

**A story about innocence, betrayal and desire,
but mostly about love of writing.**

Little Bossman

Per Axbom



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A novel written during the summer of 1993.

Second edition. A free book.

First edition was only in print. See prologue for details.

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PROLOGUE

March 2006:

Almost thirteen years have passed since I wrote this book. I was nineteen years old and writing a book had been a dream for a long time. Living on the money my grandmother had given me to get a driver's license I spent my nights during the summer of 1993 fulfilling this dream; an almost unreal experience: the book unfolded itself before me as I kept on writing and was complete after eight weeks.

My creative writing teacher at the time found an ad in a Swedish newspaper for a book publisher in London. As it turned out this was a so-called subsidiary publisher, meaning that I myself had to pay a great deal of money for the printing process. Unfortunately I was a gullible teenager desperate to publish my book. A year later it was clear: the money I had borrowed from family was gone and all I had to show for it was five printed copies. The publisher had disappeared.

So, after enduring questions and comments for thirteen years from those that read the book and urged me to try and get it published again, here it is. Alongside my deep interest for computing, open source software and the Internet I now truly believe that the destiny of this story has always been to end up as a free e-book.

I hope you enjoy reading the book. I have just re-read it and in a way the experience for me is like making the acquaintance of an old friend: my 19 year-old self – a curious privilege.

Per Axbom

Update in March, 2009:

Wow, it took me three more years to actually get this book out. I think it has tormented me long enough now and I'm ready to let it go. Maybe this action will allow me to get on with my ambitions of writing more books.

In the midst of the Pirate Bay trial actualizing the rules of a new economy, an arena I am thankful to partake in, it seemed very symbolic for me to finally publish this book as a free e-book and of course also distribute it through the Pirate Bay <www.thepiratebay.org>.

This book wants to come alive, at last. Feel free to copy, forward and distribute it any way you like. I would love it if you send me a message and let me know what you think; most of all it would be fun to see how far this book can travel.

Send me an e-mail, add me on Twitter and LinkedIn, or use any which way you want to contact me. Do you also have cultural offerings (novels, music, poetry, short stories) lying around without coming alive I encourage you to join me in sharing your work for free online.

It would make me very happy if my winnings from this book are not monetary but rather acts of love. After all: money is purely fictional and love will always be real.

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AFRICAN HUNTING MASKS.

Sometimes passion tears my mind
and rain falls from my eyes,
and lightning arrows strike me blind
when red runs through my skies.
Human burning need
cuts through my voice
in strangled noise
and tells me now to bleed.

Instead of doing what it asks,
and screaming my child's pain,
I wear my African hunting masks
and smile throughout the rain,
dripping into smears I blend with
reds in wooden heads
with inward showing leers.

Alone I flow and the moon shifts
and falls back and returns on me.

If the returning waves can show
all my masks from start,
I wonder if I will ever know
in the oceans of my heart,
I wonder if I'll see
in the tidal maze
what hidden face
is really, truly me.

- Pierce Angel

1.

"What you do is, you shoot them down, one by one." He lifts his right hand and points a chubby finger at the table, firing slow-motion shots at each of the three empty wine-glasses, his thumb moving back and forth, and his hand imitating the recoil of each of the three silent, deafening shots that echo and tumble through my mind. I wince.

He chuckles. And then silence. Deep, I think. The side of my mouth twitches briefly. The shots echo again and I look around me nervously as if they could hear them too. The back of my neck cramps and I look up at the crystal sparkling above us in transparent colors. I'm dizzy.

I sense Julie, on my right, fidgeting impatiently with her white napkin, scratching with red nails. Her eyes are cast downwards at her two small knees which are hunched together below her flaming skirt. The tiny Mrs. Cole, across the table from me, is at a loss for words and looks uneasily at her half-eaten dessert, then at her husband, then back at the cold apple pie. Mr. Joseph Cole himself is eagerly looking from face to face, awaiting a response. My mind accelerates desperately, seeking one.

I look down at him, open my mouth happily and I guffaw.

There is a hurried raising of heads, all with questioning eyes aimed at my person. Damn. I race through remarks to find one that could possibly fit into this godforsaken situation.

"Ha!" I exclaim.

They are still looking at me.

"You're a riot, Joe, an absolute riot." I continue smoothly.

"But I'm not kidding, Pierce," he says, "Really. We go to Africa and help the nigger bastards, try to bring up their country's standards, give them jobs, and what the fuck do they do? They rob us and call us names and refuse to do a good day's work. Have you ever seen them niggers digging a hole?"

Sure enough you'll always find one of them digging. And then it takes three of those black morons to watch the fourth one working! The sons-of-bitches are so goddamn lazy it's pathetic. They're about as energetic as fucking dead snails on voodoo dope. No wonder their country's a dump."

He explodes in laughter, saliva spraying from his mouth. He rocks back on his chair, revealing that he has lost a button on his shirt where a flurry of fat and hair is now protruding. I see his wife notice, and then trying to look like she had not noticed. After his attack is over he rocks forward and charges at the table as if he is going to take a giant bite out of it. He looks up at each one of us and ends his display, "Like I said, just line 'em up and gun them down."

I look at him through the the corner of my eye. He looks back and wipes off a strand of saliva that is hanging from his mouth.

"You should know all about this Pierce," he says, "Weren't you down in Tanzania when my old man was there?"

I adjust my hunched posture uncomfortably at his mention of Tanzania. As if he knew something.

"Yes, Joe, I was," I tell him in a bored fashion, "Listen, Joe, there are a few things I'd like to talk to you about when it comes to your book. I don't think I can stay very long today."

His wife reacts very appropriately to this remark and stands up.

"Yes, Julie, why don't we leave these two literature devils alone. I'll just clear up and then we'll have our own shot at solving the world's problems."

And appropriately Julie puts in, "I'll help," and she also stands up and starts grabbing our cutlery.

Not too surprisingly Joe adds in his own helpless idiocy, "Help clear the table or help solve the world's problems?" His wide mouth smiles at her. She does not smile back. I look at her and sense the pure, straight-up, no-strings-attached, thick,

putrid hatred for Joe Cole she seems to have, and at this point, looking at her small hands picking up the plates, I think I can actually hear the sound of despise crackling through her grinding teeth.

"Both," she says and follows Lisa Cole into the kitchen. Through her determined walk I deduce that she might want to start her worldly quest by eliminating the large man in front of me with a blunt, heavy object.

"Where did you find that incredible blonde beauty, Pierce? I mean, teets and aaasss, Jeesus." He does some sort of gesture with his hands to emphasize the last remark.

"Her name's Julie, Joe. Use it." I say, "She's my secretary."

"Secretary? Pierce oh Pierce. For how long?"

"Secretary for a year. Lover for two months. Listen Joe, I'd really like to talk about your book. Why don't we go into your study?"

"Sure, Pierce, sure."

His study isn't just any study, of course. It's a dark dungeon of black magic and morbid tastes. Wall coverings from East Africa, Indonesia and South America clothe the walls. They feature women carrying heavy vases on their heads and children in rags on their backs. They show rice-pickers and canoes and jungle, and they show powerful animals, cat animals, feeding on giant elephant corpses. A brownish crocodile swims next to an overgrown river shore where impala are tonguing the water. And there is a lone, rhinoceros on a hot, sandy field. There are various tribal masks used in West African hunting, some which are gifts from me. There are makonde carvings of sickly, threadlike people with long, thin faces climbing over each other as if struggling to reach some nurturing piece of food at the top. But there isn't any. There is a brown tortoise shell, there are wooden ducks, there are spears, drums, and a chess game on the desk, made out of that green

rock which I always forget what it's called. And of course there is Joe's pride, the wooden bar cabinet which stands tall at the back of the room, (beside the bookcase lined with nothing but his own books), and which has a black, devil-mask face painted on it - seemingly the ruler of this black, compact space.

What strikes anyone walking into that room is the shockingly gloomy and dark, and still cozy, atmosphere, with the only lamp being the lonely spotlight over the massive, orange-red, desk where this successful author writes all his gory stories. And also the dry, sweet smell of settled tobacco. Except he doesn't smoke.

"Fix you a drink?" he asks.

"Would you perchance know how to make a Fallen Angel, Joe?" I sit down in one of the black, leather couches in one corner of the room, next to a creepy, glassed collection, featuring a scorpion in the center and various six and more legged creatures around it. I glance only briefly at it.

"Of course. Pour some gin, add a little lime, a dab of Crème de Menthe, a drop of Angostura. But it's hardly fitting after dinner. In fact, the name hardly seems fitting at all. Something bugging you about my book?"

"Oh no. Your book is really great, fantastically unpredictable, as usual. In fact, so unpredictable that our friend Lionel Winger gets caught. It has never happened before, has it?"

"You know, Pierce," he says and pours me some whiskey, "I was at my sister's yesterday. Dorothy her name is." He offers me the glass and I take it, gulping it down quite quickly, grimacing. I loathe whiskey. "And I told her that Lionel Winger is in jail. And she cheered! She clapped her hands!" He offers me some more but I shake my head. He pours one for himself. "She said she always hoped that he would be. She said she couldn't understand why it had not happened before. You

see, that's what everybody seems to be wanting, down deep in. They want my hero to get caught."

"Okay, Cole, but what about this character that you have built up. I mean, you're giving him the electric chair! What's your next book going to be, a rise from the dead? You know if it is, I won't take it. Lionel Winger is supposed to be a sane, random killer. I don't want any supernatural stuff, you know that. Or are you planning to retire him? You know how many books I'm expecting from you." I half expect, half hope that he will say yes, he's going to retire Lionel. It would be perfect.

"No, of course not retire him. And I'm surprised you don't see the possibilities of this situation I put him in. People want Lionel to get caught. Yes. But only because they want to see how he can get out of it. And I told Dorothy very convincingly about how I would go about letting Lionel escape before the chair. In so much detail in fact, that it in itself could be the entire next book."

"Hannibal Lector stuff?"

"Hannibal Lector stuff."

"But you killed his wife off as well."

"Pierce Pierce Pierce. Don't you see? I made him single. Lionel, the most wanted man in over forty-nine states, is now single. If that won't get some adrenalin pumping in some sweet, young, innocent girls, I don't know what will."

I feel sick. He's right. I wince at my own stupidity. I came hoping to find that he was going to retire Lionel Winger. It would be perfect alongside my own retirement. Incredibly insane!

"You're right Joe, you're absolutely right," I say, "And I'm surprised at myself for not seeing it as clearly as you obviously do." I stand up. "Listen, I have to use your bathroom and I think Julie wants an early retirement tonight."

"Hey, I know what you mean. How can I blame you?" He smiles but I don't bother commenting.

We walk through the dining room to the edge of the step-down to the living room where we stop to overlook the lonely figure sitting there. Julie is sitting amongst desert red furniture, dim lighting, powerful paintings of burning sunsets and sunrises in distant countries, and a gazelle-skin carpet. In her red, suede jacket and skirt she fits right into the scenery which could perhaps be romantic if it wasn't already menacing enough to jump out and bite one's neck in two. Joe Cocker is singing, "Just leave your hat on" over the tall loudspeakers that are placed along the far wall where a panorama window overlooks the neighbor's mansion where all lights are out for the closing night. An empty glass sits on the table. Julie is drinking cold orange juice.

"Where is Lisa?" I ask.

She seems to just notice us when she responds and makes a gesture towards the kitchen, "Oh, she got a phone call." I turn and hear a muffled voice talking past the closed door of the kitchen. I look back and notice the Cobra phone next to Julie on the small resting table. A quite personal phone call, I assume.

"Well, I have to use the bathroom. Are you about ready to leave?"

"Yes." She glances uneasily at Joe.

"Good, I'll be right back," I say and as Julie sinks back into her seat I start walking down the hallway feeling her eyes digging deeply into my back, pulling, but I continue my way toward the bathroom.

I walk down a dark hallway lined with paintings of a more chaotic theme. Placed in random heights along the length of the hallway they are masterpieces of confusion, probably worth a lot of money since they are so exquisitely revolting. I have

never paid much attention to them, but I once stopped to look at one that seemed to be only a large, white blotch of paint. When I asked Joe about it he called me a name and said that it was light coming from a window. I resisted an urge to laugh, and nodded apologetically, smiling, as always, inside.

When I reach the end of the hall, instead of making a left which would bring me to the Coles' giant, pink, nauseating bathroom, or continuing straight forward into their gold-coated bedroom, I make a right and open the door that is decorated with something that appeals more to my tastes, Donald Duck.

The room is a colorful display of what I believe to be is Disney's entire cast ever. Posters and curtains and bedcovers with images of characters ranging from Mickey to Dumbo give you an instant kick of pleasure. There are two book cases filled with all those wonderful children's classics like Treasure Island and Peter Pan. The picture frames above the bed do not contain pictures but postage stamps of all shapes, sizes and motifs. I pour into the room with silent motions, half-closing the door behind me.

In the bed I find a child with brown, ruffled hair, a handsome face with a small, red mouth and a tiny, pointy nose. His bedcovers reach up to his navel, a book -The Never-Ending Story- lies just out of reach from his left hand that rests over the side of the bed, and the bed-light is still on. The boy is trying, with questionable results, to look like he is sleeping. As I come closer to the bed he lets out a huge snore. I quickly lift my hand to my mouth so as not to reveal how amused I am by this.

"Hey, kid, it's me." I whisper.

I can see his eyelids move just slightly so that he can look at me without opening his eyes completely. Soon, though, they are glowing.

"Mr. Angel! Hi!" he says and sits up in bed. My mood always rises a few notches when I hear the kid say my name with the type of excitement you always know is genuine, because it is the excitement of a child.

"So how you doin' Philip!" I pull up a chair close to the bed and sit down on it. "Have you read any good books lately?"

"Some, I just started on this one." He reaches for the book and I pick it up for him.

"This is pretty heavy reading for a seven-year old," I tell him. I can see it is doggie-eared on page 74. He said he just started on it! I love this kid. He scratches his nose.

"Are you here to talk about my father's new book?"

"Yeah."

"He can really write books, can't he?"

I suddenly feel a sting of jealousy, the only jealousy that has always been aimed at Joe Cole. He can write books. But then I'm worried.

"Have you read any of his books?" I ask.

"Nope, mom said I'm not allowed until I'm old enough." I am relieved to hear that his mother still has some sense left, having doubted that since she married Joe.

"Hey," I say, realizing something, "Where are your glasses?"

"They broke."

"They broke? How?"

"A kid in school broke them."

"Who did?! When?" I find a flurry of wild rage spreading within me.

"Today. George called me two-eyes and said I was just a rich kid and that his mother said my father was a sick b.." He swallows, can't bring himself to swear, and I love him for it.

"And then we started to fight and he took my glasses and threw them in the ground." Suddenly he smiles. "But I kicked him in the nuts, just like you said I should."

I calm myself down a bit, but not enough to laugh. "You just make sure you get a new pair of glasses. In fact, you shouldn't be reading without them."

"I know, Mr. Angel." He looks into his hands and then up at me again. "Have you ever wanted to kill someone, Mr. Angel?"

He catches me off-guard. My heart hiccups and then proceeds to a normal rhythm again. "I better go now, they're waiting for me." I stand up and I push the chair under his desk.

"Mr. Angel?"

I hear my own heartbeat again rise in speed and decibel. I hold my breath. God, I'm too tense, I think.

"Don't you have something for me this time?"

I let out a gush of air and turn around to face him. "Sure kid, sure I do. I almost forgot." I reach into my coat pocket and pull out a cigar box. "Here. Don't smoke them all in one go." He takes the cigar box and opens it gently. Inside are stamps, stamps that I have had Julie remove from all correspondence at the office.

"Wow, there are really a lot of them!"

I am thrilled to see his eyes widen at the sight of all those stamps. I start for the door but then turn around again.

"Hey, if anyone called Georgie breaks your glasses again you call me up." But he won't be able to, I tell myself. "But you know, if you just keep reading those books of yours, someday you'll be too smart for anyone to dare break anything of yours." I don't know if he has heard me at all. "And you should leave those stamps for tomorrow."

"Sure, Mr. Angel."

"And kid?" I stop by the door. I look him over. He's beautiful. The lines in his face shadowed by his crouched head run in perfect model symmetry, his boyish hair hung over to one side above his distinct forehead and the glazed teddy-bear eyes. Just the way I want to remember him.

"Mmm?" He doesn't look up and so he can't see the shiny sparkles in my own salt-stung eyes.

I draw in air deeply. "Keep my wings under your pillow, kid." I sob soundlessly. "Keep my wings under your pillow."

As I walk out I notice Lisa standing just outside, eavesdropping. I close the door behind me. She has tears in her eyes. I try to quickly blink away my own. Her arms are crossed over the pinkish polo that reveals the lovely, curved figure of her fragile-looking body. She reminds me of an insecure teenager though she is my scarred age, thirty. I look down at her sugar-spun doll's face and the black hair that barely reaches her tiny, round shoulders. I'm warm and awkward.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing. It's just that you're so good with that kid. I think he likes you more than he likes his own father."

"Oh, hey, if you want me to back off I will." I will.

"No. It's not that. It's just the opposite. I think he needs someone. He doesn't have any friends his age. I'm so worried about him. Maybe you could come over and talk to him sometimes when Joe is away."

"Hey. That's a really smart kid you've got there," I indicate the door with my thumb. "And I think you don't have anything to worry about. You know how much time I spend with him when the two of you are away. I love that kid. But if you're really worried then all you have to do is give me a ring, okay?"

She nods quietly. Needles seem to shoot through the air and bounce off my skin. I place my head against the door. "Listen." Facing me she puts her head also to the door. We smile at each other.

"He's under the bed pulling out his albums and soon he'll be busy sorting stamps until his mother will come and tell him off. Why don't you wait a bit with that?" I smile at her.

She smiles at me again and together we walk to the living room where tension like gagged fire seems to be flaming in the eyes of the two people standing by the glass table..

*

"How could you leave me with him?" Julie blurts out after a long silence at the wheel.

"Oh, come on Julie, how could I know Lisa was going to be talking on the phone?" I snicker.

"He made a pass at me! He even started by saying 'So I hear you're Pierce's very personal secretary'! What the fuck did you tell him?"

"Calm down and watch the road," I say nervously, and then disbelieving, "He made a pass at you?" I find the idea immensely funny and make that clear by my bodily noises. It's dark outside. I like the dark.

"It's not funny."

"Sure it is."

"Oh, Pierce, please."

"So what did he do, pull his shirt up?" I start laughing hysterically.

"You're drunk," she comments and looks over at me in a pestered manner. I laugh even harder.

"I'm drunk and you're beautiful," I continue after a while and know this will soften her up. "I'm sorry for being such an insensitive prick. Seriously, what did he do?"

"Well he wasn't exactly subtle," she says slowly. I know what she is doing. She is mad at me and she is going to prolong the whole story. She knows I hate that.

"And?"

"Well, you know how he is."

"I'm sure he has never made a pass at me."

"No? I'm sincerely surprised. I don't understand why you have to associate with him anyway."

"You don't know how much I owe the guy. I told you he and his father helped me and Peter get started with Angel & Gadd. Money and contacts and all that crap. And he's probably my main source of income. The bastard writes good books."

"He writes a really sick genre of pornography."

"I know that and you know that and his ample mob of readers definitely seem to know it."

She laughs sweetly.

"Have I ever told you how beautiful you are when you laugh?" I ask.

"About a thousand times."

"Really? So seldom, huh? Well, I am just perplexed by the way the light from the street lamps hits you at regular intervals and makes first the red of your lipstick glow, your little perky nose shine, your turquoise eyes glisten, and then your long blond hair is lit up like a wavy bonfire and in the next second I see only the dark contours of the most beautiful face in the world." I let that sink in for a second or two. "So what did he do?"

"Who?"

"Joe."

"Oh, no you don't. You can't charm me into telling you."

"I hardly have any competition to fear from the man, anyway, do I?" I grab her thigh. The car speeds up as her leg tenses.

"Let go, Pierce." I squeeze harder and the car goes faster.

"Man overpowers woman!" I scream.

"Let go!"

"Okay, okay. Jesus."

"I'll say Joe has a pretty good chance at me with you carrying on like this. What's with you anyway? You're acting really strange."

Looking out of the window I see a beggar sleeping in an alley with a small, white dog beside him. I think the picture is extremely poetic and I make a mental note to write something about it later. In Africa.

"The dog sleeps with his master, always by his side. The two sleep in the gutter, tired and despised." I mumble. I'm sobering up.

"What's that all about?"

"Oh, nothing. I really like his son though."

"Who's son?"

"Joe's"

"Christ sometimes I just don't know where your mind is off to."

"Nor do I," I whisper, "Nor do I."

It begins to rain. She switches on the wipers. For the rest of the ride I stare at the drops that land on the glass, that start to journey across the surface and are mercilessly swept away by the black wiper that hits them from out of nowhere, coming from the top, from the bottom, from the top... Some drops make it further than others. I think, there's something in that, it's trying to tell me something.

"You're home." She pulls up at the curb.

"Yup." I lean over, kiss her mouth, then her ear, open the door, whisper "I love you", step out, hear her say "Are you sure you want to be alone tonight?", answer "Yes", close the door, watch her speed off, walk up the stairs to safety, throw up in the kitchen sink, trip over something on the floor, fall in bed, sleep.

2.

I'm dreaming.

I'm standing at the edge of a garden, holding a sparkly cocktail glass with a yellow liquid. I down it in a gulp and look towards the sound of the recurring voices of the masses of people standing before me. I detect speedy movement in silver platters that seem to rush back and forth within the human maze, carried by athletic bodies in black and white that seem to have no obvious goal with their running but merely do so because it seems to come with the territory. Hands which appear out of everywhere place old glasses and grab new ones as the round discs fly them by. Anyone who fails to grab the glass of their choice merely waits for the next silver carriage that could come whizzing from any direction any second. "It seems to be one of these apparently random systems which actually do work", I mumble.

On the lawn conversational groups stand scattered like a kaleidoscope of dreamy soap bubbles constantly shifting in size and roundness as women in dresses like butterflies flutter from bubble to bubble hoping to find one that has not yet heard the shameful news about Ms So and so.

I listen to the circle I am closest to. I try to ignore the six men which are all wearing West-African hunting masks over their heads. Instead I notice the woman in white who is the center of their attention. I think I recognize her and I try to get closer to the group.

Suddenly all the men turn and face me. The larger one with a mask like an alligator's mouth points a finger at me. "Just line 'em up and gun them down," he says and fires three shots at my head.

"No!" I scream as I fall down and the world drains into red puddles.

But then I'm looking down at the body in the red grass. I'm standing with the other men over the dead man with a bird mask.

"Gee, I guess your finger was loaded," says one of them and they roar with laughter.

There is a clap of thunder and I look up as it begins to rain out of the black sky above. I look down again and I sense that I'm alone. I turn around and everything is still. All the people are gone. Vanished. But at the far end I see the woman in white run out of the garden. And I rush after her as the dead bird comes alive and begins to chase me, tearing through the air behind me, howling weirdly at the moon.

I run, scared, heart thundering, not looking behind me. The red rain comes down heavily and I plow through knee-deep mud. The bird screeches behind me, "I'm back Pierce! You can't get rid of me! Are you ready for your lesson!?" I turn to look at the bird with the human body and I recognise the T-shirt with the yellow, round, smiling face. "Don't worry be happy!" the bird sings. I scream and fall backwards and I am pressed against the seat as the yellow car accelerates, just escaping the birdman whose claws grab at the roof of the car.

"Who was that guy?" the driver asks. He's dressed in a cowboy outfit and a cigarette butt hangs from the side of his mouth.

"Jimmy?" I ask.

"The one and only," he says and looks with his tortured eyes at me, smiling at the end of his mouth.

"Did you see the girl in white?" I ask.

"Yup. That's who we're going to get."

"Do you know who she is?"

"She's my friend. It's Christine."

"But I know her."

"How?"

"I don't know."

It's not raining anymore. It's daytime. We are speeding down a highway and in front of us a car is getting ready to make a left turn.

"Slow down," I say.

"I can overtake him."

"No. You can't. You never could."

"I can overtake him."

The car starts turning and we hit it in the side. Jimmy's neck breaks as I fly out of the car. I'm flying away into the red and orange sky. And in front of me I see the woman in white. Her dress is fluttering in the warm wind. I reach for her foot and grab it. Abruptly she gains speed and I see the claws bury in her shoulders as she is carried away by the bird.

"I love you too," it screeches.

And I fall to the ground.

3.

I sit up in bed and hear the sound of my own voice. "...so leave a message whenever you think it's time to leave a message, or if you don't want to, don't. Really, use your own judgment..." I lift the receiver and the machine is cordially shut up.

"Hello?" I seem to shriek. I clear my throat and try again,

"Hello?"

"Pierce?"

"Mmm?"

"It's Julie."

"I dreamed about you.. I think."

"Why aren't you here?"

"Where?"

"At the office."

"Oh."

"Pierce?"

"Yeah?"

"I guess you haven't heard."

"Heard?"

"Pierce."

"What?"

"It's all over the papers."

"What?"

"Ethan Young has been shot and killed."

"Oh, I mean oh, I mean.."

I slam the phone down and lay back on my bed, eyes closed. So it has already hit the papers. When did I kill him? Yesterday? No, the day before yesterday. Pete's party. It's Monday. Already. I smile at myself and roll over on my side, opening my eyes to look at myself in the wall-mirror.

"Hey, don't I know you," I say and find myself laughing at my own ingenious remark. I sit up on my knees and tense my hairy upper body in front of the mirror. I'm pleased. Not ecstatic, but pleased. I look down at my blood-filled manhood. I'm pleased.

I am of average height and average, perhaps just a little above average, build. My face is handsome but scarred from puberty's hellish endurances. My darkish brown hair is cut short and clean, nothing out of the ordinary. I'm no model. But my eyes, those devilish, fiendish eyes. Blue and eternally deep but sometimes far too revealing for comfort.

I reach for the remote to my stereo, press a button and soon "You can call me Al" by Paul Simon is blasting over the Dali loudspeakers.

I jump out of bed and look over my room. It's a mess. It's a perfect mess. Any artist will tell you that a good, healthy mess is the key to a hearty life. Straight lines will ruin your focus. Clothes and various books should cover a barely visible chaotic carpet. The bed should never be made. Keeps the bed bugs from settling. It's true, really.

Any wall decoration should be put up with haste, as all of my film posters which cover three of the walls in my small apartment. No parallel lines allowed. The fourth wall is for three closets and an exit to the tiny hallway. The first closet contains the dirty clothes that are not part of the flooring.

The second contains shirts and pants, the third T-shirts and underwear. The two latter closets are seldom full. Dirty dishes and milk cartons are placed where other objects have not made their mark.

The hallway will take you to a bathroom not worth mentioning, or outside, or to a kitchen where the dishes in the sink are now, if I remember correctly, covered with Lisa Cole's cooking.

I tell visitors that I'm like a dog, I need to mark out my quarters. The truth is, if I clean up I admit to having some attachment to the place. If I keep it a mess I'm telling myself that I won't be staying long, that it's time to move on soon. Soon. No, the truth is that I'm incredibly lazy. Sick and lazy.

My bookcase. It stands out mostly by its fluorescent, green color, but also by the complete collection of Stephen King and Joseph Cole books that fill it.

"I'm going to miss all of you guys the most," I say with a deep sigh into emptiness.

I walk into the hallway singing "...why am I soft in the middle... when the rest of my life is so hard..." and by the door I retrieve the day's paper. The Morning Blaze. The second paper that Ethan Young took ownership of. He got the name from a poem I once wrote. About a microwave oven actually, that goes haywire and fatally shocks a five year old girl. Slowly, whistling, I unfold it and stare at the headline:

MEDIA MOGUL YOUNG SHOT IN HOME

As I take a milk carton from the fridge and put two slices of bread in the toaster I go through the facts: The scene of the crime was Young's summer house on the East coast. A neighbor heard three gunshots. He spotted a speeding car leaving the scene. He called the police. When the police got there they found Ethan Young in his bed, poor bastard. His face was beyond recognition.

I feel uncomfortable. I jump, startled, as the toast flies up. What car? What speeding car?

The phone rings again. I let it. The answering machine is disconnected. After thirteen signals it stops. I sit thinking about the trip to Tanzania I am going to make soon and I devour my

breakfast with a healthy appetite, topping it off with a microwaved, left-over Calzone pizza. I spit out the milk over the paper because it definitely does not taste like it's supposed to.

After five minutes the phone starts ringing once more. I walk over to it and turn to admire my still naked body in the mirror. I look up at the crazed face above my bed which is the only picture on the wall that is not from a movie. It's also the only connection I seem to have to my Swedish heritage. It shows the Swedish poet Gustaf Fröding sitting in his bed at the asylum, arms crossed defiantly, black beard covering his face, and his empty, all-knowing eyes staring past the artist, actually at the viewer of the picture, I think.

"Insanity is truth, isn't it old man? And truth is reality. And in reality we are all insane!" I laugh, suddenly realizing how right I am. I look up at the white ceiling. "The secret is finding just a spoonful of madness and pinch of craziness. Mix it well and nobody can tell that you're giving them virtual insanity." I look at Jack Nicholson breaking through the door in Stephen King's *The Shining* then over at him by the drinking fountain in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. "And don't you know it, Jack," I say. "You can take or leave it if you pleeease," I sing softly.

