

Keep The Rice Burning

Marek Hłasko

To all Mike Ryans who wish they were Andersons, and all
Andersons wishing they were Mike Ryans.

Note from the translator

“People are born against their will, die against their will, and they can’t seem to find much joy in between,” said Marek Hłasko in his 1958 radio interview. Hłasko was born on January 14th, 1934. One of the many tales surrounding his life says that during his baptism in the Warsaw Church of the Holy Redeemer when asked if he renounced the evil spirit, newborn Marek answered “No”.

Hłasko left school at sixteen, working as a truck driver, logger, and store clerk before turning to writing. His first stories, published in the mid-1950s, were gritty, realistic portrayals of working-class life, including his acclaimed debut novella *The Eighth Day of the Week*. By 1956, he was considered one of Poland’s most promising young writers. However, his stark portrayals of post-war disillusionment led to conflicts with the communist authorities; he faced censorship and, eventually, exile.

In 1958, Hłasko left Poland with official permission, but after speaking critically about the Polish government abroad, he was stripped of his citizenship. He spent the next decade wandering through Europe and the Middle East, struggling to find stability, while continuing to write. He repeatedly requested to be allowed back into Poland, but all his claims were consistently denied.

In 1964, he wrote *All Backs Were Turned*, a raw and brutal story of passion, violence, and betrayal set in the Israeli town of Eilat. His writing style was characterized by a raw, unvarnished tone and sharp dialogue. His sentences, often long and winding, mirrored the chaos and despair of the lives he portrayed. “It is obvious to me that I am a product of war times, starvation, and terror; it is the reason for the intellectual poverty of my stories. Simply, I cannot think up a story that does not end in death, prison, or suicide.”

Hłasko eventually made his way to the United States in the 1960s, where he was briefly connected with the Hollywood scene and worked as a screenwriter. Despite completing many successful screenplays and developing his passion for flying, he never fully

adapted to life in exile. He continued to grapple with alcoholism and his writing became more desolate. In December 1968, after a night of heavy drinking, he playfully pushed his close friend, the acclaimed composer Krzysztof Komeda, off an escarpment. As a result, Komeda developed a brain hematoma and died four months later. Hłasko was to say: "If Krzysztof dies, I'll go along".

Hłasko died on June 14th, 1969, alone in a hotel room in Wiesbaden, Germany at the age of 35. Whether it was against his will or with his approval, we will never know, but the mixture of alcohol and sedative pills took his short life away.

Keep The Rice Burning is his last completed novel.

In 1975, Hłasko's ashes were taken back to Poland, finally putting him to rest in the country he so longed for. On the grave, his mother Maria inscribed "His life was short, and *All Backs Were Turned*". And so I ask you to turn back around and turn the page.

A plane turned on the runway and rolled up to a white line where a man selling gasoline sat on a stool. Beside him, another man lay on the ground, facing the sun directly, not even squinting, though it was noon and the sun looked practically white.

"Fill both tanks," said the pilot. He was thin, had a massive nose, and his face was etched with contempt, and doubt. Next to him sat a woman with a bird-like face—a face forever marked by the humiliation of marrying someone she had likely once groveled before, begging him to marry her—for better or worse, which had turned out to be only worse: an uninterrupted streak of boredom, illness, and financial failures.

"Turn off the engine first," said the fuel seller. He sat on a stool, his feet resting on the pump, reading a left-behind newspaper. On the cover was a man who kept smiling despite having his arm twisted and his head pulled back by policemen who were pressing a rubber baton against his throat.

"It only takes a second," said the pilot. "I have issues with the starter."

"Turn off the engine."

"Okay, fine," said the pilot. He pulled the throttle all the way back but turned off the magnet too quickly, causing the engine to fire a few times before the propeller stopped turning. "Check the oil," said the pilot. "And I will write you a check."

"Cash," said the seller.

"You don't accept checks? They accept my checks everywhere."

"Except here."

"I will complain to the owner. I'll say you are a bastard."

The seller lowered the newspaper, on which everyone —policemen and the man being carried—was smiling, showing off their perfectly white nylon teeth. He put down the paper and approached the pilot; the other man kept lying still, looking straight into the white sun.

"I am the owner," said the seller, resting his heavy body on the cabin door, right on top of the pilot's fingers. "Well," he said. "I am the owner. Say it one more time. Come on."

"Then why does everyone else accept my checks?"

"What? No complaints now?"

"Last time, I paid with a check here."

"Last time, the owner was different. Now, he's begging for money somewhere, and I bought his business. You can complain all you want."

Without turning his head, the other man lying on the grass spoke for the first time, "It's clear. You won't leave without saying goodbye."

"Well?" said the seller. "Are you complaining or not?"

"No," said the pilot, pulling his fingers out from underneath him. "What do you want?"

"An eighty."

The gas seller picked up a hose, which in his hand looked like a skipping rope, checked the oil, and said, "Eleven dollars and eighty cents." He put the money in his pocket, returned to his seat, and grabbed the paper.

"Will you push my propeller?" asked the pilot.

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's forbidden at this airport."

"Then why did they push it at Oxnard yesterday?"

"Then fly to Oxnard. They will push it for you there. Or to Torrance. It's even closer," said the pump owner without raising his eyes above the paper.

"I cannot fly if my propeller is not moving."

"You really think so? That makes two of us."

"You do not have anyone here who could push my propeller?"

"We do. A dollar."

"For pushing a propeller?"

"I also think it's a lot," said the pump owner. "Especially if in Torrance they do it for free."

The pilot rubbed his skinny fingers for a while and then said, "Fine."

The man facing the sun now got up and approached the plane. His right hand was in his pocket.

"Give me your sunglasses," he said to the pilot. He was facing him sideways so the pilot could not see his face.

"Why would you need my sunglasses to push the propeller?"

"Give me your sunglasses," said the man again. His accent was thick. "I'll give them back."

"He won't push your propeller otherwise," said the owner. "Give him your sunglasses for a moment, and he will give them back to you."

"Why won't you give him yours?"

"Because if he slips and the propeller pulls him in, my five dollars will go to hell," said the owner.

"The same can happen to my glasses if the propeller pulls him in," said the pilot. "I didn't get them for free either."

"Indeed, but you still have your plane, your beautiful woman, and friends who trust your checks," said the pump owner. "That is the difference between us two."

"He doesn't want to look at people?"

"No."

"Is that why he stares at the sun?"

"He can't see anything then."

The pilot handed the glasses to the man facing away from him. He put them on his head but did not move.

"What are you waiting for?"

"A dollar," said the man. "I won't be chasing you after the propeller is spinning already. I've met too many people like that." He put the dollar in his pocket without removing his right hand from the other pocket, then walked past the pilot, exposing his sharp profile, and said:

"Gas on."

"Gas on."

"Switch off."

"Switch off."

"Brakes on."

The pilot did not reply. The man repeated:

"Brakes on."

"I've been a pilot for twenty years," said the skinny man. "I know what I have to—"

"Brakes on."

"Brakes on," said the pilot. "Hurry up, man. I am half an hour behind now. My wife is pregnant."

"Congratulations," said the man. "Do you at least know with whom? Ready."

"Ready."

"Contact."

"Contact."

The man pushed the propeller with his left arm, but the engine did not start.

"It's because you pushed it with your left hand," said the pilot.

"No. It's because you turned it on at low rotations to save half a cent," said the man. The engine was working in silence, just the sound of pistons sucking on the numb afternoon air. Then the man said, "Contact." The engine turned on. The man walked away and, without turning around, tossed the glasses to the pilot. The station owner and the man who pushed the propeller watched as the plane

took off from the runway, and for the last time, they saw the tragic face of the pilot and his wife.

"Andy," said the man to the station owner. "What plane was that?"

"I don't know. You should not have spoken about his wife like this."

"I know."

"Then why do you always say things like that?"

"Because I know I shouldn't."

"I lose clients because of you," said Andy.

"He looked like he was bankrupt anyway, Andy."

"It's none of your business."

"I know, Andy," said the man. "But I don't trust anything that has a pussy and knows the value of money."

"Me neither," said Andy, and went back to reading his newspaper.

The man picked up his airgun, threw it over his shoulder, and walked toward the barracks with a sign: "Black Satans of Frank Sullivan. Flight Training Specialist." On the way, he saw a food truck. He approached it and gave the vendor a dollar.

"Roast beef," he said.

"It's one dollar and twenty cents."

"Don't you have anything for a dollar? A hamburger?"

"No," said the vendor. "I sold all the hamburgers. Do you want a ham roll?"

"How much is that?"

"The same."

"The same as a hamburger?"

"No, the same as roast beef."

The man who had been facing away from the vendor turned around and looked at him with interest. Then he turned back toward the sun.

"Have you ever thought about becoming the governor of California?" he asked.

"I have not, son," said the vendor. "I was thinking about the same things as you—about things that many think about. But I had no money and no luck. I was starving. And when I finally made enough money to fly the hours and get my license, I already had fake teeth. They rejected me, and now I just drive around the airport selling rolls. And yet another American dream came to an end." He took out a ham roll and gave it to the man. "There," he said. "Don't fly on an empty stomach. And save your dollar."

"That's very noble of you," said the man in the sun. He took the roll, looked at it for a while, then dropped it to the ground and slowly squashed it with his heel so that the meat and the bread mixed with the gravel. Without turning around, he walked toward the barracks.

At noon, the air was perfectly still and almost audible; the barracks were empty. Through the open window, he saw the Gooney Bird take off. The plane was climbing heavily from the runway, but the window curtain didn't move one bit. The propeller cut through the thick and dead air, which closed right behind it just as water closes behind someone drowning at night, when despair and joy are equally alone. The man looked at the departing plane for a bit, then placed his dark airgun on the table with the sign "Office" on it.

"Were you the one I spoke with on the phone this morning?" he asked. "My name is Anderson."

"Yes," said the woman. "You're requesting a full course, correct?"

"Indeed, but I will pay for each hour separately."

"Many of our students do that," she said. "Many of them even work at night just to finish the school and—"

"I understand," said Anderson.

The woman took out a piece of paper and placed it on the table. Anderson did not move.

"Fill this out, please," she said.

He turned to her, his right hand in his pocket, but she noticed that his hand was bandaged.

"Could you do it for me?"

"No problem," she said. "Your last name?"

"Anderson."

"First name?"

"Jacob."

The woman smiled. "Scandinavian last name with such a first name?"

"So what," he said. "The papers are fake anyway, and this is a free country. Your school takes anyone who shows up and is willing to pay for an hour of flying. Regardless, I am not even American."

"Me neither," said the woman. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-four."

"Height?"

"Six feet and half an inch."

"Hair?"

"Dark blond."

"Weight?"

"One hundred eighty-five."

"Eye color?"

He took out his driver's license with his left hand, looked at it for a bit, and then said, "Here it says green."

The woman smiled. "You don't remember that?"

"No," he said. He put the license back in his pocket and approached the window, filling it out with his broad shoulders. "The woman I was with for ten years kept telling me that my eyes change color," he said. "That sometimes they are green, sometimes blue, and sometimes even hazel. She confused me so much that I don't know anymore."

"It's good I asked you today," she said. "You could have forgotten your license, and we would all be in trouble."

"I could have asked *you* then."

"I could have been wrong."

"Women are never wrong," said Anderson. "But they never tell the truth. Do you understand the difference?"

"Every woman understands the difference, Mr. Anderson."

"But I could never grasp it," he said. "This might be why that woman left me."

"Where do you live?"

"Ten zero five zero four Wilshire Boulevard."

"There is one more box," said the woman. Another plane started taking off on the runway, and she had to pause for a moment. Anderson turned to her and looked at her dark hair, beautiful Semitic eyes, full lips, and a small bright scar under the base of her nose, which was now visible after her face bronzed from the sun. The sunlight hit her face. Sunlight, in which her face shined for a moment and then sunk into shade and calm like a painting of a saint, in front of whom a candle went out. The woman asked:

"Who should I alert in case of an emergency?"

"Excuse me?"

"There is a box asking who I should alert in case of your death or an accident."

"No one."

"You've got to have someone. Mother?"

He was silent for a moment. "No," he said. "I think she is dead by now."

"Father?"

"He's in Europe. I'm not sure about it, but I think he is also dead."

"Do you have anyone else?"

"I have a brother."

"Let's alert him if needed."

"There will be no need," said Anderson. "This one I'm sure is dead. He died during landing."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That means you didn't know my brother," he said. "You are the only person in the world who is sorry about it. Poor son of a bitch. Pity that I cannot write to him about it. The devil would die laughing when my brother, Major Anderson, read him the letter."

The woman stayed silent for a moment.

"You see," she said. "We have our rules. It comes down to an eight-cent postage stamp. I have to write something down."

"Okay," said Anderson. "Write in that box that I have never met anyone in my life who was worth an eight-cent postage stamp. Would that be okay with you, the school, and the Federal Aviation Administration?"

"What about that woman who couldn't decide on the color of your eyes?"

He didn't respond. There was pain on his face as he took his right arm out of his pocket and grabbed the pen from her hand.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Esther."

"Esther what?"

"Esther Schellenberg."

Behind him, someone said, "But soon she will be Esther Ryan. Just write Esther Ryan, my friend."

Anderson turned around. The man who spoke to him was young, handsome, and well-dressed; his face could be spotted on soap ads,

cleaning detergents, and posters encouraging young patriots to join the Marines. Ryan smiled, presenting his beautiful teeth. He was no more than twenty-five. Esther was older than him.

"My name is Ryan," said the young man. "Esther is my fiancée. We will marry as soon as the house I bought is all set up. You can just write Esther Ryan."

Anderson was not looking at him anymore. He took the pen with his bandaged hand and asked the woman, "S-c-h-e-l-l-e-n-b-e-r-g, correct?"

"Yes," said the woman.

"All right, Esther," said Anderson. "Write a letter to yourself if something ever happens to me." He put the pen down, and Esther looked at his bandage-covered hand, which was now bleeding. Anderson slowly went up to the door. He stood there for a moment, looking at Ryan's face, after which he carefully and almost affectionately moved him aside. A bloodstain remained on his shirt.

Anderson entered the barracks and approached a mechanic working by a plane.

“Do you happen to know where Johnson is?” he asked.

“The instructor?”

“You have the other Johnson here too?”

“He went to get coffee,” said the mechanic. “You have a flight with him?”

“At one,” said Anderson. He briefly looked at the plane’s engine, then climbed onto a truck, lay down with his airgun under his head, and turned toward the wall.

“This is not a place for hobos,” said the mechanic.

“Then why are you here?”

The mechanic, a big man with a red face, walked up toward Anderson and looked at his black airgun, rusted from the sun, and at his old pants and shirt, faded from years spent in twenty-five-cent laundry machines. The man didn’t move. The mechanic kept looking at him, gulped, and then walked away, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Two pilots entered the barracks and stopped by the truck where Anderson was lying. They were both sweaty; their blue shirts were stained white around the armpits. One of them, with a tag reading “Rand” on his shirt, said, “I will not let Ryan go solo. I’d lose my license the same day I signed his.”

“I also worked with him,” said the other man, whose tag read “Johnson” above his left pocket, sewn askew. “This man should not fly, that’s all. It’s fine. I never learned how to dance, and I live with it.”

“Did your wife force you to learn how to dance?”

“Esther is not my wife.”

“If Ryan can’t learn how to land after thirty hours, he won’t learn after three hundred,” said Rand.

“I can’t help him. When we attempt landing, I tell him, ‘It’s okay, man, you’re doing everything right,’ and then I have to snatch the stick away when we’re three feet from the runway. And again, and again I say, ‘Great, man, great,’ and again, and again.”

“That’s the job you picked.”

“I am not complaining. I just won’t let him go solo. But as long as he pays...”

“You wanted to say as long as Mike wants to study.”

“Exactly,” said Johnson. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Try to always talk this way, Johnson. At least for as long as you want to work here.”

“Mr. Rand, this man bought himself a 411. But he cannot yet land a Cherokee. This is none of my business...”

“Exactly, this is none of your business, Johnson,” said Rand, and walked away.

Johnson leaned against the truck and lit a cigarette; his hand was gently shaking. Then he said loudly, “Fucking douchebag.”

“Be careful,” said the mechanic quietly.

“I don’t care,” said Johnson. “Everyone can be the owner’s cousin. I still don’t want to be an instructor whose student learned nothing after thirty hours.”

“Be careful,” said the mechanic again.

Johnson turned around. Cold, green eyes looked at him calmly, as if Anderson had no irises. It lasted a moment, and then Anderson turned back toward the wall.

“What are you doing here, sir?” asked Johnson.

“Waiting.”

“For whom?”

“For my instructor.”

“And who is that?”

“You,” said Anderson, and jumped off the truck.

“You’re the man Andy sent, right?”

“It’s me.”

“Shall we start?”

“Yes.”

They walked toward the plane. Anderson removed a wooden block from the front wheel and entered the cockpit. Johnson followed him and fastened his seatbelt.

“Did you have theoretical training?” he asked.

“I did.”

Johnson pointed at the attitude indicator. “What’s this called?”

Anderson didn’t reply. He turned his head left and watched another plane take off. Then he placed his hand on the stick and pushed it forward. Johnson did the same. Now they were both watching the

plane take off, feeling the momentum of its propeller jerking the stabilizer.

“Why did you do that?” asked Johnson once the roar quieted down.

“Why did *you* do that?”

“I’m a professional pilot; I had to do this. Jet leaves turbulence behind, and that jerks the yoke.”

“I had theoretical training,” said Anderson.

“How are you going to fly with a bleeding hand?”

“The plane won’t feel a thing.”

Johnson didn’t reply. After speaking with Ground Control, he started taxiing along a yellow line. After receiving takeoff permission, given by a sleepy voice from someone with at least two pieces of gum in their mouth, he moved onto the white line, opened the throttle, and at sixty-five miles per hour, began to pull the nose up.

“Seventy-five,” he said, and they were already in the air, climbing at eighty feet per minute. Once they hit three thousand feet, Johnson leveled the nose, straightened the plane, and said, “It’s all yours. You can do seven hundred twenty at forty-five degrees without losing more than a hundred feet if you have theoretical training.”

Anderson put his left hand on the stick and said, “Give me hundred rotations more.”

“No need. You’ll need that during a sharp turn.”

“I’m doing a sharp turn.”

“All that during your first class?” said Johnson. “That’s it?”

Anderson's face twitched as he raised his hand and pushed the throttle forward, increasing the rotations and elevator trim. Then he turned his head left and placed the plane at sixty degrees on the wing and pushed the throttle once more when the nose was too low. After turning the plane around twice, he pulled the throttle back and gave the controls to Johnson.

"We lost twenty feet," he said.

"Do the same thing to the right."

"Right side all clear?"

"Check yourself and you will know," said Johnson. "Why do you keep looking left?"

Anderson didn't reply. He repeated the maneuver, and then they returned to the airport, where Johnson landed. They exited the plane, and Johnson stood still for a second, looking at Anderson.

"How long have you been a professional?" he finally asked.

"You're talking to me?"

"You used to be an instructor," said Johnson. "I know this habit; one keeps looking to the left to make sure the student isn't doing anything stupid. You can't mask it." Anderson didn't reply. Johnson continued after a moment, "If something happened to you in the past, don't tell anyone. Even I don't want to know. But if you ever fly with a different instructor, look to the right from time to time."

Anderson adjusted the bandage wrapped around his right hand; it was wet from grease and blood. "Nothing happened to me in the past," he said. "I just didn't feel like looking at you. I will come here again the day after tomorrow."

He walked away toward the gas station. Andy was sitting on a stool with his fat and heavy legs stretched out in front of him, reading a

newspaper. On the cover, the same smiling police officers carried a smiling man and two columns below, some woman was covering her face with her hands.

“Do you have any work for me?”

“No,” said Andy. “They already brought the wrecks. You can go and see.”

“I’ve seen a fair share of wrecks, Andy.”

“One of the guys’ arms fell off when they were taking him out of that pile,” said Andy. “Can you imagine?”

“I can. But I would rather see it.”

“Me too. He had to smack the ground hard, right? If his arms really fell off. Go, see the wrecks. They are on the south side of the field. And now let me read.”

“Goodbye, Andy.”

“Did you eat?”

“Yes. Goodbye, Andy.”

He walked across the concrete field filled with airplanes, old and new, dirty and sparkling, just like the teeth of all the people he met here, smiling always and everywhere, even as their eyes remained cold and filled with sorrow. He was thinking about all this while standing next to a plane with a wooden propeller. He placed his hand on a dark, smooth, hard tree and stood there for a while, sensing the warmth and scent of the tree surrounded by steel, plastic, and concrete. It was as if he had placed his hand on the head of someone he loved.

“You,” said someone from behind, “get lost. This isn’t your girlfriend, is it?”

“No,” said Anderson.

He walked toward a fence where a man in a light-colored shirt was standing. As he approached, he saw the wrecks of two airplanes, and when he turned left, he saw Ryan’s face—pale and wet.

“Don’t worry, sir,” said Anderson. “It can even happen to the best ones.”

“Then what happens to the ones that are not even good?” asked Ryan, his voice passing through his clenched, dry throat, making it sound like a hiss. “What happens to the mediocre ones?”

“Nothing bad ever happens to the mediocre.”

“Then what about the ones who are plain bad?”

“Also nothing. No one lets them fly solo, so nothing ever happens to them.” He approached the fence and leaned on it, holding the chain link with his left hand. “Poor bastard,” he said. “He didn’t even have time to think about his difficult childhood before they attached a tag to his toe in the city morgue.”

“Did you see it?” asked Ryan.

“I was working with Andy when it happened. I was pumping gas into a Cessna and saw one of them approaching from the sea, and the other from the city. Andy was walking with a bucket of oil when I stopped him. “Andy,” I said, “come here for a minute.” The guy waiting for his oil started yelling that he had no time, and Andy wanted to go, but I stopped him.

“Careful, Andy,” I said. “You will never see anything like this, even if you pay good money. Don’t be upset later that I didn’t call you.”

And I was right; Piper hit the Cessna, and they both fell to the ground. Andy was content, but the guy who had been waiting for

his oil started demanding, “Why didn’t you call me? I also wanted to see. I don’t want your oil anymore.”

Andy was already holding an open barrel, so his mood was ruined. “Get lost, you bastard,” he said to the client. “This is a low-octane gas station, not a back-from-Vietnam cripple parade.” He stayed mad until the evening. That day, we had lines of planes waiting for gas because everyone wanted to see the wrecks, so to avoid paying for the stay, the boys kept buying gas from us.

“Inside the Piper, there was a boy with a girl,” said Ryan.

“I know. I hope they had time to grab each other's hands before they crashed into the garden of that pious old lady who came out to water her flowers. Afterward, the old lady kept saying to the reporters, ‘It was a miracle, it was a true miracle.’ And despite them telling her that three people had died and two planes turned to dust, she only kept saying, ‘It was a miracle. It was a true miracle.’”

“Why do all accidents happen during landing?”

“All? No. Yours will happen during landing because you are scared of speed. I watched you land many times. You should approach the airport with more speed. Then you will feel how the plane pulls you over the field, and if you just lightly grab the yoke, the nose will go up on its own. When landing, you need to feel like you’re flying, not falling.”

“My instructor tells me something else.”

“Your instructor will buy himself a new car soon if you keep listening to him. Tell him to work with you with open flaps.”

“But that’s more difficult.”

“Sometimes the student can do things the instructor wouldn’t even think of.”

Ryan turned toward him, wiped his face, and smiled. "I wanted to punch your teeth out," he said. "You stained my shirt."

"Why didn't you punch my teeth out?"

"You wouldn't punch someone who has a bleeding right hand, would you?"

"I would punch anyone I wanted to punch," said Anderson. "Please remember, when you land, you have to feel like you're flying over the airport, not crashing into it. Goodbye."

"Where is your car?"

"I don't have a car. I am walking."

"Do you live around here?"

"No. I am walking to catch the bus eighty-three."

"But that's four miles."

"Eight for me. I walk there twice a day."

Ryan smiled. "You should be my instructor, sir," he said. "You'd get a new car fast. Like you said."

"I told you something different: you are afraid of speed. It is normal, and even if it isn't, every young pilot is afraid of it. Your instructor should practice your approach but in the air. He should take you up to five thousand feet, close the gas, and make you do it at four and hold the plane until it starts falling, then climb back up to five thousand. You should imagine that the four thousand is the airport. This usually helps."

"You talk like you're a federal instructor," said Ryan. He pointed to the wrecks lying on the other side of the fence. "What are they going to do about this?"

“They will put them together to simulate the accident,” said Anderson. “And then some retained lawyers in court will prove to one insurance company that they owe money to the other, or vice versa. It will last for months, and the reconstruction will cost as much as five new planes. This is what usually happens in such a case.”

“I can drive you to the city,” said Ryan, “if you have some time and can drive with me to Malibu.”

“Okay.”

“My name is Mike,” said Ryan. “And you?”

“Anderson.”

“That’s a last name. What’s your first name?”

“Jacob. I never use it.”

“Why not?”

“In my country, only crows are named that.”

“So what?”

“Exactly. From my point of view, it doesn’t matter. But in my country, they believe crows bring bad luck. Big, black, dreadful bird.”

“Weird country.”

“Exactly. In my country, they also believe women bring bad luck. That’s why I don’t like women hanging around planes.”

Ryan went ahead to a car parked in the shade; Anderson followed. Once they got in and drove off, Mike asked, “And you don’t believe that?”

“I’m a different story,” said Anderson. “To me, she brought bad luck. But it’s only a superstition, and I don’t want to believe that.”

“Why? If she really brought you bad luck.”

“You misunderstood me. Let other people go through the same. I don’t have the duty to warn others and help them for free.”

“It would prove useless anyway.”

“I think so too. Besides, if you wanted to throw a stone at every whore, you’d have to take the walls of this city apart.”

They drove along the coast, passing by houses occupied by people whose neatness was almost inhumane. And if there was something human about it, it was the lethargy. Anderson said, “This ocean does not have a scent. It’s just wet and warm.”

“There are very few things you like about this place,” said Ryan. “You’re confused by the ocean, confused by the women. I am only confused by one thing: your presence here.”

“You don’t know what the ocean is supposed to smell like,” said Anderson. “When you’re walking at night, and it’s quiet, you smell resin, algae, and fish that the sea washed ashore. Later on, you sit in a little restaurant, and you drink beer, and you think about all the bodies lying down there, rusty anchors, and you listen to the stories about all these women who threw themselves into the sea because no one loved them. The sea here is like the teeth of a noble sheriff: made out of nylon, clean and vile.”

“Do you dream about the ocean a lot?”

“I know what you are thinking about. No.”

Mike parked in front of one of the houses and walked out of the car. Anderson sat still, smoking a cigarette. Mike stopped and asked, “You don’t want to see?”

“Do you want to show me your house?”

“Yes,” said Mike. “This house I bought for me and for Esther. We will marry as soon as it’s renovated.”

Anderson followed him. He walked behind Mike from one room to the next, each big, bright, filled with sunshine, and a static, numb scent of the sea visible from every window and open door. Ryan stood looking at Anderson; when he walked past a window, his long shadow cast itself across the entire room—dark, sharp, and restless.

“Do you want to see the bedroom?” asked Ryan. “That’s the one room I designed myself.”

Ryan opened the door, and Anderson followed him inside. He looked at a big old bed with four columns and a curtain stretched between them—dark, draped, and noble. In this bright, perfectly cool, and perfectly square room, the bed looked like a theatrical prop placed there for a moment to be later pushed onto a stage surrounded by fake and tragic noises; a crowd of people who traded their own faces for masks and their own fate for despair, laughter, and applause at all the wrong times.

“Your hand is bleeding again,” said Mike Ryan.

They went back to the car and drove along the coast—still, bright, and filled with all the long, golden days passing slowly over this country. After a while, Ryan said, “You are not very talkative, my friend.”

“They pointed that out to me.”

“The ones who did didn’t achieve much.”

“Regardless, they did not take it seriously.”

“But it had to worry someone at one point. You can’t say this is enough for you.”

“I couldn’t say it better myself.”

“How do you make a living?”

“Sometimes I earn a few dollars with Andy.”

“Who is that?”

“The man from whom you’ve bought gas for the past six months.”

“That fat bastard from the gas station?”

“If he wasn’t a bastard, I would have nothing to eat,” said Anderson. “He can’t push the propeller. I do it. He doesn’t want to lose clients, but he’s too scared to do it himself.”

“But almost all planes have starters now,” said Mike.

“There are still a few wrecks that you have to push with your own hands.”

They parked next to a short house where Anderson lived. The house was old, with only one tree filled with leaves and flowers.

“I didn’t know trees still bloom this time of year,” said Ryan.

Anderson looked at him. Mike was bright and handsome, his teeth white and straight, his hair the color of hay, and his hazel eyes, now in the shade of the green tree, looked golden. Anderson glanced at Mike’s bright shirt and colorful pants.

“This tree isn’t blooming, Mike,” said Anderson.

“It’s full of flowers.”

“Trees die this way, Mike. They bloom one last time and look more beautiful than ever.”

“If only people could die like this.”

“That happens. Do you want to come in? I have some beer.”

“Sure.”

They entered. Anderson let the guest in first. His room was empty, with not a single painting on the walls. Anderson took two beer bottles out of the fridge and handed one to Ryan. They drank for a while, and then Anderson said, “Now, it’s my turn to show you something.”

He walked up to the wall and pulled out a narrow bed. It was an iron bed, and it would look stolen if it weren’t for the giant hooks connecting it to the wall that could hold a ship in place. The blanket covering it was dirty and drenched in sweat.

“This is my place,” said Anderson.

Ryan did not reply; he raised the bottle to his lips but put it down before taking a sip. He looked at Anderson and his bright, young face was now filled with disgust.

“Do you have a woman?” Ryan asked.

“Yes.”

“How do you manage?”

“You have some imagination, don’t you? This bed is so narrow that we always have to be close together. Otherwise, it makes no sense. Otherwise, it would be disgusting.” Anderson took a sip of his beer, wiped his mouth with his right hand, and continued, “But it’s never disgusting with her. After just a few minutes, the entire room smells like her. Have you noticed that an old iron bed has a scent? She eliminates that scent, Mike. All it takes is for her to lie on the bed, and everything smells like her. Then I don’t think about how small and dirty this room, and this bed are.”

“Have you been together long?”

“Ten years.”

Mike set his bottle aside. “Would you like me to find you a job?” he asked.

“What job?”

“Any job. Enough for you to rent a new room and have a clean bed. You’d definitely earn that much.”

“Okay,” said Anderson.

“It’s noble that you agreed so quickly,” Mike said. He took out his notepad, wrote down an address, and ripped off the page to give it to Anderson. “Go there tomorrow morning,” he said. “And tomorrow, you’ll have a job.”

“You didn’t finish your beer.”

“Why did you show me this disgusting place?” Ryan asked. “It’s not my fault my family has money and you’re poor as a church mouse. It isn’t my fault I have a house and you live like a tramp. Don’t you get that?”

“From your point of view, I might be a tramp,” Anderson said, his voice drowsy and calm. “It is irrelevant to me. All that matters is the woman who comes here. And then I don’t remember this house anymore, or this old, rusted bed. And one more thing: it is not my fault that in your family, you build a house before you bring a woman there. Don’t you get that, Ryan?”

“Get what?”

“That you and I are the same man. That we want the same things in life. And that we even speak the same language, Mike, because love is the only language that all men speak.”

Ryan did not reply. He walked up to the window, and Anderson followed him, noticing that Ryan was looking at the

tree—blooming, bold, and beautiful, and dying in the middle of an asphalt yard. Anderson placed his hand on Ryan's shoulder; he did not move, and Anderson could see Ryan's reflection in the glass: young, beautiful, and healthy.

"Is it true?" Ryan asked.

"What is?"

"That trees bloom before they die."

"Yes. But don't think about it. In a few days, men will come and cut it down. Next time you come here, the tree will be long gone."

"And how do you know I'll come here again?"

"I told you already: you and I are the same person."

"If you also say that we are loved by the same woman, I will forget about your bleeding hand."

"This I would never tell you."

"The woman you have doesn't need a house in Malibu, nor a car, nor money. Right? This is what you want to say."

"And even if that were true," said Anderson, "I told you already: you and I are the same."

Ryan shrugged and left the house. Anderson grabbed Mike's unfinished beer bottle and sipped from it while leaning against a wall and smoking a cigarette. There was a knock on the door, and Anderson said, "No, Helen. Not today."

