

**TRUMAN PLAZA,
GERMANY**

**by
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I.

Grandmother	4
Boston – Berlin	8
Pearl Harbor	14
They Can Tell By Our Noses	21
Fathers, Artists	26
This is Your Great Adventure!	31
Communal Apartment	35
Vodka and Righteousness	38
Red Balloon	42
Feliks Mayer	47
Hobo and Rabbi	51
Vicious Circles	58
Grandmother	64

II.

PX – Post Exchange	68
Yoga	74
... You Name It, The Germans Had It	77
I'll Kill Them!	83
This Drama Has No End	86
Farewell	89
Hunger	91
Grandmother	94
Kung Fu	96
Diamonds ...	98
... And Marlboros	102
Transcendence	104
<i>Conversations with Rudolf Hess</i>	106
Grandmother	110
Chicago	113
Nudniks	118
Pumpkin Seeds	123
There Are Days Like These	128
Mihai And Wife	136

III.

Andrews Barracks	140
Making Peace	145
It's Different	151
Buttons	156
Hermits	161
Walkie-Talkie	165
Grandmother	167
A Crummy Guy	171
To Find Millie	173
So Nice and Gray	177
<i>I Swear By Apollo the Physician</i>	182
Little Drummer Boy	186
Grandmother	190
Rebels? Idiots!	195
<i>... And By Asklepios, Hygeia, and Panacea</i>	198
How Green Was My Valley	204
Why? Why, Howard?	209
A Nut! An American!	212
<i>... And By All the Gods and Goddesses</i>	214
Things Were Not Going Well	217
<i>... And Call Them to Witness</i>	219
Feliks Meyer	221
Asphyxiation	223
In the Hospital	225
Arrival	228

Jonah got along in the belly of the whale,
Daniel in the lion's den,
But I know a guy who didn't try to get along
And he won't get a chance again...
That's all she wrote, "Dear John!
I'll send your saddle home."
"Dear John", recorded by Hank Williams (Ritter/Gass)

Grandmother

"My dear Alan," my Grandma Bess wrote me a month after I had arrived in Berlin, using her blue ballpoint, "God, how I miss you and wish you were here. You've been gone much too long.

"I hope you have inherited some of me good qualities. I am a fighter. You are passive and you do nothing to help yourself. What are you looking for? You sure will not find it in Germany. All you did was follow a Nazi dame to Germany. Is this intelligent? And is it intelligent to take a Russian name? The Russians are as bad as the Germans.

"You said there is a penalty in Germany if the Hitler salute is given. According to our papers the Nazis are at it again. The Germans are a frightened people, but you are starting to act like a German also. When Hitler became the "big wheel" the Germans were starving, no jobs, no food, so somebody had to be the 'scapegoat', so he started with the Jews. Six million of your people were killed, remember that!

"Alan, darling, you must have gumption. You must stand on your feet!"

"I try to be tolerant of people but I do have me likes and dislikes. I detest Germans and Russians and Poles, all Jew-hating bastards! And you changed your name to Salnitsky, why? I dislike stupidity in people. I have very little regard for 'frightened people', and you are starting to act like a 'frightened' young man. To follow a Nazi dame to Germany whom anyone with self-respect would not cross the street to look at. You are not in love with her, you think you are, how could you be in love with a Nazi? You have had nothing but grief since you met her, she is bad luck. Me, your grandmother, fights for what she thinks is right. I am a hot-head, I am not vindictive, but don't step on me toes. I always bide m time. You followed a Nazi dame to Germany. She is not worthy of you, not even to walk across the street to see her.

"You have been 'lost' a long time, it is time you 'found yourself.'"

“Please, darling, do not ever insult me intelligence. I love you dearly, but that ‘Salnitsky’ must go. God gave you a good brain and a good backbone, fight for a principle instead of chasing a Nazi dame all the way to Germany. You are young, the world is your oyster, you could do anything you want to do if you want it bad enough. You will fall in love many times, you will torch many times. We all do. But these phases pass.

“Alan, all authors, and we have some great ones, they all start with short stories, then they grow, they did not travel to Germany, they did not change their names, they wrote right here in the U.S.A.” her last word had faded, and she switches pens, uses a red ballpoint, giving a bloodcurdling emphasis to the warning: “Not in a Nazi country!

“Please, Alan, get out of Germany, you are not a German, you are a Jew. So be a Jew. Look how the Jews fought for Israel and still are fighting. And the Germans killed six million Jews.

“That Salnitsky name makes me ill, makes me ashamed. Surprised you would want it.

“What sort of atmosphere is there in Germany? They have no culture, they are Nazis and Huns and killers.

“So stop chasing this dame like a hound dog, grow up. You will be twenty-seven so act like twenty-seven, not like seven.

“I am your maternal grandmother. I love you dearly. I try to be understanding. You are my daughter’s son, a daughter I adore. She misses you, Alan, so does your Dad. Your parents have a son and a daughter. The daughter is in California, and the son is in Nazi Germany. Saw your paternal grandparents last night. Your paternal grandfather is very ill.

“So you do not like South Bend. You know, we do have other cities in America.

“There are many disappointments in life, many heartaches, but one does not run away from them. One fights. One does not run to Nazi Germany. The Germans are Huns, they are Nazis. They are arrogant people and killers. Germany has no culture, never did.

“Alan, I will be seventy-seven in January but I still fight for what I think is right. I had an incident the other day. I purchased two Dacron pillows. Could not use them, I wanted feather pillows, so I take myself downtown to Wieboldt’s (another German), went to the Pillow Department, and who do I encounter? The buyer who is black. The moment I saw her I knew I would have trouble and I did have trouble. I told her I could not use Dacron pillows. I want feather pillows. She was real ‘bitchy’ and accused me of trying to return merchandise I had used. That was not nice. She said she would not give me credit, that she was the ‘boss’. I asked her who pays her. She was steaming and said, ‘You will not get a credit.’ I looked at her. Said, ‘Don’t make book on that. Will get credit, and you should stop fighting the Civil War.’ I left the pillows, and as

I walked out she said, 'Take your pillows.' I said, 'Those are your pillows.' I left the pillows and went to the Adjustment Department. By that time I am boiling mad and when I saw a young man in that department I told him I wanted to talk with the 'head man', no flunky. I also asked him to look up my account, which I have had for forty-five years. He looked up my records, gave me credit and said he would have someone else take care of me. I answered, 'Not on your life. I want no part of this store.' When I got home I wrote a letter to the manager commending the graciousness of the young man who took care of me and also wrote, 'Today I learned courtesy is a dirty word.'

"Alan, take your right name back, it will be lucky for you. Please come back here. Germany is not place for you or any Jew.

"When I worked for Phil Tyrrell, he was an arrogant man, but I was with him twenty-six or twenty-eight years. We still correspond.

"Alan, dear, I love you deeply. Love people who use the brain the good Lord endowed them with."

I inhaled deeply. My grandmother was giving me one rabbit punch after another. Her letters!

"You know, Alan, we do have other cities here in the U.S.A. Beautiful cities, with atmosphere and culture.

"There are many disappointments in life, many heartaches, but one does not 'run away#. Life itself is hard, but we are here for some reason. One faces tribulations, one fights for what one believes is right, one does not run to Nazi Germany. What the hell for? Culture? Not in Germany, they are Huns, they are Nazis. They are arrogant and they are killers.

"I love your very much. I love people who use the brain the good Lord endowed them with. Seems to me yours brain has become stagnant.

"I do not like Germans, do not like Poles, do not like Russians. All Jew-hating bastards.

"You were named after two wonderful people, kind people, wise people."

She meant her own parents: Louis and Anna. I was called Aland Lawrence in their honor and memory... Gram had no mercy. She wanted to finish me off.

"I love you, Alan Salt!

"When are you coming back to the country you were born in? please use your right name and please grow up! Whatever you are looking for you will not find in Nazi Germany. If you married Millie your children would be gentile, not Jewish.

“Darling, take care of yourself. I miss you, love you. If you stay in Germany too long you will not longer be an American citizen. Is anything or anyone worth losing your American citizenship for?

“Love you, Gram.”

She had kayoed me. I was down for the count.

Getting off the rotten ship was enough to do me in ... Riding the train from Hanover to Berlin, with a bunch of debauched insomniacs... We had gotten off the Mikhail Lermontov, a stinking Russian boat, in Bremerhaven... Changed trains in Hanover. On the way to Berlin... whole train compartments were filled up with us, teary with fatigue... falling on European soil, blearily...

Karl von Andreas sat next to me in the compartment, mumbling. He stares outside, intensely, the right eyelid twitching. Grabs my forearm, gripping it. "I'll kill her. I'll kill her. I'll kill her," he whispers, closing his eyes.

My arm hurts. "What's wrong, for God's sake?" I ask.

"You have to kill them! Kill them! He hisses. Clenches his teeth. The jaw muscles are moving, he is wound up... taut. Like he is chewing something over inside.

"Kill who?" I look outside... He points out the window at the scenery going by us.

"Black widows sucking you dry! It's simple! My wife..." Turns his red, sleepless eyes on me frowning. Unshaven cheeks bristly with a week-old beard. Checkered gray and black... Karl's breath smells from schnapps. Thick eyebrows.

I'd taken Karl for anything but a German on board ship. I remember him banging on an upright piano in the Lermontov's bar. He was escaping in music, I had thought... We met again while disembarking, on the gangplank. Both heading in the same direction: Berlin. Karl had given me a brief rundown of his troubles: America, women. No one had understood his genius, now he was heading to his widowed mother in Berlin. Karl was forty-four years old, had three little daughters and an American wife... He explained to me carefully. Pedantically going over the wrongs done to him by the whole horde. He and Günter Grass had once been sculpture students in the same art school in Berlin, he bragged, and they had fallen drunk into the water fountain together years and years ago. Student pranks! Ha ha! Karl was a hysterical woman-eater and, besides, was a sculptor's sculptor!... I saw it as soon as I met him. All his work looked to me like copies of other artist's pieces. He had shown me a catalogue of his crap, and some samples had been brought along to Berlin, carefully wrapped in towels and rope.

"See that girl?"

He gestures toward the houses flying by outside the window. We are rushing by them: neat, two-storey, red-roofed homes, and a lady is leaning out a window from one of them, washing a windowpane. She is far away and small as a doll.

“Which girl?” I ask watching the woman... thinking I am in Germany now...

“You don’t know?”

“What’re you talking about, Karl? Huh?”

“The woman...”

It was better to ignore my companion... otherwise he might begin again... He had already treated me several times to a disquisition on the Sioux Indians, showing me photographs and some engravings he had packed in his suitcase, so many pictures he wanted to sell to the Berlin art museum... of noble, red, burnished faces... feathers... tragedy.

Karl eventually calms down enough to finger through his photographs and engravings, lecturing the elderly man sitting next to him about the massacre of the noble Sioux nation. The aged fellow is yawning, but Karl doesn’t care ... shows him picture after picture.

Ss-sh! Ss-sh! Hissing! Screeching ... We are arriving. The noise meant only one thing: the train was rolling in. we are arriving somewhere.

Karl quickly puts his Indian pictures, snaps his suitcase shut. “Did you see the girl or not?” he asks me, as if we had both been thinking of the same thing. I nod ...

The old man in our compartment looks our way. Karl had his suitcase on the floor and a dozen round pieces of sculpture on the seats. The old boy was curious about us... “We’re here,” he mumbles, spittle gathering in the corners of his mouth ...

“This is Berlin,” Karl announces.

He stands. I have no idea how we are going to transport his works of art: they are round, heavy, and with spikes, some are gold, silver, red, blue, they look like metal puff-fish. We’ll need at least two other persons to carry them ...

“Hold on ...,” I say quickly grabbing Karl’s arm, pushing him back ... I want to help. One work of art hits the floor, sticking into the rubber mat by means of one of its spikes. Karl stoops to pull it loose.

“What’d you do? I can sell that for thousands of marks!” Karl picks up the object. The old man is looking at him and his weird sculptures with a set mouth, without any humor. He carefully folds his newspaper ... I could decipher those ornate, Gothic letters: “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.” I couldn’t understand a word of their language, or at least not many.

The artist points out the window, stepping over the old man’s legs. “That girl! That girl!” Karl pounds on the pane of glass. To break it! Glass will fly in our faces when he does... “That girl! That girl!” he makes a ruckus. Picks up a sculpture to knock it on the plate glass, lifting the object high ...

Time to step in. “Karl. That’s not how to behave ...”

He turns, lowers his arms, then raises the object to trounce it on my head. “Look outside!” he says feverishly. “There’s that girl, the Russian one, the one I was talking with on the Lermontov! She said she was going to Paris ... she lied! She said she was a painter but she was always reading books ... I hate book-readers!”

Karl’s deceased father had been a famous Protestant pastor who began writing novels when he was past sixty ... they were published too ... a friend of Gottfried Benn. Karl hated his old man. Who had died five years before. What he actually hated most was literacy, for it symbolized his father’s spirit. Dr. Kurt von Andreas, the theologian, had been a part of the upper class Resistance against Hitler, supposedly. I learned this later ...

Well, the old boy sitting next to me hits Karl with his briefcase, and mayhem with the window is avoided. Karl, startled by the attack, bands in two. The elderly fellow had hit him in the belly. He holds the object to his stomach protectively. “You are a reader too! Man of culture!” Face goes red ... a this drool of blood trickles down his chin. He’s bitten his tongue ...”You too don’t care about art! About pictures!! Tears are in Karl’s eyes.

“Where is the conductor? You are a hooligan, my dear sir! I want to speak with the conductor,” the old man shouts ... in English with a Teutonic accent ... waving his fist, in the other hand he brandishes the fierce briefcase, looking furious. He picks up his umbrella, an overnight bag, and disappears from our compartment slamming the door.

“I hate him ... Well, did you see her?” Karl asks.

I watch the railroad station looming up to us. There are people waiting on the platform. Zoological Garden, we have arrived.

You become easily acclimated to a boat’s motion on the sea: ten days, back and forth, a seesaw movement, waves, you press your hands to the ship’s walls, along the narrow corridors of the rotten tub, to keep your balance.

I still felt the motion on land ...

Why, I asked myself, had I come to this city? Millicent Gribney was in Berlin, my girlfriend. We had lived together for five years in Boston. We had both gone to college there. I wanted to take Millie back to America! We had been separated for a year, and I had kept our apartment for that time, but now it was gone ... no more Boston, no more college.

I was desperate, in other words.

Karl and I had stood that morning in a long line of fellow passengers to get off the ship, impatient to disembark from the Lermontov in Bremerhaven ... A policeman in a green uniform,

wearing a cap with a gold braided visor, sat at one far end of the gangplank, it was the exit. Another uniformed fellow sat next to him.

The cop looked suspiciously at the navy-blue passports we showed him. He was sitting in a chair behind a wooden table. There was an overcast sky. Slate gray. The green uniform fingered the paper of the passports carefully.

The customs official smiled politely as the policeman made us wait. He obviously had a tedious job. The cop looks at a placard laid out on the table next to the customs man's inkpad ... the placard with a red border. I could only make out one word written on the red poster with many photographs of people forming a square: "Terrorist."

We had disembarked on German soil, and our passports were stamped. Inked by the customs man with a grandiloquent smack of his stamp, in red.

It began oddly enough. In the spring of last year Millie had attempted suicide. She had wanted to take a bath, water was running into the tub, it was seven o'clock at night. The bathroom door was unlocked, and when I rushed in, for some reason sensing what she was up to, the water was murky pink, and blood had spurted on the wall tiles, on the floor, even the rug was wet with crimson, and Millie held out her forearm with a slit at the wrist to show me what she had done, weeping ... we had to call an ambulance and two weeks later had mutually decided either she or I must take a trip, due to our unhappiness with each other, a break from the past was needed. She had an aunt in Berlin, that legendary, divided, occupied city, and because I didn't have enough money to go to France, when a chance offered itself to me ... she went to Berlin in September of that year.

What was nice about the Lermontov was you couldn't exchange a single word with its crew.

I stayed up all night in a bar where a Russian rock band played "See You Later, Alligator", over and over, which was where I met Karl von Andreas, and about six every morning I would go alone on deck to watch the dolphins leap out of the water when the ship's cooks were throwing food remains and garbage into the ocean.

I would sometimes go on deck and look up at the sky at night. The heavens were wide and black, the moon shone on the water, the stars flickered, and I did it because my father had told me how it had looked to him during the war, in the Pacific... the Japanese Navy somewhere over the horizon, and he didn't know where.

I stole my student loan money too. How else could I have paid for the journey? I did as Millie had done the year before, instead of going to college I took off with the dough. I took care to register for the fall semester, however.

I was a pig, too. I jacked off at least twice in the shower stall of the Mikhail Lermontov thinking of Millie. A cabin with three other students. I think we paid a fare of three hundred twenty-eight dollars, one way. One creep I remember particularly: he slept in the bunk across from me, a physics genius with buckteeth and glasses called Ginsberg. He was going to London. Another student slept all day in his bunk, under mine. It took us ten days to cross the Atlantic, to arrive in Bremerhaven.

The year before Millie had taken the same ship. I remember standing on the dock in New York, the ship's horn sounding, and the Lermontov's engines churning up water as she pulled off. Suddenly I hear a Russian military melody, a tuba, trumpet, snare drum, and tambourine, a quartet of Russian sailors are playing as the ship is pulling away ... I watch Millie waving once. Water laps up against the side of the liner, waves hit the dock under me. Her face turns into a smear of pink, she leans against the railing, sailing away. The Lermontov moves out father ... nearer to the horizon ... out of sight!

More goodbyes? Inhaling deeply, striding to the dock's end. There would be no chance to swim to knots separating us, which were increasing with each moment, and I was relieved and unhappy.

I overheard a Russian voice speaking next to me at the dock, laughing. I saw mankind as sanguinary ... snarling, with bared teeth and hands clenched into claws. We glory in the sound of the words. I was overwrought.

Three months later Millie writes me to visit her in Berlin, saying she misses me. In the letter is a clear message: she will be calling me on Christmas Day, at noon my time, in Boston. I waited that day in the kitchen. I had lunch. Waiting, then it was seven at night, it was midnight. I was still waiting ... the bitch rang up at 2 a.m. Tells me she had been unable to find an empty phone booth. But it is great to hear Millie's low voice.

"Hi." She coughs. "What time is it there? It's evening here."

I had been thinking of her imminent return. I was desperate ..."Hi. Coming back to Boston?" Pretty humiliating to beg ... Didn't I get a whiff of dynamite? Something is in the works .. My life is blowing up in front of me ... whoa!

She clears her throat ... "Can't come back. Don't want to." I hear a man's voice in the background.

"Who are you talking with, Millie? Aren't you coming back?"

"Why don't you come here?"

"What'll we do with our apartment? College?"

It must have been a grave temptation to the gods. "Destroy him!" I could almost hear them murmuring in Olympus to one another.

"You should come out here," then there was a muffled, male voice again in the background ... She says, "I'm running out of coins, damn it. I hate pay telephones. Think about what I said ..."

"You're serious?" I ask.

"I'll be seeing you!"

The dial tone. She had hung up.

Gone! What a relief.

I had been getting along fine without her ... life had been okay without Millie. It was only when she called me at Christmastime I felt all ... Something strange happened when I returned after seeing her off to catch her ship: she had left her two pet parakeets with me, and I found these bright-feathered creature lying with their feet pointed in the air, on the bottom of the cage. A pretty wild omen, huh? A little one, perhaps ...

Anyway Karl had warned me about women. Not about parakeets.

I carried my suitcase, my old faithful. It was made of nappy, synthetic cloth, weighing three tons with everything inside it, obstructing my locomotion.

Millie had begged me to bring some things to Berlin ...her American heritage dictionary, her four-volume Encyclopedia of Philosophy, a two-part, illustrated Dictionary of Medicine, eleven, thick books of Durant's History of Civilization, Cassell's German-English Dictionary, Encyclopedia of Film, Webster's Unabridged, Encyclopedic Dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary in two volumes with accompanying magnifying glass, Gray's Anatomy, a hardbound edition, Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, unabridged, a Latin-English text of Julius Caesar's De belli civil, a Greek-English Iliad, a dictionary of ancient Greek, an Encyclopedia of the Classical World with deluxe illustrations, and old German copy of Struwwelpeter that had belonged to her family in another age ... that was not everything either. I had to take a brass table with removable legs, whose top was all embossed ...it was Chinese ... and a vase her grandfather had gotten in Japan. Family heirlooms. He had been an American diplomat, had stolen widely in Asia ...

My back was broken! Then came two framed paintings, one done by a dead uncle, in Silesia about 1919. Of a tanned, Polish peasant girl, from behind, nude, while milking a farm animal ... quite bucolic. The second work of art was a cornfield on a windy day. Done by the identical, German deviant.

Millie's father had come from U.S. bluebloods, the family maintained they were tied by blood to the Windsors. I didn't know what to think of it. Tragedy had befallen them when Millie's father had married beneath him: he had picked up a Fräulein in 1949, while acting as an occupation soldier. The Berlin Airlift! Had brought Millie's Mom home to Washington, D.C., and his mother and father had been horrified. Their boy had gone wrong! And how! The son moved away to Chicago, in disgrace. That's where I met Millie ...

The mother had made pigtails in Millie's blond hair, putting her American child in dresses with straps around the shoulders when she had gone to school. Nasty, rotten neighborhood kids had named her the "Nazi girl", that was not nice ... It took years for Millie's grandmother to accept her half-German granddaughter. And Millie's mother was never welcomed in Washington.

A couple other items were taken along for her: four silk skirts, three heavy, woolen sweaters, and seven blouses, a scarf, a hat, and a winter coat. She had not brought enough clothes for the winter.

We disembarked from the train, and Karl put down his packages hissing, “Look at all the damn women!” The platform was filled with people. Some hugged and called one another’s names. I didn’t like how Karl talked but I figured I was stuck with him for the time being. He knew Berlin.

He was hauling his objects wrapped in towels, tied with rope. I had offered to help but couldn’t be of much aid ... The weight attached to my suitcase handle made my fingers red and numb. My forearm and elbow were so pained I had to stop every hundred feet. Karl asked if I could carry one of his metallic porcupines ... I said yes ...

We hurried down the stairs to the main station area. The whole time Karl complained about the women he saw ...

I didn’t have any idea of what he was talking about and didn’t bother to ask questions. Just wanted to see Millie ... address, Adenauer Platz. “Do we have time for a coffee?” I ask.

“I underestimated my load,” Karl barks angrily, his back bent under the burden of his objects of art. “But they’re worth their weight in gold, you’ll see! These are my complete works ... don’t ask me about my wife! That bitch!” He shakes his fist at me, abruptly dropping several objects. “Don’t think I can go on,” he says. “Not like this ... My wife tried killing me! Am starting again in Germany.” His eyes are bulging, he looks mad.

“We’ll need a truck to get this stuff to our destination,” I lament.

He glances at me, uncomprehending. Karl lays his objects on the ground, is thinking ... holds his chin. Mulling over injustices done to him, mumbling and grumbling in a deep voice. He snaps out of his reverie and hisses, “You’ve got to watch out for them” but what a nice fit! I sacrificed everything for my art! They tried destroying me! Out of envy! Pure jealousy! You’re laughing? Not even the devil punishes me like these so-called human beings do ... women! How I hate them! How I hate everyone! Hate you! I want my mother! I am sick of this!” He turns away from me. His arms go high in the air ... he jumps up. Landing on one of the objects, crushing it. He kicks a second object across the station floor. Whom! Wham! He pummels a third work of art with his fists, grabbing a fourth, heaving it away, upwards, at the station lights. People are watching as Karl tears open his suitcase, throwing everything in disorder, laughing, “You see them cower? An appreciation of my work! Get the guard! I knew it! You can bribe them! The name! Karl von Andreas! I want to talk to your superior officer!” Points his finger at me ... sweat on his forehead, drops coming from the tip of the chin ...

I grab his arm. His eyes stare at me, the pupils pinpoints. “I need a cup of coffee,” I say, leading him into the restaurant ... gathering up bits and pieces and striding on.

Karl and I sit down to what turns out to be our first German cup of coffee. Karl orders, and the refreshment is brought to us.

"This is delicious." He snoops liquid with the spoon, slurping. Drinks in a hurry. Licks the saucer clean.

I look at the restaurant ... see our reflection in mirrors on its walls. The ceiling is interspaces with gilt and white alabaster. Cherubs are dancing up there. A Cupid holds a bow and arrow, aiming at our table. The smell isn't great ...

Surrounding us is a wall of luggage. I cannot grasp how many people speak German ... as an American I had somehow thought the world communicated in English. Karl scowls and hits his fist on the table, lost in contemplation of wrongs done ...

I was anxious to see Berlin.

We leave the restaurant, and a cab is hailed ... Karl jibberjabbles a few guttural words to its driver, and our luggage is loaded inside the taxi. It is a Mercedes Benz.

We are roaring up the Ku'damm. The taxi driver races like a possessed Formula One competitor toward Adenauer Platz ... The cab wheel hits the curb with a crunch.

"There it is!" Karl slams my shoulder, "Get out!"

Before me was a gray. Stone building ... geraniums, floral monstrosities of no name, and petunias graced the edges of rows of identical balconies. There were exactly six dirty windows on each floor, behind the blurred panes were the owner's rotten, bedraggled drapes. Five storeys of residential misery! 14 Waitz Strasse! I had arrived.

Adenauer Platz.

I'll have to ring her doorbell to get in, the front door is locked, is the apartment house the right one? No trace of her name ... To my right: three proud, black trashcans filled with fetid garbage, rancid foot remains. I search for Millie Gribney's name. "Is there another Waitz Strasse?" I yell to the taxi driver. He shakes his head no.

I have crossed the ocean to arrive at the wrong address?

The taxicab spins its tires on the pavement, bringing Karl to Zehlendorf, a rick, residential area, if I had understood him right, where Frau von Andreas awaits her son.

I spy "Poaiukai" on one doorbell. Very strange. "Millie!" shout at the first balcony, "Are you there?" a buzzer sounds. Dragging a suitcase through the front door, I am faced with stairs. No apartments on the ground floor.

I walk up a flight ... an apartment door is open ... Millie is waving at me, a mousey, blonde American girl of twenty-five in blue jeans. Standing next to her is a Chinese fellow wearing a T-shirt and white pants, grinning.

"I've been up all night writing you a letter ... I can't believe it !" she screams in surprise.

"What's his name doing on the doorbell?" I ask, sweating under the load I was transporting upstairs. This was Harvey Poaiukai, her friend ... she had written me about him, months ago. Only a friend. And ex-Air force serviceman who had been stationed at Tempelhof ...

"Harvey and I decided to live together," she replies, taking the suitcase. "It is cheaper!"

Her roommate smiles and smiles and smiles, patting my shoulder ...

"Who are you?" I query, not exactly cordially.

"Harvey Poaiukai!" he gushes, holding both my hands. "It's great to see you, I mean: hello!" Joyously bounding across the room, doing a loud war dance in me honor, waving a book with a white cover in the air ... He stops, pressing it in my unwilling hand. "Read it all! The Israeli Defense Forces! Rommel!"

There is a picture of the soldier with the eyepatch on its cover. I peer at the Autobiography of Moshe Dayan.

"Dayan! Sure, I am a Hawaiian! I'm Zionist too!"

"A what?"

"General Moshe Dayan! That's my man! Israelis are fighters! They really whipped the Arabs in '67, didn't they? Haha! General Dayan is my favorite one! Made the desert bloom ...! Yes, Zionist! ... Harvey is nearsighted, wears glasses with black rims, is thick-cheated, his arms are strong. He is taller than me. He gently touches my shoulder.

Millie, who is edging away from me, gives Harvey a look. He stops to catch his breath ... "I like winners!" he continues, rhapsodizing about killing Arabs, burning tanks, and deserts blooming ... worse than my father used to be on that subject ...

Harvey has a father too! Papa had been police chief of Honolulu for over thirty years, since 1946 ... and son Harvey had met Millie Gribney last year. Harvey had planned to go home to Oahu, but I guess Millicent had made him postpone his return to the Hawaiian Islands.

I looked around while she rifled through my suitcase. The books I had brought her, the paintings the furniture, the clothes ... Their apartment was simple. A broken couch in one corner you couldn't sit on without your ass hitting the floor. Coffee stains marred the filthy carpet. One-room place. The kitchenette was an alcove. The joint stunk of cooking. They were saving money, Millie told me, so they never went out to eat ... On the balcony was a dead plant of some sort in a

cracked, earthen pot. Although it was only the beginning of October the heat was on full blast. The air was asphyxiating. They has a small bathroom. Which had the luxury of a tub. Two hairs stood in the middle of the studio flat, naugahyde seats torn, foam stuffing coming out of the holes. A sleeping bag had been thrown on the floor for me ... When we had been students in Boston living together Millie had complained about the poverty of our circumstances, particularly the apartments where we resided. This place in Berlin was worse! There must have been abominable mold cultures under the carpet, because there was an unpleasant odor that made me sneeze when I sat down.

“Is that it?” she grumbles. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“I’m a packhorse?”

“I stayed up all night writing this letter to you.” She gives me an epistle, dated last night: her scribbling says I should rush to Berlin. So everything has worked out fine, with me here. “Harvey, why don’t you go for a walk. Alan and I have things to discuss.”

Harvey nods.

The front door is locked behind him by me. I am Groucho Marx” swiveling on my heels I race up to my girlfriend, put my lips on the nape of her neck, pull her head back ... Grab her around the waist ... shove two fingers inside the blue jeans ... feel warm, soft skin as Millicent bends backward.

My lips on hers ... she struggles. “I have something to tell you ...”

She knees me in the groin, I have to let her go.

“You happy I’m here?” she asks me. “My letter is proof ... “

“Of course, I’m taking you back.”

“You can’t!”

“Who can’t?”

“You. You can’t!”

I am laughing. “You must be joking.”

“No. we are lovers. Not just friends! No ... only friends ... I mean, you can imagine ... we’re planning on going away to Hawaii ... Harvey and I, I mean!” She gulps. “He’s a great guy. Forgive me ... “

“You’re hanging around with him? With him?” I hold my crotch. “I can’t have traveled thousands of miles. Over the ocean, to hear you say this?”

Millie explains about her job at KaDeWe, Berlin’s most famous department store. She works with Harvey on the sixth floor, in the food department. I am listening in disbelief.

I couldn't put two and two together. Hadn't had much sleep. That must have been it. Grabbing her hands, her blouse, tears welling in my reddened eyes ... "No! Stay with me! There's no reason for hanging around with him!" I turn on my heels, in a circle ... throwing myself on the floor ... am whining and wheezing ... "No! No! You can't." on my knees I embrace her blue jeans, her white thighs are my aim. If we can get into bed I am saved.

She pushes back hair from her forehead, walking rapidly across the room. Reaches the bathroom. And locks the door. I should never have crawled ...

I pound on the door with my fists. "Open up!" It was really impossible. "don't do this to me!"

The door opens, she says, "You! Always you! ...No!"

"I love you! Why not?"

"You love yourself!"

"A Hawaiian Zionist? I'm screaming, "I can't believe you're doing this!"

"I am going to Hawaii. To Harvey's family. They are good people. People who care. I need ... "

"What makes you think Harvey's family's good? No one's good! Not me! Not you, you are not! He' not either!"

"I've just talked with his mother on the phone, long distance. They live in Oahu ... white beautiful beaches there! They welcome me! You don't understand Hawaiians."

Chasing one myth after another she had spent years searching for a warm family to get lost in. Millie expected what she had not gotten from her parents: whether it came from the Hawaiians, Jews, or the Italians ... My family had never taken Millie into its bosom. She hoped to be greeted by people with brown skin and leis around their necks, with smiles. The Poaiukai clan ... a family ... my notion of Hawaii was pretty vague. Except for Pearl harbor, and that image fit well at the moment. Total betrayal!

She was leaning against the sink, looking in the mirror ... ignoring my whimperings and ravings, she was poking a finger into her cheek, looking for a pimple. She had scars on her face from acne ...

I looked at the shape of thigh, the jeans stretching behind. "I feel like going to bed with you," I say, wiping my tears, reaching toward her.

She turns to me. And pushes my hands away. "Keep your lousy fingers to yourself. Is my body all you think about?"

"It's mine." Insistent, shaking my fist. "You're mine!"

"Not yours!"

"But why not?" I get on my knees again, crying.

“Stop doing that in my apartment!”

Half my behavior was dictated by desperation, the other half was sheer calculation, because I wanted to wear her out. “You’re not kicking me out on the street, are you?”

“You’re leaving?” she asks.

I smile, hands raised over my head, in a supplicant gesture. I know I have to wear the fool’s cap ... and look ridiculous. “I’ll do anything to get you back. Dig ditches! Work in coal mines!” I shove the arms higher to show my contrition. “Give me a chance!”

Have I touched Millie?

“Be happy for small favors now,” she whispers, shaking her head as I collapse at her feet. “You can stay here until you find a place.”

We dialed number after number. Harvey and I called from the pay telephone booth in front of the apartment searching for “rooms to let” in a bi-weekly city magazine. Something appropriate for me. For my wants ...

Millie tried phoning after we had surmised Harvey’s accent in German was too atrocious ... he had no idea of grammar ... all we got on the phone were immediate rejections ... “Sorry, already rented!” Millie’s accent was better, though American.

Harvey’s opinion of me had changed. The hysterical embrace of General Moshe Dayan and myself turned to regret. I would have to find a place of my own. Otherwise, according to Harvey, I was an okay guy, but there wasn’t enough room for three in the apartment. He smiled at me a lot ... Why he had thought I would just stay for a day to say hello to Millie was beyond me.

It was not as if I didn’t wasn’t to leave the premises! Seeing those two lovebirds huddle together on the mattress in the corner while I lay in the sleeping bag was not my idea of a rescue ...Millicent ... she didn’t want to be saved.

Harvey then had a brilliant idea! We were standing in the phone booth, nose to nose.

“I’ll call the Hawaiian Grand Master! Badoyan! Big Jim Badoyan! My main man!” Harvey sometimes spoke pidgin English. “My boy! He great guy! wonderful islander! Jim know everything about practical things ... Oahu Jim! Honolulu Jim!” He is burbling with gaiety, but I do not understand. Harvey explicates enthusiastically, “Hawaiian Mafia, man! Us Hawaiians stick together, like you people do! He good man! Big Jim Badoyan!” He frantically dials a telephone number ... It is ringing.

I remain silent wondering if another Hawaiian can really help.

“Hawaiians stick together in Berlin, man, Big Jim’s our main mongoose! Is married to a German too.” Harvey stops. Somebody has picked up the phone at the other end ...

“Hi! Jimmy? Harvey here! Need your assistance!” Harvey looks at me wearily ... “Have a friend in the city who needs an apartment, big trouble, heaps of it! Like I told you before ... remember? Millie’s fine! So, so, yeah. I’m okay too. You don’t think you can help? Apartments are rare ... I know it, man!”

Harvey hangs up.

“Never trust islanders,” he tells me. “People ain’t worth shit in an emergency! He let me down. Let me put it to you bluntly: I am going to talk to my tutor ... You don’t have to go tell Millie

everything I say. Howard is the guy's name. I'll call him now." He dials the number and gets an answer immediately. "Say, Howard! No, I'm not calling to cancel my lesson! Remember you were telling me you needed a roommate? I got one for you. Yeah, it's him. The one I told you about ... Millie's old flame. Yeah, man, ha ha ha!" Harvey nods in my direction. "Same guy!"

Millie had mentioned Harvey was being tutored in mathematics. The little twit had wanted him to go to college when they settled in Hawaii.

Harvey is ecstatic. "You got it, man! A solution!" He takes my shoulder, pushing the phone in my face, pressing me against the glass wall of the booth. Harvey is strong, so the shove is forceful.

"Hello? Is this Alan?" A New York accent.

"That's me. You have a room?"

"Yes, Harvey told me a little about your visit. Sorry to hear what happened. I can imagine the grief," he sounds hesitant ... like he does not know what to say next ... He clears his throat finally. "Want to stay in Berlin awhile?"

"I would like to stay awhile." I am grinning at Harvey ... "Let's meet."

"Suits me."

"Where?"

"You probably know Bahnhof Zoo? The bookstore there ... Heinrich Heine?"

I agree. "Under the railroad bridge? In an hour?"

He tries to explain where the bookstore is, exactly.

I did not need the explanation. I would run to the bookstore to escape from my situation ... I had been spending the previous nine nights awake, while the two cuddlesome lemurs were in bed clasped in each other's arms. Millie and Harvey couldn't wait to get the intruder out of the apartment. Enough! There had once been a time when that cunt had slept in my arms!

I had lain inside a sleeping bag, sneezing. I had been allergic to whatever fungus was growing under the carpet. Everyone needed a break from the current situation ... If Millie wanted to sleep with a chimpanzee, let her have him! Listening to the sheets rustle ... Harvey and she would get up at six-thirty for work. I saw the warm, naked bodies.

A twenty minute walk down the Kudamm, turning left on Joachimstaler Strasse to get to the bookstore. When I had arrived I had been surprised by the attractive prostitutes wearing boots waiting for customers on the main thoroughfare. I had had no money ... not for such delights. Whore after whore! Every block! Whispered promises: "Only sixty marks!" I took long walks in the city to get my mind off it, ambling by regiments of prostitutes ... and couldn't get it off my mind for a minute.

Zoo. A man is standing in front of the bookstore. He wore horn-rimmed glasses, had wild, graying black hair, done up like Einstein's rat's nest. Was taller than me, well-muscled, athletic ... Howard Hermagne seems friendly enough to me.

"Hi," I shake his hand. "I'm Alan."

He suggests we amble down Hardenberg Strasse because he wants to eat at the Technical University's student cafeteria, we can sit there, discuss pertinent matters at our leisure.

The Technical University of Berlin is located at the end of the road, and the area around it is populated by engineering students wearing African dashikis, Sikh headdresses, flamboyant, long, twisted mustaches ... speaking a variety of tongues: Arabic, Swahili, Berber, Japanese, Korean.

Howard hisses, "Watch your tongue around them!" I turn around to see what he means ... don't quite get it. "They're listening to everything we say," he explicates, looking around him suspiciously.

"But we haven't said much, Howard."

"Doesn't matter. Don't talk about Israel either."

"I hardly ever do."

He looks around him as we enter the cafeteria. There are hundreds of long tables filled with screaming, eating, gesticulating, foreign students.

I couldn't imagine who would be interested in overhearing me ...

After filling our trays we turn right and find two open seats at a table already occupied by some dark-eyed engineering students discussing something in rapid, guttural Arabic. Our tablemates are vociferously maintaining opposing opinions or else agreeing with one another, violently.

The smell of rancid food. Mashed potatoes, stringy beef, stale margarine, greasy pork ... Everything reeks of vomit also, or maybe it is disinfectant used to wash the floor. I can only drink my coffee. The food looks incredible, is green and purple. The cafeteria floor is filthy, the air stinks of hundred and thirty-two toxic sauces, cheap horse meat, gelatinated, of vegetables dissolved into fetid water, overcooked slime... There were three thousand engineering students feeding themselves and screaming at each other ... the noise was constant! I had to hold my ears ...

My new roommate nods. "Look at those Etruscans! Persians! God know!" He snickers.

I look ... Our table friends are waving forks while raving.

Howard picks nervously at his food, he shoves a forkful of potatoes in his maw. "don't draw attention to us," he hisses, "they can see from our noses we're ..." His whisper was nearly inaudible: "Jews!"

“What’s wrong?” I ask. I couldn’t care less about loud students. Later they’ll be building dams, rockets, bridges, mosques. Punjab for the Indians! Bangladesh for the Pakistanis. Spain for the Moors. Who cared!

“Etruscan savages!” Howard grumbles.

He eats rapidly, like someone’s going to take away his vittles any minute. Pauses to empty two ounces of salt into his slop. Then goes on ...

“Third World ignoramuses,” he murmurs pointing toward the foreign students. “The Israelis could lick them in a minute, all dead!” Howard squints, pointing his finger like a pistol, bringing the thumb down to fire it. He takes on a Field Marshall’s pose to peer at the universe of electrical engineering students ... He wipes his mouth clean. No one is paying attention to us.

“You shouldn’t say that, Howard!”

“Why not?”

Suddenly, to our right, a group of civil engineering students from Dacca jump across two adjoining tables, knocking off the plates. A flag is unfurled! They break into song: a stirring national anthem! Water glasses go flying ... They’re after seven treacherous, enemy Bhutans, who cower in the corner, arms raised ... Forks are held in fists ... Spoons are used to gouge ... Food goes shooting through the air! In the far corner are five burly. Overweight Burmese nationalists, and they are making mincemeat of three weak-kneed Chinese. The poor guys are really taking it on the chin. I saw tiny puddles of blood on the floor, mixing into greasy piles of inedible nourishment ... Tables are overturned ... Sri Lankan patriots, waving sabers, throwing meatballs, are advancing on Tamils ... The Nepalese are furious! Shots went off! I see one Sri Lankan aim a bazooka at the group of Tamils, who beg with supplicating gestures for mercy ... Smells of shot and powder fill the air. Various West Africans are lying on the floor, motionless ... The worst had occurred.

“They are all nuts. Low conflict inhibitions,” Howard claims. He is squinting. The smoke is gathering in great clouds around us. It is not easy to see. It hurts the eyes ...

Five Persian students behead two squealing Kurdish nationalists with shiny, gold-handled scimitars in front of our eyes ... abominable atrocity! We couldn’t stop watching.

But facts were facts, and business was business ... I had to do it to my embarrassment. “I need a room, Howard, can I afford it?”

He named the price. I could afford it, for two or three months ... If I was going to stay in Berlin, I’d have to find a job, I told him.

It went fast. We shook hands, a deal!

Leaving the cafeteria we hear explosions going off behind us. There are piles of bodies we must scramble over while we descend the stairs.

We go out the big, swinging aluminum doors ... a horde of baboons are running inside ... WE quickly step aside ... they're screeching!

We have to get away. Howard is kicking out in all directions. No justice in such a situation! We withdraw fearfully behind a lamp post.

I hear rumbling ... the street is shaking. Elephants are charging down Hardenberg Strasse ...

Howard and I rush into the traffic ... We've got to get away. Swinging on a tree nearby are numbers of monkeys, screeching at us, throwing twigs down ... swooping from one branch to another, then landing in the middle of the street. Cars screech ... tires burn rubber ... drivers fly through windshields ... one accident! Two accidents! Three accidents! A pile-up! Cars carom from side to side ... metal, glass, rubber, fiber and bones breaking! Hearts flying! Teeth scattering! Tendons springing!

"I am going back to Zehlendorf!" Howard announces. "Why don't you come immediately?" He says he'll have his girlfriend Elfriede pick up my suitcase from Millie's apartment in her car. Grinned when he talks of Elfriede.

"Zehlendorf," I mumble. "That's where Karl von Andreas lives!"

No use explaining to Howard who Karl was ...

It so happened Karl von Andreas was living out in Zehlendorf. The southern end of Berlin. The family had a house on Heimat Strasse, two storeys high, with a couple of fancy toilets upstairs and a tiny, auxiliary one downstairs. His mother went out twice a week to hear the Berlin Philharmonic. She had preserved her husband's library, about ten thousand volumes, just as it had been when the old pastor had been alive, and his published books. Mostly theology and four novels in first editions, were displayed upstairs in special. Glass cabinets like shrines ...

I visited Karl as soon as I moved into Howard's place on Prinz-Handjery Strasse, his place was about two blocks removed from ours ... One afternoon, the end of October, Karl invites his new girlfriend, who was a doctor at the local hospital, to meet his mother ... The physician, thirty years old, with long, red hair, a little chubby around the hips, is nervous about meeting her. Karl worked fast.

They talked German.

We sat on the glass-enclosed veranda, in the garden in the backyard. Eating strawberries with cream and sugar ... in bowls ... we sipped brandy with coffee afterwards. The alcohol was served in shallow, crystal glasses.

"The arrival of the Bolsheviks," Karl interpreted, I couldn't understand them otherwise, his mother knew little English, but I quickly got the gist of their conversation directed at me. Every German of this class had been in the clandestine Resistance. No one had liked that gosh darned Führer! Nobody had dreamt about what Hitler had been capable of, everyone had saved the life of someone somewhere, had had non-Aryans vouching for the fact.

The old lady shows me her forearm, unbarring her bicep too. "No numbers," she says, "I and my husband were fortunate enough to escape the wrath of the Nazis ... but when the Russians came ... my God! Bolsheviks raped, raped, pillaged! Burning Mongolians! Arsonists ..."

That is why he became a sculptor, says Karl interrupting the old dame. "It has nothing to do with lies."

Why ask? His brief explanation of the origin of the desire to become an artist was one thing, understanding what he meant another. All I knew was he despised his old man's learning ...

Karl's Mom looked at me enough, but I didn't know why. She spoke long, involved sentences that Karl succeeded in translating into monosyllables. I was as anti-Moscovite as they expected me to be, nodding my head to everything.

The female physician, twisting her legs as she sat in the wicker chair, holding a blue-and-white, porcelain coffee cup, seemed nervous. Karl had apparently been speaking to her about marriage, and now she was confronted with the elegant, petite, white-haired Frau von Andreas. As a foreigner I did not analyze the complexities of the relationships between Germans ... I was pretty dense. Newly arrived.

Karl shows me the parquet floor of the room where Gottfried Benn had read his poems in the early fifties ... where his father had read the first, second, third drafts of his novels ... where chamber music had been played. There are potted plants in the corners, original Expressionist paintings hanging on the walls.

He takes me upstairs to see his father's library ... the room is wood-paneled, lined with hardcover books. I spot a Luther Bible in a special cabinet, behind glass.

"The bastard had mostly expensive editions," Karl grumbles. He hands me a small, old book that fits in my palm. "First edition of Novalis, the greatest German Romantic poet! I'm reading a biography of him at the moment ... also about Dürer ... but you know what?" He pokes his finger at the book's spine. "The only thing worthy of notice is its paper! I mean wood!" He shows me a metal-and-leather Bauhaus chair where his old man had sat when reading. "That is sensible! Metal! Wood! Animal skin! True elements!"

"Your father loved books."

"And I hate them! Do you know what he used to do? He would sit down to read in the afternoon and wouldn't get up from his chair until he had finished with the thing ... how is that for criminal behavior?"

"You read books too!"

"Because they are here," he gestures toward the tomes on the shelves. "But only biographies! They inspire!"

Frau von Andreas comes upstairs to show me the cabinets where her husband's own publications are displayed. "He was a great man," she remarks. "A friend of humanity." She shows me a volume of theological writings Dr. Kurt von Andreas edited ... all the Western religions are represented in it, including a whole gallery of big names ... The old man had apparently been a big deal in the fifties and early sixties. "It is so sad he is now gone ... How he loved his books," she laments, fixing my eye with a stern glance to cover up the sentiments she expresses, "and how we have a man of love and goodness. There will never be another like him!"

I agree with her.

I can faintly overhear Karl's girlfriend retching downstairs in the toilet. It had been a trying day for her.

Before I take leave of the three, Karl brings me into the kitchen to show me the drawings he has been doing. Looked like imitations of Paul Klee and Kandinsky to me. I compliment him on his artistic mastery.

"That is nothing, mere practice sketches!" he says. "Follow me!"

I am brought into the garage where he shows me a blowtorch, welding equipment, piles of long, metal rods, two huge blocks of wood.

"Wait until I begin doing my sculptural masterpieces," he proclaims. "I will make a million in Berlin ..."

It was disastrous living near him. He bombarded me with visits. If I didn't want to be home but was, and Howard was gone, Karl would refuse to accept my not answering the door. Would throw stones at the window ... Small stones! Once he left a long, flamboyant note for me, enclosed in an envelope with gold stars glued to it ... like a love letter. It would have made his girlfriend jealous. He wrote he loved me, missed me, I was his friend. "Alan," I read, "words are not adequate to express my desire to see you. Are you hiding, sweetheart? Hiding from me? Your buddy? I have called. I have rung your doorbell! I have knocked the door down! Will you never get in touch with your friend Karl von Andreas. We have so much to talk about! All the kisses I can send you and friendly hugs, Karl. P.S. Your absence is sorely grieved, my heart is sad. Here, again I throw you a kiss! XXXXX."

I couldn't figure it out. Karl wouldn't take no for an answer ... Would sometimes sit in the dark to fool him after I had heard the telephone ringing a hundred times ... I knew it was he. Then he would come over. I listened to the rain of pebbles against the windowpane.

One morning he surprised me ... I opened the door when the doorbell rang, and there was Karl.

He was attired in a black cape. He wore a floppy fedora on his head, with a red feather in it, and had also grown a goatee.

"Finally an answer!" Karl embraces me passionately kissing my face. He waves his hands. "Where have you been?"

I am in my underwear, with a robe thrown over my shoulder. "I was sleeping," I explain.

Karl shakes his head, smiling at the glum mien I show him.

I am supposed to go see Millie where she works, I tell him, and wanted to walk into the city, a distance of about five miles.

“We’ll go together.” There is no contradicting him, so I excuse myself. I go in my room ... look out my window. For a minute I think of jumping outside to escape him.

Karl walks around while I slowly dress, peeks, uninvited, into Howard’s room. “Look at the books!” he screams.

“Don’t screw around in there,” I yell.

“Yecch, yecch! A library.”

The place I lived in had not been dusted, its floor swept for half a decade. Dust rose and choked you as you walked through the hall. It was a small apartment: Howard had one large room, I had a smaller one, there was a tiny kitchen, a bathroom, and a narrow hall leading to our bedrooms from the doorway. The paint was chipping off the walls.

Howard’s room was a poorboy’s parody of Dr. Kurt von Andreas’s bourgeois, first-edition library: its walls and floor were piled high and solid with paperbacks. There was a mattress on the ground, and his desk stood next to the small sleeping place, but from floor to ceiling one only spied books.

Karl looks disgustedly at my roommate’s sleeping quarters.

We left, striding through Schönow Park. We had a short jog first through low, rough hillocks and bushes, dark green lawns. There was a soft, autumn wind. Sparrows tweeted and twittered.

Karl complained about his new girlfriend. I half-listened, watching where I stepped because of dog shit everywhere. He discussed my non-relationship with Millie. “Learn to be a man. Maintain an independent attitude, Alan!” he admonished.

He was still mumbling when we arrived in the downtown area ... it had taken us and our and a half to get to the department store on Taubentzen Strasse. A six-storey, Art Deco affair.

KaDeWe was crowded. We walked up to the top storey. It took us awhile to find Millie’s worksite. She was wearing an apron and a funny hat, serving ice cream. Pretty. It was apparent she was not getting along well with her colleague, a lady of fifty with russet hair. The kind of charming person who takes the company’s fortunes personally. Loyal to her last, dying breath! Millie sighs as she sees us, whispering, “I’m so tired of this ...”

Karl and I sit down in a booth. We want ice cream. It is brought us. Two bowls. I feel sorry for Millie.

“She is taking advantage of you,” Karl says, wiping his lips.

We are eating ice cream.

A frightening number of customers crowd about the counter where Millie is serving.

“Come and get this pot clean, girl!” Millie’s colleague hisses. It’s like Cinderella: the older lady talks to her like Millie is a slave ...

Millie leaves the counter to scrub an aluminum pot. Banished to washing dishes ... “You don’t scour properly,” the lady says, grabs the scouring pad from my ex-girlfriend, shoves her aside, and begins furiously scrubbing herself, eater flying out of the sink. It is finished: she holds high the glistening utensil. Millie’s head is bowed, not looking in the other woman’s eyes as the hag glares. “That’s how it is done!” she says to the customers.

Karl nods and says, “Poisonous spiders! Black windows!” Spittle is forming around the corners of his moth.

“Don’t be so mean ...”

He waves, grits his teeth, “Why not?” Saliva has been flowing down his chin, in his beard. “You know what? I’m about ready to give up on you!” he whispers, eyes widening. “You’re blind! Do I have so spell it out for you?! Karl glares at Millie, his mien is threatening, looking out from under the black eyebrow. “She’s taken advantage of you,” he reiterates. “Just like my wife did!” He growls like an angry hound, banging a fist on the countertop.

“Ssh,” I whisper, nervously looking around.

Karl makes a face. He looks as if he were going to expectorate on the floor. Knocks the ice cream dish away, and it stops spinning in front of me after ten seconds.

“You’re talking way too loud,” I whisper.

“Goodbye there, Millie!” he wiggles his fingers in Millie’s face ... I won’t say I’m embarrassed .. I am horrified.

I wave goodbye ... Everything is so screwed up anyway ...

We walk by long, glass counters displaying dead limbs, organs, and asphyxiated fish, past great tanks filled with water where lobsters vegetate before being dumped into boiling water for someone’s supper. A carcass: ripped open in the center, its entrails hanging out! It is extended from a chromeplated meat hook, down from the ceiling. Red and purple pieces of something or other ... crawfish on thick beds of chipped ice, neatly arrayed alongside scarlet shrimps, with long antennae, frozen stiff. I fell sick. “Closing soon,” a loudspeaker drones. “Today, our close-out sale ... Drastic reductions in price!” A sign in white and red letters announces, “Shark meat, last chance! Flesh, tender to the taste, melts on the tongue” ... the shopping mob is famished. We rush to the escalator ... sneak past the carnivores around us ...

My mother's first letter had been dated December, while everything was consummating in a glorious mess ... She wrote how all was quite rosy at home, apparently ... like a movie from the fifties. Requested I take a good look at the country I'm in ... Be a tourist. "You never know what you might experience. It is so delightful. I know you're excited, Alan! I am too.

"Have you seen anything beside Berlin? Let your heart take wings and go with your feelings. Live each day to the fullest, meet people, see things, and don't get pulled down. This is your great adventure!

"Please write me a letter once in a while. You have only written once. Write regular size. Not so tiny. I could hardly read your handwriting. Alan, are you hiding something?"

Couldn't follow her ... Sometimes her scribble slanted to the left, often to the right ... it changed four times within one epistle ... five times ... swerving, then going straight and rigid, down-and-up, then swooping leftward, in thick, block letters ... her trying out different types of handwriting ...

"I am not sending your books to you. Are you in Europe to have books sent to you so you can read there? You could have stayed in Boston or even in South Bend! Can't you find any English books to read?

"We just had a blizzard here. You miss snow? Bet you miss the South Bend snow. Do they have blizzards in Germany? Is there snow there now? Is Christmas celebrated differently?

"Most important: are you enjoying yourself?

"Let me hear from you, let me know what is going on with you and our feeling."

A few years before the whole family had been "into" feelings ... my father's bright notion! We were supposed to be honest, which meant saying things like, "I feel saddened about your failure to acknowledge my confusion ... We should discuss what went wrong ... don't you feel the same way?" This would be chattered through gritted teeth ... a little dangerous ... Encounter groups ... you lied your way through them. Of course. Everyone had to! The choice was screaming, violence, first degree murder ...

My father's message on the same page: the letter is a duet. My old man half-prints his stuff, easy to read ... "Appears like you have found a way to survive without gainful employment, young man. Hope you're getting along well. Must have been a very difficult period for you. And

adjustment, hope you now have a chance to enjoy and experience your environment and the people. It is certainly not easy to do so when you're anxious about money."

I had mentioned I was considering staying awhile ... have to find work, that meant I would be applying for a job with the U.S. Army ... or Air Force. Was not crazy about the idea. I was pretty laconic on the subject. I knew they didn't want me in Berlin long, I couldn't tell them Millie was taking selectively, white lies.

"Mom and I miss you very much," my old man writes. "We miss our phone conversations, even though they were not too frequent in the past year.

"Mom has not been feeling well this late fall and winter. Weather bothers her much. She is languishing, needs a purpose for getting up in the morning and she doesn't have one."

It was simple enough. I was not telling them about me ... they lied about their lives too Mainly, what had been happening to my mother: two or three toes of her right foot were getting black! Mom had been consulting a Peruvian doctor for this problem: Profirio Diaz Rabasa, M.D. My grandmother had written me extensively about her daughter and the uncaring attitude with which this "dumb Mexican schmuck" handled her diabetes.

My mother did not want to consult old Doctor Feldman. He had been our family doctor and was about to retire. Doc Feldman had been pretty strict with Mom ... had frequently gotten her pissed off with his warnings, had once put her ass in the hospital for high blood sugar, when I was fourteen. I reacted to her sudden absence at home by throwing black paint on a neighbor's house after the bastard had yelled at me for cutting through his rotten crab grass on the way home from school. He was a policeman. When Mom heard about my crime she was philosophical ... spoke to my father over the phone ... my old man was in despair. "He misses me," she told him. The cop Rudy Horvath, our neighbor, visited us that night. Did I confess? Never, never. Paint was still on my white trousers. She had never wanted to follow a diet, but the toes seemed to be succumbing to gangrene ... she wouldn't go see our old doctor. I was in Berlin! She spent nights eating boxes full of chocolate-covered orange peel, fudge, bags of jelly beans, sugared cocoanut balls, you name it! A pound of buttery maple fudge, a huge Hershey bar ... alone, at night.

