dixon put out his cigarette. His mouth seemed to quiver like the muzzle of a dog. Dixon Hartnell was going to cry.

His face was flushed near the eyes and he peered downward.



"I really never connected any of it with you."

"I find that hard to credit."

"I mean it."

"You are pathological, Dixon."

"Okay, then that's what I am." He was finally growing impatient with Stern. Self-criticism was not in Dixon's repertoire. He went forward in life, seldom looking back. "May I ask, Dixon, when this interlude occurred?"

Dixon's face reared up; he was baffled. "What time of day?"

"Please, Dixon. When in the history of humankind did these events take place?"

"I don't know. It was right after Kate Went to college.

Clara was at the end of things. Very depressed. Swimming through all kinds of dark shit. You were on your big case

in Kansas City. Busy, busy, busy."

"Is that your excuse, Dixon?"

Dixon eyed him as he removed another cigarette.

"I told you, I took advantage. She couldn't have cared less about anything. It was an act of despair," Dixon said.

"Fucking despair."

"Thank you, Dixon, for your important psychological insight."

"She was destroying her life. She was getting even with you."

"Again," said Stern.

For the first time, he felt, absurdly, that it was likely he might cry. This was not what he wanted to hear, Dixon revealing to him Clara's hidden sides. Did Dixon really have it right? Close enough, probably. Clara had taken her reprisals, hoping that in what was most forbidden some dark magic might be found. She would soil and abase herself, pray for release, and if worst came to worst, she at least would have cause for her misery, her contempt for herself.

"It was A night and A day. And it was a complete bust," said Dixon. "A zero. I'm not just saying that now. If she hadn't come up with that problem, you could have said nothing happened."

"If," said Stern.

"Obviously, I hadn't noticed," said Dixon. "I'll never forget. She handed me a note at some family sh'mdig. I still remember it..One line, She neve wasted words,. Not ewn Dear Asshole, Just 'I am being treated for, . .' ;, Dixon circled a hand to fill in the blank. "I had no idea And then when I told your sister she had to be examined, she prOmptlY tossed me out on my duff. And went to cry on Clara's shoulder. Talk about fucked up."

This drama, all of the play, had transpired entirely. out of his presence. He roamed offstage in Kansas City. In the arms of his own jealous mistress. Absorbed in the role he liked best, he had managed to miss the signal events of his lifetime.

He smoked his cigar for some time then. The night with-ofit sleep had taken its toll. His eyes felt raw and his limbs, after the rush of anger,. were now burning and weak. As for the cigar, he was shocked to find that its taste was no longer pleasing. He would finish it, of course. He had begun to smoke cigars in Henry Mittler's office when he could not really afford them, usually limiting himself to the ones Henry reluctantly supplied, and with a cigar in his hand he still experienced mixed sensations of absolute triumph and parched frugality. But he would have no difficulty, Stern thought, not picking up another. His life, after all, had changed.

"She came to my office," Dixon said. "Just showed

Up.

"Clara?"

"No, the man in the moon." He had lain down 'completely on Stern's sofa. "I knew why she had to be there.

She hadn't said more to me than 'Pass the beans' for years."

"And?"

"And she came in, she sat down, and she cried. Jesus, did she cry." Dixon lay there a moment with the thought. "Not a dry eye in the house. Anyway, I

heard the whole fucking story. Peter. John. Doctors. Treatment. What got me was the money. When she handed over the check, like she thought money--" Dixon lifted a hand, suddenly rheumy-eyed again, hurt once more to think Clara believed ' dollars. might persuade him. In his own mind, of course,

Dixon had no price. "And what was her thought, Dixon? What did she want?"

"Want? What you'd think a mother would want.

She wanted her children to be safe. She wanted me to figure a way out. That was the reason for the check. She thought maybe I could repay everybody, MD, all the customers, and wash it all out."

"And what did you tell her?" . .

"It was too frigging late for that. Peter had already started playing junior G-man."

"Did you understand that Peter's theory was that no' one would be charged?"

"Yeah, I understood. That was strictly nuts. I figured if I opened my mouth, John and he would end up drawn and quartered. I thought even those jerks in the U.S.

Attorney's

Office could see through this. What's my motive, for Chrissake. I'm going to fuck around stealing nickels and dimes?"

"Did you tell Clara that?"

"She was a bright lady. She knew what the risks were. She was scared to death for all of them."

"And so?"

"And so what?"

"How did your conversation end, Dixon?"

"Oh, I don't know. The other reason she'd come was

because of her medical condition. She wanted me to know that she might have to let you know the score. I mean, she wasn't worried for my sake--she was concerned Silvia would find out. Prayway, after she got through that, she put on this very composed look and said, 'Dixon, I am really not certain that I am able to carry on.' It was the scariest fucking moment of my life. I didn't have to ask what she was talking about."

"And how did you respond?"

"How the fuck do you think I responded? I begged her not to do it. For about half an hour. I gave her every reason I could think of. She kept talking about the children. Peter and Kate. And John. And you. A lot about you. She was completely unglued. You know, I tried to reassure her. I told her Peter and Kate and John would be okay," said Dixon. "But what could I really say to convince her of that?" He shrugged. "So I promised."

It was like everything else. Everything else. Like forms in the clouds. He had seen it but never made out the shape.

"You promised Clara," said Stern, "that you would stand mute when accused and accept the blame."

Dixon, on the sofa, let his arm dangle down. He flicked his ashes toward the ashtray and missed by a considerable margin. He sat up then and ground the heels of his palms against both eyes.

"May I ask why, Dixon?"

"I just told you why. Because I owed it to her. Look, I'm not you, Stern. I'm not wise or good. I can't help what I do. I can only be sorry afterwards. That's the story of my

life. But I clean up my own messes." They sat together for some time. "I release you, Dixon."

"What?"

, "I release you from this bargain. It was truly valorous.

You were dealing for Clara's life, but in spite of your brave efforts, you failed. You may be released." Dixon shook his head. "I promised her."

"Dixon."

"I promised."

"I cannot permit this, Dixon."

"I didn't ask for your permission."

