

Vann Turner's

Sometimes
Lovin' is
Hurtful

A Novel



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PROLOGUE

A gray mutt pressed fearfully against the apartment's wall. Although he was unheard in the physical world, the dog was speaking with God in a simple, child-like voice: "People can be awful mean, God. Do you think he wants to hurt me? He didn't bark at me, though. He didn't throw cans at me. I was scared when he tricked me and got me inside that moving thing. But he got inside with me. And my belly's now full and I'm not cold anymore, just wet. I used to have people who fed me, taught me things and played with me. I miss little Johnny and Suzy, God. Could you make things go back to how they were?"

"Look! The man is reaching his paw to the floor and he's calling me. Do you think it's okay if I go up to him? He's not trying to trick me again, now is he, God?"

God answered him and the dog said, "All right, then. If you think it's okay, I'll go see."



CHAPTER 1

Billings, Montana. 1980.

Slowly, hunching close to the floor, the three-legged mutt dared to approach. In fits and starts he inched his way toward the man who beckoned in gentle voice. The dog would creep along a couple inches, then pause and in the pauses renew his resolve.

“It’s okay. Come on over here,” the deep voice said from an armchair.

The clangor of doorbell—like a bolt of thunder—smashed his courage. He hunched close to the floor, then scurried back to the protection of the wall.

Irritated, Bob clenched his jaws. His new dog was again cowering, ears pulled back, eyes wide and outlined in white.

“The bitch!” After that single ring and a brief pause, the doorbell started ringing without let-up, a familiar way of summoning. Bob stood, dashed to the kitchen and tossed his journal into the cabinet with the pots and pans. *You’d froth at the mouth if you ever saw what I’ve written about you, baby*, he thought. With a kick he slammed the cabinet shut.

The bell demanded him and demanded him. *Hold on, won’t you!* In his rush he tugged at the belt of his old blue terrycloth robe that he might flaunt nakedness to her in greeting. That was her stipulation whenever feasible.

He unbolted the door and stepped out onto the landing. “Hi, hon,” he said, hugging her. Around them raged November’s early blizzard, white and silent. The wind caused his robe to flap against his legs. The wind swirled upward, raw and cold.

“Aren’t you affectionate?” Carmen said, hugging him in return. “After standing you up, I was half expecting words.”

“Would my saying something change anything?” he said.

“That’s a good boy,” she said. She slid one hand under the robe to his bare back. Her other hand coursed through the brown hair on his chest, then began its downward trek.

He curled his toes from the coldness of the melting snow, saying, “Come on in. We don’t have to put on a show for the neighbors.”

“Audiences can be fun.” She brushed past him. “We’ve changed our plans for tomorrow night. Tonia and Bennett somebody will be joining us. Textiles. He’s in textiles.”

Just inside the door Bob leaned against its jamb to remove his wet socks. He noticed Carmen had tracked snow across the hardwood floors and a clump of it fell from her suede boot onto the Navaho-style rug. Though he now paid the monthly rent, she had

CHAPTER 1

made the initial first and last month's payment and had purchased most of the furnishings for him—expensive furnishings, oak and beige leather. He dropped his wet socks next to the door. "Run that by me again," he said.

"We've changed our plans," Carmen said, unbuttoning her coat. "Tonia and Bennett somebody will be joining us. Your maroon suede jacket and tie, please. I'll be wearing beige and pink."

He was fully aware that his tattered robe still hung open to reveal his nakedness as he approached her. "We sat right there on that sofa and made those plans together. Were we just playing charades or something? It was supposed to be a romantic evening, just the two of us, not your whole entourage again. I had earmarked it so we talk, heart to heart, and work some things out." He cinched the robe around him tightly. "And now you go and change everything without even asking me? Well, the three of you be sure to have a good time, because I may not be going."

"It's all set, Bob," she said, flinging her red scarf on the sofa.

"Haven't you been listening? We made those plans together," he said standing beside her. "We've been through all this but it never sinks in: I'm a man. A full man. Not just something to amuse you, like your Corvette, your stable full of championship Morgans. I'm not on auction for you. You can't just buy me with clothes and furniture and dinner. You can't keep playing games with me because I'm getting damned tired of it."

"I don't know what the big deal is. It's just dinner. You should like being seen with me. Everybody says we make a striking couple," she said.

He looked into her dark eyes. A bit of lipstick had worn off a portion of her bottom lip. With her long dark hair, dark eyes and full breasts, she was attractive, though unusually tall for a woman, only half a head shorter than his six-feet-two.

"There comes a point in a man's life, baby," he said gently, "when he sees the fun and games as froth like bubbles on beer. And he starts to dream real dreams. It may have come to me a little later than to most men, but I've started to dream the wholesome dreams of a real future."

"And just what future do you see in that crystal ball of yours?" she asked with a snicker.

He noted melting snow had left a wet spot on the pastel rug, then looked into her brown eyes and said, "Would you like children, Carmen?"

"Oh," she said, turning from him and nodding toward the sliding glass doors that opened onto the lanai. Against them hung a framed piece of stained glass. Three shades of brown glass formed an Indian's head whose dark brown hair streamed—motionless and for eternity—in gale-force winds against a blue sky. "The piece I bought you looks nice up there. Moss does fine work, doesn't he?"

There you go! I talk about children and you talk about things. He exhaled audibly. "He's got talent. Would you like a drink?"

"I was wondering when you were going to ask," she said.

He headed for the kitchen which was separated from the living room by a breakfast bar.

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

"The roads are terrible," she said. "Saw two accidents on the way over. You should be out plowing."

"Well, hon," he said from the kitchen, "I've put in fourteen hours of overtime this week already. The State's not going to pay me any more."

"They still need to be plowed," she said. "Run down and bring up my overnight bag, would you? It's not locked."

"You're spending the whole night?" he asked.

"If you're amusing."

"Wouldn't you like that drink first?"

"Sure," she said, "and fix yourself a strong one. It'll get you ready for things."

"I've had three already. I'm well on my way." In silence he tended to ice cube trays, glasses and bottles. *More games! Just pour the booze down the drain! Kick her out, Bobby!* He was unsure if he had thought that or had heard it.

Neither spoke, till he heard a clipped, icy voice. "What's that!"

From behind the breakfast counter he looked at her. Her outstretched arm and pointing finger accused the mutt who was pressed against the wall, ears flattened, eyes fearful. "Beats me, baby," he said. "What does it look like?"

"You asked me if you could get yourself a puppy!"

"I did, doing a hundred miles in this storm—slippery, couldn't see—for one of Redman's shepherds."

"That's not a puppy!" she spewed.

"Well, think about it. Think hard, Carmen. He *was* a puppy once, I guess."

"You don't say?!"

"And he's had enough," Bob went on, "more than enough. People throwing things at him, chasing him off. At the diner—And you did stand me up. I had just gotten a new puppy and didn't want to be there in the first place. I wanted to take him home, not meet you for lunch. But you insisted we meet there and you never showed!"

"Something came up, okay?" she said.

"Yeah, sure," he said, slowly dropping ice cubes one by one into the glasses. *Maybe I will kick you out.* Each ice cube made a clunking sound. "Anyway I was sitting there, waiting for you, and noticed something outside in the swirling snow. It was just a small, gray something—couldn't see what it was—but it fell, got up, lumbered, and fell again. It was struggling through drifts, plodding toward the light from the diner. I cupped my hands around my eyes to block the glare and just feet from the steps, the gray something became a dog. He nestled to the bottom step, where the wind and overhang left a bare patch of concrete. He was shivering, snow pelting him. It was pathetic. He bent down and chewed and tugged at ice encrusted on his paws, baby. Then he looked up into the light from the line of windows."



Bob had stood up, called for his check, wadded the burger in a napkin, wrestled with his

CHAPTER 1

coat and bracing himself with an arm on the table, awaiting his check, had watched out the window.

“Here you go, Bobby,” Della said, still tallying on a small pad as she shuffled over. “Let me go get your puppy. He’s so tiny, ever so cute, and all curled up in a box right now. But I’ll go bother him and wake him up for you.”

“Why don’t you just go ahead and keep him!” he said. He strode to the register.

Della tagged behind. “But Jesus Crockett, he’s yours,” she said.

He gave Edna the check and a five, then turned around to crouch at eye-level with the waitress. “Listen, Della. You like him, you’ll be good to him, so keep him.”

“Oh! Oh!” she said, putting her hands to the sides of her face and shuffling toward the kitchen.

Edna handed him the change and looking over bifocals said, “Now that was an awful nice thing to do, Bob.”

“It’s nothing, okay?!” All along the counter men paused from their coffees, conversations and newspapers to turn their heads and watch. He stuffed the change into his jeans.

Della was rushing back from the kitchen—snuggling the little shepherd to her face, and saying, “Look, Mrs. Clement, he’s all mine! Bobby gave him to me, a present!”

He went out into the cold.



“Who did you give that expensive puppy to again?” Carmen asked.

“The waitress, Della.”

“The cabbage-faced one?”

“Yeah, Carmen, the one you call Cabbage Face. Okay?! Outside I had to trick the mutt into the truck with bits of hamburger, but I couldn’t leave him out there in the cold. He’s not a wild dog. He came to the light from the diner for help. He wouldn’t have survived out there.”

“So a common waitress has Redman’s puppy of championship line?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said from behind the breakfast bar. “She’ll be good to him.”

“You give a simple-minded moron a pedigree, and drag home a mongrel?! Look at that thing! It’s deformed! Ab-so-lute-ly dis-gusting!”

“Watch it, baby!” he said, slamming a bottle of vodka onto the counter. He cinched the belt to the robe even more tightly around his waist. Tall, erect, he came toward her from the kitchen.

Just feet from her he stopped and pointed a finger into her face. “People who go around insulting a man’s dog don’t end up living too long.”

“You have no standing to threaten me!” she said, squaring her shoulders, and moving back a step.

Easy, boy! He inclined his head a little to the side and smiled weakly. “I wasn’t threatening, hon. I was just explaining how things are in this world. No, the little guy just needs a friend and a little help, too. He’s fended on his own long enough. He’s had

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

enough of people throwing things at him. How would you like it if you had to paw through people's trash to find just enough to stay alive?"

"It could never happen to me," she said.

"But think about it," he said. "It could."

"Not to me!"

"Well aren't you the fortunate one," he said.

"But what do you want *a thing* like that for?"

"He's not a thing. And he might not seem like much of a dog right now, scared and huddled in fear like that," he said. "But I know about dogs, have known about them from childhood. He'll come around."

"Have you forgotten about my drink, Grunt? Be a good boy and bring me my drink."

Again she had changed the subject and the muscles of his jaw pulsed. "It'll take just a minute." He returned to the kitchen where—in silence—he poured soda water into her vodka and topped his bourbon with a splash of water.

In silence he walked back into the living room and handed her the vodka. She took it without comment. He noted how the snow swirled outside the glass doors.

"Oh, Bobby, Bobby," she said, with gentle smile. "Can't you let it sink into that hard, proud, sexy head of yours that I love you and only want the best for you?"

He sipped his bourbon and watched the snow. "I've tried to call it love, this thing we've got," he said. "It's not a storybook kind of love, Carmen. It'd never be fit for children to witness. But the thing is, Carmen, I can't imagine us growing old together, gray hair, wrinkles and all."

"Well I'm not going to get old!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah," he said, unconvinced.

"There are ways, Bob," she said, gesturing nonchalantly. "Surgeons, and this and that."

"For your sake, hon, I sure hope so."

"I don't want to have words," she said. "I love you. I love you more than I've ever loved anybody. Of all the men I've dated, I love you the most. And I think that says it all."

Half a head taller, he glanced down into her eyes. Then, silent, he watched the swirl of ice in his glass. "I don't doubt that," he said. "That's probably the most truthful thing you've ever said. The most naked thing."

"It's true," she protested.

"But sometimes people in love think about," Bob went on, "and sometimes talk about getting married, raising a family. How many boys and girls they want, what would be good names, what type of schools they should go to, those things. But the funny thing is, I can't imagine us getting married."

"Well good! Don't try! It could never happen. But even when I do get married, you'll be there on the side, Bob. We'll continue to see each other, have our good times and our games."

He lifted his bourbon in toast. "Well thank you for that, baby!" he said. "That's what I'm dreaming about, longing for—being the kept boy on the side!"

CHAPTER 1

“Bob,” she said tenderly, lengthening the syllable. She put her arms around him. “I love you, love you for today. Isn’t that enough?”

“If you did, if you really did, I could probably get by with that.”

“I do, in my own way,” she said, pressing up close. While she held her drink in her right hand behind his back, she slid her left under his cinched robe, to rub his chest, entwine the hair around her fingers. “You’ve got such a beautiful, healthy, strong body. I love it, and all the fun we have with it. If you’d run down and get my overnight bag, we could have a good time. That’s why I came over.” One of her fingernails caught in a long loose thread of his robe. “But why do you insist on wearing that old rag, instead of the red and black silk one I gave you? With such a sexy body, you should want to present yourself well. I know, you’ll say it’s comfortable, but *really!*” She found his left tit and started pinching it and twisting.

“Easy!” he said, pushing her hand away. “That one’s still sore.”

She put her hand back, still pinching but more lightly now. “Poor *ba-by*. Drink up, Bob, and have a couple more,” she said, then—pressing her body flush to his and straddling his leg with hers—added in a whisper, “Get yourself ready for me and amusing. Drink up, Grunt. Real drunk. Sloppy drunk, so your head will confuse pleasure and pain, have them blur together like they do. I *will* please you. So run down and bring up my overnight bag. I’ve got new toys to play with.”

He pulled from her. “I don’t need to endure more toys.”

“We’ll start the festivities off tonight with you in fatigues, Grunt...One of the new ones is called the Jaws of Hell. As I recall you’ve been there.”

His brows creased and lips parted in a pained expression. “Lots of guys were there,” he said and left her standing mid-room as he crossed to the sliding glass doors.

Silent, he stared into the snow. *It was hell*, he remembered a guy saying at the diner that day. He didn’t know the man and only spoke to him for a few minutes, but he remembered his name, Zane Carlson, remembered his dark wavy hair, his eyes the vibrant brown of roasted chestnuts. He remembered his words and the timbre of his voice: *I was there too, Rangers, ’67 to ’68. Hue, Khe Sanh, Tay Ninh. But I don’t like talking about it. We lifted too many men onto the choppers.*

Outside the sliding glass doors the snow swirled and eddied, with nothing visible except the whiteness. “It snows in Nam, too,” he confided softly. “You didn’t know that, did you, baby?”

There was no answer.

“And most people think Nam’s one huge rice paddy. They’re wrong. There are mountains there, many of them beautiful mountains. And if a man just started trudging through the snow that way,” he said, pointing into the whiteness, “he’d come to mountains.”

“Mountains in Montana? Really?!” she interrupted. “You don’t say!”

Bob ignored her and continued on, “Anyway, in the bad years when I was trekking from place to place looking for a job, sleeping in my truck and working day-labor whenever I could, and although I had to sell piecemeal whatever I had in order to buy

some cans of beans so that I could keep my pride and stay out of the lines at the soup kitchens, in all that time, Carmen, I never even once thought of selling my backpacking gear." He paused and in the silence heard the clink of fresh ice cubes dropping into her glass. He continued to gaze into the snow. There was the sound of liquid being poured. "Would it be okay with you if I went backpacking next weekend?"

"Maybe," she said, "I'll see. Tonia and I could fly down to Denver, I guess."

"Then I can?" he said, his voice rising. He turned around.

From behind the breakfast counter she said, "I said I'd see."

"Maybe I'll invite the guy I met at Edna's today, and we'll go winter backpacking, snow-shoes, two-man tent and all."

"Who's this you met?" she asked.

"A guy I told you to talk to about a job, an ex-Ranger. He was in country only one tour, though, '67 to '68. I served three."

"No, what does he look like?"

Bob's head lifted upward and he smiled broadly. "I know what you're up to, baby. Good-looking, just let it go at that," he said. "Real good-looking."

"But if he's a friend of yours, I'd like to meet him." She had a fresh drink in hand coming from the kitchen.

"I'm sure you would! See how he fares on that four-poster bed you bought me, huh?"

"It could be interesting. Put the two of you on that bed and watch what happens."

"Nothing would happen!" he said.

"But you're so cocksure eager to dash off into the woods with some good-looking guy you just met. 'Two-man tent and all.'"

She's mocking me!

"Is there something you haven't told me?"

"I know what you're getting at, but you know better."

"It's no big deal," she said. "Tonia and I have been... Shall I say, *friends*?...for years."

"But I'm not. Sure I've been in the Corps so I've seen men doing it firsthand. Even my Pa's a fag. He ran off with a hairy guy and left me. I was twelve..."

"Drink up, Bob, and fix yourself another," she said. "Whatever happened when you were twelve is your business, and I'm waiting to try out the Jaws of Hell on your balls—so get yourself drunk."

He didn't respond to that, but, enmeshed in the memory of his abandonment, continued on. As he spoke his voice got softer and softer. "But at least Pa thought enough of me to leave me forty dollars and my dog. Three times me and Rusty set out to find him..."

"Bob?" she said.

He resumed in a voice a little louder than normal, "...but the farthest we ever got was forty miles. Three times we returned to the oak on Bullrush Creek."

"Bob, I already told you, fix yourself a drink!" she said.

As the recollection of his Pa's abandonment wrenched anew his heart, twisted it, knotted it, he stared at her. He had come face to face with the reality of Carmen.

CHAPTER 1

“Now, boy!” she said.

Obedient, he drained the contents of his glass and headed toward the kitchen. As he passed by she told him, “Stop.” He did. She tugged the robe’s belt once, and his bare flesh again came into view. “Okay,” she said.

He continued toward the kitchen.

“No, all of it off,” she said.

He stopped and let the tattered terrycloth robe slip from his shoulders and arms. It lay in a blue heap on the floor. He was now completely naked, Carmen fully clothed.

“Now fix yourself a tall one,” she said.

He did, replacing his rocks glass with an iced tea glass from the cabinet. He started to drop ice into it but she interrupted, “No, straight, with just a little water.”

He complied.

“Now come over here,” she said.

He did. He stood before her naked, head bowed.

“Start drinking,” she said.

He drained half the glass. It wasn’t cold, wasn’t diluted enough. It burned his throat.

“Good boy,” she said. “Now there are three things I want you to do for me. First, go down to my car, bring up my overnight bag, set it on the sofa, open it and bring me the Jaws of Hell.”

“Okay,” he said. He noticed there was a run the length of a finger in her hose. Her black suede boots had shiny splotches on them left by the melting of the snow.

“And you are to do it naked. I don’t care if you get cold. It snows in Vietnam, I hear, but you already know that. Don’t you, Grunt?!”

“Yes,” he said.

“Second, you are to get rid of that disgusting mutt. You can throw him out in the snow, take him to the pound tomorrow, or to a vet and have him put down if you have to. But you are to get rid of him.”

“He just needs a bath and a little time to get accustomed to things around here,” he protested, looking up.

“You don’t seem to understand. I never want to see that disgusting freak again.”

“Carmen,” he said, looking her square in the eyes, “a vet amputated his hind leg, so somebody cared about him once. Was it a little boy, a widow, an old man? We’ll never know. And all this is new to him now, and he’s scared, but he’ll come around and be a good dog.”

“Reagan hasn’t taken office yet, and with Carter’s recession there aren’t many jobs to be had out there.”

“And what do you mean by that?” he said, his voice rising.

“Just pointing out how things are *in this world*,” she said, mocking his words.

“And what’s number three?” he asked with a controlled tightness in his voice.

“We’re changing *again* our plans for tomorrow night, that’s what. I’ll call and make our reservations for five.”

He forced a chuckle, then said, “But I already told you I may not be going. It was

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

supposed to be just you and me, a romantic evening, remember?"

"But you will be ready, jacket and tie please, six o'clock. You will go, Bob, and be your simple, transparent, masculine self. That's the bargain."

"What bargain?" he asked.

"You keep yourself available and amusing and you get to keep on working your job."

"You couldn't do anything there," he said.