"I think nothing will happen today," said the woman on the other side of the door.

"You think wrong, Helen. It can happen anytime, any day."

“Will you come to me?”

“I don’t know, Helen. Maybe a little later.”

“I feel like the child is not looking well. Could you have a look?”

“Okay,” said Anderson, his voice calm, almost sleepy, like a pilot who landed after a long, calm, and safe flight. “I will be right there.” He finished his beer, then went to the sink, ripped off the bandage from his swollen and bruised hand, and placed it under a stream of cold water. He had to lean against the wall as the pain took over his body like a flame, making his right arm rigid. After a while, he turned off the faucet and looked at his hand; his knuckles were covered in blisters. He tried to flex his palm once, then twice. “Okay, Helen,” he said. “I’m coming.” He walked to the other room, locked the door behind him, and put the key in his pocket. He stood there for a moment, looking at a woman whose eyes had turned white with fear, like the eyes of the doll she held in her arms. The doll’s eyes had once been blue, but now, after years, they had no irises nor pupils. “I am here, Helen,” he said.

At seven o'clock the next morning, Anderson entered a low red-brick building. The secretary behind the desk looked at him with a smile.

"What can I do for you?" she asked in a low, melodious voice. It wasn't a question; it was a declaration of love, commitment, and sounded like a marriage proposal.

"I came about a job," Anderson said.

The smile disappeared from her face. She handed him an application and looked at him—now coldly, without a smile—as he awkwardly wrote down his name, first name, and address before handing the application back to her and sitting down in a chair.

"Mr. Hundebauch will see you shortly," she said.

A man with a semi-conscious look in his eyes burst into the waiting room. He stared at the secretary, whose face now bore the most beautiful smile, and then rushed toward Anderson.

"Why is this man sitting?!" he began to yell, spraying spittle. "We don't sit here! It's past seven! How long have you been working here?"

"I don't work here at all," Anderson said. "I'd like to start."

"What can you do? Do you have any special training?"

"I can make bulbuliers."

"What's that?!" he shouted. "Tell me quickly! Don't waste my time! And remember: we don't sit here."

"You take a twenty-yard pine log and strip it of branches," Anderson explained in a sleepy voice; the man standing over him seemed to boil with rage. "Then you drill two-inch holes every four

inches along its length. Next, you drop the log into deep water, and then you hear a sound: bul, bul, bul.”

“And what’s it for?”

“That part I was not told.”

The secretary burst out laughing, and the man standing over Anderson in a menacing stance turned around; the laughter stopped as suddenly as it had started. The man gave Anderson one more wild look before storming out and slamming the door.

“That wasn’t very wise of you,” the girl said quietly. “That man is the boss’s brother.”

“He should know his people,” Anderson said. “That’s one. And two: his brother hates him, and if he just went to complain about me, I’ll get this job in five minutes.”

The girl looked at him; she was no longer a smiling secretary. For a moment, she was just an aging woman who hadn’t managed to find a husband during her days off and who cried during lonely nights, from the moment she took her sleeping pills until the moment she drifted off.

“How do you know all this?”

“I think I just like people,” Anderson said. “That’s why.”

A raspy voice came through the speaker: “Send him in, Susan.”

“That’s Mr. Hundebauch,” Susan said. “Second room on the left.”

Anderson walked in; a dark man with the face of a rogue suffering from liver problems looked at him for a moment before saying:

“Our company deals in distributing comic books. There isn’t any garbage you won’t find here. We have everything people want to read: *Girl’s First Love*, *Confession*, *Mission: Impossible*, and so on.

We distribute it all over the city. You'll be in the 'Adventure' group, and your boss will be Murray, which automatically puts you in the 'Fantastic' section. That means you'll be filling the position that opened up yesterday."

He paused; pain crossed his face. He swallowed a brown pill, washed it down with water, and said, "Do you want to know what your name will be?"

"I've known that since the day I was born."

"Nonsense. Forget about that. You'll be '*The Amazing Spider-Man*.' How do you like that?"

"I'm happy."

"Have you ever been arrested by the police?"

"No."

Hundebruch looked at him with amusement.

"Who are you trying to fool?" he said. A man entered the room—short, gray-haired, and cold-eyed. "This will be your new 'Spider,' Murray," said Hundebruch, turning away from them.

He stared at a wall covered with newspaper clippings, their headlines pasted on: *Hoffa: Seven Years, Daddy Claims Innocence*. One of the clippings had come loose; Hundebruch grabbed a tube of glue and went to reattach it.

"You two—what are you waiting for?" he said.

"Want to start today?" Murray asked.

"Yes."

"What's with your hand? Why are you wearing a bandage?"

“I can take it off.”

They walked down the corridor past Susan, who was seated at her desk, and entered a large hall. People behind metal tables were sorting colorful booklets, stacking them in piles, while others ripped off their covers. One man was speaking loudly into a microphone:

““When I saw her for the first time, I said to myself: this woman is my destiny. At the time, I didn’t know what destiny was. I know now, as my road grows short, and I’ll no longer be able to tell anyone because the only thing waiting for me at the end of my path is twenty-four thousand volts. I killed the Peterson brothers, the O’Brian brothers, the Rosenblatt brothers—all for her, because that’s what she wanted....”

“We handle distribution,” Murray said. “We prepare comics here for sale across the city. When they come back unsold, we tear off the covers, send them back to the publishers, and the rest gets shredded. Sometimes the covers get lost, and then you have to read bits of the text, like that guy’s doing. Listen.”

““Once, when I held her trembling body in my arms, I thought her body was the scent of love. But now I know that her body burns just like any other body and gives off the same stench when someone flips the switch. I know this because they fried her in the chair next to mine. She was the one who killed the Mulligan sisters, the Scott sisters, and the Blum sisters. But as I said, back then I didn’t know what destiny was....”

Murray pulled a smock from a locker, its back painted with an image of a man entangled in an iron spider web. Across the chest, the smock bore the words *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Murray placed a stack of booklets in front of Anderson and walked off. Anderson began tearing off covers.

A man with the face of an unhappy syphilitic sadist and wearing a smock that read *Girl’s First Love* approached Anderson.

“Help me unload the truck,” he said. “Murray told me to.”

They climbed onto the truck, where the driver, a Mexican man, stood wide-legged, smoking a stubby cigar. He looked at them with flat eyes, bursting with pride and satisfaction that he, a Mexican, was a truck driver in the United States of America, earning three dollars and eighty cents an hour.

“Watch him,” *Girl’s First Love* whispered to Anderson. “That’s Salvatore, the driver. Bastard. Put your *Spiders* to the right, and I’ll put my trash to the left. Don’t mix them up. If you throw one of your *Spiders* into my trash, Salvatore will lose his mind.”

“And then what?”

“He’ll go to Murray and claim delays because of us. And then, by Friday, you’ll be out of a job. Are you in the union?”

“No.”

“Then watch it.”

“What are you two talking about?” Salvatore asked. He spoke with a heavy accent, which he attempted to conceal, and it made him sound even worse.

“He’s explaining how I should do my work,” Anderson said in an equally heavy accent. The Mexican took the cigar out of his mouth and approached him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Salvatore asked. “You think you’re funny?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you mocking me?”

“I’m not mocking you,” Anderson said. “I’m not American.”

“You know where I learned to drive a truck?” Salvatore said. “In the army. You know what else I did there?”

“I do,” Anderson said. “You were the regimental lightweight champion.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Your ears and your nose,” Anderson said. “But don’t pick on me. Either way, I’m afraid of you. I’ve always been scared of small, ugly people.”

“You think you’re smart, don’t you?”

Anderson didn’t respond. He started unloading packages tied with string and stacking them on a wooden pallet, which a crane occasionally took away. Salvatore stood over him, spitting brown saliva every now and then. At one point, the pallet was full, but the crane didn’t return. Anderson sat down and lit a cigarette.

The crane operator was stuck at the other end of the hall, trying to restart a stalled engine. The starter ground, but the engine wouldn’t catch. The Mexican looked at Anderson, jumped off the truck, and said:

“I’m going to help him.”

He walked away. A moment later, someone touched Anderson’s shoulder, and he turned around. It was the boss’s brother, Hundebauch Number Two.

“Why are you sitting?”

“The crane left,” Anderson said, pointing to the wooden pallet loaded with square packages. “There’s nowhere to load them,” he added. “Either way, I have to wait for the crane.”

“I’m not asking about the crane,” Hundebauch said. “I’m asking: why are you sitting?”

“Should I stand up?”

“Yes.”

Anderson stood up.

“Now wait for the crane,” Hundebauch said. “If they’re paying you two dollars and fifty-three cents an hour here, it’s not so you can demoralize my people. Got it?”

“Yes,” Anderson said. “And if the crane doesn’t come back until evening?”

“Then you’ll stand until evening,” Hundebauch said. “Or you’ll sit on the other side of the door.”

He walked off but stopped after a few steps.

“What country are you from, Anderson?”

“From the other side of the iron curtain.”

“I figured. But this isn’t Red Square in Moscow. Will you remember that?”

“That will be hard,” Anderson said. “The last time I strolled there with Marshal Joseph Stalin, there were some renovations underway, and I don’t know what the square looks like today.”

But Hundebauch didn’t hear that. He was already standing over a man who had crouched down to tie his shoelace. Hundebauch hovered over him, trembling.

“And what’s with you? Why are you pretending?”

“I’m not pretending,” said the kneeling man. “My shoelace came undone.”

“And you can’t tie it?”

“That’s what I’m doing.”

“You’re doing nothing!” Hundebauch shouted. “This is how it’s done. Look.”

He crouched next to the kneeling worker, yanked, and tore the shoelace completely. His face showed despair. Then he stood up, dramatically tossed the shoelace aside like a tragic hero discarding his sword to embrace death for a cause that turned out to be worthless, and left, shoulders drooping, arms swinging heavily.

An old man with a smock labeled *Sexology* approached Anderson.

“Watch out for him,” the old man whispered. “Even if there’s no crane, you have to stand. If Murray or Hundebauch Number Two sees you sitting...” He didn’t finish; an asthmatic cough shook his sunken chest.

Sexology wheezed for a moment, eyes bulging with the desperate effort of survival. Finally, the cough subsided. *Sexology* deftly lifted his upper denture, its teeth clamping together permanently, so only his lips moved when he spoke. Holding the denture with his fingers, he slipped a cigarette between the teeth and carefully clamped it. The jaw snapped shut.

“Damn dentists,” *Sexology* said. “That’s the second time.”

Anderson watched as the man’s lips moved while the teeth and cigarette between them remained gracefully immobile.

“The first time I bought dentures was two years ago. Then my son took me in a car to San Bernardino. My son was speeding eighty miles an hour and said to me, ‘Open the window, Dad, and take a look at those mountains.’ I opened the window, stuck my head out, and when we passed a car with a young girl, I smiled—and the wind blew my dentures out.”

Murray entered the hall and shouted:

“OK, let’s take a break!”

Anderson and *Girl’s First Love* sat on the floor. *Girl’s First Love* was eating a sandwich; Anderson smoked a cigarette, watching a hunchbacked man with the unhappy face of an old Jew who had failed everywhere and in everything. The hunchback’s back was adorned with the label *Hercules Son of Rocks*.

“Why is that bastard crying?” Anderson asked.

“Don’t you know why?” *Girl’s First Love* asked.

“No.”

“Our boss has a strange sense of humor,” *Girl’s First Love* said. “He names us all to make our blood boil whenever we think about it. That hunchback was first *Tarzan Son of the Jungle*, then *Man’s Beauty*, and now he’s *Hercules*. When I first came here and they gave me this smock, and I saw that I wasn’t William Miller anymore but *Girl’s First Love*, I went to the boss and said, ‘Boss, can’t I be *Human Beast Gun for Hire* instead?’ And he looked at me and said, ‘To me, you look like *Girl’s First Love*.’ Then he turned to his secretary and said, ‘Susan, isn’t this the handsomest boy we have here in Downtown?’ And she said, ‘Yes, boss.’ And then he said to me, ‘So? Now you believe me, don’t you, when a beautiful girl tells it to your face?’ And that was the end of it.”

Girl’s First Love fell silent, lost in thought. His face, marked by the hardened expression of a syphilitic sadist, tightened further. His forehead, normally the size of a postage stamp, disappeared entirely, leaving his jaw seemingly growing straight out of his skull.

“And I even have to pay for sex,” said *Girl’s First Love*. “Just like others buy potatoes or hamburgers. I’m disgusting, and nobody wants me. Once, I went to a bar on Vine Street where the hookers hang out. They were sitting there drinking, and men were buying them whiskey and taking them home. So I went up to one and said,

‘What are you drinking tonight, honey?’ She looked at me and said, ‘I drink seven and seven, honey. And what about you? Crocodile crap?’ She wouldn’t even talk to me. Then a taxi driver told me he knew a prostitute in Downtown named Josephine. ‘Give me five bucks, and I’ll take you there,’ he said. So I agreed. He drove me from Vine Street to Downtown and told me to knock three times and say that Harry sent me. He was supposed to wait for me. I knocked, and a Black guy opened the door. I politely said, ‘Good evening, sir. I’d like to see Josephine.’ And do you know who that guy was? He was some wrestler who killed a man in the ring and lost his license because he couldn’t fake it and fought for real. That Black guy lost it, and I ended up in the hospital for three weeks.”

“Harry probably wanted to play a prank on you,” said another worker, *Bury Me Alive*.

“Who?”

“Harry, the taxi driver,” said *Bury Me Alive*.

“You think so?”

“Sometimes people think it’s funny to screw someone over,” *Bury Me Alive* said.

“Christ, I’d like to get my hands on him someday.”

“And what would you do? Remember, you’re on parole, and your officer is keeping an eye on you.”

“Still, I’d like to get him,” said *Girl’s First Love*.

“They’ve screwed all of us here,” *Bury Me Alive* said to Anderson. “To get this job, you have to be in the union. Our boss won’t fire anyone because the union would have his head in a day. Daddy wouldn’t allow it. That’s why we get two-fifty-three an hour, even though our boss knows anyone would do this job for a buck seventy-five. It drives him nuts to pay us, and he hates Hoffa, so he takes it out on us. Take me, for instance—I’ve had a heart attack

and a hernia operation. That's why the boss put me on this series about a bandit who buries people alive. Last week, the bandit buried two little girls, a nun, and his army buddy's father-in-law. All because something happened to him in his youth, and now he seems to hate everyone."

"Seems right," Anderson said.

"Tell him what your old nickname was," *Girl's First Love* said to *Bury Me Alive*, pointing at Anderson.

"I'd rather not."

"Tell him."

"OK," said *Bury Me Alive*. "I used to be called *Joe Resurrectioner*. It was about some guy in Kansas City who dug up corpses."

"And what did he do with them?" Anderson asked.

"I don't know. Just when it was about to be explained, the boss moved me to another group," said *Bury Me Alive*.

"Our boss always does that," said *Girl's First Love*. "When someone gets really interested in what's in this trash, he moves them to another job. I'm *Girl's First Love*, and I don't even know what it's about."

"It's all because the boss hates Hoffa," said *Bury Me Alive*. "Daddy was a good man. He even wanted to give us dental care. Now he's locked up, but our boss is still afraid of him."

"He hates Hoffa because Hoffa was a truck driver, and if he said one word today, the whole country would stop," said *Girl's First Love*. "But Daddy wouldn't let that happen. Daddy wouldn't let anyone screw us over, but we can't get involved in our boss's personal grudges. That's why he's turned us all into clowns."

“Still, some guys rented a plane to fly over the prison and write ‘Happy Birthday, Jimmy,’” said *Bury Me Alive*. “By the way, I’m curious how that works.”

“What?” Anderson asked.

“How the plane leaves a trail in the sky.”

“You pour oil into the exhaust pipe,” Anderson said.

The siren signaling the end of the break sounded. Anderson and *Girl’s First Love* finished unloading the truck, then stood by a metal counter tearing the covers off colorful booklets. They stacked the covers aside; another worker took them to someone operating a machine that compressed the now-useless booklets into square blocks of gray paper tied with wire. These blocks were destined for the shredder, to be turned back into printing paper, ready to carry new stories about noble detectives and honorable cowboys who could kill without batting an eye, yet melted under the gaze of two-dollar harlots who preserved the purity of their hearts and the serenity of their souls and remained untouched by the din of foul conversations, the slick slaps of cards hitting tables, or the confessions of gangsters in bowler hats, who shot only from behind corners and only in the back of the head. Nor were they disturbed by the laments of unwed mothers or the adventures of cheerful dogs with long ears and rabbits whose lives had long escaped the scrutiny of zoologists and had become the subject of study for serious psychiatrists.

Girl’s First Love stepped away when Murray called him, then returned, deathly pale, and asked Anderson:

“Where are our covers?”

“I don’t know,” Anderson replied. “Someone took them a moment ago.”

“Heavens above,” said *Girl’s First Love*. “We need to pile all this together and cover it with one intact cover so Murray doesn’t catch on. What’s the theme of these?”

Anderson picked up one of the coverless comics and started reading:

““The first time Tom took me by force was in the military cemetery in Darlington. It happened at night. To this day, I can still remember his hairy hand squeezing its way like pincers between my defenseless thighs....””

“Perfect,” said *Girl’s First Love*. “We’ll cover it with Donald Duck, and no one will know.”

He tore the cover off a Donald Duck comic, placed it over the pile, and passed it to the next worker.

On the other side of the table, the workers had also mixed things up. One of them was reading aloud, stammering as he tried to match the text to the cover:

““Then a short Mexican knife gleamed in Johnny’s hand. Johnny plunged it into the Black man’s stomach and, laughing devilishly, ripped out his guts in one motion. “This will teach you to respect a white man in the future, you Black dog,” Johnny said and walked away, laughing eerily.””

The reader paused and then asked, “In the future?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of future can this guy have? Johnny just spilled his guts.”

“You don’t get it,” his friend said. “This is all crap, but it has to feel real, right? If they sell millions of these every week and each one costs twenty-five cents, it can’t be completely stupid, right?”

“I don’t know. But a person can’t live without guts.”

Anderson’s right arm ached. He was tearing off covers nonstop, raising and lowering his arm in the same repetitive motion. The colors of the covers blurred before his eyes; his head felt empty, filled with a dull hum. From time to time, Murray would stand silently behind him, staring at the bandage on Anderson’s hand, which was slowly soaking through with blood. Anderson could see Murray’s face without turning—cold eyes behind thin-framed glasses, a cold smile, and nylon teeth worth fourteen hundred dollars, paid for in installments to a doctor who probably looked just like Murray, except his own teeth had cost far more and had been paid for with a single check. Murray stood motionless for a moment, then walked away.

“One thing I don’t understand,” Anderson said. “Why did the boss make me *Spider-Man*?”

“He’ll come up with something new for you,” said *Girl’s First Love*. “*Women’s World* is leaving soon for Vietnam to be a chaplain. Are you married?”

“Not anymore.”

“What happened?”

“I lost her.”

“Did she die, or did she leave you for someone else?”

“Where the hell is your business in that?”

“From my perspective, it doesn’t matter,” said *Girl’s First Love*. “But, for example, if the boss found out your wife left you for another guy, he might transfer you to *Women’s World*. Just so you’d have to look at those pictures and boil with rage every time you tear off a cover and see a naked prostitute smiling, making sixty dollars an hour for posing, while you go home on Friday with eighty bucks for a whole week’s work. Makes sense now?”

“I guess so. But why is *Women’s World* becoming a chaplain?”

“*Women’s World* is a priest. A worker priest. There are a lot of them. And now *Women’s World* has had enough and prefers to go to war. Look at him yourself.”

Anderson turned and watched a man tearing covers off *Women’s World* magazines. His eyes were fixed on the heavens, and he winced every time he touched a cover. As soon as he tore it off, a photo of a naked woman lying on a plush couch in an unmistakably inviting pose was revealed—inviting not just to the couch, but to her. *Women’s World* tore off covers with a look of martyrdom, muttering prayers under his breath.

Shouts erupted from the far end of the hall. Murray was arguing with a limping man whose left shoe weighed no less than twenty pounds, making the man look like a devil straight out of an operetta, which producers realized long before the premiere that they were going to go broke, so they cast the cheapest actor in town to play the devil. The bony back of the limping devil was covered with a wrinkled apron labeled “*World of Sport*.”

“What does this have to do with sports?” Murray said in his cold, venomous voice. “You’re always mixing up the covers. Come on, read me a piece of it.”

“I don’t need to read it,” said *World of Sport*. “I know what it’s about.”

“Fine. Tell me what it’s about.”

“It’s about this bandit who got engaged and then got locked up.”

“And then?”

“Then he escaped from Alcatraz and came to her to hide him, only to find her marrying someone else. So, he strangled all the wedding guests, including the priest who was blessing the newlyweds, and ripped out the eyes of the Negro playing the trumpet before

throwing him out the window along with his trumpet, shouting mockingly, ‘Times are rotten, and no one earns as well as blind trumpet players....’”

“And what does all this have to do with sports?”

“I think a man who personally strangled all the wedding guests and threw a heavy Negro out the window must have had some strength,” *World of Sport* said with dignity and calm. “At least from my point of view. I have polio, wasn’t accepted into the army, and don’t have a driver’s license.”

“Your point of view is worthless,” Murray said. “Stick to the text.”

“All right. Sorry. But still, to me, this guy is a strongman. Just think about it: a heavy Negro...”

“To me, this guy is a bandit. He belongs to the ‘*Kiss Before Kill*’ section, so drop it.”

“What? Are there no strong bandits anymore?”

“That’s not your business.”

“Of course not. We’re just talking. But objectively, you have to admit that a man who strangled all the wedding guests must have been in great shape. I couldn’t do it, and you couldn’t do it either.”

“I’m explaining this to you like a human: that man was a bandit. A gun for hire.”

“I’m not arguing with you,” *World of Sport* said. “Baby Chassman was also a bandit, but he worked out in prison until the day of his execution, and I read that his biceps were like cobras. One doesn’t exclude the other.”

Murray spat and walked away. A minute later, the bell rang, and *Girl’s First Love* said to Anderson:

“Lunch break. Are you getting something to eat?”

“I don’t have any money,” Anderson said.

“I’ll give you two dollars. Pay me back on Monday.”

Anderson took the two dollars, bought a ham roll from the vendor by the food truck, and then lay down on the cool metal panel. He felt the increasing weight of his bones, legs, and hips. Beside him, a man was asleep while *Bury Me Alive* spoke to him, ignoring the fact that the man was snoring peacefully.

“All my life, I thought that when I turned sixty, I’d retire and rent a cheap room in Venice or maybe Santa Monica near the pier. I’d sit by the sea, cook myself dinner, then go to a bar and talk to people. And if I met someone decent, I’d buy them a beer. You know, in those little bars, beer costs twenty-five or even just twenty cents. You just have to know where to go. I don’t have kids, my wife died, and all I ever thought about was that when I got old, I’d go to the bar and talk to people. I’m not a drunk, but I like to sit with a beer and chat. Finally, that day came, and I rented a room on Broadway. Evenings, I went to the bar and told people about how I tore covers off comics and stacked them up, and that’s how it went for forty years. And what happened? People didn’t want to listen. How long can you talk about tearing a cover off by pinching the top-right corner with your finger? I didn’t have anything else to tell these people because I didn’t drink, didn’t gamble, and didn’t travel. So, I wandered from bar to bar, telling them about those covers, until finally, the bar owners on Broadway threw me out whenever I walked in sober, shouting, ‘We don’t serve drunks! This is a decent, clean place, and we don’t want trouble with the police.’ Apparently, the guys I bored asked the bar owners to keep me out, and the owners did what they asked, then I came back here, and the boss took me back and turned me from *Joe Resurrectioner* into *Bury Me Alive*. That’s how it is.”

The sleeping man woke up and said:

“Sure. You were right. I don’t trust any of them. My wife was from the South too, and she also left me for some bastard. I never heard from her again.”

The truck driver stood in front of Anderson, staring at him for a moment before asking:

“What happened to your right hand?”

“It’s bleeding.”

“But what happened to it?”

“The same thing that could happen to my left.”

The Mexican squinted his flat eyes and took half a step forward. Anderson didn’t move, slowly chewing his ham roll. The Mexican glanced at Anderson’s right hand and noticed the dirty, old bandage now stained with fresh blood.

“I know you’re mocking my accent,” he said. “I’m not stupid. I can hear it.”

“I can’t speak without an accent.”

“Yes, you can,” the Mexican said. “Everyone can. Everyone but me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Anderson said. “There’s not much to talk about anyway.”

The Mexican looked at him again; his flat yellow eyes suddenly turned dark and deep, as if he were looking into a mirror and seeing death peering calmly and with dignity over his shoulder.

“I’ll get you one day,” he said and walked away.

As he walked, he swayed—his small, square head thrust forward, shifting his entire weight from one leg to the other, not feeling the

weight, just using strength to move his wiry, quick body step by step—the body of a featherweight boxer not yet softened by fat.

“He’s fighting tonight,” *Bury Me Alive* said. “You can see him on Channel Five. He’s appearing as an amateur. Wants to go pro.”

“He shouldn’t be hanging around here,” Anderson said. “He should rest.”

“He’s still an amateur. Doesn’t want to miss a day of work. Besides, he’ll leave soon. The fights start at eight.”

“What’s his name?” Anderson asked.

“He’s fighting as *Catolico Bueno*. You should watch him.”

“I think I will,” Anderson said. “What did you say his name is?”

“The *Good Catholic*. If you don’t have a TV, go to a bar. That’s what I’ll do.”

Girl’s First Love approached Anderson and whispered:

“Do you remember where you put that pile covered with Donald Duck?”

“It’s still on the table.”

Girl’s First Love grabbed the pile from the table and erased Anderson’s monogram with an eraser.

“Hey, friend,” he said to a Mexican with *Yours and the Others* written on his back. “Show me your pile. What do you have there?”

“It’s about America,” the Mexican said. “Beautiful. Homeland. Yours and mine. Everyone’s.”

“Let me see it for a moment,” *Girl’s First Love* said. “I haven’t seen this trash yet.”

Yours and the Others handed him the pile. Anderson, looking over *Girl's First Love's* shoulder, read a bit while glancing at the photograph: a house surrounded by improbably violet-red trees, which were probably green in reality. The editor, earning over fifty thousand dollars a year, had decided that someone of such stature had no need to live under the shade of ordinary green trees. They had been turned into violet and crimson. Even the teeth of the happy family gathered around the swimming pool were slightly red, making them look like a family of vampires who had just dined on a virginal girl from a nearby college.

"Nice house," *Girl's First Love* said. "What's your name, friend?"

"*Yours and the Others*," the Mexican replied.

"But your real name?"

"Carlos Romeo."

Bury Me Alive leaned in closer to Anderson and said quietly:

"The boss found out that this wetback's wife is screwing everyone, so he put him on this series."

Girl's First Love wrote two letters, "CR," on the corner of the pile covered with the Donald Duck cover. Then he tossed the pile across the hall, where a Black man by the machine compressing magazines into square blocks tied it with wire and threw it onto the truck.

"Why did you do that?" Anderson asked.

"They'll think *Yours and the Others* did it," said *Girl's First Love*. "And by Friday, Murray will fire him. Murray will come and say, 'OK, baby, this is your last day.' But Murray never does it one-on-one. He'll say it during the lunch break, when *Yours and the Others* has a crowd around him. And then *Yours and the Others* will work until evening, grinding his teeth but not saying a word."

“And what will Murray say? He has to say something more than just that it’s his last day.”

“Murray will say, ‘Mr. Hundebauch is not satisfied with your work.’”

“And what will *Yours and the Others* say?”

“Nothing. Maybe just, ‘I’m sorry, sir. Thank you for giving me a chance.’ And that will be the end of it.”

Anderson laughed.

“This isn’t funny at all,” said *Bury Me Alive*.

“I’m not laughing at that.”

“Then what are you laughing at?”

“*Girl’s First Love* is cruel.”

“And that’s funny? That someone is cruel?”

“Yes,” said Anderson. “That’s exactly what I’m laughing at. I’m laughing at someone being cruel.”

“I had to do it,” said *Girl’s First Love*.

“Why did you pick the damned wetback?” said Anderson. “Why didn’t you pick me?”

Girl’s First Love didn’t answer; he stared at Anderson’s red hand, and Anderson said:

“Don’t worry. I won’t hit you.”

“Because you’re cruel too,” said *Girl’s First Love*.

At five-thirty, Anderson left work. He stood for a moment, watching white workers drive away in their old cars and Black workers leaving last—handsome, strong, walking like young lions after eight hours of work in a room with no fresh air. He watched as they approached their Cadillacs and Lincolns, ripping them off the parking lot and driving off with a screech. All these beautiful, fit men who moved like dancers lost their charm the moment they touched their expensive cars. Anderson stood motionless until the last car had left. Now, his shadow lay in front of him, not as sharp as during the day but more like iron cast by the evening sun. He was smoking a cigarette, staring at the ground as another shadow approached him slowly. He turned around only after Mike put his hand on his shoulder.

“I was driving by,” said Mike Ryan. “I thought maybe I’d catch you on your way to the bus.”

“I wasn’t walking to the bus,” said Anderson. “I was waiting for you.”

“How could you know I would come? I didn’t tell you about it yesterday.”

“Yes, you didn’t tell me about it yesterday,” said Anderson, slowly walking toward the car.

Later, after they were seated in the car, Mike said, “I flew today. You were right. I shouldn’t be afraid of speed. Johnson said I was much better. You know, Johnson is my instructor.”

“Johnson is a good pilot.”

“But you still offended him.”

“He was offended? I paid him his six dollars for the one-hour flight.”

“So what?”

“Honor is an elastic concept.”

“Relax,” said Mike. “Are you very tired?”

“I am.”

“Would you like to have a drink?”

“What do you think?”

Mike shrugged, parked the car in front of a bar, and they walked in. The bar was dark; a few men sat by the counter drinking in silence, not speaking or looking at each other. They engaged in a silent coalition of debauchery and addiction, while the bartender, with the face of an apostle who understood human nature’s weakness, stood in the shade, shaking ice cubes and moving silently from one end of the counter to the other like a god of wickedness equipped with a face of an ascetic.

“What would you like to drink?” asked Mike once they sat down.

“Seven and seven,” said Anderson.

“We like the same kind.”

“Yes,” said Anderson. They were sitting at the end of the room; Anderson stretched out his long legs and watched people hop over them in silence.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” asked Mike.

“What?”

“That people are hopping over your legs.”

“No. I am not jealous of my own legs.”

“Do you have any human feelings at all?”

“I do.”

“For example?”

“Hunger.”

“What else?”

“Boredom.”

“I didn’t think about that when I invited you here,” said Mike. “It’s odd that it didn’t cross my mind. We can get up and leave.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Anderson. “You had to pay two dollars for these two drinks. This is how much our workers make an hour. A man like you does not throw two dollars away for no reason. If we have to go, then please tell me why you invited me here.”

Mike smiled.

“Have you ever been a communist, Mr. Anderson?”

“I was inspected by the CIA agents before they let me into this country.”

“There were a lot of communists who were let into this country because they had something to sell.”

“I think the intelligence officers who interrogated me know better.”

They remained silent for a while. Later, Mike touched Anderson’s arm and leaned toward him.

“I didn’t want to offend you.”

Anderson did not respond; he simply stared at Ryan's slim, strong arm resting on his hand. Then Ryan pulled his hand away and glanced at it briefly.

"This time you stained yourself," said Anderson. "Go to the restroom and clean off the blood with cold water. And one more thing: a man like you cannot offend me."

"Are you insulting me?"

Anderson did not reply; he was watching a woman walk toward the jukebox with a quarter in her hand. The woman swiftly hopped over his legs.

"Mike," said Anderson after a while. "I was once in Pierus for a few days, and I was bored. A prostitute came up to me at a bar, and I went to a hotel with her. When she took her clothes off, I saw that she did not have hair where a mature woman should. That girl was twelve. That girl became a prostitute because her parents didn't have enough money to make her a seamstress or a typist. No one who has money can ever offend me, Mr. Ryan."

"Charming story," said Ryan. "You're breaking my heart. Three-quarters of our books and three-quarters of our movies are stories about girls who became whores because they didn't have enough money for a psychiatrist or something like that."

"True. But in your movies, they never say what to do with them."

"What should you do with them then?"

"Why do you ask me? This girl is a product of powerful people who care about money."

"But don't you have any opinion about it?"