"I have thought about this at length, Dixon. I believe that John and Peter must be allowed to play their hands.

Speak up. Hire another lawyer and through him tell the truth. See if the prosecutors end up confounded, as Peter calculated they would."

"And what happens if Sennett gets hit by lightning and actually believes me? If he turns on those two, it'll make what he's planning for me look like a party game."

Stern allowed his shoulders to move--his weary, mystical, foreign look. There were no words.

"Listen," said Dixon, "I've held my breath all the way along. I've hoped for months that those creeps would drop the ball over there. Fuck things up, or lose interest, or have doubts. But I won't play it that way. John will never make it. I've seen him when someone turns up the bright lights. In a courtroom, or with somebody really banging away at him, he'll fold. You mark my words. And he'll take Peter down with him. Maybe even Kate."

Dixon was correct--no question of that. He had thought this out carefully. John would be wearing wires on the entire

family by the time Sennett was through with him. "That was the risk Peter chose, Dixon."

"Oh, screw that. They're children."

Stern sat down on the sofa beside him. With a single finger, he actually touched Dixon's hand.

"Dixon, I understand your object. I recognize that you are attempting to settle accounts with me--that you wish to see the rest of my family remain intact. But I absolve you."

Dixon glared at him, rankled--no, more: outraged. "Can't you just show some fucking gratitude and shut up?" He got to his feet. "I'm pleading guilty, Stern. And

I want you to arrange it."

"I shall not."

"Don't give me that 'shall not' crap. This is the right thing."

"It is a fraud, Dixon."

"Oh, stow it, Stern. Don't start boasting with me about your honor. I've known you too long. You've whored around plenty for reasons worse than this. I'm talking about your children."

"Yes. You think you're the only one in this family with the right to be noble?"

"Silvia--"

"Silvia will be fine. She'll have you to take care of her.

She'll see me on the weekends. You'll get me into some country club. I'll do that time standing on my head." ,

Dixon's 'primary talents were still in the arena of sales.

Pacing here, he had taken on his urgent salesman's bearing.

It was all bluster--Stern knew that. Dixon's haggard look and fitful nights were not due to the welcome prospect of country-club living. But Dixon had once been a soldier. He knew that courage was not the absence of fear but the ability to carry on with dignity in spite of it. At this instant he was oddly reminiscent of the young man Stern had met, with his strong chin and wavy brass-toned hair, wearing his uniform like a trophy and Willing himself to glory--a perfect specimen of what Stern then believed to be the most enviable species on the planet, a true American.

"Dixon, it is wrong."

"Oh, fuck principle, Stern. Fuck your honor! Don't you understand, you sanctimonious asshole, that this was exactly why she was afraid to come to you?" In great heat, Dixon smote the desk once with his fist. The glass broke through with an odd tone--a clear snap and a whiny ringing.

Both men moved at once. Stern rushed to his own side and, like Dixon, held the two pieces together. Along the Crack, one edge was now barely below the other. The heaps of papers had tumbled and Stern's cigar had jumped out of the ashtray

and lay in the cleft, still bum'ing.

"Will it fall?" Dixon asked.

Stern was not certain. He finally swiveled his desk chair about and propped it beneath the separated halves. Slowly, Dixon removed his hands. The desk sagged barely, perceptibly, but moved no farther.

It required a second for Stern to recollect where they had been. The hammer fall of Dixon's observation had been lost in the commotion; for the moment, he was saved. He knew that Dixon had pondered this matter at length and was once more correct. Clara had doubted her husband's pragmatism, his willingness to yield his scruples, especially in a contest with his son. For the time being, however, he could put that thought aside; the suffering would come later, when he was alone. Right now, he felt a different curiosity, one that had arisen yesterday, with a remark of Peter's.

"Why am I your lawyer, Dixon? Now. In this matter?"

"Where else would I go? And besides, you might have thought something was up if I hired a different attorney."

"But you say you feared my principles."

"You weren't going to find out." .

"Is that why you left the safe with me for so long?"

"It was locked."

"Nevertheless."

"Listen, you scared the shit out of me with that song-and-dance about search warrants. I believed you. I thought it was the best place for it."

"But you did not even take the precaution of destroying the check Clara had brought you."

"How could I? I figured the bankers would go look for it.

Or the lawyer for the estate. I had my whole routine planned when they got here: 'She wanted to open a new investment account for the kids, died before we finished the papers, boy, am I glad to see you, sign right here.'"

"Dixon smiled at himself.

"Yet you must have recognized some risk that I might piece it together?"

Dixon leaned over the broken desktop.

"They're your children, Stern. You may give me all your high-minded advice about turning them in, but I don't see you banging down the prosecutor's door. You'd never do it."

Dixon, with his canny, handsome face, his weary eyes, regarded his brother-in-law. "You'll do what I want. You've got to."

"You couldn't resist the game, Dixon, could you?" Dixon shrugged. "Competitive instincts," he said.

"Why do you feel so 'improved by my weakness? You love to see me bend, Dixon."

They were still across from one another. But the traces of some forgotten laughter already sneaked through Dixon's expression in spite of his most disciplined efforts at suppressing it. He was wonderfully amused, tickled pink.

"I want to plead guilty," he said. He knew he had won, as he knew all along he would, if it came to this.

Stern went down the hall and returned with coffee for both of them. It was, he admitted, an opportune time to negotiate. Sennett would be reluctant to confront a motion concerning the government's relationship with Peter. While he would ultimately prevail, Sennett knew he'd be seriously criticized along the way. The judges would chastise him for his zeal and the defencked."

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would be eager to avoid the damage to his reputation.

"Sure," said Dixon, quick to agree.

"But I shall not let them stampede us in the interval.

Sennett may seek to use the proceedings concerning me as leverage against you. I shall not negotiate from weakness.

If they must hold me in contempt--"

"Fine, fine," said Dixon, "we can take adjoining cells." He handed Stern the phone.

It was before eight; the secretaries were not in. But they were in luck. Sennett picked up the line himself.

