Every Act Whatever of Man

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EVERY ACT WHATEVER OF MAN

I

It was his habit to come to the courthouse early when he had business there. He would nod to the janitor as the large ancient doors opened, and then, the rising sun behind him, he would walk up and down the silent shadowed corridor, a dog run with offices, chambers, and courtrooms off to either side.

When he had a trial, he would do the last-minute acts of mental construction at this time, search out the questions to be asked that he had not discovered yet. On those days, he would pace rapidly through the shadows, hardly noticing the dark obscure portraits of long-dead judges that adorned the walls along the corridor or even noticing later the growing number of lawyers and functionaries as they came in to begin their day. Not until his opponent, or the clerk of the court where he was to try the case, came up to him would he cease his pacing and look up, distracted, to see that the sun was high and it was time to work.

Other times, when there was no trial, he would go to five o'clock mass in the tiny Church of the Holy Redeemer, and then, Christ upon him, would pace the courthouse corridor, rosary in hand, his thoughts not religious in the common sense, but pieced together out of almost seventy-five years of life, fifty at the law. His study was Christendom, that long wave of meaning which had reached from Jerusalem to Byzantium, from Aachen to St. Stephanie, Louisiana. He would remem-ber his father, a sorrowful mystery, blurred by forty years gone. He would remember the town when vegetable carts and a butcher shop had done his family and friends for a supermarket. There had been a time when young people stayed in St. Stephanie, or, leaving, spent a year or two or three in New Orleans, came back to marry and begin a family, telling no one anything of that Carthage to the east where, in the Quarter, souls were lost and sin lapped at the steps of St. Louis Cathedral, like water from the Mississippi, against levees which often did not hold.

He would consider what it meant to serve the law, to bring a poor man's suit, and walk away afterward, some small piece of justice done. He would think of what he had seen on the late news: terror, assassination, acts of vengeance, things so foul that their like had never been seen in this courthouse and, God willing, never would be.

It was as if he were forging a new rosary, one other than that handed to St. Dominic. One no less mysterious or laden with grace, but one in which the great hierophantic events in the life of the Savior were replaced with the happenings of the day. He would consider the little girl raped, killed, her body dismembered and thrown into the river there

at New Orleans. And as he considered, he would recite a decade of the rosary for the repose of that small soul, but even more for her family and loved ones who even then must be suffering an agony which the child in her innocence was far beyond.

Or he would reflect on the priests who deserted their calls—a decade to bring them faith and return of grace again. Or he would remember his very special intention: those children destroyed by abortion, whose half-formed bodies and slumbering souls had been, by the millions, given over to a holocaust as violent, vicious—and legal—as that of the Nazis against God's Chosen Ones.

Sometimes a groan would escape him as he paced.

—Sir, the janitor might say. —Mr. Journe, is something wrong?

He would come to himself then, smile, shake his head, slip his rosary into his pocket, still keeping hold of the bead he was telling, and go on pacing as the sun rose on another day in the courts.

That morning, as he paced, a young clerk came up to him quietly. —Mr. Journe, Judge Soniat would like to see you . . .

He looked up. Michael Soniat here at this hour? He glanced at his watch. It was barely seven-thirty, two and a half hours before court. He walked behind the young clerk, whose name he did not know—there were so many nowadays, they came and went so quickly. It was just before he reached the oaken door of the judge's chamber that he lost count of his beads.

II

Miss Lefebre put down her copy of *Screen Stars* with the picture of Jack Nicholson on the cover. The old man had moved—or was it that the rhythm of his breathing had changed perceptibly? Or was it simply that they had the monitor set absurdly high again. Anyhow, that shrill high keening hurt her head, and she reached over and pushed the button that silenced it. Then she looked at the old man.

He was large. Not fat, but wide and fleshy. Even lying there, he gave the illusion of strength, each of his hands as large as both of hers put together. His face was flushed with that appearance of bogus health you come to recognize, even expect, in the terminally ill. His eyes were open. Not staring, as is so often the case with patients in coma, but simply looking out at the far wall where some pious old lady had insisted they hang a crucifix. It was as if he were giving minute and indefatigable scrutiny to that image of wood and plaster, seeking its meaning, trying to penetrate its accidents, that he might discover the essence within or beyond, wherever essences reside.

Miss Lefebre smoothed the bedclothes out of habit, though the old man, paralyzed and motionless, had not disturbed them. There was,

beyond the facade of professionalism which the LSU nursing school had given her, some feeling for old people like him. Alone, dying inch by inch, kept alive by the virtuoso mechanics and electronics of the doctors. It was, she thought, following the old man's eyes, always the young doctors who ordered the machine hookups in cases like this. And she thought she knew why. The old doctors had made their peace with death. They had seen worse than death. Perhaps, beyond that, they believed that death was, for all its horror, a gateway, an ending in which a new beginning was implicit. The young doctors believed in nothing whatever but their own skill and their capacity to develop new machines, new techniques to press death back farther and farther.

The old man's lips moved, and Miss Lefebre was mildly surprised. Then she heard a deep grating sound so harsh and elemental that it seemed to be coming from the very walls of the hospital room. It took her several seconds to realize that it was a human voice. —Ah, Mrs. Baxter, the voice said, —must not hate, and surely must not study on revenge. Time is short, and the Lord . . . put that girl out of your mind . . . make a good act of contrition . . .

III

George Slack was sitting on the back porch eating a cantaloupe. It was chilled, tangy, and sweet. He looked out over the yard past the swimming pool, down toward the somnolent river where his power boat was moored. He was in a state of unthinkingness, simply appreciating what there was, and what he had of it. He tried not to think of Amy, because he would not see her until Wednesday. He could never see her on weekends, of course, and even during the week it wasn't smart to simply plan on meeting at a bar—much less a local motel.

Now he was thinking of her, thinking of her eyes, her casual laughter. The way she responded to him. She was the girl he should have met thirty years before. If he had stayed in New Orleans, taken the job with the wholesale coffee distributors there on Decatur Street . . . by now . . .

For some reason, as he set down his spoon, he looked at his hands. They were the hands of a man moving deep into the wrong end of middle age, liver-spotted, the flesh drying, showing veins and tendons clearly, as if the skin were becoming transparent, a palimpsest upon which each year etched additional lines.

My God, George Slack thought with a sudden shock. I'm dying inch by inch. Pieces of me are sloughing off, veins clouding up. It's really true. He closed his eyes, because it was embarrassing even to think silently that way. As if he had not been taught always that life was a passing

shadow pointed toward eternity, toward that other life which would never end.

Even now, he could remember Father O'Malley hearing catechism in the parochial school, and he remembered, too, that of all his classmates he was most attentive, most anxious to know his whole duty and to hear the promises of God. Because, in those days, he had feared death very much. He had lost his father and mother in an automobile wreck, had been raised by his mother's sister, and he had believed somehow, for no certain reason, that the death which had claimed his parents that rain-swept evening in 1936 was awaiting him, too, a curse not to be put off, but to be completed at last by his own death.

So he had been devout for several years. Perhaps it had been the beginning of the Second World War that had convinced him of the commonness of death, that he had no special rendezvous with it, and that in fact the mystifications of the Church had little or nothing to do with a natural phenomenon which came in time to all things born on the earth.

He had tried to talk about it to Father O'Malley. The war was on then, and the regular baseball coach for the high school team had enlisted in the Marines. (He would not be back. He would vanish like smoke while on a patrol deep into the jungles of Guadalcanal with the Second Marine Division, only to arise once more as a gold star and a blue, white, and red diamond-shaped patch dotted with stars in the trophy case of the St. Stephanie high school, that and a slightly blurred photo from years before, when he had been young and lean—his first year coaching—before the beer and crawfish, fried chicken and andouille had gotten to him.) So Father O'Malley knocked out flies and grounders, squinted at the infield play, and explained to the boys how baseball was a figure of life itself, and that to win at either called for discipline, strength, skill, and faith.

—Yeah, one of the older boys nodded cynically, —but in life, if they catch you far enough off base, they kill you.

Father O'Malley had fixed the boy with his large beautiful brown eyes, started to say something, and then let it go. It was the spring of 1943, and kids were talking differently. Especially if they were reaching draft age about graduation time.

After practice, he had walked back to the rectory of the church with the priest. It was that strange moment between daylight and twilight he had always called "the yellow moment," when, for perhaps five minutes, all things—trees, houses, cars, even people are touched by a tone of rich deep yellow, a tone from the pallet of some Flemish master.

When he had told Father O'Malley of his doubts, the priest had laughed. Not in a casual way to indicate unconcern, but a rich deep

laughter as old and wise and affectionate as the priesthood itself. He had put his arm around George Slack's shoulders.

—How old are you now, boy?

—Seventeen, Father.

—Well, that's old enough. Old enough to be fighting for your country in a few months.

—Yes, Father.

—There's something I meant to tell you one day. Later, I thought. But the Lord picks his time for these things. How much do you recall about the accident?

—The . . . accident. I remember I was at home, waiting. It got late. A state trooper brought Aunt Grace . . . then I went to stay with . . .

—Ah, and you never saw them again?

—They . . . closed the coffins. I never . . .

—I was at the hospital that night. When they brought your mother and father from Madisonville . . .

—You saw . . . ?

Father O'Malley hunched his shoulders and they walked on. It was twilight now, and the edges of things had started to blur and run. Ahead, he could see the bulk of the church and the small rectory beside it. The cross on top of the church was outlined against the pink and gray clouds, the crimson and gold streaks of last light even then fading from the sky.

—Your mother was . . . They . . . She was gone. But your father . . .

—He was . . . alive . . . ? They always told me they were . . . both . . . instantly . . .

—Ah, well, what do you say to a ten-year-old boy, Georgie? Do you give an exact report on the terrible thing that . . .

—No. No. I guess you . . . make it easy . . .