"No," said Anderson. "I only have experience. I know what to do with people who you cannot cure but who, from the point of view of other paupers, should be healthy. Over here, you make movies

about them to make money; somewhere else, they used to be executed. Today, how I see it, there is no difference.”

“What about before?”

“Before, I used to believe that people harmful to society should be executed.”

“You wouldn’t hesitate if you had to kill a person, would you?”

“Now? I would. Before, I wouldn’t.”

“What do you mean by ‘before’?”

“Before I killed people.”

A man came up to their table. He was drunk and could barely stand straight. When he sat down, his elbows hit the table loudly, and Ryan’s glass tipped over.

“I just came back from Frisco,” said the drunk. “My wife doesn’t know it yet. Actually, she can’t know it.”

“Why?” asked Anderson.

“She’s dead. Will you drink with me?”

Anderson leaned toward him and placed his hand on his shoulder.

“Listen, old man,” he said. “This is only between you and me: did you have a difficult childhood?”

“Me? If I told you, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“I would certainly believe you,” said Anderson. “Listen, I will tell you what. Talk about it with the bartender, and tomorrow I will call him, and he will tell me everything. Okay?”

Ryan watched as Anderson grabbed the drunk by the arm, lifted him out of his chair, shoved him across the room, and he saw him crash into another table, spilling the drinks.

“Hello!” said the drunk. “I just came back from Frisco. My wife...”

“I want to drink some more,” said Mike. “Do you?”

“Sounds good.”

“I want to get drunk.”

“That is the best thing you can do.”

“I could punch you in the face,” said Mike Ryan. “That is a pretty good thing I can do as well. Yesterday, you insulted me, and I found you a job. Today, I invited you to drink, and you keep insulting me. Jesus Christ. It would be a pretty good thing to punch you in the face. Why would I care about your girl from Pierus? Do you think I enjoy that?”

He finished his drink and put down the glass. He nodded at the bartender, who brought them two glasses, cold and covered with dew from a chemical spray.

“Why don’t you fly?” asked Ryan.

“I speak with an accent. I cannot change that.”

“You could be an instructor and teach.”

“Teach whom?”

“All these kids who want to become pilots,” said Ryan. “And all these idiots who pay for it. There are plenty of these, I promise you that.”

Anderson was silent, staring at his long legs over which people kept hoping. Then he said, “Do you know why my brother became

a pilot? One day, during the war, one of his friends put him in a plane and flew him over the front lines. And they were flying over the forests. Do you know what forests look like at dawn? And the deers running away from the plane's shadow? And all this earth is still filled with calm, slumber, and order, and you look at it from above, and you cannot believe there can be so much evil below. Do you understand, Mike? Looking at it and not being able to believe? This is why I don't teach. All these kids who fly on Cherokees today might be sitting in F-111s tomorrow. Do you understand?"

"I understand the feeling," said Ryan. "I just don't understand why you care."

"I also don't understand," said Anderson. "Maybe because I myself am a pilot. And up there in the sky, I feel like a better man. Because I am alone, it all depends on me. Because I am alone, I can only believe in myself to put the plane back on the ground and walk out on my own two feet. That's why."

"I don't know this feeling yet," said Mike.

"One day, you will know it, and you will understand I was right."

"I don't think I will know this feeling," said Ryan. "I know Johnson doesn't want to let me fly solo."

"You have to believe me," said Anderson. "I promise you, you will know the feeling."

They looked at each other for a bit. Mike was already a bit drunk; the bartender brought two more glasses filled with ice and alcohol. Mike said, "I don't know why, but I believe you." He finished his drink and started playing with the sound of the ice cubes hitting the side of the glass. Then he said, "You know, Esther used to be in love with a pilot. She told me about him. That man wanted to be an instructor and went to some private school, and the owner asked him, 'It's all beautiful and all, but who is going to pay for it?' And that man said, 'You. And then I will work for you to pay it off.' The

owner started laughing and told him to go to hell. Esther's man said, 'Okay. I will kill someone tonight and bring you their money.' He bought himself a bottle of Coca-Cola, drank it, and then asked Esther, 'Are there any schools in the area?' She told him there were, and asked him if he didn't want to be an instructor anymore and decided to join a kindergarten instead. He said, 'No. I didn't eat anything today, and the kids who go to school always have lunch with them, so it would be nice to eat something. I will see you tomorrow.' And he walked out. The owner said to Esther, 'I never thought you could get food that way. I'm sure he's actually going to kill someone tonight.' And because there was something in his face that made them both believe him, Esther went after him. And that's how their damned romance started." Mike fell silent and then said quietly, "I hate flying. Now you know why I fly."

"You should stop flying."

"No."

"But you have a house and all these things that help when buying women."

"No," said Mike. "It's all nonsense what you said about flying. About how when you're up there, you feel like a better man. You only feel that way because up there, the body is subject to different pressure."

Anderson did not reply. He got up and approached the TV. It was eight o'clock, and a man dressed in a suit was speaking into the microphone: "Ladies and gentlemen, another great night of boxing here at the Olympic Auditorium. On my right side, Salvatore Rossedija, aka *Catolico Bueno*, he weighs one hundred forty-two pounds. His opponent is Joe Hayden with the same weight, from Long Beach Gymnasium."

Salvatore and Hayden approached the referee, who placed his hand on their shoulders and said in a hushed voice:

“I want a clean fight, boys. Watch yourselves at all times. If I say ‘break,’ step back. Shake hands, and good luck to both of you.”

The referee stepped away. Salvatore returned to his corner, and when the gong sounded, he quickly knelt and crossed himself. Then he approached the Black man, who stood motionless, looking not like a living person but like a photograph of an athlete caught in motion at the exact moment a photographer aimed their camera at him. The Black man swayed slightly, struck Salvatore in the jaw, and *Catolico Bueno* hit the canvas, his head bouncing off the floor. The Black man indifferently walked to his corner, where his coach cut the tape securing the bandages on his wrists. He raised his hand with a slight motion when the referee announced his victory, not even glancing at *Catolico Bueno*, who was being carried out of the ring. Anderson turned off the television.

“God abandoned him tonight,” he said.

They walked out of the bar, and it was already dark outside. Just around the corner, Mike, who was driving, hit a man with his right bumper, and the man fell down. At this time, there was no one outside, just a few Mexican boys playing with a soccer ball. They sat down on the porch stairs and watched in silence as Anderson lit a new cigarette and slowly walked out of the car. He approached the fallen man, squatted, and lit a match to see his face. He got up, grabbed the man by his hair, and kicked him so hard he flew across the road and onto the sidewalk.

“Next time Mr. Ryan drinks and drives, don't be walking around these streets, my friend,” said Anderson. He pushed Mike into the passenger seat, turned off the headlights, and drove off.

He parked on a side street, helped Mike into the house, sat him down in an armchair, and went to the kitchen to heat up water for coffee. Then he returned to the room with a cup.

“Drink,” he said.

Mike's hands were shaking, and Anderson had to help him hold the cup that rattled between his teeth.

"What happens if they catch us?" asked Mike.

"I will say I was the one driving."

"So what happens to you?"

"The same thing that would happen to you if you said you were driving," said Anderson. He pulled out the bed from the wall and put a blanket and a pillow on it. "Take a nap," he said. "They won't catch anyone and everything will be fine. In the morning, you will drive home, shave, and it will all be over."

Mike got up. He looked at Anderson's bed with such disgust that Anderson started laughing.

"You can just have a look at it to sober up," said Mike.

Anderson went to the window and watched a police car drive down the street. The officers drove past Mike's car.

"They don't have your license number," said Anderson.

"Everything is okay."

"I will go home."

"As you please."

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. A man was banging on the neighboring door, speaking in a soft and quiet whisper.

"Lucy, open up. Lucy, you know I love you. Lucy, we can't go on like this..."

"What is this?" asked Mike.

"He comes here every night."

“And she doesn’t want to open the door?”

“No.”

“Have you ever seen her?”

“I have.”

The man in the hall didn’t stop speaking; his voice shifted from a prayer to a threat, and then to a complaint again. The woman remained silent.

“Why won’t you buy yourself a new bed?” asked Mike. “I’ll lend you the money.”

“Thank you, but I don’t need a different bed.”

“But you have someone. Doesn’t it bother her?”

Anderson didn’t reply, and Mike added, “Of course, you’ve never asked her that, have you?”

“She wouldn’t tell me the truth anyway.”

The man outside kept whispering, “Lucy, open the door. Lucy, we can’t go on like this...”

“For Christ’s sake, do something about it,” said Mike. “It’s hard to listen to.”

“This man is in love,” said Anderson. “And this time, I won’t do anything about it.”

Mike went up to Anderson, and they both looked at the blooming tree.

“They still haven’t cut it down,” said Mike. “I feel bad for it.”

“So do I,” said Anderson quietly.

Mike's reflection loomed in the window next to his face. It was a young, bright face beside a dark, dry, and sharp one, and now they both knew there was some similarity between them, something they couldn't name or describe, but it was definitely there—just as a good day is still similar to a bad one, a bad year to a good one, and how the night is just a reminiscence of the day.

"This is the one thing I truly feel bad about," said Anderson. Mike Ryan leaned heavily on him, still a bit drunk. "Would you like me to lend you some money for a new car?" he asked. "I mean it."

They stood there in silence looking at the tree illuminated by the street light: pale, beautiful, and dying. Anderson then put his hand on his shoulder, and their hands met.

"Do you see these houses, Mike?" Anderson said. "And these cars worth thousands of dollars? And the women inside these cars, who are even more expensive? None of that matters as long as you have that one thing, a true gift from God. It makes you just as good and important as those people who have these houses, these cars, and these women."

"And what is that thing?"

"Forgiveness, Mike. But it's a gift from God. You can either accept it or not. I did not"

Ryan turned toward him and now they were looking at each other face to face, and Ryan's face became increasingly more similar to the face standing in front of him. And suddenly he pushed Anderson's hand off his shoulder and started moving toward the door, walking backward with a face twisted in pain. And then, when he was standing by the door, the street lamps' light no longer reached him, and his face disappeared into the darkness.

"I don't like you, sir," he said quietly. "I'm not coming here again."

He slammed the door behind him.

Anderson walked up to the window and watched Ryan walk away. Mike stopped by the dying tree and looked at it for a while, then put his hand on its trunk and stood there, motionless, in his bright shirt with his bright hair. Anderson saw his face in the streetlight—pale, sweaty, eyes wide open. Ryan wiped his forehead, stepped out of the light, and as he crossed the street, the darkness closed behind him. He drove off.

Anderson went up to the phone and dialed a number with his left hand. The line was busy. While holding the phone, he used his teeth to unwrap the bandage from his right hand and looked at his bruised palm, covered in white scabs. He went to the sink, placed his hand under a stream of cold water, and after the pain passed and he could move his fingers again, he dialed the number once more.

"Anderson," he said.

"I'm watching TV right now," said the man on the phone. "Call me back later."

"You're not watching TV, because they don't pay you for that," Anderson said. "And even if they did, and there was some universal wage for watching TV, you'd still consider yourself a victim, and sit somewhere downtown with your scumbag lawyers, debating how to sue the studio or even the entire country to get some money out of it."

"Do you think you're funny?"

"No, I'm just the same as you. If I don't receive my check by tomorrow, I'll leave this place, and Helen will be taken care of by a man they call an immigration officer."

"You wouldn't do that to a sick woman," said the voice on the phone.

"If you can do it, so can I. I told you, I am no different than you."

He put down the phone and opened the door to the other room. It was dark; the blinds let no streetlight in. He stood there for a moment, listening to the sounds of the sleeping woman, and then he walked to the bed, drew back the curtain, and looked at a doll lying on the floor. A bottle of liquor stood next to it. He picked it up; it was half empty. He moved away from the window, turned on the light, and the woman woke up. They looked at each other for a moment; she reached for the bottle, but he held her hand back.

"I'm sorry, Helen," he said. "Your family didn't send the money. This whiskey has to last you till tomorrow."

"Give me some."

"Remember, Helen, the night is longer than the day."

"Give me some," she said again.

He walked to the sink, poured some whiskey into a glass, and topped it off with water. Opening the fridge, he glanced at a baby bottle full of milk, moved it aside, grabbed a few ice cubes, and dropped them into the glass. He handed it to Helen, while his eyes still lingered on the baby bottle that had never touched a child's warm lips. He closed the fridge.

"You don't have a good family, Helen," he said.

"You are with me."

"No, Helen. Don't you ever think like that. Don't even think that for a second. I take care of you because they pay me. You don't have me, and I don't have you. As far as I'm concerned, every person could die on the same day at the same time."

"I don't believe you."

"Yet you must believe me, Helen. You were sick again yesterday. Even more than usual. And once again, you thought that this doll was—"

"Oh, don't talk about it."

"I have to talk to you about something," Anderson said. "They pay me for it. Do you still remember what money is, Helen?" She didn't reply. He walked up to the window and looked at a dog slowly walking in the middle of the road. "Come over here, Helen."

She stood up and walked up to him, and he pointed his finger at the dog.

"Do you see this dog, Helen?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the difference between me and this dog?" he asked. She didn't reply, so he said, "The only difference is that I have debts to pay, and he doesn't. Though, in this country, that might as well change soon. But if today there is still a difference between me and this dog, it's the fact that I have to pay my debts to some douchebags". He stayed silent for a moment and then said: "Forget it. There is no difference. I won't pay anything to anyone. Go back to sleep."

Helen lay down on the bed, uncovering her long and beautiful legs, and it was terrifying because her face was old and damaged, so when he looked at her legs he thought it was not just one woman in front of him, but two, who decided to trick him, and one of them covered her legs, and the other her face, and they created this terrifying thing, which the mind could not comprehend. So he came up to her and covered her body with a blanket.

"So remember this," he said. "I talk to you and I am here with you because they pay me. But if they don't send me the check by tomorrow, I won't talk with you anymore, Helen. And then you

will stay all alone with her or him, because neither you nor me remember, and the baby doesn't know it either."

He picked the doll up from the floor, and he held it up with his straight arm directly up to the woman's face. She wanted to push his hand away and started to hit his arm, but his hand did not move one bit; so she looked at the doll, whose blue eyes sparkled joyfully, and at the dark face of the man standing in front of her with a calm, sleepy look on his face. And then the woman did not have any more strength to hit the doll squeezed in his hand, so she lowered her hands, but he did not lower his. The doll's hair was all disheveled like the hair of a street whore who got into a fight with her client, demanding her money, and then with a policeman, who came to arrest the client.

Helen closed her eyes, and he lowered his hand and carefully placed the doll next to the bed.

"You will stay with only her, Helen," he said. "And then it would be better if you always thought this was your baby. Just like you thought yesterday. And just like you have thought for the past twenty years. And then there will be no one left to tell you this is not your child, but just a rag doll. Then one day, they will take you away to an institution, and you will only meet people like you. And there will be doors with no knobs and people in white aprons, who won't want to listen to you when you tell them your stories. And the ones who will want to listen will be just like you."

She sat up on the bed and took a sip of whiskey. Then she put down the glass.

"Something different may happen," she said.

"I don't think so. For that, you would need God to exist. And if he did, you would die in your sleep tonight."

"Maybe I will just walk out of here," said Helen, and her voice was so clear and calm that Anderson had to come closer. "I will walk out of this cursed house and start a new life."

He smiled.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Could you say that one more time?"

"What?"

"That you are going to start a new life."

"Yes."

"And your record, Helen? Did you forget about it when talking about your new life?"

"Not everyone has to know about it."

"But there are those who know."

"Even if they know about it, they won't talk about it."

He smiled again.

"If people ever know about such things, it is only to talk about them," he said. "Remember you are in this country illegally." He was now looking at the doll, who was staring right back at him with its sapphire happy eyes. He stepped on it. "Do you see her, Helen?" he asked. "You are both here illegally. You and your child."

"I am not afraid of anything here," said Helen. "This is a good country. And there are good people here. So even if they know about it, they won't talk about it..." She stuttered, she looked at him, but Anderson did not say a word. His dark face looked like a mask, there was no anger, no joy, just harsh light filling out each one of his wrinkles. Helen waited for a bit, and then she said: "This is a good country."

And then Anderson slowly got up, approached the TV, and turned it on; they both waited, staring at the spirals running across the screen. From the fiery circles and streaks, from the sea of sounds, emerged what seemed like the face of God rising above the chaos—a chaos that was then transformed into the Earth, only for a chaos far greater, or perhaps measurable only by a number known to God, to reign over it. The face disappeared back into the fiery circles, as if never to return—a fat announcer appeared, speaking in a rigid, overly solemn voice. On the screen, soldiers poured gasoline over rice while women standing nearby cried and pointed to their children, shouting in their sharp, birdlike language. Then the rice ignited, shooting a tall, straight flame toward the sky, bathing the shame-filled faces of the American soldiers in white light. The soldiers stood silently, rifles lowered, eyes downcast, in a silence broken only by the hiss of the flames and the piercing, birdlike cries of the women, and the pudgy announcer declared, *"For these people, rice means food, and food for the Vietcong could mean victory."* The image disappeared, replaced by a fifty-starred flag. The pudgy announcer continued, *"The American flag waves proudly over California, symbolizing a stronger, better America"*. Anderson turned off the television and sat down on the bed next to Helen. His face once again resembled a mask, full of exhaustion that the harsh light of the lamp cast upon. He looked just as he had five minutes ago, as if he hadn't moved at all—his dark face, clad in a faded, rust-colored Canadian jacket, motionless. He looked like an actor playing an alien visitor from a distant planet whose name the film's producers had never fully remembered, relying instead on someone's claim that the creatures living there had human faces and human clothes but were as far removed from humanity as the paper galaxy they came from. They had come to burn the Earth, with its dark forests, fragrant meadows, and bright gardens.

"And why do you think this is a good country, Helen?" he said. He spoke now softly, calmly, like telling a bedtime story to a child. "People expect that for some childish reason they can't even articulate, but this country is just like any other country. And the people here are the same, with the same bodies as anyone else, and they know it. That's exactly why they burned that rice, Helen.

Because those other people, the ones who could have eaten it, had the same stomachs, hearts, and kidneys. And they'll die if they don't find that rice. But there are still those mothers and children who will also die, who are dying every day, because every day, somewhere, rice is being burned. And do you know the value of that rice, Helen? Maybe five, maybe ten dollars. And do you know how many gallons of gasoline were used to burn it? That village could have lived for half a year on the value of the gasoline they used to make sure not a single grain was left. So now, Helen, sober up and tell me: why would this country care about one poor, old woman whose child was killed twenty years ago? Oh, no, Helen. You were joking, and we both know it."

"Yes," she said. "You're right..." She picked up the bottle of whiskey and now drank directly from it instead of the glass. He watched her throat move as the whiskey poured through it, until she finally set the bottle down, which tipped over and rolled across the floor. "Yes," she said. "Yes. But you're not talking about it because you feel sorry for those children and those women. Not at all. No. It's because that woman was like me..."

He placed his hand over her mouth, raising his right hand as if to strike her. But he didn't. He waited until he felt on his palm that she had stopped talking and wouldn't try to speak again. Then he stood up and left, closing the door behind him and slipping the key into his pocket.

He stood still for a moment, then walked to the closet, opened it, and pulled out an old aviation shirt from a suitcase. On the left sleeve was a patch reading "*Flight Instructor*." He raised his right hand to adjust it, as the stitching was fraying, and the patch was coming loose. But then he stopped, letting his right hand fall lifelessly to his side, striking his hip and drawing a grimace of pain across his face. He touched the patch with his left hand after laying the shirt on the bed and kneeling beside it. He stayed like that, motionless, in the darkness and silence, feeling the hard, lonely, and loud beating of his heart.

Later, he stood by the truck, waiting for the crane, which was stuck at the far end of the hall. He listened to the voices of the crane operator and the worker who had dropped a crate now blocking the crane's path. They insulted each other monotonously, their curses sounding weak. Suddenly, Salvatore approached him, with a bandage covering his right eyebrow.

"This is because of you," Salvatore said. "You've been annoying me all day yesterday. Mocking me."

Anderson looked into his flat, lifeless eyes before replying:

"No. You should have rested before the fight. But you didn't want to lose a day's work."

"I'll get you one day..." the Mexican muttered. "You..." He didn't finish, both of them turning at once.

Hundebruch Number Two stood before them with an expression of triumph and fury.

"And why are you gentlemen just standing there?" he asked in the voice of a hurt child, so mismatched with his face that Anderson smiled. "Why don't you lie down on the floor and light up a Havana cigar? Why don't you bring folding beds and some whores? There's plenty of them in Downtown. If you need to turn my business into a brothel..."

The bell suddenly rang, and Anderson pulled off his gloves and stuffed them into his back pocket. He headed toward the exit, with Hundebruch Number Two running after him.

"Or perhaps you'd like me to bring you the whores myself?" Hundebruch asked, grabbing his arm. "Would you prefer Black girls? Or maybe a Japanese woman, like all those damned drifters who drank on our taxpayers' dime in Japan? Please, tell me your preference. Or perhaps a French woman with a charming accent?"

“If you really want to do something for me, I’d like a Japanese girl,” Anderson said as Hundebauch kept running after him, grabbing his elbow.

“A Japanese girl?” Hundebauch asked, stopping abruptly. “You said: a Japanese girl?”

“Yes, I did,” Anderson replied.

He left at dusk and, just like the day before, watched the Black men pulling their beautiful cars out of the parking lot. They lost their own beauty in those sleek machines, their strong, firm bodies sinking into the soft leather seats, driving away with squealing tires—like a strange kind of animal that had willingly locked itself in infernal cages, where it could not run. Anderson stood there, watching them as one might watch a burning, old, beautiful house, turning only when Esther touched his shoulder.

“Mike asked me to come here,” Esther said. “He feels bad about yesterday.”

“Does he feel bad, or is he afraid?”

“What difference does it make? He asked me to come and apologize to you. That’s what’s important.”

“Are you seeing him tonight?”

“Mike will be working late at the office.”

“For the future, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

“That’s the shortest concept I know,” Anderson said. “Ever since I met you.”

She didn’t reply. The wind was fierce and wild at this hour, and he watched her dress whirl around her legs before he said:

“Maybe it’s not even the shortest concept. Maybe it’s just the shortest word I know.”

“You know plenty of other words,” she said. “And you know how to use them.”

“I know how to use people. That’s what matters. To me. To you.”

“That amuses you?”

“Yes,” he said; his voice was lost in the wind. “It amuses me, too, Esther.”

“Will you show her to me tonight?”

“Sure. I just need to buy her a bottle of whiskey first.”

Driving Ryan’s car home, he stopped in front of a liquor store. He went inside, met by the watchful eyes of two men behind the counter. One kept a hand in the cash drawer, pretending to be counting money. Anderson approached the counter, stood silently for a moment, and stared at his reflection in the mirror behind it—tired, sharp, and dark—until the man with his hand in the drawer finally placed it on the counter.

“You’re not capable of sorting it anyway,” Anderson said. “The usual.”

The man walked across the store, took a bottle of whiskey from the shelf, and retrieved two bottles of 7-Up from the fridge. He packed everything into a paper bag and set it on the counter. Anderson remained motionless, still staring at his reflection in the dark mirror, waiting. Finally, the clerk took out the bottles, grabbed the bag, crumpled it, and threw it into the trash.

“This is Downtown, mister,” the clerk said. “People don’t want anyone to see them drinking.”

“I’m not ‘people’,” Anderson replied. He tucked the bottles under his arm and left.

He placed his hands on the steering wheel and drove silently along the highway. Esther rolled up the right sleeve of his rust-colored jacket and looked at the long scar on his forearm.

“I thought it would heal better,” she said.

He didn’t answer. She watched the muscle in his forearm move with effort as he turned the wheel of the lightweight, maneuverable car—a car even a child could drive. Yet, he handled it as if it were a truck with a broken power steering system.

“Did that happen when you drunkenly tried to scare a cat out of the bar in Louisville? The cat that turned out to be a police officer with high cheekbones? The officer in full uniform, with one revolver at his side and another tucked into his belt?”

“That bastard had no whiskers. Have you ever seen a cat without whiskers?”

“But I’ve also never seen a cat strapped with a revolver.”

“You weren’t looking properly,” he said. “That’s all. You just weren’t looking properly.”

The wind grew stronger, so he pulled over to close the roof.

“I thought about you yesterday,” she said. “A drunk Black man showed up at the airport. He got out of his Lincoln and fell flat on his face. Then Johnson and someone else helped him up and asked what he wanted. He said he had decided to learn how to fly and that he had to start immediately. He pulled out a wad of cash—God knows how much—and shouted that there wasn’t a second to waste. Then he fell down again, and Johnson and the other guy holding him up fell too. Then suddenly, he seemed to sober up, brushed himself off, and said, ‘Your school is worthless,’ before walking out.”

“You remember it wrong, Esther,” he said. “Yes, that happened in Kentucky. But that’s not where this scar came from.”

“Yes,” she said.

She was now looking at his profile; the wind blew through his coarse hair, and between gusts, she could see the scar on his forehead. She wanted to touch it, but he pushed her hand away.

“Well,” she said, “of course. I shouldn’t do that. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, and don’t do it,” he said. “One day I might push you too hard.”

He closed the car window, and now she couldn’t see the scar anymore.

“Why can’t you think of it as just an ordinary scar?” she asked. “Just a result of an injury, like can happen to anyone?”

“Do you think it’s just an ordinary scar, Esther?”

“How do you want me to think about it?”

“Don’t think about it at all,” he said. “It’s not your fault, and it’s not mine.”

“Did you show Ryan that scar?”

“No.”

“Not yet.”

“Yes, not yet.”

“But you will show it to him one day?”

“He will see it himself, Esther.”

“But that will be the last thing he ever sees, right?”

“That depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Is Mike a believer?”

“Oh,” said Esther. “I get it now. Will you go East this time as well?”

“I do not know that yet,” he said. “But that might happen. I’ve been East before, Esther.”

He stopped the car on a side street, and they crossed a yard, shielding their eyes from the clouds of dust and sand whipped up by the wild gusts of wind. He let Esther into a room and said:

“Wait here.”

He entered Helen’s room and put the whiskey bottle on the floor.

“Keep quiet, Helen,” he said. “There’s a woman here asking about you.”

She wanted to say something, but he placed a finger on her lips.

“Quiet,” he said. “Quiet. Here’s your whiskey. Drink it and stay quiet. Where you might end up, there are plenty of people who talk non stop. Quiet, quiet.”

He left, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket.

Now he looked at Esther standing by the window. The light turned her brown hair golden, as if from all the days she had lived through. Her lips were like willow leaves, her eyebrows like swallow wings, her slender hand, holding a cigarette glowed with a faint flame illuminating her fingers, and looked like a seashell drawn from a pink, sunlit sea.

“Don’t you pity him, Esther?” he asked.

“I do.”

“You pity all of them, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I pity all of them, just as you said.” She turned to him. “And I pity you, too.”

“I know,” he said. “Until you find someone better.”

“No. I know I won’t find anyone better,” she said. “There was a song about that—about someone who had a friend walking beside him all the way to heaven... But I don’t remember the rest.”

“But I do,” he said. “He walked beside him all the way to the end of heaven. To where everyone is calm and happy and without sin. But where no stars shine anymore.”

She smiled.

“No,” she said. “You made that ending up.”

He didn’t respond; so she stepped out of the circle of light, and to him, who stood in the shadows with his face turned to the wall, she seemed to carry the light with her, the way all people carry their shadow. She went up to the closet and opened it.

“Is this all you have?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“You haven’t collected much these past years.”

“You wouldn’t know that,” he said. “It’s dark. You didn’t turn on the light.”

“I would if I didn’t know you,” she said. “Didn’t you work?”

“I did,” he said. “But where I was, I couldn’t get any work in my trade. I loaded lumber at a sawmill.”

“And they paid so poorly there?”

“The pay wasn’t bad. I spent the money on flying.”

“Of course,” she said. “That was a foolish question. You know, the Black man who came to us yesterday said he wanted to fly because he needed to know if God exists. I’m sorry for telling you this. I feel now like that Black man must feel today if he remembers what he did yesterday.”

“The nigger was right, Esther,” Anderson said. “He’s up there somewhere.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because he gave me you, Esther.”

“That’s all you know about him?”

“That’s all.”

“That’s not much.”

He shrugged.

“It’s all I care about if we’re talking about Him,” he said.

From the hallway came knocking on the neighboring door and a man’s voice:

“Mary, open the door. Mary, you know how I feel.” He pounded on the door with his fist—not with the fury of a madman but with the cold precision of a maniac. The blows came at regular intervals, like the ticking of a clock designed by a crazed toymaker. “Mary, how much can a man take? How much can a man endure?”

“What’s that?” Esther asked.

“A man I was missing to complete the set.”

“And who is the woman?”

“I’ve never seen her.”

Esther closed the closet and crossed the room again, carrying the light with her. When she stopped, he approached her and placed his dark, heavy hand on her shoulder, and he felt her fragile frame bend under its weight. It bent only for a moment, just long enough for her to absorb his weight with her strength. They stood still for a moment, sensing the rapid, hard beats of their hearts as they gazed at the tree crown swaying wildly in the fierce wind blowing in from the sea—dry, hot, and scentless.

“A bad day for landing,” she said.

“Not for me.”

“No. Not for you.”

“Can you guess how fast this wind is blowing?”

“Twenty-five knots, no more. But it’s coming from all over.”

She moved closer to him, and they stood again in silence, watching the tree crown sway in the howling wind while the man in the hallway continued pounding on the door.

“Would a day like this be good?” she asked after a moment.

“Every bad day is good for people like you and me,” he said. “But it won’t even come to that. Not a single knot of wind will be needed. Not a single cloud. Don’t worry about that, Esther. It’ll be a quiet, bright day. Like a child’s dream.”

“And then?”

“What then, Esther?”

“How does the song go? Then they walk together all the way to the end of heaven? Where everyone is good and pure, but where no stars shine anymore.”

“I think so,” he said. “There must be such a place, Esther. And there are no airplanes there, no noise, no deserts. Maybe just some clear rivers, and silence. That’s all.”

Now, they looked at the dog, the same dog he had watched the day before while talking to Helen. The dog ran around the yard, its tail tucked under its body, its fur bristling wildly from the wind.

Suddenly, Esther asked:

“Can you take a dog there?”

“No, Esther,” Anderson said softly. “That place is only for us, for humans.”

“But what if someone loves that dog?” she said. “What if someone misses it? What if they want to have it with them? Maybe some old, lonely person. And they can’t take it with them. What’s the use of clean rivers, peace, and silence if you can’t take even one insignificant thing you care about? What’s the use?”

“That’s what the song is about,” Anderson said. “You just weren’t listening carefully.”

“Will you show her to me now?”

“Do you really want to see her?”

“Yes.”

She slipped out of his hands, but he stayed there for a moment, still looking at the tree and the dog running around it, yelping and dodging the gusts of wind. Then he turned around.

“Forget about Mike,” he said. “And forget about what happened before. Come back.”

“Don’t you want to show me that woman?” she asked.

He pulled a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and pushed Esther into the room. Helen wasn’t asleep. He turned on the light, walked to the bed, and first tore off the blanket, then tore off her shirt. Not with his hand, but with a blow of his fist, he spread her legs. Then he took the lamp from the table and illuminated her body, her skin now glistening with sweat as her breath came in ragged gasps. She tried to turn onto her side, but again, with a swift, light blow of his fist, he spread her legs—a blow so fast it seemed not to touch her at all.

“This is what it looks like, Esther,” he said. “Now forget about Ryan. Remember, this woman once looked like you. And you will one day look like her. No one can stop that. And the only thing you should care about is whether I will live long enough to be with you when you look like her. For others. Not for me.” He struck Helen’s legs apart again and said, “Look. Look and think about it.”

He stared at Esther’s face for a moment, then set the lamp down and said, “Come.” They went to the other room, and there he said, “Forget Ryan. He’s a child.”

“He’s not my child,” she said. “And I’ll never have a child. I don’t need to tell you why.”

He said nothing. She approached him and leaned against him, but this time his arms didn’t move.

The man in the hallway spoke:

“Mary, this can’t go on. Even if it’s my fault. Everyone is guilty of something. Mary, I can’t live like this anymore. Open the door, Mary.”

“Who is that whore?” Esther asked.

"I don't know," he said in a weary voice. "I've never seen her. Or him."

"Why is there a doll in that room?"

"I do not know, Esther"

"Then I'll tell you: that is her child, isn't it?" He did not respond, so after a moment she added, "Sometimes I think I would like to be her, just to believe, just for a moment." He remained silent. But the silence wasn't complete—the man behind the door was speaking louder, and the wind outside was growing fiercer.