SENNETT agreed to see him at four. The U.S. Attorney was cagey on the phone and asked what their meeting might concern, but Stern said merely that it was imperative that they speak. Sennett was at an obvious disadvantage, too apprehensive to ask him to elaborate. The idea came to Stern while they were still speaking. That brittle unyielding edge in Sennett's voice suddenly riled him, but before placing the call, he waited to see Dixon off, and to attend to a few matters on Remo's case, scheduled to start trial a week from Tuesday. By then, it was close to noon.

"Would you have a few minutes for lunch?" He had reached her directly.

"I'm not eating," Sonny said. "The beat's sort of got me."

She hung on the line, waiting for something, probably an explanation. "If it's about your meeting with Stan, I won't be there."

More a personal matter, Stern responded. He would welcome a moment of her time. "Could you meet me at the Morgan Towers Club in twenty minutes?"

"Oh, Sandy, I hate those private clubs. I'm dressed like a bag lady. You know, with the heat." As always, the air conditioning in the new federal building had failed.

"I prefer a neutral locale." Away from her office, he meant. "For your sake. I promise there will be no fashion commentary."

"My sake?"

"When-we meet," he responded.

He feared at first that she would not come. He sat in one of the overstuffed club chairs across from the elevators, watching the polished steel doors open and close and the business types disembarking. When Sonny arrived, she looked rosy and agitated and, as she herself was the first to acknowledge, out of place, dressed in a simple sleeveless maternity frock better for a country outing. Sonny seemed to have reached that point in her pregnancy where the premium was on merely surviving. There was a vague ungainly roll as she walked. Approaching, she removed a broad slouch hat, with a pink satin ribbon, which she had worn to protect herself from the sun.

"Here." Stern had raised a hand in greeting. He complimented her appearance, and asked again about lunch or a drink.

"I couldn't." She put a hand on her stomach and made a face. "And I'm on the run. Come on, Sandy. What's this about?"

On second thought, he led her down a hall to a rear cloakroom, a small space paneled in red oak, unused in the summer. The banging of the kitchen went on behind the wall, and the vegetable and meat smells of luncheon cooking emerged through the air returns. The place had a vague secret feel.

"I apologize for this maneuvering. I suspect Sennett might criticize you for meeting with me."

She made another face in response: Who cared? "Sonny, I am deeply grateful for your act yesterday, but it was illadvised. I am certain that the United States Attorney was displeased."

"I wouldn't call him cheerful."

"No doubt."

She was looking around for a chair. Her legs hurt, she said--she had walked over too quickly. He found a round back card chair in a corner. She put herself down in front of the empty coatrack and fanned herself with her hat.

Stern remained standing.

"Sandy, what's the point?"

"Go to Stan, today. Tell him you have thought the matter over and that you are prepared to proceed with full vigor."

"I'm not ready to proceed with full vigor. And today he doesn't care, anyway. He's flipped out over the fact that you found out about"--she dropped a beat--"about the informant. He had four assistants in the library' last night until two doing legal research. That's Stan. It's always this macho crap: it's okay because I say so. Then when it hits the fan he wants to call out the Marines to cover his der-riere." She stopped abruptly. He knew that as usual she felt she had spoken too freely. "I had no idea, by the way," Sonny said. "You know, who it was. I finally asked Start three days ago. Right after we got off the phone. I think it's sick."

"Sonny, I would not pretend I am not deeply chagrined, but I shall tell you in the privacy of this room that I do not believe the government's conduct in this matter was unlawful."

"Probably not," she said. "But it's shitty. If Start didn't have a smirk on his face, it wouldn't bother me as much."

"It's not disembodied principles to him. It's a grudge."

"Sonny, there are no disembodied principles in the practice of law." He spoke with some weight. "There are human beings in every role, in every case. Personalities will always matter."

"It was over the line. The way he handled it." She fingered the ribbon on her hat. "Listen, Sandy, I wasn't doing you a special favor. At least, I don't think I was. I just got really uneasy with the idea of enforcing a subpoena based on that kind of information if we hadn't disclosed the source. I could just see it: the judge locks you up and then finds out there was a sensitive issue which the government never mentioned. She could land on us with both feet. I thought if you wrote a brief, maybe you'd raise it, maybe we would. It would give me a chance to talk to Stan again,"

Stern nodded. Her reasoning had been cautious, sound. More thoughtful--more lawyerly than her boss's.

"Don't think I'm not still pissed at you," Sonny said. "I am. That was an ugly little charade out in the country -asking me questions about those account papers, like you'd never seen them in your life."

"I had not seen them," he said simply. "Ever in my life."

She studied him intently, trying to figure it out, whether he was telling the truth, and if he was, how it could be.

"I really don't understand," she said, then raised a hand.

"I know. You've got your confidences, right?"

"Correct."

"It must be a hell of a story." She shrugged. "I suppose that's why you don't want to tell it to the grand jury."

For an instant, he said nothing.

"Sonny, when we were in the country you shared as much as you could with me out of a sense of fairness. I would like to respond in kind. Speaking with Stan this morning, I am sure I left him with the impression that I wished to meet in order to complain about the government's use of my son as an informant. No question, I shall do a good deal of that. But assuming that Mr. Sennett is willing to make the concessions he ought to in the circumstances, I would expect our discussion to lead eventually to an agreement for Dixon to enter a guilty plea."

She took that in and then tipped her head admiringly. "Nice timing," she said.

"I believe so." They both lingered with the thought of how far Sennerr would go to prevent Stern from causing a stir about the government's tactics with Peter. "So, you see, there will be no further grand jury investigation or contempt proceedings."

She smiled when she made the connection.

"You want me to kiss and make up with Stan before he knows?"

Right?" Sonny laughed out loud. "Oo, that's sneaky," she said. "And, boy, does he deserve it."

Stern smiled with her, but did not speak. Sonny fanned herself again with her hat.

"Look, Sandy, I'm okay with him. He didn't fire me. He knew he should have clued me in a long time before on something this delicate. And besides, he's

political enough to figure out the angles. An Assistant out there criticizing him on the issue? No way he can have that. He has to keep me inside the tent. He just took me off the case. He said I'm not objective about you." With that, due to the heat perhaps, or what she had said, or one of the many bodily quirks of pregnancy, her color rose again--her cheeks grew bright, so that for all the world he had the impression of a flower unfolding. "Which I'm not," she added quickly, showing a swift, rueful smile and allowing her eyes to drift to him, where they remained.

