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Benchmarks: A Collection of Short Stories

Frank Wesley Meyers

BENCHMARKS:

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

By

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DEDICATION:

Dedicated to Gail,

Jacki, Sandi, Micki and Mark

who are my

most important benchmarks.

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THAT SILVER MEDAL

After his daughter Jenny marched in, the screen door slapped behind her like the crack of a rifle shot, startling the retired Army colonel. Noah Claybourne watched his daughter stride past the table where he was sitting and continue across the kitchen to the sink counter where she stabbed out her half-smoked cigarette, then she faced him.

"Dad, I thought you promised me you'd give up long-distance running," she said.

"I did not," he said. "I told you I'd reconsider it." He threw down the pencil he had been using to write entries in his training log. "Well, I did," Noah continued. "But I can't find any good reason why I should change my plan."

"Isn't the fact that you're 71-years-old reason enough?"

"Men older than me run in 26-mile marathons all the time. There was this 106-year-old waiter - -"

She folded her arms and shook her head. "I don't

care about other old men. I only care about my old man."

Noah didn't reply and there was silence in the kitchen of the house he shared with Jenny and her husband Al and their daughter Dodie. The only sound was the faint ticking of Noah's old windup wrist watch. All the other mechanisms in the stainless steel and Formica-surfaced room were digital, computerized, soundless.

"You're the only Claybourne I have left," Jenny said. "I'm worried about your safety."

Noah sat quietly. When she got fired up like this, he was reminded of how much she favored Sarah. Jenny had her mother's upturned nose, sunny blonde hair, chestnut eyes and little spitfire build. Just like Sarah, he thought, who's been gone nearly five years now.

Finally he said, "I've been medically cleared for P.T. Fact is, Ben Woodly ordered me to be more active."

"Did Doctor Woodly order you to take up foot racing? In July? On the sneak?"

Noah shoved back his chair and stood up. He was tall, thin and, standing, as straight as a church steeple. His pale gray eyes were glaring. "What do you mean 'sneak'?"

"Doing your running across town at Fort Monroe," she said. "Where none of us can keep an eye on you."

"No one has to supervise me. I'm not senile yet." He pushed his chair into the table. "Besides, I usually take Dodie with me."

Jenny walked to him. "Why are you so bull-headed?" She smoothed down one of the points of his shirt collar which had gotten folded up. "Why can't you get your exercise on a golf course or in a bowling alley? Like other men your age?"

"I've told you I don't like those damn time-wasters. My sport is running."

She frowned. "Because you were once a runner in high school?"

He didn't answer, but stormed away from her to the sink. He scowled out the window at the overcast sky.

She continued speaking. "Running out there at the old fort with only Dodie for help, you could have heat stroke or even a heart attack. Remember, Mom was only scouring a pot when - -"

Noah turned to her, his face flushed. "Why can't you understand? This has to do with your mother." He paused, then spoke slowly. "I was a runner when I was going with her. Running now is a way of recalling that time."

"Dad, that's crazy. Please, stop."

He started to speak again, but huffed out his breath instead. He avoided looking at her as he grabbed his training log and pencil off the table, then slammed out the screen door.

The next morning Noah was again running along the Wall. The Wall was the sea wall along the Virginia shore of Chesapeake Bay which was topped by a two-lane track of black hardstand. This particular stretch started at Fort Monroe's N.C.O. Club and ran exactly one mile along the bay to the Officers' Club. Noah had been keeping pace behind a young bearded runner in gold shorts. They were headed toward the N.C.O. Club when Noah began experiencing the agony of a side stitch. The painful muscle cramp was in the area around his abdomen and right side. He stopped, bent forward, thrust his fingers into his soft side muscles and gently massaged the ache.

His granddaughter Dodie coasted up on her bike and skidded to a stop. She was short, squat and nine. "You okay, Grandpa?"

"Just a side stitch. It'll pass."

Dodie held out the canteen that had been slung around her neck. "You better drink some water."

"Not yet." Noah straightened up, but continued

to massage the muscles. "Don't be such a sourpuss. I'm not about to die."

Noah started walking toward the N.C.O. Club, still kneading his side and breathing hard. Dodie walked her bike along beside him, eating potato chips from a one-pound bag sitting in the bicycle's basket. The asphalt surface was flat and open. On their left beyond a sturdy aluminum safety railing, the Wall plunged ten feet to a narrow strip of beach that appeared and disappeared as a result of the tides of Hampton Roads. On their right the Wall sloped down two or three feet to long rows of old brick two-stories which housed some of the military families. The only sound was the dull roar of the breakers. Above them, a half-dozen sea gulls wove languid patterns in the hot, humid air. A flamingo-colored sun floated above the horizon.

As they walked, Dodie kept watching her grandfather. "You're always getting side aches or blisters," she said. "How come you keep running?"

"There's this goal I have to accomplish." He scowled at her. "You wouldn't understand."

"Would so," she said frowning at him. "Girls have goals, too, you know."

"I keep forgetting that you're a liberated modern woman." He stopped. "I'll have that water now."

Dodie handed him the canteen. Noah took a mouthful of water and swished it around in his mouth before swallowing it.

"You were sailing along pretty good when you started," Dodie said. She pointed at a sea gull floating just beyond the safety rail. "Smooth as a sea gull." Just then the gull squawked and began flapping its wings, rising higher and higher into the clear blue sky.

"He heard you," Noah said handing her the canteen. "He probably doesn't like being compared to an old war-horse."

"Maybe she's showing you how to do better on your goal," Dodie said and speared a potato chip with her tongue-tip from her opened palm.

"And just how do I do that, Ms. Smarty Pants?"

"Just keep flapping your wings."

Noah rumpled his granddaughter's short-cropped hair. "Well, I'm not doing that badly on my goal. Fact is, I think my luck's about to change. I came across a good omen this morning in an old footlocker. Want to see?"

"Sure."

Noah reached into his faded blue singlet and pulled out a dog tag necklace. On the silver beaded chain, as he had often shown to Dodie, were the two

tarnished I.D. tags he'd worn through three wars and the plain gold wedding band that Sarah had worn for forty-eight years. But the final item was new: a silver track medal.

"Is that the medal?" Dodie asked.

"Yes."

"Looks awfully old."

"Well, I won it, let's see, fifty-three years ago. At Redburn High School. The day that the Flash, Mickey Farrell, beat me in the mile race. He won the gold medal and I got the silver. It was on a red satin ribbon. It felt cold on my chest when Mr. Moriarty hung it around my neck. He shook my hand real hard and gave out the third place medal. Then the band played 'I Want To Be Happy,' real peppy. All of a sudden I smelled lily of the valley and I knew who it was. I turned around and there was your grandmother, crying. She said it was because she was so proud of me."

"Was Grandma pretty when she was young?"

Noah chuckled. "She was gorgeous. Her hair was like gold silk and her skin glowed and her big chestnut-colored eyes sparkled like polished brass. When she hugged me that day, she felt so soft and warm. And that perfume of hers, lily of the valley, was overpowering." Noah put his arm around Dodie's

shoulders. "She was the most beautiful sixteen-year-old girl in the world."

Dodie smiled and looked closer at the medal. The god Mercury was on the face. On the back was engraving that read "Noah Claybourne - 5:47."

"Five minutes and 47 seconds?" she asked. Noah nodded. "Doesn't sound very fast."

"Well, no one took track seriously in those days. Most of us on the track team were recycled football players."

"But now you want to run as fast as you did then?"

"Yes."

Dodie frowned and asked why.

Noah scratched his chin and was quiet for a few seconds. Finally he said, "Maybe I just need to relive that particular moment. That feel of victory. And that smell of lily of the valley." Noah tightened his arm around his granddaughter's shoulders. "Maybe just to have that magic moment one more time."

Then the young bearded runner in gold shorts shot past on a return lap and flashed them a smiling thumbs up.

That afternoon the whole family visited the

Mariners' Museum. Noah's son-in-law Al didn't have any sales calls scheduled for the afternoon so Jenny decided that they could combine a visit to the museum with a picnic along the James River. The four of them had spent over an hour wandering around the many nautical relics and now they were outside. Jenny and Dodie were prowling among the huge anchors and other oversized ship accessories on display outside the museum. Noah and Al were across the street in the shade of tall pines sitting on the tailgate of Al's new station wagon enjoying a can of beer from a Styrofoam cooler.

"Look, it's probably none of my business," Al Schumacher said, "but Jenny's beside herself about this running business. Why don't you knock it off, for her sake, huh?"

"It's not as simple as that," Noah said. "It's, well, just something I have to do." Noah sipped his beer.

Al lit one of the last cigarettes from a crushed pack. He was built like an elderly beagle with a face to match and now that face was full of wrinkles. "Jesus, Jenny's trying to get me to go see a lawyer with her."

"Why would she want to see a lawyer?"

"She doesn't think it's safe for you to be

running. She wants to make you stop."

"By seeing a lawyer?"

Al looked down at the top of the beer can he was rotating in his stubby fingers. "Look, this is her idea, okay. I don't understand how this'll work. She says if she can become your legal guardian she can order you to stop and you have to do it."

Noah studied Al's face. "How does she think she'll get a court to make her my guardian? What grounds could she have?"

"Hell, Noah, you're an old man and you been acting funny lately, this running business and such." He looked away and had another drag on his cigarette. "She's going to have you declared mentally incompetent."

"Mentally incompetent?"

"Now, you gotta admit you been acting crazy. I mean doing those weird exercises and talking about your wife like she was still alive and wearing your high school track shirt. Anyway, we don't think it's right for Dodie to be along with you when you're running. I haven't laid the law down to her yet - -"

"You're putting my granddaughter off limits to me?" Noah blinked. "Like I'm some scandal she shouldn't know about?"

"Look, Noah, when a guy's wife - -"

"Did Jenny ask you to throw a scare into me?"

Al kept his eyes on the top of his beer can. "Look, Noah, all you gotta do is promise to stop."

Noah launched himself off the tail gate, then banged the beer can down where he'd been sitting. "Tell me the truth. Is she serious about this guardianship idea?"

"If you don't act you age - -"

Noah shouted his son-in-law's name, waited while the younger man looked up at him, then repeated his question.

"I'm afraid so, Noah."

Noah turned his back on Al and stormed up the road toward the entrance to the museum grounds. He didn't look back when he said loudly, "I'll find my own way home, somehow."

After that, Noah avoided his family, staying away from the house for longer and longer periods. He haunted the shopping malls, the libraries, the museums. He began running during the afternoon in addition to the morning, pushing himself to gain ground on his objective.

