Pleadings

John William Corrington

PLEADINGS

I

Dinner was on the table when the phone rang, and Joan just stared at me.

—Go ahead, answer it. Maybe they need you in Washington.

—I don't want to get disbarred, I said. —More likely they need me at the parish prison.

I was closer than she was. It was Bertram Bijou, a deputy out in Jefferson Parish. He had a friend. With troubles. Being a lawyer, you find out that nobody has trouble, really. It's always a friend.

—Naw, on the level, Bert said. —You know Howard Bedlow?

No, I didn't know Howard Bedlow, but I would pretty soon.

They came to the house after supper. As a rule, I put people off when they want to come to the house. They've got eight hours a day to find out how to incorporate, write a will, pull their taxes down or whatever. In the evening I like to sit quietly with Joan. We read and listen to Haydn or Boccherini and watch the light fade over uptown New Orleans. Sometimes, though I do not tell her, I like to imagine we are a late Roman couple sitting in our atrium in the countryside of England, not far from Londiniurn. It is always summer, and Septimius Severus has not yet begun to tax Britain out of existence. Still, it is twilight now, and there is nothing before us. We are young, but the world is old, and that is all right because the drive and the hysteria of destiny is past now, and we can sit and enjoy our garden, the twisted ivy, the huge calladiums, and, if it is April, the daffodils that plunder our weak sun and sparkle across the land. It is always cool in my fantasy, and Joan crochets something for the center of our table, and I refuse to think of the burdens of administration that I will have to lift again tomorrow. They will wait, and Rome will never even know. It is always a hushed single moment, ageless and serene, and I am with her, and only the hopeless are still ambitious. Everything we will do has been done, and for the moment there is peace.

It is a silly fantasy, dreamed here in the heart of booming America, but it makes me happy, and so I was likely showing my mild irritation when Bert and his friend Howard Bedlow turned up. I tried to be kind. For several reasons. Bert is a nice man. An honest deputy, a politician in a small way, and perhaps what the

Civil Law likes to call "un bon pere du famille"—though I think at Common Law, Bert would be "an officious intermeddler." He seems prone to get involved with people. Partly because he would like very much to be on the Kenner city council one day, but, I like to imagine, as much because there lingers in the Bijou blood some tincture of piety brought here and nurtured by his French sires and his Sicilian and Spanish maternal ascendants. New Orleans has people like that. A certain kindness, a certain sympathy left over from the days when one person's anguish or that of a family was the business of all their neighbors. Perhaps that fine and profound Catholic certainty of death and judgment which makes us all one.

And beyond approving Bert as a type, I have found that most people who come for law are in one way or another distressed: the distress of loss or fear, of humiliation or sudden realization. Or the more terrible distress of greed, appetite gone wild, the very biggest of deals in the offing, and Oh my God, don't let me muff it.

Howard Bedlow was in his late forties. He might have been the Celtic gardener in my imaginary Roman garden. Taller than average, hair a peculiar reddish gold more suited to a surfing king than to an unsuccessful car salesman, he had that appearance of a man scarce half made up that I had always associated with European workmen and small tradesmen. His cuffs were frayed and too short. His collar seemed wrong; it fit neither his neck nor the thin stringy tie he wore knotted more or less under it. Once, some years ago, I found, he had tried to make a go of his own Rambler franchise, only to see it go down like a gutshot animal, month by month, week by week, until at last no one, not even the manager of the taco place next door, would cash his checks or give him a nickel for a local phone call.

Now he worked, mostly on commission, for one used car lot or another, as Bert told it. He had not gone bankrupt in the collapse of the Rambler business, but had sold his small house on the west bank and had paid off his debts, almost all of them dollar for dollar, fifty here, ten there. When I heard that, I decided against offering them coffee. I got out whiskey. You serve a man what he's worth, even if he invades your fantasies.

As Bert talked on, only pausing to sip his bourbon, Bedlow sat staring into his glass, his large hands cupping it, his fingers moving restlessly around its rim, listening to Bert as if he himself had no stake in all that was passing. I had once known a musician who had sat that way when people caught him in a

situation where talk was inevitable. Like Bedlow, he was not resentful, only elsewhere, and his hands, trained to a mystical perfection, worked over and over certain passages in some silent score.

Bedlow looked up as Bert told about the house trailer he, Bedlow, lived in now—or had lived in until a week or so before. Bedlow frowned almost sympathetically, as if he could find some measure of compassion for a poor man who had come down so far.

—Now I got to be honest, Bert said at last, drawing a deep breath. —Howard, he didn't want to come. Bad times with lawyers.

—I can see that, I said.

—He can't put all that car franchise mess out of mind. Bitter, you know. Gone down hard. Lawyers like vultures, all over the place.

Bedlow nodded, frowning. Not in agreement with Bert on his own behalf, but as if he, indifferent to all this, could appreciate a man being bitter, untrusting after so much. I almost wondered if the trouble wasn't Bert's, so distant from it Bedlow seemed.

—I got to be honest, Bert said again. Then he paused, looking down at his whiskey. Howard studied his drink, too.

—I told Howard he could come along with me to see you, or I had to take him up to Judge Talley. DWI, property damage, foul and abusive, resisting, public obscenity. You could pave the river with charges. I mean it.

All right. You could. And sometimes did. Some wise-ass tries to take apart Millie's Bar, the only place for four blocks where a workingman can sit back and sip one without a lot of hassle. You let him consider the adamantine justice of Jefferson Parish for thirty days or six months before you turn him loose at the Causeway and let him drag back to St. Tammany Parish with what's left of his tail tucked between his legs. Discretion of the Officer. That's the way it is, the way it's always been, the way it'll be until the whole human race learns how to handle itself in Millie's Bar.

But you don't do that with a friend. Makes no sense. You don't cart him off to Judge Elmer Talley, who is the scourge of the working class if the working class indulges in what others call the curse of the working class. No, Bert was clubbing his buddy. To get him to an Officer of the Court. All right.

—He says he wants a divorce, Bert said. —Drinks like a three-legged hog and goes to low-rating his wife in public and so on. Ain't that fine?

Bedlow frowned, shaking his head. It was *not* fine. He agreed with Bert, you could tell. It was sorry, too damned bad.

—I'm not going to tell you what he called his wife over to Sammie's Lounge last night. Sammie almost hit him. You know what I mean?

Yes I did. Maybe, here and there, the fire is not entirely out. I have known a man to beat another very nearly to death because the first spoke slightingly of his own mother. One does not talk that way about womenfolk, not even one's own. The lowly, the ignored, and the abused remember what the high-born and the wealthy have forgotten.

—Are you separated? I asked Bedlow.

—I ain't livin' with the woman, he said laconically. It was the first time he had spoken since he came into my house.

—What's the trouble?

He told me. Told me in detail. It seemed that there had been adultery. A clear and flagrant act of faithlessness resulting in a child. A child that was not his, not a Bedlow. He had been away, in the wash of his financial troubles, watching the Rambler franchise expire, trying hard to do right. And she did it, swore to Christ and the Virgin she never did it, and went to confinement carrying another man's child.

—When? I asked. —How old is . . . ?

—Nine, Bedlow said firmly. —He's . . . it's nine . . .

I stared at Bert. He shrugged. It seemed to be no surprise to him. Oh hell, I thought. Maybe what this draggle-assed country needs is an emperor. Even if he taxes us to death and declares war on Guatemala. This is absurd.

—Mr. Bedlow, I said. —You can't get a divorce for adultery with a situation like that.

—How come?

—You've been living with her all that . . . nine years?

—Yeah.

—They . . . call it reconciliation. No way. If you stay on, you are presumed . . . what the hell. How long have you lived apart?

—Two weeks and two days, he answered. I suspected he could have told me the hours and minutes.

—I couldn't take it any more. Knowing what I know . . .

Bedlow began to cry. Bert looked away, and I suppose I did. I have not seen many grown men cry cold sober. I have seen them mangled past any hope of life, twisting, screaming, cursing. I have seen them standing by a wrecked car while police and firemen tried to saw loose the bodies of their wives and children.

I have seen men, told of the death of their one son, stand hard-jawed with tears running down their slabby sunburned cheeks, but that was not crying. Bedlow was crying, and he did not seem the kind of man who cries.