On the twelfth ring I turn off the music, now playing *Suicide is Painless* by the *Mash*, and on the thirteenth I pick up the receiver. I wait a few seconds.

I hear Julie's voice, "Hello is there anybody there?"

"I'm here," I mutter.

"Are you okay, honey?"

"I don't know."

"Are you coming in today?"

"I don't know."

"There is some journalist here who wants to talk to you. Should I tell her to come back tomorrow or something?"

"A woman?"

"Yes, a certain miss Elizabeth Tucker."

Immediate flashback. Wow, I think. There's a name I haven't heard at anyone's lips but my own in, what, seven years? My mind starts floating back in time, to school days, to teaching days. To magic.

"Pierce?"

"I'll be there in half an hour." I say and hang up. "Jesus mother of God!" I scream, "Christ almighty Elizabeth Tucker of all fucking people."

I look at the mirror.

"You hadn't planned this, you son of a female dog. Why does she come now? Why today? Why this year?"

Not realizing it at first, I begin to violently scratch my wrists.

4.

It is seven years earlier. I'm twenty-three years old. I stand in front of a high-school class, nervous, watched, evaluated. I have written my name on the blackboard behind me.

The room is warm. The walls are newly painted in a beige color. The desks and chairs are light brown, wood and plastic. Along the back wall are four old bookcases that I have furnished with everything from Homer to Yeats and from Plato to King (Stephen). The different heights and colors of the books create landscapes on the shelves. I imagine a winding road that I must travel through those famous and not so famous worlds. As I face them, the sun enters from the right through a row of tall windows and lights up the room of expectant minds.

I sit back against my desk, the mother whale in this turbulent sea of thoughts. I'm wearing a chequered jacket, white shirt and blue-jeans. I look out across the garden of minds that are caught in eighteen unique lines of thought that are consuming my presence, interpreting my intentions, my character, and I realize that in each of them there is a different me. I take a deep breath. Mr. Pierce Angel is about to begin teaching.

"When I began studying creative writing, teachers kept commenting on my punctuation, on use of capital letters, on sentences that were too long or too short, on words that were tasteless. Endless remarks were made on the looks of my creative essays rather than the contents. My teachers were, if you will, judging my creations on trivialities rather than personality."

I stop to cast an eye over the pupils. My pupils. Their eyes are all fixed on me but I have no way of telling where their thoughts are at. My eyes linger on a girl in front of the class. The sun breaking through the window seems to have chosen her as its target. She's radiant. Then I catch myself and continue.

"I had a difficult time accepting that my essays, the worlds I was creating from my passion, from my experiences and which flowed so freely from my soul to the lead of my pencil, were subjected to judges that did their judging with the aid of a weather-beaten grammar book and not with their hearts, as it should be."

This stirs feelings in the class, as I knew it would. They are mumbling amongst themselves, nodding. Some are still, caught in the words. I can feel myself trembling and my eyes glistening. Tears? I feel like someone else is doing the talking and I just happen to be the medium.

"When I write a short story, or a poem, or even a novel, I write it because I have a passion for writing. I am being creative, I am draining myself of feelings that long to be told and whose sole aim is to enter the reader's mind and stir up emotions. I want people to feel the stories I tell, to recognize some aspect of their dreams and fears in my imagined world."

I cannot tell if the eyes that are seeing in my direction are looking at me, or through me. I continue talking, gesticulating, walking back and forth in front of them, wanting them to feel what I feel.

"I cannot be creative if I must adjust - restrict myself to the wishes of old geezers who know only what they see, not what they sense. As long as I am your teacher in creative writing I do not want to see you writing for me. I want you all to be writing in spite of me. I want you to empty yourselves of

all mental restrictions that could possibly exist and write for the sake of writing, because you love it, because you feel it, because you breathe it. If a word like 'fuck' or 'cunt' should happen to slide into your essay in a moment of inspiration, don't you dare erase it. You keep it there because it's real, and that is what counts. Surprise me - make me cry, laugh, simply feel. If you can do that, everything else is just peachy-keen." I pause there and place my hands on the back of my chair. I look menacingly at the class. "Do you think you could do that if I give you an assignment right now?"

I stop there, clenching the chair harder than they can see. I direct my eyes slightly downwards, not wanting them to see my eyes. To my amazement and pleasure the girl in the front row raises her hand. I smile at her and she smiles back. All tension I feel seems to sprout wings and take off. I let go of the chair. She is wearing a tight, red sweater and a black skirt. I glance at her, as I realize, incredible appearance. She has black, fairly short, straight hair. A perfectly lovely small nose. Clear, pale complexion. Deep eyes that appear to have no color. And the full impression turns into an unreal experience of tumbling through tunnels of lyrical music and blinding laughter.

"What's your name?"

"Elizabeth," she says with some hesitation.

I notice the lonely sheet of paper on her desk. She has drawn numerous small hearts on it and crossed them over with black marker. I lose myself. I don't know my next move. She looks confused. Can they see it? Panic and then control again.

"What's on your heart, Elizabeth?" I bite my tongue, hard.

"I was just wondering... I mean, what you say sounds okay and all, but, I don't know, you sound like we already know how to write, aren't you asking a bit much, I mean it's really new to us?"

"Thank you Elizabeth for making first contact. Look, that's exactly what I wanted to hear. I was just trying to get some adrenalin pumping through your bodies. If you could all spit out works of literature for me then you wouldn't be needing me, would you? I want at least that from you. I know I'm new to you, my manner of teaching will be new to you. Of course you're all not going to trust me and open up to me right away, right? You have all chosen this class and that must mean that at least some of you are actually interested in writing." Some of them smile. "This is your senior year and I know we don't have much time to get to know each other. It's not going to be easy for you, and not for me either if you don't give this your best shot. During this year I'm going to make you all write like you've never written before, 'til your pencils are smoking and your secrets have all been revealed."

I am struck with a high of inspiration.

"But that does not mean that I'm a strict teacher, or a tough one. I'm an artist. I hope. And you all are as well. And I'll tell you what, each and every assignment that I give to you, I will do myself and read to the class. If anyone else wants to read theirs to the class, they can, if not, they don't have to. It's the most fair system I can think of. If I ask something of you all, you should be able to ask the same thing of me, right? Does this sound fair?"

"Yes," she answers quietly.

"What about the rest of you? Sound fair?"

I hear some yeses, see some nods, ignore some mumbles.

"Okay, then. Why don't we try and get started? I want you all to write a poem to be handed in at the end of today's class-"

"What!", a boy at the back shouts his protest, "But you ju-"

"Wait, hear me out. To be handed in at the end of today's class or at the beginning of our next get-together which I think is.." I flip through my filofax.

"Tuesday," a voice somewhere seems to whisper.

"Right, Tuesday it is." I look up. "Thank you Elizabeth." She smiles.

"It's up to you if you want homework or not. Okay? The poem's title should be your own name, but that's the only instruction I'll give you. Right now I just want to get to know you, get familiar with your various handwritings, know how much you are willing to tell me before I yank it all out of you."

I sit back in my chair, feeling content that I have just given the first lesson I always wanted to hear as a student.

"Mr. Angel?"

I look up.

"Yes?"

"Aren't you going to write yours?" An overweight girl in spectacles eyes me. They all eye me.

"Right, of course." I sit up and grab a pencil. "What's your name?"

"Kimmy."

"Thank you Kimmy for reminding me."

"You're welcome."

I look at her, immediately judging her by her ghastly, massive and nauseating appearance. Why do we judge by appearance?, I think. Because more often than never, we're right.

"Mr. Angel?"

"Yes. Elizabeth?"

"Can we write it in pencil?"

"Sure. You can write it in anything you want. And class," I await their attention, "it's Pierce, okay?" I demonstratively turn to the blackboard and erase the Mr. and the Angel, leaving two white, smudged spots on either side of my name.

At the end of the class, three of them hand in their poems. Michael Potts, the guy who first objected to the poem idea,

George Lightman, a smartly dressed kid with a full-of-shit smile, and Elizabeth Tucker.

That night I read her poem in bed, guiding my hand, traveling into forbidden canals of the mind.

E.T. (Elizabeth Tucker)

Like Joan of Arc I see myself surrounded by fire
Heat is everywhere I turn
Slowly the flames climb in my eyes ever higher
Kissing my hair as I burn

I close my mind to the pain that touches so near
And when the pain starts I die
But when I open my eyes I see I'm still here
And always I must ask why

Forever hiding and searching for my real home
My mind follows every train
And like an extra terrestrial I forever roam
Put on this planet for pain

5.

I get out of the cab and race up the stairs of my office building. I open the door with "ANGEL & GADD PUBLISHERS INC." written in black shadow letters across it with a silver halo hovering above. Julie is sitting at her desk and looks up as I enter.

"Pierce!" She stands up and walks up to me. She's wearing a white top and green jeans with a black belt that surrounds her thin waist like a protective snake. She embraces me. I kiss her ear. "How are you Piercie?"

"It's okay, Julie. I'm okay. We'll talk later."

"That woman is waiting for you in your room."

"Okay, well I'd better go talk to her."

"Oh Pierce! Look!" she exclaims, holding my hands palms up. "What have you done? You've been scratching at your wrists."

I look at the complex network of red lines along the root of my hand. Trust a woman to notice. "Yeah," I say.

"You don't have to do this now, you know. She looks like she could be a mean one."

"She probably is." I release myself from her grasp and walk up to my door. I take a deep breath, open it, walk in, close the door quickly behind me.

She is sitting with her back to me. Purposely she doesn't turn around when I enter. I look at her short, black hair, still the same, her adorable white neck, her red sweater, coincidence? I tell myself over and over that she isn't sitting there. She isn't real. She is a figment of a past life, of my dreams, somewhere between history and imagination. She doesn't fit into this sterile room. I want her to be an illusion, to remain only in my head, but somehow she has escaped my thoughts, my dreams, and her physical presence is now my reality. I close my eyes and open them again.

The sun from the back windows falls on her figure, her goodness, and creates a shadow behind her, pointing towards me. My dark mahogany desk seems intimidated, threatened, and is desperately seeking my attention as it hides its massiveness behind this small woman in the centre of the room. I am in some way awed when it doesn't jump back as she suddenly leans forward and pushes a cigarette into the clean, glass ashtray and sits back again. The three tall, filing cabinets stand back against the rock-grey walls, waiting for me to act. To do something. Anything.

I start walking. Ever so slowly. My chest heaving. I feel high, aroused, almost ecstatic but hurting all at once as my limbs seem to collapse like burning charcoal. I wonder what she is thinking. One foot in front of the other. I notice the still smoking cigarette butt in the ashtray. I don't like it. She still has not moved. I am close enough to reach out and touch her hair. I stop. I continue walking. I walk around my desk, making sure not to look at her, seeing her contours only out of the corner of my eye. Then I stop at my chair. Hesitant. I face her.

I look at her. She looks at me. Our eyes meet. I feel weak, overpowered. What does she know? What do I say? She knew where to find me. She has the edge. I know nothing about her present life. She is more beautiful than ever. I cannot open my mouth. I can't sit down. I have lost control. I see the corners of her mouth move. I can't interpret this. Did I do something wrong?

What do I say? I feel weak. What do I say? Does she know? How? Is she remembering? What now? Something must happen. She is undressing my thoughts. Her eyes registering the minutest movement. Her eyes.

"Hi," she says. She sounds confident. I have no idea where I am and what I am doing. I smile, I nod. She smiles. She leans forward, eyes fixed on mine. "Your face, my thane, is like a book-"

"Where men may read strange matters?" I finish. I laugh, all tension vanished. I sit down. Breathe. "Hello Elizabeth Tucker."

"Hello Angel."

That's enough. For the next lifetime or so we communicate without words. Remembering, laughing or crying, she bites her lower lip.

"Quite a moment," I say.

"Yes."

"I still love you," I tell her clumsily.

"I know."

"Good."

"And what about your secretary?"

"How did you know about her?"

"I know these things."

"Yeah," I say, "I guess you do."

"And she called you 'honey' on the phone."

"Oh."

"Does she love you?"

"Of course."

"Poor girl," she sighs.

"Why? Do you intend to compete with her?"

"Oh Pierce, you can't ever settle down."

"You amaze me," I say, "Why are you here?" I say. I want her to say that she loves me, that she has come back to stay with me, to comfort me, to help me.

"Ethan Young is dead," she says and I lose myself on waves of chills for a moment but then they turn and the moon sends me back to her.

"So I've heard," I say.

"You knew him."

"Yes. I went to school with him."

"Boarding school?"
"Yes."
"Did you kill him?"
"Are you out of your gorgeous mind!? Why would I kill Ethan?"
"You tell me."
"Seriously, why are you here?"
"I was in town. Ethan Young was shot. I thought you might have done it."
"I don't know what to say... we haven't seen each other in seven years and the first thing you do is accuse me of murder."
"Couldn't have happened in any other way, could it?"
"No... I guess not. I should have expected it." I smile.
"How are you?" she asks.
"I'm fine. I'm fine."
"You don't look fine to me."
"How do I look to you?"
"Your face is pale, you have bags under your eyes, you look like you've gained some weight. You look like a worn-out writer who hasn't lifted as much as a crayon in seven years."
"And whose fault is it that?"
"Hardly mine, if that's what you mean."
"You only demolished my life."
"I never made you do anything. What you did, you did to yourself."
I glance at my wrists. I don't think she notices. "You hardly helped," I say.
"Oh, Pierce. You don't know how I tried. I was the one who needed your help."
"And why the hell are you interested in Ethan?"
"It's a story."
"So, you're a hotshot journalist now?"

"Well, sort of. I'm freelancing, you might call it."

"What brought you to a lowlife like me?"

"You were in town."

"And that makes me a suspect!?"

"I don't know, does it?"

"So you're not really here accusing me for his murder?"

"I don't know, am I?"

"Oh, Jesus Christ, shut the fuck up will you! Who the hell do you think you are asking those idiotic Perry Mason shit-for-brains questions!?"

"I'm the innocent student you seduced."

"I did not seduce you and you know it."

Rage is tingling my fingertips. I clench my hurting hands.

"We can't talk about this now, Angel, we're both too tense."

"You don't seem very tense to me. Okay, when?"

"We've made contact. Let's take the rest one step at a time."

She stands up and walks around my desk. I watch her body move slowly, erotically, as her right hand slides across my smooth desk. Placing this hand on my thigh, close to the bulge, she leans down and kisses me on the mouth, then under my eye, then on the ear.

"Okay?", she says, "I'll call you."

"I still hate you."

"I know."

"Good."

As she leaves I lift my hand and touch the spots where she left her cold, wet marks. I stick my fingers in my mouth and suck on them for a while. I stand up and take the cigarette butt from the ashtray, lick it in circular motions. I catch my reflection in the James Dean bar picture on the wall.

"You're not well," I say.

I walk out of my office, look for Julie who isn't at her desk. I walk into Peter Gadd's office. Peter looks up from some paper on his desk.

"Pierce, my main man, who was that incredible-looking reporter?"

"A ghost," I say.

"What?"

"Listen, Peter, grab your coat, we need to get drunk."

And he follows me into the warm afternoon of memory.

6.

It's Tuesday. My students are settled and are watching me, full of expectation I assume. I glance at Elizabeth. She glances back. The day before she approached me in the hallway, asking first about her poem, which I praised, then about my writing. She held in her hand my poetry collection, QUIET HYSTERIA, named after a short story I once wrote about a boy who hospitalizes his teacher by placing a sharpened pencil in his teacher's left nostril and slamming his teacher's head down on the desk, forcing the pencil into his brain. She wondered how old I was when I wrote the poems in the book. I told her I was sixteen.

The room is boiling and youthful shadows are dancing on the wall opposite the windows. I walk over to the windows and open one, wincing at the light.

"Good day to all of you!" I exclaim at the sun. "Hope you're all feeling urges to create the new and inexplicable." I face them and notice someone in the front row holding his poem for me to take. "Why don't you wait with the poems until the end of the class. That way those of you who haven't finished it yet will have forty minutes to do so." I look over at two boys in the back, busy scribbling something down.

"And don't worry about it. I've done some of my best work in class. Pressure is the best way to empty someone of their inner selfs because there is no time to switch on all those mental guards which try to withhold information which may seem too personal, destructive or offending. That information should be recognised as the writer's best weapon, you know. Curiosity is what keeps writers writing and readers reading. Humans thrive on surprises, secrets and sex.

"The more of yourself you dare reveal, the more people will wish to read you. They want to see that your mind is as dirty as theirs is. They want you to undress your characters, mentally

and physically. That's your first step. Satisfy their sick minds. Then you surprise them. Lead them into false expectations. You have control of your reader's train of thought so take it into dead ends, switch tracks, put it on head-on collisions and then, when you've got fireballs flying off the rails and your reader is kissing his seat, you pull the emergency break, bring them to a flying halt. Then you start on the next sentence."

I have no idea where all of this is coming from but I'm glad it's coming. I see on their faces that I've lit a spark of creation within them, that they're actually listening to me. I smile. They smile back.

"I'm going to read something by a very famous writer now and as soon as I mention his name you're all going to groan because that's how you've been conditioned to react to him. I'm going to read from the first scene of Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare."

They groan.

"I can't believe that. I said you were going to groan and you did. You're no better than Pavlov's dogs. This man's name is wizardry."

They laugh half-heartedly. I begin reading the word exchange between Sampson and Gregory, Capulet's servants. "Gregory, o' my word, we'll not carry coals..."

As I read I stress the ambiguity of Shakespeare's word-exchange between Sampson and Gregory with my body language. Some of them catch on right away, snickering. By the time I read "My naked weapon is out; quarrel, I will back thee." I'm being so clear that I actually hold my hands together in front of my crotch. Blood rushes to some of the girls' faces. Their sides are splitting. I start laughing too and soon the whole class is with me.

"Do you realize the genius of this man," I say, knocking on the book, "He was putting such obvious sexual undertones into

what would otherwise seem a straightforward conversation as early as that. And he was writing for an audience that roared with laughter at his plays, much like you did right then. The problem is that you read his plays. To be understood by today's standards it must be seen or performed. By someone who is clear minded enough to see the wonderful comedy of Shakespeare. Somebody should take it into their mind to convert his works into today's English, because they're really a treat. I heard some of them have been made into cartoons. But then I guess they miss out on all the juicy stuff."

I look at them, all spellbound by someone they think is an absolutely weird teacher. What they don't know is that I have been given that exact same lecture myself. They never will know that. I wonder if I have actually showed something that will be of use to them, or simply made them laugh to make them like me. Is one outcome better than the other? I keep going, wanting to uphold the special tension, expectancy, awe, that has suddenly sat down with us, taking a first careful step toward the music of the child.

"Anyway, what I want you to see, and what Shakespeare demonstrates so well, is reader awareness, or viewer awareness, as it is in his case. When you write something, certainly you must expect that someone is going to read your words, or take part in them in some way or another. Reading is interpreting. In all forms of writing you must be aware of your spectator and you must show this by the way you write. Sometimes this is self-evident, sometimes you must force it. This allows for a level of writing where the characters in your scene are saying something, or doing something which the spectators can interpret in a different way thanks to information that you provide them in other scenes or through your artistic use of words.

"We know that Sampson is holding a sword and saying that he will help Gregory against the attackers. But Shakespeare's

choice of words for Sampson makes the spectator put in a second meaning into the situation. Sampson will back up Gregory in a vastly different manner. Only the spectator can make that interpretation, and he laughs.

"In the last act of Romeo and Juliet we know, as the spectators, that Juliet is not, as Romeo thinks, dead. We can scream from our seats, 'Don't drink the poison Romeo! She's not dead!' but with no effect. Despair hits the reader. This is the feeling you will recognize as the horror-movie syndrome where the frightened little kids keep screaming 'He's behind you! He's behind you!'"

I really do scream this last part, making sure to bring anyone whose thoughts are elsewhere back to the aging classroom. They're staring.

"Reader awareness is what separates the king from the princes and it is reached by the tools that separates man from animals, which are termed ambiguity, sarcasm, and my ever faithful lover irony. Nobody has been able to define irony in a satisfactory manner, but everybody is a faithful user of it."

I smile.

"Which brings us to our next assignment. I want each and every one of you to come up with a definition of irony."

I am ready for the protest before it is mouthed by good old Michael Potts, who did hand in a quite amusing poem, titled "Potty" which was about his trouble in finding anyone who will take him seriously.

"But Mr. Angel."

"Pierce," I say.

"Pierce." He says this in a determined fashion and I can tell he really has a difficult time using my first name. This amuses me. "You just said that nobody has defined irony."

"Yes."

"So how do you expect us to?"

"Michael, I'm not asking you to come up with an all-time revolutionary definition of irony. I'm just asking that you give it a shot. The trick is knowing that nobody has come up with a good definition yet. You all know that. Then you ask yourself why. Then you write 'irony' at the top of a sheet of blank paper. Use whatever means you will to fill that space but let me know what irony is for you. You're creating. I'm not prepared to give you any more instructions."

I look out at closing storms of confusion. I'm helpless, slow, but I need to say something, I can't let them lose whatever acquired faith they may have in me. I open my mouth. Truth or fall.

"Look, I know I'm teaching you not like any teacher you've had before."

"You can say that again," someone says and I ignore it.

"And I am sure that you have a lot of criticism. All I'm asking you is to give me a chance. Trust me on this. No, strike that. Don't trust me. It makes the class that much more interesting. All I mean to do is give you a few pointers, tell you what experience tells me. I don't want to give you a list of things to do when writing. That wouldn't be creating. That would be conditioning, like this Shakespeare fear you have. Or had?"

They're at least looking at me. Listening. I need to hit them with something now. Make them like me. Make them worship me.

"Perhaps I'm talking way over your heads, in which case you should tell me. I don't want you to be afraid of talking to me, which is why I'm popping the four-letter words and giving you this use-my-first-name stuff. Perhaps I'm having the opposite effect of what I intend. If you want to use Mr. Angel you're welcome to but please remember that I'm only human. And if you are afraid of talking to me there is always some other teacher you can talk to who can talk to me in turn. Or write an

anonymous note, I don't care. All communication is more than welcome. I don't consider myself the all-knowing sphinx with all the answers. I want to be able to ask you guys questions as well."

Some sort of tension is building up. Good or bad? I don't know. Perhaps it's the way I'm saying it. Words seem to be flowing from me and I don't have to trigger them from my mind. My hands are sweating. As I continue I'm speaking on a win or lose basis. I give them my best act of the teacher whose sole passion is to teach the students what he loves more than anything else in the world.

"I'll tell you why I want to give my classes like this." I hold a finger in the air. "I keep thinking 'Who am I to judge what these kids write? I am not much older than them.'" I throw my empty hands out at them. "So what gives me the right to tell them they're good or bad? I want you yourselves to feel if you're doing good or bad." I begin to pace. "That doesn't mean I'm not going to comment your work or that I'm going to be a sloppy teacher or be the kind of teacher that gives an 'A' whatever you write. I want us to grow together, exchange ideas." I stop and look from left to right.

"I've been writing for a while and I've been published as some of you know," I look at Elizabeth, "which is why I got this job in spite of my young age." I clench my fist in front of my chest. "I can be close to you because I doubt that we have extremely different ways of thinking. We're even part of the same generation. The PEPSI generation, right? So I feel I have something to give you guys. I know you have something to give me. I'm here because I love creative writing. I hope you are all here for the same reason. If not, I'm going to make you like it." I'm ecstatic, lovable, smiling. My hands are everywhere. What do they see before them? A complete maniac? I can't tell. "I see before me unique people each with a story to tell. I'm going to work on each of you until I am able to

rip that story out of your insides." I rip emptiness out of the air and clench my fist again. I smile, grimacing wildly, hungry.

"I know I've been talking a lot but that's only because we don't know each other yet. I'm hoping that will change. Give me a month and you can tell me what you think of me then."

I sit down in my chair, disbelieving that I have actually gotten all that out in one go. I breathe heavily.

"And I'll be damned if I know where all that came from. You guys must be having some sort of effect on me." I smile at them. Some of them laugh quietly.

And that's when it starts.

Michael Potts puts his hands together in a clap. Another clap. One more. Two more boys join in, clapping. Before I know it, all of them are looking at me, applauding something. What? A feeling? Honesty? I don't know. A wave of appreciation tears through the air and I think my eyes are glistening from developing tears and a wound in my chest, as if from Cupid's last arrow, feels like it is being treated with tablespoon of sweet salt with every clap.

"Whoa!" I shout "Whoa!" The clapping dies out slowly, comfortably. I talk slowly, weighing each word on the tip of my tongue. "That has got to be the most touching sign of appreciation I have ever received in my whole goddamn life. Thank you all. Before I start crying I wonder if you still wish to hear the poem I wrote last week, like I promised? Or can I back out?"

"Not a chance, Pierce," says Michael Potts. I think that's when the magic in my class really has its beginning.

The next day Elizabeth is standing outside my door. Her eyes are filled with tears. The orange sun is about to set but it lingers on the purple horizon, falling on her figure like a blanket of light, as if it won't go to rest until Elizabeth is safely inside. She is crouched and her arms are crossed. She is wearing only

a T-shirt and a blue skirt over her thinness. The evening wind is toying with her tangled hair.

"Can I talk to you?," she whispers and her voice is hoarse with pain.

I feel strange. I'm surprised at seeing her outside my door. I'm tense and I feel bad because she is crying in front of me, as if I caused it.

"Sure Elizabeth," I say, watch her step into my teacher's quarters, and close the door behind her.

7.

"I'm going in-fuckin-sane, Peter," I say, lying on Peter Gadd's expensive leather sofa, examining some spot in the ceiling that appears to be moving.

We're currently playing the who-can-fuckin-well-say-the-most-fucks-in-one -fuckin- sentence game.

Peter looks up at me from the where he is lying on the other sofa, eyeing me across the table where beer bottles lie and stand randomly like startled, green soldiers on a vacation of terror and distortion. Most are Heineken which has been my favorite beer since I saw Blue Velvet. Over the stereo Status Quo is singing "In the army now."

"All the time I've known you, you've been going insane. You're so fucking insane that you're normal."

"Peter," I say, "You've hit your fucking head on the fucking nail. But I'm not kidding. I can't stay here any longer. Is that a fucking fly or something?" I point upwards.

"A *fucking* fly or a fucking *fly*?" he says, chuckling like a baby.

"Come on. Look."

"Where?"

"There."

"Well if you could hold your fucking arm still maybe I could see where the fuck you're pointing."

"Maybe the fuck not."

"You're in-fucking-sane."

"I keep telling you that but you're so fucking pissed that you don't get it."

"Get what?"

"I'm leaving this place."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I'm not talking about here and now, Mr. Magoo, it's everything. The job, the town, the whole damn solar system. I'm sick of it. I'm going."

"Are you going on a fucking vacation, Pierce? You mean you got some fucking story going? That's fuckin great for you."

"I'm not going on any fucking vacation, lamo. I'm just going. Aren't you sick of it all?"

"Sick of what?"

"Your life!"

"I have a wonderful life. The two of us are making a lot of money. I have numerous female acquaintances. Numerous."

"What about the Africa tour we always keep talking about when we're drunk?"

"It'll happen someday..."

"Someday is never, Peter. I don't want that. I can't stay in the same place for this long. Tell me why we can't buy two African Twins and cruise along the Nile? It's all I want right now."

"Shitters, Pierce. We have our jobs, we have our responsibilities, you have Julie-"

"I don't want to hear it, Pete. I just don't want to hear it. I once promised myself I'd never get caught in the damn system. Responsibility is the ugliest fucking word I know! Next to tradition, forever, and marriage, of course. They're all up there on the most despised!" As if in protest, I remember my ghost at the office. "There's only one girl I can think about when I mention those words," I mumble. "I said I'm always going to be free to do whatever I want and now I'm stuck smack in the middle of it all, aren't I? Well, I'm getting out. I'll find a way, Pete. I have found a way. I've passed the magic line, Pete. I'm thirty. I thought I'd never get this old." I pause. "Do you know what angarka is, Peter?"

"An archa?"

"Angarka. I just remembered. A friend of mine made that word up in school. It means to go through life laughing... Pete?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not laughing any more. I'm fucking tired of the goddamn system, and I'm leaving."

"How?"

"I've found a way."

"I'm sure you have. But listen, Pierce. Things fucking change."

"Yeah, they do," I say. "Things change. And it's always the things that you want to keep the same that change. And the things you loathe, they cling to you like chewing fucking gum."

"Man, you sound really depressed."

"Well I am."

"Well don't be fucking depressed. You can angarka right here man. There are writers out there to exploit, parties to throw, pussies to fuck. If you're not really faithful to Julie that is. I can't believe you're actually fucking our secretary!"

"Hey! You were fucking the last one."

"Yes I was. And she left us when she found out about me and Patricia. Oh, Patricia! She played a mean little red riding hood, I'm fuckin tellin you. And how about my party this weekend! There was some pussy, man. Where the fuck were you when Sophie Lyman kept asking for you?"

I start thinking of something to answer him. I think I am going to say it straight out. I think I'm going to say that I left our party for twenty minutes, ran a kilometre, shot an old friend of mine through the head three times, and ran back. But then he loses the question as he continues blabbering.

"She's a perfect one-night bitch for you. She's horny as a rhinoceros." He chuckles. "Get it? Horny as a rhinoceros!" He laughs harder.