"Couldn't I? While your father owns some bar in San Francisco—It has to be a faggot bar, now isn't it, Bob?—my Daddy's on the Executive Board of the Moral Majority. He hates perversion, and wouldn't like it, not one little bit, what you've made me do with you."

"What who makes who do! Who ties who up, huh?"

"I think Daddy would believe his Pumpkin if I told him you would always tie me up and make me choke on you."

"That's not how it is. You put collar and leash on me, drag me around and you tie me up!"

"That's just a detail he'll never hear about. And it was his influence that got you that job, and got it for you in spite of the hiring freeze. It would take only one phone call from him and they would suddenly discover the error in your hiring."

"In my nine months with the State I've had two excellent evaluations!"

"I'm not positive, but I would think clerical errors are above civil service review, but even if not, Daddy will fix it. So you will be ready tomorrow at six, or you can go live out of your old, rusting pickup truck again if you want. It wouldn't be too nice with winter set in, but if you want to, I can arrange it. Your choice."

He stared at her as the memory of his homeless years trekked through him. Living in his truck, sleeping in it, eating in it. He remembered standing in the lines at day-labor hoping to be one of the chosen who are sent out to scrub pots for a day, or scrub cooking grease from floors or a hood. And most days he would sit with dozens of men, and wait and hope from five A.M. on. And at noon, as hunger gnawed at his stomach, they would be sent away without work, without pay, with only an announcement to be early the next morning. He and the other men sitting in folding chairs would disperse, hang-dog in silence.

But I survived! Managed!

He put his drink down on an end table, went over, picked up his robe from the floor and put it on.

Meanwhile Carmen put her drink on the breakfast bar and was clapping her hands together close to her chest, fingers spread like a child's. "So you can forget about number one, we'll use the Jaws on your balls tomorrow night when we get back. And number three, I never did tell you all of number three except being ready. I want you to go find that guy you met—the good-looking guy, the ex-Ranger?—and invite him, and have him here with you when I pick you up. Is he hung?"

"I wouldn't know!" he said, his voice tight and clenched.

"I hope he is," she said. "Big ones are amusing. I'd like to show you how amusing

they are and watch you choke on it.”

Anger surged, but—yet again—he checked himself. *Easy now, easy!*

“That’s what you need,” she went on, “a man to get you all worked up, then whip you, beat you, use you like a little fuck-boy. A lot of damn good fuckin’ men got killed in Nam,” she said. “Their flesh has rotted into the ground by now, but not yours, boy. You weren’t good enough to die with men, real men. I ought to cut your fuckin’ balls off.”

“Did you know,” he said in a whisper, “Sir Charlie used to do that to the corpses?”

“With your balls cut off,” she went on, “you wouldn’t be so damn rambunctious, so head-strong, now would you? It’d keep you in your place. My Grunt, the gelding!”

“Yeah,” he said, his knees giving way until he knelt on the Navaho-style rug. His shoulders shrugged and again the robe fell from him. It lay across his lower legs. His head bowed and his arms went to behind his back and stayed there as if they were bound at the wrists.

Again he was kneeling in a bamboo shack, a Prisoner of War. “Robert Newell,” he said in a lifeless voice as if abuse and deprivation had sapped it of any spirit. “Corporal, US59884526, United States Marine Corps.”

“I ought to tie you up right now, Grunt, whip you, beat you, make you squirm.”

“Robert Newell, Corporal,” he said, lifelessly. “US59884526, United States Marine Corps.”

She didn’t respond. The room was silent. *Come on, baby*, he thought. *You know all the right strings. So pull ’em. Pull ’em fuckin’ hard. Do it, baby.*

“Well, Grunt, I’ve got to go,” she said.

He opened his eyes and looked up. She already had her coat on. “No!” he exclaimed. “I’ll get that thing from the car and I’ll amuse you.”

“I’m leaving,” she said. “We’ll have festivities tomorrow night when we get back. And I expect you to be charming at dinner and amusing afterwards. Make sure your Ranger buddy goes with us. But don’t worry, Bob, it’ll be okay. I’ll put the whip into his hands myself.”

She went to the door, opened it and held it open. The snow swirled into the room. “Cold out there, nice and warm in here. And with so many good men dead, mangled, how is it you two boys got out alive? You must have a lot in common.”

He was still on the floor, his arms behind his back. “Don’t go, baby,” he pleaded, raising one eyebrow and lowering the other. It was a boyish expression, questioning and pleading at the same time.

She laughed, tossing her head, her hair streaming in a swirl of wind into the room. “You *are* most amusing. Just look at yourself on the floor there—naked, raging hard-on.” She laughed. “So simple, so easily toyed with, *so many* hormones. If you keep on being a good boy, maybe I’ll let you and your Ranger buddy go off into the mountains next weekend, two-man tent and all. Romantic.”

“Carmen?” he said as the door closed behind her.

“Carmen!” he yelled.

Against the wall, the gray mutt’s eyes were on him.

CHAPTER 2

Naked on the floor, he dreaded the next night. *It's not just Carmen and her toys, he thought. It's the prospect of ushering something new into my life. Another man in my bedroom? In MY bedroom?! The man would have a man's body, a man's strength, passions and will. He might even have a need to prove something—to Carmen? to himself or me? What difference in outcome would that make? Carmen would whisper in his ear and goad him on. She stated she wants to watch it. Drunk, it could happen. It must not. Pa? No, Pa! Never!*

In the dead quiet of the room the only sound was the faintest crinkle of snow hurling itself against the glass doors. He turned his head to stare into the swirling whiteness. It was albino universe out there, a universe without horizon, landmarks or points that define. *Without compass bearings I could wander in that whiteness for a lifetime, lost for a lifetime, struggle all my days, and in the end the white coldness would still win.*

It matters that people should cling one to another, huddle together for warmth. Huddle together for encouragement. That's the one solace in it and that's important, to cling together. In Nam we always helped one another. You had to or you wouldn't survive.

On the day of his arrival in Billings, Montana, he had met her in a barroom. An hour later she was moaning under him in the motel room she had rented. Within days he suddenly had a good job with the Transportation Department, his first decent job since the start of his downward spiral. Within a week, with her financial assistance, he moved into an apartment. He owed her the roof over his head, the food he ate, the job he worked, the booze he drank—the booze she encouraged him to drink. *Gratitude and appreciation are important. I must never let the world strip me of a sense of gratitude. Nobody makes it on their own.*

If I were drunk enough, maybe I could satisfy both of them, please them. 'I was there too—Hue, Kay Sahn,' the ex-Ranger had said as he was standing there by my table, inquiring about work, any type of work. Hair dark and curly, jeans faded. Good sized bulge. "Yes, baby," he said softly into the silence of the room, "I think he is well hung." A shiver went up his spine.

A thumping sound in the room drew his attention. Against the wall the dog was now sitting up, wagging his tail. This wasn't the championship German shepherd puppy he had driven a hundred miles that day to get. This was a pathetic, middle-aged mutt.

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

From kneeling on the floor, he changed to a sitting position, pulled his tattered robe from under him and draped it on his shoulders. With a weak outstretching of a hand and a patting on a thigh, he beckoned the dog. "Come on, boy. Come on over here."

The dog stood, looked at him with head tilted to the side and ears perked, then started hobbling toward him on three legs. Just beyond arm's reach he stopped to sniff the tips of his fingers. Then daring to approach closer, he sniffed the palm of his hand. His quick short breaths felt warm, light and fragile. The dog came closer to sniff his side, then, insinuating his muzzle under the robe, sniffed his armpit.

"Sit," he said. "Do you know how to sit?" he said, emphasizing and elongating the syllable.

He did.

"Good boy!" In silence he stroked his flank—still damp with the melting of snow and odorous in the air. He gazed again out into the storm. *One day an eternal whiteness will come to me and take me by the hand. Cold, it will bid me give up the struggles and the dreams. One day I'll have to, and will.*

With the dog beside him, he watched as encroaching night smudged the whiteness with gray. He was chilled, his skin in goose flesh.

With nothing resolved he pushed himself heavily from the floor. He took the robe—only draped on his shoulders—and put it on, then moved to the thermostat to turn it up. In the kitchen the dog had a second serving of Puppy-Chow, which he ate, not greedily this time as he had with that first dish, not with eyes fixed on him, wary, fearful, and outlined in white. This time he ate contentedly, as if enjoying the flavor of the kibble. Yet though Bob watched him, that watching didn't cheer. He watched until the liquor bottles on the counter drew his gaze.

He could see an iced tea glass half-full on the oaken end table in the living room—"No," she had said, "a tall one, straight, with just a little water."—but instead of getting it he took another iced tea glass from the cabinet. Ice cubes went into it, and bourbon to the rim.

"You know what she wants, Grunt, and you don't have that many choices," he said aloud. "And you heard her: Get yourself drunk." He lifted the glass to his lips, inhaled a deep breath, drained it empty, then refilled it. He took his journal, a large spiral notebook, from the pot cabinet where he had stashed it. As his new dog chased the last morsels of kibble around the bowl, he went to his chair of beige leather and sat.

The bourbon he had already consumed was working its alchemy on his senses. His nose and lips were numb. Soon, he thought, it'll start working on my brain. *So drink up, boy, and it'll muddy up your thinking, confuse things, confound pleasure and pain.* With a single lift of the glass he drank three-quarters of it, then poured the one he had been told to fix without ice into it.

He opened his journal. Though he neither read it nor scanned it, poignant words, carefully printed in a draftsman-like precision, burned into his retina: "...hog-tied me with her money...just using me..." The date, 12 Aug 80, astonished him.

Was it really that long ago, last summer, that I figured it all out? But I'm still here, being a

CHAPTER 2

good boy, still pandering myself at her command. So she wants to get me drunk, does she? Wants to teach me some new games, does she? Would that please you, Pa? Would you like to watch it too? I want to say fat chance. That's what I want to say.

He watched as the gray dog bathed himself at his feet on the light pastels of the Navaho-style rug. *Carmen doesn't like you.*

Outside, twilight was darkening into night. He stood up and, wobbly, carried his drink to the bedroom, putting it on the dresser and stumbling on into the bathroom where he ran water into the tub and stood there, steadying himself with a hand on the wall as he watched it fill. *Once bathed, he'll stand a better chance at the pound of being adopted. A little better, not much. People don't usually adopt three-legged dogs.*

He carried the mutt from the living room and put him in the tub where he endured the water, shampoo and rinsing without fuss. As the water drained, he dried him with a monogrammed towel, then got into the shower.

Steaming water cascaded over him. Slowly he lathered, running a soapy hand over his body, and remembering the hands of women he had known before Carmen, their softness and tenderness. *The women before had no need for toys, games, costumes and a man who, for whatever reason, would allow it. Those other women didn't see a man as just an amusement, a plaything for their lusts. But I'll be honest, Pa. Carmen's toys rouse my horniness, too.*

He held his head, face up, under the cascade of water. *With her money maybe she has dozens of men down on their luck. Keeps them in a stable, like her Morgans and quarter horses. Rows of bunk beds on both sides, like barracks. The men tethered to their bunks. The Drill Instructor will ask, 'Which one tonight, ma'am?'*

Their relationship didn't need adjustment. It needed severing. In spite of Carter's recession, he ought to pack up the truck tonight and get the hell out of here while he still could. *If she could get away with it, she would castrate me!*

He turned off the water, stepped out of the tub and started to towel off. The dog was watching from the doorway with head at a quizzical tilt. He wiped the fog from the floor-length mirror and his nakedness, strong, healthy, and six-foot-two, was there before him. *No way in hell am I a fuckboy, Pa! I'm a man!*

With towel limp in one hand, he gazed at his reflection, pleased with his appearance, his body. Yeah, he was every bit as good-looking as his Pa had been. Veins coursed down his arms. Light brown hair flared over his chest then descended as a single line, then flared again below belt line. That hair was a deeper shade.

Leaning closer to the mirror, inches from it, he gazed into the depths of his eyes, eyes a pale and vibrant blue. He gazed into the soul behind.

And eyes like his, pale as faded denim, stared back at him. His Pa stared back at him.

Bob leaned away, gasped—startled at seeing his Pa in his apartment.

His Pa leaned back too.

Slowly, hesitantly, fingers were reaching up until—through glass and years—fingers touched fingers and he was a child again, living with his Pa, doing the best they could, as his Pa restlessly searched for somebody who wanted him, or “If God forbid me love, Bobby, then I'd settle for earning a mite better living.”

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

In that quest they trekked from place to place. From town to town they sojourned throughout the South. In school after school, in Selma and Ft. Walton, in Shreveport and Savannah, Bobby's schoolmates nicknamed him The New Kid. That nickname the same everywhere. Bobby didn't like that. Those school-year phantoms halted abruptly with his Pa's abandonment in his twelfth year—with the sofa gone, Grandma's clock gone and forty dollars taped to a brown paper bag.

And it was again his own, mature nakedness that the mirror reflected to him now.

A dozen years ago his Pa had rejected him. Four years ago his Pa had again rejected him. *Two rejections and still I'm entwined with you, Pa. Shouldn't be—I'm a grownup now!—but am. And besides I'm as hairy as you! You ain't got nothin' on me!*

With a hand coursing over his chest, he reveled in his hair. His hand followed the line of hair downward, descending, descending till fingers entwined pubic hair, enmeshed them, entangled them in a fist and pulled.

But that doesn't belong there! Who the hell am I trying to fool? No way does it belong, that jungle of dark hair at my crotch. I'm not a man, not a real man. It's bogus, that hair, no more real than a child's costume for a dress-up party. It doesn't belong! To you, Pa, I'm a throw-away boy. To her, Pa, a fuck-boy!

His hand was inching over for the shaving cream.

White foam, from beltline down, clung to him in ribbons until a hand smeared it around, covering the dark hair in whiteness.

In the mirror his Pa smirked, one corner of his lips higher than the other.

And as Bobby stood before the man out of whose sinews he had been fashioned, with definite and repeated strokes, changing the blade twice and washing the hair down the drain, he shaved off the pubes.

Stroke by stroke his Pa watched the disguise being removed, watched the emergence of smooth boyish whiteness.

At last the razor was dropped into the sink, and he returned to the bedroom for his bourbon. His four-poster bed was neatly made. *There it is—the Adult Playpen, Carmen. That's what you called it when you bought it for me. Or maybe I got it all wrong. Maybe you bought me...for it.*

In the gloom—the only light coming from the bathroom—he picked up his glass from the dresser but the reflection in the mirrored wall—a reflection only half-seen—made him pause midway to his lips. The virgin whiteness of freshly shaved skin seemed to glow in supernatural light to contrast with the dark heaviness that hung below. He snickered at the absurdity of his image, half-man, half-boy. *As absurd as the bearded lady in the circus. Without the beard. Carmen will be amused.* Yet at the next moment he realized what he saw was cripplingly honest. The humor vanished and he was ashamed of what he had done.

He put his drink on the dresser untasted, backed up a few steps and flopped across the four-poster bed. Around him the walls were lonely and stark. *If I call her maybe she'll come back over, or maybe I could drive out to her place if she'd have me. Then I can find out what the Jaws of Hell looks like, feels like. I'll probably like it. I'm drunk enough.*

Around him the walls swirled, the ceiling swirled and distant memories of long ago

CHAPTER 2

swirled. They leered at him and smirked.



“Go on, Bobby, give Mommy the flower. It’ll be the last thing you ever give her. Go on, boy, drop the flower in the hole.”

~

“Pa, can I ride the Thunderbolt again?”

“Can’t afford it, boy.”

~

“Most folks be saying they’d have given ya to the State and let them raise ya. But I ain’t done it, ’cause it’s only fit your own folks should tend ya. Ain’t been easy doing it all alone, but I ain’t done livin’ yet, boy—not at thirty-three!—not by a long shot!”

~

“But Pa, you promised! You promised we’d stay here and Ft. Walton and Selma! You promised!”



Two weeks later his Pa and Grandma’s clock were gone, only a few stray coat-hangers in Pa’s closet. On the kitchen counter lay a brown paper bag with a note written on it:

13 is old enuf and youve got gristle. Youll be okay. I wish I could really explain but your not old enuf to under stand. I do love you, Bobby, and someday youll ken what love demands. So dont think bad of me pls. There is Grady you see. I see his eyes how he looks at you. Cant be. But he says he loves me and I deserve to get something out of life too. So it has to be this way. Sometimes, Bobby—Someday youll ken this for yerself—sometimes lovin is hurtful. Sorry. Sometimes it is.

Pa

He had taped forty dollars to the bag and had left Rusty for him. She was tied to the longleaf pine out back.

Such memories from childhood jeered at him as he lay on the four-poster bed. His hand moved and he felt the bristle of freshly shaved skin. The hand descended lower to pull on his balls, hard, to twist them until they ached. *This is what you wanted when you bought that thing for me, right? Well, your contraption works, Carmen. Hurts like hell! So do it, baby! Do it hard!*



CHAPTER 3

As one hand pulled scrotum and wrenched testicles, the other grasped flaccidness and sought to consummate manly, physical love. Against the effects of bourbon his hand pistoned, struggled and tried. The attempt was in vain, for bourbon and sleep thwarted the attempt.

And with sleep there came a release from his passion, pains and fears. There was a smoothing of brows as sleep bid him lay down his defenses. His chest began to rise in deep, slow heaves as he lay atop the spread. His head was now limp on the pillow, lips gently parted. He appeared to be not Carmen's toy, but a mother's son, fully grown perhaps, but still a mother's son.

Gray mists shimmered before him like a heavy fog. Without thoughts or pain he watched the gray undulations. Gradually there was a lightening in color: The fog became first a lighter gray, then took on a tinge of blue. And through those timeless mists a woman approached, swirling the fog with steps serene and matronly. She was enveloped in light—It was from her that the pale blue light radiated.—and there were swallows encircling her and darting on the wing against the blue sky.

He pretended to be asleep, yet peeked through slitted lids as she stood over him. Her dress was a simple house dress, tiny flowers against an ivory ground. She bent to tuck him under a patchwork quilt and there was a pure, clean scent about her—soap, starch and ironing boards. It was a scent he vaguely recognized from earliest childhood. She kissed his forehead.

“I'm glad you've come,” he said, opening his eyes.

“Nothing could have hindered me tonight, Bobby. Do you want to tell me about it?” she asked.

As he pondered how much to tell her, he bit his lower lip and scrunched his face up like a boy's, with one eyebrow raised and the other lowered.

She sat down on the bed, taking his hand in hers and stroking it tenderly. She waited for him to begin. In the darkness of his bedroom the pale blue light surrounded the bed and the two of them now, and swallows, flitting on the wing, encircled the two of them.

“I hurt,” he finally said.

“Is there more?”

CHAPTER 3

He averted his gaze from her to the spirited swallows so fleet on wing. "It's my heart that hurts." He couldn't look at her, but looked at the patchwork quilt.

"I know," she said.

"That's all, I guess," he said.

"I too have been in the world, have known its struggles and its sorrows. There is more you have not spoken."

He gazed into her eyes, into the tenderness there. He again lowered his gaze, avoiding her eyes. "I've let her do things," he said. Then, in a whisper such as a child might use to impart deepest secrets, he added, "I've pandered myself to her money."

"Very good," she said. "Wisdom cannot begin until we learn to call things by their rightful names."

"But after the years of wanderings it is comforting to have things and go places I can't afford myself. It is because of her that I now eat well and drink well."

"Is that enough to fill your soul, Bobby?"

He shook his head no. "I love the outdoors, you know, and woods and backpacking and critters and birds and all. But not even once since I've been here, with the austerity of the Rockies looming in the distance and beckoning me, has she let me spend a weekend in the wilderness."

"Is that what you long for, a weekend in the wilderness?" she asked.

"No, not really."

"Then what?" she asked.

"Love. I long for love. A woman to love me and cling to me, and I to her. A woman to be home when I drive up after work, and to be there regardless whether I drive a clunker held together with rubber bands, spit and a prayer, or a new Trans-Am or Camaro. To wander a park toward sunset, my arm around her."

"Such a love is a beautiful thing," she said. "I know, for your Pa and I had just such a love."