I motioned Bert back into the kitchen. —What the hell . . . ?

—This man, Bert said, spreading his hands, —is in trouble.

—All right, I said, hearing Bedlow out in the parlor, still sobbing as if something more than his life might be lost. —All right. But I don't think it's a lawyer he needs.

Bert frowned, outraged. —Well, he sure don't need one of. . . them.

I could not be sure whether he was referring to priests or psychia-trists. Or both. Bert trusted the law. Even working with it, knowing better than I its open sores and ugly fissures, he believed in it, and for some reason saw me as one of its dependable functionaries. I guess I was pleased by that.

—Fill me in on this whole business, will you?

Yes, he would, and would have earlier over the phone, but he had been busy mollifying Sammie and some of his customers who wanted to lay charges that Bert could not have sidestepped.

It was short and ugly, and I was hooked. Bedlow's wife was a good woman. The child was a hopeless defective. It was kept up at Pineville, at the Louisiana hospital for the feebleminded, or whatever the social scientists are calling imbeciles this year. A vegetating thing that its mother had named Albert Sidney Bedlow before they had taken it away, hooked it up for a lifetime of intravenous feeding, and added it to the schedule for cleaning up filth and washing, and all the things they do for human beings who can do nothing whatever for themselves. But Irma Bedlow couldn't let it go at that. The state is equipped, albeit poorly, for this kind of thing. It happens. You let the thing go, and they see to it, and one day, usually not long hence, it dies of pneumonia or a virus, or one of the myriad diseases that float and sift through the air of a place like that. This is the way these things are done, and all of us at the law have drawn up papers for things called "Baby So-and-so," sometimes, mercifully, without their parents' having laid eyes on them.

Irma Bedlow saw it otherwise. During that first year, while the Rambler franchise was bleeding to death, while Bedlow was going half-crazy, she had spent most of her time up in Alexandria, a few miles from the hospital, at her sister's. So that she could visit Albert Sidney every day.

She would go there, Bert told me as Bedlow had told him, and sit in the drafty ward on a hard chair next to Albert Sidney's chipped institutional crib, with her rosary, praying to Jesus Christ that He would send down His grace on her baby, make him whole, and let her suffer in his place. She would kneel in the twilight beside the bed stiff with urine and stinking of such excrement as a child might produce who has never tasted food, amid the bedlam of chattering and choking and animal sounds from bedridden idiots, cretins, declining mongoloids, microcephalics, and assorted other exiles from the great altarpiece of Hieronymus Bosch. Somehow, the chief psychologist had told Howard, her praying upset the other inmates of the ward, and at last he had to forbid Irma's coming more than once a month. He told her that the praying was out altogether.

After trying to change the chief psychologist's mind, and failing, Irma had come home. The franchise was gone by then, and they had a secondhand trailer parked in a run-down court where they got water, electricity, and gas from pipes in the ground and a sullen old man in a pre-war De Soto station wagon picked up garbage once a week. She said the rosary there, and talked about Albert Sidney to her husband who, cursed now with freedom by the ruin of his affairs, doggedly looking for some kind of a job, had nothing much to do or think about but his wife's abstracted words and the son he had almost had. Indeed, did have, but had in such a way that the having was more terrible than the lack.

It had taken no time to get into liquor, which his wife never touched, she fasting and praying, determined that no small imperfection in herself should stay His hand who could set things right with Albert Sidney in the flash of a moment's passing.

—And in that line, Bert said, —she ain't . . . they . . . never been man and wife since then. You know what I mean?

—Ummm.

—And she runs off on him. Couple or three times a year. They always find her at the sister's. At least till last year. Her sister won't have her around any more. Seems Irma wanted her to fast for Albert Sidney, too. Wanted the sister's whole family to do it, and there was words, and now she just takes a room at a tourist court by the hospital and tries to get in as often as that chief psychologist will let her. But no praying, he holds to that.

—What does Bedlow believe?

—Claims he believes she got Albert Sidney with some other man.

—No, I mean . . . does he believe in praying?

—Naw. Too honest, I guess. Says he don't hold with beads and saying the same thing over and over. Says God stands on His own feet, and expects the same of us. Says we ain't here to shit around. What's done is done.

—Do you think he wants a divorce?

—Could he get one?

—Yes.

—Well, how do I know?

—You brought him here. He's not shopping for religious relics, is he?

Bert looked hurt. As if I were blaming him unfairly for some situation beyond his control or prevention.

—You want him in jail?

—No, I said. —I just don't know what to do about him. Where's he living?

—Got a cabin at the Bo-Peep Motel. Over off Veterans Highway. He puts in his time at the car lot and then goes to drinking and telling people his wife has done bastardized him.

—Why did he wait so long to come up with that line?

—It just come on him, what she must of done, he told me.

—That's right, Bedlow said, his voice raspy, aggressive. —I ain't educated or anything. I studied on it and after so long it come to me. I saw it wasn't *mine*, that . . . thing of hers. Look, how come she can't just get done mourning and say, well, that's how it falls out sometimes, and I'm sorry as all hell, but you got to keep going. That's what your ordinary woman would say, ain't it?

He had come into the kitchen where Bert and I were standing, his face still wet with tears. He came in talking, and the flow went on as if he were as compulsive with his tongue as he was with a bottle. The words tumbled out so fast that you felt he must have practiced, this country man, to speak so rapidly, to say so much.

—But no. I tell you what: she's mourning for what she done to that . . . thing's real father, that's what she's been doing. He likely lives in Alec, and she can't get over what she done him when she got that . . . thing. And I tell you this, I said, look, honey, don't give it no name, 'cause if you give it a name, you're gonna think that name over and over and make like it was the name of a person and it ain't, and it'll ruin us just as sure as creaking hell. And she went and named it my father's name, who got it after Albert Sidney Johnston at Shiloh . . . Look, I ain't laid

a hand on that woman in God knows how many years, I tell you that. So you see, that's what these trips is about. She goes up and begs his pardon for not giving him a fine boy like he wanted, and she goes to see . . . the thing, and mourns . . . and goddamnit to hell, I got to get shut of this . . . whole *thing*.

It came in a rush, as if, even talking, saying more words in the space of a moment than he had ever said before, Bedlow was enlarging, perfecting his suspicions—no, his certainty—of what had been done to him.

We were silent for a moment.

—Well, it's hard, Bert said at last.

—Hard, Bedlow glared at him as if Bert had insulted him. —You don't even know hard.

—All right, I said. —We'll go down to the office in the morning and draw up and file.

—Huh?

—We'll file for legal separation. Will your wife contest it?

—Huh?

—I'm going to get you what you want. Will your wife go along?

—Well, I don't know. She don't . . . think about . . . things. If you was to tell her, I don't know.

Bert looked at him, his large dark face settled and serious. —That woman's a . . . Catholic, he said at last, and Bedlow stared back at him as if he had named a new name, and things needed thinking again.

A little while later, they left, with Bedlow promising me and promising Bertram Bijou that he'd be in my office the next morning. For a long time after I closed the door behind them, I sat looking at the empty whiskey glasses and considered the course of living in the material world. Then I went and fixed me a shaker of martinis, and became quickly wiser. I considered that it was time to take Zeno serious-ly, give over the illusion of motion, of sequence. There are only a few moments in any life and when they arrive, they are fixed forever and we play through them, pretending to go on, but coming back to them over and over, again and again. If it is true that we can only approach any place but never reach it, as the philosopher claims, it must be corollary that we may almost leave a moment, but never quite. And so as Dr. Freud so clearly saw, one moment, one vision, one thing come upon us becomes the whole time and single theme of all we will ever do or know. We are invaded by our own one thing, and going on is a dream we have while lying still.

I thought, too, mixing one last shaker, that of the little wisdom in this failing age, Alcoholics Anonymous must possess more than its share. I am an alcoholic, they say. I have not had a drink in nine years, but I am an alcoholic, and the shadow, the motif, of my living is liquor bubbling into a glass over and over, again and again. That is all I really want, and I will never have it again because I will not take it, and I know that I will never really know why not.

—It's bedtime, Joan said, taking my drink and sipping it. —What did they want?