"That woman is Jewish, isn't she?" Esther asked.

"Yes," he said.

She stepped away from him, took her coat from the back of the chair, and walked toward the door.

"You're getting old," she said. "You've lost your imagination. I know what you're thinking when you deal with her this way. I won't live that long."

"Neither will I," he said. "I'm flying worse and worse, too. And I have every right to, and any FAA doctor would tell you that an instructor whose three students have had fatal landing crashes is tired and should do something else if he doesn't want to die."

"And what difference does that make to you?" she said. "You've got that song about the clear sky and the pure rivers. That's the only thing that truly matters to someone like you."

"No," he said. "You matter the most, and then everything else. Go now, Esther." He watched her as she walked across the yard, the same way Mike Ryan had walked the day before. He saw the dog running after her, pressing itself against her slender legs, until she kicked it away, sending it sprawling to the middle of the yard.

He stood in the shadow of the hangar, watching a plane approach for landing. The airstrip was at an elevation of hundred seventy-five feet, but as the plane passed over the threshold, it was at five hundred feet. Lighting a new cigarette, he watched the plane enter a full left slip, then lurch unevenly over the airstrip before finally slamming heavily onto the ground.

He then tossed away the cigarette and entered the hangar. Inside, in the dim light, he saw Ryan and his instructor, Johnson, exiting the plane. He watched as Johnson placed a hand on Ryan's shoulder, and the two walked toward the hangar. Anderson looked at Johnson, and at Ryan fidgeting with a strand of his hair. As they approached, Anderson retreated further into the shadows, into the scent of oil and grease, and he stood there as they entered.

"Don't worry about it," Johnson said. "After all, this isn't how you'll earn your living. Some people can't do it. Just like there are people who can't swim. And, for instance, I can't dance."

"You don't want to teach me," Ryan replied.

"No, I simply am not able to teach you. You can always change instructors."

"You're my third instructor," Ryan said. "And our school has only three instructors."

"I've been honest with you," Johnson said. "It's up to you whether you repeat our conversation to the owner. In other words, it's up to you whether I lose my job or not."

Johnson walked out. Ryan stood motionless, still playing with a strand of his hair, and moved only when Anderson lit a cigarette. Burning match flew through the darkness.

“Forget about it,” Anderson said. “Forget everything that man told you.”

“And what should I remember?”

Anderson didn’t answer. He extended his hand toward the hangar door, where light was streaming in, and for a moment they both watched Esther running toward a plane, its propeller already spinning, and they saw her hand a neatly folded map to the person sitting in the plane. Then the plane began to taxi for takeoff, and the wind from the propeller wrapped her dress around her long, tanned legs.

“Remember that,” Anderson said. “Do you have any money with you?”

“What does it matter?” Ryan asked.

Anderson didn’t reply. He walked ahead, with Ryan following silently, and they both got into the car. They drove past a line of planes, and then Anderson stopped in front of another hangar.

“Wait here,” Anderson said. “No need for Johnson or this damned school to know...”

“I understand,” Ryan said.

“And one more thing: you won’t be able to log this flight in your book.”

“I know that too.”

Anderson entered the hangar. The man sitting at a table looked up as Anderson approached.

“Christ Almighty,” the man said. “Anderson, I haven’t seen you since Tangier.”

"And you couldn't. Where you were, you were only allowed visitations once a month. How's business?"

"Bad. My clients are people just like you. You don't need to ask—you know yourself."

"Can you give me a PA-28-140 for two hours?"

"I only have the 150. There's almost no difference."

"Except that it's more expensive."

"Do you want it dry or wet?"

"Dry," Anderson replied.

"Do you want to file a VFR?"

"No. It'll be a local flight. How much?"

"Twenty-four dollars for two hours. Plus your fuel."

Anderson left the hangar, gesturing for Ryan to follow him. They walked to the plane.

"Well then," Anderson said, "forget what Johnson told you. Get in."

Mike climbed into the plane.

"Everything I say, you'll repeat," Anderson instructed. "Master on."

"Master on."

"Left tank reading."

"Left tank reading fifteen."

"Right tank reading."

“Right tank over ten.”

“Flaps three degrees down.”

“Flaps three degrees down.”

“Master off.”

“Master off.”

“Good. Get out.”

Mike stepped out of the cockpit.

“Now we’ll check the flaps and the rudder,” Anderson said. “We’ll inspect every screw, touching it carefully, and making sure the nut is in place.”

He watched as Ryan walked around the plane from left to right, then retraced his steps along the same path.

“That’s not right,” Anderson said. “You should inspect the plane as if you’re moving clockwise, like the hands of a clock. It’s good to remember that this type of plane has a propeller, so you should start your inspection with the prop and move around the plane from there.”

He waited for a moment, watching as Mike circled the plane properly this time. Then he said:

“Now open the right fuel tank and place your hand under the valve. But first, hold on a moment.”

Anderson approached Ryan, who moved to wipe his hand.

“No,” Anderson said. “Hold your hand under it again, just like me.”

Anderson placed his hand under the valve, held it there for a moment, then brought it up to Ryan's face.

"What color is the stain on the bandage now?" he asked.

Ryan was silent for a moment, staring at Anderson's hand, then stepped back slightly.

"Guess what I'm thinking about right now."

"I'd like you to be thinking about the plane, especially since you're paying twelve dollars an hour plus gasoline for this."

"I'm thinking about the first time I saw you," Ryan said. "And about my shirt, the one you ruined. Look at your hand—it reminds me of blood."

"That's good. This is 80-octane fuel, and it's supposed to be slightly red."

Ryan took Anderson's hand.

"Doesn't that hurt?" he asked.

Anderson didn't reply. He looked at his bandaged hand resting in Ryan's clean, strong hands and finally said, after a moment:

"It does."

"Then why are you doing this for me?"

"For what you did for me."

"I wasn't expecting a reward."

They stood in the sunlight, looking at each other—the man who was still young but no longer looked it, and the man who was no longer young but didn't yet look it. One had a sharp, defiant face that might have once been handsome, but looking at it it brought

first thoughts of the man himself—what was wrong with him and what had been done to him, while the other had a clear, healthy, beautiful face, one that made you think of how much he had been given. One held the other's hand, their shadows frozen on the concrete, and they only moved when a Gooney Bird tore through the heavy midday air.

"I've never met anyone like you," Mike Ryan said. "I don't have to keep calling you 'Mister Anderson,' do I?"

"No. Jacob is enough."

"Thank you. I've never met anyone like you. Life is foolish."

"Oh no. *Tout le monde joue la comédie sauf quelques mauvais acteurs.*"

"What does that mean?"

"I haven't figured it out yet. Come on, let's get out of here."

They climbed into the plane and buckled their seatbelts. Anderson contacted Ground Control, and after receiving clearance, began taxiing to the runway.

"Do you know the CIGAR checklist?" Anderson asked.

"Yes."

"Get to it."

Anderson watched Ryan working at the control panel—switching the fuel tank levers, setting the elevator and stabilizer trim. Then, after Ryan tested each magneto at one thousand eight hundred RPM, Anderson contacted Tower Control and received clearance for takeoff.

"Go," Anderson said.

Mike placed his hand on the throttle lever, but Anderson pulled it back with his left hand. He didn't say a word, squinting as he looked behind them while opening the door.

A voice crackled over the receiver:

"Seven Zero Tango, what are you waiting for? You're clear for takeoff."

Anderson picked up the microphone and pressed the button.

"Sorry, we have a problem. We'll report as soon as we're able to resolve it."

The voice replied from the distance:

"Seven Zero Tango, Roger. Hold short of the runway and report as soon as you're okay. Over and out."

Mike looked at Anderson.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Mike," Anderson said, "I'm not Johnson. Work calmly and go through CIGAR again. Think."

Then Mike noticed the white fuel pump switch in the "off" position. He turned on the pump, began taxiing to the runway again, but once more, Anderson stopped his hand.

"Didn't Johnson tell you how to check the pump before a flight?" Anderson asked.

"No."

"Increase the RPM to one thousand eight hundred and turn off the pump."

Mike turned off the pump, and the fuel pressure needle dipped slightly. He switched it back to "on," and the needle returned to its position.

"That's how you do it," Anderson said. "Now call the tower."

Mike requested takeoff clearance, and the controller, speaking faster than Donald Duck, quickly rattled off the wind speed, pressure, and altimeter settings. Once they were at an altitude of one thousand feet, Anderson said:

"Turn off the pump now and check if the pressure holds steady. Take heading three three zero, climb to four thousand five hundred feet, and find Agua Dulce."

At four thousand five hundred feet, Ryan leveled off and transitioned to straight and level flight, reducing the RPM until the needle of the tachometer pointed at two thousand three hundred. However, the plane started to sink as they flew over sun-heated hills. Anderson watched for a moment as Mike's hands gripped the yoke, pulling it back every time the plane sank. Then he said:

"Climb to six thousand five hundred. Maybe we can avoid the turbulence."

"And if we can't?"

"Then we'll fly through it, and you'll see that flying in bad conditions is also possible, and nothing bad will happen," Anderson replied. "You know, when I first started flying, I once asked an instructor teaching navigation, 'Mr. X, what do you do when you're landing a glider in a crosswind?' And he said to me, 'What do you do when you're landing a plane in a crosswind?' So I told him, 'I add power during the landing.' And he said, 'Then do the same thing.' But, I said, 'a glider doesn't have an engine.' And he asked me, 'Do you have a friend?' 'I do,' I said. 'A friend you care about?' 'Yes,' I said. So then he said to me, 'I'll tell you what you should do: convince your buddy to sign up for gliding lessons with

you. And get him to fly in another glider on the day there's a crosswind. That'll give you moral strength."

The airport was at an elevation of two thousand seven hundred feet, and as they circled it, they saw the windsock being whipped by gusty winds.

"Crosswind," Mike said.

"I see it."

"I don't know if I can manage."

"Don't close the flaps," Anderson said.

As they descended for landing, Anderson watched the airspeed indicator needle swing between 100 and 80.

"Nose down, Mike," Anderson said. "Dip the right wing into the wind and apply full left rudder. Pump on."

"Pump on," Mike repeated.

The plane touched down on the right wheel, but Ryan pulled the yoke back too quickly, causing the plane to lift off again before slamming down hard with a squeal of tires. The wind pushed them sideways as Ryan leveled the wings before the plane had lost enough speed, so they came to a stop on the grass, with the plane's tail still five feet onto the runway, forcing another plane on its final descent to abruptly pull up from an altitude of no more than two feet to circle the airport once again. Anderson caught sight of the other pilot's enraged face before turning his gaze to Mike's face—pale, sweaty, and twisted in anger.

"Well?" Ryan asked. "Do you still want to teach me?"

"The landing wasn't bad," Anderson said. "The wind was gusty. Under better conditions, it would've been pretty decent. Taxi back to the runway and remember which side the wind is coming from."

But once again, the landing was rough, and the plane bounced back into the air after a jarring hit on the wheels. Only on the third attempt did Ryan manage to land without Anderson's help. Anderson said to him:

"Clear the runway. Let's take a break."

They lay down on the grass, silent for a while. Anderson stared at the sky, smoking a cigarette, while Ryan sat beside him, chewing on a blade of grass.

"I hate flying," Ryan said. "I could buy her a house, a yacht, almost anything you can buy in this country. Why is she so insistent on this?"

"Because this is the one thing you can't buy," Anderson replied. "You don't have to be an architect to buy a house, and you don't have to be Columbus to sail a forty-horsepower motorboat from Malibu to Marina del Rey."

"But there are other things I can give her."

"That woman doesn't want you to buy her things or give her things. She wants you to learn how to fly."

"But why?"

"That's something you should know. After all, I'm the guy who knows how to fly."

"No," Mike said. "That's not it. The man she was with before. The one I told you about. Do you know what that guy did? When he flew solo for the first time and landed, he placed a gun on the owner's desk at that damn flight school and said, 'Take this as a keepsake. I don't need it anymore.' And the owner said to him, 'Who were you planning to shoot, you damn drifter?' And he replied, 'Myself. If I'd crashed that plane on landing and still had the strength to lift the gun to my head, then myself.'"

Anderson didn't reply. He gazed at the bright clouds drifting in from a golden distance and floating away into the same golden expanse. After a while, he said:

"A golden land. Who wrote that story?"

"I don't remember."

"You went to school, didn't you? What school was it?"

"Yale."

"And what did they teach you there?"

"Everything. I'm a lawyer."

"A defense lawyer?"

"You should know that much about me."

Anderson sat up and looked at Ryan with his narrow green eyes and a smile, though it looked more like a grimace.

"And what do you know about me, my friend?" he asked.

"What do you want me to know about you?"

"Nothing," Anderson said. "Not even you are rich enough to buy knowledge about another person. Not because you don't have the money. Because you don't know how much it costs. And you don't know what it's like to suddenly lose someone you thought you knew."

Ryan didn't answer. They watched a plane approach for landing, touching down smoothly and quietly on the runway despite a gusty crosswind of twenty knots. Then Ryan spoke softly:

"I'm scared."

“Of what?”

“I’m scared that you’re right.” He suddenly turned to Anderson and said, “Esther can’t have children. Did you know that?”

“Did you tell me?” Anderson replied.

“She was with that man—the one I told you about when I was drunk, and the one I mentioned today. I don’t know who he was, but the moment he dies or is killed, there will be no more hell, because every devil will flee the moment he shows up there. He once got into a fight with another guy at the airport, dragged him across the runway to a gas station, doused him with gasoline, and was looking for matches when others finally stopped him. He went to prison for that, and that’s when Esther went to someone for that procedure for the first time. When he got out, he didn’t set anyone on fire, but during a landing on a soft field, he flew alongside someone he didn’t like, tucked his right wing under the guy’s left wing, and pulled up sharply. The other guy clipped his right wing on the ground, and they searched for the wreckage of his plane, but they couldn’t pin it on Esther’s guy because there were no witnesses. He said the other guy jumped on him. Esther was the only one who knew. Then he disappeared again, and she went to another doctor. And when he came back, he promised her he’d live a quiet life and wanted to have a child. Only by then, they couldn’t have children anymore.”

Anderson stood up.

“We should head back,” he said. “That wasn’t bad. If you keep at it, in a week you’ll be flying solo around the airport. Wait here for a minute. I’m going to get some water.”

He turned to leave, but Ryan blocked his path, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you telling the truth, Anderson?”

“Why would I lie? You’ve just lost faith in yourself, that’s all. A few more hours and you’ll be landing fine.”

“You know what I was thinking about when I was coming in for that landing?”

“No,” Anderson replied.

“It’s stupid, I know, but I was thinking about that tree in front of your house.”

“That tree is still standing, Mike,” Anderson replied.

“But you said it was going to be cut down.”

“They haven’t done it yet.”

“So, when will they cut it down?”

“Soon, Mike. Just a few more days,” Anderson said. “That tree has to die sooner or later.”

“That tree is already dying.”

“Yes, Mike.”

“I wish they’d just cut it down already,” Ryan said. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Don’t think about it. It’ll happen either way. Wait here. I’m going to get some water.”

Anderson walked toward the gas station, where he ran into a man near the water spigot.

“That handsome boy you’re flying with—is he your student?” the man asked, wiping his mouth.

“Yes,” Anderson replied.

“I’d rather teach a monkey.”

“Sure. You could learn a lot from a monkey.”

The man turned abruptly, glaring at Anderson for a moment before stepping away, almost leaping to the side.

“I didn’t recognize you, Anderson,” he said.

Anderson drank some water, washed his face, pulled on his worn, ruddy black jacket, and slowly made his way back to the plane.

On the way back, visibility was poor, so they switched seats, with Anderson sitting to Mike's left. They passed over a range of hills, flying at an altitude of two thousand feet. As they flew past the pier in Malibu, Anderson said to Ryan:

"Do you see that house?"

"Which house?"

"Yours. On the left."

Mike turned his head, looking out for a moment while Anderson retracted the flaps and flew at a speed of sixty miles per hour.

Finally, Mike said:

"No, I don't see it."

"Then I'll show you," Anderson replied.

He deployed the flaps and opened the throttle, waiting for the Cherokee to gain speed. Then he banked the plane over sixty degrees onto its wing and pushed the left rudder pedal. Mike watched the VSI needle, which indicated a descent rate of nearly two thousand feet per minute. Anderson leveled out at one thousand feet, letting the engine drop from a howl to a soft purr as they returned to level flight.

"Now do you see it?" Anderson asked.

"No."

"You don't recognize your own house?"

"I've never seen it from above. How do you know which one it is?"

"Your house appears in my dreams often."

Mike was silent for a moment, then placed his hand on Anderson's shoulder and said:

"One day..."

"I know," Anderson said. "I know."

They landed. Anderson returned the plane's keys while Ryan waited for him in the car. When Anderson got in, Ryan said:

"Could you drive?"

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"Yes."

"It's because of the dive over Malibu," Anderson said. "We must've pulled at least three Gs. Did Johnson ever tell you that during a steep bank..."

"Johnson explained everything to me," Ryan interrupted. "I feel this way because I know I'll never fly like you. That's all. You don't have to answer."

"Alright," Anderson replied. "I won't answer that. But where do you want to go?"

"I'd like to stop by my house for a bit. But first, I want to swing by the gun store. It's on the way. I want to buy a rifle. I don't know what's going on with that damn house. It was supposed to be ready three weeks ago."

"Why do you need a rifle, Mike?"

"I like going out to the desert to shoot sometimes. Don't you?"

"Shoot at what?"

"Not at people, of course," Ryan said.

“No, I don’t like it.”

Anderson braked suddenly; the strong sunlight had blinded him, and he hadn’t noticed the red light. Now he squinted, then turned his gaze to a group of barefoot boys and girls crossing the street—brown, slender, and laughing.

“Would I look like that if I’d been born here and could speak without this damn accent?” he asked.

“Your accent isn’t so bad,” Ryan replied.

“Oh, Mike.”

“I still can’t understand how you managed to recognize my house,” Ryan said quickly. “Did you go there once again after?”

“I’ve flown over it from time to time.”

“So have I. Why were you able to remember my house, and I couldn’t?”

“Mike, how old were you when you got your first watch?”

“A watch?”

“Yes, just an ordinary watch.”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

“How old were you when you got your first car?”

“Fifteen. Why are you asking?”

“I was twenty-two when I bought my first shirt,” Anderson said. “A new one. Until then, I wore clothes other people had worn before—or a work jumpsuit. Remembering that house wasn’t hard.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Why do you need to say anything?” Anderson replied, noticing a sign for the gun store. “Is this the place?”

“We can try here.”

They went inside. Mike inspected several rifles, setting them down one after the other, before asking Anderson:

“What do you think about this one?”

Anderson took the rifle, opened the bolt, aimed it, and then set it on the counter.

“This one’s better,” he said, picking another rifle from the rack.

“Your friend is right,” the shopkeeper said. “This model was used during the war by the British colonial infantry.”

Mike pointed at the flared end of the barrel, shaped like the snout of an odd animal.

“And what’s this for?” Mike asked, pointing at the muzzle.

“It’s sometimes used with a short barrel,” the shopkeeper explained. “Short barrel, powerful round—you could end up with your own powder in your face.”

“Exactly,” Ryan said. “Short barrel.”

“This one’s better,” Anderson said.

“For what?”

“For a quick shot.”

“Yes,” the shopkeeper interjected again. “Nobody really knows what’s going to happen this summer. I mean, really, nobody knows.”

But with this, you could shoot from the hip if you had to. When you hold a rifle low, it's harder for someone to snatch it away."

"What do you think?" Mike asked.

"The man's right," Anderson replied. "But that's not really what I think. I think that in this country, no one knows what it means to be dead. Even for pulling a tooth, they'll knock you out for an extra five bucks, and later, when you're in agony, they'll give you morphine while you watch TV. People here don't know pain, and maybe that's why everyone is shooting like maniacs. But if that doesn't matter to you, go ahead and buy this one."

"Do you want it for yourself?" Mike asked.

"That's one way to say it."

"It's easy for you to talk about all this so lightly because you're not American," the shopkeeper said as he packed the rifle, handling it with the care of a mother tucking in her child. "But it could be a tough summer. Last summer, they burned my buddy's house down."

"Too bad you weren't there," Anderson said.

"If I'd been there, that wouldn't have happened," the shopkeeper replied. "I've got a permit for my gun, and I know how to use it."

"That's not what I wasn't thinking about; you could have stolen something for yourself."

"Mr. Ryan, your friend..."

"Let's go," Mike said. And then, when they arrived at his house and stepped inside, he added, "You really don't know how to talk to people any other way, do you? One day you're going to get yourself into a lot of trouble, and it'll be hard for you to even understand how it all happened."

Anderson unpacked the rifle and looked around for a moment at the walls of the beautiful, spacious room, still smelling of fresh paint despite the open window. From the window, the sea was visible, with white waves rolling in one after another. Yet the sea gave off no scent, and the waves died silently, looking like a movie where the sound had suddenly cut out; all the noise was drowned out by passing cars. He stood leaning against the windowsill, holding the rifle loosely in his hand, and the only things he could sense were the smell of the oily bolt and the weight of the weapon.

Switching the rifle to his left hand, he pressed his face to the barrel, feeling its cold surface. He stood still for a moment, inhaling the scent of oil with his flared nostrils, squinting as he looked around the walls of the room, even though the light was gone now. The golden day had faded into night, its darkness diluted by neon lights, and its silence broken by the hum of cars and the shrill voices of singers coming from radios and jukeboxes in seaside taverns selling lobster and fish from tightly sealed tin cans. He stood there motionless for a while, then said, "We need to hang this somewhere."

"The rifle?"

"What else? There is no nigger between us," he said, opening the door and stepping into the other room. He stood there for a moment, looking at the wide, elegant bed placed in the center of the room, designed in the finest style crafted by impotent men working in the film industry. Then he threw the rifle onto the bed, walked to the window, and opened it, staring out at the sea, whose scent he could not detect, and at the waves silently dying on the now dark sand.

"I'm sorry," said Mike.

"About what?"

"Because I didn't make the bed. But we sleep here sometimes. It's hard to stand the city at night."

“It’s hard for me too.”

“Where you live, it’s not so hot.”

“I know. But even so, nights are difficult. Hang the rifle above the bed.”

“I don’t think it’ll look good,” said Mike. “And I don’t think she’ll like it. Want a beer?”

“OK.”

They sat on the terrace, watching people leaving the beach. Then Ryan said suddenly, “You should find another place to live.”

“Mine’s not so bad.”

“I can’t stop thinking about your disgusting bed,” Ryan said. “Sorry to bring it up. But if you really have a girl, you should think about her from time to time.”

“I think about her all the time, Mike.”

“It must be awful for her.”

“No, it’s not like that. You can ask her if you have to know.”

“I know how my girl would feel in such a situation,” Ryan said. “That’s enough for me.”

“I don’t think you know,” Anderson replied. “I’ve been with mine for ten years. Sometimes we have no money, and we have to do it in the desert or in someone else’s car, and it’s always been beautiful, never something I couldn’t later think about. Then we had money, and then we didn’t again, and we returned to the beach, to borrowed apartments, to borrowed cars. But you see, she’s like the sea. And when I’ve been in trouble, when I’ve drunk too much or hurt someone, I go to her, and being with her feels like emerging from clean water. That’s all that’s ever mattered to me, Mike. Don’t

think about my bed. Think about her. And think that she's like the sea. Think about that whenever you feel like thinking about her or me."

"I think about you a lot, Anderson," Ryan said. "I don't know why you hit that man in Downtown. It wasn't necessary. I don't know why you won't look at me when you talk. And I don't know why you chose that stupid name. You're from Eastern Europe, right? Are there a lot of people with Scandinavian names there?"

"No. But when I came here, nobody could pronounce my real name, and I didn't know a word of English. So I decided to change it. And I met a man who treated me terribly, and I decided I'd take the name of the first scoundrel I met in this country. His name was Anderson. So now that's me."

"What did that man do to you?"

"That was in Downtown LA. The guy was the boss of a big lumber company, and I went there to work as a loader. I got the job, picked up a pair of gloves, and was heading to the yard. On the way, I ran into some girl who said something to me, and I told her I didn't speak English. She laughed and said something to this guy named Anderson. That's how it started. It was a big yard, and Anderson had this little scooter he used to zip around on. He'd whistle at me, and I'd run after him as he zipped around at twenty-five miles an hour. That's all I remember—running. I ran for thirty days straight because that's how long it took to join the union. People were placing bets on whether I'd drop dead, but I didn't. I ran after him for eight hours a day, every day. Even when the others went to the main gate for lunch, Anderson would always send me to some far corner of the yard where I had to run back, leaving me only five minutes out of twenty for lunch. And it all started because that girl, the one who spoke to me, told Anderson she thought I was handsome. And she was his whore. That's why I ran for thirty days. Now you know why I have his name."

"But you didn't join the union, did you?"

“No.”

Ryan stood up, walked to the kitchen, and came back with a bottle of whiskey from the fridge. He poured himself a drink in silence and handed the bottle to Anderson.

“I’ll tell you what happened next,” Ryan said. “You ran for those thirty days, and everyone thought you were running to join the union. Because once you were a union member, that bastard couldn’t mess with you anymore. But on the thirtieth day, when they handed you the union card to sign, you didn’t sign it. You took your money and walked away. And that’s the part none of those people betting on you like a racehorse ever thought about. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“But that girl,” Ryan continued, “she didn’t follow you like you thought she would. She stayed there, kept working. If she even remembers you, she probably thinks you’re just an idiot. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“And that was the first time you realized women are a little different in this country, no? Let me tell you something, after hearing all this: if your girl ever cheated on you, I swear to Christ, you’d hang a portrait of her lover over your bed. Isn’t that right?”

“No,” Anderson said. “That wouldn’t be necessary. I’d remember his face until the day—”

“Oh, shut up,” Ryan snapped. “Spare me that, at least.”

He shrugged and walked to the other end of the terrace. He drank quietly, gazing at the sea as though seeing it for the first time or waiting for someone to emerge from the waves. For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Finally, Ryan broke the silence.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“No.”

“Let me lend you some money,” Ryan said. “Rent a better place. You’ll find another job eventually, and you can pay me back.”

“I won’t have enough time to pay you back.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“But you said you’d help me with flying,” Ryan said. “Not later than today. That was you, wasn’t it?”

“I won’t leave this city a day earlier than I have to,” Anderson said. “You’ve got to trust me on that.”

They fell silent for a while; the darkness and quiet seemed to drift toward them, and now they could hear the hiss of the waves and the soft murmur of the sea rising in the distance, moving closer to where they stood side by side, feeling the warmth of each other’s bodies in the evening chill.

“What’s your country like?” Ryan asked.

“I don’t know how to describe it to you. Flat, gray, cold. When things go badly, you can walk out of town and just keep walking for miles without meeting a soul. Sometimes you stop and rest. And if you see someone on the road, they avoid you, the same as you avoid them.”

“When things go badly, you can also go see friends,” Ryan said.

“Poor people don’t have friends.”

“And this woman of yours?” Ryan asked. “The one who’s like the sea to you? Isn’t she your friend? Or are you secretly a millionaire working in a Jewish company for two dollars and fifty-three cents an hour just for kicks? Or maybe you’re actually the guy everyone now calls ‘Mister Las Vegas.’”

“I don’t know how to explain what’s really between us,” Anderson said. “I just don’t know how to put it into words. I can only think about it. And sometimes I think, if I could find the words to say it, I’d be a rich man. Maybe it’s just different with her, and maybe I couldn’t do with anyone else what I do with her, and as often as I do. And when I’m with someone else, I can’t stop thinking about her, because otherwise...”

“I understand,” said Mike.

“No, you’ll understand someday.”

“Why do you talk to me this way? You know I have Esther. Don’t you think I can feel the same way you do?”

Anderson stared at the lights swaying on the water for a moment before turning to him.

“Why should you understand?” he said. “Why would you understand me when I don’t even understand myself? I get it when I’m alone, but when I see another woman, someone prettier, younger, probably better than her, I don’t understand anymore. You’re a lawyer; you know what it means to sentence someone to death, but you don’t know what it feels like to be sentenced. Well, I’m the one sitting in the chair, or standing on tiptoes with the noose around my neck, or the one waiting for the gas canister to drop. And I know that no matter where I go, that noose is always wrapped around my neck. So when I’m alone, I get it. But when I’m around people, I don’t. There are so many beautiful, young women I could be with—for a month or two, a year or two—but

I'm still with the same woman, and I can't even explain why, and I only know why when I'm alone. But you can't ask me about it when I'm alone, because then there'd be two of us, and I still wouldn't be able to tell you."

"You said you two can't be together. Is she married?"

"Yes."

"And her husband won't agree to a divorce?"

Anderson laughed.

"As long as he's alive," he said.

"But she can leave him without his consent."

"If she wanted to."

"I don't understand much of this," said Ryan. "But remember, I'm a lawyer. If there's anything I can do to help..."

"No one can help me here."

"But there's something else I don't get," Mike said. "Why are you telling me this? You go out of your way to make sure no one likes you. I haven't met a single person who has a good word to say about you. Why admit something to me that you'd laugh about if someone else told you? How do you know I won't tell anyone? And what would happen to those walls you've built around yourself then?"

The car stopped in front of the house, followed by a knock at the door. They stood in silence for a moment before Ryan said:

"It's Esther." He turned his back to him and said softly, "I'd rather stay with you tonight."

“I know,” he said. He jumped over the terrace and quietly, with long, deliberate steps, disappeared into the darkness. He walked on for perhaps half a minute before turning back and seeing the man in the white shirt still standing there, watching him, unmoving, despite the repeated honks urging him to the car.

After work, he went to the liquor store where he always bought whiskey for Helen. This time, however, the usual clerk wasn't there. Instead, a woman dressed in black stood behind the counter, surrounded by a few Black men with their elbows on the counter, nodding their heads in understanding.

"Early Times," Anderson said. "A half bottle. What happened to the guy who works here?"

"Oh, three of them came in and told him to turn around," the woman in black said. "They told him to face the wall and took the money, but he couldn't take it and he turned around. One of them shot him three times in the head, and the whole wall was splattered with brains." She began punching numbers into the register with her fingers. "Fynf zyben und zwanzig," she said to Anderson. "Thank you, please come again." Then she turned to a man standing next to her. "Smile, Morry," she said. "You're scaring off customers. Smile or find another job."

"Don't mind her, brother," one of the Black men said to Anderson. "The guy who was killed was her husband. She is not even supposed to come here. She's lost it."

"Why did they kill him?"

"He turned around," the man said. "During a robbery, you're not supposed to turn around. That's when they get scared you'll be able to identify them if they're caught and put in a lineup. Oh, just thinking about it makes me sick. They killed him and took thirty-two dollars from the register. He shouldn't have looked at them."

"Then who should look at people, brother?" Anderson said.

He took the bottle of alcohol from the woman and tore off the paper bag, tossing it to the ground. Holding the bottle by the neck, he walked out of the store.

After stepping off the bus, he stood for a moment in front of the building where he lived. The windows of Helen's room were dark; instead of going up, he turned and walked to the bar just around the corner.

"It's quiet tonight," the bartender said. "It's always like this on Mondays. A beer?"

"Yes."

"You're not planning on drinking that whiskey you've got in your pocket there, are you?"

"No."

"I figured," the bartender said. "You're a decent guy."

"Everyone's a decent guy on a Monday," Anderson said. "It's the same all over the world."

As he drank his beer, he watched a girl sitting alone in a corner. She drank silently, staring ahead with an empty gaze, her eyes a color he couldn't tell until she suddenly lifted her head and tossed her brown hair back with a sharp motion, and when their eyes met, he caught their color—green and cold. She stood up and walked over to Anderson.

"Morrison," she said. "I've never known what's stronger in me—my contempt for you or my pity."

"My name was never Morrison," he replied.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. She stared at him intently, shifting her weight from one foot to the other while turning the glass in her hand, the ice clinking inside.

“So what,” she said. “So what if you’re not Morrisson. You’re probably no better than him. Like every handsome bastard, I’m sure you’re cruel.”

The bartender approached her from behind and quickly took the glass out of her hand.

“That’s enough for tonight, Judy,” he said. “You’re all set.” He escorted her out and shut the door behind her. Then he returned to his place behind the bar. “She’s got a broken heart,” he said. “But who doesn’t have heart troubles?”