Five days after the museum incident, Noah was pounding through the morning heat on the Wall and was feeling the stress from training twice a day. It

seemed to him that there was more strain as each foot thudded on the hard surface, each ankle seemed to be grinding as it went through its range of motion. He had little feeling in his knees as they levered back and forth. His shoulder muscles felt clenched and seemed to squeeze tighter with each punishing step. He became aware of lightheadedness.

Suddenly his chest was screaming for air; he was suffocating. His lungs couldn't pump oxygen fast enough. His vision got purple and fuzzy and the faces of a dozen glowering Jennys swarmed before him and through them he could just make out Mickey Farrell running toward him in shorts the color of the gold medal the Flash had won a thousand times in Noah's memory. Then the Wall spun and hundreds of sea gulls shrieked and Noah was shivering and stumbling and the sun exploded and then all was black.

It had been the young bearded runner who saw Noah go down and had called for an ambulance. Noah was taken to the Veteran's Hospital. His usual physician Dr. Ben Woodly was on duty.

"You were lucky it was only heat exhaustion," Dr. Woodly said as he completed listening to Noah's chest with a stethoscope. "The next time it could be heat

stroke. You'll be a dead duck."

Noah was sitting up on a treatment table in a small room that smelled of pine cleaner.

Dr. Woodly handed Noah a covered Styrofoam cup, a bendable straw protruding. "Here, Jesse Owens, drink another one of these, slowly." The doctor began packing tobacco into a pipe with a well-chewed stem.

Noah did as he was told.

"Water with salt and potassium," Dr. Woodly said, "to replace all the sweat you've lost. Only a real dumbo sweats and doesn't replace it." Dr. Woodly was a pot-bellied little man with a ragged fringe of gray beard, a broad well-weathered face and a full head of steel wool hair. "Old salts like you and me have to take special precautions about exercising," the physician said, pointing the pipe stem at Noah. "Who the hell cleared you for running anyway? It wasn't Mrs. Woodly's son, now was it?"

Noah stopped drinking. "You chewed my butt about not getting enough exercise. Be more active, you said."

"Simple exercise, you old fool. Walking, horseshoes, golf; not the damn Olympics."

"One race," Noah said, "just a mile run. Is that too much of a goal for a man?"

"For a man your age it is. Stuff like that is

for the young hands."

"You're wrong, Ben. You and I, we still need something to shoot for, too. One goal to stretch for, one thing to keep life worth living."

"What you're doing is going to end that life." Dr. Woodly put a firm hand on his friend's shoulder. "Your big shot goal, is it really worth a heart attack?"

Noah looked at him for a moment, hard, then dropped his gaze. He could not answer the question.

It was murky next morning on the Wall, the air sodden with chilly mist. Noah was still thinking about what the doctor had said. He did his warm-up stretches and walked to the white starting line painted on the tarmac near the wall of the N.C.O. Club. He thought about what Jenny had said and what she was threatening to do. Off to his left, in the dim dawn, the waves were loudly slapping and slashing at the beach.

He reached into his singlet and fingered the souvenirs on the dog tag necklace. He thought about Sarah. Then he withdrew his hand, adjusted his sweat band and made sure his watch was zeroed in the stopwatch mode. There was a distant grumble of thunder.

He cleared his mind and thought only about running. He pressed the start button on his watch and ran off down the sea wall at a fast pace.

His ankles rotated stiffly, his thighs and calves tight. His body tremored with the impact of every footfall. His shoulders were rigid, his forearms slack. His breathing was labored.

Suddenly a shoelace came loose and caught under the opposite foot, tripping him and pitching him head-first onto his hands and knees on the wet, gravelly pavement. His right knee was bleeding; the heels of both hands were scratched and scored. He reached quickly to rub a stab of pain in his left ankle.

He swore loudly above the sound of pounding surf, then dragged himself to his feet and stumbled to the safety rail and hunkered over the cold bar. He stared down at the damp sand and the churning sea.

A gull swooped into his view, snagged a small fish, then flapped its wings and soared into the sky. The gull flew higher and higher, becoming a speck in the distance.

Minutes passed as Noah hung onto the rail and stared after the gull.

Finally Noah squatted and tied his shoelace, then walked to the starting line. He pulled his necklace

up and over his head and from around his neck. He clutched Sarah's ring and the dog tags and the silver medal, tightly. He reset his watch and pressed the start button. He sprang forward and ran off down the track again.

His head was held higher and his eyes looked straight ahead. His stride was stronger, steadier, sure. The memory of lily of the valley was becoming more vivid.

THE ART OF MASQUERADE

After they entered his apartment, he took her into his arms and gave her a long, yet tender kiss. When he drew back, she asked him not to rush things.

"I mean I enjoyed being kissed," she said, her face serious, "but I really do want to look around your place."

He dropped his arms and smiled. "Why?"

"Curiosity. You can learn a lot about someone from the space he lives in." She smiled. "I learned that in this interior decorating class I'm taking."

"Okay. But let's take off our coats and have another after-dinner drink while you look."

"Oh sure. Mind if I freshen up first?"

"No, the bathroom's down the hall; first door on the right."

"Thanks." She headed down the hall, pulling off her mittens as she went.

Vic Prophet stared after her, pleased with her obvious responsiveness to the kiss. He unwound the

woolen scarf from his neck and stuffed it into the arm of his topcoat before he draped the coat over a dinette chair. He was wearing black slacks and a bulky turtleneck sweater, almost the same color green as his eyes. "Soulful emerald eyes" People magazine had called them. Looking in the mirror next to the front door, he removed heavy-framed eyeglasses and untied the black ribbon holding his long, copper-colored hair. He shook his head, fluffing his hair, then ruffled the short nap of his beard. Except for the waitress who had asked him to autograph the back of a menu, the simple alteration of his appearance with the glasses and the hair ribbon had succeeded.

Sue Griffin returned from the bathroom carrying her leather trench coat and smelling of fresh perfume. "You can put your things on one of the chairs in here," Vic said as he crossed to the wet bar in the dining area. "What would you like? Another rum and cola?"

"Sure." Sue put down her coat and purse, walked to the center of the living room, folded her arms and looked about the room, an intent look on her face.

Vic fixed the drinks, glancing up at her occasionally. He judged her to be 26, maybe 27. She was tall; he guessed he only had about six inches on her, making her five-nine or ten. She was big-boned

but solid, and her figure was well revealed by her gold knit outfit. He decided that without make-up she was probably rather homely, but she looked fine now: brown eyes asparkle, long brown hair waved and bouncy, mouth lipsticked a vivid, wet red.

"I love your taste in colognes," she said still studying the living room. "Mostly from Bloomingdale's, right?"

"Checked out my medicine chest, huh?" He said it with a smile, impressed, carrying the drink to her. He had a Cutty Sark on ice in his other hand.

"I told you I learn a lot by looking around," she said sampling the drink. "That's very good."

"Expensive rum makes the difference. Really warm you up on a cold New York night like this." He crossed to the stereo as she circled the living room looking at the pictures on the walls. He glanced through his cassettes, saying, "You're sure you can get me in to see Lucas Waterhouse? This week or even next would be okay." He pulled a cassette from the rack. "Chicago street blues okay?"

"Sure to both questions," she said stopping at the mirror. Vic put the tape in the machine and set the volume low. She checked her make-up in the mirror, saying, "I bet Mr. Waterhouse has seen your show. He likes American TV, especially the soaps.

He doesn't come to the theater for his make-up until five or five-thirty." She turned from the mirror and smiled at him. "So, how long you lived here?"

"A year, maybe a little more."

"You've bought most of your furniture in that time, haven't you?"

"You must be psychic. I got it all about six months ago, after my first album came out."

"The one that went platinum?"

"Yeah."

"I heard it was real good, with all those sad old love songs. I mean, I didn't buy one myself 'cause I buy classical or show tracks." She sipped her drink and looked closely at the books and articles in a tall bookcase. "You did a second album, didn't you? Stuff you've done this season on General Hospital?"

"Yeah," he said, coming over to her.

"Isn't the title something with your character's name in it?"

"The Soul of Osborn." He sipped his drink. "When do you think you can set me up with Waterhouse?"

"In the morning I'll be with his secretary at our weekly business review." She stopped inspecting the shelves and looked at Vic. "You've bought all this stuff recently too, haven't you?"

"You are psychic. They weren't cheap either."

"So how come there's nothing old here?" She returned to the center of the room, making a big sweeping gesture with her glass. "I mean, everything here is new; nothing's used."

"I don't follow you."

"Everybody has souvenirs sitting around. Corny, sentimental keepsakes. People don't even realize they've put them out. But you haven't. How come?"

He carried his drink to the sofa and sat at one end. "I don't have things like that."

"You're putting me on."

"There's a couple of cartons of my old stuff in the storage room downstairs, but it's mostly clothes and sheet music."

"But everybody has souvenirs."

"Not me. There's nothing I want to remember."

She sat beside him on the sofa. "Seriously?"

"What's the big deal?"

"Aren't there things from your past that mean a lot to you? You know, like when you were a kid. Things from your Mom and Dad, stuff you won, something you made."

"Look, my parents were Czech immigrants. Our name was Prokovsky and we lived in Chicago's Buck-town, dirt poor. When I was ten, my mother died in childbirth. Nobody cared much about me after that.

My old man'd get a snoot full and kick my butt all over our basement flat. I was big for my age and the kids on my block either feared me or made fun of me. See what I'm saying? My life was garbage. Why would I want souvenirs of that? Look, I paid my dues then; now I'm successful. I don't want to look back at those canceled checks."

"Hey, my life hasn't been a bed of roses either. Look at my size; I had the same problems you did as a kid. Now?" she shrugged, "I'm a divorced, single parent back living under my parents' roof in Queens." Vic reached out his hand to put it on top of hers, but she took it and clutched it in hers. "But there have been so many good times worth remembering; they blot out the lousy ones. My souvenirs are those good times for me."

"For me the good times are now. Look, Osborn has been a big hit with General Hospital's audience. They love this pitiful, disfigured hermit who brings tears to their eyes with his bluesy songs. Women are crazy about him. You should read the sacks of mail I get: praise, proposals, propositions. Can you believe it? With this red hair and beard, that make-up has me looking like driftwood covered with red seaweed."

She patted his hand. "The fans see what's under

that beat-up surface. They see the tenderness."

"What I see are the doors that Osborn has finally opened for me. Hell, I'm already thirty-two; I have to grab all I can as quick as I can." He scooted closer to her. "That's why meeting Lucas Waterhouse is so important. He's the key to more success."

