

Estranged

KID GUTHRIE — I'm sorry, *Andrew* Guthrie, my pudgy young protégé at the paper—and I went to the Memorial Auditorium for Larry McKnight's speech in November. It had been a little less than a week since the senator flooded the state with his press release about the *Capital News* and the communist on its staff. Though he named no names, he meant me of course, Randall Harker, Dell for short, the city editor who happened to be writing a series on the sorry-ass job McKnight was doing in Washington.

I was mostly just chronicling his career—his disinclination to show up on the senate floor even during important votes, his constant campaign-financing irregularities, the bribes he all but bragged he took from special interests. That and his character—his phony war record, his two volatile marriages and quickie divorces, and his immense fondness for distilled spirits. The senator struck back just as the Chinese invasion of Korea claimed the lead in the *News*, so forgive me if we took too little space to defend ourselves in print. But our publisher, John Tuckerman—a thin, stooped, aging gentleman socialist (he preferred the word *Progressive*) who wore English tweeds under a swirling mane of white hair—flatly denied McKnight's vague allegations in a rare appearance on the editorial page. Nice of him, since it was his idea to attack McKnight in the first place.

Old Man Tuckerman, I have to hand it to him, warned me off the Memorial Auditorium. He said he didn't like it, my going was a kind of provocation, it might be dangerous. (He didn't mean it was dangerous for me, naturally, he meant it was dangerous for him and the paper.) He said the last thing we needed was for trouble to start with me there. When I told him it was my story and I was going regardless, he said if I went, he'd bust me off city desk. When I ignored him, he said to take that kid with the chin whiskers—and a fast car.

"If anybody," he said, "and I mean anybody points a finger at you, or even looks at you too long, you hop in that car and—better yet, leave the kid outside at the wheel with the engine running." As he talked, he took out some matches and stoked his pipe. "We can still pull this thing off, Dell," he said between smacks on the stem, "if you don't do anything stupid.

The attorney general's investigating the Senator's campaign finances, and the Republican leadership wants to bounce him in fifty-two. The whole point was: Get McKnight. For Pete's sake don't play to his hand."

I shrugged and left for the meeting, the kid in tow.

THE MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM lay on the edge of downtown, at the mouth of the North Side. From there out, till you reached farm country, the neighborhoods grew swankier and swankier, the houses bigger and bigger, the country clubs more exclusive and grandiose. The worst of the Republican big money and the best of the Progressive old money dwelled there. Out there, they all drank cocktails together, played tennis together, golfed together, planned for the education of their children, and seduced each other's wives. The few friends my father once had in Capital City lived out there now, too, but I never saw them.

And neither did McKnight. Oh, there may have been a couple of lawyers from the North Side there that evening who also happened to sit on the state Republican central committee. But most of the crowd came from the western suburbs and the South Side—the Knights of Columbus, and the Shriners, and the small businessmen, a few chamber of commerce types, a real estate agent or two. And lots of women, lots of married women, who joined the PTA and played bridge and canasta and had their hair done just for the occasion. Tonight they brought the children.

The rest of the press was already there, and some of the boys got uneasy when the kid and I showed up. The Memorial Auditorium was a modern affair with a sweeping domed ceiling, concrete walls, and a blond-wood-plank stage. Behind the podium, in cheap tile and pale washed-out red, white, and blue, was a mosaic of the American flag. The place was filled, the atmosphere relaxed, like a high school talent show. I heard a steady buzz of neighborly conversation, the occasional squeals of tykes trying too hard to have fun, and rare barks of discipline. The lights were up, and people looked around in the glare to see who they knew.

I knew McKnight mostly from photographs—the picked-over glamour shots of newspaper copy—but I had seldom seen him in the flesh. I got that mild twinge I always get when I come across the abstract people I write about in all their corporeal splendor. Real bodies can sit, for example, on a metal folding chair in a row of folding chairs behind a podium, and twitch, and shift position, and lean over trying to make strained conversation with persons left and right. McKnight wore a dark, conservatively cut,

not especially expensive suit, a white shirt, and a blue club tie. He sat with his legs crossed, one hand always resting on his top knee as he flopped legs back and forth between the older, graying man—the geezer no doubt condemned to introduce him—and a younger, severely handsome, swarthy guy I took to be his aide, Daniel “Slick” Freeman.

McKnight was shorter than I had imagined, around five foot nine. He had black, well-oiled hair, parted low on one side, the other combed straight back across the top over a bald spot. A string seemed permanently to dangle down on his forehead, dangerously close to the right eye, and he constantly pushed it back with his hand. He had a cowlick grease failed to conquer. If I had ever been tempted to buy a used car, McKnight would have been the man I expected to find standing across the hood from me.

He saw us come in while he was talking to the older man, but he did not let on. When he finished what he had to say, we were already seated, and he turned to Freeman to point us out, but before he did, he took one long, hard look at me. His face was sardonic, and his eyes—if I had been close enough to see his eyes—would hold the look of the huckster who has just spotted a newlywed walk onto the lot with his wife. His tongue flicked out across his lower lip, wetting it some more, as he smiled and spoke to the aide. Freeman’s eyes, dark and luxurious even at this distance, shot up immediately, involuntarily, at us.

The introductions consisted of mindless patriotism and half-baked eulogy. Some of us pledged allegiance to the pale-tile flag, and the gray-haired geezer, president of the city’s chamber of commerce, told a lot of silly jousting jokes playing with McKnight’s name. Finally, having spent what little dignity he possessed, the local joker gave, broadcast-commercial style, a brief pitch for free enterprise and the American way. The lights, which had remained up during the introduction, went down when McKnight got up to speak. Under the concentrated illumination of the stage, I noticed for the first time McKnight’s eyebrows. As he sat and talked casually to Freeman on the platform they were unremarkable enough, but when he spoke to the crowd they both arched dramatically, adding to the weasel-like sharpness at the center of his bloated face and to the satanic grin he deemed appropriate for his stance as a political crusader.

Later, of course, his voice and manner of speaking would become famous. All good Americans would recognize the fast, blurred, almost monotonous tone and the long, rambling, illogical style that occasionally built to a kind of ersatz intensity before he made some wild, sensational

charge. The national press would claim average folks found him exciting. But that night he was still a local phenomenon, a fast-talking small-town businessman who had somehow been elected to public office. And the audience was bored. They were bored as he repeated the charges he had made in his week-old news release. They were bored during his dissertation on the evils of International Communism. They were bored as he outlined the plot hatched by Stalin and those Soviet stooges, the Red Chinese, to conquer the world starting with Korea.

Then he stopped his slurred monologue and carefully poured himself a glass of water.

“I have here,” he said, “I have here in my hand a photostatic copy of an editorial written by Mr. John Tuckerman, owner of the *Capital News*. The editorial is dated March 14, 1941.”