“I don’t,” Anderson replied. He placed twenty-five cents on the counter and left.

Outside the bar, he stood for a moment, watching the girl walk down the street; she moved with a quick, confident stride, ignoring the cars stopping beside her and the people offering her a ride, and then she walked into another bar. Anderson turned around and walked home.

When he arrived, he opened the door, turned on the light, and stood in the doorway for a moment, looking at Helen; she was sitting, watching television. She was dressed in his faded shirt with the patch reading *Flight Instructor* sewn onto it. She turned toward him when he shut the door, but he remained in the doorway, still as a statue, breathing heavily like an athlete after a race.

“Helen,” he said, though it wasn’t a voice—just a hiss escaping his dry, clenched throat. He waited a moment, swallowing hard, and then whispered, “Helen. I told you not to do that. I told you never to touch that shirt.”

“I know you told me,” she said. “That’s why I put it on. Because you’ll never wear it again.”

“I told you not to do that,” he repeated.

“You shouldn’t care,” Helen replied. “It’s just an old shirt that means nothing anymore. It’s the same as I am. Maybe that’s why I put it on.”

“Take it off, Helen.”

"I'll take it off when I go to bed."

"But I want you to take it off now."

"You bore me," she said.

He pulled a bottle of whiskey from his pocket and placed it on the table just as the phone rang. He walked to the other room and picked up the receiver.

"We won't see each other tonight," Esther said. "I'm not feeling well. I want to go to bed early."

"Is it anything serious?"

"No," she replied. "I've just been working hard, and I always struggle through these cursed three days."

"All right," he said. "Get some rest."

He returned to Helen; she was still sitting in his shirt. He walked into the bathroom, turned on the bath faucets, and placed his hand under the stream of water, but quickly pulled it back. Then he returned to Helen.

"The water's running," she said.

"I know," he replied. He picked up a doll from the floor, sat down on a chair with it in his hand, and said, "Today you don't think this is your child, do you, Helen?"

"No."

"Why don't you destroy the doll?"

"Why should I destroy it?"

"Maybe if you destroy it, you won't think about your child anymore," he said.

"I can't destroy it."

"Do you want me to do it?"

"Go ahead."

"I can't do it either," he said. "After all, we've been living together for a while now. It's almost like our child."

"Don't you have any children of your own?"

"I don't."

"You never had any?"

"No. But I could have."

"And now you can't anymore?"

"Not anymore."

"Did you try?"

"It's not up to me," he said. "That's just how it is. I'll have to make do with the doll."

"There are plenty of other women in the world," Helen said. "Lots of women who'd want to have children." He didn't respond, and after a moment, she added, "Even with someone like you."

"Maybe there are women like that," he said. "But I don't know them."

"You just haven't met them."

"I haven't looked for them."

"You know," she said. "I've decided to change my faith. Maybe that'll help."

"Help with what?"

"Forgetting."

"That's not the point of faith. You believe in God to remember everything."

"So I'm supposed to remember that they killed my child?"

"Yes, Helen."

"Why?"

"So you can forgive them."

"Fine," she said. "I'll forgive them. I'll change my faith and forgive them."

"And why do you want to forgive them?"

"Because I can't understand them."

"Who does understand those who kill children, Helen?"

"People of your faith must understand them," she said. "If they forgive them. Does the water in the bathroom have to keep running?"

"Yes, Helen."

"Will you help me?"

"With what?"

"Changing my faith."

"Alright," he said. He walked into the other room and dialed the phone. "You should come over," he said when he heard Esther's voice.

"I told you I'm not well."

"That doesn't matter to me," he said. "You, of all people, should know that." He hung up the phone and returned to the room.

"Is that woman coming here again?" Helen asked.

"Do you have an issue with her being here? I didn't think you were so heartless, especially now, when you're planning to change your faith."

She smiled.

"I wonder who you'd be without me," she said. "And without this doll. And without knowing everything that's happened to me. What would you live on if you hadn't sniffed out that I'm here illegally, and if my family didn't pay you to keep your mouth shut? Who would you be?"

"I'd be someone who needs knowledge about another person," he said. "And I'd find that knowledge. In the faith you're about to embrace, it says: 'Seek, and you shall find.' Don't you know that, my dear friend? After all, that faith will soon be yours."

"And what is your faith?"

"You know," he said. "You know my faith."

"Yes," she said. "I know your faith. That's why you torment me and think it gives you some kind of meaning. But what will happen to you if, for instance, I die? Who will you become then?"

"And who will you be without me?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"There are plenty like you," she said.

"How many?"

"Many."

"The word 'many' doesn't mean anything. Exactly how many?"

"I don't know how many. I just know they exist."

"But do you know how to find them?"

"They find themselves. Does the water in the bathroom have to keep running?"

"Yes, Helen," he said. "But don't think about that. Think about me. Do you know exactly how many there are like me?" She didn't answer; he waited a moment and then said, "You don't understand one thing. You are something else to me. You're not a woman named Helen. And for a woman who isn't named Helen, a man who wants to be her husband is something else. And I, too, am not simply a man named Anderson to you." He picked up the doll and stared for a moment into her bulging azure eyes. "She's the only thing left that's real."

"So, there is another man," Helen said. "Did I understand you correctly?"

"Understand me however you want," he said. "You see, no one wants to leave themselves behind on the road. And if you do, you go back, even if the road back is harder than the one ahead. But you don't go back to a place; you go back to a time when you were someone else."

"Someone good?"

"Someone different," he said. "When one felt differently. When a person was afraid... and what else? After all, you watch television all the time. Help me out."

"And when a person was able to hate," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly, Helen. When a person could hate and call people what they thought of them without yet searching for the reasons that make people who they are. When a person could be wrong. That's the whole point. That's the man we're talking about."

"The man we're talking about is nothing new," Helen said. "Tell me something about the woman. Maybe she's more interesting."

"She'll do it better than I can, Helen. She's on her way."

"And what will happen to that man?"

"Which one, Helen?"

"The second one."

"Something has to happen to him so that he never becomes the first one, Helen."

"You amuse me."

"I know," Anderson said. "I've been called funny many times."

He set the doll down and walked over to Helen, who stood up. The first punch knocked the ground out from under her feet, but she didn't fall because he held her up. He wrapped her hair around his left fist and struck her with his right hand—short, calm blows delivered at steady intervals, like the ticking of a clock. As she lost consciousness, she saw his green eyes watching her carefully. Then she fell.

"Now, it's time we wash that shirt, Helen," he said.

He carried her into the bathroom and laid her in the tub, watching the water go down her face and mix with the blood. Then he returned to the room, took a clean bandage from the drawer, and began wrapping his right hand, his eyes fixed on the white tree outside the window.

He unfolded his bed and went to the kitchen. He lit the gas and placed the coffee pot on the burner, and then he sat at the table, listening to the sound of running water from the bathroom. Spreading out a map, he began sketching a flight plan, grimacing slightly whenever he had to use his injured right hand. He worked slowly, his gaze moving across the map, thinking about this country he knew from the sky and the land he had worked on. He thought of the cars he had unloaded, the roads he had traveled, and the people he had met along the way. He remembered how each one of them knew he was a foreigner, betrayed by his accent. It was like that in the Northeast, and it was like that in El Paso, and the lumber mills, and all those cheap diners where he had eaten and drunk. He was large, with a strong body and a weary face. When he sat with others in one of those dingy bars where mirrors gleamed between the bottles, he saw his face and theirs. He thought he looked like them, but he could never speak their language. He chewed gum, smoked, drank; and, over the years, he stopped talking to them, pointing instead to whatever he wanted to buy, eat, or drink.

"And only the sky made you their equal," Esther said.

She leaned over him; he hadn't heard her come in.

"You're the only one in this country who has a scent," he said.

"You shouldn't have come to this place."

"I didn't come here alone."

"You're always alone," Esther said. "You've never needed people, and you don't need them now. All you need is an hour on the plane, something you work all day to pay for."

He didn't respond, his eyes fixed on her shadowed face, lit by the glow of her cigarette. After a pause, she added, "Work or steal, or even kill for."

"You know that—"

"No," she interrupted. "You use me the same way you use your plane. Simply. You have the same control over me as you do over a Stearman or a Pawnee. You learned how to use me the way you learned how to fly planes, but because you learned to fly first and then came to me, I called it love. And it was never anything else." She took his injured hand in her thin, fragile fingers, studying it for a moment before repeating, "It was never anything else. I never understood you. I don't know why you insist on experiencing more than other people and enduring more than them. You hit people, you wreck planes—why?"

"So you wouldn't remember me when I finally crash," he said. "I want to live like no one ever has. I don't want anyone to remember me."

"When I first met you, you wanted to be remembered," Esther said, still holding his hand in hers and staring at it. "You wanted to be the best. To do something no one else had ever done."

"That was before you left," he replied.

"I didn't leave. I ran."

"You didn't run alone."

"I was so foolish then," she said quietly, "I thought the man I ran with would protect me. That he'd help me forget."

"But he didn't protect you."

"He didn't," she said. "And I haven't forgotten what happened to him. Was it you who told Ryan to buy the rifle?"

"Why do you call him Ryan? Why not Mike?"

"Was it you who told him to buy it?"

"No. I only suggested he hang it over his bed. And what did he do with it?"

"He did what you told him to do."

"I didn't order him. I suggested it. There's a difference."

"What difference?"

"I don't know," he said. "One day, you'll tell me. For me, only the results matter. So whether you're leaving or running away, it makes no difference to me if I know you're leaving or running away with someone else. It's the same with the rifle. I only gave him an option."

"You know he won't be able to do it."

"Anyone can do it," he said. "Anyone who lives with you long enough can. That's something you should know about yourself."

He stood up, silently undressing her. He watched as she stood before him—naked, slender, and fragile. He no longer heard the water running in the bathroom, drowned out by the pounding of his own heart.

"I'm not well," Esther said.

"I know," he replied. "But that doesn't matter to me." And it didn't matter to him as he painted a cross on one woman's body with the blood of another. "There's your cross to start with," he said to Helen. "And life will take care of the rest."

Standing between them, he looked at them both—one face swollen and another amused; he stared into eyes wild with fear and into calm, sleepy eyes framed by brows straight as a swallow's wings.

"Be cursed," Helen whispered.

He smiled.

"If you were truly wise, you would've simply said, 'Be loved,'" he replied softly and closed the door behind her.

He woke three hours later when Esther leaned over him and kissed him. But he didn't open his eyes, lying motionless, and in the stillness of his body there was something almost inhuman. His face in the half-light looked like a mask, and as Esther watched his furrowed brows, she stepped back. Standing in the doorway, she said quietly:

"And again, I betrayed someone who loves me."

She closed the door. He heard her footsteps fading away, and then, turning his heavy, weary body, he looked at the shirt lying on the bed. He picked it up, and it now smelled of Esther, who had worn it for a couple of hours.

Lying in the darkness, he continued to sense her fragrance, a scent he had known for years. Then he glanced at his right hand and said aloud:

"Don't kill me. I don't know why I did it. I never left her, so I never left You. That's all I can say."

He was silent for a while, then said:

"And again, I betrayed someone I love."

They were approaching the landing at Compton, and Anderson, keeping his hands on his knees, watched the runway coming into view from the right side of the plane; then Ryan tilted the wing to the right, but the tilt was too steep, and the runway shifted to the left of the propeller, beyond Anderson's line of sight. Anderson said nothing; the plane descended heavily, far past the threshold and ten miles per hour above the prescribed landing speed.

Ryan made a left-wing turn, a full one hundred and eighty degrees, and began taxiing back to the runway. A man holding a red flag stepped into their path, and Anderson, after shutting off the engine, opened the cabin door.

"Hold up for a bit," the man with the flag said. "We've got to run a bulldozer over the runway. Or, if you're in a rush, you can use the soft runway."

"No," Anderson replied. "Too much gravel. We'd scratch up the prop and the spinner, and this isn't a school plane. We'll wait fifteen minutes."

The man with the flag walked off, and they taxied off to the side and got out of the plane. They watched as the crew working for the flagman hurriedly laid a cross on the runway, and some high-wing aircraft, approaching to land, roared as it climbed back into the air and flew toward the sea, surrounded by still fog that brought no wind today.

"What do you think a plane looks like, Mike?" Anderson asked.

"Sorry?"

"That plane. Have you ever thought about how it really looks?"

"It was probably a Skyhawk," Mike Ryan said. "Or something like that."

Anderson watched the workers for a moment as they arranged white planks; the laborers were dressed in orange vests and white helmets, resembling Martians from a cheap film whose producers lacked not only imagination but also budget, and these Martians didn't inspire fear but rather laughter, with their comically large backsides. Anderson observed them for a while before speaking.

"Have you ever thought about what an airplane really looks like...?"

"Hey!" shouted the man with the flag. "We'll be ready in a few minutes!"

"You were saying something," Ryan said.

"That bastard cut me off," Anderson muttered.

They sat on the grass, smoking cigarettes, as the scent of the grass mingled with the smell of oil, warm cylinders, rubber, and brake discs. The grass was already turning yellow in places, and Anderson said, "Summer's passing."

"Yeah," Mike replied. He lay still beside Anderson, who gazed at his fair, handsome face, marred by puffiness.

"You should stop drinking," Anderson said.

"I know."

"Does it interfere with your work?"

"No," Ryan replied. "You know we've got a law office. My father is the major shareholder. He's so rich he doesn't have enough time to count all the money he's stolen. So, when I sometimes show up to work two or three hours late, and he calls, my secretary says, 'Mr. Ryan is in the library.' Or, 'Mr. Ryan is somewhere in the building, and we can't find him.' And it never occurs to him that someone might deceive him—him, who's been deceiving everyone his entire life. People, the law, his wife. And that's his weak spot."

"Is your father the famous Ryan of bankruptcies?" Anderson asked.

"Yes. And one day, I'll be the famous Ryan, the bankruptcy specialist," Mike replied, turning toward Anderson. "Is that tree near your house still standing?"

"They haven't cut it down yet," Anderson answered.

"I could take that tree with me," Ryan said.

"You probably will one day," Anderson replied.

"I keep thinking about that house I bought," Ryan continued.

"There are companies here that specialize in transplanting trees. They just move them with their roots and all. Of course, if the tree could still be saved."

"I think that's impossible," Anderson said.

"It'd be worth asking someone," Ryan suggested.

"That's always a good idea," Anderson agreed. He lay back on the grass, his arms folded behind his head. His black, sun-faded jacket lay beside him. "It's funny," he said. "Do you smell the grass, Mike? In this country, you only notice the smell of something when it's dying. I've been to Compton so many times and never smelled the grass. My brother always loved the smell of grass."

"What happened to your brother?" Mike asked.

"Which one?"

"You had more than one?"

"Two," Anderson said.

"I mean the one from hell," Mike clarified. "Your words."

"Hell takes everyone," Anderson replied. "They're both gone."

"What happened to the one who was a pilot?"

"He was a wild one," Anderson said. "Started flying when he was seventeen, then flew with the RAF in England. After the war, he married some Irish whore and came back home. But it was the worst time, and they locked him up."

"Why?" Mike asked.

"Because by then, they were locking up everyone," Anderson replied, his voice low and sleepy. "They already knew that their whole damned revolution had failed, so they started killing everyone just to have something to show for it, to explain why nothing was working. They began executing the best people, telling the masses that those they killed were responsible for their hunger, for the lack of hospitals, for the fourteen-hour workdays. It's always easier to believe in someone else's guilt than to face the fact that you're just a wretched soul, a slave who will die never having eaten a hundred pounds of meat. That's the side of dialectics your liberal girls never think about, the ones fighting for a better tomorrow while screwing niggers, reading the *Free Press*, and crying over those yellow peasants in Vietnam running from your bombers dropping explosives on their reed bridges. Don't you understand that, Mike?"

"I've never thought about it," Mike admitted.

"Keep it that way," Anderson said. "So my brother sat in prison for five years, waiting for his execution. Then they let him out, and he found out that his Irish whore had been screwing everyone while he was on death row. So he took his son, went into the mountains, and started drinking."

He fell silent for a moment, lighting a fresh cigarette as he watched a plane approach the runway. The Martians scattered, and the man with the flag dropped flat on the ground just as the plane flew over the threshold. The pilot, spotting the white cross too late, opened the throttle and pulled the plane back into the air.

"Son of a bitch!" yelled the man with the flag. "Blew all the gravel everywhere. Did he not see the cross or what?"

Anderson and Ryan stood watching the Martians and their boss waving a red flag and spewing curses in waves, one after another. He cursed the people, the planes, the poor visibility, and everything else that could still be cursed under the now cold and misty sky.

"That Irishman is a good boss," Anderson said. "I'd like to work for him."

"Why?" Ryan asked.

"He curses. You see, when he curses, his men listen—or at least pretend to—and for a few minutes, nobody does anything. Have you ever worked, Mike?"

"You mean, was I ever a laborer?"

"Yes. Have you ever been a laborer?"

"No. But my father was foolish enough to try to convince me that I should make it through school on my own. And what happened to your brother after that?"

"You know, he could never understand why his wife slept with everyone while he was waiting to die. It tormented him, and there was no way to explain it to him. So, he stayed in the mountains with his son, who was barely ten years old. In the mornings, they'd hike the mountains—him, big and strong like a bear, never saying a word, and his little son following behind. Sometimes the boy couldn't climb any further and would collapse, and my brother would just stop and wait, saying nothing, staring at the boy until he got up and started climbing again. I don't think I ever saw him sit down. He just stood there, silent, waiting for his boy to rise and follow him. So, the boy would get up off the ground and follow him, wiping his small hands of blood. But eventually, he didn't have to do that anymore, because his hands became tough—tough

like the paws of a mountain bear. They walked like that for days, without saying a word. They started in the valleys, then moved to the peaks, and eventually, that child could walk on snow and rocks alike. The only thing he couldn't do anymore was cry."

"Because he was her child, right?" Ryan said softly. "That was the whole idea, wasn't it? And he must have thought that it was her."

"Maybe. In the evenings, he'd sit with the mountain men—just as wild as he was—and play cards with them, winning all their money because, on top of everything, he was a cardsharp. Until one day, the party's politics shifted, and his old comrades decided to bring him back into aviation. They came to me and told me to go up into the mountains to find him because my brother wasn't accepting letters, telegrams, or phone calls anymore. So, I went into the mountains and found him sitting at a beer-stained table, having just lost everything he had. His opponent was collecting the money and getting ready to leave. A Gypsy was watching them, and I noticed my brother staring strangely at the Gypsy's filthy ear, which had a large gold earring. My brother didn't say a word, just kept his eyes on that ear while the Gypsy clicked his tongue, and the other cardsharp calmly gathered the money and counted it. I grabbed a chair and moved to the wall, waiting there, watching my brother's eyes and the Gypsy's ear. And then my brother said to the Gypsy, 'Sorry, old man, but I'd really like another chance to break even.' He ripped that gold earring from the Gypsy's ear, taking a chunk of flesh with it, tossed it onto the table, and told the man, 'Let's play. Give me one more chance.'"

"He tore the earring out, flesh and all?" Mike asked.

"Yes."

"And, for the love of God, what happened to the Gypsy?"

"He was lying unconscious on the ground."

"From the pain?"

"I don't know, to be honest," Anderson said. "I hit him over the head with a chair at the same moment my brother tore out the earring. I knew my brother was cruel, so I figured I had to do something for the Gypsy."

"Christ," Ryan muttered. "Why am I still so stupid? I should've guessed that."

"And then we came down from those mountains, and he was supposed to start flying again. His wife came to him, crying, moaning, and begging him for forgiveness. And that night, he slept with her, and the next morning, he got up to fly solo for the first time in seven years. He was already at the door when he paused for a moment and said, 'Keep my boy away from two things—planes and women. Let him go back to the mountains. He'll make a good guide.' Then he left, and by the afternoon, the airfield called to tell me it was over. He'd crashed during landing in a small training plane, in perfect conditions—no wind, nothing unusual. The man who had seventeen kills, who flew Spitfires and Mustangs against Focke-Wulfs, Junkers, and 109s."

"He couldn't forgive her, could he?"

"At first, her. And then, as he was coming in for that landing, he couldn't forgive himself. He didn't make a mistake during the war, didn't break in all those years in prison, but he faltered when he thought he could be forgiving. That's how I see it."

"And your other brother?"

"He died during the uprising in forty-four. He was seventeen years old and had never been in action. He broke down when a tank moved toward the barricade and fled. The gendarmes caught him—it was the third day of the uprising—and the head of the gendarmes said, 'This will serve as an important example for the fighting spirit of our soldiers.' So he waited for the execution, and all his comrades told him what it was like to be with a woman. Because, you see, Mike, he'd never been with a woman and he

didn't know what it was like. He was about to confess before dying and wanted to tell the priest as much nonsense as possible, just to live a few minutes longer. So his friends told him all sorts of nonsense, these boys who weren't any more experienced or older than he was. He just listened, staring at the tips of his shoes and biting his lip. He thought women would give him five or ten more minutes of life. Even the gendarmes guarding him told him foolish stories about their wives, mothers, and sisters. Then, in the morning, a gendarme lieutenant came to my brother and said, 'You'll be executed without confession. There are only shoelace loops left from your priest. He stepped on an anti-tank mine on his way here.' And that's how my younger brother died."

"You folks from the East have it better in some ways," Ryan said. "You only need women from ten at night until five in the morning. Or when you want to live a little shorter or a little longer. But they're not part of your life like they are here, for us. When you want to drink or talk, you go with men. And maybe that's partly why your older brother died during that landing. When he thought about his son, who was also a man—a man who feared him—and when he thought about all those other men like him, who would never understand that he broke for a moment and forgave."

"I think it could've been just like you say," Anderson replied. "If it wasn't just an accident."

Ryan sat on the grass, watching him for a moment. His eyes were puffy, and he looked tired. The hand he raised to hold his cigarette trembled slightly. Suddenly, Ryan laughed, staring at the flame of the match flickering in his unsteady grip.

"Christ," he said. "Did you know someone told me we look a little alike?"

"And who told you that?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. I must've been a little drunk. But that's not the point. You said, 'if it wasn't an accident.' Does that

really look like an accident to you, friend? Your brother, that life in the mountains, and that kid crawling after him on bloodied hands? That kid who was first his wife's child and only later became his own... Does that really look like an accident?"

"Maybe not. But it's one of those things you can never really know for sure, and it's just pleasant to talk about."

The man with the flag approached them, surrounded by his group of Martians. He removed his helmet and fanned his sweaty face with it; the Martians followed, removing their helmets as if obeying an unspoken and mysterious command.

"All right," said the man with the flag. "You're clear to take off."

Later, when they were already seated in the cockpit and the engine was running at two thousand RPM, as they watched the tachometer while testing both magnetos, Ryan spoke quietly:

"It'll be hard for me to say this. It sounds strange to me, but if you ever need a brother..." He shrugged and fell silent.

"Thank you, Mike."

"Now that you've told me about your brothers, I know how to use women," Ryan said.

Anderson didn't reply. He focused on the white line of the runway slipping between the wheels, and then, when they were in the air, watching the clouds low over the gray sea, he said:

"Don't think about that now. We need to fly as often as possible. You're getting better. But I need to leave here soon, Mike."

"Where to?"

"Oh, I don't know yet," he said. "One way or another, I won't leave until you've flown solo for the first time." He glanced briefly at his right arm, at the pale, diagonal scar running from his elbow downward. "East," he said. "Where else, brother?"

During the lunch break, Murray approached Anderson, surrounded by a group of workers.

"Listen, *Spider*," Murray said. "Things don't look good. Mister Hundebauch isn't happy with your work. So this will be your last day."

Anderson looked at him—his patriarchal silver mane, impeccable false teeth, and the cold smile of a bandit. He stood up, pulled off his apron with the spider painted in its web, and tossed it to the ground.

"This will be my last minute," he said.

As he headed toward the office, a bell rang, and he stopped once more to look back at the place he was leaving. He watched as Hundebauch the Second chased after *Tarzan, Son of the Jungle*, whose apron rippled across his hunched back as he ran, urged forward by curses. Anderson then went to the bathroom and began washing his hands, turning only when Hundebauch the Second placed a hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing, man?" he asked.

"And what does it look like? I'm washing my hands."

"Why don't you sit down, man?" said Hundebauch the Second; his voice no longer commanding but plaintive. "Why not call up some manicurist from the Beverly Hills Hotel and sit together for a while? Maybe she'll even sing for you."

"I can't do that, Mr. Hundebauch."

"Why not? If you're Hoffa's man?"

"Because I'd rather hear the devil's voice claiming my soul than the singing and laughing of a woman," Anderson said. He looked at Hundebauch for a moment, then laughed. "Mr. Hundebauch," he said, "I'm already fired. Have you forgotten?"

“Right,” said Hundebauch. “Come on, I’ll sign your check.”

Anderson followed him into the office. Two men were seated there, their calm, watchful gaze fixed on them. Anderson noticed how their jackets bulged slightly around the waist on the left side, where the heavy grips of .38 revolvers pushed against the fabric. Hundebauch stared at them for a moment with the look of a man gazing into the water he was about to dive into. Then he lunged at them.

“Stand up!” he shouted. “How do these people work, Susan? Why are they sitting? Don’t they know that nobody sits here?”

“Mr. Hundebauch,” Susan said in an uncertain voice, blinking desperately. “Mr. Hundebauch, these gentlemen are—”

“It doesn’t matter!” Hundebauch the Second began yelling again, spitting and waving his arms. “Stand up, stand up! You think that just because you’re union members, you can do whatever you want—”

“Mr. Hundebauch,” Susan said, blinking, her false eyelash coming unglued. “Mr. Hundebauch...”

“Shut your damn mouth, Susan!” Hundebauch shouted. “They think Hoffa can do whatever he wants. But Hoffa’s locked up now.”

“So are you, Mr. Hundebauch,” said one of the men.

The other man stood, leaning against the wall now, a dead cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He’d unbuttoned his jacket, and his right hand hovered near his belt, calm but deliberate.

“You’re under arrest,” the officer said, his voice low and measured. His hand moved over Hundebauch’s body with the swift precision of a boxer working in close quarters. “Let’s not be foolish now. You’ll come with us, and you can call your lawyer from there. Remember, anything you say from this point on can and will be

used against you. Also remember, you have the constitutional right to remain silent.”

“Why the hell are these people hanging around here, Susan?!” Hundebauch bellowed as they led him away. The officers had him by the arms, guiding him respectfully but firmly, their heavy bodies pressing on him.

“Why are these parasites wasting their time here instead of working—”

“Careful,” one of the officers cut in sharply. “If you keep talking like this, we’ll add resisting arrest to the charges.”

Anderson and Susan stood by the window, watching as the officers shoved Hundebauch into the back of their car; he hollered something inaudible, and they drove off.

“What did they get him for, that bastard?” Anderson asked.

“How should I know?”

“Susan, I was fired.”

“Looks like he got caught playing poker again.”

“And what about my paycheck?”

“You’ll have to come back Monday. Mr. Hundebauch senior is in Frisco. I’m sorry, Mr. Anderson.”

Anderson stepped outside; in the yard, he was caught up by *Sexology*.

Holding his upper jaw with his fingers, *Sexology* said, “It’s Salvatore. He’s complaining that you’re causing delays, that you’re not working fast enough. He thinks you’re imitating his accent on purpose. Catolico Bueno thinks you’re doing it just to spite him.”

“I worked just like everyone else,” Anderson replied.

“I know. But he doesn’t get it. He lost his fight, and now he thinks it’s your fault because you’re mimicking his accent.”

Sexology’s jaw dropped with a quiet snap as he reached out a hand to Anderson. Then he stuck a cigarette between his teeth and slammed his jaw shut with the finesse of a magician.

“Damn dentists,” he muttered. “Goodbye, Anderson.”

Getting off the bus at Bundy, Anderson headed toward the airport. He knew the way well—he’d been walking it for a year now, three miles in an hour at first, then cutting it down to just 45 minutes. Later, when he was in the air, his feet worked hard on the pedals; or, when he was too tired, they worked poorly, and the ball would stall on the inclines. He’d walked that path in rain and shine, through autumn and summer, never stopping anyone and never asking for a ride. Then the new PA-28-140 planes came in. He switched to them, flying them because working on a Cherokee meant he didn’t have to think about coordination, like he did when piloting a Cessna. All he had to do was adjust the trim tab toward the white edge at takeoff, then ease it back a bit once he was in level flight. The Cherokee became his favorite small plane, even though the other pilots preferred the Cessna, claiming it was a better training craft. But they all had cars. He, on the other hand, walked from Bundy to the airport—three miles each way, every day—and nobody ever gave him a ride, and all those other pilots who swore by their Cessnas didn’t know about it.

But this time, a car pulled up to the curb, and a woman leaned her head out and asked,

“Are you heading toward the airport?”

“Yes,” Anderson replied.

“I’ll give you a ride,” she said. When he got in, she added, “Tom, the bartender, told me I drunkenly came on to you. My name’s Judy.”

“Oh,” he said. “You’d had a bit to drink and mistook me for someone named Stevenson.”

“Morrison,” she corrected.

“Right. Morrison. Did he give you some trouble?”

“God,” Judy said. “I wish I could find the words to describe what that man did.”

“Do I look like him?”

“In some way, yes.”

“In some way?” Anderson asked. “Did this Morrison have an accent?”

“No.”

“Well, you can hear that I have one,” Anderson pointed out.

She turned to him.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I never thought about that when I thought about you.”

She stopped the car.

“We’re here,” she said.

“You thought about me?” he asked as he stepped out of the car.

He looked at her and saw her green eyes filled with tears.

“Yes,” she said.

He was walking again along the row of planes parked on the southern side of the runway. As he walked, he watched planes climbing and landing, and he could hear the steady, monotonous voice of the man working in Tower Control. The loudspeaker was mounted above the gas station, where Andy sat outside, and passing by, Anderson glanced over Andy's shoulder and saw a photo in the newspaper—a shot of three policemen leading away a beaten student.

“They really worked him over, didn't they?” Andy said.

“I need a job, Andy,” Anderson replied.

“You could work for my brother.”

“And what does he do, Andy?”

“He needs a job,” Andy said.

“That paper's old, Andy,” Anderson said.

“So are you,” said Andy. “And you've had too many accidents. Walk away from this place and forget it.” He raised the paper to his eyes again. “They sure know how to work a guy over,” he muttered. “Christ, they really worked him over.”

“I've lost my job, Andy,” Anderson said. “I need work.”

Andy didn't answer. Anderson kept walking and walked into the office. This time, Esther wasn't at the desk. He stood for a moment in the doorway, staring at the white stain under Johnson's armpit on his shirt.

“I want a Cherokee for an hour, Johnson,” Anderson said.

“OK. Fifteen dollars,” Johnson replied. He picked up the flight logbook and a magneto key, setting them on the desk in front of Anderson. “Two Nine Romeo,” Johnson added. “You won't have

any trouble with this Cherokee. It's the same one you've been illegally teaching Ryan on."

Anderson picked up the key.

"I'll pay you on Monday," he said, looking at Johnson's hand as it reached toward him, exposing the pale semicircle under his arm. Johnson plucked the key out of Anderson's hand.

"There's no credit at this school," Johnson said.

"I could've told you I'd pay after the flight," Anderson said.

"Exactly. So why didn't you?"

"You're vile."

"Maybe," Johnson replied. "But I'm also an instructor whose hours are being stolen. That explains a lot."

"You're an instructor who doesn't know how to teach."

"Ryan shouldn't be flying," Johnson said. "You know that as well as I do. You've been flying longer and better than me. I'm sorry I have to give you a compliment."

Anderson turned away.

"Johnson," he said softly, "you know I have to fly. I don't know how to explain it to you. I just know—I *need* to fly. It's not that I *want* to. I have to, Johnson. I just have to."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a prayer, you bastard," Anderson said.

"Listen, Anderson," Johnson replied. "I can't fight with you right now because I'm covering for Esther, and I've got a hell of a tiring job. I'm calculating Ryan's hours—he's got about a hundred hours

of dual flight time, and I can't afford to mess up. These are hours the school knows about, legally logged to his account. I finish at six, and then we can talk. Alright?"

"I'm sorry," Anderson said. "I shouldn't have said that."

He turned and walked away.

"Anderson," Johnson called after him. "Have you ever flown a 411?"

"No. I know the 310."