—A man wants a divorce because nine years ago his wife had a feebleminded baby. He says it's not his. Wants me to claim adultery and unclaim the child.

—Nice man.

—Actually, I began. Then no. Bedlow did not seem a nice man or not a nice man. He seemed a driven man, outside whatever might be his element. So I said that.

—Who isn't, Joan sniffed. She is not the soul of charity at two-thirty in the morning.

—What? Isn't what?

—Driven. Out of her . . . his . . . element?

I looked at her. Is it the commonest of things for men in their forties to consider whether their women are satisfied? Is it a sign of the spirit's collapse when you wonder how and with whom she spends her days? What is the term for less than suspicion: a tiny circlet of thought that touches your mind at lunch with clients or on the way to the office, almost enough to make you turn back home, and then disappears like smoke when you try to fix it, search for a word or an act that might have stirred it to life?

—Are you . . . driven? I asked, much too casually.

—Me? No, she sighed kissing me. —I'm different, she said. Was she too casual, too?

—Bedlow isn't different. I think he wants it all never to have happened. He had a little car franchise and a pregnant wife ten years ago. Clover. He had it made. Then it all went away.

Joan lit a cigarette, crossed her legs and sat down on the floor with my drink. Her wrapper fell open, and I saw the shadow of her breasts.

—It always goes away. If you know anything, you know that. Hang on as long as you can. 'Cause it's going away. If you know anything . . .

I looked at her as she talked. She was as beautiful as the first time I had seen her. It was an article of faith: nothing had

changed. Her body was still as soft and warm in my arms, and I wait for summer to see her in a bathing suit, and to see her take it off, water running out of her blond hair, between her breasts that I love better than whatever it is that I love next best.

—Sometimes it doesn't go away, I said. Ponderously, I'm sure.

She cocked her head, almost said something, and sipped the drink instead.

What made me think then of the pictures there in the parlor? I went over them in the silence, the flush of gin, remembering where and when we had bought each one. That one in San Francisco, in a Japanese gallery, I thinking that I would not like it long, but thinking too that it didn't matter, since we were at the end of a long difficult case with a fee to match. So if I didn't like it later, well . . .

And the Danish ship, painted on wood in the seventeenth century. I still liked it very much. But why did I think of these things? Was it that they stood on the walls, amid our lives, adding some measure of substance and solidity to them, making it seem that the convention of living together, holding lovely things in common, added reality to the lives themselves. Then, or was it later, I saw us sitting not in a Roman garden in Britain, but in a battered house trailer in imperial America, the walls overspread with invisible pictures of the image of a baby's twisted unfinished face. And how would that be? How would we do then?

Joan smiled, lightly sardonic. —Ignore it, and it'll go away.

—Was there . . . something I was supposed to do? I asked.

The smile deepened, then faded. —Not a thing, she said.

II

The next morning, a will was made, two houses changed hands, a corporation, closely held, was born, seven suits were filed, and a deposition was taken from a whore who claimed that her right of privacy was invaded when the vice squad caught her performing an act against nature on one of their members in a French Quarter alley. Howard Bedlow did not turn up. Joan called just after lunch.

—I think I'll go over to the beach house for a day or two, she said, her voice flat and uncommunicative as only a woman's can be.

I guess there was a long pause. It crossed my mind that once I had wanted to be a musician, perhaps even learn to compose.

—I can't get off till the day after tomorrow, I said, knowing that my words were inapposite to anything she might have in mind. —I could come Friday.

—That would be nice.

—Are you . . . taking the children?

—Louise will take care of them.

—You'll be . . . by yourself?

A pause on her side this time. —Yes. Sometimes . . . things get out of hand.

—Anything you want to talk about?

She laughed. —You're the talker in the family.

—And you're what? The actor. Or the thinker?

—That's it. I don't know.

My voice went cold then. I couldn't help it. —Let me know if you figure it out. Then I hung up. And thought at once that I shouldn't have, and yet glad of the minuscule gesture because, however puny, it was an act, and acts in law are almost always merely words. I live in a storm of words: words substituting for actions, words to evade actions, words hinting at actions, words pretending actions. I looked down at the deposition on my desk and wondered if they had caught the whore *talking* to the vice-squad man in the alley. Give her ten years: the utterance of words is an act against nature, an authentic act against nature. I had read somewhere that in Chicago they have opened establishments wherein neither massage nor sex is offered: only a woman, who, for a sum certain in money, will talk to you. She will say anything you want her to say: filth, word pictures of every possible abomination, fantasies of domination and degradation, sadistic orgies strewn out in detail, oaths, descriptions of rape and castration. For a few dollars you can be told how you molested a small child, how you have murdered your parents and covered the carcasses with excrement, assisted in the gang rape of your second-grade teacher. All words.

The authentic crime against nature has finally arrived. It is available somewhere in Chicago. There is no penalty, for after all, it is protected by the First Amendment. Scoff on, Voltaire, Rousseau, scoff on.

My secretary, who would like to speak filth to me, buzzed.

—Mr. Bijou.

—Good. Send him in.

—On the phone.

Bert sounded far away. —You ain't seen Howard, have you?

—No, I said. —Have you?

—Drunk somewhere. Called coughing and moaning something about a plot to shame him. Talking like last night. I think you ought to see Irma. You're supposed to seek reconciliation, ain't you?

—I think you're ripe for law school, Bert. Yes, that's what they say to do.

—Well, he said. —Lemme see what I can do.

I was afraid of that. When I got home the house was deserted, and I liked that. Not really. I wondered what a fast trip to the Gulf Coast would turn up, or a call to a friend of mine in Biloxi who specializes in that kind of thing. But worse, I wasn't sure I cared. Was it that I didn't love Joan anymore, that somewhere along the way I had become insulated against her acts? Could it be that the practice of law had slowly made me responsive only to words? Did I need to go to Chicago to feel real again?

I was restless and drank too many martinis and was involved so much in my own musings that time passed quickly. I played some Beethoven, God knows why. I am almost never so distraught that I enjoy spiritual posturing. Usually, his music makes me grin.

I tried very hard to reckon where I was and what I should do. I was in the twentieth century after Christ, and it felt all of that long since anything on earth had mattered. I was in a democratic empire called America, an officer of its courts, and surely a day in those courts is as a thousand years. I was an artisan in words, shaping destinies, allocating money and blame by my work. I was past the midpoint of my life and could not make out what it had meant so far.

Now, amid this time and place, I could do almost as I chose. Should it be the islands of the Pacific with a box of paints? To the Colorado mountains with a pack, beans, a guitar, pencils, and much paper? Or, like an anchorite, declare the longest of nonterminal hunger strikes, this one against God Almighty, hoping that public opinion would force him to reveal that for which I was made and put in this place and time.

Or why not throw over these ambiguities, this wife doing whatever she might be doing on the coast of the Gulf, these anonymous children content with Louise up the country, contemplating chickens, ducks, and guiney fowl. Begin again. Say every word you have ever said, to new people: hello, new woman, I love you. I have good teeth and most of my mind. I can do well on a good night in a happy bed. Hello, new colleagues, what do we do

this time? Is this a trucking firm or a tele-phone exchange? What is the desiderata? Profit or prophecy?

Bert shook my arm. —Are you okay? You didn't answer the door.

I studied him for a moment, my head soft and uncentered. I was nicely drunk, but coming back. —Yeah, I said. —I'm fine. What have you got going?

—Huh? Listen, can I turn down that music?

—Sure.

He doused the Second Symphony, and I found I was relieved, could breathe more deeply. —I brought her, he said. —She's kinda spaced out, like the kids say.

He frowned, watched me. —You sure you're all right?

I smiled. —All I needed was some company, Bert.

He smiled back. —All right, fine. You're probably in the best kind of shape for Irma.

—Huh?

He looked at the empty martini pitcher. —Nothing. She's just . . .

His voice trailed off and I watched him drift out of my line of sight. In the foyer, I could hear his voice, soft and distant, as if he were talking to a child.

I sobered up. Yes, I have that power. I discovered it in law school. However drunk, I can gather back in the purposely loosed strands of personality or whatever of us liquor casts apart. It is as if one were never truly sober, and hence one could claim back from liquor what it had never truly loosed. Either drunkenness or sobriety is an illusion.