—With no way to make it easy. But you don't add weight to the cross he has to bear . . .

They had reached the rectory. Old Mrs. Wise, long dead now, had fixed hot chocolate while they moved into Father O'Malley's study. It was dark and quiet there, only a single small lamp on the battered old desk. The walls were solid with bookcases filled with crumbling leather volumes whose titles were undecipherable. A window was open, and the chill spring breeze blew in, adding sharpness to the scent of old leather and incense that seemed part of the structure of the room. The chocolate came, and George Slack had put his fielder's glove down between his feet and sipped the hot brew, waiting for what Father O'Malley would say, dreading when he should begin.

Father O'Malley picked up a blackened pipe, which was almost invisible in the soft light from the study lamp.

—Ah, he had only a few minutes. He was in much pain. He spoke of you, of your dear mother. Then, because we both knew he had somewhere to be, he made his confession. And I had hardly done with absolution, but he was gone. That easily, Georgie. It was a fine noble man's kind of death, you know?

The tears had come, but they did not flow, and he had hardly heard the homily the priest addressed to him on a Christian death, using as text that of his own father. After a while, he had risen, thanked Father O'Malley, and left. Only weeks later he had graduated, joined the Army Air Corps, and spent a year of horror in the skies over Germany and central Europe.

George Slack came to himself, the emptied cantaloupe before him, his hands gripping the edge of the table. Something had called him back. It was a sound in the kitchen. Elizabeth came into the breakfast room, her arms loaded with flowers. It's spring again, he thought. Thirty-three years on. His wife smiled at him. She still possessed that dark almost Latin prettiness—what they used to call a "languishing" quality—that had drawn him to her long ago. But now it required effort on her part. She worked at it, and still the patching showed. There were no liver spots on her hands. Her waist was still small, but her eyes seemed to have grown smaller, more deeply seated. There was a look of wornness, wisdom, about her. She looked . . . kindly, now. As one who would, whatever the circumstances, do her duty. Christ, he thought, it's happening to her, too. And I don't care. I don't give a goddamn. I just . . . want to see Amy.

—For Father O'Malley, Elizabeth said, almost brightly.

—He won't see them, George said, and felt a flush come to his cheeks. He wasn't that kind of person. He didn't *want* to be that kind of person. He wanted to be decent—with Elizabeth, with the old priest he had not spoken to in almost thirty years, with his daughter, Jill—with everyone but Amy. With her, he wanted to be indecent. Constantly.

Elizabeth looked away, and went on arranging the flowers. —It would be nice if you . . . wanted to visit.

—It would be pointless. I haven't seen him . . . I don't go to his church . . .

—He is . . . part of St. Stephanie. If he had tended your car for fifty years . . . if he were a gardener who had seen to your yard for fifty years . . .

Her eyes were wide now, and he wondered if the anger was simply a response to his impiety, his lack of decorum. He wondered if she could

possibly know anything, feel anything. The waning of his emotion had not snapped the bond between them. She could know—without knowing that she knew.

—You'll have to appear decent, whether you want to or not. Jill took my car. She had some errands to run for Dr. Aronson. Then she's going to pick up Amy and bring her back for the weekend. Some young men are taking them to Baton Rouge . . . an auto race or . . .

He got up from the table, dropping his napkin.

—You'll have to drop me by the hospital . . . at least that.

He turned toward her, his face filled with an unfelt and unintended irony. —I can do . . . at least that, he said.

IV

—Morning, Walter, Judge Soniat said, looking up from his desk.

—Mike, I never knew you to be an early riser, Walter Journe said, sitting down, looking about for Miss Althea, who always presided at pretrials and other meetings, presenting the lawyers with steaming mugs of the thickest, blackest coffee in south Louisiana.

—She's not here, Walt. She came real early, brewed it, and left. Fix your own. First time in thirty years. Won't kill you.

—Want a little freshening? he asked the judge, who nodded.

He poured the coffee, leaving Judge Soniat's black, considering some cream for his own.

From behind him, he could hear Soniat rustling through papers.

—You heard about the old man, Walt?

—What? Ah, Father O'Malley, of course.

—Like someone discovering the timbers they built this town on, and chopping one down.

—Yes. My God, do you know he's been here, has been seeing to people . . . how long?

—Nineteen-twenty-seven. In the spring. You aren't that much older than I am, son.

—Served in the Great War, didn't he?

— . . . from the Irish Channel. Told me once he came home with the stink of men's blood on him, and never got free of it or slept a night through until he . . .

— . . . entered the seminary. Said he'd lie or cheat, steal or blaspheme before he'd hurt another of God's creatures again.

They sat, the rising sun cutting a golden path between them on the judge's desk. The steam from their coffee rose in the sunlight, twisting, flattening as the breeze moved it here and there.

Judge Soniat pushed a blue and yellow box of cigars toward him. Journe reached in, took out a long slender stogie. Marsh-Wheeling. Since 1840. One of those things you come to expect. Part of the weather— like great Gulf clouds, magnolias and jasmine and gardenias in the spring. Things you count on.

—He's got no people, Walt. Nobody. His only heir will be the diocese.

—You have his will?

—Drew it up in 1940. Never wanted anything changed. Church gave him everything. Wants to give it back.

—Is there . . . any . . . chance?

—Not a goddamned one. Spoke to old Aronson last evening. Says the sooner the better. Stroke destroyed his brain. The cognitive and operative sections are gone. Just like an explosion in there . . .

—How long . . . ?

The judge shrugged. —Can't say. When he came in, one of the young residents put him on the machines, you know. Worked like a beaver to keep him breathing. Damned kids. They're so bright. Smart as hell . . .

Journe smiled. —But, you're thinking, maybe they could use some judgment?

—I don't know. What am I supposed to say? I'm just a country judge, Walt. Father O'Malley is . . . what?

—Eighty. Maybe a year or so more.

Soniat got up from his desk, scratched his uncombed gray hair. He laughed without humor. —You know, goddamnit, he married Mary Ann and me. And he was there when . . .

—I remember . . .

—Used to go up to the . . . house every two weeks with us until Michael junior died.

Journe remembered the small boy he had seen only twice, once as a newborn, once in his coffin. He had been an extreme mongoloid. He had died in the East Louisiana Hospital of an infection. It was not uncommon.

Soniat's voice was blurred. —He didn't have to go up there . . . Said Mike was one of his parishioners, too. Said God never, never gave us a burden we couldn't bear. Proved it. Showed it to us. Made his own teaching flesh.

The judge sat down again. He was silent for a long time. Then he passed a legal-sized sheet of paper over to Journe.

—It's an order ready for my signature. I want you to take over as curator. I don't want to give this one to some kid out of LSU or Tulane.

Journe nodded. You give these small jobs to the youngsters, ordinarily. It gets them before the court, and they pick up seventy-five dollars here, a hundred there. It is what lawyers do. But sometimes even

a simple task has overtones, becomes a ceremony. Judge Soniat would not hand over Father O'Malley to some young man who did not know him, had perhaps never seen his face.

—I called the chancery in New Orleans, told them what the situation was. Said they'd send someone over . . . his confession, if he can. Last rites, anyhow.

—And the church . . . ?

—Oh, they'll have visiting priests for a while . . . Do you remember . . . ?

—Barely. It seems like he was always here.

—No, before him was an old German priest . . . had served with the Union army in the Confederate War . . . used to preach the evils of rebellion . . . old bastard.

—You can't remember that.

—Oh, I remember him. I most especially remember my father telling him one Sunday after mass that good Southern people didn't require political education from . . . a Hun.

They both laughed.

—My God, in those days . . .

—My mother knew we were all in for excommunication . . . but they sent Father O'Malley instead. His first sermon . . .

—That I do remember, somehow. How he was the son of rebellious people himself, and understood those deep passions . . .

— . . . spoke of the Easter Rising, compared it with the War . . . people, rightly or wrongly, put upon too long . . .

—And then saying that, at last, only resurrection, not insurrection, could cure the anguish of proud people—a rising against sin, weakness, the flesh . . .

They were still again.

—I'll be goddamned if I can figure remembering a sermon from . . . what . . . ?

—Almost fifty years ago, Journe said smiling.

Soniat smiled, too, as he signed the order. —And they say old men can't remember.

—Oh, Michael, Journe said, rising slowly. —We remember just fine. What we want to remember.

V

Dr. Amadeus Aronson had finished his breakfast in the hospital cafeteria. Now he would walk out on the grounds for fifteen minutes or so. Then it would be time for rounds. Sometimes he was tired, already irritable before any silly ass on the staff gave him reason. It had to do

with certain pains he could not be rid of, and which would not kill him. Minor arthritic changes. Where they hurt.

He took one step onto the porch, surveyed the old oaks and magnolias that surrounded the hospital. He was proud of them. Twenty years ago, when the hospital board had obtained this plantation land from the Callais estate, the architects had wanted to clear out all the old trees—"a solidly modern appearance" was what was wanted. Dr. Aronson had pointed out that it was much easier to replace insensitive architects than hundred-year-old trees. He had made his point, and now there was hardly a window in the complex from which patients could not see trees which had been planted long before they were born, and which would outlive them. Perhaps that was the essence of what he had wanted to say through his practice: the continuity of generations. Birth eases death as death heals birth. If a man sees himself in perspective, life should be a joy. He is a partner in the festival of being, an invited guest along with his fellows, society, the cosmos. Under God.

It was then that Miss Lefebre found him.

—Doctor, the old . . . Father O'Malley . . .

Dr. Aronson turned quickly. —Is he . . . changed?

—He's . . . Doctor, he's talking.

Dr. Aronson snorted. The help you get nowadays. —That, Miss . . . what's your name?

—Lefebre, Doctor. Amy Lefebre.

