

SoHo

Chapters 1–6

by Sam Roberts

Chapters 1–5 of *SoHo* originally appeared in *Press* magazine. Chapter 6 appears in *Birkensnake One* (June 2008).

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In estimating the progress of his mind during these two years, as well as in future periods of his life, we must not regard his own hasty confession of idleness; for we see, when he explains himself, that he was acquiring various stores . . .

James Boswell, *The Life of Dr. Johnson*

SoHo

I

Sourceless guilt, native to each of Barth's summer afternoons, finally forced him out of his large, cool apartment. In the elevator, he avoided looking at the others: a pale young woman with a dreamy smile and rheumy eyes; a mesomorph in a purple track suit, exhaling noisily through the nose as he stared down at the front page of the *Times* that he carried like a sack of stones in his huge arms. They've probably been up for hours, thought Barth.

In the lobby he received a sly nod from Tommy, the shortest and sleaziest of his building's doormen. He did nothing with the nod. It was disgustingly hot on the street, a high summer Sunday in 1993, about three o'clock. What about a health walk? No. He saw an empty cab, hailed it, and told the driver corner of West Broadway and Houston. On the way he clapped on headphones and listened to Dre on his Walkman. Bus stop full of fly bitches and skeezers. Barth was no wigger, but he supposed he enjoyed this classy Dre more than most wiggers enjoyed it.

There were no other customers at Amici Mei, the bar that Barth had decided would be the place for day drinks. The hot bartender was chewing on the end of a slim red straw while flipping through a magazine, the cover of which displayed a naked, hairless, racially ambiguous androgyne, squatting and holding up to its pursed lips an armless, naked, hairless, gyna-less Barbie. Barth quietly ordered a Stoli martini, up,

very dry, with olives. It cost him seven dollars, nine with the tip. She swept up his money and spoke no word of thanks.

He sipped his martini and felt the sweat across the back of his linen shirt begin to dry in the powerful air-conditioning of Amici Mei. He was beginning to feel well. The bar was in shadows at the back of the restaurant, where the heat and the light of the day couldn't reach. He took out an almost new pack of Marlboros and packed it loudly in his palm. He packed it longer than was necessary, enjoying the sharp thwacks in the quietude of Amici Mei.

Barth was halfway through his martini when the bartender realized that there was too heavy a silence throughout Amici Mei. Maybe Barth's presence made her uncomfortable. Maybe she resented Barth. Or maybe, Barth ventured to himself with a sudden gut-tightening spasm of quickly dying anger, no thoughts at all romped in a brain that was as immune to abstraction as it was incapable of civility. She turned, yawning, to the stereo and ruthlessly initiated a session of Brazilian samba music. Barth would have liked it to be quieter in Amici Mei, but you cannot ask the bartender to turn down the Brazilian music, even if she's heard these songs fifteen times in the last four hours. Neglect was okay, but not enmity.

Two girls walked into the bar. They had horselike faces glazed by parlor tans, and the sound of their heels across the wooden floors of Amici Mei would have been horselike too, Barth supposed, had the music not been so fucking loud. They wore tight halter tops, one white, the other baby blue, and suede bootlets, the kind favored by elves and sluts. Here are tits, here is my ass, oh my gawd. They ordered seabreezes. They sat several stools down from Barth. He watched their exposed tanned bellies crease into funfat, the navels plugged with zircons, as they took their positions.

"Or should I get a madras?" blue said suddenly when the hot bartender set down her drink.

"What's a madras?" asked white.

"A madras," Barth called from the middle distance, shocked at him-

self but not displeased with himself, “is vodka with OJ and cranberry.”

“What are you drinking?” asked white after a moment. White was the more facially appealing of the two.

“I’m drinking a Stoli martini,” Barth politely replied. His own drink, the day’s first daydrink, was nearly done. Gingerly, Barth requested another. Moodily, the bartender began to mix it. He felt a . . . stirring, which coincided quite nicely with the bartender’s inexpert but aurally satisfying shaking of the second martini. White’s tits were superb. She was quiddified by her tits, and the logical conclusion of this quiddity—the action most readily suggested by the essence—was tit-fucking. Barth sighed as he shot the shit with himself.

“Stoli,” Barth said after a moment to white, “is one of the best vodkas.”

“I like Stolis, too,” white said cheerfully as blue turned away, sulking, shunned.

“Yep, I love Stoli,” said Barth, then immediately regretted having used the correct form of the abbreviation. Hadn’t he rather too quickly “shown her up”? Should he, having discerned in his interlocutor not so much a coarser register, but rather an unstudied and fresher inclination toward those marvelous and truer idioms—should he have hung fire, or at the very least spoken her word (“Stolis,” the marvelous plural form) in a sort of tribute to its owner? For had it not indeed become hers upon the very utterance and therefore altogether finer for being a thing possessed and so readily produced, here, at the first instant? Thus far Barth could claim naught for himself. She had generously offered a gold doubloon, whereas his purse, as she could not have helped but conceive it, was deucedly empty.

“Could you make their drinks with Stoli?” Barth asked the hot bartender. “They’re on me.”

But the hot bartender hadn’t quite heard him. “Excuse me?” she asked, *with absolutely no expression*. The two girls tittered, and now three females were looking at him expectantly, curiously.

“I’m sorry,” Barth needlessly apologized. “I wanted to buy the next

round. And if you could make their drinks with Stoli, that'd be great. You know, instead of regular vodka."

Was Barth a loser? He was twenty-four, lanky and pale, a redhead, with a long face and a long nose to match. A hangdog aspect was rescued and warmed by his eyes, which were given to blinking slowly and often in a friendly way, and were large and brightly blue ("the beautiful eyes of a gay stranger," a man had once moistly whispered to him on a Central Park bench). He was independently wealthy and, since graduating from college twenty-five months ago, had felt neither the need nor the desire to think about an occupation. When people asked him what he did (which was a different and far easier question than, "what do you do all day?"), he would tell them that he was an investor, which was untrue, because his assets were handled by account managers at the Kasbeam Trust Company, who submitted the quarterly statements not only to him, but to his father. Every now and then, he would think about opening a bar with his friends. A few times, when very drunk, he had told strangers at bars that he owned a bar. He would conjure himself bartending, pretty girls ordering the drinks.

Barth received his second daydrink. As he bent to the brimming glass, he reflected that this was not shaping up to be a mellow session of daydrinking, as perhaps it should have been given the heat and the relatively early hour, but rather the beginning of a three-hour liquid decline. The voices of himself and his friends chorused in his head. Nothing wrong with a little drinking, guy. How about a couple of drinks, guy. Doing any drinking, guy? What are you drinking, guy? How many drinks have you had, guy? Drinks, drinks, drinking drinks. Later, at about five, he was supposed to meet his friends further downtown, at a restaurant called Downtown.

The girls got their free drinks. They gave him minor waves and smiles. White was the more forthright, Barth thought, and it was she who began an urgent, whispered exchange with blue, at the end of which the girls stood up, drinks in hand, and moved to the stools next to Barth. At the bar at Amici Mei they sat in the following order: Barth,

white, and blue. He smelled their perfumes.

"That's nice perfume you've got on," he said, a little too loudly, maybe. "What is it?"

"It's called Shalom," white said.

"Mine's called Lemonz," blue added in a gloomy lower key.

"Hello, goodbye, and peace," Barth said. He saw that he had started to confuse them, and he hastily explained, "That's what shalom means. It's Hebrew for hello, goodbye, and peace."

The girls received this knowledge without comment.

"Where are you two from?" Barth asked.

"Guess where we're from," white replied with a smile and a shoulder shimmy.

"Hempstead," blue answered laconically, unwilling to abet her friend's coyness.

Despite blue, Barth had become quite happy. He was carefully monitoring the beginnings of a buzz. He was relieved to be happy, because he had been through a bad spell earlier in the day, when he had awoken at one and remained in his bed for over an hour, staring at the window. He had watched without seeing the muggy white sky and the high reaches of buildings, and a fretting pigeon or two, and the only desire in his life was that the phone wouldn't ring. He spent that hour-plus darkly wondering: what are the purposes? Beyond consumption of books, movies, nicotine, caffeine, alcohol, and restaurant meal, what were the purposes? Friends? Well, yeah, but still. He didn't want to read, just like he didn't want to run five miles or speak to anyone or eat a peanut butter sandwich or drink or fuck (not that this was immediately possible) or even smoke; and it was pretty bad if even smoking wasn't an option. It was not the typical mood for Barth to be in upon awakening, but not exactly uncommon.

So he had stared at the window with his head propped up on a damp pillow, his hands clasped across his lap, his white legs extended with the knees locked, and the sparse ginger shinhairs glistened in the white light. The posture of malaise, the set position of the X mood.

Sometimes he could dispel the X mood with the first banality that came to mind—like “You’ve got to get it together, Barth”—repeated aloud for ten minutes until he could no longer stand the idiocy of his own voice, and was able to shower and dress. Sometimes, he would say to himself—in a low voice, not quite aloud—“You must change your life,” and this mostly worked.

“So what are you doing with the rest of your Sunday?” Barth asked the girls.

“We’re just hanging out,” white said with a vacant smile. “Who knows, you know?”

“By the way, I’m Barth.”

They gave their names and Barth shook their soft hands, the nails colored, shaped and glossed like candied almonds. If you buy drinks for girls, you get to get their names, shake their hands, and speak with them for awhile. But it was up to Barth to officiate, because these girls didn’t ask any questions. Barth often found himself asking other people questions and receiving none in return. Which was fine with him, because he did not like speaking about himself. But why didn’t anyone ask anyone else questions??

The course of conversation he pursued with white and blue, while attempting at all times to concentrate on the former, revealed the following:

- (1) Blue had a husky, long-term boyfriend named Gary who still lived with his parents, in the finished basement of their house. It was the room where he grew up. He felt safe there, with the waterbed, the weight bench, and a jaundiced autographed poster of Lenny Dykstra, Mets centerfielder and working class hero of the miracle of ’86, tacked to the wall. Several times in the past months, blue had tried to break it off with Gary, but their trial separations had revealed only that each was truly indentured to the other.
- (2) White did not like Gary. She voiced the charitable notion that blue could do much better. But Barth detected in white’s pity all the

secret pleasures of condescension; and it was obvious that one of the dark cornerstone truths of their friendship was that blue, in terms of face and tits and sexual currency, was no match for white. (Not that white was any raving beauty. But still.)

- (3) White did not currently have a boyfriend. Barth had put the question to her, trying to sound flirtatious. “No,” white answered dramatically, “that part of my life is ovah.” Blue nodded violently and rolled her eyes with equal violence, like a horse in a stall during a fire. Barth then expected to get, but did not receive, some description about the break-up between white and her boyfriend.
- (4) Gary had recently lost his job at Video Bitch, a video store, and white claimed to be outraged that “this lazy sack of shit” was now relying upon blue’s patronage for many of his daily needs, a situation which strained blue’s finances to the point where she could not afford to buy, for example, a green silk blouse they’d seen earlier that afternoon at a store in NYC.

“So you’re not gonna get that blouse just because you gotta keep Gary happy . . . with new Nikeys, and . . .”

“Gary doesn’t even wear Nikeys,” blue replied.

“That’s not the point,” white said wearily.

The silk blouse, it turned out, cost fifty-five dollars.

Barth grimly recalled the last time he had bought clothes.

He had gone to Barney’s on a humid June day of needly rain. It had taken him two hours to purchase three summer suits (seersucker, cream, and milk chocolate), a couple of three-button Armani sport jackets, eight dress shirts, six highly textured “casual” shirts (each of which cost more than the dress shirts), one brilliant thick scarlet tie that he thought he might wear with the seersucker but knew that he probably wouldn’t, three pairs of dark mud-colored shell cordovan shoes, several weightless Italian slacks, a healthy stock of designer boxer shorts and socks patterned with nautical designs (twenty-two dollars a pair), and a special Barney’s umbrella. The salesman, a white, narrow-skulled gay

with very long, trim sideburns, had thrown in the umbrella for free. “We like to take care of our best customers,” he had grinningly hissed at the register, revealing perfect teeth and bad breath. The bill ran to nine thousand nine hundred fifty dollars. Barth figured that the sum was roughly equal to five days’ accrual of interest income in his eleven point three million dollar trust account.

The girls began to speak more about shopping and the egregious prices charged in Manhattan. “What you’re paying for is their rent,” blue said, and Barth felt the situation deteriorating. Soon blue might bully white into leaving. And what Barth was thinking was this: I have not had sex in over six months. Maybe the martinis were deluding him but he believed that white’s coquetry could be exploited quickly. She wore that stud in her navel. Her hair, like the hair of many strippers, was styled in feathered, platinum bangs. He had thought that she had sneaked a look or two at him. And that wriggler she’d given him: Guess where we’re from. He was certain that a scarlet heart or thorny rose was tattooed above one of her ass cheeks. You don’t ask a stranger to guess where we’re from if there’s not at least a chance on some level that there could be . . . cocksucking? Right, am I right? She was fully capable, at any moment, of lowering her head, turning her eyes up at him, and saying with gloomy intent: “You wanna get outta heah?”

It wasn’t impossible that blue would leave. How, why? A migraine, something to do with Gary, a miracle of decorousness, purely originated. Then, Barth and white could stay at the bar. They could besot themselves. “I have to tell you a secret,” Barth might eventually whisper, and then tug her gently behind him into the dark, capacious, thickly doored unisex bathroom. Later, flushed and tousled, they could toast themselves with a last brace of seabreezes and then separately wander back into their dying afternoons. It wasn’t an excessive treat to ask of fate.

“What time we gotta be at Marty’s,” blue now asked white.

“Who’s Marty?” asked Barth, but he was ignored.

“Yeah, we should get outta heah,” white said to blue, with a lightness

appalling to Barth. “Stevie said he’d give us a ride.”

“Yeah, we gotta call him when we get to Penn Station. I think he’s gonna be over at Mikey’s.”

“Or we could call Jenny. She and Tommy got the Mustang fixed, and they said they were going to the party.”

“The Mustang’s fixed?”

“Yeah, Dougie fixed it for free, can you believe it?”

“Dougie’s a sweetie-pie. I can’t believe he’s working for Georgie, that prick.”

“Georgie’s a prick. He would’ve charged them, like, a lot.”

“Where are you going?” asked Barth, feeling a sudden anger and exhaustion at the names, the car, their lives, and fate, from which no treat could be wheedled.

“Back to the island,” said white. She exhaled boredom and rendered acutely in Barth’s mind the horror of having to go back to the place you started out from on a late Sunday afternoon. He blinked and offered up a silent prayer of thanks for the inherited riches which had made Sunday a day he didn’t have to dread because of Monday.

“Don’t you have time for one more drink?” he asked listlessly, tracing a finger up and down the stem of his glass.

“We pretty much should be getting outta heah,” said blue.

“Yeah,” white sighed, “we should really probably be getting back, you know?”

All interest and possibility had been drained, so unfairly, from her voice.

“Okay,” said Barth, swallowing the rest of his martini, looking straight ahead. “Do whatever the fuck you want to do.”

Both girls put hands to their open mouths. They looked at him, probably expecting a smile or a laugh but Barth remained serious.

“Oh my gawd!” exclaimed white. She gasped and giggled.

“No,” said Barth. “Seriously. Do whatever the fuck you wanna do.”

Barth attempted to chuckle but it didn’t work. Instead, he made a noise that sounded like a half-suppressed burp.

“Wait—” said Barth.

“That is, like, so fucking rude?” blue said slowly. “Come on, let’s get outta heah.” Then, turning to Barth, she blasted him with what must have been her most damning judgment: “You are, like, a seriously weird guy.”

The bartender had overheard the exchange and was herself shaking her head. All three women were now joined in their distaste of Barth, a weird guy.

He had no idea why he’d said what he’d said. He could remember no other moment in his adult life when he had been so deliberately rude to strangers. Sitting very upright, he watched blue’s and white’s stately departure from Amici Mei. As they dissolved into the rectangle of bleary white light that was Amici Mei’s entrance, Barth realized that he was no longer welcome in this place. The bartender had moved to the end of the bar and from this distance was watching him over the edge of her magazine.

A couple of months ago, while in line at a subway token booth, after enduring a series of petite nudgings from the man behind him—much worse, somehow, than one real shove—he had turned and quietly said, “Stop pushing me.” The fleshy businessman had scowled but nevertheless stepped back and said nothing. It had been a significant incident for Barth: significant because it was so rare for him to say anything untoward to strangers. He was willing to suffer indignities; his breaking point was sky high. His extreme shyness, his patient affability, and his will to privacy were what enabled him to remain silent when the counter person called “Next!” and someone cut in front of him. This had infuriated a number of people who knew him, particularly his ex-girlfriend. “Why can’t you ever say something?” she had spit out through grinding teeth after they’d had to wait three more minutes to order prime dry-aged boneless shell steaks at the Jefferson Market. “It’s just not worth it,” Barth said, shrugging. “So what is worth it?” she had hissed. “I don’t know,” Barth replied, “the Holocaust?” She had left him standing alone at the crowded counter. It wasn’t the first

time, nor would it be the last, that, overwhelmed by frustration and the hard-wired ice fury of the nutty blonde, she had abandoned him in a public place. But he was not a frightened pushover, as she and others must have thought; he really did believe that it was only rarely worth it.

So why had it been worth it, all of a sudden, to take a quick, mean stand against two girls who'd done him no wrong, owed him nothing, and were no more than partially sex-promising innocents with whom he'd conversed desultorily for half an hour on a Sunday afternoon? Yet he'd never see them again. They would laugh it off as a good little story tonight, at . . . wherever the fuck they were going. Why, then, having perpetrated an arguably justified or at least excusable strange-and-bad, did he feel so bad?

Barth stared for a moment at the rubble of butts in his ashtray and the bloated olive in the bottom of his glass. His head jerked, tic-like, as if shaking off gnats at dusk. He had suddenly remembered a nightmare from the early morning: He was in an unlit apartment as large as a city, and he knew that Linda Blair from *The Exorcist*, in her soiled nightgown, with her face at its worst, was somewhere inside. As Barth tried to find people, the dream suddenly provided additional backstory: he was in love with a girl who was somewhere in the apartment, hanging out *sexually* with a group of people in one of the thousands of rooms, but she was unfindable, she didn't love him back, and there was no chance of appeal. At some point, he walked into a kitchen that had a faint blue, sourceless light and he knew that presently he would see Linda Blair from *The Exorcist* seated crossed-legged on the counter. He woke up when someone said something very frightening in a loud monotone.

He clawed in the crowded pocket of his jeans before coming up with an unwieldy fistful of credit cards, house keys, old receipts, denuded matchbooks, and a balled wad of cash. "Could I settle up?" he asked the bartender. She tonelessly told him the amount he owed, arms crossed over her boyish chest, leaning against the backbar. She regarded Barth levelly as he fumbled with his wad. Avoiding the bartender's evil gray

eye (catalog work, he decided, but not covers or runways) he left most of the wad on the bar. He was unsure of exactly how much it amounted to, but he was certain that he had grossly overtipped her, which struck him as a cowardly act. He left Amici Mei, then, expecting at any instant to feel a hail of stones upon his narrow back.