"I fuckin get it, Peter," I sigh.

"Why don't you call her up, sometime? And when the fuck are you moving in here anyway? It's not that I'm lonely or anything. Ha! But you're the one who bought this great place you know."

I'm trying to balance a beer glass on my forehead. I used to be able to do it even while young girls punched me in the stomach.

"Pete?"

"Yeah."

"There's something really important I have to tell you."

"What?"

"That spot."

"What spot?"

"It must have been a fucking fly because it's gone now. It flew away."

He starts laughing crazily.

"You are sooo insane Pierce."

"Funny thing, flies. It flew away."

I look around his apartment with all the fuckin' paintings from Africa, fireplace, fuckin' lion on the wall, fuckin' red carpet. Fuckin' Peter with fuckin' better build than me is lying in his fuckin' sofa understanding fuckin' nothing.

I throw the beer glass into the fire, shattering it loudly in clear droplets of distorted light. "They do that in fuckin' Russia!" I shout.

"What the hell are you doing! That's an expensive glass. What's going on with you?"

"I'll tell you what's going on with me. Have you ever killed a man, Peter Gadd? Have you? Because it's not a pretty sight. He's breathing and then you pump him full of death and he's not breathing. See? He's not talking and you know that sometime earlier he's been breathing and thinking and maybe

he wanted to go somewhere too, but he never got the chance, because he's dead now and he's not going anywhere because he's dead now."

"Shitters. Who the fuck did you kill?"

"I killed me, Peter. I'm so dead it's scary. Maybe I'm even deader than the fucking moonman but I'm sure as hell going to come back to life. Because I'm leaving the land of the dead, you know, forever."

"You crack me up."

"Do I sound like I'm joking?"

"Yes. I mean, well, aren't you?"

"Oh man. Don't know and don't give a damn, next stop is Vietnam. Pete?"

"Yeah?"

"Listen closely, do you think Daisy was really driving?"

"What Daisy?"

"The Great Gatsby's Daisy, of course. Gatsby said Daisy was driving, but I don't think so. I think she wasn't, you know. Actually, Gatsby never says straight out that Daisy was driving, does he? So maybe the bastard is so fucking devious that he only hints that Daisy was driving and let's Nick draw that conclusion, but he really doesn't say it because it isn't true. That way he doesn't really lie and it doesn't hurt his conscience. I mean, nobody knows where the man's gotten his fortune and everything and there are so many rumors going around. Wouldn't you just love to have that kind of myth around your person? I would. Just like Jimmy."

"What Jimmy?"

"Jimmy Dean, of course."

"I already know about that obsession, Pierce, spare me."

"I used to say I wanted to die just like him 'cause I think maybe that's the secret, you know, the meaning of life. Die

young so that you can be young in heaven. But I don't know anymore."

"Is this why you wanted to get drunk in the middle of the afternoon? To tell me that you're gonna commit suicide or something? I've heard it before, Pierce, many times, and I don't want to hear it just now."

I begin scratching my wrists again.

"Face thinks I killed a man," I say.

"Face?"

"Elizabeth Tucker."

"I don't connect."

"From when I was teaching."

"Isn't that the student bitch you fell in love with that you used to tell me about? But you said you haven't seen her since you lost your teaching-job."

"I saw her today."

"When?"

"At the office. You saw her."

"I saw her? But the only person at the office was the ghost, the reporter with the long legs. I'd fuck her in a sec."

"I'm sure you would."

"Wait a minute! You're not fucking telling me that bitch was the reason you had to leave your teaching-job. The student you seduced! Man oh man Pierce. You had some hot fun as a teacher."

"I didn't seduce her. I never seduced her. And it was more than her. Man, I really loved that fucking job. I loved being a teacher. It was fuckin magic."

"So you keep telling me. But you didn't have it for very long, did you? Three months?"

"One month."

"You told me three months. Man are you're in big trouble."

"Why?"

"Does Julie know?"

"Know what?"

"About miss student?"

"No."

"So you're in big trouble, you lucky s-o-b."

"Oh, Pete, I have fuckin other things to worry about."

"What if she's back for your cock? Return of the student nympho, now showing in a theatre near you. Hold on to your pencils teachers, you're in for the biggest lesson of your life! Man that would be a great ad for a porno flick." He's laughing crazily again. An ugly, neighing laugh.

"Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!" I scream.

"Okay, gawd, you're really touchy about this, Pierce."

"With reason, Pete, with reason. Look, get another bottle of ABSOLUT from your little cute liquor cabinet and we'll go out and make the city unsafe. I need to clean out my insides."

"That's the best thing you've said all fucking night. All fucking day, I mean." He chuckles.

"I'll call a cab," I say as Roxette finish off "It must have been love."

But it's over now...

8.

Elizabeth sits in a chair in my kitchen. Makeup is running down her white cheeks. I sit across from her, studying her, wanting her, feeling sorry for her. She looks vulnerable, the tears are cracking her porcelain face, and I feel afraid. I look over at the three wooden monkeys on my window sill. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I didn't know where else to go Mr. Angel. I just felt you might listen right now."

"Hey," I say. I place my hand under her chin and lift her face so that she can look into my eyes. I into hers. I try to be strong but I already feel lumps in my throat. I look away hastily. I don't know how to act. I don't know what's coming. I hate not knowing.

"How can you think that you could possibly bother me?" I say. "You can talk to me anytime. I'm really glad that you came to see me. I'm happy and very flattered. Please tell me what's wrong."

She smiles at me and my stomach performs somersaults between Jupiter's moons. She wipes her tears with the handkerchief I've given her. What I wouldn't give to taste the salt on her cheeks!

"He hit me." And the words themselves strike hard and suddenly, sending me into a daze.

"Who hit you?"

"My stepfather."

That's when I notice the large, red and bluish mark on her left cheek, close to her eye. If she weren't sitting there I'd be punching and kicking the walls and screaming 'til I was bleeding. Until God was bleeding and the oceans turned red.

"Your stepfather?" I ask.

And pictures fly past my eyes. The kinds of pictures that you never rid your mind of. Like when me and my high school

classmate, Carl, found Maria Falloni without any clothes on in the woods behind the boarding house. The bruises on her face were dirty and bleeding.

My throat hurts and I swallow, trying to stop the tears from flowing. Oh why did she come to me? I don't know what to do. I look at her face, struggling with so much pain. I want to hurt the man who did this to her, her stepfather. I want to watch his head explode like an egg in a microwave oven. For Maria Falloni. But I can't stop thinking that I have imagined this girl in bed with me. Who am I to come to, to judge? I feel sick with myself. Anger and rage start somewhere but I try to hold them back, frightened.

"Has this happened before?"

She nods.

"But why haven't you told anybody before? What about your mother?"

"She knows."

"Oh jeeesus. What about some other adult?"

"They wouldn't understand."

Maria Falloni was still alive when we found her, raped by six boys from the school. I have always thought I knew who they were. But I could never be sure enough to turn them in. I had found a pen. A pen with initials.

I realize that I'm asking questions and it strikes me as the wrong thing to do. I can't deal her the word when she needs someone to hold her, to comfort her. I just don't know if I dare hold her. I don't know how to comfort her. I take her hands in mine, trembling, aware of their cold softness.

"Listen, Elizabeth, I'm not good with these situations. I don't know what to say or do. All I know is I've got a beautiful girl sitting here and I'm holding her hands. She's hurting and that makes me hurt. Her pretty face is stained with tears and I keep wishing they weren't there. I feel like crying but I'm afraid to,

afraid of what this girl will think of me if I do. Maybe she'll run out, maybe she'll think... the more I think about it, the only reason I'm not crying is because I'm not supposed to as a man, because it's a sign of weakness."

I cried when Maria Falloni died in my arms. While Carl was running for help. I didn't know what to do. I had secretly loved Maria Falloni. I had written letters to her that I never signed. She had also been the first woman I had seen naked. Except it wasn't as beautiful as I had hoped it would be. She puked over her breasts before she died. I didn't know what to do when life poured out of her in red.

"I'm sitting here... holding her hands and I'm thinking about what she has just told me and I'm thinking of how much I would like to hurt the person who did this to her, beat him senseless, shoot him through the head at close range, and watch his brain paint the walls. And then I'm thinking about what to say to her, I'm searching through all the movies I've seen and I try to find something to say from them, but I can't. And then I realize it wouldn't be right to say something that I didn't think of myself. That would be like saying that she is a machine and I can say to her what someone else has written in a script for some other situation. I can't do that. This girl is alive and breathing and she needs someone to talk to her."

Maria Falloni had coughed, gurgled. She whispered, trying hard to smile, 'I know you wrote the letters.' And then she puked.

"She is a beautiful girl who I met last week. I am her teacher but barely five years older than her. Her beauty makes me think about her sometimes, and this moment she is sitting in my kitchen and tears are falling from her eyes and I try to hold back the tears that are making my eyes shine. She wipes her eyes with my handkerchief and I feel close to her. I don't know what to say. I just don't know what to say."

I began to gather up leaves when Maria Falloni puked. And I started trying to wipe it off. But in the end it all smeared with the blood and the sperm on her flat stomach. And I cried and I urinated in my underwear.

My voice fades. I feel a salty drop running down my cheek and I quickly wipe it away against my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I say weakly.

She looks at me. I look away. When she speaks her voice is shaky but under control.

"Please don't stop talking Mr. Angel. Why do you keep saying 'her'?"

Not thinking, I pressed my head against Maria Falloni's stomach, weeping, and when I brought it up, the mix of sperm and blood and puke was in my hair and running down my face in warm streams and I started throwing up then, all over Maria Falloni before I turned away and put my hand against the pen, the silver pen, in my own puke. The smell of Maria Falloni and me that evening clings to me still. Often when I lie in bed at night.

I can't hold back any more and when I start speaking, my voice is trembling and I draw deep breaths. I don't wipe off the tears.

"I keep saying 'her' because if I say 'her' I'm still... being the writer. There is distance between us and I can speak... like I'm creating a story. I want it to be a story, because if it is... then I can walk away from it.. later.. and go about my everyday life, feeling moved... but getting over it because, because it's only something I've written... and I can close my eyes and when I open them... you're gone... because you were only a character in my imagination. It's easier for me to talk that way because I'm afraid, Elizabeth... afraid because I know this is not a story.. and I know something really bad has happened... and I know I have to take steps to... solve... something. I'm afraid

of... of what you're telling me. Afraid that I will do something wrong."

I shake my head. In vain. I let go of her hands and bury my face in my own hands. I sob heavily. I sense that she is getting up. I expect her to leave. Instead she walks around the table. She gets down on her knees and puts her head in my lap.

I used E.M.Y.'s pen to write one final letter to Maria Falloni. I read it aloud once before I set fire to it and made the stupid, whining alarm go off.

"It's okay to Mr. Angel. You're doing okay."

We sit like that for a while. I'm still, she's stroking my leg. I put my arms around her. She puts her arms around me. We share warmth, comfort, darkness. I touch her hair. She looks up at me.

"Do you know why I came to you?"

"No," I say.

"Because I know you're hurting. I knew you would understand."

"How would you know that?"

"I finished reading your poetry collection last night."

"You did?"

"Yes. They're the most beautiful poems I've ever read."

"Thank you."

"But there is a lot of pain in those poems. I wept when I read them. Nobody could have written those poems if it weren't for pain."

I'm silent.

"I'll help you if you'll help me," she says.

I close my eyes.

"What do you want me to do Elizabeth?"

"I want you to be here for me."

"You mean you don't want me to report this?"

"No, please don't Mr. Angel."

"But what about what he has done to you, what he might do again? He struck you. More than once it looks like."

"But my mother loves him, Mr Angel. Please understand."

I do.

9.

My head hurts. I try to block out the knocking at my door with a pillow but it's not working.

"Shut up!" I scream, "Shut the fuck up!" This protest sets my skull in vibration so painfully that I feel inclined to add, "Down boy, down!" and I smile at the mirror as I always do when I feel that I've said something funny.

The knocking merely increases in loudness, ignoring my protests. Slowly, really slowly, I push myself up against my arms. When they are straight, I fall down again.

"Damn..."

I use plan B and roll over, falling to the floor. My fall is blocked by layers of old clothes and I smile at the mirror, having found another excuse for not cleaning up. I get up on my knees and start crawling towards the door. I fall over only once as I try to look in an old milk carton to see if there's any milk left. There is. There was.

At the door I lie down in a doggie-crouch and yelp at it.

"Woof! Woof!" I laugh.

"Angel?" I hear through the door.

"Face?"

"The one and only. Why don't you open up?"

"Give me an hour."

I get up on my knees and reach for the lock. I turn it and fall down again. The door opens and I see a pair of black shoes, high-heels, skin-colored stockings.

"Angel!" The door closes and I feel a hand on my head.

"You're a mess."

"No kidding?" I manage to get out. I laugh.

"God!" She pulls her hand away. "What's this in your hair?"

"Milk," I say and laugh even harder. "I dreamed about you, you know."

"I'm very flattered."

"Don't be."

"You need to get back to bed."

"I'm fine here." I grab one of her legs and hug it.

"Oh, Angel, I don't need this now."

"Sure you do. You need your guardian angel to take care of you."

"I think it's the guardian angel who needs some help."

She somehow steps out of my grasp and grabs a hold under my armpits, starting to pull me towards the bed.

"You have gained some weight."

"Oh, darling, that just means there is more of me to love."

"No. It means that you're getting older."

With me kicking, she somehow manages to get me beside the bed.

"Now, climb in."

"Aye, aye, skipper," I say, salute her, and manage to get on the bed. I smile at the mirror. It is quite often that I think I say something funny.

"Have you been burgled or something?" she asks, looking around.

"What you see around you," I say and I make an artistic pause, "is home."

"It's disgusting."

"Thank you, I try my very best."

"Let me get you something for your head," she says and walks away.

"Yes please, a hat would be nice." She doesn't hear me, but I laugh at the mirror.

"Oh my god!" She screams from the kitchen.

"What?" I whisper to my pillow, "What now?"

"Do you realize that you have puked all over your dirty dishes!"

"Funny thing, puke" I say to Arnold Schwarzenegger on the "Terminator" poster, "I haven't puked over my dishes. I've thrown up. There's a difference. Puking is what girls do. You know, they lift their serviette to their mouth, hiccup, and out comes the remains of last night's carrot or something. Puking is girlish. It takes a man to really throw up. Throwing up is what men do. They have it in them to do it. When men throw up you can really tell that they're emptying their stomach because they really prepare themselves. You see it on their face that they're really feeling bad. They grin sort of crazy-like. And then, surprise, they open their mouth. And out comes this fountain of digested food that's all these crazy pinky-orange colors and you don't know why it's all those crazy colors because it sure wasn't those crazy colors when you ate it. And men can't catch it in a damn serviette, they need a whole damn carpet. What I'm trying to say is, girls puke, and men throw up."

"What are you talking about?," she says as she reenters my humble quarters.

"How far from the toilet can you stand when you pee? I have a record of around four meters. I can open the door to the bathroom, you know, and stand in the kitchen and piss across the hallway. It's really funny. I think I broke my record last night but I can't remember."

"You make me sick."

"That makes two of us," I say and laugh.

"Well I know I'm not going into the bathroom."

"I'm like a dog," I try explaining to her, "I need to mark out my territory."

"And so you have. Odor and all. Here."

She holds a glass for me to drink.

"You live in a shithouse long enough and eventually you can't smell the shit," I say.

"Oh, that's deep. Really deep."

I take the glass with both my hands. Our fingers touch. She helps me lean the glass. I'm only thinking about our fingers touching. I finish drinking and our fingers part again.

"You've really changed, Angel," she says.

"I know, Face, I know. Things change. But it's your fault. I've missed you so much."

I'm almost crying and I hate myself for it at the same time as I hope she'll be moved by it, that it will appeal to those good old maternal instincts.

"It's been a long time since I heard you call me that."

"What?"

"Face."

"About seven years, huh? Glad to be of service."

"You could have gotten in touch with me. You knew where I was."

"Are you back now?" I cry. "Because I want you to be back. I want you to stay with me. Will you stay with me? Hold me please."

She takes me in her arms and I rest my head against her breathing chest. She puts her legs up on the bed and I crouch closer to her, and heat travels between our bodies, and I feel happy, and I smile.

10.

"What is the meaning of all this!" I exclaim as I enter Elizabeth's class. The class looks dumbfoundedly at me. I try to avoid looking at Elizabeth, but I can't and I notice that her left cheek is clearly swollen, though she has used a great deal of powder in an attempt to hide it. She's still the most beautiful figure I've ever seen. Perhaps more beautiful. I point at the four impressive bookcases at the back of the room.

"What is the meaning of all these books I ask you," I continue, "Are they merely pastimes for the imagination or do they give us something useful? Tell me, what is it that you mean to accomplish with your works?" The last question is directed outwards to the class. Nobody seems eager to answer. "Speak class, or forever hold your silence!" A pimply kid in the second row raises his hand. "No need for that," I say, "speak when thou art ready."

"Well, like you said before, we write because we feel and we want somebody else to feel."

"Okay, so we want our readers to feel something. We have a story to tell. But what about when they stop reading. Do they stop feeling? Do they forget our story? Anyone?"

"We want them to remember," says the fat girl in the front row, Kimmy.

"Good. We want them to feel, we want them to remember the feeling. But why do we want them to remember?"

"Because it is important to us," says a girl in the back row. I've got them thinking now and answers start popping from all corners of the room.

"But why should anybody be interested in your story?" says another kid in the back. Michael Potts.

"Ah!" I exclaim, "A doubter. Good. Could you elaborate your line of thinking, please."

"Well, just because I feel strongly about something does not mean that somebody else will care about what I have to say."

"You've got that right, Potty." some other boy says.

"Shut up lighthouse."

"Ah. Good. A conflict. May I ask, though, Potty, is it?, if you do feel strongly about something you have to say, you will want people to care, won't you?"

"Sure."

"So we feel something, we have a story, we want to write it, and we want people to remember it. Fine. But we also know that people may not be interested. Okay. So our problem is making them interested, isn't it? And how do we do that?"

"By writing really good, I guess."

"Yes! And there's our ticket to fame and fortune! Writing good. And to write good we must have a fire within and we must practice. There you have the essence in writing. But," I say, "my original question was: What is the meaning of all this? I want to know why we want to people to remember our stories. Is it merely fame and fortune that makes us want to share our stories?"

"We seek attention, I suppose", begins Elizabeth, "If I feel lonely I can share this feeling with other people by writing it into a poem. Mostly, perhaps, it's a form of therapy. We write to get out certain feelings that are making us not being able to think straight. I mean, writing for some people, sure, it's for fame and fortune, but others write because that's the only way they know to tell what they're feeling. So the meaning, I guess, is to get out feelings because they're, you know, wanting to get out."

"That's confusingly well put, Elizabeth, and there's a lot of truth in what you're saying. What makes a person journey into writing, no one really knows. A good way of saying it is that there are feelings wanting to get out. There are some feelings

we just don't understand, and sometimes the best way of trying to understand them is to try and write about them. There is one feeling especially that poets struggle with, that they try to make sense out of but never seem to because it's different for everybody. Anybody know what that feeling is?"

"Love," Elizabeth answers softly.

"Great Lizzie," Potty says but I try to ignore him.

"Love it is," I confirm, "And there is one of the reasons people start writing. And then there are probably other feelings that make a person feel strange, but that is definitely the major one. Love is the reason many poems lie around in people's drawers all over the world, unread by anyone besides the holder of the pen. Some are ripped to pieces and some are thrown in fireplaces. Those creations can not be said to have been written out of anything but passion. Are they the most beautiful poems? We can never know. But we can pretend that they are, because it is romantic to believe so."

"So what is the meaning of it all?" Potty shouts from the back of the class, impatiently.

"I'm sorry. Have we still not answered the question? Well, Potty, do you want to give it a shot?"

"Yes sir, Pierce. I say the meaning is to give us something to think about, to remind us of our doings and wrongdoings and to give us something to talk about just like you're doing, you know, sort of talking about irony and love and all that."

"That's good."

"Is it right?"

"I don't know."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying that there is no specific answer. That's what I want you to realize. I'm not trying to talk above your heads or trying to hide the answer from you. You expect me to be able to give an answer because I'm the teacher. But I can't tell you

what's right and wrong in abstract matters. There are only rights and there are as many rights as there are people.

"You all have your own idea of what the meaning is behind writing, and as long as you have an idea it doesn't matter what anybody else's idea is, or does it? What you think is true to you is the most important because your truth is what makes you an individual, what makes you interpret things differently from someone else. The next thing to do is recognize that everybody else has their own truths and to be able to understand them fully you must understand what makes up their truths. You do that by communicating with them.

"I can say that the meaning behind writing is to attract attention, to provide a companion for the lonely, to understand love better, to... make people understand you, to escape reality or some other fear, to give me something to talk about. The list is endless. What one must realize is that in one way or another, all of them are right. Eventually we learn to understand other people and we either agree with them or stay away from them. You might even be talked into believing something new. I don't know but maybe someday we all will understand each other's truths and adapt them, the one truth being the acceptance of all truths."

I realize that they're all staring at me as if I'm some Martian freak with a hat that flashes: Unstable brain.

"I'm sorry, I'm getting a bit carried away."

"So Pierce," Potty says, "Why can't you at least tell us what your truth is."

"Fair enough, Potty, I will. Peace, love and sex?" I try and they laugh at me.

"No, I mean really. What is the meaning of writing to you?"

"Beauty," I say.

"Beauty?"

"Yes. We write because we think it is beautiful. We read because we think it is beautiful. We whistle appreciatively when a beautiful girl walks by. We smile at the sound of a beautiful musical rhythm. We cry when we see a beautiful movie. We look with awe at beautiful paintings and applaud the beautiful, colorful display of fireworks on the sky. We work out in gyms, eat health-food, put on make-up, and some even do facelifts to achieve something. Beauty.

"Models learn how beauty can be appreciated. Those who fail to meet the requirements of beauty in their looks are told that beauty should be found on the inside. And yet beauty on the inside is rarely achieved without an ability to experience beauty on the outside, perhaps by accomplishments. We can all tell what is beautiful, because it makes us feel good, though we don't know why. Most often, though thankfully not always, we all find the same things beautiful.

"Beauty is something we all strive to have. Some people have beauty in appearance but others can have it only in what they create."

I realize I must try to lift the mood in the class and I finish, "A few chosen ones have it in both. Like myself, of course."

They boo. I laugh.

"Look, I've been talking a lot this lesson and I think it needs time to settle within you, so all I ask is that you go home and think about what I've said. If you think it's all baloney, I want you to tell me, or submit any criticism in readable handwriting. Your poems have been looked through and you can pick them up on my desk. If someone would like to read it to the class on Tuesday next week we will all be waiting eagerly for that someone to step forward. Have a beautiful weekend."

That evening I'm sitting at my kitchen table, trying in a poem to capture all that I said during the day's class. I watch the

liquid colors of the sun spread outside the window and I hear a voice behind me.

"Hi."

"Elizabeth? Hello."

"I let myself in. I hope you don't mind. I just wanted to talk to someone."

"Sure Elizabeth. Have a seat."

She seats herself and fixes her eyes on mine. She doesn't say anything. I try to make out the color of her eyes, but I can't. Perhaps because I am not looking into her eyes. But I don't dare raise my head to face them.

"Do you see Beauty in me?" she asks.

11.

"Pierce, wake up." She kisses my nose. "Hey. Wake up."

I sit up and squint my eyes.

"What's going on?" she asks.

"What do you mean, what's going on?"

"You cleaned your apartment. All the time I've known you you've never cleaned your apartment without my help."

Julie is sitting next to me, looking seriously into my eyes. I look around. I don't see anything. I don't see any dirty clothes, any dishes or milk cartons. All the books are on their shelf. Everything, from the wooden loudspeakers down to the computer mouse, is placed in symmetry. A set of clean clothes are even hanging over my chair. I'm still dressed, though very dizzy.

"Have I been burgled?" I joke.

"Come on. What's going on?"

Then I realize. And feeling almost frightened, looking around my room, I experience a sincere feeling of *deja vu*. The James Dean poster has been moved and placed beside the door. Just as it was once.

"Oh Julie, I just felt like surprising me, I mean you," I try.

She searched my apartment! Face searched my apartment. I'm sure she did. Damn. What if she found what she was looking for. That which I hope she didn't know she was looking for. I don't like this. She could ruin it! She could ruin my one chance to be free. The one woman I constantly dream about, the one woman I may actually love in the core and every sense of that word, is back in my life and she is about to ruin it! Why couldn't she stay in my head? I don't know if I should laugh or cry. But then, who ever does? So I realize, in fact, that I probably have been burgled.

"The door was open."

"Well I must have left it open when I came home last night. How did I get home?"

Too easy. She won't fall for that. Will she? Too many thoughts are clouding my ability to lie convincingly. How did Face clean and rearrange the whole apartment without me waking up? This is too much for me to handle in a dazed moment. And where is she now? The police? I don't feel so good.

"Something's going on with you and if I didn't know you better I'd say it was another woman."

The trick is not to deny it, speak around it. Tell the little truths that she will listen to. They aren't lies. Be devious. Tell the little truths but not the one truth that they lead to. Play it cool, old sport. Angarka!

"Oh, come on Juul, I was out with Pete yesterday. We had a few drinks, maybe seven too many."

She drugged me! That must be it. She did give me something to drink. I slept deeply for a couple of hours. Put those two facts together and you have a conclusion. A frightening one. She comes back after seven years and drugs me. And I love her!

"You came late yesterday, stayed only to talk with that reporter and then the two of you vanished. And today you didn't come in at all." She's talking slowly, knowingly.

The two of you vanished? Me and Pete, or me and the reporter? Is she implying something? Just don't let her know that you think that she may be implying something because then you're caught in her trap. Okay? Okay.

"Hey, miss secretary," I say, grab a hold of her, throw her down on the bed and throw a leg over her. I stare menacingly into her eyes and kiss her on the mouth. "Who's the boss?" I say.

"I'm just not sure I like the way my boss is running business."

"What if I fire you?"

"Then I'd find another boss."

"But would you find one as handsome?"

"Oh, yes I would, she says and puts a hand on my stomach and pinches a layer of fat.

"Hey, that's a blow under the belt!" I cry playfully.

"No, it isn't," she smiles, "but this is."

She brings her knee up, fast, and it meets up with the one part of my body that has a specific fear of female knees.

I fall over on my back, on my side. I scream. I hurt. I bring my hands down. I wince. I scream. Scrambled curses escape me in sharp pain. "Oh Jeesush, fuck, damn, fucking hell, oh man, oh gawd, oh no, oh no." And then: "Fuck!"

"You lying son of a bitch!" she screams at me. She's standing at the foot of the bed and I'm lying on it, hurting like a woman in labor.

"You asshole. You, you-" She's angry. Oh boy is she angry. She's holding a finger out at me. Strands of blond hair are hanging over her flushed face. She's moving from leg to leg like a boxer getting ready to lay the final punch, trying so hard to find some word, some word that will hurt me worse than her little knee-trick.

"-cheating, two-faced, hypocritical, fuckfaced, fatso." That's the word. She knows it.

"I hope you're sooo happy with your new woman, because you're not seeing this one again. You may regard this as my resignation. Here. From your little darling Face. What did she take, your underwear? And the next time you're going to lie in someone's face, at least have the decency to wipe off your previous engagement's lipstick from your ear."

She throws a piece of paper at me and disappears, slamming the door as is the custom in these situations.

I lie for a while looking at myself in the mirror. I'm crouched like a baby and still hurting.

"You miserable boy. Look at what's happening to you. You should be glad it's all going to be over soon."

Then I remember Face's little visit. I sit up in bed and reach for the piece of paper. I read.

Angel, I have something that you may want back. If you do, or even if you don't, meet me at PATRICK'S tonight. 6.30 sharp. We have a lot to discuss.

XXX,

Face

*PS Angels are bright still,
though the brightest fell. DS*

I duck under the bed and pull out the shoebox, open it and look inside. It's empty.

"Oh Face, why oh why oh why?" I cry with my eyes closed and I feel my itch craving in an addictive urge.

12.

"Are you serious, Elizabeth? You're extremely beautiful."

"Then why don't you look at me?"

I raise my head and look into her eyes.

"You have blue eyes," I realize.

"Yes, I do, just like you."

"It's just that, the other day, I was trying real hard to remember what color your eyes were but I couldn't."

"Because you hadn't looked into them. Not really. You rarely do look into anyone's eyes. Why?"

"I guess because I feel that it's too intimate. I keep thinking that I don't want people to see my eyes because if they do they can see inside me in some weird way."

"I know. I do the same."

"Not with me, you don't," I say, smiling.

"No, not with you."

"Are you sure you're only seventeen?" I ask, "Because you sure look and talk older. You're even one year younger than everybody else in the class, my research tells me. I was one year younger in my class as well."

"How old are you, Mr. Angel?"

"I'm twenty-three."

"Well, Mr. Angel," she says and leans forward, "you hold a creative writing class like you were a hundred."

"So what is this, are we trying to find out how alike we are?"

"I don't think we have to try, Mr. Angel."

I fall helplessly into a pink cup filled with waves of creamy night and boiling ice.

"Mr. Angel?"