He pulled the paper down and held it out in front of his face, as if he were straining to read it. “And in this editorial, Mr. Tuckerman says, and I want to quote this to you. He says: ‘Now let’s get down to cases. Mr. Harker’— and by that he means Red Randall Harker, the same Red Randall Harker who now works for Mr. Tuckerman as his city editor—he says, ‘Mr. Harker is a communist, and I defy him to publicly deny that statement.’”

It was the same kind of crap he’d been tossing around for ten minutes already. And I doubted very seriously that he held in his hand anything but another page of the speech the polished young Freeman had written for him, or even that five people in our crowd knew what photostatic meant. But the difference was this: he had supplied a name and now he had his audience. A breeze of hushes silenced the restless noise of the children.

“And let’s get down to cases. Before I came here tonight—early this morning, in fact—I sent Mr. Tuckerman a wire. And in that wire I told him, I said, ‘Mr. Tuckerman, I have a question to ask you. WERE YOU LYING—’” The shout made most of us jump, and almost immediately one or two of the children started to cry. McKnight went on: “Were you lying, I asked, when you said Harker was Capital City’s leading communist? If so, I said, tell us, *please* tell us WHEN HE CHANGED. And I did even more than that. I got down to cases. I went even further than he did in his editorial. I did not merely challenge him to publicly deny that he made that statement. No, I URGED him that if a single word of what I say is not the truth, I URGED him to sue me for libel, and I will gladly pay the damages.”

Yep, he's got us now, I thought. Right in the wallet. I had been with Tuckerman all day, and no such wire had come for him. Still, McKnight had those of us in the audience now, in the moment, regardless of what I could disprove tomorrow.

"Let me quote something else to you," he said, frenetically searching through his notes. Since I was positive that whatever he was looking for did not exist, the search must have been an act. But it was convincing. Why would a man act out incompetence, why would he openly reveal how unprepared he was?

"Let me quote you something else. Only this time let me quote you something from a great American—J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI. I know Mr. Hoover personally, and he is extremely concerned about this case. Extremely concerned about what is happening in communities like this all over this great country. Here it is, here it is." Again, he held a sheet of his speech out as if he were reading it. "Mr. Hoover says, 'The primary aim of the Communist Party at the present moment in the United States is to plant party members in important newspapers and radio stations, especially in college towns.' Now think about that—did you know that in addition to the *Capital News*, Mr. John Tuckerman owns controlling interest in your city's major radio station, KNET?"

I finished his thought for him: And the renowned and progressive University of Wapsipinicon was just down the street. Every person there could finish that thought for him, now, or tonight at home, or tomorrow on the way to work. Yes, he had brought his bottled fear home for us. Now, he went in for the kill. "Now I don't want to frighten anyone here tonight," he said. "And when I tell you what I must tell you, now, I want you all to remain seated. And I want you all to remain calm. But you read the papers, and you know what's been happening with the labor unions in this state and around the country, the strikes, the violence, the threats. So I have to tell you this TO PROTECT MYSELF. Let me say now that when the time comes that I quit exposing things because I might bleed a little in return, I promise you here tonight, I will resign from the United States Senate. There is someone here tonight, right here in this audience, who would do me great harm if he thought he could get away with it. Yes, out there among you, in the dark, maybe sitting right next to you, is a communist—"

The whispering and the sporadic whimpering, and the hushings, created a kind of tremor through the audience.

"You better go start the car," I whispered to Guthrie. "Now."

“Right, Chief,” he said.

“Yes, he is here tonight. Let’s have the lights up! Turn them up so we can see him! Yes, Red Randall Harker! The very man we’ve been talking about!”

The lights came on. If folks did not know where to look to find me, the boys in the press made it clear enough. And as the eyes of the crowd began to search me out, a reporter no doubt on McKnight’s payroll made it final by pointing and shouting, “There he is!” A couple of the women screamed out, the way they used to on dates at a double feature horror show, and I remember worrying how I was dressed.

“I want that man searched!” McKnight shouted. “I want him searched!”

As the shock of light wore off and I could focus on the faces around me, I got a very, very unpleasant feeling in my gut. These people—these housewives and shopkeepers—seemed to suffer from paralysis, from the slowness of action you find in dreams. Or was it me, me who felt the leaden clamp of fear, the unreality of the moment? I should have known, I told myself. I should have figured that if McKnight was getting to me, his effect on those who knew nothing about the dark alleys of real politics would be that much worse.

I was surprised to find myself standing. I could not remember having stood. Then, I saw the men hanging around the back entrances moving down the aisle toward me. Oh, they would search me all right, and they would find on me, no doubt, the guns they now carried under their own coats.

I looked at McKnight and said as calmly as I could, “I am a US citizen. Where is your badge?”

He smiled sarcastically. He said: “Oh, so you are a US citizen? Okay, boys, you better forget it. Let Comrade—I mean Citizen Harker hide behind his legal rights. He would not dare to try anything against me here, now. But Citizen Harker, before you go . . .”

I had already started to move awkwardly down the row toward the aisle. The crowd was buzzing now, and people jerked their legs out of my path—but, at least, they were letting me pass. I stopped in the aisle and turned to face McKnight’s ellipsis.

“Since your boss, Mr. Tuckerman, does not like to answer inquiries,” McKnight said, “I’ll ask you. I’ll ask you to do the same thing he asked you to do back in 1941. Only, I’ll ask you to answer the question in the proper way. To answer the question Congress will ask you if we are fortunate enough to ever get you out there in Washington, D.C., on the witness stand. The question all communists refuse to answer. Are you now, or have

you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?"

To this barrage, I responded: "I am not a member of the Communist Party."

"That's not the question!" he shouted as I walked out. "That's not the question! The question is, were you a—"

Outside, I took a long breath and thought about the crowd. They had sat there, frozen. By that clown. Guthrie pulled up, and I got in the car. Before he could ask what happened, I said, "Let's get out of here. Tucker-man's not going to like this."

I WAS SHOOK UP, but it wasn't fear or dread I felt. I felt embarrassed. McKnight had thrown a spotlight on the foolish enthusiasms of my youth. He had not so much unmasked my nefarious past as exposed its juvenile naïveté. Again, I was reminded of a dream, of that odd mixture of excitement and shame you get when, I don't know, you look down to discover you are suddenly standing in front of a crowd of folks buck naked. In reality that night I was much more concerned with my private life than McKnight's public one, more worried about my crumbling marriage than his political posturings. After the speech, for example, I didn't relish going home to Kathy, so the kid and I stopped for a quick drink or two at one of his hip but dimly lit dives. Once I was well lubricated, I had him drop me off at Sharon's.