"You started to explain that at dinner, but then the food came. How is Mr. Waterhouse the key?"

"They're going to cast the Chicago production of The Phantom Of The Opera next month. My agent has got me a shot at the lead."

"Hey, you'd be great in that part. I mean because of the kind of character Osborn is and your popularity. And there'd be the hometown-boy-returns thing. But Mr. Waterhouse wouldn't have any say in who plays his role in Chicago."

"But he knows the secret of playing that role. If I could find out that secret, I could get the part. Look, I'd crawl through ground glass for that opportunity. It'd prove to the public that I'm a serious actor. Who knows what that could lead to next?" Vic brought his face close to hers. "Now this is important, Sue. I have to see him privately, understand? And I need enough time -- fifteen, twenty minutes -- to convince him to trust me with his secret. Without privacy and enough time, seeing

him would be useless. Do you understand?"

"Sure." Her voice was soft.

"Do you really understand how very important this is?" He searched her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes, Vic, I really do."

He looked deeply into her eyes a moment more, then said, "God, you're wonderful." He kissed her gently. She slid her arms around his neck.

Sue set up Vic's meeting with Lucas Waterhouse two nights later at the Majestic Theater after the evening performance. She was also able to arrange a complimentary ticket because Vic had not yet seen the show. As he waited in the quickly filling theater for the curtain to rise, Vic could feel the electricity of anticipation surging within the crowd. The Tony-winning musical was the most sought-after ticket on Broadway, with performances sold out for a year in advance. Much of it was due to Lucas Waterhouse whom many critics said was even more poignant and more powerful as the Phantom than Michael Crawford who had originated the role and had won a Tony himself.

From the moment of Waterhouse's entrance as the facially disfigured and masked Erik, Vic was awed by the actor's skill, particularly during the "The Music

of the Night" number. Waterhouse captured the misery of Erik's desire for the beautiful chorine Christine during a scene set in Eric's subterranean lair, supposedly five-stories beneath the stage of the Paris Opera House. Surrounded by swirling mist and hundreds of flickering candles, Waterhouse displayed his mastery over his art as he exploited a host of technical devices: crisp diction, volume shifts, pitch changes, breath control, whispers, rasps, chokes. With passion shading every syllable of the lyrics and the lights slowly fading, the perfectly controlled tenor voice sang:

> You alone
> can make my song take flight --
> help me make
> the music of the night . . .

And then the lights were gone.

Tears were streaming from Vic's eyes and he was astonished to discover that he was part of the deafening, prolonged applause praising Waterhouse's artistry.

Throughout the show, Vic was similarly moved and enthralled by Waterhouse's forceful performance. During the curtain call when Waterhouse finally came out, Vic was one of the first on his feet, clapping uncontrollably and shouting "Bravo." When the house

lights came up, Vic was emotionally drained. He could not remember ever experiencing anything so overpowering. He was certain now that he wanted this role, this opportunity to utterly devastate an audience. And Waterhouse had the key.

After the theater had cleared out, Sue came for Vic and escorted him backstage. At the doorway to Waterhouse's dressing room, she said, "I'll meet you by the stage doorman's office." She exchanged a kiss with him. "Break a leg."

The private dressing room of Lucas Waterhouse was only ten-feet square, its air heavy with the smells of citrus and alcohol. The right-hand wall contained closets, the doorway to a bathroom and many framed photos and shadow boxes. Along the left-hand wall was a long mirrored make-up table, its top filled with rows of jars, tubes and other cosmetic supplies. A squat red candle burned in a far corner. Centered in front of the well-lit table was a huge, leather-padded barber's chair. In it sat Lucas Waterhouse, removing make-up.

He rose to shake Vic's hand, a latex cheek piece flapping about. "I've enjoyed your Osborn on the telly very much," Waterhouse said. "Striking characterization, very Christ-like. Of course, the reddish beard and long hair help. But I think it's

what you do with your eyes that makes it work visually. That pitiful haunted look you achieve. Fine work, really."

"Thank you," Vic said feeling humbled.

"Big hit with the women, eh?" Waterhouse laughed. "You must tell me what that's like."

"At times it's a pain in the butt."

Waterhouse laughed again. "Listen, I enjoy your singing, too. Have you studied?"

"No, I picked up most of it on the street corner. Lots of blues and gospel where I grew up."

"You do it so well. Nice knocked-about quality to your voice."

This was not the same brash, tortured figure Vic had watched strut around the stage for the past three hours.

Waterhouse asked, "Do you mind if I take off my face while we talk? Pull over Make-up's stool," he said indicating a padded bar stool in a corner. As Vic sat beside him, Waterhouse picked up a long thin brush and dabbed an oily liquid on the adhesive holding the rubber piece to his face. "One must be very careful not to injure the skin. No time to heal before tomorrow's performance."

Vic was surprised at the slight build of the older man. When he'd stood, Waterhouse was at least

a head shorter than Vic and was thin and wiry. His 51-year-old face was lined with many wrinkles and his complexion was shiny, possibly a result of wearing the make-up everyday. Vic sensed vitality in the man, prompted by a dense thatch of curly brown hair, a disarmingly broad smile and boyish good looks.

"I enjoyed your performance, Mr. Waterhouse," Vic said. "You were magnificent."

"Call me Lucas, eh? First names between colleagues, right?"

"Right. I was also very moved by your singing. It's been a long time since I've heard a voice charged with so much emotion."

"Thanks. A little shaky tonight during the lead-in to 'Music of the Night.' Reversed the lyrics in several spots."

"What do a couple of unnoticed slips matter?"

"A great deal, old chap. Getting it exactly right is what it's all about, isn't it?"

Vic studied the other actor in the mirror before agreeing with him. Waterhouse was leaning close to the mirror, dabbing at a small piece attached to an eyelid. Vic looked at the items decorating the walls and make-up table. He was struck more by what was not there than what was. No telegrams nor flowers from well-wishers, no autographed photos from other

celebrities, no indications of Waterhouse's status as a reigning Broadway star. Instead, what was there resembled a museum display: yellowing snapshots, architectural diagrams, nautical sketches, a pair of rusted manacles, religious plaques, animal figurines, a pistol in a case lined with black velvet. An odd assortment Vic thought. He decided the situation was right to get into the purpose of his visit.

"Just between colleagues," Vic said, "how do you go about playing a character like the Phantom? I know what I do for a short TV scene. But what do you do for an evening-long show?"

"Same as you. Once you get the character cooking, it's simply a matter of sustaining the heat."

"You're being modest," Vic said forcing a broad smile. "Or are you hiding some mystical secret?" He held the smile.

"Nothing mystical about a lot of hard work. Give it your best shot; maintain concentration. That sort of thing, really."

"You couldn't accomplish what you do just by working hard. There must be some special process."

Waterhouse stopped undoing his make-up and made eye contact with Vic in the mirror. "I simply do everything I can to never give an audience a poor performance." He smiled tightly. "That's all."

"No, I think you've discovered something you ought to share." Vic held Waterhouse's reflected gaze with his own. "Didn't some old actor ever share his secrets with you when you were on the way up?"

The smile vanished from Waterhouse's face as the two men continued eye-wrestling. After a few seconds the older man said, "Obligations of success, eh?"

"I promise your secret will be safe with me."

"Very well, then." Waterhouse broke eye contact and returned to removing the latex pieces. "It's very much like what a prizefighter does before he goes into the ring. You have to do preparatory things, physically and mentally. Warm up your body and get your spirit up for every match."

"What kind of preparations?"

"Surely you do some sort of drills before taping a scene. Body stretches, articulation exercises, vocalization things?" Waterhouse had taken off all of the latex appliances; he began smearing a cleansing lotion onto his face.

"Yeah, I do those things. Depends on what kind of scene it is. But there must be something else you do. Maybe something in the mind." The older actor was wiping off the lotion, using tissues in each hand. "That's the secret, isn't it?" Vic said. "Mental preparation."

"If you say so."

"Stop being cute. You agreed to share your process. You're the one who said that getting it exactly right was what it's all about."

Waterhouse dumped the soiled tissues into a waste basket beside the big barber chair and said, "Oh, I'll honor my bargain. And I wasn't being cute. You simply lack patience." He rotated the chair to face Vic. "It's like this. You must bring your mind to believe three things: that you are Erik, that you are in love, and that you are isolated from the world." He leaned forward. "Now, you stop being cute, eh. Don't you use the same spiritual devices for Osborn?"

"No," Vic said. "I don't."

Waterhouse sat back and folded his arms. "You're lying, old boy. It's you who're being evasive."

Vic lowered his feet from the stool rungs to the floor, straightening his body. "Honest, I don't do anything unusual."

"You don't live the character?"

"No."

"I simply don't believe you, old chap."

"I do my scenes in bits and pieces, sort of emotional chunks. In each chunk, I concentrate on the meaning of the lines and the proper feeling. I make an effort to communicate each of those chunks to the

others in the scene. The flow of those emotional chunks adds up to Osborn." Vic clapped a hand to his chest. "Me, I never lose track of being Vic Prophet who's acting out a scene." He pointed at Waterhouse. "Maybe, basically, you do that same thing: nothing but age-old acting tricks. I've noticed you do that in your movies."

"For those movies, yes, you may be right. But not for this role."

"Come on, Lucas." Vic folded his arms. "When you're doing that part, you don't believe you're really the Phantom anymore than I believe I'm the Queen of England."

Waterhouse rose out of the chair. "You're dead wrong." He stormed past the chair and faced the far wall. Vic could hear him taking deep breaths. After a few seconds, Waterhouse turned around, but his eyes looked beyond Vic. "I got by with dabs of technique in films, even in comic stage roles, but not in this play, not with this role. This complex, melo-dramatic, tragic character; he's nothing like I've ever attempted before." His eyes focused on Vic. "Probably not like you have ever attempted, either. This is more than just professional curiosity, isn't it? You have some ulterior motive, don't you?"

Vic held out his arms. "Look, I'm not trying

anything unethical here. Honest." He dropped his arms and shrugged. "I've got a good shot at the Phantom in the Chicago production. If I get it, I want to do it right." He cocked his head to one side. "Exactly right."

"I see." Waterhouse massaged the back of his neck before saying, "Well, I intend to live up to my stewardship." He folded his arms. "You're correct in thinking that Erik requires special care. Each performance requires me to mentally merge my past with Erik's. In my mind's eye there must be a single entity."

"This sounds like some of that artsy hocus-pocus they teach in college acting courses."