"And with soft breasts and figure," he said. "A woman I can be proud of saying, 'And this is my wife.' A woman who, years away—when the children are grown and starting families of their own—who, eons hence, when we are beginning to think of having to say goodbye to this world—a woman who, in our grayed years, would still smile at me a funny wrinkled smile. An old woman, but still my princess and my bride."

"You ask well," she said.

"That is what I want. I'll let other men chase after their heart's content, whether it's houses and boats, clout or fame. For me love would be enough."

"I shall pray, beloved, for a love that surrounds you like a quilt, and for a love..."

"But will I get it?" he interrupted.

"...and for a love that overflows your heart and flows out to all the world."

"But will I get it?" he asked again, a desperation in his voice.

"I can but pray, as you could. But I think the Father will smile upon your request for it keeps with what He pleads with us to do." She stood up. "I shall pray He grant it before the appointed time."

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

“But if you’re not sure if I’ll get it or when, I’ll settle for a friend or a buddy for a while, okay?”

“His wisdom. It will be granted according to His wisdom, my son,” she said as she stood up. “But for now there is Quasi, the dog you saved from impending death. The Father loves all his critters equally. And Quasi has much love to give. So let it rest in His wisdom and sleep now,” she said, stroking his forehead and running her fingers through his hair. “Sleep now, my beloved. My child.”

Though he closed his eyes, he peeked and saw his mother kneel beside his bed. Surrounded in light, with hands clasped and face lifted heavenward, her lips moved in ardent prayer. Gradually the blue light dimmed and grayed into darkness and he slept.

During his hours of sleep the blizzard abated and morning followed the night in its ordained course. With a stretching and a rubbing of the eyes he awoke into that Sunday morning, crystalline and bright, with sunrays streaming into his room. Strange, his first thoughts were of his mother. Strange, for she had died before his earliest memories. His recollections of her were not memories, but vague associations with print dresses and the scent of ironing boards.

Among the crumpled spread and sheets, Quasi was curled on that bed with him. It surprised him that he knew his dog’s name, Quasi, but shrugged off the source of that knowledge. In the warmth and brightness of the sunlit room he scooted down in the bed to curl around him and rub his belly. Quasi didn’t have to raise his hind leg, for that had been amputated at the hip. “Don’t be ashamed, boy,” he said. “Lots of guys got maimed in Nam, maimed or worse.” Quasi seemed to smile, his pink tongue drooping from the side of his mouth.

“You would have died out there in the storm. But you’ll be safe now. You won’t have to wander in the cold, not alone anyway. That’s what she’d like to see. It won’t happen. We might not always have a grand apartment like this, but rather the rusting roof of my truck for shelter, but I promise you’ll be safe now and you’ll never be alone.

“She doesn’t like you, but don’t feel bad. She doesn’t like me either. Or maybe it’s men she doesn’t like and I’m just a specimen. She wants to get me drunk and stand there and watch another man humiliate me.

“It won’t happen tonight. Getting out of it tonight is easy—I’ll just lie to her about not being able to find him. But the idea is in her head now. She wants to watch another man use me, rut with me. And someday, somehow, she will work it out.

“With that sin upon me, I could not stand in congregation with other men with my head held high.

“She would probably love to cut off my balls for the fun of it, and would, if she could.

“I know, Quasi. I know. In spite of her money, influence and power I have to sever this thing with her. I will. Somehow. Someway. And while I live, I will again live in the dignity of being a man.

“Thanks for the advice, little guy. And maybe, along the way, I might even find love.”



CHAPTER 4

Although Carmen was displeased that Bob had been unable to find the ex-Ranger, the flight by private jet to Denver that Sunday evening was amiable enough. A limousine waited on the tarmac to take the four of them—Carmen, Bob, Tonia and Bennett—to the Maison D’Or. As Bob held the door for Carmen to get situated, Bennett commented on what an attractive couple they made.

Once all were ensconced Carmen grasped Bob’s knee, kissed him on the cheek and said, “Bennett, I can honestly say I love him more than I’ve ever loved anybody.”

And there’s been a stable-full, right, baby? Bob thought.

“He’s had a lot of pain in his life,” she went on, “but he hasn’t let that crush him. Just last week he worked fourteen hours overtime. My only complaint is he’s a little provincial in some of his attitudes, but he’s learning to loosen up a bit.”

“What type of work do you do?” Bennett asked. He had a mane of shoulder length hair and was closely shaven.

Extremely close shave. Has to be Ivy League. That’s their hallmark, Bob thought. “For the State,” he answered. “Department of Transportation.”

“And he’s very good at what he does, Bennett,” Carmen chimed in. “He plows the roads well and fixes the potholes just like new.”

You bitch! He continued to look at Bennett without a glance in her direction. “But it’s decent pay and good benefits. What do you do?”

“Not much, really. Home base is Houston, but I travel a lot. We opened a new plant in Thailand a couple of months ago. Bangkok is the wildest city on the face of the earth! Absolutely anything goes, anytime of day or night.”

“Now, honey,” Tonia said, putting a hand on his sports jacket. A solitaire diamond sparkled on her wedding finger. “You of course do not indulge, do you?”

“Me? Of course not,” Bennett replied. “All it takes is money, Bob, and not an awful lot of that, either. But besides traveling, I just sign my name to whatever papers my people put in front of me.”

“That doesn’t present very well,” Tonia said. “You must read them first, and if you agree, you sign them.”

“Matter of fact, I don’t, Tonia. I trust the people working for me and their judgment.

CHAPTER 4

If I didn't, they'd find themselves standing in the lines at the Missions."

"The number of the homeless in the country is a real problem," Bob said.

"No it's not, Bob," Carmen said. "It's not a problem for me. It's not a problem for Tonia or Bennett. It's only a problem for the homeless."

Bob's mouth opened, then closed as he checked himself. He looked out of the limousine's window and recognized the highway they were on. Before his unwitting plunge into the downward spiral, he had lived here in Denver, had worked for the Manville Corporation as a security guard. At day's end he would change clothes in the men's locker-room, then get into his jeep and drive this same highway out to Boulder, to the University and his classes. He had wanted to become a teacher, elementary level.

As the elevator took them up to the Maison D'Or at the top of a skyscraper, Tonia chatted with Carmen about possible locales for the upcoming honeymoon. The two men stood silently side by side.

The *maitre d'hotel* greeted Carmen by name, then held the chair for her as she sat. Bennett held Tonia's chair. As the four of them settled into their chairs and places, Bob looked out the plate glass window. The city lay at their feet. Lights sparkled here and there in the encompassing mountains, while overhead—stretched out against the darkness of interstellar space—lay the Milky Way. He scooted his chair closer to the window, cupped his hands around his face to block the glare and gazed in awe. "That's the galaxy we're a part of, Bennett," Bob said. "Can you see it from there? I forget if it's a hundred million or a hundred billion stars. But if you could travel at the speed of light, it'd take you a hundred thousand years to cross it. Beautiful, huh?"

"Yes, Bob," Carmen dismissed. "But where's the waiter?"

Just then a busboy arrived at the large round table and started to remove the fifth place setting. "Leave it," Carmen said. The busboy, a teenager with red hair and freckles, asked if they were expecting another. "No," she replied, "but leave it in honor of all the men who have died and rotted in jungles. But you are a little too young to remember any of them, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," the busboy said and left.

"But you remember them, don't you, Bob? Pity what happened to those good men."

Bob repositioned himself at the table and looked at the chair being left empty in honor of Lt. Loomis, Lance Corporal Robbins, Stemmler, Blue.

"So," Bennett said, "you were in Nam?"

"Yeah," Bob said absently as he gazed at visages, at the faces of men, the grime of dozens, hundreds.

"What branch were you in?" Bennett asked.

"Corps," he said, then shook off the hauntings of the past. "But I went to the VA for counseling—me and Doc—and it helped. There are just some people, Bennett, who know all the right strings to pull." He scowled at Carmen then said, "Where's the waiter? I need a drink." He scanned across the candlelight of the room, the coiffures.

Carmen reached over and put her hand lovingly on top of his. The pink of her sleeve contrasted nicely against the deep maroon of his suede jacket, a gift from her. A tuxedoed

waiter approached, followed close behind by the same busboy. The waiter was maybe a year or two older than Bob, with blond hair and mustache. As the busboy began to fill water glasses, the waiter inquired about cocktails.

"Bourbon and water," Bob said.

The waiter gasped as he looked at Carmen's hand atop Bob's on the table. In spite of his professional etiquette he appeared distraught, eyes wide and gulping. He cleared his throat and inquired, "Any special brand, sir?"

"No."

Carmen glanced up at him and a grin came over her face. "Well, Jesse!" she said. "Are you in a wedding party or something tonight? Just look at you!"

"Smirnoff and soda, Carmen?" he asked.

"Everybody, please meet Jesse. I trust you didn't starve too long."

"Getting back to the drinks, please."

"Should I remember him?" Tonia asked Carmen.

"Of course, a couple years ago. Jesse Parker. You know, *Smegma*," Carmen said. "Prodigious gobs of the slime. So much he could put K-Y out of business! That Jesse!" The women snickered together. Then Carmen looked up at him. "No offense—that's just girl talk, Jesse." She opened her evening bag—pink with bold purple and crimson swirls to match her gown—and took out a bill. "Here." Bob could see it was a hundred dollar bill she was pressing into his hand.

"Thank you," Jesse said. Without a glance at the bill, he slid it into his trousers. "But getting back to the drinks."

"Oh, skip all that and join us for old-time's sake. I could set you up in the complex where Bob lives. It's nicer than where I had you," she said, squeezing Bob's hand. "Join us. It might be fun."

Bob pulled his hand away from her.

"I have a job to do, Carmen," Jesse said.

Bennett spoke up, "I'll have a J&B and water, Jesse, and please bring Tonia a dry Manhattan on the rocks, Crown Royal."

"Thank you," he said and left.

"Proud and foolhardy," Carmen said. "Look at him, a lowly waiter."

"I'd say he's maintaining," Bob said. "His haircut's fresh. And he may be in school."

"But going around and asking people what they want to drink and what they want to eat. How demeaning!"

"He's the guy you picked up hitchhiking, right?" Tonia asked. "He was thumbing alongside the road. A backpacker who had broken his leg. Yes, I remember now! You took him to the emergency room, visited him, and then rented an apartment for him as he healed. And he's the one you said you got on film."

"That's right!" Carmen said, then bent to whisper in Bob's ear. "Many fine attributes. Huge, uncut, and he can beg just like a dog and eat out of a dish on the floor. So guzzle your drinks tonight, boy."

There was a tinkling overhead. While the others at the table craned their heads

CHAPTER 4

upward to the single swaying chandelier, Bob fixed his gaze on the redheaded busboy standing attentively against the wall. His face became a mask, lips contorted, nose scrunched, eyes bulging and brows raised. His expression confounded revulsion, nausea and fear.

Bob had seen that look before and had himself seen the Hag before, in Nam. He did not join all the others in the room in looking up at the one chandelier swaying among the dozens. He would not gaze at her, the Hag with her toothless grin, the matted hair, the flies on her belly, maggots on her toes. He kept his eyes on the horror on the busboy's face. But now he knew the Hag had followed them—or just him?—back to the States.

A fine gentleman stood and made a lighthearted remark. Another sought to top it and the clientele resumed their chatter.

The busboy retreated into the kitchen.

“I can't understand why just one chandelier was swaying,” Bennett said. “It couldn't have been a little earthquake—all of them would have moved.”

Tonia said, “You men like figuring things like that out. I'll let you worry about it. Doesn't matter to me.”

“Men are most curious animals,” Carmen said.

Bob recalled Jesse's gasp for breath at seeing Carmen's hand atop his. *Jesse hadn't gasped because Carmen had found another man. He gasped in apprehension as to what it entails for me.* “Did you love him, this Jesse?” Bob asked for all at the table to hear.

“That's hardly fair,” Tonia said, coming to her defense, “to ask a woman the tender secrets of her heart.”

He laughed an insincere laugh. “It's fair...and significant! Did you?”

“No!” she said.

He looked at her. *You bitch!* were the only words throbbing in his head. Without response he stood up and began to walk. Behind him came Carmen's voice, and Tonia's, calling his name. With carriage proud, erect and military, he went past the *maitre d'*, got onto the elevator.

On the ground floor he crossed the lobby and exited onto the street. The cold wind was bracing. He pulled the collar of his sports jacket around his neck and began to walk toward where the Greyhound station used to be. He hoped it was still there.

It was a sixteen hour bus ride from Denver to Billings. Once there he made a quick stop at Edna's 24-Hour Diner where Della paid for his burger from the money in her apron and where a machine dispensed a pack of Winstons, his first in a couple of years. *It's something Marines do. All of us smoked. All except Doc and he wasn't really a Marine anyway. A Navy Corpsman.*

Outside, he made two phone calls from the booth, the first one to his boss, “I got stranded in Denver and had to take a bus back.” The other call was to Foster's taxi.

And finally Quasi! Out to pee. A double serving of kibble. A ride to the vet's. And then his first heeling lesson in the vet's parking lot. Quasi did well on three legs.

Back home he took a chicken from the freezer and put it still frozen into the oven to roast, then found his copy of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. During his homeless years, he

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

had had no access to television, so he had read voraciously. At day's end he would sit in his pickup truck, and by moonlight or street lamp would read paperback copies of SciFi, Western, Classics. He purchased them cheaply at church bazaars and yard sales. Six large banana boxes of them were stashed in his closet.

As Quasi munched the first of his rawhide chews and as the chicken slowly roasted, he sat in his chair, struck a match, lit a cigarette—only the second from the pack—and began anew Hugo's timeless tale of mismatched love.

He had not read thirty pages when the doorbell rang. Though it rang only a single short ring with no annoying continuance, he knew who it was. Quasi's dark eyes were questioning him as he stood up and crossed the room.

"What do you want?!" he demanded. His body blocked entrance into the room.

"Can't we just talk?" Carmen asked.

"I think it's all been said. Weren't you listening?"

"Bob, may I please come in and apologize?" Her hand was reaching timidly toward his.

He stepped back from the doorway and she entered to mid-room.

"Is that chicken roasting I smell?"

"Go ahead and apologize," he said, closing the door.

She was unbuttoning black leather driving gloves. "I see you still have *that dog*."

"Where's your apology?" he said. As erect as a recruiting poster he was standing beside her now.

"I was thinking about that old truck of yours. If you'd like, we could go out this evening and you could test drive something you'd look good in."

"That ain't much of an apology, baby," he said.

She put her arms around him and laid her head on his chest. "I do love you. There's a strength about you...I can even hear your heartbeat. Solid. Firm. It sounds like the heartbeat of ten thousand men. Forgive me. Forgive me, Bob. I never realized you had fears so deep within you. Other people can have sex and just take a shower and wash it off. But not you. I promise I'll never force you into sex with another man. You're too strong for that. Too provincial."

Hesitantly he put a hand on her head and started to stroke her hair. "Well maybe the Pastor had something to do with that outcome."

"Who?" she asked, pulling back a little and looking into his face.

"Reverend Negley. No, I didn't live in the woods with my dog from the time Pa left until I was old enough to enlist." He chuckled. "No. The Pastor found us there, and maybe some of his water and blood seeped in."

"I never realized you were religious," she said, hugging him and putting her head back on his chest.

"I was baptized, but no one who's been through what I've been through and who's seen what I've seen, could possibly keep on believing in God."

"Oh, Bob. I do love you. I'm just beginning to appreciate the depth of you. Let's go to bed and make up properly. And if we hurry, we can go out and get you a new truck, or

CHAPTER 4

MG, Trans-Am, whatever you want.” She held him tightly.

“If we hurry, huh?” he said.

Clinging to him close—with her gaze averted to the floor—she whispered, “I’ll even let you fuck me as long as you use some grease.”

“Some grease, huh?!” he said.

“Come on, Bob.” She took him by the hand and pulled toward the bedroom.

He didn’t move. “One question first, baby...Can I go back to school? I would like to be a teacher.”

From arm’s distance she looked at him. Her brows knitted briefly, then her free hand went on top of Bob’s to surround it. “But if you did, with your job and the classes and the studying, how much time would that leave us to be together?”

With increasing backward pull, he extracted his hand from her grasp. “That was a test, baby. You failed. So you can get the hell out of here. You talk about love,” he said, “but you know nothing about encouraging, nurturing, loving.”

“Bob?”

“Go.”

“Bob?” she said entreatingly.

“Get the hell out!” he bellowed.

Without further protestation she began to put on her gloves. He watched in silence. At the door she paused and turned. “It’s not as cold out there as it has been. But it’s only November and winter hasn’t really set in yet. I think I’ll stop by the Mission and give them a donation. There are so many homeless. Pathetic. Then I’ll go visit Daddy. *Ciao!*” The door closed softly behind her.

He got his journal from its stashing place and a pen from a kitchen drawer. He sat in his chair, lit a cigarette. Quasi was against the wall now, again chewing absently on his rawhide stick.

He put the date on the page and under it wrote:

1. *Give notice.*
2. *Close checking.*
3. *Lights/Phone.*
4. *Dispose of things.*

Scary. Having served on the front lines meant something after previous wars. Now it’s a liability. Even my Decorations mean nothing when you’re looking for a job. But maybe I’ll find something anyway. And even if I don’t, I’ll manage somehow with my dignity intact.

The first thing next morning, Tuesday, he told his boss he was quitting and gave four days notice. At noon he went to the bank.

On Wednesday he found several good boxes behind the supermarket and purchased a blue plastic tarp and some rope.

On Thursday the telephone was disconnected.

On Friday evening the Salvation Army arrived. They were pleased to receive such fine furniture and clothes in such beautiful condition.

That last night he and Quasi slept on the floor in the empty apartment.

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

By first light they were in the truck. He stopped by the diner for breakfast and to say goodbye to Della. Then, with Quasi snuggled so close it made shifting difficult, they set forth, headed south, headed to the land of his childhood.



CHAPTER 5

Atlanta, Georgia.

While Bob and Quasi curled together on the floor in Montana, a couple thousand miles away Blaine Shirer found no parking spot at Graffiti's. He circled around again to the off-duty policeman hired to protect the vehicles. With his red MG still running he got out to speak with the officer.

"Jamie, if I left you my keys, would you move it into a spot when somebody leaves?"

"Of course, Mr. Shirer, not a problem. We got a babysitter for tomorrow night and we'll be front and center for the opening. How's it going? Will it be as good as *Macbeth*? *Is this a dagger I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?...*"

"Five curtain calls. That's the most we've ever gotten and after opening night it was standing room only. That's what you guys did! I can only hope it'll be as good. We've worked hard enough but we're having a little problem with the blocking. We're doing it just as it would have been done at the Globe. The only difference is we're using women—except for Nursie. We've *got to use* drag for her!—and we're using lighting. The lighting's the problem. In the dimmer scenes the students can't see their blocking marks. And the opening's tomorrow night!"

"Did you know your Juliet—Margaret—is our next door neighbor?"

"Yes, she's mentioned that."

"Well, you'll remember Carl was *our* stage manager. He was always spot-on when any little problem came up. He'd ponder it and find a solution, every time, never failed. Maybe he'll have a workable suggestion for you. He's inside."

"I'll check him out and thanks for tending my car for me."

"Anytime, Mr. Shirer."

Blaine showed his ID, paid the cover charge and merged into the crush of men and the throb of tom-toms. Strobe light cast its fairy dust over sweaty torsos.



In an abandoned textile factory, not six blocks from Graffiti's, dogs barked, then snarled, then whimpered. The loser was dumped into a black trash bag while some men cheered,

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

others cursed and money exchanged hands.

Observing it all from a loft was Bronc and two of his bodyguards. He noted one of his lieutenants enter by a side door and run across the floor to the stairs. Bronc was already standing when he barged into the manager's office.

"O'Neil's storage unit is empty!" he shouted.

"All sixty-four kilos?"

"Empty! *Nada!*"

One of the two bodyguards spoke up. "And that was good shit, boss."

"Best powder money can buy!" Bronc said. "Horse, to Graffiti's! Extract Tony! We've got a fuckin' war to wage!"