Irma Bedlow was a surprise. I had reckoned on a woman well gone from womanhood. One of those shapeless bun-haired middle-aged creatures wearing bifocals, smiling out from behind the secrecy of know-ing that they are at last safe from any but the most psychotic menaces from imbalanced males. But it was not that way. If I had been dead drunk on the one hand, or shuffling up to the communion rail on the other, she would have turned me around.

She was vivid. Dark hair and eyes, a complexion almost pale, a lovely body made more so by the thoughtless pride with which she inhabited it. She sat down opposite me, and our eyes held for a long moment.

I am used to a certain deference from people who come to me in legal situations. God knows we have worked long and hard enough to establish the mandarin tradition of the law, that circle

of mysteries that swallows up laymen and all they possess like a vast desert or a hidden sea. People come to the law on tiptoe, watching, wishing they could know which words, what expressions and turns of phrase are *the ones* which bear their fate. I have smiled remembering that those who claim or avoid the law with such awe have themselves in their collectivity created it. But they are so far apart from one another in the sleep of their present lives that they cannot remember what they did together when they were awake.

But Irma Bedlow looked at me as if she were the counselor, her dark eyes fixed on mine to hold me to whatever I might say. Would I lie, and put both our cases in jeopardy? Would I say the best I knew, or had I wandered so long amid the stunted shrubs of language, making unnatural acts in the name of my law, that words had turned from stones with which to build into ropy clinging undergrowth in which to become enmeshed?

I asked her if she would have a drink. I was surprised when she said yes. Fasts for the sake of an idiot child, trying to get others to do it, praying on her knees to Jesus beside the bed of Albert Sidney who did not know about the prayers, and who could know about Jesus only through infused knowledge there within the mansions of his imbecility. But she said yes, and I went to fix it.

Of course Bert followed me over to the bar. —I don't know. I think maybe I ought to take care of Howard and let her be your client.

—Don't do that, I said, and wondered why I'd said it.

—She's fine, Bert was saying, and I knew he meant nothing to do with her looks. He was not a carnal man, Bert. He was a social man. Once he had told me he wanted either to be mayor of Kenner or else a comedian. He did not mean it humorously and I did not take it so. He was the least funny of men. Rather he understood with his nerves the pathos of living and would have liked to divert us from it with comedy. But it would not be so, and Bert would end up mayor trying to come to grips with our common anguish instead of belittleing it.

—I never talked to anyone like her. You'll see.

I think then I envisioned the most beautiful and desirable Jehovah's Witness in the world. Would we try conclusions over Isaiah? I warn you, Irma, I know the Book and other books beyond number. I am a prince in the kingdom of words, and I have seen raw respect flushed up unwillingly in the eyes of other

lawmongers, and have had my work mentioned favorably in appellate decisions which in their small way rule all this land.

—Here you are, I said.

She smiled at me, as if I were a child who had brought his mother a cool drink unasked.

—Howard came to see you, she said, sipping the martini as if gin bruised with vermouth were her common fare. —Can you help me . . . help him?

—He wants a divorce, I said, confused, trying to get things in focus.

—No, she said. Not aggressively, only firmly. Her information was better than mine. I have used the same tone of voice with other attorneys many times. When you know, you know.

—He only wants it over with, done with. That's what he wants.

Bert nodded. He had heard this before. There goes Bert's value as a checkpoint with reality. He believes her. Lordy.

—You mean . . . the marriage?

—No, not that. He knows what I know. If it was a marriage, you can't make it be over. You can only desert it. He wouldn't do that.

I shrugged, noticing that she had made no use of her beauty at all so far. She did not disguise it or deny it. She allowed it to exist and simply ignored it. Her femininity washed over me, and yet I knew that it was not directed toward me. It had some other focus, and she saw me as a moment, a crossing in her life, an occasion to stop and turn back for an instant before going on. I wondered what I would be doing for her.

—He *says* he wants a divorce.

She looked down at her drink. Her lashes were incredibly long, though it was obvious she used no makeup at all. Her lips were deep red, a color not used in lipsticks since the 1940s. I understood why Bedlow drank. Nine years with a beautiful woman you love, and cannot touch.

He told you . . . I'd been unfaithful.

Bert was shaking his head, blushing. Not negating what Howard had said, or deprecating it.

—He said that, I told her.

—And that our baby . . . that Albert Sidney wasn't . . . his?

—Yes, I said. Bert looked as if he would cry from shame.

She had not looked up while we talked. Her eyes stayed down, and while I waited, I heard the Beethoven tape, turned down but not off, running out at the end of the "Appassionata." It was a

good moment to get up and change to something decent. I found a Vivaldi chamber mass, and the singers were very happy. The music was for God in the first instance, not for the spirit of fraternity or Napoleon or some other rubbish.

—What else? she asked across the room. I flipped the tape on, and eighteenth-century Venice came at us from four sides. I cut back the volume.

—He said you . . . hadn't been man and wife for nine years.

—All right.

I walked back and sat down again. I felt peculiar, neither drunk nor sober, so I poured another one. The first I'd had since they came. —Howard didn't seem to think so. He said. you wouldn't let him touch you.

She raised her eyes then. Not angrily, only that same firmness again. —That's not true, she said, —no. Bert nodded as though he had been an abiding presence in the marriage chamber for all those nine long years. He could contain himself no more. He fumbled in his coat pocket and handed me a crumpled and folded sheet of paper. It was a notice from American Motors cancelling Howard Bedlow's franchise. Much boilerplate saying he hadn't delivered and so on. Enclosed find copy of agency contract with relevant revocation clauses underlined. Arrangements will be made for stock on hand, etc.

It was dated 9 May 1966. Bert was watching me. I nodded. —Eight years ago, I said.

—Not ten, Bert was going on. —You see . . .

—He lost the business . . . six months after . . . the . . . Albert Sidney . . .

We sat looking at the paper.

—I never denied him, Irma was saying. —After the baby . . . he couldn't. At first, we didn't think of it, of anything. I . . . we were lost inside ourselves. We didn't talk about it. What had we done? What had gone wrong? What were we . . . supposed to do? Was there something we were supposed to do?

—Genes went wrong . . . hormones, who knows, I said.

Irma smiled at me. Her eyes were black, not brown. —Do you believe that?

—Sure, I said, startled as one must be when he has uttered what passes for a common truth and it is questioned. —What else?

—Nothing, she said. —It's only . . .

She and Bert were both staring at me as if I had missed something. Then Irma leaned forward. —Will you go somewhere with me?

I was thinking of the Gulf Coast, staring down at the face of my watch. It was almost one-thirty. There was a moon and the tide was in, and the moon would be rolling through soft beds of cloud.

—Yes, I said. —Yes, I will. Yes.

III

It was early in the morning when we reached Alexandria. The bus trip had been long and strange. We had talked about east Texas where Irma had grown up. Her mother had been from Evangeline Parish, her father a tool-pusher in the Kilgore fields until he lost both hands to a wild length of chain. She had been keeping things together working as a waitress when she met Howard.

On the bus, as if planted there, had been a huge black woman with a little boy whose head was tiny and pointed. It was so distorted that his eyes were pulled almost vertical. He made inarticulate noises and rooted about on the floor of the bus. The other passengers tried to ignore him, but the stench was very bad, and his mother took him to an empty seat in back and changed him several times. Irma helped her once. The woman had been loud, aggressive, unfriendly when Irma approached her, but Irma whispered something, and the woman began to cry, her sobs loud and terrible. When they had gotten the child cleaned up, the black woman put her arms around Irma and kissed her.

—I tried hard as I could, miss, but I can't manage . . . Oh sweet Jesus knows I wisht I was dead first. But I can't manage the other four . . . I *got* to . . .

The two of them sat together on the rear seat for a long time, holding hands, talking so softly that I couldn't hear. Once, the boy crawled up and stopped at my seat. He looked up at me like some invertebrate given the power to be quizzical. I wondered which of us was in hell. He must have been about twelve years old.