—That, Miss Lefebre, is impossible. His speech centers were destroyed by the cardiovascular accident. He cannot move. He cannot talk. He is not conscious, despite his eyes remaining open. You heard someone in the hall.

The young nurse was very pretty. She was, in fact, exceptional. Dr. Aronson found it hard to believe he had not noticed her. But what was she saying?

— . . . made my report. I invite the doctor to come examine his patient who is not only talking, but who will not shut up, and who is even imitating other people's voices . . .

Dr. Aronson reached out for Miss Lefebre's arm, pulled her close, sniffed her breath—which was very sweet—glanced at her arms, stared into her eyes, and thumped her gingerly on the elbow with his finger. She jumped. He studied for a further moment. —I'll come, he said.

VI

Miss Casey Lacour was president of the Ladies Altar Society of Holy Redeemer Church. As such, she was the acknowledged liaison between Father O'Malley and the ladies of the congregation. It was her task to

carry back to the others his wishes regarding the decoration of the church and such other ancillary matters as were the responsibilities of the Altar Society.

She had served for almost twenty years. Not so much because she was beloved as that she had the time and the willingness to see to details, while the other ladies simply offered an afternoon here or some money there. Miss Lacour took her work seriously. She had virtually memorized the liturgical year, and as years drew on, she came to know what the priest wished on Easter, on Christmas, at Pentecost. She knew which feasts he regarded as significant, and which of less importance.

Miss Lacour had spent numberless afternoons with Father O'Malley. Indeed, she had made the nine First Fridays each and every time they had been offered, so that the treasury of graces she had stored up was inestimable. She had been the solid center of support for every novena and vigil at Holy Redeemer for thirty years, and no morning mass had been celebrated without her presence in almost that long.

Now she was desolate. Since Monday, she had divided her waking hours between the silent empty church and the waiting room of the hospital. She had tried by prayer to maintain her closeness to Father O'Malley, who wandered now in a limbo between life and death, and to blot out from her memory the awful events that had suddenly torn asunder the fabric of her life. Somehow, she had not expected this. She had supposed that one day her life would end amid the physical and spiritual furniture she had so carefully collected and lovingly arranged. At such cost. For so long.

She had envisioned the end of her life in many ways: as she placed, so early on Easter morning, a last perfect lily in a vase before the statue of Christ risen, there would be a moment of hazy forgetfulness, and she would find herself standing in fact before the Holy Redeemer she had so long served. All the sacrifice and grace that had been hers on earth now compacted into that symbolic lily she held out to Him. He would smile and receive it, and her eternity would begin.

Or it would be during confession. There in the darkness, she would be reciting to Father O'Malley the threshold sins of pride, anger, covetousness that were the curse of involvement with the Altar Society ladies who, individually, sowed so little and yet wished to reap all. Then she would reach the Great Sin once more. She would recite what had happened that spring day in 1944 still again, whispering it breathlessly from yet another vantage point, trying to explain to the distant and momentarily impersonal spirit of love and understanding on the other side of the grate that forgiveness was not, could not be perfected until the discovery was complete, until the confessing was done.

And Father O'Malley would say to her, sighing, —Casey, Casey, it is all done when the will moves forever away from its sinful object.

When the heart turns around, it is forgiven. Now you must learn to give up that afternoon, all the wrongful ecstasy and the awful guilt of it. It will never be April 21st of 1944 again. Not in all eternity. The young man is dead; the child is dead, never lived, indeed. It is forgiven . . .

And she would die then, feel her soul drift out from her old unrealized indifferent body, feel the chill of time and space evaporating, the essence of herself, which was ageless and eyeless, longing for eternity and light. Then she would reach the downs, a field in Sussex in April while the invasion was preparing, and he would be there, and it would happen again, only untainted by flesh and the curse of earth, and she would be ashamed of nothing because sin, *that* sin, is of the flesh only, and whatever else, there would be no windblown dark November following, no sudden letter announcing the end of April dreams turned to blood and death in the hedgerows. But most of all, beyond all else, no rush of terror, no trip to London to the small hospital in Wigmore Street. No, not in death. Nor the boat trip home, the time in New York and New Jersey, where in her desperation . . .

Miss Lacour opened her eyes. She had not been sure whether she would find herself in the small pew before the side altar of Holy Redeemer or sitting in the quiet waiting room of the hospital. It was the hospital, and she saw Dr. Aronson moving rapidly down the hall toward Father O'Malley's room, his face dark and concerned. She rose and followed him quickly. She tried to speak to him, but he didn't even hear her soft voice. He entered the room and, almost without thought, she followed him. A young nurse was with him, and as Miss Lacour stood in the shadows at the back of the room, the doctor and the young nurse moved close to the bed where Father O'Malley lay. The doctor examined him closely, shining a small flashlight into his open eyes. He checked the vital signs, then read the chart quickly. For a moment, there was no sound in the room at all. Then Dr. Aronson spoke, his voice low, incredibly vicious.

—I want you to erase . . . this last entry. Do it now and initial it.

The young nurse stared back at him coldly. —I will not falsify that chart . . . not for . . .

—Ah, Casey, what in God's name can I say to you . . . ?

The voice was that of Father O'Malley. Or, it was almost his voice. But not quite. Not the tired gentle voice she had known during the last years. It was rather that voice rejuvenated, made stronger, younger.

—You can . . . tell me . . . it's all right, Father. Tell me that . . .

Miss Lacour's eyes widened. It was her own voice that she heard now. Only not quite. Rather her voice as it had been. In 1955, perhaps. In 1960. But hers, down to the tremulous undertone, the inaudible gasp, holding back those hysterical tears that remained everpresent even now. Then it was Father O'Malley's voice again.

—It *isn't* all right, girl. Not in this world or the next. It is forgiven, has been since I pronounced the words of absolution over you thirteen years ago . . . but . . . all right? My God, how can a thing that happened in the world, a thing done, ever be erased, made not to have occurred . . . ? Can you unring the bells of Holy Redeemer, Casey Lacour . . . ?

It had been 1958. Now she remembered. That very tone, those very words. In the confessional, in the secret August heat. He had told her that a thing done was eternal, because by its very happening in God's imperfect world, it subsisted in eternity, in His perfect mind. She felt herself falling back against the wall as Dr. Aronson leaned down over the old priest, his face a mask of astonishment and something akin to fear. The young nurse stood close by, her eyes flaming with triumph, a cold smile on her lips.

—Oh, girl, I know your shame, your desperation, the loss of your young man . . . but in God's mercy, you could have spared the child . . . what kind of demon took you to that English hell where they . . .

And her voice cut in, almost strangled with sobs—even as it had eighteen years before. —Not without him. He swore he'd come back. That we'd be one.

—And, damnit, Casey, so you were. You sinned with him, but don't you see? That new life, the one you threw away in London . . . it was his and yours . . . He tried to keep his promise . . .

Miss Lacour was sitting on the floor now. She was not unconscious, only transported, and her eyes were fixed on a lithograph of the Holy Family that hung above his bed. Where she had placed it the day after his attack. Father O'Malley's eyes still probed the room's shadows far above her head where Jesus Christ in plaster simulacrum lay against varnished wood.

Dr. Aronson stood by the bed, shaking his head as the old priest talked on. Miss Lefebre was checking the connections on the bank of glistening machines on the far side of the bed. Her eyes crossed those of Dr. Aronson time and again.

—I'm sorry, Miss . . . Lefebre. These things don't . . . happen. Never in the literature, never in my experience . . .

—Don't bother, Doctor. It's just that I'm . . . a good nurse. I don't . . . hear things.

—Of course not.

His hand touched hers on the bed sheet where she was smoothing it. —You're . . . a splendid nurse.

Neither of them saw Miss Lacour struggle to her feet, and open the door and leave. Later, if asked, they could say with utter certainty that she had not been to see Father O'Malley that day.

VII

It was early evening now, and the sun was beginning to lose itself in the clouds that were coming up from the Gulf. A tall thunderhead stood over the town, and the TV weatherman over in Houma had said there was a 50 percent chance of evening showers that night.

Walter Journe sat in his office which was, in fact, one of the two parlors of his home. He had finished writing up some small matters, and at the bottom of the papers he had come across the order signed by Judge Soniat by which he was made curator for Father O'Malley. He picked it up and stared at it as if he had never seen it. What a curious thing, he thought, and laughed silently at the pun. The curator had once stood for ancient Roman soldiers, to protect their interests when they fought outside Italy. It was the Republic's way of protecting those absent in her service. And later, for those who, though at home, yet were absent—the *furiosi*, the mad, whose spirits sojourned elsewhere though their bodies lay within the jurisdiction of the state.

Mr. Journe loved the Civil Law because there came to it no problem that men had not struggled with before. And not simply Englishmen whose Common Law was as rough and recent as their ways, but Spaniards, Frenchmen, Germans—even Russians and Arabs. All had their civil codes. To be a civilian lawyer was like standing for a moment at the end of the law's long intricate web. This strand, two millennia old, still grew, was vital, and no man who served within it was left alone with his problem. If the code of Louisiana had no answer, then the Code Napoleon. If not that, then Justinian or Gaius, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. What work could man undertake that had not been done before, by those of every tongue and hue who had preceded, those brothers in the law?

He set the order out on his desk, clear now of the week's matters. How was it, he wondered, that he should be seeing to a man who had always seen to him? Father O'Malley was the only priest he had known as a grown man. When he had come back from law school in New Orleans, they had become friends. They would go fishing. Sometimes, on a long weekend at a fishing camp Journe owned near Ville Platte, they would pass the evenings, after cleaning up the dishes, with a Mason jar of good local liquor. Father O'Malley had always claimed that Prohibition was against the law of nature, and that no man was obliged to obey a law aimed at altering the very nature of man itself.

One night, after many drinks, he had told Journe about Ypres, the second battle, when the Germans had used poison gas for the first time.