CHAPTER 6

Locketville, Missouri.

Slowly, not daring to push the old pickup faster than forty-five miles per hour, yet with the dream of a future drawing them on, Bob and Quasi made their way. Seventy miles west of the Mississippi smoke bellowed from the engine. It bucked and lunged to a grinding noise. It shimmied and stalled.

When the tow truck arrived, the burly mechanic—with baseball cap turned backwards—said the towing alone would cost sixty-five dollars.

“Okay,” Bob said, “I don’t have much choice.”

The mechanic held his hand out. Bob paid him in advance, watched him attach chains and climbed into the passenger seat. While knitted dice swung from the rearview mirror, Quasi snuggled comfortably on his lap.

Once in town the two of them pushed the pickup into a bay. While the mechanic searched for the problems—which he asserted in advance would be many—Bob and Quasi went out to the sidewalk and stood on the curb under oak trees. They were skeletal with winter and rattling in the wind.

This was a cameo of a town, one from a by-gone era, one time and progress had overlooked. Across the street was a white steepled church with plywood nailed across the door and onto the windows, and even the plywood was gray with age. *If there is a God, He wouldn’t let that happen to His churches*, Bob thought. The sign out front mocked the hope that once thrived here: The First Baptist Church of Locketville. *As if there’ll ever be a Second!* Besides the church, there was the service station, a tiny post office, a one story brick elementary school, a little grocery store, barbershop, feed store and restaurant. That was Locketville, all of it, Locketville, Missouri.

He pulled his wallet from his jeans and sat down on the curb beside his dog. Without taking the bills out but thumbing through them, he counted three hundred sixty-four dollars. *I started with six hundred ninety. Where’d it go? There was food and tips for the waitresses, gas, three quarts of oil, a motel room one night—but only one night—a new retreat on the right front and the tow charge. That’s it.* He gulped. He wished he had a cigarette, and considered walking down the block to the little store. *Can’t afford it.* He went back to the service station.

The mechanic was under his truck on the hydraulic. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Come over here," the mechanic said, coming up steps to point to a gizmo in the engine. "Here's the first problem, guy. The water pump's shot. And see all the burned wires? But back here's a bigger problem." He moved back, squatted and pointed to something under the bed.

Bob at least knew enough to know that what he was pointing to was part of the axle. As a teen, living with the Pastor, he never had a car, and then on his eighteenth birthday he had enlisted, so he had never learned about auto-mechanics.

"Look in there," the mechanic said, pointing into a joint. Bob looked. "See how it's all worn? See the metal shavings? Well, that's the universal and yours is dangerous. Let that thing fall off while you're high-tailing it, and wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am, you're a goner."

"That dangerous, huh?" Bob said.

"Yep. If it'd start—and it won't—I wouldn't drive it around the block," the mechanic said, standing up.

"How much is all this going to cost?"

"Mighty old truck there, buddy."

"Ball-park figure?" Bob said, raising his eyebrows.

"I'll have to call around to see if I can find the parts first. If I can find them, I'll have you an estimate in about an hour. But don't get your hopes up, guy. And I guess it'll take four or five days to get the parts here, and then another one or two for the labor."

"Is there a cheap motel anywhere near by?" Bob asked.

The mechanic pointed caddy-corner out the bay door. "Thirteen miles down the road in the next town over."

"Je-sus Christ!" Bob said.

"But then you might check with Mrs. Sloan about taking you in. She used to take guests in, hasn't in years, but used to."

"Where would I find her?" he asked.

He walked Bob out to the sidewalk, and pointing, gave directions.

He found the clapboard house a block and a half down a side street. A gutter, long since pulled free from the eaves, wavered in the strong north wind. The front yard was overgrown with weeds, brown with the solid onset of winter. He went around to the back. Burdock had grown up in the chicken yard where hens hadn't cackled in years. He had Quasi sit beside him as he knocked at the kitchen door. There was a tapping across the floor and the door opened.

"Yes?" a gray-haired woman said. She was plump and of translucent complexion.

He said he was in a jam, his truck had broken down, and his name was Bob. "And I'm told you used to take in boarders."

"Well I don't know. A body hears about strange happenings on the radio these days," she said.

"I'm not strange. Honest," he said with his best Sunday-school smile.

"And who was it told you come here?"

CHAPTER 6

“I don’t know his name. At the station, the mechanic. A big guy, black hair, a little older than me.”

“You must mean Willie. Growing up he wanted to be a teacher—I might have had something to do with that, or I like to think so anyway....But I really don’t know,” she said and hesitated.

He explained about the water pump and the universal and about having to order all the parts in, and he was just trying to return to the South, the land of his childhood.

She took from the pocket of her house dress a white handkerchief. It had lace on the edges. She dried the palms of her hands with it, then said hesitantly, “Well, I guess if Willie told you, I imagine it would be all right.”

“And my dog, too?”

“You have a dog?” she asked.

“Yeah, right here,” he said.

“What type of dog is it?”

She was blind. “He’s an awful good dog, never messes or bothers things. I haven’t had him too long, short gray hair. The vet said he’s forty seven pounds. And he has only three legs.”

“How’d he lose his leg?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve only had him a week and a half or so. His name’s Quasi.”

“From Quasimodo?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Have you read it? *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*?”

“Sure. I’ve read lots of things.”

She made clicking sounds with her tongue against the roof of her mouth as she pondered, then set the price at twenty a week, room and board.

“It probably won’t be a week,” he said.

“Then we can divide it out.”

He agreed to the price and accepted her invitation to come in. Except for the kitchen with its yellow linoleum floor and glass curtain, the house was dark, with dime-store bric-a-brac cluttering the tops of surfaces. There was no television, but books, books in cases from floor to ceiling in the living room, books in smaller cases in the hallway, and even stacked in the corner of what was to be Bob’s room.

She fixed two cups of instant coffee from a kettle, and they sat together at the Formica table. The preliminaries about the cold front passed quickly and Mrs. Sloan talked about herself. Her husband had died forty years ago, but she had managed by teaching school. All the knickknacks throughout the house were gifts from her students accumulated over the years. Now and then she used to take in the occasional boarder to supplement what a schoolmarm earned. It was diabetes she had, but got by okay on her Social Security and two visits a month from the county nurse.

He surmised she was a lonely, old woman—she had talked on so long. “This is all very interesting,” Bob said. “But I’ve got to go back and check on the truck now. We can talk some more when I get back.”

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

"I was planning on tuna casserole for dinner," she said. "Would that be okay with you? I make it special—I put green olives in it. It makes it special."

"That sounds great, Mrs. Sloan."

"And would you mind leaving Quasi with me? It'll give us a chance to get acquainted. And would it be okay if I gave him a Saltine?"

"Spoil him all you want, ma'am."

"Thank you," she said.

"Sure," he said and left.

He arrived back at the station almost exactly one hour from the time he had left. Through the plate glass window he could see Willie sitting on a high stool in back of the counter. "So, Willie," he said as he opened the door and entered, "I hear you once wanted to be a teacher. I still do."

"Yeah, a ton of years ago when I was a kid. You're lucky it's a Chevy, guy. I found the parts in St. Louis. The universal is brand new. The water pump's a salvage, but what the hell, it should be okay."

"Great," Bob said, "but uh, how much is all this going to cost?"

Willie picked up the pad on which he had written. Bob noticed his fingers were stained with grease. "Three hundred and twenty, maybe plus a little, maybe minus."

That depletes my funds! He inhaled a deep breath, held it, then exhaled. "Okay," he said. "Go ahead, get the parts in and do what you got to do. But if you can keep the cost as low as possible, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure will."

"Thanks," he said. His head was spinning and he was a little wobbly by the time he reached the sidewalk. He placed a hand on the bole of an oak to steady himself. When the truck broke down, he had foreseen a day or two of rest from the highway, not this.

If I were alone I'd stick my thumb out, hitchhike, and get there with hundreds still in my pocket. But I'm not alone anymore. I've made a commitment. And no way will Quasi be cast out again. The commitment isn't our problem. Money is.

There are jobs in Atlanta but I'll need at least two hundred to rent a room and eat while I look for work and then wait two weeks until I get paid.

Three hundred sixty-four dollars. That's it. Period. If the repairs cost only three hundred, that would leave sixty-four. And then minus twenty to Mrs. Sloan for room and board. No way can I get to Atlanta on forty-four dollars. That's not even enough for the gas.

And no way in hell will I defraud an old blind woman. No way can I, upon leaving, hand her a one dollar bill and tell her it's a twenty. She's putting herself out to help me and I can't do that.

Divine intervention would be helpful, if Divinity existed. That was a beautiful pipe dream while it lasted. But it's just that. It's all up to me, my actions. Mine alone.

He glanced upward through the rattling branches. Against the crystalline sky, high aloft, soared a raptor. The triangular shape of the tail told him it was either an eagle or buteo, but he couldn't see the size of her head so identification couldn't be made. *I wonder if they even have buteos here. If not, then it's an eagle. Can't see what type.*

CHAPTER 6

Across the street doves searched contentedly in the leaves while a swallow darted in the air. He followed the swallow toward the restaurant.



CHAPTER 7

At the counter of the Blue Plate Diner Bob draped his sheepskin coat—an expensive gift from Carmen—on the back of a stool. He scanned the room. Two men were bent over newspapers along the counter. Three tables were taken: two women and a child at one, a young couple at another, and an elderly man and grandson at the third.

He sat, ordered black coffee, got it, and moments later asked the waitress—as she was carrying an order to a table—if he could speak to the owner.

He watched the plastic clock on the wall tick off the seconds as he waited. A middle-aged man came out of the kitchen and approached. He wore a soiled apron, had deep lines drooping from nose to chin around his mouth, and his salt-and-pepper hair was cut into a flat-top. Wiping hands on his apron, he introduced himself as Mr. Atchity, the owner. Bob explained about his truck breaking down and being towed in from the Interstate, and about trying to get to Atlanta, where he'd heard the recession hadn't depleted all the jobs yet. "So what I'm getting at is I need work. Do you have anything that needs doing or do you know of anybody who does?"

Mr. Atchity massaged swollen arthritic fingers. "Things are right tough in these parts too. But in a couple months we'll have a new President and maybe he can do something to change things around."

"But I need a job now," Bob said.

"Are you a veteran?" Mr. Atchity asked.

"What difference does that make?"

"To me a lot," Mr. Atchity said.

"Yes, sir, I served."

"What branch?"

"Marine Corps. Three consecutive tours in Nam, sir. So you don't have a job for me and you won't help me either, right?"

Mr. Atchity took off his glasses and wiped them on a handkerchief from his hip pocket. "I was in the Corps, too. And war, son, is not pretty. The only difference with you guys and us is you had reporters swarming all over the place and cameras."

"Well can you help me find a job then?"

"Would you like a piece of pie?"

CHAPTER 7

“It’s a job I need, not pie!”

Mr. Atchity took a slice of apple pie from the glass display case, put it in front of him and filled his coffee cup. “Tell me what you think. I make them myself from my wife’s recipe,” he said and left.

Maybe! I’ve got to tell him what I think about the pie, so he’s planning on coming back. Please. Through the pass-through window he could see Mr. Atchity in the kitchen. He was talking into the black receiver of a telephone mounted onto the wall. *Please!*

He hadn’t eaten half the pie, its crust full flavored and flaky, when Mr. Atchity was again standing in front of him. “This is not for public knowledge,” he said, “but the health department is threatening to close me if I don’t fix the place up, and that right soon. Now I can’t afford to pay that much, no more than minimum wage, but I’ll throw in meals for you, as much as you can eat. So it’s not much of a job I’m offering—not for a veteran who served honorably—but if you want it, you got it.”

“What time do you want me here, sir?” Bob asked.

“You can cut the *Sir*, I was enlisted too. You can call me Mr. Atchity. Now there’s not a lot of dishes first thing in the morning, so I’ll come in early, get breakfast going and you can come in about seven.”

Bob stood up and offered his hand. “Thanks! I’ll be here at seven,” he said.

Mr. Atchity shook it and nodded.

When he got back at Mrs. Sloan’s, she was keeping the casserole warm in the oven. He tried to help her carry things to the table. “No, you go sit, young man,” she said. “This is woman’s work.” Slowly, using the sense of touch rather than sight, she placed things on the table. He noticed her lips moved with each step across the room. She was counting them. The tuna casserole was tasty, enlivened with the green olives.

As they ate, he explained that, from now on, she wouldn’t have to bother to fix him anything. He’d take his meals at work.

“No,” she said.

“But Mrs. Sloan, it comes as part of my pay.”

“The deal we made was twenty a week for room *and* board,” she said.

“But I’m just trying to help. It must be an awful lot of bother, having to do it, you know...”

“Blind?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“A body learns to manage, Bob. And planning the meals and then cooking them will give me something to do with my time.”

“Well, then,” he said, “I can at least do up the dishes for you every night.”

“And just how would I ever find anything if you go and put them away?” she asked. “We have our deal, young man. We’ll stick to our deal.”

“Okay,” he said. “Then I guess I’ll take a walk. I need to go to the store anyway.”

“What do you need at the store?” she asked.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you, but I’d like a cigarette.”

“Well, right around the corner there you’ll find a pack. I don’t know what kind they

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

are, of course, but a church lady left them here last month. She's probably forgotten about them by now, but even if she hasn't, I don't think she'd mind."

He found the cigarettes and lit a Kool as Mrs. Sloan scraped all the dishes into an iron skillet. She put it on the floor for Quasi. It was too much food for him, but Bob checked himself from saying anything. He smoked that cigarette and another as she did the dishes and tidied the kitchen.

Back at the table she said, "See, being blind isn't all that bad. A body can still manage. The one thing I really miss, though, is not being able to read."

Bob asked if he could read aloud to her and they talked about what she would like to hear. She finally decided on *Middlemarch*, which, after much searching, he located on the top shelf of a bookcase in the living room.

In the weeks that followed he would read aloud every evening—at the table, after their chat—a chapter or two. At passages her plump face would light and blind eyes would twinkle like a girl's.

She would wake him every morning by making the sound of a rooster crowing—It was pretty authentic.—and there would be a full breakfast waiting, biscuits, honey and all.

In those weeks he worked for Mr. Atchity with the strength of unfailing gratitude. He scrubbed the kitchen hood inside and out, he painted walls, and tinkered with plumbing. He did pots and dishes, stripped twenty years of grease from the floors, and working through the night, singlehandedly ripped out the carpet from the dining room and replaced it with new.

When his pickup was ready, he paid for the repairs, but left it parked on the street in front of the house and walked the two blocks to and from work. The only time he used it was on Thursday evening when he and Mrs. Sloan would drive thirteen miles to the nearest supermarket. Through the aisles Mrs. Sloan would push the cart, and walking beside her would be Bob, towering above her, handsome with his light brown wavy hair and eyes of palest blue. As they slowly made their way up and down the aisles, he would describe what they were passing and she would ask a hundred questions—Did he like this or that? Or did they have *baby* lima beans? Back home he would hand her item by item, telling her what each one was, as she patiently placed things where she could find them.

After three weeks on the job, he began to leave the restaurant for an hour in the slow part of the afternoon to return home to check on Mrs. Sloan and Quasi. During those hours he tried to teach three-legged Quasi to play Frisbee. As long as he kept the Frisbee low, Quasi did almost okay, but jumping was not his thing. They changed the game to Fetch the Stick. He did great with that.

He was off Sunday afternoons—The restaurant closed at two.—and under brilliant blue skies or gray, he would walk, content and happy, along dirt roads or woodland paths. Quasi went with him, hobbling at his side, or sniffing in the dead leaves, or dashing into this bush or that. Once Quasi discovered why skunks aren't called a dog's best friend. Mrs. Sloan told Bob to bathe him first in tomato juice. And no, he could take it from the pantry—fourth shelf up, far right. When he had accomplished the proper order of bathing as Mrs. Sloan had explained it—and had dried Quasi the best he could—he found a bottle

CHAPTER 7

of cheap perfume sitting on the kitchen table.

A few days before Christmas she asked if he would cut a little tree. “Oh, I know what you’re thinking,” she added, “but it does smell good and brings back memories.” The next day he got permission from Mr. Atchity to extend his afternoon break by an hour. With a shovel resting on his shoulder and with three-legged Quasi hobbling beside him, he wandered woodland paths until he at last came upon the perfect tree.

He didn’t cut it but dug it, and back home found a large earthenware pot among the brambles of what had once been the chicken yard. He put their tree on the Formica of the kitchen table, washed up and drank a glass of warm milk before returning to the restaurant.

When he got home that evening, a little after seven as always, he found their Christmas tree decorated with a porcelain angel on top and twenty-four fancy red ribbons blind Mrs. Sloan had tied and placed the best she could. He asked how she knew which spool was red, and she explained she had carried all of them to the variety store and there had asked Peggy to pick out the red.

“You mean you walked to town?” he asked.

“Of course. It wouldn’t have done at all to have purple ribbons, or green or something, now would it?”

“You’re a remarkable woman, Mrs. Sloan,” he said.

“A body finds you can do a lot in the dark as long as you go slow,” she said.

On Christmas morning there were four packages under that tree: a flannel shirt for him, a small bottle of Chanel Number Five for her, and two boxes of dog biscuits.

One day during his afternoon break Mrs. Sloan broached a subject she had previously avoided. She asked why he wasn’t married.

“Well, I guess I just haven’t found her.”

“But that’s where your future lies, Bobby,” she said, “in home, and caring and providing.”

Don’t you think I dream of that, long for that, need that? “Well one of these days, I guess,” he said. “But uh, I’ve gotta get on back. Uh, we’ve had a real busy day at work, you know? The dishes will be stacked high for me. And, uh, I just wanted to make sure you were okay, but I really need to get back to those dishes now. I’ll see you tonight.”



The week before Reagan was to take office, they were sitting and chatting over their hot Ovaltine—Coffee kept Mrs. Sloan awake and Bob had enough of that at work. Into their conversation fell one of those peaceable lulls that sometimes befall among those who are comfortable with one another and have no need to impress. Into that silence Bob said, “I’ve been thinking, Mrs. Sloan. I’ve been able to save up a little money, and I’m wondering if it would be okay with you if I used some of it to buy some paint. I’ll do the inside first, and come spring I’ll get the outside done. And maybe I’ll fix up the chicken house and we could have some hens.”

“No,” she said. “It’s time you and Quasi left.”

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

"But why?! I think we get along pretty good!"

"That we do, and it's been nice having you here. And Quasi's been company for me during the day. But it's time for both of you to leave."

"But I'm happy here," he said.

"And I've been happy too," she said. "I never knew how lonely I was with just the radio for company. But you've got to find your future, Bobby. That's not here. We can stay in touch."

"You don't even have a telephone."

"You can write," she said.

"But how'd you..."

"Mrs. Hutchinson, the traveling nurse, can read them to me. And you can come back and visit an old woman now and then. And maybe bring the wife and kids? My first name is Ethel in case you have a little girl."

"Yeah!" he said, "come back and visit. Excuse me!" He stood up—the chair scuffing roughly on the floor—went to his room and slammed his door with a thud.

"Bob?" she called after him.

He flopped face down on the bed and hit it with his fist. *Rejection! What the hell's wrong with me?! After that shit with Pa, those years of homelessness, that debauchery with Carmen! Shit! I thought I'd found a home here and maybe a little love. And now she's kicking me out. 'My first name is Ethel in case you have a little girl,' she had said. Is there meaning in that or is it just senile babble?*

He sat on the edge of the bed and into the darkness of the room said those words aloud, slowly, in his deep masculine voice. "My first name is Ethel in case you have a little girl." And then he understood. She wasn't rejecting him. She was demonstrating something about love.

His chin quivered. Now he understood. She probably needed him more than he needed her. Yet she was sending him away, for she knew—as he did if he were honest with himself—that his future and dreams didn't lie here. He stood from his bed, went to her door and knocked.

"Come in, Bobby," she said.

He opened the door. In the meager light he could see she was already in bed, with the blankets up to her neck.

"Come, sit," she said, patting the bed.