II

The holiday of all the French was Bastille Day, the fourteenth of July. But nowhere was the Quatorze Juillet more savagely celebrated than in Manhattan by the expatriate Bistro French. Though the names of the Bistro French were Phillippe, Marc, Jean-Georges, Jean-Vincent, Lucien, Jean-Michel, Michel, Jean-Luc, Jean-Lucien, just as they would have been in France, these names were *more French* in Manhattan than they would have been in Lyons or Aix-en-Provence.

Barth was acquainted with one or more of the Bistro French, and accordingly—a month before, on a similar Sunday afternoon of white-skied humidity—he went to the French national independence day petanque fest on MacDougal street.

Petanque, a game of clicking metal balls and sand, is played by the French in the heat and for hours; the players are immune to fatigue and boredom; and Barth watched for hours, hoping for something girl-related to evolve, and found himself gripping a second, a third, a sixth glass of Pernod as he watched. The hope that something would happen changed to a hope that it would end, and he could set down the sticky, warm glass and leave without offending any Bistro French.

“Now they’ve had enough,” you think, “now the petanque must surely end.” Another game of petanque begins. Jean, a real fucking Bistro French, the one who casually mentioned that this was happening and

thus, strictly, was the one who invited you, slaps your sweaty neck, slams a steel ball into your palm, and shoves you into the sandbox. Half-blinded with sweat, you toss the steel ball poorly, and a Bistro French unleashes a garlicky roar of mockery right in your face. He doesn't seem at all like Charles de Gaulle nor does he seem like Cocteau or Proust. And even though most Americans aren't like Lincoln or Eli Whitney, still, there's something inexcusable about a Bistro French sharing nothing with the good historical French.

But Jean—the one Bistro French you know here—can do no wrong in the eyes of a lanky blonde wearing a leather Kangol cap and a bikini top and ripped baggy jeans riding low off the hips and dipping to the upper margin of pubes, and a minuscule red vinyl satchel strapped to her arched back containing, what?: a lipstick, a three-pack of lubed condoms, and a paperback, unread, entitled *Boy Loves Girl Loves Prozac*, all of which fits inside this satchel no larger than the head of a prematurely born week-old infant. Jean squints, spits, hefts the petanque ball and lobs a perfect shot. The crowd, already crazy, goes crazier, and Jean's fine piece of ass claps her hands wildly and jumps up and down, all jiggly and excited. "Fucking amazing, Jean!" she screams, as if he's just cured breast cancer.

There are five or six courts ranged on MacDougal Street between Houston and Prince. The Bistro French and their attendants are having the time of their lives, bumping and grinding to Serge Gainsbourg, a singer of throaty banal lyrics, often lewd, now dead, the ultimate thick-featured, curly-headed, grinning proto-Bistro Frenchman who, had he been here on MacDougal Street on this glorious 102-degree Quatorze Juillet, would have been proclaimed emperor of the monde. Genius for life, you think, genius for life, as you beg off from another go with the steel ball and stumble away to seek a shady place wherein you might sit and drink a little cool water. But there is neither shade nor water, and someone has given you another pastis. You didn't ask for the pastis, but it's yours just the same. There is no one to whom you can turn and say, "Guy, this is a wasted drink."

Bistro French are pissing in the gutters of MacDougal Street, smoking, laughing, braying at the sun, and ogling each other's organs as they piss out the pastis. Which is better, Pernod or Ricard? The gutters are choked with French urine, cigarette butts, and petanque sand clotted by piss. What are the purposes? But there is no allowance for this thought today, just as there is no allowance for breathing when you are underwater, unless you are Bistro French and snorkeling off a beach on St. Bart's, breathing quite easily, actually, while beside you swims your hot blonde box who rapturously tells you as you surface and shake Caribbean water from your massive curly head, "The water is, like, so fucking clear and amazing." But that's not you on St. Bart's, that's Jean, who travels there at least twice a year and pays for the trips with undeclared waitering tips, twenty-four fifty for the steak frites. The reason you're here, in fact, is because you and your friends have sat down to that steak frites many, many times and, after a couple of years of pocketing your enormous tips, the Bistro French have come to know your face and name.

Now as you sway on the margins of the fields of petanque, you see a bent old woman moving through the crowd. She wears an overcoat in spite of the heat, and she is smiling. You see her eyes are bright and cogent. What is worse, you wonder, the pathos of the afflicted old or the pathos of the happy old? Both are bad, both break your heart. As she totters down MacDougal Street, the Bistro French greet her with love and smiles. One man goes so far as to rub her frail white head. She waves to the Bistro French, she receives their attentions as her due. She is not unlike the harmless mother of Mussolini before the crowd, gentling the savage crowd, beloved of the crowd. "She is so cool," says the blonde with the Kangol cap. A ginger-haired shirtless Frenchman with an Adam's apple and the popping eyes of the inspired runs to the old woman with a cloudy glass of pastis. She demurs, but this carrot-headed Bistro French insists, and she takes the glass. A crowd rings around her and claps as she drinks. No stranger to a drop, she finishes it in one gulp. What did she do in '44? Did she hide them in her

barn or give them up, and later watch as they were led to the trains, *with absolutely no expression*. No matter. Her admirers celebrate her draining of the glass with a French drinking song. And then a soccer song begins. Then rugby. Jean approaches you grinning and dripping, his flowery loose shirt soaked. "Good time, eh?" he shouts. An amazing time.

Later, when the lemon sun settles in the early evening over the World Trade Centers, the City's two front teeth that years later were knocked out, the southern half of MacDougal Street is golden with late light, the other half in shadows. Throughout this latter section, the activity has changed. The petanque, with its teams and recorded scores, has been abandoned. The games are discontinued in media res, the balls lie unused, and doorways along MacDougal Street are taken up by couples. The Bistro French, who a few hours ago would have died for another game of petanque and a rugby anthem, now are closing the deal with hot girls. The old woman has passed into another life. Jean crouches on a stoop, nibbling the ear of a mulatto girl. "Gorgeous café au lait," Jean murmured to you earlier in the day, eyeing this girl; and when you asked about the blonde in the Kangol, Jean shrugged as only a Gaul can shrug. "That girl?" he said. "Oh, she is a cuckoo."

Boom boxes have been lowered and Serge Gainsbourg is no longer audible. Serge Gainsbourg, appearing at the head of MacDougal Street with outstretched arms, would be given short shrift. No one happy to see him at this late hour on the Quatorze Juillet. Gainsbourg would start to sing one of his most popular tunes, a famous song, but no one joins in, and Serge unheeded falls into a silence. Get your own girl, Serge, he'd be told by dozens of landsmen as he goes from doorway to doorway with a dying smile. He begins to limp and to creak. Gainsbourg passes, rebuffed, a figure of loneliness.

A few of the older Frenchmen doggedly play out the final games of petanque. Many celebrants have left and with reduced numbers and an older demographic there is a new sense of calm. For the first time in the day, a breeze rustles the leaves of the small trees planted along

MacDougal Street. You sit on the curb and watch the old. The sun has burnt your long nose and the tips of your ears, and this wind feels very good. You watch the light in the moving leaves, the western breeze carries a smell of water, and for once the clicking of the petanque balls, unaccompanied, is a pleasing sound.

One of the older men, scrawny and tattooed, staggers up to you and begins to relate the story of his days in Djibouti as a member of the foreign legion. He is wearing a beret with a metal death's head insignia. He claims to have killed more than a dozen men. Some with the knife, some with the rifle, all in the desert. Some were innocent, some were guilty, all deserved what they got. He watches you closely. "French foreign legion!" he barks, waiting for you to say something. You nod, and not knowing what will please him, you say, "That's great." He seems satisfied with this and wanders back across the street. The Quatorze Juillet is over.

On the sidewalk now on the Quinze of August, stretching his long, skinny arms and yawning in an unwitting parody of morning, Barth looked idly down West Broadway and saw a dozen parked Harleys gleaming outside the broad dried-blood-red frontage of I Tre Merli, a restaurant. A motorcycle in SoHo is a bullet in my brain, thought Barth. Beautiful girls sat on a few of the bikes, bored and silent, though where else would they want to be? A Mets game? Bistro French were at play among their Harleys and the women. There were two kinds: blond Bistro French, deeply-tanned and great-headed, buoyant, running their horny hands through their thick curls; and dark-haired ones, small, pale, skinnier on balance, more serious and maybe smarter than the blonde Bistro French. Now as Barth approached, he thought he recognized some of them from the Quatorze Juillet and wondered what to do. The question regularly assailed Barth: Do you say hello? He often said hello to strangers, and sometimes he was ignored by them. When this happened, it stuck to him, stinging, making him sadder. Why wouldn't they say hello, even if they happened not to know Barth? Why not just say hello even if there was the smallest chance? Why would they risk

making him feel strange and bad?

Barth gave a half wave and a hopeful smile to a man carrying a tray full of apricot-colored drinks in martini glasses out to his friends by the Harleys, a man whom he thought might be Jean. But Barth was ignored. On purpose? Accidentally? No matter. This dark Bistro French, oblivious, was focused solely on the wonder of the cocktails he was trying to carry without spilling a drop, urged on by the catcalls of his fun-kid acquaintances. Barth, scant yards away, bowed his head and counted from five to zero. He then ducked into I Tre Merli. Snubbed by a Bistro French, it was high time for another drink.

After several minutes of pure quietism at the crowded bar at I Tre Merli, Barth was finally noticed by the bartender. Above the dull sounds of Brazil, he ordered a white wine. He extended his platinum—a card so well used that the numbers on the front were gone. The bartender, *who could have been a model*, took his card. Barth imagined a West Broadway a thousand miles long; and at each restaurant, the hot bartender was hotter than the bartender at the restaurant before, so much so that the first hot bartender cannot even bear to look at the fourth or fifth hot bartender, so much hotter is the fifth than the first. Until you came to the last restaurant on West Broadway—the last restaurant on Earth, and beyond nothing but mountains, forests of iron trees, etc.

Barth worked on his glass of white wine. He savored the sense that his buzz had gained true momentum and power. In him the onset of a good buzz was defined by a surging like the surging of love in his sternum. This was the point of drinking: thirty minutes of intense happiness. Thirty minutes of joy—never more than an hour—when drinks bring about their witchery; and how fine if you could pocket your half hour, tip the dealer, walk away from the table, and wave good-bye to those others and their unlucky cards. But you do not, of course, because the triumph itself—the love and the fitness—is predicated on the belief that it can be maintained forever. You refuse to believe that the house will break you, and it is this very refusal that has allowed you to come to the table at all.

But Barth was getting lucky with his drinks. He was at the beginning of his thirty minutes. He turned to the man sitting beside him.

“Hey,” Barth said, hoping for brotherhood, “how’s it going?”

The guy waved a hand in dismissal of Barth’s question then began to speak.

“A guy walks into a bar, and he orders three pints of stout. ‘Three pints?’ says the bartender, ‘for yourself?’ ‘Well,’ says the guy, ‘it’s a tradition I have. I always drink with my father and my brother, but they moved away, so when I do go out now, I drink for the three of us. It’s a way of keeping the family in mind.’ ‘Well, isn’t that the tradition then,’ says the bartender. So the guy drinks the three pints and leaves. This goes on for a while. One day, the guy comes back to the bar and says, ‘Gimme two pints of stout.’ The bartender sets up the pints and shakes his head, figuring something bad must have happened. ‘Only two pints today?’ says the bartender sadly. ‘Was it your father, or God forbid your dear brother? I’d like to extend my condolences.’ ‘Not at all, not at all,’ says the guy. ‘My father and brother are in the best of health. It’s just that I quit drinking.’”

This was an excellent joke, Barth thought. A brotherhood *was* developing. This man was in later middle age and there was not too much to say about him except that he was alone and that a mole was riding his right eyebrow, a raisin, from which two coarse, gleaming hairs sprouted like spider’s legs. Barth chewed his lips, fascinated, and let his eyes linger on the mole and thought how wonderful it’d be for the man to take matters into his own hands with a razor and slice off this fleshbead.

Suddenly, the man laughed.

“Quit drinking! That’s a good one; that’s really good.”

His laughter faded, he straightened, and he looked gravely at Barth.

“I see that you’re watching my mole.”

Barth, chilled, began to stammer but the man put up a hand.

“That’s alright. My wife, Coco, is always after me to get it removed. It’s not like I can’t afford to have it removed, I’m a multi-millionaire for

God's sake. But this mole's not going anywhere. Coco can just deal with it. No one can presume to understand the secrets of our marriage."

Barth solemnly nodded and ordered another chardonnay. He raised his glass in a mute toast to the man with the mole. He liked to give toasts, often with very little provocation. The love of the world bred in Barth by alcohol was reaching a first early peak. The secrets of this guy's marriage, he thought, are indeed deep and unknowable. In such a mode, Barth was generous in his thought, which might extend to a word like *indeed* or even the simple actions of the bartender, who was cleaning out the ashtrays with cocktail napkins and just a moment earlier had filled each compartment of the garnish tray with fresh wedges of lemons and limes.

A voice behind Barth said, "And what are you two boys up to?" Barth turned and saw a pair of big old dugs. Coco. She and the man with the mole were soon exchanging some kind of smile over Barth's head. Perhaps they envisioned a threesome, certainly they were depraved.

"This very special lady is my wife, Coco," said the man with the mole. Then suddenly keeling toward Barth, he whispered, "I've outlasted all her boyfriends, and I'll outlast you too, chump."

"Guess I've got to use the men's room," Barth said, feigning a yawn, wanting out of I Tre Merli.

Coco looked deep into his eyes and said, "In the back. To the left."

The line for the bathrooms was long. Barth stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans and waited stoically to use the unisex single-occupancy bathroom of I Tre Merli. Many are called, few are chosen. He was at the front of the line and preparing to enter when he felt a hand on his back. It was Coco.

"Is it Number One," she asked in a low voice, "or do you have to make a poo?"

"Excuse me?" said Barth.

"I shock you?"

Barth shook his head.

"No, ma'am, it's just that I've got to use the restroom."

She smiled and did not remove her hand from Barth's lower back. Feeling quite strange and bad, he edged himself into the bathroom and bolted the door behind him. I Tre Merli's bathroom was probably the best thing about I Tre Merli. It was well air-conditioned and perfectly lit, making Barth appear tawnier than he was. He knew it to be one of the most flattering bathrooms in SoHo. He watched his face at length. He observed that his linen shirt draped well. He made many expressions, some that he thought heroic. Finally, Barth regarded himself with as blank an expression as he was able to muster. But a rapping on the door interrupted this enjoyable time in the bathroom of I Tre Merli. Shit, thought Barth, I hope it's not that woman. But it was a male voice, a fey male Germanic voice specifically, that whined, "Okay, so come on then, it's so long already." Barth dried his hands ineffectively with toilet paper (I Tre Merli was not the sort of place where they restocked the paper towels) and departed, refusing to look at the strictly gelled, bony, Germanic head of the man who had ousted him from the bathroom of I Tre Merli. "Gott im Himmel!" hissed the German, as he went to take his sheiss.

His barstool had been saved for him. Coco and the man with the mole were silent. They seemed deactivated, awaiting Barth's return. They had bought him another glass of wine. This would be his fourth drink of the day: two martinis, two white wines. It was twenty after four. Barth would have left I Tre Merli but now politeness—a minor virtue, Barth knew, but a virtue nonetheless—dictated that he remain to drink at least half of this glass. What a little wriggler, thought Barth, studying the chardonnay before him.

"So what do you do?" asked the man with the mole.

Barth took a slug of the wine and said, "Well, I have a private income. Right now I'm not really doing that much of anything."

Coco and the man with the mole looked at him in quiet judgment.

"Actually," Barth said quickly, "I spend a fair amount of time looking after my investments. I also help some of my friends with their investments. You know, as a consultant."

It was better than saying that he had just finished a six-month stint on a salmon boat, as he had once lied to an elderly man on the coldest night of the year in a bar on the Upper East Side he had never been to before nor visited since. That had been a glorious lie, he recalled, forcing him to invent, on the spot, the size of the catch, the white waters, and the dangerous nets. The elderly man, a decorated veteran of the Second World War—or so he said—had believed every word, and what harm had there been in that? “I wish I was your age sometimes,” he had said. “Gotta be young to be doing things like that.”

“Do you have any good *tips* for me?” Coco asked slyly.

“I don’t know. I haven’t been too successful recently.”

“Maybe you just need some inspiration,” said Coco, staring at him.

“What,” said Barth, swiveling to face the man with mole, “do you do?”

“I tell lots of bad jokes,” replied the man with the mole, and he laughed hollowly.

“Harry’s like you,” announced Coco, her tone suddenly flat. “A trust fund brat. Never worked a day in his life.”

“That’s right, Coco, I’ve never once lifted a finger except to pay your bills.”

At this Coco and the man with the mole laughed uproariously.

The man sharply cut off his laugh.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” he sharply demanded of Barth.

“She certainly is,” said Barth, turning to regard Coco who was at that moment picking at her molars with a fingernail, trying to dislodge a remnant of food. She smacked her thickly lipsticked lips and patted Barth’s head.

“Well aren’t you just the sweetest thing.”

“My wife,” Harry said with grand deliberation, “is prone to flattery. Flatter her, and she’s yours on a platter. Slim pickings, but yours if you want it.” He leaned in and whispered to Barth, “Better watch your step, ace.”

No one had ever called Barth ace, except for the garage owner, Mag-

gio, who had sold him the Mustang last summer on the East End. “She’s all yours, ace,” Maggio had said, counting out the hundreds (fifty of them). It had been a ’69 convertible, sky blue, a piece of shit. Ah, Maggio, that beautiful scumbag. Best summer of my life, he thought.

In reward for this memory, against steep odds, all of a sudden, without any warning, Barth’s most beloved Rolling Stones song started on I Tre Merli’s speakers. It was “100 Years Ago,” the second track off *Goats Head Soup*.

Went out walking through the woods the other day, with the world like a carpet laid before me. . . .

As Jagger began, Barth drank with fresh zeal. What a fucking great song, he thought. What incalculable I Tre Merli genius could have put this on a mix-tape? A superb shot of joy ran through him: an epiphany. Turning to the man with the mole, Barth said, “Do you realize how long this band has been around?”

“A long time, I guess,” muttered the man with the mole.

Barth leaned across the bar and cried out.

“Hey! Could you turn this up?”

The bartender heard him and smiled, the genuine smile of the Hot Bartender, which occurs but rarely in nature.

“This is a cool song,” she said as she bent from her hips into a stunning isosceles and touched the volume control in accord with his bidding. What a hot mensch she had become. Magisterial Jagger now shouted down the room.

“They’ve been around for thirty-five years!” Barth said to the man with the mole. To his right, Coco shrieked under the cranked up Stones, unheeded and unseen, because she had shrunk to a height of three and a half inches. A tiny busboy with the patient wide-cut features of an Aztec at once swept her off the barstool and into a dustbin filled with rinds and ashes. He nodded to Barth and hurried away. Such efficiency was uncommon in I Tre Merli.

“Thirty-five years,” Barth continued. “That’s as if they’d been playing from 1939 till five years after I was born: 1939 to 1974. From the

Nazi invasion of Poland until well after Watergate. That's incredible. Do you know how long that is? Between 'Satisfaction' and 'Bridges to Babylon,' you fit in the Holocaust, Vietnam, nuclear weapons, Kennedy, computers, the moon landing, the—the New York Mets. God! Doesn't that seem weird and good to you? When the Rolling Stones started playing, there were people still alive whose fathers had fought in the Civil War. Isn't that insane?"