I got the raw dope from Gram's letters. Dr. Rabasa prescribed sun-lamp treatments for my Mom's gangrened toes ...

My grandmother predicted the very worst ...

My Mom didn't write the truth, her words were coming from another world: Sough Bend, Indiana. And my father lied too.

“I cannot describe the kind of weather we have been having. A blizzard that outdid blizzards, three feet of snow came down from the skies, and it was truly beautiful, snow drifts that were six to ten feet tall, some higher. Trenches that were dug to get to the street! A shovel-width wide. People talking to one another, concerned about each other’s health, Dad and Mary Kulish and I walking to the store. With a borrowed sled! People were friendly to one another! They walked! This was like an old-fashioned, quaint, tiny town, and everyone walked, and all were equal, and everyone was friendly, and it was just neighborly and community living.

“For a couple of days all stores and businesses were closed. I felt so secure. I thought it was wonderful. Dad and I were stuck in the house together, and I liked it.

“We have not been with others since last Wednesday. The storm hit Thursday, but I was taking medication Tuesday and Wednesday for a toothache, and Dad stayed with me Wednesday because I was dizzy from the medicine. Back to being home: anyway I felt safe and secure and cozy and warm, no fear, no panic, or any negative feelings. I don’t know how I would have felt if Dad had not been with me. It was just fun, and I think I was probably feeling smug and contented and then I thought that was wrong to feel so good when others were frightened or panicky. I just don’t feel guilty. I liked being snowed in, really snowed in.

“The snow flurries are light and fluffy but when they all get together they sure do get heavy and big.

“What’s the weather like in Berlin now? Do you dress warmly? Do you have warm clothing, do you need anything? A heavy sweater? Boots? Socks? Gloves? Hat? Scarf? Pants? Underwear? What?

“Do you have someone sleeping in the same room as you or do you have a room alone and just live in the house with others? Please answer this.

“Am assuming you do not see Millie. You have met other *fräuleins*, huh!

“Do you still listen to good music. Faust is a very good opera. Tosca, Aida, Wagner operas, they are heavy, but when you get into them they are great, and even without singing the music is tremendous. That’s a good start!

“You sound happy and contented somewhat. It’s got to come from yourself. Make peace with yourself, accept yourself. The others have their own problem, accepting themselves. Learn to like yourself. I like you very much and I count for something.

“I’ve discovered I am quite a gal and, as your father has often said, too good for him. He doesn’t deserve me. But even though he’s inferior I like him, even love him, Jackson!

“Keep on plugging, I’m proud of you, miss you like hell. Keep healthy and have someone give you a hug and kiss for me.

“Alan, I have a favor to ask of you. I will send you the money for the items if you can get them. You and I have discussed Russian enamels. But of a certain section of Russia. I am not discussing the black or red enamels, I am talking about the Russian enamels that look like stained glass. They were made into spoons, bowls, large and small. I don’t know what else. It is definitely glass, different colors in one piece. Most Russian Jews had pieces like these and they might sell them to individuals or perhaps to an antique store in Germany. Ask Millie. She’ll know. She might be acquainted with this item. A spoon could cost as much as twenty American Dollars. The other items I am interested in, my dear, are Russian icons, each icon should have a paper authenticating it.”

My mother asks me to search for old enamels. Antiques. Spoons, bowls, large and small! Europe is big and wide ... I know she thinks Berlin is near Vladivostok! Kiev! Had to get used to my parents having no notion of what I was doing ... Like I had nothing to do except look for antiques! What money did I have anyway? What did she think I was doing ...

“That’s a job. I would really appreciate you looking around for these two things.

“Say hello to Millie and keep well. Will write another day.

“Love you bushels, Mom.”

Howard divided his room in half. String a clothesline across the width of it, draping sheets over the barrier... In the other part of his chamber were two mattresses. The situation reminded me of a Moscow apartment. Howard figured he needed more dough...

Tom would be out of the house all day, Peter consoled me. And Jerry, the second one who lived and slept in the other half of Peter's room, was in the Army... would hardly ever be there, except weekends. My two new roomies.

Tom was from Milwaukee, and his parents were Germans who had emigrated from Berlin in the late forties. He worked as a teacher. He lectured to Army illiterates about the English language and American history. His students were working to get high school diplomas. Sometimes he came home with these bastards. Dirty dogs in my book. Young smart alecks wearing Army uniforms. I felt better than them. My old man had taught me to look down on the military. He said they were idiots. My father had had a chance to serve in the Navy, to continue in government service after the war... the Navy had been anxious to retain him... he had been on Admiral Mitscher's deciphering team in the Pacific. My old man had been invited to join up again, no, he wouldn't! "Too many anti-Semites in the armed services" was his credo. He had been a First Lieutenant.

I would arrive home after trying vainly to court Millie ... Had taken the bus from downtown, from Waitz Strasse, back to Zehlendorf. And then the stench of the cat litter, always uncleaned ... Howard's cat ... the first smell hitting your nose as you unlocked the apartment door was of cat shit plus the acrid stench of feline piss. I was allergic to it. Great, I loved coming back to this hole ...

Putting the key in the lock I hear someone, and it's not Tom. It's not Jerry ... I'm not in the best mood either.

I open the kitchen door that had been half-closed ... There. Toms stood next to him.

Tall fellow, with short hair. Someone strange in my apartment.

The guy is smiling. Beer on his breath. A can is there for me to take. "Hi, how're you doing?" The fellow shakes my hand. "Take a beer, man!"

He is a head taller than me, had red hair and freckled cheeks. Wears soiled levis. Old and faded. I refuse to make any gesture. I will to say something ...

"Where are you from, man?" ask the GI.

I ignore this klutz. They've been drinking beer awhile ...

It is not going to be easy to ignore him.

"It's Wilbur! Horny cat you've got, man ...don't you ever clean up after it? It looks sex-crazed to me!" He giggles. "I'm a medic. What do you do for a living, huh? Lots of Americans in this city." He doesn't let me answer but goes on. Just looking at this red-haired colossus makes me uncomfortable.

"I'm looking for an apartment!"

Tom senses my lousy mood ... Tom never liked me. "Maybe Howard will take you in," he says to Wilbur. My stomach hurts. There's no end in sight. Howard has stopped paying his own rent. His three roomies do it for him: me, Tom, Jerry ... maybe Wilbur, too, soon. I won't escape. I have hardly any money, and Howard is definitely not going to lend me a penny. Was I going to stay in this lousy town and wait for Millie's decision and end up sleeping in the park in winter?

Tom clears his throat. He gives me a glance, not friendly either ... the bastard hates me, I can feel it. I am not happy to be hated.

"Sure, I'll talk to the assistant manager ..." Tom blurts out, no context. "The job's not so bad at the PX. I know the assistant manager! Why don't you go to Mister Siegel? You're a Jew, aren't you?" Tom rolls a cigarette, slowly. Looking at me with distaste. I abhor him too. Wilbur pops open another beer and downs it ... a gigantic swallow, fitting for a gargantuan red head ... with a massive body.

"You can't believe what chicken-shit things we have to do," he says after burping loudly. "We walk around in circles, put bandages on guy's heads. Idiot's work. The Army is something else. I hate my sergeant. I have everyone!" He pats my shoulder with his fleshy, freckled hand. "What do you think, Tom was saying you guys needed a new roommate, how about me? Four in this place would be a cozy crowd!"

"Like the barracks," I reply. "Only one missing is your sergeant. Why not ask him along? ... "Lots of room."

He grins, shaking my hand vigorously, "I'll age like good wine! You'll love me! I'm from Tennessee. Ever been there?"

I tell him I have. Had been to Lookout Mountain in Tennessee when I was ten years old. With my parents on the way back home, driving north from Miami Beach, Florida ... remember seeing drinking fountains and toilets: "For Whites," "For Coloreds Only." That had been in Georgia.

Had it been Tennessee? 1961, in September.

“I hope you don’t get mad, but someone ought to clean up that horny cat’s shit. If I am going to live here,” Wilbur proclaims, then hesitates, like he might be thinking. “Come to think of it, a lot of white folks still live like this ... back home. Ever been to Nashville?”

“No, Wilbur,” I answer.

“That’s not your fault.”

I retreated to my room. After a decent interval of listening to Wilbur in the kitchen.

It was great living in Howard’s place.

I would eventually have to find a job.

The Hawaiian and I were sitting in a small bar, a sleazy joint selling hot dogs and gray Berlin boulettes, reeking of cooking fat. The kind of smell that stick in your clothes. The boulettes were made of pork and white bread, rolled in a ball like a hamburger.

Harvey was angry at something ... Maybe he had had an argument with Mille. Anyway the place was on the Ku'damm, around the corner from Millie and Harvey's apartment.

Something would have to happen ... What? Nothing was happening, that was clear.

Harvey and I had already had a couple of vodkas. It was three in the afternoon. That's how I was wasting time. On the wall, facing us, was a poster of the sun setting behind Manhattan skyscrapers. Because that was the name of the joint: "New York Carry-Out". On the opposite wall was a life-size poster of Elvis Presley. Next to it were three pinball machines. The bartender was a muscular, short German of about thirty whose head was hairless but who wore a scraggly. Blond beard, a Viking type. On the ceiling above was a gigantic, superimposed photograph of the King of Rock, again, when he was in the army and stationed in Germany, standing with two teenaged girls ... the kids are wearing saddle shoes and bobby socks, and each of them has her hair in braids ... The tape deck plays two songs continuously ... One goes: "If you love me and leave me, oh ho, baby, oh, baby, take me with you!" The other one ... Harvey is wearing a frayed cowboy shirt. I am desperate to get Millie back. Harvey is confident he has won the duel. For Millie ...

"Harvey, I got a question." I venture. "Do you think I can find something with the Army? What about the Air Force?" I clear my throat. "Just be honest! Maybe I'm going to stay here awhile. Let me explain: I'm running out of money ... What's to explain! I can't even get out of here! No other way. I'll have to find work of some kind ..."

"Sounds a little familiar," he replies. "Sure, you might have a chance now," he hesitates. He doesn't know whether to trust me.

"Familiar?" I laugh. "I bet you've been in my shoes, right?"

"Uh, well."

"Here's to contraceptives!" I raise my glass. "I always had to wear them."

"How was she for you?" he queries, timidly. "Was Millie a good lay?"

"Not with rubbers! Be honest, Harvey!" I was getting drunk.

"I just want her to be happy ..."

“Think she gave a damn about my happiness?” I raise my fist and pound it on the bar. “You wouldn’t want that to happen to you, would you?”

Raising his glass, clinking it against mine. Drinks.

We order more vodkas. I had no job.

“Here’s to Millie!” I say. “To rubbers! She used to ask me to rub her down with oil ... and beforehand, two weeks before, wouldn’t go to bed with me ... can you imagine allowing me to rub her down, and she’s lying there ... can you imagine ... in her panties?”

He was leaning forward on the bar stool, face reddening ... breath making my glasses foggy. We were really plowed. No matter! ... Wanted to know what Millie always did with me ...

“Everywhere. I was supposed to rub her down, see? Naturally” ... We gulp our drinks together.

He was brooding now. He was squinting.

“What does she want?” he pleads. Harvey cries. “Millie is a cold bitch!” His shoulders are shaking. “One of them,” he jabbars drunkenly, putting his arm around me, “white women are heartless bitches who only think ... let me be hones: Millie is always complaining about my job, my education!” He shakes his fist. “She’s breaking my balls!”

I’m not about to start condemning Millie. I say, “But it’s your own fault, Harv.”

“She’s always saying I’m uneducated!” he interrupts. “Telling me I’ve got to go to college! Tutored! All last night ...” He bangs his chest. “I’m good enough as I am! Good enough, aren’t I?”

“Of course!”

“Been in the Air Force! That’s something! Served my country. Haolis! Whites! Let’s go back,” he mutters ...

I order another ...

The song is blaring ... “If you leave me! Leave me! Leave me! Oh ho, baby ... uh! Uh-unh! Uh-unh! Yeah, yeah!” The smell, the odor of the bartender’s sweat as he reaches and hands us two chilled glasses nearly has the effect of an emetic on me. I gulp.

My grandmother would’ve laughed ... certainly, for want of better candidates, Harvey saw me as and Honorary Hawaiian. Pathetic. We were desperate for something to cling to larger than our measly personalities ...

Harvey hesitates a moment, thoughtful. “You know, tough guy, my whole life before that, in Hawaii. A tough guy. Want to know something? I was a virgin! Before I met Millie I was a virgin!”

The voice from the tapedeck croons: “If you leave me! Leave me! All shook up!”

“Millie is okay ... from what I gather it hadn’t been so great between you two either.”

“No.” a moment reflectively ... “Going to rescue her, too, right?” I down my vodka angrily. “Am I right?”

He nods. “I’m sure going to try.”

“Partly at fault for what happened there. But not only me. Her family ... you’re going to get along with them great!” I exclaim.

“I won’t go see them, ever!”

He embraces me so powerfully I nearly fall off the bar stool. “Ua mau o ka aina I ka pono! The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness! Ua mau ke ea o ka aina I ka pono!” he crows raising his fist in a Power salute, “life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness! Will always prevail!” He makes motion to crush something under his foot, violently. He stamps the foot again to emphasize the point. Go right away, I tell myself ... our drinks weren’t paid for. Run out.

He motions to the bartender.

His eyes are reduced to unfocused slits, so I have to hold him steady on the bar stool. “Upstairs ... my buddy, aren’t you?” he says.

Harvey falls off his stool, I help him up, and we’re leaning on each other. Walking out of the bar ... around the corner. Toward Waitz Strasse.

Harvey is weaving ... stops in front of the apartment window ... smiles.

He rammed open the house door ... rather ...

“Both drunk!” Millie complains. She had been standing on the balcony waiting ...

I wave hello.

We go inside. Past her.

Harvey murmurs ... the Hawaiian takes a mean swipe at the drape for no reason.

“You’re an ass, Poaiukai.”

“Haoli!”

“Say that again.”

“Haoli!”

She slapped him so hard his glasses fell off.

He lowers his head. Millie punches him ... stomach, he doubles over to protect himself, tries to grab her flailing fists.

Harvey’s nose is bleeding. I pick up his glasses from the floor ... before they get stepped on, but Harvey is already reacting ... it’s his drunken state ... he clobbers her with one fist: she somersaults ... backward.

Her fingers into claws and scratching his cheeks.

Harvey lunges at Millie.

They merge into a tumble of slapping and kicking limbs.

I rush at them, my arms clasp about the Hawaiian's waist, Millie is smashing Harvey in the face. Zow! Wham! The floor under his brown, scuffed shoes is being drip-dropped with blood. Millie is dancing on tiptoes, landing a hard right on his mouth! His eyes are bulging, Harvey puts out his foot, trips her, jumps on Millie's belly with his feet. Down and up, down and up! I'm holding on. He reaches the ceiling, bends his knees to his chest and lands heels first on her. Harvey grunts. Trying to crush Millie's skull. I slacken my grip by accident, Harvey shakes me off, flies away, takes Millie, throwing her across the room, over the couch! She pulls herself up, stumbles into a corner. There he is standing in front of her again, his jeans have opened at the belt. Lifts her over his head and heaves her like a rag doll, she hurtles through the air, lands and lays there and doesn't move. I have jumped on his back, and he leans forward, ignoring me, and seizes Millie, pulling her up. And then she falls under his fists again, rips away her blouse. She screams for help, she has no shirt on. "Blond haoli whore! Think I'm inferior, huh?" He unzips his pants. I press his head between my knees, I'm riding him.

He falls backwards ... me on top. I whack him twice in his kisser, he gasps and coughs, I ram my elbow into his windpipe. Then his efforts cease ... I have rendered him incapable of further mayhem. Bur my ribs hurt.

She screams, livid. Her forehead is bleeding red. She's naked above the waist, she cries, "Get out of the apartment!"

Harvey can only shrug helplessly. His strength waning ... turns his head to look in my face ... then is sobbing hysterically ...

"I can't live with such an animal!" Looking in her purse Millie shouts, "I don't have enough for a taxi ... can you lend me some money?"

"To my place?"

"No, to Heinz and Erna's! I'll be safe there ...," show sobs at Harvey.

Yes, now! Millicent's salvation! "Wait! Wait! My duty is clear: we've got to get out of here." I sigh emotionally. "We're going!"

She tearfully puts on a good blouse and leather jacket, we have finally understood each other. "Heinz and Erna's ... you'll visit later." Rushes down the stairs ... I wave!

“I have the feeling you haven’t received all the letters. I believe my first letter was an eight-page one, and then a seven-page letter was written, s short one. Don’t know if I wrote more. Maybe one more. But you never answer my letters. I write one thing, and you never mention or acknowledge it, in any way. I don’t know if you’re getting them.

“Alan, the icons are extremely high, right? Best to forget them.

“I am glad to hear you have made new friends! You always had that ability.”

Howard Hermagne ... and Elfriede Marx ... that’s who she means.

You couldn’t really call either of them friends. Howard was too exclusively self-involved to have energy for me or anyone else, too neurotic to be a friend, too busy fighting decades old battles with his parents ... they were Stalinist octogenarians ... dinosaurs in the Bronx. And he fought with Elfriede ... The way he and Elfriede discussed things! Battles royale. They talked about Israel incessantly. The bombing of Cologne. They were screaming at each other ... vehement, snarling with hatred. Then they would go to bed with each other. I would tell Howard to stop arguing about a land he had never been in. he didn’t listen ...

Elfriede was Howard’s Rhenish, Catholic, female twin. Wild-tempered, virulent tantrums, screaming fits. For both people I hardly existed as a separate personality ... Elfriede insisted I was from Manhattan. I kept saying no, but she knew better! Woody Allen, all that crap ...

I had told my mother about them on the telephone ... I read her epistle on the bus, on the way to Millie’s dump.

“What happened with Millicent? Answer this time!

“I’d love to be able to talk to you. Couldn’t we arrange something, can’t you give me a telephone number? A time, a day. Something?

“I am not blue, Alan. Just want you in the States. You’re so far away! You have to do what you want to do. Do the right thing, make yourself happy. I’ll adjust, if not Dad will send me to you!”

Now’s the time ... Millie’s rescue! I knock on the apartment door. She had given me her house keys ... told me she was leaving Harvey for good. First had to collect her belongings form Waitz Strasse. Howard told me Elfriede would not mind storing them. I had been chosen to bring her crap away.

It’s only four, I’ll be a bit early. I call Elfriede. I am standing alone in Millie’s apartment. I tell Elfriede I am coming over now with Millicent’s debris. Elfriede asks how much is there ...

“One large suitcase, an overnight case, a box of books. What have I forgotten?” I’m going to deliver everything, everything.

“Number Twenty-Three! Fasanen Strasse,” I tell my cabman. “it’s house number twenty-three ...” It only takes five minutes to get there from Adenauerplatz.

Ring her doorbell. Elfriede buzzes to let me in. I go up and down two flights of stairs three times to haul the suitcases and boxes up there.

Elfriede’s hair is cut shoulder-length, it’s dark, brown like her eyes. Eleven years older than me, thirty-eight ... not bad-looking either. After I push Millie’s belongings inside Elfriede shows me the room where they will be stored. The pile of another’s personal goods looks strange to me ... I hope Millie will soon be with me, I tell Elfriede.

Elfriede smiles. “You look loaded down ... I’ll get us both something to drink, okay?”

“Suits me,” I agree. Want to be amiable. Hardly know the woman ... “Mind if I first give Millie a call?”

“Go right ahead.” Elfriede hands me the telephone and quickly disappears into the kitchen ... returns in a few minutes holding two cold glasses.

I dial Erna Schmidt’s number, she answers after the first ring, Erna’s tone of voice lets me know she cannot stand me ...Erna’s baby is squealing like a pig being slaughtered in the background. Can’t hear what Erna is telling me, then Millie gets on the phone. Everyone sounds in a bad mood at their end of the line. Millicent snaps at me, asks me what I am doing. I don’t know how to answer, say I am getting drunk ... I sip the glass Elfriede gave me. I thought my girlfriend would appreciate the newfound equanimity. Far from it. Millicent screams at me for being inconsiderate, instead. I cannot follow her accusations.

“My own vicious circle,” I murmur, “becoming narrower...”

The phone goes dead, because Millie hung up ...

Elfriede asks me what my queen has said. If she’s happy now ...

“It’s no use trying to please anyone. It’s too hard to make Millie happy. What am I doing this for? ... Why can’t she see what I am going through and just come back to America with me ...”

Elfriede has ignored what I said and stares fixedly at my face instead. Like she is seeing me for the first time, without Howard ... My roommate is due to arrive back at his girlfriend’s place in a half-hour.

I go on like an idiot about Millie’s lack of appreciation. I’m a martyr. Why doesn’t she respond? I need some advice.

"You don't need advice, you need a new girlfriend," Elfriede laughs. She takes a swallow of her drink.

Elfriede has been married to an artist for twenty years ... this joker lives in Cologne and pays for her huge apartment in Berlin. He knows Elfriede is having an affair with my roommate. In her living room are his drawings, framed, in chalk. About five of them it's a nice apartment, and I spend some time looking around, sipping wine.

"My husband Manfred ... he's a genius!" She points at a picture of seven or nine zigzaggy blotches on expensive paper, framed and visible behind non-reflective glass, on the wall. I'm ignorant, a philistine! I nod my head and look. What are they supposed to be?

"Philosophy of post-modern composition. That means: no pretty, harmless pictures around you ... Isn't that just like life?"

"Meaningless chaos!" I get carried away.

"Quite right!" she nods. I, too, know phrases. You can get away with anything. I say whatever enters my head, utter crap! Doesn't matter. I am talking like she is. In the next room are more pictures ... Elfriede's husband designs furniture too: crooked tables, chairs cut in two, a couch with a hole in the middle, seats with legs at very odd angles. He had an unusual sense of humor ... for an artist. There's a picture of an apartment house leaning dangerously sideways. I think it's great.

"Extraordinary cerebral density!" I whisper and follow her into the kitchen like an obedient hound. I have enjoyed my museum tour.

She pours me another glass of wine and pours herself one too. We down it quickly. We're not drinking water! She is telling me about Howard ...

"Such an egotistical bastard! An ass! I hate him! You know how he's always saying he's overworked? It's done to lock himself away ... and to avoid me! He is scared! A baby! Scared of life. Of life! He won't ever be a real man! I know him: a coward! Afraid of committing his emotions ... afraid of his feelings! Needs a mother! Oh! Why do I even see him? Why! He's utterly catatonic and he hates his mother and is psychotic and collects inanimate objects because he thinks they will do him no harm ... and he has no taste! No class ..."

I switch off listening. She yells and curses Howard. It's all the same to me.

"Then why bother?" I finally query.

She relates the tale of her initial, all-night encounter with this monster: at the Amerika Haus on the first Tuesday of November, about a year ago.

"Carter's election. Howard was so cute! So intelligent. He had such good taste in those days. No dirt under the fingernails!" She puts her hand on mine, presses my fingers in an iron grip ...

laughing her teeth are very white. She jumps up to refill. Walks to the refrigerator, takes a new bottle of Pinot Grigio. Laughs while she uncorks it. The wine is cold. I am getting plowed.

Elfriede's knee presses against mine. "I love Woody Allen. You look like him, you know? What was it like growing up in Brooklyn, huh?"

"I'm from Indiana."

She ignores what I say and takes my hand and leads me down the hall.

Elfriede closes the bedroom portal behind us, turning the key in the lock.

I look at her a little curiously.

The TV is on ... We sit on her bed, I can't comprehend a word of what's being said, it's a film about the flight of a red balloon. A waltz! Sailing high over the earth, through the sky. A shift of focus: again the balloon rolling, rising through the atmosphere, the earth below is neatly divided into square: highways, suburban streets, single homes ... hills on the horizon, villages.

Elfriede, sitting on the bed to my right. Sways to the music. But I watch her from the corner of my eye.

"I think I've got to take a walk," I venture.

"No, no! stay right here! ... Woody," she whispers and wets her lips with her tongue and closes her eyes, inches over, the face is a quarter of an inch from mine. She jabs me in the side, I can't breathe, am frightened, fighting for air. Her sharp fingernails ... She is everywhere, is coming nearer. I see what she is doing but refuse to have any part in it! Her tongue licks my unshaven cheek, she holds me by my throat ... her sharp fingernails ... on my jugular ... I am at her mercy.

I knee her away as quickly as I can, legs pumping in bicycle motion, but she rips my shirt off, the buttons jump across the bed. She is emitting low, pained moans, while I try crawling off the bed. She throws herself on me. Her knees press both my arms down flat. Her feet stink! I can't tell what's happening ...

She grips my big toe. With an acrobatic twist of my leg is shake her loose ...

She's on me again!

"Your struggling ... it's hopeless."

My heroism is ruined as Elfriede unzips what's unzippable and pulls the mess halfway to our knees. We wrestle around, muffled screams and a loud sigh coming from me.

"Howard?" she murmurs, breathes the name into my face, lying on my chest ... naturally she'd thought of him.

I'd wanted another woman too.

Strauss waltzes play as the stupid balloon floats across the TV screen, wavering over fields and dales and crummy hills.

I hear the door opening, keys are clinking.

“Howard’s coming!” Elfriede whispers.

“Can’t be,” I murmur, then get up with a start as I realize what she means.

Howard lumbers by, outside the bedroom door, the steps are heavy, an elephant in the hallway. He is home.

The door handle turns in silence. “Elfriede, you asleep?” he calls.

She feigns a high-decibel yawn for Howard. “You woke me up! Damn it. Wait a minute ...” Doesn’t say why she locked the door. We hear him fussing with plastic bags. I suspect he has been book shopping. The program ends on TV, with the balloon losing air quite suddenly, diving to the ground.

In haste Elfriede puts on the sweater backward. Clothing ourselves at a greatly accelerated tempo, like we are in a fast-motion, silent film.

She tiptoes out. I creep after her. I hear Howard calling again ... his rucksack lies in the corner ... inside it are a good twenty paperback books, a few pairs of underpants, his toilet articles ... Howard is in the kitchen. He will never know I was here.

I tiptoe outside and ring the bell. Am let in by the two lovers ...

I was a knight errant bidding for the hand of Dame Millicent, jousting against the Black-Haired Harvey the Hawaiian, and I was in Germany looking for my roots... It had already begun at home, I'd changed my last name to its original Russian spelling, the one my grandparents bore before the Ellis Island officials had gotten to it. I expected to discover the shtetl somewhere in the east, to "find myself" ... it could have happened... in Eastern Europe... but I was forgetting there was no more shtetl to find in the east...

I spent the whole day reading in the Berlin Jewish Community library. The community... a motley crew of Displaced Persons who had stayed in the rotten city after the war ... mostly for business reasons ... No German Jews were to be found. The Yekkas lived in New York ... were arrogant fools ... or Nobel Prize winners. My grandmother knew all about them.

The head librarian Mister Lublin nevertheless belonged to this rare species ... a true German Jew ... born in Magdeburg. Lublin liked Americans, he never stopped gabbing. Amazing, a library where you had to beg the librarian to be quiet. He used his job to make new acquaintances ... conversed with researchers and students from all over Europe and America. I was happy when Lublin went out to lunch ... finally peace and quiet.

Opposite me was a young man obnoxiously attempting to peek into the book I was holding in my hand ... probably pissed off I had it. I ostentatiously took my time thumbing through every soiled page ... something about Marc Chagall in Russia. Then we got to talking. About art. In very broken German.

Feliks Mayer, nineteen years old. "I wanted to say," he spurts out the words in a big hurry, "I want to be a composer!"

I have heard his Russian accent.

"I'd like to become a writer," I tell him.

"My parents don't take my wishes about music very seriously." He confesses, whispering. With Lublin at his desk, gabbing, with six or seven other visitors talking in normal tones in different corners of a cramped, L-shaped room that held several rows of narrow shelves full of books there was no objective reason for Feliks to be quiet ... unless he is shy, another matter.

"What're you reading about?" I ask.

"Supposed to study medicine ... it bores me. Am reading about composers, Jewish ones," he points at the shelves behind him. "You know where I can find a piano to practice on?"

“Don’t know where I can find anything in this city.”

His accent is very strong, it is a hard-edged German. Feliks runs his hand through his hair, wearily ... “I have to find a piano somewhere ... earn money to get lessons. It must be kept secret.”

Feliks Mayer is my size, a little more on the wiry side than me. Skinny, with black, curly hair, light blue eyes ... Feliks frowns a lot when he talks. Getting perturbed talking about his plans he gets out of breath in his enthusiasm, and I listen. He describes his high-flown ambitions. The words he uses are not uncomplicated. My German is improving, however, I want to speak the local lingo, too. Practice makes perfect.

“I could do it!” He gestures toward the window, which is above and behind me and is black-smudged with dirt and dust, you see people’s shoes passing by, the sidewalk is above us, since the library is in the basement. “I have perfect pitch, I have absolutely perfect pitch. Give me a piano, and I can prove it! My parents don’t allow it. They’re paying for my so-called education. I can’t stand medicine! No, it isn’t true, it doesn’t matter. Many doctors are musicians. Maybe ...”

“I can’t carry a tune.”

The young Russian is a fanatic for music. I try to change the subject, but it’s no use. “Beethoven! That was a man! Too bad he wasn’t Jewish,” he laughs, “you won’t find anything about him in this library ... He is my hero.”

Friends? Howard and Elfriede? Forget it. Don’t mention Millie and Harvey. I thought a little walk would do me good, so we left the library and strolled down the Ku’damm together. Feliks raved, waving his hands, singing patches of melodies. A born composer .. The next day he invites me over to his parents’ place. In his room are pictures of Beethoven everywhere. Mister and Mrs. Mayer were suspicious of me, any friendship of mine with Feliks was an encouragement of their son’s wild, impractical whim. They sensed danger immediately. His father was a tailor, Mrs. Mayer much younger, a German Jewess originally from Danzig with a university degree, she taught English at a gymnasium, was very cool in her manner, while Feliks’ father was an emotional, uneducated little man. What they could not know was I listened to their son, and Feliks did the rest himself. He eventually found a piano, renting it by the hour to practice on, in an evening school ... He gave lessons in the Russian and Hebrew languages to accumulate the extra pennies to pay for the hours ... he made use of the piano. He was that desperate! What influence could I have had?

They spoke Russian at home, I liked visiting the family, thought the sound of the language was great. I was an idiot about things Russian then. It was probably a good reason I first took to Feliks ... Mister and Mrs. Mayer wanted me to speak English with their son, however, and would suggest

Feliks and I practice, so Feliks could improve his facility in case he went to America where all doctors are rich and influential! They had his life planned. I was a hindrance to the smooth process of their boy's career ...

It was a joke to speak German with him. Neither of us took the lingo seriously yet we communicated well, better than we had with anyone else, like a younger and an older brother. We had a game: collecting German verbs at the end of our sentences, laughing like maniacs over the string of random words we had arbitrarily accumulated, in his room, with the door halfway open, we made his parents worry more.

"Feliks, what do you think we should play, could, maybe, want to, feel, know, enjoy, participate in, cut down a tree, a buzz say having had and wanted to have..."

"I don't know, I mean, we want, need, have had to want and need to cut down a tree ... maybe," he replied.

Then we would cackle and honk with mirth. Throwing ourselves on the floor, it was pretty bad. Conversations would go on like that. It drove Mrs. Mayer crazy to hear her son talking such garbage.

"Feliks, practice your English with Alan," she would call, "you never know, you might need it later." Pretty plaintive too. Was really pissed off at me. I was a hooligan in her house. And Feliks had a genuine gift for languages, spoke Russian, Latvian, Hebrew, German, later Italian and Rumanian. He was a crazy brother to me who spoke German with anarchic grammar, who did not want to speak English either. I needed to improve my German by any means, to practice it.

The Mayer family had a red Lada ... a Russian automotive contraption that putted along, backfiring, bravely polluting the environment with its exhaust, a boxy deformity on wheels, only one step above an East German automobile but bad enough. Its seats were cramped, were presumably built for Lilliputians. When driving Feliks proved himself even more of an anarchist than with language. He sometimes did not look. I got scared as he reversed at full speed. Just for a laugh. He had no respect for cars or machines. He drove like we spoke German!

One time he had to get into a tight parking space downtown. Feliks had already had the Lada all afternoon, but there had been nowhere to go. We had gone for a ride. "Going for a ride" meant we had circled for hours in West Berlin, bumping into the Wall. He had to pick up his mother at the hairdresser's, on the other side of the street. Traffic going against him. He spots a parking space there, across the way, veers across two lanes, swerving in front of other automobiles who are honking at him ... drives up the sidewalk like an Italian. I am astounded. I figure when someone's drunk they can drive this way, but Feliks is not drunk. He just drives carelessly. Seems

to believe himself invulnerable ... charmed! As if metal, gas, and grease couldn't just as easily burn and mangle him if he made the wrong move.

American health insurance won't cover me in Europe. What if I got sick? My asthma sometimes bothers me. All this running around, picking up loose ends, trying to rescue Millicent ... I would come home to Zehlendorf breathing hard ... Howard was never home. Confronted with Tom, with Wilbur, Jerry. We bumped into each other in the hallway in the morning, afternoon, at night ... waited in line to use the toilet. It seemed someone was always cooking something horrible, making a real stench, Budweisers were being popped open, at all hours ... and we had visitors! And the cat! I was not about to resign myself to defeat, I was too stupid for that. All I asked was why had I left the United States to come to this.

I needed to do something ... am running out of money. Have six hundred marks to pay two months rent, no food money.

My parents had no idea about what I was doing. It was natural. I had not left any friends back home ... my girlfriend lived on Waitz Strasse. I wrote some of the truth to no one besides Gram ... I was laconic with Mom and Dad ... tight-lipped ... they didn't need to hear about my life in Berlin. That was paramount! This didn't stop my father from writing me solemn letters, all-knowing, blustery, full of empathy and understanding.

"Am so happy to see your notes and letters," he scribbles in a neat and blocky scrawl, "you know how I visualize the places you describe, I talk to the people around you, move around, and be you! Being you is wonderful, a feeling of happiness is simply overwhelming. Please continue describing your feelings in Berlin! This brings me closer to you, and I am happy. While I am happy as I read I am also a bit sad. A good sad, but nevertheless sad! I think about how much I miss you and the good times we had together. I get such a good feeling when I remember our talks and feverish tirades. I must admit, son, you totally captivated me and involved me in your enthusiasms." He lied, anyway I skimmed through the first letter he sent. Must have been written from another planet. My old man believed he was a smart guy in the wrong job. He should've been a lawyer fighting for the poor and underprivileged! Or should've been a star journalist. Realistically, he might have had a solid, high job in the Navy ... even, with his wartime Navy connections, could've gone into government. That was too "low" for my old man ... Instead he had followed his father's advice, a hustling immigrant who dealt in goods only this side of legality, in black market, in bootlegging.

He had told his son to get into “sales”, wholesale and retail. My Pop had owned a furniture store in south Bend, switched jobs to work wholesaling car parts from the closed Studebaker factories, then had taken to selling hot merchandise, like cardboard packing boxes, rolls of tape. He sold them from the back of our family station wagon, a red and white '57 Plymouth. Was a fence. Finally he gave that up and tried selling life insurance, got good at it. People bought from Dad, but my father never respected himself for his sales talent. A smart guy in a dumb job.

“I’m proud of you, my son! You have had a tough experience and you have been alone. Yet you have survived. You are making it and you’re doing the making! I get this sense of pride and strength flowing through your letter.”

Pride and strength! Incomprehensible ... he got it from my silence ...

“It isn’t just because you’re making it. And through your letter comes the good, caring person that is you. I am very proud and happy you’re you.”

I figured ... Howard was frightened of me being a burden on him ... financially ... things would soon begin getting desperate. And Dad writes, “...got into a heavy discussion with Rabbi Rosenstock and a Protestant minister and an Episcopal bishop about the cosmic God and the personal, caring God. I have a somewhat difficult time bringing together the living Force and Transcendental Power that caused Creation with the personal, caring God, the God in history, the message of Judaism.”

When it came to characterizing my friends ... or my mother ... or her friends my father’s temperament and judgment were reflective of having gotten answers from Reader’s Digest homilies. I could not fend him off except by being away ... what my mother had to endure! My father was like his mother in this way, and he hated his old lady for her preaching.

He continued by writing about watching a pro football game on television .. and about his financial dire straits.

Before I left my old man had said to me, “When you go to a strange place, first go to the Jewish Community ... and visit your own people, for help and company ...”

I did it. I had learned from Tom that Jewish services were held not far from where we lived, in the southern part of Berlin. For the American Army, that is. In the Army Chapel on Hüttenweg ...

I had heard about Mister Siegel, a Jew from New York who had been a resident in the city since 1945. He had not been ordained, was a layman volunteer for the post of Army rabbi. He was also a full colonel in the Army. And Chief of the Supply and Services Division, where he wielded influence inside the Army community. And was a Freemason .. making the network complete.

I had nothing to lose.

There is much traffic on Hüttenweg. Cars hiss by, honk for no reason as I emerge in the circle of light under a streetlamp. Straight ahead: Wald Cemetery ... It is a black, cloudless night, around me are rows of high-rise apartments where Army dependents reside. It is a cold, dry, wintry Friday night. I had some difficulty at first spotting the Army Chapel. It is a nondescript place, a one-storey, rectangular, brick and stone building with a glassed-in lobby. A genuine eyesore built with government funds. No sign of a synagogue, only a chapel.

At seven-fifteen in the evening I walk through the swinging glass doors. Services were to start at eight.

In front of me is a tiny fellow with shiny, gold-capped prominent front teeth. The teeth glisten in his wet mouth, he smiles, says something in Russian. I nod. Don't understand a word. This is the Army chapel, what are these people doing? The lobby is tiled with old, worn, black linoleum. It is a standard government look, everything looks functional and public ... and ugly. Pamphlets are laid out in a row on a wooden, collapsible table: Norman Vincent Peale, hortatory, self-help church literature. American Protestant sects. A lady joins the Russian man, she has emerged from the bathroom ... Her hair is red-brown, henna color, the lips heavy and pink. Then their daughter comes from the toilet, where she had obviously been powdering her nose. Had dyed red hair like her old lady. They're eyeing me a little. They see I am apparently not a Russian, am a good prospect.

The daughter smiles. Everyone's wearing heavy coats. It's winter, it is not exactly a scene from Doctor Zhivago, because I want to escape.

Another couple come in. with daughter, the more the merrier. Also Russians. The couples eye each other. Daughters do the same. They cackle a few Russian words ... six pairs of eyes examine me from head to toe ... with heavy coats puffing up.

The door opens and a guy who looks like a bum, with short gray hair, wearing a beret, saunters past me ... dressed in raggedy, baggy black Levis. A rope holds his pants up ... He has come in off the street. He nods, mumbling to himself. A bum.

"Maxie here yet?" he quacks.

Stares at me through black, horn-rimmed eyeglasses that don't fit properly ... which are awry on his nose. His glance is crooked because of the insane angle of the lenses.

"Want a job, eh?" he smiles. "You have to talk to Maxie about a job."

I am taken aback.

“I guess I need to find something ...”

“PX is where Maxie sends you.” He points at the Russians. “They all want work too!” giggles malevolently. “And rich sons-in-law!” ... Didn’t know whether he was mad or just kidding. He offers me his cold hand. Shakes vigorously.

“You call me Mister Buchalter! I’m a lawyer. Haven’t missed a service since 1950. I’ve been here since 1945, between you and me ... don’t say anything to Maxie: can you buy me some peanut butter and baked beans ... a couple of cans?” He whispers like a conspirator. “After Maxie gets you a job you’ll shop at the Commissary. Can you do that for me?” He taps my shoulder, hissing, “I’m a little short on money!”

Standing next to us is an overweight man, about my height. Wearing a dark blue suit ... Dyed black hair, covering up the gray, balding on top, he wears glasses with wide, square lenses American Style, military ... His eyes are heavily lidded. He watches me while swaying on the balls of his feet, sizing me up and giving me a look that threatens. My grandmother would have loved Mister Siegel. He would have reminded her of her thrice-married, thrice-divorced husband Nate ... my other grandfather I never met. Siegel only lacked a black shirt and white silk tie, with a diamond stickpin. He chews on an unlit, half-smoked, fetid, black cigar, changing the cigar’s position as he speaks, but retaining it Edward G. Robinson style.

“I’m Max Siegel,” he says. Shaking my hand.

“Glad to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.” Seems unfriendly ... No matter, my grandfather Nate was a shtarke for the unions, in Chicago ... a mobster ... Gram told me enough about these types, so why be alarmed ...

“So you’ve come to services! Not many young men here. “ he looks at me suspiciously. “You need a haircut. What’s your name?”

I tell him, confessing, “I’m from South Bend, Indiana.”

“Is that your fault? I know the place well.” Rolls the black cigar between his lips, staring at my hair.

I stutter, shyly, “Berlin’s a nice place.”

“Saw a lot of kids like you come here. Berlin’s a tough city with no job.” I already knew about Siegel’s life. He had been a slum kid, raised on New York’s Lower East Side, who had made a modest career in the Army during wartime, had arrived with the occupation troops ... he did what my father did not do, he saw his chance in forty-five and seized it. My Dad had been raised in the slums too: Chicago’s Albany Park. Siegel and my old man were a kind of person I called Herman Wouk Jews. I knew the type! Postwar nineteen-fifties suburban America with its I-made-it-good

religion was impossible to combat, it was too self-confident ... you only removed yourself from its sphere of influence ... but what was I doing! It again stood opposite me, personified, while I begged Siegel for help!

Anyway Siegel knew his way around, which is more than my father did.

“How’s your German?” he asks.

“I’m learning..” I thought of Feliks. I’d have to practice more.

Siegel turned to jabber in Yiddish with one of the Russians. When he spoke it, however, it sounded unlike the language I had heard my grandmother sometimes speak with my parents. When he spoke it with the Russians at the services it sounded German. I didn’t know if it was one or other, the two tongues had become mixed, like Siegel had: staying in Germany, marrying the house maid who was working in the Dahlem villa he was occupying as an American officer in the late forties, he had never told his mother he had gotten a wife and why he was making his home here. Was successful but had betrayed the tribe.

“What do you want to do?” he asks turning back to me.

“Anything.”

“Anything? What do you mean? The trouble with kids your age is your age ... Salnitsky! Listen to me, you want a free lunch, you ain’t going to get one. Nothing’s for free. You have to work for a livelihood. Everything’s got to be paid for.”

Buchalter, the bum, nods his head vigorously. “Can’t get something for free! Nothing’s for free!” he who had requested from me, a complete stranger, to buy him canned goods at the Army Commissary once Siegel to me a job...

“But I do want to work,” I protest.

“He wants to work,” adds Russ Buchalter patting my shoulder.

“Work? You kids know anything about labor?” Siegel yells viciously, clenching his teeth. “How many hours do you work a week ... seventy? Eighty? Ninety? A hundred! There’s no end of work for me ... tomorrow I go to orthodox services at the shul on Fraenkel Ufer ... that’s a synagogue, for your information ... What do you know about Judaism, goy? I do community work there for free! I know how to be a Jew!” He looks at me, as if seeing me for the first time. “What can you do anyway?”

“I can type! I can read and write Mister Siegel!”

“He can! He can!” Mister Buchalter crows after me, pressing my forearm with strong, dirty fingers. “A guy like him reads and writes, Maxie! Believe him, I can vouch for ...” He looks at me puzzled.

“Alan,” I say.

“Alan! That’s it! He’s your boy!” Buchalter is enthusiastic.

Siegel frowns devilishly, ready to pounce on me. A word of sarcasm from me, and I get a kick in the teeth. “I expect you in my office at nine Monday morning!” He hands me a card. He waddles slightly but walks very fast. He’s taken leave of me. I watch his fat behind and small but powerful shoulders, the blue suit, I’ve just encountered Meyer Lansky and a rabbi rolled in one! My luck.

“I helped! Did you hear what I said? Now you’ll get me the peanut butter and beans, won’t you? You’re morally obligated,” Buchalter says, adjusting his beret. His glasses are absolutely crooked. How can he see? I nod yes. Yes, I will buy him everything he wants ...

The Russians and their daughters are smiling, standing nearby, looking in my direction ... We file into the chapel, following Siegel. A wooden floor. There is no tabernacle.. it’s completely makeshift: no torah, just a speaker’s lectern in the front. A place to play Bingo, that’s what it reminds me of, church bazaar rooms. Facing the lectern, where Siegel officiates, are seven rows of standard auditorium chairs, what you find in Army barracks or high schools. Behind us I spy a table, the Kiddush table, that’s where you get something free to munch, often bagels and cream cheese, ice cream from the Commissary, I think this is why Buchalter always comes ... Free meal. A gray-haired German lady with Nordic features, high cheekbones and straight nose, takes care of the food behind us. She obviously does not participate in services. Buchalter whispers she had been married to an American officer after the war who died... A Jew. She’s not paid, it’s charity work she does, in honor of her deceased hubby...

Siegel goes through a fifteen-minute prayer recitation with the measured calm and dignity of a runaway Wells Fargo wagon: prayers are yodeled swiftly. I cannot catch anything. Not as if I would anyway, I had hardly had any religious education ... my father’s theological speculations were a new interest, I hadn’t known him to speak that way before ... Siegel’s New York accent is very strong when he recites prayers. I am still getting looks from the Russians from across the room. Buchalter nudges me. In his mind I am a gigantic jar of baked beans, a fountain of endless peanut butter being poured in his mouth, Bacchus is nothing compared to what I can bestow... He can wallow in a tub of Jiffy peanut butter, smear it over his limbs in plastic ecstasy, the baked beans can bubble away in the pot, in many pots on the stove, waiting for him to consume them ... bubble in his belly.

In fifteen minutes services are finished. Mister Siegel announces the coming activities of the American Jewish community in Berlin. Which means Jews in the Army, Air Force, and State Department community. Not exactly numerous. We nod our heads in culinary anticipation,

turning our heads toward the Kiddush table laden with goodies, mouths salivating. Siegel wishes us, “Gut yontif,” happy Sabbath.

Then this fat guy with shiny, slicked hair who looks like a Greek waiter rushes in. Siegel opens his arms, hugging him, the overweight Greek takes off his voluminous coat and begins wailing. I don’t like his voice much.

The others think he’s Caruso. I am glad when he’s quit.

Buchalter tells me the round Greek had had a role in the film “Cabaret”, playing a cantor. Himself: Baruch Benjamin. A Sephardic Jew from Saloniki blessed with an operatic voice, who had survived Auschwitz. As a displaced person arriving in Berlin in 1945 he had stayed and become the cantor for the Berlin Jewish community. He also sings at the German Reform temple on Pestalozzi Strasse... afterward rushes here in a cab. I figure he feels obligated to the American Army, the liberators, and Siegel is only incidental in this context. That’s what is funny about Jews in this city, most feel obligated somehow, for some reason ... many even toward the Germans.

“Couldn’t care less,” I say to Buchalter after he has described the cantor’s operatic ambitions stymied for a cantor’s career.

The cantor had dragged his son along ... a guy about my age who looks pretty uncomfortable here.

I had slept overnight at Elfriede's ... in the guest room. When we were sober we never talked about certain things in the past, at least three weeks before ... dead and gone. I wanted to be in town so I could rush over to Nollendorfplatz where Millie was staying with the Schmidts.

Heinz und Erna hated me. I couldn't blame them. I had popped up from nowhere, from America, to intrude on Millie and Harvey's lives.

Their joint is on the third floor of a high-rise, a cheap apartment complex, as hideous as Millie's place on Waitz Strasse. The building is whitewashed, inside are public welfare recipients. Foreigners, criminals, the elderly,,, battalions of raucous kids squealing Arabic, Turkish, Bengali ... no Teutons except the Schmidts, who had come from East Berlin a couple years before. They despised their neighbors ... Heinz had been in an East German prison for political reasons, had been "bought" by the West German government, been generously provided with an apartment, income, given connections for jobs. He once told me in his opinion all the dark-eyed, dark-skinned neighbors should be deported, collected in camps ... and as the night grew longer and Heinz got more drunk he added: should be ... gassed.

On each floor every resident had a balcony the size of a small sink. Should you want to commit suicide decently you most likely couldn't get onto the thing. I never saw a soul standing in them.

Millie opens the door putting a finger to her lips. "Erna's baby's sleeping, be quiet!"

Millie looks great, a little worn out, but I loved her when she looked tired.

I stumble over the throw-down rug in the living room, and the baby starts screaming in the next chamber. Erna, who is six feet tall and wears thick glasses magnifying the pupils of her eyes to the size of the palms of my hands, hits the coffee table with her fist. She's quite skinny ... No, we don't like each other.

I sit down on the couch. Erna goes in the next room. The baby squalls, facing me is a wall-sized, color photograph of a Hawaiian beach, swaying palm trees, white sand, all that. That's the wallpaper. I immediately feel sick.

"How is Harvey?" Millie asks, not looking at me.

The huge couch took up half the room. In front of me is the coffee table, an illustrated book is lying on the table about Hawaii ...

"Did I hear you right?" I inquire.

Millie gives me a look like I'm crazy. "I have to make a new start ... can you help me? I want to stay here for now ... they're my friends. New Year is coming up. I want to get away. Erna and I will probably be taking a vacation ... to Amsterdam ..."

I kiss her hand ... She looks beautiful, my American doll.

"I'll be back in a week," she promises. "I'll see how Harvey is doing!" I've stood up. Me, Alan Salnitsky! The last unselfish, chivalrous lover! "I'll see you later!"

As I leave I hear her calling my name ... I turn around and open the door to the living room.

Millie stands close to me. "Can you do me a favor? How much money do you have?"

Showing her two hundred-mark bills, two fifties, three twenties, some tens, and change she grabs it out of my hand. "Can you spare it?"

"Four hundred marks? Sure!" All I had.

I leave her and take the bus to Waitz Strasse. Millie wanted to know how Harvey Poaiukai was doing. Now she belonged to me!

He is home, of course. Harvey looks miserable, anyone could see the pain in his face, wearing a red bathrobe ... Like someone had come at him with a club and mallet, his brain all messed up.

The apartment has not been cleaned up in weeks. Plates with leftovers are on the floor, and the place reeks of rotten victuals. There also is the fungus ... I sneeze three times. My asthma. I get a little cramp in my chest.

Ironically enough the doorbell rings just after I have arrived, and it is Howard Hermagne, there to give the Hawaiian the math tutorial. Harvey had forgotten to cancel it. Won't need math anymore, I surmise. He won't be going anywhere with Millie! Ha ha!

Harvey is moaning as he talks, he groans ... sits down on the floor, and Howard and I do the same. All chairs have been destroyed, the stuffing ripped open, the legs twisted, thrown on the balcony. Harvey did that.

I feel great.

"I haven't had a day off in months," Harvey says. "Working seven days a week, Sundays cooking with Heinz Schmidt at his sandwich place. Just to save!" He shakes his head. "My father was the same. Screwed everything up just as he was about to make it big! He had an 'in' with the local politicians. I'll tell you why, maybe you'll understand: the whites did it to him. The haois. My Dad! ... Forget the whole thing! White-skinned broad! I got myself laid and was hooked like a shark. You ever see how they hook sharks in the Pacific? Huh?" Harvey wipes his eyes. "I drank too much. Talked too much. You put me up to it!" He points at me. "What happened? What did we talk about. Alan?"

"She slapped you after you called her that bad word for whites," I reply. "You hurt me too, Harvey. I got a broken rib." Well, almost broken.

"What a mess. Don't have to tell me! I don't deserve anyone's sympathy."

But he had the sympathy of my roommate. "Everything will work out," Howard whispers, hand on Harvey's shoulder. He actually stands up to pat the shoulder of this bastard!

"Millie is in safe hands," I say, to counteract this betrayal.

"A man should never, never hit a woman! I know it. My Pop told me these truths. He also hit my mother, you know. We're sons of bitches. My family's ruined me. Millie thins the Poaiukai clan is great, I've lied to her, the whole time..."

"She's fine," I smile.

And Howard: "Don't be afraid, Harvey, things will work out. You'll get back together."

What's he saying?

"Men have got to stick together," Howard continues, "otherwise the feminists will cut off our balls."

"Did it ever happen to you?" Harvey urgently queries. It alarms me. Where is he getting the energy?

Howard nods.

"Jeez! That so?" Turns to me pointing his finger. "You didn't even write her! Some boyfriend you were! I don't feel bad at all, man!" He takes a sip of coffee. I look around at the cups of old coffee lying around. Scattered about on the floor. Growing inside are civilizations of scum and fungi! Thank God, Harvey offers us nothing, otherwise poisoning would be certain.

Howard shakes his head again, solemnly. "Women are awful..."

If I had stayed in America I would never have met these delightful people.

Howard has this thing about being a real man. He had never served in the armed forces and seemed to regret it. Had left New York in 1965, as the troop build-up was beginning in Vietnam. A draft-dodger, you bet. Has a bad conscience and an enormous need to prove himself as a man. Maybe he sees his decision now as wrong ... but his assertions of maleness were infantile. Harvey had served in the Air Force. That was enough to make him a Man in Howard's eyes...

I stayed a little too long ... it was evening when I rushed to the bus, already dark as I arrived at Nollendorfplatz.

When I knocked on the door Erna Schmidt would not let me inside. She blocked my way into her apartment. What kind of coup was this? "Am I late?" I ask timidly, looking at my wristwatch. "Please, tell Millie I'm here! I'm sorry I'm late!"

Millie pops up behind Erna. "What were you doing for six hours? We're going to Amsterdam!" Erna, a head taller than Millicent, puts her arm around her. They glare at me... me, the monster.

"How long?"

"Forever and ever!" Millie rushes at me and pinches my cheek. I put up my hands to defend my face, and she kicks her foot at me, pushes me against the wall.

As she rears back with her leg, aiming at my belly, I plead, "Hold on!"

She slams the door shut.

I slowly walk across the plaza in front of the apartment complex. Peer at the lit window. No sign of bodies or faces in it. Look in my wallet ...am a fly about to be swatted. "This can't be real," I ask myself, "can it?"

I make a call in the telephone booth dialing a familiar number: Elfriede. Yes, she's home. And Howard, the traitor, has just arrived. It snows on my head, it is a bitter, cold night ... I walk down Tauentzien Strasse.

There is a fat stranger standing in Elfriede's living room focusing a weary, drunken glance in my direction, and Howard the Rat is also there. We sit down at a round table, a large, oaken affair. Elfriede is pouring glasses of vodka for all.

The fat man has paint under his fingernails. I notice it and ask him why.

"I am a Dadaist! Pop Dadaist! A friend of Manfred and Elfriede's," he explicates holding up his claws, palms turned toward himself, for inspection. "A painter!" He laughs. "I also had a girlfriend once." My story has obviously been discussed .. "An American woman. We were living together in a cabin in Iceland. In the country, see? I work better there. Can't stand Berlin! Or Vienna! Had to go away ... to an exhibition. I was about your age..." He looks at me. "But certainly twice as stupid as you..."

I laugh. The fellow is a rhinoceros. He can barely be held in the chair. The seat squeaks loudly as he moves.

"Dorothy was her name. I had left, and she got herself a lover in my absence. An Arab! Her friend was crazy, jealous of me when I came back to my own cabin. He had been sleeping with Dorothy the whole time and when he saw me he took my books and squeezed tubes of oil into them. Then he chases me around the cabin with a loaded pistol! And in between he is ripping open my finished canvases with a stiletto! Ha ha!"

Very funny.

"A situation, eh?" Cheater Weiss is a painter who likes telling colossal stories. Anyway it's nice he bothers at all. He presses a stained finger into his glass and fishes out an ice cube. He lets it melt in his hand. A small puddle forms on the table.

"I'll tell you something ... What is your name?" I tell Cheater who I am. A nothing. A big nothing. "See how things can happen? I wanted to slug Dorothy for having a lover, and the guy nearly killed me." He swallows vodka. Elfriede pours him more. Cheater Weiss' hair is shorn off, butch military style, the stubble on his face is longer. Wears a leather vest.

"Cheater," I said to myself, 'either you kill yourself or let it be.'" I gather to put a bullet through his armored skull would take a howitzer. People like him did not die of gunshot wounds but must be harpooned and brought to a beach to die slowly of exposure from the sun and elements...

"Take it from me! The deeper you descend," he points to his feet, "the higher you'll rise!" and crosses his arms like a Buddha. "Don't be afraid of sinking! Just go down!" Elfriede asks Cheater what he means. He inquires in German about a book, which she fetches. "I'll read a couple poems. My old Heine..." He reads in German, jerks his head while he is reciting and intones individual syllables, they're noise, can't understand much, I'm not so crazy about poems at the moment, I hate poems anyway. He stops abruptly, slams the book shut and tosses it into the puddle on the table.

Raps on the table and stands up. Cheater sings a melody, his eyes roll back ... he falls ...backward. Lies there, like a stiff, passed out cold.

New Year.

Naturally when I got an invitation to spend New Year's Eve with Heinz, Erna, and Millie I accepted pretty quickly.