He did. "You're one hell of a woman, Mrs. Sloan."

"It's just you're young, and healthy and you've got to set forth, Bobby."

"I know," he said. He found her hand and squeezed it.

"Now what would the church women say if they found us here like this, young man? Or what would my Papa say? He would insist you marry me. Now wouldn't that be a sight!"

"Goodnight, Mrs. Sloan," he said, rising.

"Sweet dreams," she said.

He was going to leave Friday morning after getting his pay Thursday and a final trip to

CHAPTER 7

the supermarket.

It snowed heavily late Thursday night.

Morning came and Mrs. Sloan woke him, as usual, by crowing like a rooster. As usual, she had prepared a full breakfast—oatmeal, eggs, sausage, biscuits, honey.

He made three trips carrying armfuls of clothes out to his truck and put them under the tarp with his six cartons of paperbacks. He came back, hugged Mrs. Sloan, and said his thanks and his goodbyes. He called Quasi to come with him this time.

From his truck he gazed for one last time at the house. He saw her at the front window, her hand parting the glass curtains. Above her the gutter still hung free and water from the melting snow dripped from the eaves. The weeds in the yard, draped in that heavy wet snow, assumed the enchanted appearance of snowdrifts.

It wasn't a grand house, but here within those clapboards he had found, after his years of wanderings, had found, for a little while at least, a home. Here he had paused from his downward spiral. And here he had learned something about love, something that his thousands of hours of sitting in church as a teen, of his thousands of hours of studying the Scriptures, hadn't even hinted at. Stripped of the gilded babble of preachers, love—working itself out in the real world—was, indeed, sometimes hurtful.

He had learned about self-denial from the old blind woman standing in the window there, her hand foolishly parting the curtain as if she could see. He promised that if she couldn't come to Atlanta for the wedding, they would honeymoon here, in Locketville, Missouri, in a clapboard house with gutter hanging loose.

He leaned across the seat and Quasi and rolled down the passenger window. Mouthing widely the words, he said, without sound, "I love you." How he wished blind eyes could see, but maybe they did. While the glass curtains were still parted, he shifted into gear and headed onward toward his future.



FROM THE JOURNAL

When I was crossing the bridge from Indiana into Kentucky the car in front of me skidded on the ice and plunged through the railings. I slid to a stop and jumped feet first into the darkness below.

Somehow I managed to pull a little boy from the car and get him onto a sheet of ice. But I couldn't find the car again—what with the ice floes and it being dark and the current and all. If it hadn't been like that maybe I could have seen bubbles or something. But I couldn't find the car again. Anyway, I'm told a helicopter rescued the little boy three miles or so down the river and Fire Rescue tossed me a line.

The Church of the Black Brethren put me up in a motel room. TV crews came and wanted to interview me, but I wouldn't go out and talk to them. Quasi and I just lay in bed watching a Redford movie.

Angels singing awoke me in the morning. That's what it sounded like. I looked out the window and dozens of black men and women with tons of kids were there. All were dressed in the black of bereavement and their voices, what heavenly voices! I never heard voices that celestial before.

I put on my jeans and opened the door. And here they come, all piling in, the women carrying cakes and two cardboard boxes with gobs of homemade food, some of it still hot. One of them had even baked dog biscuits. They weren't all perfect like in a store-bought box, but Quasi loved them.

The men wanted the keys to my truck to take it to some garage. I told them no, so they hot-wired it and brought it back an hour later with new tires all around. Michelin. They bought me Michelins.

I left that afternoon, foregoing a church service and banquet in my honor. I had to invent a lie, so I told them I was headed to Atlanta for my wedding. A little white lie, but I think they believed it. They were still going to have their banquet, though, to celebrate little Isaac's survival.

A little ways out of town I noticed they had even filled my gas tank up. I wish they hadn't gone to all the bother. I'm not the hero they say I am. I managed something but it wasn't enough. There will still be a double funeral, for mother and son. I wish I were a better man.

FROM THE JOURNAL

At least little Isaac will have the church to raise him and tend him and love him. To be all alone in this world is not how it's supposed to be.

Atlanta lies only eight hours down the road. Perhaps I'll land a decent job.



CHAPTER 8

Atlanta, Georgia.

In all the much ballyhooed city, the only job he could find was that of roofer. Yet it was enough to keep him out of the lines at the soup kitchens where the well-meaning seasoned the chili with despair. For several weeks he had been dating Linda, a graduate of the Culinary Institute and formerly the chef in a now defunct restaurant. “The *Journal* gave us two rave reviews, Bob. And we were on the way to making it a real destination, but with this economy, kaput! you know.” She was now working as a cook in a diner located about mid-way along the route he took between King Roofing and his room.

As he walked from work to the diner this Thursday—his denim jacket folded and perched on his shoulder—he was puzzling over Linda’s avoidance. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday he had seen her busy at work in the diner. Each time she had smiled and waved, but each evening when he had called her from the pay phone, her mother had offered excuses why she couldn’t come to speak. He wondered if today she would find time to come from the kitchen for a moment.

There was nothing wrong with last weekend, that’s for sure. Saturday had been her daughter’s birthday and he had attended the little party, had given her a stuffed Dalmatian and, later, the three of them had gone out to see Disney’s *101 Dalmatians*. Sunday he and Linda had taken a long walk through the city, gazing into the window displays of department stores and jewelers. They had stopped at Burger King for dinner, then, for the first time, had made love. Although it had been in his shabby room, it had been wonderful love, first slow, tender, and building to passion and writhing.

He wondered why she was avoiding him. She said she understood how tight jobs were, that the only work he could find in the whole city was that of roofer, and how she understood it was only temporary. She said she understood that his truck wasn’t starting dependably since his arrival here and that it would take him another week or so to save enough to have it fixed. She said she understood. That’s what she said.

Along cracked sidewalks and new, for twelve blocks, under ancient oaks and past azaleas already budded, he walked. Gray-haired women, wrapped in bright afghans, rocked—in their timeless way—on porches. On the telephone line overhead, a flock of grackles perched—thousands of them, stretched out for three blocks or more, each

CHAPTER 8

grackle identical, each with an iridescence on the wing, all but four facing the same direction.

Half a block ahead he saw Linda coming out of the front door of the diner. She was getting off work early and had already changed into slacks and a multicolored sweater. Her blond French-cut hair was freshly done. *Must have had it done yesterday after work.* At the sidewalk she got into a red Camaro, double-parked, the engine running.

He slunk into a doorway to watch her leave in the sporty car, a young man with mustache behind the wheel. He hoped she hadn't seen him pressed in the doorway there.

He watched the traffic go by. *I don't have a Camaro, baby. I don't have a nice apartment. I don't even have a decent job. But damn it, I'm doing the best I can!* He hit the wall with his fist. *It would just make things easier to work toward a future with you by my side. I never should have allowed you to see my dumpy room.*

Still in the doorway he lit a cigarette. *I'll never stop here for dinner again, but I do understand, Linda. You have a daughter to worry about as well. There'll be needs and bills that I myself could not meet. I can barely support me and Quasi, so I can't blame you for looking at my empty wallet, baby. So I'll miss your laugh, your smile, and our future together that I've been imagining. That was foolish of me, wasn't it?*

Maybe I should have told you I've got something up my sleeve, something I'm working on. Some magazines pay ten thousand dollars for a short story. Imagine, Linda! But if I could just get paid a hundred or two at first, that would help, wouldn't it? But with you passing by in a Camaro that's just a would-a, could-a, huh, baby? I promise you'll never see me again, never hear from me. And as somebody used to say, Ciao....But that's kinda harsh, what I really mean is Good luck, Linda. Really.

I wish I hadn't written Mrs. Sloan about you. I'll have to write again and explain, or maybe I'll just stop mentioning you. That's easier. For the time being I'm not going to date. I'll just maintain, keep myself out of the soup kitchens. I've got paper, pencils and maybe I can tell a story. Maybe a magazine will buy one.

The kids in the school yard over there are cute, all bundled up in their jackets and sweaters and playing. I'd love to play with my kids when they got home from school, or maybe walk them to a park and watch them play with their chums. But it all depends on having some bucks. Can't watch too long. Someone will think I have motives, but they are so cute.

Against the chain-link fence around the schoolyard two policemen shoved a black man, his hair braided into dreadlocks. As the children tossed balls and jumped rope, they frisked him. On numerous afternoons that man had beckoned to Bob, hawking euphoria.

The evening chill was starting as he crossed caddy-corner through a little park. He paused to take his denim jacket from his shoulder and put it on. He noticed his jeans and tennis shoes were stained black with tar. Cars streamed by as he walked, and delivery trucks, occasionally a limousine.

He passed the Laundromat where he did his wash on Saturdays, and passed by the adjacent storefront church, The Church of Penitents. The afternoon service was beginning with a piano pounding block chords of a hymn he recognized from childhood.

He entered the next doorway down, Bud's Place Cold Beer, and although the

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

transition from sunlight to gloom blinded him, he knew the layout, went straight in a dozen steps and turned left a couple more to the bar. He sat.

Bud, a bald, bespectacled man, put a draft in front of him. "Why is it your little lady ain't been in with ya all week?" he asked.

"She's anybody's lady now. Want her phone number?" Bob said, putting two quarters on the bar.

"Sorry, man," Bud said.

"Plenty of fish, ya know?"

"Well, here's something to cheer ya up. We're having a drawing. Chance for a pitcher of beer for a nickel."

"Sure," he said.

Bud scooped Bob's two quarters into his hand. "I'll take it out of this," he said. After ringing up the cash register, he took a clean pitcher, turned it over and dropped Bob's change, a nickel, into it. Bud handed him the stub of a pencil and a bar napkin. "Got to write your name on it now." Bob did and gave it to him. Bud repositioned his bifocals and held the napkin beneath the light under the bar.

Bob scanned the room. The heavy jowled cigar smoker sat on his usual stool to his right. Four young men in white tee-shirts, all familiar, stood around the pool table in the back. At a table behind him two women sat with a pitcher, one rocking a baby carriage, the other with curlers in her hair. To his left, nearer the door, three businessmen sat at the bar.

Bud stood upright, held the napkin before him and proclaimed in loud voice, "Ah yes, Robert Newell!"

Bob started with bafflement at the loudness of his announcement.

"Them dudes down there been asking 'bout cha," Bud informed. He motioned with his head toward the three businessmen.

Bob snapped his head to look. Two of the businessmen, dressed in matching blue blazers and white turtlenecks, were standing up. The one in the center, in sunglasses and suit, leaned toward the bar and looked Bob's way. "Hey Newell!" he called.

In the back of the barroom the cue ball smacked into the rack. The baby burst into wails.

The businessman put his sunglasses into his breast pocket. "Hey, Newell!" His voice was syrupy. "Hey, buddy." The pallid scar at his temple, like a tree blasted by lightning, seemed to glow.

"Bronc?" Bob said, astonishment in his voice. Grinning, he stood up and went down to him. "Gees, it's good seeing you, Private," he said with a jovial punch on the shoulder.

"Don't muss the clothes," Bronc said, swiveling to him. His companions were standing by their stools, one tall, Bob's height, the other shorter, with dark Italian complexion.

"You really look good," Bob said. "Are you doing okay?"

"A hell of a lot better than just okay," Bronc said. "The limo out front's mine."

"That's great!" Bob said.

“And I’ve got pads,” Bronc went on, “acreage in the country, power. I’ve got ’most anything a *man* could want.”

“That’s great,” Bob said. “Have you heard anything from Sgt. Hollinger, or Tanner, or Frog? I know Doc Preston’s doing okay. He’s got a lovely wife, home, and he’s working for his uncle. Gees, it’s good seeing you.” Again he punched his shoulder.

“I done told ya, don’t muss the clothes,” Bronc said, leaning back on the barstool. The two men in blazers moved half a step closer to Bob, one on each side. “So tell me, what’s happening with you?” Bronc asked.

Bob shrugged. “I, uh, just got off work and, uh, broke up with my girl friend, you know?” He gave a little chuckle. “And well, I’m just working as a roofer, but it’s a temporary thing.”

“We know,” Bronc said. “We seen you walking lots of times, seen you come in here, too. Lots of times.”

The two men in blazers were nodding. The taller one on Bob’s right started working his jaws as if he were chewing on something.

“Well by next Tuesday or Wednesday I’ll be able to get my truck fixed, so I won’t have to walk everywhere. Since I’ve been here it’s not starting right—sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn’t. If you saw me walking, though, you should have stopped and said Hi, maybe given me a lift.”

“But you stink of tar, Newell,” Bronc said.

Bob glanced at the black stains on his jeans and shoes. “Let’s see you do roofing work and not get dirty!” he said, his voice rising in defense.

Bronc looked down at his nails. He held his hand out to the shorter, dark-haired man on Bob’s left. A switch-blade was put into it, its blade flashing open with a solid cling. Bronc cleaned his nails. “I will pick you up in the limo one day, give you a ride you’ll remember,” he said.

“You know,” Bob said, “I had nightmares—me and Doc—for a while. But we went to the VA for counseling and it helped. Did you have nightmares?”

Silent, Bronc pretended to pare his nails. In the back of the room pool balls clinked one against another, thudded against felt, and rumbled down pockets. “Was your last time fuckin’ your girl friend super?” Bronc asked, looking up. A broad grin came over Bronc’s face, his eyebrows raised, the pallid scar at his temple taking on an inhuman orange tinge.

“Bronc, I wasn’t responsible...”

“To hell you weren’t! You had to run off like that, didn’t cha!”

The two men in turtlenecks looked past Bob at each other.

“What do you mean, *run off*?!” Bob said. “I escaped!”

“Did you hear that, boys? He e-scaped.”

The men in turtlenecks nodded.

“It’s not my fault...”

“Shut up!” Bronc said. “I knew someday. Knew it!” His lower teeth were bared, the scar on his temple pulsing red.

“I don’t have to listen to this,” Bob said.

The men in turtlenecks moved in so close he could feel their warmth through the blazers. From the church adjacent the piano started pounding chords again.

"But you go and high-tails it, and Charlie fuckin' takes it out on us!"

"But who brought the Regulars?" he protested.

Bronc shook his head. "You had nightmares, but I have a fantasy—Ever have a fantasy, Newell?—and my fantasy is going to fuck the hell out of your nightmares. It's about a little bamboo cage somewhere, Corporal. A *little* bamboo cage, not big enough to sit up in or lie down in, and set up on stilts, just like it was, remember? And maybe I need a pet for my little cage."

"I'd break the fuck out. Charlie couldn't hold me and you fuckin' can't hold me!" The baby in the carriage howled.

"That's what I told you he'd say, right, boys?" The dark-haired one nodded; the taller one continued to chew. "Well Newell, I've got that cage and I need a pet for it."

Bob turned to leave, but the two men grabbed his arms.

"Stuff you in that cage naked. And stuff something else in there with ya. A demon maybe."

"You're crazy," he said.

"But funny thing about demons is you've got to keep feeding them to keep 'em happy because it's not nice when they get hungry. Demons get mean and nasty when they're hungry."

Both men nodded. Bob noticed that in the back of the room one of the pool shooters indicated Bob with an upward nod and all four stood around the pool table looking at them. *Hey guys, he thought, I don't know you and you don't know me, but we've seen each other lots of times. How about giving me a hand, huh?*

"You're crazy, Bronc," he said, sweat now trickling down his sides.

"Naw. Not me. Just got fantasies about putting a demon inside ya, in your blood and in your head. He'll keep a real close eye on ya. But my boys here will keep him fat and happy, give him demon food every couple hours. Demon food comes in a needle, Corporal. Have my boys here stick your arms every couple hours. Every couple hours for three or four days, till you're hooked real good and the demon is big and strong, but fat and sleepy. But then the boys stop bringing the juice because I told 'em to, and the demon starts getting hungry and mean, and takes it out on you."

"I'd fight it."

"Yeah, fuckin'-A, Newell! But when you've eaten almost the whole turkey and your guts stop cramping and you stop belching up blood, my boys here will start feeling sorry for the poor little demon and will bring him more needles and keep feeding him till he's again big and strong, and then—you know how forgetful boys can be—they again forget to feed him and he gets mad at ya. Again. How much cold turkey can you take, Newell? Way out in the country, without food, water? Naked in that bamboo cage, with the sun and the mosquitoes and the cold at night? Remember? Could you take a week, Corporal? Maybe two? Or maybe there might be a little food, some water. Could you take it month after month in that cage? Bronc's pet?"

With sharp snap of his shoulders Bob turned but failed to break free from the men's grasp of his arms. They tightened their hold and moved in, their bodies flush with his.

Slowly Bronc inspected the switchblade, looking at it close to his face, rotating it. In the gloom the bright metal glowed and glinted with a light of its own, a supernatural, unholy light. Bud, the owner, was no longer in back of the bar. The cigar smoker got up from his stool and headed for the rest room. The women scurried out the door. The four pool shooters stood at the table, watching. *Hey, guys?* The shorter dark haired man on Bob's left started grinning and grinding his crotch up and down Bob's leg. The hymn, "O What a Friend," came through the walls. One of the pool shooters dropped coins in the jukebox.

Bronc moved the blade, a gleam in the darkness, before Bob's face. It wavered before his eyes, then lowered in graceful, serpentine scrolls. He held it, still twisting it, at Bob's crotch. "But you've got one uncle," he said, his voice now calm, measured, distant. "All you've got to do for your uncle, is do to your balls what you did to mine. I've got to hear ya telling me how sorry you are. And I've got to hear ya weeping and crying with the pain where your balls used to be. And when I'm sure you're really sorry, and not just cutting 'em off for some more juice, but really sorry—when I'm sure, we'll drop you off at some hospital. But if detectives ever ask me one fuckin' question—Just one!—you're dead, boy."

"I'm not responsible..."

"Fuck you ain't!" Bronc flared. "Charlie beat 'em till they were coconuts."

"The doctors..."

"Fuck the doctors!"

"Well, Bronc," Bob said with a snicker, "maybe lots of little boys and girls are sleeping safer because of it."

Bronc jabbed the blade at Bob's crotch. It missed its intended mark, sticking two inches into his thigh instead. With a fierce twist of torso Bob freed himself from the grasp of the taller man on his right and slammed Bronc backwards against the bar.

Both men seized his wrists, twisting them behind his back and pulling them upward toward his neck. The pain that radiated from his shoulder, elbow and wrist forced him to arch his back, forced him to strain his chest unnaturally and uncomfortably high. It was a horrible, intense pain. *Don't dislocate them! I can't work if you do!*

Bronc, standing now, looked at his prey. A crazed smile flickered on his lips. It vanished into a blank gaze, then flickered again.

Suddenly he kned Bob's crotch, which doubled him over, the breath knocked from him. A right upward hook to the jaw straightened him, until a knee again crushed the balls, then another hook, another knee. And again, and again.

He was limp in the men's clutch when at last Bronc grew tired. A hand grasped his hair and pulled his face upward. Bob tried to open his eyes. Everything was blurred under a red haze. His hair was released, his head fell and there was a wiping of hands across his back. His arms were released and he collapsed with a hollow thud onto the floor, his hands moving meekly to protect genitals.

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

“Your little, tiny balls hurt now, boy? Aww. We’ll fix it so you don’t have to worry about ’em no more. You *do want* to cut ’em off for me, now don’t you?” Bronc said, then shouted, “Fuckin’ answer me!” He kicked Bob in the abdomen, which caused him to cough and to choke on the very coughs. “Now get that fuckin’ asshole out of my sight.”

His armpits and legs were grabbed, and his back dragged across the ground. They dropped him on the sidewalk, his head hitting with a clunk. He slowly curled up into a ball. The concrete was cool under him.

Blood flowed from his forehead and mouth to form a puddle. It seeped from the gash on his thigh to darken his jeans. And he lay there, curled up, his hands protecting genitals from the pain which radiated up from them, a pain so intense it usurped all thought, a sick, nauseous, unmanly pain.

Women carrying grocery bags passed by. Groups of high school students parted left and right. Old men walking their dogs tugged on the leash as they commanded No, No. In hushed silence they gawked at him who hovered in and out of consciousness.