She was a tall, ice-cool blond with pale Scandinavian skin and sky-blue eyes, if they were open. But she was asleep on the couch when I let myself in. She was wearing a dark green silk nightgown that perfectly matched the apartment. The place was a breath of the tropics. The furniture was all bright green flowers on a stark white background with white wicker chairs and tables and so many plants placed in corners, hanging from the ceiling, arranged on walls, that you had to check twice to make sure you did not hear the caws of toucans and the chatter of monkeys. The temperature must have been in the eighties. I was amazed she could sleep amid the hiss and clang of the steam radiators, painted a bright green. She heard me close the door behind me, and she moved off the couch toward me with a grace most women only dream of.

"You're wet," she said. "And late."

"Very late," I said. "I got caught in a storm with Guthrie. A kid from work." I stepped back, displaying with a movement of my arms my overcoat, soaking from the heavy snowfall outside.

"Always the patter," she smiled, and the smile stretched into a yawn.

“Even at midnight.”

“You’re right,” I said seriously. “Shouldn’t have come. I know you have to work in the morning.”

“My, my, aren’t we considerate? You must be drunk. You do reek of alcohol. And don’t you dare apologize. I haven’t seen you in almost a week, Dell. You are staying?”

“I’m staying,” I said. “Couple hours?”

“Then let’s get you out of those clothes.” She snatched my hat. “And get you a bath. There’s time for that. Let’s put it this way, there better be time for that.”

“Lady,” I said, “I am at your command.”

She floated toward the bedroom’s bath to run the water. When she came back into the tropics, she smiled, turned sideways, hitched up her hip and revealed her shoulder, winking and motioning with her head behind her.

“I know what’s wrong with this room,” I said.

“There’s nothing wrong with this room,” she said.

“It’s not really a room at all. It’s a display. Like one of those things you do at work. Like it’s in a glass case at the Emerson Museum. In the section marked American Decor. Entitled: Exotic Nights.”

“Life,” she laughed, disappearing again into the bedroom, “is an aesthetic phenomenon.” This time she left the green nightgown behind with the wicker.

SOME TIME AFTER THAT, much later, when Sharon was asleep again, and I began to think again, I thought about long ago in Chicago where my wife and I first slept with each other, and I wished I understood how it was that you once loved somebody and then no longer loved them. Now I could not think why I had ever loved Kathy. Her father was a retired banker and her mother an emeritus professor named Dr. Rose Spencer, who I’d had a schoolboy crush on back before the war when I attended her class on Shakespeare. Dr. Spencer seemed the height of sophistication to a farm boy like me, so maybe it was inevitable that once I met her daughter I wound up marrying her. I certainly loved the memory of our first weekend in Chicago. Kathy seemed so spontaneously to enjoy the big city nights and the rush of fear that accompanied our plunge into pleasure. We saw the Whitehead Band and whispered about the gangsters at the tables around us. One minute she wanted it all—the cars, the furs, the money—and the next she wanted to run home and set up a refuge

for the two of us. As we steamed up the nights and slumbered away the days, I guess I mistook her lust to escape girlhood for passion and imagined I loved her.

These are certainly not thoughts to share with your good-looking mistress, so at Sharon's I drifted along, not thinking about tonight at the Memorial Auditorium or tomorrow at the office but about how marriages depend on lies, and how marriage, like politics, was not a base for building anything, much less a decent life. Eventually, I let myself out and caught a cab back to our apartment, regretting a little all the times I had been unfaithful to Kathy in the last fifteen years. She had stood by me, I told myself, she had accepted my notion of who I was. Now it seemed I didn't care if she believed in me or not. I only cared that Sharon would sit up nights in her tropical digs, waiting for me to come over late and take a bath. When Kathy asked me where I had been, I would lie to her about McKnight's attack, tell her how Guthrie and I went back to the *News* building, elaborate on how we got caught in the snow on the way home. But would that have taken us all night?

This time Kathy was not up waiting for me. For a moment I wondered if this was even our apartment. It looked as if we had been burgled. Clothes had been tossed about the place, and some of them shredded. Crumpled pieces of paper lay everywhere. Broken glass dotted the floors. I shouted out for Kathy, ran from room to room looking for her. About the time I realized she was not home, I noticed all the ripped-up clothes were mine. And I discovered the crumpled paper were all love letters I had written Kathy years ago, before we were married. Then I knew: Kathy herself had done this. She had trashed our home with a passion I assumed long vanished. When I checked the bathroom her makeup and toothbrush were gone. And some of her clothes seemed to be missing from the closets.

So she had heard about Sharon, and McKnight had dug up more dirt on me than a checkered political past.

TO MY SURPRISE Tuckerman stood by me when the event at the Memorial Auditorium made the next morning's radio babble. Maybe he didn't have a choice. After all, what McKnight said was true no matter how much we tried to gloss over it. I had indeed been a communist for a couple of years in the 1930s before Stalin and Hitler got together and stabbed Poland in the back. And, yes, once the Old Man called me a Red in print: I'd dropped out of school after my father killed himself, and I went to work for Tuckerman's paper; I joined the Newspaper Guild and came under the influence

of a CIO organizer and party recruiter named Vladimir Padunov (“Paddy” Smith to the Irish jokers in the union); I helped organize the *News* for the guild, and the Old Man almost never forgave me. It didn’t matter much to the bullyboys on the right, still searching for the specters of the Comintern, that these facts belonged to another era now and concerned mostly dead issues. Besides, I’d lost my faith, not my pride. Just because I was no longer pals with the Bolsheviks didn’t mean I suddenly believed Karl Marx an idiot nor all capitalists choirboys.

Tuckerman aside, there were quite a few faint of heart among my friends. All of us at the *News* were uncomfortably aware of what House Un-American did recently to that bunch of Hollywood hacks out West, so even at the paper a number of folks who should have known better looked at me differently after the speech. Things were also a little dicey outside the cocoon of the city room. Buying a pack of cigarettes, I noticed a disapproving frown from the girl at the cash register who once flirted so freely with me.

To the next day’s local headlines charging I had tried to disrupt McKnight’s speech, we responded that I was there covering the story for the *News*, trying, we said, simply to do my job. We ignored the newspaper accounts claiming I had refused to answer a direct question as to whether I had “ever” been a member of the Communist Party. That is, we ignored them for a while. I wanted to admit publicly I was once a party member and challenge McKnight to prove, based on my recent articles and labor activities, that I was still a sympathizer, but Tuckerman said no. He was afraid they might drag me to Washington to grill me at length about my past. What we needed was less, not more, publicity on this thing, he said. We were beginning to lose sight here of the real objective, he said, which was, as everybody in the city room listening to the argument could repeat in their sleep, to get McKnight.

I asked him how being defensive would help us get McKnight, but as usual when he did not want to face something, he puffed on his pipe and went about his business. He issued the—for me—embarrassing statement: “Randall Harker has repeatedly assured the management of the *Capital News* that he is not a member of the Communist Party.” An intelligent reader of the paper, if there were any readers left at all by now, might have asked why, if McKnight was lying, did I need to reassure the paper about anything?