Traveled to Nollendorfplatz...

We start drinking champagne and vodka in the apartment, Millie looking great, as always, she is nervous about me. Sound of loud shots ... Everyone blowing off firecrackers, cherry bombs, and other ammunition tonight. A German New Year's Eve.

I try to get closer to Millie, on the couch, drinking one glass of champagne after another. She had not yet made a decision ... There was always a chance... Forget Hawaii! I'm reborn. Maybe it's the alcohol.

Heinz and Erna put their arms around each other, Heinz proposes a toast. "We'll drink to freedom!" Heinz yells loudest. Millie looks at me, and we drink. I am entranced by her eyes. Millie wears eyeglasses but often she puts in contact lenses, which make her orbs bloodshot. The whites of her eyes are rosy ... the contact lenses are torture.

“To life!” I cry.

It seems to me I am the only one drinking heartily in the room... Millie, Heinz, and Erna are looking at one another in anticipation of an event. Heinz glances at his wristwatch when the doorbell rings.

Harvey strolls in, taking off his winter coat, full of energy. He kisses Millie on the shoulder ... I watch them, not knowing what is up. This is absolutely the end.

“I won’t stand for it!” I jump up! I’m going! Stamping towards the door... It is eleven-thirty at night, there is not snow on the ground yet it is dark, lonely, uninviting out there...

“What’s wrong?” Harvey calls, but I slam the door behind me.

Am wandering around the plaza, a sharp wind hits me in the face ... My breath comes out in crystalline clouds. Firecrackers go off, lights explode in the sky. If you are alone, in a strange country, any celebration is lousy.

Reconsidering a rash act ... made an ass of myself. I retrace my steps quickly, rapping ashamedly at the door, I am let inside, but everyone hates me. Contrite. I sit down.

All four are huddled around a book with huge color photos about Hawaii and shark-fishing. “This isn’t anything ... you should see where my family goes swimming,” Harvey winks at Millicent. She presses his hand. No one looks at me ... I don’t dare stand up and leave. I sweat.

“A little angel ...,” Harvey hugs Millicent, a long embrace. I am tired out. My mother! Father ... grandmother ... proud and strong. Everything’s rotten. Don’t dare make a remark, am contemplating what I should do. Dozing ... waiting. A light goes out. Hissed conversation. Broken sentences ... Words are far away. No one glances in my direction.

The couch has been pulled out to make a fresh double bed for Millie and Harvey, who are so drunk they flop on it fully clothed. I lie on the floor, using a vodka bottle as a pillow. I want to leave early, don’t wish to face this mob again.

Heinz and Erna are snoring in the bedroom. It’s eight in the morning, I slept a couple hours. Empty bottles scattered on the floor, potato chips, cigarette butts. I trip over the bed where the lovely couple slumber. Outside is a milky blue, dawn light. I watch her breathing, next to her lover. Blond hair has fallen across her cheek, she twitches slightly. Harvey’s hand is lying across Millicent’s spine, the fingers protecting the small of her back from me view.

I look the last time at Harvey, then pull the trigger: brat a-tat-tat! Rat-tat a-rat-tat a-brrat! Brrat brat! Brrat! Brrat a-tat-tat tat-tat! Their corpses go flopping and flipping across his room. Bullet holes pock the apartment walls, fountains of dust and blood. Smoke pours from my gun. It hurts. My hand. It hurts. My gun is heavy. No. I walk out and don’t say goodbye ever.

“Well, you straightened me out. I believe I sounded very ‘anti’. To this, I can say that six million of our people were killed in Germany, by torture, by gas, and many buried alive. But according to your letter it seems all that has changed? Never, Alan!”

I thumbed through the letter she had sent me ... twelve handwritten pages ... key passages, like always, in red ball point...

“Alan, anti-Semitism will always be with us. Anti-Semitism is hatred, greed, and jealousy. Why jealous, because a Jew does not become a ‘ditch digger.’ They are intellectuals and are on a higher level. Alan, the Jews do not kill their own people, the Jews are not killers.

But they are fighters. Alan, honey, things have not changed. There will always be anti-Semitism. Now the Egyptians are at it. But they have been at it from the beginning of time. We Jews have had rough going, that will never change. Now Mr. Sadat, the big wheel in Egypt, wants Israel! You have enough intellect and understanding to comprehend anti-Semitism will always be with us. And the Egyptians are Semites, so figure that one out.

“The Nazis wanted to parade in Skokie, an all-Jewish community. Most of the residents lived through the Holocaust, they were in Germany, they have marks on their arms, they lost parents and loved ones in Germany. Now you say there is no anti-Semitism in Germany. Never!

“But for the first time Jews fought back, and we have Israel. But Mr. Sadat of Egypt thinks they should have Israel. Mr. Sadat made a trip to Israel, he said for ‘peace’. A lot of crap. He wanted Israel, ‘a piece’ of that. The Jews have had it rough from the beginning of time. How much can a Jew take? So now we are fighting. Jewish people are intelligent and shrewd, so Mr. Sadat is getting nowhere. Sadat thinks part of Israel belongs to Egypt. And Mr. Carter, our President who got in by a ‘fluke’, thinks Egypt should have part of Israel. Our President, a peanut farmer, doesn’t know what time it is. This is a one-shot President, he will not happen again.

“Honey, most anti-Semites are poor white trash, rich or poor.”

My Grandma Bess existed on Social Security: two hundred ten dollars every month, paid fifty-one dollars a month for her thimble-sized apartment, which was federally subsidized. That was at the Bryn Mawr El stop, at 5600 north in Chicago. As a kid I had often visited Gram with my mother ... she told me endless tales about Chicago’s gangsters ... about her husband.

And when I turned nineteen and moved away from South Bend I would regularly eat dinner with her, sometimes sleeping over in her small place. In her apartment complex there was no one

had been born in America, in the land of the free and unlimited opportunities. Gram claimed she had been born in the United States... When she filed for Social Security she insisted she had been born in Chicago, and the city authorities could find no record of her birth certificate there. Gram had arrived on Ellis Island as a ten year old! From Odessa! Claimed she didn't remember a thing about Russia. When I lived in Chicago we would eat together, dining at the Walgreen's Drugstore lunch counter ... Gram puffed cigarette after cigarette, talking, hardly touching her food ... she fed me ... I was poor. She was poorer than me, I think. As a child I would lie down to sleep in her bed, and we would stay awake until midnight as she retailed story after story ... tales about Chicago hoodlums, gangsters. And the unions, what she knew about them from Nate.

In Gram's neighborhood the elderly were more impoverished than the inner city's traditional welfare recipients. They are dog food. Social Security was not enough. It was alarming. And the new barbarians who had recently moved into the decaying neighborhood watched the geezers who would stumble along on canes mumbling to themselves, old ladies with purses slung loosely over thin arms, wouldn't let them out of their sight for a moment ... Chicago was shifting its population. Dirt poor whites from the South, along with blacks, had invaded Gram's enclave ...

One time Gram and I were walking home after a meal, under the Bryn Mawr El bridge. She spotted a couple strolling opposite us on the sidewalk. The woman is a blond, hair sprayed high in a bouffant, her arm locked in a laughing, black gentleman's arm. He wore a straw hat and yellow shoes. Gram was hard of hearing but would not admit it for a long time ... And her voice carried. Because she spoke at a high decibel level. She jerks my arm. Swinging her purse pointing at them, "What? With a shvartze? You're so liberal? In public? Out on the street!"

"Gram," I urge with a timid voice, "it's a free country ..."

She pokes her finger at the couple, who are smiling at the lady who swings her purse at them ... The man ducks.

I glance around me hoping no one else is listening. I apologize to them both ... murmuring my Grandma's ... hysterical...

"They should be ashamed! In public ... on the street! No!"

"Keep your voice down," I whisper in desperation. The couple slowly turn around once more to smile at us. They don't take Gram seriously.

She stares at them, is now addressing the newspaper vendor at the entrance of the El. "That didn't happen in my day," she claims. "Degenerated, mixed dating!" She smiles sadly. Burrows in her purse, pulls out a cigarette, lights up, inhaling deeply.

A skinny black man with a bandanna around his head is lying in front of dilapidated, boarded up doorway. There is obscene graffiti smeared all over the wooden boards, he drinks wine out of a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag and watches us.

“Egypt is a poor country, people starving there. Sadat has done nothing for his country nor his people, so most of Egypt is here, and they become American citizens as soon as they can.

“My dear grandson, anti-Semitism is still with us, will never leave, but now we are fighting back. We have a President, a peanut farmer, strictly a one-shot deal, he says Israel should give Sadat what he wants. You think Mr. Carter, our President, the peanut farmer, likes Jews?

“Alan, I am an old woman, this old lady wishes you only the best. Please do not be bitter. Everything is much better than it was, Southern Trash will always be with us, as will anti-Semitism.

“Sorry I sounded off.

“Love you, Gram.”

Oh. No! she hasn't ended the letter, there are a few pages attached.

“Say, whatever happened to Millie? You see her? Some day you will meet the right girl, marry and be happy. A friend of mine here in the building has a son who married a German girl, a real Nazi, she finally killed herself. They had two sons, and they are not considered Jewish. They are Gentile. Even if a Christian tries to convert to Judaism, he is still a Christian. This woman's two grandsons could not even be pallbearers at a Jewish funeral. Her brother said, “They are goyim.” That took care of that.

“Understand me a little better?

“Miss you, darling. Miss our talks, our dinners, but most of all, I miss you.

!All my love, Gram.”

... But the epistle was not finished.

“Alan, darling, hate that ‘Salnitsky’. Make it Salt again. Salnitsky is Russian. Russians are animals. A cruel people, the Germans are cruel people, all anti-Semites! Are you trying to tell me the Germans changed? Never!

“Honey, here is a check for twenty-five dollars. If you need more, let me know.

“Another thing, Alan, you went with Millie a long time. It did not pan out. But to keep ‘torching’ for her is very foolish. But time does take care of heartaches. I should know. And, believe me, you will get over her. There are so many lovely girls, lovely and looking for someone like you. You will find her, maybe not in Germany, maybe in Israel, who knows, but you will find

her. You will marry, have a family and then you will be contented. I am not a fortune teller but I believe I do have ESP.

“I do not know Millie. I do not know her make-up, except she is German, and Germans as a whole are very arrogant, Jews or Gentiles. In time Millie to you will be ‘something in the past.’ You will meet a nice young woman who will appreciate you, your good mind, your kindness and so many other virtues that have not arisen as yet, but it will all happen. And when the nice things happen you will think of me and say, ‘I guess Gram did have ESP.’”

The letter is interrupted by illegible scribbles that are crossed out, and my grandmother writes, “Some shorthand, not important.” That, too, is scribbled and then crossed out. She continues in red.

“You are very fortunate, you have good parents, fine grandparents, be thankful for what you have.

“You will have much more as you grow to full maturity and not take all troubles on your shoulders. Everyone gets kicked in the teeth, but you are a man, skip all that until Miss Right comes along. But, please, God, not another German shiksa!

“Here is a check. Enjoy it. You’re twenty-seven. Still very young, don’t abuse youth, it’s with you for such a short time.

“Talked with Mom the other day. They just returned from Hawaii. She was tied, so I got a ‘quickie’ call, but I did hear her voice.

“Alan, how long is your visa good for? I’m sure you will not want to stay in Germany always. If you do, I’ll never see you again.

“I love you, grandson. I miss you, would like to see you, hope it is soon.

“Please write, love you, Gram.”

You need both fists to swat a fly,
to hang a cat you need a rope,
all you need is to make it die!
Oh, long gone is all their sad hope!
--Arrow Cross song, 1944

PX – Post Exchange

The store where I work is a nasty, long, flat building, unadorned, rectangular, put together according to the architectural principles of a warehouse, a K-Mart ... one-storied ... an eyesore! Like a Woolworth discount department store ... the American PX, my new worksite, this monstrous, windowless, steel-and-concrete shoe-box ... blinding fluorescent lamps on the ceiling illuminate a sheer infinity of rows of shelves inside, endless display counters where a plethora of merchandise is put up for grabs l... it is not even vulgarly “commercial,” only nondescript, without color ... with its low ceiling ... And hidden behind two swinging metal doors painted scarlet on the right marked “Employees Only” is the shipping ramp ... the long ramp where we unload trucks. A heavy freight elevator is located in this area too, it brings us upstairs and down, to and from the ramp ... The only escape from the cave below, as prisoners of the elevator ... metal floors and walls, twenty-five square feet, surround us as we ride a floor higher. We trolls have on occasion been known to peek through the red doors separating us from the retail store ... To stick our heads through the portal to peer at the things in rows, in piles ... a mile long, glass counters and metal stands holding cameras, stationery, jewelry, teapots, stoves, dishware, baseball bats, clocks, Hummel dolls, footballs, yarn, typewriters, cigarettes, turpentine, winter coats, cosmetics, clocks again, stereo equipment, regulation Army and Air Force uniform apparel, shotguns, BB guns, hats, knives, coffee machines, dishwashers, hand rags, house paint, cigars, and heaps of blue, yellow, pink, alabaster sheets and pillow cases, mattresses too, cowboy hats, umbrellas, galoshes, jeans, and dresses hanging on long racks... All goods reeked faintly of perfume ... a PX anomaly ... No one spoke about its cause ... Hundreds of amplifiers and turntables on special wooden shelves going the length of the store itself, a mile long. Two racks of long underwear, they were atrocious, dangling from the clothes racks ... scaring children, like the tentacles of a sting ray ... Shoes galore: eight

hundred varieties of footwear, some for jogging, dancing, basketball, casual, light, formal, in cow hide, in patent leather, in canvas, high-heeled, with reinforced toes, loafers and combat boots. Cleared shoes,

ice and roller skate. Custom-made Italian types. Then came the hockey sticks, the jock straps in all sizes, football helmets, knee pads, you got dizzy looking at the choice in front of you. Mitts and balls of every kind ... Kitchenware, aspirins, cough drops, fountain pens, light bulbs, power drills, hammers, wrenches, sewing machines, knitting needles. A tailor was also there with a fake English accent who took personal orders for suits. A custom-made three-piece suit? Every GI needed one. Uncle Sam provided well. Trucks arrived four, five times a day with merchandise to be unloaded from semi-trailers, from the ramp. Tons of crap to be unloaded and unpacked by us, unfortunately.

The stock room was down below. We were buried alive. No customer could imagine what had been unleashed on us by his consuming habits. Shoppers see only magnificent retail displays upstairs. Downstairs in our cave merchandise had been dumped in the middle of every aisle because the shelves were already full. We had hundreds of shelves, but still there was no more room... Boxes were broken open! Perfumes bottles split! Lipstick was smeared on the gray, concrete floor, washing machines were cracked in half, springs protruded from mattresses. It was a vast graveyard of the shopper's cherished wishes, reeking of cologne ... so many bottles had been broken ... every crevice downstairs emitted the stench of Chanel No. 5, there was no way out, we piled up the crap as best we could, climbing over boxes, destroying them, to get at other shelves ... not one square inch of room was left anymore ... Rows of shelved packed solid, including the tips, all aisles blocked. There were teetering mountains of goods! It was perilous to work down there, but we were oblivious to the danger. One hundred twenty-one aisles, thirty feet long. Our supervisor Mickey Szalay was in despair, daily threatening to fire us or quit himself.

The American PX was there so the military and diplomatic personnel didn't have to go shopping in German stores. It was extraterritorial, like the occupation itself. Who needed foreign goods with such a homemade cornucopia? It made Dahlem and Steglitz an American ghetto. The PX sat opposite the United States consulate ... on Clayallee.

A semi-trailer with a full load of stereo parts, turntables, amplifiers, speakers might easily carry untold tons of freight. Think of kitchenware, washing machines! You name it, we had to get the stuff out of the trailer. Our supervisor Mickey had seven fulltime workmen: a foreman Skipper Moon, a twenty-two-year-old Texan who had gotten his Bachelor of Arts degree from some college in the Midwest and had come to Berlin as a tourist ... Rosie, and ex-GI, a skinny black alcoholic from Louisiana who showed up for work three out of five days, whom Mickey refused to fire ... David Douglas, a tall, blond Englishman with a German girlfriend who had until recently lived in Johannesburg ... David had been born in Tanzania, was sent to public schools in England

when he turned ten ... There were the two Turks Ali and Turhan, who communicated with us in a fantastic pidgin German ... plus graying, fat Herr Lösch, a Berliner with a near

part in his hair who ran the linen section downstairs and never did heavy labor ... he was sixty and was too old and obese to lift a box without risking heart failure ... and me. We also had the services of a single

part-timer, a loquacious, overweight ex-GI from Arkansas, a black who had married a German woman and had opted to stay ... Louie Zachary had another career: he was a fulltime guard at Spandau Prison watching its lone inhabitant...

The loading dock is a narrow, gray concrete surface, forty-five feet long, with two brown, roll-up-able corrugated steel doors ... When any trucks arrived they would back up, our doors were opened, spacious enough to accommodate the gaping rear end of a trailer. Boxes must be unloaded onto wooden pallets first, then shoved inside the freight elevator by a forklift or hand jack.

We were in a state of continuous exhaustion. Mickey stood next to you counting the boxes you unloaded. "One hundred sixteen ... was it seventeen? Hey, not so fast!" He watched you laboring with a packing invoice in the hand. I can't say how many times Mickey forgot what number he had counted ...

The first truck arriving before lunch had a load of four hundred twenty-three cartons, the second, containing pillow cases, had eight hundred forty-eight boxes, a third containing radios had five hundred seventeen. Some trailers' floors are caked with red Georgia earth. We inhale it while working. Sand and dust. You coughed a lot. It got into your nose, it made your mucus reddish brown. You sneezed ... lungs bled. Spines were daily decimated by this slavery ... It was like Egypt. Building the pyramids! You had to eat like a horse to keep up your strength. Eight hundred forty-eight boxes ... pillow cases can be as heavy as granite, my arms were weak, I could barely catch my breath ... I had to do it alone, Mickey said I had to. My foreman Skip didn't give a good goddamn either.

Siegel had really done me a favor...

The others had already done their share by unloading two trailers ... I was the new guy ... so the third had been mine ...

Just before lunch another semi-trailer slowly backs up ... to the dock.

I want to get out and eat. I'm hungry. Half-hour lunch. Take a nap. That's the choice.

Mickey Szalay is a Hungarian. He left his homeland in 1956 and emigrated to America, where he became a citizen.

Mickey strides along the length of the loading dock, hollow-cheeked, his brown hair falling in his face, he really did have snake eyes. It's the end of him, too, although all he's done today is count boxes... he's limping, for he has a lame hip... Mickey clears his throat ...He's growling at us. The job's too much for him. "They're having another inspection," he laments ... "We're up to our ass in merchandise! And they're just running around trying to find our mistakes..." The words are spit out, it's a Budapest English. "This is an inquisition, not a job! I need a new one! A new job!"

Mickey dreads an official store inspection. One's taking place. He retreats from us. Goes to the other end of the dock. The others are sitting watching me, smoking cigarettes, bullshitting. Skip and David

are downstairs... Mickey doesn't care what they do, I'm the new one who's got to be broken in ... He comes back, stands frowning at the entrance of the trailer ... has the nerve to ask me to begin again because he's lost count.

"Which what?" I murmur ... trembling. I want to kill him!

"Didn't get the number of the last bunch of boxes."

I was careful not to bash in the corners of the cardboard cartons. I have already unloaded fifty boxes onto three wooden pallets... and it's almost gone into my lunchtime. I know the rules. Mickey wants me to recount the cartons. "All from the beginning?" I ask in disbelief.

"Don't know... I'll get it right ... You so smart? Try checking the invoices against the merchandise ...you're so clever, huh? Now get going!" Mickey snarls, rarely polite when he's wrong.

He is scared of losing his job... When inspections occur his behavior is a burden on everyone ... to nervous to count properly he snaps at us ... it lasts from eight o'clock in the morning until we close up at five. He says sweep the aisles. you have to climb over goods, broom in hand, push aside boxes ... his trolls do what they're told. An aisle has got to be swept, then re-swept. We push brooms along the peaks, along mountainsides of goods in boxes, ten feet off the ground ... calling to each other across the piles ... "David!" "Rosie!" "Skip?" "I'm here!" "Turhan!" "Yes!" Ali's voice: "Where are you, when you're where?" Topple over a couple hillsides ... no one notices, there are barely any crevices between. Striding along, near the ceiling, we hear Mickey Szalay down below screaming hoarsely. "Do it again!" If Mickey wants the floors swept who are we to protest we cannot find the floor ... Our supervisor looks down an aisle full of boxes, grumbling Hungarian to himself, barking in English. "Sweep it again!" ... Can never be clean enough, his respect for the

bureaucrat-inquisitors is a religious belief „he’s sinned. How to keep his job is his dogma...until the next inquisition ...inspection. There’s no ruling out the malevolence of the opposing forces, despite his precautions Mickey is never sure about how many times he has to do something to ward off the boles of fate ... He’ll tell you he’s preparing for the worst, he’s behaving cautiously...

The freight elevator opens .. A tall English troll emerges, behind him: Skip ... our foreman.

Mickey smiles when he sees them.

I always liked David ... much more than Skip, who nearly became my friend ...David had been trying to avoid his father and middle class England by going to places he can’t easily be found... After school he returned to his beloved Africa as soon as he could. Ethiopia. South Africa, then Berlin, this gulch for lost souls. The son of an English colonial doctor ... skip’s parents lived in Texas, he had been born in Ohio. David hangs around a lot with him, at least at work, he probably considers Skip an exotic...

It was my second day on the job when I met Skip. It was at the Army bus stop. It was spring ... Skip overheard me talking to Ellie Wong. Ellie, a Vietnamese woman who was married to an Army captain, had been to a French Catholic school in Saigon, worked as a saleswoman in the PX radio department ... We

gabbed about the behavior in foreign countries of Americans, of the French, whose language she fluently spoke, and people from the Far East ... Their shopping habits ... Ellie asked me what I was doing in Berlin, and I said, “I want to be a writer!” She was friendly to me, had a pretty face and wore a yellow flower in her black hair. Stupid enough, based on nothing, and Skip overheard me ... I knew him by sight ... He was my height and fifty pounds heavier, with a beer belly, fat legs, a Hemingway beard ... his eyes were turned inward toward his nose. When he hears my answer to Ellie Skip guffaws like a white English teacher in Texas hearing of an ambitious black student’s pretensions of becoming President ... for some reason I get embarrassed. He might have been less condescending as he erupted into wails of hilarity at the bus top, hitting his fat thighs with his hands...

Mickey loved Skip! He was the immigrant’s vision of a small-town, All-American boy, what Mickey could never be, his Sonny Boy. Sometimes Mickey put his arms around Skip’s shoulders and kidded him! At the Hungarian’s home in Tempelhof Skip slurped up Mickey’s Chivas Regas and the Paul Bunyan tales of the escape from a Stalinist gulag. A regular guest. Szalay and his wife did everything they could for him... Besides selling cosmetics two days a week at the PX Mrs. Szalay worked part-time at a real estate agency office, she knew about empty apartments and arranged to get Skip one on the Kurfürstendamm. I visited it once: a living room with a high

ceiling, wall paint of indeterminate hue cracking and peeling, only a television set standing on a wooden orange crate, a weak light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a ratty carpet, in the kitchen were two plastic coffee cups, a can of instant Nescafe, and a gallon-and-a-half bottle of whiskey. Skip and I drank the Chivas Regal Mickey had given him... I got to know him, as best I could, Skip grew lyrical about college and the friends he'd made there, and Professor So-and-so seemed to him "great"... I couldn't sympathize much with his nostalgia for collegiate life, for the influential friends he'd made, for the year he had studied political science in Luxemburg. Skip's Professor So-and-so had dropped hints... very hush-hush... Skip was supposed to learn something about Europe in Luxemburg! After Skip had graduated he had returned to the Old World, while his college buddies began careers in the State Department, CIA... IBM, ITT...

I couldn't have cared less.

The elevator had disgorged Skip and David... Everyone stands up, I quit too. It is lunchtime.

The Turk shouts, "Yah! Yah! Oh yah, yah!" Ali's makes dance movements. We are hungry. Ali twirls. Szalay shouts loudly enough for us to hear above the sound of Ali's rapidly pounding, rhythmic fee. "Let's go feed the monkey!"

The phrase Mickey uses when he's going to eat.

“What’s the problem anyway? Cure your asthma! Willpower!”

The cafeteria was on the opposite side of the parking lot at the ‘Truman Plaza shopping center .. During the half-hour we had for lunch Mickey pried into our private lives. The cafeteria was a cheap hamburger joint reeking sour and like a toilet ... but we were so famished we didn’t mind.

“Alan, you’re a mess! You’re a mess!” Mickey smears his hamburger bun with ketchup, takes a bite, talks with his mouth full, we sit at a round table, it had puddles of mustard, relish, and ketchup on its surface, intermixed with crumbs from previous eaters ... Rosie drinks one beer quickly, his meal is a six-pack, one beer after another... and David and Skip are breaking crackers into bowls of chili con carne, they shake pepper into the concoction, enough to incapacitate an infantry regiment... Mickey spits a piece of hamburger out while waving his hands to illustrate a point he wants to make with me: I was having difficulty breathing lately... everyone noticed it, because I wheezed while working... embarrassing... How was I supposed to take care of the problem? ...”No, wait! Yoga, I recommend yoga. Yoga is the best solution for asthma!” I laugh at Mickey’s suggestion. “God, what do you guys know? You’re all young idiots! When I was your age we were lobbing Molotov cocktails at Russian tanks. Listen to old Mickey! Yoga is the answer.”

I envisioned Mickey Szalay in a lotus position, legs folded, in his underwear... I laugh again.

“What ignoramuses you guys are. I practice yoga every morning, I’ll tell you why, if you want to know... I had difficulty going to the toilet! Constipation you wouldn’t believe! Couldn’t go! Nothing! For months! Got worse in America...Yoga helped, it cured me. Hey, you have to be more positive!” Mickey goes into detail about his digestive system... an elucidation at lunchtime about defecatory difficulties... I grew sick listening, but you weren’t allowed to interrupt. He didn’t stop to catch his breath... he talked... People sitting at the tables surrounding us stare in our direction and shake their heads in disgust. “Always greet the future with a light heart! With a light stomach! It makes difference. Constipation is conquerable. Yesterday I drank an entire bottle of laxative!”

“I thought you did it with yoga,” David comments, then quickly fans his hand in front of his open mouth to indicate it needs cooling... his eyes are watering, his chili is a torture ...

“No! I cleared myself out! Yoga and a laxative... take my advice, boys, if you want to feel great.”

“Congratulations, Mickey. You can always cure yourself, but I’ve had this problem since I’ve been a kid...,” I grumble. “Maybe I should unload one truck less per day...”

He ignores me. "Everything we do to ourselves is psychological. No problem is incurable. None! I used to get terrific migraine headaches, from the age of four until I was thirty-five... migraines... I wanted to put a bullet through my brain but I read a book once, and it said I could find the reasons for severe headaches

in myself, in my 'subconscious.' I decided I'd had migraines from the age of four until I was thirty-five in order to gain attention."

I was sleeping badly but didn't mention it to him... late at night people were slamming doors, playing the radio loudly... to many people living in Howard's apartment.

"I'll let you work a couple days with Herr Lösch... in the 'soft-line' section, you can rest there. Go to sleep. Herr Lösch won't give you much to do..." Mickey grins. His face is reptilian, the pupils slits. Irises very pale blue... a lizard's eyes. Mickey's brown hair was graying... He had a limp when he walked, a muscular, thick-shouldered man, he had once been a Hungarian folk dancer before he had had a serious accident in New York.

The first thing I said to Herr Lösch after lunch when I walked over to his department on the far side of the stockroom was, "I'm just a paskudne arbeiter!" I said it one of the few Yiddish words I knew.

"What?"

"I'm just a paskudne arbiter!"

"Is that English?" He scowls at me, incredulous. Mickey always sent him real losers... another one!

"It's Yiddish, Herr Lösch! It means I'm only a nasty, lousy worker, ha ha!" An idiot...

"Yes?" he replies irritably, in a manner making me believe he wasn't interested in this. Five minutes later he came up to me as I was putting some bed quilts on the shelf. "Is Yiddish like German?"

"A lot like German," I answer.

He sighs. "You're married?"

"Not yet."

"Thank God, you're lucky."

"Maybe I should've gotten married..."

"A young man? Are you crazy? When you marry you'll have no time anymore. Horrible idea... no will of your own! You just kill yourself in the middle of life... you must enjoy yourself first, once you marry and a family is made, everything else is kaput!" He had already checked out how stupid I was, now he wanted to give me advice...

The next day I singlehandedly unloaded two trailers, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. David spent his time downstairs checking in forty-eight thousand six hundred handmade dinner candles... he was taking his time dividing them into massive piles, according to the eleven different hues...the job would last a month, a bright future... Skip was at the doctor's, he had cut his finger, and Rosie had called in sick, but our stalwarts Turhan and Ali had done their share... taken care of three trailers by themselves...

Mister Batterman, an accountant, is a Brazilian citizen. His parents had emigrated at war's end to South America. Batterman is in his mid-forties, grew up speaking German at home, in the Brazilian city where he lived there was a whole community of German neighbors...a small Fatherland... His eyes stare through you when he talks to you, blinking rapidly. He imposes a rigid discipline on himself to remain as noncommittal as possible at work... Batterman barricades himself behind the desk...several times a day he pops up his head, like a mole coming out of its hole, and exclaims, "Well! I'll say! Hmm!" No one pays attention to him, not even Frau Steenz who sits opposite him. He speaks English, talking in a sing-song voice, gesturing spastically with long, thin hands and both arms, always avoiding your eyes. He is small, wiry, "loose-jointed", and when Mr. Batterman is forced to rise from his desk to check on an invoice he rushes around in a peculiar, duck-footed stride, taking long, awkward steps. Like he wanted to go in two directions at once, the sudden, spasmodic limb movements giving him a puppet's aspect ... there were invisible strings guiding him... looking like he would be disassembling into separate parts, an arm dropping to the floor, a leg on the desk, his torso falling off. Emitting noises, "Hm! Mmm-hmm... I'll say! Well!" Whatever he mutters is neutral. He is a nervous fellow whose life is run, by his own confession, in accordance with a rigid schedule, the exact minute he wakes up, falls asleep, when he eats, reads the newspaper, and washes his hands are timed actions... Last week he had to work twenty hours overtime. His hands shook, tears were in his eyes, he couldn't swallow,,, catatonia! A wet towel was placed on his forehead! He was given a drink of water! Frau Steenz tried to comfort him... He had been promised compensation time by the manager, time he could take off later, not a penny extra pay. Batterman looked so wretched I asked him why he didn't refuse. Why didn't he say no?... He stared at his hands.

The accounting office is a walled-in cubicle next to the stockroom, downstairs, where five bookkeepers sit at frayed steel desks punching adding machines...looking very busy... We have to give them all invoices and packing lists...the stuff we've checked in... That's a joke! We throw twenty papers at them, sheets covered with marks, arrows, crosses, checked-out columns certifying items have been accounted for, or not, our initials scribbled in at the bottom. David, Skip, Rosie and I are lax, to say the least. Herr Lösch is the only accurate counter, and the accountants wish him to hell since he is the only slow one in checking in items. Mickey Szalay

always miscounts anyway, otherwise no one bothers to keep track of the waves of merchandise overlapping us.

Frau Steenz, an accountant with dyed blonde hair who wore tight dresses showing off her figure, was taking a cigarette break sitting across from Mr. Batterman. There is a third, empty desk next to hers, I sit down... have to elucidate the intricacies of a kitchenware invoice... merchandise had come to us, but no one knew who'd ordered it. It is about four in the afternoon...

That afternoon Frau Steenz gave me a solemn oration on the situation in Germany in 1945: hunger, defeat, dirt, refugees, you name it, the Germans had it... "We were unprepared! I was only a young woman, what do you think soldiers were like? We were poor... a pair of nylons cost a fortune. Only lucky Strikes as currency... and our legs... nothing means anything except survival..."

"Oh? Hmm!" echoed Mr. Batterman, not looking up from the papers he was adding... the calculator made a clattering noise. "No? Hmm! Well! That's something! Hmm!"

"It was horrible! The Americans Were nice, however.. I remember!"

"Yes... I mean, nope. I was in Sao Paulo, hmm...only twelve years old..." Mr. Batterman glances at her and in my direction, quickly lowers his head so no one would think he had said anything.

"The problem of Communism was formidable, Alan," Frau Steenz adds. "The Russians were at our doorstep. There were other problems: displaced persons and criminal fugitives... those camps were everywhere."

Batterman pipes up. "Terrible problem!"

Frau Steenz swivels on her chair, reaching to the floor to pick up my book... her breasts were nearly popping out of her low-cut dress. She is sixty but wiggles when she walks, it's amazing...

I was not aware Mickey Szalay was sitting behind me. The guy has the hots for Frau Steenz. Mickey's taken to provoking her. Because that's the kind of fellow he is! This time he turns his attention to me while watching the real object of his amour. "Hey, you, wouldn't you like to be a soprano in a Jewish choir? You look the type with that nose!"

"Soprano in a Jewish choir?" I ask.

"Yeah! Yankel the Soprano."

Rosie, who is six foot three inches tall, a skinny fellow, gangly like a spider, has entered the office. Hearing the end of the question... he's an ex-musician, a gospel singer... he gets enthused...smelling strongly of whiskey. "Amen! I heard you, Mickey! That's the spirit! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!" he sings a long, low melody... "He could join a Baptist choir, man! Where I come from, Baton Rouge! People there know how to sing, say it out loud now: praise the Lord!" He

giggles... it's nearly time to quit...just a little tipsy. "God bless you, Mickey! Let's sing it together now..." He moans melodiously, hell... the guy's great.

"Praise the Lord!" I call.

"Bless you. Brother Alan!" Rosie retorts...throwing papers with a backward lift of his hand at Frau Steenz .. the papers fall to the floor... The office was silent, no adding machines clicked... Rosie is outside, in the stockroom, singing to himself.

Mickey shouts after him, "If you don't be quiet I'm going to castrate Alan, then he can do it! His voice is nasal enough certainly! The type of melody... you know the kind? Listen up!" he lets the Communist "International" song gurgle away in his throat and sneers... punches an adding machine, presses its keys: the

machine goes, "Click click click!" several times. "The Jewish music, eh, Alan?" ... hits the keys like a piano... "The dough rolls in, let's call for international brotherhood too! Let the Goyim pay for it."

Mr. Batterman looks up puzzled, frowning, but lowers his head again and can't hear anymore. His shoulders hunch up, he concentrates on his calculations.

Frau Steenz retorts, "Mickey, you don't have to be cruel!" the accountant stares at Szalay. I am facing her, and her face is scarlet, pissed, she's not bothering to conceal animosity. She tells him she and I have the right to talk. We were having a break.

"Alan's already had a break! He's not the boss of this company yet, is Salnitsky called Rothschild? He should work! Work, not blab away his last hour with you!"

I carried a book in my back pocket to peek into if there was a lull in work, "The Poor Fiddler," by Grillparzer, in German, it took me four months to get through it, I learned the language word for word... after the encounter with Mickey I stole away, went into the men's room... locked myself in the toilet stall to read. Later I did the paperwork alone... we were working overtime... on the other side of the stockroom, behind two mountains of pillow cases... as far away from Mickey as I could be. In Herr Lösch Land, the soft-line department.

Skip joins me, having heard of Mickey's sense of humor. Mickey owned a "Jewish Joke Book," Skip says he's seen it in Szalay's toilet ... when he visits there ... "It's well-thumbed! He sometimes quotes from it. But, you know, he always tells Hungarian jokes at lunchtime."

"He tell jokes about Jews, Skip, not Hungarians..."

"Wow! You're right! They're the same jokes in the book. He just changes Jews into Hungarians! His jokes all come from the book!"

"Skip, you're an idiot!"

He thinks about it for a minute. "You're right ... he tells me Hungarian jokes when I go see him at home... we get drunk on his good whiskey..."

"Well, I don't..."

"Maybe that's why you hate him."

"He hates me!" I reply. "I don't hate him..."

"He's a great guy, Alan. Give Mickey a fair chance!" It was already ten minutes to sex... Old Herr Lösch ambles over to us, he's rubbing his hands together, satisfied. A hard day's work is finished, he feels okay. Herr Lösch was near retirement, was stolid and orderly. His soft-line section was as clean as a whistle, everything in its place... the sole spot in the stockroom where anything made sense. Herr Lösch was proud of his achievement, and Mickey left him alone. Once you got to work with the old gentleman you had it made,

no problem with Mickey anymore ... and Mickey had promised me I would stay put there I was even feeling

a little optimistic as I contemplated the elderly Berliner dressed in his gray smock. He addresses me, had

obviously overheard...

"He's a big mouth, don't worry," he says, without any pretext for the conversation. "The man on the street always knows nothing. Mickey is a man on the street..."

"That's history!" Skip elucidates, eyes shining. "Like when I visit Mickey it's always the same thing. If he's drunk he tells me about the Russians! The Russians were worse than the Nazis!"

"I can imagine what he says," I chuckle.

Skip swallows hard ... "Those are questions..."

Today had been the twentieth of April. As I'd left to walk across the park to the bus stop I had had to unroll my umbrella, the cheap thing reeks of mildew since the water seems to dry funny on it ... school bells were ringing, it was a rainy. Dreary morning. Herr Lösch had been a prisoner-of-war in Russian, in Tula ... five years long. He had told me that before. "Do you know what today is?" I ask him.

He peeks at his wristwatch. "Why?" he asks me politely, raising his black eyebrows. Never jumbling his dates up he remembers: "On this day thirty-three years ago I was captured by U.S. servicemen ..." He had been handed over by American troops to the Soviets ... "It was Adenauer who made arrangements with the Soviet Union to have captured German soldiers returned ..." Skipper moon listened in silent reverence ... I thought he was going to cry ... "Das was sehr bitter," Herr Lösch says, "Ja, ja ..." Two American students of history look in awe at him ... Herr Lösch

walks quite slowly, all day he whistles and hums to himself, he's dressed tastefully in a tie, wearing the gray working smock over his good shirt, his flawlessly combed hair completely white, striding without moving his head, shoulders, arms. Hardly notes his surrounding and only incidentally makes his remarks, not putting much emphasis behind the words. Herr Lösch has two more years to go before he retires. I knew the old fellow used politeness as a means to keep distance intact between himself and the mixed American rabble of the PX. It was hard to get him to talk and even harder to imagine Herr Lösch had been a soldier.

Skip came by my apartment that evening after we had had two beers at the fast-food stand next to the subway. He marveled at the rank stench of the cat litter as we opened the door, the air stunk horribly, its fragrance had been strengthened by Howard's big evening meal, from last night. Windows were never opened, our rooms were never freshened, and it was unfortunate, for when my roommate cooked it smelled like he'd thrown a half-dozen old socks in a pot and heated them. Skip received a tour, saw all five dilapidated, unmade beds, four mattresses in one bedroom, on the floor, books piled absolutely everywhere, the clothesline and sheet dividing Howard's room in half, our version of the Berlin Wall ... he watched Tom, Wilbur, Howard, and Jerry running around and into each other, heard the telephone ringing every five minutes, reminding Skip of a college fraternity house. Chi Beta Kappa something-or-other ... always college. "My God!" he exclaims. "Graduate school texts! Can Howard understand them? He must be brilliant!" Howard owned the complete Works of everyone, as long as it was in paperback.

"Howard never reads anything except two newspapers ...," I told him. It didn't daunt Skip's admiration of Howard's intellectuality ...

Skip and I talked about Herr Lösch's flawless organization of pillow cases, linen, and bed sheets ... "The job could be so easy," I added hesitantly. "Why is it the PX never seems to fire anyone?"

"Firing someone ... Mickey told me why: the store is happy to find idiots who will work for almost nothing. Maybe we should do a little black market on the side. I'm always short of cash ... beef up our incomes."

Feliks had a friend named Yuri who was willing to buy American cigarettes, groceries, cosmetics from us ... I open up two more cans of beer. "We could try it with a Russian fellow I know ... If you think we should I'll talk with him."

He spit out beer, coughing. I had to hit him on the back. He tried to catch his breath ... "Jesus! Are you crazy?" he exclaims hoarsely.

"What's wrong with that, Skip?"

“Not with Russians.”

“They’re in Berlin!” I maintain.

“Yeah, they’re in Berlin! Four Power Status, all that crap!”

“No, I don’t want to sell cigarettes to Soviet diplomats ... they’re ... uh ... dissidents.”

“You mean you know ... them?” He puts down the can of beer. “You have something to do with Russians?”

“Oh, what part of the world are you from? We’re in Berlin! What’s wrong with you?”

“You take care of it then,” he says, like I had been asking him to sell American military secrets... “Let’s not talk about it ... How much money can we make?”

There is a period of silence ... there are several muted thumps against the wall, the cat is screeching, hissing, and someone’s laughing. “Throw it again!” Wilbur commands. This is happening outside my bedroom, I don’t bother about it. We change the subject, the Second World War has filled our minds today, and skip goes back... “Did you know Herr Lösch was a POW in America?” Skip asked.

In summer we got the help of three young men ... It had been Skip's brilliant notion to apply for summer student help.

Byron was a six-foot, weight-lifting, football-playing black sixteen-year-old with a flaming red Afro haircut, shaved on the sides, who frequently spit in the store, right on the stockroom floor ... it didn't make much difference, we weren't allowed to dynamite the building but anything slightly less you could get away with ... The Civilian Personnel Office had sent us three muscular, young bodies. Besides Byron there were two others, both tall seventeen-years-old who had just graduated from Berlin American High School, majoring in surfing. They didn't spit on the floor but claimed to have spent their lives on beaches ... Castro and Ronnie. On their first day at work they stopped checking in goods that were urgently needed upstairs to compare "Kalaupapa," "Kahoolawe," and "Long Beach"-style toe-holds on imaginary surfboards. These fellows were not going to compromise themselves by working. They had no desire to have much to do with us, you had to translate instructions into Southern Californian for that. Byron wore "bad" sunglasses, while the surfers combed their locks into their eyes, half-blindness was what they all three had in common.

Skip was in charge of them the first June morning but gave up by nine-thirty, handing them over to Szalay... Everyone stood of tons of glorious merchandise ... "You kids getting haircuts?" Mickey asked Ronnie and Castro. He's serious. They thing that's funny, Mickey's strong Hungarian accent is a joke for Byron too, who speaks a recondite street jargon only he can decipher. We'll again need interpreters. Szalay shouts something about how it's good for a kid to earn an extra buck and wants to send the youths to a training film upstairs. Mickey intones, "All new PX employees are pledged to reflect honor on the United State government in Berlin ... We are a service organization!" He is reading from a piece of paper, they don't budge an inch to go upstairs ... it's a matter of honor with them.

Byron spits on the floor laconically, growls, "I am not going to watch bullshit! Man, I'm already in the end zone, but you're going to come under my cleats!" He sounds even angrier than Mickey, I have to hand it to him. The other teenagers follow up with a demand: without a fair and equal portion of hot, buttered popcorn to make the "super promo porno" palatable they're staying put, okay? Mickey's dynamism fizzles, he can't cope with such cynicism ... admitting early defeat he commandeers them over to Herr Lösch as candidates for the soft-line section. They're pushed our

way. “I don’t like anything having to do with white sheets,” says Byron magniloquently, his forehead wrinkles, he lowers his shades, he frowns. We get no further word from him except a loud expectoration on the floor, he had style, and we had to take him as he was.

“Follow me,” Herr Lösch calls, and the young fellows follow. A caravan crawls across the floor, away from the soft-line section. Lösch goes left down the first aisle, kitchenware, which is clocked with

seventy-five pallets and one hundred wooden boxes of various sizes. “Clean that stuff up!” The kids don’t think it’s too funny, look toward the cluttered mess ... irons, hair-drying machines, and electric bread knives.

Mickey snuck up, snapping his fingers, scowls ... “Damned if you’re going to get away with that, Herr Lösch! Take them to the soft-line department!” Ronnie, Castro, Byron are peering quizzically at Mickey, they’d immolate him for a penny, Castro mumbling to Ronnie what toe-hold would be best to stomp his head in, a Long Beach or Kahoolawe. Ronnie withholds his opinion by giggling.

Byron turns to Herr Lösch, smiling: “That’s a mighty pile of junk! You say, ‘See what you can do with it!’? I can do what I want with it, old fellow.” Byron adjusted his lingo, it was kind of him. Castro hides himself in the next aisle, watching through a crevice of a shelf, Ronnie loudly whistles to himself while leaning against a pallet that is standing upright.

Everyone marches to the soft-line section:. We had to sort out two thousand cotton sheets according to color and carefully place them on shelves, in the right spot, orderly. Mickey runs away from us as quickly as he can ... Herr Lösch looks distressed watching the new helpmates.

“Where you guys from?” I inquire to break the ice.

They ignore me. Byron lowers his sunglasses from his nose with his hand, looks at me awhile, like I’m an insect. “Where am I from?”? He enjoys his own voice, and I wish I’d never said a word, the question hangs in the air... “Where’s this old boy from, huh?” Byron taps Herr Lösch on the shoulder. The elderly Berliner, who had always worked for the PX but had never seen a lost American generation, is nonplussed, and Byron taps him on the shoulder again, so Herr Lösch becomes annoyed, confused by the youth ...

“He’s from Berlin,” I point out.

“They force you to volunteer to do this,” Castro chirps, “it’s a bor. My old man’s a colonel. What’s the deal, man?” Herr Lösch, whose fat cheeks are reddening, knows a confrontation is brewing ... Ronnie and Castro wipe their blond forelocks from their eyes. “Everything here’s a joke!” Castro stretches out his fingers. “You guys have piled up a bunch of junk everywhere... “ I turn around to look for Mickey. “This old PX is a drag. Berlin stinks! There, what are you going to

do about it? Nothing.” When you’re sixteen or seventeen a lack of warm beaches with waves can seem fatal. Mickey’s steps are loud, hurriedly approaching, he snarls something in Hungarian, he stands behind us, in his left hand is a coil of white rope.

“Do you intend to hang someone?” I query.

“Where are the other?” Mickey barks.

“There’s only three of them,” I murmur. Mickey has a grudge against punks. He swats the rope on the steel shelf, the noise is loud. Mickey is used to taking unusual measures when called for ... everything in his life has prepared him for the care of wayward idiots ... hanging them would be a bit much. The boys look at him timidly.

Mickey intervenes: “You bastards get to work in the back ... Herr Lösch, show them where!”

Herr Lösch looks up absentmindedly, hasn’t understood a word of Mickey Szalay’s instructions ... The Hungarian repeats them in broken German, and Herr Lösch nods assent. The old man covers up disgust by keeping a tight lip, for he learned such things early. What does he have to do with part-time help? The boys follow Herr Lösch, toward the back, Mickey stands with arms akimbo watching Herr Lösch’s fat, retreating back ... All’s quiet.

Two more trailers arrive. We were busy at the loading ramp upstairs all morning, left the nasty kids downstairs ... Herr Lösch had given them a four-hour task to perform in the back part of the soft-line section...

Up until lunch hour nothing occurs. Then one minute before noon we hear, “No! Nein! Nein! Nein! O nein! No! why here ... why here ... “ It’s Herr Lösch. We rush over to the strange voice. He is in tears viewing the damage: in the back, hidden from our eye, we see rope had been strung everywhere, aisles made impassable ... miles of strong hemp barricaded everything ... a veritable nest of white snakes! It looked like a huge spider web had been woven across each aisle, from top to the bottom. The pallets and boxes were peeking out through the strands of white hemp, just barely. “This bloody revolution! Bloody revolution! My beautiful section ... my section!!” We had to assist Herr Lösch, who was weeping ... this was the last low. He had been beaten by the rabble. Mickey limped around in a rage. David, Rosie rushed upstairs, trailing them was Mickey...

“Where are they?” Mickey screams at the office secretary sitting at her desk. “I’ll kill them! I want to murder all mothers! Fathers! I want their heads!” In fright the secretary holds papers in front of her breast, she thinks Mickey wants to attack her. “I want those boys’ heads! All! Up on poles ... on poles! Impale them!” He had grown so riled up he switched to his native language. The secretary holds up three time cards. They’ve all been punched out.

“They quit,” she said.

It was four-thirty in the morning, and the phone was ringing. I stumble into the hallway ... it stood on a small table in the corridor ... I blearily stride toward the telephone, reach for the damn instrument ... It's been taped shut with scotch tape ... the receiver is fastened right to the dial. No answering! There's a note in Howard's miniscule, alarmed scribble, red felt-tip: "To all concerned: Do not answer the phone, under no circumstances!" A tiny, square skull-and-cross-bones had been drawn by his nervous hand: "Gaby is staying overnight here. Danger in the winds! No answering the telephone tonight or in the morning, don't let Elfriede inside the apartment, in case she knocks ..." The smell hits me unprepared from the kitchen: the nuclear waste accumulated in there ... rotten chicken bones, three-quarter-empty beer bottles, rock-hard pizza slices crawling with worms, a liquefying heap of toxic filth. Everything had been thrown into the corner where they thought the overflowing garbage can stood ... and the kitchen had the aroma of a public trash dump, any dog would refuse to piss there. We had a dirty cat, however, and no fresh trash bags ... Howard's bedroom door bursts open, he points a shaking finger at me, Old Testament prophet style, in his underpants. I can't stand the trash lying around, I tell him, it needs throwing out, or the kitchen door should be shut, because the smell is too much ...

"Ignore the ringing!" he admonishes me solemnly.

I look at him in disgust, while Gaby watches me, peeking from behind his shoulder, I inhale deeply. Unfortunately ... making me sneeze, a bacterially-enriched, two-weeks old stench had been infesting our apartment air ... I've had enough! I want to make a drastic move ... rush into the kitchen ... a couple of germs in bathing suits are diving down for a swim in our garbage pool, the sand from the cat litter reeks horribly... Everything had been dumped inside! The fungi thrived ... grew fat and thorny, like coral: red, blue, and yellow branches wound themselves around the trash can ... I lift everything up ... Breathing through the mouth I carry outside a stuffed, blue plastic bag ... stumble blindly toward my destination. Gaby holds open the door, the garbage cans are in the front of the apartment building, this is a nice, residential neighborhood, and it's not yet five in the morning, I mumble vile curses ... swaying under the load ... watching the sidewalk helplessly for orientation, striding onto a dewy lawn. The sky's just becoming blue. Where is the stone sidewalk? I nearly step on a brown object ... moving ... The air's a little chilly. I want to hurry, but it's crawling ahead of me on the sidewalk ... a brown toad ... in and out from under my

feet, it's a nuisance, something wet and glistening runs again in front of me. A sparrow? I had to look closer ... But why

didn't it fly away? Peering closer I see a brown mouse, its thin, wormy tail dragging ... disappearing into the grass ... I reach the cans, dump the bag, it doesn't fit inside. I let the garbage fall where it wants to. I have to hurry, skipping back to the apartment I rip off the tape from the telephone, to call correct time. It rings the moment I touch it. Her voice is slurred, she's been drinking. I had picked up the receiver the very second

she had re-dialed Howard's telephone number. "He's asleep...", I warn Elfriede.

"Wake him!"

"Can't do it," I whisper. "Elfriede, I have to work, can't you call later? Please ..." I hear him screaming from his room, in my ear I have to listen to Elfriede's desperate pleas. He lunges out of his bedroom, yanking the phone from my hand.

"Where are you? What do you want? You woke me up! Can't you see you don't let me sleep properly!" He is shaking his fist, the veins on his forehead stand out. I know he's basically a timid person, what gets into him? He had recently fallen in love with a twenty-year-old philosophy student ... Gaby ... An elderly man mates with a girl, talks about himself and God, the World and himself ... wonderful, how many lovers can Howard Hermagne handle? "Elfriede, I'm telling you I was asleep! Honest to God! No one's here ..." I shake my head in agreement with him, fearfully, because Howard catches my eye, he wants corroboration, wants me to say something on the telephone line ... no way. I have to rush inside the bathroom before the others get there. "I swear, Elfriede! I was up half the night trying to get my paper on Wittgenstein written!" the comic. "Yes, it's due on Monday. I'm under pressure, you know how hard the professor is on me in the seminar ... I'm the one who really understands him, and he expects a lot from a student of my caliber ... " That was for Gaby's ears ... "Stop it, Elfriede! Of course I'm not lying! No one's here! You can't come over, I need to sleep now ... have nothing to hide ... Stop it, you damn Amazon! Stop tearing me apart ... I know, I know! ... and what are you trying to say ... I won't let you drive me crazy, damn you!" Twenty minutes later, after I had done with my morning ablutions, I still hear him pleading with Elfriede not to jump in her car to visit him, the drama here is never-ending ... He's woken up Jerry, Wilbur, and Tom, who crowd to get in the bathroom, to have breakfast and leave the house. The kitchen is narrow, without room for two people. Let alone sex. I have to boil water for coffee. I hear him throw down the phone, it rebounds in the hallway against the wall ... maybe he's broken it. Howard is panting with fury, he works savagely with his fists to push something away from himself. Easing the movements suddenly, without elucidating

why, he says, "I broke up with Elfriede." Gaby goes to him, he smiles ... Gaby is attired in a torn T-shirt and panties, she puts her arms around Howard, the outlines of her breasts are visible underneath the T-shirt, her behind is not quite covered by the underpants, Tom, Jerry, and Wilbur ogle her from the rear. The girl sits down in the only chair in the kitchen ... we stand and eat. Tom and Jerry argue about who eats breakfast first ... In my pocket was a piece of paper. I fished it out and read the note Howard had written me two days ago: "If Gaby calls early this morning tell her I'm already gone ... don't answer the telephone please before seven-thirty in the morning, Elfriede and I have talked about the future, and this time it's forever. How could I have said I loved two women at the same time? It's a shame what I do to them ... P.S. I'm going to be at Elfriede's next week. She won't let me down!" He was a recidivist. There were complications ... Howard got all his new students by word of mouth ... didn't advertise in the newspaper, he was a good tutor, and Zehlendorf was a

neighborhood, parents could afford paying Howard more than fifty marks an hour to help their idiot offspring graduate ... Waldemar Goltz was an executive vice-president of the Berliner Bank, and his daughter Hermione needed Howard's aid ... in mathematics ... Her tutorials were intensive, because in her debut lesson she had worn a transparent, cornflower blue blouse whose topmost four buttons she had inadvertently left open... and a clinging white cotton skirt. Had smudged fire engine-red lipstick on her nipples that first evening ... Howard said ... he couldn't believe her blond hair, in curly locks like a cherub's falling in half-closed, sleepy blue eyes ... The girl was rich, her allowance was from Papa. That was two times a week of tax-free frolicking with a seventy-year-old.

The next Saturday there was a loud knock on our door, about nine in the morning ... someone pounding at it. It couldn't be Elfriede, for Howard had spent the weekend with her ... I get up to answer it ... Jerry, Tom, and Wilbur run toward the portal. We're hoping it's the mailman with a package for us ... something nice from the States. Jerry gets there first. He has been doing weight training, and it shows, his shoulders are four times bigger than normal, he blocks the door with his back and wide neck. Jerry turns. Outside there is a huge ball of fur: it's brown mink and white ermine, in uppermost portion I see a beard ... wearing silver sunglasses. "I'm leaving for good!" the fur says. "Berlin's a pain! Too much female trouble here! Only trouble! Succubus after succubus! Succubus after succubus! Do you know the painting by Breughel ... crazy Margaret? My mother! She treads on me. Sword drawn"§ he takes off his sunglasses, soft brown eyes frown. The short-cropped, salt-and-pepper beard, the spittle? ... "I want you to know what you're ding! Women can be so demanding," a furred arm pushes Jerry aside, briskly ... he walks inside. "Take it from me: never trust your mother." We laugh at him while he hectors us. "What is this, a place for the homeless? Stop laughing at me! I'm a friend of Alan!" I hadn't seen Karl von Andreas for months ...

"No."

"If it isn't an asylum for hoboes who are these fellows?"

I can smell Karl, too, he is accompanied by that brand of men's cologne that knocks you unconscious. You would have thought he had poured a bottle over his head and shoulders. I tear open my bedroom door to let him inside, opening the window wide ... the fumes he emitted were formidable. "Why are you wearing a winter coat?" I ask.

"I'm leaving on a plane this afternoon ... and wanted to say au revoir." He ignores my question. "O my American friend! Had that viperous witch not drive me from her home I would be there today ... here today trying to make my fame in Berlin! That's how women are. I'm at wit's end! Who do I turn to? My mama has disappointed me! O; bitterly! Bitterly!"

"An artist must go where he must," I offer weakly.