"This is the God's truth about how I bring Erik to life. As far as I'm concerned, it's the only way." Waterhouse stood behind the barber chair, his hands gripping its back. "My first requirement is to convince myself that I am Erik. For that reason I avoid looking at myself in the mirror until the make-up is completed and I am in costume. Then I study the reflection. I tell myself over and over, 'That is my face and my clothing. Because they are Erik's, I must be Erik.'"

"Don't those things glued to your face remind you that you're only an actor playing a part?"

"Not at all. That mask confirms the transformation. Because my face feels different, my intellect is convinced that I am someone other than Lucas Waterhouse. I must be Erik, the man whom I look like." Waterhouse waved a hand at the wall hangings. "I also study these architectural drawings of the Paris Opera House, my opera house. I've actually gone there, crawled the rafters, spent a night beside the underground lake. For my entrance in the show then, I mentally travel every corridor, my corridors. When I actually arrive on stage, I am convinced that I am Erik." Waterhouse was silent for a moment before quietly adding, "One must simply believe that whatever one sees in his mirror is life's reality."

Vic smiled. "Okay, I'll accept that process. Maybe without really being aware of it, I may be doing the same kind of thing with Osborn. Is that all there is to it?"

"No, I said there were three beliefs."

"Those other two should be easy after you fool yourself into believing that you're the Phantom."

"Quite the contrary, being in love and being alone are far more difficult."

"I've been in love and I've been lonely. So?"

"It's not simply knowing what the feeling is. What's important is evoking the actual emotion."

"More hocus-pocus?"

"Hardly. It requires using physical objects to trigger the emotion. That lit candle there on the table suggests the many nuances of love. During the performance when the lighted candles rise out of the mist on the stage, they instantly evoke the pangs of love." He gestured at the wall on his left. "That's a photo of my wife and son. I also spend time meditating on it, remembering their love."

"I thought you were single."

"Widower. My wife and son perished in a house fire five years ago."

"And you want to remember a thing like that?"

"It's exactly like the love that has been denied Erik. And that pistol in the case there was my father's. He used it on my mother when he discovered she was unfaithful. Before he turned it on himself."

Vic was stunned momentarily, then said, "It's not natural to recall such things."

"No, but useful. I purchased those memories with great pain. Now I simply exploit their value." He smiled and added, "You will have to exploit similar memories."

"Not necessarily. I've convinced myself of being in love many times. Doing it to play Erik shouldn't be hard. Or as painful as your method." Vic smiled

back at Waterhouse. "What about your third trick?"

"Alienation is no easier to conjure up than love. Being an outcast is perhaps the very essence of that 'loathsome gargoyle' named Erik."

"That should be easy. I've been an outcast all my life."

"You're fortunate then to have a head start on most actors. But you will have to recall those times when you felt the most rejected." Waterhouse indicated the burning candle again. "That black object holding the candle is made from a lump of coal from my hometown in south Wales. As a child there, poverty was a member of our family. Few wanted us. When my parents were gone, no one but the orphanage would take me in. I use that rejection to fuel the lifeblood of my Erik." Waterhouse turned to the objects hanging on the wall and spread out his arms, his voice growing stronger. "Here's more fuel for loneliness. A sketch of the ship that brought me to America to be a friendless immigrant. Newspaper reviews saying I couldn't act. The cigar box I begged with as a sidewalk juggler after my acting troupe failed." He lowered his arms, paused briefly, then said in a voice just barely audible, "So many symbols for banishment, eh?" He faced Vic. "Thus is the Waterhouse museum of misery."

"But to open all those old wounds --"

"Each night my mind must rekindle that painful past. It's the only way I can resurrect Erik, his inflamed heart, his seared soul." He walked to Vic and put his hands on the younger actor's shoulders. "There, that's what's hidden behind my mask, old chap. The tortuous secrets to creating Erik. The painful labor makes the price of art high, eh?"

Vic stood and lifted Waterhouse's hands off his shoulders. "Maybe too high?"

"Ah, but with enormous rewards." Waterhouse beamed. "Simply enormous."

Afterwards, Vic met Sue at the stage door and neither said anything until they were outside in the alley walking toward 45th Street. Then Sue asked, "So, did he tell you his secret?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Vic stopped, faced her and shook his head. "It turned out to be nothing but a bunch of hocus-pocus. Nothing I could use." He shook his head again. "Nor would want to."

"So how about your chances of getting that part?"

"I'm no worse off than I was. At least I know there isn't some magical key to the role." He shook

his head once more, shrugging off introspection. "Okay, where to?"

She took his arm and started him out of the alley again. "Sardi's; I want to show you off to some friends." She chuckled. "And a petite bitch or two."

He stopped. "I'm not in much of a mood for meeting people."

"One of them is on the staff of the Man of La Mancha revival. I'm sure you've heard that Raymond Donnelly in the lead is blowing away the critics."

A broad smile broke across Vic's face. "I swear you've got psychic powers."

"I just know what's really behind your mask."

He patted her hands that were around his arm, saying, "God, you're wonderful." Then they strode into the oncoming crowd.

THE MacCLINTOCK LEGACY

The latest prospective buyer for Annie's tavern had presented herself unexpectedly at the business during the afternoon lull. She was the twenty-sixth inquirer since Annie's ad started running in the Chicago Tribune eight weeks ago.

"Run down," the prospect announced after a quick tour of the facilities behind the bar.

"Wouldn't you say more of a 'lived-in' quality?" Annie said, forcing a smile.

"Run down," the prospect repeated.

"With all these antiques - -"

"Junk."

"But you won't find bar mirrors as good - -"

The prospect thrust up an index finger and cocked an ear toward the floor. By rocking back and forth, the woman was producing a medley of high-pitched squeals.

"The hardwood floor under this tile," Annie began but was cut off by an arched eyebrow and a moist clucking sound. The prospect was a stout matron who

reeked of lavender cologne and reminded Annie of a nun who had made sixth grade an agony. By contrast, Annie MacClintock was slender, had honey-brown hair pulled back into a pony tail, and was the picture of kid-sister earnestness.

The prospect motioned toward two small groups of customers. "Business always this dead?" she asked.

"The lunch crowd just left," Annie said. The remnants included two elderly women seated at a table near the TV, but paying little attention to its soap opera. One of the women was Mrs. Zimmerman, who was crocheting an antimacassar, and the other one was Natalya Shapiro, who was leafing through Cosmopolitan. Across the room three old men -- Dr. Obolensky, Chalky Quinn and Liam Daugherty -- were playing darts. "After work is out," Annie continued, "the place fills right up. What my momma -- God rest her -- would call nice peace-loving, church-going folks."

Annie thought that Momma would probably feel they were a better bunch than a MacClintock deserved. Momma firmly believed that there was a curse attached to the family bloodline. You're a MacClintock, she would say to Annie, meaning you was conceived under an evil star and delivered on a woebegone day.

Annie's recollections were interrupted by a

sudden burst of excitement among the dart throwers.

"Dammit!" Liam Daugherty snapped. This was followed by laughter and applause from his opponents. "You fat devil, you hit me arm," Daugherty shouted at Chalky Quinn and waved toward a dart lodged in the oak paneling three feet to the right of the dart board.

Annie suspected that the men were staging another of their "fakeries" but she felt powerless to stop them.

Delivered on a woebegone day, Momma's voice repeated in Annie's memory.

"You're the guy who bumped into me, old wino," Chalky said huffing up his portly chest.

Daugherty, a wiry, little, red-faced man, chugged over nose-to-nose with Chalky's moonface. "You bumped me on purpose, fatso," Daugherty said.

"Let's not have another altercation," Dr. Obolensky said loudly and distinctly. Dr. Obolensky, a retired college professor, was a stately old gentleman with the demeanor of a medieval abbot. "Just take your turn over."

Daugherty shambled over to the errant dart. "Get me goat and devil me concentration, that's what he's up to," he said, then yanked the dart from the wall causing some splintering. He spat on his right index

finger and dabbed at the woodwork's latest gouge.

Annie turned to explain the incident to the prospect, but was stopped by the arrival of Scratch Evans, the bartender, who lumbered out of the backroom. He was a large black man with nappy gray hair and a left eye that was clouded with pale fog. He was wiping his massive hands on a soiled white towel. "Air conditioner's busted again."

"Phone that service outfit." In the back of her mind, Annie recognized the improbable timeliness of this minor catastrophe.

"Already did. Said they wouldn't send nobody 'til we squared the bill."

Born empty-handed; be empty-pocketed was another of what Momma called "her preachments."

"Want me to prop open the doors and drag out the fans?" Scratch said.

"No, I'll get at it in a couple of minutes."

Scratch shrugged and said, "You the boss," then clomped to the backside of the bar.

"Numerous overdue bills?" the prospect asked.

"Each week I put a little aside - -"

"Debt-ridden," the prospect said with a nod.

Annie took a deep breath and tried to press on. "If you're done looking down here, upstairs there's a real nice apartment. The stairway's - -"

"Hey, you ladies hear there was another rape?" It was Rosie Vasquez who had burst through the front door and was threading her way through the tables toward the two older women. Unlike most of the daytime regulars, Rosie was only in her twenties and possessed the intensity and carriage of a flamenco dancer.

"You mean the little Yazev girl?" Mrs. Zimmerman said staring up at Rosie through thick-lensed glasses.

"Naw, this one happened last night," Rosie said.

Bad news has an ill-timed tongue. Momma's preachments came to mind like blood from a fresh cut.

"Anyway, the Yazev girl wasn't raped," Natalya Shapiro said raising her voice to her tiny, bird-like companion. "Just molested. There's a difference." Like Mrs. Zimmerman, Natalya Shapiro was in her sixties, but was tanned, toned and tucked to the extent that she looked twenty years younger.

"I know from raped; I wasn't born yesterday," Mrs. Zimmerman said. "So who was it got molested last night?"

"Raped," Natalya said.

"Whatever," Mrs. Zimmerman said.

"Maria Inocentes," Rosie said. "She's plenty tough, but there was three of them."

"Where?"

"Eugene Field Park. Same place Odie Nordquist got knifed last month."

Annie turned to say something about the recent increase in police patrols in the neighborhood, but all that was left of the prospect was the smell of lavender.

. . . the MacClintock curse . . . whole family's surely snake-bit . . .

Annie faced the regulars. "You gremlins!" she said. The Mole Hole regulars stared back blankly at Annie. Scratch wandered out from behind the bar. "You've done it again," Annie continued. "Chased off that one same as the others before her."

Dr. Obolensky cleared his throat and said, "Are you accusing us of, well, sabotage?"

"You bet," Annie said glaring at them. "You folks will do anything to keep me from selling off this hangout of yours. You know that a new owner won't keep this place as homey as Granddaddy MacClintock did."