It was, Stern thought, a sweet look they shared.

"I think I might have been away with you that night," she said quietly, "if you had asked."

"And I was so close to asking," he answered. Until he heard himself, it did not occur to him that they both had spoken of something in the past, but now, for the first time, that seemed to suit him just as well. Speaking, he had found some touch of grace, a perfect note, so that neither she nor he nor anyone passing would ever know precisely where the meter fell, how much of even one syllable was uttered in the kindest jest or the truest lost ardor.

"Regrettably," he continued, "you are married."

She placed both hands on her stomach. "Lucky for me."

"Just so," he answered.

"I told Charlie we got married so we could be crazy together, so we just have to go on that way." She laughed at herself, flipped her hat, took her feet. "Tell me you approve."

"I do," he said.

"That makes one of us."

He laughed out loud.

"Sonny, you have inspired me," he said. He took a step closer, and she averted her face slightly, giving him her cheek. But he did not kiss her. Instead, moved or, as he would have it, inspired, he placed one of his soft hands on each of her bare shoulders, and then in some peculiar ceremony, standing just a few inches from her, let them travel down her arms, a strange would-be embrace. He grasped her above the elbows, on the forearms, at last

her hands. She had raised her face by then to greet him, eye to eye.

"When I grow up," she said, "I want to be like Sandy Stern.

SO that was life, thought Stern. He descended in the Morgan Towers elevators, blinking off the presence of this young woman as if he were emerging from strong light. For an instant he was full of doubt. On another day, when he was less weakened by lack of sleep, might there have been a different outcome? The doors fell open to the noon sun blazing through the lobby's enormous plate-glass windows, and as he stepped forward, eyes stinging, light-headed, he was amazed to find again that he felt more positively himself than he had in months. The core thingsnot simply the safe items, but matters of faith and influence-remained in place, impervious to the stamp of failure. He touched the center button on his suit jacket'and lifted his chin properly, as he so often did. Mr. Alejandro Stern.

He did not return to the office. Instead, he drove home and went immediately to bed. He would rise and re-dress in time for his appointment with Sennett. But right now he 'needed solemn contemplation. One of the philosophers, Descartes, Stern believed, had chosen his bed as the site for intense reflection, and for unknown reasons Stern had long followed his example. Most of his closing arguments were composed here, with a bed tray beside him amply laid with food and a yellow pad. He wrote down very little. Instead, he weaved the arguments and phrases in his mind--the same sentences, the same notions, again and again, until his consciousness was little more than the passionate speech he was going to deliver. Today it was Clara. Her last hours now belonged to him.

Stern had known a number of suicides. It was one more sad facet of his practice--so many of his clients were intent on doing harm to themselves one way or the other. He had stopped asking himself why decades ago. For too many of them, the answers were obvious: the self-negation, the willful personal abuse, the deficits, shames, the scars. In the late fifties, when he was starting out, Stern had defended the drag case brought against a local rock'n'roll star who went by the name of Harky Malarky. Harky was full of the untamed moonstruck bleakness of an Irish bard and always danced along the precipice. Morphine addiction.

Destructive women. Violent friends. He died, blind drunk, on a motorcycle he purposely raced from the roadside into a magnificent Utah canyon.

And there were others, not as vivid as Harky, but they  
'all had the same unshakable belief that they were doomed.

And Clara had it, too. He had always known that. A terrible hard-bitten pessimism, an absolute gloom, She never foresaw a future in which she was included. A psychiatrist he had met over the years, Guy Pieace, confessed to Stern one night at a private moment, during a party at the Cawleys', that he wrestled with the impulse to commit suicide each day. He got up every morning and it was a task as certain as shaving and going to the office: he must not kill himself. That night, Pieace said, he had seen a goblin of sorts beckoning to him from a lamppost. He had driven around the block three times to be certain it was not there.. His wife, who was accustomed to this, took it calmly, knowing that he would have to satisfy himself.

Eventually, three years ago, Guy had played a losing game of Russian roulette, one round in the chambers--he had, apparently, let the goblins take their shot.

In the midst of his unnerving, half-drunk confession, Pieace had laughed, because some famous depth psychologist, probably Freud, had commented that human beings cannot grasp the reality of their own deaths<sup>2</sup> That was not true of Guy; and probably not of Clara, or most others who make a deliberate departure. The cup is always half empty or half full. For most of us--certainly for Stern--the concern was over how much remained. Since the time of his fortieth birthday, in his inevitable greedy way, he had remained irritated by the feeling that the serving had been slight to start with. Here, at home, under his covers, alone with the afternoon sounds of the neighborhood and the air conditioning recirculating the still air of the household, he recognized how frightened Clara's death had left him. We stand in line with certain recognizable figures. Her turn.

Now yours.

But for Clara, a bit lille Guy, the moment must never have been far away. Nate, in fact, said she had told him as much. To Clara it was always a brief ride to a known destination. She meant to be of service along the way. But a sense of futility that went beyond any psychological l name--depression or anomie--no doubt often overcame her.

What was the point in waiting, given the aeons, the eternity in which she



would never take part? And in this frame of mind she had faced her final choices. Dixon's magnificent, grandiose act in the end must have only complicated her overwrought state. There was not a bearable alternative on the horizon. Could she actually stand by and watch as Dixon undertook this gruesome act of selfsacrifice? Could she reveal her problems, and the past, to her husband, devastating him and, in all likelihood--given the odd explosive chain effect of anger and grief---Silvia, too? That would be a poor reward for Dixon, who, in the circumstance, might even lose the will and strength to see his promise through. Could she instead bear the rest of it and also watch her children march off to the penitentiary?

It was not suicide, thought Stern. Not in her eyes. It was euthanasia in the face of mortal heartbreak.