"My daughters miss me! Inform me constantly of their trivial love! My wife too, wondering how she can endure life in Pennsylvania..." he tore papers from both coat pockets, tossing old letters in the air... "Life without Karl von Andreas! Such people are impoverished ... living in the back woods" don't say it: you dare to contradict me!" I hadn't said a word. He had taken off the coat,

throwing it at me, it must have weighed fifty pounds. A horrible blue suitcase was stowed under my mattress, I lived out of it, more or less

... I didn't know if I would be staying long ... My bedroom has a low ceiling, a large window, there are a chest of drawers, a bed, and a writing desk whose legs are wobbly... Jerry knocks on the doorjamb. Karl peremptorily closes the door in his face ... I didn't hear Jerry knock again ... maybe he had wanted to

borrow something ... Karl without his coat was something else, wearing an iridescent jump suit with heart-shaped breast pockets, the suit emphasizing the tire of fat around his waist and the protruding belly, his thin arms dangle in balloon sleeves of yellow silk, he takes out a black cigar and a wooden match, scraping the lighting utensil against my wall, paint peels off ... Karl von Andreas makes an impression. An aristocrat ... I imagined them arresting him in America as soon as he got off the airplane. "What happened between you and the blond succubus you came here to see?" he inquires, exhaling a puff after puff of cigar smoke ... m room is filled with fumes ... in this apartment, in this laboratory for maximum pollution, I'm going to croak. "There's no escape. None whatever, " I know that's what you're going to tell me, Alan! But there is escape! Her name again? The American girl?"

"Millie."

Turns away from me, gesturing emphatically to the sky ... "Horrible name ... a name to forget! 'Millie at the Ice Cream Stand.'" Hesitates... "I could make a bronze sculpture on the subject ... feminine reactions to it would be violent ..." He raises his arm upward, real-life tears come as he embraces me, he turns away, shakes his head in desperate disbelief, closing his eyes... taking up his coat with a sweeping movement, draping it over his shoulder, looking once behind him saddened, throwing open the door, leaving my room, no one could have done it any better. Jerry was in the hall making a phone call, Karl bumps him aside, striding past the muscleman ... he's humming an opera song. I follow the artist to our front door, he glances at his wristwatch once, he puts on his sunglasses and bids me farewell with a wave ... Last words: "Have pity on those who have mothers! Poor mortals!"

Jerry shrugs, quickly hangs up.

The phone immediately rings. Four people rush for it, but I get there first.

A saleswoman in the stereo department. And every week I had to go upstairs to deliver stereo parts to her besides doing the job at Herr Lösch's section... it was Rosie's job, but I did him a favor. I liked the look at that lady ... thought she looked fine, spoke nicely, with a French accent. I rolled the cart up to her feet, she stood waiting with arms crossed across her chest, I was pretty tired, it had been a long day ... I was not much for flirting, Millie had driven it out of me, I ad fourteen boxes ... I had to go in and out of the freight elevator to get the garbage to her. "Say, what's your name?" she asks ... "are you American?" I nod yes. I was scared of her. She had fine, white teeth, dimpled cheeks, her eyes smile, the French do it well ... her nose is straight, flat, like it's been punched in the middle. Marie Youssai wore long, bright dresses with pearl necklaces and colored shawls, with high, brown leather boots, her wavy black hair was pulled back in a ponytail ... there were many gray strands in it, she was five years older than me, a folksinger. "What're you doing after work?" Maybe she is talking to someone else ... "I'm making you an offer. I always wake up early in the morning anyway ... how about it?" I stood in my work clothes, navy blue, heavy trousers made of stiff, synthetic material, a powder blue shirt with the initials, "PX", stitched on its collar, without the steel-toed shoes, free of charge under the terms of the labor contract, for it was strictly against rules to work without their protection ... we never saw the things, I was wearing tennis shoes ... David, Rosie, and Skip wore toeless sandals. Of boxes happened to fall on your feet you were cooked.

"Okay," I reply. We planned to meet in the cafeteria.

Truman Plaza is made up of two rows of stores, with a parking lot in the middle, with the PX on the left side, near Clayallee, the Commissary's on that side too, the cafeteria is across the way ... it was our little ghetto, there was even an American Express bank ... I go to the cafeteria, to drink a cup of their lousy, murky water called "coffee," it only gave you heartburn ... Marie sits down in the booth with me and puts her hand on mine ... we talk, then walk to the U-Bahn, Oskar Helene-Heim. Around the entrance of the subway were two packs of black GIs sitting on benches, drinking beer, yelling at girls, shooting the breeze ... in a free land ... Somehow it depresses me. What does Marie think I'm doing? I don't want any adventure ... we travel a long way, to Neukölln, I don't care, let myself go ... Marie has been babbling enthusiastically about Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, without catching her breath she compares him with Henry Miller, I watch a drunk, sitting opposite, who has a filthy, greasy face and stinks and is grumbling, mumbling

something ... Marie takes three paperbacks from her immense purse ... it was black, huge enough for me to sit comfortable in.

shoves the tomes in my face. They're in French ... "You're pretty gloomy..." she ventures, when I don't answer her questions ... "Have you ever read Gurdjieff?" I nod no. "So you know about him ... how interesting ... The Middle Ages were a beautiful time! The Knights Templar were a mystical order based in the holy city Jerusalem ... it was a time of great purity." No use discussing the matter ... We finally arrive.

Ascend to a twilit street from the caves of the subway. The buildings are old, black with soot, statues of women in Grecian robes stare from the facades, they carry swords and scepters to protect house entrances, other ladies in war helmets, a couple cherubs without noses ... Marie stops in front of a building with a weather-beaten façade and high, curlicues portal and takes out her house key. Two simian-canine gargoyles grin at us above the entrance, guarding both sides, the door creaks, everything reeks of urine, by the time we've reached the fourth I've inhaled so many fungus spores I'm wheezing. Marie uses a key to unlock the door, although judging by its decrepit appearance it looked like it could be shoved open with one finger. Throwing her large purse in a corner of a darkened room causes a ringing, chiming explosion, I guess it's a stringed instrument: she hit the guitar. Now the light's on ... we walk into a dinky kitchen ... two chairs, a lacquered, glass-fronted cabinet for dishes ... I see a table, a wooden bowl filled with red apples. Next door to the kitchen is a small, narrow bedroom, walls are white, there's a mattress on the floor covered by a French quilt. There's a full-color photograph of her guru Gurdjieff pinned opposite a window without drapes or shades, incessantly looking out onto a sooty wall ... I like the room but don't want to stay inside. We go back into the kitchen.

I tell her, "My appetite is a thing to be reckoned with!"

Folksingers react to such impudent demands by picking up a guitar ... the same one she'd almost destroyed ... by sitting on a chair and strumming it.

"I miss the sea, O Brittany!

Come back to me in dreams, my man,

A fisher wife is a searcher,

fishing for the fisherman's wife

only she can be the sea's wife ..."

She rattles the strings and pounds the guitar ... it's great. My head hurts. Her eyes had been closed while singing... as soon as she opens them there's something in her glance, I'm going to get

asked a question, I see, which makes me happy, yet I am hoping fervently for food, my cheeks are sunken ... I stare at the bowl of apples ... can't eat a melody ...

"I'm pretty hungry, Marie ..."

"Gurdjieff says fasting is good for the spirit."

"But I have to unload trucks all day." Working with Herr Lösch was not unloading trucks, what the hell, a small untruth ... "What about a meal, huh?"

"No meals here."

"Ha! You're joking. I'm not fasting ..."

"My Master says to fast evenings."

"Who cares what that Turkish dervish prates on about? This won't work!" I stand up. "I'm not on a diet."

"I am!"

"You're not fat. You're skinny!"

"Just a normal Joe ... always hungry ...," she giggles. She was very thin. She pinches my arm. I flinch away from her. "Ticklish? Huh, want to fight?" While I am falling over backward on my chair. Only to escape her ruthless tickling, she's molesting me ... "Fight! Fight! Come on, come on! Fight!"

I lie on the floor covering myself ... she cannot be fended off .. "I want to eat!" I plead, laughing.

She kisses my mouth, that's how it happens, and isn't put off as we roll on her guitar, the snap of its strings does to make us stop ... "Bedroom ... bedroom," she whispers, "come now!" Her ponytail looses, her hair falls, really black, Marie pulls me to the bed. She wasn't built too badly for being a starvation fanatic. She only had on a pearl necklace. My Gypsy waits for me on the quilt, I shut my eyes, feeling at her bouncing body, my stomach's growling, the old Turk stares down at us, and she's hissing continuously in my ear ... "Now! Now! Orgasm!" No matter what I do or say! "Oh! Now! What're you doing ... come now"§ She wouldn't shut up ...

I went to bed hungry ... At dawn, two hours before I had to go to work, I remembered the fruit on her kitchen table! Spent a frantic half-hour munching, then forty-five minutes on the subway. My gut rumbling like a percolator ... Marie had fallen asleep. The wench was snoring the slumber of those privileged enough not to have to rise early ... I had a flatulent gut the whole day from the apples, which didn't matter, the stockroom smelled so strongly of Chanel No. 5.

“My dear Alan, forgive me for not answering sooner.

“You are my favorite grandson, to me you can do no wrong! I misunderstanding can occur, but please let us forget the ugliness. I love you too much and miss you very much.

“Yours is the only name given for my mother and father, I speak with our mother every day. But please do not convey what I am writing to you now.

“Your mother, my daughter whom I adore, is very negligent. She has diabetes, as you know. Has done nothing about it. When she was a five-year-old child she kept getting colds. I couldn’t understand this so I took her to the doctor. He told me she has hay fever and required shots. And she was a minor, still under my protection. I took her to the doctor, and he gave her shots for the hay fever. She is not a brave soul, afraid of a shot in the arm. Her diabetes is acting up, so I again became the ‘nagging mother’ and asked her to go to the doctor please. Insulin is for diabetes. She was disturbed and told me she is a grown woman. So, very politely I said, “Act like a grown woman! If insulin will help take insulin!” After a short time she went to the doctor. Her insulin will be given on Friday. It’s a ‘shot’, and she has a phobia about ‘shots’. I told her on the phone, ‘If you do not care about yourself and act like you are a two-year-old, then you are being very foolish.’ Well, Alan, when I talked with her yesterday, she will get her insulin shot on Friday. And your Mom is afraid of a shot. The insulin must be fresh. So the doctor will give her the insulin shot on Friday (tomorrow). I also suggested she get a special shoe, so she does not stub her toes. Whether she does this I don’t know. Will wait and see.

“Am glad you got your birthday check. Enjoy it. You are now a man, twenty-eight years old. It would make everything complete if I could see you, but that, too, will happen. Your letters were like ‘pennies from heaven.’ My whole domicile seems full of them, but you are not here.

“Alan, dear, when do you expect to come back to the U.S.A.? everyone misses you.

“Ruthie is going back to South Bend, so Mother told me. Alan, dear, another country is not a home. A home is where your loved ones are. I know your parents miss you.

“Sorry I do not have really good news to write, expect I miss you very much. I would give anything to see you. Did you enjoy your birthday check? The same as always: your age, that’s twenty-eight dollars and twenty-eight cents. Imagine my favorite grandson now twenty-eight years old.

“Alan, darling, forgive me for not answering sooner. I love you, darling. I miss you and would give my life to see you. Do not write Mother about the insulin shots. She is not very brave.

“Your mother was always a strong, healthy, and beautiful woman. But she is a bit foolish about ‘shots’. I said to her on the phone, ‘When you have a headache you take a pill to relieve it. You are a diabetic,

and diabetes requires insulin!’ Well, she promised she will get the insulin shot tomorrow. That is my news

to you. When you write her do not mention anything about what I have written you, but you could ask her about her diabetes.

“Pray, Alan dear, she will do this. It is important to her, her health and well-being.

“Write me, darling, and take care of yourself and please come back to us. Please!

“I love you, dear, take care of yourself and come home soon.

“Write your mother, she says she has not heard from you. In her condition to be apart will not help her.

“Be well, my dear Alan, write me, love you, Gram.”

“Dear Alan. Happy birthday! I’ll bet you were wondering if you still had a sister, well, believe it or not you really do, her name is Ruth, she resides in the state of California and she is still miserable as ever. See, Brother Alan, when you think things really change you should remember only thoughts change. The original process originating those thoughts never ever changes, so as a result you never really lose contact with another person who is close to you, the only thing you may possibly lose is exchange of familiar experience, which I will concede in most cases is expedient, if there is to be further growth of understanding.” I turned the letter upside down ... sideways, right side up! Couldn’t make sense of it! “But in our case, dear brother, what never existed will never be missed! Anyway I love you and at times I even go so far as to miss you, it’s a rarity, but it does occasionally cross my mind I have this brother with whom I have not communicated in God knows how long”

“Enough of the bullshit, I figured I would have to go through some ridiculous jabber so you would know this is really me and not some impersonator, as if someone would really want to impersonate Me. I just had to write and remind you owe everything to me and I promise to be modest when you mention my name out there.

“Okay now, seriously, you found your niche, hang onto it. Joke, Alan. You know, Alan, I don’t know how often you have to come back to this country, or even if you do, but if you do consider flying to California, it’s one hell of a lot cheaper, and you can stay with me, of course, just a thought.

“I like being alone, the start here in California has been very good for me. I hope Germany has been just as beneficial for you. You can join the crowd, everyone goes through a searching and storing-out process.

“I’m sorry I haven’t written until now. My mind has been rather uprooted. I moved, had an abortion, etc., the point being I’ve been feeling a variety of emotions in a rather short period of time. I am just fine, I feel better with myself than I’ve felt in God knows how long!

“ I started taking Kung-Fu about three weeks ago. I also love that. I work out every night after work for about one and a half to two hours, it feels great, what a release and discipline.

“I intend to take Karate too. I need to find a Karate studio, if I can’t find one here I’ll switch to Kenpo Karate, there’s a big difference, but if karate is not available I would like to learn Kenpo. I really enjoy the martial arts, one hell of a lot of work, but it feels so good mentally and physically.

The power and force in one blow is phenomenal, whether is be a punch or kick, plus discipline is fantastic. I start stretching out to go to the studio about four thirty in the afternoon, get there around five fifteen and stay until about seven thirty or eight. I have more energy now than I've had in years, plus a quiet confidence is developing. I think Karate is something you would enjoy, Alan, especially Kung-Fu, which is different than Karate, much more extension and concentration on form! I am taking 'Chou-Li-Fut', those are your weapons.

"Do you speak German fluently? When are you coming back here? Or are you?"

"The town I live in is small, about twenty to twenty-five miles north of San Francisco, mountains and redwoods, very pretty. I have a very nice apartment but I miss snow and cold weather, that's why I'm considering leaving California.

"See you now! Please write, much love, Ruth."

My sister had moved to California shortly before I had left for Europe ... Since she had been there she had already resided in three towns, Fairfax, San Rafael, and Novato, and intended to move a fourth time ... Ruthie said she was uprooted ... my grandmother had hinted she might be returning to South Bend. She had been married to an Italian, as soon as she graduated high school, at seventeen, it had lasted five years ...

Only two years separated our births, she was the younger child ... As kids she used to try to "gross me out" by pulling down her pants, bending over to display her pink anus ... We fought a lot ... I made her unhappy ... I would punch her in the shoulder when we passed each other in the hallway, a jejune Ivan the Terrible, I made her unhappy, I did!

"Could you go to a clock shop in Berlin where they make cuckoo clocks and send me a catalogue? I want to purchase one but I need a price list and pictures, if it's possible.

"I think, whatever happens, you and I need time to get reacquainted, if only dinner alone, when you come here."

I was certain this was a threat: as soon as we would be alone she would administer some swift Kung-Fu chops, and I would be finished off ... I had to avoid any meeting, Ruthie meant what she said ...

The work methods Skip and David used were extraordinary. Yesterday they double-handedly pulverized a large clock enclosed in a tall glass bell jar costing four hundred dollars ... David took a wrench to it, Skip a hammer, Rosie clapped his hands gleefully, at first I heard glass shattering, miniscule pieces of metal tinkled onto the floor... Somewhere in the back. They waited for Mickey to leave, then went to work on the merchandise. Wristwatches were battered to smithereens with monkey wrenches! Ball-peen hammers crunched to pieces priceless Hummel figurines! David once drove a forklift right over a shipment of crystal vases, fountain pens costing a hundred twenty dollars would be thrown out with the garbage, we took extra time checking goods in and we buried them in the aisles, so they would never be found again, Mickey Szalay was Always blamed, no one was fired, and Skip and David waged an undeclared war against the store ... a fearless team. My time wasn't wasted at the PX, I knew Millie had left for Hawaii with Harvey, they had not contacted me again, I was drifting, my job was as good as any other, Skip and I had become buddies, we sometimes drank a beer together, my night with Marie had scared me off further adventures ... Before Millie had left she had gotten a job at the Air Force library at Tempelhof, I had told her about it I was that stupid... after I'd heard about the job opening from Rosie, whose wife worked there. Millie had applied for it and gotten it, I had also applied and didn't get it ... for the head librarian was a Hawaiian dame ... knew Badoyen ... Harvey arranged things. For once his Hawaiian Mafia connections worked, for Millie... A few months ago she walked into the PX, I happened to be upstairs with Skip and secretly pointed her out to him, he said, "I wouldn't wash my dog with her hands, wouldn't let her have the fleas from its hide!" Skip had never had a girlfriend, his opinion was colored by a few anecdotes I had told him about my arrival ... We were two depressed Americans making minimum wage, hardly able to live on the money ... we envied Louie Zachary, who made extra dough by guarding Hess at Spandau. But he had been a soldier, the job wasn't open to everyone, we had no illusions about any pay raises, the only choice was black marketeering. I had told Skip about my negotiations with Feliks' friend Yuri, who promised to take everything we could get, especially cigarettes and liquor. Skip didn't think it was a bad idea either. I had spoken to Yuri on the phone, the evening before...

"Can you get sixty cartons of Marlboros?" I asked Skip as we stood behind a wall of boxes, hidden from view.

"No! Are you mad or something?"

“We have to make an offer ... we can’t just starve to death in this city. Come on.”

“I’m not whack-o.”

“What about the extra cigarettes?”

“Keep your voice down. What’s wrong with those crazy Russians?”

“I’m not asking for the world.”

“We better look for better jobs with more pay. This makes me unhappy ...”

Mickey discovered us and shoved an invoice in my face from an Israeli manufacturer of leather coats, I was startled because I knew if he had overheard us we were cooked... Mickey wanted me to read the invoice and the Hebrew letters on the stamp that had marked the packing bill aloud, he smiled, “I’d like you to change your image, got it? Give me the lowdown on what they’re saying here ...”

“What do you mean?”

“I can see you in my mind’s eye. What about a beard? Skullcap? Earlocks?” he suggests. “A gabardine coat?”

“A gabardine coat ... you’re an asshole, Mickey.”

“No. when you’re driving the forklift it might get caught ... don’t misunderstand! A Hasidic Jew would be a bad co-worker here ... I don’t want you to dress like one! It wouldn’t work, you couldn’t lift your eyes, it’d hardly be safe with you always working with your eyes on the ground ... anytime a lady’s in the neighborhood.” He holds the invoice in his hand .. he grins, “ I learned Hebrew myself,” he doesn’t look at me, studies the sheet of paper, “in school. I was confirmed like all good boys. The priests at school wanted us to learn it.”

“In school?”

“Sure! Confirmed! The Church! When I was sixteen I studied Communism too! You have to know your enemies ... I used to know my Aleph, Bet, Gimel ... I forgot what comes after Gimel ...”

“Daled.”

“Yeah, right.” He walks away, with the invoice. We trail behind, and coming our way were three men in dark blue suits and black ties. One man raises his hand, stopping Mickey preemptorily. Like he had been searching for Szalay everywhere, the other two surrounds hm.

“Can I have a moment of your time, Mr. Szalay?” His accent is slightly German, the words are pronounced too precisely. “Who’s in charge of critical cards?”

“I am, sir.”

The cards were numbered. Expensive merchandise like cameras, watches ... diamond rings ... stereo equipment ... get a “critical card” when they’re checked in, if they survive Skip and David’s

robust efforts ... One copy was given to the customer, he used it when he crossed the border, showing it to customs officers, the serial number was recorded by us ... we're talking about diplomatic and military personnel who are buying this stuff from an official outlet of the U.S. government ... customs duties were superfluous, but you had to show where you had bought it ... "Who checks in diamonds?" the second man asks. "Four diamonds are missing! Who writes the critical cards for diamonds, Mr. Szalay?"

"I do, sir." Mickey dances awkwardly on the balls of his feet, shifting his weight from one foot to the other ... He's nervous.

"Where do you get the critical cards? From whom?" Mickey points at the accounting office: the cubicle where Mr. Batterman, Frau Steenz sit. "Who gives you the critical cards?" the third fellow demands. Mickey points ... "What do you do if you have not completed checking in a shipment, I'm asking you! What do you do with the cards?"

"I give them back to the accountant, sir."

"The accountant keeps the cards?" the first one queries.

"Yes, sir. The accountant keeps them."

"Why?" I could well understand a government detective coming to the PX, going downstairs, to our cave, peering at the hills of merchandise, shaking his head incredulously ... how could Mickey Szalay know what was what. The PX manager had ceased visiting us, he was in despair, the piles of goods had reached the stockroom ceiling, everything was blocked. "Why does the accountant keep the cards?" Three pairs of eyes stare at Mickey's hands, which are shaking.

"Well ... the accountant keeps them because it's the way we've always done it."

"Oh!" The three men hesitate to go on, the pause implies criticism. "You yourself check in the diamonds?"

"I do, sir."

Mickey was repeating "sir", the detectives got sufficient deference from him, but nobody had a reason to give Mickey respect apparently, they don't hide it either ... "You get the critical cards from the accountant? From Frau Steenz? Mr. Batterman? From whom? You said you check in the diamonds alone?"

"No, I call the jewelry department ... and a girl comes down and helps me." Even I notice he's changed his story. Slightly, with these bastards you had to be careful.

"Oh?..."

"Yes, sir! You can come to my house, sir, if you want to, sir, look around, and if there are any unpaid diamonds lying around there ..."

“Perhaps we will, perhaps we will ... We intend to do that, indeed. How are the cards kept, Mr. Szalay?” The second man takes out a pencil and notepad, writes something in it.

“In numerical order ... sir. But I want to say something: I called you fellows! What’s the idea? I’m no a thief.”

“How are the cards kept again?”

“Oh, come on ...”

“With the accountant?” The first guy holds up his forefinger, like he’s making an important point now, he glances over to the second fellow who is busy scribbling in the notebook.

“Yes, sir.”

“Frau Steenz?”

“With her, sir!” Mickey neither laughs nor protests at the public interrogation. He talks to the three inquisitors like he’s being punished by a trio of stern but just fathers ... The torturers walk away, the first detective had given him two papers and an envelope with an address typed on it, it was a form to be filled out, “in block letters” ... a government form with numbered questions, fifteen lines at the end for a “statement” ... maybe they would be visiting him too. My supervisor frowns, bringing his hand to his mouth, biting on his fist, angrily, eyes narrowed, they’re reddening ... he might have played the patsy with the detectives but he’d renew his image ... in no time flat ... “I have all the luck! I expected help from those guys. The stupid bastards,” he mumbles loudly. “I’m going to quit ... get back to work! Why do they do this to me?” He treads in circles, biting his fist, reading off a list of his pet peeves, “you’re not supposed to worry, I guess you’re going to say. “Today isn’t the rest of your life!” He tosses the papers to the floor and tramples on them ... Skip quickly waddles away, running upstairs, dreading the consequences of Mickey’s words. Not me, nothing would happen ... Szalay’s resignation? I knew a coward when I saw one ... he answered every slap in the face with a “Yes, sir” and a click of his worn heels ... “I bet you wish you could exchange places with me, think I’m in an enviable position? Bring me prison clothes ... someone can apply for my job as supervisor ... be happy for the rest of his life! Don’t worry, they have a big bark but no bite ... same crap, yeah, it happens every day.” He wiped his eyes. “People are just bastards, always telling you some crap, but it’s the same crap! Have to keep your head down! Low profile! They really played that up ... they got a problem? I do too! First of all you take it and take it ... I told them where to get off their high hobby-horse, didn’t I? I’m not going to take it, let them threaten me with Sing-Sing! The electric chair! ... There are better jobs with more pay ...” He lowered his voice considerably. “Who does the work around here? No one except me! I’m sick of it! I’m hardly being paid a slave’s wages!”

I was afraid of being busted for black marketeering, my fears grew on me: simply to cover myself I thought of a hundred ways might get caught. And since I had bought twenty-five cartons of Marlboros that morning I saw betrayal everywhere, crazier than a cop would be. The cigarettes sat in the main retail office, on a shelf for “employee’s purchases,” next to the secretary and time clock ... I had been too frightened to pick them up and take them down to my locker, because a detective had been sitting with the manager Mister Reymont in his office, the secretary told me ... I stapled them shut and had the secretary write my name on the bags, she had not seen inside ... I left the package sitting there. At break time, ten o’clock, I took them from the office when the timekeeper went out for a bite, no one had been around ... stuffed them in my locker downstairs. Had someone seen me buying cigarettes earlier in the month? I had six more cartons stored inside my locker, I was twenty-five cartons over my monthly rations quota, I couldn’t recall who had seen me buying what when ... the lady at the cigarette e and camera counter had cooperated with me ... I was a criminal, she had been a witness to it. Owing to our sales to our Yuri Skip and I were due to get an extra two hundred dollars this month, but that Thursday was just too much, I didn’t want to go to San Quentin for crimes against the government and when I retrieved the cigarettes from the office and put them in my locker I was saying these packages were mine ... my only excuse, by claiming they were not mine, even if my name had been written on them, would lie in saying the handwriting hadn’t been mine, pretty flimsy, but it was now dissolved by my depositing them downstairs in the locker-room... Mr. Twelve-Feet would bust me, the store detective, with his greasy black hair and wide girth, he already knew everything. I heard over the store’s loudspeakers, “Mr. Twelve-Feet! Please come to the main office!” And Rosie came in after break, announcing there were two C.I.D. detectives in Mr. Reymont’s office now ... either I would leave the cigarettes where they were, risking whatever consequences it might lead to, since they could open my locker up, or take them with me, past the guards at the entrance. Just before lunch time I whisper to Skip, “I have thirty-one cartons of cigarettes downstairs, goddamn it, can you help me carry them out? We’ll take them out the front way, right before their faces, straight to the garbage cans, stow them away ...” He walks out with me carrying a brown paper bag with my name on it, containing fifteen cartons ... at lunch ...

The store detective Sam Twelve-Feet, a retired Army sergeant, smiles, "How's is going, boys?" He's an American Indian, a descendent of the Sioux too, I'd never met one before, there had been none in Indiana ... "Going out for lunch?"

"Yeah," Skip replies, face reddening, I stay silent, expecting the handcuffs any minute ... sirens, police, the end ... Sam nods goodbye to us, cordial as hell, I look around, no sign of the police. "Jesus God!" Skip mutters to himself, we saunter across the parking lot to the Laundromat, behind the buildings on that side are a lot of open trash bins.

"Wait ... Skip, tall Mickey I've gone home for a minute, tell him I've got a stomach ache, say anything! I want to stash this stuff away..." I ran to the German bus stop, carrying two brown bags, with paper bags like these you are advertising you have bought goods at the American PX, the Commissary, no German store gives you such bags, I was marked. As I stand waiting for the bus a uniformed, helmeted American soldier comes up ... stands next to me. I guess he is an MP, he will follow me home, then he will bust me, the bus arrives, he boards, I don't ... After it had left I decided I am not being "followed", maybe ... I try to rest easy, waiting fifteen minutes for the next bus. Had to rush like a maniac to get back to the PX on time, I didn't make it, naturally. "Sorry, sorry!" I made my excuses to Mickey ...

“If a person’s working life degrades and debilitates him, he is wasted on the grindstone of existence. That is tragic! He is lost. A person caught in such a trap is forced to create a shell of indifference to protect his integrity as a human being, seeking some kind of release and escape in fancied or real ways that may not be productive. Some transcend it! Some cannot.”

I skipped a few lines, at made perusing the epistle easier.

“I read your letter about living in Berlin and accept your feelings as you describe them.”
“Where there is a lack of hope there’s a semblance of dryness in life, Alan.”

He was talking about two short letters I had recently sent to my audience of my grandmother and Mom...

“What I am trying to say is it’s clear you don’t want to write about your own reflections but about a human being’s integrity. It certainly is necessary to keep everyone’s integrity intact! Maybe your Magyar is a case in point: you write he was so frightened he became a bully, a schmuck. Others find ways of keeping their integrity, ways of responding and caring.”

I blinked my eyes. Caring? Why was he talking about caring now ...

“Your letters show an idealistic reaction. The world has not yet caught you up, bless you! Nothing has overwhelmed your belief in mankind of made you into a person who is insensitive or biased, you’re a mensch, son, you appreciate and care for people. Even if they are not Jewish! You have an orientation, you’ve been given eyes and ears for the Good. What else do you want to say but this: ‘I want to dispel doubt and expand happiness?’ don’t be a dried-up egghead, life is a miraculous game! One thing you’re lacking is transcendence.”

I credited him with more common sense than he had, was he kidding

“This is our never-ending drama! The great ones, the honored ones express the potentialities of humankind! It’s inspiring.”

Genghis Khan?

“O the wisdom of destiny! You too participate in the unquenchable potential of Man.”

Sheerest crapola ... a high philosophical thunder storm ... it was raining beautiful ideas, his enthusiastic outbursts in letter ...

“I’ve said more than I intended to but somehow I’ve said too little! Love you, Dad.

“P.S. Every effort must bear its fruit. Take your sister, I forgot to mention Ruth has moved again, the fourth time in a year, to Petaluma. We are very happy for her! It’s what she wants, and we support her efforts.

“Let me say one more word about the subject of transcendence, my boy: I suspect you’ve projected feelings, hates and fears, your frustrations on others, all our encounters are loaded with a psychological factor. Your Magyar is a case in point. Each person brings himself to the situation at hand according to his needs in his own particular pattern. Have I made myself clear? Radiate hope! You must also find a way to live with your fellow human beings. Beauty can be found every day, in every living person. It’s woven into the fabric of life, transcending everything. In other words you gain direction by a transcendent force. I will be sending you a book by.”

I closed my eyes to pray to the suburban God of South Bend: get this monkey off my back, it tortured me ...

“You, Alan, participate in the unquenchable potential of Man’s innate equipment. Learn to express your feelings! Let your potential unfold, make a personal commitment to yourself, accept and know yourself, let your good heart flow. I’m very, very happy, for you! Man is indeed immortal, for all of myself, your mother and all of humanity manifests itself in you, in a wondrous way, how uplifting! Beautiful.

“I concur in your renewed efforts to find a less demanding job, but are you sure you’ll find it in Berlin? Isn’t it in East Germany? A general observation: out brethren do not thrive where life is economically depressed and an anti-Semitic bias reigns.”

“What’d he say?”

“Can’t tell you.” Rosie spoke slowly, with a Southern drawl, I smelled a hint of last night’s whiskey ‘n’ gin ... today was Tuesday, he had no showed up yesterday, calling in sick ... We were sitting together on boxes in a small open space in the center of the stockroom, Louie Zachary was standing, listening ... around us loomed innumerable piles of un-checked-in merchandise. When Rosie took a break I did, too ... Louie worked on call, and Mickey had asked him to come in, there had been four trailers this morning, three due this afternoon, the two Turks were already upstairs slaving on the ramp ... unpacking two huge shipments ... situation normal, and we were goofing off, skip and David hiding somewhere in the back and plotting various breakages, more mayhem, discreetly, avoiding labor by clandestine means, while we were open to everyone’s discovery ... Louie and I followed Rosie’s lead, since he didn’t seem to care ... “Worse thing than a chain gang, man, is working on a construction crew in the summer in Louisiana,, go to get up and be at work by three in the morning, the sun’s so hot! The air’s humid, unbearable! By noon no man can work in that heat, white or colored! Get out! You’ve never experienced anything like it, whew, it’s ho! I was on a chain gang too, been in prison, been on both sides of the bars ...” Rosie smiled. “Improved my voice in Louisiana state prisons ... that’s the God-honest truth. I worked as a guard too, in the Army ... with Louie at Spandau ... just what Louie’s doing now, sure, I did it! What else have I done! Can’t answer any questions! I’m sworn to secrecy.” I had been asking him about Louie Zachary’s job of guarding Rudolf Hess at Spandau Prison, the elderly Nazi was a talkative fellow according to Rosie and Louie, but no one was allowed to say a word about what he babbled on about. Silence ... Louie had been bragging to Rosie about making “a million dollars” by writing his “Memoirs of a Spandau Guard”, Rosie countered by saying Zachary wouldn’t be able to do it for a simple reason... “You’re half-illiterate, man! The other half of you is plain dumb!” He snickered. Louie shook his head, he didn’t like Rosie’s sarcasm.

“Half of what you say is lies, all lies!” Louie turned to me, as mediator I was a useful person, and gave me his district attorney pitch: “This is a born criminal! You might think old Rosie here is an honest guy ... he’s talking nothing but fibs, and I know it. He’s been in prison twice!”

“But I got a good singing voice,” Rosie hums a gospel melody. “Better than you have ... better than any of you, I am not ashamed of being in the clink ... but I joined the Army, and it made a man out of me ... sent me to Nam...”

Louie had not been in Vietnam, he had been stationed in Germany and south Korea ... “He hasn’t ever seen the inside of Spandau Prison,” Louie tells me, “It’s all lies.”

“You want to hear what that old buzzard talks about?” Rosie winks at me. “We’ll sell it to the newspapers ... Rudi has still got plans, with all those people ... Louie is joking with you when he tells you I’m lying.” He giggles.

“Sounds bad, Brother Roseberry.” Rosie and I called each other “brother”, like we were members of the Baptist Church.

We were doing nothing, sitting on boxes, it was just after lunch, our food needed digesting ... Mickey limps by us, barks: “What’s the idea? Get to work!” and limps on. Szalay had just been sitting with us, at the same table, being jovial, telling jokes, a Jekyll-and-Hyde type ... His face was all screwed up and angry. Something’s wrong again ...

“His English isn’t bad for a German of his age..,” Rosie continues. “Louie just guards him part-time, let me tell you, Louie and I will be writing a book about the Hess conversations, he landed in the wrong place: Scotland Yard said nothing about it, they wanted to protect some Duke and the King who’d resigned, see? Hess told me everything, everything, I mean everything!” Rosie assures me ... Louie mutters some words under his breath ... “It’s naturally pretty secret...”

“Bullshit!” Zachary fires, he hisses contempt for Rosie’s braggadocio. “Only a fool’s going to believe this character has been inside Spandau Prison’s walls...Rosie, stop telling lies!”

“I guess Hess was not so crazy,” I add good-naturedly, “he didn’t have to grow up like you did, Rosie, fighting the Louisiana heat ...”

“Yeah, I’ve been in prison too, Brother Alan! I’ve since seen the light ... Both sides of the bars.”

“Does Louie take Hess for long walks, Rosie? Hess always talks to Louie? I can’t believe it.”

“Always.” I never felt sorry for Rosie, he didn’t need my empathy, the guy really didn’t give a damn ... that’s why everyone like him. When there was much work to do he simply took off and got drunk, which made the stockroom more chaotic, it was difficult to rein in the mess but with Rosie absent it was even harder ... when he was there he was the one who made the reasonable decisions.

“Watch this,” he told me, breathing in my face, reeking stately of alcohol. He throws an epistle in my lap. “Watch, I’ll make Mickey’s heart beat faster! Hey, Mr. Mickey ... I have to see you a minute or two.” Mickey ambles over, looking mistrustful. “Hey, don’t worry, man! It’s nothing! Nothing. Don’t worry.” Rosie hands Mickey his letter.

Mickey dances on the tips of his toes as he makes a swift perusal of the bilingual letter ... it’s in English and German, in his best handwriting ... he turns around, biting his lip, waves the epistle in

Rosie's smiling mien ... "No. sorry, no ... Two weeks notice? Two weeks notice? At the end of the month you'll be gone?" He's angry as hell. "You can't do this to me! Two weeks notice? You're leaving me: Mickey?"

"Why ... Stop shouting, Mickey! Your hair will get grayer! It's pretty gray already. It isn't worth worrying about, you don't need me!"

"You know I need you! Skip can't handle ..." Mickey carefully looks around him ... "I need your goddamn experience, Rosie ..."

"Don't give me a foreman's wages, do you? Huh, why not?" The extra wages amounted to five dollars a month ... it was a question of prestige, Skipper Moon got the extra five dollars a month for foreman's wages, but Rosie was entitled to them since he was the fellow who actually organized us, when he showed up for work ... Rosie had been supply sergeant in the Army, it was true.

"Don't say that to me now, Rosie! I won't accept it ... We have eighteen trailers scheduled this week! Help me! I need you there, goddamn it! Want to be in my shoes? No one wants to be in my shoes, you can't quit on me, not on me ... get back to work!" he screams ... Skip and David join us, they've come from their hiding place ... Mickey was making a lot of noise, unaware of how loudly he was talking. "Okay, I saw it coming! Trailers ... the same garbage ... Who does the work? You're dissatisfied? You're not exactly working like a slave! Feel pretty comfortable here, don't you, all of you, huh?"

"I have two kids to support, I need more pay ...," Rosie stresses.

Mickey closes his eyes. "I was anxious to hear what you had to say," he whispers, "That's all. Keep your voice down, Rosie! I was anxious to hear what you had to tell me about prospects for your future. It's not enough, I intend to get you guys raises, believe me when I say I'm disappointed by your letter," he throws lay his hands on it, his forehead is damp with perspiration, "do you guys, we have disappointed some people here ... am I right?" David and Skip nod negatively, I didn't say anything, Mickey was talking like a broken record, stuck in one spot, with the volume turned very low .. speaking in a near whisper, so no outside ears could be in one the degradation ... "Anyone else going to quit his job? This is what happens to a guy who wants the best!" He makes a derisive gesture, "I'm a Hungarian, this is uncalled for! You know what I think? I think you guys don't appreciate what I do for you ... okay, look for better jobs with more pay. I'm quitting, too, if this is a mutiny! You win." We know Mickey is unhappy... why he is hurt is incomprehensible; he blames himself because he hasn't been successful in making Rosie enthusiastic about work. "I don't want to read any more letters like that! I've seen people hanging

from street lamps ... Let me decide about this matter,” Mickey angrily stuffs the letter into his pocket, his eyes look snakier than ever before ... “You have better things to do with your time, am I right, Rosie?” He quickly limps away ... Once he is thirty feet removed from our group he turns, raises one arm, high, like a flamenco dancer he see ... seizes it firmly with his other hand, rips it in half ... Stamps his foot again, leaves the stockroom to go upstairs.

“I like doing that to this man, it keeps him on his toes,” Rosie confides laughing, slaps his knee. Rosie had been through ten years of the Army, had twice had one-year stints in Vietnam. Mickey didn’t want to lose him, since Harold Roseberry acted as our real foreman ... whereas Skip couldn’t motivate a flea.

My grandmother was afraid I might forget all the stories she had told me when I was a boy, when I slept overnight with her in her bed ... she told me stories all night long ... about her parents who had come to America from Russia ... it was “like Heaven” ... about gangsters in Chicago in the twenties and thirties, her adventures working for various creeps ... and they had been creeps, some of them! And about Nate...

I had forgotten nothing, but she retold everything again in her long letters, as if the old stories had the power to take me away from Berlin back to Indiana, to return home, to work magic ...

“We had a very rough time here. My father, who was brought up in luxury, became a milliner. My paternal grandfather had cotton mills in Russia. He was a very wealthy man but pious. The Russians are a cruel people. The Germans are cruel people. All anti-Semites! When Hitler came along and killed the Jews, my father, who was a very religious man, asked, ‘Is there a God?’ They attended services at the synagogue, but after Hitler my father did not go to ‘shul’. He was well educated when he was in Russia. When he came to the United States he learned to read and write in English, he spoke Russian, Polish, and Hebrew. Alan, my dear grandson, you are certainly entitled to your opinion, as I am to mine. Honey, I am not the smartest human being, but please grant me the thought I do have some intelligence. At one time right here in the U.S.A. a Jew could not get a job. So I ask you: is that civilization? You talk about South Bend? An insignificant city!

“Hitler was a pervert and a degenerate, so the ‘smart German people’ followed him . German intelligence! As I wrote my parents lived in a Jewish neighborhood, and anti-Semitism was there. I was on vacation, was going out with a man who knew every judge in the city and all the ‘big boys’. I was to meet him and go out, when I saw the writing on the neighbor’s fence: ‘Jews, Kikes keep out’. I stared at the writing and I remember my sister Phyllis saying, ‘The guy is a nut’. That did not satisfy me. I went to the house, rang the bell and asked for Mr. Murphy, the neighbor, Mrs. Murphy answered, and she was not Irish, she was definitely a Pole. Asked her about the writing on the fence. Really smart and intelligent she answered, ‘You mean about the Kikes?’ I said, ‘Who wrote it?’ She replied, ‘I did’. I said, ‘When I get through with you, you will be sorry you ever learned to write.’ I called the police station, got a Sergeant O’Hara on the line and told him about the anti-Semitic scribbling on the fence and said I couldn’t talk to him about it, because it concerned his ‘landsman’. He said. ‘You can talk to me. I just got back from German, I saw the horror’. It was 1945 or forty-sic. So I told him the story, he said, ‘The judge said, ‘I cannot compel

you to sell your home! But if you continue to live there you will have a lot to contend with, because this lady is going to run you out of the neighborhood.' The judge fined him, and in two weeks Mr. and Mrs. Murphy were out of the neighborhood. When I had talked to my friend and told him about the writing When I had

talked to my friend and told him about the writing on the fence. He said, 'Honey, leave it alone.' Well, Alan, I was fighting mad! I answered, 'Leave at alone?' Let Joe do it? That is what has been happening, so Hitler had a field day!' your Great Aunt Phyllis was also a fighter, and when anyone talked about lousy Jews in her presence she hauled off and whacked him one right in the kisser. She wasn't even five feet tall, a tine thing. Someone recently mentioned to me Sadat will get the Nobel Peace Prize because he tried to make 'peace' with Israel! All I answered: 'When Sadat gets the Nobel, that will be the day.' The Nobel Peace Prize to a killer?

"I cannot figure you out: you write you still do not know about yourself. I have never been evasive! I try to answer intelligently but I guess I do not make it with you. Honey, what are you trying to find out there? You mention four thousand years, six thousand years would be more like it, from the beginning of time, and every religion from its inception comes from Judaism. Any person can stand on a soap box, yell loud enough, gather a crowd and found a new religion."

If someone was secular it was my grandmother, I didn't know why she was suddenly going on about religion ... she wouldn't have been caught dead inside a synagogue, she spent the twenties in speakeasies, had been a flapper, a "working girl" ... Chicago in the twenties and thirties must have been a lot of everything for a young woman born in another land ... there must have been a lot to do ...

"I married my 'Ex' several times, my ex-husband Nate Schlitz."

Nate had been born in Odessa like her, his real name wasn't Schlitz, it was Tzarkoff ... I don't think he ever bothered to change it legally to Schlitz, it didn't matter...

"I was very much in love with him, but there does come a time to stop and think, then you know what a waste it all was. I recall meeting him one evening by accident on Randolph Street, he was still a handsome man, still very cocky. With his red hair and blue eyes, muscles and his fedora on his head, a cocky bastard! Asked me please to have a cup of coffee with him, which I did, he sat across from me and kept staring. At that time I was 'easy on the eyes.' He asked, 'Do you hate me, Bess?' I said, 'No, Nate, hate is too close to love.' He answered, 'If you don't hate me you must still love me.' I replied, 'No, Nate, I feel nothing about you and I feel very badly about it because I loved you, and you killed it.' So you see, Alan, you can 'torch' for someone so long. And then you suddenly wake up. You think: why go through all that torture and unhappiness? When I was

married to Nate he was a good provider, anything I wanted I could have, but it wasn't anything like that I wanted. I just wanted him to come home at night, to stop playing the field, be a family man! He did have two children, he was jealous of his own children. He was jealous of the milkman, the telephone man, everyone. He used his fists. So you see, Alan, a human being can endure just so much and then he stops being a 'patsy'. Alan, I had a lovely home, beautiful things! Left everything, took my two children, there is so much to tell, the anguish I went through. He molested, he threatened, he tried beating everyone I was with! I'll tell you something strange: granted, he was a wonderful provider, he always had

money, in this way he was a 'good husband'. But I said to him before I left him, 'Nate! I am taking my luck with me. You'll never make a dime.' Alan, he never made money, it happened that way, was the most miserable, unhappy man I ever saw until he dies, but as far as he was concerned he was my husband, divorce and all, he lived a sad life, very sad, after I finally divorced him, he did not 'adapt', said it didn't mean anything anymore: a man disrupted a family, loused himself up, and for what? Alan, when you were a little boy you were a lot of fun, you loved wearing hats, wore three or four at a time on your head, you loved your Dad's war medals, it was a joy to be with you. Now you have turned very serious and you're in Germany. For what? You are young, that lasts a short time. Youth is fleeting.

"Stay healthy. Write! Love you. Gram."

Back in 1971 in Chicago in my grandmother's apartment at Bryn Mawr smelling of old linoleum and aging concrete, minus food smells, for she never cooked, she went to eat dinner at Walgreen's Drugs, dining at the lunch counter, occasionally she bought chopped liver, a jar of pickles, carry-out from the delicatessen down the block owned by a Korean family, the neighborhood had once been Jewish but was now changing ... old residents, the retirees were still Jews, but the businesses catering to them had been moving out, they were sold to newcomers.

Gram played solitaire on a small card table with folding legs ... I had only been living in Chicago a short time, had been accepted at the Chicago Art Institute but was too poor to afford it, besides I wanted to become a rock star and wanted to study music at the conservatory, Frank Zappa was my idol ... I had no talent, I'm tone deaf ... can't carry a tune, don't recognize a note if it's yelled in my ear, so I wasted my time ... I visited Gram and I still occasionally stayed overnight in her apartment, we would have dinner together, then sit around afterward in the tiny rooms she rented ... Gram would play solitaire while talking ... carefully placing one card in front of another, taking one card away ... she would go on like that for hours ...

Two small rooms, next to the living room was her tinier bedroom, which contained a double bed and a night table with a lamp ... she would read mystery novels all night, had insomnia ... "As for your questions about me," she extinguished a cigarette in the ashtray, shifted some cards around on the table, I was sitting on the couch, which rolled out into a bed ... she forced me to sleep on her bed, she slept on the fold-out bed. "Why do you want to know these things, Alan? My father called me Bosh, as did my mother. Ma name is Bessie. How I came to the name Betty is strictly by accident. I applied for a position, I was very young and when I got to the office there were four girls named Bessie, so my boss said, 'Your name is now Betty.' My birth certificate? I have it somewhere." She looked at me mistrustfully, she didn't like going on about Russia, didn't want to admit anything ... if I asked her direct questions she maintained her Americanness with a stubbornness I found amazing ... I wanted to hear about the past, about Europe, because I dreamed life had been truer, more real there ... back then, there.

"As I began working for the firm I gradually became Betty. Then, of course, when Social Security came in the firm I worked for listed me as 'Betty.' That's how come..."

She flipped two cards over, removed them, replaced them with two more.

“Alan, my parents were wonderful people. Gone since 1951, but I still miss them and maybe soon I will join them, you should wear my father’s ring with great pride ... he was a wonderful man, and my mother was ... oh, never mind, you wouldn’t understand how it was.”

She wasn’t serious. “Tell me, Gram!”

“My mother was outstanding ... intelligent, not very educated, no, but she was intelligent, do you know what it means? I loved them dearly,” she took a puff from the cigarette, took away cards, replaced them, “sure, I miss them more every day. I did the best I could for my parents ...” she looked up at me. “Want to hear something? It reminds me. When your mother was pregnant with you my father died ... my mother didn’t survive him by three months ... It was April when he died, my mother died in June, just after your mother’s birthday, she was not allowed to go to their funerals, she was pregnant! They had been married for fifty years ... You’re named for them, Alan ... When Pa got ill we took him to a physician ... you know how doctors are? Years ago when a doctor couldn’t diagnose a case he called it a ‘virus’ or ‘change of life.’ Many things doctors still have to learn ...”

She bent over the cards, put out the cigarette, immediately lighting another, a random summer breeze came in through the window, noise from the street below us, five floors down, someone yelling, “I’m going to get you!”, and a car honked twice, the smoke got in her eyes ... Gram squinted.

“Too bad, I only have two grandchildren ... just between you and me: when Ruthie became seventeen I sent her a check for seventeen dollars and seventeen cents ... And an extra ten dollars for her coming marriage, she never acknowledged the checks ... also last year I sent her a check ... no ‘thank you’ note, nothing, bad manners. Seems she doesn’t know how to write ... so I guess I will just forget Ruthie, too bad, only have two grandchildren, a wonderful grandson and a very negligent you. Hey, what I am saying about Ruthie is confidential ... please! I don’t want you to relay this to your mother ... We have time for another coffee.”

She poured hot water into a coffee cup, I added a spoonful of instant coffee. Why give either of us money. She lived on two hundred dollars a month.

“So, Alan, what do you do for amusement?” I never told her much about what I was doing. I had moved to Chicago to get away from South Bend but I didn’t know myself what to do ... I was living in a dingy apartment, one room, on Pratt Boulevard, near her old residence at the Rogers Park Hotel ... was alone, but since Gram was there and some aunts, uncles, cousins, it wasn’t too bad, it was rough at times ... Gram was worried I was wasting time after school, the fact was I hardly ever went to classes...

“I hope you’re enjoying yourself. Do you go out in the evenings? Have you met any girls yet? What do you do with yourself? ... I’ll mind my own business ... How’s your part-time job?”

I was working at an ice cream stand.

“You say so little about yourself, what do you do for amusement, do you got out and enjoy, have you made friends here? Anything I can do for you? Tell me how you find Chicago?”

Chicago was “her” town ... She, my other grandmother, and both my grandfathers had come here as children, as teenagers, had been given American names. You had to understand these people, they weren’t proud of coming from Europe ... Europe wasn’t so great for them. What did they have in common with

Russia? When I was thirteen, on the day of my bar mitzvah as all my relatives had gathered for the high occasion in South Bend I asked my paternal grandfather where he had been born ... He mumbled a word ... became gruff. What had he said? This plagues me the whole afternoon: he had not said Chicago. I finally went up to my grandfather again.

“Where were you born?”

“Hey! Can’t you understand me? Chernigov Guberniya! Good enough for you?” He walked away from me, was pissed, ashamed ...

My parents were born in Chicago and grew up with these old “Europeans” ... my mother heard her grandfather speaking Yiddish and drinking tea with a lump of sugar stuck between his teeth, it was considered old fashioned and “heimische” ... My father’s grandfather never left the neighborhood on the West Side because his “shul” was there, founded by men of his hometown in Russian, the old fellow went there every evening to pray, to meet with his “lantzmenner.” While my Mom and Dad were growing up they weren’t interested in their parents’ birthplaces or real names ... They were Americans and they wanted a home of their own in an American suburb like everyone else ... away from Chicago, away from the poor Jewish neighborhood in the middle of the huge Polish settlements of the city, where Polish kids made a port of conducting war against Jewish kids. Their prejudices, which were their parents’ ones, were taken with them: America was the magic land of opportunity and justice ... Europe was dark and backward ... the Poles were dumb and hated us ...

“ I can’t stand riding the El, Gram, the people seem either criminals or maniacs who scream weird things at you. I guess I’m a little new here ...”

“Ride the bus!”

I started riding the bus and met fewer maniacs and hoodlums, it was an alternative ...

“How’s the job going? Is he paying you anything? If it’s true what you said and he’s a Mafioso ...” Gram rifles through her bag ... takes out her change purse ... I refuse it before she can hand me ten dollars.

“You should always have something in your pocket! You need money?”

“No, Gram, no, no! Even if he hardly pays me I can eat all the ice cream I want, and my boss knows it. Besides Uncle Vince gave me a twenty today...” I was working running an ice cream parlor for a young lawyer named Johnnie Russo, in Old Town, I did it with another student. John had an uncle who had given him the money to set up the joint ... that was Uncle Vince, a fellow who was chauffeured through Chicago in a Rolls Royce by his bodyguard Shorty ... boss and gunman wore identical black sunglasses, expensive suits, and jewelry, Uncle Vince hardly walked anywhere, Shorty wore his pistol under his armpit ...

John was a friendly guy in his late thirties who had graduated from law school and was partner in a legal firm. He had a stunning, dark-lashed spouse named Linda Lou who visited the shop with her husband every once in a while and drove me to distraction wearing hot pants, high heels, and halter tops, her breasts wiggling .. hips swaying ... had he met her in a strip show? When she asked for a free ice cream cone and licked it I would try not to look her in the eye, I was nineteen then ... fresh from South Bend. My boss had secrets to keep ... at lunch hour he ran from his office to the ice cream parlor ... not to eat a sundae ... it was only five minutes from his firm by foot ... rushed to his shop to meet “kids”, those trysts took place in the back room where there was a mattress on the floor. A horde of runaway teenagers were stranded in Chicago at that time, poor kids with no place to go who had only their bodies to sell, they panhandled too ... good opportunity ... he took what he could .. girls and boys, it was all the same to him. Old Town was a Mecca for Midwestern hippies, it was a rotten life, I worked for him twelve hours a day, paid a dollar fifty an hour tax-free ... I stole small change, I opened the ice cream parlor in the morning, the other student came to shut the place up, it was open about twenty hours a day, we were cheap labor, student slavery ... and the parlor made a monstrous profit, because Uncle Vince, whose connections supplied the joint, got him the ice cream plenty cheap! I had been telling Gram stories about John Russo screwed during his lunch hour, she liked Shorty best: an unsmiling hoodlum whose eyes met no one’s, prowling around for assassins .. protecting his boss, Shorty radiated a hail of bullets and bombs, he hated you at first sight, I was afraid to look in his direction when he and Uncle Vince visited me, unannounced, asking for ice cream cones ... Gram loved my stories, it reminded her of old times.

On hot summer days you could see the Rolls parked in front of the parlor ... Vince wanted to know what his nephew John was up to, I could see through his questions .. couldn't say much, John Russo was paying me, or I was stealing my pay, the same thing. "Two bi scoops of vanilla ice cream, vanilla, no a drop of chocolate, understand? I can't stand anything else." Vince demanded politely, smiling, and I couldn't see his eyes because of the sunglasses. Shorty the gunner held his hand under his arm, just in case. Vince got two big scoops of vanilla in a cone, never said a word while he ate. I gave Shorty two scoops of his favorite: strawberry. Shorty licked at the stuff suspiciously ... watching me. Ready to shoot. After Vince had eaten the treat he beckons me toward him by crooking his finger, I lean over the counter. "Hoe's my Johnnie doing? Try being honest with me for once,, kid!"

"Fine!" I replied innocently.

Vince hinted at my boss backroom activities. "It's a shame for a good Catholic boy not to be satisfied by his wife." Shorty grunted assent. Uncle Vince shook his finger in my face, there he was: in white silk robes, with gold braid, in holy raiment, wearing sunglasses, he has on a golden cardinal's hat, holding a scepter, admonishing the fallen ... "Why do it so publicly?" he asked. "You've got to do right to your own family ... a man's got to keep things private ... hey, I understand you, kid! He's your boss! A fool, maybe,

my nephew, but your capo, eh?... I like loyalty in the young!" Vince hands me something rolled up in his fist, I take it and stare at my palm, incredulous, he is rewarding me ... "Keep it," it's a twenty dollar bill. Shorty gave me a look... "Now don't refuse a gift!" I thanked Vince, who trailed behinds Shorty's broad back, striding out of the parlor...

Being with Feliks was strenuous! He was so insistent on his dream of fulfilling himself as a musician. It had grown worse since Yuri had come into the picture, who Feliks had met in a premedical course he was attending ... Feliks had finally begun his first year at the Free University. Yuri, a Moscovite, had told him about two professors who were big music lovers, tinkers on the keyboard, it made Feliks crazier, more stubborn to realize his dream, nothing would stop him...

It was Saturday, early afternoon, we were sitting in Feliks' bedroom... Mrs. Mayer knew what she was talking about ... "art without bread" ... she was working hard against his crazy notions. "Did they make Beethoven study anatomy?" he'd asked his mother a while ago in the hallway of their small apartment. "What did Schubert care about the cardiovascular system?" She shrugged, his questions made her anxious about his future ... she glared at me ... I was definitely her enemy ... Yuri was in his second year of premedical studies, the harm he did was less vicious... Yuri was doing something, he was doing the right thing. I was a worker at the PX with a big mouth, I saw she was right, too, but I liked Feliks, he was not someone I visualized as a physician ...she thought his friends were putting ideas in his head, which was not true, but when Feliks started raving I wouldn't contradict him. At the same time he was pretty ignorant about how he intended to do what he wanted ... It was clear his parents were going to make him study medicine, they had not left Riga and everything it stood for ... Communism, deprivation, clandestine anti-Semitism, a dearth of culture in their eyes, no opportunity, the whole mess ... for nothing, not so their son would throw his life away! I had to agree with them, becoming a composer was absurd, at his age: twenty, a little late... Feliks, however, wanted music, he was in love with it ... he was quite an idiot ... "You have to be consequent in your desire," he would tell me.