How incredible it was to see men drowning in their own fluids, how many of his friends farther toward the sea had perished.

He spoke of the Great War, of men drowning in mud, of trench rats as big as dogs, of men killing German prisoners, no more than boys, shooting them in retaliation for the ugliness and hatred of it all, while the boys cried, —*Bitte*, *bitte*.

They sat in the dusk there, watching the individual shadows of the cypresses melt and blend into blocks of shadow. Father O'Malley drank another glassful of the whiskey. His voice was getting thick now, and Journe knew he was approaching his limit even though he could no longer make out his face.

—Years later, the curse of it on me, when I entered the seminary in Cork, can you guess how I disposed of it? Can you? Hell no, Walter Journe, you decent man, you. I said, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. In the war, I killed . . ." "Ah," but my confessor said back, "in a just war, killing is no sin." "Aha," I answered him back, "if that's so, how is it I'm as sure to be damned for it as the sun will rise, and our Jesus died to save?" After a while when I saw there'd be no reply, I left the good old man who would see me through to ordination with his own best thoughts, and I went outside, and I cried . . . bitter, bitter the tears . . . and all that twenty-five years ago, and more . . .

Later, Journe had helped him to bed, and the next day they had driven in Walter's 1935 Ford V-8 back to St. Stephanie. They had always been friends thereafter, but they did not fish or drink together any more, and Journe came to understand what the seal of the confessional meant. The ultimate privilege of the ultimate advocate with his ultimate client.

Journe put the paper aside. It was twilight now, and sure enough, rain had begun to fall. He walked out onto the front porch just in time to see a car pulling into his oyster-shell driveway and to squint at the darts of rain falling through the headlights.

VIII

Jill Slack sat in the car until Amy Lefebre came out. It had started to rain, and she just didn't feel gracious. She was tired. Tired of her family. It seemed strange that all the time she had been growing up her family had been wonderful. Or, at the least, covert. Now it was like a snake pit. Her father hardly ever spoke to her mother, and her mother seemed to have an inexhaustible catalog of petty slights and annoyances that she wanted to work through with Jill. Over and over again. Second childhood, she considered. Both of them. Or what was that other thing?

Games People Play? Mother's adult to father's child? Or the other way around? She had read a review. Or had she read the book? Anyhow, she felt dragged out. Which was a shame. Clay Moore was coming from Lafayette where he worked at Exxon. Clay was fun. They'd always made it real good together. She didn't know the other boy. Somebody from New Orleans, somebody Amy had known at school. Sometimes Jill wished she had finished school. Not that she wanted to nurse, but it was something. Something to tell people you were, something you did. Doing something was important. No, it wasn't—to her—but people seemed to *think* it was important. Nowadays, you had to *do* something. No one ever asked what her mother did. She was a mother, a housewife. That took care of that. But someone always wanted to know . . .

Amy pulled open the door, and almost fell into the car. Her hair was glistening with rain, and against the distant lights of the hospital, her profile was perfect. Jill loved Amy, really loved her. But you get tired of perfection. Thank God she had a simply miserable disposition to go with those looks.

—Christ, what a day, Amy said. She was looking in her purse for her cigarettes. She found one loose, and cursed when her wet hands soaked it through. She had not even looked at Jill yet.

—This one you'd never believe. Everything that could happen did. Miracles, encounters, goofs, confrontations, sudden reversals, attempted seductions, general screw-ups . . .

—Sounds like an ordinary day at City General, Jill said as she started up the car.

—No, really. I almost got fired for writing the truth on a chart, and an hour later he . . .

—Who?

—Oh, you know. Aronson. King of the Jungle. An hour after he wanted to fire me, he was trying to put the make on me.

—Really? Dr. Aronson? God, I didn't know he even had one, much less gave it any consideration.

—Ummm . . . I'm not sure. I sort of think it . . . was my mind.

Jill laughed out loud. The rain was still hard, and the headlights of passing cars refracted into thousands of needles of light. It was hard to steer straight —Come on, big lady. You've got a perfectly fine mind . . . but I never saw anyone pay it the slightest attention. Your . . . other things keep getting in the way.

Amy nibbled her lip and tried to comb her hair in the dark. It fell like thick burnished silk to lie along her shoulders as if there were no rain at all. —No, really. It was . . . what happened with Father O'Malley.

—How is he? He baptized me, gave me First Communion.

—Ummm . . . he's different.

—Better . . . ? Worse . . . ?

—Different. I mean, he's supposed to be a vegetable, you know. Terrible hemorrhage in the brain. Some kind of aneurysm. Blew his brains out, according to Aronson. Just a matter of a few days . . . but today, this morning, he began to talk.

—That's a hopeful sign, Jill said, concentrating on the road.

—Dummy, you didn't *hear* what I said. His brain is gone. I mean, gone. Deep coma . . . you remember the lecture from second year . . .

—But you said . . .

Amy blew a fat smoke ring. It broke up on the windshield, and turned to mist on the glass.

—He's talking, but not consciously. You won't believe what he's doing.

— . . . ?

—He's . . . he's repeating confessions . . .

—Oh, Amy, my God. That's gross. Really . . .

—Hon, I'm not being . . . blasphemous or whatever you call it. He's doing it. He started this morning. Something about a Mrs. Baxter. Something about Mrs. Baxter wanted revenge against some girl.

—I never heard of a Mrs. Baxter. Not ever. And I know everybody in town.

—That was just the start. And anyhow, it's not the *weirdest* . . . He does *both sides*.

—What?

—I mean, he does the voice of the other person, too. He says what he said. But he says what they said, too. God, it's . . . it's weird.

—Amy, you're putting me on.

—No, there was a Mrs. Tohler . . . she lost a son in some war. She . . . couldn't stand to have her husband touch her. Something, it wasn't clear. Anyhow, he died at Le Shima . . . somewhere in Vietnam, I guess. She hated her husband . . . because he was alive, and her son Eddie was dead . . . So Father O'Malley told her he couldn't give her absolution until she worked it out. He was . . . really hard. Said she was a corrupt woman, loved her son too much, unnaturally, and then she broke down and told him what she had done when the boy was small . . .

Amy stopped as the car pulled down the shell-and-gravel drive under the portico. She'd been at the house often, had visited since the days she'd been Jill's roommate in New Orleans. But she was not used to it. George T. Slack, oil and gas properties. This was what you could get with oil and gas properties. Twenty-six rooms, swimming pool, tennis courts, a cathedral ceiling in the living room, and a step-down nook near a walk-in fireplace. Hell, why didn't it snow? Or why hadn't she met George T. Slack when he was hustling his first well? Of course, that was probably before she was born. But it sounded like an exciting

time. He'd been in the Air Corps. Bombing Germany. He'd been hit with flak, had lain in the waist of the ship near his gun watching his blood flow, then slowly freeze. Which saved him, he said. Over Frankfurt, the bloody cold had frozen his blood. And, he had gone on, staring at the small pitted scars in his legs and stomach, nothing unthawed me—until you. It had been very good, really. Elizabeth and Jill had been in Dallas for a week of shopping, and when her shift was over, she'd go to the house, sleep, swim, fix a salad, and choose a wine. Then he'd come and, like a college boy, couldn't wait for it. Beside the pool, in bed, in the living room. Once, in the kitchen, she'd astonished him with her own favorite kind of loving. Something Elizabeth couldn't even have imagined. —Not with a blueprint and a book of instructions, he'd gasped.

As they got out of the car, Amy picked up her overnight case and started up the steps, thinking of the aftermath. Wednesday evenings. In a tiny place he rented outside Boutte. They'd have dinner at a small Cajun restaurant and then go play house for a few hours. It was a dingy place, but he was very good. She liked the feel of his body. Not just a good-looking carcass, but the body of a man who had flown three miles above the earth, sending down judgment.

Once she had grown glum about it. It could go nowhere. He'd never walk away, and Elizabeth would live to be eighty. Once, on a weekend, when he'd been in Kuwait or some impossible place, she'd gone . . . to confession.

The implication of that struck her just as she came into the kitchen where Elizabeth was pouring coffee. Elizabeth looked up and saw the expression on Amy's face. She smiled warmly. She had always liked Amy. Surely the most intelligent and sensible of Jill's friends.

—You look as if you'd seen a ghost, Amy.

For a moment, Amy was speechless. She was trying to recall what she had said, whether Father O'Malley had called her by name. Even if he hadn't, would it matter? Maybe he hadn't called Mrs. Baxter by name, either, the first time. How could anybody know, or be sure?

—Oh, no ma'am. It's just the rain, the storm, and I'm . . . I guess I'm beat.

Elizabeth Slack handed her a cup of coffee. —Then it won't break your heart that your young man and Jill's both called. Said the storm was awful north and east of us. Some of the roads are out . . .

—Oh, really? No, I'd rather sleep. It's a good night for sleeping.

She and Jill and Elizabeth drank their coffee and chatted awhile. Oddly, Jill never mentioned what Amy had told her about the priest. Somehow, to Jill, it was not a central matter. She was still very young, and changes go almost unnoticed.

IX

In his hospital room, Father O'Malley was breathing steadily. It was late now, and only the night lamp gave soft illumination to the room. His eyes were still open, but there was an expression almost of hilarity on his face. His lips were moving, but no sound came forth. The night nurse glanced in. When she had no other duties, she ordinarily sat with the old man. She was one of his parishioners, and it pleased her to attend this impromptu vigil. But earlier he had been talking, some of it peculiar, something about damned filthy fuckers, strafing the trenches . . . There they go, those damned fuckers . . . She would say nothing to anyone, of course, but she was astonished. Even in delirium, a priest . . . It tested her faith. She looked at the rank of glowing instrument faces in the large bank beside his bed. The insane thought came to her that it was the machines that made him talk so. She shook her head, and went to check the other intensive care rooms. But all the same, what kind of sense did it make to hook up an eighty-year-old man with his brain gone to that bank of super-expensive gadgets. Father O'Malley was gone, and had left behind the merely human remnant with its insufferable dirty mouth.