Could he have saved her? Was it the cheapest lie, the glossiest balm for his soul to think that if the same two persons had married today, in a franker era, this would not have taken place? They had assigned one another roles at a time when their own ambitions for each other allowed for more unexplored geography. Now there were counselors and meddlers and self-help aids to force couples to walk within each other's fence. He had respected boundaries that, with just a bit more strength or attention or nerve,. he might have been able to surmount. His every effort, though, would have been against her ill.

Thirty-odd years ago, Clara Mittler had drafted a composition, called it Clara Stern, and remained intent on playing it to the end. It was a woodwind part of austere and unwavering beauty, and he was the uncritical audience, one set of hands clapping when he took the time to occupy his seat. The quiet precision of this performance hid from all --but most significantly herself--a terrible banging turmoil. Somewhere, well beyond her power to bring it forth, there must have been a thunderous rage. She knew it only as disorganized sound. The noise, she had told Nate, the crashing dissonance of anxiety and unending disappointment, was always with her. Ultimately the noise had come from all directions, at unendurable volume, and Clara bowed to the aesthete's inevitable grief that Beauty would not be her.

He knew for some reason just now what he had not beforemhow it was done. He had never understood why she had chosen the car. But today that was clear. She had triggered the ignition and then slipped a cassette into the player. The police, of course, had not even looked. It would have been

Mozart, certainly, but Stern felt a stitch of a keen frustrated grief that he would never know which selection.

The Requiem? The Jupiter? But the remainder he could imagine. The volume had been turned up considerably--the woodwinds lowed with lost sounds of the soul and the plangent violins engulfed the small space, so that even a fine ear could not detect the engine's rumble, and she lay back, eyes already closed, no doubt, while the magnificent music rose in great waves toward that perfect moment at the end of every piece when there was silence.

WHEN Helen called, Stern was dreaming: Dixon had accosted him on a street corner. He was smoking one of Stern's cigars and in his usual joking manner was pointing out that he had gone bald. He circled his hand over his crown and with considerable satisfaction turned about so that Stern could see the large spot where the straight black hair had actually fallen away. As Helen spoke, the dream and its difficult feelings still swam within him and for just the barest instant

he was convinced his dreaming had gone on.

"What?" He was lost. Was she crying?

"I need you." She seemed short of breath. When he had answered--as in the office, 'Stern here'--she had said repeatedly she was sorry to be calling. Sorry. Sorry. "I need you here. Please."

"Yes, yes. I shall be there momentarily."

In the bathroom, he felt unbalanced by the light. He splashed water on his face and gave up the thought of shaving. The line of a sheet was impressed on his cheek.

Had she even mentioned the problem? One of her children, he imagined. The boy in college. He crept down to the garage.

When he started the Cadillac, the digital clock flashed on.

It was almost three; early Friday morning. He had been asleep since a little after nine, having gotten only an hour or two on Wednesday night. Marta had kept him awake, demanding that he share in advance every thought and nuance that would go into the closing argument in U.S.v.

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waited with poor Remo most of the day for the jury, which returned near five o'clock. Not guilty. With the verdict, Judge Winchell had fixed Remo with a sour look, but her sole comment had been to Moses Appleton: 'Better luck next time.' Marta, who had assisted her father throughout, even cross-hat perfect moment at the end of every piece when there was silence.

WHEN Helen called, Stern was dreaming: Dixon had accosted him on a street corner. He was smoking one of Stern's cigars and in his usual joking manner was pointing out that he had gone bald. He circled his hand over his crown and with considerable satisfaction turned about so that Stern could see the large spot where the straight black hair had actually fallen away. As Helen spoke, the dream and its difficult feelings still swam within him and for just the barest instant

he was convinced his dreaming had gone on.

"What?" He was lost. Was she crying?

"I need you." She seemed short of breath. When he had answered--as in the office, 'Stern here'--she had said repeatedly she was sorry to be calling. Sorry. Sorry. "I need you here. Please."

"Yes, yes. I shall be there momentarily."

In the bathroom, he felt unbalanced by the light. He splashed water on his face and gave up the thought of shaving. The line of a sheet was impressed on his cheek.

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next time." Marta, who had assisted her father throughout, even cross-examined one of the surveillance agents, was eager to celebrate. Gracious to the core, Moses had insisted on buying both of them a drink..After a single soda water, Stern had left Marta and Appleton for the sleep of the old and weary. Why were triumph and exultation always so fleeting? He drove through the night streets now, toward Helen's, waking gradually and increasingly alarmed.

Facing him, in Helen's drive, a van had been backed to the paneled door of the garage. In his own headlights Stern could read the lettering, reversed to be legible in rearview mirrors:

gEl(IEIMA.qAq

Not again, he thought, God, not again. He ran up the walk, his change and keys jumping in his pockets; he did not have to ring the bell. Helen, by the door, swept it open and was in his arms at once, weeping and thanking him for coming.

He had caught her face for just a second, but it was a sight. She had been fully made up when she started crying.

A mess of liner was clumped along her cheeks, and the tears had washed away the cosmetics in streaks below her eyes. A tuft of her hair stood on end. In his arms, in spite of the heavy robe, he could tell that she was otherwise unclad, and all of this--the sight of her, the feeling now, her voice and breath, her urgent clinging--unloosed in him a tremendous wallop of sensation. His poor heart. It was like a barnacle drifting through the sea and ready to attach itself to any prominence. And still how welcome all this was, her ardor, her presence, her declared need. Lord, what a dear person Helen Dudak was to him. For this instant he felt amazing gratitude.

"What? Please?" He held her hands.

She tossed her head about.

"I'm so sorry I had to call you. You were the only person I could think of. Sandy, please..." She did not finish; a retching sound escaped her. She pressed her folded hand to her mouth and once more leaned against him.

"Lady, hey. Sir?" A latino in the ambulance service's brown uniform was on the landing of the staircase, beckoning down to both of them. "His no good."

The man slowly shook his head.

Helen wailed, a brief wavering sound.