Yuri and I were lying on the floor, Feliks was standing at the window. I was perusing one of his textbooks ... graphically detailed photographs of skin diseases, throat goiters, liver cirrhosis, all the horrors of man. That's what Feliks was going to go into? I couldn't see how he could stomach it, he didn't see it that way: "My professor of anatomy is a musician! He plays the piano ...," he had told me over and over the same litany. "Yuri was there! He visits his house in Dahlem, the prof played Schubert and Brahms for him ..." And Yuri also knew a surgeon who was a passionate cello player ... I looked through a second textbook ... a profession where you were entitled to open up a body like a can of worms to do good, what you found inside looked like garbage to judge from the photographs ... while Yuri and Feliks were talking. Yuri had discovered a third physician-

musician: a professor of parasitology who played fiddle in a string quartet, whom he offered to Feliks as a further example. My friend grew ecstatic, he only saw the side he wanted to.

Yuri was twenty-one years old, wanted to become a doctor and nothing else ... Feliks didn't know about my business relationship with Yuri, however. We had met at Howard's, earlier, had gone into the park nearby to make a deal ... I had asked Yuri to bring me Russian items, made of wood, glass ... for my mother ... maybe something could be found for her, finally ... to trade for twenty cartons, Yuri had brought me two cheap Palekh boxes and a matrushka doll ... Yuri arrived in his parents' car, what he brought me was unbelievable, chipped, cheap imitations, he had cost me twenty cartons of Marlboro ... his matrushka doll was crippled, made of balsa wood, it nearly broke in my hand. He must have thought of Americans as fools to be swindled, who purchased anything as long as it was quaint and "antique" .. this was the trash of his homeland, these were Russian versions of the plastic Statue of Liberty's you could buy for thirty cents in New York harbor ... the Palekh boxes were full of scrapes, their enamel finish was shot to hell, I had wanted to give these things to my mother on her birthday ... a shame ... seeing my disgust with him Yuri had lowered his price to fifteen cartons, then twelve ... he had had the nerve to ask for cigarettes in exchange for his debris! I didn't take anything. Afterward in the car on the way to Kreuzberg, to the Mayer family's small apartment, he had requested I get a hold of another sixty cartons of Marlboros, God, I was sick of him, that bastard was too greedy, he would have to pay me cash in the future ...

"That's what I mean!" Feliks interrupted Yuri's description of a rendition he heard on the keyboard by some pretentious prof showing off in front of students who adored him, who were half his age ... Feliks braced himself against the wall, standing in front of the frowning Beethoven poster, holding rightly to his dreams, for his dreams were what counted now, what counted most, otherwise he couldn't endure what he was getting into. "Medicine and music can be combined, yes, indeed! I know they can ... Yuri, tell me more ...," he was breathless, his blue eyes were becoming wider, committed to his certainty ... If professors of anatomy and biology could do it, why, so could he ... I didn't know how Feliks was going to manage piano lessons, for which he had no allowance, not to speak of music theory studies, a hundred and thirteen other items he needed, he didn't even have a piano... Feliks ignored his mother who walked back and forth in the hallway.

Medical students I had known in Boston had been vastly overworked, their formal studies had been time-consuming ... it was going to be hard, I naturally didn't see it immediately, Feliks caught me up in his enthusiasm, his hope ... "You're going to have to be disciplined," I told him. I forgot Mrs. Mayer was still standing in the hallway overhearing our jibber-jabber...

Feliks left Beethoven and opened the door: “What do you want to hear, Mother? You’re spying on me ... Why?”

She stands in the door, arms akimbo. “Is that all you have to say? Have you studied your anatomy? Your biology? I’m your mother, speak respectfully!”

“You’re driving me crazy.”

We hard keys jingle ... Feliks’ father unlocks the front door, coming inside .. Mrs. Mayer calls to him, “Come! Hurry!” she chatters in Russian ... God knows what she is saying ... Feliks had lowered his head, his fists are clenched ... then Papa Mayer comes into the room, he is a little fellow, with dark brown hair, has a stubby nose, is not heavy, a small man, apparently fast on his feet, he could’ve been a lightweight boxer in Latvia when he was young ... The old guy had been at work, on a Saturday ... Feliks’ mother had given him a shove ... to do something ... use his authority.

“Feliks, did you study?” Mr. Mayer queries in admonishment ... He speaks Yiddish, then switches to Russian, so I don’t know what he babbles. Feliks answers, sounding quarrelsome, Yuri is trying to keep his attention on Beethoven’s eyebrows, he is forced to comprehend what’s going on, not me ... I let the Mayers have it out with one another, can’t get involved ...

... No, I can’t escape, it continues in German, “Feliks Mayer, you’re a nudnik, you know that?” his father poked Feliks in the chest with his finger, Feliks apologizes for his words, says he’s sorry, he’s studied hard today. I can’t help liking his stupid son, is it my fault? I’ll defend my friend ... Mr. Mayer waved his hand, I should kindly shut my mouth, too ... “A nudnik remains a nudnik!” He points at me and Feliks. “You’re both the same!” Also in my father’s eyes it was true, despite his philosophical high-flying: I was a nudnik, just as Feliks as a nudnik in his father’s eyes, as for Yuri, he’s a solid young man who knows what he wants ... Both fathers should’ve had Yuri as a son, and I don’t believe it would’ve hurt him in their eyes to learn what kind of business he conducted, how he tried to cheat me ...

“I am not a nudnik,” Feliks counters, raising his voice a few decibels, hoping to drive his father from his room. “You and Mama don’t understand ... the only thing is I don’t want to get sick! From all the work, it’s a lot, I admit, I might get ill. But I can do it, where there’s a will ...”

His father lowered his eyes, defeated, he had a soft heart. “I know, I know, Feliks. We just hope for the best, we want you to have it better than we did, we’re on your side, my boy. Come on! You, Yuri! Alan! Come into the living room where we can talk,” he urged us forward with his hands, pushing Yuri out the door, into the hallway, putting his arm around Yuri’s shoulder, I trailed them, we strolled past the frowning mother ...

I turned to see whether Feliks was coming, he stood in the doorjamb, lost in the afternoon light filling his room. I waved in his direction...

He followed us, slowly, we marched into the tiny living room, it was cluttered up with three stuffed chairs, a large couch, a dining table seating six... There was a television set switched on but its volume had been turned off, on its screen soccer players were furiously kicking a ball in mute grace. The kitchen was next to the living room and, pointing us in the direction of the dining table, Mr. Mayer beckons us to sit down and runs to the refrigerator, pulls out a bottle of sweet Israeli wine from its innards, grabs four glasses from the cupboard, smiling ... pours us a glass, Mrs. Mayer stands off to the side, she doesn't sit down, she looks

distraught, frowning at our frivolity, worried. Might have thought her husband was overdoing the simple joviality ...

The wine tasted like grape juice spiked with high-proof alcohol and saccharine, went right to your head, dangerously ... and Mr. Mayer was enjoying himself, pouring us more, he filled up our glasses as quickly as we drank ...

"What do you think of the Nobel Prize being given to Sadat? Begin, that's a choice I understand. We cannot be strong enough, boys! Never give up! Fight back!" He sipped wine. "Take what we need! What do you think of Begin, huh? That's a man! They shouldn't give anything back to the Arabs! Nothing, not an inch of land! They gave enough to the Egyptians ... that's politics ... We're forced to defend ourselves!" Mr. Mayer had fought in the Second World War on the Soviet side, he had known what it was to be a soldier. "A Hitler could come again! From Baghdad or Damascus this time ... No one likes war, do they?" he queried. I had no opinion, read no news, my energies were taken up with working at the PX ... and the sugary drink was going to my brain .. He wanted to talk politics, Yuri went along ... he was a better gabber than I was about these things, while Feliks stayed out. He either raved on about musical ambitions or didn't have much to say in front of his father ... laconicism was his defense against his parents... and maybe I liked him because of his mad ideas about the future, because he listened to my griping about work in the PX ... and I took his composing as seriously as he took my half-baked dreams, I assured him all would work out ...

Yuri was more realistic, his eyes told Feliks he didn't think harebrained ideas were good for anyone ...

Mr. Mayer directed his words at Yuri. "Think of what has happened! We have a state now! Somewhere we can go to ... I'd like to be buried there ... No one can push us out of Jerusalem! Nobody! The Arabs don't have a chance, we have atomic bombs and rockets! And what do you

think the Arabs want to do? I'm asking! Push us into the sea! They want nothing better than to kill us. How can you trust these people. We need a wide security corridor ..."

"It's a regrettable situation ...," Yuri says, reaching across the table to refill his glass.

Feliks is bored, doesn't pretend to be listening, and his mother sits next to her son ... "Speak some English with your American friend, you don't realize the golden opportunity you're throwing away. Alan is a native English speaker, oh, Feliks, why are you so lazy? You have no drive, no backbone! Have to work, work, nothing will be given to you, work hard, speak English when you have a chance to ... have you studied your anatomy and biology, really?" her son sighs wearily, nods his head. "Improvement is life's key! Work to improve yourself! Isn't that true, Alan?" she looks at me, in her eyes I sense her mistrust, her hope I will answer correctly.

"Yeah, I know...," I murmur.

"I know he'll make us proud one day," she directs her words at Feliks, gabbing English.

"Is my German that bad?" I ask tipsily. "He's only pick up a lousy American accent from me, Mrs. Mayer ... It isn't an Eton accent I speak with ..."

"I know ... it's not the right thing, it's not British, we'd have to send Feliks to Oxford for that, you can believe my words, if we had had enough money we would have done it!"

My father hated my grandmother ... Gram had to help out my parents, financially, during the first years of their marriage, maybe even later. Dad called her “old buzzard.” On a separate page he had written me, in his last letter: “Grandma continues to give Mom a bad time. There is no mellowing the old witch!” He wasn’t all wrong, Mom had not broken yet from her mother, not entirely ... a love-hate relationship existed between daughter and mother, including everything you can imagine being involved ... between two fairly high-strung ladies ... “She remains as she was, a totally neurotic, obsessive, self-concentrated, and tough old vulture!! My biases are showing, of course, but I can’t forgive her continuous insertion of her neurotic needs on Mom! Non is constantly being put in a position of handling her guilt-induced feelings, guilts Grandma induces and nurtures! I see how much Mom needs protection from her own mother.”

He didn’t write me what was truly going on. Mom was sick, and I didn’t know how ill she really was from Berlin, I only had Gram’s letters warning me ... I didn’t know what was better. Should I nag Mom about taking her illness seriously, finally, or let her be?

I was getting sick and tired of the PX ... my body was giving me trouble, my lungs, it was too much ... on Thursday I fell down on the loading ramp, I thought I wouldn’t be able to catch my breath again, my lungs were bloated with bad stuff, couldn’t get good air inside ... it got me worried, before my asthma had always been under control, I hadn’t had any bad attacks since I had been a kid. So, waiting like an idiot, I wrote my mother to send me “pumpkin seed pills” instead of going to a German doctor or Dr. Prabhakar El-Hakim, at the U.S. Army Hospital on Fabeck Strasse ... I had seen this man once, he hardly spoke English, he was a nearsighted Indo-Egyptian physician the Army had contracted for a six-month stint due to a lack of North American sawbones, a doctor who had done his internship in East Berlin ... what sane doctor would want to work for the Army ... didn’t trust these fellows, only Mom knew best ... my favorite pills gave me relief for congestion of the chest, with some prophylactic properties, not too many, my mother and I had referred to them as “pumpkin seeds” because they were pale orange, oblong, had a lot of caffeine in them they got you high ... bad for sleeping though, but if you can’t catch your breath who cares about slumber. The pills’ arrival would take awhile, she would have to send them by air mail, that meant two weeks, I waited for them, choking.

“Where has the time gone, Alan, where has it gone? The days drag by, but the months go so swiftly, sometimes days are over before they’ve even begun.” The letters of my mother were

growing more and more melancholy, she spoke of getting old ... I felt guilty, was worried ... “Got your letter and the photograph you sent. Yes, you have changed: your face is longer and thinner. Your weight looks the same, also your wardrobe! I send you pictures of Dad and me, do you thing Dad and I have changed much in over a year’s time? I think Dad’s gotten handsomer, in my eyes he had! And his beard is very honorable looking! I’m

getting to look matronly, don’t you think, Alan? I spread around the twelve hairs on my head so my coiffure will look like something, elegant, I believe my medication had affected my hair follicles. Please comment! Ruthie was taken aback when she saw us last month in California, when we visited Judging by her reaction I thought I had aged seventy-five years, Dad was positive he had.. we both felt old, decrepit, helpless, and ready for rocking chair! Ruthie resides in a young state: California.” Her handwriting had already changed three times, it weaved back and forth now ...

“Spoke to Gram a while ago, she said she’s got a flock of letters from you and she’s still raving about the birthday card you sent her. She’s proud of you, she’s always been close to you, she talks about the times you had together in Chicago. With me it’s another story! I gave her an air conditioner after she’s been telling me how hot it’s been. An argument immediately. She can’t put it in her apartment! It’s against the rules! That wasn’t so. She will not turn it on, says it’s not strong enough for the apartment. I say, ‘Keep you door closed, it can’t cool an apartment if the doors are wide open or else have it put in the bedroom.’ I also say, ‘It’s better than nothing.’ Her comeback is it will cost ten dollars to move it to the bedroom. Another comment: ‘I have a floor fan that cools the whole room, I don’t need the air conditioner!’ Very gracious lady. Another subject we got on: travel. Aunt Lottie wants Gram to go on a trip, anywhere. Gram said, ‘Israel.’ Okay. I said to Grandma, ‘but you don’t like traveling.’ ‘Oh, yes, I do! I love to travel.’ This is the woman who got off a bus in Miami Beach and stayed in the station and said it was terrible, nothing to see or do, this is the woman who spent maybe three days in Florida with you, Ruthie, and me, couldn’t stand it, and this is the woman who went all over Los Angeles in a taxi cab, hated it, said she was a prisoner. Only she’d like to travel with me now! She’s also upset with Aunt Fern because Aunt Fern won seventy-two cents in a lottery, my mother is actually peeved. This same woman, your grandmother, also took me out about a week later and bought me a present of a crystal goblet at Marshal Field’s for ninety-six dollars! Figure it out. Don’t mention the seventy-two cents and Aunt Fern, she didn’t tell me! Sometimes my mother acts so childish.

“Alan, I had a most peculiar thought. During my life with my mother she had had one name, I another.” My mother meant she had borne the last name of her father ... Schlitz. “She has been in

the telephone book, I have not. How many people thought, 'With a name like Schlitz I'll just look it up in the telephone book.' But I was not in the telephone book, Alan. I might have been looked for but never found! It makes me think perhaps I was not unpopular, just unfound. It also makes me realize a portion of my life was eliminated, I'm not sure if it was done deliberately, all the same it was squelched, isn't it an odd thought, my cocoon-like life?

"That was the day today, it's over now. Life is sad, tired sometimes, Alan, you spent it with me, dear. Keep it up, Alan. Love you, Mom."

The plan was: to call in sick and visit Mr. Siegel's office first thing in the morning, if he would see me. His lair was on the southern edge of the city along Teltow Canal. A deep, murky waterway separating

West and East ... the headquarters of the "Supply and Services Division", which used to be a German naval equipment testing center. I didn't know what might come of it, but that was my plan of escape ... I didn't have any desire in my present state to traipse down Hüttenweg on Sabbath evening to meet the top guru ... unhappy about the idea of seeing the creeps and hearing Siegel rant in front of his captured audience, the idea depressed me ...

I called in sick Friday morning and phoned Siegel. "Mr. Siegel, sir? This is Alan. Uh, can I speak to you in your office?"

"Are you going to services tonight?"

Oh, no! ... If you need help you crawl on your knees ... "Sure."

"See you there," he hung up.

I went to the American shopping center to purchase two jars of Jiffy peanut butter, the crunchy sort, and five cans of baked beans ... I was wheezing all over the place, sounded like I was dying. The important thing was avoiding my colleagues from the PX, so I took great care to sneak in and out of the Commissary as swiftly as my two legs could carry me ... went around the back. Maybe I would have to ask Mr. Siegel about a German doctor, couldn't go on ...

When I arrived at the Army chapel that evening at seven I was carrying the brown paper bag full of goodies. Before I opened the "Synagogue" portal I was met by Mr. Siegel, who was easing his overweight body, with a grimace, from his Lincoln Continental deluxe something ...he beckons me toward him, I help him out, he frowns, looks with his lidded eyes into mine ... watching, would I lick his shoes, would I be too proud? "Salnitsky, I'm here to help you, if you need it ... but not everything can be discussed at a place of worship, you know? I want you to come to my office ... Monday morning at nine on the dot! Can you do it?"

I had no chance to reply, I got pushed aside, into the Lincoln's fender, brown bag torn from my hand, I see a shadow, some bum is robbing me ... I am accosted by an elderly fellow in oversized, black trousers, nearly knocked over by his rush to grab my hand. "Hey!" He had seized my bag to look inside, no stopping him. "Yum yum! Have some! I'll have some, a taste!" He grips the peanut butter jar, twists off its cap, pushes his dirty, grubby finger inside, a swab of peanut butter hangs from his forefinger, snot is coming out of his nose, he licks the finger, digs in again, hectically wipes his nostrils clean with his sleeve, wipes his lips with his sleeve. Russell Buchalter is wearing an Army fatigue jacket whose collar is pretty soiled, enjoys a treat...

We walked inside together, I lent Buchalter a sheet of Kleenex to better clean himself, he reeked of peanuts ... one jar had been scarped down, he didn't care, however, he had enjoyed himself, I found it difficult to imagine this man had once been an important lawyer under General Clay and the American military government. "My favorite ... Jiffy, wow!" he mumbles, making a lot of noise with the bag, rifling

through it in search of a second jar, Max Siegel shoots Buchalter an evil glance. So the bum stops. "Thanks

for the goods, I'll pay you next week!" I would never see the money, that was clear ... He dips his finger in the bag, more cautious about the noise ... making such a racket with the rustling and crackling paper.

I ignore Buchalter, I don't know whether I should call in sick Monday to see the super guru ... why didn't he see me this morning ... he was a monster ... I'm going to need a doctor's slip. "What's up now?" Siegel asks now. "You're not giving up, are you? You have to have a head on your shoulders." He frowns. "My times is precious, kid! What can I do for you, what can you do for me, what are your skills? I'm not a welfare committee, Salnitsky, what's the problem?"

"I don't think my health is going to hold up if I continue to unload two trailers a day at the PX ..."

"That's what everyone says ... But that's okay: you've got a head on your shoulders, I need someone who's willing to think a little ... Can you handle people?"

Buchalter stuffs five cans of baked beans and a jar of peanut butter into his baggy trousers, they fit in easily, he throws the paper bag on the floor. No one else has arrived yet for services except the German woman who sets up the Kiddush table ... There is a commotion behind us: Berlin Moscovites saunter by us, a couple with daughter in tow whose hair had been dyed six different colors from auburn to henna, streaked with blond, a blue flower affixed to her coiffure ... her patent leather high heels click on the linoleum, she looks at me hatefully, Pops and

Mamushka crowing Russian, bickering with each other ... Siegel nods at them, and the young lady sticks out her tongue at me as soon as Siegel turns away. I'm wondering how soon I can take off but I had wanted to inquire what the Big Boss meant ... "handling people"... He waves with delight at an incoming visitor in Army fatigues, a colonel, they shake hands and start to kibitz ... the name tag above his breast pocket: "Bernstein", I stand there like an idiot listening to their palaver, Colonel Bernstein is an Army doctor, from the military hospital in Frankfurt, he's also a Lodge brother ...

"What kind of people, Mr. Siegel, are you talking about?" I ask, but he ignores my presence, I am nugatory now that Colonel Bernstein's arrived. "... I can handle people, Mr. Siegel..."

He interrupts his conversation, with irritation on his mien he barks, "We'll talk about it Monday, Salnitsky!"

Okay. So what.

I spent Saturday and Sunday trying to catch my breath. And what a weekend! Loud doings in our ratty apartment: forty-eight hours of party time, there were a hundred and fifty-three barbarians from America, guests of Tom, Jerry, and Wilbur ... all drunk. On Saturday Howard thrashed, he raved about Elfriede before he left too mooch off her on Fasanen Strasse, cursing her intrusions into his life ... I put in earplugs and remained locked in my room.

Monday morning I was sitting in Siegel's office, on Goerzallee ... I explained the situation, my elucidation was not long, the strenuous work was making me ill, and Mickey was a lousy bastard, I told him, he hated me. Siegel said I was withdrawing more and more from people. "You're catatonic!" he yells. "Have some ice cream!" His office is the size of a closet, looks Lilliputian with its monstrous desk. He sat across from me, a window was at his back looking onto a railroad yard ... his office seemed like an extension of his secretaries' worksite next door.. he had two good-looking ladies typing in a huge room, both were frightened of Siegel, they shivered at his command, that was normal ... but their office was gargantuan in comparison to the boss'. In Max Siegel's chamber, covering three walls of the miniscule room, were multitudes of framed certificated of appreciation, commendations, War College diplomas, a plethora of photographs, shots of the famous, Berlin's first burgomasters, two-star generals, even one of him together with an American President ... John Kennedy ... He had known everyone, had a master's degree in psychology, he told me that right off, there was no getting around him, he was a Berlin institution.

"Carmen! Carmen! Bring Alan two scoops of vanilla!" Smiling. "I want you to relax! Relax! Hear me? huh?" Taps his fingers on his desk. "Cake? Cake too. Carmen! Carmen! Bring Alan cake!"

A weeping, thin young woman with black hair and hollow, red-rouged cheeks rushes in carrying a plate. I don't want anything, I gaze at the slice of chocolate something with frosting thrust in my hand while I cower on a low, low chair ... across from the boss' uncluttered, orderly desk, which is one of the standard Army regulation kind, the one a division chief is entitled too.

Siegel lights a cigar while I am forced to consume this stuff he's given me ... it's nine in the morning, I nibble at the cake, let the ice cream melt. Carmen sneaks off, sniffing, to her secretarial antechamber ... I hear furious typing in the next room, from the other secretary. Siegel orders, "Close the door on your way out!" Her reddened eyes look once at me as she shuts it, I can't read her mind .. perhaps she thinks I know Siegel well, I won't get yelled at like she had gotten this morning. Siegel made the impression he enjoyed his ... scaring of women.

What a day this was going to be. I would have to go see the quack doctor at the Army Hospital, in the evening would be forced to dine with Howard and Elfriede ... Howard's birthday, he was treating us, but I dreaded their maniacal arguing, it would be a punishment. I put down the plate on the floor, looked Siegel in his lidded eyes. He was mustering me. "I need to find a new job, Mr.

Siegel. Perhaps I could be of assistance to you. It's not like I'm so unqualified! My German is getting better, I'd like to do something more than unload trucks at the PX, sir." He rattles off two sentences in German, which I comprehend and immediately translate into English .. it was a test.

"I asked you about handling people ... with your catatonia, huh? You kids don't know what it is to work, I need someone at the Laundry, in the office ... to run the office, do the paperwork, be in charge of six clerks ... and supervise four pick-up points, where they throw in dirty wash and it gets picked up and re-delivered, that's ten women out at four points in Berlin we're talking about ... plus two driver-deliverymen, think you can do it? Supervise eighteen .. An answer!"

I gulped, "Yes, I can, sir."

He dials a number ... "Hello, Mrs. Bohnenstengel." He speaks German, "This is Max Siegel, you know the position of chief administrative clerk at the Landry and Dry Cleaning Branch?" it was a branch in Mr. Siegel's division, what he was doing was not kosher but also not illegal, really ... since he was chief of the division. He was recommending me to the Civilian Personnel Office. I was to go in today, take my typing test, my German test, pass them, hopefully, so I could prove my qualifications for the job, then Mrs. Bohnenstengel would send me to Mr. Brown tomorrow. Mr. Brown was chief of the Laundry and Dry Cleaning Branch and he had had no one there who could fill the position, no one fool enough to try ... I would have to run to the Army Hospital, get written out sick for a couple days more, go to the Civilian Personnel Office, I needed a jet to get everywhere ... then Howard and Elfriede tonight, my God, I didn't want to live my own life, this was pure hecticness. Siegel warns me to behave on the interview with Brown. "He's Irish, from Boston. Don't like him, but he's a good laundry manager, don't have to invite him home with me, do I, no! a little bit of a lush, I'm afraid..."

I was leaving one to go to another? I didn't say a word to Siegel, I was happy to be rid of Mickey Szalay, replacing him with a Mr. Brown might not be so bad.

I walked from Siegel's office to the Army Hospital, it took me an hour and a half, I lost time but the nurse let me see the esteemed physician immediately. No one else had been waiting for his services, he probably had no victims who willingly came to him, not even Army dependents ... I was lucky again. Prabhad El-Hakiim was a dark-skinned, curly-haired fifty-year-old with thick, brown-tinted eyeglasses. He graciously offered me a seat on one of the two black stools, the only furniture in his bare office besides an immense gray file cabinet ... the room was Spartan, it had whitewashed walls, the three-drawer regulation Army file cabinet was badly chipped. The doctor sat down on the second chair, opposite me, pulled open the top drawer with a tug of his

arm, straining ... it creaked and screeched and bottles of medicine and pills rattled against one another, cacophonously ... took out his wooden tongue depressor ... I stuck out my tongue. He held it tightly on its end with thumb and forefinger, looked at the index card the nurse had filled out, U.S. Army Form Number so-and-so, containing the patient's Social Security number, place of employment, and symptoms ... saw my name at the top of the card, sweetly asking, "How do you feeling, Mr. Salnitsky?"

"Asthma, asthma," I burbled, my tongue between his fingers.

"Aha! So unfortunate ... my brother Salim in Cairo suffers incessantly form shortness of breath, aha, my sympathy goes out to you, but ... sorry, you are not angry with me? You are working at the PX? For Army? A sit-down job of work? Selling? Do you smoke? How is sleep? Tell me, what kind of work?"

"Unloading ... unloading ." I gasp, he holds my tongue tightly.

"Allah be praised, calm! Calm down! 'Unload!' what is that?" I lean backward as far as possible, he holds on, however, leaning forward, breathing in my face, gripping and peering at my organ of taste.

I say, "Heavy work ... at the PX!"

"Heavy work?" He releases my tongue. "Unfortunate, aha, aha! Oh, very bad ... my brother, when he needs relief from asthma, goes and jumps in the Nile! You do that?"

That was his cure? I should go jump in the Spree River? I am happy my tongue is under my own power, I let it swish around in my mouth a little, move it form cheek to cheek, to my palate, let it ride along my upper and lower gums. "I don't want to go swimming, Doctor."

"Aha, precisely, that is what Salim does, goes swimming in the holy river, water has curative properties, in my land we say ...," he spewed forth poetically in a guttural Arabic, as if I could understand him, I nod my head glumly. "I will translate: 'There is water in my mouth and a Nile between my legs, I come to quench the fire!' thus spoke a pagan deity, words the goddess Isis used according to legend as she rescued her son Horus from death by burning ... muck like choking, aha! That is an ancient notion, to the river, bathe! Swim! Dampness! Let the water of God guide you!"

"I can't unload trucks when I can't breathe, Doctor."

"Aha, good point!" ... I will be cut up into hamburger meat, fired, be thrown on the street ... this freak won't give me a doctor's excuse for my absence on Friday and Monday, a goddamn catastrophe ... and no job to replace my PX slavery, not yet ... The physician squints in my direction, maybe he can't see me too well ... takes off the eyeglasses and polishes the lenses on his

sleeve, rubs his upper lip, muttering in Arabic. I wait. Maybe God will intervene, but I doubted it ... He then takes out a white slip of paper from his breast pocket ... a piece of cardboard, an advertisement for tranquilizers, serves him as a table ... scribbles, spins around on his stool, reaches his hand in the file cabinet, pulls ink pad and stamp from it, strains, with an effort slams the drawer shut, everything rattles madly, peruses what he's written, hands it to me: ..."and to excuse Alan Salnitsky from work for three working days ... certified by Dr. Prabhad El-Hakiim, M.D., U.S. Army Hospital, Berlin," with a flourish ... he winks, it's a conspiracy between us two ... he stamps the paper.

Out of breath I hurried to the bus and rode down Teltowerdamm and Clayallee, arriving at the Civilian Personnel office on Sundgauer Strasse at twelve-oh-one... a minute too late, Mrs. Bohnenstengel was at lunch, not a soul sat anywhere. One office next to another, a row of open doors with no inhabitants.

Two gray metal desks facing each other, gray file cabinet, and a window: every office looks identical except for the variety of posters with humorous cartoons and sayings expressing how lazy and slow everyone was, the usual stuff...

I would have to wait along with six other examinees, two males, four females ... we were seated on uncomfortable metal chairs in a half circle in a dim chamber reeking of dust. There were dated issues of "Time" and "Spiegel" lying on a low table, and a sign, "Please take a number and await your turn, your number will be called." We took a number from the reel of tickets mounted on a stand, I was forty-three. I fingered through magazines, trying to ignore the others ... not to think about the future. At twenty minutes after one a lady in a gray-and-yellow spotted dress, with a florid face and brown, shoulder-length hair peeked inside the waiting room...

"Is Alan Salnitsky here?"

I wave my hand, the number meant little, my fellow applicants accept her calling me ... that's the military, the Germans who work for the Army, no one complains. I follow her into her office, lay my application form on a heap of papers three solid inches high ... written certificates and applications, test results, God knows what else, birthday cards, postcards from Hawaii and Sri Lanka ... that covers her desktop. I didn't know how she could find anything in that mess. She moves junk to one side, then to another, you still can't see the desktop, it's opaque with bureaucratic debris ...

"Klara Bohnenstengel! Pleased to meet you! How's your German?"

"It's not perfect."

“Max is counting on you,” she smiles. She shakes a test form in front of my face, pointing with a pencil at a door to my right. “Go into the next room. You have twenty minutes to fill it out. I’ll say when your time’s up.” Pencil in hand I open the door to the test room, a cubicle where one chair, a table, and a typewriter just fit ... couldn’t move the chair and had to climb over the back of the seat to sit down. I put my crosses and checks in the appropriate tiny boxes, translate a three-sentence paragraph into English.

After Mrs. Bohnenstengel graded my efforts she grins. “You got a ‘ninety percent.” I had passed, then came the typing test, I hacked away like a maniac, I was sweating when I finished ...

“Mr. Salnitsky, you’ll need a through medical examination at the U.S. Army Hospital,” and started filling out another Army form, scribbling, “Dear Dr. El-Hakiim...,” but when I told her I had had a check-up before I was employed at the PX she crossed off the one remaining requirement ...

“Mr. Salnitsky, can you find your way alone to the Laundry and Dry Cleaning Branch?” Shows me a map of the southern part of Berlin, points out Andrews Barracks on Finckensteinallee, in Lichterfelde. I nod, she was already dialing a number on the telephone ... I couldn’t imagine what else I would have to do today, fly to Frankfurt to deliver a letter personally? This was getting to be a lot of running around ... I wanted to go home.

“Mr. Brown, this is Klara ... oh, you’ve already spoken with Mr. Siegel? Excuse me! Mr. Salnitsky is sitting right across from me. You’d like to see him tomorrow morning at eight o’clock sharp? I’ll relay your message ...,” she winks at me, another conspiracy. “I know Mr. Siegel can’t force Mr. Salnitsky on you ... I hear what you’re saying, Mr. Brown, you may turn down the other forty-five candidates on your waiting list ... Mr. Brown, wait a minute, he’s passed all the tests, Mr. Siegel has nothing to do with it!” Mrs. Bohnenstengel quickly peruses my two-page application, Form AE 57, “Replaces AE Form 57, 1 May 67, and AE Form 57-S, 1 June 74, Which Are Obsolete,” chocked full of criminally wrong information about previous job experience, I had written: “Manager of an ice cream shop in Chicago,” a joke, “Manager of a shoe shop, South Bend, Indiana,” another fib, “Assistant Manager of a bookstore, Boston” ...

Mrs. Bohnenstengel hangs up. “You have nothing to worry about,” she elucidated as I got up to leave, “nobody has applied for the position. He gets choleric sometimes .. his drinking ... Charlie is a sweet soul.” She attaches a half-page, slightly crinkled referral slip to my application form, it is officially stamped, “Civilian Personnel Division, Berlin Command, USAREUR.” Tomorrow an interview with Mr. Brown, the laundry manager ... “Supervisory Administrative Clerk” ... nice. By two o’clock I had left Mrs. Bohnenstengel’s office and was walking home...

Howard usually worked himself into a volcanic rage at Elfriede by scribbling down everything in a notebook, all his resentment ... I peeked into his writings once, venomous stuff scribbled against Elfriede, against Mrs. Hermagne, whom he hated: "My Mom believes Stalin was right, can't be helped, at least my father saw through him in the fifties ... plus she is against Zionism!" Howard accumulated notebooks, he had stacks and piles of them in his room...

We left Zehlendorf at six-thirty to go to the restaurant ... to "Tojo", this chopsticks joint was located on Kant Strasse. Its windows were veiled by black cotton cloth, walls were made of blond wood, there were white paper banners with red writing hung up everywhere, probably insults to the guests ... a short, stocky waiter bowed, he greeted you, intimidated you right off, I had my misgivings about going to such a place ... no guests, we had been the first, it was a small eatery, with only seven tables, no silverware to be had ... I had my reasons for mistrust, my father had nearly been beheaded by a kamikaze in 1945. The first thing Howard did was order three teeny tiny glasses of saki, we each downed a glass ... getting in the mood, no one wanted to scarf down raw fish completely sober. Elfriede's brown eyes glistened, but Howard's were dim, veiled by his eyeglasses. "My new job is a dream!" He had an official income: sitting at the door of a gambling casino situated in Europa Center, in the middle of downtown Berlin. By "official" it meant he paid

income taxes, was registered at the Employment Bureau ... his other income was untaxed, Howard dreaded a deportation for tax evasion, he was a foreigner, it was unclear from what he lived, he visualized the tax bureaucracy swooping down on him, followed by the police ... shooting him off in a rocket toward New York, from where he came ... his good life, whoosh... Appropriate end for a New Yorker. "I love getting up at three in the morning. I do my exercises, eat breakfast, I show up at the casino at six as the last gamblers leave ... it's great ... All I do is read and write in my notebook until I finish work at two ..."

The waiter, the silent, frowning Nipponese assassin, grinned at us as soon as we looked his way. Elfriede pointed toward her empty glass, for sake of simplicity she ordered a whole bottle.

"Sounds perfect for a loner," Elfriede raises her glass, "here's to America's downfall,"

We're drinking quickly, the aroma of Japanese food is penetrating, I would have thought twice about coming here, my nose was suspicious, I didn't like alimentary experiments. But Howard inhales with delight and ignores his girlfriend, who was getting in an ornery state.

"That Disneyland world you come from, Howard! Here's to its end! You and your anti-Communist mush, your fear of not being a real man! I just love being with you ..." She tips the glass over, the saki spills...

"How could you be so clumsy?" he hisses. "You always make a mess of things, goddamn it. I'm sick of your fooling around, you drink too much! It's a scandal, a sin what you're putting me through..." he sounded like his notebook, which consisted of such tirades, and too much saki ... "Is it too hard to be civil, huh? What's wrong with the good old U.S.A.? It's better than, than, than..." he sputtered, slammed his palm down on the tabletop, his cheeks reddened. "You'd be marching around singing Nazi top hits and saluting, 'Heil Hitler!' if we hadn't liberated you folks ... if we hadn't done our duty. You and your stupid talk, Elfriede, makes me wonder why we did it ..."

"We? What's 'we'? you didn't liberate me, Howard!"

"There she goes again," he looks at me for sympathy ... I am embarrassed by the volume at which they are arguing ... "With her, 'You bombed Cologne, and I hate you for it, I was a child, I still remember ...' Bullshit! I can't stand it, Elfriede, you ruined ..."

"I do remember, I do remember! What do you idiots know? What nights when bombs fell have you folks lived through, huh? None, Howard! I don't have to imagine things, I know them. I don't have to read books about ugh ... and what have you people done to the Palestinians?"

"I'd like to know what you mean! They want to kill us! Drive us into the sea, Elfriede, you make it sound so easy!"

"There he goes," she chitters, "he sits in Berlin or in new York and talks about the Palestinians wanting to drive him into the sea ... a farce, I'm telling you, Howard, you ..."

"You make it so easy, all this student sixties stuff, pro-Communist garbage! If you think Communism's so great why don't you go over the Wall?"

"Oh, God! Not that argument, my mother doesn't even use that anymore ... Howard, you know what? You're from the Ice Age, you have no arguments ... Waiter, another bottle!" the Japanese killer raises his finger to corroborate Elfriede's request, she nods, he disappears into the kitchen, reappears holding a second saki bottle, it is thrust onto the table, opened swiftly, saki is poured in our glasses ... this is getting dangerous ... "Zionism is a crime against humanity! Isn't that the truth, Alan?" She presses my hand. "Howard wants to provoke me on his birthday, but I won't let him. Go to Israel, Howard, if you think it's so great!"

"Maybe I will! Better than here! With you!"

"Go! Go!" She waves her hand toward the door ...

He jumps up, the table is nearly upset, everything rattles, I steady the thing by placing my hand on the top. Howard shakes his fists at Elfriede, luckily there are no other guests, just the murderous waiter who stares inscrutably at the mayhem. This is a mess ... it's his birthday, why couldn't we have sat in Elfriede's apartment, quietly. Did the restaurant have to be? Howard picks

up his various plastic sacks and an overnight bag, takes off, right out the door. Elfriede and I exchange awed stares, he returns, throws the door open, comes up to the table, lets two hundred-mark notes drift down from his open palm, at least he paid ...

During my last weeks at the PX, as my plan of escape matured, Mickey came down to the locker-room one morning at a quarter to eight, while Skip and David were changing clothes, Turhan primly buttoning his ironed PX shirt, Rosie taking off his shoes ... his feet stank terribly ... No one wanted to be around when Mickey was there, not even Skip, who quickly slipped away, as did David ... “What’s the hurry?” Mickey complained. Skip could be heard mumbling something but he had already gone ... Turhan rushed past, extending his arm to push the Hungarian aside, nearly bowling him over. Then Ali, Rosie, and I were left listening to him. Rosie was putting on his noisome socks, no panic, he did not care what the supervisor was spouting off about.

“I hear you,” Rosie looked at his work shoes, hanging from his hand by their shoelaces, “I’ve been in this place against my will fifteen long years, right, Mr. Mickey ... U.S. Army, then five years of marriage ... it makes a life. Vietnam was not a pleasure either ...” With this Rosie put on his shoes, tied up the laces, he walked off, Mickey trailed ... in silence .

My boss turned, I won’t get a chance to go to the linen section ... “go help my wife load up her cosmetics! That way.” I followed his finger ... to the other side of the stockroom where, I the cosmetics aisle, I spied a half-foot of clear floor, a nook of open space ... on all sides were boxes, it was like a test for how long you could hold out in such claustrophobic circumstances ...

A woman was waiting for me in the only passable part, in the half-foot of space. She was dwarfish, a large head with a porcine face .. her eyes going from my foot to my head: I was not much to look at, clearly ... In her late forties, she spoke English slowly, precisely ... I had to help her pull boxes from the shelves, and she didn’t believe ii was capable of it. “Ha, you’re a stock boy?” She fixed her hair, her hair was adorned by a golden pin. “You don’t look too strong ...” My incredulous mien did not make her abstain from commenting on my capacity, so I nodded in agreement ...

“You kids don’t know what hard work is, neither does Mihai ...” She made a gesture with her lips like she wanted to spit in her hands. “We have a house to pay for and a son to raise. Du lieber Gott! ... where does money come from, does it grow on trees? We must work, work hard, be ambitious! Yes, well, well, well, what do I see, what do I hear? ‘No chance.’ The lack of gumption in the young is atrocious, even the Poles work harder! I tell my Mihai, ‘Try’!

She looked at my scuffed shoes, at my eyeglasses. I had inherited nothing, there was nothing to gain or fear from me ... Mrs. Szalay had been run out of the Sudetenland, in 1945.

“The Czechs are worse than the Poles! Lazy, without ambition, do you know Prague? Ach! It had degenerated into a Slavic village, like in Russia! ‘Be an American, act like one,’ that’s my motto! Am I funny? ‘Stand up for yourself’, I tell Mihai, ‘show them who you are! Get up there, become the manager!’” I couldn’t fathom how she could hold a tirade against Eastern Europe in the middle of the stockroom, making references to a fellow named Sigismund Reymont, from Buffalo, New York ... the PX manager and an unworthy Pole, she said, while she dabbed at Kleenex on her lips, then she heaved a box of lipstick into the shopping cart ... She pointed at cartons on the upper shelves for me to carry down ... “Hard work never hurts anyone, show me your hands!” She saw, with interest, there weren’t leathery calluses on my palms, shaming me she heaved two heavy boxes of mascara into the cart ... I was afraid to look in her eyes, I climbed as high up as I could, I thought of shoving a couple boxes down on her head.

In Herr Lösch’s softline section every metal shelf contained five times the amount of sheets and pillow cases it had been made for, the rows were sagging, and overpowering clouds of cotton, Dacron, and synthetic fibers kept making me sneeze. Everything would cave in to bury Herr Lösch, someday ... I had decided to counter Mickey’s asinine badgering. It was on Thursday, the day before I had planned to carry off my clandestine “Go to Siegel” project, having unwillingly had the honor of Mickey’s presence in the softline section all afternoon I wanted finally to level with the bastard, he had been driving me nuts with his banter and harassment, I couldn’t get rid of him, for some dumb reason ... I insulted him, it did no good ... Mickey was a “hillbilly Hunkie” ... he actually liked the epithet, ethnic slurs were his specialty ... kept coming back for more, his saurian eyes had that excited glint in them, I felt provoked to make more ludicrous statements ... Mickey thought I was funny ... just like my wheeze was an object of mirth ... I threw a weighty box of yellow pillow cases toward his feet, he jumped away, I had had enough ... “Mickey!” I made a threatening movement with my fist.

“What about me?” He came towards me, galloping despite his lame hip ... he reeked of perspiration, I noticed his white shirt was soiled under the armpits, swear stains. Yesterday David Douglas, who loved to find out about people, had made hints about a dark spit in Mickey’s life, back when he was in Hungary. David had ended by saying Mickey was an ingrained anti-Semite, a son of a bitch ... Mickey poked me in the chest, he chuckled, “Hey, I got a question, what is a Jewish blind date?”

“Don’t know.”

He covered his eyes with his fingers, made a thrashing movement with the other hand in front of his crotch. “Ha ha! Hee hee ... ho ho! Get it? Ha ha ha!” he brayed and guffawed for a full minute ... his face twisted by a grin, tears cruising down his nose ... the laughter rolled out of him like a cry. After he’d recovered Mickey’s face grew pained. “What did David tell you about me?” He was holding my be the shoulder, I had turned away, he was angry.

“He didn’t tell me anything.” Frau Steenz, who had been standing with David and me, must have tattled to him afterwards ... At the same time, however, she’d added more to David’s speculations about Mickey’s family, telling us he’d been more open when he first started work at the PX ...

“Oh? He didn’t tell you I’m a Jungarian Hew?” He had covered his mouth with his hand, I had understood him as saying he was a “Hungarian whore” and was still trying to puzzle out the words he had garbled up, when he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and exclaimed, “A baptism is better than a gas chamber, isn’t it ... isn’t it?”

Then it clicked. “You’re not Jewish!”

“I didn’t always know, only after the others had disappeared from my hometown. Never saw my mother in church, her family had come from Poland, Löwy. We had the protection of my old man. Ma mother and me ... my father was an officer in the Army...”

“He saved you and your mother?”

“They put him in prison after the war for being a fascist. I’ve got his kind of luck ...”

“Prison?”

“Sure, for being in the Arrow Cross. The Russians brought him to Siberia.”

“So you’re Jewish?”

“No!” Mickey limped off, yelling over his shoulder. “I’m Catholic. I’ve been baptized, I was confirmed, I got to the priests in time!” This maniac had begun giggling again, I had had enough, so I slouched off toward the locker-room ... before going down the hallway I peered once behind me to look at this ludicrous proliferation of ruined products, rotting in our stockroom: a mercantile Alpine Range, endless shipments adding to its height and grandeur ... twenty, thirty-six, forty-two ... fifty, one hundred and fourteen, two hundred seventy pallets, in storage five-high, ten-high, twenty-high, until the ceiling had been reached, right to its girders ... when it rained water leaked into the basement, the walls got damp, the shelves rusted ... puddles, rivulets formed if the rain lasted ... We spread out flattened cardboard cartons everywhere. Aisles had disappeared under nasty, moist avalanches of unrecognizable retail morass ... the piece of bare floor in the middle, the one place we had so long defended against the growing mountains, had become

impassable ... cardboard and paper dissolved into slime, in which waves of plastic wrapping and string had gotten tangled up into one another ... the rotting, splintered wooden pallets disintegrated at the touch ... hail clouds formed, a gale whistled near the ceiling ...

Before the silver cord is snapped,
or the golden bowl is broken,
or the pitcher is broken at the fountain,
or the wheel broken at the cistern ...

—*Ecclesiastes, 12,6*

Andrews Barracks

“Hup! Hup! Left, forward ... march!” Boots hit the ground in unison. “Hup! Hup! Right, forward ...” Hobnailed heels down Kadettenweg. “Hup! Hup! Straight ahead ... march!” with drums, cymbals, trumpets ... Pennants waving ... “Hup! Hup! Right, forward ...” Military music ... goose-stepping. Whomp! A-hoo-whoomp! A-whoom! Heels pounding paving sons. “Hup! Hup! Straight ahead, forward ...” The drums beat in unison, cymbals, trumpets, tubas. Standards high! Flags waved, five thousand boots, two thousand five hundred black helmets shone in the sun ... the entrance of the barracks had been guarded, on opposite sides, by watchful, obedient, dutiful men ... in monstrous coats ... on both sides of the entrance, beside these young guards, had stood stone troopers in identical poses: the statues ready for battle, muscled, bell-jawed ... in long coats, helmeted, thighs taut, their stony glance ... “Hup! Hup! Right, forward ... stop!” The GIs sounded to me like a football squad, jogging in gray Army sweat suits, they have butch haircuts, running inside Andrews Barracks, Lichterfelde, southern Berlin. “Hup! Hup! Forward ... march! Come on, let’s hear it, let’s hear ... Hup! Hup!” Yelling college cheers, while these buildings and perhaps some neighbors were used to something else ... Half of Röhm’s SA had been shot in the basement , at close range, their brains sticking to the walls, they last cry, “I believe in the Führer!” ... in the basement of Building 906 ... here on the compound. The “SS Leibstandarte Adolf-Hitler” had stomped and romped twelve years long in this joint, had pounded the cobblestones of Kadettenweg flat. Then the boots of the Fatherland there had ceased their rhythm, they had been replaced by American ones ... “Hup! Hup! Right, forward ... stop!” The GIs are in training, in their sweat suits, there are no pennants waving ... As they run inside ... On both sides of the entrance way stood ten-foot high rectangular pillars... The U.S. Army had poured cement over the stone statues, had turned warriors into pillars ... the barracks compound had also once housed a Prussian military academy from 1707 to 1919, the elite destined for the General Staff or something worse ... the First World War ... that carnage ate them up ... you could find some of the fellows frozen in the oversized photographs displayed in the main building of Andrews, in the middle,

along with a couple of old uniforms ... young men with pomaded hair on top but shaven skulls close on the sides, cadets in white trousers with red stripes along the leg, wearing spiked, silver-plated Pickelhauben ... white plumes were attached to the helmets, sabers in embossed scabbards hanging from the belts.

I was supposed to have been there at eight that morning but couldn't find Building 965 on Andrews Barracks: the S&S Laundry ... Finckenstein Allee in Lichterfelde ... I found what I was looking for in the left-hand corner of the barracks, far, far away, in a God-forsaken spot ... climbing up the metal stairway at the side of the L-shaped, weather-beaten, beige building I saw above me people sitting behind desks watching me ... the stairs were rattling with my steps, and I held on right to the railing, opened the door at the top of the stairs but I was too much in a hurry and rushing ... out of breath to mince words, no hellos ... I had reached some office or other ... "Where's the boss?" I cried.

I fled through this one office ... they had pointed me through a door, connecting their sanctum with another, and followed me with their eyes, and I glimpsed somebody at his work sleeping with his head on the desk, but I was already in the next office where I found the boss waiting, pacing impatiently on a small carpet.

"Sit down!" I sat down. He continued pacing around me ... Mr. Brown was a red-faced man with a heavy gut who talked with a strong Boston accent. "It's eight thirty! It's eight thirty! Weren't you supposed to be here at eight o'clock?" I was late and explained why, giving him my application papers. He briefly looked at my mendacious list of past work experience, skills, qualifications, pertinent schooling ... was twisting them in his hand. Could I placate him? Looking through the window built into the wall between the two offices I saw seven office workers huddled in a group ... craning their curious necks to get a look at me ... I was seated before Brown's desk ... But glass protected us from intrusion! Next door you couldn't hear a word, only the lips were seen moving ... My future colleagues didn't have to pay money for the performance in pantomime, however ... Brown waved the papers in front of my face and jumped around three times on the carpet ... "Now I have no time for interviews, there are a lot of clothes to wash down there ... the troops are filthy! I'm the one who sticks his nose in the stinking underwear! Cleans the crap off their tents!" He glanced at my name on the referral slip: "...I'm calling Herr Wrobel! I have no time for interview, Alan, talk to him

... and to his wife." He waved at a woman who stood with the others at the window ... there was no reply. Yet something had been understood between them ... "Let Wrobel do something for his money, I've got enough headaches ... what's Siegel want from me anyway? I've got a laundry to

run ... Siegel sent you to spy on me.” He narrowed his eyes. “For Christ’s sake ... I supported the unions in the States, you’re damn right I did, I know what it’s like for people to work ... I’m for the working man! You’re laughing again? Let me see your hands.” I showed him mine. Again the same thing, like with Mickey’s wife ... “No welts! No calluses! You kids don’t know what it is to work ... look at the women down there sweating.” Of course none

of the workers downstairs had been organized into unions, and a strike was unthinkable ... it was treason. The Russians might jump over the border, raise up a red flag. “I have a laundry to run, no one wanted to fight for freedom in Vietnam ten years ago! Alan! In East Berlin ... a police state. It’s what happens when you don’t defend ... what was I saying? Can you type? It says so here, but I don’t know whether to believe

these thing. What’s Siegel want anyway? Sigel’s bluffed me too long! What do you have in mind? Have you seen how little you’re paid? You seem a nice kid. Want the job?” He threw my application at my feet. And ran out of the office ... I saw him consulting with the middle-aged woman next door. He ran back. “What’s your answer?”

“It’s better than where I am now, sir.”

Closing the drapes over the windows separating the offices ... for privacy ... he was a nimble man for such a beer gut ... he stooped, quickly picking up my papers, searching in them, tearing away the referral slip signed by Mrs. Bohnenstengel from CPS. Brown grinned: “The working man ...” His voice trailed off as he marked an “X” in one of two boxes ... I couldn’t see which ... hit it violently with a stamp he’d grabbed from his desk, stuffed my papers into a “shotgun” envelope, it was a large yellow envelope you used for interdepartmental communication ... it had rows of boxes for fifty addressees on it.

The office wasn’t too big, five long steps ... going from the carpet to his desk. And two chairs ... There was a wide window where Brown could look down at the laundry floor ... get a bird’s eye view of things in the plant. It certainly was noisy! Below us it rattled, rolled, and rumbled. I waited ... hearing a public-address loudspeaker crowing, the words were drowned in the clamor, then lots of static reigned awhile over the cacophony below...

Thirty seconds later somebody throws himself into the office, head down, rushing toward me. His hair was handsomely parted, and I was sitting there and had to stand up, shook his hand, I didn’t know what else I should do since I didn’t know who he was. No one introduced us. This gentleman was in his late-fifties, had a pear-shaped torso, thick in the middle. His eyebrows stood in spectacular contrast to his hair: black eyebrows, the hair was snow white. He reddened ...

“Glad to meet you,” he said. “I’m the plant superintendent: Baldur Wrobel.” He took my arm, we left, I caught Brown slapping his hands together behind us, out of the corner of my eye ... Wrobel and I were swiftly marching into the other office ... to meet Frau Wrobel, I supposed ... As I entered the main office the people pretended no to notice me ... were at their desks again. But there was one dark-haired fellow, dressed in mechanic’s coveralls, whose head was still on the desk ... asleep. Wrobel cleared his throat loudly: “Wake up, Lester! Lester! Roll call!” The guy stirred. He raised his head, his eyes closed. “Wake up, Lester. Roll call! He’s the mechanic,” Wrobel explained, taking a newspaper from his wife’s desk opposite, rapping on the typewriter. The mechanic Lester got up, without a word he left. He slammed the door. “Allie, do me a favor,” Herr Wrobel said in German to his wife. “Give me a warning. I hate surprises.” He turns to me with a smile, his teeth are perfect specimens for a guy his age ... the eyes are frightened ... of me ...

Frau Wrobel said, “That’s where you’ll sit, Alan.” In German. There were six desks arranged in three pairs, one desk pressed against another, by two’s ... you faced each other. To my left, on top of a file cabinet, I saw a weird, blinking metal console, oblong like a flight-control box, it was how I imagined one anyway, with knobs ... that was the public-address thing, it had a microphone standing on top of it that swiveled. You spoke into the mike ... It was a futuristic intercom box connected to the loudspeakers placed in every corner of the building, but its sound was more than a little muffled, there was too much rival dissonance downstairs to cope with, a trillion noises ... If you pressed a button for one department your voice was electronically directed to where the labels below each knob said ... they flashed too, in red, if someone below wished to call the office ... The person on the main floor pressing a button to call upstairs made the console box light up, and it began making a sibilant zizz like an angry, wicked doorbell! A horrible buzzing filled the room ...

It rang. It buzzed! But Herr Wrobel and I escaped the contraption’s static to submerge in the cacophony below ... We took to the stairs ... Herr Wrobel wobbled strangely when he walked but could go fast.

The Laundry looked like a gigantic sauna ... steam rising. Everywhere, to the rafters ... steam, mists ... rushing water, clamorous, shrill hissing ... waterfalls ... the plant floor: two hundred forty feet long, ninety wide ... the ceiling had thick steel girders ... rows of windows on both sides, open wide ... the structure was formed in an I, the laundry being connected at a right angle with a smaller construction, the dry cleaning section ... Building 965 had cellars where motor vehicles could be stored ...

We took a right: into the dry cleaning part ... it stunk worse, fumes continuously emitted by the chromeplated smokestacks of two dry cleaning machines ... they were fit to be props out of the Wizard of Oz ... and we sauntered back ... to the laundry ... an African in white work clothes waved at Herr Wrobel, who shouted, “Abdullah! Our new chief office clerk!” The black man didn’t replay. Work downstairs was accompanied by yelling in six languages ... steam presses, washing machines, tumble dryers, mangle irons, marking machines, sorting trolleys, plastic wrapping machines ... bed wear, linen, towels ... T-shirt, underpants ... fatigue trousers, combat gear ... jackets, tents, sheets. God! People slaving away, mostly women ...

A supply sergeant, sleeves rolled up, tattooed biceps, was waiting to pick up his unit’s laundry ... “Herr Wrobel!” he yelled. I didn’t understand what he was inquiring about. Something about missing items, his men’s underwear, the unit’s socks. Wrobel reacted by screaming at the women who packed up the linen: she should serve him immediately ... give him what he needed ... The sergeant got what he wanted, backing away his truck ... its diesel engine roared. Its flatbed was loaded up with packages the women had given him

... Wrobel, the supervisor, had anxiously spoken to the supply sergeant, like he was trying to calm him down, “You know, Sarge, sometimes things get misplaced. We’re awfully sorry, sir ...” He looked helplessly at me.

I didn’t know a thing, I confirmed his assessment, however ...

Many German and American women ... Turkish and Greek washmen ... there were sixty employees downstairs. “We had two hundred fifty after the war in Darmstadt when I was superintendent there. Those were great years!” He had had an apprenticeship in the Berlin garment center before the Second World War, Wrobel added, his career was just beginning when the companies were being Aryanized ... his boss left the country, and Baldur joined the army.

The superintendent pointed out the different departments of the laundry ... the heat was too much, I was perspiring ...

The door flew open. Ziggy Kluszcja ran inside. “Where’s Rodney? Where is he? I’m going to kill that bastard!” Ziggy was a redheaded fellow, our deliveryman, born in Radow, Poland, who had grown up in Detroit, and Rodney was our other driver ... my supervising instinct said I must attempt to calm Ziggy down, who was raging in the middle of the laundry office. “He put clothes from Pickup Point Two in Pickup Point One. Just to screw me! I’m not coming back until I find him .. I’m going to kill him, I’ll teach him to screw with Polacks! I’ll kill him!”