"Mmmm? Oh. Well if this conversation is going to proceed I will have to begin calling you Miss Tucker or you will have to drop the mister stuff."

"Okay Angel, that's fine by me."

I laugh.

"So you liked my class today?"

"You were okay."

"I don't know. When I'm in that class it's like I'm another person."

"You sure do put on an act."

"Yes I do, don't I? But that's the only way I can do it. If I try to be myself then I wouldn't be able to say anything. I borrow personalities and words from the books I've read and the films I've seen. Perhaps I just haven't found the real me, yet."

"And if the returning waves can show all my masks from start, I wonder if I will ever know in the oceans of my heart, I wonder if I'll see in the tidal maze, what hidden face, is really, truly me?"

"You have read my poems."

"That's one of my favorite. It has a way of sticking to your mind, because it's so true."

"Thanks."

"It's Beauty."

"Okay, okay, I get it."

She leans forward again, blowing in my face, and my hair flies up and settles on my forehead again.

"Perhaps you had better explain that Beauty thing to me again," she whispers.

"Are you trying to seduce me, Elizabeth?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided yet."

"You haven't decided?"

"If you're worth seducing."

"Thank you."

"Do you really, truly find me beautiful?"

I look at her.

"Like the sun. You glow. Like ice. You sparkle. Like the earth. You're warm. Like the wind. You fly. Like the stars. You shine. Like-"

She leans over and puts her lips on mine. We taste each other briefly. Then she sits back again. I touch my trembling mouth with my fingers.

"That was definitely the earth part of you," I say, somewhat taken aback.

"Did you rehearse that or something?" she asks playfully, smiling like a child who has gotten away with her best ever prank.

"No, in fact, I'm glad you caught me in the middle, I was running out of Likes."

"Then you had better start on the Loves," she says and kisses me again. Momentarily we circumtravel a blue moon. We return back to Earth and I open my quivering eyes in a blinking slow-motion. Hurting.

"Listen, I know something special is happening here and I'll tell you that my heart is galloping away like crazy but I have to think clearly here and when I think clearly then I can't stop thinking that yesterday we were crying in each other's arms and today we're kissing and I just can't stop thinking that we've just met and I'm your teacher and I can't stop thinking about the damn reason why we were crying yesterday."

I catch my breath.

"It's all I've been thinking about for the last twenty-four hours, I sat up all night thinking that I shouldn't have let you go home and now I'm thinking that we have to get this sorted out because right now I don't know what I'm feeling and I'm not sure if this thing that I don't know that I'm feeling is really the thing I ought to be feeling, considering the circumstances since I'm your goddamn teacher."

She looks at me, calm as a breeze on a bright summer's day.

"You know what Angel?"

"What?"

"You sound to me like you're in love."

"I think I was coming to that," I say weakly.

"Listen Angel," she begins and grabs my hands. She smiles.

"I really like calling you Angel because I can think of you as my guardian angel. I came to you yesterday. I was frightened. I was crying. I came to you because I liked you from the first day. That's why I got hold of your poems. You helped. You talked with me. Maybe I helped you too in some way. And you're right. Something special is happening here. Why can't we just trust that and forget about the rest of the world. Just like the monkeys you have here. What are they? See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil?" She indicates the three monkeys by the window, with their eyes, mouth, and ears closed to the world.

"You know that's what we should do. I know that's what we should do. Our only problem is that the world around us will probably not think it's the right thing to do."

"I just told you to forget about the rest of the world."

"I wish I could, Elizabeth. I wish I could. But look at the monkeys. They only have a pair of hands each. Only one of them is holding his hands over his mouth. He can hear, he can see what's happening. But that's the poor one. He can't share it with anybody else. The other two can. Together those two can see and hear everything and I'll bet at the first opportunity they'll go chattering all that evil all over the world."

"You've been waiting for someone to say that to, haven't you?"

"I guess." I laugh. "God you seem to see things so clearmindedly."

"It's elementary, my dear Angel. If you have three monkeys in your kitchen window then most probably you have taken

some time to think about what they tell you. It sounded like you've given it a lot of thought."

"I have."

"So you want me to go?"

"No!" I shout. "I want you to stay and proceed a little slower please. You're not leaving without kissing me again. But I think we need to talk first."

I'm hit with some inspiration and remove the white tablecloth from the table. I throw it so that it covers the monkeys.

"There," I say. "Forget about the damn monkeys. That was just something I said because it's something I've thought about a lot. Maybe I was trying to impress you, I don't know. But there is some truth in what I said. You know that. But they can't see us now, can they?"

"But two monkeys can hear us," she teases.

"So maybe we'd better go into the other room," I say and take her hand. We walk into the only other sitting room in the abode, where I keep my desk and my books and my laptop computer and my posters. The James Dean poster beside the door. And my bed. But this evening, and all other evenings, we filter dreams, seeking identity.

"Wow! You sure have a lot of film posters."

"Well, I like films."

I sit down on the bed, leaning against the far wall so that I can watch her. She floats around my room touching everything and asking question after question. Sometimes she laughs and chills of pleasure run along my delighted spine. I actually pinch myself several times, not to check if I'm dreaming, but to check if I can still feel pain.

"Have you read all of these?" She indicates Shakespeare's complete works in the bookcase.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. No, actually, for some reason, I have read all the kings except for King Lear. It's one of those you may read in school but I only studied Macbeth in school."

"I've read King Lear."

"Really?"

"But it's the only one I've read."

"So... together we are complete."

"Yes. It is the stars, The stars above us, govern our conditions."

"Well roared, Lion."

"The prince of darkness is a gentleman." She comes closer to the bed. "Here, I stand, your slave."

"She's beautiful and therefore to be woo'd; She is a woman, therefore to be won."

She climbs onto the bed and approaches me, walking on all fours like a cat.

"But his flaw'd heart-," she whispers, "Alack, too weak the conflict to support! - 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, Burst smilingly."

She leans in to kiss me but I hold a finger over her lips and whisper, our eyes in each others, our noses barely touching and our breaths caressing each other's faces, "Her voice was ever soft, gentle, and low - an excellent thing in woman."

We kiss and turn amidst a darkness eternally in a ripe, unchained and violent pleasure, biting and breathing with draining exhaustion in a light breeze, a gentle rain, in a blue, coiled sea shell. My heart knocks increasingly higher in sound and pressure until it bursts in volcanic eruption and I burn.

When we open our eyes again white light blinds me briefly. Her face is still in mine and I smile.

"Wasn't that from King Lear?" she asks.

"The kiss?" I breathe heavily, dazed.

"No, silly, the quote."

"Oh. Yeah." I retrieve my thought from somewhere in the back of my head. "I had a roommate who read King Lear when I went to boarding school. We used to study quotes together. I remember he really liked the one about the birds, you know. God's spies and everything. He said he'd be a bird in afterlife."

"We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Beauty, huh?"

"Yeah. Funny thing, Beauty. You. Your face is so perfect," I tell her, "you're like a painting. There are simply no faults because the artist created your face from an image in his head, from a dream. The lines in your face are a composition of full, alive inspiration caught on a blue mountain above the clouds. Your skin tone is a creamy pearl from fathoms below water where mermaids swim. Your eyes are clear, pure pools of water that I always spill into when I attempt to catch my reflection in them.

"A curve is formed when I run my finger from between those pools, down and slightly outwards, and gently the gradient increases, like when an orchestra moves toward a crescendo, and when I reach the end of this exquisite masterpiece and the little mound that gives your face it's majestic form my heart leaps and I know I've touched Beauty. If I were to calculate the formula for that curve I'm sure I would end up with the ultimate, mathematical truth.

"It isn't a nose really and anybody should be ashamed of ever calling it so. What you have is so rare that it has not yet been given a name. It must therefore be christened. I hereby christen thee Nezina, the goddess of facemounds, and I do so with a kiss." I kiss the tip of her nose. "And now to thy mouth. It apparently is gifted with perfection as all of your face jewelry. What now! It appears to have an invisible magnetic field. It's

pulling me in! No man of the human race can withstand such power." I quickly kiss her mouth.

"Do you know, woman," I say and lean back, examining her, "that you are much too beautiful to be called Elizabeth. I must be realistic and examine the facts. You, woman, can possibly not carry any other name than Face."

"Face?"

"Yes. Face."

"I guess I could live with that. If I can call you Angel."

"It's not my real name, you know."

"No?"

"I stole it from a movie I once saw when I moved to the states. `Angelheart'. With that girl from the Cosby Show, Lisa Bonet. She showed her belly button and there was this storm of protests. As if that was going to make less people see the movie! Sometimes I really wonder where some people were when they handed out brains."

"So what's your real name?"

"Maybe I'll tell you one day."

"Why not now?"

"You'd laugh."

"I wouldn't laugh!"

"Yes you would."

"Well maybe now I would laugh because you keep saying I will."

"See what I mean? You'd laugh."

"I think I'll stick with Angel," she says.

Face and I speak for another hour.

When she is about to leave we're standing just inside the door. I hold her waist, she holds my arms, and we look into each other's eyes a short second and taste a piece of unmasked reality.

She kisses my lips. "Speak no evil." She kisses below each eye. "See no evil." She kisses my ear. "Hear no evil." She puts her forehead against mine and when she speaks her breath again caresses my face.

"Now no evil can touch us," she whispers.

She walks out and I raise my head towards the ceiling, look beyond it and in dramatic impression exclaim, "Oh father of our milky way, why must you toy with me in such a manner?"

13.

She is wearing a midnight-black, tight, knee-length, full-body dress with shoulder straps and a modest, teasing cleavage. With her black hair, blood lipstick, cat's eyes and panther body she is beyond stunning. She is sitting by herself, legs crossed and smoking a cigarette. No, she's making love to that cigarette. She's breaking that cigarette's heart. And one has to see it to understand it. Men around her are seeing it. She knows they are seeing it. When I make my entrance she knows that I know they are seeing it. And I'm prepared.

A few feet past the entrance I stop. I stand, legs apart, left hand in the left pocket of my jacket, right arm hanging against my side. My pressure point is on my right leg. I make sure to stand tall, head up, tummy in. They've seen her. Now let them see me. I'm wearing a buttoned, dark blue, double-breasted three-piece suit with vertical, distanced, hair-thin gray stripes. Under my suit, of course, the vest to match it. The tie is a display of merging, artistic brush strokes of rough, green colors. Beyond a kaleidoscopic pattern in the tie is the face of James Dean, rarely visible to those who don't know about it and not visible now because of the vest. My hair is slicked back with an ample amount of gel. On my scarred face, of course, I have placed a pair of silver-framed Ray-Ban sunglasses.

When I notice faces turning, I scope. Slowly, I turn my head to the left, making sure not to recognize anyone else's presence in any movement. I hold my line of vision. I make my mental notes. The place is relatively full for a Tuesday. All the bar stools are occupied except one at the far wall. There is a clear majority of men at the tables. The mood of the room is pleasant against the beige, wooden interior. The air is stuffy but not revoltingly so. The noise-level is quieter now than when I walked in. Then I start casing back again, turning my head

slowly to the right I repeat my procedure. I notice Face noticing me but I don't look her way. I finish by looking straight ahead, at nothing as it would seem to an onlooker.

My right hand goes into my left, inside jacket pocket for a packet of CAMELS. I hold it in my right hand and tap it gently. Then I bring it to my mouth and take one of them between my teeth, grinning. As my right hand discards of the packet where it was found, my left hand moves up out of its pocket and I hold it a short distance out and in front of my chest. In this hand is a gold-coated ZIPPO lighter which is alight with the quick flick of my thumb. Instead of bringing this up, I move my head down, so that I'm in a crouching pose, still with my line of vision fixed straight ahead, as if I'm sizing someone up. I inhale and the cigarette lights. I let a curtain of smoke rise in front of my face as my hand goes back in the pocket and I stand up straight. I let the edge of my mouth smile.

I now make contact with Face by nodding her way. I notice other people looking in the direction I'm nodding. Then I go for the real kicker. I approach her table, left hand in pocket, right arm swinging at my side with the cigarette in its hand - and I'm limping. I pull out the chair across from her and sit down slowly. I remove my sunglasses with my left hand and place them on the table. I look up at her.

"What are you drinking?" I ask.

"A Pepsi." She's calm, not showing surprise though I know she's full of it. I extinguish the cigarette in the ashtray. I don't smoke cigarettes.

And when the waitress appears I sit back in my chair and eye her name-tag.

"Two Pepsis for me and the beautiful lady, Shirley."

Shirley looks questioningly at first. When I look questioningly back at her, her face seems to just realize something. She opens her mouth, closes it and opens it again.

"Oh yes sir, right away sir." She walks hurriedly away, turning once to look at me again.

"I think I'm going to crack up," Face tells me, finally not able to hold back. She gapes at me.

"See what you do to me, Face," I say. "I haven't done something like this in a long time."

"Why now?"

"Because I think I have everything to win and nothing to lose. Because you're back in my life. Because I wanted to do something like this with you. It's the first time the two of us are together in public, you know."

"I may not be back for long."

"I know."

"We need to talk about something really serious."

"I know."

"Since you seem to know so much, why don't you tell me why-"

The waitress arrives with our drinks, she places them in front of us, smiles at me, and she walks away. I look after her.

I say, "Now this is a typical establishment where people go to find a new mate or to mourn the loss of an old one. Or perhaps both." I glance around the tables. "Do you realize that we are being watched constantly. This is scary. Maybe we should try making a break for it."

"I am aware of people's eyes, Angel. I rather enjoy it. You taught me viewer awareness, remember?"

"No, but I'm sure it was good." I taste my Pepsi. "Such sweet sorrow."

"A driver's license, a passport, and air tickets to Dar es Salaam? Please explain, Angel."

"Damn it, Face, what's going on with you? What made you come to me? The police haven't even called me on the phone."

"I asked you a question first."

"Okay, so I'm going on a trip to Tanzania. Why does that have to be such a big deal?" I'm playing the cards like she wants me to. So far everything is very predictable.

"Because that's your picture in the passport but it's definitely not your name."

"So, maybe I want to travel incognito."

"Peter Axe? What you have arranged is not only illegal but since you're not really famous enough to be recognized on a plane to Dar es Salaam it's also very suspect."

"That's very true, Face, good for you. Now please cut the crap and tell me what you know."

"So that you can withhold what I don't know? We once made a pact to always be honest with each other, Angel."

"That was seven years ago and as I remember it, you broke it, along with another part of my internal anatomy."

She's quiet.

"Listen, Face, I'm having a difficult time with this because my feelings for you are all mixed up and I'm not sure where they're going to take me. I am in the middle of a big step in my life, and suddenly you're here kicking a leg out for me to trip over so that I can fall right back into your arms again."

"I never said I wanted anything of the kind."

"You don't have to say it or want it. I just feel it that way because-, well you know."

"Because what? I don't know. Tell me."

"No. Not today. Maybe not ever. Because today something is going on that's making us speak on different levels. I don't want that. So if you're not going to tell me what you know then I guess I'd better tell you." I whisper, "Yes, I killed Ethan Young."

"I don't believe it."

"Why? You were so busy accusing me yesterday."

"What I mean is. I know it. But I don't believe it. You once represented everything that was good in my life. For you to do something like that. I don't know. It's like there had to be something that made you think that it was for the best. And I don't mean that Ethan probably asked you to kill him. I know that. But that's not enough for me. That's not you." She eyes me helplessly.

"Look, Face, I don't know how you know all this but I suppose I will find out. But listen. There comes a time when every child loses a part of themselves. They lose the gullible, foolish part that believes that being grown up is being better, being morally perfect, understanding everything that goes on around you and being able to act calmly, objectively, and understandingly in all situations that come up. In the split second of that realization, that's when the child becomes an adult, never to be a child again. We believe adults can love infinitely but only a child can do that.

"Some children have to realize this sooner than others. I believe I am one of those children. I did kill Ethan. And if you think there is something else behind my actions, there probably is. I've never known you to be wrong. And so you know I killed Ethan. Please tell me. How did you know?"

Our waitress appears again and puts two more Pepsis on our table.

"Shirley, we didn't order these."

"I know," Shirley says, "They're compliments of the three ladies over there."

I look where she's pointing and I see three scantily dressed girls at another table waving at me. I wave back and smile. They crouch together, giggling like school girls. They probably are.

"It must have been the entrance," I say to Face with raised eyebrows.

"Yes.. must be," she says, muffling her surprise.

"Well, once again, how did you know that I was involved?"

"I saw you."

"Where?"

"At the-"

I become aware of the presence of one of the three scantily dressed girls. She is holding a pen and a napkin in her hand. She's a long-haired blond dressed in red. Red lipstick, purple eye shadow.

"Um, I'm so sorry to bother you, but, we were just wondering, you know, if we could, like, have your autograph, please. It would really mean a lot." She blinks her eyes.

I think fast, not looking at Face.

"Sure kid," I say and take the writing utensils from her. "It would be my pleasure. What's your name?"

"Uh, Jane, Jane Peterson."

"Okay, Jane." I realize everybody in the whole damn bar is now looking our way. I write "To the beautiful Jane Peterson with love," and in my unreadable handwriting I deftly scribble a completely unreadable name. A large, twisted scribble for the capital letters and then wavy lines for the rest of the name. As I write I notice her glancing at Face repeatedly, as if she is trying to figure out if she is someone famous too. Or is it jealousy? I give the napkin back to her.

"Oh thank you so much. You don't know what this means to me. And I thought you were dead. I knew it wasn't true. You fooled everybody, again. I guess not too many people ask you for your autograph, see, but I'm really interested in, you know-"

"It's okay, kid, I get the picture." I wave her away.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Thank you. You're so much more handsome than I thought from the picture." She curtsies and returns to her friends where tantrum soon begins.

I look at Face. Her eyes are wide open and she mouths 'What was that?' questioningly at me.

I lean forward and mumble to her.

"We had better get out of here." I grab her hand and together we stand up. I put on my sunglasses and I'm about to call for our waitress when the three girls stand up. And the people at the table next to them stand up. And then everybody is standing up. And they're clapping their hands. And some of them are cheering.

I start walking with my limp and pull Face close behind me. As we make our way out I nod generously at my fans and smile. I think that most of these people don't even know who the hell I am supposed to be according to the three girls, and still they're standing up and clapping like monkeys. And finally we're out on the street.

A warm wind hits us and I look down the dusky street where cars pass us by with familiar engine noises and running headlights. People walk randomly, talking amongst themselves, here and there airing a bubbly giggle or shriek. Reality.

"Keep walking in case someone tries to follow us," I say. And we walk briskly down the street, hand in hand.

"I can't believe what just happened in there," she blurts out. "Who did they think you were?"

"I don't know."

"And you signed an autograph! You are so crazy."

"Tell me about it."

We make it around a corner. I stop and look behind us.

"There's nobody following us. We can take a breather."

We are both panting slightly.

"We should have stayed in there," she says. "We could have gotten free drinks all night. And what's with the limp? You don't have to act anymore."

"I'm not acting, Face. I really do have a limp."

Somehow, that makes her laugh. I laugh too. And soon we're in fits about the whole situation.

"I am so happy right now," I say, "I'm laughing. I'm holding your hand and you're not pulling it away. I'm supposed to be defending myself from murder charges and then this happens. Whenever you are near there is magic in the air. It's pretty clear that the two of us simply can't argue over anything. And I don't even want to try again. I say tonight we have a really good time. Let's go see if we can lure the people at some other bar to think you're Demi Moore's more beautiful sister. Are you game?"

She's smiling. We're standing with our arms out between us and our hands interlocked.

"I really like the way you are now. But I don't know. There are some things we need to get out in the open. We don't have to argue about them. Just let me get my car."

"You have a car?"

"Yes."

"Well why didn't you say so?"

"I just did."

"What?"

"I just did."

"What?"

"Oh shut up and kiss me, Angel."

She comes close to me but I turn my ear at her and say,
"What?"

She kisses my ear.

14.

The next Tuesday when I walk into the class there is an apple on the desk. It's red. A red apple. I look at the students, but their faces are neutral. I look at Elizabeth. She looks back. I look away.

"A beautiful red apple sits on my desk," I say. "I love apples. And I once had a teacher tell me that some historical time ago students used to give their teachers apples as a bribe. But, since I don't know who it is from I cannot raise anyone's grade. But I do love apples." I take the apple and raise it above my head, eyeing it. "This would not happen to be a poisonous apple, would it? You're not trying to get rid of me, are you? Or is it the other way around? I won't know until I taste it, will I?"

I bite the apple.

"Mmm, it's really juicy too. Do you people in fact realize that you have put the topic of today's discussion in my hand? What am I in fact holding here?"

"An apple?" someone tries and people laugh.

"Yes, I think we all know that, but what about this apple?"

"It's an apple that you have taken a bite out of." Another voice.

"Yes, clearly so, since I'm chewing on the part that's missing. But why did I fear it might be poisoned? What does it make you think of?"

"Snow White?"

I laugh. "True, very true, but that's not exactly what I had in mind. "Come on people, think."

"Adam and Eve!" someone shouts.

"Yes! Of course! It's the apple in the garden of Eden," I say. "The apple, and particularly the red apple, is one of the most effective symbols known to the artist. The story of Adam and Eve is known to all of us. So what does this apple symbolize?"

"Deception," Elizabeth says.

"Yes. Deception. Foul play. Good. And what else? Why is it deception? Why can't they eat from the apple?"

"Because God said they couldn't."

"Right. It's forbidden. That's the essence of the story. Woman lures man into eating something that was forbidden."

"Just like a woman." Potty.

The conflict I predicted may have it's beginning here, I think.

"So do you mean that the apple may also indicate that the person deceiving is of the female gender?"

"Yeah. That's usually the case, right?" says Potty.

Some of the guys laugh.

"I think I detect some sexual implications, here," I say. "Are you perhaps referring to a deception of the heart?"

"Something like that. You know, when they wear their sexy clothes and all that make-up and smile and blink their eyes, flirting you know. That's deceiving, right?"

"I don't know, why don't we ask one of the girls."

"I think that is so chauvinistic!" says one of the girls, loudly. "You mean as soon as a woman blinks her eyes she's being deceptive? Or when she puts on some nice-looking clothes she's trying to trick you?"

"Yeah. Girls do that all the time. They attract attention to get their way. As soon as you see them wearing something sexy you know they want something from you."

"I think it's you who want something from them, Michael," Face says and girls cheer.

"I assume you're speaking out of experience?" I cut in and ask Potty.

"Well, yeah, as a matter of fact I am. I had a girl once and she always did things like that to me. She got those bedroom eyes, you know, and the next thing you know you're out buying her

something in some expensive store, or you're at some expensive restaurant."

"So do you think girls should walk around in old rags and look really bad?" This is some other girl talking. "Has it ever occurred to you that we might feel good in good-looking clothes?"

"Okay, maybe. But you can't say it's natural to paint your face and walk around in mini-skirts and... you know, half-naked practically."

"Mikey," Elizabeth says mockingly, "has it ever occurred to you to resist?"

"It's pretty hard, Lizzie," Potty returns and the guys laugh.

"Well," she continues, "I think that the apple that Ange-, Mister Angel is holding is a symbol for men's inferior intelligence. Why shouldn't we be deceiving you when you clearly fall for it every time!"

The girls cheer again. I see Potty thinking of a return to that.

He looks at her. "You know, Lizzie, I am not offended by that." He looks around at the guys and repeats, "I am not offended by that." He looks back at Elizabeth. "And I'll tell you why. Because I know that you are nothing more than one of my ribs." The guys cheer. I snicker. Elizabeth throws a menacing expression at him, but at the same time she seems to smile forgivingly with her eyes.

"Okay," I say, "I don't think this discussion is going to give us much more so I want to continue with the red, the red of the apple. The color red is frequently used in all literature. What is it? Let me hear you shout out what the color red is."

"Love."

"Sure, that's a given one."

"Blood."

"Blood is red. Fine. But what about the blood? I want something else too."

"Pain."

"Yes, exactly. Love and pain and blood, so far."

I write these down.

"Hope."

"Sure, hope is related to love. Some of these will bring on endless connotations you know. What else?"

"Fear."

"Okay, the fear related to pain. Come on, I want more."

"Deception."

"Good! I didn't think you'd get that one. It was obvious. Of course, deception, from the forbidden fruit, naturally."

"Death."

"Yes, also from the pain and the fear and the blood."

"Life!"

"I think you're getting it. Life being related to the love and the hope. And the blood."

"But now you've got both life and death."

"Exactly. Isn't red a fantastic color? If you're a good writer you will get it to mean whatever you want. And there are so many connotations that it's sure to have some dramatic effect in almost all of your writing. Listen to this, I just realized something looking at these words. Forget about the life and death. What do these words have to tell you? Hope, love, pain, blood, fear. Think about them for a minute. Do they have a common denominator? You're really good if you get this. Hope... love.. pain... blood.. and fear."

The class is quiet for a minute.

Elizabeth looks at me. Almost soundlessly she whispers, "Virginity?"

"Yes, Elizabeth. Virginity. That's really good. Listen everybody again." I say the words slowly again, "Hope.. love.. pain.. blood.. and fear. Isn't that amazing? Virginity. That which hurts and pleases all at once. The most treasured state of

man. And woman. Men desperately seek to lose it, women desperately try to keep it. Or so a conventional manner of thinking brings us to believe. It is an extremely powerful word with a seemingly powerful significance. What do we hope to find beyond virginity? Do we find it? Why does virginity mean so much to us, why does it occupy our mind to the extent that it does during puberty? Is it a search for experience, knowledge, or simply a meaningless, animalistic desire for flesh?

"And it doesn't have to be in a sexual sense. It can be doing anything for the first time. Learning to ride a bicycle. Learning to ski. Learning anything in fact. A lot of blood is spilt before you're there, but boy oh boy are you happy when you've got the hang of it. And that can most certainly also be in the sexual sense. We have an endless hunger for knowledge, and I think that's what keeps us going. We want to know everything, no matter what we have to go through to get there. Knowledge is power."

I look out at them, my heart beating. I hold up the apple, still with only one bite out of it, for them to see.

"What in fact was the reason for biting the red apple in the garden of Eden?" I ask, feeling cold and perspiring all at the same time.

"Knowledge," Elizabeth says. "You were supposed to gain knowledge by eating the apple."

I laugh seemingly out of relief and exhaustion.

"We started out with this red apple," I say, "and from it we got a whole lifetime. We got deception. We had a discussion about men and women's role-play. We got virginity from this apple. And we ended up with death. I swear I had not planned for all of that."

I feel like I just had a board meeting with God himself.

"It makes you put Snow White in an entirely different perspective, doesn't it?" I say and they laugh. But at the same time I know they do understand.

"And how else do we find the use of our ambiguous red in our stories and our poems? We have the classic red rose, of course. It's symbolic value for love is evident. And yet it's thorns may prick the fingers of the receiving hand and result in lost blood, a lost bond between two lovers.

"Ah, and we have the red wine. We consume wine for the sake of amour and yet when our willingness for pleasure brings us to bed it often clashes with our lost abilities for the same."

Some of them laugh.

"You know what I'm going to give you as your next assignment. This red apple. Write anything you will about a red apple. Lyrics, prose, I don't care. Just write something about a red apple."

When they leave for the day I absent-mindedly put the apple in my briefcase, the same apple that I had myself placed on the desk long before class started.

Elizabeth is sparkling that evening.

"You know what?" she tells me. "I think Michael was right in a weird kind of way."

"So why didn't you say so?"

"Because I had to defend my side."

"Your side? I thought we were all humans."

"Not me. I'm a rib." She laughs.

"But don't you think that's kind of a double-moral?"

"Sort of. But he was only right about us wanting to deceive you. I sort of like being whistled at. What I think is that we deceive you but I think you're aware of it." She looks into my eyes. "Because you all want us to deceive you, right?"

I look at her. She's radiant.

"Right?" she asks.
I kiss her in answer.

15.

"So she kicked you in the nuts?"

"Yeah. The girl knows how to break hearts and testicles all in one go."

We laugh. We laugh together and I feel good all over.

We are lying in cool grass, a bit overdressed for the escapade, with our feet aimed at the Atlantic's roaring waves. Our arms and legs are spread out on our sides, relaxed, tickled by the green life growing below us. The wind is brushing past our faces, making our clothes ruffle and our hair play in our faces. And the sun is settling behind us, in the past. Her left hand is barely an inch from my right and I think we both feel the closeness.

Our eyes are searching the clear, star-lit sky. In it I find so much and yet so little. For a few seconds I overload my mind as I grasp the vastness of the black space and then I close my minds and relax, shivering.

"You know," I say to Face. "Quantum physics is really romantic."

"Why?"

"It says that once two particles have touched, they are forever related to each other in an invisible bond, no matter what distance may separate them. Whatever the distance, a force that moves one particle will affect the other."

I stretch out my hand and touch hers. The tips of our fingers hook together.

"Are you trying to tell me something, Angel?"

"I guess I am," I say, "Because on Sunday I have to kill myself and on Monday I'm going to Tanzania." It's a funny remark, really, but I feel a sharp burning in my throat as I make it.

"So you're actually going to do it. I remember when you told me, about seven round years ago."

"I did?"

"Yeah, you said something about faking your own death and going to live in Africa, becoming a bartender or something. Living life like it should be lived. You were talking about how insane the world was, how Africa was the land of peaceful minds, or something like that. There was fire in your eyes when you said it. But today it doesn't sound like fire. It sounds more like tears."