"Mac -- may he rest in peace -- understood the value of friendship," Dr. Obolensky said.

"Unfortunately, Granddaddy was cursed like all us MacClintocks," Annie continued. "He left me with a load of debt on this place." . . . snake-bit . . .

"And the bills just keep coming."

"We could pass the hat," Daugherty said.

"From you cheapskates she wouldn't get bus fare," Chalky said.

"Then a fundraiser is in order," Dr. Obolensky said. "That's what our temple does when we need a quick infusion of cash."

"Okay!" Rosie shouted. "A big fiesta with lots of drinks and food."

"Local merchants would be glad to donate prizes," Natalya said. She knocked on the wooden table top for good measure.

"You're gonna put on something like that in here?" Chalky said.

"Gompers Park by the river would be nice for it," Mrs. Zimmerman said. "You know my youngest has a rock-and-roll band?"

"Hold on here," Annie said loudly. "I don't want any charity."

"This is not charity," Dr. Obolensky said. "We are speaking about paying our dues. To retain what is ours."

"Yours?" Annie said. "I'm the owner."

"You just own brick and mortar," Dr. Obolensky said. "We customers own The Mole Hole, its heart, its spirit. It's your building, but it's our home."

"Well, you're right about one thing," Annie said. "This place is more than just a building. It's like a millstone Granddaddy hung on me. And it's dragging me down into an ocean of red ink."

"That's why this fundraiser is a fine idea. It'll settle the back indebtedness and afford you an opportunity to start fresh."

Annie folded her arms and looked at the regulars sternly. "Can you folks raise enough money fast enough to keep the bill collectors from taking the place away from me?"

There was silence as the regulars exchanged grave looks.

"That's why I'm unloading this place while I can still get something out of it."

"It's so heartless to just take the best offer," Natalya said.

"Thanks to all your shenanigans, it's no longer a matter of the best offer", Annie said. "I have to take any offer that's sensible."

"What if it's from some guy who looks like trouble?" Chalky said.

"Whoever's got the cash will be okay with me," Annie said.

"And what do you think money will get you?" Dr. Obolensky said.

She stuffed her fingertips into the back pockets of her faded jeans and thought about having some money for the first time in her twenty-nine years. After all those years of wandering and wanting with Momma. . . . just you and me, baby . . . twin sisters of grief . . . Then there were the squandered wages and dishonored checks that tormented her short-lived marriage to Phil Parker. Recently, there was the disappointment that came with inheriting The Mole Hole, the windfall that proved to be just another gust of an ill wind. . . . snake-bit . . .

"Maybe," she said, "that money'll help me break free of the MacClintock curse."

"There you go again with that folderol about bad luck," Dr. Obolensky said. "You can't buy good luck. Besides, there's already good luck right here. The camaraderie of these people here at The Mole Hole, their friendship, that's all the good fortune anyone really needs."

"Hasn't been very lucky in the four months I've been here in Chicago."

"Pshaw, you can't see your flowers for the weeds," Dr. Obolensky said. "Well, we'll help you clear your weeds." He shook a finger at Annie. "We'll press on with the fundraiser. We'll not be evicted without a battle."

"Viva, Professor!" Rosie shouted and the others murmured their agreement.

"That's fine," Annie said. "But I can be just as stubborn about selling this place as Granddaddy was about hanging on to it. But no more newspaper ads for me. I guess I've waited long enough for buyers to show up. So I'm going out looking for them. I'll start with folks in land development."

"First thing those guys do is knock down the building," Chalky said.

"Maybe," Annie said. "If they buy the property, they can do with it as they like."

The regulars gaped at one another. Natalya made the sign of the cross.

Dealing with land developers turned out to be the most demanding, most humiliating, most frustrating work that Annie had ever done. She started at the beginning of the listing in the Yellow Pages and, during the next two weeks, worked her way through to the last entry. She learned that there were all kinds and sizes and personalities of developers, and that there were dozens of reasons for not being interested in her property. And throughout these efforts, she felt truly snake-bit.

Her regular customers continued to be a problem.

In addition to thwarting potential buyers, the regulars seemed determined to fan their fundraiser into an event to rival the Chicago Fire. To Annie, the park festival and the raffles were nothing less than begging, and would only bring in a poor-box pittance. But she was unable to snuff out their fervor.

Regardless of the obstacles, she labored on and slowly cultivated a small crop of potential buyers. One of the most promising was Brice Hackett. He had built four different ethnic restaurant chains into commercial successes in the Chicagoland area. After much struggle, Annie finally stirred up enough interest among his staff to get an appointment with the man himself.

"So what gives you the idea you can bargain with this tycoon person?" Mrs. Zimmerman asked Annie on the morning of the appointment. "Forgive me, but you're only a little country girl."

. . . seed from seed; weed begets weed, Momma had said on her death bed. You and me, baby, are nothing but twin sisters of grief . . .

Natalya Shapiro glanced up from a Mary Kay catalog and said, "She's got moxie; she'll do fine."

"Rumor has it," Mrs. Zimmerman went on, "this Mr. Hackett is connected with" -- she paused and

whispered -- "the mob."

Natalya nodded. "There was an article about him in last Sunday's Trib. He's loaded, but he's a Scorpio and's gone through two wives already."

. . . Phil didn't mean you no harm directly with that woman. He couldn't help doing the things that men do. That's why you can only hang onto men just so long. Then it's over and they got to chase off. Just be glad he stood still for an annulment . . .

Natalya flipped a catalog page and said, "Of course when one of those rich marriages breaks up, you never hear who's at fault." She smiled. "Probably both of them."

Annie had dismissed her customers' concerns about her ability to handle Brice Hackett as being part of their self-protection campaign. Still, during her bus ride to Brice Hackett's ultra-modern offices, she said a full rosary.

Hackett turned out to be a handsome, middle-aged giant of a man. As soon as they were seated in armchairs facing one another, Annie charged into her proposal. All the while, she felt like she was confronting her ex-husband. There was something about Brice Hackett that brought Phil Parker to mind. Was it the perpetual grin etched onto his well-tanned face, the confident boom of his voice, the animal

energy that flashed in his brown eyes? There was certainly something.

. . . your poppa had that same magic. Even after he run off on us, I still ached bad for him . . .

After Annie had said her whole piece, Hackett studied her for a few moments before responding. "Let me get this straight. You're offering me all the land at the site of your building? From the main street to the alley and from the side street to the Swedish gift shop, right?"

"Yes," Annie said.

"Including that vacant piece with the billboard that your building encloses?"

"Yes."

"That makes a big difference. I'd need the whole site to put up a Braze 'N' Brew. Should do well with the two colleges nearby. But any less land and no deal, understand?"

"I guess I could double-check."

"Do that. Get me a certified title check and a lot survey." Annie suddenly realized that a long-absent tingle was flashing through her system. "If you've got clear title," Hackett said, "you've got yourself a sale."

"Yes, sure, I'll do that right away." Annie felt exhilarated, as much by the man as by his deal.

"Now, what about your personal plans?" Hackett continued. "After you sell the bar, what'll you do for a job?"

"I hadn't thought that far yet."

"Then come to work for me. I like your spunk. You're attractive and you've knocked around enough to have more maturity than most girls your age. A good combination."

Annie felt lightheaded. There was a sense of unreality to all that was happening. It made her think of the kiss that Sleeping Beauty got from the handsome prince.

"Are you serious?" she asked. "You want me?"

"I don't joke about business. If you can pull off this deal of yours, that'll prove you're more than just a pretty face. I'll pay you a good salary. Start you as an assistant manager at one of my places. Use your experience from working all those short-order grills."

"How'd you know about - -"

"Checked you out. Don't deal with people I don't know about. Your background's good. Humble perhaps, but honest."

Annie was sure she was blushing. She felt inspected and exposed, like this man had been poking through her underwear drawer.

Hackett did not seem to notice her discomfort. "You'll need somewhere to live, too. Your place over the bar will be gone as soon as we can set a demolition date."

"I don't have any place that I really call home." . . . gypsies and MacClintocks can't stay unpacked long . . .

"So stay here in Chicago. My most critical need is for managers at my inner-city stores. Get yourself a condo in one of the refurbished neighborhoods. Live like the other junior executives."

"I'll have to think about it," she replied, to say something, to snatch a moment to catch her breath. The man had overwhelmed her with his magic. Her mind was reeling. Management, salary, condo. Surely nice clothes. The tavern sold. A future with this man. It was difficult to believe all this was suddenly possible for her.

"You do that; think about it. Think about what your goals in life are." Hackett nodded his head, a broad smile on his face. "This whole thing could work out fortunately for both of us. A real win-win transaction."

Annie's mind stopped whirling and she felt a pleasant warmth spreading within her body. Maybe Momma had been wrong.

Hackett stood up and stuck out his hand. "Get back to me with the title paperwork as soon as you can, huh?" Annie took his hand. She noticed how warm and comfortable it felt. "After that we'll talk some more about our future." When they shook hands, Annie tried to make her grip as confident as that of Brice Hackett.

After a very long week, the crucial phone call concerning the property survey came at mid-morning just after Annie had opened for business. The real estate agent got right to the point: Annie did not own the whole piece of land. The disembodied voice on the other end of the line quickly explained the details, then clicked off. Annie woodenly hung up the phone receiver.

. . . if MacClintocks didn't have bad luck, they wouldn't have no luck at all . . .

Most of the older regulars were present. Natalya Shapiro seemed to sense that Annie had received terrible news. She made Annie sit down and had Scratch Evans bring a glass of water. The others gathered around as Annie drank most of the water, then recounted the phone call in a lifeless voice.

The real estate agent had said that Annie did indeed own the building and the land it sat on, but

not the little vacant lot adjoining it. The Mole Hole was a U-shaped structure as a result of several additions to the original building. Like a horse-shoe, it wrapped around a small piece of land no bigger than a grave. It was vacant except for a large billboard which faced the main street. This little lot was owned by a T.J. Parmelee.

"I guess I would have found that out right off if I'd have gotten a real estate outfit to sell the place. But I didn't want to pay a commission."

"Should've asked us," Chalky Quinn said. "We'd have told you about Parmelee's Plot."

"You knew about that piece of land?" Annie said.

"Sure, it's common knowledge," Liam Daugherty said.