The man with the mole was paying his bill and not responding to Barth. He did not appear concerned about the absence of Coco.

"Can you think of anything else," said Barth, "that approaches it? I mean, Jagger's in his *fifties*. He's around my father's age, maybe even older. Is there anyone else with so much mythos? And he's still around, singing on a stage—you could probably go see him do it somewhere in the world tonight—and everyone just accepts it like it's normal."

The man with the mole was leaving I Tre Merli.

"Mick Jagger!" Barth cried. "Thanks for the drink, guy!"

"100 Years Ago," like love, came to an end. Barth without breathing awaited the next song. And as the samba started again, Barth heard behind him an emaciated blonde in horn-rimmed glasses ask her companion, "Do you think Americans care too much about celebrities?"

Dolph Lundgren, Todd Rundgren, Uma Thurman, Thurman Munson, Barth thought. The thirty minutes are up. He signed a credit card slip for the two thousandth and twelfth time in his life, shouldered his backpack, and moved not swiftly but surely from the dark patches of I Tre Merli.

The chorus of "100 Years Ago" stayed with him and provided some armor as he sailed past the Harleys and a mime and a baritone homeless who begged with beautiful diction. At the northeast corner of West Broadway and Prince Street he waited for the light to turn green, still humming the Stones. Suddenly, from the left flank, two voices hailed him by name. Bearing down on Barth from the east were his older cousin Mark and Mark's wife, Judith.

"Barth-ol-o-mew!" Mark, a guy, said gruffly. Judith kissed Barth on

both cheeks. They had just returned from two weeks in the south of France. She smells the liquor, thought Barth. For her own part, Judith was well doused in Fendi. She was wearing a loose white T-shirt with no bra, and her breasts were small, very present Spaldings. Barth blinked and inhaled the expensive perfume.

“You’re looking well,” said Judith unconvincingly. “What’re you up to?”

“Just having my day in SoHo,” Barth said. “How’re you two doing? How was your trip?”

In the south of France, they’d had exceptional meals and toured the fortifications of Les Baux.

“So Barth,” said Mark, “what are you doing with yourself these days?”

Barth faced his cousins in the hot Sunday light. They wore expensive sunglasses, they held the high ground.

“Not too much,” said Barth, “and yourself?”

“Just doing a little shopping,” said Judith, brandishing like scalps the two glossy black bags she held.

“Toys,” she said coyly.

“How ’bout you?” Mark asked.

Barth, stepping into the minefield of a casual conversation, hoped as always that he would not say anything that might be perceived as strange and bad.

“Hey, weren’t you going to open up some kind of restaurant with your friends?” said Mark.

“Well, yeah, we were,” said Barth. “But the project stalled. Anyway, how’ve you guys been?”

“We’ve been great!” said Judith. “And what about you?”

“If you go ahead with your venture,” Mark said, “I can put you in touch with a few people in the restaurant business you might want to talk to. They could give you an idea or two.”

“That’d be great.”

“The restaurant business is so hard,” Judith said.

“It couldn’t hurt, right?” said Mark, for some reason jabbing Barth’s shoulder.

“No, it’d be great.”

“I mean, it’s important to get as many ideas as you can, right?”

“Absolutely,” said Barth.

“Where are you looking to open?” Mark asked in a sudden low voice of business.

“It’s kind of up in the air. It all depends, because there’s a lot to think about.”

“The one guy I’m thinking of,” said Mark slowly, “this one particular guy, he’s a major player in Golem Restaurant Group. He’s a really sweet guy, you know what I’m saying? I mean, you know what I’m saying, right?”

“We could really use a good restaurant on the Upper West Side,” Judith said, and they all chuckled.

“Seriously,” Mark said, “give me a call at work next week. I’ll give you this guy’s number. You have my work number, right?”

Barth could not comprehend the circumstances that would have led to his having this number. He had seen his cousin perhaps three times in the last four years. He humbly shook his head.

“Take my card,” said Mark. “Seriously, you should call me.”

“You’re not smoking, are you?” Judith said.

“Yeah,” Barth exhaled. “I know, bad habit. I’m going to quit soon.”

No way I’m going to quit, thought Barth. I’ll never quit smoking, I’ll never quit drinking.

Judith shook her finger at her cousin, her pert rough tongue darting in and out.

“It’s soooo bad for you!”

“Those things’ll kill you, buddy,” Mark said. “It’s a medical fact, you know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah.”

“Listen, listen, listen,” Judith said, excitedly patting her husband’s bicep. “Why don’t we all do dinner? I’m sure Barth could pick a great

place, being in the business.”

“Sure,” said Mark, consummately unthrilled, as he looked up and down the street. “Sure, that would be terrific. Hey there, Judy-Joo-Joo, we should really get going. Hey, listen, Barth-ol-o-mew, it was great seeing you, man.”

Mark grabbed Barth’s hand and manipulated it with great complexity, as if he were a Freemason or a wigger, bewildering Barth, who abandoned the handshake before the sequence was completed.

“We’ll see ya’ Barth!” called Judith.

“Later, Bartheroni!” cried Mark. “Call me!”

The couple left him. Now it seemed to Barth that SoHo could be infested with family members and acquaintances, all demanding to know what he did with himself at all times. Getting an iced coffee and reading two newspapers from cover to cover (the *New York Post* and the *New York Times*, always in that order) occupied a full hour and a half, sometimes two, every afternoon. You could blow through sixty minutes with no problem in the video store on Sixteenth and Eighth. One hundred eighty in the bookstore on Seventy-Third and Madison. The days and nights were much shorter than anyone gave them credit for.

He waited until his cousins had dwindled, then Barth, too, turned west. It had become his intention to join his companions somewhat later than he had originally planned. There were few circumstances more luxurious to Barth than those in which he might purposefully delay meeting with his “set”—where the meeting had been conceived and its particulars ratified some time beforehand in the highest of spirits—without causing his fellows disquietude, comfortable as he was with the thought that their meeting place, the “good spot,” was a pleasant one with or without him in it. For the place of convergence was always selected with this very concern at the fore, simply that it should satisfy on its own account, through its own essence and devices, whomsoever happened to arrive beforehand. He had forsaken punctuality, giving his watch “what for,” in order to prolong the savor of anticipation—as one with a whetted appetite might profitably sit some time above his roast

before “going at it”—not only for himself, but for them, certain that their regard for him must fairly match his own. His veering from the course was, then, the most inclusive of gifts.

It was also a matter of extending his alone time. He wasn't quite ready for his friends, the great monsters. He needed to engage in another activity before walking the two blocks downtown, to the restaurant Downtown. He was hungry, probably, but how can you eat when you know that food will wreck the work of your daydrinks? In lieu of food was the option of a double espresso, which functioned, at such times for Barth, as a food. What did you have for lunch today? A double espresso, two tic-tacs, and ten cigarettes.

Barth needed cash. The platinum was a powerful instrument but still. A platinum couldn't help you with any of the following: another pack of Marlboros, taxis, your double espresso, money for the homeless, money for a jukebox, money for a game of pool, which Barth intended on playing at Milady's, a bar that squatted on the corner of Prince and Thompson, and which he now passed, murmuring happily with self-conscious idiocy, “I shall return, guy” on his way to the cash machine in the deli at Spring Street and Sixth Avenue.

Barth returned to Milady's with five hundred dollars in his jeans. He would have withdrawn less, but you never knew how much the monsters would hit you up for later in the evening, when one of them wanted ten dollars for drinks for girls—just give me a couple of twenties—or another wanted to put himself up at a room in the Paramount, because the last New Jersey Transit train had already left and your friend was not going to wait two hours, drunk, in Penn Station for the 5:40 Trenton Local, especially when you've got hundreds of dollars in your pocket, guy, and a few hundred dollars means nothing to you, guy.

Cigarette smoke played in the columns of church-like light that slanted through the stained windows of Milady's, Barth's favorite pool bar. He loved pool, though he was not very good. Entering, Barth noted at the table the Appalachian-style brothers, Micro-Mind and Mini-Mind, short, thick, and dirty. At the end of the bar stood Fred, who owned

no part of Milady's, who didn't work at Milady's, who transacted no legitimate business with Milady's, but who had appointed himself long ago a kind of protector of the bartenders of Milady's (non-hot girls) and who devised and enforced rules of conduct for the clientele. Such as what constituted a scratch in pool, whose name was next on the board, which channel to play on the TV.

Barth nodded to Fred, received nothing in response, and then ordered the cheapest Stoli rocks in SoHo (the fifth drink), and (counter-intuitively) a double espresso (because this was still SoHo, and they all had espresso).

Awaiting his drinks, Barth watched the Mets go up three nothing against the Astros in Houston, top of the fourth, Hundley going to the opposite field for a stand-up double.

"Should've gone to third, the bitch," says Fred joylessly.

"The bitches!" shouts Micro-Mind as he missed a bank shot.

"Haw!" cried his brother, on the verge of winning.

Murmuring "excuse me," Barth gingerly stepped behind the back-thrust ass, elbow, and cue's butt of Mini-Mind as he sighted his next shot, to chalk his name on the board behind the pool table. "BARTH." He turned from the board and saw that Micro-Mind hadn't yet taken his shot. Both Mini- and Micro-Mind were smirking at him. Had Barth nudged or otherwise disturbed Mini-Mind as he was shooting? No. Then why? A little strange and bad, guy, thought Barth, but ignore them.

Over his vodka and caffeine, he lit a Marlboro, waiting his turn, and began to dream in earnest. Okay. He owned Milady's. He was a . . . subtle owner, coming out from behind the bar only occasionally to play a little pool with his regulars. He counted out the register at closing time, he cut off the drunks, he wrote checks to the liquor companies. Would it be the worst sort of life? Probably, yes, but on his fifth drink, it didn't seem bad. It wouldn't be hard to purchase Milady's. An all-cash offer of seventy-five, perhaps one hundred thousand would do the trick. What do you do? I own a bar in SoHo. Barth looked at himself

in the mirror behind the bottles (not an I Tre Merli bathroom mirror, yet not the worst mirror in SoHo) and now he meets his cousin Judith for a drink (a Fendi drink?) at the bar of the St. Regis. There's always been a little . . . what? A little bit of a wriggler between Bartheroni and Judith. I don't want to talk about Mark, she says. You wanna get outta heah? And they go and book a room. But a room at the St. Regis is not always the best place to be.

A room at the St. Regis (\$445.00 per night, standard weekday occupancy rate not including hotel tax) was where Barth found himself more than once on a bright Monday or Tuesday morning, having neglected the previous night to make his room sleep-conducive. Thus the blackout shades are up, the curtains undrawn, and the Do Not Disturb sign does not dangle from the knob. The forest is infested with vampires among the iron trees but one was too drunk and hopeful to hang the hut with garlic and a crucifix. Thus the monsters come, the first wave at nine, with hard, quick knocks on the door. "House-keeping." "Not ready," Barth croaks just as he hears the door opening. He falls back to dreams of apocalypse, but the monsters try again at ten, and this time, fending them off, he is wise enough to run to the door, pull it open, and hang the sign, but not before a Hispanic maid sees the pale, skinny, nude form and gives Barth the look of sadness and judgment from which there is no redemption. She supports a family of five, but Barth needs more sleep on a weekday morning to offset his hangover. These facts are in no way linked, but to him, they are inseparable. She might ask why anybody would stay at the St. Regis, *alone*, when they live less than a mile away. Is there a satisfactory answer to this question? He pulls down the shades, draws the curtains, and dozes on the twisted damp sheets till noon, when the phone rings and will not stop ringing until he picks it up. Sir, will you be checking out today, or will you be staying with us another night? Hoarsely, Barth admits that he'll be leaving the St. Regis. Check-out was at noon, sir. Half a grand and he has to deal with this. But of course he says nothing. The shower, with its glass door and marble floor, still holds promise, because where

in the city is there better water pressure? Prior to the shower he consumes M & M's and a six-ounce glass bottle of Evian from the mini-bar. Eleven dollars. Glass makes it colder, he thinks dully, gulping it down. The shower will help, the shower will help. Though he didn't bring a change of clothes, Barth did pack his bag with the products. They include high-end moisturizer and the incredibly expensive pink-tinged proprietary skin toner of the vanity-dermatologist, Dr. Zizmor, whom he and the friends visited a few months back, but nothing can mitigate the purple dells under his eyes. An hour later downstairs, everyone but Barth in a suit, he signs his bill. Did you have a good stay, sir? Yes, a fine nine hours. He descends the carpeted steps of the St. Regis.

Were Mini-Mind and Fred staring at him? Mini-Mind had beaten Micro-Mind and it was Barth's turn to play. Barth racked the balls and saw Mini-Mind and Fred standing side by side at the bar. They were whispering. Fred was doing most of the whispering, a look almost of calculation on his face, as Mini-Mind listened and nodded, breathing through his mouth. Fred's breath: the hissed words tumbling down Mini-Mind's encrusted, hairy ear canal. What dark plot against me? thought Barth. Then Mini-Mind, grinning and unashamed of his state, shuffled over.

"Uh, maybe," said Mini-Mind, "maybe you wanna play for a little mucking funny, yeah?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know. Maybe put a little money on the game? Twenty bucks?"

Barth looked over at Fred, who stood leaning against the bar, his arms crossed over his breasts. He winked at Barth. Why had Fred picked today to decide that Barth was an easy mark? This sucks, thought Barth. Proles in league against me. He had just wanted to play a little pool, and now they were treating him like a rube who'd never before set foot in Milady's. He suddenly hated Milady's. Dumbed-down enjoyment of this pool bar was no longer possible. He wanted to take handfuls of dollars and cram them down Fred's throat until the fat fuck started to die.

“Sure,” said Barth to Mini-Mind, “I guess so. Why not? Let’s make it forty, though.”

Mini-Mind put two twenties on the table and Barth covered it with his own, one two hundred and eighty-three thousandth part of his fortune.

“Fuckin fucks,” cried Micro-Mind from a corner table, unspeakably jealous of his brother. He knew with the sense of a truffle pig that Barth was rich.

It should be Micro-Mind up there, thought Micro-Mind.

“I’m not seeing this!” Fred bellowed, mugging for everyone. “I am not seeing gambling in this bah!”

The game began and Barth missed his first, easy shots. A sound like an odor rose from the small crowd that had gathered around the pool table. He missed a third shot and, unable to help himself, muttered, “Sorry,” as he stepped back from the table. He hoped no one had heard this idiotic apology. Typical, typical, typical, thought Barth. He was capable, was he not, of greater things than apologizing to Mini-Mind for missing his own shot in a money game of pool at Milady’s.

“Oh don’t worry, it’s no problem,” Mini-Mind said, rolling his eyes at Fred.

The purposes came out and buffeted Barth with renewed force. What he should have done then was paid for his drinks and got the fuck outta there. Instead, he watched Mini-Mind run the table and sweep up the twenties, counting them many times to make sure it was all there.

Why do I always have to say I’m sorry? Barth wondered. In silence, he glared at Fred’s neck fat.

“Hey, Fred,” Barth called. “Here’s a little something for all your trouble.”

Barth, his hand trembling slightly, held a one dollar bill out to Fred. Fred uncrossed his arms.

“Excuse me? Do I know you?”

Barth gently placed the dollar by the fat man’s elbow, “Just a little something, Fred.”

Fred started to speak, but Barth quickly left Milady's. Outside, he felt some satisfaction, but not much. The act, after all, had been small and strange. Alone time at Milady's had been ruined. And probably no more going back to Milady's for some time. Yep, his mood was falling. He was hyper-sentient when it came to tracing the fortunes of his mood. Heading south on Thompson, he knew the mood was falling, not precipitously, but fast enough, no doubt. By Spring Street, he was conscious of being aware that he was aware that his mood was falling, the second derivative of his mood's falling. The smells from Ben's Pizza were almost enough to distract him from his introspection, because his hunger hadn't yet been completely destroyed by the daydrinks. If he were sober and alone on this day, he'd go into Ben's, order two slices, sit down with a *Post* and read closely, paying attention to Page Six and news of the Mets, whom he loved. But he was headed one block downtown, to the restaurant Downtown, to his friends. How's your mood, guy? Don't let your mood turn, guy. I'm actually in a pretty good mood, guy. You're in a dry fucking mood, guy. Mood, the dark diamond word of his life and his friendships. Barth, a few drinks into Sunday, halted at the Broome Street's red light.

III

Albert—one of two great monsters—had occupied one of the tables illegally placed on the sidewalk outside of Downtown. Set before him was the thrill of three liquids: espresso, glass-bottled Evian, and what was certainly a seabreeze. Next to him, Barth saw with dismay, was some guy.

“Albert! What’s up!”

“What’s going on, Barth.”

“Where’s Griffin?”

“Inside, being a dick.”

“Why?”

“Who the fuck knows. By the way Barth, this is Haber. Haber, this is my friend Barth.”

“Good to meet you Barth.”

Barth, blinking, smiled and shook the hand of Haber. Albert noted Barth’s state with approval.

“Have a drink, guy,” he said with a slow nod and a smile.

“Could you order me a seabreeze?”

“Sweet.”

Barth turned from the mellow light of six o’clock and entered Downtown. He immediately spotted a little winter in the middle of summer: Chris Griffin at the crowded bar. Black leather jacket, NYPD baseball

cap, neat whiskey by his fist, Walkman cranked. Griffin was staring angrily at the bartender's belly button as he listened to Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle*.

"That girl," Griffin said to Barth without taking off his headphones, "is fucking beautiful."

Barth said nothing and lit a Marlboro; he saw that he had six left; soon enough another pack would be required.

"No, no, no, no: do you understand? She's a beautiful girl. Understand what that means."

Griffin removed his headphones while continuing to stare at the bartender.

"Are you in love with her?" asked Barth.

Griffin winked, for his own benefit, and laughed a laugh of two syllables, *ha-ha*, an iamb of laughter for the benefit of the bartender who did not hear him and was Russian. Barth quickly discerned two things about his best friend: (1) Griffin was buzzed but not nearly drunk; (2) Griffin was in a foul humor of lust.

"Can you believe," said Griffin, "that Albert brought that business-kid along? It's absurd."

"Haber?"

"Yeah, Haber. Are those losers still outside?"

"Yep. They're not going anywhere."

"Look, if that Haber kid hangs out with us, it's going to be a shitty night."

Barth shrugged.

"No, no, no, no: do you understand? He's one of Albert's *business* friends. It's going to ruin our night. Here, listen to this."

Griffin braced Barth's skull with the headphones. Patiently, Barth listened to a little loud *Doggystyle*.

"Understand," said Griffin, "that what you just heard has more prosodic juice than pretty much any of the so-called serious poetry that's being written right now."

Albert appeared behind them. Griffin looked at his good friend and

gave a snort of disgust.

“What’s up, belligeroid?” said Albert.

“Where’s your buddy ‘Haber’?”

“Belligeroid. Why do you have to be such a loser?”

“Look at you, you goofball.”

“Whatever, guy,” said Albert.

Albert: an oxford shirt over a teal pocket T, khaki shorts, all-the-way-pulled-up black socks & sandals. Yet the women at the bar of Downtown were watching him. He handed Barth a tall glass filled with seabreeze.

“Thanks for the drink, Albert.”

“Cheers, guy.”

Barth drank with satisfaction, and the previous daydrinks seemed moot.