"Ryan bought himself a 411. It's parked near Crescent Bay. Go take a look at that plane, and if you want to fly it, come back here, and I'll give you the key. Ryan told me I could always let you use his Cessna if you wanted to put in some work on it. After all, Ryan would probably be happy if someone actually flew a ninety thousand dollar plane. The guy can't even taxi properly to the yellow line in the old school plane that's not worth more than six grand."

"Is it dry or wet?" Anderson asked.

"I don't know. Go check it out. In the meantime, I'll call Ryan, and if he's okay with it, I'll give you the fuel card and settle up with him later."

"Thanks, Johnson. Sorry about what I said earlier."

Anderson walked out, passing Andy again. Andy didn't even glance up or put down his newspaper. Anderson continued on until he stood in front of the twin-engine 411A—clean, bright, and still carrying the scent of fresh factory paint. He climbed onto the right wing and peered inside. Beneath the instrument panel, a small silver plaque was mounted, engraved with the words: "*Esther and Michael Ryan.*" He stared at it for a moment, then wiped the sweat from his brow and climbed back down.

As he walked toward the city, Judy's car pulled up again. He got in without hesitation.

"Thank you," he said.

"We'll see what's stronger," Judy replied, "your indifference or your Irish stubbornness."

"It's just a coincidence," Anderson said. "The man who hurt you looked a bit like me. But that's all there is to it."

"Are you married?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And that's the obstacle?"

"No," Anderson replied. "My wife left me."

"Then what's wrong with me?" she asked.

"Nothing. You're young, beautiful. There's nothing wrong with you, Judy."

"There has to be something wrong with me," she said. "I'm not some whore? Is that what bothers you?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," he repeated. "It's just that there are some things you can never fix. I think money gets in the way for you all to understand that some things God just keeps to Himself. Then you run to some idiot psychoanalyst with a Harvard or Yale diploma on the wall. But there are still things that God does simply out of boredom. That's all, Judy."

He was silent for a moment, then added, "So, you never noticed my damn accent?"

"No."

"How is that possible?"

"When I looked at you, I simply wasn't thinking about how you speak," Judy said. "I just looked at you, and that was enough for me. I guess that's another one of those things God takes care of."

"I'll get out here," he said, and Judy pulled the car to a stop.

"Will I see you again?"

"No," he said. "We don't have a chance. I'm tied to someone, Judy. Forget about this."

"I won't forget. Now go to hell."

"That wouldn't take much time, Judy. You didn't think of that when you looked at me."

He stood still for a moment, then asked again, "So you really didn't notice my accent?"

"No. But we've talked about that already. It's just one more thing God handles Himself."

He looked at her lovely freckled face and bright eyes—eyes that he, along with the two Black men standing against the dirty, sweltering wall of the liquor store, knew were unmistakably Irish. The men, weary from alcohol, idleness, and the oppressive heat, had thin mustaches and hair straightened for eight dollars, now stiff and greasy as if coated in grime. And she had a short, straight nose, and full lips, and arms the color of frosted glass, glowing softly under the sun. And her shoulder, on which he placed his heavy, grease-stained hand was warm to the touch, and so was her cheek that she pressed down to his palm.

"Go back to living," he said.

"Why did it happen to me?" she asked.

"Why did it happen to me?" he replied and walked away toward the liquor store, still feeling the heat of her face on his hand.

"Can you give me a bottle of gin and a large bottle of cola on credit?" he asked.

Later, he sat atop a stack of crates, sipping gin and chasing it with cola from the large bottle wedged between his knees. His gaze wandered to the rows of cars: one of old, battered vehicles belonging to white folks, and another of Lincolns and Cadillacs driven by Black men. And again, he thought about them—the beautiful, athletic men whose bodies seemed diminished, their grace eroded by the same luxury cars designed for the rich, the aged, and the frail. For those already crawling toward their graves, and for their women—cunning, long-lived companions who would outlive them, squandering their fortunes and recalling them in shrill, harsh voices between visits to the manicurist and the doctor.

He took another sip of gin and thought about Clay and Liston, about how Frazier was too short, and then his mind wandered back to Liston. He truly liked the Big Bear. He remembered seeing him once, shaking hands with a white reporter, the reporter's pale, frail hand disappearing into the enormous paw of the Big Bear, who offered it as though handing over a cushion. The white man spoke to him, oblivious to the Bear's face, which gazed past him with tired eyes—the eyes of a man promised everything but given nothing.

Another swig of gin, and then he noticed a small Black boy sitting still at his feet, staring at him with a calm yet calculated intensity.

"Why're you looking at me like a spider at a cunt?" Anderson asked.

"What are you going to do with that bottle?"

"Drink it, first of all."

"You got gin in that bag?"

"What else would I drink with this cola?"

"Can I have the bottle when you're done?"

"What for?"

"Four cents."

"Fine," said Anderson. "But you'll have to wait till five. I can leave it here for you."

"No," the boy said. "I'll stay with you. My name's De Vane. What's yours?"

"Anderson."

"My old man's out of work."

"So am I."

"Then why're you drinking gin?" De Vane asked. "For a buck twenty-five, you could've had a gallon of wine and stayed drunk twice as long."

"I can't afford to get too drunk," Anderson said. "I'm waiting for someone. He's around here somewhere. Catolico Bueno, the boxer."

"That guy who does the cross before a fight?"

"The same one. You know him?"

"He always goes to the Mexican restaurant around the corner," said De Vane. "That's where he picks fights."

"He'll find one tonight."

"You planning to kill him?"

"No. I just don't want him boxing anymore. Do you think Irish Jerry could fight Liston?"

"Sure he could," said De Vane. "The Irish would give him a five-grand funeral afterward. Are you Catholic?"

"I don't know."

"You've got to believe in something."

"I believe in Jerusalem, De Vane," Anderson said. "And I believe that if I forget it, God will forget my right hand. You get that?"

"Yes," the boy said.

"Good. Because I don't," Anderson replied. He was a little drunk now, and De Vane could tell. "You see," Anderson continued, "you can feel it, but you can't understand it. So all you can do is chase after it until you drop. Because if you're walking somewhere at night, and it's dark and windy, and you see someone carrying a flame in their hand, you don't think about putting it out—you just follow it as long as it burns, and sometimes it's better to follow another person's flame in the dark than to walk alone in broad daylight. Because only then—when you feel something that makes you sad—can someone, or something, blind you for a moment. And only then can you glimpse the true face of God or love. That's Jerusalem, De Vane. Do you get it now?"

"Of course," said De Vane. "Watch the bottle."

"Don't worry. I'll leave it for you. What are you gonna do with it? Trade it for candy?"

"No. I've already got four others."

"You gonna buy yourself something to eat?"

"Yeah," said De Vane. "Hey, Anderson, let's be friends."

"Alright," Anderson replied.

"What do you do for money?"

"Nothing right now," he said. "But I've got a few buddies, and maybe I'll go with them to Mexico. We're planning to work a miracle. You know, De Vane, you head to some little town, and this one guy—a Jew who's coming with us—he knows how to make the Virgin Mary cry. He's got this special paint that dissolves when the church fills up with all those poor souls, and the temperature and humidity rise. You get it? You paint the eyes of a statue or an icon with invisible paint, and when the crowd packs the place, the paint melts, and then Saint Francis or Saint Joseph cries like a guy who just found out his wife ran off with a hunchbacked mailman. Then people start pouring in by the hundreds, and we bring in prostitutes, sell photos, and peddle miracle cures. All those folks show up dragging their blind or armless relatives, and we take the cash and skip town. You just need a few bucks to get started."

"And you've got that?"

"I'll be flying with these guys from town to town. I'm a pilot. We're taking a plane—it's quicker that way."

"And safer."

"Yeah. That too."

"Take me with you," said De Vane.

"No. You're still a kid."

"But you said we'd be friends."

"That's exactly why, De Vane. You don't know what it's like to sit in a Mexican prison. But someday, I'll take you with me."

Anderson took another swig of gin and added, "If I live that long."

"You're not thinking about dying, are you?"

"No. But it could always happen."

"I don't want you to die," said De Vane.

"Alright. I won't die now. I'll wait until you're very, very old. When we're both old men."

Lifting the bottle, Anderson looked into the boy's face, into those eyes filling up with tears, and his mind wandered to Judy. He thought of the warmth of her cheek pressing against his hand—the same hand now clutching the gin bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag.

"And then you'll leave me," De Vane said softly. "Some friend you are. You'll leave an old, poor man all alone, and then you'll die."

"Don't think about that," said Anderson. "And don't think about me."

He finished the gin, chased it with a swig of cola, and stood there for a moment, staring at his hand and he swayed slightly, thinking of Judy's soft cheek against his palm; then he turned his gaze to De Vane and watched as the boy stood up and moved beside him, trying to mimic his posture. Anderson stood motionless now, tense like a photograph of a man running from a place he could never return to, knowing that the place chased him harder than any man ever could.

"Now I get it," he said aloud. "Now I know what Jerusalem is, De Vane. If a man is chasing you, you still have a chance. You can run until he tires, or you can stop and kill him. But if it's a place chasing you, De Vane, you've got no chance. Because the place will always catch up to you. And if it doesn't, then you'll go back to it yourself, just to die there. And that's Jerusalem."

They stood, looking at each other now—the man who had once been a boy, and the boy who had long been a man, though he didn't yet know it, just as he had never realized he'd once been a child.

De Vane watched as the white man's hand rose. The bottle of cola arced through the oncoming dusk, tracing a bright arch before shattering against the wall.

He stepped into the bar and stood there, staring at the gleaming espresso machine, steam billowing out each time the Mexican filled the small cups with coffee. Then he saw Salvatore's flat, yellow eyes watching him from the corner. He stood and waited, breathing heavily yet calmly, and that's when Salvatore hit him in the face—a quick, hard right hook—and jumped back, and Anderson fell, feeling his weakened hands splay out like a frog's limbs on the sawdust-covered floor. The sawdust bit under his fingernails as he tried to rise, getting kicked again and again in the face, but he got up, and Salvatore hit him again, and Anderson slammed against the wall, rebounded, and struck the Mexican and dragged him to the counter, and all those people watched as Salvatore's head, pressed hard against the wood, scraped across the counter, knocking off glasses and sharply scented dishes, and moments later, they saw the taller man's bloodied hand turn the steam valve, while his left hand forced Salvatore's head under the rushing vapor. Then they heard the man's voice: sleepy, calm, and tired.

"I figured you wouldn't like that."

And they watched as the man dragged Salvatore across the room, his legs leaving two deep trails in the scattered sawdust—as if they weren't the legs of a lightweight featherweight boxer, but of someone a hundred pounds heavier, and they saw the man prop Salvatore's right arm on the curb and stand motionless, wiping the blood from his broken nose and split lips.

"Now you'll have to do the cross with your left hand, hombre," Anderson said.

And then he heard the wail of a police siren and the screech of tires as a car swung around the corner, and he watched the policemen jump out, drawing their revolvers as they ran. For a moment, they froze—stunned by the stillness of the scene. One man lying on the

ground, his arm propped against the curb, and the other standing over him, dark and immovable, like a tree. And only then Anderson jumped with both feet onto Salvatore's arm, which cracked with crack so loud it could be heard through the monotonous squawk of the radio. And only then they swarmed him, tackling the man who stood there again, calm and motionless, like a shadowed tree.

They arrived at Central Jail around midnight. Anderson was still cuffed to a Black man named Dick, who had tried to slit his enemy's throat but, in the darkness, had mistakenly slit the throat of someone he liked, and now he slept, his weight slumping against Anderson with each jolt of the vehicle, tugging him along, and he continued to sleep as they waited in the jail, sitting on the hard benches, and Anderson watched young men with long hair undressing and suddenly laughed out loud. The Black man suddenly looked up with unexpected energy.

"What's so funny, brother?" Dick asked.

"Look at those guys," Anderson said, "They look like survivors of Bergen-Belsen."

"No," Dick said, yawning, his breath heavy with alcohol. "They got monkeys on their backs, brother."

"But they still look the same. Bergen-Belsen was a place where Hitler—"

"Oh," Dick interrupted, yawning again. "If that guy was alive, things would be different. He didn't have nothing against Black folks, brother."

With that, he slumped back into sleep. A police officer came over and unlocked the cuffs; Anderson stood up, rubbing his wrist. The officer looked at him.

"Do you want to make a call?"

"A call? To whom?"

"Your lawyer. There's a phone over there."

Anderson walked over to the phone, flipped open the directory, and found Ryan's number. But no one answered. After waiting a few

minutes, he called Ryan's office, and his secretary picked up the phone.

"Which number would you like to reach?" she asked.

"I'd like to leave a message for Mr. Ryan," Anderson said.

"Senior or junior?"

"Junior. This is Anderson."

"What message should I give him, Mr. Anderson?"

"Tell him to find a new instructor. I won't be able to teach him for a while."

"Does he know why?"

"He should. Generally, prisoners don't have the privilege of flying planes," Anderson said, hanging up the phone.

Anderson returned to the bench and watched the people standing near the wall, where a police officer, standing perhaps six feet six inches tall and no older than twenty-two, conducted searches. The officer called everyone "son," and Anderson observed as the giant frisked an old man with one leg who clung desperately to the wall with his dirty, claw-like fingers.

"Officer," the old man said, "I firmly demand the return of my wooden leg."

"You didn't have a leg, son," the officer replied gently.

"Yes, I did, officer. Every prisoner is entitled to a set of false teeth, a wooden leg, and even wire-frame glasses if needed."

"I swear to God, you didn't have a leg, son," the officer said with a weary, martyr-like smile.

“You’re an officer of the law, right?”

“What, do I not look like one?”

“Then why don’t you know the regulations that govern the Federal Correctional Institution in Texarkana?”

“This isn’t the Federal Correctional Institution in Texarkana. This is Central Jail in Los Angeles County.”

“You’re joking, officer,” the old man said.

“Not at all, son. I’m far from joking. But I’m glad you think so. It’ll make it much easier for you tomorrow when the judge hands you at least six months after we tell him what you pulled tonight.”

“How the hell did I end up in Los Angeles?” the old man muttered, as Anderson watched his grimy fingers slide further down the wall. “I was released from Texarkana just two days ago.”

“We’re trying to figure that out, son,” the officer said, “But tell me, you didn’t happen to stop somewhere for a beer after you got released, did you?”

“Well, I did stop for a beer.”

“And maybe it was more than just one beer, no?”

“On a day like that, officer, a man doesn’t count the glasses. He’s just happy and tries to respect the law.”

“Is that so? Then I guess that makes two of us, son.”

“What’s the charge against me?”

“Public intoxication, disturbing the peace, and vagrancy.”

“Vagrancy?” the old man said. “But I don’t even have a leg.”

“The law is never wrong and is fair to everyone, son,” the officer replied, and Anderson watched as the old man slowly slithered off to the side.

“Son,” the officer said to Anderson and he stepped toward the wall and spread his legs, feeling the officer’s knees press between his thighs and the heavy hands pat him down.

“All clear, son,” the giant officer finally said. “Now head over to the table. They’ll take your fingerprints there.”

Anderson walked to another table, where a seated officer asked him:

“Do you know when your father was born?”

“No.”

“Your mother?”

“No.”

“Come on, give us some dates,” the officer said. “Make something up if you have to, just make sure they were at least a day older than you, okay?”

“Okay.”

“How old are you?”

"Almost thirty-five."

"We'll just write down that they were both born in nineteen hundred. Easier for us to remember, easier for you too. Sounds good?"

Anderson shrugged. "If it works for you."

"Now, give me your left hand," the officer instructed. Anderson watched as the man spread his fingers, pressing them against the ink pad and rolling them onto the paper, leaving black smudges in neat rows. When the officer reached for Anderson's right hand, Anderson jerked it back.

"What's the matter with you?" the officer asked. "Keep your hand steady."

"I know, but I took a bullet in the joint, and it doesn't turn left too easily. I've been cuffed to a nigger for hours."

"A bullet? Who shot you?"

"Somebody who wanted to shoot me."

"And what happened to them?"

"They got shot," said Anderson.

"And I bet you don't know who did it, do you?"

"No."

"You're a real good boy" the officer said, "But why is your hand such a mess?"

"I don't know," said Anderson.

The officer turned to his colleague. "Take a look at this, Sean."

The second officer, named Sean, took Anderson's hand and looked at it for a while. Then he said, "Looks like this guy's been pounding on something every day," said the officer. "Send him to the photographer, and then we put him in a lineup and see if anyone recognizes him." He turned to Anderson. "Go to photography now."

So Anderson stood, waiting his turn, and the man taking the pictures wasn't a police officer but a prisoner acting as an orderly, and one could tell he had the soul of an artist. The man before the camera looked like a professional strangler; you couldn't deny the strength in his face, and despite the faint, inward smile he wore, the artist wasn't satisfied.

"Turn a little to the left, Harry," he said from behind the camera. "Yes, better now. No, no—before was better. Don't get mad, Harry, but you really look like a scumbag. Oh, there it is. Better."

The flash went off, and Harry stepped aside, his shackles softly clinking.

Anderson stepped up to the camera; the artist was not happy.

"Smile," he said.

"I don't want to."

"What do you mean, you don't want to? Don't you want a good photo? Don't you care if you look like an idiot? Tell me, won't you be ashamed?"

"Fuck off," Anderson said.

He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and turned.

"Shut your goddamn mouth and hold it," said the cop giant. "Or we'll slap you with another charge for foul language against officers. You want me to remind you about the first regulation of conduct? 'Officers and jail employees will be treated with courtesy and respect. All Officers will be addressed as 'Sir,' 'Officer,' or, if the name is known, as 'Mister' followed by the last name. Ranking Officers may be addressed by their rank. Signed: Peter J. Pitchess, Sheriff.' You got that, you dirty son of a bitch?"

"I got it."

“I got it, Officer.”

“I got it, Officer.”

“You’re a good boy, son,” the officer said. “I know what you’re feeling right now. Court, lawyers, fees... But look at Harry. He’s looking at ten years minimum, plus the rest of his parole, and he still looks so good in his photo that even his guardian angel is proud of him right now.” He turned to the photographer. “Right, Bob?”

“Right, sir. But Harry’s exceptionally photogenic, sir.”

“I’m not,” Anderson said. “That’s because I’ve got a Black guardian angel.”

“Oh yeah? And why’s that?”

“Times are tough, sir,” Anderson replied. “And a Black angel is always cheaper.”

“You’re a good boy, son,” the officer repeated. “Now stand in front of that camera and be nice.”

Anderson stepped forward; Harry clinked his shackles knowingly, and the artist behind the camera decided the picture was good enough.

“You guys are like children,” the officer said as he led Anderson down the hallway. “All you want to do is kill, steal, and screw, and the second someone asks you to stand still for a minute in front of a camera, you can’t manage...”

He opened the door and shoved him into a dark room. Anderson stood against a wall that looked like a school chalkboard, marked with white vertical lines; a powerful light suddenly flashed on, forcing him to squint, so he could only make out the outlines of heads turned toward him but not their faces. And then he heard the steady, calm voice of the policeman:

“Six feet, half an inch tall... Weight, one hundred eighty-five. Born outside the United States. Profession: crop duster. Recently employed as a porter. Thirty-four years old, marital status: separated. Worked for a time in Kansas City as a flight instructor. Served a year and a half for abusing one of his students. Suspected of murder in Kansas City, acquitted due to lack of evidence. Never served in the army. Currently charged with assault and causing permanent disability.”

The officer paused; murmurs spread through the room. Anderson could hear whispers between the people beyond the light before the policeman’s voice returned:

“I’ve already said clearly: this man was born outside the country and speaks with an accent. Did the man who threatened you also speak with an accent?”

“No. But make him say something, Officer. I was so shaken up...”

“That’s fine,” the officer said. “Anderson, say something.”

“If by some miracle I’m released from jail tomorrow morning,” Anderson said slowly, “it will be one of the few days in my life that I’ve lived without financial worries.”

The murmurs resumed; the policeman argued softly with someone unseen, then announced clearly:

“Negative at this very moment.”

“What do you mean *at this moment*?” the tall policeman asked.

“The charge against him is assault and causing permanent injury. I need to know if he’s connected to that case on Western Avenue or not.”

“Negative,” repeated the unseen policeman.

Anderson followed the tall policeman and was led into a cell. He sat on the cold concrete floor and watched a man who was telling a

story, his slow gestures punctuating his words, like a farmer using his heavy hand to give weight to what he said.

“And then they brought Johnny in. Johnny was still on his feet, but he looked done for. Behind him walked a priest, and he didn’t look much better, mixing up the words of his prayer. You know how it goes: ‘He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake...’ Well, the priest got stuck right there and couldn’t go on, and he asked one of the guards, ‘Can you finish it for me? Everything’s jumping in front of my eyes.’ And the guard said, ‘I didn’t bring my glasses.’ And it took a long time to tie Johnny to the chair. And then they cut open the sleeves of his shirt and put the electrode on his head.”

“And the legs?” someone asked from the corner. “They cut the pant legs too, and they even wet your legs with water.”

“Don’t you worry. They did everything the right way. And then they pushed the electricity through him, and you could see all Johnny’s hair stand up straight in an instant.”

Black man Dick sleeping in the corner of the cell, suddenly bolted upright.

“They straighten hair? Where?”

“In New Jersey.”

“And who does it?”

“The guy the boys call ‘The Electrician,’” he said. “They told me about it, but I don’t know if it’s true. He’s not even an executioner. They just call some guy who they know is broke, and they tell him, ‘Look, we don’t want one of our boys to do it cause they feel bad about it later. We’ll bring you in, no one sees or knows a thing, and we’ll pay you three hundred dollars just to pull the lever.’ And a

guy like that takes the deal because, in the end, who makes three hundred bucks in thirty seconds?”

“Not even Mrs. Onassis knows about that,” said black Dick. “Don’t ask me about it, brothers. Not even she knows. Or maybe she’s the only one who does.”

“Fine. Her. And who else? Who else gets three hundred tax-free bucks for pulling a damn lever? Somebody tell me that.”

“Don’t ask me, brothers,” Dick repeated, walking over to the toilet and taking a piss.

“Hey, you,” someone called out to him. “Ever been to a masquerade ball?”

“No,” Dick said. “I got nothing to do with that, and you’re not dragging me into it.”

“That’s not the point. If you ever get invited, go. You won’t have to spend a penny on a costume. Just throw your dick over your shoulder and say, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Texaco Gas Station...’”

A man walked up to Anderson. “Remember me?” he asked.

“No,” Anderson said.

“I’m Steve. Steve O’Hara. We stood together at the draft board. Only they turned you down, and I went off and did my two years.”

Anderson didn’t answer. He stared at the ground for a moment, then said: “You’ve got the wrong guy. That wasn’t me.”

“No way I’m wrong,” Steve O’Hara said. “I remember that day like it was yesterday. You’re the guy who wanted to get into the USAF, right? But they turned you down. Why’d they turn you down?”

“You don’t remember anything,” Anderson said.

“Maybe *you* don’t remember *me*,” Steve O’Hara replied. “You’re the guy with the accent. Man, I remember every person I’ve ever met in my life. It’s some kind of special talent, except I forgot what it’s called.” He paused for a moment. “Hey,” he said. “What’s wrong with you? Want some water?”

“No,” Anderson said, wiping sweat from his forehead.
“Everything’s fine.”

A policeman entered the cell.

“Nine forty-six,” he said. “Anderson. Jacob. Your lawyer.”

Mike Ryan was pale, and the cigarette trembled in his hand as he tried to light it, but the match flame shook in his fingers, and Anderson watched him for a moment, then stepped forward and held Ryan’s hand. “It was self-defense,” Mike Ryan said. “You walked into the restaurant, and that man jumped at you, right? You’ll remember that? You got scared because you knew he was a boxer, right?”

“No,” Anderson said. “That man *was* a boxer.”

“Shut up. You’ll remember that? When the judge asks you if you’re guilty or not, I’ll answer for you, and then the judge will decide whether to let you out on bail or on your own recognizance, OK?”

Anderson looked at him; now, exhausted, Ryan looked older than he was. His lips curved downward, the lines on his forehead deepened, as did the wrinkles around his mouth—lines Anderson had never noticed before, and when Ryan finally lifted his eyes, they shone with an odd, green light. They looked at each other for a moment.

“Why did you do it?” Mike Ryan asked.

“I lost my job because of that man. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to fly.”

“I know how that feels.”

“No,” Anderson said. “You don’t know, and you never will, because money will always pull you out of any trouble. Besides, you don’t fly for yourself. You fly because the woman you love wants you to fly.”

Ryan smiled a strange, lifeless smile.

“That’s how it used to be,” he said. “But it’s not for her anymore.”

“So you don’t love Esther anymore.”

“That’s not what I said. I still fly, but not just for her.”

They were silent for a moment. The policeman sitting in the corner yawned and glanced at his watch.

“Ryan,” Anderson said, “I want to stay in this prison.”

He walked to the window and stood behind Ryan; their faces loomed in the dirty glass, beyond which the day began to rise.

“Why do you want to stay here?”

“It’ll be better this way.”

“No one’s better off in prison.”

“I will be, Mike,” Anderson said. “I will be. Because if I get out of here, I’ll kill a man.”

“And who’s the man you’re going to kill, you fool?”

Anderson didn’t answer; he took half a step back but still looked into the dark, dirty window, where Ryan’s aged face loomed faintly.

“I’ll be that man, Mike,” said Anderson.

Lying in the shadow of the airplane's wing, the day was bright and cool, and they could see the still, silver basin of the sea every time they took off from Compton, and Anderson said:

"There's got to be about twenty-five miles of visibility. If you can see the sea from six hundred feet..."

"I don't like Compton," Ryan said. "I don't like this place."

"It's a good place to land, Mike. No tower. The only shame is you can't do touch and go."

"Why don't we fly to Dulce?" Ryan asked. "Why do we have to fly here? Here, I keep thinking about your brother?"

"Then don't think about him."

"I can't not think about him," Ryan said. "It's here you told me about it. And I keep thinking about how that boy of his followed him through the mountains. Though after what you did to that Mexican, nothing should surprise me anymore."

"Well, if you're going to think about him, think about him the way I do," Anderson said. "That man couldn't live without flying, and he was already dead long before he killed himself. That was all that mattered to him, and when they took it away, he couldn't hold onto anything else."

"And his wife?"

"What of it, Mike? Why complicate things? You people in this country can't name anything for what it is – you just look for reasons. Every single thing has a thousand reasons, and if you try to explain even fifty of them, you forget what you were trying to understand in the first place."

“Sure,” Mike Ryan said. “Don’t trouble yourself about it. I’m the one who’s supposed to find reasons. I wonder what the judge will say when he hands down your sentence six weeks from today. Should I tell him: ‘Your Honor, my client is a man who maimed another man because someone told him he lost his job because of him.’ Or: ‘My client is a violent man, and in general let’s just not talk about it.’”

“I’ll tell him that myself.”

“No. For Christ’s sake, you won’t say a thing. I don’t want an extra charge for contempt of court. You’ll keep quiet. What could you even say?”

Anderson didn’t answer, watching a plane coming in for landing; the plane descending with the hum of lowered flaps, its shadow wandering alone over the earth bathed in cool light, and then the wheels struck the runway, and the shadow rejoined the plane. Something that had been strange and unreal now took back its weight, the smell of exhaust and grease filling the air as the plane taxied back to the start.

“That’s the most beautiful part,” Anderson said. “When you watch a plane come in to land, and you see its shadow running ahead of it, and then the plane is on the ground, and you think about the man inside, and how he sees his shadow now, not in front of him but to the side, and he knows he’s back with us again. You know, Ryan, I think that’s what I liked best before I even started flying—watching a plane reconnect with its own shadow.” He propped himself up on his elbows and turned his swollen, battered face toward Ryan.

“There are a lot of things I could tell that judge of yours,” he said. “I could tell him that flying is like a woman, and if you love her, you’re afraid you’re not good enough for her, that you won’t have enough life in you to enjoy her fully. But you only feel that way when you really love, because you don’t care what a whore you sleep with thinks or says. You tiptoe out in the morning so you don’t wake her, and you don’t have to talk to her.”

“You’re breaking my heart, Anderson,” Ryan said. “But I’ve read that a hundred times, that flying is like being with a woman, I’ve seen a hundred movies about it, and I’m afraid the judge would tell you the same thing. And I’ll tell you one more thing: in all those little private schools where I started flying, every one of those private instructors took me aside and had an intimate talk, when they’d say: ‘Mr. Ryan, flying is like making love, and you’re going to love it. I’m telling you this privately...’ Well, there you have it. So don’t say anything and leave your defense to me; it’s a duty I consider an honor, and I’m sure my homeland will never forget it. But for God’s sake, don’t say all this nonsense to the judge, who’ll probably be some failed young lawyer whose father didn’t have enough money to set him up with an office in Beverly Hills.”

“I know all that,” Anderson said. “But in all those books, you never read what happens to you when you’re really honest. And if you think about flying honestly, not just about stealing six bucks from a student and calling it a day.”

“And what happens if you’re honest?” Ryan asked.

“What always happens: you’re left alone with your love, but without your woman. If you love flying and you believe someone else wants to be a pilot, and you teach him, thinking he feels the same way you do, and he wrecks the plane or dies suddenly—then you’re left alone, without a job, without a plane, because no one will give you one. They’ll think you didn’t know how to teach. They won’t think that you simply trusted yourself and your student, believing he felt the same way you did. Then you’re left alone, and people think you’re finished, and that’s the truth that neither the judge nor you, nor all those books you read know, Mike.”

“And you don’t think that man could have felt the same way?”

“Which one?”

“You don’t think that man could have loved boxing the way you love flying?”

“I do think so.”

“So why did you do it?”

“That’s exactly why: I knew he loved boxing.”

“There’s no excuse for what you did.”

“Even if there isn’t one, you’ll find it.”

Ryan laughed. They watched the airplane taxiing on the soft runway and a little Black boy picking up a stone, throwing it at the plane, and running away. They saw the plane spin around on its axis, while the pilot let go of the controls to shield his head with his arms. But nothing happened; the plane spun a full three hundred and sixty degrees with a screech of its tires and came to a stop. Ryan picked up the stone and aimed, but Anderson grabbed his arm, and they stood facing each other, breathing heavily, until Anderson twisted his arm; the stone fell to the ground, and Anderson pushed Ryan away.

“And you really think you’re better than me?” he asked.

Ryan sat heavily on the ground and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He looked up at Anderson with his beautiful, youthful face.

“No,” he said quietly. ‘I don’t think that. I don’t even think I’m as good as you.’

The wind brought the smell of kerosene and smoke, and the sky began to darken over the sea, and Anderson said, “We’re going to fly, Mike.”

“Anderson,” Ryan said. “I’m sorry, but I have to tell you something: I’ve heard all this before. What you said about flying and honesty. I’ve heard it all.”

“Not from me.”

“From Esther. That guy she was with before let one of his students fly solo after five hours, and the kid died right in front of his eyes. So you think that was it?”

“What?”

“That cursed honesty you talked so beautifully about?”

“Maybe,” Anderson said. “Maybe he thought the kid would be just like him. And he lost.”

“Strange.”

“No. This happens a lot.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Ryan said. “You know, I think a lot about that Esther’s guy. Actually, I used to think a lot about him. I don’t need to tell you what I thought of him. But now I’m not jealous of him anymore.” He gestured toward the plane taking off, its shadow trailing behind on the ground while it climbed into the sky, buffeted by the wind. “It happened just like that,” he said. “Just like that. I know that man is gone from her life, his shadow’s still here with us, but he himself is like the airplane you can’t see anymore, and you don’t care about it anymore. And just like that, that man is gone.”

“But the plane always connects with its shadow,” Anderson said. “That’s when it comes back to the ground.”

“Yes. Only then it won’t hurt me anymore,” Ryan said and stood up. The wind blew through his light hair and tugged at his shirt. “I’ll tell you how it is: when I started flying, I hated it. And now I love it. I know it’s only because of you. That’s why that man doesn’t mean anything to me anymore.”

Anderson turned and walked to the plane. With one foot already on the wing, he said, “I’m taking off. I don’t like this wind.”