My telephone rang. Frau Wrobel hissed in my ear, “For you, Mr. Supervisor.” Mrs. Thomas at Pickup Point Three, whom I didn’t know, was weeping over the line ... pleading with me to fire Mrs. Wolf, with whom she worked... I hung up. Another phone call: Pickup Point Two, from Tempelhof ...urgent ...whether the Base Commander’s formal dress uniform would be delivered today ... not just today but in the next hour! The Base Commander himself had been complaining, the clothes were already two weeks late! And they had been turned in on a “One-Day Special” ... the Commander had paid extra money for the service, the uniform was supposed to have been returned the next day ... at twelve noon.

“It’s the second time it’s happened this week!” groaned Mrs. Washington on the phone. “Colonel Wilkinson is hoping mad! Yesterday he called me twice to complain about the tardiness ... Is Ziggy coming to deliver them soon? Please say yes!”

I asked Ziggy. He didn’t respond, but his face was transformed ... into pink ... blood rushing to his cheeks ... “I’m not waiting around, if they’re not finished. I’m waiting around! Do I get paid overtime? No. never. Are the uniforms ever ready by noon?” I didn’t know, it was my third week, I told him. “Well, the dry cleaning isn’t finished ... No. of course not! I have to leave this place by one o’clock, at the latest, to get the junk to Tempelhof on time ... damn it, I start at six in the morning! A half-hour before any of you make an appearance here ... Enough, no one appreciates me anyway ... I make a hundred excuses for you, try getting clothes out on time ... Why should a deliveryman be offering excuses to customers? It’s what I do! Am I getting paid for being a diplomat? Goddamn ‘One-Day Specials’ are rotting in McNair Barracks now ... since Rodney put them there! I’m going to pick them up! I don’t have the time! Screw you guys. That stupid hillbilly can’t even read his own name! you should fire that idiot. But not before I kill him!” he snarled. “You don’t understand, do you? We’re behind ... ten days behind schedule! ‘One-Day Special’ are coming back in ten days ...” He whipped his small body around, heaving his money pouch at Mrs.

Gooch, who sat in the corner ... who ducked ... the heavy pouch landed on her desk with a smash, bowling over the lady's coffee cup.

I glanced away ... I needed Frau Wrobel's assistance ... she'd refused to take cognizance of Ziggy's antics, was reading a tabloid newspaper spread flat on her desk as the tumult was mounting to its logical climax.

I'd been sifting through a small pile of letters before Ziggy had run in ... All epistles had been forwarded to me here, were still postmarked, "A. Salnitsky, AAFES-Berlin PX, Stock Room ... APO 09742." There was an epistle from Mom. I heard more noise ... a woman ranting ... Gooch's voice ... she swung her purse at the deliveryman, with hate, before she strode past him on high heels, straight into Mr. Brown's office ... Why hadn't I handled it? One moment of hesitation ... I stood up, Gooch was sitting in Brown's office .. I'd flubbed it!

Frau Wrobel pushed the telephone to me. "Pickup Point One, McNair Barracks," she said.

Mrs. Weaver, a Vietnamese woman whose English was almost incomprehensible, was inquiring when the Tempelhof One-Day Specials would be picked up, they were in the wrong Pickup Point ... I told her I knew it and hung up. There was peace for a moment until his knuckles hit my desktop, my eyes were met by Ziggy Kluszcja's glare ... Frau Wrobel was shaking her head, in her opinion Ziggy was a wild animal ... a obnoxious, boorish fellow who didn't know where to stop, a Poe into the bargain ... his rage seems to be growing and growing. "Ziggy! Ziggy! Wait!" I would treat him like any maniacal mortal ... "Be reasonable ... you can't run around here like that ... look what you did to Mrs. Gooch!"

"What you don't know! Greenhorn, they've got it in for you," he giggled maliciously. "She's gone to Brown! You think I care?"

"I'm your supervisor, I'll handle it! Ziggy, you're rude and out of order! Stop it!"

"Gang of hillbillies ... they're Brown's gang, all hillbillies ...," Ziggy declared. "You're going to have rough going, friend."

Ziggy wanted attention and got it from Mrs. Clark, who sat in the desk across from Gooch ... He was talking to me as he lifted a "Berlin Brigade" paperweight, and it flew across the office, the thing just missing his head and mine. The lady cursed him with all the weight of history ... she was a native of Tennessee and told Ziggy he ought to be lynched, he believed her but just laughed. She said they should never have let Ziggy into America in the first place ... stuck out her tongue at us both ...

"You didn't get your first pair of shoes until your husband joined the Army! You should be downstairs pressing shirts where you belong!" Ziggy gave her the finger and left the office ... I chased him downstairs ...

"Be reasonable," I exclaimed. "You're turning things into a nightmare! There'll be a war if you keep it up!"

"No one screws with me and lives!"

"What's eating you? You can't throw stuff at Gooch, just like that ... those things you said to Sandy Clark weren't polite either! What's eating you!"

"I'm not polite?" He was running down the steps, two at a time ... I had trouble keeping up, Ziggy was fifty-three years old, in terrific shape ... "I'm going to find Rodney and murder him ... Them both, him and Gooch! I hate them." He stopped on the last step, I caught up ... "I'll tell you something about these people: I used to work on highway construction, in Detroit, in Vito Mascaglia's crew, we built the roads in Tennessee, Alabama, hired the locals sometimes ... you know what they'd do? Work with us one day ... then steal a tire or a shovel or a car jack ... not show up the next day .. not even for their pay! That's what these people are like ... they didn't even wear shoes until their husbands joined the Army ..."

"You can't say those things to people's faces ..."

Just then I spotted Rodney ambling past the marking section ... throwing laundry bags around, gathering some into one hand ... ones that weren't already ripped, unusable ... his transport truck stood with open rear door at the entrance. Our two delivery trucks had a carrying capacity of three and three-quarters tons each, for clothes are heavy! There were two small Confederate flags hanging from Rodney's aerials ... that's how you knew it was Rodney's truck, not Ziggy's. Rodney didn't appear to be dismayed by Ziggy's appearance ... just the opposite ... "Yahoo!" he let out a Rebel Yell. "Damned if it isn't both of them! Whole company of ..." Rodney laughed, his upper front teeth were absent. He'd already served a couple stints in Vietnam, the tattoos on his arms told of it. As soon as Ziggy saw Rodney he crouched slightly ... circling the other driver, like a cat ... Rodney was unperturbed ... I don't think Rodney had much respect for Ziggy's fighting ability, their age difference stretched to twenty years.

"What's this I hear form Ziggy?" I queried. I told myself: You're their supervisor, make peace!

His dirty blond hair was long, he was tall, with a beard. Only his chromeplated Harley-Davidson motorcycle, the Wehrmacht helmet, the sleeveless denim jacket with "Hell's Angels" stitched on its back were missing, he removed his sunglasses, blue eyes were slightly crossed... his breath smelling of beer ... "Ain't nothing I did wrong! See? Tell Ziggy to shut his stupid mouth!" he

guffawed, like a duck quacked. Ziggy circled him, meantime. Maybe Ziggy had been right, and Rodney was unable to decipher the signs placed before our five Pickup Points ... At McNair Barracks, "Pickup Point One", "Two", Tempelhof Air Base ... "Three", Truman Plaza, Clayallee, "Four", the Schlangenhader Strasse military housing area in the middle of the city ... "Five", Andrews Barracks, Building 906, in the basement ... Rodney watched my lips as I spoke ... said nothing else ... was nobody who felt at home with language.

"Rodney, what's our problem? Ziggy says you deliberately misdelivered stuff ..."

"What a jackass!" Rodney, however, admitted he might've made a mistake ... "I sometimes get confused."

Ziggy's reaction was immediate, ran toward Rodney, head down, to butt him, I scrambled, got between them, seized hold of Ziggy by his small shoulders, swerved the older man in another direction and hollered at him to quit it. Rodney had both strong arms folded in front of his muscular chest. There was a pack of Marlboros rolled up in his left sleeve, he had on a tight T-shirt. Ziggy made his second attack by taking his ring of fifteen pointed keys ... the keys each belonged to various doors at various Pickup Points ... Ziggy swung the key ring in the air ... he twirled them high, charging, Rodney reacted by putting up his fists. A thistle blew, it was twelve noon. Ziggy stopped ... "You dumb cracker, I'll teach you to screw with me!" Ziggy spat out, doing the best he could still do to insult Rodney to cover up his defeat.

"That's just blab, boy," Rodney grumbled. "Talk is cheap." He turned, gathering up the sacks, threw them into the back of the truck, closing its doors, climbing athletically into the cab ... The vehicle started up, Rodney sticking out his head from the window ... "Bye now."

"Ask him what he does during lunch hour!" Ziggy said, a last ditch effort ... the truck was moving, slowly...

Rodney braked, leaning out, telling how he moonlighted at lunchtime, being a part-time waiter at Harnack House ... he was straightforward about it, knowing the laundry was paying him a salary during this time ... "I only accept tips," Rodney clarified and pulled away.

My day had consisted of nothing but interruptions. I went back to the office to look at my mail ... Herr Wrobel gut up when I came in, he'd been sitting at my desk, wife and hubbie ate lunch together in the office. Among my mail was an August newsletter from YIVO. On top of the pile. I'd given twenty-five dollars to them. I got a monthly newsletter ... On its cover was a well-known photo showing an orthodox Polish Jew whose beard was being plucked out as he is surrounded by German soldiers, who are laughing. Wrobel wolfed down a sandwich in thirty seconds, as was his habit ... I don't think he chewed food but, like a shark, swallowed it whole ... he thought he'd

palaver with the new guy, me ... smiling ... had been looking through my mail, obviously ... pointing at the YIVO newsletter. "Look at the picture. Allie, have you seen it? Ach, ja. See. See! I told you ... we Germans always got along with Jewish people."

So the office staff might better overhear him he said it in English.

"Guten Tag!" The Ethiopian fellow from downstairs loomed into my vision, out of nowhere ... normally, at lunch, Abdullah Abdullah sat in the supply room downstairs ... he was supply clerk ...this was a special occasion, however, he had come up to see the new supervisor. He was supply clerk. He greeted Frau and Herr Wrobel in German and then shook my hand. Abdullah had four thin scars on his forehead, which gave him a foreign majesty, but I learned later he got very annoyed when people stared at them.

Frau Wrobel clapped her hands ... "nay, I'm so forgetful! Forgive me, Alan ... There were two phone calls from Pickup Point clerks, they were screaming and crying on the phone ... I don't know why they're ... uh ... one came from Mrs. Wolf and, uh ... Mrs. Thomas ... while you were out of the office, I forgot to give you the message! They can't stand being together and can't be at work on Saturday ..." I'd have to find two others to replace them ... On such short notice, a headache. Maybe they would make up, but it would be up to me to make peace ...I decided to drive out to Truman Plaza.

"There are no kings in the nest of dragons," Abdullah added cryptically yet encouragingly in farewell.

"I haven't been feeling well since about a week," my mother wrote me. "Yesterday I was in a strange mood, was very dissatisfied with myself but don't know why. There is something I'm doing I shouldn't do or I'm not doing something I should be doing. I suppose a great deal is caused by my not feeling well. I look at myself, knowing things I did years ago are hard to do now, if not impossible. I see a face that's old, dad says no but he sees me as he did years ago, and that's lovely, but I see me now. I always thought age was a frame of mind, thought I'd never grow old. I almost don't want you to see me, Dad improves with age, he's quite handsome.

"Gram keeps asking about you, says she hasn't heard from you for a long time and misses your letters. Gram fell last week and was in the hospital from Tuesday on and came home Friday. Never let me nor Aunt Fern know but she had aunt Lottie call, of all people. Gram finally phoned on Saturday, we had a conversation, she got angry at me, swore at me, you know she needs a hearing aid but won't get one. I told her to go to the doctor and get one. No, she won't, and it got me angry at her. The usual. I'm past those emotions.

“I have been away from home a couple of weeks. I was in California with Ruth. You have a very unhappy sister, and I feel so helpless, all I can give her is our support and let her know she’s loved. I can’t take the hurt away, perhaps ease it, I’m not that wise to know why people do the things they do. Being people I guess we all make one mistake after another, if we’re lucky we learn. To have telltale signs and ignore them is a sadness. I did try and help emotionally but there are limitations to what you can do for another. I feel so stupid. I realize how little we know, am so aware each of us is his own tormentor, we are always fighting what we are.

“Ruth rises about six in the morning, showers, dresses, goes to work. After work she goes to a pool, swims for one hour continuously, after that home, and by then it’s seven-thirty, then she eats horrible stuff from a health food store, does this every day, don’t see how she has the time for anything else. She’s usually in bed by ten o’clock. I think we only pose an interference to her routine.”

I had stayed overnight in Naomi's run-down apartment in Kreuzberg, with its overflowing toilet in the stairwell. She was a drama student, had come from some Texas college where they specialized in East German literature ... was fond of the dissidents over there ... most likely funded by the scholar at the CIA, no matter, to Naomi it was for the sake of art. She was twenty-nine, a translator of a couple plays by Knut Zobel, unknown East Berlin playwright ... My first trip to East Berlin was in late summer, the same time I got the laundry job ... On the way over the border Naomi had discoursed for an hour on modern drama ... how boring .. she knew every name, it seemed ... I couldn't stand theater! The newest thing was actors hanging in some kind of cage above the stage ... execrable! Anyway I hadn't been across the Wall yet ... We took the subway, riding below the eastern half of the city ... past the shut-down, twilight stations, without stopping ... a man in gray uniform was in each ghostly station, holding a machine gun, guarding it ... the train went fast. At Friedrich Strasse we pushed our way along with the horde of East German pensioners, mostly ladies, toward the border area and got into the line. The two pale, jejune East German guards weren't polite, had been perspiring under their buttoned-up uniforms, smelled ... they sifted the people out. One sat behind a glass window in a booth checking passports, the other stood at the end of a narrow way, his hand on his weapon, behind a one-way door that locked behind you ... they were peering at us, angrily ... we had handed them U.S. passports, had been judged and condemned as infidels ... Naomi giggled while the Guardians of Socialism made a study of both photographs, in particular of mine ... examining faces, and by an act of grace we were waved through, not before we had exchanged twenty-five West marks for twenty-five worthless Eastern ones. You had to open your bag for a third guard standing behind a low platform, he'd make sure there was no clandestine literature being smuggled across ...

"How exciting! Did you see them frown? Isn't the border like theater?" Naomi was going into raptures as we hit the street. "It's different, don't you feel like you know how it is to be a dissident?"

We had to make a phone call to Prenzlauer Berg ... using the aluminum coins they called money ... we couldn't find any phone booth, however ... On the corner of Leipziger Strasse we found a broken-down one ... no luck. Then discovered another one located on Unter den Linden, we picked up its receiver, no telephone book ... "My head!" Naomi lamented. "I didn't want to bring my address book ... you know how border guards are ... but I forgot his number ..."

“Whose?”

“Knut Zobel, dummy.” She rummaged through her purse ... whose contents fell on the sidewalk: an old toothbrush, used, ruffled-up Kleenex, a comb, two slices of Wrigley’s chewing gum, a deck of cards ... a pair of tweezers ... unopened packages of lemon-scented tissues, like the airlines gave you with your flight meal ... these were labeled “Courtesy of Air France...,” she had everything she needed but the phone number. “I promised to call him ... Damn, I’m so absentminded.”

“You need help?” a man asked in English, an Asian ... he stopped to assist us ... the man was dressed in a white shirt and tie.

We told him our problem. The post office was where we ought to head, he said, but it was far away ... he pointed in the right direction: north. We started going whither his finger showed ... found the “Deutsche Post” in a box of a building ... a phone call got through to our unknown playwright: we had to meet back at the Berliner Ensemble cafeteria.

We discovered the Berliner Ensemble theater, he came into the cafeteria soon after we’d arrived, baldheaded, about forty ... a thin cigarette, one he’d rolled himself, hung from his mouth ... I had trouble understanding him, his kind of staccato-rhythmic mumbling, accompanied by gatherings of saliva in the corners of his mouth. Was he speaking German? In any case it was a dialect I’d never heard before. After we’d been drinking coffee together for ten minutes Naomi turned to me to tell me a secret: “Alan! God...” She looked like she needed oxygen, she was so excited. “Zobel has written a startling new play, he’ll read it to us.”

Knut smiled benignly. What had he written about? While spraying me with spit Knut said a couple syllables, which I didn’t understand. Naomi’s tone had communicated awe.

“What are you doing in Berlin?” the playwright asked me ... relit his cigarette, which had gone out ... had had the mercy to slip into High German.

“Working ...”

“For whom?”

“It’s not normal ... what you think ... it’s a huge laundry plant, I’m there to run its office ... it employs eighty people. I supervise ...”

“How many?”

“Twenty or so, the Army ...,” I hesitated, left it ambiguous.

Maybe telling him had been a mistake, because he started gleefully hitting me on the shoulder like he was congratulating me. “Laundry plant! For the Army! Great! Oh!” ... hitting the table with his hand. “Are there Germans working there?”

“The superintendent, his wife ... a lot of people downstairs, but most are Americans.”

“Great!” It was like I had told him I went to the Arctic Circle to sunbathe ... “Why not?” he tried catching his breath. Then he took a look at me, dissolving in tears of hilarity. “Why not, why not...” His laughter echoed through the whole cafeteria.

Dodo greeted us with a shriek, “Oh, Naomi! Zobel, you devil!” She didn’t stop bouncing about ... This raven-haired pixie was dark and petite ... her language was strongly Berlinisch. The building on Dimitroff Strasse where she lived had scarred-up walls ... holes from ricochets, grenades, bombs ... missed shots from the war ... a pile of bricks lay in the courtyard ... it smelled of decay in the hallway ... We visited her apartment on the first floor, Zobel had wanted to come here, since we needed somewhere to go ... couldn’t sit in the cafeteria all day ... Dodo had two rooms, with open windows letting in sunlight ... paintings everywhere ... the place belied the impression it had made from the outside, was homey, it was East Block bohème ... This lady had a son, a nose-picking five-year-old who was eating a piece of bread covered with brown schmaltz ... the little bastard couldn’t sit still, climbing in your lap, prancing on our thighs, greasy mitts always grabbing you, loveable. I avoided contact with him, he wanted to kiss you, and his cheeks were smeared with chicken fat. There were no intros, because Dorothea never stopped talking long enough to get any in. “I adore Proust! ... what a human being! A writer!” Dodo screeched, dancing on tiptoes, like her son ... Kissed and re-kissed Knut on his high forehead. She turned to me, the stranger. “Zobel doesn’t like to read Proust all the time, like I do ... he’s a philistine, to his core ...”

“Alan works for the laundry, for the Army,” Knut immediately confided, “great, great, isn’t it?”

“Oh, my!” Dorothea embraced me ... her face was close to mine as she held me tight. “Alan looks like Marcel Proust, doesn’t he?” she murmured.

“Without the mustache,” Knut replied. “Marcel in the laundry ... ha ha ha ha! Working for the Army!”

Naomi’s friends didn’t have jobs like mine, in fact they didn’t work in any usual sense I was aware of.

They went on a little about my laundry job ... a big deal! Dodo queried, giggling: “Do you have to wash clothes too? Can you work without getting up early in the morning?”

“We start at six-thirty.”

“Evenings?”

“Mornings.”

“Oh...” She couldn’t imagine why I’d want a job like that.

To these darlings of the gods I was a freak ... they were dissidents, with honor. I had become a lackey, a “local national employee” ... I knew better: no more enslavement, pauperdom ... the old dollar-paid freebies were lost, along with Stateside mailing privileges, Commissary shopping ...

“My grandmother can’t understand me ... she thinks I’m crazy, maybe I am, for staying in Berlin,” I elucidated.

“As long as I have my painting, my Proust ... I can pretend I’m not here,” Dodo replied. “My mother lives nearby. Berlin! What’s a home? If you’re Jewish.”

I didn’t like arguing with people I hardly knew ... thought this a pretty confused way to think, however. When she turned away to give her son something to blow his nose in I took a good look at her ... her face was radiant and hungry, I sensed something she was looking for ... that was not there, that couldn’t be there.

Naomi had brought a book for Zobel under her skirt ... Kafka! I had of course brought nothing, I didn’t know this standard East-West ritual. Zobel was overjoyed about the book! I was ashamed, promised to bring something next week ...

“The Proust biography!” Dodo exclaimed.

Her “naïve” art was all over the place ... arty Art brut, but all were self-portraits, somber, lonesome, if colorful ... Dodo’s monster jumped in my lap again, adults were mostly trampolines and bigger nostrils, to him ... the zebra tried to put his big finger in my nose, Dodo apologized ... he had no father, Daddy had been an Algerian who had split the scene, was no more in East Berlin. Everyone had become weary of the high-energy nose-picking of the kid ... who was wailing ... Dodo had finally given him a slap ... although he deserved far worse! She’d hit Sabu on his nose, however, which meant it bled, since its nostrils were so full of sores from his excavating there ... It was getting hard to handle. It was time to defenestrate the boy.

Knut cleared his throat and suggested we go to his place, and Dodo begged off because she had to care for her kid...

We walked uphill.

Zobel’s apartment had one large room with a high ceiling, whitewashed walls, half the room bookshelves, a desk ... lots of books, was he a compulsive collector like Howard? Paper had been tacked onto the wall in front of the desk ... I couldn’t read his handwriting, just like I couldn’t understand his language. Kitchenette ... toilet outside in the stairwell: a hygienic measure I had seen in the West, too, something I’d never written home about. They wouldn’t have believed me.

“None of the Western playwrights are any good!” he chuckled, feeling duty bound to devastate his rivals ... He was no out-and-out dissident ... in his opinion, it was too dangerous, but the writers he’d once hung around with had made it bit as soon as they’d skedaddled westward ... I sat in the corner, listening, he rolled a fresh cigarette, shifting his chair next to mine, while Naomi was looking at Zobel’s records, she picked out something execrable, with a piano accompaniment ... A torture. He smoked ... “Some of those who’ve left ... can’t even write ... so they got into trouble with the police and security forces here! Next thing you know they’re famous! In Frankfurt on Main ... ‘He’s a genius, a genius.’ I don’t know ...” A glass door led out to a balcony, I wanted to go outside, take a look, the record player was blaring ... to escape, also drinking to get over the noise ... North Vietnamese vodka ... he kept filling my small glass. He and Naomi were dancing to German lieder in the middle of the room. I, too, had missed out in life? By working! I came inside to examine his books, ninety percent of which had been printed in the West ...

I was wasted ... the vodka was powerful, a hundred proof ...”Who in the world sees your plays? Naomi tells me they don’t put on your stuff in East Germany ...”

“Well, they like you in Texas...,” Naomi reassured. “At the university!”

While Naomi was twirling around, in circles ... Zobel had unclasped his arms from her waist to elucidate the dilemma: “I have to write a children’s play ... it’s due at Christmas, I’ve been commissioned. I can live by my work but I have to ... uh ...”

“Whose your benefactor?” I inquired.

“The government, it’s for the PLO.”

First thing in the morning three Pickup Point clerks had phoned in succession threatening to call in sick that day unless clothes were finally delivered on time ... an hour later, after I'd successively calmed the three hysterics down, along came Mrs. Clark, who whispered how Gooch had become terribly insulted by how I'd asked her to do some extra work ... "When?" I'd inquired ... I couldn't remember any extra work I'd asked about.

"Four weeks ago ... watch your mouth, a word to the wise!" she'd said witheringly.

I couldn't reply, for Herr Wrobel, who was always upstairs hanging around his wife ... somehow it had been forgotten to give him an office of his own ... he bear us to the phone, had stood at attention a minute long, the receiver pressed to his ear, and I could hear Siegel shouting my name on the other end of the line. Wrobel swung the phone, which stood on a metal holder suspended on a n expandable, zigzaggy affair propped between Almuth Wrobel's desk and mine, right to me.

The chief of the division had called to let me know I was causing mayhem, everyone in the Pickup Points wanted to quit! Accused me of not showing up regularly at the Jewish chapel for services ... "Ha! ... What's that for management tactics?" Siegel wanted to find out. I couldn't see any connection between Friday night religious observance and the chaos of my new job ...

"Who wanted to quit? What happened?" I queried. For the life of me ... I wanted to quit we were so miserable at cleaning junk, getting them back to customers on time ... most of my problems with the clerks stemmed from the abuse customers gave them once they discovered how rotten we were ... such lively info along with Brown's drinking habits would've gotten my immediate superior into trouble with Siegel ... I was forced to lie, to prettify the incontrollable mess...

He didn't let me talk ... "You've only been on the ob three months ... know nothing! Still in your trial period! They call me up to complain! Why do you switch them around every day? From one Pickup Point to another, they like to stay in one place ... one place, Salnitsky. Don't laugh! You like being shoved form one office to another?" Herr Wrobel stood next to me, listening, and his eyes became wet, he gulped, while I only grinned and raised my pupils to the ceiling. Sighing loudly Wrobel woefully shook his head... I was being chewed out, but for Wrobel it was like an execution for weaknesses and unwillingness to handle my fellow human beings correctly ... the superintendent snuck from the office, in shame. What had I don't to him! Poor man ... I defended

myself by telling Siegel I had had enough of these crazy Pickup Point clerks, I told him I got insane phone calls at three in the morning from these ladies ... he interrupted ... “Get your act together, or else! Understand?” And hung up.

I was six weeks into the game, and everyone wanted to fire me.

“Those were good times to be young in,” Frau Wrobel retailed, immune to stress, while I tried to recover from Max Siegel. “those heavy American tanks rolled into the Odenwald, and I saw GIs everywhere ... on the streets, on or villages ... we didn’t expect it ... Negroes too! I didn’t turn around when they made wolf-whistles ...,” she confided she’d been forced to scrub floors ... reeducation in democracy. “How arrogant the officers’ wives were!” She had been a BdM leader ... only an honest Mädelführerin! Honest ...

“Hi! This the Laundry?” I recognized the voice ... appearing unannounced, carrying a rucksack, coming to visit me. He was again at school, studying linguistics at the Kennedy Institute ... that put him in my neighborhood. He couldn’t see me, for he’d turned to the left, where Gooch and Clark sat. he’d interrupted their gossip about what a repugnant miscreant I was ... favorite subject ... but they gave him their immediate, suspicious attention. Was he a customer?

“This is the laundry office,” Mrs. Clark piped, “do you want to turn in dirty clothes?” She eyes Skip ... What had we done to his favorite suit, ripped it to pieces? Burned a row of gaping holes in his underwear? Was his wife’s dress now the size of a dime? ... Sandy Clark, claims clerk, would quietly listen to his lament, then play Skip off ... if he were a customer ... it was his tough luck for turning in clothes to us ... One important thing: he wouldn’t get past us into Brown’s office, where a catastrophe might happen, since the manager was his own worst enemy ... customers had to schlep their damaged stuff to us if something went wrong ... had to find us first! It was not easy to file a claim either ...

Skip walked to the center of the office ... still not turning around ... without catching sight of me ... Sandy shouted, “Where are you going? What’re you looking for?” Didn’t want him going any farther ... we knew Brown tended toward abruptness with customers ... He hated complaints more than anything, announcing just yesterday to a first lieutenant whose pants had been scorched to tatters, “You nincompoop. You don’t know your ass from a hole in the ground!” He’d also been accused of other things ... charges lodged by employees, big complaints! ... One claimant had been Mrs. Glenda Watkins, who pressed clothes downstairs ... another was Maw Vhong Tuttle, wife of a soldier, who worked on the mangle iron ... Brown’s big mouth had gotten him into trouble ... “racism” ... What did I make of that? At eight this morning Brown had already cornered me in his office ... I’d listened to an hour-long tirade about how “coloreds” were out to screw him, ruin his

career ... he'd already drunk a little ... Brown couldn't see much good in the Equal Opportunity laws, not with witches like Glenda Watkins, a black woman from Alabama ... or Mrs. Tuttle ... how he'd suffered for Mae Vhong's people in Saigon! They'd had the nerve to make it official, too, by lodging a complaint with the Inspector General, and Brown didn't dare fire them ... altogether it was his word against theirs.

The metal stairs rattled again. A lanky fellow in his early fifties with a flat-top haircut, in blue jeans, a plain cowboy shirt, entered the office. Gooch and Clark immediately whipped around to receive him. Skip had become irrelevant.

"I need your assistance, Madame, please," the guy handed Sandra Clark a green shirt. "Button's gone ... on my dress uniform ..." Gooch, meanwhile, ran to the intercom and called Brown. Static and incomprehensible cacophony rang out, and Brown suddenly appeared in the doorway... a rare occasion, he didn't often leave his little room...

"Good God, great to see you! Wonderful! ... What can I do for you? May I be of service?" Brown was taking the shirt from the fellow, examining it. The visitor was Major General Bennett, the Municipal Commander! Incognito ... His incognito never worked.

"I didn't mean to put you out ... it's only a button ..."

"My highest pleasure! Right away, sir!" Brown whirled around to Frau Wrobel. "Call Baldur," the manager peremptorily snarled, "call your husband immediately!"

"What? ... I don't understand!"

"Call Baldur!"

Frau Wrobel strode to the intercom box. She'd demonstratively pretended not to be interested in Bennett ... in her opinion the English language was sibilant gibberish, anyway, something she had neglected to learn, a lingo occupiers chattered ... none of her business ... although she'd been working for the Army fifteen years. "Baldur, bitte ins Büro kommen! Baldur! Please, come to the office!" she called.

When Baldur Wrobel strode inside ... he blanched ... all gray, like a corpse, as he saw Bennett, his body stiffening ... grinning a sycophantic, drooling grimace he took Bennett's shirt from Brown. "Sir, do you need a new button now, sir? Right away, sir!" Wrobel waddled downstairs, garment in hand.

"We'll have it back to you in a jiffy," Brown shouted, like he was still a drill sergeant ... he had been one too ...

"Don't want to be a problem," the General replied with exquisite modesty ...

“Have you seen Max about it?” Brown questioned tentatively, without looking at the Commander.

“No,” said the General, “Didn’t want to give you folks trouble by calling Mr. Siegel.” Skip too had recognized him, because every PX employee had seen Major General Bennett at least once, running his own errands in civilian dress ... buying a battery for a transistor radio, looking for a typewriter so he could type his own letters ... escaping from the City Commandant’s mansion on Pacelli Allee, with its American banner waving on the flagpole ... You never saw Bennett in the company of adjutants, out of uniform he didn’t care to have every little thing done for him by numerous lackeys ... everyone knew General Bennett.

“Alan!” Skip then spotted me.

“Skip,” I breathed. “So funny to see you here ...How’re you doing?”

“Fine!” he said. “I was here in the neighborhood, kid! Hey, you go a second?”

“You’re going to go to the F.U. That’s good.”

“Have to take a few tests ... then we’ll see. I quit working at the PX, got a girlfriend. Got a minute?”

We went into the break room to have some peace. “I saw David two weeks ago,” I told Skip. “I’m trying to get him some kind of job here ... you too, if you want ...”

“Alan! Alan! Psst!” I was being called by Frau Wrobel ... who stood at the door.

“What’s up?”

“Mr. Siegel wants to talk to you, Alan! Now! Come immediately ...”

I rushed from the break room, into the office, grabbing the phone. General Bennett sat where I usually worked while Brown orated, seated across from him ... the manager was on his favorite subject ... Vietnam

“What’s going on there,” Siegel screamed at me, “what’s you idiots done to Colonel Dewberry’s buttons ...” Oh, shit .. Colonel Dewberry wasn’t like General Bennett. Not at all! Siegel smashed the receiver with all his might several times against the side of his wooden desk, my eardrums suffered while he whipped his phone with an unknown metal object, maybe a pistol, then his voice returned, the pitch having gone high up. “Where’s Brown,” Siegel wanted to know, “why is my life being made difficult by what we do to Colonel Dewberry’s buttons ... officers are important people. You should treat their clothes carefully ... I have told Brown to handle Dewberry’s uniforms with the utmost solicitude, if need be Brown should’ve washed and pressed the garments himself, so nothing goes wrong!” Sometimes things went wrong ... after I’d been there a month I suspected someone had had it out for the Laundry manager ... had deliberately been

busting Colonel Dewberry's buttons, who then wailed and raged at Siegel ... a single well-placed enemy in the plant was enough to ruin a Laundry manager .

Mr. Brown was sick of calls about buttons, he preferred to explicate some unpatriotic frame-up in the media ... the General was kind to him by saying, "Ahem ... I see ..." And Wrobel was downstairs looking for shirt buttons ... so I was again the one who got chewed out by Siegel ...

I felt sorry for myself.

Colonel Dewberry was the Berlin Command's Chief of Staff and he frothed at the mouth when he complained to Mr. Siegel. "Why," Siegel questioned me. "why? For breaking buttons! Buttons, buttons, buttons, why?" Siegel hung up.

Skip had to leave in a hurry ... he saw clearly enough the Laundry was too busy for visitors.

I was never sad being alone with Howard's books ... I was alone only when he went to Elfriede, on Fasanen Strasse.

Nevertheless things had gotten better on Prinz-Handjery Strasse: our place had emptied. Tom had said, "I'm going back to Milwaukee!" He had gone. Two days later Jerry had announced he was getting out of the Army... he had returned to Virginia, and Wilbur had been transferred Stateside. The cat ran away too. Howard charged me a lot more money for my room. But we were only two.

Life was made simpler.

Modus Vivendi was closure of bedroom doors, if a need to communicate popped up, then notes to each other. We kept glass gallon jars, with lids, in our rooms to urinate in, so we hardly ever used the toilet. I tiptoed around, took the phone in my room if I wished to use it, not to disturb the other hermit ... not wishing to see the other ... every day a note from Howard: "Went to sleep at five a.m., Alan, will be sleeping until eleven ..." "If Hermione Goltz calls wake me ..." "Please be quiet, Alan!" "Please, Alan, don't cough so loud ..." "If Elfriede calls please tell her I'm at the Free University ..." "If you have to cook please don't be noisy ..." The kitchen sink had been overflowing ... the drain stopped up with used paper towels, silverware, pots noodles in a pan ... how Howard left it. Didn't touch anything ... I couldn't look. Had a crate of apples, tomatoes, peppers, peaches, pears behind my door so I wouldn't have to enter the kitchen, except under duress ... my bedroom smelled like a fruit and vegetable stand.

"If Gaby calls please tell her I'm busy, busy, tell her to call again in a half-hour!" "If Michael calls ..." "If Harry calls..." "Am sleeping ..." "Be quiet!" "I borrowed your Pascal ..." "Alan, have telephone in my room, am awaiting an important phone call Stateside ..." "Yesterday Feliks Mayer called, you're supposed to call him back." "Alan, don't want to see anyone ... nobody! So please say I'm not home ..." The phone wire was Howard's umbilical cord to the outside world. The only time he sought any conversation with a visible person was during the period before his annual trip to New York ... in order to confess, to make sure he was there, to bid farewell to the familiar world he knew, forever ... It was during this time when I snuck around in the apartment like a little mouse, so we could avoid meeting each other.

On Saturday I had had to go into the kitchen, so my door was opened, I ventured out ...

No notes ... all was quiet, the phone in its right place ... I crawled around corner ...

Elfriede and Gaby ... no one there.

He was in the kitchen. His one o'clock pupil had not shown up ... Howard wanted advice. He was complicating his life ... he said what he was doing with two women at once was insane ... he wanted nothing except that ... "What should I do? I love them both ... but Elfriede's mouth, her shrillness, her screaming instead of quietly conversing ... like a civilized person ... can't stand it anymore! Gaby is so nice, so normal compared to that crazy woman!"

"But, Howard! You spend your weekends with Elfriede..."

"She tortures me ... you know she does nothing but torture me. I can't talk normally to people anymore because of her ... Elfriede! That woman is killing me ...," his breathing was becoming audible, very excited ... his voice had risen too. I knew what he had in store for me ... wanted to get something straightened out by yelling at me ... in Howard's eyes he always remained passive, things happened to him, he never committed acts ... "I let this happen," he said, but I knew he manipulated events and people ... so they happened in a certain way ... by driving everyone nuts with his noodging and foolish accusations ... "I didn't want it ..." Silence .. angrily gnashing his teeth, moving his right foot in a violently dancing kick.

I sat on the floor, moving my head reflexively, eyeing the swinging foot of Howard ...hoping he would soon get over the rage ... in a minute the phone might ring, perhaps the two o'clock pupil would arrive early ...

"You know how many pupils I have!" A pupil's face rang the doorbell every hour beginning Monday at noon, lasting until Saturday whenever ... Howard terrorized himself with visions of not having enough money ... being dependent on outside events and people for a livelihood had become jumbled and tumbled up in Howard's head: no earnings equaled disaster, then Elfriede ... Gaby ... aging parents in New York ... would have to care for them ... how he worked himself up. Howard snapped. "How will I get enough money to support them? Every year they're getting older ... older ... my father's back more bent ... thinner, his white hair ... I'm going to have to go back ..." Flattering himself with inaccurate fantasies about his solicitude. The different sources of rage were combining in him ... "I'll be flying to America in a week, I'm sure everything is going to come out wrong!" When he visited New York he stayed up all night writing ... fell asleep when Mom and Dad woke in the morning. They hardly saw each other. He had gained twenty pounds when he'd returned last year, he said. "American ice cream wow!" He hit his forehead with his palm. "Fifteen years of living here, but it could all end tomorrow!" It was always about money and love ... I asked him if he also wanted to work Sundays. Logic was irrelevant to Howard ... and he was majoring in philosophical logic at the Free University. "I'll be on the street ... don't smile ... Elfriede doesn't

understand what will happen to me ...” He massaged his biceps with his hands. “I don’t know what’s going to happen either. It’s a fact, Alan! I’m earning money illegally ... but everything could collapse when I’m gone, it’s a confirmation of my ...”

“Paranoia,” I said.

“Income, apartment, women! All! I might be right ... what if I’ve done the wrong thing for fifteen years! At age forty-three what am I doing?” I told him to calm down, he earned seven times as much as I did. “Don’t laugh! Nothing in life will survive my absence. Nothing, not my apartment either.”

“Do you expect me to be gone?”

“You’ll disappear, evaporate ... Oy, my head ... it’s too much. Gaby! Elfriede! Pupils! Why can’t they stop?”

Who? Who offered him succor?

“Alan, I’m desperate!” Overwrought Howard dreaded meeting his girlfriend ... fights had been occurring frequently ... last week Howard had slammed out of her abode in the middle of the night, books under each arm, screaming at Elfriede from the courtyard. Elfriede had thrown a flower pot at him from the balcony ... “Why can’t they leave me in peace?” Howard asked. His voice was hoarse ... he often got sore throats and lay down in bed, it was terrible, he ended up doing nothing ... wouldn’t leave the apartment then and if he didn’t visit his girlfriend it meant he’d be with Gaby ... I’d have to stay in my room all weekend. I would’ve done anything to get him out of the house. “What will I do?” he called... I shifted my position in order to leave the kitchen at an opportune moment ... “Alan!” I’m at a loss .. When I ...” He gulped. “I think about Elfriede! Don’t know why I do it, either I’m going to die of a heart attack ... or I’ll strangle her someday!” I looked behind me in the hallway, dark with grime ... the floor was atrocious, and something stuck to my pants when I tried to stand up ... the New York accent had become thicker ... twitching his torso to the right, jabbing, Howard shadow-boxed with rapid thrusts. “I don’t have the nerve to bear it anymore ... I’m not as flexible as I was before ... she’s driving me crazy!” The phone rang.

“Alan is not here,” Howard answered ... and hung up. He coughed.

“Thanks.” I’d slowly been edging along the wall toward my bedroom, Howard popped a cough lozenge in his mouth ... chewed and cracked it . we closed out doors.

At five o’clock the phone rang, and I opened my portal ... Howard ran and got it ... “Should it be anyone from the Laundry ... I’m not here ...,” I whispered. Knowing how yesterday afternoon, during the time I’d been riding home from work on the bus, between three and four o’clock .. three Pickup Point clerks had called: Howard had heard Tama Wolf and Janice Thomas back-

knifing each other ... and Mrs. Washington had phoned. Ziggy had not delivered One-Day Specials ... Next a barracks guard phoned me up. These fellows patrolling the compound had found a window open in the laundry ... I got rung up five times the first six weeks to come down after working hours to close a window ... this time he demanded Howard dot it. To Andrews. No, a mistake ... Howard had said to my besiegers I was not home ...

Now the mighty Chief of S&S rang ... Howard did not know what to make of a voice assailing him ... “Alan Salnitsky, yesterday Building 965 was left unsecured!” Howard admitted he wasn’t me . “Who are you then?” My roommate claimed he was Howard. “Howard, where’s that Salnitsky idiot? I want to know something ... where is he ...”

“He’s gone shopping.”

“Say, I can hear a New Yorker a mile away! I grew up on the Lower East Side ...”

“So did my parents,” Howard responded.

“We’re practically lantzmänner! No reason not to see you at Jewish services. Plenty of pretty girls Friday night. Wait! Tell Salnitsky I don’t get paid for shutting windows.” Siegel put down the receiver.

Howard and I withdrew. ..Two hours later I discovered a note attached to the phone after I’d been in my room, earplugs in my ears ... A square piece of paper had been stuck to the phone receiver: “ If Elfriede calls tonight say I’m not home.”

He was home the whole weekend ...

“It wouldn’t be right to take it from a nigger,” Sandy murmurs to me ... can’t believe what I am hearing ... “You know how dirty they are ... who knows where Abdullah got it?”

Sandy is overweight, has a sharp, beaky nose ... thin face, freckles, blond hair. Her behind and legs are rather massively proportioned ... she waddles ... The funny thing is: I like her! I want to be friends!

Gooch, the other clerk, the Stan Laurel to Sandy Clark’s Oliver Hardy ... a tiny woman, only stands up to my armpits ... also really despises me, I ruined her office ... she was the one who had actually been running things before I arrived, very well! Much better than I ... she understood the poor souls of the women I was supervising ... whereas I only understood Ziggy ... a little ... and Rodney, he had no soul I could conceive of. Gooch had been the one making the Pickup Point schedules, refereeing between unhappy employees ... he had a husband, an Army sergeant ... he was a little crazy, the only thing he’d said to me was, “You in Nam?” I shook my head, he spit ... think he wanted to shoot me. I couldn’t understand these people! Because my father had taught me the military was a heap of human refuse! Wrong, wrong! The country needs its armed forces! But my father’s dumb idea had formed me ... I was an arrogant, stupid slob! They sensed it ... and Mrs. Gooch was also jealous of my position ... I had just come in, gotten a job ... she had been working to improve herself, laboring at a hundred odd, menial employments ... to get somewhere! Along came Alan! The buddy of Maxie Siegel! Brown poured oil on the fire by going on and on ... about “minorities” ... griping about a certain conspiracy ... not to say a Masonic plot ... I wasn’t a Mason! Brown had done the hiring, hadn’t he? Why complain? Okay, I had had no right to be there ... I had cheated Gooch out of a good situation ... and before I came there had been a wonderful working atmosphere there, I heard them whispering ... every had been friends.

I grab the candy bar from Sandy’s desk. I had given it to her as a peace offering ... for certain reasons ... Both she and Gooch were convinced, whatever I did, I was giving reports to Siegel, daily ... hourly! Every twenty minutes! I had a walkie-talkie! Max Siegel and I were in contact! Our relationship was akin to an umbilical cord between two humans ... no separation, we were one! I didn’t think they had gotten this idea themselves ... this was the topic of Brown’s discourses, he gave the ladies the central guidelines, behind my back ... I was condemned! He knew certain people ... who were out to get him. Ruin his career! True, Siegel didn’t like him. Yet they didn’t know what a burden it was for me to work for Siegel, and how little chance he gave me, I was

always the idiot for Max, and it was not due to his towering expectations of what I might be capable of accomplishing ... it was plain sadism. I was neither a military dependent, like Sandy and Gooch, nor was I from the Deep South, as they were ... I had tried to make a peace gesture by giving Mrs. Clark this stupid chocolate bar ... I didn't eat sweets, I had told her ... due to insanity created by my mother's habits ... the inveterate sweet-devourer ... which had been poisonous for her, in the long run ... Sandy had been bored, of course, as I explained myself, the whole song and dance about my family, then finally added Abdullah had bought it in a German store ... I wanted us to be friends! Please! Accept Alan Salnitsky! Abdullah's name turned my pretty plan to nothing ... double tactical incapability! Not only was it a German candy bar, foreign food ... but Abdullah's black claws had been on it. My peace offer ... not accepted! "I don't eat food from niggers ...," she smiles.

Every day Sandy Clark and Gooch met in Brown's office to discuss the daily concerns: me and Siegel ... Brown's fear of the Chief of S&S Division ... of me.

Sandy Clark hates me. Gooch does too. Brown is scared of me.

The truth was! No one had real work to accomplish! It was a shame ... and downstairs they scrubbed, pressed, sweated, died ... broke buttons ... screamed at one another, did exhausting labor! Here upstairs there was nothing meaningful to do ... it was strenuous for me! It did me in ... but Gooch, who had worked years downstairs as a presser before she got a chance to come up to office heaven, knew it better ... Sandy also knew what it meant to sweat downstairs in summer over a steaming press ... Who was I?

Abdullah was downstairs in his Supply cave ... he never came upstairs if he could help it ... he had also known what it was to slave in the Laundry ... he'd once been a washman ... had weighed twenty-five pounds less than he does now, he's told me ...

That was how it worked .. and I had just gotten hired out of the thin, blue air!

I could understand their point.

“Dear Alan. You wrote in your letter, ‘Time is precious.’ What kind of job takes all your time? Sorry you have neglected writing me. I know time is precious to one so young. You are twenty-eight, very young and rushing your time. Don’t do it, Alan. Your working hours are terrible. When do you rest? I used to work very late hours. One night my boss walked in, it was around one a.m., I was looking for a loss of nine cents in our bookkeeping balance. When he saw me he said, ‘Bess, what are you doing here so late?’ I told him I was out of balance. He said, ‘You’re a fool! Your hours are from nine to five.’ Well, after that when he asked me to work late I replied, ‘My time is your time from nine to five. After five my time is my own.’ I never worked after five from that day on.

“Sure glad you’re having a mild autumn in Germany. The weather here in Chicago? Horrible, so windy, rainy. I fall easily if the sidewalk’s wet, was bad a few days ago, do not have much stamina. Old age. But thank God it didn’t rain too hard today. What happened was I slipped, had an awful fall and hit my forehead against the curb near our building, was bleeding like a stuck pig! I was rushed to the hospital, they stitched my forehead. Still has not healed. Big deal.

“Please, darling, write more often. Miss your letters. I miss you. It’s been years since I’ve seen you. Have you put on weight? Do you have a beard? How do you look? Alan, dear, please take a minute or two to write, just to tell me how you are.

“Honey, what can I do for you? Here is a check for twenty-five dollars for Passover, enjoy it. You’re still a Jew, aren’t you?

“Time is precious. To the young time’s precious, but, Alan, they waste much of it. It will only take a few words to tell me how you are. My favorite grandson, and only God knows how much I love you.

“Be well, darling, and take a second to write your old grandmother. All my love, Gram.”

The postscript added: “Alan, please come back! I know your Mom and Dad miss you. What is the attraction of Germany of all places? Come home, please. Stay too long and you will not be a U.S. citizen. Is Germany worth losing your U.S. citizenship for? Surprised at you, you’re a bright and intelligent man so use the brain the good Lord gave you and come home where you belong. Have you accomplished much in Germany, did Germany give you the atmosphere you wanted? Why are you still there, of all places? Holocaust! If you had accomplished some great thing there I could understand. But what have you accomplished in Germany?

“Am seventy-seven years old, will not live forever, would like to see you where you belong, please come home, dear. Hope I get to see you in the U.S.A. before the good Lord calls me. I love you, Gram.”

She had written a few lines more: “People come from all over the world to this wonderful country, and you leave it! Doesn’t make sense to me. You ran from it. Why, what the hell is the attraction of Germany? Holocaust! As I wrote I’m seventy-seven years old, will I ever see you again? What do you think you’re doing to your parents? You are their son, their only son. Come back, fast. My time is not long, darling, come home. Love you, Gram.”

My grandmother had not finished: “My parents ran away from Europe. You went there! For what? You went to Germany on account of a dame. So many girls here. You did not have to go to Germany for a girl. And where is she now? Why don’t you write anything about her? No schooling, no degree. Alan, what a waste all this has been. What have you gained in Germany? You can’t even make a living, working long hours. Is Germany that important? It has no atmosphere, a real ‘nothing’ country. Why are you in Europe? What has Europe got. Everyone came here. You don’t even make a living, honey, why do you work such terrible hours? You told me so in the card you sent for my birthday.

“Europe? God almighty. Don’t you want to see me before I die?

“Don’t you miss your wonderful parents who are lonesome for you?

“Alan, I talked with Mom on the phone today, she’s not well. Tells me she’s getting better, but I know she has had an infection, on her right foot, has never taken care of herself properly. And Mother is a sick woman, you are in Europe. Shame on you! Don’t write me it’s none of my business, anything that concerns your mother is my business. She’s not well. How are you helping her? When I talked to her she said, ‘Mother, I miss Alan, and he doesn’t seem to care.’ That is disgraceful! I could understand if you were a howling success. If you had been a howling success, well and good! So come back.

“I once knew a young man, Alan, he was an author. I had gone to school with him, and he went to South Bend to become a writer, not in Europe. Sid Pakulsky was his name, a brilliant young man. But I got it wrong, he became a doctor.

“Your best writers are from the U.S.A., with the exception of Hemingway who went to a foreign country and blew his brains out.

“The next letter you write me, tell me when you are coming home. If you are to be successful at anything, then here, in the best country in the world.

“Again I would like to know, what have you succeeded in? other than causing anguish to your parents, what? You are not a sadist. What are you, brainless? I love your mother, and what are you doing to my daughter? She’s not well, a diabetic, and you have made her terribly unhappy. What for? Maybe you’re sadistic. I hope your mother can forgive you for your actions, I cannot. Yours, Gram.

She continues: “And, brother, are you a disappointment! Your parents have a son and a daughter. The daughter is fine. I wish I could say the same about the son.

“I don’t care if you don’t answer this letter but I’ll never forgive you for hurting my daughter, your mother, who’s sick. You’re of no help, no consolation.

“If you were a howling success, well and good, but the best writers are from the good U.S.A., a country you gave up. I can understand being in love, can well understand it, but the dame you crossed the ocean for, chased to Germany? A real nothing dame. And where in the world is she?

“My parents ran away from Europe, and you have ignored your family by going to Europe, what the hell is it with you?

“Alan, I adored you, but what are you doing to my daughter? I could almost kill you. You think your mother and father are happy with their precious son? A Jew you may still be but you are not a human being, you’re cruel!

“Whether you answer my letter is immaterial to me. But what you do to my daughter is very important to me, I love her, would kill for her, and what are you doing to her? Alan, you will never be a success, not if you continue to hurt people as you are hurting my daughter, who loves her son deeply. How deeply do you love anyone but yourself? Selfish. And a sadist!

“You’re in Germany, and as far as I am concerned I don’t care where you are, but don’t you dare hurt my daughter! She means too much to me, and I will not let you kill her. Your mother, my daughter, had a wonderful childhood, a wonderful girlhood, and married the man she loved. And you, her son, don’t give a good goddamn about Mother. It must be stupidity, you think you will be a big success. Never in your life, ever! One is never successful hurting others. Remember that always. Gram!”

The end had not been reached: “ My sister Fern has a son and a daughter, happily married, very successful. They did not have to go to Germany to do it.

“Honor thy father and mother.’ Someday you will look for them and how sorry you will be. I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes for anything. How can you live with yourself? But selfish and sadistic people can.

“You’re in a Kraut country. Holocaust! To get good from life you must give good, you give anguish and pain. May God forgive you, I never could.

“Write your mother, tell her you’re coming home. For once in your life do something to help another human being, quit looking for the rainbow you’ll never find. What’s that talk about your precious time? You work long hours, and a laundry office, my God! How much you’ve accomplished with your precious time. Will you continue to cause unhappiness to Mother? One is never successful by hurting other.

“Remember your mother is a diabetic, ill, and what are you doing to help her? Writing her foolish letters. It’s time you grew up, became a man. Your father struggled but, thank God, he now makes a living, wasn’t always like that but he’s learned to live like a mensch, not like a Kraut.

“Why in Germany, of all places. I’ll never understand. I’ve never written you a nasty letter. ‘Give good, good shall be!’”

Scribbled along the right-hand margin of her epistle: “That Salnitsky name must go. Are you nuts?”

“But this letter you deserve! This you deserve! ‘Honor thy father and mother.’ Personally I don’t give a damn what you do, but it bothers me your mother is not happy. Alan, if you do anything, if anything happens to my daughter I’ll come to Germany and kill you! Grandmother!”

After Naomi ... I met Peaches ... an Englishwoman. She was as screwed up as I was ... her folks in far away Albion. I never figured out what she wanted from me ... I had very little time! Whereas Peaches had a lot of time ... she used it unwisely by phoning my many times at the office ... it lasted awhile before she got my message ... an impossible situation ... Frau Wrobel wringing her hands, shouting, "They're going to kill each other ... Mrs. Wolf and that other cow: Mrs. Thomas! Alan, they're on the other line again ... do something!"

Things occurred, matter what! Things only tended toward chaos. The machines were falling to pieces, half the pressing section had called in sick today, and three Pickup Point clerks had gotten run over by an Abrams tank ... Dirty Rodney was last been seen four hours ago ... miles from any Pickup Point ... by Ziggy, who had been spying on him instead of delivering clean clothes ... they were a grand pair ... Rodney had just finished another great job! Had delivered stuff belonging to Pickup Point One ... One-Day Specials ... mistakenly to Pickup Point Three ... It was a continuous mess of missed appointments, angry customers ... irate employees ... insane managers ... hateful colleagues ... no rest, waking up so early ... miserable ... a brutal way without respite! I hated it! My work? It's minimal, I would've rather unloaded semi's, however, than cope with so much chaos while being responsible for part of it ...

So how could I listen to what Peaches had to tell me. "You can't meet me?" she queried. "Why, Alan?" you promised."

"No! I don't want to see another human being after three o'clock ... when the bell rings! I hate you! I hate everyone! Go! Peaches, leave me alone!"

"You're always worn out ... how come?" Being polite and English ... she ignores my words.

I refuse to answer questions ... just let her come and manage this office, I bark... Arrange the Pickup Point schedule! And be here at six-thirty every morning! Do some mendacious report every day! Be bored ... yet be harassed, harassed, and harassed!

Then she asked questions. "Lay off," I say wearily ... "I've got to go ... There's a disaster ... a woman happened to walk in now ... she's informed me one of my clerks committed suicide! I've got to find a replacement! You know how long it takes the Personnel Office to accomplish such a simple task? Don't even ask!" Frau Wrobel swings the second telephone at me ... "Look, I've really go to go ..."

"What a crummy guy you are!"

It's lousy ... am incapable of controlling my words ... this stress! These people. The noise. The stink. However, I knew I was doing it for a good reason ... Once upon a time Millie had said I was impractical, would never earn m living ... So here I was earning it! Trying to prove I can do it. Millie isn't around me only recognize ... if they see anything ... my incompetence ... a part of the grand waste ... This was the life I was leading ... and no one around me appeared to have a better life either ... Well, too tired to say anything else ... I hung up on Peaches ... that's just the kind of friend I am ...

I never felt right in leotards ... attending classes at Jane's Dance School ... Torturing myself with ballet for three months ... legs sore the whole time, barely able to walk straight ... diligently practicing what Herr Schwarz taught me ... the task master ... getting off work at three o'clock, eating an apple, rushing off on my bike to Jane's ... to Roseneck, on Hubertusallee. There were only two males in the adult class ... this guy about thirty-five ... and me ... he was an accountant, long arms, short legs, hirsute as a wild ape ... the T-shirt he wore in class gave you a view of his shoulders, the back of his neck covered with black growth ... hairs bristled everywhere on him ... and the way he pretended not to look at the girls ... kids barely grown out of their teens ... I knew we had a sly one on our hands ... his eyes on Penny, Wendy, Gwendolyn, three skinny eighteen-year-old, and Dolores, Bettina too, the seventeen-year-olds. At least the girls looked like ballerinas ... I had joined the class on a whim ... something Feliks said had inspired me to this decision ... had been dreaming of Millie ... in my nocturnal fantasy Millie was in her apartment, on Waitz Strasse ... hadn't left.

I had first gotten curious about ballet lessons when I saw this woman at the Deutsche Oper ... going there with Feliks Mayer, to see "The Idiot", a ballet that was danced like a gymnastic exercise. Choreograph Valery Yussupov's wife was something to watch ... a ballerina twirling around, jumping up, little woman, blond ... so for the first time I told Feliks about my arrival in Berlin ... Millie Gribney ... she was a lot on my mind, but Feliks said: forget it ... I should join a ballet class, it was good exercise ... if ballerinas looked like Millie, okay. I searched for a school in the yellow pages ...