"How can you tell, Face?"

"I can't tell it by your voice and I can't see your eyes," she says, "But I can feel it. I always could. From the first day."

"Why did you come here?"

"I received a phone-call from Ethan Young one week ago."

My train of thought races into a wall and I fall silent.

"He said you were in trouble. He said you needed my help. He said something bad might happen if I didn't come down here. He said some other things too. And he said he wanted me to come to his house on Saturday the 14th of July at precisely eleven o'clock pm, preferably sooner, no later. He said you would be there. But he said I should wait in the car outside until he came and told me to come in."

"I don't understand," I say. I feel confused, strange. And there is something wrong in her voice. Something that was there once. Only once.

"So I did. I mean, this was Ethan Young calling. And it was about you. I drove down from Washington on Saturday. I was outside his house at ten forty. I waited. And at eleven o'clock I see you. I feel all strange seeing you again. You look old. And you walk in just like you owned the house. You don't even ring the bell. You just walk in. And my heart is beating and I think Ethan Young is going to come out and get me soon. And you're going to be all shocked and all and cry. But then I hear the shots."

"Three shots."

"Yeah. Three shots. I don't understand at first. And then I see someone running away behind the houses. It looks like you. And then the lights in the next house start going on. I'm really scared so I start up the car and drive away."

"You were the speeding car leaving the scene."

"Yes."

"So, actually, you're more of a suspect than I am." I don't know if I should laugh. I don't.

"I couldn't go to the police. I didn't know how to explain my being there. And I thought maybe nothing happened. Maybe it was a game or something. And then I see it in the tabloids on Sunday. He's dead."

"Yeah. He's dead."

"And how about you? You almost succeeded once with the real thing, but now you're going to fake your suicide instead?"

I let go of her hand.

"Yeah."

"Why? Did he pay you?"

"Yeah."

"The air tickets?"

"And a house. A house in Oyster Bay. And a new identity."

"He knew that's what you wanted?"

"It's really what he wanted too. He was my roommate in boarding school. He was one year older than me. I was one year younger than my whole class, really. Like you were. He was the guy who helped me adapt to the totally different world there. So we became friends. Sort of. And sometimes in the night, sort of inspired by the Great Gatsby I suppose, we would talk about our plans to get new identities and leave it all."

"It all?"

"You haven't gone to boarding school. The thing about those places are the accepted forms of hierarchy that rule. I'll tell you

this much, the ruling power is hardly any adult. They come in second."

"What about house parents?"

"What person is capable of keeping track of thirty teenage boys? Often they were a part of the system. The older boys ruled. And when they didn't get their way, they beat the younger kids. Ethan was pretty bad when I got there. He showed me his scars on his chest and his back. Pretty bad."

"Were you beaten?"

"Yeah."

She's quiet for a moment. "We never talked about this did we?"

"No," I whisper.

"Why did he want you to kill him?"

"I guess you want it from the beginning," I say. I'm remembering things I thought I had forgotten a long, long time ago. Just like I did on that Saturday.

"Please."

"Stars, hide your fires," I whisper and close my eyes for a few seconds. I am a tiny pebble on the beach, just out of reach of the waves. But the man in the moon is up and the tide is coming in.

"Ethan called me two weeks ago," I begin, "I haven't talked to him in at least a year. He sounds excited. He says he is going through with the plan that we had made up in school. I don't know what he is talking about. He refreshes my memory. He says he's going to give me a new identity. He's been putting away money in a personal bank account and there's a house waiting for me in Oyster Bay in Dar. I say he's crazy, but I'm excited now too. I start asking him questions. How the hell is he going to pull that off?"

"He says all I have to do is kill him. Now I'm scared. What's he talking about? And so he tells me. He has AIDS. Ethan

Young has AIDS. I'm real quiet. Here is a famous man, a man I envy because people recognize him on the street ever since he impersonated the damn vice president and uncovered the groupie connection. And he's on the phone telling me that he's as good as dead. And he tells me he doesn't want anybody to know. How can he do that I ask. You have to kill me first, he says and I say oh right.

"He's a man. A really famous man he says. He doesn't want to be remembered as dying in AIDS. People would wonder. And that's all people would remember him as. The young media giant who was probably homosexual. But if he's murdered, see? If he's murdered then he'll really be remembered as the media giant who was too good at his job. There was just one story too many and one of his many enemies bumped him off.

"So he tells me what I have to do. I say I'll think about it. I hang up. There's a moon out. A full moon."

I think the wind is colder now. The warmth has ducked into a pillar of rising air further inland and left us with the waves.

"An hour later I call him and say yes."

I pause. She doesn't say anything. As if she's just waiting for me to finish. Where is she? Where am I?

"The rest is what you saw. I walk to his house from a party I'm at really close by at Peter Gadd's, my partner's, house. The party was my idea of course. I walk in and there's a gun, a pair of white gloves, and a robe by the mirror in the hall. I stand in front of the mirror and pull on the gloves and the robe and I keep looking at my eyes and I keep saying 'You're insane, you're insane.' I take the gun and I walk upstairs to his bedroom. There is a strange smell and I guess it's probably the vomit that I keep swallowing back down. Ethan is in the bed with his face in the pillow. I do it fast. I lift the gun up to the back of his head and I turn away my head and I squeeze the

trigger three times and I run out. All the time I'm thinking, 'It's what he wanted. It's what he wanted.' I run out the back and I run down to the ocean and I throw up. The smell is stronger then, almost as strong as it once was. I put the gun and the gloves and the robe in a bin on the beach and I walk back to the party."

I feel hot and uneasy. Space seems to be shrinking, closing in on the two of us, listening to every word I say and echoing it through the air to galaxies behind our backs.

"And how do you kill yourself?" she asks as if it's another one of those meaningless every-day questions: Hello, how are you?, How's work?, How are the kids?, How do you kill yourself?

"I write a goodbye note where I explain how depressed I am with my life. In fact, I've already written it. Everybody knows I am depressed – I keep telling them. And now that Julie broke up with me they'll believe me even more, I guess. I just vanish. There is no body. They think I threw myself off the pier or something. I really wanted to die in a car accident, like Dean, you know, but they'd need a body."

"So you're really doing it."

"Yeah..." I breathe softly. "Yeah."

"Why do you have to kill yourself. Why don't you just leave?"

"Because it's always been a dream of mine. Cut of all obligations, all responsibilities. In all computer records, you become listed as dead and nobody bothers you anymore. Isn't that great?"

"I guess so," she says.

"I just don't understand why he called you. Maybe he wanted to test me or something. See if I'm really up to this. But look at me, I've already told you everything. Do you know what you've got here? You've got a great story. You could write about how

I killed Ethan Young and then committed suicide. Maybe I'd even die famous."

I lean my face to the side and look at her. She is too beautiful, I think. Much too beautiful.

"Then you could come to Tanzania," I say.

"Or maybe I could write the real story," she says. "That would be an even greater hit, wouldn't it? Pulitzer prize winning, don't you think?"

I don't believe her. Should I?

"You wouldn't do that," I say, confident.

She leans her head to face mine.

"Wouldn't I?" she says and I'm not sure anymore. I wave it away.

"You're beautiful," I say.

"So people tell me."

"What people?"

"Just people." She smiles. "Your mind must really be in a turmoil right now."

"Yeah."

And just then the turmoil sends me tumbling into some deep memory pit where, for some unknown reason, some words fall in and some don't, and there they are, briefly swerving past my consciousness, briefly speaking 'You love it when we deceive you, right?'. And I shudder and then I'm back again, rubbing my wrists against the ground.

"It's getting cold. Why don't I take you home?" she says. I feel awkward. That should be my line.

"If you come up with me," I say.

"Maybe for a minute."

"That's enough for me."

"You wouldn't try anything would you?"

"You know I won't. And besides, you forget I'm disabled," I say and look down at my groin area.

She laughs.

It's just past eleven. I'm sitting on my bed with my back against the wall. Face is sitting on my chair with her feet up on the bed.

"Tell me what happened after I left," I say.

"Well, the class was really in a bad mood. That was some exit you made. The new teacher hardly lived up to your standards."

I feel pleased. Pleased enough for me to shoot a satisfied grin at her and for her to catch it and smile back.

She continues, "He was the type you warned us about. He did a lot of writing on the blackboard. He drew diagrams which supposedly explained how a good story is laid up. We hit him with the stuff you had taught us but he just laughed. We didn't like-"

The phone rings.

"Maybe it's your secretary," she says.

"Maybe."

I lean over and get the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Is this Pierce Angel?" It's a man's voice.

"Yeah, it's me."

"This is Inspector Salinger with the police department."

I stare at the mirror. But I'm not laughing.

16.

We are sitting beside each other on my bed. She is leaning her head against my shoulder and our legs are intertwined. She is drawing invisible art on my leg with her finger.

"You started on your autobiography when you were sixteen?" Elizabeth, recently turned Face, sounds surprised.

"Yeah. I was pretty sure of myself back then. I thought that I should start writing it real early so that I wouldn't forget any details."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Let me read it."

"I haven't written much."

"So?"

"I was only sixteen."

"Angel! Let me see it."

She clings to me tightly and kisses me a long, passionate kiss with vivid sound, generating the purple heat of meteors penetrating the atmosphere.

"I guess it wouldn't do any harm," I say dreamily. I get up, take out a binder from my bookcase, flip through it, find the printout, and I hand it to her.

She begins reading. "The Bible part 2?"

"Yeah," I say as I sit down and slide closer to her, "I had a period in my life when I thought I was Messiah."

"You did!? You must really be crazy. This is getting more and more interesting."

"Is it?"

"I was born in the the pov-'," she begins.

"You're not going to read this aloud, are you?"

"I sure am. You just sit there, put your head back and listen to your words as a sixteen year old Jesus."

She starts over again: The Bible part II

I was born in the poverty-stricken continent of Africa. The country was Liberia, the town Yekepa. Due to lack of hospital space I was placed in a small pantry with two screaming negro children on either side of me, filthy flies on my perspiring face, and seven cockroaches which kept me company when the stench became too much. So I joined the screaming. I emptied my lungs and let out my first baby protest, "I have no ambition to be a part of this underdeveloped world, take me to another dimension!" But my statement only reached the ears of my two comrades in a loud "WAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAH". It was the most fitting word I could think of for the occasion. WHY. Why is the world as it is? None of the negroes, though they suddenly fell silent, seemed able to respond. They merely stared at me in puzzlement as if to say, "WAAAAAAAAAAH NOT?"

As we were trying to solve the world's problems by asking "WHY?" four hundred times in a row, our concentration was interrupted by a loud bang. I quickly deduced that somebody had brought their hand down on the door. Hard. Maybe it was a nurse, but more probably it was a big, fat, lady cook. The bang was followed by a voice, "Joo shaddapp ynn deare." Wow, that was going to be a big help. Dearie, dearie me. We were going to be silent right away because some half-ape who could not pronounce a word of English told us to "shaddapp". Maybe when hell freezes over. We brought the noise-level up to 80 decibels.

I was given a ride home the next day. As we turned into what was to be my estate for the next five years I let out a howl because my father was vandalizing the gears on the white punch buggy, going from third to one. It was understandable, though, him being nervous in my presence. After all, I was going to control his life from now on, demanding shelter, food and a large amount of luxuries. I was greeted at the door by my

jealous older sister, age 7, who was now going to receive less attention from her parents than before, and a muscular, black man with brown eyes and short, curly hair.

I immediately took a liking to this garden boy, Peter, since he knew his place well. His first reaction to presence was a realization which many people after him, including you, will come to understand and appreciate. He looked down at me in my crib and looked up to me in all my glory, and exclaimed, "Little Bossman!"

"Well, there are some harsh words in there for a Messiah."

"I'm a modern messiah. Besides, it's all true in its own romantic way."

"So this Peter person really called you Little Bossman."

"Sure. He called my father Bossman, so naturally I was 'Little Bossman'."

"But did he call you Little Bossman all the time?"

"Oh no. My mother wouldn't let him. I guess she had a point."

"So, what did this Peter do for you?"

"You know, I was only in Liberia for the first five years of my life but I can always remember Peter clear as a bell, except his face. He was always fun to be around. He was always laughing and he played with me when I was out in the garden. We had a really big garden. But I guess everything is big when you're small. And to my mother's annoyance I used to sit on the steps to the house with him, during lunchtime, and together we'd eat out of a bowl of rice with our hands. I would give anything to go to Liberia and meet Peter again, to see his face. I can never remember his face. I sometimes daydream about walking down the road and meeting him, like you would meet anyone, and at first he wouldn't recognize me but when I say 'Peter!' he breaks out into this big blinding, grin and he hugs

me and we both cry." I feel tears pushing in some hidden canal. I swallow.

"You sound like you miss it."

"Yeah, well, it was the first five years of my life."

"Do you think you'll ever go back there?"

"I want to. God knows I want to. But things are never the same when you go back to a place. You can never live the same life again, you can never be happy living in the past. And I'm not sure I want to see Liberia today. The civil war has probably done a lot of damage. I like to remember what it was for me."

"I didn't know there was a war there."

"Since the year before last. Few people know or care. And yet, as far as I know, over 300,000 people have been killed there including the president."

"Gosh."

"Gosh is right. Media is always interested in the wars that big old US of A has some involvement in. And people just don't know more than what information the media decides to feed them, it's pretty scary you know. And I have a friend, my old roommate you know, who is making his career in that business. I once wanted to as well. But he was better than me. So I gave it up. I think I should thank him one day."

"Hey," she says and squeezes my hand, wrapping her smaller fingers around in sweet touch. "You're getting all depressed. Don't." She kisses my cheek. "And don't worry about it. My little Bossman will go back to Africa someday. Someday. I know you will. All you have to do is set your heart on it."

"You know, sometimes I fantasize about going there and faking my own murder. Like I was killed by a lion or something. And then nobody will bother me about anything anymore. And I can get a new identity and just live life like it should be lived. I'd become a bartender or something and

people would come to me with their problems and I would give them advice."

"You, for one, could do that, I guess."

"Yeah. Or I'd just find my own Acaisia and sit down underneath it and smoke my pipe and write scriptures of wisdom. And people would travel from all dark corners of the world to come and talk to me. And when I die my scriptures would be published and people would write about the wisdom I preach. And my name would be eternal."

"You're crazy. You sound like you really are Messiah or something."

"Who knows?"

"You're scary."

"I don't know. I just made my judgment of the world at an early age. Something brought me to that judgment and somehow, I trust it. I'm not asking anyone else to make the same judgment but since I seem so sure about it then I consider everybody else of lesser intelligence since they don't see what I see."

"No, you don't. Because you know they make their judgments based on other experiences."

"You can see right through me can't you? But what if I'm one step ahead of that. I do know that people make their judgments based on experience and upbringing and all that. And I can say that I understand other people's judgments. That makes me a very understanding person, doesn't it? And why am I understanding? Because I've been through all those beliefs that other people have and why they believe what they do. And since I know about all other people's experiences and am this extremely understanding person, that's why I think I am somehow superior."

"But how do you know that this superiority feeling you have is not just something that everyone feels and thus you are no different from everybody else?"

"Very good, Face, but I'm ahead of that, too. I already know that everybody has this superiority feeling. My awareness of the fact that we all are the same makes me one notch higher than the rest."

"But that's a contradiction in itself, stupid. If we're all the same then you can't be a notch higher."

"Everybody else is the same. Life is full of contradictions. Besides, I'm from another planet. And that must make me superior to you humans."

She laughs. "But to you, we humans are from another planet and so our thinking is different from yours and you don't know if we are superior to you. Maybe we are the ones analyzing you. This is in fact your home planet. We have killed off the rest of your race and hypnotized you into believing that you are on Tellus. You think you have a teaching job but in fact the students that you see before you are merely studying your strange, weird and lunatic behavior."

"Well I know you're an alien, E.T." I say and laugh, "So here we are, two superior aliens without an idiot to make fun of."

"I think we're pretty good at making fun of ourselves," she says.

"Ah, the story of the human race."

We laugh quietly together on a bed in a room on planet Earth.

17.

"Yes?"

"I am sorry to bother you this late but we have a situation here. Do you know a Philip Cole?"

The kid. Something's happened to the kid.

"Yes I do. What's wrong?"

"He keeps asking for you and we found your number by the phone. Do you think that you could somehow make your way to the Cole residence? I assume you are a friend of the family?"

"What's wrong? Is he all right?"

"I think he's going to be a lot better if you could make it here, Mr. Angel."

"Cut the shit, please Inspector, and tell me what's happened!"

"Will you be driving here Mr. Angel?"

"No."

"Well, sir, I'm sorry. Mrs. Cole is dead."

"Dead? How?"

"I'm afraid she has been murdered. Her husband has been arrested."

"I'll be- there- in fifteen..."

I'm all numb when I put the receiver back on the hook, lost somewhere in an internal exile.

"Oh my God."

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"You have to take me to Joe Cole's house."

"Joe Cole the writer?"

"Joe Cole.. the psychopath..."

Face can't get a word out of me except directions on our way to the Cole house. I'm flowing between winter and summer in feverish, dazed cycles.

When we rush inside little Philip is sitting in the orange, living room couch, held by a black policewoman. He's been

crying. His eyes and cheeks are red. He takes one look at me and is out of the couch. He's wearing his white pajamas with Mickey Mouse on the front ever smiling.

"Mr. Angel!"

I lift him up and hold him against me and I start to cry. I sit down with him in the couch and hug him hard and long, feeling his little heart's beat thumping softly next to my shoulder.

"Dad was hurting mom, Mr. Angel."

"I know, kid, I know."

Out of the corner of my eye I see Face looking at the two of us. She looks like she may be crying but I can't tell.

"I had to call the police. There was blood everywhere. Dad screamed to me to get out."

"You called the police?"

"Yes. Nine one one. It was by the phone but I remembered it anyway."

"You're a really brave boy, kid." A wet stream of hurting exhaustion is running down my face, flooding my facial trenches.

"Like A-tree-shoe?"

I realize he means Atreju and I laugh through the soft rain of my eyes.

"Yeah, kid, just like A-tree-shoe."

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Angel. I told the policeman I wanted you to come."

"And I came."

"Yeah. You came." He hugs me harder and I cry harder.

"It's all right now, kid. I'm here."

"But they took Mom to the hospital."

No, they took Mom to the morgue.

"Don't worry, kid."

Be happy?

I squeeze him and he squeezes me back. We sit like that for a while. And slowly he drifts into a slumber and I hope that in his dreams he is Atreju and he is riding along the plains of Fantasia in the Never-Ending Story, chasing his fleeing father and clenching the ebony handle of a newly sharpened sword, sparkling in the light from a sky of floating diamond mirrors.

"Can I talk to you, Mr. Angel?"

Salinger, a man with a small, black growth under his thin nose and a receding hairline, leans over me and talks with a timid voice. he is in civilian clothes. A blue suit and a tie. A diagonally striped, neutral tie. His left eyebrow is slightly larger than his right and this seems to bother me.

"Sure."

I start to get up but the kid begins to move uneasily. Face gallantly comes to my rescue and slides smoothly under the kid as I slide away. He clings to her in his sleep. I walk away with the inspector.

"Listen. Until we get all our paperwork sorted out I wonder if it would be all right if Philip here stays with you."

I bury my hands in my pockets and lean against the doorway to the hall, where at the end of the hall of confusion is the bedroom where I assume the murder took place during a peak of pain so many summers and fevers ago. I glance at the closed door and then face the Inspector.

"That's fine. Great. Is there going to be a trial or something?"

"No, Mr. Cole has already confessed. He said something about having made a pact with the devil." He looks down into his hands.

"Pact with the devil?"

"Yes. How well did you know him?"

"Well. I don't know. I'm his publisher. I knew him as such. His father knew my father when I lived in Tanzania. Joe and his father were the ones who got me started as a publisher.

That's why I live so close. I've been here a few times a year, discussing his books mostly. So I don't know his wife much. I've taken care of his son for him sometimes when he's been on trips, gathering inspiration as he says. I guess I know his son better than I know him. I've known the kid since he was born."

"Well his son seems to have taken a liking to you. And your wife over there." He makes a gesture toward the two persons in the couch.

"Oh no. She's just an old friend. Very old."

"Very good-looking for very old."

"No, I meant I've known-"

"I know what you meant," he interrupts, making me feel briefly like a lone oxygen atom lost in the hairy maze of his gauche eyebrow. "So you are Joe Cole's publisher. I've always wondered who gets firsthand look at those books."

"Well, you're looking at the poor guy."

"What I want to ask is, how mentally fit would you regard Joe Cole as a person?"

"Joe Cole? I don't know. I guess he is a person with a great many prejudiced ideas and he isn't slow to announce them. It's rather difficult to have a straight discussion with him. But I never thought, you know. I never thought he would do something."

"Do something?"

"Kill someone. I mean he writes about all these sick sex crimes, about serial killers and rapists like they're some sort of heroes. But, you know, I always thought he did that in a sane way, like he was only trying to sell as many books as possible. But I'll tell you, Inspector, I've had some difficult times getting through some of his books. I've even had to censor some parts. Oh Jesus..." I lift my hand to my forehead. I'm struck with fever again as my memory dungeon coughs up more recently read words.

"Mr. Angel? Are you okay."

"Inspector. I have to ask this." I take a deep breath.

"Whatever happened in there." I indicate the closed door.

"There didn't happen to be a small piece of sharp rock involved?"

"How...?" He doesn't have to say yes. I can see it in his attentive eyes.

"It's in his latest script. In it Lionel Winger uses a sharp rock to carve a ring in his wife's stomach, and he uses the blood to write a message on the wall: 'I'll be back.' And then he sits down on her and-"

The inspector nods slowly.

"And then he... Oh God.. a straw..." I look over at the sleeping kid in Face's warm arms where I would rather be.

"And then he uses the same rock to circumcise his seven-year old son." I look into the Inspector's face, my eyes pulling on the tears trembling by the edge of the drop-down to my face.

"Well, I'm glad to say that we got here before... before such a thing could take place."

I let out a soft shriek of relief.

"Mr. Angel. You do realize I will have to get that script from you."

"Yes." My muscles are numb. I don't even dare look at the damn door anymore.

"Since he has confessed it's no hurry though. I think it would be best if the three of you go home. I still have some work in there to do for my report. Would it be okay if I came by your office tomorrow morning and pick that up?"

"Sure."

"I'll need your address."

"Oh," I reach into my pocket for my wallet. I give him my card.

"Angel & Gadd Publishers? Quite a nifty name. Pretty ironic, too, I guess."

"Inspector?"

"Yes?"

"The book's working name is Give Beelzebub his due."

"Okay. By the way. Is your leg okay?"

"Oh. Yes. My privates just had a run-in with a knee of the female gender."

"Not..?" He indicates Face with a movement of the head.

"Oh, no. I guess you could say she is the reason."

"Well, she looks like a fine reason."

"Yeah." I smile half-wittedly and I nod. I look at Face with her head buried in the kid's brown hair. "I suppose she is."

*

I am sitting with Philip in the backseat of the car on our way back to my place. Home. He is staring out the window and I follow his gaze. All I see is grey blurs passing quickly in front of my eyes. Grey blurs of consciousness in some distant reality.

"Mr. Angel?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Is Mom dead?"

"Yeah, kid. She is."

"Why?"

"Your mom was tired, kid. She needed a long sleep. Everybody needs to sleep, some just a little longer than others. Some never get a chance to wake up." I catch a reflection of my distant self in the window. "Some do."

"That's not true. She's dead. I saw her. When you're dead you're dead. It's not like when you're dreaming. Nobody can wake you up ever ever."

"That's true, kid. Nobody can wake you up so that you come back to this world. But being dead is something special. Maybe you do dream when you're dead. And maybe all your wishes come true in that dream. I wish I had a belief that would tell you where she is now. But I don't. Some people say that she would go to heaven. Others would say that she has been re-born into another person or maybe even an animal. Some would perhaps say that she has become a spirit that stays close to you and watches over you so that you will be safe. I can't tell you what's right because I don't know. Maybe they are all right. Maybe it depends on what you yourself believe. Perhaps your wanting her to be someplace makes her be there."

"But I want her to be with me now."

"I know. So do I. But that's not part of our choices, I'm afraid. Some people would tell you that she is with you now because you can close your eyes and you can see her face. But I know that's not the same. I do know that your mother can talk to you - with the words that she has used when she has brought you up or the words that you think she would say to you. So when you're alone you can pretend that she is with you and you can talk to her because you sort of know what she would say to you. Or when you see a bird in a tree and you think it might be her watching over you, then you can wave to her so that she knows you're okay. And maybe if you think of her just before you go to sleep, she can visit you in your dreams and she'll be just like you remembered her and maybe then she can tell you about the place where she is and how happy she is."

"Really?"

"Yes. Dreaming is the best way because then you can even touch her and ask her real questions."

"I think I want to sleep now, Mr. Angel."

He puts his feet up on the seat and lies down with his head in my lap. I put my hand on his little head. I look out the window.

The street lamps blind me at regular intervals and in the light I seem to see my own mother. I lift my free hand to the window and with my finger, feeling strange, I wave to her. Then I lower my hand again.

"Wherever you decide that your mother is, kid, you make sure that she is someplace that you think that she would want to be. I think that would make her happy."

"How do I know she's happy?"

"Well, listen." I stroke his head and I feel his hair between my fingers. "You know how beautiful a sunset is, kid. We like to think of it as a day being born, right? We like to sit and admire its beauty and each time we see one we think it's the most beautiful thing we've ever seen, even though we've seen lots of them. That's because each day is special, just like each person is special. And then when the sun sets, I guess we could think of that as the day dying. But a sunset is just as beautiful as a sunrise, maybe even more beautiful. We can sit and watch a sunset and think it's the most beautiful thing in the world too. And we're happy even though that special day is ending. And I guess we're happy because we know that the next day is going to be just as special and maybe even more beautiful. And when people die, all we can know is that wherever they go, it will be just as beautiful and special as the next sunrise."

I can hear his soft breathing in my lap and I'm warm. I look at the driver.

"Hey, Face," I whisper, "I'm sitting back here and I'm staring into your absolutely amazing neck. Would you mind very much if I kiss it?"

"Is he sleeping?"

"Yeah."

"Go ahead."

"I'm afraid I can't just now. I might wake him up. But it's the most beautiful neck. Don't lose it. I may want to kiss it later."

"Angel?"

"What?"

"You've still got it."

"What?"

"Your way with ideas. I liked the way you talked with Philip."

"He's a great kid. I only had to say what came to mind. I don't know if I could have done it if you weren't sitting there, you know. You do something to me. I once called it magic."

"Listen, Angel. I heard what you said to the inspector."

"About what?"

"About Cole's book. I've been thinking. I know what you have to do."

"What?"

"You could do it."

I catch her eyes in the rearview mirror as she catches mine. I feel ready to take part in a never before heard secret about the origin of the Earth, as if she has been holding onto it for a few million years, sprinkling her beauty with it.

"What do you mean? Do what?"

"You can get away with your murder."

I swallow. The kid moves and mumbles in my lap.

"Let's just get this kid in bed, first," I say. "Then let's talk."

18.

"Who is the ultimate creator?" I ask the class. "Who makes the best stories, the real ones that we are all a part of and can never escape?"

"God?" George Lightman answer-asks.

"Yeah," I say, "God. God is the guy who writes the stories that we all believe. And sometimes he even writes stories we can't believe."

I have pulled the red curtains over the windows and there is a warm, flushed light in all of their faces. I want them to feel uncertain, insecure. But I also don't want anyone to be offended. I hope that there isn't a believer amongst them. There usually isn't, I suppose.

"Our job is to create the worlds that God never got around to. Fiction. That's our territory. Our dilemma is making our creations just as believable as God's.

"The best way to go about it is to borrow situations from God's world and put them into our own. In our stories, we become God. If I want in my story to murder my character Jane, the blond girl next door, I can let my murderer go to her house and ring the bell. And I can let Jane answer, standing, as she is, wrapped in a towel, about to take a shower. But what if she hadn't been home? How do I know that Jane is going to be home? I know that Jane is home and about to take a shower because I'm God. I put her there. I'm her real murderer. And I can stab her as many times as I like wherever I want to. I can even rape her dead body. I can do anything to little Jane because I'm God.

"Of course the story could be more believable if I let her murderer in the book be someone close to her who also knows that she will be home. I can give him that information. For your world to be real it must be probable."

Potty goes to attack. I love him for it. "But how probable are Stephen King's books?"

"Oh Potty," I say and raise my head, eyeing him as a psychopath would eye his next victim, "you shouldn't say anything bad about King in my presence. As far as I'm concerned he writes killer plots, in all senses of the expression.

"What you say is partly true, though. We have science fiction. We have horror stories, fantasy worlds where turtles cast magic spells. Seemingly they defy all convention that ever existed. And yet they are the product of logic minds. They are extremely conventional, undoubtedly because otherwise they would not work. People would not buy the books, in a belief sense or money sense.

"We all scare from generally the same monsters, we all envision the future and space travel in roughly the same manner, we can all fantasize about worlds where animals talk, where wizards prophesize, where the dead rise from their graves, where brains live in jars, where aliens eat humans, where circus clowns decapitate children and body parts run around by themselves. Why can we imagine all that? Because all those ideas are in our heads. Mixed feelings of hope and fear put those ideas there and they become real in our dreams and nightmares.