CHAPTER 9

Bronc, massaging his knuckles, followed his bodyguards and Bob out. He paused on the sidewalk to take the sunglasses from his breast pocket and put them on. "Oh my!" he said mockingly. "Look what we have here. Must be a drunk." He stepped over Bob and climbed into the open door of the limousine.

The taller man, Spider, got into the rear with him while Tony, the dark Italian-looking man, went around to drive. As they pulled from the curb, Spider in the rear said, "You weren't serious about taking him to a hospital after he's made himself a girl, were you?"

"Shit!" Bronc said, scooping white powder up into a spoon. "Picture it. All naked and bloody, howling with pain, but sticking his arm out through the bars and begging for more poppy juice..."

Tony, driving, interrupted: "Why don't you make him cut off his cock too?"

Bronc ignored him. "But under the cage we'll have a pile of straw. And as his blood flows and he howls and begs, you guys will have marshmallows on sticks and roast them. And I'll roast his balls. And there he is scrambling in the cage, trying to get out and clinging to the top of it. But his scrambling won't do no good as his flesh grows red, then blisters, then blackens."

From the front seat Tony asked, "What the hell we waiting for, boss?"

"Sure ain't no huntin' blood in you," Bronc said.

"Hey, Spider," Tony said, pointing to his left at a slight frizzy haired man loitering in a park. "You can have him tonight."

"Actually I wouldn't mind going out on the town, picking up a whore and fooling around."

Bronc had the powder melted into a clear liquid over a cigarette lighter and with his teeth was uncapping a hypodermic needle. He spit the plastic cap out. In silence he stuck the needle into his forearm.

"What do you say, boss? Can I?" Spider asked.

Still in silence Bronc pressed a button to lower his window and tossed the used hypodermic out. He rolled his sleeve back down. "Tony, drive over to the girlie district and let him out. Spider's got some business to tend to."

"Can I have some bucks?" Spider asked.

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

"That frizzy haired freak in the park," Tony piped up, "wouldn't cost nothing. I'll turn back if you want me to."

The men in the rear ignored him. Bronc took his wallet from his breast pocket, opened it and handed Spider three one hundred dollar bills. "Pick out a real young one," he said, "just learning the trade, still tight and not all stretched out. And teach her things she never imagined and never even heard of. Use her good."

"Thanks," Spider said.

Bronc scooted way down in the seat to stretch out. "Good stuff...and we might even film it."

"Not me, you're not!" Spider said.

"No," Bronc said. "The cage, the fire under it. Film it for posterity's sake. Then when you're out fucking whores and Tony's out with some guy, I'll watch that bloody, ball-less punk burn. But we can't have too much straw under it, just a little pile, do it slowly and watch him scramble. And the last laugh is mine."

"Can I go out later, too?" Tony asked.

"No. I'm thinking about calling Mrs. O'Keefe, have her send over some entertainment, some young stuff. You picked up the manly juice at Dr. Olstein's like I told you to, right?"

"Yeah, he did," Spider said. "Four vials. Two for here, two for the country place."



As the limousine turned toward the red light district, the frizzy haired man Tony had mocked continued to loiter in the park.

With his short stature, his receding jaw and reddish hair—so frizzy no one could do anything with it—God had not blessed Blaine Shirer with a commanding facade. Instead, he had other gifts. Four years ago the Diocese had voted him Teacher of the Year. In the slanted late afternoon light he was standing under an oak. This park was too small to be a major attraction—only one block—but it occasionally proved profitable and was convenient to home.

Though clouds scuttled against the sky, though children played on teetertotters and pairs of morning doves pecked in the grass, Blaine was not watching them. He was watching a man in white tee-shirt smoke a cigarette. With his back toward Blaine, he was sitting on a bench, his legs well spread, a white hard hat on the bench beside him. Dark curly hair descended to the neck of the shirt, soiled from the day's labor and the underarms still wet. *Hot*, Blaine thought. *I'd love a chance to satisfy you. If you were drunk, it'd be easier.*

With a flick of the cigarette butt onto the ground the man stood up. He turned his head to look at Blaine watching him. A sneer came to his lips, then he picked up his hard hat and continued on his way.

At a discreet distance Blaine followed him, not close enough that it was blatant, but close enough that he could hear each strike of metal cleats against concrete. The strides

CHAPTER 9

were measured, arrogant. He remembered the last time he had had a construction worker, months ago now, around Thanksgiving, two of them, brothers, both drunk. They had been abusive and wonderful, until the end, anyway. He followed the man with the hard hat out of the park, up the street.

Ahead, something was on the sidewalk outside a barroom. An old man tugged on a cocker spaniel's leash. School kids, slowing their pace, gawked at the something on the sidewalk. The construction worker he was following did not slacken his stride or even glance down. It looked like a person lying there.

Blaine quickened his steps, then knelt over a man who was curled into the fetal ball, hands on genitals. Blood, thick and sticky, was on his forehead, in his light hair, on the sidewalk. Blaine looked up and around. Standing in the doorway of the barroom were four young men in tee-shirts. "Call an ambulance, will ya?" Blaine said.

The men shot quick glances at one another until the most athletic-looking one said, "Shit! Maybe he deserved a beating. We don't know."

"But he still needs help," Blaine said.

The athletic man shrugged. The others shook their heads. They turned from the doorway into the darkness within. From the storefront church came the strains of "Amazing Grace."

"I'll get you to a hospital," Blaine said.

"No," the man on the sidewalk said, then coughed. He spit bloody sputum onto the ground. "Just help..." Again he coughed. "...home." He was laboring to push himself from the ground, struggling to his feet. His arm went around Blaine's slight shoulders. "All I need is some help...walking," he said and coughed.

For three slow blocks Blaine steadied and supported the weight of the man, Blaine's hand at the man's waist, his arm around Blaine's shoulders. The man's torso was firm and tight, not an inch of flab. Sexy. The scent of him mingled the honest aroma of a day's labor with the acridness of asphalt. In the acridness was also a tinge of brimstone.

Along century old cobblestone streets, under majestic oaks, past pairs of mourning doves on lawns they went at a plodding pace. People paused on the sidewalk to gawk at them. Blaine knew what they were seeing—one tall, athletic and bloodied, the other slight, frizzy-haired and jawless. On Hyacinth Street, the street on which Blaine lived, they turned left.

"There," the man said, "second house down."

Blaine knew the house. Brown weeds rioted in the yard. Years ago the front door had been removed, its entrance now a black yawn. A storm shutter hung askew on the second floor and paint peeled from the clapboards. The house was attracting undesirables into the neighborhood and a year ago he had joined his neighbors in signing a petition that the building be razed.

When they reached the cracked walk leading to it, the man said in feeble, irresolute voice, "I can make it on up," but did not protest as Blaine continued to support him through the doorway, into the dark mustiness within.

Beer cans, McDonald wrappers and newspapers littered the floor and somebody's

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

radio was blaring out rock and roll. The rag rug on the stairs—once charming in an Old World way—was black with grime, though on the portion that ascended each step it still held a tinge of color.

The man grasped the bannister—creaking and wobbling under his weight—as they went up the stairs. He laboriously probed in his jeans for keys at a door on the second floor. Blaine still supported him and steadied him. *Poor guy*, he thought, *wanting to live like this*.

Together they crossed the room eight feet to a narrow bed. It was neatly made with an olive drab US ARMY blanket. With a moan and hand to his head the man lay gingerly back and Blaine lifted his legs onto the mattress. They were heavy and muscular, and through his jeans he could feel the hair on his legs.

He began to unlace the tar-stained tennis shoes until a dog's sudden jump onto the bed startled him. He stepped back as the dog snuggled close to the man and started licking at the blood on his chin.

“Can I get a washcloth and towel and clean you up some? Undress you, see how bad your wounds are?” he asked.

“No,” the man said with difficulty, then added, “but take a beer from the fridge.” He coughed.

Blaine stood motionless at the foot of the bed and watched the dog tend his master.

He licked the blood from the man's chin and cheek, his long pink tongue making slow strokes. As he licked a soft, high whine started to come from him. He licked more quickly, more urgently. At last he sat, lifted his head and, with his eyes closed, howled a long, piteous, and desolate howl.

The man patted him on the shoulders. “It'll be okay. It's okay,” the man said. The sound of master's voice calmed the dog and he stood over the bloodied face and started slowly licking at the blackened blood in his hair. It was a gray three-legged dog, the man's arm around him.

Blaine looked around the room. The single bed jutted out between the windows. An overstuffed easy chair overflowed with tar-stained clothes. Against the wall to his right stood a tiny closet someone had built of plywood and not bothered to paint. Beside it were two stacks of cardboard banana boxes, each stack three boxes high. He read the labels, Sci-Fi, Western, Poetry/Sci/Text, Am/Br Lit. The one on top, Sci-Fi, was open to reveal paperbacks. Next to those boxes were two larger boxes, unlabeled, with tee-shirts visible in the top one.

To Blaine's back was a make-shift wall, not extending to the ceiling. He went around it, and past a table set against the outer wall, into what was supposed to be the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator, half-heartedly going after the offered beer. Icicles hung from the freezer. There was a carton of eggs, half a loaf of bread, a package of bologna, a bottle of catsup and two beers. He closed the refrigerator without taking a beer.

The little table, painted green, had initials, hearts and obscenities from previous occupants carved into it. An ashtray served as paperweight to a stack of white handwritten pages. The page on top bore the words, “Not Rusty Too, by Robert

CHAPTER 9

Newell.” Under the title the handwriting commingled, curiously, script and printing. At the place the man apparently sat were other pages with a plastic ball-point pen on top. The page was numbered sixteen, apparently a draft, for words were scratched out and arrows directed the text to smaller words in the margins. Blaine leaned forward and twisted his head to decipher a portion of that page. It was either fiction or biography.

He looked again at the man, at Robert Newell, lying on that bed, the dog licking at darkened blood. On the wall at his head, between the windows, hung the only adornment on the walls, a document in a simple black frame. From its general format he knew it was a military discharge. He hoped it was from the Marine Corps—those men were rougher/wilder, because they had something to prove about their manhood both to themselves and to others.

As he approached to find out what branch of service, bared fangs and deep growls warned him off.

He went to the open door and turned to gaze again at the man, his stained tennis shoes still on. *You’ve got a hot body, and maybe you’re handsome too, so I’ll be back. We could make a deal. You could use some financial help, and if you’re hung, we might even make it a weekly thing.* He threw the lock on the knob and checked to make sure it was securely locked: *The poor guy doesn’t need to be robbed tonight. He’s had enough trouble for one day.*



Four houses down and on the opposite side of the street was a large brownstone with white swans at the bottom of the landing and leaded glass sidelights flanking the door. He entered the building and in his apartment, the entire second floor, fixed a gin and tonic. He took it and sat in an antique wing-back chair, richly upholstered in a fabric of white magnolias and green leaves on a crimson ground.

He recalled that the only adornment on the walls in that room across the street was a military discharge—no crucifix, no pictures, no calendar of pin-up girls, only a discharge. *The best men are military. We couldn’t possibly meet here—couldn’t bring him into my home!—but I could go across the street once or twice a week to his room. I could take a bottle of booze and a fifty dollar bill.* He chuckled at a joke Russ had told him last weekend: What’s the difference between a straight Marine and a gay Marine? A six-pack.

He conjured an image of that Robert Newell drunk and bare chested—a drunken Marine on leave. *So, you really want it, huh?* he would say, rubbing the bulge in his jeans. *So, how much is it worth to ya, per inch, huh fag?*

In late-afternoon light his huge oriental carpet—patterned of off-white, pale blues and greens—seemed to glow and colored the air itself with a diffuse pastel light. His eyes fixed on the ornament on the coffee table in front of the sofa. It was a marble replica of Michelangelo’s Pieta, a souvenir of his grandmother’s last tour of Italy. He crossed himself at her memory. There, on the coffee table, a Man lay limp across a woman’s lap, His arms languid at His sides.

As he gazed at it, he saw, superimposed on it, a man languid in a shabby room, a military discharge proudly displayed on the wall. Although he wanted to fantasize about

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

Bob as he wanted Bob to be, he found himself wondering about the real man. He wondered why he had gotten beaten up, what his stories were about, how his dog had lost a leg. He wondered what swirling elements in his past, in his history, in his accumulated days, had brought him to dwell in that derelict room on the fringe of society.

A strange thought came to him: *For Dr. Holzhauser I have explored every insignificant nuance of my own past. Both the traumas and the insignificant thumb pricks. Carl, Russ, Sofonda, they all have pasts. I know about them. They've told me. I've asked questions. But I don't believe I've ever, not even once, thought about the histories of the men I proml for. Strange. No! Not strange! Pathetic. I suppose even those men have histories, each of them a common tale of hopes and dreams, disappointment, failure, and happenstance. And maybe some achievements along the way. I hope so. But I don't know! I never asked! I never cared!*

Heretofore, he admitted, he had been so preoccupied with his own desires and the exciting adrenalin of the search, he had never thought of the hearts of the men, their sorrows, hopes and aspirations. He had seen them not as full, real people, but only as Manhood, for that was what his own needs, his physical and psychological needs, needed to see.

Not even once had he wanted to talk with them, get to know them on a personal basis, maybe become friends. For they existed in this world to be searched out and used. And over the course of years he had used many hundreds of them while on his knees—construction workers, truckers, soldiers, punks—had used them in parks, restrooms, abandoned factories, locker rooms, alleys, cars, culverts and bushes. Occasionally he would hear a “Thank you,” or “That was good,” but whether he heard it or not, he would walk away satisfied, and back home, would write a slash mark for each one on his calendar.

It was more than a slash mark, though, because his kneeling before each one of them wrote a sentence or a paragraph not only in his history, but in theirs as well. And his contact with hundreds of men, or thousands, had injected into their lives, into their indelible histories, incidences of indiscretions. Some would see it as more than indiscretions. They'd see it as homosexual sin. He saw it as homosexual sin.

Across the street a man, a veteran, lay bloodied, while on his table lay handwritten stories. On that same table previous occupants had carved their initials and inarticulate messages to posterity. Maybe the man had a story to tell, a story worth hearing. The man was hurt and only his dog was there to minister to him.

Perhaps I should have sat up until morning with him, keeping watch. And if he took a turn for the worse, at least somebody would have been there to call an ambulance. But in the morning there would be no telling how he would have reacted on finding that a stranger had sat in his room all night watching him sleep. Maybe I would have been the one in the hospital. I think my patron would have taken that risk. Yes, I'm sure St. Francis would have.

From under the eaves pigeons were cooing and throughout the city steeple bells began to strike six o'clock, first one, then another. *What was the Nursie's line? 'Now afore God, I am so vexéd.'* It was the hour of the Angelus, and Blaine, sitting in that wing-back chair, humbled and ashamed, begged God Almighty to have mercy on him.

CHAPTER 10

Across the street Bob slept a troubled sleep.

He thrashed on his narrow bed, cursing at the demons that haunted. He tossed and turned among the corpses in the jungle while his fingers clawed again through bamboo. He cringed before the saggy breasted Old Hag, her breath foul. He flailed out at Death, then cowered again under the Hag's blood-shot gaze. He ran delirious and naked through the midnight forest, rotten leaves underfoot.

He endured again that far country until a woman in a starched house dress found him cowering in a clump of bushes. She reached out her hand and led him quietly back to his room, where she tucked him into his bed. With a sweep of her arm over him, she said, "Flee, demons. Your claim here is not yet firm. In his father's own arms, with me standing at his side, he was baptized. You cannot boast yet, so return now to the shadows of the past."

He heard a scurrying sound, like rats in a wall, and opened his eyes. His room was illumined with a supernatural light and there were joyous swallows flitting against the clear blue sky. Through the walls, transparent now, opened vistas of flowery meadows. His mother was standing over him, radiant in light. He gazed into the love in her eyes and his chin quivered. "Am I going to die a horrible death?" he asked.

"You fear, my child, the threats of this world?"

"Yes," he said.

She sat on the bed and took his hand in hers.

He continued on in voice that trembled with sobs. "I never told you about it, but there's someone who once threw the gladioluses I brought him in the hospital. He screamed curses at me. He swore he'd get even, but it wasn't my fault. And he's here now."

"But I am here with you, too," she said, and bent and kissed his forehead.

"I don't want to die like that. I know I've got to do it sometime, but I want it to be with family around me, maybe grandkids, too. Not some horrible agony in a cage."

"Solemnly, Bobby," she said, "at the appointed time you can pass from this world peacefully, and more than peacefully."

"Not if he has his way 'bout it."

CHAPTER 10

“But if you so choose, at the appointed time there can be a benediction on your lips and love in your heart.”

“Love?” he asked. “Why does He make love so very, very hard?”

“It’s not,” she said. “It’s as easy as the air you breathe. It is but you who make it hard.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Do you remember Della, the waitress you once described as cabbage-faced, the one you gave that little puppy to? In her simple way she offered you a simple love. If you had reached out to her and touched, love unbounded would have been yours.”

“Della? But she was overweight, and plain and not too smart. She wasn’t my type.”

“But from her you would have received, full measure and overflowing, love and devotion and family—all those things you dream of, my son.”

“But I need a woman of soft breasts and flowing hair to cling to me and I to her. A beautiful woman, a woman I can be proud of saying, ‘And this is my wife.’”

“Before the appointed time, you must learn that unto which you aspire.”

“And what is that?” he asked.

“That you must learn. And when you do, you will enter into joy.”

He snickered. “There’s not much of that in this world. He made everything too hard. But in spite of that, I’ll survive,” he said. “And no way am I going to run scared from a damn eunuch!”

“But you contend and vie and struggle on your own, and will not listen to a Man who once said, ‘Consider the lilies.’ There was no yelling, no bombast in His voice. He never jumped up and down in a pulpit like Rev. Negley. Look at the flowers behind me, Bobby, look how beautiful they are. They too are His children. But you have rejected all that.”

“Yes. If He won’t even help a dog have puppies, what good is He?”

“Oh, my son!” she said. “Solemnly I tell you, your days ahead will have a heaping-full of trials and tribulation. Yet, for your good and with a mother’s love, I pray to the Father that troubles descend upon you, Bobby. For you are proud and it is only by enduring trial and tribulation that you will come to know what love is, and call it by name, and enter into its joy.

“It is love you long for, and love, my son, you must attain. Troubles will come, but do not despair.” She stroked his hair. “They come to edge you on toward love, and toward recognizing its homeliness and its peaceful joy.” She stood up and the light surrounding her began to fade.

“I shall pray, my beloved, as you could as well,” she said. “The Black Brethren continue to pray for you at every service.”

“Who?” he asked.

“The Church of the Black Brethren and little Isaac are praying.”

“That’s nice of them, if there’s anyone to hear.”

“Oh, my dear little Bobby. But for now you need your rest. So sleep, beloved....Sleep, my child.” Her fingers coursed lightly down his cheek. He entered a deep slumber.

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL



At the licking of Quasi's long sandpapery tongue he awoke. Without opening his eyes he put his arm around his dog. Strangely, the room smelled of flowers and ironing boards. He was wondering if it were evening or morning as he raised his head and twisted around to look from the dark room out the window. There, in the east, the sky was dim with the pastels of sunrise.

His pillow was on the floor, the olive drab blanket twisted into a ball. He was still dressed and realized he hadn't tended Quasi since the previous morning. He sat up, the change in position making his head first dizzy. Then, filling again with blood, it began to throb. He walked with Quasi down the stairs and back up, each step jarring the contents of his skull, but he knew his dog was thankful for being let out, and thankful for the heaping portion he fed him.

As he ate, Bob took his towel, soap and toothbrush from the top of the unpainted plywood closet and went down the hall to the common bathroom. The mirror reflected hair darkened with blood, dark blood crusted in his nostrils and on his neck. There was a gash over his left eye, a black and blue on his left cheekbone. His lips were puffy. In spite of all that, he didn't look as bad, he admitted, as his head felt. It was as if someone had split his skull, emptied the contents into a skillet and scrambled it like eggs. The headache made his stomach heave in nausea.