X

The young priest smiled, and Walter Journe smiled back at him. Father Veulon was from New Orleans. He was assigned to the archdiocese. He went where there was trouble, where decisions had to be made. He was of the new clergy. He had had a course in decision-making at Harvard Business School while he was taking his Master of Sacred Theology at the seminary. He really felt more comfortable with professionals, he told Mr. Journe. There is an apostolate of lawyers, doctors, and businessmen. Mr. Journe said he had no doubt of it. Father Veulon asked if he anticipated any legal difficulties, such as with Father O'Malley's will being probated. Mr. Journe raised his eyebrows slightly, and allowed that, at least in the country parishes, there was one formality before probate would be possible.

—And what is that? Father Veulon asked.

—The testator must be dead, Mr. Journe told him.

XI

It was almost midnight, and the rain had softened. It fell gently, barely making a sound against the trees, the roof of George Slack's house. It had not stopped, but the thunder was distant now, moving eastward. She could hear it, sullen and inchoate, toward New Orleans. The rain

fell quietly, its sound muffled against the leaves in the gutters of George Slack's house. She came to herself, awake suddenly, and eyes open, looking out into the yard where certain lights illuminated the distant pool, where oaks and magnolias stood in sharp relief against the bulk of shadows behind.

She had tried to sleep, but it was impossible. In her half-consciousness, she heard Father O'Malley telling again the sins of his people, assigning to them penances, arguing the meaning of what had happened to them and because of them in a world they had not made, nor he accepted. She thought how small, condensed it all sounded. Had the world actually become larger?

Was it possible that Father O'Malley's world had been determined in its size by his consciousness? Or was her world an illusion, not nearly so large as she would like to imagine? Everything depended on this. She had to know. But there was no way to know. She was left on her own.

It was then that she heard the door open. She did not grow tense, because she knew who it must be. She heard his breathing. Then she heard his voice.

—Amy . . . ?

—Yes.

—Oh my God, how I love you, he said, his voice as distant, hollow, and uncertain as a boy's.

—Oh Georgie, she said, and what she had been thinking vanished from her mind.

XII

The rain was hardly more than a soft tattoo on the leaves of the trees and plants now. Even though the sky was still clouded over, one could walk without being soaked, and that was what Miss Casey Lacour was doing. She had put on her best suit, and now she was walking through the bare shower toward Holy Redeemer Church. She was smiling a smile no one had seen in thirty years. Her face, just for then, was that of a woman half her age.

Because, she thought, I am walking somewhere for the first time since I got off that train at Kings Cross Station, heading toward a rendezvous with death. Now I am walking toward . . . Ah, God, please love me. He—or she—would be thirty-two years old today, and walking in this small rain. Wouldn't he? Oh Christ, forgive me for waiting so long. And in your heavenly mercy, touch that good priest who so long ago gave me absolution and tried to give me understanding, and please Jesus, let them be waiting for me, my husband and my son . . . or my daughter, if it was so in your eternity . . .

The rain became heavier then, and Miss Lacour increased her pace almost to a run to reach the cover of Holy Redeemer Church before it became a downpour again.

XIII

It was almost morning, but Judge Soniat had had a restless night. He rose, the usual pain in his lower back, the usual bad taste in his mouth. He slipped into his robe, and walked slowly through the darkened house which his ability and labor had purchased. Even his bare feet sounded hollowly in this house of no children. Oh Jesus, he thought, I should have left years ago. Why stay in a place where seeds cannot . . .

The morning paper awaited him there on the front steps. As if a surgeon had laid it there. Precisely where it should have been. A blind man could have found it. He picked it up, threw away the rubber band, and glanced at the headlines as he walked back toward the kitchen.

HUNDREDS DIE IN BEIRUT

He closed his eyes and walked the last few yards to the coffee pot without even seeing where he was going.

XIV

Early Monday morning, George Slack was awake. He called his lawyer and headed for his office. He was waiting for a phone call. All his nerves were alive, ready, prepared for action. Even beyond his horror, he had not felt so alive in thirty years. It was strange to be challenged at all. Much less from such a strange quarter. But George understood the way things are: a challenge is a challenge. Where it comes from is secondary. Isn't it?

XV

Mr. Journe strode back and forth in the hall of the courthouse. He had a trial this morning. At ten o'clock. He had read the depositions, reread all the evidence. His lady had been injured by the act of another. This morning would see the truth told. As he paced, he reconstituted the testimony of the opposition in his mind. There was no doubt. He would win.

But down the hall, at Mike Soniat's door, he saw the young clerk beckoning to him. He frowned. Even the hall of the courthouse at six-thirty in the morning has no privacy. People will be . . . everywhere. With demands, with needs. Lord God.

Mike Soniat had already poured the coffee. He looked very tired.

—We've got a problem, he said.

—I reckoned that, Walter Journe said. —But I've already talked to the young man. The insurance company has decided to make a last stand here. Lord, they all remind me of Custer.

—No, Soniat said. —Father O'Malley.

—What?

—A petition for an injunction . . . to . . . end heroic measures . . .

Walter Journe squinted at his friend. He had never had any problem in understanding Mike Soniat before. He might disagree with his decisions. But he understood him. —I don't think I'm . . .

Soniat's face was expressionless. He held a paper in his hand. —I have here a petition which asks that I order all extraordinary measures ceased in the matter of Father Cornelius O'Malley, that I direct the hospital and its staff to allow him death with dignity, to end his suffering . . .

—I . . . don't understand, Mike. What the hell . . . ?

Mike Soniat leaned back in his chair, his face still revealing nothing. —Walt, haven't you heard? Where the hell do you live? In a vacuum-sealed box?

Journe took that as an insult. He put his coffee down. —I live, goddamnit, in my house. Where I have lived for fifty and more years. What's going on here, Mike . . . ?

But even before he answered, Walter Journe knew that the case was altered, that it was a lawyer talking to a judge. Not Walt talking to Mike.

—He's at the point of death, Judge Soniat said. —But somehow he's . . . talking. About people. About everything that ever happened in this town . . .

Journe was not sure he grasped what the judge was saying. —Talking, he said.

—It's something . . . that happens. He's repeating . . . all his confessions, everything. From God knows when . . . until now . . .

—My God, Journe said. —How is that possible . . . ?

The judge shrugged. —They found Miss Lacour this morning . . . in the church . . .

—What . . . ?

—Dead. She had gone there . . . when? Saturday night or Sunday morning. She had cut her wrists. There was this note . . .

The judge handed a piece of paper to Mr. Journe. He took it gingerly, read it slowly, thinking of Casey Lacour, such a fine lady. Oh Lord, the cost of being a survivor.

> I go to meet those who have awaited me for thirty years. I go gladly,
>
> because Father O'Malley, even in his last days, has made me see that I should have paid long ago the small price of life for the great gift of love. God, his illness is my health. Thank you, God, and forgive my hurrying. Please. Please.

—Dr. Aronson called. Said the old man had been talking about what Miss Lacour had told him years ago. About a boy she met while she was in England. About a baby she . . . didn't have. Maybe a nurse's aide told her. It doesn't matter . . .

Mr. Journe stared at the judge. —That's right. It doesn't matter.

There was silence between them for a moment. That silence that comes between rivals in the law. After a moment, Journe came to himself.

—Who filed the petition . . . ?

—John Doe, Judge Soniat said.

—What the goddamned hell are you talking about?

—It's valid. We have an attorney of record from Baton Rouge . . .

—Who the hell's the plaintiff . . . ?

—He alleges irreparable damage, a proper interest . . . and that he cannot make himself known . . . because to do so would . . . amount to the same damage . . . He alleges the old man can't recover, can't even live more than a few days . . . but that many people will be hurt if he goes on . . .

Journe felt his face flush with anger. —That's not a petition . . . that's a bad joke . . . Judge Soniat returned his glare. —We're going to have a hearing at eleven o'clock. Is that convenient for you, Mr. Journe?

—I don't believe this . . .

—There's law on it. You've read that New Jersey case . . .

—This isn't sonofabitching New Jersey, your honor . . . This is Louisiana . . . Who's a plaintiff that has any proper relationship to Father . . .

—Father Veulon . . . from the archdiocese . . . he . . . joined with the John Doe plaintiff . . . to end Father O'Malley's . . . suffering . . .

—My God, Mr. Journe gasped. —Mike, is this a . . . setup?

Judge Soniat's eyes did not waver. —I'll see you at eleven o'clock, counselor, he said.

XVI

Elizabeth Slack was carrying her flowers into the hospital when Dr. Aronson met her.

—For Father O'Malley . . . ?

—Yes. How is he?

—He's terminal. A matter of hours or days.

—He can't . . . recover?

—No, Liz. I'm sorry . . .

She went onward, toward the corner room, pushed the door open, smiling, and before Miss Lefebre could say anything, Elizabeth had placed the vase full of daffodils on the table beside the bed.

—That much, at least, Amy, she said triumphantly.

Amy returned her stare without emotion. —Mrs. Slack, no one is admitted . . .

—And why not? Elizabeth asked, her voice rising. Dr. Aronson said . . . he said there was . . . no hope. How can we hurt one with no . . . hope?

Amy was about to answer, but she was too late. And she, like Elizabeth, was transfixed by that deep, strong distant voice that brought back a past neither of them had known.

—Ah, my sweet Christ, Father O'Malley said. —What have you done, George? Do you know what you've done? In that car? It was an accident, wasn't it . . . ?

And another voice answered, a voice neither Elizabeth nor Amy had ever heard.

—Ye . . . yes, Father . . . killed . . . killed the whore, didn't I . . . didn't . . . I?