In the station, Irma made a phone call while I had coffee. People moved through the twilit terminal, meeting, parting. One elderly woman in a thin print dress thirty years out of date even among country people kissed a young man in an army uniform goodbye. Her lips trembled as he shouldered his duffel bag and

moved away. —Stop, she cried out, and then realized that he could not stop, because the dispatcher was calling the Houston bus. —Have you . . . forgotten anything? The soldier paused, smiled, and shook his head. Then he vanished behind some people trying to gather up clothes which had fallen from a cardboard suitcase with a broken clasp. Somewhere a small child cried as if it had awakened to find itself suddenly, utterly lost.

Irma came back and drank her coffee, and when we walked outside it was daylight in Alexandria, even as on the Gulf Coast. An old station wagon with a broken muffler pulled up, and a thin man wearing glasses got out and kissed Irma as if it were a ritual and shook hands with me in that peculiar limp diffident way of country people meeting someone from the city who might represent threat or advantage.

We drove for twenty minutes or so, and slowed down in front of a small white frame place on a blacktop road not quite in or out of town. The yard was large and littered with wrecked and cannibalized autos. The metal bones of an old Hudson canted into the rubble of a '42 Ford convertible. Super Deluxe. There was a shed which must have been an enlarged garage. Inside I could see tools, a lathe, work benches. A young man in overalls without a shirt looked out at us and waved casually. He had a piece of drive shaft in his hand. Chickens ambled stupidly in the grassless yard, pecking at oil patches and clumps of rust.

We had eggs and sausage and biscuits and talked quietly. They were not curious about me. They had seen a great deal during the years and there was nothing to be had from curiosity. You come to learn that things have to be taken as they come and it is no use to probe the gestations of tomorrows before they come. There is very little you can do to prepare.

It turned out there had been no quarrel between Irma and her sister's family. Her sister, plain as Irma was beautiful, who wore thick glasses and walked slowly because of her varicose veins, talked almost without expression, but with some lingering touch of her mother's French accent. She talked on as if she had saved everything she had seen and come to know, saved it all in exhaustive detail, knowing that someone would one day come for her report.

—It wasn't never any quarrel, and Howard had got to know better. Oh, we fussed, sure. My daddy always favored Irma and so I used to take after her over anything, you know. Jesus spare me, I guess I hated my own little sister. Till the baby come, and the Lord lifted the scales from my eyes. I dreamed He come down

just for me. He looked like Mr. Denver, the station agent down to the L and N depot, and He said, "Elenor, I had enough stuff out of you, you hear? You see Albert Sidney? You satisfied now? Huh? Is that enough for you? You tell me that, 'cause I got to be getting on. I don't make nobody more beautiful or more smart or anything in this world, but I do sometimes take away their looks or ruin their minds or put blindness on 'em, or send 'em a trouble to break their hearts. Don't ask why 'cause it's not for you to know, but that's what I do. Now what else you want for Irma, huh?"

Tears were flowing down Elenor's face now, but her expression didn't change. —So I saw it was my doing, and I begged Him to set it right, told Him to strike me dead and set it right with that helpless baby. But He just shook His head and pushed up His sleeves like He could hear a through-freight coming. "It's not how it's done. It ain't like changing your mind about a hat or a new dress. You see that?"

—Well, I didn't, but what could I say? I said yes, and He started off and the place where we was began getting kind of fuzzy, then He turned and looked back at me and smiled. "How you know it *ain't* all right with Albert Sidney?" he asked. And I saw then that He loved me after all. Then, when I could hardly see Him I heard Him say, "Anything you forgot, Elly? "but I never said nothing at all, only crossed myself the way Momma used to do."

Elenor touched her sister's shoulder shyly. Irma was watching me, something close to a smile on her lips. —Well, Elenor said, —we've prayed together since then, ain't we, hon? Irma took her sister's hand and pressed it against her cheek.

—We been close since then, Charlie, Elenor's husband, said. —Done us all good. Except for poor Howard.

It seemed Howard had hardened his heart from the first. Charlie had worked for him in the Rambler franchise, manager of the service department. One day they had had words and Charlie quit, left New Orleans which was a plague to him anyway, and set up this little backyard place in Alec.

—Why the fight? I asked Charlie. He was getting up to go out to work.

—Never mind that, he said. —It . . . didn't have nothing to do with . . . this.

Elenor watched him go. —Yes it did, she began.

—Elenor, Irma stopped her. —Maybe you ought not . . . Charlie's . . .

Elenor was wiping her cheeks with her apron. —This man's a lawyer, ain't he? He knows what's right and wrong.

I winced and felt tired all at once, but you cannot ask for a pitcher of martinis at seven-thirty in the morning in a Louisiana country house. That was the extent of my knowledge of right and wrong.

—A couple of months after Albert Sidney was born, I was at their place, Elenor went on. —Trying to help out. I was making the beds when Howard come in. It was early, but Howard was drunk and he talked funny, and before I knew, he pulled me down on the bed, and . . . I couldn't scream, I couldn't. Irma had the baby in the kitchen . . . and he couldn't. He tried to . . . make me . . . help him, but he couldn't anyhow. And I told Charlie, because a man ought to know. And they had words, and after that Charlie whipped him, and moved up here . . .

Elenor sat looking out of the window where the sun was beginning to show over the trees. —And we come on up here.

Irma looked at her sister tenderly. —Elly, we got to go on over to the hospital now.

As we reached the door, Elenor called out. —Irma . . .

—Yes . . . ?

—Honey, you know how much I love you, don't you?

—I always did know, silly. You were the one didn't know.

We took the old station wagon and huffed slowly out of the yard. Charlie waved at us and his eyes followed us out of sight down the blacktop.

IV

Irma was smiling at me as we coughed along the road. —I feel kind of good, she said.

—I'm glad. Why?

—Like some kind of washday. It's long and hard, but comes the end, and you've got everything hanging out in the fresh air. Clean.

—It'll be dirty again, I said, and wished I could swallow the words almost before they were out.

Her hand touched my arm, and I almost lost control of the car. I kept my eyes on the road to Pineville. I was here to help her, not the other way around. There was too much contact between us already, too much emptiness in me, and what the hell I was doing halfway up the state with the wife of a man who could make out a showing that he was my client was more than

I could figure out. Something to do with the Gulf. —There's another washday coming, she whispered, her lips close to my ear.

Will I be ready for washday, I wondered. Lord, how is it that we get ready for washday?

The Louisiana state hospital is divided into several parts. There is one section for the criminally insane, and another for the feebleminded. This second section is, in turn, divided into what are called "tidy" and "untidy" wards. The difference is vast in terms of logistics and care. The difference in the moral realm is simply that between the seventh and the first circles. Hell is where we are.

Dr. Tumulty met us outside his office. He was a small man with a large nose and glasses which looked rather like those you can buy in a novelty shop, outsize nose attached. Behind the glasses, his eyes were weak and watery. His mouth was very small, and his hair thin, the color of cornshucks. I remember wondering then, at the start of our visit, whether one of the inmates had been promoted. It was a very bad idea, but only one of many.

—Hello, Irma, he said. He did not seem unhappy to see her.

—Hello, Monte, she said.

—He had a little respiratory trouble last week. It seems cleared up now.

Irma introduced us and Dr. Tumulty studied me quizzically. —A lawyer . . . ?

—Counselor, she said. —A good listener. Do you have time to show him around?

He looked at me, Charon sizing up a strange passenger, one who it seemed would be making a round trip. —Sure, all right. You coming?

—No, Irma said softly. —You can bring him to me afterward.

So Dr. Tumulty took me through the wards alone. I will not say everything I saw. There were mysteries in that initiation that will not go down into words. It is all the soul is worth and more to say less than all when you have come back from that place where, if only they knew, what men live and do asleep is done waking and in truth each endless day.

Yes, there were extreme cases of mongolism, cretins and imbeciles, dwarfs, and things with enormous heads and bulging eyes, ears like tubes, mouths placed on the sides of their heads. There was an albino without nose or eyes or lips, and it sat in a chair, teeth exposed in a grin that could not be erased, its hands making a series of extremely complicated gestures over and over

again, each lengthy sequence a perfect reproduction of the preceding one. The gestures were wholly symmetrical, and the repetition exact and made without pause, a formalism of mindlessness worthy of a Balinese dancer, or a penance, performance of a secret prayer, played out before the catatonic admiration of three small blacks who sat on the floor before the albino, watching its art with a concentration unknown among those who imagine themselves without defect.