“Could I get a little money for that, Barth?” Albert asked very casually.

“What, you can’t buy me one lousy drink?”

Albert sighed, the sigh that came before an explanation.

“Do you know how much credit card debt I’ve got to service?”

“You’re a single individual making a salary that approaches six figures,” Barth said.

“Before taxes, guy, before taxes.”

Griffin looked at his good friend Albert and said, “You’re a cheap piece of shit, aren’t you?”

Albert chuckled.

“Belligeroid,” he said. “Barth, could I get ten bucks for that drink?”

“Ten?”

“Guy, this is Downtown. Drinks are expensive. You think I’m not gonna leave a serious tip for a bartender like that? Especially the way she’s been looking at me.”

Griffin studied his friend with suspicion and hatred.

“So you think she’s looking at you? I give you credit, Albert, you’re capable of a high degree of self-delusion.”

“What,” said Albert, “you think she’s into you? Because it’s really

cool to sit by yourself and listen to Snoop Doggy Dogg in your played baseball cap?”

“Guy, my cap is exquisite.”

“You’re just wearing it because you’ve probably got some weird thing on your head.”

“Go play with Haber.”

“Maybe you could weep a little. She’d probably be very into that.”

“Go play with Haber.”

“Are you gonna squirt a few right now?”

“Silence.”

Griffin summoned the bartender.

“Another, please.”

“How are you paying for your drink, Chris?” asked Albert, loud enough for the bartender to hear. “I’m not paying for it. Barth, are you paying for Snoop Doggy Dogg’s drink?”

Barth with his seabreeze went to join Haber at the sidewalk table. He did not relish joining Haber, whom he didn’t know, but it seemed better than waiting wedged between Albert and Griffin while they vied for the favor of a hot bartender.

“So how do you know Albert?” Haber asked.

“We were all friends at college.”

“You guys were roommates?”

“We lived together in a house off-campus our junior and senior years.”

The crazy stone house, grilling chicken in snowstorms.

“I heard Bert was a real animal in the pool,” Haber said. “Were you on the swim team with him?”

“No, I didn’t play any sports.”

Barth grew hopeful as a silence began.

“Yeah, Bert’s a great guy,” Haber said very soon into the quiet time—somewhat wistfully, Barth thought. “He’s really great to work with. We’re on the same Project Group right now.”

Barth nodded, sipped the seabreeze, and prepared to contemplate West Broadway, but:

“So what do you do, Barth?”

“I’m kind of in between things,” Barth answered. He did not hate Haber, but was it seemly to endure this question when one was out with the friends?

“Your friend in there—what’s his name? Chris?—he’s a pretty intense guy, isn’t he?”

“Quite a character,” Barth replied automatically.

“But he seems pretty cool, you know?”

That Haber had offered an unsolicited compliment of Griffin actually boded well for the evening. Griffin would not dislike anyone who liked him. Barth imagined his friend, much later in the night, weeping over the decencies of Haber.

Albert and Griffin and their drinks returned to the table.

“Ha-ha,” said Griffin.

“You talk to that bartender, Bert?” Haber asked eagerly.

“I’m afraid she wasn’t all that interested in Albert,” Griffin said. “Believe it or not, maybe she liked someone else. But you never know, ha-ha.”

“Why? Just because you wrote her a faggy note?”

“Believe it or not, Albert, a certain kind of woman actually likes me. But don’t worry, you’ll be all right.”

“Whatever, guy. Whatever.” He turned to Haber and said, “Chris is very insecure.”

“Poor Albert,” said Griffin.

“So what’s the plan,” asked Barth.

“The plan,” said Griffin, “is we finish these drinks and get out of here.”

“What’s your fucking hurry, guy?” said Albert. “We’re sitting outside, we’re having a few drinks. You’ve gotta get a little more mediterranean with yourself. Just relax and enjoy a little sweet downtime at Downtown.”

“Downtown is a turd in the toilet of my day.”

“A little downtime at Downtown, guy.”

“Well then maybe Barth and I’ll just meet up with you guys later.”

“Whatever, Chris. A little downtime at Downtown, right Haber?”

“Sounds good to me, Bert,” said Haber.

“Maybe we’ll go to La Strega,” Griffin said to Barth. “They’ve got that fine metal bar. A real summer evening bar. With the late light. You love the late light, don’t you, Barth.”

“Fuck the late light,” Albert said. “La Strega sucks. There’s plenty of sweet late light right here.”

“Well, nevertheless, Barth and I might just head over there.”

“There’s never any decent pussy at La Strega. Anyway, why the fuck would you go to La Strega when you’re so deeply into the bartender right here? Why don’t you stay and try to close with her?”

“Have another drink, Albert.”

“Are you sexually enraged by the bartender?” asked Albert. “If you were virile, you’d be in there right now getting her phone number. Not that you could anyway.”

“You get her number, scumbag.”

“A little downtime at Downtown, guy.”

“Ha-ha. Listen, Barth, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“I’m right here,” said Barth. “You can talk to me here.”

“Actually, in private for a second?”

“What can’t you tell me right here?”

“Look Barth, don’t be a dick. I just need to ask you something.”

“Give the baby his bottle,” said Albert.

Barth grabbed his drink, gave Haber a smile en passant—not an apology, but a minor concession to this outsider among the monsters—and followed Griffin to the interior of Downtown.

“Look,” said Griffin. “Let’s just get the fuck out of here and go to La Strega.”

“But you don’t even like La Strega.”

Griffin cocked his head and raised a hand.

“Not necessarily true. La Strega’s all right, if you go there at the right time. Obviously, La Strega at midnight is bullshit. But if we get there

now, we've got the bar, and the late light. You gotta know when to go to a place. But that's not the point."

"What's the point, then?" asked Barth.

"The point is we can't get screwed into hanging out here with Albert and that kid Haber. Because you know what's going to happen if we do, right?"

"What will happen."

"First of all, we'll be dragged to this shitty TriBeCa party that they're planning to go to. You know about that, right?"

"Is it a stripper party?" asked Barth with some interest.

"Not even strippers, guy. It's a work party. A Sunday office party. A barbecue."

Griffin paused to observe the effect of this on Barth.

"Do you understand," said Griffin, "that we'll be sitting there with wasted drinks, having to be polite to the meatheads Albert works with? Understand how thickly peopled with groves of standing meat that hellish hot shitty TriBeCa roof is going to be. Do you really want some analyst kid wearing shorts to ask you what you do for a living?"

Barth shook his hung head.

"Understand that I'm right," said Griffin.

They went outside.

"Did you guys talk to that bartender?" Haber asked.

"No, that's already been taken care of, ha-ha."

Albert squinted, dropped ash from his Marlboro and leaned back, fully reposed. A few short fair hairs glinted at his mouth's corners, because Albert didn't shave on Sundays.

"This is what Griffin did," Albert said with the weariest authority. "He sat at the bar hoarding her for twenty minutes, listening to Snoop Doggy Dogg and saying 'ha-ha.' Then he ordered Johnny Walker Black because he thought she would think it was really cool that a white guy with a leather jacket was sitting there listening to rap, saying 'ha-ha' and drinking a brown drink. She probably didn't even read his note."

"Guy, she definitely read my note."

“There’s no way she even read your note, guy. Hey, Barth, say a typical Griffin note for Haber. Relate a Griffin note.”

In the restricted company of Albert and Griffin, Barth would have provided a solid parody of a Griffin love note. But with Haber gazing up at him, Barth’s heart was not in it. It was not right that these parodies be orated in the presence of outsiders.

“Come on Barth, do a Griffin note.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Barth said vaguely.

“Come on Barth, say a Griffin note. Griffin, tell Haber what your note said.”

“Albert,” said Griffin, “you’re eating the steak.”

“Guy, I’m not eating the steak.”

“You’re utterly eating the steak.”

“Talking about eating the steak in front of Haber,” said Barth, “is itself eating the steak.”

“What’s eating the steak?” asked Haber.

“Let’s just say,” Griffin said genially to Haber, “that you’re having dinner with some of your friends and one of your friends’ terminally ill fathers is there. All of you are having steak. Now the father of your friend has always loved steak—it’s a thing about him that he’s always loved steak—but this guy’s so chemoed, he can barely eat a string bean without puking, right? Nevertheless, he orders a steak because he’s trying to make everyone else feel all right. It’s just one of the boringly sad braveries of the terminally ill. But, of course, he takes one bite and that’s it, he’s done. If you have a brain in your head, you can tell that this guy’s remembering those sweet days of health when he could wolf down a Wollensky T-bone just like any other asshole. So what do you do? If you’re at that table, what do you do? I’ll tell you what you do. *You don’t eat your own steak.*”

“Eating the steak,” Barth said, “is when you persist even though it would embarrass someone or make them feel—”

“Sweet explaining voice,” said Albert tonelessly.

“Don’t you love it when Barth goes into his explaining voice?” Griffin

asked of the company.

“So who ate the steak?” asked Haber.

“Albert’s the kind of kid who eats the steak constantly,” said Griffin. “Whereas I am embarrassingly polite.”

“Not really guy,” said Albert. “You pretty much darken the air wherever you go. Ask that hot bartender. Anyway, I’m not eating the steak. It’s more like five and a quarter ounces of eighty-two percent prime lean ground beef.”

Barth wondered, like a spectator, what would come of the night. He wondered only distractedly because right now, standing in SoHo, he was at the ocean—the sun, the sand and the sea triggered at this moment for him by the plastic white furniture, the taste of seabreeze on his dry lips, a glance at Albert’s sandals, and the sound of the cubes in his glass. He was barefoot and walking across the deserted parking lot at Georgica Beach in East Hampton, a mystical place which sent the purposes packing, he and his friends having just come off the sand, a retriever barking at the margin of the lot, and fresh towels in the car.

A waiter in a white collarless tunic came and switched ashtrays. The waiter’s head was absolutely bald, finely boned, and tanned like a nut. His head glistened.

“Thanks, Vincenzo,” said Albert. “Vincenzo’s all right.”

“Sí, Alberto, you crazy,” said the waiter with a wink.

“You actually know that waiter?” Griffin asked after the waiter left. “He has one of the purest structurally gay skulls I’ve ever seen. Of course he loves a fun-kid like you.”

Would it be an amazing night? But of course one did not plan amazing nights, they were freakish, like no-hitters. Barth judged that it was possible, because it was always possible, if there were no wasted drinks, if they got lucky with drinks, if there was new humor, if they were received with love and fascination at the places they happened to go, if the weather was right and there were fine women. But if Barth had to choose which element was chiefest in the building of an amazing night, he could not say, it was incalculable.

“So Barth, you ready to get out of here?”

“Just remember,” Albert said, “be back here by seven twenty-five so we can have dinner before going to the party.”

“Yeah, the incredible party,” said Griffin. “But if for some reason we’re not back, you guys might just want to go ahead without us, you know what I’m saying?”

“Whatever.”

“See you guys later,” Haber called manly as Barth and Griffin left.

“So how you doing, Barth?” Griffin asked as they walked. “You’re looking a little run down, guy. I mean, you look good, but you’ve got a real SoHo pallor going today, you know what I’m saying?”

“Are you saying I look bad?”

“Guy, I didn’t say that. All I’m saying is that you’re running a sweet SoHo pallor.”

They moved in silence past the many tables deployed without permits on the sidewalk outside the following restaurants: Novocento, Diva, Jour Et Nuit. Barth looked to see if any girls at all were noting him as they passed, but no. He thought, however, that one or two of them may well have considered Griffin, and he felt such a strong surge of hatred that he decided he needed more drinks. For whatever reason, the effects of what he’d already consumed had waned. He imagined with a shudder what it would be like, among his friends this day in SoHo, were alcohol not to be had. Several months ago, he had woken up one day unusually early (10:00 AM!) and had decided to make that day a day of health. So he put on a pair of sneakers he hadn’t worn since college and ran three times around his block. The final lap had been tough, and while running it, Barth decided that for one year he would neither drink nor smoke (though there were no resolutions about caffeine because who in their right mind could expect him to give up espresso?). Furthermore, he would eat meals like a normal human being. After his run, he bought Raisin Bran, milk, and toothpicks and sat with these articles on a chipped wooden bench outside the D’Agostinos. He had a fondness for this bench, though it afforded

a view of nothing less homely than a shoe repair shop, a dry cleaners, a Te Amo newsstand, and the tall building where he lived. Sitting with his groceries on the bench, his sweat drying in the spring air, he watched the weekday afternoon without anxiety. A fat, cheerful black woman left the Te Amo with a lottery ticket, Tommy the doorman stood under the awning laughing with a cop, and life appeared less like a slot machine, which one gets something from, and more like an ocean or a mountain. Barth was happy. He thought he could already feel the salutary effects of his new healthy lifestyle. What a perfect time for a cigarette. He quickly went back up to his penthouse and threw away the two bottles of wine in his refrigerator and the carton of Marlboros on his desk and then fixed himself a bowl of cereal. After this breakfast, he sat on the couch and looked out his wide windows. The sky was marked with idle clouds, the course was clear. From now on, everything would be different. By two o'clock Barth had chewed through all the toothpicks. He forced himself to eat his second square of the day (a dry turkey sandwich), morosely read the *Post*, and observed without pleasure that the exercise of pure will for its own sake was necessary in the leading of a courageous life. That evening at six, Albert met him after work and suggested they have a drink. Barth countered with the notion that maybe they could just walk around for awhile, it was a clement night. "That's a sick idea," said Albert. At eight Barth consumed his first drink and cigarette. When he got home at two in the morning, he had smoked twenty-seven Marlboros and drunk ten rocks drinks among four different places. But the early part of the day had taught him that he could, indeed, if called upon, live a healthy life.

They entered La Strega and Griffin said, "Sweet," because La Strega was silent and empty. They sat at the bar and placed their hands on the chill metal surface. The bartender—not a hot bartender, but a human—lowered his newspaper.

"Two double espressos, please," said Griffin. "Didn't I tell you this place would be fine right now? Look at that light, guy."

"And a seabreeze for me," said Barth.

“You should probably wait on your next drink, guy. You don’t want to put a seabreeze over your espresso like that. Hey, maybe we should get something to eat soon.”

Griffin’s voice had quickened. The friends were hungry only when they were happy. The redness and wetness had abated in his eye. It was always important to monitor Griffin’s eye, never more so than when he was drinking brown drinks. Confronted with the bettered mood of his good friend, Barth fidgeted and sighed.

“You seem a little distracted,” Griffin said charitably.

Barth hesitated before he spoke.

“Maybe I’m just a little lonely with myself.”

“Holy shit, are you serious?”

“Well, maybe. Yeah, maybe I’m a little lonely with myself.”

Was Barth serious? Was being lonely with oneself simply a matter of being a newly-minted uber-virgin (no sex for six months) in the dark, dry, fundamentally ungreen city? Barth remembered when he’d had his girlfriend: He had often been miserable, but never lonely with himself.

“Sometimes,” Barth said very carefully, “I miss having a girlfriend.”

“That’s fucking sick. The last thing you need, guy, is another girlfriend.”

“I wonder,” said Barth.

“Why, so you can dumb down with some blonde in your penthouse and be incommunicado? Guy, you know how you get. Anyway, you’re the type of kid who thrives on alone-time. It’s good for you to be a little lonely with yourself.”

Barth’s seabreeze came and he bent to it.

“A man improves when he’s lonely with himself,” Griffin stated. “And trust me, you get a lot smarter. Domesticity is bullshit.”

Satisfied as ever with the giving of hard truths, Griffin ordered a JWB rocks.

“That’s a cool cap,” said the bartender as he set down the drink. “Are you in the force?”

“No, it’s my dad,” Griffin lied vaguely. The bartender nodded and

moved away.

“That guy’s all right,” said Griffin. “Anyone who appreciates my cap is doing all right.”

“What do you mean by your dad?”

“Trust me,” said Griffin. “It’s what you give a bartender like that, you know what I’m saying?”

“All I know is that I’m a little lonely with myself.”

“Why, because you’re not getting laid?”

“Partially.”

Griffin leaned closer to his friend.

“Listen,” he said, “you’re a rich guy, why don’t you just get a whore again?”

“I don’t know.”

“And I don’t mean some two-bit tunnel skank. An escort. A gentleman’s companion. I know you loved waiting that time, for that sweet knock.”

Barth remembered.

“Okay,” said Griffin hungrily. “Let’s just say you called a really good agency this time. You’d spend, say, eight hundred bucks. You know what level of escort you get for that kind of money? First of all, the girl is hot, slut-hot. And she does what’s right. Not that a guy like you would know.”

“Whatever,” said Barth.

“Realize that on any given night, you could whip out your platinum card and within an hour you could have a seriously hot girl sucking your dick. That fact alone is insane. Don’t you remember what a pisser we had when you called me that night?”

Half a year ago, in the dead center of winter, soon after his girlfriend had wordlessly and untraceably disappeared, Barth had returned home a few hours before dawn after a very long night out with himself. A serious snowstorm had been going on—which was the official reason for Barth’s going out with himself, because how could you fail to celebrate the snow? He had passed his night in bars, and he’d been enraged

by the ripe winter girls jockeying by his mournful face all night long. Swaying in his kitchen, staring through the glass door at the progress of the blizzard on his terrace, he remembered some of the sweaters and the lips he'd seen just a little while before and he then experienced the most intense surge of lust that he had ever known. He opened the Manhattan Yellow Pages and saw that the Escort section was forty-four pages long (as compared with Restaurants, thirty-one pages). Barth settled on the ad for an agency called Premier Knights.

"For the Special Gentleman: Let Us Take You Through Our Fantasy World With Style. We offer models, beauty queens, actresses, dancers, airline hostesses, coeds, designers, and other glamorous types. The perfect complement to any business or social occasion."

That's right, thought Barth as he dialed, that's right.

Someone picked up and Barth heard the voice of a tired prole.

"T3M Entertainment Systems."

"Hey. This is Premier Knights?"

"Can I help you?"

"How you doing tonight? Well, I'd like to see a girl tonight, please."

"What's your phone number?"

"Excuse me?"

Barth heard a deep sigh.

"I need your phone number to call you back."

Barth gave it and the man hung up instantly. Two minutes later the phone rang.

"Our rates," said the man, "are three hundred dollars an hour, with a minimum charge of one hour. You'll need to present your credit card to the lady for an imprint."

"Sure, no problem."

"Are you affiliated with the New York Police Department or any other local, state, or federal law enforcement agency?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you affiliated with—"

"No, no I'm not."

“I need your credit card number, the name as it appears on the card, and your billing address.”

Barth gave the information. Now, he thought, I cannot run for office.

“What sort of lady would you be interested in seeing this evening?”

The sigh Barth heard now was one of deepest boredom. But, for Barth, this was the single question, scarcely to be believed: You get to choose the girl!

“Well,” said Barth, “I’d like her to be pretty, of course, and on the younger side.”

“Blonde or brunette?”

“Blonde, please. The girl in your ad would be great, but I guess everybody asks for the girl in the ad, right?”

Barth chuckled nervously. There was no response. He heard what sounded like the turning of pages.

“Vanessa will be at your address in forty minutes.”

The man hung up, and Barth immediately called Griffin, who at 3:30 AM was in the thick of his day.

“Guess what I’m doing,” said Barth.

“What?”

“I’m waiting for the escort I just called.”

There was a long silence.

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.”

There was another pause.

“You’ve just done the right thing,” Griffin said with utter solemnity.