Stern was already on the way up, following the attendant, who had retraced his way along the staircase and was headed down the hall. In Helen's bedroom there was a terrible st'ink. The bed was unmade. And a man was in it, a crippled, still figure, unclothed, his face beneath the plastic form of an oxygen mask. In extremity, he had apparently lost control of his bowels. There was a second attendant here, a young white man, and both of them were busy with the equipment which they had at the bedside, two large green cast-iron tanks and a cart with wires and various apparatuses. On one corner of the king-sized bed, entirely unexplained, stood a small wooden end table. The latino, the one Stern had seen on the stairs, gestured to Stern in the doorway. He was removing the last lead from the man's chest.

"EKG?" He whistled and drew a smooth line in space.

"No good. They'll pronounce him at Riverside. Okay I use the phone? I got to call the cops." Before he moved on, the attendant leaned over and removed the air mask from the man in the bed and stopped to close his eyes, a quick stroke with his forefinger and his thumb. Even from the doorway, Stern could tell.

"Oh, dear God," he said out loud. Helen had arrived beside him. Stern was holding on to the doorjamb. "Who is it?" he asked her, moved by some impulse of propriety or hope.

Helen had not looked at him directly since he had arrived.

She gripped Stern's hand with both of hers and bowed her head a bit, so that her forehead rested against his shoulder. "Helen, please tell me that is not Dixon."

As before, she merely shook her head, the washed-Out tousles of fox-colored hair. She had no words for the moment. And in any event, what Stern wanted was something she could never say.

With the attendants' consent, it was Stern who summoned the police. He called Division 4 Homicide and insisted they rouse the lieutenant at home. When he called back, Stern put him on the line with the attendants. At the lieutenant's instruction, they were relieved, told tO go on their way and to

leave the body to the police. Stern saw the two out as they bumped their tanks and cart over the threshold. Helen was seated right there, on a low, upholstered bench positioned by the doorway to collect mail or packages or wraps. She remained downcast, looking into a snifter of brandy.

Stern sat beside her and she passed him the glass.

"I'm sorry I had to call," she said again.

"Please, do not--" A hand drummed in the air. The words did not need to be spoken. "In the act?"

She nodded with emphasis.

Dead with his boots on. Dixon Hartnell in his many lost vain moments would be abundantly pleased. Stern attempted without success to smile.

"And how long has this been going on?"

"Going on?"

"This," said Stern decidedly.

Helen glanced up.

"Sandy, please don't take that tone with me. He called. Did I do something wrong?"

Stern worked against the weight of various judgments, too shocked, it seemed, to follow his customary instinct for reticence.

"He is married, Helen."

"I'm not."

"No," Stern agreed.

"Do you think this was aimed at you somehow?"

Did he? God knows what he felt. He looked back up the stairs, where Dixon's body now lay beneath an old blue sheet, like some shrouded piece of statuary.

"He called me. The week you left me high and dry, as a matter of fact. And I enjoyed his company. That's all."

"Very well," said Stern.

"He was very romantic," said Helen. Her face was harsh with unconcealed ire. "He'd call, he'd come by at any hour. He was charming."

"Yes, I see," said Stern. No need now to ask where Dixon was roaming to at night. His next utterance would be 'Enough.'

They sat in silence. Stern could hear the clocks tick, the appliances. The headlights of another car swcpt into the drive.

"The policeman," Stern said.

Helen tightened the belt on her robe, preparing to tell the story.

Radczyk, alone, in his rumpled sport coat and an old fedore, approached the doorway. Stern shooed Helen into the living room, then let him in.

"Always sad occasions, Lieutenant."

"My business," said Radczyk, and laughed in his inoffensive, hickish way, amused by himself. His blotchy face was red from sleep. He raked the straying hair over his head and clutched his hat.

Stern introduced Helen, who in a few brief strokes said what she had to. They were making love, she said. Radczyk stood in the living room with his tiny pad, making notes.

"So, let's see," he said. "This guy and this gal--" He nodded in a courteous way to Helen, who was standing right there. "This guy--"

"My c/lent," said Stern.

"Your client," said Radczyk. He hitched his chin finally and invited Stern to walk farther down the hall.

"I take it this fella wasn't the gentleman of the house."

"Ms. Dudak is unmarried. He was my brother-in-law," said Stern. "My sister's husband."

"Okay," said Radczyk. He nodded a number of times. He got it now.

"This will be terrible for her."

"Sure, sure. So wha'dya got in mind?" He knew there was something, because

Stern had told him on the phone he would ask a favor. He wished to spare his sister, Stern said now.

Radczyk listened. It was nothing to him, one way or the other.

"Let me look around, be sure it's kosher," Radezyk said. He was matter-of-fact. It was his job.

Upstairs, he examined the body, touched the chest, rolled Dixon a bit from side to side. Radczyk held his nose.

"P.U.," he said. "Stroke or heart attack, you figure?"

"Heart," said Stern. That was the paramedics' diagnosis.

Radczyk thought so, too. "Looks okay. No marks or anything.

I ain't got a problem, if you're sure that's what you want fo do."

Stern said it was.

"I gotta make a call or two," said Radczyk. "Get somebody to hit the wrong key on 'the computer." He winked. At the doorway to the bedroom, Radczyk grabbed Stern's ann, lowered his voice. "What about the table?" He hitched a shoulder toward the corner of the bed where the small end table had remained.

Stern only shrugged.

While Radczyk was on the phone, Stern returned to Helen.

She had not moved. She was st'ill in her robe, still pale and stricken, barefoot, with her thin calves looking white without hosiery. The brandy glass was beside her. Stern took it up again and told her what he planned.

"It will be much easier this way for Silvia," said Stern.

Dixon and he were to have lunch with her today. Stern would drive out to the house and together they were going to tell her--that Dixon was going to plead guilty to two counts of mail fraud next week, and soon after would be confined in a federal penitentiary, probably the one in Minnesota, for a year, ten months; actually, with good time. It had not been a task he had been looking forward to, and in a peculiar way the notion that he had already shouldered some ominous duty toward his sister made the thought of what was now at hand easier by some bare measure.



"Silvia," said Helen. With that realization she started crying again. "I was trying to get even with you, I suppose. You were entitled."

She wiped her nose on her sleeve before Stern could get out his hanky.

"I was," said Helen, as only she could, in her frank, emphatic way. "I was so hurt, Sandy. I feel. Felt. Shit."