"Don't ask me why we can all imagine all that. It is rather sick, right, because all those thoughts must originate somewhere, in some psychopaths sick mind or maybe in all our minds at the same time. All I know is that I sometimes like being scared, I like sitting in my bed at night with only the gloomy light from my bedside lamp - making a Stephen King book damp with perspiration from cover to cover.

"I wish I knew why I like that. Is it perhaps the evil one? The fiction that we seek is perhaps the thoughts of the beast. We spread these ideas and hence we have rapists, serial killers, and people who think that they are vampires. I don't know.

"The thing about humans is - we are sick, like it or not. Search your minds and the sick is there. Don't ask me how it got in there but I sure as hell do not think that it is healthy keeping it in. Sick is in everybody. All those things we don't dare say. You know when you're caught with that strange look on your face and somebody asks 'a penny for your thoughts' and you say 'oh nothing'. Like hell nothing but you're not so sure that whoever asked the question may feel so comfortable knowing that you were imagining their head on a stick with a boa constrictor crawling through a large hole in their cheek."

I've got them listening. I've got myself listening. Again someone else has taken over and is speaking from some distant part of my mind. I realize that it's me. The person talking is me. Smiling, I welcome myself to the world, hoping that I'll stay and not let the masks take over again. Though I know they will quite soon.

"Sometimes you can really scare the living daylights out of yourself. You know when you're walking with somebody next to a busy street and you get this crazy urge to push them in front of a car. Sometimes your urge is so great and you're so frightened by yourself that you walk around them so that you're the one closest to the street. Or when you're cutting up bread and your mother is taking something out of the refrigerator. You glimpse the back of her neck. Before you know it you're thanking yourself for not driving the knife into her. I don't know why we get these urges. And I don't know what keeps us from listening to them.

"The thing to remember, though, is that some people do listen to them. And that's why we should all be pretty damn scared all the time. Why aren't we scared? Maybe because it's tiring. All we can be sure of is that anyone can be a potential murderer. It's not something you decide on. It's something that happens. And where does it put us? With a lot of potential murderers in

our books. Isn't it great? We have insane, psychopathic stories because they mirror real life."

Quickly I grab a small Uzi from my briefcase and aim at the class and in the dim, warm room, moving it from left to right, I fire continuously with a crackling, blazing sound as I hear screams, yelps, and frightened voices shouting "Noo!" in a symphony of terror and inferno as if pain is as real as my own cries of joy when I see them cover their poor faces and scramble backwards. But I also see Michael Potts not even blink. And then all is silent.

I put the toy machine gun back in the briefcase, looking at Face in her white outfit, charcoal hair, and terrified expression. Beautiful. I smile at her but she looks too shocked to smile back and I lift my head and continue, and leave them to later wonder if the incident had ever taken place or had merely sprung out of a small, fiery spark of imagination's insanity.

"The weather-beaten authors just find that little extra niche, twist or turn which makes the story that extra bit more exciting and sweaty than our own thoughts and nightmares."

I walk in front of the desk again and I half-sit, half-stand against my mother whale desk, keeping a straight face. All the time they are watching me and nobody has uttered even a sigh to confirm their existence.

"God is good. Devil is evil. Isn't that simple? But we can't let our stories be that simple, can we? Nobody will buy their contents. In any sense. Real life is too simple, if you will. Or it isn't, if you will.

"I think we are today living in a world where evil's got the winning hand. What makes religions wrong is not their ignorant bipolar and dualistic belief that everything is either good or bad, right or wrong. Bi as in bible, I like to say. Their problem, and our treat as authors, are their rules and rituals. Their group routines. Those are the happenings that create the

evil, conflicts, wars. And so, ironically, every religion is a pursuit of good, resulting in evil. Weird but true. At least in my mind.

"Nobody has yet had the guts to be good and alone. I say we don't need groups to be good, we can just follow our hearts. Old cliché, I know. Evil has come up with a weapon against the good people. If you're alone and good, you're gullible. And so you're laughed at. If you're a group trying to be good, you're at once a believer in something different, thinking different, acting different, because groups make rules. Groups require admittance, acceptance. And you have your conflict.

"Isn't life great? There is so much material out there. All you have to do is get your basket, pluck it all from the branches of life, dip it in a bottle of ink, and devour those stories like you would a chocolate-covered apple on a stick."

They're listening, attentive, and in our dim grave I continue talking in my slightly lower voice.

"If you want to scare your reader you should never give him a bug-eyed monster. It doesn't scare anymore. We've seen it all. What scares people today is a feeling of insecurity. Like I said before, you never know what's going on within the head of the guy sitting next to you on the bus.

"So we've got our safeties that we can always lean back on. You've got your house, your family, your brother and sister, children, your friends, your kindergarten teacher Miss Fairley, your clowns, your priest.

"And what happens, my dear disciples, when those people turn on you? When they are the ones swinging the knife? Where do you go? You can't run. That's your nightmare right there, when there is nobody to lean on." I knock on the wooden desk. "When the only people you trust cannot be trusted. There are no safeties in our stories. Except maybe when the guy you thought you never could trust rescues you in the end. You

never know. Life is never predictable and neither should your stories be.

"You all read the paper, watch the news. You all have a life. You've heard some nasty ones. Use them. Write something that will scare me."

Potty looks up at me. "But what you're saying, Pierce, is that we should use the stories of suffering people in our books, like, take advantage of them sort of. I mean use their stories to scare other people so that you can sell your book."

"Exactly Potty," I say, "Exactly."

19.

I carry Philip up the stairs to my apartment. Face opens the door with the keys I gave her and silently we enter. I walk into the bedroom and place the kid gently on the bed. I pull my brown and orange lion cubs blanket over him. I stand looking at him for a while. Then I join Face in the kitchen where she has lit a cigarette and is eyeing the three monkeys in the window.

"You still have them."

"Yeah. I'm a sentimental guy."

"Yes. You are."

"I'm working on it... So," I say and sit down, "what's this fantastic con of yours?"

"Well, as I understand it, Joe Cole killed his wife today in a manner which matches how his last book character kills his wife."

"Yes. So we know that he's flipped out."

"And," she continues, "the only one who has a copy of the script is you."

"And Peter."

"Your partner?"

"Yes."

"That's not good."

"Why?"

"Has he read it?"

"I know he has started reading it. We both have it on disc. We always handle Joe's books together. So I guess he printed it out for himself. I don't understand what you're getting at, Face."

"Don't you see? You have the story which describes exactly how Joe Cole killed his wife. It's the perfect evidence."

"So what? I'm giving it to the inspector tomorrow. And besides, Joe already confessed."

"Yes, he did. Because he was caught in the act. But what about another murder that he has not confessed to?"

"Would you know of any murder he's responsible of?" And I find myself believing she would.

"That's beside the point. I know of one where you are the responsible one."

A freeway of ice pours through me behind tunneling acid. I look into her eyes. She into mine. Serious. She's more insane than I am, I think.

"Jeez.. But I couldn't."

"Sure you could. It's perfect. You're a writer. You're a good writer."

"Maybe once."

"Don't give me that. I know you're an excellent writer. And you're definitely familiar with Cole's style of writing. And you know exactly how the murder went down. All the details. All you have to do is find a fitting place in the book, and stick in another chapter. I've read his books and I'm sure that won't be too difficult. Then you print out the book again and that's the version you give to the inspector."

"Wow. This is crazy. So you mean that the inspector will read through the book and connect Joe to Ethan's killing. What if he doesn't read through the whole book?"

"I'm sure he will. You heard him. He's a Joe Cole fan. Was. I hate to admit it, but I am too. Blood and gory pornography is in style, Angel. And I'm sure your wallet knows it."

"Yeah. But tampering with evidence?"

"Listen. There's a little boy sleeping in the next room. Because of this man he no longer has a mother. Or father. I know you want to hurt Cole real bad. And what better way to do it than to nail him for another murder."

"You have a real knack for convincing a man. But what are you doing this for? What's in this for you, Face?"

"Maybe I just want to save you from getting hurt. Maybe I just like you."

Again I hear the echo in the back of my head, 'You like it when we deceive you, right?' and I rub my wrists, as if washing them with warmth.

"Maybe your mind is as sick as mine," I say and stand up.

"Maybe," she says.

I walk into the bedroom where the kid is sleeping. I sit down next to my computer. I stand up again and start looking for the remote to my stereo. I finally find it by the computer. With the press of a button the CD player whirs into action. I quickly lower the volume. Gently I raise it again and I let 'Blue Velvet' with Bobby Vinton softly massage the kid's subconscious. And mine. I start up the computer and peripherals. He's still asleep. I load BEELZEBU.DOC into the word processor. A hand touches my shoulder. I touch it back.

"I'm going," she whispers. "I think you'll do this better by yourself."

I lean my head back. "Please stay. My heart is pounding. And I'm quite sure it was pounding before you touched me. The bed is big enough for the two of you. I don't think I'm going to do any sleeping tonight."

"But I don't have my things."

"I don't care."

"I do."

"Where are they?"

"At the hotel."

"So call for them."

"I can't do that. Angel, listen. I'll be back tomorrow morning to make sure you get off to work. And I guess this little guy

could use some looking after. If I stay I'm going to distract you."

"You already distract me."

"You see."

She kisses me on the ear and walks out.

"Face?" I whisper-shout.

"Yeah?" She sticks her head around the doorway.

"This is crazy."

"Yes it is." She ducks back.

"Face?"

"Yess?"

"Thanks."

She smiles at me before she disappears.

In half an hour I've found places for the new text. Gene Pitney is singing 'Something's gotten hold of my heart' and I start writing:

THE MAN IN THE MOON

The beach is still. Lionel Winger's meeting with Dorothy was pleasant, almost gratifying. His tension is gone. He can think clearly. He rolls down the window and puts his elbow out. His hair is blown back and the wind hits his forehead. Lionel feels like a lion running across endless lands of heat and prairie, ready to pounce on and claw anyone who might come his way. With his right hand firmly on the wheel he is power personified. Nobody can touch him. He and his machine are roaring.

Lionel is not aware of his increasing pressure on the pedal. Lionel cannot see the houses that he passes. There is only desert as far as the eye can see. There is only the draft from the propeller. There is only Lionel Winger, flying ace. The red landscape passes by him at amazing speed, the sun of hell

playing tricks with his eyes. He thinks he sees a face. The Face. The laughing face with those piercing eyes and the yellow, beaming teeth. "Do your homework, Lionel, or the man in the moon will punish you."

Newspaper wrapping begins to flutter on the passenger seat. Lionel is awake as the road turns and his tires screech as he wheels the car expertly through the curve. He howls at the dark and then laughs loudly at his image in the mirror. He snarls and bites at the wheel. The newspaper flutters again and a bony hand claws at it, gets a hold, and forcefully hurls it into the night. The garden clippers fall out of the wrapping as they make a vanishing metal-sound, bouncing across the road that Lionel's machine quickly leaves in the past. Dorothy will never be able to breast-feed, he thinks.

Suddenly Lionel's foot lunges at the break and he skids to a halt. He does not know why he has stopped. He reaches for the door and steps out. He looks up at the dark building he has stopped in front of. The house stares at Lionel through red curtains. The porch grins at him, ridiculing him, laughing at him. Someone in that house has hurt him. Someone is hiding in there.

Lionel knows who lives here. Lionel knows. The man in the moon. That's who. Lionel's friend told him that the man in the moon lives here. The man in the moon is not nice. He hurts little children. Lionel walks over to the trunk of his car. He opens it. He opens the tool compartment and takes out his gun. It's a nice, stiff, black gun and it feels nice, firm - real. He puts it in his pocket. Dorothy's robe. It's white. Lionel liked when she wore it over her nakedness. He would make her pretend that she was a nurse and listen to teddy's heart and Lionel would lift up the robe behind her.

Lionel walks up to the house with the robe under his arm. He pushes open the door. It is not locked. He walks in and closes the door behind him. Inside everything is dark. The man in the

moon made everything dark. Lionel puts on the white robe. It feels nice and cold, sprouting memories and smells of Dorothy. The front pockets are red. He puts his left hand in one of the pockets and squeezes the fresh piece of dark nipple between his fingers. He leans his head back and grunts. His trousers bulge violently.

There is a smell. A sweet smell of woman somewhere in the house. It's the man in the moon playing tricks, a voice tells him.

Silently Lionel walks further into the darkness. There are stairs.

"Hello?" he whispers.

He walks up the stairs. He hears breathing. In one of the rooms there is a man. He is sleeping. It's the man in the moon. Lionel takes the gun in his hands. He puts the gun up to the man's forehead.

"The man in the moon.." he sings. "You're supposed to be floating with the stars of raped souls."

The man in the moon opens his eyes and Lionel fires his gun. Three times. A bullet for every monkey. The man in the moon's face is gone. Lionel walks down the stairs again. He walks out the back of the house and down to the water where the waves are racing each other to the beach. The wind is tearing through him, grabbing at the robe. The robe is not white anymore. Red covers his side. The smell of woman has been replaced by a mixture of vomit and come and blood that make Lionel's nostrils twitch in pleasure. Lionel takes it off and throws it in the foaming water, drooling. He sits down and washes the blood from his hands. His own blood. The blood of the red brother.

In the black sky the man in the moon is smiling. Lionel looks up at him.

"I told you so," he says, "That's where you look your best. Great face-lift wonderboy.!"

He notices a sharp rock on the ground and picks it up. Thumbing the black edge so perfectly molded by sand from unseen corners of the world brings tears to his eyes and Lionel waits patiently for the rush of warmth to fill his underwear. He stuffs the rock absent-mindedly in his pocket and walks back to the car heading for home - as far as he is concerned - straight from another filthy working day. ---

"I'm home!" He shouts as he walks into his own house. His home. He hangs his jacket and hat on the coat hanger, the twisted, coiled coat-hanger that reminds him of a starved nigger. Louise appears twinkling on a spell of smells from the kitchen.

"Shhh. Thomas is sleeping."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"How did your case go with the Fawcett girl?"

"Not to good today. But we still have a week to go. A lot can happen in one week."

"How was your sister?"

"Dorothy is fine."

Lionel kisses his wife on the cheek and they embrace.

"Dinner's ready."

"What is it?"

"Chicken."

"Mmmm. Wonderful." ---

After dinner Lionel is sitting in his study. He takes the rock from his pocket and places it on some case papers. He looks at his beautiful paperweight, feeling his wonderful ecstatic best.

20.

She sits on my bed. She is wearing bluejeans and a white blouse. I'm lying against her. I am wearing bluejeans and a white T-shirt. My head rests against her tummy. She is hugging my neck and her legs are wrapped around my body. I take her naked foot in my hand and lift it to my mouth. I kiss her baby-white toes one by one and then let go of her foot again. She blows soothing air at my head, through me, until she has filled me with her breath and my pulsating life is sailing on winds and I sigh her love.

"So what's the story with you and all these movies?" she says.

"How do you mean? I just like films."

"As do most people. But they don't hide their walls behind posters from all the movies they've seen in their life."

"I do."

"So I have noticed. Are they where you get your imagination from or something?"

"Sort of. I guess. I've seen a lot more movies than I have posters. These are just the films I've seen five times or more."

"Or more?"

"Or more. I love movies. There was a time in my life where people could come up to me and ask questions about any actor and I'd tell them all the movies that actor appeared in. And maybe something about their age, marital status, kids, dogs, social security number, what they keep in their fridge, etcetera etcetera." She laughs. I feel good. "Or if they'd ask me about a film I'd tell them the actors, director, year, length of the movie, what scenes had been censored, how much money it brought in and perhaps who shows their tits, at what point in the movie, and for how long."

"Right. And who would you go and see all these movies with?"

"Oh I would get a gang together and then me, myself, I and my shadow would go to the movies and sit in the back and laugh in all the right places."

"So, basically, you were a loner and movies were just a way to pass time."

"I guess that's how it started. And then I became obsessed. I could rent a movie and watch it two times in the same day. I think I saw TOP GUN four times in the same day once. I don't know why. I could dream myself into another world I guess. And also I liked the way I could become an authority on movies. That's what I knew, computers and movies. That's what I was good for. One-way communication. It didn't exactly stimulate my social life in any significant manner."

"So you weren't satisfied with your real life and so you escaped into your movies."

"As if I haven't heard that a million times. That's what people see. It's a simple solution. So that's how we label that guy. Loner, insufficient love, finds comfort in escaping responsibilities in daydreams."

"So that's not right?"

"Of course it's probably right! But what does that help the poor guy who doesn't know how to carry on a conversation, who does not know how to make contact, who feels like he doesn't have a damn thing to share with anybody else. What does he do? The only thing he can do is live his reputation as a loner because he doesn't know how to break out of it. And people think he's doing all right, that he's being the person he wants to be. And really the more people think he is doing okay, the worse of he is."

"Hmm. So, this guy you're talking about, what happened to him?" She buries her chin in my hair.

"Well, I guess he started writing. He got all his feelings out in short stories and finally books. All those blank pages would

listen to him. One-way communication again. Until he got his first book published and suddenly people started asking him questions. And he could answer those questions because they were about something he had done. He could repeat the feelings he had written. And he saw how easy it was. And soon he had the confidence to actually start a conversation with someone. And people listened because now he was someone! And, I guess, he became me."

"What, you went through some metamorphic process and became another person?"

"Mmm."

"That's bullshit. You're still the same person. You just learned something. You learned how to overcome some fear of talking."

"But only because I was someone. I had written a book, that's why people listened."

"Bullshit again. You're not exactly famous, are you? So all the people who, as you say, actually listened to you, couldn't know that you've written a book!"

"I guess."

"So when they listened to you, they did listen to you, not some person who had written a book. It was just you. The only change that happened, happened in you, not because of the way other people saw you."

"Sure. You're right. And I love you for it. But what did help me was my writing. When I talked I could use my writing to back me up. I mean, sometimes I could borrow entire passages from my books, well-formulated and all, and people would think I was making it up as I spoke. That helped I'll tell you."

"Do you still do that?"

"Not all the time."

"Well, good. And I love you too."

"Do you know who says that?"

"What?"

"I love you too."

"I just did."

"I mean, an actor."

"Well about every actor I should think. No wait, actually I think I do know who you mean."

"You do?"

"James Dean."

"Yeah. How..?"

"In Rebel Without a Cause. I've only seen it once but my brother used to go around saying it all the time."

"Really?"

"Mmm. He has some sort of Dean obsession. I guess you do too, huh?"

"I guess I do."

"I don't see what's so special with that line, though. It's pretty common material."

I laugh but I feel I have to defend my hero. I try to find a path of feeling that I can walk into words.

"I don't know. I guess it's the way he says it. He tries to be nice to this girl, Judy, Natalie Wood, and she just sticks her nose in the air and ridicules him in front of her gang members. And when she goes off the camera does this close-up on Jimmy and he doesn't make a face or anything, he's just real calm, and he looks after her and he says into the air, 'I love you too.' And it's so damn beautiful."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I guess because it's such terrific irony. Everybody watching the movie, at least everybody watching with some sense, knows that the two of them are going to get together before the movie is over. And this guy has this fantastic nerve to be sure about this as well and he just says, 'I love you too' and he walks off as if that's your basic everyday

situation and there you have the magic of movies in a three-second clip. 'I love you too.' And in the scene you know he doesn't love the girl and she doesn't love him because they've just met. But at the same time you know they will love each other in perhaps an hour's running time of the movie. And so what Jimmy is doing, in a roundabout sort of way, is he's talking to the audience and hopping ahead of action. And at the same time, he isn't. I don't know. Do I make sense?"

"Well, no. I don't know. Maybe."

"I love it when you can't make up your mind."

"What I don't understand is why James Dean is so great. I mean, he only made two movies and then he died, right?"

"He made three movies and got killed before the last two were even shown to the public. When people got around to praising 'Rebel', Jimmy was dead. I don't know. It means something to me. I can't tell you what. Most people see Dean as the person he was in 'Rebel'. He became a cult hero. Someone who could be a symbol for all young people's fight against authority. That's the way I saw him at first. And then I read a lot of biographies about him and suddenly he became a person instead of a symbol. He lived a really strange life and nobody could really make him out. I have identified him with myself. I think that's what a lot of people do and I suppose that's why he's the immortal he is. Everybody can see something of Jimmy in themselves. But of course I will never know what he was really like."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It would be interesting to have known him, I guess. But I think then the magic about him wouldn't be the same. And then again, maybe it would be. It's strange how some people, a few chosen people, seem to lead the lives that millions of other people dream about living. They have been chosen to be the hopes of other people! But those heroes and heroines we see

aren't perfect. That part of their lives we know nothing about, we sprinkle with happy moments when in fact, most often, they've had rather tragic lives. It's ironic, once again. People are better off being the dreamer instead of the dream."

"Ah, words of wisdom from my guru."

"Oh, is that what I am to you?"

"In a weird sort of way."

"Well, I guess I'm a crazy guru. I used to think that I should kill myself in a car accident like Jimmy. I thought that was the meaning of life. To realize that if you die young then you will be young in whatever place you go to next."

"And why didn't you kill yourself?"

"I was too chicken."

"You're a complete maniac."

"Yes."

"So you're scared of dying."

"Not since this friend of mine's brother was dead for three minutes. He was stung by this poisonous fish in Africa. He was dead at the hospital and they woke him up. And he talked about this tunnel of light that a lot of people talk about. There was this light and he was floating towards it and he felt really good."

My mind sidetracks into a picture of a girl puking over her breasts and the smell hits me, I wince and pull back, pressing against Face and she shrieks and I'm flushed with warmth and I smell only Face's smells of washed hair and tropic gardens and I relax into her.

"And you believe him?" she continues.

"Of course. I have no reason to doubt him. Why would he come back to life to tell a lie? So I'm not really scared."

"But what's behind the light?"

"You seem to be asking all the right questions all the time. I never knew how to do that. I don't know what's behind the light. But I assume it's something better than this life."

"Why?"

"You're really annoying. Because I want it to be better. Okay, you got me. So what if there's a tunnel of light. It could be a frightening slide to hell. Who knows? But I want it to be something better and as long as I want that, maybe it will be."

"Maybe."

"Yeah. Maybe. This other friend of mine, Ethan, my ex-roommate. He and I once made a pact that whoever dies first, that person will, if it is possible, come back and somehow try to communicate with the living one. So I'm hoping he will die before me."

"That's not very nice of you."

I remember the pen. The pen with the initials E.M.Y. in Maria Falloni's last gasp for life.

"No."

She laughs.

"Actually," I say, "Do you know what a writer's dream is?"

"No."

"To kill a guy and get away with it. To know what murder feels like. That has got to be one of the strongest feelings one can know. And knowledge is power, you know. And with that knowledge I could write really good books."

"You really are a maniac."

"Maybe."

"You could never kill a guy."

"There is a solution to that which many authors have found. If you can't kill another person then who's left?"

"I don't know."

"You yourself. See? Take my pipe, for instance. I don't smoke it often but I do smoke. I guess it's a way of killing myself really slowly. So in the end I will have killed a guy."

"You're scary. I'm never going to start smoking," she says. "But if you're dead you won't get to write about it, will you?"

"No."

"Maybe you could kill a guy."

"Maybe." I lean my head back and smile crazily with my eyes wide open. She kisses me on the nose.

"You know what?" she says, "You're my hero."

"And you're my heroine," I counter, "and I'm addicted to you."

Before she leaves we stand a long time embracing each other by the door.

"Don't kill anyone before I come back," she whispers, joking. I kiss her ear.

She walks out the door. When she has walked a few steps I stick my head outside the door and say, "I love you too, Face."

She turns and smiles. She blows a kiss at me and I catch it in my hand and put it in my pocket.

21.

"Wake up, Mr. Angel."

"Mm?"

"Mr. Aayen-gel."

I'm in my chair with my head buried in my arms against the desk. The kid is shaking my left arm and my head falls on the desk.

"What? What? What's happening?"

"You fell asleep in your chair Mr. Angel. Come on. You have to get up."

"Oh no. What time is it?"

"It's seven-thirty, Mr. Angel. Let's go eat breakfast."

I sit up and rub my face.

"Breakfast? What breakfast? Oh kid I'm sorry. I don't have any breakfast food. Unless you want some pizza."

"Pizza?!" someone says from the doorway. "Well that's a fine thing to feed a child in the morning."

"You don't have to make breakfast, Mr Angel," the kid says, "Miss Face is making it."

"Miss Face?!" I turn around and look at the gorgeous figure in the doorway. "Miss Face?!"

"The one and only," she says. "Come on, Philip, and leave this man to whatever he likes to do in the mornings. He looks like he could use a change of clothes and a shower. And if he hurries up he may even get some ham and eggs."

"Ham and eggs?" I sniff at the odor that I realize must be coming from my kitchen. "But I don't have ham and eggs?"

"Now you do, Mr. Angel," Philip says and rushes out of the room.

I look at Face. "Miss Face?!"

"Come now, Mister Angel. On the double." She claps her hands together and then she vanishes too.

I get up and walk into the hallway. I hear the two of them chattering away in the kitchen and suddenly I'm overcome with a delirious feeling of happiness defying all gravity and pulling me into orbit around myself. I walk into the bathroom, humming 'Who am I to blow against the wind...'. I put my hands on the sink and look at myself in the mirror.

"My two favorite people in the world are having breakfast in my kitchen. Do you understand? Breakfast! In my kitchen! And they're talking too. Voices! In my kitchen! It's a Kodak moment."

I undress. I hang the James Dean tie on the towel hook and throw the clothes on the toilet seat. I turn on the shower and step into it. Over the noise I start singing the song I've sung so many times in the last seven years: "Oh did you happen to seeee, the most beautiful girl- in the woorld, aaand if you did, waaaaas she cryying...?"

When I turn off the shower I reach for the towel and find only my tie. I walk over to the door and open it a little."

"Excuuuse mee! Could somebody get me a towel?"

I hear a response from the kitchen and I quickly rush back behind the shower drapes. Soon Face enters with a white towel and walks up to give it to me. I reach out for it.

"Here you are, Pavarotti."

"Oh. You heard me?"

"We tried not to."

"Thanks."

I start drying myself but she doesn't leave. I stick out my head again.

"Are you leaving?"

"Do joo want me to leeve so soon, senor?" she flirts erotically, pushing me into sane arousal.

"There's a kid having breakfast out there."

"Wee coud have brekfast ynn here."

"You're teasing me."

"Aam I?" She begins to unbutton her blouse.

"Hey, stop it."

She looks up at me.

"Joo dont want me?"

"Jeesus. Stop it. Give a man some privacy."

"Si senor. It ees joor loss." She curtsies and walks away.

I dry myself and step out from behind the drapes. She has left the door half-open and now she sticks in her panther leg and caresses the melting door with it.

"Sssenor?"

"Christ, Face. Why do you torture me like this?"

I walk up to her. She sticks her head in the opening.

"Ay keess senor?"

We kiss shortly, but perfectly, now and not then, in a flash of wanting and giving and taking.

"Jore clodes senor."

I take the neatly folded clothes from her.

"Thankyou. Now go and entertain the kid." She walks away and I whisper, "But, hey, drop the accent with him."

I walk into my bedroom and look over the clothes she has given me. My regular blue suit and white shirt. White boxer shorts with red, painted lipstick mouths all over. And a light-blue tie scattered with red hearts and purple teddybears.

I start getting dressed in front of the mirror.

"She's testing me, isn't she? She doesn't think you'll put on this tie, right? Well, you will and you'll wear it to work. That bitch is driving you right out of your senses. Look at what she's doing. She's got you tampering with fucking evidence. Okay, so you killed a man. But only because the bastard wanted you to. You had to do it. He gave you a lot of money, right? He gave you a fucking house! It was worthwhile. You got away with it. And you wanted to kill him. The bastard raped Maria didn't he? At least you think he did. So far so good. But what if you don't get away with this? Huh? So why did you do this? For her? Why? Why do you love her so, Pierce? For what reason? She's making you weak. You've got to get out of here, you see? Before you get into some deep trouble. What are you rambling about? Don't worry. You're leaving on Monday. You're going to Tanzania."

I start walking away but I go back to the mirror to adjust the damn tie.

"Or are you?" I say.

I walk into the kitchen where the two of them are having a discussion about what they're going to do during the day. Go shopping, apparently. They become aware of my presence.

"Ah, the awaited master of the house. How absolutely darling you look. Your breakfast is ready for consumption. Please have a seat."

She pulls out a chair for me and I sit down across from the kid.

"I see you liked the tie that Philip here picked out for you," she says happily.

"I didn't think you'd wear it, Mr. Angel. It was really a joke."

I take a piece of toast from the tray and start buttering it.

"Why shouldn't I wear it? It's one of my favorite."

"I think it's sissy," he says.

Face breaks out laughing and Philip puts on a big smile. I can't hold back and I start laughing too. And then the kid starts laughing. Face kisses me on the cheek and looks over at Philip.

"I think it looks really good on him, don't you?"

The two of them laugh even harder.

"I don't care what you say, I'm going to wear this tie to work today because it's... it's a really nice tie."

"O-oh, I think we've hurt is pride," she says.

"Don't worry Mr. Angel. We can buy another tie for you today."

"You're going shopping?"

"Yeah. Miss Face and me are going to do some browsing."

I laugh at the way he says that.