Barth laughed.

“I’m a little buzzed,” he said.

“Barth, you have no idea how happy this makes me. It’s incredible. What kind of girl did you get?”

“I asked for a pretty blonde.”

“Holy shit. That’s it?”

Barth supposed that he could have been specific: a really young, tan, short-haired blonde. Not skinny. Big tits, big eyes. Oh well.

“Do you understand,” asked Griffin with real joy, “how it’s going to be to hear that knock on the door? It’s one of the few times in life where you can actually buy the sublime. I’m pretty fucking jealous, guy. Hold on a sec, I’ve got to finish cooking this stir-fry.”

Barth heard the clashing of pans. That a snowstorm raged, that his best friend was cooking his dinner shortly before dawn while the two of them awaited the knock on the door made Barth feel well favored, and life seemed the best of wrigglers.

“All I’m going to say,” said Griffin, “is that I understand more than anyone else possibly could how you feel right now. You’ll remember this moment.”

“I’ve entered a strange world,” said Barth happily.

“Yeah, but what a fine world it is. You nervous?”

“A bit.”

“Guy, don’t worry. I’ll wait for the knock with you, I’m fully in your corner.”

Barth almost wished, in fact, that the escort would take a little longer to get to him. He spoke for a high half-hour on the phone with his friend.

“There you go,” said Griffin when Barth’s buzzer sounded. “It’s all you, guy. Good luck, Barth.”

Afterwards, he remembered the waiting more clearly than he recalled Vanessa, a skinny blur of a brunette in her early thirties. She was forced to charge him for a second hour, because Barth really had had far too much to drink. But, bizarrely, she did not ask him to wear a condom. A miracle. This was the important thing that the friends would not believe: it was totally bagless.

“I don’t know,” he told Griffin in the golden late light of La Strega. “I don’t want to get into the habit of using prostitutes.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean what do I mean? It’s just not the kind of habit I want to get into. It’s also illegal.”

“Guy, it’s no crime. If I had your money—well, let’s not even think

about it. But then again, you're not a highly sexed male."

Barth scowled.

"Sir, another round," said Griffin to the bartender..

"There's nothing wrong with my sexuality," said Barth. "I've got a fairly strong sexual appetite, to tell the truth. Definitely much higher than average. I'm very into sex."

"Look at Barth," said Griffin, laughing into the air of La Strega. "You're awesome."

For the first time, Barth was unsure of his drink count.

"Hey, where do you want to go for dinner?" Griffin asked. "A little steak frites, maybe? A little roast chicken? Red wine? We should go somewhere expensive. How are your drinks hitting you? You're looking good."

They were starting to hit Barth quite well. He had perhaps forgotten about being lonely with himself.

"I think," said Barth, "that we should go to the Albert party."

"Really? You have some kind of weird insight about that?"

"Don't ask me why," said Barth, "but I think it'd be all right to go to that party."

Griffin nodded in serious contemplation of the counter-intuitive surprise.

Barth's mind had begun to fill with images. A treed rooftop at dusk, Albert introducing him to girls. You get lucky with your drinks at La Strega, you get lucky with the friends' moods, you get a little breeze in the terrace trees, and maybe you talk to a few girls. The eye of Griffin was completely white and dry. The walls of La Strega were flush with the late light.

"You know what?" said Griffin, delighted to be surprising himself, "We'll go to that party. Why the fuck not?"

What was remarkable was not that it should be resolved so quickly, for he was accustomed to, was indeed hopeful of, his friend's deciding this or that matter "on the spot," but rather that Griffin had this time struck the note of decision without having first assured that the propo-

sition itself appear his own. Oh it was no small source of peace to Barth, when the question of what should be done arose between them—and when did it not?—that his friend was likely not only to furnish the answer, but to have made the very query. One conversant with his manner, yet unstudied in Griffin's deeper character, might well have wondered why he had in this case so readily ceded the foreground in favor of the middle distance; why the deuce had he deferred? But Barth was not unaware that, for his friend, there were shades of pleasure to be derived at times from being rare.

"A little counter-intuitive surprise," said Barth, raising his glass. "But first, let's finish these drinks."

IV

A column of children with Down's Syndrome was marching by the heads of Novocento. Freaked from birth, these children of God passed in ecstasy, babbling at the sun. The two social workers who flanked them urged them on, but their charges needed no encouragement. The heads of Novocento, Diva, then Jour Et Nuit looked away, but Griffin and Barth stared, awed.

"Look at the sweet downies," said Griffin. "Do you realize how happy they are?"

Barth nodded. And why shouldn't they be happy, despite ass problems and the missing chromosome? Nobody fucked with a downie. The downies loved each other. Nobody troubled a downie with phone calls or sharp knocks on the door. No one ever asked a downie what he intended to do with his life. The children of God were not made to feel strange and bad, though the idea of a mentally retarded twelve-year old girl rubbing herself up and down your leg, grunting with pleasure—it feels good, it feels good—might make you feel strange and bad indeed. But was that the fault of the child? Obviously not. That was you feeling strange and bad, not her. The downie is blameless.

"If only," said Griffin, "you could be a genius downie. What a perfect life."

The special ones passed from sight. Barth and Griffin had made it

fifty yards north out of La Strega. In front of Novocento, Griffin slowed.

“What’s wrong?” asked Barth.

“Guy,” Griffin exhaled, “there’s no way we’re going to that party. Just look at these heads. How can you go on?”

Barth looked at the heads of Novocento. They refused to look back. Hit hard by his friend’s genius for exhaustion, he stopped and unshouldered his backpack as if it were a stone, though it contained nothing heavier than his last trust statement and a thick book, unread. He wished that he were freshly showered, no more than two drinks into the day, with some hard-minded project recently completed. How fine the leisure after travail. Instead, all was leisure, and going on seemed difficult, and the linen shirt stuck to his back.

“Two minutes ago you were into the idea of the party,” said Barth with frustration.

“In La Strega, it was a sweet canard of an idea. With a few drinks and a little escort nostalgia, anything’s a good idea. But look around, guy. We barely move half a block through SoHo without falling to the ground. You think we’re going to be able to endure an Albert party?”

“What do you mean ‘we’,” said Barth. “I’m fine. I’m feeling great as a matter of fact.”

Griffin laughed, the laugh of scorn from a height.

“Guy, you’re out of your mind. I’m actually beginning to think the best thing might be to cut our losses and call the night.”

The notion of “calling the night” was frightening. What would Barth do were his night to end? Go back to his apartment? What could he do there? Eat a sandwich? He could always smoke.

The pack was empty. He crushed it and shoved it back into his pocket.

“I need to get cigarettes.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Look,” said Barth, “let’s just go back to Downtown and meet up with Albert. If the downies can enjoy their day in SoHo, so can you.”

Griffin nodded at this.

“All right, but don’t think that at any minute I might not be hopping a New Jersey Transit out of this fucking city.”

Albert and Haber hadn’t left their table. And now two girls were sitting with them, on them, what you will. For Barth, life quickened. One was hot, one less hot, both tan.

“Holy shit,” Griffin muttered as they approached. “That’s intense.”

“Have a seat, guy,” Albert said to both Griffin and Barth. “I want you to meet Patrice and Inez. They’re a little mediterranean.”

Griffin stepped lightly in front of Barth and took the seat by Patrice, the hot one. Incredible, thought Barth. Girls were now officially a part of their night. He sat next to Haber and Inez, the less hot, perhaps average, one. Summer dress, long hair, dark skin, teeth, eyes, limbs, and a spine.

“Hi,” said Barth, “I’m Barth.”

“Barth and I just saw something that made me very happy,” Griffin told the table.

“What did you see?” asked the average one politely.

“Actually,” said Griffin, “we happened to see a group of downies.”

“Sweet,” said Albert.

“What is that?” asked the average one.

“They’re from Spain, guy,” said Albert. “They don’t understand downies.”

Barth saw that the girls were equipped with drinks. Those clear, carbonated drinks could have been mineral water or Stoli tonics, one couldn’t yet say, and he felt that the night, or at least this portion of it, hinged on the answer.

“A downie is a child of God,” said Griffin. “You know, Down’s Syndrome. I’m sure you’ve got plenty of downies in Spain.”

The girls were silent.

“A downie, you know what I mean.”

The average one frowned.

“I wish I could have filmed them,” Griffin said.

“But you wouldn’t just film them walking down the street,” Albert

said seriously. "You'd probably want to film them at play. Maybe on some kind of field trip. Like a trip to the petting zoo."

"A dilapidated petting zoo," said Barth, unable to help elaborating, despite girls. "A petting zoo on its last legs."

"Exactly," Griffin said. "A petting zoo where the most exotic animal is a goat. So you see the downies with dogs and housecats and a Central Park pigeon. They're having the time of their lives."

"And a ripped-up stuffed animal with one eye," Albert said in a monotone.

"Sure, you could have that if you wanted," Griffin said generously. "Anyway, that's the movie. You see the downies petting the animals, hugging each other, and literally overjoyed. You have to show the natural affection of the downie. Then the movie ends."

"That's it?" said Barth.

"And there's no dialog," Griffin continued. "In fact the only sound during the movie, the only thing you hear, from the opening shot to the end, is the Bob Seeger song 'Night Moves'. Played in its entirety. Nothing else. Seeger's tune. 'Night Moves'. You call the movie 'Downie'."

Haber, laughing, shook his head.

"That seems very crewel," said Inez.

"I do not think I like that movie," said Patrice.

"You know," said Haber casually, "my niece has Down's Syndrome."

Silence obtained at the table and Barth saw Inez place her hand on Haber's forearm. Shit, thought Barth, she's into him. While he'd been with Griffin, shooting the shit about escorts, Haber and Albert had met women. European fun-girls stopping to ask for directions, girls from Barthelona. She had placed a hand on Haber's arm and he made no move to dislodge it. That sucked. Because Barth, sitting close to Inez, had decided that a re-classification was called for: Patrice wasn't so much the "hot one" as she was the "pretty one"; while Inez, though not "pretty", was in fact "hot". There was eternal difference between the "pretty" of Patrice—the clear eyes cut precisely into the head, and the finely hacked out features, and all the things—and the "hot" of Inez,

which did not disdain a big nose, a little funfat on the clean limbs, and eyes like Streisand's, that lived too close to the nose. Which brought to mind the more extreme examples of the Beautiful Ugly Girl and the Hot Fatty. Barth recalled his hairstylist, who was both a Beautiful Ugly Girl and a Hot Fatty: a young large woman of central Europe with enormous t-shirted tits pressing Barth from behind; soapy-smelling skin; and a dreamy, dropsical, camel-like, cud-chewing, cocksucker's face. Oh my gawd.

"I am sorry for your niece," said Inez to Haber. And though she was from Spain, not Long Island, it seemed a small leap from her fingers on his arm to: you wanna get outta heah?

"It's no big deal," said Haber. "She'd probably get a kick out of the movie. It's weird, but she loves stuff like that."

"You see?" said Griffin in triumph. "They're extremely sweet-natured people. Haber's all right."

Moist redness had once again taken hold in Griffin's eye. He moved his chair closer to Patrice.

"So you find it offensive?" he asked.

Griffin was smiling with one side of his mouth, and Barth recognized the beginnings of a belligeroid scam, whereby Griffin, via a battery of sexual insinuations, mild insults, teasers, flatteries, and the foisting of drinks would hopefully lead the girl to the following conclusion: What an asshole, I really want to fuck him. On another night, Griffin might have gunned for Inez—who seemed, when compared with the froideur of Patrice, more apt to do what was right—but the will to compete with Albert was too strong. There was no question, Patrice would be fought over, like Poland, between the Griffin of Fascist Germany and the Albert of Stalin's Russia, while Barth and Haber together formed Italy, given the Greece of Inez to conquer, thought Barth, a student of history.

"It is not so nice to make fun like that," said Patrice with a pout.

"What are you drinking?" said Griffin.

"They're drinking Stoli tonics," said Albert. He leaned across Patrice to address Griffin. "What are you drinking, guy?"

Griffin stared at the hand Albert had placed on Patrice's bare, honeyed shoulder.

"Ha-ha," said Griffin. He touched Patrice's other shoulder. "Are you enjoying your drinks? It's a shame when a pretty girl doesn't enjoy her drinks, ha-ha."

Barth signaled a waiter and ordered a seabreeze.

"A Johnny Walker Black, rocks, please," said Griffin as he stared slyly at Patrice. "And two stoli tonics for the ladies."

To Barth's surprise, neither girl offered even token resistance to the drinks. So they're into their free drinks, the sluts. And now Albert had taken a strand of Patrice's hair and was caressing it with his fingers. Time and again, Barth had seen the efficient fingers of his friend Albert stroke the hair of girls with whom he was barely acquainted.

"You have very beautiful hair," Albert said.

And why, thought Barth, am I incapable of similar demonstrations? It was an action of no great moment to take the hair of an Andalusian girl between your fingers, in the summer, at a sidewalk café, when you were twenty-four years old. But there was a mathematical chance that the girl would push your hand away and coldly say: "You presume a familiarity that doesn't exist." So he smoked and drank and watched the monsters campaign.

When the girls got up together to experience the ladies' room of Downtown, a place that Barth would never see, it was revealed that both had luscious asses. There was quiet at the table, in which the recognition of the girls' asses' quality was a palpable thing.

"Sweet sluts," said Griffin.

"Say it a little louder, guy," Albert replied. "Maybe you can embarrass yourself some more."

"What do you mean, loser?"

"Guy, belligeroid scams don't work on Spaniards. Especially a girl like Patrice. You're dealing with the children of the sun and the sea. They're not into dark scams."

"Guy, it's working quite fine."

“Whatever,” said Albert. “What we should really do is invite them to dinner with us.”

“Okay, Bert,” said Haber.

“Because mediterranean girls are into things like that.”

“Things like what?” Barth asked.

“Guy,” said Albert, “they’re just into things like that.”

“Thank fucking God,” said Griffin, “you’ve given up on the idea of the party.”

“Not really, guy. You go to the party after the dinner. If you go to the party first, you haven’t staked your time with them, and you might lose them at the party. But if you stake dinner time with them, they’ll stick with you at the party. Dinner is the equity, and the party is your debt service that you’re owed. The party is the amortization of the debt of the dinner.”

“But we do want to get to the party at some point,” said Haber—a little anxiously, thought Barth. “Right, Bert?”

“What if there’re other girls at the party?” asked Barth. “Then you’re stuck with the ones you brought.”

“At that point the choice is yours, guy, and it’s zero downside,” said Albert.

“Where should we go for dinner?” asked Barth.

“Somewhere with young people,” said Albert. “We can go across the street and eat outside at Novocento. The food over there is tasty, nutritious, and cheap.”

Griffin appeared outraged.

“With those heads? No way. Why? For some fucking portobello sandwich? No way. I’m not setting a foot inside that place. Let’s go somewhere expensive. . . . Guy: we’re headed to Provence.”

“I’d be up for that,” said Haber.

Albert shook his head.

“Guy, the last thing those girls want is to sit inside a ‘restaurant’ restaurant looking at you in black leather. These are very casual mediterranean girls. They’re children of the sand and the sea. They need to be

outdoors. They need to play in the sun.”

“They need to play with my cock,” Griffin replied. “Do you know how into Provence they’d be? I don’t care if they’re mediterranean, they want to see men spending a little money on them. How much better than the seedy youth-culture sangria hostel life they’ve been living since they’ve been here. Girls like that like to be treated well, trust me. Especially Patrice.”

“You’re underrating Inez,” said Barth.

There you go, thought Barth, my hat’s in the ring.

“I don’t know, Barth,” said Albert. “She may be into Haber. What do you think, Haber?”

Haber remained mild and inscrutable.

“So we’re going to Provence, right?” Griffin demanded.

“Whatever, guy. I don’t care either way.”

“Barth, you’re up for a little Provence dinner, right?”

Yes, he was being asked for his opinion, but he was also being asked because he would be paying the tab. Power of the purse, guy. Which was customary. And why not, because, truly, you don’t take it with you. What Barth thought of Provence was this: it was an excellent idea. You get the wine list, the entrées in the high teens, Bistro French waiters who loved the monsters, and the memory of a couple of actual amazing nights having occurred there. After a third glass of that Chateauneuf-du-Pape, you put your hand on Inez’s thigh and the sunny thigh doesn’t budge, hand on thigh underneath the table, very sexy, equivalent of or leading up to: you wanna get outta heah. Let’s drink a lot tonight, he thought.

“Provence sounds great,” said Barth. “Let’s drink a lot tonight.”

Haber frowned.

“But, Bert, you guys do eventually want to go to the party, right?”

“Let’s not even worry about the party,” said Griffin affably.

“First the dinner then the party,” said Albert.

The girls came back. In the ladies’ room of Downtown, they had lipsticked themselves. Patrice is a very pretty girl. You sure is purty,

Patrice, thought Barth, a little angry with himself. Why did he consider himself out of the running whenever a seriously pretty girl came along? Why cede the field? The girls took their seats. Patrice checked her watch. Inez crossed her legs.

“We were thinking,” Albert said in the slow voice of announcing plans, “of getting some dinner at Provence. Would you girls like to come with us to Provence?”

“What is Provence?” asked Inez.

“It’s a French bistro,” intoned Albert, “but it’s not named in the French Bistro Song.”

Barth was obliged, then, to join Albert in a chorus of this song:

Je suis enfant ce soir
(This evening, I am a child)
A ta maison porte-moi
(Carry me to your house)
La Jumelle, Le Relais
Jour Et Nuit, Bilboquet
Fe-leeex, Fred-ereeeque

“Where is this restaurant?” Inez asked after two choruses.

“It’s very, very close,” Griffin replied. The reply was addressed not to Inez—who’d asked the question—but to Patrice. And the tone was one of secret knowledge and sexual import. It was all part of the belligeroid scam. The tone and stare of Griffin got a blush from Patrice, which Griffin hoarded.

The girls spoke quickly in Spanish.

“Yes, all right,” said Patrice. “We would like to go.”

“But it is expensive?” Inez asked.

Enough of my silence, Barth thought.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Dinner’s on me.”

“Wow, thanks, man,” said Haber.

“Sweet,” said Albert.

“That is very kind,” said Inez.

“Okay, grathiath” said Patrice.

“As it should be,” said Griffin.

Barth felt generous and worldly. We met a couple of wandering Spaniards and took them to Provence. His good spirits refreshed, he wanted to spend a few minutes of alone-time. He went inside Downtown to the men’s room. Wash my face, re-tuck my sweet linen, and think only of confidence, valor and cleanliness.

On the walk to Provence, Barth occupied the point, ahead of the others. The pairings behind him were expected: Albert and Griffin flanking Patrice, while Haber walked side by side with Inez. Downtown’s drinks were doing nice work, particularly the last half of the last seabreeze, which he had consumed so quickly, and therefore so effectively. Slow drinking was bullshit. Now it was nearly eight o’clock, dying light. The physical day was no longer such a desecration of the senses.