She lowered her head and laughed and cried at once. "He would have dropped me, anyway. -He hadn't come by for days and he told me tonight that he'd decided we had to break it off. I couldn't believe it. Jilted by the replacement, too." Helen smiled a bit, but then the thought of something, the moment probably, came back to her and she wrapped her arms about herself and closed her eyes. "He was trying to comfort me," she said.

She took a second.

"I should have known better. I tried to get even with Miles, too, 'after I found out about him. Did you know that?"

That I had an affair before I left him?"

"No. Should I?"

"I always felt everyone knew. Didn't you? I was certain you did, that night."

Stern looked at her blankly. "What night?"

"When Nate dropped by," said Helen. "At your house? I'd brought dinner?"

He absorbed this, too.

"I do not approve," Stern said suddenly. "I understand. But I do not approve of any of this."

This utterance amazed him. Not so much the judgment as its sudden force. He realized that he stood revealed, a man of harsh opinions, which he ordinarily kept to himself. It seemed that he spoke mostly out of confusion, but the significance was not lost on Helen. She looked at him bravely, knowing, apparently, with her strong intuitions of

him, that it was necessary that something be denounced. "Of course not," she said. Radczyk returned then.

"Okey-doke," he said. "All set. No report, no nothing. This here never

happened." He nodded politely to Helen. "I'll give you a hand," he said to Stern.

Dixon's clothes were strewn about the room. Stern gathered the items, but Radczyk took them from his hands. "Here, here, let me," he said. "Homicide dick is half an undertaker."

When Dixon was dressed again, they carried him out. Radczyk took the ankles and Stern grasped Dixon's hands, clammy to the touch and strangely firm. The feel was like nothing human; cool, almost chilled. Dead weight, they said. It was a considerable task. Helen walked away, at the sight of the body. They rested Dixon on a sofa in the small den off the kitchen and then Stern backed his' car into the garage.

Together, they laid Dixon out in the back seat and covered him with the same washed-out sheet. "I'll meet you down there," Radczyk said. "I gotta make a call, then I'll be there."

Stern insisted it was not necessary, but Radczyk would not hear of it.

"You gonna go walkin round Center City with a stiff, better have a badge along. Could get pretty peculiar, otherwise."

Radczyk drove off, and Stern returned to Helen, who had sat again on the bench, her place of contemplation for the night. She had dressed in the interval, a black top and stretch pants, and had washed her face clean of any makeup.

She looked plain, drawn but composed. He had been pondering his outburst, haunted now by embarrassment. Something--that high-and-mighty tone--was so wildly hypocritical. He began to apologize.

"Please, Sandy," she said.

He sighed at length.

"You must understand," he said. And so he told her, more directly than he ever could have imagined, about Clara: she and Dixon had had a brief affair some years ago. As he spoke, it occurred to him that there was nothing in the world he could not say to Helen Dudak.

"Oh, Sandy." She covered her open mouth with one hand.

"So you see," he said.

"Yes, of course." She closed her eyes. Then she took his hand. "He must have envied you terribly."

"Envied me?"

"Don't you see?"

The thought was breathtaking.

They sat together on the bench in silence. He would have to move along, he thought, meet Radczyk. She continued to hold his hand, and now Stern was reluctant to depart,

"How's your friend?" she asked presently.

He did not understand.

"Your new friend," Helen said.

"Oh, that." He smiled to himself. "Well past. Temporary insanity," he said. "I seem to have grown up again."

They were both quiet. Eventually, Helen slumped and

held her face in her hands in her familiar, youthful manner. "Do you believe," she asked, "that we're doomed to repeat the same mistakes all our lives?"

"There is that tendency," he said. But, of course, if he believed that the soul would forever be a slave to its private fetishes, why had he come to the U.S. ? Why did he cry out for justice for those who were most often unredeemable? What, indeed, had he spent these months trying to transcend? "But I also believe in second chances."

"So do I," said Helen, and reached over again to take his hand.

After he married Helen the following spring, Stern told her on a number of occasions that it had all been foregone from the moment they had sat together on that bench. But this was not really true. For months after, he remained uncertain about many things, particularly himself, the limits of his strength and the exact form of his wishes.

But as he rose to leave that night, he took her once more in his arms--Helen, who had been in bed with Dixon a few hours ago, and Stern, who had his body in the back seat of his car and felt, as he embraced her in these

impossible circumstances, if only for an instant, the clear bright light of desire. It was what he had felt when he greeted her tonight, but the events that had unfolded since had added a new urgency. What was it? He could never explain, but as he had absorbed her peculiar confession, he had been full of strong emotion. In her disorder, her confusion, her hasty admission that she, like the rest of us, was still, for all her effort, partly invisible to herself, he adored her. So he held her another moment and told her a bit more of the story. About the latest turn of events with D'Lxon.

And the fact that his children were involved. He did not say how. Helen, he knew, would want to share every secret, to tell each of hers and to hear from him everything he told no one else. And in time, he realized, he would probably do that. It was that moment, those discoveries, he would be talking about the following spring.

Then Mr. Alejandro Stern, heavy with thought and feeling, drove through the night, eerily aware of the presence behind him. At every light, he ffitd down the rearview mirror so that he could look at the form in the back seat.

"My God, Dixon," he said out loud at one point. Envied him.

Envied, Helen said. For what? He was a fat man with a foreign accent. The respect he claimed, esteem, was nothing, minor, transitory. What, really, were his achievements? A disordered family life? Poor Dixon. His cravings were unending. Great men, thought Stern, had great appetites. Had someone said that? He was not certain, nor was he sure what name he would put to Dixon. Great something, was the thought tonight.

Radczyk's car, an old Reliant, was in the loading zone behind the building. Stern took the door handle and was ready to alight when he was struck again with that sensation, clear as d.jd vu, that none of this had happened, that this actual moment was not occurring. Not this or anything of the last week, weeks, months. He was someone else, somewhere else. This was all the concoction of some stupefied wreck in the comer cot of a distant bedlam. He stared at the amber circles thrown down by the crane-necked street lamps and returned gradually to his life.