They were already in the cockpit, and Anderson taxied the plane to the runway. Planting his feet on the brakes, he pushed the throttle all the way forward, waiting until the tachometer needle passed the red line, and then, he suddenly released the brakes, and at fifty-five miles per hour, he pulled the nose of the plane up, holding it in a critical angle of attack for two or three seconds before dropping it again; the plane leveling out three feet above the ground at maximum speed while the VSI needle stayed motionless. Ryan watched as the trees at the end of the runway came rushing toward them, and he wanted to grab the controls, but Anderson's hands clamped down on them, and the yoke didn't budge. They flew tilted, the right wing nearly brushing the ground, almost merging with its shadow, and Ryan could see this because the sun was setting directly in front of them, sinking behind the trees rushing to meet them, and then Anderson suddenly yanked the nose upward, pinning Ryan back into his seat, knocking the breath and sound out of him; Ryan no longer looked at the trees but at the speedometer needle dropping sharply, and he saw the red stall warning light flashing, and at that exact moment, Anderson shoved the nose back down, and Ryan saw their shadow fall away behind them as they cleared the trees by two feet.

"That was stupid," Ryan said after a moment.

"It's possible that on the exam you'll have to fly three feet above the runway," Anderson said. "And when that happens, remember that at three feet, the altimeter is dead, and you need to watch your own shadow."

He reached out his hand toward Ryan, who silently handed him his sunglasses. Anderson put them on and turned to him.

"And remember," Anderson said, "it's usually hard to lose your shadow."

They gathered in the yard at six in the morning, standing in line, yawning and squinting whenever a truck rolled in, its bright headlights blinding them; now, at the end of October, the sun rose a few minutes past six.

At this hour, the boss usually came out of the barracks, walking down the line, pointing his finger at those he chose, simply saying, “You, you, and you.” Then he’d turn back toward the barracks, saying, “That’s all for today, folks.” The boss was a good man, but he always fell into a bad mood when he had to say, ‘That’s all for today, folks’ because it meant there was no more work — not until the next day.

That day, Anderson finished work around two o’clock; he went back to the barracks with the other workers, as they were paid a flat rate at the end of each day. But then Tracy came out — the Irishman who half-replaced the boss and half-stole from him — and told them:

“You’ll have to wait until tomorrow. Chink, our bookkeeper, died.”

“So what?” someone asked; a small man whose eyes seemed to pop with rage. “You must have something written down in those books.”

“Exactly,” Tracy said, rubbing his forehead. “That’s the problem. See, our boss wanted to hire a cheap bookkeeper, so he got himself a Chinaman. And Chink kept those books, but in Chinese, because he didn’t know how to write in English. Now a whole army of specialists is trying to decipher it, but all we know so far is that it’s not written in Cantonese.”

“Chink was a good guy,” someone whispered to Anderson. “He always added hours for me when the boss wasn’t looking. Too bad I never understood what he said. I don’t even know his real name.”

“Everyone called him ‘Chink,’” Anderson said.

“He didn’t even know that wasn’t very polite,” the same man said. “I wonder what they’re going to do with him.”

“Bury him,” Anderson said. “That’s the only thing you can do with him now.”

“They’ve got some kind of special way of burying people. I saw it on TV.”

The boss came out of the barracks; he was red and furious.

“What are you standing around for, folks?” he said. “Tracy told you Chink died, and we can’t read the books. All we know so far is that we’re short a receipt for a hundred and eighty thousand pounds of potatoes and eighty-eight thousand pounds of tomatoes. Does anyone here speak Japanese?”

“But he was a Chink, not a Jap,” someone said. “Boss, they get offended when you mix them up.”

“Oh, they get offended, huh? What do you think I feel like when I realize I’ve got fifteen years’ worth of business records written in a language no one knows a damn thing about? You think that makes me happy?”

“No, I don’t think so, boss.”

"They've called in everyone who might have something to do with this," the boss said. "We even had two judo teachers in here. Nobody can make heads or tails of it." The door suddenly swung open, and a man in a white coat stumbled in, pushed hard by Tracy's powerful arm. "What's wrong with you, Tracy?" the boss snapped. "Haven't I got enough problems already?"

"Boss," Tracy said, "I went all the way to Inglewood for this guy. He runs an Eastern school of meditation and judo and karate. But his name is Rosenblatt."

"So what?" Rosenblatt said. He was sitting on the ground, wiping sweat from his forehead. "I've got to make a living too, don't I?"

"Do you know Chinese?" the boss asked. "Quick, yes or no?"

"How would I?" Rosenblatt replied. "I'm a tailor by trade. But this is a country of ready-made clothing. They just shorten or lengthen the sleeves. Anyway, if you need a good, elegant suit..." He reached into his pocket and pulled a business card from his wallet.

The boss ground his teeth.

"Get this son of a bitch out of here. Or I'll do something nobody's ever done before."

"I'm sorry," Rosenblatt said. "But your Irishman here showed up with two other guys and told me to get in the car. I thought they were either cops or gangsters."

"You can be sure they were gangsters," the boss said. "Do you think I could run this business with Hoffa's people, strikebreakers, and Negroes if I didn't have a few tough guys for backup?"

"I can always help you," Rosenblatt said. "I've run all kinds of businesses before."

"Get this son of a bitch out of here!" the boss started shouting.

"Don't make me a murderer. Don't make me a murderer... I don't want to be the first man in the world to kill a Jew pretending to be a Chinese karate teacher. Maybe that's my quirk, but take him, take him out of here. And come back tomorrow, folks..." He stormed into the barracks, slamming the door behind him.

"This will end badly for him," Rosenblatt said. "This country is controlled by Jews and will be controlled by Jews."

"Go to Dallas and say the same thing," someone said. "Or Houston."

Anderson walked to the bus stop, watching the sky darken. Here, in Downtown, it was hard to tell what it looked like over the ocean or what it would look like in an hour when he got there. There was no wind; a fog soaked with smoke hung motionless, like a brown carpet suspended over the city by the devil, and the people on the bus coughed, wiping their sweaty faces with handkerchiefs that, like their shirt collars, had already taken on the color of the smoke.

"Wake me near Bundy," Anderson told the driver.

He sat behind him and drifted into a half-sleep, occasionally hearing the conductor calling out street names and the sound of people coughing before slipping back into slumber, feeling the weight of his own bones every time the driver hit the brakes and his body shifted. He had worked eight hours, unloading crates from the truck, with a twenty-minute coffee break; the driver's arm shook him awake.

"Jesus Christ," the driver said. "Everyone's already off. Bundy."

Anderson stepped out, crossed the street, and stopped next to a hamburger stand. Two police officers sitting at a table drinking coffee watched him for a moment with mild interest as he stood motionless, staring straight ahead; it was no more than three miles to the airport, and he tried to see whether the planes were taking off from runway twenty-one or runway three, but he couldn't see a thing. Only once did an Aero Commander roar by, navigation lights flashing and the landing light flickering on and off every second, making the aircraft just barely visible. But the Aero Commander was at four thousand feet, heading north.

The telephone booth was occupied by a man with his back to everyone, shouting into the receiver with one finger jammed into his left ear. Anderson waited for a moment; the man pulled his finger out, reached into his pocket, and fed a dime into the machine. Anderson turned to the officer.

"Do you know what it looks like at the airport, Officer? I don't feel like walking six miles."

"It looks bad at the airport," Judy said from behind him. "It makes no sense for you to go out there." She stood next to her car, smiling. "The situation's completely unusual. You won't even get permission for Special VFR."

"He can get Special VFR clearance," the officer replied, "if after takeoff he continues runway heading and reports VFR as soon as he clears the clouds."

"The airport's closed today, Officer," Judy said. "Besides, I want to take him, have a drink, and commit acts against good morals. I'm talking about what they call free love. What do you say to that, Officer?"

"Listen, mister, this young lady..."

"Judy," Anderson said. "I just got out of jail three days ago." When they were sitting in the car, he asked, "Where'd you learn all that?"

"Free love?"

"No. Special VFR Procedure."

"Oh," Judy said. "I drive through here from time to time. Want a drink?"

"Okay," he said.

"Want to go to Mucky Duck?"

"For a bit. I'm tired."

"So am I."

He brushed her cheek with his hand.

"You don't look tired, Judy," he said.

"Waiting wears you out."

They sat later, drinking heavy dark beer, watching big, blond-haired Irishmen toss darts at a board between pulls from their pitchers, and the Irish girls drank just as hard, laughing and talking, and Anderson said:

"None of them are as pretty as you, Judy."

"I know that."

"You've got that round little face."

"I know that."

"And you've got beautiful eyes, Judy."

"I know that too."

He moved to swat her hand, but she pulled it away just in time, so his swing caught the side of an Irishman sitting nearby who turned eagerly.

"Sorry," Anderson said.

"Are you a man or not?"

"I am. But I'm not standing up and walking outside. Not right now anyway."

"Then when?"

"When I'm done drinking and talking to this young lady."

"OK. I'll wait," the Irishman said, and sat back down.

“You know, Judy,” Anderson said, “there’s nothing as nice as sitting here with you, having a drink, or just talking. This is real rest.”

“Good,” she said. “If you really already think I’m so pretty, then tell me—what’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” Anderson said. “We’ve talked about this already. Want another beer?”

“Yes.”

He stood and pushed his way through the crowd to the bar. He set the pitchers down on the counter, and the bartender said, “Watch out for that girl, Mac. She’s caused us plenty of trouble before.”

“That’s nothing compared to what she’ll stir up tonight,” Anderson replied. “Kids will be reading about it in school a thousand years from now.”

He brought the beers back to the table and set them down.

“You live around here, Judy?”

“No. Out past Topanga Beach.”

“Shame summer’s over.”

“We’ll still get a few days of Indian summer,” Judy said. “You can come out and visit me. We’ll grab a gallon of wine and go to the beach.”

“Sure. If I’m still in this town by then, we’ll go to the beach.”

“You want to leave?”

“I’ll have to,” he said. “I think I’ll have to.”

“Who even are you?”

“I used to be a pilot.”

“Oh. Do you have your own plane?”

“No. I’m not an American citizen.”

“And what does one have to do with the other?”

“A non-American isn’t allowed to own a plane. And I’m not allowed to be an American. I’ve got a criminal past.”

“That’s why you’ll have to leave the city?”

“Yes.”

“And where will you go?”

“East, Judy,” he said. “Every time I leave, I always go east.”

“And won’t you miss this country?” she asked. “A lot of people think this is the most beautiful country—sun, water, mountains.”

“Yes, Judy. It’s the most beautiful country I know. That’s exactly why I’ll go east when I have to leave.”

“Leave or run?”

“That depends on the point of view, Judy. But why do you have to know all this?”

“I want to know everything about you,” she said.

“And what for, Judy?” he said. “Why think about people like me? What really remains of us when we’re gone?”

“I don’t know that yet.”

“Don’t follow me any longer, Judy,” he said. He laid his hand on her round face and felt her soft cheek press against his palm. “I’ll never be with you, and there’s nothing I can do about it. You’ll just

get drunk and angry every time you see me. I'd like to say it differently, but I just can't."

"But why?" she said. "Why does it have to be like this?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's simply because everyone's wrong. Life is a question, not an answer. And until you understand that, there's nothing you can do."

"And what do you do if you understand it?"

"Shoot yourself. Will you drive me home?"

"No. I want to stay here with people," she said. She was silent for a moment, then said, "And with the questions." She tore a page from her notebook, wrote her address on it, and handed it to Anderson.

"Alright," he said. "I'll come see you before I leave. Goodnight. Don't drink too much."

He stood up, touched the shoulder of the Irishman sitting at the next table.

"I'm leaving," he said. "Should I wait?"

"Yes," the man replied, turning to his companion. "Dorothy, I'll be back in a minute."

"That guy's got an accent," Dorothy said. "Aren't you a Hunky by any chance, sweetheart?"

She screamed; Judy spilled a mug of beer in her face.

"This is a proper Irish bar," Judy said. "Let them go outside and let them fight."

They went outside and stood facing each other for a moment before they started laughing.

“That girl of yours is one hell of a woman,” the man said. “What did you two fight about?”

“Nothing. I want to go home, I have to get up at four in the morning, and she wants to drink. That’s all.”

“And now you’re going to walk in the rain?”

“Looks like it.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” he said. “Where do you live?”

“Corner of Warner Avenue.”

He got out and ran through the rain across the yard. In the hallway, his landlord blocked his way.

"I have no intention of interfering in your affairs, Mr. Anderson," the landlord said. "But the lady you're living with... well, in short, we had to call the police. She started screaming that she was going to kill herself, and it scared the other tenants."

"She's not well," Anderson said. "I'll calm her down."

"But you understand, our tenants..."

"I get it—thirty days from now."

He opened the door and stood for a moment in the dark, watching the rain streak down the window. He turned on the light; Helen was sitting in a chair, and he walked over, gently taking his razor from her hands.

"Well," he said, "even that was too hard for you to do. What a damn day—Chink died, Judy's drinking, you're pretending to kill yourself, and some guy at the bar wants to fight me... Why is everyone so awful to me?"

"Esther was here," Helen said.

"What did she want?"

"She said she's moving to a new house the day after tomorrow and you shouldn't call her but come see her. I don't know what that means."

"But I do."

"Are you... leaving here?"

He laughed.

"For God's sake, Helen. You don't even know what you're saying. You shouldn't think that way. I'm not leaving you, and even if I had to leave, I'd take you with me. I couldn't live without you, Helen. You know, when I look at you, I think maybe God really does exist."

"And why do you think that?"

"When I look at you," he said, "I think no one is too worthless to be exploited. You just have to know how."

"And that's your faith?"

"In a way. You're my faith, Helen."

She was silent for a moment. He poured half a glass of whiskey and handed it to her, but she refused to take it. He shrugged and drank it himself.

"Christ," he said. "How can you drink this stuff?"

"Do you remember those soldiers burning rice?" Helen said. "The ones you showed me on TV? Well, you and Esther are like those people burning rice. You destroy everything and everyone around you just because you don't know how to love. And just because you don't know how to love. But one day..."

"Exactly," Anderson said. "You put it perfectly: 'one day'—and then what? What happens on that day?"

"Nothing," Helen said. "That's the point—nothing ever happens to people like you and Esther. Absolutely nothing happens inside of you."

"But plenty of things happen around us," he said. "Surely you can't deny that, my dear friend."

"Yes," she said. "But even if all the people in the world died on the same day at the same hour, nothing would ever happen to you. Even if the whole world were left empty, and the two of you had to live together forever. That's because you don't know how to love. And you keep waiting for a miracle. But there won't be a miracle. You'll burn everything around you, and one day you'll wake up old and ugly. And that will be all."

"I think you might be right," he said. "And even if you're not... so what? This whole week has been terrible; Chink died, the weather's below minimum, Judy's drinking." He picked up a doll from the floor and looked at it. "At least the dear little one is doing fine," he said.

"Oh," Helen said. "The rifle's still in its place."

"Is that what Esther said?"

"Yes. The rifle's still in its place."

"That's good news," he said. "You're not going to do anything stupid tonight, are you?"

"No. I wouldn't even know how to do it a second time."

"The first time didn't go so well either," he said. "Good night, Helen."

He turned away, tossing the doll behind him, and stood in the doorway with his hand on the light switch.

"Christ," he said. "How can anyone want to die just because someone like me might leave? How is that even possible?"

"So it's true?"

"What?"

"That you want to leave?"

"Don't worry," he said. "We belong to each other in some way, Helen. I already told you—you're my faith. When I look at you, I keep thinking I might still be able to make something of myself. Now go to sleep and don't think about what you tried to do."

He turned off the light and stood again in the darkness, silently watching the rain streak the window, listening to the monotonous voice in the hallway asking Mary to open the door.

After the night's rain, the morning was bright and crisp. People stood in line, yawning and rubbing their hands as departing trucks lit up their tired faces. This time, the boss didn't pick anyone individually; he simply called out the first fifteen from inside the barracks, and Anderson went back home.

"There was a call for you," Helen said.

"Esther?"

"Yes. She said to call her if you're back before five. She's already at the new place."

He walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver. The window was open; a crane truck pulled into the yard, and the noise of the engine annoyed him. He set the receiver down and went to the window, resting his arms on the sill as he watched the workers talking to the building manager.

"There's no reason to cut this tree down," one of the workers said.
"This tree can be saved."

"How? It barely has any roots," the manager replied.

"You could loosen the soil around it and wait. Sometimes that helps if you cover it with fresh earth. You'd also need to trim the ends of the roots. That can help, too. But there's no point in cutting it down. It's a good tree and could live for many years."

"Are you sure about that?" the manager asked.

"Of course. But it's your decision."

"Could we wait a few more days?" the manager said. "Until the homeowner gets back?"

"That's fine."

"But you're sure it can be saved? I'll need to tell him that."

"Yes," the gardener said. "We'll do everything needed. It's no more than a day's work, costs about the same, and you'll keep the tree."

Anderson stood there, staring at the tree and the men, motionless, his hands resting on the windowsill. He didn't feel the passage of time or the sun on his face. The tree still bore a few white blossoms, and he could smell their fragrance as they drifted down, spinning lazily in the sunlight and breeze.

He reached for the phone again but set it down once more. Putting on a clean shirt, he stepped outside.

A Black man gave him a ride all the way to the sea, complaining about how hard life was in this city. But Anderson listened to his melodic voice, and the man's lament sounded like a song.

"You see," the man said, "in this city, the women are all greedy for money. I invited one over, started cooking, bought a bottle of

whiskey, and before she even showed up, I'd spent ten bucks. That means in this city, you're out ten bucks before you even know what you're paying for. Oh, how greedy they are, brother. I could talk about it day and night. That's why I've got to work two jobs. Two jobs at once..."

He stopped the car and extended his hand. "I wish you all the best, brother."

Anderson shook his hand and walked down to the sea. He looked at a bright new house, its windows reflecting the sunlight, its scent still fresh with paint, wax, and likely gasoline from cleaning. He noticed a small, slightly pudgy sports car parked in the open garage. A woman stood in the sunlight, watering the neatly trimmed but slightly yellowing lawn with a rubber hose. Everything—the house, the car, and the woman moving leisurely around her home—had a sense of order and harmony. It exuded a quiet certainty that it would endure for years, untouched by time. The house seemed impervious to the rains that would fall in those golden days to come, solid and enduring as though it were the home of the dead.

He looked at the water, at the sea, at the white waves silently dying on the sand. From the neighboring house came the shriek of a radio—someone howling into it, tearing at the tortured strings of an electric guitar, its sound amplified through dynamic microphones and speakers. The singer screamed about leaving his broken heart in a place he thought was safe, only to return and find it gone. Howling so loud the windows rattled, he begged for his heart to be returned. And once again, ripping the guitar strings as if clawing them with the talons of a demon, he declared that he sang so loudly because he could not live in silence, unable to hear the beating of his own heart.

She hadn't seen him approaching—not as usual, emerging from the shadows or from some place unseen, a place others feared but that he considered safe. This time, he came from the light, from the direction of the sea, which gleamed like a bowl filled with sunlight.

She only noticed him when he was already beside her, their shadows meeting before their eyes did—green eyes and brown. He stood there silently for a moment, then opened the hand he'd kept clenched for the past hour. A gust of wind carried away the petal of a white flower he had plucked while crossing the yard of the house where he lived.

"I came to say goodbye, Esther," he said.

"You've never had that habit," she replied. "You would just leave. Then the police would come asking about you, and then some people whose planes you wrecked, and then those you owed money for fuel. And then a postcard would arrive from you, saying you were in trouble and promising a longer letter soon. That's how it's been for ten years. Have you changed your ways now?"

"Fine," he said. "Think about it however you want. I came to say goodbye."

"You even brought a flower," she said. "Unfortunately, the wind took care of that."

"Esther," he said, "don't you really understand? I came to say goodbye to you."

"Then say it," Esther replied. "Say whatever you need to before the ones chasing you catch up."

"No one's chasing me," he said. "I'm just leaving, and I'm never coming back to you. Stay with Ryan, live with him for a hundred years if you like, and don't think about me. Ten years—that's enough. Stay with Ryan and let this be over. Because, you see, Ryan..." He trailed off.

"Why do you keep talking about Ryan?" Esther said. "You came to say goodbye to me."

"To you and to everyone," he said.

"What 'everyone'?" she asked, laughing this time. "You've never had anyone but me. You don't even know if your mother is alive, and you've never cared. You don't know if your father's alive either because that never interested you. The only reason you know about your brother's death is because he died in a plane crash, and you can't forgive him for wrecking a good plane. So who are these 'everyone' you're saying goodbye to?"

He didn't answer, so she continued, still smiling, "There's no one here you need to say goodbye to. No one's going to remember you, mourn you, or think about you. Why on earth did you suddenly decide that someone like you needs to say goodbye to anyone?"

"Fine," he said. "Then I'm saying goodbye to you."

"That's foolish, too," Esther said. "I know what you think of me. You didn't have to come here just to say goodbye. You could've called, written a letter, or simply disappeared without a word."

"Can I sit for a moment?" he asked. "I'm tired."

"Please, go ahead," she said. "After all, Ryan is your student and your friend. Surely these noble farewell words are meant for him."

"Fine," he said. "What do you want to do with Ryan? Do you really want to be with him?"

"I don't know yet," she said. "Maybe I'll get used to him in time. Besides, he's so similar to the man I once loved..." She paused for a moment. "No," she said. "That's not it. He became similar. Let's leave it at that."

"Do you want to marry him?"

"I don't think so. Besides, I have a husband."

"You *had* one."

"Okay. Have or had. One is enough for a lifetime."

Anderson sat motionless, his head resting on his fists. Then he said, "But I don't want Ryan to be similar. Let Ryan stop flying, stop drinking at night, and let him go back to being himself."

"What was that?"

"Let Ryan go back to being himself," Anderson repeated.

"Anderson," Esther said, laughing again, shaking her head like a child hearing an old joke told poorly by adults pretending to find it hilarious. "That man I spoke of took everything from me: my youth, my child, and all the dreams a young woman has when she gets married. You see, that man I loved..."

"Stop," he interrupted. "It's a pity there's no mirror here. You could walk up to it, and I'd show you the only person you've ever truly loved. I know that. And I'm no better than you."

"You're undoubtedly dumber," she said. "It wasn't because you wanted to get rid of Ryan to be with me. That was just part of the performance you staged for me. And you thought, even for a minute, that I believed you? Oh, you couldn't have thought that."

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know if I thought that."

"But I do," she replied. "It pleased you to look at him and think about yourself at his age, back when you were still human. You looked at him and thought about yourself, about when you met me, when I believed in you, and when, as people say, everything was ahead of us."

"Who says that? Who says everything is ahead of us?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Esther said. "Some people."

"What people?"

"Everyone. Maybe it's those you wanted to say goodbye to? So you looked at Ryan and thought about yourself, about being young

again and having everything Ryan has. Now, when you have nothing left."

"No," he said. "I still have you."

"But you're leaving."

"Not you. The place."

"I don't understand," she said. "But it's one of your ideas, the kind that sometimes turns out to be funny. You know, you're like Goofy the dog: you always have a great idea, but at the last moment, someone slams your paw in the door. Like with that poor madwoman, Helen. How do you even know she's here illegally and terminally ill?"

"Good people told me."

She took his right hand and looked at it for a moment. She shook her head again.

"And you really thought it was me when you were hitting her?"

"I tried."

"But you could have hit me," she said. "There's something here I don't understand. What would it even mean to you in the end?"

"I couldn't," he said. His face twisted. "I couldn't even think about it. I can't hit you, Esther."

"And kill me?"

"I don't know," he said. "That, I don't know either."

"No," she said. "That's something you know well. You know exactly how to do it. Now you're lying, and that's not like you."

"Fine," he said. "I'd like to kill you, Esther. But I know I'll never do it."

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other; and once again, he saw her brown face and the dark, now weathered, sun- and wind-burned brows arched like a swallow's wings above her eyes—drowsy, half-closed, and gazing at him as if from a distance, though in reality, they were only two steps apart. He could smell her, and he knew he would give in to that scent again. So he grabbed the hose lying on the ground, still trickling water, and turned the stream on her, thinking the scent of water might erase the scent of her body. But Esther didn't move, not even slightly; the warm water clung to her, and her dress stuck to her body, revealing her figure as if she were naked in the sunlight—brown, long-legged, and dark as a statue. He shook his head when she reached out to him, but he couldn't stop staring at her, couldn't look away. The water had failed to erase her scent, and then, for the second time, she reached her hand toward him.

"Come," she said.

He entered her body as one enters water; water that moment by moment transforms into light, and he moved toward the light that came toward him slowly, yet relentlessly, and then it began to approach faster and faster, transforming from light into warmth that engulfed him—not as fatigue, but as strength; strength that, now as he looked into her wide-open eyes, feeling her lips and her hands tightly clasped around his neck, began to transform into a heat he could no longer bear, and into a silence he could no longer endure—a silence broken by her voice; her voice, now different from how it always sounded, was like his own: drowsy, calm, and weary—the voice, which had come to him, summoned him and cast him down from the summit of light and warmth, and it pulled him away from the arduous climb he had made with clenched teeth, like an animal's; it cast him back into silence, and from silence into water, where he lay, exhausted, seeking rest.

He lay motionless, unable to move, knowing he couldn't move, and he felt her trying to free herself from his arms, which were tightly wrapped around her. He wanted to help her but couldn't; he never could. It was always she who had to free herself afterward from beneath his body—limp, tired, as heavy as the body of a pilot banking sixty degrees on one wing. And it had always been this way when he was with her.

From the day he met her, many years ago, in another country, in another part of the world, at another time of day, much had changed in his life. He had changed countries, names; the people chasing him had changed, as had those he pursued. Planes had changed, as had the people whose money he stole or robbed to afford flying. The men he worked for to earn money for flying had changed—owners of sawmills, liquor stores, and trucks who struggled to understand him. Those who laughed at his accent had changed; prisons, judges, and the uniforms of police officers had all changed. Only one thing in his life had remained constant: what he felt when he was with her.

"Alright," she said. "I'll come back to you."

"Only?"

"You'll never make it back to the plane," she said. "You won't even think about it again."

"So it was him who was meant to be me, wasn't it?"

"You won't get to the plane, and you'll stop thinking about it," she repeated.

He smiled. He stood, took the rifle down from the wall above the bed, and opened the chamber. The bullets were in place. For a moment, he stared at the rifle, weighing it in his hands, then closed the chamber and hung it back where it had been.

"Don't worry," he said. "In this country, women aren't blamed for anything. It'll be me."

"So, you don't want to?"

"No," he said. "I can't live without flying. I don't want to."

"You're not young anymore."

"No. That's why I have to fly more and more. I can't do with you what I used to."

"Even if we love each other night after night?"

"Esther," he said. "You've left me so many times before in my life. So be it. But now, I won't leave the plane."

"The man I knew before you died because of you," she said, her voice calm and drowsy again. "And so did your brother. And the man I met after you."

"And I'll die the same way," he said.

"Fine," she said. "Then leave. We've said our goodbyes."

He sat on the bed, and she now looked at his strong hands, his lean torso, and his sharp profile.

"No," he said. "I owe him that much. That's why he bought the rifle—to protect this house and you. I was there with him then."

"So now I'm supposed to watch him kill you? After everything you did to make me think it would be the other way around?"

"What difference does it make, Esther?" he said, watching Ryan step out of the car and slowly approach the house. Ryan stopped by the mailbox, pulled out some letters, and then, noticing the garden hose lying on the ground, turned off the faucet.

"And even if he does, I'll still leave you with myself," Anderson said. "This man lost himself faster than I thought. Just watch him closely. You know, Esther, one stone can't destroy a city. But a city can be built starting with just one stone. I'll give him that stone."

He was already dressed in his pants; he stood, took the rifle down from the wall, and tossed it to Ryan. A silence followed, broken only by the faint hiss of the water slowing to a stop.

"Go ahead," Anderson said.

Ryan raised the rifle, its iron sight wavering before Anderson's eyes. But he couldn't hold it steady. He stepped back, leaning against the wall, the barrel still aimed directly at Anderson's face. Then, finally, Ryan lowered the rifle.

"I can't," Ryan said. "I can't."

Anderson turned to Esther.

"Esther," he said. "Tell him how many times you actually finish with him when you're in bed together."

"I never finish with him," she said, her voice calm and deliberate. She spoke as if she were carefully considering her words. "No," she repeated.

"Never?" Ryan asked.

"No," she said. She paused again, brushing the hair that had fallen over her forehead. "No. I just know how to fake it."

"And now tell him how many times you finish when you're with me," Anderson said.

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. She lay still for a moment, and they both looked at her lips. She brushed her hair back again. "I never counted," she said. They watched as her hand moved the sheet covering her, then slid across the fabric she lay on.

"I think I finished with him about eight times today," she said.

Anderson turned again, watching Ryan retreat to the wall and lean against it. Once more, the barrel of the rifle began to rise toward him.

"But now you should be able to?" Anderson said.

The barrel started to trace parabolas in the air again; as he watched, a ray of the setting sun caught on the metal. Ryan, with the barrel swirling in wilder and faster arcs in his hands, looked like a magician conjuring light out of empty air, breathing loudly and raspily. Then, suddenly, he lowered the rifle.

"I can't," Ryan said. "I can't." He threw the rifle down and collapsed to his knees. Crawling toward Anderson, he stretched out his hand. "I can't," he said. "I can't." He began to weep, still crawling on his knees, his hand reaching forward. "I can't," he repeated, crying. "I can't, God, God, God. I can't, my God, I can't, I can't, I can't."

"Then if you can't, I will," Anderson said.

He walked out, making his way along the shore, inhaling the air, feeling the sand shift under his heavy body. He kept his eyes on his shadow running alone ahead of him; but his shadow didn't meet another. Silently and alone, he walked toward the city along the edge of the sea, now darkening slightly.

When he turned inland and crossed the beach toward the road, a shadow of an airplane passed over him. So he lifted his head and looked: the airplane flew low with its lights on, banking left over Marina del Rey. Then the sun set, taking with it the shadows—his and the plane's—into the night.

He worked little in the following days; they were days of rain, and then came the days of wind that chased away the rain, but the rain returned again. So now he was alone with Helen, staring at the

telephone that hadn't rung during those days, and then looking out the rain-blurred window. He went to bed each night, watching the shiny and silent phone; and lay for hours with his hands behind his head, listening to the night and trying to sleep.

One night, a man in the hallway caused too much commotion, and the police took him away. Anderson walked to the door, then forgot to close it, leaving it ajar, and sat late into the night. Then he heard footsteps in the hallway, louder than usual, and realized he hadn't closed the door. He got up and went to the door; he spotted an old man opening a door—the one behind which Mary lived.

The old man looked at Anderson and nodded to him.

"The police took some guy from outside your door," Anderson said. "Thought you might want to know."

The old man smiled; he pulled a note from his pocket and handed it to Anderson. It read: 'I am deaf-mute. But please speak to me; I can understand when people talk if they look at me.'

"All right," Anderson said. "There's some guy always asking about Mary. Is she your daughter?"

The old man wrote on a piece of paper torn from a notebook: "I have no one. I've been living here alone for three months."

"But it says on the door: Miss Mary Roberts," Anderson said.

The old man wrote: "I know, but it's nice to think you're living in a place where a young person used to live." His hand paused, then he added: "I even talked to the manager about it, and he agreed. Do you think I'm harming anyone?"

"I don't know," Anderson said.

The old man wrote: "If it bothers you, I'll take the sign down."

"You're not bothering me at all," Anderson said. "I'm used to it by now. But do you know that young man keeps knocking on that door?"

The old man wrote: "Truthfully, I know." He paused again and wrote: "The loneliness of an old man isn't easy. It's always nice to think that someone..." The old man stopped writing.

"I understand," Anderson said. "I think I understand." Then he returned to his apartment.

The next morning, the sun shone again, and a northwest wind blew. Anderson woke up too late and skipped work. He took a bus to the sea and started walking toward Zuma Beach. A young man pulled up in an old Ford, the smell of hot exhaust filling the air, and asked:

"Where are you headed?"

"Zuma," Anderson replied.

"I'm going to Frisco," the young man said. "Buy me a gallon of gas, and I'll drop you off at Zuma. It's on the way."

Anderson got into the car. The old Ford rattled and sputtered. Anderson glanced at the instrument panel: nothing worked. The speedometer, oil pressure, temperature gauge, and fuel gauge—every needle was resting firmly on zero.

"You said you're heading to Frisco?" Anderson asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you have someone to push you along the way?"

"This is a good Ford," the boy replied. "I'll make it. Once I get to Frisco, I'll make some cash and then head to Vancouver."

"You must be joking, right?"

The boy pulled a crumpled copy of the *Free Press* from under the seat and showed Anderson written in red pencil: "*Ron, sweetheart. The draft is after you. Run. Ma.*"

"I don't want to kill," the boy said. "You understand?"

"Why?" Anderson asked. "Have you killed someone before?"