—You killed a woman you swore to love and honor till death, you damned fool . . .

—She . . . they . . . everybody . . . knew . . . everybody but me.

—What of the boy, George? What about your son?

—No. No . . . her . . . *his* son. Not mine. Blood tests. In Baton Rouge. I . . . that . . . bastard . . . not mine, you understand . . . not mine . . . It's certain . . . not mine . . .

Father O'Malley was silent for a moment, his dry lips working. His eyes closed, and it seemed that there were tears on his cheeks, but it was impossible to be sure, because Miss Lefebre moved so quickly, her small cloth mopping his expressionless face.

—Really, Mrs. Slack . . . Dr. Aronson . . .

—Shut up, Elizabeth said, her eyes wide, her ears perked. —Just shut up, Amy.

—George, you're dying, do you know it? You're dying with her blood on your hands . . . in the name of Jesus, make a good act of contrition . . .

—My ass . . . I'd kill her a hundred times, do you hear? Do you . . . do you . . .

—George, in God's name, think of the boy . . . think of your immortal soul . . .

— . . . Ga . . . Goddamn the bastard, and my soul . . . is . . . is . . .

Father O'Malley fell silent, his eyes fixed on the distant crucifix.

Elizabeth watched him, hardly believing what she had heard.

—Mrs. Slack . . . you've *got* to leave, do you understand . . . ?

Elizabeth shook her head, closed her eyes for a moment, then turned to Amy. Her voice was soft, composed, her smile serene. —Of course, Amy, I don't know what . . . I was thinking of . . .

XVII

Dr. Aronson was meeting the press. He had hardly gotten to the hospital before the newspaper and television people began demanding, on behalf of the public's right to know, that he clarify certain stories which had already traveled as far as New Orleans and Baton Rouge. It was said that a priest in St. Stephanie had gone mad and begun blackmailing those who had gone to him for the sacrament of penance. There had been one death, possibly as many as three. Someone questioned whether, at the insistence of certain church officials, the priest was being confined there at the hospital under deep sedation. Dr. Aronson shook his head and said, —No comment. But it was not as simple as that.

—Is it true, a young woman from Channel 6 in New Orleans asked, —that there is . . . something . . . abnormal about . . . Father O'Neill's ailment . . . something . . . beyond . . . medicine . . . ?

My God, Aronson thought. Demonism. Voodoo.

—No, he said. —Father O'Neill . . . I mean Father O'Malley suffered a severe cardiovascular accident last Wednesday. His brain was . . . virtually destroyed . . .

—Then how can he be doing these things, a reporter from *The Advocate* demanded.

—He isn't doing anything, Dr. Aronson shot back, angrily. —Except dying.

—Look, doctor, some of us saw that note. The one the old lady wrote. One of the deputies at the sheriff's office . . .

— . . . nothing to do with Father O'Malley. She was elderly, lonely . . .

—Some of your staff says the old man is talking, telling things that happened in the 1920s . . . that he was talking in foreign languages . . .

—A volunteer nurse's aide said she heard the living voice of her mother who died in 1941, making a confession . . . heard her mother confess an act against nature with her father . . . She says she's considering suit . . . ruined her memory of her family . . .

XVIII

—George, Amy was saying. —George, is that you? Listen, honey . . . what? She is? Oh, my God. Don't pay any attention to anything she tells you . . . really, she's making it all up, she's a spiteful bitch. No? Believe me . . . she . . . what? I'm not. I never asked you for . . . Oh, goddamn you . . . Go ahead. And every single word she says is true . . .

XIX

Mr. Journe had just put the finishing touches on an act of sale that would be passed the next day when Father Veulon strode into his office with that ubiquitous confident smile of his. It was as if he had an arsenal of expressions, each stamped out to grace an occasion, but none which was not rehearsed, the result of considerable market research. He was not much like Father O'Malley.

—Yes, Father, what can I do for you? Father Veulon sat down unasked, raised the crease in his black trousers, glanced at his digital wristwatch and smiled.

—At . . . eleven, I think . . . the hearing . . .

—Yes?

—Judge Soniat tells me that . . . your representation in a case . . . like
this is . . . pro forma.

Mr. Journe bristled. —About as pro forma as your consecration of the host, Father . . .

—But . . . you're court appointed . . . for legal purposes . . .

—Father, the nature of my representation is a legal matter. What's your interest . . . ?

—I . . . I've spoken with His Excellency . . .

—And who would that be . . . ?

—I mean the Archbishop, of course . . . He feels that any prolongation of Father O'Malley's life . . . under the circumstances . . . given the hopelessness of it . . . He would prefer . . . death with dignity . . .

Mr. Journe's eyes locked on those of the priest. —I never saw that kind, he said, —Ordinarily they puke and bleed and gasp. They give up very slowly, unwillingly . . . perhaps, though, you have a charm . . .

Father Veulon tried to look scandalized. —I thought . . . you were . . . a Catholic, Mr. Journe . . .

—So did I. But then Judas was a Catholic, wasn't he?

—So you mean to . . .

—Right to the Supreme Court, Mr. Journe said. —Good day, Father.

XX

He had gone now, and Elizabeth was relieved. Truly, there is an ecstasy in being free from a burden you can no longer justify. She giggled aloud as she poured herself a cup of freshly brewed coffee. —Bastard, she shouted into the empty house. —Bastard . . .

It was not freedom from him, from the Bastard. That was nothing. It didn't matter. One Bastard or another, or none at all. No, that didn't matter. It was the other thing. About what she had heard, she could feel compassion. He was a person who could not do well with that truth suddenly jutting out of the earth after forty years as if it had never been buried in those two graves that he never visited on that rainy January day so long ago. As if, rather, it had only been placed in a time machine, sent off to return with full vigor and potency a little later.

Her face lost its hilarity. She was thinking of Father O'Malley. For some reason, she was remembering an afternoon in 1946. It was his last year with the baseball team. The young men were coming home now, somebody had said. It was possible to obtain the services of someone more suitable. The boys had resented it, but in 1946, boys did not strike or sit in. They only played their hearts out and somehow made the Class A semifinals. She had gone on the trip to Baton Rouge on the bus, with George. One of their first dates. The team had lost in the semifinals. But they had lifted Father O'Malley high on their shoulders, carrying him back to the bus when the game was over. She remembered him there, up high, flustered, tears in his eyes, a man of fifty who had never really learned to take love and admiration in stride, his hands touching the hands, the caps, the shoulders and faces of his boys.

—Ah, God, she had heard him almost shout, —how the Lord loves good fighters, boys . . .

The tintype of that moment stayed fixed in her mind for a moment, and then began to fade, the background first, then the boys and the tumult, even the warmth of the June day until at last, like the smile of Alice's cat, there remained in frozen frame only the flushed face of Father O'Malley, a lock of gray hair over his eyes, unfading, sharp-edged, as if his presence had been the only truth of that day so long ago.

She closed her eyes and opened them, and he was gone. He had not blurred and then slowly disappeared like the rest, like George, like that distant weather encircling the ephemeral game. He had only vanished.

I wonder, Elizabeth thought, if he is so sharply etched because I knew somehow what he bore, what everyone of us put upon him, and what he could not put away, give over, share with anyone else. We had our births and deaths and agonies. He had his own, and all of ours. My God, how can all that die? How can he?

She drank down her coffee, and started for the car. Somehow it was changed now, changed utterly. She could hardly remember the pain or the hatred she had felt Saturday night when she had awakened to find the bed beside her empty. What she had come to know, she knew. But it no longer had meaning. It was changed. She saw that they were all Bastards, teasing, hurting, because they were alone. She had heard those last terrible moments of his father's life, and she had thought she was running from the room with her awful new weapon to scourge him, to twist away his pride and self respect, to punish him. But she hadn't. She had fled, fearing another revelation, one meant for her from that dying oracle created by fifty years of silence amid them and their ways.

She climbed into her car, started it quickly, and did not hear the uncharacteristic squeal of tires as she pulled out of the driveway.

—Ah, God, she said aloud over the music of the easy-listening station, —How the Lord loves a fighter.

XXI

—I'll see you in chambers, gentlemen, Judge Soniat told Walter Journe and the attorney from Baton Rouge. —You come along, too Father Veulon. I'll recognize you as a friend of the court . . .

—Where's the principal? Mr. Journe asked harshly. —I want to see the plaintiff . . .

—He's represented, the judge said shortly. —This is Mr. Amacker from Price, Moses, and Amacker in Baton Rouge.

They shook hands as they walked toward the judge's chambers. The courtroom was almost full now with newspaper people, TV reporters, and a gaggle of townspeople.

Mr. Journe stepped before Judge Soniat's desk. —I want the plaintiff, Mike. He's alleging irreparable harm, and I have the right to examine him on that allegation . . . under the act . . .

—This isn't a criminal trial.

—In Louisiana, the rules of evidence are identical . . . and there's a death involved . . .

Judge Soniat brushed him off. —Now, gentlemen, I mean to settle this in chambers. Then we will go out there, I will read my decision in about two minutes, and these nasty sons of bitches from the city—sorry, Mr. Amacker, Father, I mean the newsmen—can go crawl back into the walls and under the rocks where they came from . . .

—I'm filing for supervisory writs just as soon as you get done, Mike, Mr. Journe said. —Unless they all go home with no story at all.

Judge Soniat looked across at Miss Althea, his secretary. She was crying, and the tears were dropping onto her stenographer's pad.

—Now, gentlemen, Mr. Journe is here to show cause why I should not grant a permanent injunction ordering the hospital to cease and desist from taking any extraordinary measures to preserve the life of Cornelius O'Malley, lately pastor of Holy Redeemer Church, now in the parish hospital, under the care of Dr. Amadeus Aronson. It is alleged that Father O'Malley is, in fact, clinically dead, but that he is being kept alive by mechanical means which are cruel and unnatural, although he has no hope of recovery or of leading a meaningful life. It is alleged further that in his terminal condition, without his volition, he is, and has been for several days, revealing the secrets of the confessional and things told him by hundreds of people in the most strict and holy confidence, and that these revelations have already caused pain, suffering, and death, and will cause much more, including to the John Doe who institutes this suit because of the irreparable damage that will be done him if certain things told by him to said Father O'Malley should be revealed . . .