He took off his denim jacket and tee-shirt, and undid his jeans. Dried blood glued the jeans to his thigh and he had to peel them off. The gash there began to ooze a little blood. His scrotum was tender and bruised.

The stream of water from the shower made his gashes burn, and when he held his head under the cascade, a loud racket boomed in his skull.

Back in his room he dressed for work and put a small pot of water on the hot-plate. As it heated he sat at the table with a cigarette. Quasi dropped his white tug-of-war sock—one tied into a knot—at his feet. As he picked it up mallets pounded anvils in his skull. He tossed it across the room. Quasi retrieved it, waited, sat, then put a paw against his leg. "Not now, boy," he said, and Quasi lay down with his head on his sneakers.

After a cup of instant coffee and a second cigarette he left for work ten minutes earlier than usual, each step on the pavement jolted and joggled his head. *Maybe I ought to go to a hospital instead, but that's expensive and where would I find another job?* He walked the slow blocks to the empty house lot that was the dropoff/pickup site.

Jeers and profanities about whitey greeted him as he approached. Six black men already stood on the bed of the truck while the owner of King Roofing waited beside it. Mr. King called to him to hurry up, which prompted him to jog half a dozen steps. Then his hand went to his head and he resumed his plod.

He said he was sorry he was late.

Mr. King, a tall black man with gray at the temples and one tooth of gold, said, "Just what in tarnation's happened to you!"

"I guess it was a fight," Bob said, "but you should see the other guy." He forced a

chuckle.

“Well, you ain’t climbing no ladders today,” Mr. King said.

“I’ll just do the ground clean-up then, if that’s okay.”

“Nope,” Mr. King said.

Somebody from the truck bed said he ain’t gonna carry no fuckin’ shingles up. In chorus they all said they weren’t either.

Without turning around Mr. King said, “You will if I damn well tell you to! And you, Newell, get yourself home and get mended up.” He climbed into the truck, closed the door.

Bob, stepping onto the running board, pleaded, “But I’ll be okay once the blood gets flowing.”

Mr. King didn’t answer, but squirmed in the seat, took a roll of bills from a front pants pocket, folded a ten and shoved it under the neck of Bob’s tee-shirt. “Get yourself some aspirin and get to bed. And a prayer won’t hurt none neither.” He started the engine. “And don’t be slow and late come Monday.”

Bob stepped off the running board. As the truck lurched into gear, the six black men on the bed—holding tightly onto the wooden slats of the sides—talked shit over who was and who wasn’t going to do Bob’s job: carrying up bails of shingles, rolls of tar paper and buckets of molten asphalt.

He stood in the lot, watching the truck’s exhaust cloud in the morning chill. As he returned to his room, public benches beckoned to him like the Sirens calling Odysseus. *Come, rest a bit.* From Homer he knew the dangers that lurked on those benches. *Better not. In my condition I couldn’t fend off Bronc’s thugs.* Once home, he slept in his narrow bed until early afternoon.

After four cups of instant coffee and twice that number of cigarettes, he decided to take the risk. He needed his truck to start twice in a row, once here, once getting back from the country. With Quasi on the seat beside him, he followed an Interstate out of the city, then turned to follow a State road for a while. Finally he parked.

The sign on the barbed wire fence, NO TRESPASSING, forbade any to enter, but he lifted Quasi through the wires and squeezed through them himself because he could not imagine that any landowner would really be upset if he should one day learn that, one afternoon, the last day of February, a man parked along the road and he and his dog wandered quietly through his meadows and woods.

From Quasi’s inquisitive snoopings quails took flight, startling the dog. He chased a rabbit through brown weeds while Bob followed a little brook, along whose sides there was still green growth. He picked a sprig of watercress, the bending splitting his skull. As the prickly flavor spread over his tongue he noticed a brick chimney to his right and went over to it.

Only the chimney still stood, jutting two stories into the blue sky, the bricks blackened with fire. Gone now, the farmhouse had once stood on the sure foundation of granite. Behind the ruins were stunted apple trees, four rows of them, now gnarled with neglect.

A blue jay crossed the sky and perched on the blackened chimney where he screeched

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

at the intruders below. Bob wondered if the ruinous fire had been by lightning bolt or accident, or if the Union Forces had pillaged their home, then burned it, driving them hence, mere vagabonds. *A home is a precious thing, not easily replaced. How well I know.*

He remembered he had once intended for the Marine Corps to replace the home his Pa had snatched from him. But curses and a swearing of vengeance drove him from the Corps. That hairy-chested, streetwise punk from the slums of Detroit, had never belonged in the Corps in the first place. The only reason Bronc was there was that a judge had given him a choice of the Corps or prison. And there Sir Charlie and American doctors did what the legal system could not. Through the use of bamboo and then knife Bronc lost his manhood. *Perhaps there's a justice in this universe after all, and little boys and girls can sleep a little safer—the sex-crazed punk!*

He sat on a granite slab and remembered Bronc had arrived in country the same day as Tanner, who came to them from the suburbs of Baltimore. Tanner was like the rest of them. He had freely enlisted, just as Bob and the others had enlisted.

Sgt. Hollinger put Tanner under Frog's wing, and Bronc under Bob's, to teach them workable ways of coping—ways they had learned from experience, ways that did not always mesh with what Drill Instructors taught and training manuals expounded.

At first something of a friendship flourished in the bush between Bob and Bronc, until—on an R&R together in Saigon...



Bronc arrived back at the motel room with a little girl, maybe four or five years old. Bob laid the Western he was reading down on the bed and swung his legs over the side. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Is she lost?"

"Wise up, dude!" Bronc said. "We'll take turns with her."

"No, fucking way!" Bob said, standing up from the bed. He pulled himself to his full height.

"Suit yourself, man. But I'm paying for half this room. So watch the fuckin' or fuckin' leave."

"You're not touching her!" Bob said.

"But she's cherry and just a gook! I done paid her old man for it! He don't care."

Bob strode the few feet across the room to him. The little dark haired girl—her arm in Bronc's clutch—struggled toward the door. Bob smacked a hand down on Bronc's shoulder and held a finger in his face. "She's leaving, Private, still cherry."

"Busted cherry, Newell! 'cause I'm gettin' me some!"

Three hundred dollars each, a hundred dollars a month for three months taken from his pay. That's what the damage to the room cost, but she left, still cherry.



As he sat on the timeless granite of what once had been a home, another incident of the same ilk presented itself. In his capacity as fire-team leader and assistant squad leader Bob

was making the rounds of the pillboxes to relieve the men one by one so that they could go up to the mess tent for pie and coffee.—Firebase Henrietta was known for its excellent mess.—When he came to the second pillbox, with the moon casting his shadow onto the sandbags below, two of his men were having at it.

Bronc was standing, hands on both hips, Tanner on his knees before him. His head was moving back and forth. Bronc looked up at Bob and smugly grinned, putting finger to lips in sign of hush. When Tanner noticed him, he tried to pull away, but Bronc grasped the back of his head with both hands and forced his face flush to the pubic hair. Tanner choked and gagged, his eyes—fearful white orbs in the darkness—fixed on Bob.

Bronc, looking up out of the pillbox, said, “I’ve got a good cocksucker here. Real deep throat and he needs it. You can use it next.”

Bob, saying nothing, turned away to give his men a few minutes of privacy. He went to sandbags, propped his M16 against them, took off his steel pot and sat. Although it was against regulation to smoke after dark, he took a cigarette from a plastic case. He twisted around as he lit it in order to block from slant-eyed observers the glare from the lighter. He cupped the glow in the palm of his hand to block that as well. The smoke he blew lingered in the heavy damp air.

The hills before him were clothed in darkness. A moon-glow, hovering on the trees, imbued them with transcendent beauty. It was almost incomprehensible to him that among those fertile hills, in those beautiful trees, Death lurked, but he knew she did. Somewhere, behind some tree, or perhaps in the branches, lurked the saggy-breasted Old Hag. Some said she had yellow teeth; others said no teeth. Regardless, she stalked him, stalked all of them, and one day—recumbent on rotted leaves, legs spread, the odor foul—she would welcome them all into an orgy of death. Even as he sat on the sandbags in the quiet of the night, he knew stringy-haired Death sneered at them, fantasizing over the splattering of entrails and the moans of her orgy.

To the east a shooting star blazed silently in the sky, and he gazed at ten thousand stars so silent and so far away. *They were closer, I think, those same stars, when Rusty and I lived on Bullrush Creek.*

He crushed his cigarette on a sandbag and stood up because that was enough time for his men to finish what they had begun. They had finished, and Bronc was eager for his coffee and pie. Bob took his place at the lookout, his rifle pointed into the darkness.

Tanner, now dutifully at the lookout, said nothing, but in silence would sneak glances at him out of the corner of his eye, then look away. Bob scanned the sky for perhaps a second shooting star until—with a stammer and still not daring to look at him but looking out into the darkness—Tanner said, “Uh, you aren’t going to, uh...”

“Forget it, Tanner,” Bob said. “Things like that sometimes happen out here, so far from home. You’re not the first, so forget about it.” He gazed at the moon-glow on the trees.

Tanner was silent, gazing into the darkness. “But aren’t you required by the UCMJ...”

Bob interrupted him. “Do you want a Dishonorable Discharge, Marine?! You’ll get it!

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

And you'll go waltzing on home and just leave us here. Is that what you want?"

"No," Tanner said.

"Well then, uh..." He searched for a neutral subject. "Do you think the White Sox have a chance at the pennant this year?"

"No way." It was Bronc's voice, behind them. He was coming down the ladder. "It'll be the Tigers."

"Okay, your turn," Bob said to Tanner.

"Get either the cherry or apple," Bronc said. "They're both good." That remark pleased Bob, for it indicated no rift, from Bronc anyway, in the harmony of the squad. He figured there would be no rift from Tanner. Maybe, he supposed, this had been their relationship since their arrival in country.



As Bob remembered, sitting on that large granite block, Quasi chased a squirrel up the oak tree in what had once been the front yard. With excitement in his eyes and tongue panting he circled the tree. *Once children had climbed with the squirrels in that tree, and this was a happy home.*

With almost three consecutive tours of Nam under him, he had decided to make the Corps his home. By now he would have had some real rank, a cushy peace-time job and good pay. But his own failure and Bronc's response to that failure drove him from it. Again—while he sat on granite and while Quasi sniffed out scents—he admitted to himself he had not lived up to the confidence placed in him by being assigned to point. And through his negligence or distraction or whatever, he had been responsible for handing the men over to the slant-eyed. He had failed them, failed his self-appointed commission to keep his buddies safe. It was his fault they were taken POW. And although it was he who eventually escaped, bringing the Regulars and rescue, that did not nullify his responsibility for the torture and deprivation the men had endured for days or weeks.

It was not his fault, though—on this he drew the line—that in his absence Sir Charlie had bound Bronc spreadeagle and had used bamboo rods against his balls. It wasn't his fault the doctors couldn't save them. To stave off gangrene they had to cut off his testicles, his pride and joy, the apple of his eye with which he tormented little girls and punished lonely men.

Had he not visited Bronc in the hospital, had Bronc not thrown the gladioluses against the wall, swearing vengeance, he probably would have stayed in uniform, humbled, but bedecked with a second medal for heroism for his escape and return with the Regulars.

But Bronc was right. Bob's escape did not redeem his initial failure on point.



He remembered he left Bronc's hospital bed to search out Sgt. Hollinger, finding him in the day room. He told his squad leader he had changed his mind and was not going to re-up. Then as they walked through the hospital gardens, Bob confessed to him his guilt and

CHAPTER 10

wept in front of him.

The twenty-six-year-old's arm went around his shoulders and he tried to comfort the tall twenty-two year old with sage words about nobody being invincible. Bob would not be consoled. "No, I'm leaving the Corps," he said.

"But where will you go, Bob?"

"The States."

"It's a big place. Where?" Sgt. Hollinger asked.

"I don't know. I'll find a place. I'll make a home."

"But you've got a home and a future right here with us."

"No. My mind's made up."

On the Sergeant's orders he went to see the Chaplain, who talked to him gently about feelings of guilt. His First Sergeant, Company Commander, Battalion and even Regiment Commander each sent orders to him to report before them. Each, in turn, tried to talk him out of leaving: *If you stay, yours will be a most illustrious career.*



For a while it had been something of a home for him, the Corps, where he felt needed and wanted. They were good men and on that granite slab he missed them. He wondered which of them had returned from the Vietnamization alive. Doc Preston had. He wondered if Doc ever convinced his wife to let him trade their station wagon in on a Camaro. Had Melendez, a whiz at chess, become a Grand Master? Had Smythe established his empire in real estate?

Bronc already has a limo and bodyguards. And what do I have but Quasi and a dream in my heart? A simple, humble dream, the dream of Everyman. Yet with that ball-less eunuch and his thugs plotting, stalking me, I probably won't live long enough to attain it. And along with me in an unmarked grave—unmourned by the wife—will lie my children who never were.



CHAPTER 11

The next morning, Saturday, Blaine Shirer sat in a chair at Bob's green painted table. His eyes lusted over Bob who was at the sink rinsing a brown earthenware mug. Parallel cords of muscle flanked his spine, jeans snug, feet bare.

Bob carried two mugs of instant coffee to the table and set them on the edge. "I hope you drink it black," he said. "I don't have any milk or sugar."

Blaine nodded. *That hair on your chest, man!* he thought as things bestirred in his slacks.

Bob, leaning over the table, straightened into a stack the papers strewn there. A paperback *Webster's* went onto the top of them.

Blaine opened the red and white box he had brought to reveal an assortment of donuts: glazed, jelly-filled, crullers, chocolate covered.

"So tell me," Bob said, picking up his mug decorated with swallows, "what the hell are you doing here?"

In the seconds before Blaine responded, he thought, *Well I should have stayed the other night as my Christian duty, but I'll make up for not staying by sucking you off. God, you're handsome. Blaine! there you go again. Try to see him as a person, not Manhood.* "Well, uh," he said, "I like donuts on Saturdays and the coffee canister was, uh..." The incredulous frown on Bob's face made him pause, and start over again. "No, I was wondering how you were doing. You don't look as bad as I thought you would."

"Are you really the one helped me home? Dead weight is awful heavy, and, no offense, but you don't look too damn fit and strong."

"You walked by yourself. I was just there to kinda lean on. It's terrible what's going on in the neighborhood. What with the druggies and the gangs of punks, the burglaries are up. And there's a lot of random violence, so it's unsafe for everyone."

"So, you've got it all figured out! It was some random thing, huh?!"

Bob's tightly wound hostility was not lost on Blaine. He wondered why he should direct it against him.

"Well, you're wrong!" Bob went on. "It was planned, right down to Bud verifying my name for them. And it's not over yet. That was just the foreplay and I'm scared."

"You don't look like a man who's used to running scared from anybody. Here," he

said, gesturing to the box, “have a donut.” Blaine recalled the delay from his knock, the subtle creaks across the floorboards, Bob’s hushed, furtive, Who’s there? Then a scuffling on the floor. He glanced at the chair Bob had again wedged tightly against the door.

“Well I am. A man’s nuts are pretty precious to him—aren’t they, Blaine? And I have no desire to pretend I’m not and end up in an unmarked grave because of it.” He reached for his Winstons.

Blaine, silent, watched closely as Bob lit the cigarette with a plastic lighter, then held it Marine-style—between thumb and the first two fingers and cupping the glow in his palm. “You were in the Corps, weren’t you? And it’s somebody you served with in Nam, isn’t it?” he asked.

Bob exhaled a lungful with force and studied Blaine. “And how the hell do you know that?”

He shrugged, shook his head. “I guess I just sensed it,” he said.

“Well, you hit it bull’s-eye. His name’s Bronc, a fuckin’ punk. And he’s got e-lab-or-ate plans for me,” Bob said.

“Like what?”

“How the hell would you like it to be scrunched up in a bamboo cage?” he said, demonstrating the position by curling his back, his arms in front of him.

“You’re kidding,” Blaine said.

“I’m not kidding and he’s not kidding. And there’ll be drugs and cold turkey in that cage. But he’ll drop me off at a hospital if I cut off my balls for him. Yeah, sure he will! He’s a son-of-a-bitch, and he’s got a grudge.” He went on to tell Blaine about it, of Bronc’s choice of the Corps or prison, and of their initial friendship. He told him of the little girl in the motel room. He piled incidence on incidence, talking on and on.

Blaine sat enmeshed, listening to every word. *Blaine, he’s not Manhood itself, but every word is manly and he’s lived a man’s life. Flesh, blood, heart and soul a man, not Manhood. A man.*

“Then we were taken prisoner, all of us, the whole squad while I was on point. We were beaten, tortured, then put in these little bamboo cages on stilts. We were in a circle in a clearing. We couldn’t talk, communicate. Any attempt got a rifle butt slammed into your skull. I don’t know how long we were there—days, weeks, I don’t know. It’s a blur. But I finally dug through the ropes holding the bamboo together with my fingernails.” He held his hands out to show Blaine the tips of his fingers, now malformed.

“I don’t remember anything except running through the forest. I must have been half-crazed, delirious or something. I don’t know how long I wandered, ran. That’s a blur, too. The Regulars found me whistling and walking naked along some road, and the next day we went back—they knew where there was a bowl with an opening to the east, and with a stream cascading down the rocks on the north. Stealthily we surrounded the place at night. Throats were cut, the men gotten out, then the air strike came and the whole camp exploded in orange and black flames. A man covered in flames and running in flames, doesn’t get very far, Blaine, not very far at all.

“Anyway, Charlie had taken my escape out on the squad. Bronc’s balls had been

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

beaten till they were coconuts. The docs tried to save them but there was gangrene and in the end they had to cut 'em off. And to his way of thinking it's my fault, all of it my fault. I told the squad leader I wasn't going to re-up."

On that he fell silent. Blaine had listened, transfixed, to the spontaneous litany for twenty minutes or more, and now watched as Bob's fingers traced the initials carved into the table by previous occupants.

Histories, Blaine thought, *indelible histories, the accumulated weight of his days*. "Well, uh..." he said. *Say nothing, Blaine! Anything you say would be sacrilege to the man, his pain and his dignity*.

Bob reached again for his cigarettes. "Sorry for dumping on you like that. I don't know why I'm telling you all that shit. It's not your problem."

"It's okay," he said, "you needed to talk it out. I'm just glad I was here to listen. I'll bet when you told your girlfriend she was real upset."

"I *knew* you'd get around to that subject. There is no girlfriend, but I've told Quasi." He patted on his thigh. "Come on over here, boy." The gray dog lifted his head from the pillow on the neatly made bed. After a great stretching, he jumped to the floor and hobbled to him. "You've heard about it more than once, haven't you, boy?" he said, scratching him behind the ears. He broke a piece from a donut and held it down to him. "By now he could probably recite the whole saga."

"That's what I figured," Blaine said. "But you've got to lay it aside now, Bob. Going over it any more isn't going to help."

"Well, let's see somebody toy with your balls, your life, and you not think about it!"

"But any more won't help."

Bob took from the box the donut he had broken, bit it, and gave another piece to Quasi. "That's what they told us at the VA when me and Doc went for counseling: Acknowledge it, own it, but put it in its historical perspective. It was then, it is not now."

"That's what you've gotta do."

"But it is here, man! It's here and now! Stalking me on the streets *now*!"

"We've got to get you out of this room," Blaine said. "What do you say we go somewhere?"

"What I've got to do is get the fuck out of this town! But how? My truck needs work, and what would I live on till I found something?" he said and took a bite of the donut.

"How about the zoo?" Blaine asked. "We Atlantans are right proud of it, one of the world's finest. Have you seen it?"

"Animals? I love animals," he said. "And it was animals, especially birds—where they were singing, where they weren't—that I paid a lot of attention to while I was on point. And not even once, for almost three full tours while I was up there, did we ever meet ambush. The Lieutenants put me up there lots—Yeah, we went through several Louis's—Not even once was a single man injured....Until that day. I guess I just wasn't listening to the birds closely enough."

Blaine noticed Bob's mug. While the one he was sipping from was a solid brown, Bob's had swallows painted on it. "So, what about the zoo?"

“How much does it cost, though?”