They carried Dixon under the sheet. Radczyk propped the building's from doors open with pieces of' cardboard and they hauled Dixon around to the back service elevator. In a building tenanted principally by lawyers, someone

was likely to be here, even at 5:45 in the morning. In the dirty elevator, they kept Dixon, taller than both of them, between them, under his pale blue sheet. Radczyk held the body upright with a hand on D'nton's belt.

In Stern's office, they attempted to position him, as he had been on those two recent nights, on the sofa. Stern crossed Dixon's legs, and with that the body rolled slowly forward, collapsing by stages, until it arrived with a heavy helpless thump on the floor.

Stern covered his face. It could not be avoided. Both Radczyk and he laughed out loud.

Then they placed him once more on the sofa, holding him there. Stern unbuttoned Dixon's jacket, lifted his hands.

He was like a store mannequin now. When Stern bent Dixon's legs to position his feet, Dixon's head fell backward,

his mouth open, agape, in an unmistakable pose of death.

Neither Radczyk nor he moved for a moment.:

"How may I thank you, Lieutenant?" Stern asked as Radczyk started to leave.

"No need," said Radczyk, He looked at Stern sadly. "I owed you. I told ya. Never woulda straightened myself out otherwise."

Radczyk had said he owed him forty ftmes if he had said it once, and Stern had never caught the meaning But now he did. There was a reason Radczyk sat through each of Marvin's meetings with Stern. A reason for his nervous garrulousness. He and Marvin, after all, were raised as brothers. They had shared many things. Too many. Rad-czyk, given a reprieve and the opportunity for reform, had seized it; Marvin took the more familiar cturse. Stern shared a look with Radczyk, this man whom he barely knew--:they possessed many of each other's most terrible secrets. Then Stern simply nodded, a compact of confidence, gratitude, renewal.

Stern saw the policeman to the outer door and then, on second thought, went back to retrieve the sheet. He wanted no telltale signs when the others arrived here this morning.

Then he returned to his office and was alone with the body of his brother-in-law, Dixon Harmell. There was no comfortable place to. sit. The sofa clearly

was out, and his desk chair was still beneath the broken glass, which had not been removed or replaced, given the spell of busy activity for Remo's trial. Stern was required to use one of the upholstered pull-up chairs, cut a bit too narrowly for him. He hauled the chair about to face the body. How sad Dixon looked, how fully depleted. His color was unnatural, that dark gray veined him once more on the sofa, holding him there. Stern unbuttoned Dixon's jacket, lifted his hands.

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shade. The spirit had red.

"Does good always win, Dixon?" Stern asked. "It does on TV."

He had no idea how the words came to him or why, with them, he began to cry. The tears had been in the offing for some days now; that he knew. He was puzzled merely by the moment. But there was no point in holding back. The storm blew up and through him. He covered his mouth with his hanky and pressed his fist to his lips at moments to suppress his howl.

"My God, Dixon," he kept repeating when he spoke. When he was done, he stood, approached the sofa, and decided to pray. He had never been certain what it was he believed. On High Holidays he attended shul and engaged the Lord in direct address. The rest of the year he seemed agnostic. But at this point, he called on his talent for sincerity, since he was his finest self, an advocate not speaking on his own behalf.

Accept, dear God, the soul of Dixon Hartnell, who made his own amends, and who traveled his own way. He failed, as we all fail, and perhaps more often than some. Yet he recognized fundamental things. Not that we are evil; for we are not. But that, by whatever name--self-interest, impulse, anger, lust, or greed--we are inclined that way; and that it is our tragedy to know this can never change; our duty to try at every moment to overcome it; and our glory occasionally to succeed.

An extra suit hung behind the office door, and Stern quickly changed. He had a tie and shirt in a drawer, and a razor. He would not have his attache case, but in the confusion no one would notice. He went down the hall to shave, returned, and sat before the telephone. When he heard the first stirring of someone else within the office, he would call Silvia to tell her he had just found Dixon, here where he had spent many recent nights, intent, obsessed with assembling his defense.

From this side of the desk, he faced the shelves of the walnut cabinet where the framed photographs of his family remained, the ones Dixon had lingered with last week. They were free. Totally. John. Kate. Even Peter. That thought had not occurred to him until now. With Dixon's death, the entire matter was over. The events--theft--would recede into the past. With Clara's fortune, they were now even prosperous. The three of them would have their second chances, too. He tried to envision theft futures and his with them, but

nothing came--murky shades, something bleak.

Then he recalled. There would be a baby--a child. Children always drew a family together. Even his, he supposed. He had some vision, like a vaguely surreal painting, the strange conjunctions of a dream, of all of them drawn close to this pink, unknown infant in a kind of halo radiance, each face alight with that wonderful instinctive glee. They would surround this child and be, each of them, someone new: parents, grandparent, uncle, aunts. New responsibilities. Fantasies. Dreams. Mistakes, of course, would be made. Bad habits would be repeated and, worse, taught anew. They would succumb, each of them in some measure, to folly, to the grasp of unwanted portions of the dark, indomitable past. Nonetheless. We go on.

In the outer office there was the sound of someone arriving; he reached at once for the phone. When he heard his sister's voice, he spoke her name and, in spite of the qualm of grief which unexpectedly rifled through him, began. Yet again, he said, a terrible blow. She knew at once.

"We must manage these burdens together," he told her. "I am able to help."

#### NOTE

I have been fortunate to draw on the specialized knowledge of many friends in writing this book. Dr. John Weiss provided invaluable advice about medical matters, as did Dr. Robert Stein, the Cook County Medical Examiner, and my father, Dr. David Turow. I am grateful to Nadya Walsh for sharing her recollections of Argentina and to Steve Senderowitz for discussing with me various questions of commodities law. My partners Jim Ferguson and Tom Opferman were of great help on other legal points.

I also should note that Gabriel Turow is the author of most of the good lines in Chapter 29.

Finally, to my friends on the commodity futures exchanges, particularly Frank and Brian Gelber of Gelber Group Inc., I am especially indebted.

The aid of these persons undoubtedly prevented many factual errors. Any that remain are solely my responsibility.