"Tuck Parmelee and your grandfather were partners until Tuck found a better investment," Dr. Obolensky said. "Tuck sold Mac his whole share with the exception of the small parcel of land. At the time there was a shed on it in which Tuck kept his car. Eventually Mac expanded and acquired adjoining buildings. But not Parmelee's Plot. You see, shortly after they broke up the partnership, they got into a fistfight over a woman. Tuck carried a grudge and obstinately refused to sell his plot. So Mac, just as obstinately, built around it."

"Do you think Mr. Parmelee'd sell his lot to me?" Annie said.

Dr. Obolensky shook his head. "I doubt it. You're Mac's granddaughter and, by default, heir to the grudge."

. . . weed begets weed . . .

"I can't close my deal with Brice Hackett without that lot." Annie sighed resignedly. "Looks like you folks get to keep your hangout." She looked at the pleased expressions on their faces. "But, it's just borrowed time. It won't be long 'til the bill collectors close us down."

There was grim silence, then Natalya Shapiro said, "Tuck would sell his plot if I asked him to." Natalya kept her eyes lowered. Annie thought she detected a blush. "I was the woman that Mac and Tuck fought over."

Like the others present, Annie was deeply moved by the woman's selfless admission, but Annie remained glum. "That'd be awful nice of you to do that, but I don't know how I'd pay Mr. Parmelee for his lot."

There was another grim silence, then Dr. Obolensky said, "There's the proceeds from the fundraiser." He looked from eye to eye. "Isn't it our intention to give that money to Annie?" A few heads nodded. "Do we have the right to dictate how

she uses it?"

"No." Natalya said. "We give it to her out of friendship. Friendship comes without strings."

"Now, hold on," Chalky said.

"You hold on," Daugherty said shaking a reddened fist at Chalky. "Doc and Nattie's got the right spirit." Several others voiced their concurrence.

"Why would you do this for me?" Annie said. "I sure haven't acted very friendly to any of you."

"You're Mac's granddaughter," Dr. Obolensky said. "Mac would expect us to watch over you on his behalf."

"You'd do this knowing it means the end of The Mole Hole?" Annie said.

"Friends sacrifice," Dr. Obolensky said. "We told you before The Mole Hole is more than brick and mortar."

"So, close your deal with Hackett," Chalky said. The others stared at him. He continued, "We can hang out in Hackett's new restaurant, can't we? It'll probably be a nicer place anyway."

Dr. Obolensky took a notebook and some scraps of paper from his coat pocket. "I'll calculate how much has been pledged," he said.

Natalya said, "I'd better go over and see Tuck." She opened a compact and began checking her make-up.

The next morning Annie waited in Brice Hackett's reception room until she could see him between his scheduled appointments. Her eyes were bloodshot and her complexion was muddy; she hadn't slept much the previous night.

Brice Hackett looked the opposite. His big hand wrapped around Annie's and his handshake conveyed vitality and power. "Understand the survey wasn't what we'd hoped for," he said.

"It's taken care of. The man who owns the little plot that juts into mine is willing to sell. He's asking for half of Fort Knox, but he'll do business."

"Where are you going to get half of Fort Knox?"

"My customers just about got it raised. If their doings are half what they expect, we'll have enough to buy Parmalee's Plot."

"Good. We can do both property closings at the same time." Hackett crossed behind his desk to a phone console. "I'll get my people working on it immediately."

"Hold on," Annie said. "I'm not sure I want to go through with this."

"I made you a very handsome offer, young lady." He leaned toward her, his fists resting on the desk. "You're not going to manipulate me into raising that amount."

"This isn't about more money. In fact, I've decided the money isn't really all that important after all. Putting down roots is."

Hackett straightened up, a puzzled look on his face. He studied her a moment. "What about putting down roots in my organization?"

"That's not roots; that's just passing my reins. You'd be in charge same as my momma or my ex-husband had been." She smiled. "Maybe my real curse all along has been not being in charge of myself."

During the next ten minutes, Hackett upped his offer, then reviewed the benefits of working for him, and ended by getting her to agree to call him in two weeks to "confirm her decision."

As she waited on the corner for the bus to take her back to The Mole Hole, she thought about how strange it was to not be riding away from a place. She thought about the long, up-hill battle that would be required to save The Mole Hole. And she thought about the legacy -- the real legacy -- that Grand-daddy had passed down to her.

. . . seed from seed . . .

The memory of Momma's voice was becoming barely audible.

A PAIR OF LEATHER GLOVES

Jeff Rafferty had been pondering the significance of the strange items visitors left strewn along the base of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. A copy of The Hobbit, a little statue of St. Jude, a dented Zippo lighter and a tiny teddy bear lay alongside flowers, letters, medals and flags. Deeply personal tributes, he thought, to men and women lost in America's most hated war.

Then suddenly, when he looked away from the Wall and its black slabs of Vermont granite, he saw the ghost again, to his left just beyond the midpoint of the 500-foot long wall. Yesterday, when he first caught a brief glimpse of the ghost, Rafferty had decided his smoky blue eyes must be playing tricks on him, but not today. The figure looked exactly like the great Eddie Battaglia, his best friend.

Rafferty started through the noontime sightseers toward the figure. No, Rafferty thought, there was no mistaking that potato-shaped nose, that black bristly crewcut, that way Eddie planted himself, kind

of crouched, a study in pent-up energy. But the figure up ahead had to be an illusion. Eddie Battaglia had died eighteen years ago in Vietnam. Yet this figure looked exactly like that 20-year-old youth that Rafferty had last seen get on a plane in Chicago bound for southeast Asia.

The ghost started walking in the direction of the end of the Wall that angled toward the Lincoln Memorial. Rafferty quickened his pace. Even though he was six-three and taller than most of the tourists, Rafferty had trouble keeping the figure in sight over the clusters of heads. There were dozens of small groups bundled up against the chilly fall wind and scattered along the shrine. Some people were reading the engraved names, some photographing a particular panel, some just standing.

As he zigzagged through them, Rafferty felt tense, his breathing labored. The skin on his lean face seemed as tight as the kidskin gloves on his hands. He brushed back a stray lock of damp brown hair. There was a steely taste in his mouth.

Rafferty elbowed through a bunch of yelping school children being herded along by two nuns. He was almost at the west end of the Wall. He stopped and gulped in air that smelled of ashes and exhaust fumes. Ahead the ghost stood motionless near the

bronze statues of the three Vietnam fighting men who seemed to be scanning for their own names on the Wall. Eddie also scanned the Wall. Rafferty was struck by the contrast between the cold combat garb of the lifeless statues and the sodden gray sweatsuit and gym shoes of the resurrected athlete. It was the way Eddie dressed when they played touch football together. Why, Rafferty wondered, why was he seeing Eddie's ghost here?

The ghost began jogging along the sidewalk, west toward the Potomac River. Rafferty lurched after him, nearly tripping over a man in a camouflage-printed baseball cap seated in a wheelchair. The man shouted something, but all of Rafferty's senses were focused on the fleeing figure fifty feet ahead.

When Rafferty came out of the park at Henry Bacon Drive, he was almost run down by two helmeted young women on ten-speed bicycles. He paused to catch his breath. He could not see Eddie and Rafferty recalled that Eddie had excelled at most sports, especially running. The rumbling street traffic was thick and busy; Rafferty did not think Eddie had crossed the street. He looked at the sprinkling of tourists on the sidewalk to his left. He could see all the way to the white steps and columns of the Lincoln Memorial. A honking Tourmobile loaded with

sightseers was trying to pull away from the curb into the flow of traffic, but no one was running.

He could not see as much to his right, so he concluded the ghost must have gone that way, toward Constitution Avenue. He jostled through a group of slow-moving oriental tourists who were listening attentively to an animated guide jabbering in some Asian language. At Constitution Avenue, he looked both ways and as far as he could see on the other side of the street. Eddie was not in sight.

Rafferty's spirits sagged. He kept looking about, breathing heavily, fidgeting, adjusting the wrap of his trench coat about his lean body, recinching the belt. There was a lull in traffic; he heard dry leaves crackle as they blew along the sidewalk. But Eddie had disappeared .

When Rafferty walked back to the Wall, Trina Spurling was waiting for him. She was huddled into a bulky ankle-length coat and had an arm around two delicatessen sacks. The muskiness of her perfume drifted to him through the chilly fall air.

"You're late," she said smiling.

"Sorry," he said. He gave her a brief kiss with a one-armed hug.

"Tough morning?"

"It was okay."

"You look pale. Sweaty forehead, too." She frowned. "You coming down with something?"

"No, it's just, well, I was trying to catch up with someone I used to know." His glance darted from face to face among the sightseers.

Trina stared at him. He was a head taller and she had to crane her head back. Curly auburn hair fell to her shoulders, tousled in the wind, framing a pretty oval face with intelligent crystal gray eyes and a broad Grecian nose. She was ten years younger than Rafferty, but something in the set of her mouth and the way she held her slim body suggested a maturity that bridged their age gap.

"Old girl friend?" she asked.

"Guy I grew up with in Chicago."

She shifted the sacks from one arm to the other. "So, guess what happened to me this morning."

His attention stayed on those moving about the monument.

She went on, "The hotel manager called me into his office at about ten. He told me corporate headquarters has approved my promotion to Catering Manager. Isn't that great?"

"Congratulations."

"I'll be the youngest female manager at a major property."

"Good."

"Thanks for being so excited."

"I'm very happy for you; the promotion is super news." He kissed her on the forehead. "Seeing Eddie Battaglia again and not catching up to him, it just got to me. Especially after so long."

"How long has it been?"

"Eighteen years."

"And you're this shook up?" He shrugged. "There's something else, isn't there? You've been acting strangely ever since you came to town Monday."

"It's nothing."

"It's us, you and me, isn't it?"

"No."

"I thought what we'd found with each other was working."

"It is."

"Things have been rushed, haven't they? This is only your third trip to D.C. in, what, two months. Eight, nine days is all we've had together - -"

"It's not us!" He hadn't meant to bark at her. "Hell, maybe it is. After two failed marriages, I'm gun-shy about an involvement."

"Is that what you call this? I thought we had something special."

"We do." He put an arm around her shoulders.

"Look, I'm not thinking straight. Seeing this guy has thrown me into a spin."

"Why? What's so astonishing about him?"

"Nothing; he's just a guy."

She pulled away from him. "Why are you being so evasive?"

"Because the guy I saw has been dead for eighteen years!" He combed his fingers through his damp hair. "He was killed in Vietnam. I just saw his ghost." Trina's face was impassive; her gaze meeting his squarely. Rafferty continued, "His name's Eddie Battaglia. I saw him here yesterday, too. We grew up together in Chicago. We were best friends."

"Why would you suddenly start seeing him after all these years? And in Washington?"