He realized he was far ahead of the others, perhaps exhibiting too great a will to the remote. But was it so great? He supposed that, like others thus disposed, he was expected to “own up” to this will lightly, and with a sense, even, of being charmed by the deficiency—for it was, was it not, just that, a deficiency, if indeed he must “own up”—as if it were no more than a question of admitting a flaw in the diet, such as a predilection for fondant. After the confession, of course, one was quite expected to abstain from the sweet. So Barth, with regard to this particular tendency, supposed that he must, having once recognized his will to the remote, forever after opt for the midway rather than the margin. But they were not to be helped, these occasions—and did the present minutes not constitute one of these?—when the midway seemed positively uninhabitable, veritably overgrown, and the margin the one good place. Yet one must travel from time to time among the natives of the middle ground, and indeed derive pleasure from the journey. One could hardly refrain from such voyages; just the same, it was necessary to spend most of one’s time within one’s borders in order to “pull them off”. Oh, it was a matter of retreating just when one thought the battle won, this deuced impulse which compelled him to leave his

friends at the very moment in which he took greatest pleasure in his congress with them; and now, as he stopped, as it were, "in his tracks" and looked back, he knew that the friendship he felt for the dwindled figures of his companions existed not in spite of their distance, but fairly because of it; were they any larger, he would have loved them, perhaps, less.

Behind him, the configurations had changed. Griffin was walking between the girls, and Haber and Albert were side by side. Why in the name of God had Haber forsaken walking alone-time with Inez? Would Albert lecture him about the rising yen? Barth wondered what he would say were he alone with Inez. There were complicated mechanics to the scam, and nowhere in those workings was there room for polite questions. But, for Barth, there seemed to be nowhere to go outside of these questions. Outside the politeness questions, as it were, the air wasn't breathable.

"Do you have a cigarette?"

The others had caught up and moved on. All but Inez, standing in front of him, leggy, a little googly-eyed and eyes-close-together-eyed, asking him for a cigarette. She could as easily have asked Albert, absorbed though he was in giving Haber a business-lecture, one of Albert's bizarre pastimes. Maybe she didn't want to disturb Albert. Or, maybe . . . she's trying to get a little something going with Barth?

"I'm sorry, I'm all out," he said, showing his empty palms, mugging a little.

"Do you know where we can get them?"

"There's a deli down the block," said Barth.

Inside the deli, they waited on line.

Now is the time, he thought, to pay her, at the very least, some small compliment, or to make the sort of remark that one would not make to one's aunt.

"So," he said, "how long are you staying in New York?"

"Until Wednesday."

Provence and the Chateauneuf-du-Pape receded as Barth could think

of nothing to say. In the brightly lit deli, Barth thought of the twenty-one year old Caesar weeping with envy and an inexplicable sense of loss at the statue of Alexander the Great in Gaul, cast and erected when Alexander was sixteen. There was only one person ahead of them in line. Best to say something now, in the store?

“Do you smoke a lot?” asked Barth.

Inez shrugged.

“Only a little. When I am on my vacation, I smoke more.”

“I smoke too much,” he said.

There was a grinning Oriental behind the counter. What was he so happy about?

“Marlboros, please,” said Barth.

“Parliament Lights, please,” said Inez.

“Fie fitty,” said the counterman. “Das oar you wan? Anyting maw?”

No, there was nothing else to be had from this store, though all male Oriental voices made Barth hungrier if, for Barth, he was hungry. He thought of one of the two poems he had written:

*The best Chinese restaurants
Have the best Chinese voices:
One dumpling
One spring roll
And many other choices.*

Inez fingered her ratty, beaded purse, the purse of the European fun-girl trying to travel on twenty dollars a day, fishing up quarters and dimes.

“I got it,” said Barth.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, giving him a look of surprise which, were it more pronounced, would have made him feel strange and bad.

“I always like to encourage a pretty girl’s vices,” Barth replied, and lightly touched her dark hair.

Or, maybe he should have done so. Instead:

“Oh, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

She shrugged and accepted the Parliaments. They left the store. The moment for flattery seemed to have passed. But he was still alone with her; the others were more than a block ahead. In fear and desperation, Barth ran through his few conversational gambits and found none. He saw her opening her pack of cigarettes and instantly lit a match. It was a talent of his, a very minor one.

“Allow me,” said Barth. He cupped the flame carefully, as if he were offering up a little wriggler of a tweetie-bird which needs love and protection. Their hands touched. It had been a long time since Barth had gotten any.

“You smell good,” he said.

“Well, thank you!” she said brightly and, Barth inferred, without a trace of sexual complicity. “We should go up to the others.”

“Seriously,” he said, “what perfume are you wearing?”

“I’m not wearing any today,” said Inez.

“Because it smells familiar.”

Inez smiled wanly and shrugged.

“Maybe it’s the soap I used,” she said.

“Maybe it’s just that you have a natural smell, you know what I’m saying?”

“Well, thank you,” she said vaguely.

“I mean,” said Barth, “it’s a sexy thing, to have a good natural odor.”

“We are,” said Inez, “close to the restaurant?”

“It’s just hard to stay smelling nice in the summer in Manhattan, you know what I mean? Everyone sweats so much.”

Were he to continue to speak about smells, she might think him very dull and maybe even bit of a creepster. Which was not the way to conduct a belligeroid scam or, for that matter, any kind of scam. The corner of Prince and MacDougal. They were getting close to Provence. The others were already inside. The night was coming on fast.

V

Barth held the door of Provence for Inez and watched her laudable ass enter the restaurant. In Provence it was hot because the greedy Bistro French refused to provide air-conditioning at effective levels. It was like their habit of putting only one cube of ice into a drink that thrived on ice, stoli avec tonique, though if one really thought about it, the latter was an example more of generosity than flintiness, because didn't stoli tonique cost the Bistro French more than would the extra ice cubes that would have displaced the stoli tonique in an American drink? Wiggler. Fuck the French, thought Barth as he began to sweat. Platoons of heads quickly separated him from the others: Inez next to Haber, laughing at something Albert was saying, Griffin sidling up to Patrice. There's no way, thought Barth, that I'll pay for everything just so Inez can get really wet for Albert or Haber. But the thought immediately struck him as being less than worthy and he called over Michael the bartender and extended his platinum. Wealth is the pillow: share the pillow.

"Everything's on my tab," he said.

Imagining falsely that he needed a civilizing interstice between drink drinks, Barth ordered for himself the counter-intuitive surprise of a red wine and thought about how a sugarcube-size piece of neutron star weighs more than a hundred million tons. He took the glass from the trembly pathos hand of Michael the bartender, a severe alcoholic and

the sole American who worked at Provence. If you look through the Hubble Space Telescope, you can see objects that are ten billion light years distant, which means that you're looking at those objects as they were ten billion years ago. And if you look into the Hubble Space Telescope of Barth's mind, you can see the juicy ass of Inez winking down at you from way up over there in the Crab Nebula. Barth sipped the red housewine. It was awful. And since cosmology didn't make things matter less, he called in firm tones for a rocks drink.

A hugely yellow-headed Bistro French, a sunflower with halitosis, appeared.

"Bonjour, hombre!"

"Oui," said Barth.

"And ware is the belle chinoise of your friend, eh campadre?"

"Excuse me?"

"La belle chinoise of Al-bare. Ware!"

The Bistro French was referring to Joanne, Albert's love girlfriend, now gone.

"Tonight's a little mediterranean," Barth said. Though his eyesight was perfect, this Bistro French squinted downbar at Patrice and Inez, as if he were a very tan and doomed legionnaire and they were the first Viet Cong to come out of the trees into the hot light at Dien Bien Phu.

"Al-bare has good taste, no?"

Barth shrugged.

"So, amigo, you want a table?"

"Yes," said Barth. "In smoking, please."

No smoking table was to be had for another half hour. But a drinking wait was no disaster. In fact, it was a treat to be hoped for. Barth decided to enjoy the drinking wait apart from the others. He would stay where he was at the end of the bar, his man's drink, his ashtray, and his knuckles at rest against the huge pewter vase, cool to the touch. He had achieved a bar stance. Now, as Barth saw himself in the moderately flattering mirror of Provence's backbar, the top of his head and one eye obscured by flowers, he began to ask himself those pleasur-

able alone-time drinking-wait questions which demonstrate love for the world of life and the small things, such as: why splurge on great sprays of flowers and nothing on AC, and how much does Michael make in tips? He hoped Michael did well, because Michael was all right. Also: who would help Hundley take the Mets to the playoffs? And do we agree that two plus two is four? Is two plus two equals four a discovery, like the source of the Nile, or an invention, like the zipper? If it was an agreement, how and when did we come to a consensus? And if it was an invention, did we somehow get along without it before, like no lights at night before Edison? The same question could well be asked about gravity or the endlessness of pi. Barth was gripped by the warmth of his drinking-wait drink. He borrowed a pen from Michael and wrote on a cocktail napkin: "2 + 2: invention or discovery." "Huh-huh," laughed Barth to himself. He folded the napkin into a little square and put it in the breast pocket of his shirt.

Griffin, now riding a full sidle with Patrice, spied Barth's looking over and raised his brown drink. "Ha-ha!" Griffin called. Barth nodded and gave what he hoped appeared to be a smile of indulgence. He then turned away and decided to observe details about people around him. But what good did it do to note the names on the dainty packages carried by that storklike Armanied gay with a face set in hatred and sheer acquisitiveness fussing through the front door? Better to look back at the mirror and watch the two professional New York blonde female whites sitting next to him. They were drinking salted, straight-up margaritas. They were wearing stuff. One was saying:

"Cappuccino is sexy, the city is sexy, good pasta is sexy. My summer assistant is really sexy. He's a beautiful Latino boy. I could eat that boy alive. And why not, right? But I know the rules. Hel-lo, re-ality check. I do not play in the workplace. It's like, I'm thirty-one years old, I'm an associate producer, okay, and I busted my butt to get here. I'm not going to throw it all away just to play with some beautiful boy. But you know I like to play, and I swear to God he's got the cutest butt. You just want to look at that butt all day. Guys talk about my butt, why

can't I talk about a beautiful boy's butt? And he is so shy. It's adorable. He's got that hot Latino way of moving his butt when he walks? You just know he'd be a seriously fucking fuck in bed. With that butt. I haven't come in, like, forever. The last guy I dated who made me cum was a total asshole. You remember El Jerko. Emotionally abusive, mind games, totally unsupportive, like, Mr. Dysfunctional. But, I'm sorry, he really made me cumm. I mean, I want a guy to be there for me and give me my space because I'm really at a point in my career right now where I need space and support, but I have needs, and one of those needs is to culm. Why can't guys understand that? I mean, if I'm going to be with you, you're going to have to make me coulml, okay? And I'm a psycho-bitch from hell for saying that? Whatever, I don't think so. Guys just can't deal."

"You go girl."

"But work is work and play is play. And you know I like to play. If I hooked up tonight with a beautiful Latino boy, I would play with that beautiful boy. And sometimes you want to play with a man, and sometimes you want to play with a beautiful boy, you know what I mean? It doesn't have to be a Latino boy, it could be an Afro-American boy or a preppy boy. Either way, I'm going to want to coulml. Sometimes you just want a penis to make you cwlm, you know? And I shouldn't be afraid to say that. Do you want to do another margarita? Tonight's a school night, but whatever. Shit, I have to be in the studio at seven tomorrow morning, plus I'm going to need an extra step class to work these off. That means yours truly is up at five."

"You go girl."

"The gym is business. I mean, work is work, okay, but the gym is business. I see a lot of really cute guys at my gym, and it'd be very easy to play at the gym, but I am a serious bitch when it comes to my workout, so even if you're a cute guy, you're going to want to stay away from me at the gym. I mean hel-lo, I'm there to bust my butt, not to play. The last guy I dated didn't even go to the gym. That was a problem. Not that he was fat or anything. He actually had a pretty

nice bod. It was just that he had, like, zero motivation? I mean, I wondered how he could live with himself, never going. Even just for cardio. Michael makes the awesomest margaritas. You remember, this was the guy from the network? So with him there was the whole not-going-to-the-gym thing, plus he was going nowhere at the network. I'm talking two major turn-offs. Needless to say, he couldn't make me koulm. At first, I didn't say anything, because I guess I just didn't want to hurt his feelings because he was so fucking sensitive. But one night I was finally like, 'Doesn't it bother you that I don't come?' And he goes, 'I always thought you did.' And I'm like, 'Hel-lo, did it ever occur to you to ask?' And he was like, 'Well, I thought that would be unromantic.' And I'm like, 'Excuse me, but you're not serious?' And I'm thinking, look, not on my time. I mean, if you're not part of my solution, you're part of my problem, okay, so the next day he was history. And I was like, do not call me at work, stay out of my voicemail, do not send me flowers, get on with your life. He was not too psyched. For awhile, I was worried he was going to become a serious stalker. I can be a really giving person, but if I'm going to go down on you, you are definitely going to go down on me, okay? The year is not 1950, and I am not my fucking mother."

"You go girl."

"What's the craziest place you ever did it? The one time El Jerko and I went away together—the vacation from hell?—we did it in the bathroom of the airplane. He was like, let's join the Mile High Club. I came at twenty thousand feet. Twice. He was such a fucking asshole, but sometimes I really miss him? Did you ever do it in a really weird place? Sometimes I don't know why I stayed in such a destructive relationship. I know, I know: I was thinking with my pussy, and that's totally stupid. I mean, it's great when you're twenty-one, but now it's like, get a life. Been there, done that. It's such fucking bullshit. I mean, so sue me, I want what I want, you know? I want respect in the workplace. And when it's playtime, I'm going to play. I can be office bitch goddess and I can be miss let's party but there is a line and I want the line to be re-

spected. If I get pissed off at one of the geeks from accounting, I don't want him to think I'm having my fucking period. I mean, I know he's not going to say it, but I don't want him to even think it, okay? Like, don't even think that shit. Do you have any cigarettes left?"

"You go, girl."

"I know I said I quit but I can absolutely not do another margarita without a cigarette. Shit, we're out. I hate bumming. Anyway, we are like so late already, we might as well just get out of here. Girl, let's do this thing."

He reflected that were he to have acted at the first hint of her requiring something—anything—he should have prolonged their stay. And indeed he might have, and with ease, for hadn't she needed something rather less than an Alp? In fine, hadn't he even now at his very near disposal a box of no less than seventeen of her "requirements", as it were, of which merely one, and at most two, would have sufficed to hold them fast? But did one so very much want to hold them fast? Oh, they had looked charming enough, but he had so deucedly chanced to hear, and on the spot he had withheld. Now they had quite gone and in addition to the pleasure he felt at their having removed themselves, which was that simple pleasure derived from the sudden cessation of a pain, he was able to marvel at just how easily the thing had been done—at how, really, it was simply a matter of hanging fire for mere moments—when the expectation had surely been, in the immediate aftermath, to have felt rather "put out", indeed even somewhat distraught, by the effort of resisting what was the most preponderant of his natural inclinations. Perhaps it were better to withhold more often.

The table was ready, the drinking wait over. They were led to a round sixtop by the window in the front room of Provence. Griffin, his eye ablaze with the passions of brown drinks, pulled out the chair for Patrice. "Ha-ha!" he said, and stepped immediately in beside her to occupy what was the table's best seat, dark MacDougal Street behind him, the whole of Provence before him.

"He who seems most kingly is king," said Griffin.

“Griffin’s such a gentleman,” said Albert as he lowered into the chair on the other side of Patrice. Haber hastily sat next to Albert, Inez next to Haber, and Barth for a moment was the last person standing before he took the remaining empty seat, between Griffin and Inez. It was better to be there than, say, in a politeness seat between Haber and Patrice. But was it really better to be next to Griffin, who could at any instant flower into full belligeroidism? Barth frowned as Griffin took the winelist from the waiter.

“Maybe I should look at the wines,” Barth said.

“Trust me, guy. I’ll select.”

“You know shit about wine.”

“Who seems most kingly is king.”

“The baby,” said Albert, “and his bottle.”

“Sir,” called Griffin to the waiter. “We’ll have the Meursault from the reserve section. And flat water for the table. Sir.”

“Sweet,” said Albert.

Barth shook his head at the presumptions of Griffin. He decided to fuck the wine and run his dinner with drinks. These were brought over from the bar, and when the waiter set down glasses for glass-Evian and wine, bread basket, menus and butter crock, and an additional Albert-ordered round of non-wine drinks with some of the earlier generation of glasses still alive, the table started to become beautiful.

“Well, it is quite extravagant,” said Inez.

“Hardly,” said Griffin.

“But you must not be doing this all the time, no?”

“Actually, yes. As often as possible.”

“But surely it is too expensive for all the time?”

“Actually,” said Griffin, slowly patting Barth’s shoulder, “there are those for whom the expense is utterly trivial, ha-ha.”

“The golden cookie jar,” Albert said.

“But surely,” Inez continued, “there is not so much pleasure when it is so often?”

“It really isn’t that often,” said Barth.

“And what the fuck difference would it make,” said Griffin, “if it was?”

Albert leaned back and shook his head. The blond hairs at the corners of his mouth caught the evening lighting of Provence.

“Guy, you have to understand that concepts of discretionary spending and leisure are completely different among the youth of Western Europe.”

“Holy shit,” said Griffin.

“In Western Europe, young people who are attractive, creative, ambitious and affluent don’t use service environments for their gatherings. Gatherings take place at the beach, or in the house of a certain kind of almost-hot but not really hot girl who everyone thinks is very cool and who’s friends with lots of legitimately hot girls. At least four. Or there might be a secondary service environment like a certain kind of interesting outdoor café that a kid like you, Griffin, would stupidly think of as a shitty place. In New York, there are very few gatherings of elite young people that take place outside of service environments. Probably less than five hundred and fifty a year. A certain type of New York kid is completely reliant on the service environment gathering for the development of his social skill set. And that’s exactly why America dominates the global economy.”

“Holy fucking shit.”

“The typical American CEO has been raised in service environments, like restaurants, where you’re constantly dealing with questions of capital, unlike the beach, where there’s no activity that requires an understanding or use of capital. This allows the American youth to develop respect for capital and it makes him learn about the uses of capital and access to capital. It also makes him sexually frustrated, first, because sex is less readily available in the service environment gathering and, second, because constant exposure to service environments is likely to make him pale and out of shape and this prevents him from getting laid, at least until he acquires enough capital to get seriously laid. The resulting sexual frustration makes him more aggressive, less relaxed and

even a little cheesier than a European CEO, all of which leads to much greater success in business.”

“That’s a sweet theory, Bert,” said Haber.

“It’s true,” said Albert as he began efficiently to butter a roll.

“Goofball,” said Griffin.

“But it is true,” said Inez to Griffin with a frown. “Do you not think there is too much concentration here on the money and what you buy, all this, the menus, the wine? Does the life then not become, how you say, so shallow?”

Rather than pursue what promised to be an incredibly desultory conversation with a serious-voiced socialista, Griffin opted to turn to Patrice and ask, “Do you like my jacket?”

“Look,” said Barth, sneaking a look at the bared crossed thighs of Inez, “why is having an expensive bottle of wine any more or less shallow than a cheap one?”

“I agree,” said Haber.

“Girls love this jacket,” Griffin said softly to Patrice.

“But you say you are doing this always,” said Inez with the sort of serious squint she might have used in a Barcelona café, speaking about the cruelty of a cinemataxta, “and I understand that to be shallow, no?”

“It’s the kind of leather jacket,” said Albert to Patrice, “that’s worn by a lot of gay men in New York. Gays a lot like Griffin.”

Griffin smiled tolerantly, his eye not quite dry but neither was it gleaming.

“You’ll be all right, Albert, don’t worry.”

Patrice giggled into her wineglass.