"No. That's why I'm running."

"Funny," Anderson said. "We're both making a run for it at the same time."

"You got the same problem?"

"In a way," Anderson replied. "But once you start running, you won't be able to stop."

"It's better than killing," the boy said. "But yeah, it looks like I won't be able to come back. I've got family in Canada. They run a restaurant up there. I'll wash dishes for them."

"What did you do here?"

"I was supposed to be a doctor," the boy said. "And you? Were you in the military?"

"No. I'm too old for that."

"You said you've got the same problem," the boy said. "Or did I misunderstand you?"

"You understood me well," he said. "Let me give you some advice: buy yourself some aviation oil, fifty-weight. I can feel that the engine's running too hot. Get the fifty-weight. It's about the same price, and the engine will heat up less." He handed the boy fifty cents and stepped out. The old Ford sputtered off, trailing black smoke.

He found Judy's house and knocked on the door, but no one answered. The house was by the sea. Walking around it, he spotted her lying on the sand, sketching something on a sheet of paper. For a moment, she didn't notice him standing there, watching her: fair-haired and pale-skinned, absorbed in her drawing, biting her lower lip. Then, suddenly, she turned.

"Strange," he said. "The first time I saw you, I thought you had brown hair. You're so fair, and I was always told Irish girls have dark hair." He sat beside her. "What are you doing, Judy?"

"Designing a dress," she said.

"Is that what you do for a living?"

"Yes. I work for myself, at home."

"And can you make a living doing that?"

"If you manage to sell what you create," she said. "Are we going to talk about dresses now?"

"Looks like I'm leaving this town," he said.

"East?"

"Where else?" he laughed. "Every man who loves someone eventually has to head east."

"I didn't know that," Judy said. "Everyone used to head west."

"Yes, Judy. That's how it always is. First, you head west. But then, you always return east. That's how it has to be."

"I wonder if you even understand what you're talking about," Judy said. "Or if you're just heading to Chicago to borrow enough for a ticket back to California."

"I understand," he said. "You know, I got a ride here from a guy dodging the draft. He studied here, he learned how to live comfortably here, but now he's running away because he's scared of a year in Vietnam. Says he doesn't want to kill anyone and that he'll wash dishes up north."

"So what's strange about that?"

"But why's he running north?"

"The border's closer," Judy said. "If he's going to run, he's not going to cross the entire U.S. when Oregon and Seattle are right there. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't," he said. "It's the north."

She turned to him.

"What are you even talking about?" she asked.

"I don't know, Judy," he said. "You have to talk about something, don't you? But I can stop. I promised I'd come here before I left, and here I am. You can talk to me about something, if you want."

She touched the scar on his shoulder.

"How did this happen?" she asked.

"You see," he said, "it happened the first time, before I headed east. And here too—" he brushed his hair back from his forehead, and Judy saw a dark, thin scar she'd never noticed, hidden under his always unruly hair. His hair was thick and coarse; even now, sitting on the sand, his dark face turned toward the bright sea, the wind couldn't move it. "That's when it happened," he said.

"And what actually happened?"

"Oh, I crashed a plane, and people beat me up."

"That's awful," she said. "You must have been in terrible shape even before."

"No, Judy. Not at all. I wasn't there. It was my student who crashed the plane."

"I never noticed that scar on your forehead before," Judy said.

"Judy, almost no one's seen this scar. And no one knows about it."

"What about your wife?" Judy asked. "The one who left you."

"It didn't mean anything to her."

"What does that mean? She didn't care?"

"Oh no, she cared. But it didn't matter. If it had meant anything to her, she'd be with me today, Judy."

"Looks like today's my day," she said. "First, I get a call telling me they won't buy my collection, and now I'm with someone who talks like he's quoting the Bible." She stood and said, "Come on. Let's make some coffee and something to eat."

They went inside, and Anderson sat in the armchair, listening to the sound of water running from the bathroom. Judy returned, wrapped in a colorful Chinese robe, and Anderson's eyes followed the bright dragons with their vivid red tongues and her bare feet leaving wet prints on the floor as she walked toward him, but he didn't lift his head; he stared at the floor until her steps stopped.

"Judy," he said, "this can't work for us. We don't have a chance going for us. It would not work."

And it didn't work; afterward, he lay beside her with his face buried in the pillow, feeling her hands gently stroking his hair, and her lips pressed to his neck. They didn't speak, he felt good, warm; he knew the person beside him harbored no resentment or disdain. And he knew it all already—everything about this; the kindness of

women and their rage; their understanding and their scorn; their compassion easily turned into fury; he knew it as well as he knew Esther's body, which had never deceived his own.

"Has it always been like this?" Judy asked.

For a long time, neither of them spoke, caught in the delusion they had allowed themselves to believe. But now, the delusion had faded, and they knew it wouldn't return. Darkness had fallen outside; the sound of the sea roared like in every film where lovers make love, with waves or storms raging beyond the window. Storms, fireworks, or flocks of birds rising in a wild cacophony against paper backdrops and artificial light. Here, though, nothing had happened. The woman's face twisted in a spasm, but it wasn't the man beside her who had brought it—she had done it herself. His body was lifeless, like a corpse being touched by the hands of old, devout women preparing it for burial, not by the hands of a young, healthy, full-blooded woman; and now the sound of the sea outside reminded him of something that hadn't occurred. But now it was dark, and he lifted his face from the pillow and saw hers in the glow of a cigarette: pale, slightly broad, the face of an Irishwoman with a short, straight nose and full lips.

"No," he said.

"Well, maybe there's something we can do about it," she replied.

"No."

"You don't know that," Judy said. "You're not a doctor."

"I asked you to believe me," he said. "It's not my fault."

"I'm not blaming you for anything," Judy said. "In situations like this, no one talks about blame."

He propped himself up on his arms, resting his head in his fists, and looked at her. "So, Judy," he said, "what do people talk about in

situations like this? Just tell me, what should they say in moments like these, and I'll be grateful to you for the rest of my life."

She placed a hand gently over his mouth.

"Hush," she said. "Hush."

So he lay back down beside her, listening to the wind—the wind still blowing in from the southeast—and thought about how it would keep blowing for many days now, following the rains and mists that had passed. He thought about how, across the desert he would cross heading east through Arizona and New Mexico, the wind would stir up clouds of red dust, and he imagined how the desert in Nevada looked different in the calm of a still day and under the force of a windy one—dark, almost black in color, and the road he thought about, the one leading through Indio, Phoenix, and New Mexico, would swirl with dust at each gust of wind, a dust that reddened from sunrise to sunset, scattering against the flat mountains.

"I'm going to go now," he said.

"You don't have to leave," she replied. "You can stay here."

"Until morning?"

"Until whenever you want."

"I didn't ask for your pity, Judy."

"This isn't pity."

"Then what is it?"

"Faith."

"Faith in what?"

"That this will change."

"That's not the kind of faith I want for myself," he said. "Faith is believing in something that can never change."

"All right," she said. "If we both believe in something, and if we can talk about it together, maybe it's not faith. Maybe it's love."

"I never asked you for love, Judy."

"That's true," she said. "You didn't. So when you're there, back east, think of me. You said yourself that anyone who loves someone eventually heads east. So if you ever think of me, think of me there, in the east."

"All right," he said. "If I can. If I can, I'll sing about you in the east."

He lay still again, listening to the wind, and saw himself, thinking about himself; he saw himself walking alongside roads where no policemen could stop him, walking through the red, swirling wind that would eventually turn into rain, then chill, and then snow. Only when he reached the snow line, he thought, would the motorcycle cops no longer be a threat, and those in cars wouldn't pay him any mind. He thought about how many people didn't make it in the West, and about how they return to the East; and he knew the policemen knew that too.

And he saw himself walking, even though he could have bought a bus ticket and ridden, but he chose to walk, knowing the road he had picked was one he had to traverse again. He needed it—to see the desert, the mountains, and the sand that seemed red or dark, whipped up by gusts of wind. He knew he had to see it again; to walk there as long as his strength allowed; and always, everywhere, there would be people unsettled by the sight of a man who walked, asking for nothing. He knew that people only gave when nothing was asked of them; they only gave when compelled. So he knew he would compel them, that he would provoke contempt and hatred in others, and that they would remove him from the road to keep him away from their cities and their homes. They would justify it to

themselves as separating him from their lives, without admitting that they wanted to keep him away from their own hearts; they would think of him as one of those who had failed in this golden country given to them by God; they would remove him from the road, to send him as far away as possible, making sure he couldn't even think of returning.

And that would be their faith—in God, in the world, and in the laws that governed it; laws their fathers had learned by fires and in churches, and that they themselves had learned sitting in front of televisions and drinking alcohol, but they wouldn't know the one thing—that he was leaving this golden country they compared to paradise, not because he had failed, but because he had succeeded; he would do what he had resolved to do. He thought of this as Judy reached out and touched the scar on his forehead again—that he would be the only person who knew he had succeeded here. And that would have to be enough; he would have to be enough for himself.

"I'm going to go now," he said.

"You can take my car," she said. "I won't need it for a few days."

He smiled.

"So you think we'll make it?"

"I still believe."

"We believe in different things, Judy."

"No, we just call them by different names."

"All right," he said. "Then I'll come back here once more. But remember: you asked me to."

"Yes," she said. "I'll remember: I asked for this myself. Don't turn on the light."

He touched her face; it was wet with tears, and Judy took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. Then he left, holding his hand out before him in a theatrical gesture, looking at it but seeing nothing, feeling nothing; the wind coming off the sea dried his hand. He stood in the wind, in the darkness, his eyes wide like an animal's, still looking at the hand he couldn't see; and he knew that nothing would ever help—not a man, not a woman. God had given him that hand and God had given him his body; God had given him courage and had spared him from death many times. God gave, and God took away; God punished and God rewarded. God had given him much of what He hadn't given His other sons, but God hadn't given him the one thing he truly wanted—God hadn't freed him from another's body, and often, whenever he wanted to kill her, God's silence warned him not to do it. And not to rid himself of her, for if he did, then God, even if He didn't kill him, would never do anything for him again; and he knew that if he rid himself of her body, he would lose his own forever, and that was his only matter with God; that was what he thought about—driving now through the night, seeing people raising their hands, asking for a ride.

Someone knocked on the door one day not long after, and Anderson opened it. They stood in silence for a moment, looking at each other. Ryan was paler than usual, but as always, his hand shook as it held an unlit cigarette.

"Can I come in for a moment?" Ryan asked.

"Of course," Anderson said. He watched as Ryan moved across the room with the unsteady gait of a sleepwalker, bumping into furniture but following some invisible axis only he could sense. He went to the window and yanked the curtain aside. Anderson heard him exhale deeply, almost in relief, as he looked at the tree crown bending under the wind.

"I can't hate you," Ryan said, not turning around.

"And why would you hate me, Mike?"

"Do you think I don't have a reason?" Ryan asked. "Do you really think that?"

"A reason," Anderson said. "It's just another word you people invented. I simply showed you the truth."

"You didn't show me anything," Ryan said. "I don't care about what happened between you and Esther. Maybe it's my fault. I didn't think about the fact that she's working there, at the airport, earning two dollars an hour, when it wasn't even necessary. I didn't take care of her the way I should have."

"So, you've found someone to blame, Mike?"

"And what? Do you think I'm blameless? Do you think you just walked into my house, and she fell for your charm? Is that what you think of yourself? That everything is just a sum of coincidences?" He was silent for a moment, then said, "You matter too little to be guilty here."

"So I don't even matter that much?" Anderson said. "You know, I never believed in the laws made by men. One day, someone told me that people are divided into guilty and not-guilty, and I lost all interest."

Ryan turned around.

"And yet you don't matter here," he said. "You're just an aging sadist with a criminal past. That might impress her, but not me. I've been hearing about people like you since I was a kid. I've seen them, and later I defended them." He extended his hand toward Anderson, holding the burnt-out cigarette stub, and crushed it between his fingers. Anderson watched the tobacco spill onto the floor.

"Sorry," Ryan said. "Or maybe you don't have anything to smoke either? That was my last one." He ground the tobacco underfoot.

"Yes," Anderson said. "It's true, I don't have anything to smoke. I haven't worked in days." He grabbed a piece of newspaper, knelt, gathered the spilled tobacco, and lit the stub. "So, what else did you come here to tell me, Mike?" he asked.

"I'll give you money, so you can leave this city."

"You always reduce everything to numbers, Mike. You buy, or you think about buying. Has it ever occurred to you that some things are for free, and some can't be bought at all?"

Ryan laughed.

"No," he said.

"Why not?" Anderson asked, extending his hand with the lit stub toward him. "After all, you gave me this cigarette for free, Mike."

"I threw it away."

"Well, I didn't pay for it."

"Fine," Mike said. "That's about as much as you can get from people. But no more."

"So you came to give me money," Anderson said. "And you want me to leave this city. But what about you, Mike?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"And I don't have to leave."

"I'll marry Esther the very same day you take your sorry face and get out of this city."

"That won't be so simple, Mike," Anderson said. "To marry Esther, she'd first have to divorce her husband. And her husband would have to agree. Which means they'd both have to want it. But that won't happen because neither of them wants it, Mike."

"What are you talking about, for God's sake?" asked Ryan.

"You mentioned marriage. I was just telling you it won't be that simple."

"Esther had a husband?"

"No. Esther has a husband."

"And who..." Ryan started to speak. He stopped, and leaned so heavily against the window that the glass cracked. But he seemed not to notice, staring at Anderson as if seeing him for the first time. He tried to say something, but no words came; he extended his hand instead, drawing circles in the air, while his open mouth remained speechless.

"Yes," said Anderson.

Ryan reached into his pocket, pulled out an empty cigarette pack, crushed it, and threw it to the floor. He tried his other pocket but found nothing there. He looked at Anderson, whose face was surrounded by the dark smoke from the rolled in newspaper cigarette.

"Give me that cigarette," Ryan said quietly.

"No. I found the tobacco on the floor, rolled it up in a newspaper, and now I'm smoking it. Go buy your own. A moment ago, you talked about how much can be bought, Mike, and you weren't interested in what people give freely. And now you're asking?"

Ryan struck him across the face. Anderson staggered back a step, then began to laugh.

"That wasn't you, Mike," he said. "That wasn't the kind of man you are. Don't do that. If you want, I can work on you for five minutes, and you'll understand it wasn't meant for you."

Ryan turned away again, and Anderson moved to stand beside him, and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

"And yet, I can't hate you," said Ryan. "I don't know why."

"You're the one who took Esther from me," said Anderson. "Maybe I'm the one who should hate."

"Any suggestions?"

"No. You're the one who suggested me money."

"And you don't want it?"

"No," said Anderson. "I'm sorry, Mike, but I have to go now."

"I don't want to be alone," said Ryan.

"Go to some bar and get drunk."

"I don't want to go to a bar," said Ryan. "And I don't want to drink. I want to be with you. Only with you. But I don't know why that is."

"Then come with me."

"Where?"

"I need to return a car to a girl."

"Oh, so there's another girl," said Mike. "Esther didn't even have a car."

"You'll buy her one."

"Who is this girl?" asked Ryan. "Some sweet little clerk? Or maybe a little junkie?"

"Mike, it doesn't matter who people are to us. What matters is who we can become for people. Otherwise, we have no power over them."

"I don't want power over people."

"But I do," said Anderson. "And if you want to stay with me, we'll go to this girl, you'll sit with her for an hour or two, and then I'll pick you up from there. She always has something to drink and is quite nice."

"I don't want to be with a nice girl," said Mike. "I want to be with you, though I don't know why." He suddenly laughed. "Could this be it?" he said. "Could it be because we do have something in common?"

"You shouldn't say that, Mike. Really, you shouldn't. And besides, you're wrong."

"Wrong?"

"We had something in common," said Anderson. "You'll sit with this girl, if you want, while I go to Esther and tell her I'm leaving her."

"You're not serious."

"No, Mike. I don't lie. But I want to be alone with her and tell her this doesn't make sense anymore. Ten years is enough. But I don't think I could talk to her about it in the presence of a third person. You'll have to give me that much."

"And if I don't give it to you, you'll just go to her anyway, right?"

"No, Mike," said Anderson, pointing to the telephone. "I'll call her, and she'll be here in twenty minutes. But why frame it like that? You'll wait with the girl, then I'll pick you up, and you'll drop me off."

"Where?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe the bus station, maybe the train station. Either way, I'll tell you one thing: tomorrow, I won't be in this city."

"But will she be in this city?" said Ryan. "And can someone like you be trusted? Is there anything sacred to you?"

"You know there is," Anderson said. "And I promise you that."

"And I have to believe you," Ryan said.

"I suppose you do. I suppose you must."

"And is it only because I couldn't kill you then?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, Mike. You couldn't do it, that's a fact."

"Maybe it wasn't that I couldn't," Ryan said. "Maybe I didn't want to. Did that ever cross your mind?"

"No," Anderson said. "You couldn't, and there's no need to lie about it. Do you think I wouldn't have done it if someone had taken Esther from me?"

"But I took her from you," Ryan said.

They stood in silence for a moment. Anderson looked at Ryan's face and his light hair falling across his forehead. Then, he reached out and brushed the hair away.

"You said it yourself," Anderson said.

They looked at each other again. Ryan's eyes were sunken, his hands trembling. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days; his breath heavy with alcohol. Suddenly, Ryan turned toward the window, catching his reflection in the glass, and it was a sharp, weary face, nearly indistinguishable from the face next to his. If

there was still a difference, it was the ten years separating the two faces. But even those ten years were no longer a difference—they were merely a promise made to the younger face: a promise that it would become like the old one.

"So you hate me," Ryan said.

"No, Mike. I've never felt that way about you."

"If she really is your wife?"

"She is, Mike. You talked about your guilt, now I'll tell you about mine: I was always the one destroying, running away, and the one being chased. You see, Mike, it started because I couldn't lose my accent. So I couldn't work for the airlines—those are the rules—and I bounced around in small planes or was out of work altogether. And I felt marked, Mike. I was always the outsider, and I knew I always would be. And then things got worse for me. Later, we met again after years, and I had a good job, and we were living quietly, but, Mike, she didn't love me anymore. And that's when I realized: she only loved the parts of me that I hated most." He paused, then added, "And that's the part of me that you love too, Mike. You and Esther are like one person. You believe in money, that money is power. Esther never had money, so she believes in violence, in terror. You and Esther share the same god."

"And that god is you, yes?" Ryan said.

"No, Mike. Not me. Your god is whatever you want for me. But now I can leave you both alone. Now, when you know who she is, and she knows who you are. Because you couldn't pull the trigger back then. But one day, you'll be able to."

"Listen," Ryan said. "Maybe it's all a little different? Maybe you were never a communist who killed people back in your damned country? Or the man who lived outside the law, breaking people's arms and bones? Maybe all of that is just what you want to believe about yourself? So no one would think you're a weak, pitiful little

man." He laughed at his own words. "Well, isn't that it?" he asked. "A little man who just wants a little job to keep a little sweet whore for himself. And maybe that's the truth we haven't talked about yet? And the rest? The rest is just a show. A show staged by a small, insignificant nobody for others like you."

"Think about it however you want," Anderson said. "It doesn't change the facts. Esther is my wife, and I am her husband. And you can only guess at what's between us. Don't you remember what she told you in bed that time?"

"If it was true."

"Do you want to ask her again?"

"Fine," Ryan said. "Forget what I just said about you putting on a show. You are vile."

"I know," Anderson replied. "But now I really have to go. If you want, come with me. If not, I still have to see Esther."

"And what if I won't let you?"

"You can do that, Mike. You have the rifle."

Ryan didn't answer; he was watching the people working around the tree in the yard. They were shoveling the soil, exposing the roots. The wind still blew, now from the northwest, tugging at the tree and the blue coveralls the workers wore.

"What are they doing?" Ryan asked.

"They're working on the tree, Mike."

"But they were supposed to cut it down."

"They're trying to save it, Mike. There's still a chance. The idea is to replace the soil around it, and then it might start living again. That's what they told me."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes. I think so. If they reach the roots and decide the tree can adapt to the new soil. I'm sorry, but I have to go. Will you come with me?"

And after an hour, he said:

"Judy, this is Mike Ryan, my friend. He'll wait for me here; I'll be back soon."

But he didn't hurry; he drove slowly along the coast, watching the white boats and the houses of all those people who had made it here, living like plants on this coastline—tanned, smiling, and as scentless as the sea around them. The seasons came and went, but this land and the people living in those rich homes remained unchanged; their dramas stayed under the strict supervision of doctors, lawyers, and pharmacists; the years that passed over the world did little harm to their health, and if time reached their awareness at all, it was only in the form of a new car they purchased well before the end of the year—another year of sun, light fogs, and silver clouds. And driving now in Judy's car, he looked at this shore and at those people who had turned into plants, dedicating themselves to cultivating plants and using artificial fertilizers to do so; swimming in artificial pools; and dining in expensive seaside restaurants on lobsters and fish from metal cans; he looked at their women hiding their faces under layers of lipstick, and he knew that this time, he was seeing it all for the last time and that he would never return.

He stopped the car in front of an auto parts store and went inside.

"I need a tire iron," he said. "The largest you've got."

"For a truck?" the clerk asked.

"The largest you've got," he repeated.

He paid and then drove to Compton. At this hour, there was no one around; the gas station was closed, and he left the piece of iron, wrapped in paper, on the ground. He looked at the row of cars and then at the windsock; the wind was now blowing at a right angle, and in the remnants of the setting sun, the shadow of the wind sock crossed the white runway. He stood for a moment longer, thinking about how the only smell he would remember from here as he left would be the smell of the airport: grease, high-octane gasoline, and warm concrete, along with the faint scent of grass growing at the edges of the runway, always trampled by people.

He returned home when it was already dark. He entered Helen's room, but she wasn't there. So, he went to the manager's apartment, and the manager opened the door.

"It's terrible," he said. "I'm so sorry. I didn't want to do it, but it was necessary. That woman was screaming so loudly that someone called the police, and they brought an ambulance. You can visit her at the hospital. The doctor who came here said she'd need to stay there for a few days. She needs supervision. I'm truly very sorry, Anderson."

"When did it happen?"

"Three hours ago," the manager replied. "I'm really sorry. I imagine how you must feel."

"Don't do that," Anderson said. "It will be better for you."

He went into his apartment and opened the closet where his shirt was hanging. He put it into a bag along with a few books and his shaving kit. That was everything he had: an old, faded flight instructor's shirt; a Jeppesen computer in a vinyl cover, which he'd bought for seventeen dollars; a two-dollar plotter; and aeronautical charts. He knew he'd never have anything more. He didn't need anything else because he still had the strength and determination of an animal, and he thought about how a few more years would pass before he lost that strength and would no longer be able to work as

he had so far—loading timber, crates of liquor, and sacks, acting as a machine that didn't need to be spoken to, reacting only to a whistle or a wave of the hand. And after that, his strength would be gone; he'd lose the ability to work and to fly. He didn't think beyond that, about what would happen when airplanes would no longer be within his reach. Nothing would happen then; there would be nothing left worth thinking about. He believed in God, though he couldn't imagine Him, and for many years, this had tormented him, but one day, he understood that God wasn't a matter of imagination but of necessity, and that some people could live without God while others could not. He was one of those who needed to believe, and he always believed that God would take his life when he no longer had the strength to live as he had. He didn't believe in punishment, but he did believe in reward, and he believed that death would be a reward given to him by God for the life he'd lived in poverty and in constant flight. And he believed one more thing: that life was a question posed to man by God for no particular reason. And so for man, the only true and meaningful punishment was faith.

He unfolded his narrow bed, covered with two dirty blankets, and lay down, resting his arms behind his head, staring into the darkness outside the window. He didn't know how many hours remained until dawn, because he didn't own a watch. He always woke up at the time he intended to. So he lay there in the darkness, thinking about Helen and what would happen to her, knowing he would have to send her money and bring her to him if he managed to make it east and find a job there. He didn't want to leave her in the hospital, and now, as he glanced at the cheerful eyes of the doll staring at him from the corner, he thought about how Helen was as necessary to him as Esther had been, because Helen was a source of comfort. He thought it would be better if Helen believed he hated her and tormented her. That was a separate matter—Helen's faith; he knew Helen couldn't afford another kind of faith and would never understand that people could be different. As long as he was with her, he was her faith, and he didn't want Helen to live without faith. He didn't want anyone to live without faith because he was one of the few who understood what faith truly was.

But that was another matter, this business with Helen, and he didn't feel like thinking about it any longer; he couldn't anyway, because Ryan entered the room without knocking on the door which Anderson had never locked, waiting. He lay on the bed, watching Ryan, who sat in a chair facing the window, tears streaming down his face. Then Ryan turned to look at him, lying motionless and filling the narrow, dirty bed with his heavy frame.

"Well," Anderson said. "Do you see everything differently now?"

"It could have been due to exhaustion," Ryan said.

"Exhaustion can last a long time."

"So that's what's happening to you and Esther?"

"Yes," Anderson said. "That's what's happening to me, when it comes to Esther. But Esther, as you know, can lie. I can't."

"It's impossible for both of us, you and me, to be ruined..." Ryan started to say but didn't finish.

"And yet it's possible, Mike," Anderson said. "But that's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"The point is that you never become me. Remember what you said a few hours ago about me? That's the point: that you don't turn into a small man, focused on a small woman and a small house, where small human happiness resides. That's the point, Mike."

"I didn't mean it when I said it," said Mike. "I didn't want to hurt you."

"But it's true, Mike. And now you know it. It's true for both of us."

"But it's not just that," said Ryan. "I wanted to be a man like you. Isn't that right? Don't you understand that if I truly fell in love with

flying, it was only because I believed someone like you existed? It doesn't matter what I think of you. You have your own truth, which might be stronger than what everyone else believes. Don't you understand, don't you understand, that I really wanted to become you?"

"Maybe. But it wouldn't have made sense. You wanted to become someone like me without losing anything of yourself. You wanted to reconcile those two things." Ryan didn't answer. "You know," said Anderson, "you're just a good man, but you don't know it. So you think that goodness equals weakness. And everyone has taught you that if something can't be beaten, destroyed, or conquered, it can always be bought. And that led you to want to be a man like me. But you wouldn't take what I had to take, Mike. Because how much can one man take, Mike?"

"So what's the answer?"

"There isn't one. You know, when you fly north, you leave behind a trail that might follow you from the south or the east. No one else sees that trail: it's inside you because you know where you're going and where you came from. So now you know where I've come from and where you'll be coming from. And you'll never forget what Esther did to you and what I did to you. You'll have to live with it, and that's the trail that will follow you and catch up with you at any moment in your life when you think of us, of people. And probably the same thing will happen to you that happened today with Judy. Don't you think Judy is prettier than Esther? And she's younger and probably quite good in bed. Probably. Because as for how she is in bed, Mike, you and I will never know."

"But there must be a way that leaves no trail," said Ryan after a moment.

"There is."

"And what is that way?"

"Goodness."

"There was one man who walked only that way."

"Yes. But do you remember what happened to him at the end? But that's not your problem, Mike. The point is that you don't become like me."

From behind the door, there was knocking again, and a voice began speaking: "Mary, I can't live like this any longer, Mary, surely there is mercy. Even if it was my fault, Mary..."

"Have you ever seen her, Anderson?" asked Ryan.

"Yes."

"And what does she look like?"

"She's very beautiful, Mike. But what good is it to either of us? What good is it to know she's beautiful after what's happened to us?"

"Yes," said Mike. "You're right. But can you tell me what she looks like? It doesn't matter now, anyway."

"Don't think about her," said Anderson. "Think about the fact that you can be somewhere else. Somewhere where there are no people like me and Esther. Where no one will deceive you, and where you won't have to buy anything."

"I know," said Mike. "But now, does it even matter anymore? Tell me, what does she look like?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Anderson said, "All right. She knows me. I'll go and bring her here."

"No," said Ryan. "No." He stood up, looking at the narrow, dirty bed where Anderson lay, and which bent under his weight. Ryan was very pale and very calm. "Anderson," he said. "I'm very tired. Can I lie down next to you? Here, on this bed?"

"Yes," said Anderson. "This bed has been waiting for you all along."

They lay in the darkness; Anderson put his arm around Ryan, who stared at the ceiling with unnaturally wide eyes. They didn't speak; they felt the warmth of each other's bodies and now both knew that this was the only real warmth they had ever experienced from anyone. And they also knew, as they watched the dawn rising, that they would never feel it again—that any warmth another human body could give them would always be warmth they would have to pay for or be ashamed of.

Later, they watched the men who came into the yard and cut down the tree, which fell, stirring up a white cloud of dead leaves, and then the men carried the tree away with them.

"I thought it could be saved," said Ryan.

"I wanted to believe that," said Anderson.

"I guess we should go now, right?"

"Yes," said Anderson. He picked up his bag and slung the worn Canadian parka over his shoulder. "Honestly, there's not much left to wait for."

"There was never much to wait for, really," said Mike. "Except for that one thing."

In Compton, Anderson got out of the plane, took Ryan's license, and signed it. Ryan smiled; they said nothing to each other, and Anderson didn't watch as Ryan taxied to the runway and took off. For a moment, he looked at the windsock whipping furiously in the wind, then he walked to the gas station and took the tire iron he had

left there the day before, slowly unwrapping it from the paper. He didn't look at the plane flying parallel to the runway and didn't see it turn; he stood still, facing the wall, and only turned when the sound of shattering metal tore through the morning silence. Then, he slowly climbed onto the wing of the plane and tried to open the door, but it was as he had expected: the plane had crashed nose-first into the ground, and the frame was bent. He had to use the tire iron to pry the door open and pull Ryan out.

Ryan was still alive as Anderson dragged him across the airfield, then sat above him. His eyes were wide open, and he was saying something Anderson couldn't understand, so he leaned closer.

"Anderson," said Ryan. "You're the only man I ever truly loved."

"And you, Mike," said Anderson. "You're the only man I ever loved."

He looked into Ryan's eyes as they faded into darkness, then at his pale, peaceful, almost childlike face, which suddenly became dark and sharp. It was no longer Ryan's face; the fair, kind face of a man who had been given everything he had first been promised; the dying man now had a face like the one standing over him, and while standing over him Anderson felt a chill grip his throat. Ryan's once-bright eyes turned green, sinking into the shadows; his lips curved downward, and his face took on sharp features that Anderson had never seen before.

"Mike," he said. "I want you to live. Think about her, Mike. Think about her, Mike. Think about her cunt; think about what her lips and breasts feel like, Mike. What she told you isn't true. She always felt good with you, Mike. Mike, you know me, and you know I would not lie. Mike, you have to believe me one more time. Mike, do you remember how wet she gets every time you're inside her? And how her stomach tightens? Mike, why don't you believe me?"

But there was no one left to believe him; he spread Ryan's legs with a kick and kept kicking him until his strength gave out, and then, limping, he moved aside, feeling a terrible, aching emptiness in the pit of his stomach. He sat there, thinking he was crying. When people came for him, they saw that his face was twisted into a strange smile and that his green eyes were full of the morning's light. They stood and watched as he tried to lift himself off his knees, his fingers clawing at the gravel, and they saw his eyes filled with light and his smiling mouth, from which a sound emerged—whether it was crying or the howl of a dog, they could not tell. So they took him by the arms, but he couldn't walk; he felt pain in his stomach, knowing it would soon turn into a void that would last forever, and he thought he felt God there. So he walked between the men, who bore the weight of his body—a burden as unbearable to them as the weight of dead Ryan.

In another part of the country, at a different time of year and day, a man stopped in front of a hangar with a sign that read: *Flight Instructors*. He watched a plane taking off, then stepped inside. A young man was sitting behind a desk.

"Do you have anything for rent?" the newcomer asked.

"Like what?"

"Something to fly. I didn't come here to rent a wet nurse," said the man. He was dressed poorly, and the man at the desk looked at him with disapproval.

"Do you have any bank references?" he asked.

"No."

"You see, I'm not the clerk here," said the young man at the desk. "I'm filling in for my girlfriend, who went to get some coffee. I have to take off now. She'll be back, and you can discuss everything with her."

They stepped outside the hangar and watched another plane lifting off the airfield.

"What kind of plane is that?" asked the man, now standing next to the visitor. He was tall and well-dressed.

"Bonanza," the older man replied.

"Funny," said the younger man. "From down here, it looks like a cross, doesn't it?"

The older man laughed.

"You said it," he replied, glancing once more at the younger man, who stood with his head tilted back, the wind tousling his blonde hair. "You said it, brother."