The voice of Judge Soniat droned on. It appeared that there was no end to the petition. Mr. Journe almost smiled, imagining the terror of John Doe, one who confessed and assumed that that was the end of it—not only in the next world, but in this one as well. Now, suddenly, he was faced with the horror which had plagued even Guido da Montefeltro, burning in hell: that his sins should be revealed on earth. Mr. Journe considered what might be the value of a confession when one was prepared to end a life rather than have his sins revealed. Surely the good Southern Baptists had found a better solution: open confession before the congregation; or none at all. Perhaps a secret confession was no confession, simply a deal. I will set my wickedness out before God, with the understanding that it shall never be known to man. But who had been most injured by the wickedness? Was the right of man to know and to forgive less than that of God?

— . . . be removed from any and all mechanical devices or support systems of whatever kind, and allowed to die a natural death with dignity.

Judge Soniat was done. He took off his glasses.

—This appears to be a case of first impression in Louisiana. Once the ways of death were . . . beyond our tampering. Now . . .

He stared out the window. They could hear the soft sound of Miss Althea's sobbing. The sun was high and hot, and through open windows the sweet, incredibly pure fragrance of magnolia and gardenia came.

The judge's head snapped back around. —Damnit, Althea, stop that sniveling . . .

The sound stopped abruptly, then began again, perhaps a little louder. —I'm going to get me a tape recorder in a minute or two . . . I mean it.

Miss Althea was quiet. —Mr. Amacker, did you want to add anything to your petition?

The young lawyer cleared his throat. He was not ill at ease. Not civilized enough to be nervous, Mr. Journe considered. Another technician.

—Your honor, the situation we have here is unique. We have a wonderful old man who passed most of his life in this town, whose contribution . . . but now, in the closing hours of his life, he . . . he's jeopardizing the very community and people he served for fifty years. He is, according to Dr. Aronson, clinically unable to support his own life without the marvelous instruments and mechanisms at the hospital . . .

There was much more praise of the hospital, of the town, of the court, and especially of Father O'Malley. Mr. Journe considered it sounded more like a testimonial dinner speech than a demand for capital punishment. But Amacker was good. He knew how to go about it. He knew better than to play the prosecutor, knew that the judge had nerved himself up to consider this petition, was obviously nerved enough to issue the order. It would not take much to wreck that readiness. No, Journe, he's a smart young bastard. Not going to do my work for me.

Amacker was finishing. —Heavy with years, loaded down with memories of his people's anguish. If he could, he'd say, "This shouldn't go on. I'm hurting people in my final delirium that I'd rather die for than hurt . . . Better death with dignity. Now. Once and for all . . ."

Amacker smiled kindly at Mr. Journe. —After all, what does Father O'Malley have to fear from death? His whole life has been . . . a preparation for it . . . After this death, there is no other . . .

Amacker's voice almost broke as he concluded. Mr. Journe shook his head. This little bastard would be governor or senator in a couple of years. He was a lot better than good. He'd covered almost all the ground.

Judge Soniat looked over at Mr. Journe. —Well, Walter?

Mr. Journe looked around the room. —Does Father Veulon plan to have a say . . . ?

Soniat looked at him. —Father . . . ?

Father Veulon gave the judge one of his most organized smiles. —I had thought . . . after Mr. Journe was done . . .

—Oh, no, Father, Mr. Journe said. —If you're speaking for the writ, you can do it right now . . .

—But I . . . I have only Father O'Malley's interests . . .

—Crap, Mr. Journe heard himself say. —I'm his curator . . . you're his hangman . . .

—All right, Walter, Judge Soniat said. —Watch your mouth. If you want to talk, Father, it'll have to be now . . . I want this thing done right.

Father Veulon shrugged. Mr. Journe smiled almost imperceptibly. Their orchestration was thrown off. Not an important thing, but something.

Father Veulon spoke of the sanctity of the confessional, the price in human suffering that had been paid through two millennia in order to assure the silence that Father O'Malley was now breaking, through no fault of his own. He pointed out how the priest's affliction was causing him to break his most sacred vows and, by doing so, to injure his people, his priesthood, and the church itself.

—Nothing in church doctrine demanded this extraordinary treatment, Father Veulon said. —Death is not the great terror, after all. When there could be no meaningful life, then wasn't it time to cease the almost demonic determination to keep the body alive at all costs . . . ?

—Death is the common end, Father Veulon said. —Why should it be resisted when such resistance is of no help to the dying, and a positive injury to those who must go on living . . . ?

The room was quiet for a moment. Then Mr. Journe got up, stretched, and walked around the capacious chambers.

—I guess I must be missing something, he said, —because you all make killing seem so right, so inevitable. You make it sound like ending a life is the greatest favor you can render. What youall are setting forth for the judge to consider is that a lawyer and a priest say that justice and truth can best be served by getting this old priest underground as fast as it can be done . . . What can I say to that? I feel like somebody picked me up and took me back forty years and 3,000 miles away. I feel like some poor devil of an advocate before a Nazi court arguing that you shouldn't kill or maim a feebleminded woman, and that maybe even killing Jews for the sake of the state misses what the state is about . . .

Mr. Journe argued for a long time, but he couldn't break out of the Alice-in-Wonderland feeling, as if Judge Soniat and Amacker and Father Veulon were no more than a pack of cards, and that this whole business was like Moot Court back in school, that, when it was done, everyone would laugh, and say "April fool," and go home, and Father O'Malley would either recover despite the diagnosis, or he would die in his own time, surrounded by people who loved him. Mr. Journe knew better, but that feeling still clung. So he decided to end it. How do you argue with a pack of cards?

—If it weren't for his talking, no one would be here. It's not death with dignity you want. It's silence and secrecy. If I could guarantee that, you'd all go home. But you and your miserable John Doe, you want him quiet, and it happens that the only way you see to manage that is by seeing him dead . . . It won't be the first time some guilty conspirators remembered that dead men tell no tales.

That last seemed to bother Father Veulon, but Mr. Amacker just continued to look concerned.

Then Mr. Journe's eyes narrowed. He looked at Judge Soniat for a long moment. —It's as if, seeing that it was a burden on society, a priest should refuse to baptize or give care to a helpless feebleminded child . . .

Mr. Journe heard his own voice, but he could not believe the words. He would have supposed that he had never spoken them, that they had been no more than phantasmagoria of an old man lonely too long, words thought but never spoken. But Judge Soniat's face gave proof that he had spoken his thoughts. Michael Soniat stared at him, his face bleached by sudden emotion.

I shouldn't have done that, Mr. Journe thought in the pendulous silence which swung above them, both men speechless, but with the very burden of soundlessness passing from one to the other with the fierce urgency of terminal conversation. I shouldn't because the old man wouldn't have, not to save his life.

He said more, remembering none of it, able later only to conjure the recollection of a fabric of skewed language fluttering like torn curtains in the window of an empty house. He would remember feeling abstracted, removed from the small circle whose shadows, pinned to a distant book-lined wall, grew perceptibly shorter as he argued. He would be amazed that he could have gone on until one o'clock, Amacker and Veulon at first passive as funeral mutes, then restless, eyes wandering out to the sun-flamed street where the town's blood flowed, cell by cell, in the people passing, incredibly unaware of the loss being compounded so near their ordinary ways, and finally paying no attention at all, looking at Judge Soniat with pleading expressions, almost as if they had decided to join with Journe in his struggle against death with dignity.

But it isn't compassion or understanding or the power of words that drives them, Mr. Journe remembered thinking. There's no turning around in the bastards. They're just hungry. And they need to piss.

He paused, tried to remember what he had said, what he might have left unsaid. It was late. Finish it. Never just stop. Unworthy of the craft. There must always be a coda. To let them know you could go on all day.

—I didn't know that you demanded a man's death because he spoke the truth, because, as a matter of fact, you're dead certain he is speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth . . . What we demand of a man in court can get him killed nowadays . . . No, I didn't know that . . . It took a big-town lawyer and a hotshot priest to let me know . . .

He stopped then. It was way past one o'clock and he was tired. He was trying to think ahead, to the Court of Appeal, to the Supreme Court, to what he would say there. There was talk between Mr. Amacker and

the judge, and then, almost before Mr. Journe could grasp what he was saying, Judge Soniat was giving them his decision.

— . . . of opinion that this writ should issue, since no medical purpose can be served by the mere extension of bodily functions where all sentient and meaningful life has ended irreversibly. . .

Mr. Journe's shoulders slumped. The pack of cards had assumed the status of reality.

—I'll be filing for an appeal, Mr. Journe said slowly, not comprehending the look of pity in Judge Soniat's eyes. The judge turned to his secretary.

—Miss Althea, you dial up Justice Walker . . . He said he'd be standing by . . .

The judge turned to Mr. Journe. —We'll step out, Walter, so you can speak to Justice Walker. . . I talked to him this morning . . . The Supreme Court is ready to take this case directly as *res nova* . . .

Mr. Journe could tell that Amacker and the priest had known. It came across his mind that he had lived too long, much too long. God knows what the world would be like in another twenty years. But, surely, he had lived too long.

Mr. Journe watched Miss Althea slowly dial the long distance number of the Louisiana Supreme Court. He remembered her telling him not so long ago that it seemed unnatural, long distance with no operator. Then, suddenly, as he watched her head bent over the push-button telephone, he saw her for just a moment as she had been thirty-five years before. He had known her mother and father, her brother who sold used cars in Slidell and died in a fishing accident in Lake Borgne. Lord, how he knew the details of the lives he had lived out his own among. But not the inside, not the portion that Father O'Malley knew.