“I’m already feeling the need for a little convalescence,” said Albert, his mouth full of wine and bread.

“Convalescing from what?” asked Inez.

“You need to convalesce.”

“Our lives are exhausting,” said Griffin. “To choose yet another appetizer, to have to decide the right next place you go, is relentlessly exhausting and requires heroism. We are heroic.”

“Mind, stoke and draw,” said Barth.

“What?” asked Inez.

“Mind, stoke and draw are the three tasks when you’re convalescing in the black mansion,” Barth said easily.

“It is so strange to imagine you need recuperation from being in nice restaurants,” said Inez.

“You’re walking on Georigica Beach in East Hampton with your friends,” said Albert, “and you see a huge black mansion that would be ideal for a year of convalescence. So you shut yourself inside the mansion for a hard-minded convalescence. You don’t speak, you don’t have any access to capital or media, and you wear elite housedresses of the thinnest gray material. You convalesce.”

“You have done this?” asked Inez.

“There are,” Albert continued, “three tasks: mind, stoke and draw. Each friend has one job. The stoker maintains the enormous fire of the huge house. He stokes naked, the underhairs of his balls lightly touching the stone floor. It’s the only time you don’t wear housedress. Stoking has the most prestige. The one who draws pulls down the shades of the house to make it sleep-conducive and also draws the waters for the baths of convalescence. The one who minds just minds, guy. He minds the provision of the house, like porridges. He minds the rooms and corridors and if anyone is sick enough to knock on the door of the house, he minds the knock. He doesn’t open the door, he just minds the disturbance of the knock. And you constantly cry out mind, stoke or draw in response to somebody else crying out mind, stoke or draw. Mind, stoke, draw.”

“Actually,” said Griffin, “that’s precisely the kind of humor invention that precedes an amazing night.”

“I think a night can be amazing whenever you want it to be,” said Inez.

“But a real amazing night is a very different thing,” said Barth. “An amazing night—”

“An amazing night,” interrupted Griffin, “is when you’re with your

friends and some non-love girls out in a fine East Hampton beach house in the middle of a snowstorm and you've got drinks and you're running a veal stew and there's a presidential assassination attempt, so your hot winter fatty runs up to you wearing a white bathrobe and says, 'the president's been shot, we saw it on TV, oh boy it's cold outside,' and a little later you look over at Albert and he howls 'mind' and you answer 'stoke' and I say 'draw', because the day-reference to the afternoon's humor invention in the night's midst of love sluts and Stoli is the sweetest of references."

Then the waiter was upon them and it was time to order.

Griffin: "Sir. I will begin with the watercress soup. And for my middle course, the aged goat-cheese terrine. And to follow—the rabbit. And we'll have another bottle of Meursault. Sir."

Inez, quietly: "I will have just a simple large insalada, please. With no tomatoes."

Patrice: "For me, the pâté of the country, then the bistecca, very how you say rare."

"Guy, I'm pretty hungry," said Albert. "I'm ripe for a little double entrée dinner. For my appetizer main course, I would like the yellowfin tuna entrée. Then, for my actual main course, I'll have the steak frites, medium rare."

Haber: "That's awesome, Bert. I'll have the exact same thing."

The waiter turned to Barth.

"I don't think I'm going to order anything. I'll just have another man's drink."

"What the fuck's the matter with you?" said Griffin. "Eat something."

"I am eating something. I'm eating bread."

"You are not hungry?" asked Inez.

"It's just better this way," Barth replied.

"Why he does not eat?" asked Patrice in wonderment, as if she were with her parents at the zoo.

"Because he's a weird kid," said Griffin.

"I'll order something if Inez has more than a salad," Barth said. He'd

wanted it to sound flirtatious, but instead it sounded loud and strange.

“Why?” Inez asked.

“Because you should enjoy a dinner,” said Barth.

“Beware of accepting bribes, ha-ha,” said Griffin.

“I do not think of a dinner as a bribe,” Inez answered stiffly.

“Of course, it’s a bribe,” said Albert. “Anything that one person does for another is a certain kind of bribe. There’s nothing bad about that.”

“I could easily bribe Patrice with my very beautiful black leather jacket,” said Griffin to Patrice in the voice of the most highly geared teaser. “You want to wear my jacket, don’t you?”

“And what are you receiving in return for this bribe, as you say?” Inez asked Griffin.

“Actually, we’re not the sort of men you have to worry about trying to get things from you. In fact, we’re quite possibly the safest men in the city.”

“What?” Patrice asked.

“Let’s just say that’s a good thing, because at any given moment, if you’re a young, pretty girl, there’s someone watching you. There’s always someone watching, waiting for someone to leave the normal world and enter another.”

“Okay,” said Patrice, “I will wear the jacket.”

Griffin stood to make the transfer of his leather—the highpoint in the middlegame of any belligeroid scam.

“Whatever,” said Albert. “Gays like Griffin always want women to wear their leather jackets.”

“Who is watching?” asked Inez.

“There’s always someone watching, waiting to see someone leave the normal world and enter another,” Griffin slowly repeated.

“But that is being true of any city,” she said. “Madrid, Roma, Zurich . . .”

“Is it a matter,” asked Barth, “of waiting for someone to leave the normal world or taking someone from the normal world? By non-normal world, you mean a bad world, right?”

“Look at Barth,” Griffin said happily. “Hoarding and loving my leaving the normal world idea.”

Nothing fascinated Barth more than a proposition about the deep, dark and sinister. Bad things being done to someone in a bad place in the middle of the day. The bright steel door slams on the normal world with terrifying speed.

“Is someone watching us now?” asked Patrice.

“You’re beautiful young women of the Mediterranean,” said Albert. “Of course people are watching you.”

“Guy, that’s not what she means. She means, is there someone in Provence watching to see if she’s susceptible to leaving or being taken from the normal world.”

Patrice shivered and looked genuinely disconcerted.

“That is a frightening idea. And what happens to you when you are taken?”

“It’s probably not so good to talk about that,” Griffin said simply.

“How are you knowing about this?” Inez said.

“Because he goes to the peeps and he’s read a few weird library books,” announced Albert. “Do you know what the peeps are, Patrice? Griffin, tell everyone about the peeps.”

Griffin, immune to the strange and bad, simply smiled. Soon, thought Barth, we’ll be talking about what actually goes on in the dreary, contentless, evil, non-normal world, like the filmed cutting of an eleven-year-old Haitian girl in the curtained parlor of a house in Queens.

“Just remember,” said Griffin with a wink as the appetizers arrived, “there’s always someone watching. Sir, another bottle of Meursault. Sir.”

VI

In the cool blue bathroom of Provence, Barth stuck two fingers in his mouth and vomited. Rarely did he feel more optimistic about the upcoming hours than after emptying his guts into the toilet of a favored restaurant. A little trembly, he smiled at the passable mirror, rinsed his mouth and dried himself with the shitty brown paper towels. Outside the bathroom, Inez was waiting. She stared at the scrubbed corners and underbags of his eyes.

“Are giu a sad?”

“No, just allergies.”

She shrugged, the shrug of frank doubt.

“I am sorry that giu are so sad,” she said as she passed him in the narrow space. I’m not sad, thought Barth, why would she want to tell me I was? She wants me to be sad. Her frocked tits had grazed him, but because the secret caesura of vomiting had killed his nerves, he felt only default lust.

Outside Provence it remained hot. The idea that night makes it cooler was a canard.

“Guy,” Albert said to everyone, “let’s get to that party. Where’d Estella go?”

“*I-nez*,” said Patrice.

“*I-nez*,” said Griffin, stamping his foot and giving her the challeng-

ing smile that was characteristic of a belligeroid scam's well-executed middlegame. Patrice giggled.

"You stop it," she said and ran off to do girl pirouettes around the corner streetlamp.

"Ha-ha."

"Whatever," said Albert. "Here comes the other one. Let's get out of here."

"Sounds good to me, Bert," said Haber.

"The come of my buzz," Albert said savoringly, "is starting to drip from the pussy of my mind."

"You're insane, Bert."

Albert's buzz, thought Barth, was in no danger of dripping from his mind's pussy. It appeared, in fact, that the nights of Albert and Griffin were evolving rapidly while his had suddenly stopped, as if these moments were the crucial millennia following the end of the Pleistocene Era, with his friends starting to discover metals and harvest maize in the plains and forests while he remained an aborigine, in the desert, with termites. Better to concentrate on the simple pleasure of feeling clean after vomiting. Patrice had grown still under the streetlamp and was listening with interest to things that Griffin was whispering into her ear.

Next to Barth, a short business kid was mouthbreathing and pissing at the trunk of the tree that grew outside Provence. American urine splashed the roots and came within an inch of Barth's toe. Flanking the business kid were larger ones, each with lots of neck beef, four or five drunk meats. They hoarded the Spanish girls—a level of girl from which they were barred, Barth believed, even Inez.

"Making things grow," Barth observed pleasantly, a genuine observation. One enjoys the human-ness of a weightless remark offered to a stranger under the seasonal constellation, Orion.

The short kid finished pissing, zipped himself, said something to his friends, turned back to Barth and asked:

"Are you some kind of faggot?"

“What?”

The kid gestured to his meats.

“This guy,” he explained, “was trying to look at my dick.”

“Holy shit,” said Barth, looking down, shaking his head, smiling a little sadly.

The largest of the business kids stepped forward and grabbed a sleeve of Barth’s sweet rust-colored Irish linen shirt, his favorite linen shirt and the second-favorite of his summer shirts.

“Are you a faggot?”

This business kid wore a flapping suit jacket and an untucked flapping dress shirt and an untied tie. The face was flushed and straining with gross belligerence and a perplexity about all things.

“I said, are you a faggot?” he asked in a breaking voice. He appeared on the verge of weeping.

Griffin, Albert, and Haber had come over. The girls remained in the rear, fascinated and excited.

“Gentlemen,” Albert said evenly.

Albert’s outfit, particularly his all-the-way-pulled-up black socks and sandals, caused snickering among the meats.

“They’re all faggots,” said the brutal head that held Barth.

“You’re acting like hooligans,” said Albert. “Just let go of Barth.”

“That’s right,” Haber said nervously.

The short one (the Goebbels, thought Barth, the Goebbels) had taken from his pocket a kind of club, a white beertap handle.

“What you’re going to do,” he said slowly, “is walk to the end of the block and then walk back. You’re going to walk to the end and then back, because we don’t share our block with faggots.”

Albert laughed, the delighted laugh of real surprise at an insane suggestion.

“Guy, you’re being incredibly unproductive with your leisure time,” said Albert. “I mean, really, what’s the matter with you?”

The short one turned and mugged for his meats.

“I don’t think these fags are cooperating, what do you think?”

The meat holding Barth released him and stepped toward Albert.

“You have a problem?” he said, breathing rapidly, as tiny tears began to run down his hogcheeks.

“Guy, this is New York City,” Albert said in an explaining voice. “It’s not about that. It’s not a matter of asking someone if they have a problem.”

“Walk to the end of the block,” said the short one, tapping his palm with his weapon, “and then maybe, just maybe, we’ll let you walk back.”

Barth kept his eyes on the Goebbels. He imagined being cracked on the temple and freaked for life, fully chaired and unable because of lobe lesions to experience the feeling of Reluctance or perceive any shade of green. That’s when your real friends wheel you out to a sunny glade and give you the shotgun.

“You better start walking.”

“Whatever,” said Albert in disgust. “You’re absurd.”

“Faggot!” screamed the large meat, then swung at Albert and missed. With exactly the same degree of efficiency he employed in the making of grilled chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise, Albert hit the business kid twice in the face, two short blows delivered with the right fist. He fell at once, like a wriggler.

“Holy shit,” yelled Griffin, crazily waving a canister of mace. But the short meat and the kibbitzing meat behind him made no motion to pursue a brawl. They were completely demoralized, like the Arab States in 1967 after seeing the Egypt of their largest meat felled in the six days of two punches by the Israel of Albert, thought Barth. They helped their buddy up and left. From far down the block, one of them turned and yelled, “Faggots!” but that was all.

“Holy shit,” said Griffin. “Holy fucking shit.”

“Wow, Bert, that was really awesome,” said Haber—a little worshipfully, thought Barth.

Patrice was staring at Albert.

“Why,” asked Inez, “was there fighting?”

“What do you mean why was there fighting?” said Griffin, exhila-

rated. “Those fucking kids were incredibly sexually enraged by their meaningless night and then they see ungettable girls with guys like us. Amazing, strange guys so deeply essenced in our night. The whole arrangement’s violently intolerable to roving meat like that. Particularly me. Of course, I’m instantly noted and hated.”

Albert shook his head.

“Guy, what you have to understand about kids like that is that they’re the lowest level of a certain kind of retail broker. The market’s really shitty right now, they’ve gotten completely out of shape, and they have no real capital or access to capital. They don’t have necessary levels of disposable income and they run out of city pretty quickly. That’s what makes them violent.”

Patrice continued to stare at Albert.

“Did you see me take out my mace?” said Griffin.

Never in his adult life had Barth inflicted or endured face-hits. He calculated that he would have paid up to four hundred dollars to have been the one to punch out the large meat.

“I don’t like fighting,” Inez lied. “Let’s go away from this place.”

She hugged herself and affected shivering, as if she had just toured Belsen.

“Look,” said Griffin, “when you’re dealing with kids like that—holy shit.”

Patrice had taken Albert’s arm.

“What’s the matter?” asked Albert.

“Ha-ha,” said Griffin as he looked at the arm, bitterly, but not too bitterly, but bitterly enough. He returned the mace to his backpack, which also contained his walkman, John Leslie porn, saline solution, and *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, though that wasn’t all.

“Are we not going to a fiesta?” asked Patrice.

They started west, the girls skipping in front, all happy and excited with themselves.

“The sickest cockblock,” said Griffin, watching the asses. “The fight cockblock.”

“Guy, what are you talking about?”

“I give you credit, Albert. Ha-ha. Maybe now I’ll just have to deal with the other one.”

“Whatever,” said Barth, lighting a cigarette.

“Or maybe I’ll just do Barth a favor and take myself out. Ha-ha.”

Barth shook his head and began to smoke what he suddenly believed to be the fifty thousandth cigarette of his life.

“Guy, if you tell me you’re into her, I’ll step aside. But you have to say it.”

“Go to hell,” said Barth lovelessly.

“Guy,” said Griffin in the cautioning voice, “don’t be a jackass. I mean if you’re into that girl, then all you have to do is ask me to take myself out.”

“I’m not asking anything.”

“Barth, think carefully. If you ask me, I’ll take myself out.”

“The bleating of the Griffin lamb,” said Barth.

“Ask me nicely,” said Griffin, “and I’ll take myself out.”

“I don’t need to ask you anything. There’s nothing that could possibly happen now or in the future that could make me ask you.”

“You were warned,” said Griffin.

They stopped at the corner of lonely underlit Varick Street, now at 10:15 on a Sunday night resembling the widest boulevard of a medium-sized yokel town that had been taken by plague. A light rain began to fall.

“Where are we going?” Barth asked.

“What about the roof party, Bert?” asked Haber dutifully.

“Sí, a fiesta,” Patrice said.

“Forget the fiesta,” said Albert. “Let’s go to Tabac.”

“Guy,” said Griffin, “thank fucking god you’re not insisting on that meaningless party of funkid losers and mediocre pussy. It’s the smartest thing you’ve said in a year.”

Barth might have protested. Sometimes, when it seemed like the friends were making decisions without consulting him, he decided to

protest, even if he happened to support the plan. You can't let the ravening friends always take advantage of your good nature and your propensity for goodwill and silence. But now he wanted a place place, not a party where strangers and outsiders would bring about questions. What do you do? What do you do each day?

They hailed two taxis: Albert uncontested and sexually alone with Patrice in the first; Barth, Griffin, Haber, and Inez in the other. When Griffin immediately followed Inez into the backseat, Barth chose to ride shotgun because now the backseat held nothing but Griffin's chattering head of taunts, ha-ha's and jealousy teasers. He settled into the seat and noted the grimness of the driver. Nothing to be had from that guy and nothing to give him.

Better to imagine the phantazy of going back in a time machine to traumatize Nabokov, knowing that mowing Nabokov's lawn was the only way to traumatize him. That's right: you'd have to get with Vera. And after you finished mowing his lawn, you'd drink all of little Dmitri's orange juice. I guess this is one day that baby's not getting all the fresh-squeezed oj he can drink, right? Or when Nabokov comes home early from tutoring or giving one of his arrogant boxing lessons, you're mowing his lawn on the bed of the flat where he's writing *The Gift*, and he's completely traumatized and you say: Now I guess you'll have to find someone else to dedicate all your books to, right? *Right?*

The cab crossed Houston Street and a Griffin song came on the radio: "Weight of the World."

"Sweet, a little obscure Neil Young," Griffin said rigorously. "This is an amazing song."

There was no traffic up Lafayette, and the song wasn't even halfway done by the time the cab turned onto Tenth Street and came to a stop in front of incredibly crowded Café Tabac. The french doors were thrown open to the building rain, the front tables were packed with aggressive New York nightheads and Barth felt a strong wash of the old nervousness.

"The song's not over," said Griffin from the backseat, a slight brown

drink's break in his voice. "This is a song you hear out. Nobody leaves."

When the driver saw that no one was getting out, he started talking to himself.

"I dropped the weight of the world," sang Griffin.

The driver turned to give everyone the weary and accusing eye of the subcontinent.

"Blease bay and go."

"Guy, just keep the meter running."

"Come the fuck on," said the driver. "This is a bullshit."

"Barth, give the guy ten bucks."

There was nothing in the air to suggest, by the common measure, that his friend's proposal was anything but "offhand"; there was everything in Barth's experience to indicate otherwise. When, on similar occasions, he chanced to be alone with Griffin, he was quite cheerfully incapable of refusing the request. He had, after all, many worlds of "tens" to give, and he felt—as one, properly, so often does—that the chief consideration of such a transaction was that they be parted with in the spirit of a happy, even a thoughtless, capitulation—and, if not in that style, then not at all. That they were so plainly now not by themselves was, as a mere circumstance, perhaps insufficient to dash that spirit, yet there had been—oh, it could not be denied!—a diminishment. For had he not detected in his friend's voice the sharper, public note—the lower note, indeed—that convinced him that it was not unreasonable to assume that the question of whether he should give over the "ten" had taken on depths?

"I dropped the weight of the world."

"Blease bay and go."

Two truths warred in the mind of Barth, one dominant, one an underdog. The dominant truth: paying the driver on Griffin's command was the will-less act of a lackey, and there'd be nothing from Inez but Galician scorn if she watched him hand over money so that they could all sit in a parked taxi, indulging the whim of Griffin. The underdog: paying the driver was a cool and unconventional, i. e. life-giving, wrig-

gler; it didn't hurt Barth, it helped his friend, and it was a happiness wriggler that might be recalled, later in the night or even later in life, as a touchstone wriggler of spirited youth.

Before Barth could decide, the driver switched off the radio.

"Okay, now you are out of this taxi, my friend! Now you are out!"

"That's insane," said Griffin.

"Let's just go," said Barth, relieved, paying the fare, overtipping.

"I wonder," said Inez on the sidewalk, "where is Patrithia and your friend? They left before us and still they are not arrived."