The Old Man made me write an anonymous article quoting myself denying McKnight’s charges, and he added to the story a long list of anti-communist credentials for the paper. In one of his writing rages he called

the “alcoholic senator’s” charges the “delirium tremens of a reactionary Republican whose standard defense mechanism is to place the label of Communism on anyone who opposes him from the highest public servant to his next ex-wife when she complains about the late hours, the messy rooms, the loud mouth, and the constant staggering.”

“Good stuff,” I said. “This is the kind of thing we should be doing. Attacking full front.” His response was to cut everything after *him*.

The real thrust behind Tuckerman’s defense, however, became clear to me the following morning, when the second article signed by him in as many days appeared on the editorial page. Somehow, the article got past my desk not only without my okay but also without my even having seen it. That meant that he and our editor-in-chief Dennis Sterne had plotted behind my back. The editorial claimed confidently that years ago, when I had first been elected president of the Newspaper Guild, I had signed a noncommunist affidavit and filed it with the National Labor Relations Board, which simply was not true.

Worse than that, though, was a news piece attempting to clear my name by trying to explain the remarks Tuckerman had made to me in 1941 that McKnight had quoted in his Memorial Auditorium speech, about how my view that the coming war was imperialistic just happened to be the view held by the Communists at the time. This one did come across my desk, and I tried to suppress the entire article. Tuckerman objected.

“Do you want me to resign, is that it?” I asked him.

“Why?” he said, looking for matches.

“Because this thing is obviously an attempt to clear you and the paper while damning me with faint denial. I figure, maybe you’re saying it’s time to go.”

“Can it, Randall,” he said. “I thought you were the one who wanted to martyr yourself and admit you used to be a commie.”

“Yes,” I said. “Admit it. Right out. Not softly, ever so quietly explain why maybe somebody might think I was a communist once way back when because everything was, oh my gosh, *so* confusing in those days. We ain’t saying I was and we ain’t saying I wasn’t. You are letting us be hamstrung by the truth, because you are afraid of it. McKnight’s writing a horror story, mixing up fact and fiction. He thinks that all he’s got to do is say it first, before anyone else, because it’s a good story and it scares the hell out of folks. The only thing you’ve got is the truth.”

“I don’t need a lecture on how to run this paper from you. Or about how to deal with Larry McKnight for that matter. Why don’t you just get

your work finished, for a change, and let me handle this. We are as much on the line as you are.”

BUT IN TRUTH, those first days after McKnight’s speech, my mind lay elsewhere. When I hadn’t heard from Kathy for almost forty-eight hours, I sent Kid Guthrie looking for her.

“Found her,” he said, bopping into my office. “Took time, because I cruised the city first.”

“Did you talk to her?”

He nodded. “Finally, I got wise to where she had to be and called. She said there was nothing to talk about. She said I was sweet, I was the best friend you ever, ever had, but this had been coming for a long time. What she didn’t say was I should mind my own business. Boss, somebody told her about you and that museum chick. The little details, who your lady friend was, what she did, where she lived. Cat called her on the phone, she said.”

“She should have talked to me about it, before she—” I could hear the whine in my voice, but I couldn’t stop.

“You didn’t make a secret of it much,” he said abstractly, cautiously, stroking his goatee, not watching me.

“Where is she? Ravensport?”

“Bingo. At her folks. She told me to tell you not to hassle her.” He paused, carefully thinking through his next question. “What is it, Pops? You told me she saw what she wanted to see. There were other women. She must have copped to that.”

“Sharon’s her excuse. She wants out. She’s wanted out, really, for a long time. It’s me—my life. I don’t know. Times change.”

I hoped he would drop it. Hell, I reminded myself, I didn’t love her. Probably hadn’t for years. But all separation is a kind of suicide. Kathy had been part of something, of some self I hated to let die. After her, there would be only work and sex, I thought.

“I’ll say this, her timing was definitely uncool,” Guthrie said.

He was making a noble effort to be sympathetic when he really did not feel sympathetic.

“I dig,” I said.

I ASKED OUR PRODUCTION MANAGER Bill Dyers to borrow his heap till tomorrow and told Tuckerman I was taking the day off. He did not like it, but there wasn’t much he could do other than fire me. And how

would that look? Dyers' bomb was a secondhand Willys with a slipping clutch. I did the bump-and-grind over to my quarters to get my best wool duds and took a couple of knickknacks of Kathy's to use as an excuse for dropping down. I swallowed my pride and tried to call her once or twice, but her mother was running telephone interference. Ravensport was only an hour or so away, but if I had tried to go down after work, her father would have been at home—though he was retired now, he still fooled around days on the boards of various cultural organizations and hung out at his club—and I stood a much better chance with Mom. I headed down Firman, making my last stop at the liquor store for the wet courage I had exhausted at home.

US 218 South takes you straight to Ravensport from the capital through the state's, and maybe the country's, and maybe the world's best farmland. Paddy Smith, the émigré's son, had once asked me, the farmer's boy, on a cold winter's night during a union picket, why anyone in his right mind had ever stopped here as he headed West. It was so Siberian, so bleak, so harsh. And I said to the city boy: Look at your feet. You are standing on pure gold. Earth. Soil. The land, Paddy, the land. Even an old Bolshevik like you, I said, maybe especially an old Bolshevik like you, should understand that. And he had looked at me oddly for a time, vapor rising from our nostrils in puffs as we jumped up and down to keep warm, our hands in our pockets.

But I was a stranger to the country now, a creature of man-made horizons. And maybe because I was, I could only see what we had done to the land, not what it had given us. Out there, below the uniformity of the snow, it was gentle, sloping prairie land, a prairie that had once covered the southern half of the state and much of the Midwest with wild grass higher than a man's head. We had lopped it off for the dirt down below. The prairie had given us back an upside-down image of ourselves, gazing up at us as we gazed down at it. They had called it the Looking-Glass Prairie, because it stood under water that never completely drained from the flat terrain, creating a natural—and the world's largest—mirror. Then someone discovered even better, richer dirt below that, and we cracked the mirror with underground tile, drawing off our own reflection as we drew off the water. When I was still a boy, I had often heard of the looking glass and I longed to see it, knowing even then it had vanished for all time.

Now it was winter, and there was no native prairie underneath the snow. Chopped into greedy little quarter sections almost a century ago,

it had been pillaged by men like my father. They calculated its worth right down to the number of dollars lost per arable foot when, say, the state wanted to build a highway across it. They rode the land the way they rode their women, taking every ounce they were good for as long as they lasted. But that, my father would say, was city-boy talk, crying for a lost Eden.

Besides, he would have said, the farmer does not *use* the land, he *becomes* it. It gets down into his bones, and he knows it as a *living* thing that can be cultivated, yes, and nurtured, too, the way a child is nurtured and taught to become productive. That was what he called *farming*, he would say, and no government could tell him differently. No government could say it was a matter of possession, distribution, economics, mortgages. It was not a business at all, he said, but a *life*. That's why, I thought, when he lost the farm, he shot himself in the head.