This was the tidy ward, and all these inventions of a Bosch whose medium is flesh wore coveralls of dark gray cloth with a name patch on the left breast. This was Paul, whose tongue, abnormally long and almost black and dry, hung down his chin, and that, the hairless one with the enormous head and tiny face, who coughed and petted a filthy toy elephant, that was Larry. The dead-white one, the maker of rituals, was Anthony. Watching him were Edward and Joseph and Michael, microcephalics all, looking almost identical in their shared malady.

—Does . . . Anthony . . . I began.

—All day. Every day, Dr. Tumulty said. —And the others watch. We give him tranquilizers at night. It used to be . . . all night, too.

In another ward, they kept the females. It was much the same there, except that, wandering from one chair to another, watching the others, was a young girl, perhaps sixteen. She would have been pretty—no, she was pretty, despite the gray coverall and the pallor of her skin. —Hello, doctor, she said. Her voice sounded as if it had been recorded, cracked and scratchy. But her body seemed sound, her face normal except for small patches of what looked like eczema on her face. That, and her eyes were a little out of focus. She was carrying a small book covered with imitation red leather. *My Diary*, it said on the cover.

—Does she belong here? I asked Tumulty.

He nodded. —She's been here over a year.

The girl cuddled against him, and I could see that she was trying to press her breasts against him. Her hand wandered down toward his leg. He took her hand gently and stroked her hair. —Hello, Doctor, she croaked again. —Hi, Nancy, he answered. —Are you keeping up your diary?

She smiled. —For home. Hello, Doctor.

—For home, sure, he said, and sat her down in a chair opposite an ancient television locked in a wire cage and tuned, I remember, to *Underdog*. She seemed to lose interest in us, to find

her way quickly into the role of Sweet Polly, awaiting the inevitable rescue. Around her on the floor were scattered others of the less desperate cases. They watched the animated comedy on the snow-flecked, badly focused screen with absolute concentration. As we moved on, I heard Nancy whisper, —There's no need to fear . . .

—Congenital syphilis, Tumulty said. —It incubates for years, sometimes. She was in high school. Now she's here. It's easier for her now than at first. Most of her mind is gone. In a year she'll be dead.

He paused by a barred window, and looked out on the rolling Louisiana countryside beyond the distant fence. —About graduation time.

—There's no treatment . . . ?

—The cure is dying.

What I can remember of the untidy wards is fragmentary. The stench was very bad, the sounds were nonhuman, and the inmates, divided by sex, were naked in large concrete rooms, sitting on the damp floors, unable to control their bodily functions, obese mostly, and utterly asexual with tiny misshapen heads. There were benches along the sides of the concrete rooms, and the floors sloped down to a central caged drain in the center. One of the things—I mean inmates—was trying slowly, in a fashion almost reptilian, to lick up filthy moisture from the drain. Another was chewing on a plastic bracelet by which it was identified. Most of the rest, young and older, sat on the benches or the floor staring at nothing, blubbering once in a while, scratching occasionally.

—Once, Dr. Tumulty said thoughtfully, —a legislator came. A budgetary inspection. We didn't get any more money. But he complained that we identified the untidy patients by number. He came and saw everything, and that's . . . what bothered him.

By then we were outside again, walking in the cool Louisiana summer morning. We had been inside less than an hour. I had thought it was much longer.

—It's the same everywhere. Massachusetts, Wyoming, Texas. Don't think badly of us. There's no money, no personnel, and even if there were . . .

—Then you could only . . . cover it.

—Cosmetics, yes. I've been in this work for eighteen years. I've never forgotten anything I saw. Not anything. You know what I think? What I really *know*?

— . . . ?

Tumulty paused and rubbed his hands together. He shivered a little, that sudden inexplicable thrill of cold inside that has no relationship to the temperature in the world, that represents, according to the old story, someone walking across the ground where your grave will one day be. A mockingbird flashed past us, a dark blur of gray, touched with the white of its wings. Tumulty started to say something, then shrugged and pointed at a small building a little way off.

—They're over there. One of the attendants will show you.

He looked from one building to another, shaking his head. —There's so much to do. So many of them . . .

—Yes, I said. —Thank you. Then I began walking toward the building he had indicated.

—Do . . . whatever you can . . . for her, Dr. Tamulty called after me. —I wish . . .

I turned back toward him. We stood perhaps thirty yards apart then. —Was there . . . something else you wanted to say? I asked.

He looked at me for a long moment, then away. —No, he said. —Nothing.

I stood there as he walked back into the clutter of central buildings, and finally vanished into one of them. Then, before I walked back to join Irma, I found a bench under an old magnolia and sat down for a few minutes. It was on the way to becoming warm now, and the sun's softness and the morning breeze were both going rapidly. The sky was absolutely clear, and by noon it would be very hot indeed. A few people were moving across the grounds. A nurse carrying something on a tray, two attendants talking animatedly to each other, one gesturing madly. Another attendant was herding a patient toward the medical building. It was a black inmate, male or female I could not say, since all the patients' heads were close-cropped for hygienic purposes, and the coverall obscured any other sign of sex. It staggered from one side of the cinder path to the other, swaying as if it were negotiating the deck of a ship in heavy weather out on the Gulf. Its arms flailed, seeking a balance it could never attain, and its eyes seemed to be seeking some point of reference in a world awash. But there was no point, the trees whirling and the buildings losing their way, and so the thing looked skyward, squinted terribly at the sun, pointed upward toward that brazen glory, and almost fell down, its contorted black face now fixed undeviatingly toward that burning place in the sky which did not shift and

whirl. But the attendant took its shoulder and urged it along, since it could not make its way on earth staring into the sun.

As it passed by my bench, it saw me, gestured at me, leaned in my direction amid its stumblings, its dark face twinkling with sweat.

—No, Hollis, I heard the attendant say as the thing and I exchanged a long glance amid the swirling trees, the spinning buildings, out there on the stormy Gulf. Then it grinned, its white teeth sparkling, its eyes almost pulled shut from the effort of grimace, its twisted fingers spieling a language both of us could grasp.

—Come on, Hollis, the attendant said impatiently, and the thing reared its head and turned away. No more time for me. It took a step or two, fell, and rolled in the grass, grunting, making sounds like I had never heard. —Hollis, I swear to God, the attendant said mildly, and helped the messenger to its feet once more.

The nurse in the building Tumulty had pointed out looked at me questioningly. —I'm looking for . . . Mrs. Bedlow.

—You'll have to wait . . . she began, and then her expression changed. —0h, you must be the one. I knew I'd forgotten something. All right, straight back and to the left. Ward 3.

I walked down a long corridor with lights on the ceiling, each behind its wire cover. I wondered if Hollis might have been the reason for the precaution. Had he or she or it once leaped upward at the light, clawing, grasping, attempting to touch the sun? The walls were covered with an ugly pale yellow enamel which had begun peeling long ago, and the smell of cheap pine-scented deodorizer did not cover the deep ingrained stench of urine, much older than the blistered paint. Ward 3 was a narrow dormitory filled with small beds. My eyes scanned the beds and I almost turned back, ready for the untidy wards again. Because here were the small children, what had been intended as children.

Down almost at the end of the ward, I saw Irma. She was seated in a visitor's chair, and in her arms was a child with a head larger than hers. It was gesticulating frantically, and I could hear its sounds the length of the ward. She held it close and whispered to it, kissed it, and as she drew it to her, the sounds became almost frantic. They were not human sounds. They were Hollis's sounds, and as I walked the length of the ward, I thought I knew what Tumulty had been about to say before he had thought better of it.

—Hello, Irma said. The child in her arms paused in its snufflings and looked up at me from huge unfocused eyes. Its tongue stood out, and it appeared that its lower jaw was congenitally dislocated. Saliva ran down the flap of flesh where you and I have lips, and Irma paid no mind as it dripped on her dress. It would have been pointless to wipe the child's mouth, because the flow did not stop, nor did the discharge from its bulging unblinking eyes. I looked at Irma. Her smile was genuine.

—This is . . . I began.

—Albert Sidney, she finished. —Oh no. I wish it was. This is Barry. Say hello.

The child grunted and buried its head in her lap, sliding down to the floor and crawling behind her chair.