"I don't know. That's why I chased after him." Rafferty looked beyond her, along the Wall.

She regarded him momentarily, then hefted the two sacks she was holding and said, "Let's eat this stuff, huh?"

"You think I'm nuts, don't you?"

"No, I think you saw something strange. But there's a logical explanation. Someone who looks like - -"

"We were best friends."

"Okay, a relative of his maybe."

"It was him."

"Anyway, he's gone now and I'm hungry. Let's have these pastrami sandwiches while they're still hot, huh? Then we can figure out how to catch your ghost."

"Don't play mother with me."

"I want to help. Your problem is messing up our relationship. So, solving it is important to me too." She smiled. "All right?"

His face remained set in an anxious expression, but he shrugged and said, "Sure."

That evening, they dined at one of the better restaurants in The Pavilion, the shopping mall that had been created in the hollowed-out and refurbished Old Post Office Building. After ordering cocktails, Rafferty handed her a small package wrapped in gold foil that sparkled in the candlelight. "To recognize your promotion," he said. His smile was broad, relaxed.

She tore open the package. Inside was a pair of designer-label gloves. "They're beautiful. Kidskin just like yours."

"Other guys give flowers for big events; I give leather."

She leaned across the table and kissed him.

"They're an elegant pair, like you and me."

He laughed and said, "Smell them."

"What?"

"Smell the leather."

She did, then arched an eyebrow at him.

"There's something honest about the smell of leather," he said. "To some it's the smell of death, skin from dead animals. But for me it's strength, endurance, the smell of success."

The waiter brought their drinks. They toasted success. Rafferty sipped his drink and continued. "I've always tried to own good leather things. When I was a kid, I saved a long time so I could have the best baseball glove in the store. When I found out about my college scholarship, I blew a paycheck on a fine leather attaché case."

His smile vanished. "That same night, Eddie and me, we got drunk together celebrating. He left for the army soon after that." Rafferty dug out a pack of cigarettes and undid the red cellophane band. "It was the last time we got drunk together, ever." He looked Trina in the eyes. "It was him today."

She reached across the table, putting both her hands on his. "It's all right. We'll find out about it." She squeezed his hands. "All right?"

"Sure."

"So, do us both a favor and put away those coffin nails, huh? I'm proud of how well you've been doing with your program. Just put off having a smoke for another five minutes."

He was quiet for a moment, then said, "Sure."

The waiter returned and they ordered. While they finished their cocktails, she talked about her hectic afternoon at the hotel. It was in the hotel's health club that he had first met her. He was the vice president of marketing for a major midwestern housewares manufacturer and frequently stayed at her hotel when he visited the Washington office. After the first encounter, their romance developed quickly.

When he finished telling about his afternoon making calls with one of the local salesmen, there was an awkward pause. Finally she said, "I couldn't locate your friend. I phoned all the Battaglias in the area. I checked registrations at other hotels. I even tried variations of the spelling. Nothing."

"That proves he's a ghost." She scowled at him. "Okay then, I'm hallucinating."

"Come on, Jeff. He's no ghost and you're too level-headed to be seeing things. He exists."

"You'll blow your new promotion wasting company time on this."

"I promised you I'd find him and I don't quit on

a commitment. He's here somewhere around D.C. Maybe not using the name Battaglia." Their salads came. "Do you remember any other surnames of his relatives?"

Rafferty chewed some salad before answering. "Vincenzio. That was his mother's maiden name." He straightened up in his chair. "I remember meeting all kinds of aunts and uncles with that name." He spelled it for her.

After writing it down in a pocket secretary, she said, "Any others?"

"I don't think so. Everyone was either a Battaglia or a Vincenzio."

"You said Eddie never married?"

"He only had one real girl friend I can ever remember. Gloria something. Madigan, that was it, Gloria Madigan. They started going steady during our senior year. She was only a sophomore. A baton twirler with the school band. Quiet kid, but she lit up when she got with Eddie. He used to write poems for her. I snuck a peek at some of them. It was something else he was good at." Rafferty shook his head. "God, he was crazy about her."

"He was going with her when he went into the service?"

"Yeah. She really went to pieces when he got

notified of his induction. See, neither Eddie nor I could afford to go to college and we were both ripe for the draft. So scholarships were important. Athletic grants were out because our school teams weren't much. So we took lots of competitive exams. Finally I got a scholarship and an exemption; Eddie wasn't so lucky." Rafferty ate a forkfull of salad. "Wonder what ever happened to Gloria. Her family moved away a couple of months after Eddie left."

The waiter brought freshly baked biscuits. Trina buttered one. "Was it definite that Eddie got killed over there? I mean, sometimes didn't they just have to make a guess?"

"Not in his case. Almost everyone in his platoon was killed in an ambush, near Quan Loi. They were in armored personnel carriers and tanks, but they were badly outnumbered. Eddie was one of the last killed, passing out ammunition with his platoon leader."

"So, why would the ghost of your best friend come back from his grave to haunt you?"

"I'm alive; he's dead. Isn't that reason enough? The pair of us got separated. His name got engraved on the Wall; mine didn't." He brought out the cigarette pack. "Five minutes are up."

It was one o'clock the next afternoon when

Rafferty phoned Trina. The salesman he was riding with had stopped for gasoline. Rafferty was shut into a public phone booth across from Arlington National Cemetery. Outside, under a pewter-colored sky, a frigid wind slashed at the booth, rattling loose glass panes.

"I got your message," Rafferty said into the phone. "What's up?"

"I found your ghost," her voice said. "I spoke with him over the phone, less than two hours ago."

"Is he, I mean, who does he - -"

"He's Battaglia's son."

A burst of wind howled through cracks in the booth's folding door.

"His son? How the hell --"

"Gloria Madigan was pregnant when Battaglia left for Vietnam. He probably didn't even know about it. Anyway, your buddy was killed before the child was born."

Rafferty said nothing, staring across the road at the fields of endless grave markers. Even best friends, he thought, don't share all their secrets.

"I told you I honor my commitments."

"Yeah." Rafferty wondered what other information Eddie hadn't shared with him.

"Today I searched under the name of Madigan.

And I tried the local colleges. It dawned on me that those were possible residences for kids of that age. That's how I found him. Through the registrar at Georgetown University. The son's a new student there. His name is Ed Madigan."

"God, Eddie's son."

"I invited him for dinner tonight at my place." She paused on the other end of the line before saying, "I promised you'd tell him about his father."

Rafferty was silent. He didn't know if he was prepared to confront this ghost, recall past events, revisit Eddie Battaglia. Rafferty's tongue felt dry.

"Jeff?" she said after awhile. "I wish you'd make me feel better about inviting this kid over. Did I do something wrong?"

The wind surged again, shaking the phone booth. Rafferty took a deep breath and said, "You did okay."

He was outside the booth before he remembered that he had not thanked her.

Rafferty arrived at Trina's Georgetown condominium half-an-hour ahead of Battaglia's son. Trina tried to make conversation while she fussed in the kitchen, but Rafferty said little. He paced about the living room, sipping at a Scotch and, contrary to Trina's efforts, smoking one cigarette after another.

When the doorbell finally sounded, Rafferty opened the door and found a slight-built young man with a black crewcut, a prominent Roman nose and melancholy hazel eyes. The newcomer said, "Hi, I'm Ed Madigan."

"God, you're the spitting image of your father."

Madigan grinned. "Mom says I have some of his bad habits, too."

Trina came out of the kitchen with a snack tray to get dinner under way. After some fruit punch, they moved to the table. Trina asked Madigan to say grace, then they ate. Rafferty said little. Trina got Madigan to talk about college courses, then his impressions of Washington and how it compared with life in Milwaukee where he grew up. It turned out that his mother did not marry, but two older uncles took a fatherly interest in him.

"You were lucky," Trina said. "I never got much attention from my own father. I sort of blamed myself for his lack of interest." She ate silently for a moment. "Maybe that's why I'm such an overachiever. Trying to earn approval from male bosses."

"Guess I've done the same thing," Madigan said. "I mean bust my butt for 'attaboys' from teachers and coaches. I still send cards to my high school track

coach and he sends them to me. Probably why I still run everyday."

"Do you always run near the Mall?" Trina said.

"When I can bum a ride over at lunchtime from my Psych teacher. Then I run back. It's neat over there because of the Vietnam Wall. Dad's name is carved on it, you know."

"Too damn many names on that wall," Rafferty said. His sudden entrance into the conversation caused Trina and Madigan to stop eating and look at him. "Those vets who tried to keep the monument from being built, they were right. They called it 'the black gash of shame.'"

"I think you're wrong," the younger man said. Rafferty glared at him. "The Wall makes you feel good. I mean, knowing that people remembered those who died."

"Hell of a remembrance," Rafferty said shaking his head. "Having your name on a roll call of failure." He turned his attention to cutting his pork chop.

"Well, it makes me feel closer to Dad. When I look at those three statues there, I can see how he must have looked. Tired, dazed maybe, but still kind of proud." Madigan munched a forkful of baked potato, a wistful look on his face. "Sometimes I

take along this diary Dad kept in Vietnam. Mom gave it to me for my confirmation. Just kick back by the statues and read the words he wrote. Makes me feel really at peace." He swallowed the food and said to Rafferty, "Maybe you'd like to read the diary."

"Maybe. Someday."

"Mom's told me a lot, but you knew him his whole life. What was he really like?"

"Probably the greatest guy I ever knew. He was smart, tough, brave; the best athlete in the neighborhood; a natural leader; always captain of the team or president of the club. And I was his best friend, his faithful sidekick. That made me special in the eyes of the other guys. Eddie and me, we were a team. He was Wyatt Earp and I was his Doc Holliday, on the way to the O.K. Corral. Together the pair of us were unbeatable."

Rafferty helped himself to some red wine, took a sip, then continued speaking, swirling the wine slowly in his glass.

"Eddie knew he had a lot going for him. He believed he'd been given those talents because he was destined for some kind of extraordinary greatness. Maybe even, well, who knows. His belief was unshakable. And he expected me to go with him. The sidekick. With me backing him, he was going to

achieve his ultimate dream. A 'grand and golden glory' he called it."

Rafferty stopped swirling his wine, his face tightening into shadows.

"But then the damn war came into our lives. Eddie was drafted." Rafferty drained his glass before saying, "The Land of the Free decided that Eddie Battaglia was expendable."

Madigan rested his chin on his folded hands. "But you got a deferment, didn't you? Because you won a college scholarship?"