And somewhere I almost agreed with him, in that part of me I left behind when I grew up and moved into town. I could imagine in the plowed-under fields on either side of US 218, unified now by the whiteness, a living thing. But it was no ancient rolling prairie, nor the hidden heart of America, nor the earth-goddess my father married, though it had been each of these things once upon a time. Even the time-haze of scotch and the jerky movement of a secondhand heap, the legacy of city life, could not keep me from thinking clearly through the matter. The land, too, was something historical, something that grew and changed and became a different thing in a changed world, just the way men did. No, I thought, the land is no more or less mutable than human nature, which my father insisted never changed, and I knew changes all the time.

And thinking that led me right back to McKnight, because his attack denied exactly that I had changed at all in over a decade. And to the people who lived in the A-frame houses between the clumps of trees that dotted my trip down to Ravensport, that kind of argument would make sense. Like my father, they believed in land, not in history, and McKnight would be able to fix me for them like a character in a novel, who develops maybe, but does not fundamentally change. The irony was not so much that Tuckerman's dictum had backfired, that instead of us getting McKnight, he was getting us. No, the irony was that he was a better writer than I was, that he was creating a more believable villain for his audience than I was for mine. I was his bogeyman whose evil ways explained to these people what had gone wrong with their modern world.

“It’s YOU,” he said.

I had been inside James Spencer’s house once, years ago when I drove Kathy home our sophomore year at Wapsipinicon U. I had stayed only a day, and he was away at some business conference. I’ll say this for him, he had taste. The thing I remembered most was the huge sweep of the living room. It had a high ceiling, with exposed dark-wood beams trailing nicely into a mahogany mantel over a large fireplace at the opposite end of the room, a good half-day’s journey from the expensive golden sofa, high-backed wooden chairs, and mahogany coffee table. It had been intimidating to a farm boy from Winnebago County, and I told Kathy while I was there that I thought “taste” was the weakest word in the English language.

“It’s me,” I said.

He looked as distinguished now as he ever had, with dark gray hair turning pure white at the sides, a hawkish kisser (righteously indignant at the moment), and Kathy’s perfect teeth. But he was short, shorter even than McKnight. Kathy was probably in the living room behind him, sitting on that dark gold couch of his, looking into the fireplace beyond the flames toward eternity.

“What do you want?”

He asked it with difficulty. Anger had joined the indignation in his face and he was turning very red. I hoped, perversely, he’d have a stroke.

“I want to see Kathy, naturally.”

“She doesn’t want to see you.”

“I thought you still pretended to work days.”

“You have thirty seconds to get off my land,” he said. “I’m closing this door, and walking over to the phone and calling the police.”

“It won’t be difficult if I’ve got thirty seconds,” I said. “It’s not much land, when you look at it. Just a little suburban plot with—”

The door had slammed so there was no use continuing. That was it, then. What had I expected? Kathy to hear my voice and come rushing past him to the swell of violins? As I turned back toward the drive where I had parked Dyers’ Willys, I could hear him shouting at Dr. Spencer. Kathy said he never raised his voice to anyone but her mother.

“He’s done quite enough to her! And to me, if you want to know the truth! To me! And to this state! And to this country, yes, to this country!”

I got off his porch, then, before he could get to the world, the solar system, the universe, God. I didn’t like his nasty old land, anyway. I took a kick at the well-tended lawn I knew had to be there underneath the snow. Wind caught the spray and blew it, glistening and icy cold, into my face.

I heard the garage door open as I climbed into the Willys. I fought an impulse to rush over to Kathy as she came rushing out. Instead, I was standing there, head above the open door of the car, half in, half out, and it was Kathy's mother who issued forth from the gap in the bottom right of the house. She was striding out into the cold, sun-shot, late-morning air in her determined little way, arms folded across each other, gloveless hands buried in her wool sweater, the red highlights in her hair gleaming in the sun through the gray and her white breath streaming behind her from her nose.

"You shouldn't have come, son," she said. "I told you that on the telephone."

"Where's Kathy?"

She stood level with my chest, looking up fixedly. As she talked, she stamped one foot to keep warm, but it made her appear schoolmarmish, as if she were tapping it impatiently.

"She's not here. *He* could have told you that, but he wanted you to understand she refuses to see you. And she does, Randall. It won't always be like that. Give it some time. You have hurt her, somehow, hurt her badly, though I don't know how, since she won't talk about it, even to me. Fifteen years is a long time to put up with someone and then leave and then have nothing to say about it. Has it anything to do with all that bosh in the newspapers about you?"

"Where is she, Dr. Spencer?"

"Now? She's playing tennis. But, if I tell you where, you will go find her, and I don't want that. She doesn't want that. You can probably find her anyway, now, but I honestly hope you won't try to, Randall, until she is ready. Do you think all this in the news, do you think she is frightened by it, somehow? That she has been . . . well, scared away by your tribulations?"

I could see she was troubled by the possibility. She did not enjoy the idea that Kathy might be made of less sterner stock than she was herself.

"No," I said. "It's not that."

"Because I would hate to think that was it," she said. "I told her so. I told her no matter how she felt, I did not think it right for her to go off and leave you that way, Randall, right now. Then what was it? I know enough about you, you know? You hear about you at the caucuses; and at the conventions, I would see you. You were not much of a husband. Drinking and womanizing. And a woman has to make up her mind about that. Whether she will put up with it or not. But it seems to me

she had made up her mind long before this. Was there somebody else, somebody important?"

Once again, the pain was evident on her weathered face. She liked me, I knew, but I did not realize how much she liked me till now, when despite the fact she thought I was a poor husband, she was hurt by the idea that I would give up her daughter, yes, and her, too, for another woman.

"No," I lied. "Not anyone, not anyone I would have—"

"I understand," she said, looking out across her front lawn, a little blue about the lips from the cold. She must be freezing, I thought, without a coat. I looked back toward the house. James Spencer had come out into the garage. He was standing just inside, staring angrily at her. She followed my gaze. "But there *could* be someone?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't know. That's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to her. To explain."

"Don't worry about him," she said. "He didn't call the police. He hates you." She looked straight at me again with her level, honest, old woman's eyes. "And so do I, son, in a way. So do I. Do you think children would have made a difference?"

"No," I said. "No, Dr. Spencer, I don't."

Rose, he called from the garage.

"Don't be so sure," she said, ignoring him.

Rose!

This time he was coming. He moved out of the garage so quickly that he slipped some and almost fell on the icy drive, which only made him angrier, and he reached us in a near run. His hair was a little disheveled from the jolt of the slip and his face was a little wild. He hit the car door with all his weight, jarring me back against the jamb on my shoulder.

"You son of a bitch!" He was screaming very loudly now, having lost all dignity, and he was shoving the door up against me over and over. I held the door with my free arm until he seemed almost out of breath.

"You son of a bitch! You son of a bitch! You son of a bitch!"