"Are you worried about your friend?" asked Griffin in the teaser voice as he expertly sidled and put his arm around her shoulders, a successful blitz move in the competition scam. Barth fancied that nightheads of Tabac were watching and judging him as he stood in the orangey rain light.

"Should we go in?" asked Haber.

"Why don't you two go," said Griffin. "Inez and I will wait out here. In the rain. Ha-ha."

"I'll wait with you," Barth said immediately.

Griffin emitted a laugh of perfectly pitched minor condescension.

"You're an intense kid, Barth."

"Why would you say that? It has nothing to do with being intense. Maybe I just feel like waiting outdoors instead of in a room. The rain feels good."

"Guy, you know why you want to wait here. You should have asked me to take myself out, but you didn't ask me to take myself out, and you didn't do the right thing and pay the driver. You should always listen to Griffin. You reap what you sow, guy."

"Fuck you," said Barth with real anger. It seemed then that some rebellion was called for. The option that occurred most readily was: no more money for Griffin for the remainder of the night. He thought this over with a small, sour thrill. He imagined making an announcement of no more cash for Griffin in front of the others, and how strange and bad this would make everyone feel, including himself; but then let

it come down, thought Barth. It looks like rain tonight, says Banquo. Then let it come down, says the first stabber. No more money for anyone and maybe even no more speaking with anyone ever again. He would conduct an independent life in remote places. But immediately he was ashamed and his face got long; no, the money was not for venal wieldings and withholdings. It belonged to everyone, they'd found it together one day in the rain, in an enormous gray bag, half-buried in the dunes outside the mansion of convalescence.

A cab pulled up. Out of it came Patrice and Albert, strictly expressionless. Had they done anything in the cab? Certainly they'd kissed, perhaps more. Being fellated in a Bovarianly re-directed taxi by a hot non-professional you'd known for less than two hundred minutes, after winning a physical fight in which you had held the moral highground. Doing what's right, thought Barth, doing what's right.

"What's up?" said Albert with mindless ease and goodwill.

"Look at this fucking place," said Griffin, without irony, almost with respect.

Albert narrowed his eyes at the paradise and slowly nodded.

"Sweet," he said slowly, really meaning it.

Barth watched everyone go into Tabac. Haber and the girls entered through the front door, like anyone else from the tribe of humans; Albert and Griffin stepped right up from the street and moved as conspicuously as possible between the closely set tables, like tribeless ones. Barth opted to give himself two minutes of alone-time smoking in the rain, with the possible benefits of rain ions. It was necessary to wait. Let the friends have their brazenness entrance. Why should he follow them, just to dole out apology smiles to the people he jostled and worry about judgments against him? And why should he immediately go in after Haber, thereby admitting that he was incapable of a brazenness entrance, and by implication incapable of so much else in the world of youthful primacy and pleasures? He lit his Marlboro with great skill against the weather. Rain began to darken the shoulders of his sweet linen, and he wondered if it was absurd to think that the manner in

which a young man chose to enter a restaurant might betray a failure of nerve.

Barth was standing in the hot midships of Tabac, his legs shoulderwidth apart and his back braced against all the bodies of heads that would not stop knocking into his knapsack. He stood behind Albert, who, in turn, stood behind and inappropriately close to two girls sharing a plate of steak tartare at the bar. Albert stared at the dish, entranced by the highly seasoned raw beef.

“That’s a sweet plate of beef you’re running,” yelled Albert.

“Excuse me?” one of them screamed. The endproduct of Tabac’s noise comprised the loudest of european music with ambient laughter flarings—about seventy percent from women, most of the rest of it gay—and the breakage of glassware by incompetent and slightly less than clean waitstaff. Severe heads bobbed to this endproduct of noise in Tabac; it seemed that the noise was feeding the heads and that the bobbing showed that the heads were incubating properly. Heads were sown throughout the place like dragons’ teeth by the music of Tabac. A carthage of heads, thought Barth, and then he giggled to himself: “Heh, heh.” He was drinking a stoli rocks, wedge of lime, bumps of glass on the bottom of the glass. The stoli was from the freezer, not the shelf, therefore syrupy stoli, the best.

“I was just noticing that sweet tartare you’ve got going,” Albert shouted. “Could I get a little taste of that?”

Without hesitation, without even looking at her friend for oh-my-gawd giggles, one of the girls handed Albert a forkful of tartare. One wore black tights and the other had bare theighfleisch, and that was enough, that was enough.

“It’s a fairly high quality beef,” Albert said after a moment’s chewing, “but a little too lean.”

“Want some more?” asked the other girl in the voice of lewdness and promise.

Barth nudged forward, rather clumsily, but forward all the same.

"I'll try some," he said. Amiably but chargelessly, the girl handed him a beef-tipped fork. Barth ate the schmear and handed back the fork. No fingers touched. There was no using the prop of beef to get with them; but wasn't it the role of objects to restore silence? Having thought of a Beckett quote, Barth stood a little straighter and shook off the first patchy inklings of being at sea with himself.

"That would be perfect beef for beefpacking," said Albert.

"For what?" said one girl.

"For packing the head in beef," shouted Albert.

"Excuse me?"

"For a beefhead."

"Albert," said Barth.

"The concept of the beefhead is one of the sweetest concepts," Albert told the girls, leaning in between them. They laughed—a little nervously, thought Barth.

"The concept is that you get together with your friends on a hot summer day and you get a hotel room in a certain kind of old hotel where the rooms are large and they don't have A/C."

The girls began to giggle meaningfully but Albert shook his head with impatience.

"No, it's nothing like that. It's not that kind of a thing. Anyway, you go to an old kind of hotel room. Like the Chelsea Hotel, right Barth?"

"Right," said Barth cautiously. Was Albert really going to speak to them about beefpacking?

"So what you do, basically, is bring about thirteen pounds of eighty to eighty-five percent lean pure ground beef as well as a plastic squeeze bottle of medium quality olive oil and a brush—like a pastry brush that you'd use to put melted butter on dough, for example—and also scotch tape. Ideally, you'd want one of the friends to bring along a video camera, because it's very creative," Albert continued matter-of-factly, "and it'd be good to film something like that, you know what I mean?"

"Excuse me?"

"So one of the friends strips down to nudity and sits in a straight-

backed and not really comfortable wooden chair in front of the open window of the unairconditioned hotel room, while the other friends pack his entire head with beef. After you encase the head in a thin, light layer of beef, you apply the lightest sheen of oil, and you then wrap the beefhead with scotch tape to hold it together and also for extra depravity,” Albert admitted with a genial shrug.

He wasn’t smiling, and his eyes were focused on the imagined beef-skull before him. As he spoke, his hands made cupping and smoothing gestures not far from the girls’ faces.

“Could you imagine having your head fully packed in pure ground meat? Of course, you have to leave holes in the beefhead for the eyes and nose, and maybe you’d stick straws into each ear, but there’s no mouth hole in the casing of beef. The reason you want it hot is to attract summer flies to the beef.”

“Albert,” said Barth, beginning to laugh but nevertheless starting to feel embarrassment quivers of the strange and bad.

“Why would you want to talk about something like that?” one girl calmly asked.

“What’s that?”

“I said: why would you want to talk about something like that.”

“Ideally, you’d film the wearer of the beefhead walking up and down Twenty-Third Street in the middle of a summer afternoon. People might start feeling weird and might even cry when they saw the walking beef-head.”

“And remember the old English gentleman,” said Barth, unable to help himself.

“Right. That’s sweet. A retired English colonel wearing an ascot would be walking by and he’d point at your friend with his cane: ‘Good God, that boy’s got beef to the skull! What a magnificent head of beef!’”

“What?”

“‘Good God,’” said Albert, “‘that boy’s wearing a full head of beef!’ And at a certain point, you might start eating out the beefhead from inside. Because, remember, there’s no mouth hole in the beefhead.

With all the flies buzzing and walking up and down the skull of beef.”

“It’s very weird,” the girl said—a little angrily, thought Barth. “Actually, it’s disgusting.”

“It’s not that upsetting, it’s not that weird. It’s just transgressive. In fact, it’s one of the most transgressive things you could do in a public environment that wasn’t a service-related or performance-related environment. Being weird isn’t particularly interesting, but being transgressive is proactive. Just imagine if your boyfriend was proposing to you in a prestigious restaurant and you opened the ringbox and instead of velvet the ring was imbedded in the thinnest layer of the most finely ground, barely sheened, ninety percent lean pure beef? Prime Angus, culled from the sirloin. Would you say yes?”

The girls stared back at Albert with the confusion and indignation that rise like floating wrigglers in the flood tides of the strange-and-bad.

“Why would anyone think of something like that?”

“It is a little bit crazy,” Barth middle-mindedly conceded.

“Don’t recant,” Albert said. “Don’t apologize for it, just because you’re talking to a girl. It’s an amazing idea. If we had any balls, we’d go and do it tomorrow.”

Certainly, one wouldn’t be so badly off remembering beefpacking on one’s deathbed. What else should you be remembering? Ginkgo trees, blowjobs, *The Godfather* parts I and II? Well, maybe. But four hundred feet beneath the beefpacking laughies, in Barth’s gloomier, lower layer, there existed a greedy and therefore shameful regret that Albert had abandoned the normal protocols with girls in order to pursue the comparative artistry of strange-and-badding with beefpacking.

“Where’d Patrice and Inez go?” Barth asked.

“Who knows? They’ll come sniffing around soon enough.”

Albert waved his hand. The trunk of the hand moved slowly but the fingers manipulated themselves with speed and complication. It was a depraved gesture of the hand, such as might be made by an athletic Dauphin after delivering a binding pronouncement of indolence and

cruelty.

“Would you girls like to go to upstairs Tabac and play a little pool with me and Barth?”

The girls’ plate of half-eaten tartare had been taken away. They had paid their check and gathered their satchels to their laps. Clearly, they were ready to get the phuck out of there.

“I think we’re going to get going.”

“Why? Come on, you’ll love the sweet VIP room of upstairs Tabac.”

“We’ve got to go, we’ve got to work tomorrow.”

“There’s an incredible Zeppelin photo upstairs. You should definitely see it.”

“Sorry, it’s a schoolnight.”

“They’re standing on the runway in front of their private jet in the early seventies and Plant looks sicker and more amazing than any human being has ever looked at any other time.”

As the girls were leaving, Albert violently finished his drink. Lees of ice spilled down chin. His eyes looked a little smaller, and his face had babied in the low downlighting of Tabac.

“Sweet,” he said, to no one, about nothing. He gaveled the empty glass on the bar and a few people stared. Albert was in the early stages of losing his humanity. But why? He had won a physical fight of justice and partially gotten with a hot girl (that’s right, that’s right, thought Barth mechanically, doing what’s right). He marveled at a friend who could begin to turn unfit for human consumption so soon after triumphs.

“Their reaction was so fucking absurd,” said Albert in a volume higher than the endproduct of Tabac noise, causing a few more stares.

“Are you losing your humanity?” asked Barth. “It’s barely midnight.”

Albert slung the Burmese python of his forearm around Barth’s close shoulders.

“Barth, Barth, Barth: my good friend Barth. It’s not about losing anyone’s humanity. Get us another round and I’ll be right back.”

Barth ordered two more drinks. Albert took his place at the end of a

long line for the Tabac single-occupancy unisex toilet chambers, which meant at least six minutes of alone time at the Tabac bar. Now it was time to think about objects and their relation to the history of man. Thousands of instructive objects were to be found throughout Tabac. The cellophane on his Marlboro pack, for instance. Mass-produced cellophane could not exist in a society that hadn't constructed, say, a hydrogen bomb, in the same way that there would be none of those identical yellow pencils without the internal combustion engine, and here Barth let himself linger on a remark somewhere in the enormous country of Nabokov (crazy alps, birch forests, endless natural resources), where a pencil's being sharpened sounds like "Ticonderoga, Ticonderoga." Again, he stood straighter, and his love for Nabokov at that moment was as great and unforced as his love for the stoli's syrrippiness. Incidentally: there was a sort of cottony taste to the coldest stoli. There were other things, too. Considering the limes in the drinks, one might think about agribusiness. Momentarily, Barth thought there was a chance for him to become some kind of a Creator, because was it everyone who thought of something like this while awaiting a friend's return from the toilet? And there was more. There were stories to be had about the people who came into contact with all the objects in Tabac, namely the patrons and workers of Tabac. Definitely, there were surefire interesting stories about sluts, but then you also had the illegal alien dishwasher story, too, with the five dollars an hour, the escape from El Salvador. Though it always came back to the objects and their relation to the history of man. Talking about some wriggler of a guy with a profession of some sort who'd happened to order the steak frites, you'd eventually drift into details about cattle and slaughterhouse workers, i. e. specialization of jobs, i. e. the history of man. And then one might consider the history of dentists, because who could eat a medium rare steak au poivre without strong chompers? Ancient man gummed his food.

Albert returned. He had water-gelled his hair. Barth handed the drink and examined his friend's face for any change in babying or blood-ying of the eyewhites. It was hard to tell.

“Have you regained your humanity? Seriously, have you?”

“Guy, I’m fine. Let’s go about our business and not worry about things like humanity. It’s not about that. I’m very up for a little pool in upstairs Tabac. Tonight should be pretty sick up there.”

“Yeah, but don’t you have to be on the guest list to get to the upstairs?”

Albert snorted.

“Guy, don’t worry about that. You think I can’t get us to upstairs Tabac? You’re a weird kid, Barth.”

Griffin had staked out the first step to upstairs Tabac, headphones on. His head made an occasional sharp dipping motion. He was singing Snoop to himself. Above him, actually smiling down on Griffin with a certain kind of benevolence that brought to mind the tired notion of gods protecting madmen, gamblers, and wrigglers, stood an enormous black bouncer with a shaven skull. Griffin and the bouncer wore similar black leathers. Definitely, Griffin had said something to the bouncer about Snoop, and probably the bouncer had responded with some sort of encouragement. Barth imagined his friend later bragging about the bouncer’s having understood what kind of a kid he was, and the thought irritated him unspeakably.

The bouncer had a clipboard, but he disdained looking at it. Others—a certain kind of shrill or oafish girl or a bony kind of eastern european girl with pointy elbows and lots of clean hard shiny pimples, along with desperate gays, goombahs and wrigglers—had pooled around the bottom of the stairs, but no one was being allowed into the magical pussy of the VIP room.

Barth made his way to Griffin.

“A little Snoop?” he asked. He tried to impart to his voice a sense of antibelligeroidism, i. e. goodwill and cheerful rationality. No reason to have hostilities with Griffin, especially with Albert perhaps about to lose his humanity. Worst case: you could always be friends again with Griffin if you told him that you respected his life.

“People,” said the bouncer, “people you cannot stand here. If you’re

not going up my stairs, then get away from my stairs.”

Albert stood mesomorphically before the bouncer.

“Guy,” said Albert, “your name’s Bernard, right?”

“My name is not Bernard.”

“Come on, guy. You’re Bernard. I’m Albert, remember? I’m a friend of Roy’s.”

“I do not know you.”

“Guy, I’m Albert. I was here just a couple of days ago.”

The bouncer made a clacking sound from the side of his mouth where a toothpick lived. He cocked his head and shook his head and made all the muggings of amused disgust that he, by virtue of race, dress, and occupation, was obliged to display when confronted with the ingratiations of a smaller white. The bouncer saw and then refused to look further at Albert: the tee-shirt, the dress shirt over it, the shorts, the sandals with socks.

“Where’s Roy?” asked Albert, his voice a little higher.

“When and if Roy comes down,” said the bouncer staring above and to the northwest of Albert’s head, “you can tell him what you need to tell him.”

“Guy, you know your name’s Bernard. You know you know me. Why wouldn’t you let us up? It’s not about thinking that it’s in any way productive not to let us up to play a little pool.”

“Please move away from my stairs,” said the bouncer, looking way, way over Albert’s head.

“Just let me speak to Roy,” said Albert.

Griffin took off his headphones and descended the step.

“What the fuck is Albert doing?” he said to Barth.

A white funkid was coming down the staircase. He, too, carried a meaningless clipboard. His eyes were squinted, his lips pursed, and he was sucking in his cheeks, all of which conveyed the impression of both abject confusion and extreme physical vanity. He wore a goatee and his head was very, very small.

“Whassup, B,” he said to the bouncer.

“Roy!” cried Albert, his voice now really highpitched, as would befit an Albert one and one-half feet shorter than the real Albert.

“Woe,” said the funkid, “do I know you?”

“Roy! How’s it going, man? How you doing?”

“Woe.”

“I’m Albert!”

“Woe: excuse me?”

“Roy?” asked Albert with a quaver, but the funkid was moving past, gone.

“Holy shit,” said Griffin.

“As I said, step away from my stairs,” the bouncer told Albert with finality.

“That’s really sick,” said Albert.

Griffin was nodding slowly, judiciously.

“Holy shit,” he muttered gravely to Barth, “Albert flew too close to the sun.”

“That’s fucking crazy,” Albert said after a moment. “That’s just really fucking sick. What a sick kid. That kid Roy is a dick. Of course he fucking knows who I am. Why would he pretend not to know who I am?”

“Guy, he didn’t know you for shit.”

“Shut up.”

“You just flew too close to the sun. You had your fight, you had your shot with Patrice, but then you tried for Roy and you flew too close to the sun. Don’t worry about it: you’ll get it back.”

“Griffin, seriously, shut up or you’ll be sorry.”

“Fuck Roy,” Griffin told Albert in a sudden tone of true friendship. He placed a hand on his friend’s back. “Who cares about that kid? This place is played. Let’s get out of here.”

“What about the girls?” Barth asked immediately.

“Fuck the girls,” said Griffin. “They’re upstairs with Haber and a bunch of european funkids.”

“God!” said Barth. “Seriously? You saw them go up with funkids?”

“Yeah, the worst version of semi-wealthy european funkid.”

“Did Patrice and Inez know the funkids? Were they Spanish? Did they ask you to come up with them? How did they get upstairs?”

“Who the fuck knows? Those girls are done. Everything about this place is played, right Albert?”

“Longinus,” muttered Albert, and Barth was sure that quarts of humanity were leaking through the soles of his sandals and evaporating on the dark red rug of Tabac.

“What about Haber?” asked Barth.

“Haber’s fine,” said Griffin. “He’s probably getting his cock sucked right now by that slut you were so into. Trust me, he won’t miss us.”

“Longinus!” Albert screamed at the bouncer.

“Anyway, who cares? You should have asked me to take myself out, but who cares! Albert flew too close to the sun and we’re getting out of here.”

Inez was no great shakes. Cosmology counted much more, and so did Nabokov. But ideally you persisted. You got yourself into upstairs Tabac and you found a way to get with Inez. And you forced yourself to deal in teasers and the unblinking world of silent, sexual complicity. Remember the Rilke poem: you must change your life. Barth could change. He might cut down on all the blinking and politesse, he might touch them without awkwardness. The first step, he decided, would be to run the rest of his night as pure alone time.

“I think I’m gonna call my night,” said Barth, but no one heard him.

“Chandelis!” Albert yelled at the bouncer in the strangulated voice of lapsing humanity. He was grinning wildly, without comfort. The bouncer’s toothpick grew still in his mouth.

“You better calm down, my man.”

“Barth,” said Griffin, “come on, it’s time for a new place. We’ve got to get that kid out of here before something really sick happens.”

“Chandelis!”

Alone time could wait, Barth thought. Friends were the friends, the unfungible family.