"You are, are you? Well if you are looking for a tie, there is this one tie that I've had my eye on for some time. It's this green tie, you know like grass, and it has these pink little pigs in white pampers and bibs running around on it."

They laugh again.

"I'm not kidding. It's a really great tie."

"You're crazy Mr. Angel."

"So people tell me, kid. Listen, are you guys taking me to work?"

"We thought that would be a nice gesture," she says.

"Okay. I just have to get my disc and then let's go." I stand up and start for my room.

"Hey!" she shouts.

"What?" I turn around scared, startled.

"You rinse off your dishes before you go anywhere."

"Are you kidding me? I've nev-"

"No, I'm not kidding. Take your dishes like a good boy and rinse them."

"Okay, I will."

"Good."

I rinse off the dishes and put them by the sink.

"Satisfied?"

"Very much so." She kisses me on my other cheek now. She holds me under the chin and turns my head to the kid.

"Isn't he a good boy?" she says to the kid.

The kid lifts his hands to his mouth as if to muffle a shriek of joy that somehow escapes through his eyes instead, and nods repeatedly at her.

"You guys are sooo weird," I say.

I walk into the bedroom and take out my disc. I put it in my jacket's inside pocket. I walk over to the mirror. I see what made them laugh. I now have two red mouths of lipstick not only on my underwear but also on each cheek.

"You know what you've got out there, you bastard? Do you know what this could pass for? A fucking family that's what! But it's too late for that, isn't it? Too fucking late."

I don't wipe off the red marks. I think I should give them a few more laughs, for the kid's sake. I go and stand in the small hallway.

"Are you guys ready?"

"Just a minute Mr. Angel!" the kid shouts from the kitchen over the sound of rushing water.

"I'll just wait outside."

I step outside as my neighbor across from me steps outside her door. She is good-looking, blond, in her mid-thirties, with big breasts and wearing a dark coat and a long, black, tight skirt. I wonder later what her description of me would be in the

same situation. She looks at me strangely. I feel the blood rushing to my already red cheeks.

"Good morning," I say.

"Good morning," she says and hurries down the stairs. I hurry inside again and break out laughing. Face and the kid hurry to see what's going on.

"What happened, Mr. Angel?"

"Oh, nothing really. I've just been lunatic-labeled by my neighbors as well now. That's all. Shall we go?"

As we drive to the office the kid is sitting in the backseat with a bad case of the giggles. The kind of giggles that shoot sparks of joy in every direction. I'm glad. Before I get out I kiss Face on the cheek.

"I'm sorry my kisses don't carry any color," I whisper. To Philip I say, "You take care of Miss Face for me now so that she doesn't get into any trouble. And try to find that tie for me."

He puts his elbows on the front seats and eyes me seriously.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Angel, we'll be just fine. You take care of yourself for me. You look like you could be getting into trouble yourself."

"Thanks a lot," I say and step out of the car.

I stand and watch after them, laughing. Then I notice people's gazes and I quickly head inside to wash off the lipstick with my handkerchief. When I open the Angel & Gadd door Julie is sitting by her desk. I dive bravely into the room, ready to take on a tidal wave.

22.

"I have noticed that we only have one black american in this class."

I look over at the boy sitting to the far left in the front row. Closest to the door. Everybody looks at him. Curly hair, brown eyes, wide nose, large lips, excellent physique, tall. One might think that he was the original stereotype and yet when I look at his expression I think that there is something more to this guy.

"Somehow blacks haven't made as much of a mark in literature just yet, as they have in most other arts, and there I definitely include sports. And most often black Americans or Africans make their mark by being the best."

I look at the boy again. He seems pleased with the last remark. As I hoped.

"What brought you to my class?" I ask him.

"I don't know. I suppose that I like writing."

"And you feel that you have a story to tell."

"Well, yeah."

"Good. And do you think that you will be one of the best?"

"Definitely, Mr. Angel."

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear. And that's what I want you all to feel. I don't want to hear any modesty. I want you all to not only want to reach the top of the shelf, I want you all to expect it. Let me tell you why blacks make it to the top.

"When blacks create something. Okay, I may be a little prejudiced now, but you'll have to bear with me.

"When blacks create something it's all about creating from the heart. Blacks have somehow always known what pain is, they know about suffering and being spat upon and endurance. They know about living in the ghetto and they know about being killed. When they make a tune, sing a song, and perform a dance they are doing what their minds and bodies tell them to

- they are letting free all those aggressions and suppressed feelings that need to get out. And when all those feelings are allowed out, they explode in an inferno of Beauty. It is Beauty and stays Beauty because the feelings are real. They catch you and won't let you go until you really understand what they are saying to you.

"And always there is something new. Remember when rap singing hit us? Break dancing? Do you know why blacks succeed? Because they work under pressure. I think I told you that once. You will find you do your best work under pressure because that's when your true, innermost feelings are released.

"Blacks often make it to the top because they're often at the bottom when they start out. For them it's not about fame and fortune. It's about staying alive. It's about making a stand, about being one of the crowd. It's about being someone so that nobody will beat you up! And eventually it turns out to be about breaking free and giving back. About singing greater than the rest, about dancing with the fastest and smoothest moves.

"The thing to remember is that the people who make it to the top are often the people who had the furthest way to travel. They are the people with the superior experience.

"So what do you all think about this? Am I right?"

The black kid opens his mouth.

"What you're saying is, that slavery and oppression help us to the top," Mark, the black kid, says. It's hard to tell if he agrees with me.

"Yes. For some I claim it did."

"But racism isn't that serious anymore," says a boy in the second row behind Mark, "So I guess that Mark here won't have the same incentives."

"Ah," I say, "Racism is by all means very real even today. It's just not spoken in the same direct manner. It's more of

psychological warfare against blacks by more people than anybody would care to admit. Maybe it's not even intentional but-" I see Mark raise his hand. "Mark?"

"If I may answer that?" he says.

"Sure, by all means, please."

Mark turns around to face the other kid.

"Kevin, you moron, there is no way you can say that racism isn't real anymore. Because when you're black you see it everywhere. And like Mr. Angel says, maybe it's not always intentional, but I sure do feel it. You know, when the cab driver doesn't stop when you wave. When the waiter waits a little longer before coming to your table. When you don't get the summer job though you know you have really good credentials. When nobody will sit next to you on the bus. Or when you're the first person people look at when a store alarm goes off. I sure do feel it. And it's particularly bad when you see contempt in people's eyes and they're not saying it straight out. People try to hide some hatred that I do not know why they have."

He finishes there and the class is silent for a moment.

"I'm glad you said that because I'm sure I wouldn't have said it as well. But you've illustrated a point. Blacks have a lot to come down on. There is a lot of criticism to be made and a lot of feelings to be let out. If they're released in a controlled, productive manner then there's no telling what you can get away with."

"But what about us poor white people who don't have this unfairness to build on?" says Kevin.

"Don't tell me you haven't had your share of suffering in your life, Kevin. You've gone through puberty, haven't you?"

"Yes."

The class laughs.

"Well, there must be a lot of suffering there to build on. Love is a many splendored thing that has caused us all a bundle of

pleasure and load of pain. Our voices cracking, hair under our arms. At least a dozen different hairdos attempted, each one worse than the other. The first kiss and the first slap."

"Okay, okay. But how does that compare to slavery?"

"Oh come now, Kevin. You can't tell me that you think that one bad experience is better than another. All experiences are just as bad. But well communicated they can all create wonders.

"But I do know what you mean. You want to write about something that society values as really important. More important than our own growth and production and loves and suicidal tendencies. Something that will shake the pillars of our planet and send history into yet another ultimate era which should finalise our search for truth and satisfaction. And a possible side-effect could be your fortune."

"Something like that."

"Well, Kevin. You have eyes and ears and a mouth to ask questions with. Read books and newspapers, listen to the wisdom of experience in other people, ask your way to knowledge. Travel to corners of the earth. If not in person, in mind. Learn about the world, experiment, make your judgments, find the illness, think for a few years, find the remedy and then put into words. There's really nothing to it.

"Learn about the suffering, breathe it, experience it and then with the aid of your pen you must make ignorant people feel it. And a really good imagination doesn't hurt of course," I finish.

"But you sound like all this suffering is something positive," some girl says.

"Oh no. I'm not saying that the suffering in itself is positive. I would be really happy if there was no racism and prejudice and rich versus poor and beautiful versus ugly. But that's something that is part of the world we inhabit and cannot be erased or

forgotten. The conflicts came first. I'm saying the experience from the conflicts can be turned into something positive.

"If people can communicate their hatred and love, their tears and their laughter, their fears and desires into writing that other people willingly share. If those books and poems make someone stand up and cry for change, help someone get through the night, make that someone feel that they are not alone, or just make someone laugh or shed a lonely tear, then the creator has accomplished something." I look at Face.

"I, as you know, call it Beauty. Beauty, that which makes our palms moist and our eyes glisten and our hearts gallop and our voices weak and our legs tremble. Beauty, that which we all recognize but cannot summarize in any definition. Beauty, that merely is just that. You may all call it what you wish but I have never found another word for it." But I have found a name, I think for myself. And she's sitting really close. Close enough for me to feel the energy of invisible lightning tearing through the short distance of air between us.

"We seem to be coming back to that, Pierce. Beauty. Is that what we're supposed to live for or something? You sound as if nothing else matters." Potty has raised his voice from where he is sitting in the back.

"Thank you Potty for raising that question. I've told you before and I'll tell you again. You never have to agree with me in this. Creative writing is something very abstract and should be seen as such. I am a romantic and writing has been for me up to this day, everything. I started writing seriously when I came to boarding school. I came there because my parents had divorced. I was hurting during my time there. I used that pain to write. And I wrote a lot. And I wrote it good. And I tried to see my pain as something desirable, something that had given me the first push towards writing.

"Writing helped me get out feelings that would otherwise have been released in other forms of action that I dare not

discuss. I turned my pain into Beauty is the way I saw it. And during that time I also did a lot of thinking. I found answers to most of my questions about the world but I would not share them with other people because I thought I would be classified as insane. A writer's Galileo, I thought. So I put those thoughts into writing as well. But I still have not shared them with anyone. Well, this Beauty thing was something I thought up back then. I was depressed and so were most of my thoughts. But I did come to the conclusion that the best I could do was write. I felt good doing it and I especially felt good when I was appreciated. That's really what it's all about, being appreciated, keeping your dignity and attaining respect."

"Let me share with you a little passage I have memorized. It's deep and all that and it doesn't have to mean anything to you people. You may discard it as just one of your teacher's crazy ideas or you may ponder upon it for a while."

I look over the lot of them. I feel ready to crumble into a flaming pyramid of dust to be blown away by the wind that speared through me when I caught a glimpse of truth on that day when Maria Falloni was raped. Are they up to it? I don't know.

"Here goes," I say and I start reciting my own lines:

"Unsteady and gullible I came to this world thanks to a suffering woman's immense strengths. But quite early in my life I learned that all is not bright and blissful on our planet. Words such as lie, deceit and betrayal acquired memorable meanings for me when I made use of them as the rules require. The one who loses his virginity first and dies last, wins. I mock my own words.

"This fuss about women was for me a simple game. That desire was restrained by good behavior and morals turned out to be a rumor. A taut belt is easily unbuckled. A heart is fragile

but so also is a state of mind. Insanity bothers clear thinking. Therefore one must hide one's desires in the many acts of the face. A mouth is not always for the taster what it is for the tasted. An eye may shut and a mouth may close. But the ear will forever hear the evil that is whispered behind walls.

"If one seeks to understand the feelings which control man, one contemplates eternally over actions that remain undone. If one instead desires to act then the thought does not always have time to join the behavior. Laugh therefore always at the man who loses himself in dreams and ridicule the man who falters in his actions, because they have lost their face. Seek instead to amuse the easily amusable, to hurt the sad, to control the weak and to libel the strong. Popularity is for man what the tail is for the scorpion. Through a pleasant mood and superior mentality one reaches the status where all jokes are laughed at, where all orders are performed and where all women do.

"Man is frightened of the one who knows more, has more and is seen more. Therefore man obeys. But man is also jealous. The popular one lives the desires that all have but which are held back by unwritten protocol. Behind locked doors are heard screams of this forbidden satisfaction. Therefore the little man discredits. He is more in number and he conquers. And soon our hero is dead. Soon our hero is replaced by his executor. And the wheel is a circle, and hence a completion of the circle's track leads us to a point where our hero dies and is replaced within one and the same connecting point.

"The thinker seeks to localize this point which forever seems to be the reason behind our misery. He wants to cut the circle straight across this point to end our suffering. But what he does not see is that the cycle then will end."

I stop there and wait for a moment, half-expecting a small earthquake. I look out over my disciples. Most will have understood nothing. Perhaps one will have understood all.

"Did you write that?" Potty asks.

"Yes. When I was younger than you."

"Do you believe it's true?"

"Yes."

"But it seems to me like you're making fun of the idea. Just like it's just one in an endless line of amusing ideas that we like to quote now and then to seem important-like."

"I'm not laughing at the idea. I'm laughing within the idea. I am mocking the simplicity of human behavior as if I thereby can wake people and make them act otherwise. And at the same time I am saying that things cannot change. People can change but never the path that we follow. There will always be someone ready to take over. So, in fact, I am a product of my own idea and my own simplistic behavior." I laugh.

They're all silent.

"You may label me as crazy and I should really leave you all to find your own truths. But I think it may be stimulating for you to take part in insanity once in a while. In fact, I'm going to give you your first reading assignment today."

I hear some low mumbling.

"I know, I know. I didn't like to be forced to read a book either. But a book is a book is a good reading. And besides, I'm not forcing you all to read it. I'm just saying we're going to have a discussion about it later on. That means that you can test how good you are at faking having read a book. But I warn you, I used to be good at that too so I'm also good at discovering acts in others. Since this is not an English class we're not going to do an analysis of the book. What I would like you all to do is form an opinion about the last line in the Prologue. Maybe you could even write something about it.

"In fact, I think we have reached a point where I'm going to let you all write more freely. I sort of expect you all to be writing poems and stories on a day-to-day basis but I know that's wishful thinking. You don't have to hand in anything that you don't want to but I will comment all work that you wish to give me. That way you write about what you want and I get a lot of stimulating reading done.

"So, you should all pick up a book on my desk before you leave. By the way, does anybody know what the last line of the Prologue in 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' is?"

I see Potty raise his hand to get my attention and then he says, "All art is quite useless."

"Quite," I say. "That's what we're going to be discussing in a few weeks time."

That evening I'm just finishing a poem when I hear steps in the hallway.

"Pierce?"

"Yes?"

And then in the doorway appears an unexpected figure. The only person who in fact calls me Pierce.

"Potty!"

"Excuse me for walking in but the door was open."

"Of course. I mean, yes. Welcome. I'm glad to see you. Have a seat."

He sits down, looking into the table, or rather at the paper lying there.

"What can I do for you, Potty?"

"Well," he mumbles and looks out the window where the tall shadow of a tree is blackening the small lawn. His hands are gripping the chair and he rocks uneasily. "Are you sure that, I mean... can't things change?"

"What?"

"Today, in class, you said things can't change."

"Oh, Potty, I didn't know I made that kind of impression on you. My oh my."

"But that's what you said, right?"

"Yeah, but I also said not to take it very seriously. When I said things can't change I was not referring to things as in everything."

"Well what then?"

"Well. Umm. I guess I was referring to the general circle of things. We are born and we die. We fall in love and we fall out of love. We seek to be the best and that makes us the worst. Today, I made a lot of generalizations but I did that deliberately. There are always exceptions that confirm the rule. The most important thing to remember is that there are always people who fit into your generalizations. So I guess I was really referring to a situation where certain people will have more than other people. We will have the kings and we will have the servants. We will have the various believers and we will have the non-believers. We will have the ugly and we will have the beautiful. And that's why we will always have conflicts."

I see him barely nodding.

"But that's not really why you came here? To ask me about that crap."

He laughs softly. "No," he says and I begin to fall from a tree, waiting to reach ground, but not yet knowing if I'm a leaf or a fruit.

23.

"Julie! I wasn't expecting to see you here. Are you back to stay?" I try to snub her and start walking for my office.

"Hello, Pierce," she says and she follows close behind me through the door. She is wearing a very tight, grayish, half-polo shirt with a black leopard-pattern. It is bulging with her large, well-formed breasts. Equally tight, gray trousers cling to a firm behind and muscular thighs. On her feet are black, high-heeled boots. Her blond hair hangs freely against her shoulders and she is wearing a pair of silver, rather sizable, coiled earrings that hang from each pinkish earlobe. Her eyes are somehow deeper than I've noticed before. Her mouth carries no lipstick.

As I sit down behind my desk my eyes encompass this enticing appearance. My eyes rest on hers. She smiles. I open my briefcase and take out my disc. I turn on my computer and insert the disc into the drive.

"I thought you quit," I say.

She sits down in the couch in front of me and folds one leg over the other, slowly, seducingly.

"I was being hasty. I wasn't thinking. Look, about yesterday, why can't we just forget about that."

"I have a strong feeling that my privates still have a grudge on you." With a few mouse clicks I load the word processor.

"Oh, Pierce, I'm so sorry about that. Does it still hurt?"

"Yes," I lie.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I know you weren't cheating on me. I know it was that reporter woman who was there."

"Do you now? Well how clever of you to think of that all by yourself. What about the lipstick then, and the note?"

"She took something from you didn't she? She set you up!"

"What is this, Miami Vice? Why don't you go home?" I load BEELZEBU.DOC into the word processor.

"If you had slept with her you would hardly still have had your clothes on. Look, Pierce, I know who she is."

"Well yippie-kie-yeah for you. What a detective you are." I move the mouse pointer to the drop-down menu and click on PRINT DOCUMENT. The laser printer whirs into action in the next room.

"You mean, you know who she is too?" she seems genuinely surprised. My mind flips. Who else is she but the student I used to have?

"Yeah... what? What do you mean do I know who she is too? But... I mean, yeah, she's a freelance reporter."

"Besides that."

"What do you mean besides that?"

"What do you know about Ethan Young's death?"

"Oh no. Now don't you start on me." Everybody is on to me besides the fucking cops, I think.

"That's why she was here asking questions, wasn't it?"

"Yes. But only because I knew him."

"How did she know you knew him?"

Think fast.

"Well... I don't know."

Slick.

"I'll tell you why."

"*You* will tell me?"

"Because she knew Ethan Young."

Immediate implosion of the brain and piece by piece fly into black holes only to be spat out again with old cobwebs and bones. You love it when we deceive you, right?

"Say that again."

"She knew Ethan Young. She was dating him."

"That can't be." I stare at her but my vision is fuzzy.

"It's true. I get some input from reading all those trashy magazines, as you call them. They're even in a picture together in some western bar."

"No." I shake my head, expecting myself to wake up any moment now.

"Yes. I have it on my desk."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. The photographer caught them kissing even. Really romantic. It's that famous photographer, whats-his-name, I forget, but he had to throw the camera to a friend close by and he just ran for it."

"So she's not a freelance reporter?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. Anyone can say they're a freelance reporter, can't they? Well she showed me some sort of ID, I remember. It said "Morning Blaze" or something like that.

"My oh my." My head begins to freeze a few inches from the core of the sun.

"That's what I said. I just realized last night that I'd seen her face before. I was lying in bed feeling sorry for myself and stuffing myself with chocolate and then it struck me. And I found the magazine under my bed and there she was in some black number with Ethan Young. He was in some dark suit and sunglasses even."

"Wait a minute." I already feel my voice weaken as I am slowly drained of life. "When was the picture taken?"

"Oh I just bought the magazine last week. I don't know. Some month ago? The thing that troubled me was that it wasn't her name under the picture you know. So I thought it may not be her but now I'm sure she must have lied about her name."

I'm silent. I grip the arms of my chair and try to hold back the tears. But I don't think my efforts are paying off. My friend.

My girl. No. He was never my friend. She was never my girl.
Who was I?

"What do you mean she lied about her name?"

"Well the magazine said Elizabeth Potts."

I'm going insane. A pinball machine fires my head into a stellar game of random flight. I'm woozy, about to faint.

"Pierce? What's wrong?" Julie brings me back and I find some energy in sheer artist confusion.

"Oh, I don't know. Everything, I guess. About every goddamn thing that could possibly be wrong." I look up at her and I know she can see the tears. "Why can't things stay the same Julie? Why do people die?"

"Hey. Calm down. What's wrong?"

She stands up and walks around the table. I sob. She kneels beside me and takes my hands in hers.

"What's wrong honey?"

"Oh Julie... yesterday night... The police called me..."

"What? Why?"

"Sophie Cole is dead."

"Oh no, Pierce. How?"

"Joe... " I can't say it.

"What about Joe?"

"Joe... "

"Yes?" She puts her head in my lap and strokes my arm gently. Somehow I hear her purr.

"Joe killed her."

"O my God."

"Joe is a psychopath."

"Oh god o god o god."

"People die, Julie. People die even when you don't want them to die. Isn't that so bloody irresponsible of them? And when they die they're supposed to be buried aren't they? You're

supposed to go to their funeral. But some of them die and they just keep on living. And you think it's still them but it isn't.

They don't do the same things anymore. Do you know Julie?"

"What do I know?"

"Jimmy did the right thing."

"Jimmy Dean?"

"Yeah. He got himself killed first. See? That's the trick. You kill yourself first and then you let everybody else suffer. That way you don't have to be around to see all your dreams die. You get yourself killed when you're at the top. And then people can only remember you at the top because that's all there was. And you let them sit around crying over you. Stupid bastards.

"Oh, Pierce. Don't talk like that. You know that's not true."

"How do we know what's true? The truth is we don't know. Ha! The truth is that we don't know the truth. I got it!"

"No, Pierce. The truth is that I love you."

She looks up at me and I get a lump in my throat. I squeeze her and look up at the white ceiling.

"Don't talk like that."

"Why?"

"Because I'm just some fellow whose ready for the asylum any day now."

"No you're not. You're a great, lovable, kind, generous person and I love you. I want to take care of you."

"Ah. But you think I'm fat."

"That just means there's more of you to love."

I smile.

"Cm'ere" I mumble and I lift her up into my lap. I place her arms behind my head and look into her eyes. "Cm'mere and kiss me."

She does. We kiss deeply and she presses her amazing body hard against mine. We embrace awkwardly and violently in the swivel chair. Standing up I lift her and seat her on my desk.

Still with our lips pressed together she leans backwards and I forward in a smooth, joint effort. My left hand supports her head and the other seeks pleasure in its harsh game over her body, over her neck, feeling her heaving breasts, down and pressing between her legs, around and grabbing her behind, pushing, as she yelps with pleasure like a puppy on every impulse with every tune and note I feel.

There is a knock at the door. It opens as we scramble up to a standing position behind the desk. A head pops in with a questioning expression.

"Mr. Angel?"

"Yes. Inspector Salinger! Do come in. I wasn't expecting you this early."

He closes the door behind him. The two of us are breathing heavily in a fluster of shame and joy. This is not happening, I think. The inspector eyes her, forming his opinion quickly.

"Yes, well I thought that I should get this over with as soon as possible."

"Please have a seat. I'm just printing the script for you. Coffee while you wait?"

"Well, yes, why not?"

Julie awakens suddenly. "Cream or sugar?" Great move, Julie.

"Black."

Julie walks around the table, fixing her hair, and past him as he sits down in front of me. He looks after her.

"Mr. Angel, you seem to be getting around."

"Well, actually it's quite the contrary." I sit down.

"I can't help feeling a bit envious, I must say."

"Inspector, do you have kids?"

"Yes I do. Three. Two boys and a girl."

"Well Inspector, it is I who envy you."

"Really, would you care to switch?"

I laugh politely. I see him notice my tie.

"Actually, inspector, there's something I want to ask you."

"Go ahead."

"I was a friend of Ethan Young's. Are you involved in the murder?"

"The case, you mean?"

"Oh," I laugh and lose myself in his eyebrow briefly again, "Yes of course, I mean the case."

"Well if you've read today's paper you will know as much as I do."

"Oh. But I haven't."

"Oh, well then. The latest findings show that Mr. Young was actually dead before someone shot him. Poisoned, you know."

"Excuse me? Poisoned as in drugged?" The pinball machine rings and a spring is pulled back. I wince and try to stop it.

"Yes. By the looks of it it was suicide. The drug must have been consumed where he was found on the second floor. It's an instant killer.

"But why would someone shoot a dead person?"

Exactly Pierce. Why would they?

"We can't tell. That's the mystery. Perhaps the killer didn't realize that he was dead. Our guess is that Ethan Young knew of his coming assassination. Which probably means that this was a professional hit."

I stare at him and the spring is released as I realize what he in fact is telling me. I slide back on a rainbow, caught in a gasp between tears and joy, my hunting-mask unchanged.

"Before I forget, Mr. Angel, is the child, Philip, doing all right?"

"Oh, Philip is fine. In fact he's out shopping now with Face. You know, the woman you met last night."

"Ah, of course. Well, I just wanted to tell you that we contacted his

grandparents last night."

"Joe's father?"

"Yes."

"In Washington?"

"Yes. You know them?"

"Yes."

"They are expecting him today. So I will send a car around to pick him up. When do you suppose they'll be finished with their shopping trip?"

"Oh, I don't-"

The computer makes a short beeping sound.

"Oh that will be your script for you Inspector. The printer is in the other room." We stand up together and walk for the door. "I don't know when they'll be back. I guess in an hour or so. But I'd really like to say goodbye to him first, you know."

I open the door for him.

"Of course. But we really do have to pick him up as soon as possible. Is there any way in which you can go home and tell him goodbye? It would save us a lot of time.

"I guess." I notice Julie by her desk, trying to look like she's working. "Julie! what happened with the coffee?"

"Well I just put it on, Mr. Angel," she says, using my last name for the first time since she started working for me. "We didn't have any ready coffee, you know."

"That's all right, dear," the inspector says, "I'm sure I'll get my share of coffee today anyway. I always do."

Peter appears from the side room holding the newly printed script.

"Did you just print this, Pierce?"

"Yes. Peter Gadd, this is inspector Salinger. The script is for him. I'll tell you about it later, okay?"

They shake hands.

"So your name really is Gadd?" The inspector says.
"Well, it has been in the past seven years."
"Oh?"
"It's a long story."
"Well maybe I'll have time for it someday. But I really must go now."
"Okay, inspector, it's been nice talking to you," I say.
"Yes, well I'll have a car by your place in two hours to pick up Philip?"
"Fine," I say.
He leaves and they attack me.
"Inspector Salinger, Pierce? What's going on here? Why the hell does he need Cole's script?"
Julie stands up.
"Pierce! Is Philip Cole at your place all by himself? What's he doing there?"
"Hey!" I cry. "Wait a minute. Let's see how fast I can run this by you guys. Peter, Mrs. Cole is dead, killed by her husband."
"Joe?"
"Yes Joe!"
"Shitters."
"And the inspector needs the script because I talked to him yesterday and as it turns out he killed his wife in the exact same manner as he killed Winger's wife in the book."
"Shitters, Pierce."
"I know I know."
"But why didn't you just give him one of our scripts? We have at least three printed scripts."
"I don't really know so I'll answer that when you're good and ready. Julie, Philip is not alone at my place. In fact he's not home at all. He's out shopping with Elizabeth."
"Elizabeth who?" she asks, but she knows.

"The reporter!"
"Why is he out with her?"
"Because... because he is. Okay?"
A whining sound starts somewhere. Boiling water.
"No it's not okay! You explain this to me, right now!"
"Julie, it's too complicated right now. Please get the coffee, that sound is driving me crazy."
"Yeah, well you drive me crazy. What the fuck is going on with you!? Tell me that you didn't spend the night with her."
"Jesus Julie."
"Tell me or I'm out that door and you'll never see me again!"
The whining continues.
"Please, Julie, think. Philip is at my place. I didn't spend the night with her. I spent the night with the kid. Peter! Get the damn coffee!"
"The two of you are driving me crazy," he says and he leaves from somewhere in the corner of my eye.
"Philip is not at your place. He's out shopping. With her."
"Yes but only because she is helping me."
"Why is she helping you?"
"Because she was there yesterday too."
"Where?"
"At the Cole's place!"
"Why?"
"Because she came there with me! Peter! Get the damn stupid shitfaced coffee!!!"
"Why did she come there with you?!"
"Because we were together remember? The note? And the inspector called us?"
I grab her arms.
"Let go of me!"
"Not until you calm down."

"How can I be calm when you're out running with other women the whole night!"

At last the whining water stops.

I kiss her. She struggles at first but then her temper turns and she kisses me harder. When we stop I bring her close to me and I bury my face in her beautiful blond hair.

"I love you, Julie. There's nothing going on between me and that damn reporter, okay?"

She starts crying. "I don't want to lose you, Pierce." I hold her.

"You won't, Juul, you won't. There's no chance in hell that you're going to lose me. And I'm hoping that I won't lose you. Will I?"

She shakes her head against my chest.

"Damn you. Why do I love you?" she says.

"Because I'm such a great guy?"

Our faces join in a bed of lips.

Peter appears.

"You guys really are crazy! Anybody want some coffee?"

We ignore him.

24.

"Well actually, Pierce, there is this girl," says Potty.

"Ah!" I smile though I'm not sure I want to hear him out.