She pulled him off and pushed him back toward the garage. He allowed it with surprising listlessness. She came away ashamed and angry herself. He stood back there staring and fuming and impotent.

"You better leave, now," she said. "I'm sure Kathy will talk to you when she's ready." Suddenly her face twisted into a million wrinkles—a shocking expression of worry and doubt. "What are they doing to you, Randall?" she said. "What are they doing to all of us?" She stopped to catch hold of herself. "Please. Just go. Leave now."

I motored around Westgate till I found the country club, and I looked for the Spencer Buick Mom always drove to caucuses and state conventions that had been missing this morning from the garage. I still had those knickknacks to deliver, and I could taste victory when I saw the family wheels parked near the empty outdoor tennis courts. She would of course be playing inside on the field-house courts just beyond these. I parked Dyers' battered wagon and waited, hoping no one noticed the heap that stood out like a sore thumb among the new and the polished. Kathy appeared half an hour later with a broad-shouldered, clean-shaven type. She had on a camel's hair overcoat I'd never seen, and she was smiling. When she left him for her mother's car, she tossed her black hair back, free of her hooded collar, and touched his forearm. She was flushed and healthy looking and she had no need of knickknacks, so I waited until she pulled away and then I headed out of Westgate downtown, toward the giant, ugly industrial park that made up the real city. I knew a good bar called the Substation just the other side of the tracks.

WHEN I THINK BACK, the speed with which everything happened seems remarkable. The very night I returned from Ravensport Sharon told me over a late dinner, "There were some men at the museum today asking questions about you and me. My boss, Sam Endicott, got very angry. He brought them to my office and made them ask me their questions directly. Questions about you—us. Afterward, he wouldn't tell me who they were. I think he got confused about whether he was more angry at them or at me."

"What did they ask?"

"How well I knew you. If you were really a communist."

"Hold it," I said, sitting up against the back of my chair, crushing out one smoke and lighting another. "You mean they interrogated you? Threatened you?"

"No," she said. "In fact, they were rather pleasant about the whole thing. I think they were surprised I didn't deny—going with you. Sam wanted to know if you were a communist, too, after they left. And if I had told them the truth. I told *him* that I thought you had been once, but not any more. I told *them* I had no idea. When I asked him who they were, he got coy. Who were they, do you know?"

"The FBI," I said. "That would be my guess."

We didn't talk much more about it, but Sharon, already planning a trip home for Christmas, now decided to leave early to spend Thanksgiving

as well in South Carolina. She swore she wasn't fleeing to her rich daddy and promised she'd be back by New Years, but I had my doubts. So I wasn't exactly surprised when, after I hadn't seen the Old Man around the paper for a couple of days, I walked into my office to find a written invitation to his place for drinks and dinner. It was never good news when John Tuckerman wanted to explain something, at length, over brandy in his study.

I TOOK A TAXI to the far North Side, where the Old Man lived in the gentlemanly luxury becoming a Progressive publisher. His Italianate villa had been built in the 1830s on bluffs overlooking the river by one of the lumber barons who originally platted Capital City. For a time, before his father bought the place, it had served as an elegant and discreet whorehouse run by a Madame Chouteau for the river-trade moneymen. Dinner was well prepared, conversation with the family pleasant, Mrs. Tuckerman stridently charming. Afterward, he sent her and his daughters and their boyfriends and one husband all on their way in fine cars to a wonderful evening's entertainment at the symphony. We retired to the library, not to his study, for brandy and a smoke and for the moment of truth that was the point of his Olympian summons.

Tuckerman's library, like libraries everywhere, was filled with books. The difference, though, between the Old Man's library and mine was that his books sat on mahogany shelves in specially built cases lining the wall in their expensive Moroccan-leather bindings with gold-leaf lettering and tiny crimson tassels for bookmarks. The Persian rug was genuine. The French doors opened onto a small balcony looking down the bluffs. The scotch was sequestered in a Waterford decanter below an antique dark-wood side table adorned with a stained-glass Tiffany lamp. I drank Chivas Regal. He drank Martel.

A brick fireplace with a marble mantel neatly broke the line of books and shelves. Hanging above it, Tuckerman's grandfather, painted by a frontier artist in some atrocious shade of purple the textbooks might call mauve, looked hopelessly out of place and startled. Around about, here and there, were all those photographs and tabletop cigarette lighters and jade trinkets with which the rich love to clutter their lives. One of the pictures, I was surprised to discover, was an old sepia-toned oval rotogravure of "Prince" Albert Collette, the former leader of the state's Progressives in whose vacated Senate seat sat Larry McKnight. Tuckerman saw me look at it and motioned with the wave of claw.

“Yes, Father took that,” he said. “He became something of a god-damned good photographer in his days at the *News*.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “You keep his darkroom intact. Just the way it was. Down in the cellar, the other end of the wine caskets.”

He chose not to take offense. “You shouldn’t resent someone’s inheritance, Randall. It’s unbecoming. I don’t fool myself that any of this is essential to the good life, and certainly not a decent one, any more than you do.”

“I don’t think about it much.”

“Jesus Christ, man. I met your father a few times. You simply cannot pull that poor-boy-from-the-farm rubbish with me. He was a well-to-do Republican stockman, and you had things not unlike all this most of your life.”

“He was a land-rich, cash-poor, middle-class suicide,” I said descriptively and, I hoped, without either resentment or bitterness.

“Care for another drink?”

“Do you need to ask?”

When he finished the ritual of pouring, returning my glass, setting his down, looking for the lighter (in plain sight on the side table), lighting his pipe, and checking his watch, he picked up the photograph of Prince Albert and launched himself on his meandering journey toward the point.

“He was an admirable man,” Tuckerman said. “He and my father worked together, like brothers, reforming the old Stand-pat Republican Party. It was dangerous then, too, Dell, to talk responsible social reform, with the anarchists and the ignorant immigrants, all those revolution-crying lunatics. But they did it. They did. And for thirty years we had responsible reform and clean government in this state. Good government. Progressive government. Socially constructive government. Intelligent government. Until—”

“I know,” I said. “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. I’ve heard it all. Want to get to the point? How about another?”

“You go ahead. I’ve had just about my quota.” And when I filled my glass, he said, “Come here. Sit down a minute. I’m an old man, Randall. And I’m not prepared to give up the *News*, not at my age. But I don’t want you to jump ship on me, and I’m afraid you will when I tell you what I have to tell you. You are one goddamned fine newspaperman and a good city editor, regardless of your politics, but this has gotten beyond all that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Advertising, Randall. Money. Even my paper runs on money. The radio station, too, it runs on money. And I don’t have the kind of money, personally, I need to keep it strictly a family concern anymore, I’m afraid. Someday, and someday soon, I’m going to have to go public to survive. You communists—forgive me, Dell—you labor people have always had a very shaky notion of finance. How does Marx treat money?”