The teacher at Jane's was a former ballet dancer who couldn't pirouette anymore due to an injury: his knee had gotten screwed five years ago, on stage ... it had burst or something. He had been trained in Russia ... Bolshoi Ballet. Herr Schwarz had then gotten the job at Jane's, to preside over novices ... eleven in our adult class, and everyone was a disappointment to him ... Five nubile teenagers ... the accountant, me, and three Yonkers, New York, women wearing colored beads, headbands. One day we had a treat ... got to watch the teacher's boyfriend dance ... guest artist Silvio de Silva ... twenty-five-year-old from San Francisco, svelte, Chicano ... whose hair was tied in a bun in the back with a pink silk ribbon, he came to us in a white body suit, shedding his thigh and calf warmers with a flick of his foot, to pirouette, jump all over the joint, really spectacularly. Schwarz made a speech afterwards. "You too can learn to dance like Silvio!" No one doubted his

sincerity ... But after one and a half hours of kicking my feet in the air, throwing myself around the place, contorting my neck ... I was too worn out to care. Next in line, after us, was a children's dance class ... they would howl! ... Twenty energy-charged girls ... sometimes I stayed to watch them falling on their faces ... with youth on their side ...

Why did I tell Frau Wrobel about it? She listened curiously. As my mother might have, for while Mom was sick in South Bend Frau Wrobel sat across from me in the office every day, and her reaction was similar to how my own mother might have responded to my newfound hobby ...

"You're not really interested in it, Alan, you want a ballerina. Come, tell me the truth!"

"Don't you think I'm capable ..."

"No, you're a klutz. But you're lonely."

Okay, if I was looking for something else there, so what. Was Millicent's mug among the girls' faces there, Yussupov's wife's? No ... What I had wanted to do was to reach her ... not to take ballet! I quit the stupid class that day and decided to try something else.

I wrote Millie a letter ... taking a whole afternoon ... when I had finished my epistle, putting a stamp on the envelope was easy, but I realized something was wrong ... had to think hard ... and think clearly ... Where did she live in Hawaii? I had no address to send it to.

"Operator!" I'd dialed International Information. "Give me the telephone number ... for Honolulu!" I spelled her name ... "Nothing? Not listed?" I ruminated, just like when I came to Berlin ... doorbell! Poaiukai! Millie was registered under his name ... I quickly learned there were islands and multitudes of villages in Hawaii, but no entry for Harvey in Honolulu ... "Operator!" I pleaded. "Don't leave me ... NO, give me a chance. Her phone number must be listed ..."

It wasn't.

I rode the bus down Clayallee to the American library, going through the phone books myself ... Hawaiian names, full of vowels ... I found a "Poaiakakai," "Poaiakoi", no Poaiukai, no Gribney. Arriving back in Prinz-Handjery Strasse late ... spent.

I rang up Millie's aunt ... it was almost midnight. Aunt Gerti was my last resort ... we had never met! She answered, voice tired, I started by telling her something in English, she cut me short, couldn't speak my English ... making a date with me for Sunday, at her place ...

An unwed fifty-year-old, living in Friedenau, alone. Her apartment on Stubenrauchstrasse consisted of one room ... The air was filled with perfume ... the joint crammed with strange toys, bizarre stuff ... everywhere I moved things were piled on chairs, tables, desks, cabinets ...

"I've collected them for twenty years ... porcelain and crystal figurines," Gerti informed me ... had bought the menagerie at flea markets ... and had given a name to each new roommate.

“There’s Hoopi,” pointing at a green elephant, “in the corner are Vigfett, Mabbinn, Chaquie!” Little monkeys, more names ... I sat on the couch ... glanced behind me at the wall, where a couple of prints were hanging, a girl with night-moon blue eyes, and a clown with tears staining his cheeks.

Gerti had brought coffee and plates of sweet rolls, tarts, cream puffs, éclairs, donuts of the table but didn’t eat any ... nor did I ... and as there was an U-Bahn station nearby the train rumbled by at intervals as we talked ... making the cups rattle, the crystal figurines clink and shiver ... She twice inadvertently put her hand in mine ... I smiled. It was comfortable ...

“Millie deserves better,” Gerti was beaming ... “I was disappointed by my niece’s taste, a girl with such gifts ... going off with such a dummkopf.”

Millie had shocked me too, I said.

“How do you like our city?” She was pressing me to say something, squinting, must’ve worn glasses but hadn’t put them on. Her hairspray was noisome, I sneezed ... her hair was bouffant, in three colors: blue, red, and black. I moved to the right, along the couch, she moved toward me, I reseated myself a little farther away, she moved closer ... “You’ve hardly eaten the whole time.”

I looked away ... “That’s not so terrible.”

“Yes, there’s more to life than eating ...”

“There’s what’s afterwards, Gerti.”

She pressed her fingers to her midriff where her flesh rode out past the waistband of stretch pants she should never have put on. “You write poetry?” I said no. “I shouldn’t show you mine. Have some rhymes ... here.” She went past her collection of porcelain whatnots ... toward a wooden cabinet, opening its drawer. “I’m often visited by the Muse.” She returned ...

“Read this.” Gerti handed me a piece of paper. It was a poem ... but I kept my mouth shut.

This went on for six more weeks. Each Sunday I went to Gerti, for a couple hours. She often phoned me during the week, inviting me to take her somewhere... I didn’t have time. On the seventh Sunday there was an unknown woman sitting on the couch ... Frau So-and-so ... who was pretty enthusiastic about meeting me, having heard so much about me ...

“Are you the young man she planned to marry in Boston?” Didn’t stop for me to answer. “Oh!” She sneered. “Thin girl ... pale!” Frau So-and-so lit a cigarette. “Never understood why she married a nigger ... let’s look at the girl’s wedding pictures, shall we, Gerti?”

“No ... uh, maybe next time ...” You could see her skin flush through layers of make-up, Gerti wouldn’t glance up, eyes remaining steady on her knuckles ... she had never dared mention to me ... the whole time ... Millie had had a wedding. With pictures! Next week we would see them.

I never went back.

I had seen her on the street once, wrapped in a white fur coat ... a Russian princess ... shopping for clothes in exclusive shops on the Ku'damm ... I looked through the window while she tried on the newest from Paris and Rome ... Yves Saint Laurent ... Christian Dior ... Chanel ... nothing less than the best suited the skin of Madame Yussupova ...

I met Feliks and Peaches Friday evening at the Deutsche Oper to see "Tutti Guru", a ballet about the ceremonial sacrifice of an Aztec virgin: dancers wearing loincloths ... they were Indians ... it was a pretty wild affair on stage, with a bloody climax: a feathered priest raised an amber knife over a half-naked ballerina, wham! Into the young woman's chest! The sharp point twisting, music tomtomming into cacophonous crescendo. The priest ripped something out of the ribcage, holding it, laying it ... dripping ... into a goldplated bowl. Aztecs going nuts ... dancing in body-length masks, striking copper gongs ... hitting tambourines against each other's asses, jumping around on stage ... a headache!

Despite Yussupova as its virgin sacrificial victim I had left the Oper disappointed ... "Tutti Guru" was, I guess, too terrifying-avant garde for a princess ... she should've felt such a work was beneath her ...

On Saturday afternoon Feliks refused to go to East Berlin with Peaches and I ... he believed the Soviet secret police would kidnap him. I'd argued he had a West German passport, but Feliks shook his head, wouldn't dream of setting his foot over there. I'd been bragging to the Englishwoman about my connections ... Tucked under my belt were three glossy issues of a Berlin literary journal called "Stabhochsprung" ... "Pole Vault" ... in the East it was forbidden. I had along the new Proust biography for Dodo, too, shoving it under my shirt and told Peaches everything was banned in the German Democratic Republic ...

We met Knut Zobel in a bar renowned for its artist clientele, which radiated the glamour of a dentist's waiting room ... while you're waiting there root-canal treatment, to make matters lovelier ... I didn't try to imagine what the bars here looked like without artist clientele ... Knut Zobel sat there in jeans and a loose-fitting lumberjack shirt, reading "Neues Deutschland" ... We drank coffee, and I showed him my "Stabhochsprungs" ... pulling them from under the shirt. The playwright glanced at me like I'd been a wild hare infected with rabies, and instantly made the "Pole Vaults" vanish under his newspaper. I thought he was being watched ... or certainly he thought it.

“Stabhochsprung’ will print your newest play, Knut! Think of ‘I’m the Revolutionary Egg’ appearing in West Berlin! In the West! Well?...”

“I ...uh ... don’t know ...” Rolling a cigarette, ruminatively wrinkling his high forehead ... hardly falling into buoyant conniptions at the prospects I’d offered. Searching slowly through his pockets for a match ... Zobel lit up, blew out a cloud of smoke ... “Hmmm ... I’ll have to ... uh ...see what I have.”

Peaches shoved a cube of sugar in her mouth ... sipped, meditatively, her coffee ... didn’t know any German ... “I like it here ... it’s so gray ...” he disdainfully sniffed at Peaches’ aesthetic assessment of his side of the Wall, and we got up to go ...

We were brought somewhere, I didn’t know where ... ambling past darkened thoroughfares, under dim orange-ish streetlights, following Zobel, who walked quickly, with his hands in his pockets. Stopped at a corner in front of a certain apartment building ... Zobel rang a bell. Walking up an unlit flight of stairs Zobel tapped me on the shoulder ... I froze and thought of Feliks ... He handed me the literary magazines ... my gift to him. “We’ll speak about it later,” he cleared his throat. “Dodo’s here too, these are friends of mine ...”

In this small apartment three women and a man were sitting around a table ... they’d obviously been waiting for us, been drinking .. here was wine and food. Dodo clapped her hands hysterically ... scampered around enthusiastically when I gave her the book.

“Super duper!” ... Kissed me several times, while her three friends brought us chairs.

Knut did introductions ... Eckart Sachs, Steffi Kindereit, Rita Valerius ... my ears pricked up at the last name ... some minor member of the GDR governing clique who had this surname had recently made a boring anti-NATO speech ... maybe he was her father, gray-colored guy ... Eckart Sachs grinned at me, Zobel’s friend had a shaved head, bent nose ... his eyes betrayed his instant dislike ... Steffi was pudgy ... I saw a brown rat, with a long tail, creeping from her shoulder into the neck of her bulky blue pullover sweater, quick to scamper away ... Steffi slurred her words, told us new arrivals it was harmless. Peaches wanted to pet it, so it was fished out. No, I said, I didn’t want to hold it ... turned away, glanced at Rita Valerius, a woman in her thirties with a swarthy complexion and long black hair ... sat as far away from Steffi’s rat as possible, between Zobel and Eckart Sachs ... Four empty bottles of Circassian wine already lying under the table, three uncorked topside ... Eckart poured us drinks ...

We got a shot glass full of aniseed spirit ... a hundred-fifty proof, brewed in the Caucasus Mountains ... “To friendship and understanding!” Eckart proposed a toast, downing the dynamite Russian style, in a gulp ... we followed, hardly able afterward to catch breath ... I coughed ...

"You work in a laundry?" Eckart asked.

"Yeah, forty hours a week."

"How can you work so many hours?"

I wanted to make a pitch for "Stabhochsprung", but no one wanted to listen, they wanted to know about my work! That was the most significant thing about me! My way of making a living ...

"I can't get out of having to work for ...," I couldn't finish the sentence ... after taking another glassful of aniseed lava. I was gasping ...

Eckart took a gulp from his shot glass ... "Everywhere you look ..." His eyes narrowed ... "Why not use the Jew connections ... they're always good for something ..."

"What? For a lousy job ... you call that good..."

"I'm writing a drama about our great German playwright ... his tragic suicide ... and our current German demoralization," Steffi broke in ... Peaches gave her back the rodent ... Steffi's darling was crawling round its mistress' breasts. "My play is only incidentally about Kleist's problem with his penis ... I'm a dramatist of Germanic despair ..." She emphasized the word, "Germanic", by tapping her fork against the wine bottle.

"Kleist's best part was deformed!" Eckart Sachs snickered, and Steffi gave him an admonishing signal by hitting the fork against his shoulder ...

"The foreskin had grown together at the tip, and it was painful for this great German writer to have an erection ..." She put her hands on the table, as if praying, then bowed her head ...

"Maybe Kleist needed an operation," I offered.

"Operate? Imagine how hideous an operation of the kind must have been in 1810!"

Eckart guffawed.

"You're nasty, Eckart Sachs! A philistine ... I'll tell you what it's about, drama arises from deep and secret forces rooted in the people ... the German nation, that was Kleist's problem!" Steffi looked at me ... holding the fork ... "It was the depth of this problem, driving him! Drove him incessantly. You understand me? Our theater needs to awake and address our hearts again! The soul's power moves us, not calculating reason. There has always been this power in ... in German poetry! What I intended to do ..."

Eckart poured us more aniseed ... Dodo was not listening, flipping through the pages of the Proust book ...

"German theater has been ruined!" Rita Valerius hit her glass on the table so hard it broke ... "By foreign values!" ... swept the broken pieces to the floor without looking at what she was doing ... "Hollywood! Why the same naked flesh, if you can't bring any deepness ... only Jewish tinsel."

“Depth!” Steffi echoed.

I queried whether she’d seen “Night of the Living Dead”, it was my favorite film, I joked halfheartedly, maintaining, as far as I was concerned, all theaters in which Yussupova didn’t dance could be shut down permanently ... I wouldn’t complain. They looked through me as if I had said nothing ...

“Our theater has been destroyed by dollars...”, Steffi let the mouse slip from her hand onto the tabletop, it skittered past the napkin, wayward, it ceased movement in front of me. Squeaked! I shooed it away with my hand. “German art has been prostituted ... no more can be said!”

The Valerius woman flung back a lock of hair from her forehead ... “Right, right! German aren’t given a chance to see their own theater anymore, they’re given pabulum ... Broadway values ...” She made her lips go downward to express herself.

“Regaining ourselves in our theaters again! No more dollars!” Steffi was shouting, the fork was being waved.

Wine and strong spirits had whirled my thoughts around ... I tried to remember ... college ... with Herbert Marcuse, Trotsky versus Harvard professors ... here I was in a socialist land ... Germany ... dollars? ... I didn’t get the scholarship ... I gave up, I didn’t want to stay in this room. Announcing I had an urgent appointment in West Berlin, then whispering to Peaches, in English, we had to go now, we skedaddled! Explaining to Peaches would’ve been too difficult ... she hadn’t understood anything, had liked Steffi’s mouse, however.

I accompanied her home. Peaches Luther lived in a one-bedroom place with no heat or electricity in Siemenstadt. As we walked in we had to grope to find a candle. When she lit it our shadows stuck to the walls. After a few steps I bumped into lamb’s head, placed on a stool, whose dead eyes glittered ... Her easel had been set up in front of it, the canvas showing an unfinished oil rendering of this subject ... I got out of there quickly. Reaching her bedroom I closed the door.

“Don’t want to impose on you, it’s just after those maniacs in East Berlin ... I didn’t want to go back alone to Zehlendorf,” I explained.

“Not at all,” she muttered ... “Keep forgetting to pay the electric bill! Sorry for the inconvenience.” I sat on the bed. I warmed my hands by rubbing them ... Peaches found a bottle of Irish cream, which I opened it while she got clean glasses from the kitchen. We drank the sweet stuff quickly, which we hardly needed, we were drunk ...

The place she lived in wasn’t hers, it belonged to an absentee optician whom she’d met three months ago ...he’d walked into a London gallery to buy her paintings while she, by chance, had been present ... Peaches having just returned from a six-month sojourn in Jordan ... she had

switched her residences many times the past few years ... The optician, a Berliner, offered the keys to his Berlin apartment, saying he'd be staying in London a year ... business reasons ... she accepted on the spot ... As for the lamb's head a Turkish butcher had been kind to provide it ... I smelled it distinctly, although her place was freezing cold and the bedroom door was closed.

"You know I'm married?" she queried ... I hadn't . we drank two glasses empty, poured again, and I just sprawled out on the quilt, made the mistake of shutting my orbs. I thought all I'd ingested this evening would come up. She had already taken off her boots, sweater, was unzipping herself out of her dress, retailing how her worse half was a teacher in a Yorkshire school: J. Julian Luther. Peaches sat near me. I touched her leg as she was removing her nylons ... she had a hundred goose pimples on the skin. Our candle guttered ...

"It's late, Alan, I could just as well fall asleep, couldn't I?"

I assented as I passed out ...

When awakening early Sunday afternoon we didn't have much to say ... A headache was my excuse, I left. Riding the U-Bahn I discovered I was without a key to my apartment ... disembarking from the train I called Peaches from a phone booth. She screamed at me she had no time, must finish her painting, no key in Siemenstadt. I'd lost it somewhere in the East. Gaby answered the phone at Prinz-Handjery Strasse, was I happy... Howard there, I was allowed back into my cell.

When Feliks took me to the Anatomy Institute on Königin-Luise-Allee, to have a look ... going into the dressing room in the basement, putting on long white coats over our street clothes ... I didn't quite know what to expect. Feliks pushed me inside a large room, lit by fluorescent lighting ... Two of the aluminum-plated tables were empty: just slabs with drains in the middle, ridges on the edges ... students marched by us, they were holding surgical instruments, scalpels, saws, scissors, funnels, pans ... Pipes led from the drainage affairs to uncovered buckets lying under the table. Feliks and I followed a group of students, who gathered around a third table and a professor ... The professor was talking in a low voice.

"Here you see exposed a full array of ... let's see ..." He was cutting, I was behind two rows of medical students, trying to get closer ... it was easy, the others didn't seem so anxious to be close up ... "The organs are clear to all of you, huh? Here, the diaphragm, right lobe, left lobe, there! How wonderful!" He made a movement, below my horizon of vision, so I stood on tiptoe to see over the shoulder of a short-haired giantess. "Large intestine ... ooops! ... and here is the stomach! Ah!"

Feliks elbowed me in the ribs, pushing me forward to the first row, and whispered grimly, "isn't it something?"

Lying on the table only a few inches away was the gray corpse of a guy about sixty-five ... whose chest was being cut away by the professor ... I glanced into the surgeon's round, black eyeglasses, he didn't look up but sawed, strenuous for him to pull the ribs out of the breastbone ... another incision was made, the wound gaped wider. How well he wielded the saw ... laying four severed ribs in an aluminum pan, which an assistant held out, a person who had since the beginning been standing next to the prof grinning hungrily ... I inhaled the odor of disinfectant whose penetrating, sour stink was an olfactory adjunct to what I was witnessing. I tried to stop a sneeze, inhaling with difficulty. It was impossible.

"The cone-shaped, red-brown object you are now seeing," the professor held up an organ in his hand ... fingers sheathed in a surgical glove ... then pitched it into a bucket at his feet, it hitting there with a wet, sucking sound like someone smacking his lips ... Mengele reached for more goodies ... "What occupies the upper right-hand portion of the abdominal cavity?" he queried, lifting his eyes. He meant what he'd just gotten rid of ...

Silence.

“Immediately below the diaphragm, to which its upper side was attached! What was it? Its base was I contact with the stomach, right kidney, intestines ... tucked in ... Future surgeons? Idiots! Never trust you with a live patient ... Second chance, look here!” Pointing to a depression on the underside of the cavity he’d made: something purple. “So ... take a guess?” No voice was raised. “Gall bladder!” he shrieked finally...

I jumped when Feliks put his hand on my shoulder.

The breastbone had been divided ... the surgeon dug into wads of muscles, carefully tearing them away from one another ... for the future of science the body of an old man was being made into a bucket of specimens ...

We walked toward the next slab, where a crowd of more advanced students were working ... lying ready for dissection was a female ... she was not old, had black hair, her body had not yet been touched. From a pipe under the table, dripping into a bucket ... asphyxiating disinfectant wetness, drip drop, drip ... Corpses for science kept fresh in alcohol, water, and in a preparation known as formalin, which annihilated bacteria, Feliks explicated the how’s and why’s. as I turned around I bumped into an aluminum pot lying on a shelf behind me. The thing had a lid on it, which hadn’t been tightly fastened, and Feliks impulsively lifted it.

“Alan ... don’t look.” I wasn’t tempted to take a peek into the receptacle. Feliks put on the lid and said, pokerfaced: “Just a head.”

“What?”

“You know, it all makes me sick.” He pushed me toward the metal doors, leading outside.

As we took off our white coats in the dressing room I asked him why he had taken me here.

“It’s part of my studies ... to become a doctor ... I have to go through it. Last week another student fainted while we were dissecting ... imagine people die, and that’s what happens to them ...”

“It’s what you have to do to get to be a physician ... would you rather have them dissect live people?” I asked, using the voice of reason as we went along the corridor. Laughter and calls of, “Bravo!” came from the dissecting room ... a cloud of formaldehyde walked along with us.

“I’m going to Rumania, you know?” Feliks said ... indifferently, as if Rumania was where you vacationed, like Florida in winter time ... for millions. It was on the parking lot in front of the Institute. I was rooted to the spot and pulled him by the arm.

“Rumania?”

“To continue my studies ...”

“Rumania!”

"I have a chance there ... to do my musical studies too. Where they can't supervise what I'm doing," Feliks reasoned. He was angry, his fingers curled, grasping out rapidly as he explained how his old man and old lady did nothing but bitch at him about his extravagance of renting a rickety upright piano ... a measly twenty marks a month from an acquaintance, a Russian pianist, who'd encouraged Feliks' musical ambitions ... Why wasn't he studying to be and m.d., they groused ... His parents worried he wouldn't be able to feed himself later ... they had to be taken seriously as long as they gave him an allowance. He had talent! Several people had remarked on it, not only me ... Yuri had even confirmed it ... and Yuri remained M and Pa's uncomplicated ideal of a doctor-to-be, with the same background as they, an emigrant from Russia: a living accusation for Feliks. The Mayer family knew what they wanted ... Now Rumania.

"Feliks! A couple weeks ago you made a fuss about going to East Berlin! You idiot! East Germany is a paradise compared to Rumania!"

He preferred to reply and played with the antenna of the Mercedes we stood next to.

"When are you supposed to go?" I asked, resigned.

"Uh, my parents want me to be finished as quickly as possible with my degree, the Rumanian medical schools can speed up the preliminary exams ... don't ask ... please ..." He sighed. "In two days the winter semester starts."

"Two days! Jesus ... Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I just got accepted there ..."

We were driving, in Feliks' manner, on the wrong side of the road ... down Königin-Luise-Allee, turned left to Clay Allee ... always happily zigzagging along, for in Feliks' opinion it sufficed to touch the steering wheel only in extreme emergencies ... he needed his hands to convince me of his stroke of genius: how he would placate Mr. and Mrs. Mayer by becoming a doctor overnight.

I answered: But Rumania? In Rumania?

We somehow arrived at Prinz-Handjery Strasse.

Gave Feliks a copy of the "Great Maggid" ... had never it read myself, it was a fine, old edition ... we sat in my room.

"Be careful ...," I warned him. "Ceaucescu is a cannibal."

"The liver is a large organ with numerous functions. It absorbs oxygen and nutrients from the blood ..." He recited from memory. "Alan, I've got to go home and pack ..." Seemed to be thinking ... lifted the book like he was feeling its weight. "My parents even allowed me to take the Lada with me ... to school. In Rumania."

"Write me ... okay?"

“The liver also produces bile, which removes waste products ... and helps process fat in the small intestine ...’ They have a good orchestra in Bucharest ... Here’s where I’ll be.” Feliks wrote his new address on a piece of paper, threw it on my desk.

“Cluj-Napoca. Never heard of it.”

“Never did I before yesterday,” he winked as he hit my forehead lightly with the book I’d given him ... “Hey, enough! I’ll drop you a line when I get there ...”

We parted by hugging each other.

Herr Wrobel had had a full glass of bourbon before I had arrived ... and had a bad heart he didn't take care of ... Allie Wrobel was worried about it. His blood pressure had gone way too high yesterday ... he innocently claimed it had come from trouble at work ... at Christmas time. He was not a hard drinker but he would occasionally take a drop or two ... whatever was available downstairs, the Laundry basement. Old Frau Sauermann, the Sorting Department supervisor, always had a bottle stashed away in a portable refrigerator Wrobel had drunk a glass or two with Sauermann ... a total alcoholic, with flushed cheeks and a ruined liver ... Wrobel would never fire her, she was the one who gave him what he sometimes needed in the Laundry. When Wrobel had taken his nip he did the thing he should've known was a giveaway: he chewed lifesavers ...

We'd lost a Laundry manager ... Mr. Charlie Brown had been promoted up to Grand Inspector of Army Laundry Facilities in Europe ... had had to move to Kaiserslautern to accomplish his tasks ... Siegel had given Brown a week's notice to clear out his desk, the usual ... Brown had broken too many uniform buttons ...

A new one came: sixty-two years old, a religious-minded, white-haired creep, from North Carolina, arriving from the States ... Mr. Rudolph McDuffie was a pious man, Southern Baptist bent on converting us ... did it by reading the Bible aloud whenever we came into his office ... it always lay open on his desk. The old boy had not taken too kindly to Herr Wrobel's mint breath ... queried whether I smelled something funny on Baldur Wrobel's breath ... no, I had never ... who wanted to get involved ... I'd been taught my job by the Wrobels, I worked too closely with them ... ignoring the others in the office. Anyway McDuffie lasted two months, then a job was offered him back home. Siegel, who didn't think much of religious maniacs of Christian Persuasion, let him go ... no Laundry manager ... Herr Wrobel was Acting Manager.

Didn't pay to adjust to new bosses, Wrobel advised. "Don't get too friendly with anyone, especially your superiors ... Distance! Distance! Be aloof! You might easily end as an enemy." I sat on the couch in their living room, and he had given me a shoebox of photographs ... some stemmed from the war. Others from the late forties and fifties, when he was Laundry Superintendent in Darmstadt ...

Frau Wrobel came from the kitchen to gripe in her hessian accent about how late Nils was ... about her boy ... her only child would be coming tonight for Christmas dinner. Everything in the three-room apartment reeked of cooking ... in the oven was a big fat goose roasting ... cookies and

small cakes had been baked, red cabbage, green beans, vegetables had been heaped on plates ... soup was bubbling.

“Nils is bringing Julia, Baldur, behave Yourself,” Frau Wrobel admonished her husband ... she had on a white apron, was holding a sieve. She turned to me: “She lives in a villa in Zehlendorf!” Nils’ fiancée ... her father was vice-president of an electronic parts company ... I knew Nils, like Feliks, was studying to be a doctor... He and his dad didn’t get along ... Almuth Wrobel had confided in me how embarrasses Nils had been by the subservience of his father. When they had met with Julia’s parents ... they had been chauffeured around in Mister Big’s Jaguar ... which had had a portable telephone in it. She had retailed how in Nils’ youth Baldur had forced his son to put on boxing gloves, to spar with him. Had given the kid a black eye! Now Nils was twenty-three. When he wasn’t cramming to pass his exams he showed up at peace demonstrations, carrying signs ... “Go home, Carter! Amis out of Germany! Capitalism equals Imperialism equals War ...”

Herr Wrobel had poured himself and me a glass of bourbon. Id dint like the stuff. He stared ruminatively at one photo taken outside a Russian village, it showed a tank, and drank ...

“Baldur, stop talking about the war...”

“Did I say a word?” He wiped his mouth ... “Alan, my boy! I attended the best gymnasium ... graduated with honors ... then came the war ... if it hadn’t ... Oh! Drink up, Alan!” He patted my shoulder. “I was raised strictly, my mother believed in discipline. My father, dead by the time I was born ... we needed money for clothes, books. Frau Lieben, our neighbor, had had a son who had dies she paid for my education ... otherwise I would’ve been ashamed to have shown up in school without the proper things ... Frau Lieben, an elderly Jewess. Did I say how Goebbels had visited me at the hospital?”

“Baldur!”

He grinned, standing up ... Wrobel had always limped slightly, now he really dragged his leg ...stumbling across the room, back and forth ... raising a hand, halfway, in a Nazi salute ... “He came to the military hospital where I was being treated. I shook his hand!” He joked with his fellow patients, after the Propaganda Minister had left, he’d never wash his hands again. Baldur had been a sergeant. “Our general was queer, you know. Swabian nobleman wearing a monocle named Hasso von Stickratz, during hot summer months he would walk around behind the lines nude, only riding boots and a whip! And a monocle!” He guffawed. “I’m not making it up ... von Stickratz and a boyfriend named Claus ... acted like he was his orderly ... I got shot in the ass there ... But atrocities?” He waved his hand, negatively ... “This ... this field, it was in southern Russia: we saw a scarecrow, what we thought was one ... and got nearer, it was a German soldier ... impaled

on a stake ...a Russians! Had left him there for us to see, the only atrocity I saw.” He poured himself a glass and was quicker than his wife, who put out her hand to take it away ... he pressed it against his breast. “Then in forty-five we tried hard to get through ... to American lines ... West! We got to Hesse ... Knowing English saved me ... had learned it in the gymnasium. We were taken prisoner by the Americans .. I acted as an interpreter in our camp ... weighed ninety-six pounds in 1946, when I was released ... somebody had saved me, as my blessed mother used to say. There was one American lieutenant, an interrogator who had come from Europe originally, who always slipped me extra rations ... I survived that way.” Wrobel gulped down the contents of his glass, drinking as fast as I had seen him eat ...

Earlier that week while walking through the plant behind Wrobel ... he hadn't known I was there ... I'd witnessed a Turkish washman shaking his fist furiously in Wrobel's face, calling out, in bad German, “You! Slave driver! Fascist!” The superintendent had looked the man up and down ... what an arrogant glance ... and had walked on. Didn't let himself get riled by underlings ... Just three days before he had fired the washman's colleague, having brought the letter of dismissal by military taxi to the guy's house personally ... I had had to go as a witness with him, so when he had handed over the fatal missive to the poor slob, whose wife and kids had been standing behind him, not allowing us to go farther than his door jamb, I got the full brunt of the looks from the family. Wrobel wrote on a copy of the letter, “Delivery on ...”, and my name also went down below his as witness to its delivery...

Frau Wrobel rose, speeding into the kitchen, returned wheeling a tray in front of her ... there were plates, silverware, napkins, salt, pepper shakers on it ... the husband spread a white cloth over the dining table.

I'd brought them presents: flowers for her, a record for him of Russian songs. I knew he would like them. Wrobel's father had been an East Prussian lumber merchant who had traveled extensively in Russia ... he had spent years there himself, anyway, those had been burned into his memory. We put on the record, waiting for Nils and Julia... The songs and voices ... melancholy ... Wrobel's eyes softened ... “We had to take pills to keep us awake ... days at a time ... driving over the land, an endless expanse ... one night we could go no farther, were exhausted ... so we stopped in a village, asking for a place to sleep. Never any young men around, only children, women, the elderly. Well I chose a house, went inside, made myself understood, and an old woman brought me to the room where a bed was, with a feather mattress, I slept for hours, between the members of the family ... heh heh ... afterwards I thought, ‘They could've slit my throat while I

slept!” He sighed, wiped his eyes. “Why didn’t you Americans arm us to fight against them instead of putting us in POW camps?”

Julia turned out to be a precious and petite little lady wearing white lace gloves, wrapped in a navy blue cap ... noble, next to the stocky Nils with his dull brown hair ... We shook hands all around ...

“We can eat!” announced Baldur. The newcomers demurred, they had an appointment with Julia’s parents ...

“Didn’t I tell you, Mother?” Nils asked, looking contemptuously at his father... “We’ll only have a drink, then we have to leave ...”

They stayed a half-hour ... Almuth and Baldur Wrobel and I ate silently, quickly. After the meal Wrobel drank more bourbon ... sang along with the record, he needed no other amusement, while Frau Wrobel and I got to talking about things ... I lost track of what she was telling me about Nils’ rudeness, or was it about Odenwald ... or how she used to make scrambled eggs for her brat. It faded ... I slept on the couch ... she was still blabbing. Sometimes or other she shook awake me and led me into Nils’ former bedroom ... boy’s room ... I rolled up into a ball on a far too tiny bed and was out instantly.

I was woken .. the percussion concert of silverware and pots being sudsed up, scoured, rinsed ... clanging, banging. My body felt numb.

“My husband overslept ...”, Frau Wrobel waved her wet hands toward their bedroom ... but there he came now ... looking like he had a pitiless headache, didn’t forget to shake my hand ... in his pajamas. The aroma of very black, German coffee filled the air, a boys’ choir was warbling out of an old-fashioned radio...

How clever I was! I’d procured a family ... for Christmas...

“Dear Alan, I have written you repeatedly, all to no avail. I cannot compel you to write me. Two months since you last sent me a letter. Am not going to annoy you with any further correspondence. Am sure it’s what you want, to stop writing me! Which is entirely up to you. But why have you taken this attitude toward me? Haven’t the faintest idea. And you know I am very concerned about you. You’re my favorite grandson, you’ve always been. So don’t worry about my annoying you, I won’t anymore. If this is my lot in life there’s nothing I can do about it! I have only two grandchildren: Ruthie, who never writes me, and my favorite grandson Alan, who has disowned his grandmother. Still remember your smiling face when you were a boy with a missing tooth, staying overnight with me. Regret our relationship has to end as it has. Your letters had been arriving, one a week, suddenly they stopped, and my world collapsed. Think kindly of me, I only tried to help. Won’t plead with you to send me a letter.

“How long have you been in Germany? Seems like twenty years. I am a senior citizen, now you’ve disowned me in my old age. Haven’t been feeling up to par, your silence is not helping.

“If this is the cause of your silence I want to apologize for trying to force my ideas about Germany on you. Won’t happen again! Why you stopped writing me I do not know. Explain, please. Are you accusing me of something? What, I have no idea of! Try to overlook my sharp words, if I have been stupid. I must be in my dotage, keep thinking about you, want the best, hope you’ll be home soon, where you belong.

“Honey, even if you’re far, far away I think of you constantly. You should work hard for what you want, what is it you want anyway? Do you eat enough? Lacking money? You have to eat, Alan. You need sustenance to do achieve you want.

“Have a book I have been trying to send you. Should interest you, it’s about Germans.

“I’ll try to mail the letter and book tomorrow. Have no stamps.

“All my love to my favorite grandson. Gram.

“P.S. According to your letters you do not do much of anything. Was that worth leaving the U.S.A. for? Cannot understand it, wish I could. Must mind my own business, which I will. Hope you find what you are looking for, wish you’d leave that Nazi-country! Can there be happiness in a place that is ‘way down’, which is cruel. They are sill Huns. A land, not for my grandson.

“P.P.S. Here is a small check, fifteen dollars, enjoy it.

“The book I’m mailing is called ODESSA (not the city). Interesting reading about your good German ... Must send it, I’ll do it tomorrow...”

I received a second missive a short time later ... after I had sent her a conciliatory epistle ... some words had been carefully written in capital letters, no the normal slovenly grandmotherly scrawl I knew ... The letters looked shaky and leaned the wrong way ... like she hadn’t been able to get the ballpoint pen to press onto the paper properly ...

“ALAN, DEAR, thank you for your lovely letter. Honey, you are so far away.

“Was not QUARREILING with you, am sorry you had that opinion! I’m happy just to be, honey, am not looking for grief, have had enough GRIEF in my life. Do not go around looking for enemies, who wants them? The entire planet is in chaos, everyone hates everyone. The world is a mess, I would like to know why.

“Under separate cover I am sending you a book called ‘THE ODESSA FILE’. Will interest you, too, I am sure. Am going downtown on Monday to the post office to get it in the mail.

“HAVE BEEN INVITED TO LIVE IN LOS ANGELES WITH MY COUSIN. BUT I DON’T LIKE LOS ANGELES; BESIDES I HAD AN ACCIDENT.”

I was wondering whether Gram was only repeating herself, as usual ... maybe it was more serious.

“HAD TO HAVE MY FOREHEAD STITCHED AND AM A MESS. The weather had been terrible, icy streets, gale winds were murder, dear, they knocked me off my feet, I fell against the curb in front of my building, was rushed to the hospital. They stitched my eyebrow, stitches still in, not healed, do not have much stamina, not anymore. Am sort of frail. ANYWAY ENOUGH ABOUT ME.

“Just talked with Mother. She sends her love, misses you, would like you to come home, sounded low, told me why. Her words: ‘Miss Alan. Love him, want him to come home’. I know you love your parents, be the good son you are and come home, NONE OF US KNOW HOW LONG WE HAVE ON THIS EARTH. Let Millie stay there. She is a Kraut.”

Millie Gribney was as American as they came, but Gram maintained otherwise, moreover I had never told her or my parents about what had occurred between us ... I’d been too ashamed.

“Why struggle there? For what? Quit looking for whatever you’re looking for, you may find it here.”

The last dozen words had been underlined, twice, in red.

“Your mother is not a well woman, pining for you doesn’t make her healthier. You work like a slave, so slave here!

“HONEY, AM NOT GETTING YOUNGER, WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU. ONE NEVER KNOWS. HOW MUCH MONEY DO YOU NEED TO GET BACK? ANSWER IMMEDIATELY. LET ME KNOW.

“What you wrote about the number of Jews in Germany is sad, but I’m not interested. I’m a Jew. The Germans massacred the Jewish people, don’t write me about them. You are a Jew, don’t forget it . at one time I thought you wanted to do something sensible, but what you do in a Nazi-country is not sensible! You have a right to do what you want, okay, none of my business.

“NOT NECESSARY TO RETURN THE BOOK. WOULD LOVE YOU SEE YOU BEFORE I AM CALLED AWAY. LOVE, GRAM.

“P.S. What is it with the incessant questions about Russia, Alan? Russia, Shmussia, about Russia I could tell you stories, they would make your hair stand on end! To me you will always be connected with the memory of my mother and father, who were the good people after whom you were named. You never knew Pa and Ma. Want you to wear my father’s ring with pride.

“Crazy questions you’re asking me! Why you’re interested I’ll never know! Will try to answer DESPITE HOW YOU RAISED SUCH A HUE AND CRY ABOUT MY NOT ANSWERING IN YOUR LETTER. They’re hard to answer, honey. Ma and Pa spoke very little about Europe, what they did say was in Russian, which I did not understand well. I came here as a girl. As for my parents, your great-grandparents: they did what they could to bring everyone here. AND DID BRING EVERYONE TO THE U.S.A. CAN’T REMEMBER MORE.”

I had merely asked whether she had any recollection of still having relations in Odessa ... maybe a cousin. But I couldn’t win! If my grandmother spoke of her parents, stirred by memories ... by her own volition ... she always blabbed generously ... life had begun for her in the States ... yet when I requested reminiscences she clammed up ... as if I were trying to get out secrets of immigrants, as soon as she might mention a word about Russia, wham! I’d have her in the clink , to be deported to Siberia. Europe a dark, painful secret ...

A newspaper article about literary agents in America had been clipped to her letter ... Gram loved the notion I wanted to become a writer ...

“Writing is a gift of God. I am not a writer. I tried it once. I can write a sweet letter and can write a bitchy letter. But I have learned to control ma emotions, only gets me in trouble, makes me unhappy. SO WHO NEEDS IT? Many years ago I tried to write a book, I typed for hours,

nothing came of it. So I went back to my typewriter and said to myself, ‘Well, a writer you will never be so you’d better be a good secretary’. I was a good secretary, the best, commanded a big salary, handled a great many people, FOUND A GREAT MANY THIEVES.”

She had worked in the fifties and sixties for a Chicago real estate agency.

“A good secretary is sometimes not so good either, I’ll tell you why. I managed the office, we had thirty girls, steno typists, clerks. It’s enough a rough job to handle a bunch of females. At one time I felt like a policeman. I worked for a man who built homes. I never handled cash, always the girls in the office. I did secretarial work for the Big Boss, it was a tough job. One day the bookkeeper, who takes the cash and deposits it, was home ill. That day a man came in, made a payment on a home he wanted to buy. He had to pay a certain amount before he could get the home. Homes then were very expensive. This man came I and handed me cash. I tried to find the cards on which entries were made as to which home he was paying on, how much, and so on. I looked everywhere for the card. No card. This bookkeeper was away for two weeks, and everyday some man came in to make a payment on a house. No cards. No nothing! I’m looking everywhere for a card, for a deposit slip, for something that would have a name or address of the new home on it he so desperately wanted, no card, no home, no nothing.

“This man handed me cash. Ma boss wondered what I was doing. I am still hunting for the cards, the names, the houses. Nothing. All my boss said, ‘Bess, she is a gonif. You won’t find a thing, get rid of her.’ I couldn’t believe this girl would do it. My boss said, ‘The cash, give the customer a receipt, and when the thief gets back, fire her’ just like that.

“ WELL, ALAN, I WENT THROUGH THE ENTIRE FILE. THE DEPOSIT SLIPS, BECAUSE I TOLD THE GIRL WHEN THEY MAKE A DEPOSIT TO THE BANK TO MAKE DEPOSIT SLIPS IN DUPLICATE. WITH THE CUSTOMER’S NAME. COULDN’T FIND DEPOSIT SLIPS, COULD FIND NOTHING. Before she got back my boss said he was going to have her jailed. It was sad. Here was a woman who went to a plastic surgeon to make herself beautiful with a new nose. But before she had this nose job she’d divorced her husband, now all she had were her son and daughter, both very young, and she was getting her nose job to get a new husband.” In tiny capital letters, above the last sentence, Gram had penned in: “BY THE WAY SHE FOUND A MAN BUT SHE WAS JILTED!

“THE boss had lent her five hundred dollars for the nose job! The nose job turned out very good, now she wanted a new husband to go with her new nose. She was getting two hundred dollars a week. So each week she would pay twenty-five dollars toward the five hundred dollars she had borrowed. She made three payments, then she asked me not to take any more from her

paycheck, because her expenses were so high. So she owed four hundred twenty-five dollars. When my boss learned she was not making payments at all he said, 'Bess, get rid of her, she is a thief.'

"I said to him, 'Why do you accuse her of stealing?'

"His answer, 'Bess, she is a thief. But do it your way.' SO I DID.

"when she got back to the office I told her about all these men who came in to make payments on their homes. I said, 'There are no cards, no addresses of any homes, nor do I see money listed on any deposit slips.'

"She said, 'Are you calling me a thief?'

I said, 'No, just show me records, show me an address, show me where the money was deposited.'

"In the meantime my boss was fit to be tied. He called her into his office, sat her down and said, 'You are a thief. I could put you in jail but I want you out of this office. I've lost a lot more than four hundred twenty-five dollars in my life.'"

I assumed she had wanted to tell me a tale ... so I would learn something ... invisible connections, which made no sense ... what had come out of her life, clear and unique but not clever ... I should write it down. Felt helpless and angry and I laughed. These idiotic stories, which began nowhere and ended nowhere, which were none ... just like when she had told me tales, chain-smoking, while I had been with her ... I wanted to go home.

Getting the number of the Asylum for Homeless Men ... the one on Teltow Canal ... was not easy. Who knows how to use the Berlin white and yellow pages? The listings went by some impossible principle known only to post office employees ...

Howard helped ... he'd been in Berlin fifteen more years than I had ... experience made a difference, he found the right number. I dialed ... A male voice answered, he was the caretaker. "You don't think I live here! The boys don't have phone sin their rooms. Hey! There's a pay phone down the road, if they want too have a private conversation, otherwise they can speak here ... in my office. I sit in the front! In front!"

"May I speak to Mister Buchalter?" I queried.

"I'll go get him, sure ... sure!" he said ... "Russ! Russ!" he yelled without covering up the receiver ... shuffled away ... muffled tones ...

"I am M-m-mister Buchalter ... who is it?"

"I've been trying to get in touch with you ..."

"Who are you? How did you get this n-n-number?"

"Mister Buchalter, it's Alan ..."

"Don't know any Alan ... Answer m-m-me!" how did you get this number?"

"Mister Buchalter! Alan! From Jewish services! Remember! I work for Mr. Siegel ... at the Laundry .. S&S Division, am glad I could finally reach ..."

He smacked the phone twice with the palm of his hand ... it was an explosion in my ear ... "How did you g-g-get the number!"

"I wanted to tell you I've read about you ..."

"How did you get th-th-this t-t-telephone number?" His words were squeezed out with difficulty ... "D-d-did someone give y-y-you my number?"

"Mister Buchalter! It's Alan!"

But he cut me off by screaming ... "You're following me! Let me alone ..." I thought he was going to hang up yet didn't.

"Mister Buchalter, I read about you ... in a book..."

"I'm asking you f-f-for the last time: how d-d-did ..."

"A book, Mister Buchalter! I read about you in it!"

"I d-d-don't want a book ... There are surgical instruments being hoarded under m-m-my bed! Someone's waiting for me to go to sleep ... I'll be operated on! S-s-stop bothering me ..." He cleared his throat. I heard the caretaker's voice in the background complaining. Didn't know what to say, it was a far cry from those days when he'd asked me to get him Jiffy's peanut butter ...

"Mister Buchalter, I would like to meet with you ..."

He hung up.

I had first gone to his old apartment on Ehrenberg Strasse ... but his former neighbors had been more curious about who I was, unable to imagine Buchalter had had any friends, for he had never allowed anyone inside his place .. they retailed how they had had to truck out hundreds of pounds of garbage from the apartment after he had been evicted from it, for thirty-four years he had collected tin cans, old newspapers, anything ... the man who had once been on the staff of the American Military Government, also the reason why he had been allowed to live in this chic place: confiscated in 1945, he'd been district attorney ... The building had been returned to its original owners in the mid-seventies . they had wanted a token rent from the lawyer ... he had refused to pay it, had been taken to court .. six months ago he'd had a stroke, the neighbors said.

I had read about Russell Buchalter ... in a book printed in 1950 ... it told how he and eighteen jurists and administrators in the legal and Decartelization Branches of the Military Government had protested against the new policy of pampering Germany and had gotten canned for their efforts.

After speaking with him on the phone I saw clearly enough the way I would meet him would be by attending Jewish services .. I had not been there in months ...

I'd learned the lawyer was in good hands after I'd briefly spoken with Big Boss Siegel, who assured me, "If Russ doesn't come to services I worry, go looking for him ..." On Friday night Russell Buchalter could be discovered holed up in a small kitchen at the rear of the chapel, nose running badly ... spooning out chunks of vanilla ice cream from a two-gallon carton ... snot pouring out in two loops from both nostrils, on his full, white beard ... sniffing to gather it in, filling his mouth with cold dessert at the same time. His eyeglasses were thicker, his shoulders were uneven, yet he was still attired in the wide Levi's with the rope around the middle ... at seventy-five the after-effects of the stroke were totally evident ... stuttering, "Y-y-you called me ... y-y-you were on the phone! Y-y-you!" I reiterated what I had read about him ... He coughed, ice cream spurting from his lips, landing on the refrigerator door, I took a towel and wiped his mouth ...

"Mister Buchalter, you were a rebel!"

He threw the ice cream carton in the sink ... it was empty ... snatching his stocking cap from his pocket. “Rebels? Idiots! T-t-take it from m-m-me!” pushed me aside, pulling his hat ... which had a fat puffball at the top ... low on his forehead so it touched the top of his eyeglasses... “I was a f-f-fool...” He walked past me ... going out into the cold.

A month and a half later I took a walk to the end of Teltowerdamm, proceeding toward the canal ... just wandering ... by chance I found the homeless men’s asylum ... knocking on the door ... I knew the caretaker by the way he answered my summons ... “Get lost, buddy! No empty room! No job? No woman homeless? Go to the Welfare Office!”

“Excuse me ... Mister Buchalter .. he lives here...”

He looked at me suspiciously. “Well, from the cut of your clothes ...” I was wearing an old jacket, jeans ... “Hey, my apologies! Looked like one of our boys. Guess you’re another joker from the press ...”, he’d decided. Held up three fingers for me to look at. “Three hundred fat mark-o’s per interview!” let me inside. “I’ll tell you, partner, Buchalter was a strange one!” He was guiding me along a hallway, where ten stale odors wafted out of the sad rooms of the homeless men whose eyes stared as we passed. The overseer was giving me a blow-by-blow description of something ... what, I didn’t know! There was a dirty common bathroom with two shower stalls in it. It smelled worst. “Isn’t exactly the Hilton, huh? Here was his room.”

“Where?” I saw an old man, lying on a cot reading a comic book ... it reeked of gin. The room was barely large enough to hold him and his cot ...and a suitcase ... “Where is Mister Buchalter?”

The caretaker scratched his head. He groused about an interview he’d given to a big daily tabloid ... he’d only gotten a hundred marks for it ... “Cheap swine! Do I earn much? Look at these vermin!” He pointed down the hallway ... meaning his boys ... “It isn’t easy, with these bastards!” held out his hand, palm up. Didn’t know what to make of the gesture. “Aren’t you from the newspapers?” I shook my head. “On television they said he was rich, the authorities aren’t convinced they’ve found everything Buchalter had in Switzerland ... secret accounts galore! Living like a pauper” why’d that idiot do it, I ask? Resided in a trash pile! Loony!”

I’d had enough ... I went away, strolling a long time until Heer Strasse, through the cold, to the Jewish cemetery ... Found a fresh plot with no headstone ... only a tag had been attached to a stake at its foot ... “Dr. Russell Buchalter, born August 3, 1905, died ...” And the caretaker’s voice: “Buchalter hadn’t answered his door ... So I forced his latch ... he was on the floor ... Coroner said he’d already been dead for days ... I found him two weeks ago ... No family! No will! Everything goes to the government ... he was a millionaire!”

“Won’t go to a Kraut doctor! He’ll cut ... everything out ... can’t, can’t ...”, Ziggy blue eyes looked into mine. He had broken his ankle ... but was holding his side, too, lying on the basement floor. “Can’t breathe ... pain in my chest ...”, pleading ... “Don’t let me go away alone!”

Jesus, the only thing I’d been thinking of that Friday was the weekend ... I’d been feeling rotten the whole time, five days a week, the office was torture ... the people. I was the big office boss and wanted to run, hide .. my roomie didn’t know what this was like ... Howard sat in his room receiving students ... I had to be up every morning at five, hated my slaves’ faces ... was frightened of their questions, demands ... it was enough for me when they intimated they were feeling ill for me to flip out, angrily declaring ... betrayal! I was not healthy ... Howard didn’t know I drank in my room at night, terrible, sour Greek wine ... would get soused on an empty belly, bad ... the weekends were basically crap, too ... Feliks had left Berlin, Peaches Luther had returned to England ... everything crummy. I stole the black bread Howard had hoarded away on the kitchen shelf ... when he was gone. I had always been a serial mono-eater ... for a couple months I had been eating my “soup”, boiling lettuce leaves in olive oil, then adding tomato sauce ... what I liked, but Howard of all people got squeamish and bitched about the smell ... wrote threatening notes to me ... The soup was sometimes my only daily meal ... putting me to sleep ... was drunk anyway. Lately I ate bread, Howard’s bread ...

What a week it had been ... Herr Wrobel had first turned up Monday looking yellow ... so by Friday we had tried to convince the old soldier to see a doctor ... while in the basement, in the Sorting Section, my star deliveryman was on the floor ... screaming at me about being delivered into the hands of German physicians ...

As for me ... I had troubles ... couldn’t get a deep breath ... wheezed ... congested lungs, I was always pushing a spray inhalator in my mouth, spraying like a maniac, but it didn’t help ... permanent asthma.

Frau Wrobel had rushed into the office at a quarter to three that Friday... “Your Polack!” She knew I liked Ziggy, and those two were sworn enemies ... “What a dummkopf! He’s down in the cellar! You help him!”

“What’s he doing in the basement?” ... in fourteen minutes the bell would ring to go home.

“His leg’s broken! You’ll have to call an ambulance! Don’t know what else to do, he’s lying in Frau Sauermann’s section ... First my husband ... Now him! I’m sorry, Alan, I’ve got to go now.”

She gathered up her overcoat as I dialed ... there went the bell. She waved goodbye. "My husband's alone at home ..."

I rushed down the cellar stairs ... everyone was dashing out, the weekend beginning ... I saw the delivery truck standing before the low garage door ... where was he? Been loading up clothes ... items on hangers were lying in a chaotic pile on the floor. He was under the pile, grimace on his face ... I bent down next to him. "Was putting my garbage into the truck ... felt something funny ... pain ... in my back, in the arm ... then my chest ...", Ziggy was having trouble breathing, "it hurt so much, it was my last delivery today ... God! my ankle's screwed ..." I helped him up, he was heavy ... while attempting to stand up he collapsed, right into me ... kept assuring me he didn't want to be cut into sixty pieces ...

The ambulance ... sirens wailed! The attendants took hold of him as he screamed at them ... laid him on a stretcher. I got in with Ziggy, he cursed during the whole ride, we arrived at Oskar-Helene-Heim Hospital in ten minutes ...

They made us wait while ... Ziggy, lying flat, explained to the staff what had occurred ... murmuring to me, "They're going to skin me ..." I knew Ziggy was an FBI-protected government witness ... this was the secret reason for him being in Berlin ... they could protect him in a walled town, he'd been given a job by the authorities. Abdullah had heard about it from Jimmie, a naïve youngster who had been working with us last summer ... We'd condemned him to aid Ziggy in the delivery of clothes. Jimmie's dad was in one of the intelligence agencies with a dossier on Kluszcja ... he had seen his son in the front seat of the truck, next to the government witness. The father took Jimmie from the Laundry on the spot .. didn't want the boy to be exposed to danger. It seemed Ziggy Kluszcja had testified, in one of the big trials, against gangsters in the labor unions...

He had also served in Patton's tank corps ... 1945 ... liberating Buchenwald ... The Army had had trouble finding the camp's guards .. who had thrown away their uniforms ... but had still been in the area ... All the suspects were rounded up, interrogated by appointed officers. Ziggy had told me, every suspect had put his hand on his heart, exclaiming: "Not me ... Never, I swear to God and on my mother's grave I was only a cook for the inmates!" Each had then pointed at the other colleagues ... "they were all brutal ones! All Nazis! Not me." Ziggy had said he'd had not yet been repatriated ... he spoke fluent Polish, some Russian. He'd let them out at night from the barracks ... they'd been housed in barracks on the camp complex ... they went straight to Weimar to break shop windows, to plunder, and kicked the asses of Germans found on the streets ... Summer of 1945 Ziggy had been nineteen years old ... and still couldn't deal with Frau Wrobel without telling her, "I know a Nazi dame when I see one!"

Two nurses put Ziggy into some kind of wheelchair ... he had wanted to hobble into the next room to get his X-rays done, to go home ... never ceased cursing them. “Nazi cunt!” he screeched at a twenty-year-old nurse. “I know you!” He closed his eyes, hands crossed over the blanket they’d placed on top of him. Forehead soaked with perspiration. I tried to make him calmer, telling him they wanted to help him. When a physician came in, telling him in English he had been disturbing the patients with his loud-mouthed remarks, Ziggy broke down, croaked how his pains were getting worse ... they quickly rolled him away ...

I had seen Ziggy two months ago at an orthodox synagogue on Joachimstaler Strasse ... Been flabbergasted! ... “What’re you doing here?”

“Don’t worry! I’m a Catholic! What do you think? I’m a Pole, aren’t I? ... Came here for the herring, vodka, conversation,” he revealed ... “Just old friends ... people.” Gestured toward three men in the corner wearing yarmulkes, grinning at him ... “From Radom, come from my old hometown, from Poland!”

He was always up to something. In East Berlin there had been a time when he had crashed the Soviet Embassy ... on Unter den Linden, the bust of Lenin in front ...mumbling Detroit-tinged Russian, dressed in white shirt, coat, tie ... wanted to go in their canteen! Where they served him wine ... caviar, lox ... blintzes ... he’d eaten his fill, didn’t know if I should’ve swallowed this whopper ... lies ... vivid tales ...

I had once before been to the orthodox synagogue myself. After getting unclear reports about Mom ... Gram ... didn’t know what was going on in South Bend and Chicago ... it was in October ... on Yom Kippur you begged forgiveness of those you’d done wrong to ... had offended ... I just couldn’t do it in a U.S. Army chapel! Had to go to a real place! Me with a prayer book! Which I could not read, in Hebrew ... going inside as the men ... with prayer shawls draped over their heads, shoulders ... had been reciting kaddish ... praying for European dead ... I heard weeping very old voices, “Treblinka. Sobibor. Auschwitz ...” I was an American baby. Left soon.

Ziggy had been arguing with the doctors while he was being treated ... could hear his yells down the corridor ... The physician who had spoken English came back into the waiting room. “We’ll have to keep him”, he told me, “he has a multiple fracture of the right ankle, the right fibula is split in half, we will definitely have to operate ... immediately ... And he’ll need surgery on his heart. Is Mister Kluszja an employee of the United States Army?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Presumably insured ... Another problem ... about the heart ... it is very bad, if he doesn’t get immediate attention ... he won’t cooperate with me. Is Mister Kluszja married?”

“Did you tell him about his surgery?”

“IT is difficult to communicate ... he calls me nasty names ... That is not the problem. However ... he is beginning to lose consciousness but wants to be operated on in America. I’m afraid I’m in a quandary about what I should now do ... Is Mister Kluszcja married?”