“It’s my idea, my invite, and I’ve got some extra bucks. We might even stop somewhere and have lunch—on me,” Blaine said.

The way Bob looked directly into his eyes—a piercing, probing look—made Blaine uncomfortable. He wondered what the meaning behind it was: the way his left eyebrow raised and the right corner of his lips lifted.

“The zoo and animals would be fine. Give me a minute to change,” he said, stood up and walked over to paw through a cardboard box of tee-shirts.

God, you’re handsome. If I had known, I’d have been back sooner, but how could I have, with that blood covering you. He gazed at his strong bare back, his height. He watched as Bob took a fresh pair of jeans from the plywood closet. *Yeah, strip for me. There could be some bucks in it for ya.*

Bob had clothes and tennis shoes in his arms as he turned his head—that same half-smile, almost a sneer, on his face—and said, “I’ll be back.” He left the room.

He wondered if Bob suspected he was gay. He hadn’t made any untoward comments to him, though, hadn’t even complimented him on his good looks. And he had made it clear that he had come out of concern for his well being. He hoped he didn’t suspect, for he would like to get to know the guy, maybe become friends. That was more important than just sex. He took a bite of a lemon-filled donut, its flavor tart. *But maybe we could be both friends and fuck-buddies. Go out once a week to a movie or dinner or something, then get him drunk at some bar. Come back here, not my place!...Maybe I should have brought beer over instead of donuts.*

Bob had changed into tight, faded jeans and white tee-shirt. “How is it outside? Will I need a jacket or anything?”

“You might want to take something with you, just in case,” Blaine said. He tried to judge how big Bob was, but he wore himself up and to the side, not hanging down the leg, making appraisal difficult.

He took a denim jacket from the make-shift closet. Blaine watched him put it on. It looked like the same jacket Bob was wearing when he found him on the sidewalk. On the back were two smeared hand prints. He thought about mentioning it, but checked himself, for maybe the guy had nothing else to wear.

Bob bent to rub Quasi’s belly, who was again on the bed. “Okay, you stay now, and you be good, and you watch the house.” He stood upright and said he was all set.

Blaine felt unusually short, at five-feet-four, as he stood up and headed to the door.

As they went down the ratty stairs, Bob said in lighthearted voice, “Quasi keeps after me about getting a couple more dogs. He says it’s just not fair. He says I have one job and he has three. He has to stay, and be good, and watch the house. He says with three they could each have one job. One could stay, one be good, and one watch the house.”

“Are you really thinking about getting a couple more dogs?”

“Someday, but I can barely support myself and Quasi now. But one day I will. As a kid I had an Irish Setter, Rusty. And my kids—whenever that day comes about—should have the joys and responsibilities of growing up with a dog.”

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

They drove Blaine's new, specially ordered, red MG. "Great car, guy," Bob said. "But there are no jobs in this city. The only thing I could find was roofer, and my truck doesn't even start right. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. But I'm working on something. I found out some magazines pay real good for short stories. I've got three almost done. I'm not putting all my eggs in one basket, you see. When I have all three done, I'll send 'em out to three different places, and then maybe I'll be able to get a Trans-Am or Camaro or something."

"Have you been published?" Blaine asked.

"Just a couple poems in a veteran's magazine. But, hell, I've read a lot and have been through a lot. Did you know the library has a shelf full of books on how to write a story?"

"It's an awful difficult line to break into," Blaine said.

"I'll do it. I've got to. Doors are slammed in your face when you don't have some bucks in back of you."



Haughty llamas chewed their cud, indifferent to those who watched. Lions yawned in their leisure, while Mickey Mouse and Pluto sold brightly colored balloons to children who ran with them.

At a railing Bob and Blaine tossed peanuts to the elephants, their trunks moving—graceful, serpentine—to pick them from the ground. A little one stood close to his mother's side. At a distance, in the shade of trees, zebras swished flies away with their tails. Blaine stared at two bare chested workmen shoveling dung into a cart. Sexy.

Bob tapped him with his elbow. "Hey, the elephants are this way," he said, gesturing with his head.

"The shorter guy must work out," Blaine said. "Look at the lats."

"The what?" Bob asked.

"Lats, *Latissimi dorsi*. Latin for 'the widest muscles of the back.' These," he said touching Bob's back.

"You don't have to work out for those, just do a man's job."

"One of my friends, Carl—he's a former student and now the coach at a high school, and yeah, I'm a teacher—has been Mr. Atlanta three years in a row. The contest is coming up in about a week. It'd be great if he makes it again, but he's getting older, too, and there's a lot of fine young stuff coming up. It would be unprecedented for anyone to retain the crown four consecutive years. I hope he does."

Antelopes grazed peacefully as if they were still on the Serengeti. Polar bears basked on white painted rocks, rams butted horns.

On the way home they stopped at Jacques Patisserie and Cafe on Peachtree Street. The *maitre d'* showed them to a sidewalk table with an umbrella. Bob looked at the menu and promptly closed it.

"Do you know what you want already?" Blaine asked.

"Man," Bob said with a chuckle in his voice, "the thing's all in French. If I picked out

something, I could end up with liver and onions or even something worse, like snails or innards. No, I'll let you pick out something kinda American for me."

Everybody was out that warm March afternoon walking their dogs, gray-haired men walking old Labradors, coiffured women carrying lap dogs. A young bearded father came along with a blond little girl in lime-green dress on one side and a groomed Irish Setter on the other. "I had a dog as a kid, Rusty, an Irish Setter. Maybe I already told you that," Bob said. "And she was every bit as beautiful."

"I wasn't allowed pets," Blaine said. "Mother claimed she was allergic to dog and cat hair. It's funny, though, she now has six Siamese."

A uniformed nanny came down the sidewalk. In her black hand was the white hand of a little boy, and behind them there waddled a yellow duck on green ribbon. Both men said it was cute.

Two bodybuilders—with their gray sweatpants snug and hiding nothing, shirtless, with their chest carried before them like shields and both with identical Dobermans on leash passed by. Blaine followed them with his eyes.

"You see queers everywhere these days," Bob said.

Oh, God, he suspects! Blaine thought, and stammered, "Yeah, uh, I know."

"And it's okay with me, if that's what they choose. Just don't make a move in on me, okay, Blaine?"

Blaine's heart pounded. He felt his face turn hot. "I don't know, uh..."

Bob interrupted. "You're not a bad guy, you know. Thanks for getting me out of that room. And thanks for lunch too, I think..." He smiled broadly and assumed hillbilly talk. "...as long as you ain't gone and ordered none of them there Frenchy snails."

Blaine chuckled, Bob joining in with him. They were still snickering as the waiter put a silver pot of coffee on the table. He put salads before them and between them placed a wicker basket lined with a cloth napkin. Blaine took a croissant, then pushed the basket toward Bob, asking if he had tried croissants before.

He was pouring coffee into his cup. "What are they again?" he asked.

Blaine said, "Croissant."

"Kru-sent," Bob repeated, taking one.

"No, Croi-, croissant."

He tried pronouncing it again, with slim improvement, which amused Blaine, but took one, broke it just as Blaine had, and tried it.

"It is good," he said. "Warm, light, buttery. It reminds me of a biscuit, no, not the usual type, but the ones with all the little layers. Maybe a biscuit has more flavor than a krusent, but the texture's kinda alike. And there was this big black cook in Nam when we were in garrison who made two types of biscuits every Sunday. He gave the normal kind to most everybody, but to the southern boys he liked he gave the special ones, the ones with all the little layers. And in Ft. Walton there was this restaurant, The Twin Oaks, that made biscuits all light and layered. My Pa took me there for my birthday once."

"Then you're from Ft. Walton?" he asked.

"No," Bob said, a simple short syllable. He sipped from his coffee and was silent.

In the silence Blaine surmised the dog he had mentioned, Rusty, had been the highpoint of his childhood, and surmised as well that there was something that lurked in his childhood or teens he did not want to speak about.

The waiter brought their entrees, Petite Filet Mignon with parsleyed potatoes.

"Well, that's different, huh?" Bob said, "Wrapping the tiny little steaks in bacon. But what's that green stuff?"

"Parsley. Most places use just plain parsley butter, but here they use *Maitre d'* Butter. It makes a world of difference. Don't worry, Bob, you'll like it."

He did like it, which pleased Blaine. As they were leaving Bob tried to leave the tip. "Absolutely not," Blaine said, "it was my invite in the first place, and it's on me."

In the car again, Blaine asked why, if the horror stories about Nam were true, had he planned on re-upping. "That's what it's called, isn't it? Re-up?"

"Yeah," Bob said. "Well, I guess I felt I was needed and had a purpose there. And besides, I didn't have much back here to come home to."

"Oh," Blaine responded. His brows creased with only partial comprehension, though he did not pry for further explanation. *We'll have to part pretty soon, and unless I think up something for later on, it'll be difficult knocking on his door again.*

"Bob," he said breaking the silence, "if you want, I could throw something together for dinner later on. You could bring your stories over and I'll read 'em and comment on 'em for you."

"Are you really a teacher?" he asked.

"Sure I am, high school English, St. Jerome's Catholic High."

"Then who said this, 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven'?"

"Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*. I teach drama, too, and we produce two of Shakespeare's plays every year. Last December we did *The True and Pitiful Tragedy of Romeo and Juliette*. We've started work on this spring's production, *Richard III*."

"The hunchback! Then I guess you could have real insight. But you've got to be honest with me and say what you really think, and not just tell me how wonderful they are, that I'm going to be the next Hemingway or Steinbeck. You have to offer real criticism and real advice. Okay?"

"Sure I will," he said, pulling to the curb on Hyacinth Street.

"Okay," Bob said, "but where do you live?"

Blaine pointed two houses down across the street.

"Right across from me almost?!" he asked.

He nodded his jawless head. "The brownstone, with the swans, right there, second floor."

"But you're not going to pull anything funny on me, are you?"

"Just dinner and the stories, I promise."

"Okay, sure. I'd like that."

They set the time, five o'clock, and parted. Blaine pretended to be locking his car with the key as he watched tall handsome Bob vanish into the black yawn of the entrance.

CHAPTER 12

Tapping a white painted swan on the head, then grabbing the banister Blaine swung himself in arcs up the stairs. From room to room he paced. Not only did he have to appraise where to start straightening, but he also had to determine how much could and couldn't be done before Bob arrived. He changed the paper in his cockatiel's cage, put in fresh seed and water. In the kitchen he washed two glasses, a spoon and his coffee mug. In the bedroom he hung his dry cleaning, stuffed his dirty clothes into the hamper, then changed the sheets on the bed, first putting on black and white striped sheets, but changing his mind and putting on silver satin sheets instead.

In the living room he sat in the antique wing-back chair and on a small pad of paper planned the dinner. He scratched out item after item and changed the list until he had it right: ham, rice, sliced tomatoes, peas, croissants, chocolate cake. It still wasn't right. He scratched out croissant and wrote biscuit. From his menu he made a shopping list: canned Danish ham, Sarah Lee cake, Pillsbury biscuits. He stared at the word Pillsbury and scratched it out. He picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number.

"The Shirer residence."

"Rose, this is Blaine. How are you?" he said.

"Right fine. And how are you?"

"Fine. Tell me, Rose, would it be any problem for you to make biscuits for the house there tonight and make a dozen or so extra for me to pick up and cook here? I mean would it work doing it like that? Would they rise?"

"Well don't you sound sparklin' today, honey. And sure it would, but aren't you coming for supper?"

There was a noise on the line.

"Oh, that's right," Blaine said. "I forgot—Rai's coming with his nurse. But something's come up. Uh, Rose?"

"Yes?"

"I've just met a super, super guy."

"You have? Well that's just great," Rose said.

Blaine's voice raced. "Yeah. He's tall, handsome, with the palest blue eyes, my age or maybe a year or two younger. He's a veteran, a former Marine, and I think a southern

boy, too, but he doesn't have an accent, so I'm not sure. But he's down to earth and kinda humble, Rose. He's trying to become a writer, nothing published yet, but he's trying."

"Well, it sounds like y'all have lots in common, honey. I still got that little poem you wrote about me, *My Sugar Cook-ie*. Got it stuck right on the mirror in my room."

"You do?" Blaine asked, a childish joy in his voice.

"Sure do."

"Well, Rose, will you tell Mother I called and offered regrets about tonight and I'll park on the street and sneak to the back door for the biscuits."

"I'll take it, Rose," somebody else on the line said. It was his mother. "And just what are you doing sneaking into your own home?"

"Oh, Mother. What are you doing listening in?" he asked.

Rose said she had to run. "But you take care of yourself now, honey," she said and hung up.

"Well it is my home," Mrs. Shirer said, "my son and my housekeeper. So I might have just a little right."

"Uh, well, Mother? I won't be coming for supper tonight, but I'll stop by sometime this week to see you and Father. I'll call first, of course."

"Blaine, I haven't received Dr. Holzhauser's statement. You're still going for your sessions, aren't you?"

Blaine stammered, "Uh, I'm having them sent here. I, I think I should pay for it."

"You aren't draining your trust fund, are you? You know that's got to last you. You aren't touching it, are you?"

"No, Mother, I'm letting it accrue."

"Oh, is that so? Well then, explain the mathematics of it all, please. On a teacher's pay you can afford \$160 a *week* for the sessions? Six hundred and forty a month on a teacher's pay?"

Blaine didn't answer.

"Well that says a lot," Mrs. Shirer said. "And you know how important those sessions are."

"Mother, there's really nothing wrong with me!"

Mrs. Shirer forced a demeaning laugh. "Nothing wrong? Well, who's 'this super, super guy'?" she asked, mimicking his words. "'And he's got the pal-est blue eyes.' Now we've been through it, Blaine, we've been through it and you've agreed to go. Once before you quit when you were on that religious kick of yours, and you see how long that lasted. You know we're just trying to help you."

He could feel his heart pounding. "Yes, Mother. Somehow I picked that up. But will you just tell Rose I'll be by for the biscuits about four?"

"And this 'super, super guy' you're having over is more important than your own family?"

"Mo-ther!"

"How long has it been since you've seen your brother? He's coming with his nurse, you know."

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

"I went up Saturday. I saw him a week ago."

"Oh, you did?" she said.

"Yes. And he's not too happy Lena's off in Europe and you two never bother driving up."

"That's not fair. You know how busy your father and I have been."

"Oh, I forgot. Country clubs and fund raisers and the Inauguration. Well, I'm not coming tonight but you can tell Rai I'll drive up and see him next weekend. I love you, Mother. Goodbye."

He hung up. Gradually his pulse rate slackened and he began to listen to the silence. Slowly the silence engulfed him, and he felt little and small in that chair. It was almost alive, that silence, and breathing, a silence huge that filled to the high corners of the room. Even from the crib it had been there, always there, that silence—stalking him, watching. That cold, impersonal silence. Sapping his blood, his joy.

He glanced at his shopping list, and wanted to throw it away. He wanted to go out to prowl the parks. He wished Bob had a phone so he could call and cancel. Maybe he could find a construction worker, or better yet a whole carload of them, drunk and abusive. Or maybe a carload of long-haired punks.

A blue cockatiel—jabbering *Pretty-bird, Pretty-bird, I-love-you*—strutted proudly across the huge expanse of the oriental rug. Blaine called to Napoleon, lowered a finger to the floor and waited patiently. Napoleon perched on his finger and he raised him to his shoulder where he sat clucking contentedly. Blaine scratched through the feathers of his neck with a single finger.

At the supermarket he plodded through aisles, then drove to the grand white pillared mansion with circular drive. He parked on the street out front and walked around to the back door. *This is where I grew up, Mother. It's a fine house, but was never a home.*

Rose was concerned that his spirits had plummeted so low. It was nothing, he said.

Parking again on the cobblestones of Hyacinth Street, he sat in his car, wishing there were some way to get out of the engagement. Those two brothers he had had around Thanksgiving would be fun again.

Unnoticed in his window, he watched Bob walking toward him on the opposite sidewalk. In his arm he carried a brown bag from which protruded the red and white checkerboard pattern of a bag of dog food. Quasi, hobbling three-legged beside him on a leash, kept looking up at him and wagging his tail. Together they went up the walk past brown weeds and entered the darkness of the building. Once he had signed a petition to have that eyesore of a building razed. To Bob, though, it was home. A storm shutter hung askew at a window that was his.

He picked up the cookie sheet of unbaked biscuits, his eyes scanning Rose's note. Under the baking instructions she had written: *Never mind your mother. You know what's best for you. And honey, I say it's time, high time. Love, Rose.*

Inside, he set the Sarah-Lee cake to thaw on the counter. He preheated the oven, put the peas and rice into pans. Four years ago he had been happy, he remembered, for he shared his life and this same apartment with one who had loved him—or he said he did. It

CHAPTER 12

was the one and only relationship Blaine had ever had. Terry. Captain Terry DuLac of the United States Air Force.

He wished the interference, the attempted blackmail, had never occurred. He wished a student, Tony, had never been assigned to his class, had never turned in what was supposed to be an essay test. Tony had been the first to complete the test and had placed on Blaine's desk a piece of paper with sparse writing for an essay and already graded in red pencil.

A+

We gotta do some thing about my grades.

At the end of the school day Tony presented himself, as instructed, before Blaine in his classroom.



“Hi, Teach. I'm glad to see you, too!” From his hip pocket Tony took photographs and plopped them on Blaine's desk:

Blaine and Terry leaving a known gay bar arm in arm.

Blaine and Terry kissing in the parking lot beside Blaine's sports car.

On the reverse he had written:

Blaine Shirer, St. Jerome Catholic High School.

Terry DuLac, Captain, United States Air Force.

“How'd you find out his name?” Blaine asked.

Tony, moving close to Blaine's chair, rubbed himself. “I can find out *an-y-thing* I want 'cause fags just go crazy over this thing and you can too, Teach. Nobody needs to know— it'll be a secret love affair between you and my cock. And my old man will be proud of me and my grades.”

Blaine leaned back in his chair, scooted it back from such close proximity. “I don't think so! Take your paper. Here's a pen. Sit and write your essay.” Blaine stood up.

“I could fuckin' flatten you!”

“Do it and you'll find out how much you like being cooped up in juvenile detention!”

“Don't mess with me, Teach. I know people. Rough people!”

“That's it! We're going to the Principal's office.”

“The pictures are going too!”

“Take 'em!”



Blaine left the Principal's office and went to his parish Church to pray. That evening he told Terry about the incident. There was a smashing of things in the apartment, screaming and a ransacking for Blaine's checkbook. The next day Blaine found he had depleted his bank account. On a phone call Terry told him he had requested an immediate transfer. And no, he wouldn't be back.

Blaine understood. While Terry's schoolmates had their varsity teams and their dating

Vann Turner's
SOMETIMES LOVIN' IS HURTFUL

and hanging out, Terry had made pizzas, but had gone on to make something of himself—Captain in the United States Air Force. Captain Terry couldn't allow some punk to strip him of his commission. And the money he stole didn't matter. Terry did.

Alone, with the help of the Principal and the Archbishop, Blaine managed to weather the storm okay.

Yet for years following he avoided the places he and Terry had frequented together lest he be forced to confess to this friend or to that acquaintance, that his lover had left him. Even Carl seldom heard from him in those years.

He was going to give it all up, become a monk, and dedicate his life to prayer and God. For two years he prayed at home, attended daily Mass and fought off desires. He applied, but no religious order would have him. For years he continued to sit at tables for one, tables set apart from the others, lest he should hear the ignorant mock his homeliness—his slightness, his frizzy hair, his jawlessness.

As he stood in the kitchen slicing tomatoes in preparation for Bob's arrival, he admitted four years was a long time. Maybe it was long enough. And maybe it was time, or, as Rose had said, high time!

With the finest he had—his grandmother's silver, Limoges and her Waterford—he set the table. Then with twenty minutes to spare, with a lump in his throat and a hope in his heart, he walked three blocks to a florist for a single yellow rose for that table.

Maybe God will permit me to love again, love and be loved. Maybe He will. And maybe this is the time.

Bob arrived promptly at five with his stories and two quarts of beer.