“As a commodity,” I said.

“Well, I don’t know about that. Maybe a *symbol* for the rest, for all commodities,” Tuckerman said. “That’s what he would have said, if he wasn’t so damn afraid of Idealism. This McKnight thing. It’s starting to hurt us—in the pocketbook, I mean.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“If it was just that, Randall . . . I don’t know, I might fight it, despite the fact I feel old right now, too old to *really* fight change. The attorney general’s office has dropped the proceedings against the senator. We are losing credibility with them.”

“Damn,” I said.

“There’s more. I want you to look at this. They sent us an advance copy. It hasn’t hit the stands yet.”

He handed me a copy of *Time* magazine, open to the “Press” section. Tuckerman kept quiet as I read about how the seventy-year-old firebrand muckraking owner of the *Capital News* in Capital City, Wapsipinicon, and his crack-reporter-cum-left-wing-ideologue city editor had begun slinging mud at the state’s incumbent junior senator and anti-communist champion only to have this former war hero turn the tables on them.

When I sighed and set it down, Tuckerman said, “You’ve become an event, Randall. It’s the worst thing that can happen to a reporter.”

“Please, Boss, just tell me what you are going to tell me. Let’s get it over with. Stop it. No, don’t go looking for a match. You’ve got a lighter right here. Now, tell me.”

“I’m not going to run any more pieces on McKnight.”

“You’ve got to be out of your mind,” I said.

“Listen to me, Dell. Listen to me. Before all this started, McKnight had only a slim chance of being renominated by his own party and an even slimmer chance of being reelected. Now you can’t walk into a shop in the city without hearing people talk about him. Because he has found an issue. Because he has made himself newsworthy. And every word we print, every denial we make, every time we run that egg-sucker’s name in *my* paper, he gets more publicity.”

“I —”

“No, don’t interrupt me, Dell. I don’t like it. I hate his ass. I hated him when he came sniffing around Prince Albert’s camp back in the thirties. I told the Prince that little shits like McKnight were going to ruin the Republican Party he and Dad built. And I’ve hated the man ever since.”

“So,” I said, “you had to go and pound him flat with your very own sledgehammer. And you made him famous instead.”

“You think?” the Old Man said sarcastically. “Well, no more. Not another goddamned word, do you hear me?”

I waited until he had calmed down before I told him I was leaving and headed for the front door and my coat and hat. When I got there, he stopped me, asked me what I planned to do. I said I planned to call a taxi. That’s what I planned to do. And I planned to go home and write him that letter of resignation I had been promising off and on for years. Only this time I really planned to write it. And I planned to give it to him in the morning. And I planned to grant interviews to the press, any newspaper but the *News*. And I planned to tell them everything, everything I could think of at the moment. Just as I had always wanted to do, I said. I planned to fight this thing out my way, with the truth.

“Why?” he asked, looking at his pipe as if it was a gun he might use on himself after I left. “What’s the use?”

“Because I don’t like suicides,” I said.

I DIDN’T WRITE the resignation I promised him any more than I wrote those I promised in the past. But any idiot would have recognized the gig was up. Unless I did something very clever and did it fast, McKnight’s attack would mean more than just my job. And, in the end it proved to be surprisingly simple. I’d always associated the kid and his hipster pals with the old prewar Weimar Republic’s smoky underground excesses, I just didn’t realize how different the town had become since I trolled the dark alleys and dives on the East Side during my college days. I was pretty desperate by the time one of Andrew’s coffeehouse friends told him how often Slick Freeman came slipping around to indulge his carefully concealed sexual needs. I was a newspaperman far longer than I was ever a communist—I got photographs.

I took the images with me early to work one morning and spent a couple of hours before the office opened with our production manager, Bill Dyers. After that, I left the *News* building and caught a taxi to the Ritz downtown, where McKnight and company holed up when they were

back in the city. The too-plush lobby was filled with the desultory midday lounge lizards who smoked, leered, yawned, played chess, gossiped, and read under overwrought capitals topping marble columns. I used some hotel stationery, salmon pink, to scribble a note: "Tomorrow's front page. We should talk. I'm in the lobby and dying for a drink. Comrade Harker." I folded it inside the bogus spread I got Dyers to print up for me, put it all in a cute square envelope, and wrote across the outside: *Senator McKnight*. I found a cocky bellboy and gave him the package and some change, and asked him to deliver it.

I was waiting in the lobby when the elevator doors slid open and Slick Danny Freeman stepped out. He had the eyes of a poet and a voice that competed with his silk tie for smoothness. His teeth were the last perfect expression of beauty in postwar America, and the smile he laced around them was the phoniest attempt to do good since Prohibition.

"The famous Red Randall," he said. "We met formally the other night at the Memorial Auditorium. Let's put it this way, we were both introduced."

"Yes," I said. "I'm afraid we didn't have much time to chat then; I was rather in a hurry. Also, I didn't have as much to say."

He laughed, damn it, genuinely.

"The Senator awaits," he said. "Let's say he's atremble with expectation."

"But not you," I said.

"No," he smiled. "Not me. I always look on the bright side. The fact that your front page comes to us through a bellhop rather than a newspaper delivery boy seems to me a good sign. It seems to me a sign that we might have something constructive to talk about. Shall we join his Nibs?"

"You're good," I said on the way to the elevator. "If I had a limp-wristed kid brother instead of a sexy little sister, I'd certainly want to introduce the two of you."

He laughed genuinely again, and with good humor, let me step into the elevator first.

"To save us all a lot of time," he said, still chuckling some, "I'll simply tell you straight up. The Senator knows all about my interest in ... promising young men. It's not a problem for him."

"Oh?" I said. "I didn't realize our talk was going to be about sex and our private lives. I thought our meeting was about publicity and elections."

He never broke stride from elevator to second-floor suite, and his smile, lighting the hall, never even flickered.

McKNIGHT WAS WRAPPED in a wine-colored silk smoking jacket, naked underneath, surprisingly scrawny, dark-haired legs sticking out below a rotund and pasty body. More than one string of greasy black hair dangled in front of his eyes, eyes red-rimmed from drinking around green centers made intense by contrast. His face was bloated by alcohol, and he held an absurdly tall glass filled with scotch cut the color of piss. Sitting there in an overstuffed, royal-blue-and-bone-white chair, leg over leg, he was more frightening than I wanted to admit. You saw the high-school ring among the pudgy fingers around the tall glass, like some apology by the boy he once was for the man he had become, and you felt sorry for him because he still wore it. And then you saw the eyes again, and the falling flesh robed in elegance again, and you felt disgust for his weariness and his indifference. The combination of the emotions he invoked in you, of pity and disgust and fear, made him a monster. He was the only man I had ever met I could imagine actually pressing the button that would send us all to perdition.

He saw me looking him over, and he smiled wetly.

“’Twas a rough night?” I said.

“I don’t think we need any introductions,” Freeman said. He stepped back a step toward McKnight.