—You . . . wish . . . ?

—This is Albert Sidney, she said, turning to the bed next to her chair.

He lay there motionless, the sheet drawn up to what might have been the region of his chin. His head was very large, and bulged out to one side in a way that I would never have supposed could support life. Where his eyes should have been, two blank white surfaces of solid cataract seemed to float lidless and intent. He had no nose, only a small hole surgically created, I think, and ringed with discharge. His mouth was a slash in the right side of his cheek, at least two inches over and up from where mouths belong. Irma stepped over beside him, and as she reached down and kissed him, rearranged the sheets, I saw one of his hands. It was a fingerless club of flesh dotted almost randomly with bits of fingernail.

I closed my eyes and then looked once more. I saw again what I must have seen at first and ignored, the thing I had come to see. On Albert Sidney's deformed and earless head, almost covering the awful disarray of his humanity, he had a wealth of reddish golden hair, rich and curly, proper aureole of a Celtic deity. Or a surfing king.

V

We had dinner at some anonymous restaurant in Alexandria, and then found a room at a motel not far from Pineville. I had bought a bottle of whiskey. Inside, I filled a glass after peeling away its sticky plastic cover that pretended to guard it from the world for my better health.

—Should I have brought you? Irma asked, sitting down on the bed.

—Yes, I said. —Sure. Nobody should . . . nobody ought to be shielded from this.

—But it . . . hasn't got anything to do with. us. What Howard wants to do, does it?

—No, I said. —I don't think so.

—Howard was all right. If things had gone . . . the way they do mostly. He wasn't . . . isn't . . . a weak man. He's brave, and he used to work . . . sometimes sixteen hours a day. He was very . . . steady. Do you know, I loved him . . .

I poured her a drink. —Sometimes, I said, and heard that my voice was unsteady. —None of us know . . . what we can . . . stand.

—If Howard had had just any kind of belief . . . but . . .

—He just had himself . . . ?

—Just that. He . . . his two hands and a strong back, and he was quick with figures. He always . . . came out . . .

— . . . ahead.

She breathed deeply, and sipped the whiskey. —Every time. He . . . liked hard times. To work his way through. You couldn't stop him. And very honest. An honest man.

I finished the glass and poured another one. I couldn't get rid of the smells and the images. The whiskey was doing no good. It would only dull my senses prospectively. The smells and the images were inside for keeps.

—He's not honest about . . .

—Albert Sidney? No, but I . . . it doesn't matter. I release him of that. Which is why . . .

—You want me to go ahead with the divorce?

—I think. We can't help each other, don't you see?

—I see that. But . . . what will you do?

Irma laughed and slipped off her shoes, curled her feet under her. Somewhere back in the mechanical reaches of my mind, where I was listening to Vivaldi and watching a thin British rain fall into my garden, neither happy nor sad, preserved by my indifference from the Gulf, I saw that she was very beautiful and that she cared for me, had brought me to Alexandria as much for myself as for her sake, though she did not know it.

— . . . do what needs to be done for the baby, she was saying. —I've asked for strength to do the best . . . thing.

—What do you want me to do?

—About the divorce? I don't know about . . . the legal stuff. I want to . . . how do you say it . . . ? Not to contest it?

—There's a way. When the other person makes life insupportable . . .

Irma looked at me strangely, as if I were not understanding.

—No, no. The other . . . what he says.

—Adultery?

—And the rest. About Albert Sidney . . .

—No. You can't . . .

—Why can't I? I told you, Howard is all right. I mean, he could be all right. I want to let him go. Can't I say some way or other that what he claims is true?

I set my glass down. —In the pleadings. You can always accept what he says in your . . . answer.

—Pleadings?

—That's what they call . . . what we file in a suit. But I can't state an outright . . . lie . . .

—But you're his counsel. You have to say what he wants you to say.

—No, only in good faith. The Code of Civil Practice . . . if I pleaded a lie . . . Anyhow, Jesus, after all this . . . I couldn't . . . Plead adultery . . . ? No way.

—Yes, Irma said firmly, lovingly. She rose from the bed and came to me.

—Yes, she whispered. —You'll be able to.

VI

The next evening, the plane was late getting into New Orleans. There was a storm line along the Gulf, a series of separate systems, then monotonous driving rain that fell all over the city and the southern part of the state. The house was cool and humid when I got home, and my head hurt. The house was empty, and that was all right. I had a bowl of soup and turned on something very beautiful. *La Stravaganza*. As I listened, I thought of that strange medieval custom of putting the mad and the demented on a boat, and keeping it moving from one port to another. A ship full of lunacy and witlessness and rage and subhumanity with no destination in view. Furiosi, the mad were called. What did they call those who came into this world like Irma's baby, scarce half made up? Those driven beyond the human by the world were given names and a status. But what of those who came damaged from the first? Did even the wisdom of the Church have no name

for those who did not scream or curse or style themselves Emperor Frederic II or Gregory come again? What of those with bulbous heads and protruding tongues and those who stared all day at the blazing sun, all night at the cool distant moon? I listened and drank, and opened the door onto the patio, so that the music was leavened with the sound of the falling rain.

It was early the next morning when Bert called me at home. He did not bother apologizing. I think he knew that we were both too much in it now. The amenities are for before. Or afterward.

—Listen, you're back.

—Yes.

—I got Howard straightened up. You want to talk to him?

—What's he saying?

—Well, he's cleared up, you see? I got him to shower and drink a pot of coffee. It ain't what he says is different, but he is himself and he wants to get them papers started. You know? You want to drop by the Bo-Peep for a minute?

—No, I said, —but I will. I want to talk to that stupid bastard.

—Ah, Bert said slowly. —Uh-huh. Well, fine, counselor. It's Cabin 10. On the street to the right as you come in. Can't miss it.

I thought somebody ought to take a baseball bat and use it on Howard Bedlow until he came to understand. I was very tight about this thing now, no distance at all. I had thought about other things only once since I had been back. When a little phrase of Vivaldi's had shimmered like a waterfall, and, still drunk, I had followed that billow down to the Gulf in my mind.

They were fantasies, of course. In one, I took Irma away. We left New Orleans and headed across America toward California, and she was quickly pregnant. The child was whole and healthy and strong, and what had befallen each of us back in Louisiana faded and receded faster and faster, became of smaller and smaller concern until we found ourselves in a place near the Russian River, above the glut and spew of people down below.

Acres apart and miles away, we had a tiny place carved from the natural wood of the hills. We labored under the sun and scarcely talked, and what there was, was ours. She would stand near a forest pool, nude, our child in her arms, and the rest was all forgotten as I watched them there, glistening, with beads of fresh water standing on their skin, the way things ought to be, under the sun.

Then I was driving toward Metairie amid the dust and squalor of Airline Highway. Filling stations, hamburger joints,

cut-rate liquor, tacos, wholesale carpeting, rent-a-car, people driving a little above the speed limit sealed in air-conditioned cars, others standing at bus stops staring vacantly, some gesticulating in repetitive patterns, trying to be understood. No sign of life anywhere.

The sign above the Bo-Peep Motel pictured a girl in a bonnet with a shepherd's crook and a vast crinoline skirt. In her lap she held what looked from a distance like a child. Closer, you could see that it was intended to be a lamb, curled in her arms, eyes closed, hoofs tucked into its fleece, peacefully asleep. Bo-Peep's face, outlined in neon tubing, had been painted once, but most of the paint had chipped away, and now, during the day, she wore a faded leer of unparalleled perversity, red lips and china blue eyes flawed by missing chips of color.

Bert sat in a chair outside the door. He was in uniform. His car was parked in front of #10. The door was open, and just inside, Howard Bedlow sat in an identical chair staring out like a prisoner who knows there must be bars even though he cannot see them. He leaned forward, hands hanging down before him, and even from a distance he looked much older than I had remembered him.

Bert walked out as I parked. —How was the trip?

We stared at each other. —A revelation, I said. —He's sober?

—Oh yeah. He had a little trouble last night down at the Kit-Kat Klub. Bert pointed down the road to a huddled cinder-block building beside a trailer court.

—They sent for somebody to see to him, and luck had it be me.