Rafferty paused in the act of pouring more wine. "It was Eddie's idea to take those scholarship tests, not mine. Eddie's plan, understand?" Rafferty filled his glass and set the bottle aside. He lifted his glass, stared at its contents and resumed slowly swirling the red liquid. "Both of us were prime prospects for the draft. The army would've been okay with me. But Eddie said that'd waste precious years. Eddie figured we'd get scholarships, get deferred, get that valuable sheepskin, keep moving toward the dream. So what happens? The plan falls apart. Suddenly I'm the one following the golden path. The hero, he gets exiled to the rice paddies."

"It wasn't all that dark and tragic," Madigan said. "In his diary, Dad felt he'd gone on to

something bigger."

"Sure," Rafferty said, "just like Eddie to be noble about a lousy situation."

"No, it seemed to be more than just going along."

"Seemed to be? That's only your romanticized interpretation of what he wrote."

"But I don't think he felt abandoned."

"How the hell else could he feel? His country dumped him."

There was tension in Madigan's voice. "He felt he gained something as a person."

Rafferty thumped down his glass. "He died, dammit! He gained nothing!"

"He felt fulfilled."

"That's absurd!"

"Not according to his diary."

"Look, kid, this isn't some damn college research paper. Don't misquote reference books at me." Rafferty leaned forward. "Eddie Battaglia died alone and a failure."

Madigan stood, tossing his napkin on the table. "Hey, I don't know what your problem is. But I'm not going to hang around and argue the beliefs of my dead father." He turned toward Trina and lowered his volume. "Thanks for the meal." He headed toward the front door.

"I'll get your coat," she said.

Before Madigan was out of the dining room, he pointed at Rafferty and said to Trina, "He really needs to read the diary. He'll see I'm right."

When she returned after seeing Madigan to the door, Rafferty had carried his wine to the glass patio door. He was gazing out at the moonlight on the flagstones. Folding her arms, she said, "What the hell was that all about?"

"Nothing."

"I think I'm entitled to an explanation."

He didn't face her. "I should've turned down that scholarship. I should've gone to Vietnam with Eddie." He sipped his wine, then shook his head. "Me, Doc Holliday. I let Wyatt Earp go off to the gunfight alone."

"So what does all that macho nonsense mean?"

"I deserted him, Trina, for the safety of college."

"You're blaming yourself for his death?"

"I betrayed my best friend."

"That's ridiculous."

"Look, it's my problem. Let me deal with it."

"It's mine, too. It's screwing up our relationship. Maybe it's what screwed up your marriages." She refolded her arms. "If you can't

love yourself, you certainly can't love anyone else."

"That's not it."

"Yes, it is. You wear this guilt like a second skin. You've convinced yourself that you're unworthy of love, even your own. So, you've got to decide to shed that dead skin."

He looked squarely into her eyes. "You don't understand."

"Like hell! Do you think you're the only one who ever made hard choices?" She paused, took a breath, then continued in a shaky voice. "This is something I've been holding for the right time." She took his hands in hers. "Just after high school I got pregnant." Rafferty continued to stare into her eyes. "I thought the guy -- his name was Rick -- loved me. When he learned about the baby, he bowed out." A grim smile passed across her face. "Anyway, like Gloria Madigan, I had to make a decision. Raise an illegitimate child or have an abortion. After a week of anguish, I decided to have the baby." She dropped her head, held his hands tightly and was silent.

"What happened?"

"I miscarried. Isn't that ironic? After living with my decision almost a month, then to lose the baby." She looked up, her eyes glassy. "At first I

was devastated. Why had God done this terrible thing to me? But then I realized that the control of my life had been given back to me."

She lifted her chin. "So, I put myself through college waiting tables at night. With the degree, I got hired by the hotel, worked hard and here I am."

She squeezed Rafferty's hands. "Our relationship isn't easy for me either. You're the first man to matter since Rick. I think maybe I'm ready to make another hard choice in my life. But first you've to make your choice. To choose whether or not to face your ghost. To put Eddie Battaglia's death behind you."

He was quiet a few moments, then said, "How do I do that?" He shook his head. "How?"

"You accept the random irony of life. Accept the fact that you can't control all events. Like me and my pregnancy. Recognize the random irony of your scholarship, of Eddie being drafted, of Eddie being killed." She searched his eyes. "Understand that those events were truly beyond your control."

"How do I do that?"

"Examine what happened. Look at Eddie's death objectively. Maybe Eddie's diary is the key to that." She paused a moment before asking, "Will you try?"

His mind tried to sort out tangled thoughts but failed. He looked away and said nothing.

"Then I don't want the pain of being with you." She released his hands. "Until you can love yourself, you can't possibly love me."

Rafferty went to the Vietnam Wall at noontime everyday following that last evening with Trina. The first day he merely wanted to be some place quiet to think. The second day he thought he might come across Madigan and just chat. On both occasions, he was there nearly two hours but didn't see Eddie Battaglia's son. On the third day he felt it imperative to talk with Madigan.

Rafferty got there at ten. It was another crisp, overcast day without a whisper of a breeze. As had become his habit, he smoked and prowled the length of the gigantic black tombstone. Starting at the east end that pointed toward the Washington Monument, he trudged west toward the other end that pointed toward the Lincoln Memorial. He spent time looking among the people near the three statues, then he went out onto the Mall and crunched up the wide gravel path that ran along the Reflecting Pool, before circling back to the Washington Monument end of the shrine.

The place gave him an overpowering sense of the

past, especially the Wall. It seemed to him that time spent there was not ordinary time. People spoke only in whispers; pilgrims came and went continuously. Most of the mourners spent their time touching the cold stone, their fingertips tracing the half-inch high letters spelling out the names -- Spanish, Polish, German, African, Anglo-Saxon. Nearly sixty thousand names echoing taps for a war that few understood.

For a time, Rafferty watched a bearded man in a tattered field jacket and a floppy-brim hat who was working rosary beads, tears sliding down his cheeks. Rafferty thought about Eddie Battaglia, and Trina Spurling, two special people who never knew each other, now locked together in Rafferty's mind.

At noon Ed Madigan appeared. When Rafferty approached him, the younger man started to walk away but stayed when Rafferty apologized. Rafferty asked for Eddie's diary. "I want to know how the gunfight at the O.K. Corral turned out." He said it with a smile.

Madigan cocked his head to the side and stared at Rafferty. It was the way that Eddie Battaglia looked at his sidekick whenever he was waiting for a straight answer.

"Okay, I want to read Eddie's words for myself.

Draw my own conclusions."

"Why?"

"Maybe what's there affects what happens next in my life. Maybe Trina's too."

His head still cocked, Madigan continued to eye Rafferty. "That night at Trina's I figured the diary scared you."

Rafferty shrugged. "Maybe it still does."

"This book we're studying says the truth can set you free."

Rafferty smiled tightly. "Or destroy you."

Even though Rafferty received the diary from Ed Madigan at one o'clock and went directly to his hotel, the book was still unread at nine that night. Lunch, business reports, a shower, cigarettes from the corner convenience store -- all had become more necessary.

It was painful enough, he thought, to suspect yourself of having failed a friend; it might be unendurable to learn that you really had. Suspicion, perhaps, was more tolerable than certainty. But what if certitude could prove suspicion false? Did that happy possibility make risk worthwhile?

For a long time he stood at the window in his room, the curtains drawn back, smoking tasteless

cigarettes, staring out at the bleached marble monuments of Washington.

Finally he walked to the table and picked up the diary. The book was about the size of a hardback novel and was bound in leather, scarred and stained. He fingered the rough nap of the covering, then stubbed out his cigarette and carried the book to a stuffed chair by the window. He began to read.

The words were small and tight, printed in a familiar hand. The first entry said the book had been made in Saigon on Le-Thanh-Ton Street, which was known as "shoe street" because of all the leather craftsmen there. A rearing horse carved into the cover was from the patch of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Eddie's outfit. The early passages were in the words of an American fighting man:

> . . . evidence of Charlie everywhere. All along the trail were fresh propaganda leaflets, recently dug spider holes, and lots of new punji pits. Sarge says those dinks wanted you to know that you couldn't get rid of them for long. The only land you own here is what your M48A3 tank is sitting on. Everyday the old tin can feels more comfortable. It's like having a diesel-powered mobile home with a 90 mm gun on the roof. But it doesn't drive away this helpless feeling that another GI is about to die . . .

Eddie said he missed Chicago, pepperoni pizza, Gloria, the Cubs, dago red and Doc Holliday. He wrote about sights and sounds, but mostly feelings.

Often the words were in a teammate's vocabulary:

> . . . I have been scared and still am. Some of it is fear that I will fail my unit; finally fall short of what's expected. Then I'll have to live with that, forever. The sniper in the bush isn't as fearsome as the scorekeeper in my heart . . .

Around midnight the warrior's voice changed to that of a traveler who told about a country, its people and friendship in a distant land:

> . . . evening is chilly but beautiful, lots of soft moonlight. I can hear waves breaking on the beach and I can smell orchids. I'm sitting under an apricot tree while writing this. The people believe that powerful genies live in these trees and will protect them from demons. Down by the beach, I can hear the guys softly singing 'Amazing Grace.' It's become SOP that we sing 'Amazing Grace' before breaking out the hootch. Somehow drinking warm beer with your unit, swapping lies, and sharing C-ration butts just feels right . . .

Soon the traveler's voice became that of an immigrant:

> . . . got my second Purple Heart today. It was only some frag in the thigh. The Lady was still with me. So I won't have to go back to the world. I can stay where I belong . . .

Then in the early hours of the next morning, Rafferty read passages that were written by a poet just days before his fatal moment:

> . . . I've spent the coin of youth to buy the wisdom of manhood. I've learned that service fills life with purpose, order and satisfaction. That friendship is devotion, not proximity nor entanglement. That glory is knowing well your job, not being well-known. Such knowledge is more than I've ever owned.

Maybe this is why I was sent here . . .

Rafferty read four more pages of the diary and then was done. Dawn was breaking. He laid the diary down, put on his coat and gloves and left. The streets were empty, a stiff breeze swirling about him. He marched along mechanically and didn't break stride until he arrived at the Vietnam Memorial.

He went directly to the black granite panel with Battaglia's name engraved on it. He peeled off a kidskin glove. He reached up and ran his bare fingers back and forth over the inscribed letters, several times, slowly, finally pausing in the middle of the name. He stayed that way for several minutes.

Finally he peeled off the other skin-tight glove, put it next to its mate and placed the pair at the base of the panel. He thrust his hands into his pockets and turned and walked away. He was going to Trina. The wind whipped his hair. Tears formed in his eyes. He began to softly sing "Amazing Grace."