"What an absolutely splendid opportunity to try out some of my theories concerning that tempting threat to all men. I don't think I've been given that chance before. I thank you, my dear Potty."

"You're not going to start talking about Beauty again, are you?"

"Potty! Why I believe I am. But not about the Beauty that I have previously talked about which you seem to have something against."

"Well.."

"Well nothing. Do you know what women are?"

"I suppose you're about to tell me."

"They are where all beauty originates and where it all assembles into one being. For our love for women can only be explained by our love for Beauty. And that is why we see sparkling diamonds in their eyes, we feel mountains move at their touch, we smell bouquets of sweetness when they enter a room, we hear violins in their laughter and we taste apple pie when we kiss them. They are the world and the world is them."

"Apple pie?"

"Well certainly. Don't you believe me?"

"I suppose."

"Well, you shouldn't."

"I shouldn't?"

"No, because I talk a lot of nonsense. We just like to compare women to these radiant phenomena for poetic value, to make them seem godly, for their pleasure, and hopefully later, for our pleasure."

"Ha! Aren't you ever serious about anything?"

"My dear Potty. Seriousness comes from a stale, perfect, spotless, and happy upbringing. We who suffer eternally tend to discard seriousness as the pain that people with those perfect upbringings have to endure to compensate for their fine lives. It's all about balance you see, and so by being not so serious I compensate for my own suffering, hoping to bring some light into the lives of content people."

"What?"

"Once again I have managed to confuse you. I'm sorry. But I will let you in on a secret. If you promise not to share it with anyone in your close vicinity. You may, if you wish, use this piece of information as a lesson, you may use it to your advantage, you may use it to discredit others when you find yourself at a loss of words in a debate, or you may use it as toilet paper and flush it down the drain. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Pierce, hit me with your best shot."

"Perhaps it won't be news for you. I already detect some mastering over sarcasm on your part. Do you realize that you are so far the only one in this school who calls me Pierce."

"I'm aware of that. And you are the only teacher who addresses me as Potty."

"And how does this apparent first-name basis affect our teacher-student relationship do you think?"

"You were going to say...?"

"Ah, I see your point. Well put. I think I was about to tell you about seriousness."

"Yes."

"Well, Potty, I hope that you will grant me at least the benefit of knowing that you have received some sort of stimuli by attending my class?"

"Yes."

"And you will grant me that I do seem to have some interesting and withstanding points to make."

"Yeah, sure, but some things you say could take some thinking through. I mean sometimes you are speaking way over our heads."

"That's comforting to hear."

"It is? I thought that's what you didn't want to do."

"Well, Potty, what if that's what I want you to think I'm doing - so that everytime you don't understand me you'll think that I am talking of something that your minds are too juvenile to grasp. Another conclusion, perhaps more correct, could have been that I'm talking way over my own head.

"I see something in your eyes but I don't know what it is. Come now, Potty, you have gone to school all your life and you're at the end of the line. Everything is fresh in your mind. It is strange to me how you young people are so ready to believe that the teacher always knows more than you. You're ready to take the teacher's word for anything, aren't you? Simply because he happens to be standing at the front of a classroom!"

"So what are you saying, that we don't need you?"

"On the contrary. I know my subject very well."

"I think you do."

"Thank you. And I think I do my job of teaching it well."

"Which I also think you do."

"Thank you also for that. But the point is that I'm putting on an act every time I go into a classroom. For my own pleasure, for your pleasure. Sometimes that backfires. I strike you with awe because you don't understand what I'm saying. It's insane! What I should be doing is going in there and admitting that you all know better than me because you're all studying a lot more subjects than me right now. I'm just a dummy who happens to know something about creative writing. The point with you all moving from different classes during the day is for you to be thinking in that many different ways so that you can use all

your knowledge from your different subjects in each and every class you find yourself in. And here you are going from class to class like you would go from room to room in a building, switching off the lights in every room you leave instead of keeping them all on at the same time. Okay, bad example. Huge electricity bill. But we aren't talking electrical power, we're talking brainpower, and that's the power you get paid for."

Silence.

"Well my God Pierce, why don't you go in there and tell us all just that?"

"I don't know. I've always been afraid that my students would lose confidence in me if I went in there and told them that they all know better than me. No, that's not true. I don't know."

"Maybe you're afraid of your students knowing better than you?"

"You're a helluva good listener, Potty."

"I try my best. But Mr. Angel, I mean Pierce, damnit! I have nothing more than a lot more respect for you as a teacher from what you just told me."

"Isn't that because we're sitting here just the two of us, you think?"

"Maybe. I don't know. But I do know that that class really likes you. And I really doubt that anyone is going to think worse of you for one of those confessions. I think the opposite."

"I'll have to think about it."

"So what was the moral of the story?"

"Well. I forgot. No, we were talking about seriousness. Okay, the thing is, if you act like you're never serious and keep saying things in a cryptical manner you always get away with it. When you perchance say something that may not be considered very smart, people will just think that you're not being serious. And

when you say something smart people will think that you're being bashful and they will like you for it. Get it?"

"Maybe."

"Good, cause I'm not sure I know what I mean. Anyway, I'm sorry, we were supposed to be talking about women weren't we?"

"Yep."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What about your woman?"

"Oh, it's my turn to talk is it?"

"O, hey, Potty, I'm really sorry if I gave you a load of bullshit you didn't want to hear."

"No, Pierce, you didn't. I'm sorry about the way I said that. It's just that, I don't know, I'm in a bit of a squeeze."

"U-huh."

"Listen, if somebody does something bad to someone you like but the person you like does not want you to do something about it, what the hell are you supposed to do? I mean you like the girl so you don't want any harm to come to her, but at the same time you don't want to do anything she doesn't want you to do. So what do I do?"

"You dodo," I say.

He laughs. I don't.

"Sorry, Potty, I suppose it's not a joking matter but a joke once in a while never hurts. I suppose we're talking about your girl here?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"And this thing that happened to her. It's bad?"

"It's really bad."

"She's special?"

"She's really special."

"Great. An all-time great. I won't ask why you came to me. Sometimes when a person with a problem goes to a person for advice, it's because he knows what kind of advice he's going to get. He has already made up his mind but he wants to be backed up. So what do you think I will say?"

"Do the right thing?"

"Which is?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, we have a problem. I know very little about the problem and I doubt if you're going to tell me much more. There is never a right or wrong in these cases except what you feel inside. There is a written law somewhere that would probably want you to do something about this, if it's as bad as I think it might be, you coming to me and all. Is it that bad?"

"Yeah. I think so."

"And there is a heart in you that's wanting you to stand by your girl. So we have a conflict, the heart against the law. It is a classic conflict in which the heart usually suffers defeat whatever you decide."

"Great."

"Listen, Potty. What do you want me to say? As an adult maybe you think I'm supposed to tell you that you should go straight to the police. Should you?"

"Well, sir, the trouble is I don't know who did it to her."

"Did what Potty?"

"Well, sir, she hasn't exactly told me that either. It's just that I know it. I can feel it. I can see it in her eyes. All my life I always could when it comes to her. And I think it's as bad as the baddest thing that can happen to a girl. There is this red sweater she has, you know. She really likes that sweater. But you see, she hasn't worn it in a long time now and so I asked her about it. She said she spilled something on it and threw it

away. She didn't tell me what. She would never throw that sweater away, sir."

"Oh God, Potty. Oh wow." I bury my face in my hands and try to shake him away. But when I look up he's still sitting there.

"Sir? Pierce? I just know something's wrong. I feel it. She's been acting so awful strange lately."

"You really love her don't you Potty?"

"Oh, yes sir, Pierce. "

"Don't you think you should try and get her to tell you what's happened?"

"I can't. It's hard. She won't listen to me when it comes to that. I think she loves me too much to tell me. Actually I was hoping you would, you know, talk to her about it."

"How can I do that if I don't know who she is." But I do know who she is, I keep thinking.

"Well, it's Elizabeth, sir. I thought you knew, sort of."

"I used to know someone I could walk through fire for, Potty," I say dreamily, lost in a high of hidden despair.

"Sir?"

"She really was Beauty. Still is I suppose. She was the kind of person you could easily commit genocide for. She would tease you in ways about things that nobody really understands. She would brush you gently with her arm walking past, she would sometimes whisper sweetly in your ear and almost unnoticeably she would blow air in your face when she talked with you. Her eyes would tell you of things that you dare not speak out loud, afraid that you had misinterpreted something. She would drive you mad..."

"What happened to her?"

"She just died."

"How?"

"How does a woman die, Potty? Eventually her time comes when her childish play no longer makes men laugh, when her touch no longer makes men tingle. Not because you no longer love her. But because her act has been revealed or she has simply forgotten the charm of her character. Women are the strangest creatures, Potty. They criticize us for our roughness and yet that is what they say they love. How can they say that a blow to the head is healthier than their trickery with minds? At least we know where we hurt. Do they ever? When we drive a spear through the skin, they drive it right through our heads. When we hurt and when we bleed, men do it on the outside, women on the inside. Female pain is just harder to detect.

"Is she still alive then?"

"Oh by all means, still alive. Potty my friend. You must go to Elizabeth and show her that you care for her. Eventually she must tell you what is hurting her. If you love her as much as you say you do then the best thing that that you can do is stand by her in everything that she may have to go through. She will want you to even if she tries to make you leave her alone. She needs you even if she doesn't know it."

"I suppose, but if only you could talk to her, you know."

"No Potty, it's best if I'm left out of it. I think I could do only more harm than good. Listen. This is your fight, now. Just stand by her and don't you dare let any harm come to her."

"What if I can't do it alone, Pierce?"

"Potty, I know you can. You're about the only kid in that class who has made sense out of all the things I keep saying. If there's anyone I trust, it will be you."

"Gee. Trust? I don't know, Pierce."

"I see a lot of myself in you, Potty. A lot. And that of you which isn't me, is a lot more attractive. I don't blame her." I look at him. "I'm sorry if you don't think I'm being any help."

"Well, it's just that I thought that you and my.. No never mind. You're being helpful I guess."

"Good."

"I've got to go." He stands up.

"Hey, Potty, do you want to have this?"

"What is it?"

"It's a poem I just wrote about the woman I told you about."

"Yeah the woman. Right. A Pierce Angel original huh? `My heroine'? You're not on drugs or something?"

"No." I laugh.

"But don't you want to keep this yourself?"

"Nah, I've got it all up here," I say and point to my head.

"Okay, you said it." He folds it once. "I guess I'll see you Tuesday."

"Yeah, kid, I'll come flying in on my wings."

He walks out. I listen to the door slam shut and then I look out the window. It's dark. It's begun to rain. I see my reflection in the glass.

"You all like it when we deceive you, right?" I say.

I stand up, reciting my poem for myself. By myself.

I never thought I'd get addicted to my heroine-

I always thought that I could control my highs.

But I cannot deny that I'm getting wet.

I have fallen for sin and those deafening cries.

I will never ever forget the taste of my heroine.

I now stay indoors so I can't tell days from nights.

If soon I shall die - Be it in bed I bet.

But my will will not win over those bare baby-whites.

She said "Love me" when I met my beautiful heroine.

I thought that one lie would more than suffice.

But I'm lost in a tie I will never regret.

We can't stop when we begin,
lost in a knot of whys.

She once said to me, "You're my hero."

I replied, "You're my heroine..."

And I'm addicted to you."

I walk over to the sink. From the knife rack I pull the largest one, the sharpest one. I feel like I'm about to throw up. I cough and spit on the floor. I smear the saliva into a circle with my foot. A cycle. Then I walk into my bedroom and stand in front of the mirror. I hold up the knife.

"Is this a dagger I see before me?" I ask myself. I start laughing incessantly.

25.

I try the door to my apartment. It's open.

"Face?"

"Shhh. He's resting." She appears from the bedroom. I follow her into the kitchen.

"Resting?"

"Well, he started crying and I took him home. We sat on the bed for a while. He's such a wonderful child."

"Brings out the mother in you does he?"

"I suppose. He's seven years old isn't he?" she whispers. I notice the screaming pain in her eyes.

"Hey what's wrong?"

"What's with the rose?" she asks, pushing my question away.

"Oh, I forgot. Here. For you." I hand her the red rose I bought while I was waiting for my cab.

"Well, thank you. Ow!" A thorn penetrates her skin and I watch the blood begin to run in tiny droplets, growing and falling to the floor. I quickly take the rose from her and place it lying down on the table.

"Oh, Face I'm so sorry. Here. Let me make it better." I take her hand and I'm about put her finger in my mouth when she pulls away screaming harshly.

"No!" she sits down on the chair, crying, "No, Pierce, no." She brings her hand to her body, crouching. She wraps her arms around herself and begins to rock back and forth. "No," she says quietly. "No, no, no..."

Slowly, in an icy fog, I sit down in front of her, looking at the child in her rocking, I stare and I'm lost somewhere between blue mountains and pools of water. When I begin talking my voice has almost lost all its ability to do just that.

"So it's true," I say, "It's really true."

She's rocking. Crouched. Lost.

"I'm talking about you," I say, "I'm talking about you poisoning him."

"Do you have any Band-Aids?"

"No."

"I didn't expect so."

"Did you at all hear what I said?"

"Oh sure."

"Am I right?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," she whispers.

"Because the police bloody well did an autopsy in him, didn't they? And now maybe they think it's a suicide! And now maybe what I wrote in Joe's book is pretty useless, when I do think about it. So what the hell have you been doing with me here?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know!? You'll have to do just a bit better than that."

"I didn't think they'd do an autopsy. I thought the cause of death was pretty clear."

"So did I. Jesus. So did I. What the hell did you have going on with Ethan anyway?"

"We were lovers." She pauses. "We met a long time ago. I needed someone. He helped me. I liked him. I thought he liked me. But as it turned out he liked boys even more. Then I met him again this year. At my father's birthday party. He told me he had AIDS. And he told me maybe I should go and have myself tested. I was going to throw him out but then he told me about you and the plans you had going. I didn't believe him. And I didn't understand why he told me. But I gather he picked me up because of me knowing you and all. And lately I suppose he even had his own photographer follow us around. Sort of proof that he was a heterosexual I guess."

"You're telling me he was a homosexual?"

"Of course. That's why he had AIDS."

"O Jeez... This is so weird. Face, you were in the house when I went there. You were in the living room. I felt you."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you stop me?"

"Oh Angel, I just couldn't believe it was you. I watched you talking to yourself in the mirror. It was scary. I just couldn't step out of the darkness. I didn't know what you might do. And I knew Ethan really wanted to die. I just didn't want him to feel any pain. I drugged him. And I didn't want you to be the one to have killed him. I was supposed to be long gone when you came. But I stuck around to watch you."

"How-? But I don't know if I really care anymore. There's one thing, though, that keeps bugging me really, and has been bugging me since your first story about Ethan calling you up."

"Which is?"

"In the last seven years I've talked to Ethan about ten or twelve times only. And I have never told him about you."

She draws a deep breath and answers.

"Well, let me put it like this. I didn't know he knew you either. But I did know he knew of you."

"Huh?"

"I met him seven years ago."

"Seven years ago? What are you talking about?"

"He came to the hospital."

"What hospital? Were you ill?"

"I was ill. You were ill. You don't know anything do you?"

"How can I if you don't tell me?"

"You were in a coma for months, Angel, you bastard. I used to sit and read Shakespeare for you. I read King Lear. One day Ethan came along and started asking questions about you. I thought he was a reporter. Well he was. But I didn't know he knew you."

"You used to sit and read Shakespeare for me?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Why were you so blind? I loved you, you bastard. I've always loved you."

"No. You used me. I thought I was the only one. And then Potty came along and told me the two of you were in love."

She starts crying suddenly. She hiccups.

"My God, Angel, is that why? Is that why you did it?"

"That and a hundred reasons more. God knows I loved you. And knowing that you loved Potty was the trigger, I guess."

"Angel! Potty knew about us. That's why he went to you for help. He told me about that night the two of you talked. And soon after that I had an abortion you bastard. I had an abortion. I had been raped, Angel. Raped by my stepfather."

"Oh God." Something grabs a hold of my throat and for a moment I can't breathe. Maria Falloni is sitting in front of me, naked and drenched with puke, rocking back and forth with her arms crouched in her lap. But then I see Face again as her anger breaks out of it's time cell.

"I had been raped by my stepfather! And that's when you decide to do your disappearing act, when I need you the most. At least Potty stood by me. He said he had to do that. Stand by me. And he was the one who held me after I had my abortion. Not you. Potty."

"Oh, Face. I'm so sorry. When Potty came to me I thought the reason you were acting strange was because of me. Because of what we had. And I liked Potty. And he seemed to love you so much. I couldn't hurt him. And you loved him too. And now you married him. Maybe everything turned out as it should have."

"Married him? What are you saying?"

"Yes. The picture of you and Ethan. It said Ethan Young and Elizabeth Potts. Wife of Michael Potts, right?"

"Oh. God. You still don't know, Angel, you still do not know."

I see her face as she says those words and somehow those words scare me more than I have ever been scared before, more than shooting Ethan, more than Joe killing Lisa, more than Maria dying in my arms, more than the damn knife, and they echo back and forth, increasingly louder between the flapping iron curtains of my aching head, "You still don't know, you still don't know, you still don't know..."

"What?"

"Look into my eyes."

I do and she drops me off a cliff.

"Angel, Potty is my brother. He's my brother. Potts is my father's name. I took my mother's maiden name when my parents divorced. Potty is my baby brother."

And that's when I snap. I should have snapped long before. I open my mouth. After a few seconds of sheer shock tears flow in sizzling rivers down my face from canals beyond anything and all that can be grasped in a child's hand reaching for the light in the sky. I try speaking and hear a baby's gurgling sounds escape when a rotating blade stings the sides of my throat and the returning smell of sin clogs my nose and my head begins to throb in fits of cramps.

"I have to go," she says.

I see a shape disappear in a thick mist and beyond it I hear the words "I love you too," before a door closes and I'm alone.

*

I don't know how long it is before I feel a tiny hand on my shoulder.

"Mr. Angel? Why are you crying?"

I turn to look at Philip's tired face and then I hug him hard.

"There's someone knocking at the door, Mr. Angel. Should I open?"

I release him from my grip.

"I'll go with you," I say.

We close in on the door as I wipe off the tears on my face, and I open it. We stand back to look at the policeman. I can't make out his face and this scares me.

"Mr. Angel?"

"Yes."

He flashes something in front of me. "I'm here to pick up one Philip Cole."

The kid looks up at me.

"Who is he Mr. Angel?"

I get down on my knees to face him. I place my hands on his hips. "He's going to take you to your grandfather."

"Are you coming with me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because my place is here. Just like you have to find your place with your grandfather for now."

"But I want to stay here."

"Oh. Philip. I can't take care of you like I want you to be taken care of. Look, I know your grandmother. She's the sweetest woman alive. She'll take care of you just fine."

"But I love you Mr. Angel."

"Oh, kid," I gasp and hug him. Tears are flowing down my cheeks again. "I love you too. And you know what? I'm going to visit you as often as I can."

"Every week?"

"Every week if I can. And then you can come and visit me too. Just like you always do. So the sooner you get to your grandfather's, the sooner I can visit."

"Okay." He backs away and puts one of his little fingers on my nose. Now remember, Mr. Angel, you promised."

"Yeah." I put a finger on his nose. "I promised." And I watch the policeman take his hand. The kid waves as he disappears out the door.

I lift my hand and wave to him. Still on my knees I walk over to the door, look behind him and close it.

"You promised, Mr. Angel, I say. You promised."

I stand up and walk into the kitchen. From a drawer I take out a pair of scissors. I pick up the red rose that Face left on the table. I start cutting the rose from the bottom, and green pieces of rose and thorn, each one no larger than a pinky's fingernail begin dropping to the table.

"Snip, snap," I keep saying. And when I reach the top of the rose I lift it to the kitchen lamp. "Well aren't you pretty," I say and I carefully place the rose in my breast pocket buttonhole.

I walk into the bedroom. I stand some time in front of the mirror, looking at myself. "Well, aren't you pretty," I say. I lift up the scissors for my mirror-image to see.

"Is this a pair of scissors I see before me?" I ask and and look into those other eyes. I smile.

26.

I'm swimming. Something is close behind me. I can't look back. I see something. Land? No, it's a school bench. I swim faster. There it is. I reach for it. But there are two people already standing on it. They're holding each other, embracing.

"What are you doing down there Pierce? What are you doing in all that blood?" Potty is shouting.

I look around me. The ocean is red. I'm terrified. Red. I look up.

"Help me Potty!"

"Help you? You were trying to steal my girl from me and you want me to help you? I trusted you. You were my teacher."

"I'm so sorry Potty. Help me."

"Well I've got news for you, friend. It's me she loves. It's me you see? She's my heroine." And they kiss. Forever.

"No!" I scream. Whatever is behind me is getting closer. I can hear it breathing the smell. The smell of Maria. And I know who it is.

"Out damned spot! Out, I say!" Elizabeth shouts. She's rubbing her hands together. They're red with water. Or blood?

"Let me help you with that Face darling", Potty says. He lifts her hand and begins to lick them clean with his chameleon tongue. I hurt and I avert my eyes.

I reach for the bench again but it speeds away from my reach. Something grabs my foot. I'm pulled down. Under water I turn to face Ethan. He's wearing our dark, blue school uniform. He's smiling and his long hair is combed back.

"Remember me, old pal?" he says.

"You get away from me."

"How can you say that, Pierce? After all I've done for you?"

"You never did anything for me, and you know it."

"I took care of you, Pierce. I took care of you good."

"You killed Maria!" I hiss at him.

"Wrong Piercey, so wrong. Maria was my lover. That's why she had my pen. You are the one who killed Maria. You. You didn't stop the bleeding. Because you couldn't touch her pussy could you? You wouldn't touch her bleeding pussy!"

"Go away, please go away," I cry.

"Are you ungrateful, Pierce? It sounds to me like you're ungrateful? You know what we do to ungrateful people, Pierce! You know the procedure. I was very easy on you before. Maybe I won't be now."

And from out of nowhere comes the Man in the Moon. Ethan is holding the Man in the Moon in his right hand. The white smiling face with two sides is hanging on an ancient chain from the gleaming silver pipe in Ethan's right hand.

"No!" I start crying.

"Don't cry Pierce. Don't be a baby. Babies get double treatment. Stop crying! Now strip! Strip Pierce! You know I had it much worse than you. I'll be gentle. I'll be nice. Strip, you motherfucker! Strip!"

Suddenly I realize that we're standing behind the dorm house. I look up and in the dark windows I can see faces, anticipant, blood-thirsty, scared. Everybody's watching, Pierce. You better show some guts. I start taking off my clothes and I kneel on the wet grass with my back to the dorm, freezing.

"You killed Maria!" I scream and then I feel the Man in the Moon hard on my back. Again. And again. I see his smiling face speed through the air. He strikes hard, leaving his smiling face behind. Again. And again. And I think I hear him laughing. "Angarka!" Or is it the people watching? Tomorrow I will have his face all over my back. A hundred coin-sized, smiling faces. And for every face, I repeat, "Thankyou moonman. Thank you moonman. Thank you moonman..." until

I can no longer hear my own voice which seems to fade into a broken record. And the blood from the cuts warms me.

"The gods are just, and of our pleasant vice make instruments to plague us."

"What," I say, "who said that?"

But there's no answer and slowly I seem to float into the darkness, into my song. Night makes blindness the ruling power. The sea below wants me tonight. And I jump, now and forever, as the tale would have it, seeing you in red.

"Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell," her voice reads.

27.

I sit down on the bed. I reach for the phone and press memory 3. The phone rings twice at the other side of the universe before her hand picks up the receiver.

"Hello?" I hear in the other end.

"It's me."

"Is everything all right? Did little Philip leave yet?"

"Yes."

"Will you come back to the office?"

"No. I'm not coming back to the office, Julie."

"Do you want me to come over?"

"No."

"Is there someone there with you Pierce? Is she there with you?"

"No. She is not here with me."

"Good. You sound really strange, Pierce."

"I know."

"It's Philip isn't it? Don't worry about him. You'll see him again."

"Yeah. I promised."

"So what's going on?"

"Listen Julie."

"What?"

"Do you hear the birds?"

"No. What's going on with you?"

"Ethan said if he was coming back he'd come back as a bird. You know, if they gave him a choice."

"Pierce, I'm coming over."

"No. I won't let you in. I'm going to hang up now. And then I'm going to pull the phone out of the wall. Tell Peter I'm taking my vacation. He'll understand. He'll tell you. Don't worry."

"Pierce!"

I hang up.

I take my scissors and stand in front of the mirror. I lift my air tickets from the dressing table and cut them in half. I look up into the mirror. I smile.

I walk into the kitchen and get the monkeys. All three. I walk back and place them in a row on my desk beside the computer. "You should have told me, guys. You really should have told me." I face the mirror again.

"There comes a time in a man's life when he knows what he's doing." I snicker. "You see, Face, we can never be together. I guess that's why I love you. One cannot dream about something which one has, you see. Here I can write your portrait and I can pour your beauty in a glass of wine.

"Besides," I say, and touch my nose, "I promised."

I throw the scissors on the bed and walk over to my computer. I sit down and I close my eyes and say. "You know, Face, there never was a tunnel of light. It was all red. Just red."

I glance at my scratched wrists - both with a thin white line across the burning nail marks, as if from a bracelet, not along my arm as I know it should have been, as I had known even then, but across, as if that was my misfortune and luck in the same, even cut.

"This is going to hurt," I mumble and turn my wrists over to face the keyboard, but I don't care because my mind is already elsewhere, tripping over secrets:

SECRETS.

by Pierce Angel

I.

When Beauty hits a small town like Angelheart, you know it miles away. The barber shop is packed all day, with men needing a shave, a haircut, or "Just a trim Bob." Ladies stand in street corners, whispering and pointing jealous fingers. The men begin to glance in shop windows, not at the goods, but at the reflection of her walking by. And suddenly, when she is alongside them, they pretend to just notice and turn around, smile and tip their hats at her, saying "Good morning miss", "Good afternoon miss" or "Good evening miss."

When someone as mysterious and pretty as this one woman chanced to be comes to town - alone and with such little belongings - gossip is never far behind. As I heard it, she got off the train at the station by herself. She had one piece of luggage and a handbag. Little Philip Axe, the schoolteacher's son, was the first to see her, sitting as he was by the railroad tracks and carving one of his wooden animals. It was mid-day and not a cloud in the silky sky. She was dressed in all white and as she stood there and the train started to leave, she lifted her head and also brought her hand up to adjust her hat, wincing at the sun. And for a few minutes Little Philip just sat there, taken aback by her appearance. Then he jumped to his feet and ran to her.

"Can I help you with that m'am?" he said and looked up at her. And then she looked back at him, her blue eyes smiling at him. He quickly looked away, feeling rather strange.

"Why thank you. It's quite heavy but I hope you can manage. I don't think we have to walk very far."

When she spoke her voice played in little Philip's ears like old Matthew's flute sometimes did. He picked up the bag in his left arm and though the bag was obviously heavier than it had looked he said, "Oh this isn't heavy at all m'am." And she smiled at him again. "Are we going to the hotel?" he asked.

"Oh no," she said as they started walking for town, "I believe we're going to the baker shop."

"Oh, but that old thing is closed, miss." Philip changed carrying hands.

"Not anymore. I've bought it." She was walking gracefully, even more like a princess than Laura Bitley, Philip thought, and he was in love with Laura Bitley. "Are you sure you can manage?" she asked him again. Maybe she was a princess! She sure looked and talked like one.

"Just fine miss." He changed hands again. "Begging your pardon, miss, but everybody thought there was a man coming to start up the baker shop."

"Shouldn't you be in school?" she said. They were just reaching the main street through the town and were passing the schoolhouse, a tall, white building with a pointed roof and steps to the entrance. She noticed the white wooden bird, a dove, sitting on the roof like a church rooster.

"No ma'm. I mean yes m'am but we were let out early today. We sometimes are."

"Why? Is there something special going on today?"

Yes.

"No m'am. We're just sometimes let out early."

"How odd."

"And I spend most of my time there anyway so I don't mind much."

"Why is that?"

"Well, you see, the schoolteacher, Mr. Axe, he's sort of my father see and we live up there." It wasn't far now.

"Sort of your father?"

"Well, he took care of me when my real parents died."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry m'am."

They were walking through the middle of town now. There weren't many people out but the ones that were had their heads turning to watch the woman in white and the Axe boy make their way towards the baker shop.

"How old are you then?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven? That's a fine age to be."

"It is? Why?"

"Well, because that's about the age when you get to do adult things but you can still get away with doing children things."

"Ha, my father says things like that."

"Does he?"

"Yeah, like he said that 'a child is the spirit of invention and the parent is the spirit of gray hairs' or something like that."

She laughed and Philip felt good all over. And finally he set the suitcase down with a tired thump.

"Here we are, m'am."

"So I see." She looked through the window of the baker shop. It was empty and dark. On the counter she seemed to notice three small, black statues of some sort. She tried the door.

"Oh no. I completely forgot! I was to pick up the key at the post office. Where is that?"

"It's not so far. I can run and get it if you want."

"Oh would you? That would be wonderful. This heat is just too much for me." She sat down on the suitcase and winced at the sun like she did before. Carefully she removed her hat and threw back, her long, midnight-black hair. Philip studied her