Howard looked like an old man up close. His eyes were crusted, squinting up at the weak morning sun, still misted at that hour. His hands hung down between his legs, almost touching the floor, and his forefingers moved involuntarily as if they were tracing a precise and repetitious pattern on the dust of the floor. He looked up at me, licking his lips. He had not shaved in a couple of days, and the light beard had the same tawny reddish color as his hair. He did not seem to recognize me for a moment. Then his expression came together. He looked almost frightened.

—You seen her, huh?

—That's right.

—What'd she say?

—It's all right with her.

—What's all right?

—The divorce. just the way you want it.

—You mean . . . like everything I said . . . all that . . . ?

—She says maybe she owes you that much. For what she did.

—What she did?

—You know . . .

—What I said, told you?

—Wonder what the hell that is, Bert put in. He walked out into the driveway and stared down the street.

Bedlow shook his head slowly. —She owned up, told you everything?

—There was . . . a confirmation. Look, I said. —Bert will line you up a lawyer. I'm going to represent Ir . . . your wife.

—Oh? I was the one come to you . . .

I took a piece of motel stationery out of my pocket. There was a five-dollar bill held to it with a dark bobby pin. I remembered her hair cascading down, flowing about her face. —You never gave me a retainer. I did not act on your behalf.

I held out the paper and the bill. —This is my retainer. From her. It doesn't matter. She won't contest. I'll talk to your lawyer. It'll be easy.

—I never asked for nothing to be easy, Bedlow murmured.

—If you want to back off the adultery thing, which is silly, which even if it is true you cannot prove, you can go for rendering life insupportable.

—Life insupportable? I never asked things be easy.

—Yes you did, I said brutally. —You just didn't know you were.

I wanted to tell him there was something rotten and weak and collapsed in him. His heart, his guts, his genes. That he had taken a woman better than he had any right to, and that Albert Sidney . . . but how could I? Who was I to . . . and then Bert stepped back toward us, his face grim.

—Shit, he was saying, —I think they've got a fire down to the trailer court. Youall reckon we ought to . . .

—If it's mine, let it burn. Ain't nothing there I care about. I need a drink.

But Bert was looking at me, his face twisted with some pointless apprehension that made so little sense that both of us piled into his car, revved the siren, and fishtailed out into Airline Highway, almost smashing into traffic coming from both directions as he humped across the neutral ground and laid thirty yards of rubber getting to the trailer court.

The trailer was in flames from one end to the other. Of course it was Bedlow's. Bert's face was working, and he tried to edge the car close to the end of it where there were the least flames.

—She's back in Alec, I yelled at him. —She's staying in a motel back in Alec. There's nothing in there.

But my eyes snapped from the burning trailer to the stunted and dusty cottonwood tree behind it. Which was where the old station wagon was parked. I could see the tail pipe hanging down behind as I vaulted out of the car and pulled the flimsy screen door off the searing skin of the trailer with my bare hands. I was working on the inside door, kicking it, screaming at the pliant aluminum to give way, to let me pass, when Bert pulled me back. —You goddamned fool, you can't . . .

But I had smashed the door open by then and would have been into the gulf of flame and smoke inside if Bert had not clipped me alongside the head with the barrel of his .38.

Which was just the moment when Bedlow passed him. Bert had hold of me, my eyes watching the trees, the nearby trailers whirling, spinning furiously. Bert yelled at Bedlow to stop, that there was no one inside, an inspired and desperate lie—or was it a final testing.

—She is, I know she is, Bedlow screamed back at Bert.

I was down on the ground now, dazed, passing in and out of consciousness not simply from Bert's blow, but from exhaustion, too long on the line beyond the boundaries of good sense. But I looked up as Bedlow shouted, and I saw him standing for a split second where I had been, his hair the color of the flames behind. He looked very young and strong, and I remember musing in my semiconsciousness, maybe he can do it. Maybe he can.

—And she's got my boy in there, we heard him yell as he vanished into the smoke. Bert let me fall all the way then, and I passed out for good.

VII

It was late afternoon when I got home. It dawned on me that I hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours. Huge white thunderheads stood over the city, white and pure as cotton. The sun was diminished, and the heat had fallen away. It seemed that everything was very quiet, that a waiting had set in. The evening news said there was a probability of rain, even small-craft warnings on the Gulf. Then, as if there were an electronic connection between the station and the clouds, rain began to fall

just as I pulled into the drive. It fell softly at first, as if it feared to come too quickly on the scorched town below. Around me, as I cut off the engine, there rose that indescribable odor that comes from the coin-cidence of fresh rain with parched earth and concrete. I sat in the car for a long time, pressing Bert's handkerchief full of crushed ice against the lump on the side of my head. The ice kept trying to fall out because I was clumsy. I had not gotten used to the thick bandages on my hands, and each time I tried to adjust the handkerchief, the pain in my hands made me lose fine control. My head did not hurt so badly, but I felt weak, and so I stayed there through all the news, not wanting to pass out for the second time in one day, or to lie unconscious in an empty house.

—Are you just going to sit out here? Joan asked me softly.

I opened my eyes and looked up at her. She looked very different. As if I had not seen her in years, as if we had lived separate lives, heights and depths in each that we could never tell the other. —No, I said. —I was just tired.

She frowned when I got out of the car. —What's the lump? And the hands? Can't I go away for a few days?

—Sure you can, I said a little too loudly, forcefully. —Anytime at all. I ran into a hot door.

She was looking at my suit. One knee was torn, and an elbow was out. She sniffed. —Been to a fire sale? she asked as we reached the door.

—That's not funny, I said.

—Sorry, she answered.

The children were there, and I tried very hard for the grace to see them anew, but it was just old Bart and tiny Nan trying to tell me about their holiday. Bart was still sifting sand on everything he touched, and Nan's fair skin was lightly burned. Beyond their prattle, I was trying to focus on something just outside my reach.

Their mother came in with a pitcher of martinis and ran the kids back to the television room. She was a very beautiful woman, deep, in her thirties, who seemed to have hold of something—besides the martinis. I thought that if I were not married and she happened by, I would likely start a conversation with her.

—I ended up taking the kids with me, she said, sighing and dropping into her chair.

—Huh?

—They cried and said they'd rather come with me than stay with Louise. Even considering the ducks and chickens and things.

Hence the sand and sunburn. I poured two drinks as the phone rang. —That's quite a compliment, I said, getting up for it.

—You bet. We waited for you. We thought you'd be coming.

No, I thought as I picked up the phone. I had a gulf of my own. It was Bert. His voice was low, subdued.

—You know what, he was saying, —he made it. So help me Christ, he made it all the way to the back where . . . they were. Can you believe that?

—Did they find . . . ?

Bert's voice broke a little. —Yeah. He was right. You know how bad the fire was . . . but they called down from the state hospital and said she'd taken the baby, child . . . out. Said must have had somebody help . . .

—No, I said, —I didn't, and as I said it I could see Dr. Tumulty rubbing his hands over eighteen years of a certain hell.

—Never mind, listen . . . When the fire boys got back there, it was . . . everything fused. They all formed this one thing. Said she was in a metal chair, and he was like kneeling in front, his arms . . . and they . . . You couldn't tell, but it had got to be . . .

I waited while he got himself back together. —It had got to be the baby she was holding, with Howard reaching out, his arms around . . . both . . .

—Bert, I started to say, tears running down my face. —Bert . . .

—It's all right, he said at least, clearing his throat. There was an empty silence on the line for a long moment, and I could hear the resonance of the line itself, that tiny lilting bleep of distant signals that you sometimes hear. It sounded like waves along the coast. —It really is. All right, he said. —It was like . . . they had, they was . . .

—Reconciled, I said.

Another silence. —Oh shit, he said. —I'll be talking to you sometimes.

Then the line was empty, and after a moment I hung up.

Joan stared at me, at the moisture on my face, glanced at my hands, the lump on my head, the ruined suit. —What happened while I was gone? Did I miss anything?

—No, I smiled at her. —Not a thing.

I walked out onto the patio with my drink. There was still a small rain falling, but even as I stood there, it faded and the

clouds began to break. Up there, the moon rode serenely from one cloud to the next, and far down the sky in the direction of the coast, I could see pulses of heat lightning above the Rigolets, where the lake flows into the Gulf.