I informed him he probably was and gave him Ziggy’s address in Rudow.

“Both operations ... please excuse me, I don’t wish to alarm anyone ... but the heart surgery must be performed forthwith! I’ll have to speak to his spouse ... he is losing time!” He strode away, quickly, debating with himself aloud.

I had a couple minutes to think about this morning ... it seemed to have happened a year ago.

Herr Wrobel had turned up for work yellower than ever ... all week he had been getting progressively more yellow, and this morning he resembled a banana ... “It’s nothing. Just a slight allergy ...”

When Frau Wrobel, overexcited from lack of sleep, heard her husband brushing off his bizarrely pigmented skin ... even the whites of his eyes were that color ... “It’s jaundice! From the war! You had a bad case of it in Russia! Tell Alan the truth! I’ve been up all night with him! Stubborn! Nils wasn’t home ... don’t know what to do. It’s stupid! Can’t reason with my husband. He must see a doctor.”

Unfortunately I knew no doctors outside of Dr. Prabhad El-Hakiim ...

It was not easy. Herr Wrobel refused on principle to see a physician ... whenever he had consulted anyone about recurrences of jaundice in the past he had had to undergo long hospital stays ... Had been in the hospital too many times in his life he explained. No! ignoring the Acting manager I phoned, as always, the man I called when I was in affliction, Maxie Siegel.

“Mister Siegel, is there a German doctor somebody might see ... on a walk-in basis...”

“Doctor Amadeus Jack Bunyan! My man in Roosevelt Barracks! What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s Herr Wrobel ... he’s turning yellow.”

“Let him see Bunyan then ... Amadeus is an old friend from me Lodge ...” Another Mason.

Baldur shook his head no ... “Mister Siegel, he’s being very stubborn!”

“Tell him it’s an order! I ... as Chief of the Division ... command Baldur Wrobel to see Bunyan!” I did what Siegel told me, while conveying orders Herr Wrobel looked at his shoes.

Amadeus Jack Bunyan was a German and a Colonel in the Labor Service ... that group of men who guarded all compounds and installations, a reserve force to defend the city in an emergency, paramilitary training ... some East Europeans ... The guy on the phone had a funny accent but understood me well enough when I mentioned Siegel’s name ... Doctor Amadeus Jack Bunyan

would immediately see us. We drove ... Wrobel yellow and shriveled up, next to me, in the military taxi ... to Lichterfelde-West. Roosevelt Barracks ... high walls, red brick buildings ...

Colonel Bunyan's office was gigantic ... like a fairground, we had had to walk a mile to his desk ... a colossal eagle on a stone pedestal ... red-black-gold flag on the wall alongside the Stars and Stripes ... map of the German Reich with borders suspiciously resembling those of 1940. The physician wore oval glasses, was thin and tall, with slicked hair parted in the middle ... he wore a dress uniform, with gold buttons, none missing. An orderly brought us freshly boiled coffee on a tray, three cups, and we were politely urged to partake. We sat in silence ... Bunyan was not going to be the first to speak of illness. "Nice weather today," he remarked, sipping coffee ...

"It's my wife ...", Wrobel started ...

"Ah, you wife ..."

"Allie says I have to see doctor ... nothing wrong with me! You can see! Sorry to have taken up your time, sir ..." Herr Wrobel got up from his chair.

"Stop, Herr Wrobel! He's ill! He's all yellow." I owed it to Frau Wrobel ...

"Well ... hmm ... well," Bunyan stood, his svelte form emerged from behind his desk, he had on polished riding boots ... peeking into Baldur's eyes with a small pen light ... afterwards he washed his hands, wiping his fingers on a scented handkerchief. "You see, I am a specialist for tropical diseases ..." He suddenly clapped Baldur's shoulder with his open hand ... old comrades .. same age ... then picked up a thick reference book from his desk, fluttering through its pages ... "Hmm! Ah! A problem with the liver? Drinking, eh?"

"Never!" shouted Wrobel, indignantly.

Bunyan handed him a packet of pills ... "If you feel weak ... twice every four hours ... come back again on Monday."

Although he had, in a certain sense, been acquitted by Bunyan ... and thereby by Siegel himself ... of having been sick Herr Wrobel didn't come back to the office ... he really wasn't feeling very hot, he confided in me, he would drive home ...

I did finally get home that Friday ... after having spent the evening in Oskar-Helene-Heim ... Ziggy's wife had duly arrived, had okayed his heart surgery, a dangerous undertaking. I saw ... not to my great surprise ... Mrs. Kluszcja was a German. They had rolled the frightened Ziggy into the operating room at seven-thirty, where the chopping block had just become available ... Now it was ten, I hoped he had already gotten through it, hoped his surgeon wasn't drinker, a madman, an old geezer ... hoped they'd let him out alive ...

Howard's part of the cupboard was full of bread ... I was lucky ... Howard was at Elfriede's for the weekend. I was alone finally! The phone rang ...a hysterical woman. "I'll kill that quack! Want to kill him!"

"What happened, Frau Wrobel?"

"My husband was so sick! And Nils stopped by, took one look at Baldur ... forced him to go to the hospital. He's now in the emergency room ..."

"Bunyan wanted to see him again on Monday ..."

"Monday?" she broke in ... "They said he had acute jaundice! Another couple days ..." She stopped and was sobbing ...

"Another couple days, what?"

"In two days ... my husband would've been dead."

I had recently been ordered to rewrite the Laundry office “SOP”, its Standard Operating Procedure ... that was a bureaucratic requirement ... pages of descriptions of everyone’s working day, their responsibilities, it was tiring ... didn’t know where to start ... looked at old descriptions in the files ... fifty pages of illegible carbon copies ... useless stuff. No one could aid me ... in Frau Wrobel’s desk were job descriptions stemming from 1949! In two weeks my office would be scrutinized, and my head was on the block, the government bureaucrat-inquisitors would ask me questions, just as I had seen them do with Mickey Szalay ... they would sniffle through papers, and there had better be an office SOP in my files. My rescue ... there were boxes downstairs in Abdullah’s supply cavern ... old files ... I copied pages from them ... Herr Wrobel had done the same thing in his day, he still sweated through inspections, although it must’ve been his hundredth ... they wanted you to feel like you’d joined the Army.

In Abdullah’s opinion strange things happened ... I sat downstairs in the supply room ... it was quieter there ... away from Frau Wrobel’s incessant jabber. He retailed about a visit he had received last week from an American officer who’d confided: “I know Mengistu! You’re from Ethiopia! Would Mengistu talk to me if I called him long distance in Addis Ababa?”

“I’ll tell you why,” the American had revealed. “We sat next to each other in officer’s training school ... Mengistu and I! ... the late sixties ... I didn’t hear him say then he was a Communist!”

I found that funny, Abdullah got pissed off about it. He sat on a wooden stool, I at his decrepit desk ... and Les had dropped by, hanging around, sitting on the floor in his greasy overalls ... his dark hair was matted up, sticking sweatily to his forehead ... all day he’d been trying to repair a washing machine ... The supply room had windows on three sides ... wondrous things en masse had been stored around us in a labyrinth made of cabinets and banks of shelves ... everything from boxes of soap powder, hangers in the hundreds, laundry carts, spare parts, mops, cans of loose buttons ... who knew what else had been stocked away! There was a tall mound next to me of torn, smeared up, stamped up, crumbling at the edges, folded office paper, a Laundry Tower of Pisa of which I was making good use ... Army regulations prescribed preservation of records for twenty-five years. The history of the American occupation from the Laundry’s perspective!

I needed Abdullah ... his advice in matters of the office. We often sat together, talking about politics and religion... we weren’t sensitive, we insulted each other ... He was okay! He tried to explicate the situation in his homeland ... he was pro-colonial ... a reactionary ... his father had

spoken Italian. To divert him from complaining about Mengistu I told him about East Berlin. I had met Knut on the weekend. I could stand Knut, but when he suggested meeting another one of his countless friends I had always found some excuse not to go along ... He found it impossible to imagine anyone working ... getting up early in the morning ... having to write a report ... By the same token I couldn't stomach seeing how they lived so free, so easy, and why I lived how I lived ...

Abdullah had no patience with my complaints about the incomprehension of East Berlin writers, but Les had an opinion: "Be careful! Sealed lips, don't be a blabbermouth there with your big mouth ... you're an American. The Vietnamese didn't have to work either ... at least not when I was there."

I preferred to tell about my manifold worries. I was getting verbally bombarded by the chief of S&S Management Division ... she weighed three hundred pounds and called me daily ... Inge Dombkowski ... it was on her desk where reports and correspondence had to land ... Army writing. I lacked experience! Inge was nearing retirement and was fierce! ... specializing in locating mistakes. Les said it was old times' madness: they knew all rules ... used them to carve you into pieces ... how many spaces go between the signature block and last-numbered paragraph? The proper Army way to stamp, to type the correct date? I was Army- illiterate! I rewrote, rewrote! All for a malevolent woman. Les laughed ...

While Wrobel was in the hospital we had gotten a new manager, Earl Arthur Doolittle, former Air Force supply sergeant, scar across the forehead, going from the left eyebrow to his right temple, extending into the scalp. Doolittle was a glad-hander, at first ... all had unfortunately been tricked by his expectant smile, asking how you were doing, holding your arm tightly ... Wore shirts with disgusting geometrical designs, gazing upon them made you sick to your stomach ... and a pair of glasses with tinted lenses ... and an elegant beige camel's hair coat ... Doolittle had arrived from Thailand, where ten years he'd been Army Laundry manager ... The new guy was always showing me photographs ... pulling dozens from his file folder ... "Great looking girl! Sung Mi, thirteen when I met her ... " He rubbed his crotch. "Cute, huh?" Next photo ... "Nhu Dak, what a lay! Should've felt her." Described the tricks a little ... flipping through more ... the Thai girls didn't have much on. And he told me the story of his scar, confessing with a grin how he had once upon a time been a slave driver ... the laundry in Bangkok, a fellow who had pressed trousers for him for twenty cents an hour ... had waited for him after closing hours, when Earl had walked down the alley, in the dark, he'd clobbered him with a lead pipe ... I understood immediately when he'd scream and jump and begin rolling up the carpet in his office ... during the fits he big

and chewed up papers, ranting ... I avoided disturbing him then. Again! ... we had landed a winner.

After two weeks in the hospital and four at home Baldur Wrobel had returned to us the middle of March ... we still had the Bangkok pimp as manager, Baldur was scared shitless ... he'd already heard too much about Doolittle's tantrums, Allie had talked too much at his sickbed. Now he saw an Attila, the King of the Huns, instead of a Laundry Manager ... shivered when Doolittle was friendly to him, which was not often, since the Manager remained bestial to everyone the last four months of his regime ...

The inspection had passed ... I had survived ... Disciplining people, firing and hiring ... When I wished to get away from the office nightmare I chose to be with Abdullah downstairs .. hiding in the supply room.

One time I nested awhile with Les and Abdullah after lunch ... discussing monkeys ... Les had had a pet monkey, once upon a time ... in Saigon ... had taken it out with him on combat missions, it had gotten plugged. Les had been a medic, he couldn't save his friend ... it made him ruminative. Said he'd watched a Vietnam movie the previous night ... had made him angry ... "It lied, lied! Didn't show how it really was ..."

"Mister Lester, Mister Lester!" over the loudspeaker ... "Go to the Washing Section!" ... rang through the plant.

Robert Lester, hiding, was Wrobel's problem .. not mine. Wasn't Lester's supervisor ... Standing up he hit his fist on Abdullah's desk. "That college kid! That's who made it, who didn't know a thing about Nam!" He looked at me suspiciously ... "You went to college?"

"Not for long."

"You took it easy, protesting, huh? I'll tell you what it was, I found my buddy, he'd already been missing two days, I found him, he had no eyes, no balls anymore ..." he was angry at me! He described Gooch's husband Jerry who had a case of shattered psyche ... attributable to Nam, Les knew. Two years in combat. "Sergeant Gooch and his screaming fits! If Jerry drinks he goes berserk, runs into a corner to shiver ... hallucinating ... everyone who's been in Nam's screwed! Screwed!"

Now it was time for Abdullah's problem. His problem was called Ebermeyer, and Ebermeyer was in charge of the main SS warehouse on Goerzallee. Abdullah had to go there to pick up Laundry supplies ... soap, paper, all we needed to operate properly... "Killer" Ebermeyer, the warehouse supervisor, had been working with the Army as long as Wrobel had since 1946 ... from Wehrmacht and POW camp to a beginning as a common laborer ... working for the big

democratic brother. “Today Ebermeyer made me wait three extra hours ... half the day! Wrobel asked me where I was so long ... like I had been having a good time. Ebermeyer let four people go in front of me ... he hates me!”

I had come to the conclusion Siegel had a policy of hiring jerks like Ebermeyer because they were the supervisors he needed, who kept a disciplined, not to say terrorized house in order. Ebermeyer’s own underlings longed to see him dead ... Siegel had known and chosen only such pure creeps ... who were at the top in every section of the S&S Division, bullying everyone ... because Siegel wanted it that way ...

I had to travel that afternoon to S&S Division to deliver personally a suit to the Big Man himself ... Abdullah asked if he could come along. The whole ride there he did nothing but rant against Ebermeyer ... Ebermeyer and again Ebermeyer ... I had no advice to give my advisor.

Siegel was in his office. We didn’t want to stay, but he ordered us to sit down. The Big man had a free moment ... although he held his pen in his hand ... there were papers scattered on the desk ... we should be aware we had interrupted him! But he didn’t mind ... lit a cigar ... with his free hand opened a box of cigars ... gigantic things ... offering Abdullah one, who didn’t smoke. Me too.

“You’re a Moslem, aren’t you?”

Abdullah nodded.

“Like to know something ... What’s the Arabic word for kosher?”

The supply clerk spit out a couple syllables through his teeth ... darkly. He was a Moslem and good-natured but there were two things he hated: Ebermeyer and the Arabs ...

Siegel gave us a lecture ... bragging, smoking, informing allowing us to partake in his knowledge ... half-facts stemming from a popular religious book he might have been reading ...

“The Islamic religion is based on Judaism ... as you might know ... Everything stems from Judaism! Based on this fact the whole Western world hates us to this day! Right??”

Jabbered away ... like my grandmother and my father had always done ... some boring subject.

“And now they call their spirituality a true religion. Ha! Only wars ...”

I wondered what Siegel had against belligerency, he was an Army Colonel ...

“Massacres ... pogroms across Europe, clear to the Orient ... Jerusalem ... Crusades, have you read the history of the Papacy? Witnesses have confirmed it ... in writing! Jews don’t glorify violence! Look at Church art! Disgusting use of God ... I don’t really want to say they’re bloodthirsty pagans... But!” Siegel rattled off every crime in Church history. It wasn’t bad... “The crimes of Christians ... two thousand years ... for Christ! These Goyim know nothing but hate ... Think about it!”

The secretary timidly knocked on the door, bringing her boss more papers for his signature ... Abdullah remarked on the beauty of his pen, a shiny one with a solid gold tip ... Siegel was ecstatic. "My friends, you can have one!" He pulled two of the more expensive ones from his drawer. Abdullah thanked him. He threw one at me... I caught the fountain pen in mid-air.

What I liked least of all was firing people ... couldn't bring myself to fire the most flagrantly negligent of lazy Pickup Point clerks ... and I was always exhausted, never got enough sleep, Laundry hours were murder ... evil moods suddenly came upon me, not always a bad case from the managerial view, these were moments when it appeared I would finally get the point ... Siegel dealt with the world based on moods ... got obedience. While I just felt sorry for everyone, was barely be conscious of anything I was doing ... too tired ... Lousy supervisor, Siegel had said it more than once ... he grew impatient of complaints about my criminal laxity. I attempted to explain myself sometimes ... for instance: I had tried getting rid of Janice Thomas ... this neurotic, overweight, totally worthless Pickup Point clerk who had fainted when I told her she would have to go, and when her husband came to plead for her job I gave in. Wrobel liked to listen to Mr. Siegel curse me ... didn't trust Wrobel a hundred percent ... sometimes he picked up a phone extension to overhear Siegel's tirade ... Wrobel had given his own son a black eye ...

When Abdullah and I returned Wrobel asked us where we had been...

"Never go to a Prince unless you have been called," Abdullah quoted a proverb, in a friendly way.

"Why were you there so long?" Wrobel wanted to know, and his forehead wrinkled, angrily.

"Am I late? Siegel begged me ... I mean, positively ... what did he ask, Abdullah?" The supply clerk left it to me. I thought hard. "Max Siegel urged me ...I call him 'Max', you know? Tried to convince me to officiate at Friday services ..." I couldn't decipher Hebrew letters ... we showed him out black pens.

Baldur. His face reddening, wiggled his ears in embarrassment ... confused by us ...

Howard blamed Elfriede for interrupting his studies ... Elfriede's subversion ...

He had gone in every direction, then had left it lying ... "She wants to destroy my masculinity ... whatever I say she contradicts ... I know! Elfriede has probably told you a different story." He walked, this way, then that in the corridor... we had our jackets on, waiting for her to pick up us up I her little Simca. We were going to drive to the woods, to have a picnic. In Howard's hand was a plastic gab holding two heavy bottles of mineral water, slices of bread, and salami. The water was for his girlfriend, who was dieting. It didn't help Elfriede's mood to starve. Bread and salami for us. He swung the bag to and from while pacing.

Elfriede honked the horn.

I could see right away she was pissed off ... she sat in the front seat, glaring ... she ordered me to sit next to her ... waved her hand for Howard to sit in the back. Only a week ago she'd sworn to me she was breaking up with him. Affair was over! She had picked me up, taken me away ... she'd needed to confide it to Howard's roomie ... we had ridden to the outskirts of the city, to some lake. Had had a lot on her mind. "I can't hear it anymore: 'You remind me of my mother!' I've asked him a hundred times why he hung around with me, why, when he hates his mother so much? He blames me for everything." She was looking for words ... "A little man worrying about his own strength all the time!" Her eyes opened wide ... smiling, she mimes sarcastic astonishment ... "No, he knew better! Fucking young women! He outperforms himself!" I'd sighed volubly to show I sympathized ... Every week they wanted to break up. I'd be confronted with Howard coming home in a cab, fuming, three a.m.

I heard the water bottles hitting against each other as Howard obediently pushed himself into the rear ... Elfriede put the machine in gear, we started off. She didn't pay attention to the road, half the time she turned to him ... in the back ... making remarks about news from the Middle East. "Can't stand watching the same Israeli brutality!" Howard had no television himself. "Who do the Israelis think they are? Palestinians are people, now more than ever before! I'm sorry," she put the car into a lower gear as she turned the corner ... slowly. "Well, have they learned anything from history? No! Not anything ... why? Why haven't they learned from history?"

"Not again! When it comes to Israel you're an expert?" Howard seemed not alarmed, but I knew he would not be able to control himself ... I was hopeless as an umpire between these two

bickering lovers ... His voice was getting high, with rage ... “As a German! You’re an expert on Israeli politics, huh?”

“My parents were not Nazis, Howard!”

“What makes you think you have a right to ...”

“I see .. I should shut my mouth! Jews are the only once allowed to say anything about Israel! That’s what you’re telling me, isn’t it?”

“Elfriede!” Howard wanted to be patient ... did his best not to flip out ... to keep the peace intact ... but he knew he hadn’t succeeded yet! “Israelis are fighting for their lives! Jews are dying in the Middle East! You watch TV ... in your big apartment in Berlin! You’re the judge?”

“Jewish violence is the same as ... as ... Nazi violence was. They’ve learned nothing ... bullets and clubs! Why? Why, Howard? Howard! Answer me!”

“The Jews don’t want to be victims, there!”

“The Jews ... I mean, Israelis ... do whatever they want! The pro-Israel lobby had so much influence, your media! The Germans ... not allowed to utter a critical word about it!” She abruptly changed the subject. “Tell me honestly why you don’t want me to come with you to New York to visit your family?”

“You wouldn’t like them, Elfriede.”

“They wouldn’t like me, your German shiksa?” Things had gotten out of hand, and we had only driven two blocks ... “Howard, you’re ashamed of me! Violence is violence, today and in the past! Violence is violence ...”

“Stop the car!” Howard screamed ... reaching for the door latch over my shoulder, on my side ... there were no doors in the back ... I suppressed a desire to slap his hand away ... didn’t want to fall out suddenly if he succeeded ... his impulsiveness would get us killed. Elfriede was watching him, not the road ... was as dangerous as driving with Feliks. The car was still slowly moving, I made ready to grab the steering wheel should she start pounding him with her fists ... He succeeded in pushing down the door handle and in climbing over my back ... I had leaned forward and squished myself against the glove compartment. The car was in motion as he exited.

She laughed, put on the brakes, lit a cigarette ... blew smoke, staring at Howard. “Sanctimonious hypocrite!” she hissed. “Your lies make me sick! I’ll let you go away! Go ...” Her voice got pinched up ... perhaps she’d start to cry.

“Elfriede!” I have had it!” Howard put his face in her window, sputtering righteously, “Broads like you! You’re out to kill us!! Feminist Stalinist pro-Palestinian ...”

“Typical!” Elfriede snorted ... forgetting the tears, blowing smoke through her nostrils ... taking another long puff. “That’s all you know nowadays ...”

“It was better, huh, when we marched quietly into gas ...” Holding the plastic bag, aiming, heaving it on to the roof of an apartment house nearby. The bottles crashed .. hopefully no one was at home. “Everybody else in the world ... Go then, Elfriede! I have better things to do, to finish my Wittgenstein paper ... my professor is waiting! You dissipate me!”

“Wittgenstein!”

We had gotten as far as the corner of Teltowerdamm and Potsdamer Chaussee ... it was a mild summer day, Elfriede had rolled the window up, her eyes focused on her hands holding the steering wheel. I watched a retreating back. Howard had gone home.

Never caught a cold, bacteria, muck just gathered in my lungs, I had enough mucus to fill a small pond ... a dirty yellow one in my chest. To compensate for shortness of breath I inhaled faster ... which tired me out ... my airways getting narrower ... only tightening further ... nothing was there to free them, they cramped up more and more ... I sat up in bed ... at night leaning against the wall, using arm and back and stomach muscles ... to get air ... The problem was exhaling! My chest grew wider, more voluminous than it had been before. No medicine ... had thrown away the rest of the pumpkin-seeds pills, they were worthless.

I did not want to call in sick, a supervisor always had to turn up. We had had enough trouble with Herr Wrobel and his jaundice. The Laundry, like a giant sauna, produced steam ... which made me cough ... everywhere water crashed ... hissed, belched out. I strode through the main plant, trying to breathe, wishing I had gills.

I had had it! This had been my last visit to East Berlin ... I had gotten my paycheck, spent it on books ... and had gone to seek these famous dissidents in the Workers' and Farmers' Paradise ... I met Knut and Dodo at the abandoned, uncared for Weissensee Jewish Cemetery ... they'd sworn to me: I must see it ... I liked the old graves ... Samuel Fischer's had a big, fat brown spider hanging from it, making its inscription undecipherable, hanging on a strand of web ... "That reminds me," I say ... Opening my coat, pulling a library from under my belt, from pockets ... from under my armpits ... wherever I could hide a book ... I had become a criminal agent versus the Socialist State, for my friends! Had taken the complete works of three banned, decadent writers with me ... I wanted to do something good ... had been a pain in the ass to get across the border, however ... I had looked like a snowman ... had given the impression of being inordinately obese ... I was voluminous! I had worn a wide coat! The three writers whose works I carried ... had all three lived to be eighty or more, one to be a hundred! I had gathered up everything they'd published ... and I had it all! Every word! Under my coat! Taped to my chest ... was sweating like hell as I pressed my girth through the Friedrich Strasse border gate ... didn't make a sound and looked straight ahead ... that was a daring deed! I was bringing a bookshop along ... the poetry ... essays ... plays, comedies, tragedies ... and epic works galore ... I had whatever you wanted ... I appreciated my own ingenuity in getting this crap to them ... if they didn't ... didn't matter ... Why wouldn't they give me their precious manuscripts to smuggle back over the boundary ... to Freedom! I had always wanted to make these unknown dissidents famous dissidents ... my efforts, I personally would do it! They knew it: a nut case ... Dodo and Knut knew right away they were dealing with an American! Great idealist fool ... my father's son! Who wanted to help, it was a good cause! They were screwed. Naturally! The last total idiot! No one trusted me ...

"You should be more careful, Alan," Dodo warned. "They'll put you in jail someday if you keep up taking chances like you do ... We don't want all these things you're bringing!"

Knut was perusing the volumes ... twenty ... for one writer ... sixteen for the second ... twenty-five for the third titan who had lived to be a hundred years and nine months old. The bound works were lying in the dirt ... would need a wheelbarrow to take them away ... Knut was too frightened of the consequences ... I fantasized about my derring-do ... Too bad other East Germans had never known me! All would go to prison due to my good works ... yes, I was dangerous, and Dodo definitely didn't want this garbage I had brought ...

They didn't trust me ... I left the books in the graveyard, would they remain unclaimed? Or would a spark of Freedom be struck? ... That night, sleepy, sitting in the train I knew better: who needed freedom? Disappointed in my heroic act I dreamed ... I want the idealist I had made myself out to be, should emigrate. Go to East Berlin ... live there ... wouldn't have to go to the office ... every day at six-thirty ... would feel as good there as a pig rolling in shit...

I fell asleep on the train ride home ... The conductor had to wake me ...I thought I'd arrived in East Berlin.

“Dear Alan. Visited Gram yesterday. Her apartment building is something else. She regularly plays cards, is often to be found next door at Mrs. Miriam Adelman’s, a very nice woman who can barely communicate in English. I’m getting worried about my mother, however. So far her teeth are missing, her hearing aid is gone, clothing missing. She doesn’t notice anything, she barely hears me when I talk. Yesterday I came to her apartment, the first thing I did was kiss her. Strange, she stayed seated. I had carried in a potted plant, asked her to take a look at it, but she stayed rooted to her seat, wouldn’t get up.

“Come, take a look, Ma.’

“Can’t.’

“Why?’

“I’ve just had an operation.’

“What kind of operation are you talking about, you had no operation!”

“I did. It was inside of me. Somewhere inside, forget where, can’t get up today. I’ll get up tomorrow.’

“She is always talking about operations on the phone. Can you imagine our conversations? Me screaming, her not hearing me and talking about what she likes. My mother has had at least two dozen operations in a short period of time, including falls she says she’s always taking. Now she can’t walk! Everyone except Miriam next door is ‘meshugge’ and ‘full of shit’. My mother refers to her opposite neighbor, I think she is Italian, as a ‘goy’ and a ‘shiksa’. The woman thinks Gram is calling her ‘Esther’. She can’t hear well either so she doesn’t feel insulted.

“Gram is almost unconscious of time, doesn’t seem to know I live out of town. Really must think of her in a humorous way or else I am so sad for her. She will need, very soon, someone around her at all times, she is so fragile, her skin almost transparent face in repose looks like a death mask, yet when she opens her eyes, giving me the toothless Popeye grin she’s beautiful. This had occurred in the last three, four months. Her forgetfulness, living in a private world, seeming to enter into another dimension. Want to bring her back, won’t let her go. Gram asks about you, seems unaware now you’re in Germany. You’ll have to visit her when you come. She’s forgotten how old you are.

“I’d love to see you soon, Alan. Love, your mother.”

“Dear Alan. My mother is in the hospital, she’s had a stroke. It’s affected the right side. The stroke happened Friday morning. Miriam Adelman said Gram was having orange juice in her apartment, was talking when the glass dropped from her hand.

“They rushed her to the hospital. Some mix-up in calling me occurred. They reached me only hours later. Dad and I immediately drove to Chicago, breaking speed limits, racing through rush hour traffic on the Outer Drive, three hours, what a record! She was in Intensive Care. Grandma tried smiling, one-sided, only the left eye followed me. She was unable to speak. I did succeed in calming her, I hope.

“When I got there the next afternoon they had her hooked up to some machine. It frightened her terribly. They wanted to kick me out of the room while they continued treating her, but I yelled I would stay with her, she was frightened.

“ I stayed as she went through heart tests, and X-ray, an ordeal, remained there and was holding her, telling her not to be frightened.

“The heart, the doctor said, and her age was against her, the circulation in the hands wasn’t improving. Couldn’t hear what he was really saying.

“We returned to her room, they told me to leave so they could prepare her for other tests, so I had to go but waited outside, they wheeled her out. When she came back he was clean, breathing better but looking bewildered. Gram had become more calm. I left to take my shot.”

Since when did she use insulin? Damn it, she had never written me about it ...

“Saturday she had gotten worse, her breathing had become more labored. Gram fought everything. I had hoped I would have a calming effect and told her, by writing notes, what the doctor had wanted to do. Gram has had no food for over a week, only intravenous liquids. Right arm is better, she raises it, can grip slightly with the hand. The eye is not great but it’s moving. No speech, but I know what she’s saying from the sounds she makes. Her tongue doesn’t work like it should. Miriam Adelman came to see her, which reminds me, we’ll have to give notice. Her apartment. Gram cried at one point, I think she was ashamed to be like this. Remember, she’s a proud woman.”

I got a third letter ... this time didn’t open it immediately ... stared at it, horrid thing ... weighing it in my hand ... her epistle, my unopened envelope. “Help senior citizens,” was on its postmark.

“Dear Alan. She’s much better than last week. With God willing, I’ll get her to eat. Let’s remember Grandma is almost eighty years old, her weight is ninety-five pounds.

“A week later. Had Gram transferred here, she has a room in St. Joe County Hospital. Visiting hours are short, but I stay all day. Am writing this at her bedside. Being here has brought back memories of what happened to me.”

My mother had been hospitalized, two years ago, for treatment of diabetes ... I had never been informed about what had really transpired there when she had had some trouble with her foot. An infection on her toes ... My mother's Peruvian doctor had prescribed heat-lamp treatments for it. “Not to worry.” This “dumb Mexican schmuck”, as Gram had written about him in a letter ...

“Gram's stroke was minor, but it's left damage on the right side. She cannot speak, has gotten back more use of the right arm, right side of the mouth doesn't droop as much as it had. The right eye won't focus, a problem with swallowing. She still can't eat or drink. I come here daily to feed her, and she tries very hard, but liquids dribble out of the mouth. If she doesn't eat soon they will put a tube in her nose, down to her stomach. Must get her to eat and drink. Friday she had some dinner. Saturday, no luck. Sunday I got her to eat chicken broth, for lunch. I decided to taste it myself, it looked so bad. Had one spoonful. Alan, it had as much flavor as a five-day-old tea bag, which had already been used for the entire state of Georgia, in Russia! If a chicken ever dipped its foot inside the water to test it, it only did so for a second, then ran away.

“Gram is asleep, so is her roommate, it's quiet, I'm falling asleep too. Don't know what I'm writing anymore. Maybe I'll be able to finish a decent letter. I look forward so much to your coming, Alan, for New Year. Have you booked a flight already? Everything happens at once! You and Gram did have good times together. It is just as well you cannot see her now but remember her as she was.

“I love you, darling.

“I know everything turns out for the best.”

Things were not going well ... couldn't breathe. Laundry air choked me, Howard's apartment throttled me... My guts had filled with stale gas, bad how my diaphragm heaved, stuffed with carbon dioxide. And still drinking wine every night ... my evenings were gasped through, half-drunk. Might never book a ticket to America, simplest things were impossible to accomplish ... dry cough, straining, n early asphyxiating me ... when phlegm doesn't come up ... passage tightening more ... Wheezing ... becoming smaller ... more cramped ... more cramped.

Chuck Joe Manning, new manager, our fourth in sixteen months, New Mexican. He had come from fort Huachuca, gotten fresh off the plane ... had arrived with something on his head: a tall cowboy hat ... It had been a Monday morning, no one had expected to see him ... high-heeled, decorated boots with real spurs... When he strolled past the two rows of pressing machines the ladies grinned at him ... real ranchero ... dressed in a beaded, frayed cowboy shirt ... Chuckie-Boy was here ... finally had the Marlboro man ... There was not much chance for him to find a horse ... Siegel had promised us, if this cow puncher who was over six and a half feet tall didn't work out ... he would make Baldur the manager of the Laundry ... Siegel swore an oath! Had had enough of fly-by-nighters! To hell with Americans ...

I also had a new helot to train in the office for a job we had just created: Productions Clerk. This woman drove me to distraction ... I didn't know what to tell her to do ... Hanna wore her hair cemented into a perm, was wedded to a black Air Force supply sergeant ... Everyone who worked for the Laundry seemed to be married to a serviceman who was a supply sergeant. She made us tired ... not just me ... Wrobel took her in hand, it had been his idea to create a Production Clerk. He had wanted the new job, so a pendant could be created for Frau Wrobel ... outside of Almuth all other office helots were non-Germans, stars like Mrs. Gooch and Sandy Clark ... and Wrobel was trying to demonstrate the new working style by hiring "Prussians" Hanna was a Berliner ... had been born in Breslau. I could see the point. As much as we didn't need her ... Hanna made it her duty to be a pain in the ass ... the whole time ... kept asking me what her job was ... calling her husband to complain about us in the Laundry. The position she was filling made it mandatory she have a desk ... We found her a desk ... She was seated in a corner ... away from us, the one with nothing to do all day. Only lasted two long weeks. Hanna shouldn't have opened her mouth ... she could've read magazines eight hours for all I cared. Officially a Productions Clerk did have something to do. This person had to record production ... how many shirts, pants, sheets we had

done per week, comparing totals to standardized minimum or maximum figures ... Army standards were high! Inordinately high, how could a presser iron twenty-nine shirts in a half-hour ... a shirt a minute ... Was the office to be measured by how many scribbled papers we produced? ... Slaves were slaves ... terrifies of not reaching goal figures ... "Employee motivation." Once we had fired her ... or Wrobel had ... I had signed the paper as office manager ... she put in a complaint with the Army against us. Just because my two Southern belles had once whispered to each other: "She's a Kraut and a nigger lover ... that's enough ...", Hanna told the Equal Opportunity people we were racists! Not only both of them, Frau Wrobel too, Herr Wrobel, me ... Abdullah, all racists.

I had other things to think about beside this nut. I vowed this coming November I'd make good what I'd done wrong to my Gram and mother ... even my father ... sister. To get back home to Indiana. Sure, I hated the idea of having to fly ... hated change of any kind...

I had gone with Gram to see “Play Misty For Me” ... Chicago, 1971 ... We ended by having dinner together, sitting in a booth at Walgreen’s, she had told me about those days ... how Jews had slaved their lies away under the Tsar. Who had he been, she’d asked, a bastard, another gangster in the family of man ... she skipped around a little, describing what an adorable, dimpled child my mother had been .. inevitably came Nate Tzarkoff, the man she had married three times, who entered the picture with Luciano, Capone, Mussolini, what a no-goodnik! What was the world? A universe of hoodlums and anti-Semitic sons of bitches, and she puffed at one cigarette after another ... sipping coffee, not touching her dinner, stirring a spoon in her brown coffee, putting the fork occasionally into congealing mashed potatoes and peas, a mound of nutritional nothingness metamorphosed into something weirdly waxen, those were vegetables no one wanted ... Walgreen’s peas looked poisonous ...

“I last saw her alive two days ago, in the evening. The following day I had had to go to the eye doctor, he sent me to the hospital for ‘eye surgery’. Laser treatment is called eye surgery. As it was the first time I had had it done I had come home immediately afterwards, emotionally wiped out. I called the nursing home to find out how my mother was, instead of going there myself, couldn’t anymore, I said to tell her I would be there tomorrow. Would have to miss a day. The nurse wrote it down, so my mother would know I’d called.

“I thought being with her constantly would make her stay. Not go away. I had let go for a moment, she had been alone.”

She didn’t eat, preferring a nosh at home. Later, reading Mickey Spillane until four in the morning, books with lurid covers ... she stopped before in a delicatessen a block away, run by Koreans ... they made a living supplying the half-done pickles, herring, lox, tongues, chopped liver, rye bread to old Jews in a dying neighborhood. Gram’s refrigerator was empty of food, inside it there was a bottle of water. I’d never known her to cook ... She had been a working woman. Nights she would lie on the couch ... she read mysteries, collected her paperbacks in shopping bags, my mother had to take them away when she visited.

She and I went that night to our movie, afterwards she had been so damn talkative! Had wanted to gab about her parent’ lives ... telling me about Louis and Anna Beckett. I got the

razzmatazz for the eightieth time, was happy to listen, it meant a warm meal at Walgreen's ... she was her usual tactful self, whispering, volubly, remarks about a homosexual couple, a wildly made-up lady sitting near us ... stopping her was impossible.

My rotten apartment on Pratt Boulevard. I lived across the street from the Rogers Park Hotel, Gram's old domicile. The hotel I knew well. We'd visited it often when I had been a kid. The odor of its corridors ... dusty, smelling of old-fashioned perfume, cigars ... And there had been a toy shop across the street: in its windows there were models of Italian, German, French, English racing cars ... rows of tin soldiers, painted, in every color an kind of uniform, crafted, glittering miniatures from old wars ... there, next to the shop, I found a five-dollar bill on the sidewalk ... gave it to Gram. She told me I should go get a racing car, my mother didn't let me ... it was too much money for a six-year-old, the toys there were too expensive ... were toys for rich kids ...

I went to Gram's office on Devon Avenue hat day. Tyrrell's Real Estate Agency, got to sit on Grandma's chair, playing with thy typewriter, then an old man walked in, the most ancient personage I had ever seen ... wasn't much taller then me, I was six, seven years old ... hobbling on a cane, had a stooped back. It was my "Uncle Irving", Gram said I should shake his hand. He patted my head ... using some other, strange language to speak to my grandmother, couldn't understand my great-great Uncle Irving. He was Louis Beckett's brother. That had been in 1957, he had been ninety-eight.

"Alan, I can't write you more except to say Gram died. In four weeks she would've been seventy-nine. I'm so sorry I have to give you the news. I want to see you! Love, Mother."

“It’s been a long time since I’ve heard from him, Mr. Mayer ... he was supposed to write me, you know ... that’s the reason I’m calling, if you ...”

“Feliks is ... Feliks is ...”, the father’s whisper interrupted me ... a word I hadn’t understood, then another voice was on the line, the cultivated voice of Feliks’ mother: she was surprised to hear from me. The cool voice of his mother: “Feliks is dead. Feliks is dead, he died in a car accident. I’m sorry ... so sorry. Dead.”

I take a taxi to Kreuzberg, go to the family apartment ... I am sitting on the couch, in the living room is an enlarged color photograph of their son nailed on the wall. When I look to my left ... he’s grinning at me ... I don’t remember him grinning so much ... he was always so angry. I get up to look in his bedroom, I find his trunk ... it’s returned from the journey. Arrived again. Books are in it, clothes, sheet music. Feliks who had been blessed with luck. I dig in the trunk, with haste. “The Great Maggid”, a Bible, shirts folded so orderly. They had picked up his stuff from the dormitory room in Cluj. His passport is lying on the desk, I look in it and say: “Dumb, Feliks, dumb, dumb ... dumb Feliks, dumb Feliks.” ... Loud, can’t stop doing it, my own voice drones in my head as I return to the living room.

How did it happen? Mr. Mayer groans something in Yiddish ... one eye swollen ... shrunken ... thin, bent back ... eye pus-filled. “Geharget ...”, he whispers, inhaling sibilantly ... I glance again at the photo on the wall. “My only son ...” dumb Feliks.

“It was at night. He was driving the car.” Mrs. Mayer is impatient ... four months ... damn it, damn it ... his mother hadn’t thought to invite me to his burial ... he’s lying at the Jewish Cemetery on Heer Strasse. Stupid old cow! She had sent him to Rumania! To become a doctor ...

She looks at me ... I see it in her eyes: why couldn’t it have been this loser, not my son? The old man rubs his blood red, puffed eye over and over. “Leibel! The infection won’t go away if you continue like that!” She turns to me, smiling. “My husband’s eye problem came when our son died.”

How did it happen?

“My son was on the wrong side of the road, and it was a narrow road.” She wipes her lips dry ... “A truck was coming the other way ... Feliks had tried to pass a peasant’s cart.”

“It’s my fault,” the husband murmurs ... “We should’ve kept our boy here ...”

Rumania. Be careful, Feliks, Ceausescu is a cannibal.

“A truck hit Feliks head-on”, Mrs. Mayer interrupts the husband’s lament. “Two days later we got a telegram to pick up his body, the Rumanian police hadn’t at first been able to identify him ...”

“Driving our little Lada!” Mr. Mayer whispers. They had let him use the family car there, as a carrot, a reward, so he would study ... become a real doctor ... “The truck driver tried to brake, to brake! He couldn’t ...”, Mister Mayer shakes his head. “Couldn’t!”

“Our son died instantly ... his head ... his head was lying two meters away, with the roof ... you understand, they kept the remains for us to see. In an ice chest! The mother clears her throat ... runs a finger through her blonde hair, grasps a loose strand, pulling it over her eyebrow, across an eyelid. “We’re very unhappy...”

“Rumania...”, the father caws.

“You know my son ...” I know only too well how he drives ... when I meet him next time, tomorrow, I’ll tell him how dumb it is ... it’s dangerous ... The thought makes me glad, I confidently gaze at Feliks’ parents ... Mr. Mayer raises his hands.

“I’m going to talk to him about it ...”

I said goodbye ... running away, down the stairs ... five flights ... Dear Gram. I wrote you before about Feliks. He was driving on the wrong side of the road, he wanted to pass a peasant’s horse cart. In Rumania. He wants to become a doctor... and composer ... I’ll let him know how dumb he is ... miles from Zehlendorf making at home fast... Dear Gram. I have to tell you what Feliks did in Rumania ... A truck was coming toward him ...

“If Elfriede calls ...”, Howard says, friendly ... good mood! ... I can’t now. Close the door to my bedroom.

“Okay, okay, okay ...”, I wheeze and turn on my heels, run out, past Howard .. quickly, outside, through the park. What a clear, sunny blue winter sky ... but hurry, hurry ... hurry ... going past the leafless trees ... past the spiders, I count eight spiders. Run faster ... three in the afternoon, it’ll be dark there soon. The way ... A horse cart, the kind peasants still use in Rumania, see, Gram. Feliks wanted to pass him. Feliks Mayer, know him, don’t you, the car’s roof, see ...

Heer Strasse. Where the earth’s been dug up ... his name ... it’s winter , I’m overheated, I hack my guts out, coughing ... my ribs hurt. My god, I can’t breathe.

It’s winter ... I’m overheated, I hack my guts out, coughing ... my ribs hurt. Wheezing ... wheezing ... my God, I can hardly breathe ... now him ...

Standing in Zehlendorf Mitte. I don't know if I can make it home ... I have an acute attack of asthma, this is no joke, paroxysms of wheezing wring me out ... It had begun two days ago at the graveyard and due to my continuous walking since then it had worsened considerably. Of course. I'm choking ... no cough really, nothing but a long gasp, my ribs are sore, the diaphragm is bloated ... my lungs have shrunk, their capacity is nil ...

I lean on a fence. Every bronchiole shut up tight! My muscles strain ... From imprisoned carbon dioxide! I'm a puppet on a string! My respiration ... how long can it go on like this? Need a shot of theophylline ... fast. To get in air ... Stepping awkwardly, bending, hands on my knees: mouth wide open ... air ... throat sucks! Stumbling I trip, slipping all over the sidewalk ... falling against a lamp post ... to support myself, wrestling, fighting ... every muscle ... working, the chest, stomach, shoulders, legs, but it makes it worse. This is the end, isn't it: on the street ... asphyxiating ...

A shop employee in a green apron glances at me as he's sweeping the sidewalk in front of his store. I want to hold on to him... if he would only lift me up, take me five blocks, six in his arms ... my feet move, but no air ... no air ... Where's a First Aid Station! Have to ... have to go somewhere to get an injection, passing the man who's wielding his broom as if the world's happiness depended on what he is doing, he doesn't look up from his work, why won't he throw his broom away? Why doesn't he save me?

Home ... I get on somehow ... Prinz-Handjery Strasse. Bent over I wheeze past Howard, sit down on my bed. He comes in my room, frowning. "You sound terrible ... I'll call a doctor, huh?" Don't care anymore, my lungs are shut up tight ... Howard kneels at my side ... "Alan!" ... far away ... He rubs my shoulder ... "I'll call an ambulance ..." Don't go away, Howard ... put your arm around me, I'm so weak, stay here ... he leaves, dimly I see him through the open door next to the telephone, I'm writhing on the bed.

Hear the doorbell ... Two men in white rush into my room, they talk to Howard .. he can explain! ... bad, an entire world filled with oxygen, if you can't inhale it you're dead. This one fellow rummages in a black case ... "theophylline!" he whispers and jabs the needle into my arm ... "It helps!" Can't feel anything, my eyes water ... it's too late, folks. He grabs me under my arms, his colleague lifts me too, reaching under my knees, I'm put on a stretcher, the straps are fastened

over me ... still feel myself nearly fall out as they shake me ...thrown into the back of an ambulance, its engine is on, we're skidding away, a siren screams, for me ... we're in a hurry ...

The first thing I do is fall, and the fat doctor says, "You'll have to stay with us," motions with papers, looking into my face ... and I go somewhere else where I wheeze again and fight against the people in white and rise up They chain me down with straps ... on the arms, and I fall.

In a darkened room ... I try not to think of anything ... It's quiet except for Millie's voice ... she has finally come to see me. She lets me play with her hair. "Alan," she says, "how did you do it?" Tell her it was a natural impulse. My hand is in hers, but she lets go of me ... feel a flush of blood in my cheeks, don't dare ask about her plans, want her to stay another minute. "I'll be here," she lets me know.

"Good."

Millie closes her eyes ... She is weeping. "When I cut my wrists ... in the bathtub ... I wanted you to save me! You only called the ambulance ... I left horrible red stains on the towels ... horrible ..."

"That's over now. You shouldn't think about it."

"Alan, never!" she cries. "It's done and finished!"

While she utters these words she pushes me away, goes to the door ... I stop moving my lips to think ... I must get up and save her ... wherever she goes ... Berlin ... Hawaii! I have to get up, but while raising my hand she retreats ... Millie and Harvey are making love on the beach, the waves sweep high against me bed...

"Alan? Alan! Can't you hear me?"

"Not now," I whisper, annoyed ... but it is too late. Wires and tubes are attached everywhere to me, a green light blinks ... yet I am too weak to lift my head ...

"Alan..." My mother puts her warm hand on my forehead. That's my father sitting next to her.

"Alan, thank God, you woke up!"

My mother is probably crying.

She's wearing a light blue dress ... "Alan, I have to tell you something: I wouldn't let your father send you any money ... ever! The whole time I wanted you back ... " She cries ... She's waited for my awakening to hit me with tears ... who needs honesty? I had other problems. Meantime she's stroking my hand, and my old man is grinning at me ...

"My boy!" he grasps my hand. "You almost died on us! Do you know it's Thursday? Realize that?" Thursday, shmursday. Dreamed of tubes being stuck down my throat ... why am I here? Could it be Thursday ... where had I been. "You've been out for four days ..." He is telling the truth ... my God, am I high too, no memory ... I look at electric wires stuck to my chest, attached there by rubber suction cups, leading to the monitor where my heartbeats get graphically depicted ... A-bumpa-bump! Bump-bump! That's me ... in geometric-squiggly curves ... my pulse makes charts on the stock exchange ... "Your friend Howard called us long distance ... Monday afternoon. We arrived yesterday from South Bend! Mrs. Kulish says hi! I knew you'd be a tough old bird! I know how it is ... from the war ... you get scared, sure!" He's nuts, and I'm so high ... they are figures attributable to a soft delirium ... Why are they making me hear voices? ... I can't place things. My father is noisy ... he sighs, raising eyes to the fluorescent lamp on the ceiling ... "God has granted you life, you're back ..." Great.

"We're so glad to see you again, Alan ...", Mom reaches for my wrist, clasps ornithologically to it with her sharp fingernails, a little bird ... pulls me a little too hard, Jesus, she'll pull out the three tubes plugged into my arm veins, and all the fluids will be spilled out, uselessly ... I'll end up as an anatomy specimen. I'm silent from weakness ... a cane is leaning against the bed, next to Mom ... I wanted to come home, Mom ...

I'm going to dissolve under cascades of care. "The family," my father says, lifting my from my bed ... my God, I am light ... and kisses me three times on my lips. His beard! "God has performed a miracle! We should pray! Pray!"

I couldn't see how these two got here ... how they'd arrived. The question makes me want to laugh, but I am too weak to ...

My savior from Sunday strides in, chirping good morning, he proceeds to the foot of the bed: Dr. Grünwald ... tall and overweight, wearing glasses ... his eyes stare at my chart ... his black hair is streaked with gray around the ears. The geometrical graph has been perused. "How're you doing?" he queries looking warily at Dad. Already had to deal with my father ... for the last

twenty-four hours ... hopefully Pop had held himself back, not called him a Nazi to his face! The Doc had saved my life.

“He’s doing fine!” my father confirms ... replies for my mother too, this way ... it’s natural for him.

The physician smiles knowingly, thinks he knows fathers ... not the ones from South Bend, Indiana ... mine ... responsible men with a lot of questions ... Feeling the heat of his hand as he touches my shoulder I’m relieved ... the doctor’s here ... I try to move my arm ... my arms are pretty thin ... no food ... must look rotten to them. My father is badgering Grünewald, asking him quick questions in Chicago English. The doctor clears his throat: “The medication still has an effect on Alan, I’ve been pumping you son full of morphine four days now. He was admitted here Sunday evening, on Sunday night this rascal tried to escape ...” Dr. Grünewald releases my shoulder. “Alan arrived during an acute asthma attack, almost too late, for his blood samples gave evidence he was in the last stages of asphyxiation!” My mother is crying. “His lungs had collapsed, we had him on an artificial respirator ... two days long ... the morphine kept him quiet.” He hesitates. “Well, I nearly lost him! On Monday, when his condition was at its most serious ... I ... uh ... I requested Mister Hermagne to telephone you ...” The physician has a tick ... he’s holding my heart chart while the right corner of his mouth twitches spasmodically ... “Someone called Monday night ... uh ... I think it was his sister ... your daughter ...” Ruthie! Karate is no joke, she immediately threatened him with some swift chops from her iron hand! Seven steps ... right ... left ... hyunng! She throws herself at Grünewald! A near lethal Yoguchi Sono punch to his solar plexus! Super Sister! She’s everywhere! She’s come over the ocean to revenge me, using all the tricks of a Rear Admiral Matsushima defense to kayo Grünewald ... The way is short from Petaluma ... from Novato, wherever she is residing at the moment. Watch your step, Grünewald! My sister, the adept. “She phoned, and it was a little hard understanding what she was getting at ... she accused me of keeping her brother away from the phone ... uh ... at that time Alan’s lungs were being administered by artificial respiration .. You’ll have to give my apologies to your daughter ... she called the next day too ... but, see, Alan, had just woken up now... There was o way she could’ve spoken with him when he was lying unconscious, doped up ... with a tube down his throat! Well, she might phone again today ... Maybe her brother will be able to take the call. Still have quite a lot of morphine in you, eh, Alan?” He winks at me, apparently I’m the lesser evil compared to what he’s had to endure form my demanding old folks. Yes, my father is suspicious ... drifting away I recognize a high squeaky tone in his voice: he maintains I might very well get addicted to drugs! You know what he means. Dr. Grünewald grimaces apologetically ... I try to smile at him ...

hearing from far off, while Dad is teaching him the wide difference between South Bend methods of recovery and Berlin ones .. I knew, I knew they both had never realized, the whole time I was growing up ... me, chronically asthmatic ... how an attack could wipe you out. You could die. They'd stuck a pumpkin seed pill in my mouth, the big experts ... the fog in my head starts to clear up a little bit: what was he babbling on about? He narrows his eyes and turns his head at an angle, has Grünewald in his sights: is this hospital a good one? I know what he's getting at ... been too wired up to converse ... Fundamentally he doesn't like the idea of a German hospital! And then my father asks about his medical training! A nurse brings in a small plate with bread and bologna ... mayonnaise, other crap ... I try getting it down, cannot, Dad's smiling condescendingly at my efforts: it's concentration camp-beer hall food, he knows the krauts from Chicago, with fat behinds sitting on bar stools, swigging the national drink ... when they're not marching in parades ... when they're doing what else ... Dear God, don't allow him to say it out loud ... The nurses will be insulted, and Grünewald, who saved my life ... please, God.

Dr. Jürgen Grünewald speaks English slowly but he gets the words right, somehow ... why, and my old man relents ... surprisingly ... my father's satisfied.

"Alan must find himself!" he announce. "Been lost! We'll all aid him."

They should go now, I'd like to sleep ... their monotonous singsong ... this morphine's not bad ... it makes the weaving and creaking of the Mikhail Lermontov nicer ... lots of people on board ... I see the cliffs of Dover, Le Havre will be the first landing ... eight days ... nine ...

"Come!" My father beckons, wearing an old Navy cap, with visor ... First Lieutenant Salt! The signals of the Japanese are decoded by him daily ... in four-hour shifts ... sleep four hours ... decode hour hours ... sleep ... decode ... the Imperial Japanese Navy has been laid naked ... "All fathers come!" he shouts, and arriving ... in an Army uniform, with colonel's insignia, is Russell Buchalter, Colonel Buchalter is giving my father an idea of what it was like to arrest a German industrialist ... Baldur Wrobel stands next to Dad and nods enthusiastically, approvingly, explains to him the best strategy to get over the Russians steppes ... on the Atlantic ... the Pacific ... grass weaved, wildly growing shimmering jungle splashes away over the ship ... Colonel Maxie Siegel climbs from a tank, Dad stands at attention ... it isn't easy to keep on your feet ... huge waves whip us around, back and forth ...

"Alan!" Dad's urging me, and they look around toward our side. "You'll be arriving soon! The Admiral's waiting!"

"The General!" Buchalter points out ... each loyal to his branch of service ...

Ziggy Klujsza, who has thrown away his uniform, jests and complains and points toward a fellow playing piano on deck ... in a heavy seaman's raincoat ... the noise of the waves ... mist ... He'll have to play louder ... or I'll have to get to where he is ... The deck is engulfed by a wave ... hitting the musician, cresting over the piano ...

Gram and Mom are holding hands and waiting for me ... Mom's twenty and gorgeous ... dimples, blond hair, and sunglasses ... hair piled up, a pompadour, forties style ... student at the Chicago Art Institute, she's Judy Holliday ...

"Think of me, Alan: be brave!" Daddy yells. "The Lermontov is nothing compared to the U.S.S. Enterprise!"

"The beaches of Normandy!" Buchalter compares notes with Siegel, Dad, all are experts ... Wrobel ... "That was something."

"My head wound! These meshuggene kamakazes. That's war! Come here, Alan!"

"Dad, I'm sick. Have to stay in bed ..." I raise myself a little, however ...

"Alan has Millie," Mickey Szalay lets everyone know ... "In bed!"

“Angry weather. Storm on its way. Clouds getting darker,” Dad reports. “The sea!”

“I personally arrested Krupp! Don’t need any sea! It’s nothing but crap!” Buchalter is angry. He pushes Mickey away, who is shaking his hips and sticking out his tongue. This is not funny ... he only wants to mock Dad and Russell, that’s why he’s here!

The wind has gotten stronger ... the others near me seem to hear the piano ... Elfriede and Howard are dancing slowly, close together, with shut eyes, they don’t know anything about a storm ... Rosie puts on a Cab Calloway act, wearing a white suit and top hat ... stepping along, gracefully twirling a cane ... who’s the piano player? ... I know it is him ... Karl von Andreas’ face is hidden under the hood... his raincoat flapping in the wind ... I pull on the sleeve ... Grandma is saying something ... his back is so crooked when he sits on the piano stool, and without glancing up, while one hand slams the black and white keys, he takes out the car key, sticks it in my hand ... “Karl! Karl!” The waves and mist and cold and rain ... and snow are slapping down on the piano ... I hear myself screaming, waves are going nuts! We’re going to go overboard ... the piano rolls ... Everything has turned into howling salt water. Help! Lightning! Thunder! A tornado ... and the kamikazes! Wind moans in my ears ... and Dad screams excitedly, “We should hold hands ... the end’s near!” Get me a pillow ... I’m lying on deck ... People are streaming out from down below ... the ship goes on its side ... hey, Abdullah, Skip! Those faces ... We’re going down! They run ... swaying to the right side ... the left ... Tom, Jerry, Wilbur! Knut Zobel! I’m crying ... On the other side Dad and Maxie Siegel are taking turns shaking their fists in the air. Idiots! Ruthie ... Marie, peaches, David and Louie and Rudolf Hess! Yuri! Louis and Anna Beckett! Gram is making low sounds with her lips ...

Dad shrieks, “We’ll get him back! The day of infamy is expunged. He’s ours.” And hacks with a machete through the jungle of Okinawa toward me ... there’s Mom in a WAVES uniform. “No more slant-eyed devils and swastikas!” I’ll be saved.