Could there be such a thing as a spiritual delict, Mr. Journe wondered. *Every act whatever of man that causes injury to another obliges him by whose fault it occurs to repair it.* That lovely convoluted prose of the code. *Every* act. Of course, not that of a child of tender years, not that of a *furiosus*, one gone in his own visions, out beyond the reach of common reason. But Father O'Malley was neither a child nor a madman. Could his stroke absolve him? No, nothing could. Every act whatever. And what act had the old man not known? His act had been to reveal those other acts; his tort to bring up to light the shame and pain and evil of a whole community. Ah Lord, today we do not send the scapegoat forth. If he names the sins put upon his head, we simply pull him off the machine.

—I've got Justice Walker . . .

Miss Althea was starting to cry again. She put down the phone and followed the others out of chambers.

Mr. Journe stared at the phone and picked it up. The voice at the other end was one he recognized. Leave it to Michael Soniat. He had chosen the one Supreme Court judge they both knew: Harold Walker. Short, jovial, a Santa Claus of a man. From their district. A fine legal scholar, an activist who used the code like a canvas to sketch out his own ideas of the meaning of the law, and who always required that whatever formula you used, you got down to the rights and wrongs of a case. Mr. Journe's heart sunk within him. Harold Walker was a pragmatist.

He remembered arguing a case before the Circuit Court of Appeal before Harold went to the high court. Mr. Journe had had a fine case. He had had the law, the code, even the precedents, for whatever they might matter. But Harold had interrupted his argument, and fixed him with that affectionate jovial smile of his, and asked, —Well, well, Mr. Journe, you've laid it all out for us, and I see what you're saying. But is it right?

Lord God, is it right? What kind of a maniac judge asks that of a lawyer? The judge is supposed to answer that question, not the advocate. No, the lawyer, having taken a case, is supposed to have only one view, and to argue that view until a final decision cuts him short. No one has the right to ask the advocate to judge. He cannot. It is not his function.

—Hello, Harold, Mr. Journe said, and then he listened.

When he hung up, he sat down, drew out a white handkerchief, and wiped his forehead. Justice Walker had not asked him what was right this time.

XXII

It was late afternoon now, and Miss Lefebre was on duty next to Father O'Malley. He had been quiet for a long time. She had wet his lips with water. She was very high. Was it Percodan, Darvon? She couldn't remember. Something. Oh, Christ, she should have had courage, should have left her enameled pillbox alone. Now her head was full of peculiar things raised up from her childhood. Was she moistening the lips of Christ, or was what seemed to be cotton really coals, and were those the lips of the prophet Isaiah, or was she out on the edge of something she couldn't handle? Christ, why don't people just lie down and die?

But if that was what she really felt, then why was she touching the old man's lips again so quickly? Why were her lips touching his dry pink forehead where the silver hair had been combed back so immaculately?

XXIII

George Slack was drunk and walking toward the hospital. He was not clear on his purpose. Perhaps he wanted to hear his father's voice through the lips of the old man. He could not remember his father's voice, and amid the liquor it had come to him that he would be willing to hear that voice say anything, admit to any crime, profess any horror. Just to be able to hear that voice again.

He stumbled once, and fell into some shrubbery, but after a few minutes he got to his feet and started again. It began to rain. It was a soft rain, and he hardly noticed it, only the gradual wetting of his suit which grew heavier and heavier, until at last he threw away his jacket, pulled off his tie. But he kept walking.

XXIV

The raindrops fell on Elizabeth Slack's windshield and they made her feel very old. Make the small rain to fall, she thought, wondering where those words had come from, suddenly, into her mind. Her anger had passed. Even the pain had begun to ebb. It was her pride, after all, wasn't it? The notion that she could be all things to him, and no one, truly, is all things to anyone. Not even to themselves. People reach for what they need, most especially when they feel the slow inexorable pain of age, terminal and irreversible, coming upon them. They do not suppose that it can be altered. They only imagine that it can be put off, held at bay for an hour, a day, a week. I think they are probably older afterward, she thought. They use up something of themselves in trying to hold off what is coming to be themselves.

She wondered where he was now. The rain fell harder. The radio, between easy-listening tunes, said that the rain was general all over south Louisiana, from Lafayette up as far as McComb. It ran down her windshield like tears, and Elizabeth shivered, recreating in her mind that winter rain long ago, in 1936, and a car out of control like the man within it, hurtling toward a concrete bridge abutment so recently completed by workers for the WPA. To end his agony, to defeat the woman who had hurt him already beyond defeat, thinking not at all of the child who was waiting, who would wait for forty years for word of what had befallen them.

—Oh, my God, can you forgive me? Elizabeth said aloud, unsure of whether the forgiveness she asked was God's. Or his. Wherever he was. Now, tonight. In the rain.

XXV

Dr. Aronson was driving. In the seat beside him Judge Soniat and Mr. Journe sat silent. In the rear seat Father Veulon watched his breath fog the side window. He would try to get back to New Orleans tonight, rain or no rain. Even if he had to rent a car.

The car pulled up in front of the hospital. There were a number of cars there with the call letters of TV stations in New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

—Goddamn, Dr. Aronson said. —Excuse me, Father. Oh, the hell with excusing me. Those stinking vultures . . .

They sat wordless for a moment. —Vultures follow killers, Mr. Journe said.

—That's uncalled for, Judge Soniat said roughly.

—Don't push me, Michael, Mr. Journe said. —This isn't your courtroom . . .

Dr. Aronson shrugged. There was nothing to be done. He could see another clump of reporters around the side of the emergency entrance. —As well here as there, he said, and opened his door.

The rain was coming in gusts now, and the men ran clumsily under the portico of the hospital, pushing past reporters who shouted questions at them and followed them into the reception area and down the corridor until two sheriff's deputies sent ahead by the judge pushed them back roughly and kept them there in the reception area, where visitors and families of patients looked at them with astonishment.

They brushed the rain from their garments as they walked, still silent, saying nothing to one another.

The room was dark after the brightly lit corridor, and for a moment they could not penetrate the darkness with nothing but the night-light above the bed and the glow of the instruments for illumination. Then they came to themselves, and saw Amy Lefebre kneeling beside the bed, her hand intertwined with the unresisting hand of Father O'Malley, whose eyes remained fixed on the crucifix, which must have seemed as distant as the moon, if, indeed, he could see it at all.

Father Veulon hurried to assist Miss Lefebre to her feet. It was obvious that she was not herself. Somehow she had hurt her hands, and they were bleeding. A nurse's aide took her outside, and even within the room, it was possible to hear her voice, and the muted sounds of the reporters down the corridor.

— . . . killing a saint . . . God forgive . . . bless me, Father . . .

Judge Soniat exchanged a glance with Dr. Aronson. —Did you want me to read the order, doctor . . . ?

Dr. Aronson stared back at him. —I really, think we can . . . do without that, Judge.

Father Veulon went to the bed and began to give Father O'Malley the sacrament of extreme unction. He placed the holy oil on his head, his hands, his feet. Father O'Malley stirred, his lips moved, as if they were searching for a voice to give them meaning. His eyes seemed to follow Father Veulon . . .

—Ah, son, Father O'Malley said, his voice hoarse, coming from a vast distance. —No, no, you must give that up. What worse crime is there . . . ?

Another voice came from him. —But . . . it's . . . it's what I *am*, Father. Isn't it . . . isn't love what . . . we're supposed to have?

—Not love . . . a thing that kills the spirit . . . the ruin of all fleshly ruins. My God, better you be with a poor innocent girl . . .

—No, I don't *want* that . . .

Father Veulon reddened, did his work quickly.

—I'm . . . through now, he said, making a final unconvincing sign of the cross over Father O'Malley, who had fallen silent again.

—All right, Doctor, Judge Soniat said, and the doctor moved toward the machines.

Mr. Journe moved toward the bed. He took the old man's hand in his, some of the chrism rubbing onto his fingers. —Go in peace, Cornelius, Mr. Journe said, tears running down his face. —I tried to . . . never mind. I'll be along in no time at all . . .

Father O'Malley roused again, his eyes turning toward Mr. Journe for sure. He looked at him for a long moment.

—For your penance, he said, —say ten Our Fathers, ten Hail Marys . . . and a good act of contrition . . . now . . .

While Dr. Aronson snapped switches, Mr. Journe knelt beside the bed. Behind him, Judge Soniat found himself kneeling, too, saying —Oh, my God . . .

XXVI

When they came out, the reporters had been pushed outside by the deputies, and some had left rather than stand in the rain. There was one car with the call letters of a TV station in New Orleans owned by the Jesuits, and Father Veulon, after making cursory farewells, hastened to it, spoke with the driver briefly, and got in as it drove away.

Just beyond the portico, George Slack lay in the rain, coatless, a rill of blood running down his mouth where a deputy had struck him, mistaking him for an exceptionally obstreperous reporter. Beside him, Elizabeth knelt, wiping away the blood, telling him, in a voice so soft that it could hardly be heard above the rustle of the rain, that not a

word she had told him earlier was true, and that he had to try to get up now, try to get to the car. They had to go home.

Then there were only Judge Soniat and Mr. Journe left standing under the portico. The rain had let up, but it had not stopped. They stood speechless beside one another, hearing, above the soft sound of the rain yet falling, the louder sound of it dripping from the eaves of the hospital, from the trees all around, scuttling downward to earth through the drains. In the distance, a pair of headlights lanced through the darkness for a moment and then were lost again in the gloom.

Judge Soniat cleared his throat and started to walk down the driveway. He paused for a moment, and without quite turning, looked backward at Mr. Journe.

—See you in court, Counselor, he said, and then walked on.