“You wanted to talk?” McKnight asked.

He drank down the yellow liquid in a gulp and handed the glass back to Freeman, still looking at me. As the scotch took effect, the face came together some, and I could see the handsome Irish boyo he had once been inside the jowls and the puffiness of the malaise. He blinked, and I noticed his long, almost feminine eyelashes and, once again, the dramatic arch of his brows.

“Slick,” he slurred. “Make Mr. Harker a drink. We, the two of us, we are going to have a drink together.” He looked at me, heightening the arched brows. “You wanted to talk?”

McKnight fit the place, a two-room suite, with the door to the second room closed. This was the office and receiving end of the thing, done like the chair in royal blue and bone white—blue walls, white patterned flowers; white doors, blue trim; white tables, blue drapes. At one end of the room sat a desk, standard size, clean, empty, ignored. At the other was a portable bar, behind which Slick Freeman happily attended to his important work. Behind me squatted a white sofa. The floor was of some well-polished dark wood with plush white throw rugs. Just this side of the closed white door to room number two, on the burnished chocolate

floor, lay in plain sight a pair of woman's red silk panties.

"The bed's in the other room?" I asked.

Freeman's laugh came from the bar.

"You want to get a piece of ass from us as well as a drink?" he said.

"Can do. My, but you drive a hard bargain, Comrade Harker."

"Shut up, Slick," McKnight growled. When I had my drink in hand and had plopped down on the sofa, and when McKnight had taken his extra tall one from Freeman's dark, long, well-groomed fingers, the senator said, "Get rid of the girl."

Freeman disappeared behind the white door, but before he did, he made his first mistake of the day. He glanced quickly back at the two of us, and I caught him. He was more worried than he let on. And he was nervous about leaving the senator alone with me.

"Freeman," I said. "That's not his real name, is it? He's too dark. Jewish, maybe?"

McKnight managed to smile wetly again. Like all despots ruled by their subalterns, he sort of despised his second-in-command.

"Friedman, F-R-I-E-D," McKnight nodded. "New York, originally. Worked for an advertising agency when I met him. His biggest account was a Yid company made, I don't know, toilet paper or something, owned by his damn uncle. Now, he studies law nights at Georgetown University when he's not kissing my ass."

"Him being a Jew a problem out here?"

"Jew, not so much. Fag, yeah."

Then, McKnight remembered himself and took another huge gulp of booze. He tried to shake it off, his ennui, and to get down to business, but he seemed worried and couldn't start without Freeman there. Then the politician in him automatically took control.

"We're from the same place, you and me," he said. "Winnebago County. Why we so different?"

He said Winnebago County in the lost and abstracted way I had heard the seventy-year-old father of commie union organizer Paddy Smith once say Russia, and the question he asked seemed pleading rather than confused.

"We're not," I said. "We just left for different places."

"But we both left," he said.

"I didn't go as far," I said.

"Not in miles maybe." Suddenly his eyes changed. He was still looking at me, but he seemed to have lost focus. Odd. "But I think you know what

it's like to dream about getting out altogether—am I right? And then you do, you know, and, somehow, it's not enough. You miss it. And you know there is nothing there to miss. But you miss it, somehow. What you don't know is what it's like to work for Albert J. Collette for twenty years. I mean he treated me like dirt. Everybody thought he was wonderful. So gentlemanly, so kind, so concerned. But, I *knew* him. He was just like you and me. Only he hid behind his high ideals rather than—this stuff.”

He rattled the ice in his glass.

“I want you to know, Harker, it's just politics. I mean, this left-wing, right-wing crap between me and you. It's just politics. It don't mean shit. And it was never you we were after. Hell, you're a guy. I'm a guy. You know how it is. But that Tuckerman—he acts exactly like Collette. Like he's a prince, not a guy. Like they don't want a thing for themselves. High ideals. They started out rich, that's all. They thought that meant they were born to rule.”

I waited as he took a long draft from his drink.

“We had to use you to get to him,” he said bluntly. “He wouldn't leave me alone. From the start, he wouldn't leave me alone. They were already ahead—the damn Collettes and the damn Roosevelts and the damn Tuckermans—and they acted like all they wanted to do was to help out the little guy, but what they really wanted was to keep us from catching up with them, that's all. And that was just politics, too.”

“I'm not sure they think so,” I said.

“But you and me,” he said, ignoring my interruption. “You and me. We weren't fooled by them, the way they fooled all the others with their talk about public service and helping mankind and fulfilling a destiny. Am I right? You—you know—you with this ideology crap. Me, just fighting. Just fighting tooth and nail, toe to toe, right in the ring, on their own terms. But it was just politics. Underneath, we are both the same. We don't like them. Not a bit. We like fucking. Drinking. Being somebody folks know, respect or hate, it doesn't matter, what's the difference.”

It took a while to realize he had no idea to whom he was talking. He knew who I was, for sure, but he did not actually know why I was there or what my being there meant to him. He wasn't even sure how I had gotten there. All he knew was that I was there, and he had to get along with me. He had to connect with me by any means possible. He honestly expected me to forget, and worse, to forgive, what he had been doing to me and my life for the past month, because he had only been using me to get at Tuckerman, because he bore me, personally, no ill will.

My god, I thought. He wants me to like him.

He downed the rest of the scotch in his glass and paused, waiting, not knowing what to do next without Freeman there, and in the silence, we could hear faintly the haggling going on next door between Slick and McKnight's midmorning twist. I got up, took the drink from his hand, and went over to buy us both some more liquid time.

"Thanks," he said. "I told Slick you were all right. I told him you were Winnebago County to the core underneath all that international soviet bullshit—or whatever it is your opinions are right now. *Strong opinions*. That's what I thought you had. I told Slick, go out and get me some strong opinions. Like Harker. Opinions I could act on. Opinions I could feel good—inside—about. Hell, I said, I don't have to believe any of that shit, I just need me some strong opinions I can feel proud to hold. I told him, I understand you; he didn't. I told him drinking men understood each other. But he just smiled that damn Doris Day smile of his and said, *No—*"

I put the filled glass back in his hand.

"—At first I thought the way was not to have opinions at all, you know? That was my mistake with Prince Albert. He called me *The Weasel*," he said, as if he were confessing a sin to a priest. "*The Weasel. Get the Weasel to do that*, he'd say. *That's the Weasel's job*. When I ran for the senate right after the war, after Collette died—hell, I didn't have any opinions then and people elected me. I thought they recognized what I knew all along, that I didn't need opinions, because—I don't know if I should tell you . . ." He dropped his voice to a whisper. He glanced at the closed white door. He leaned forward, arching his brows.

"I have greatness of soul."

The scotch tasted sweet. Whenever scotch tastes sweet, you know something is wrong. Reality has lost its contours. I felt as if I had entered another dimension, and I was anxious for Freeman to return and cage the beast. Freeman was slick all right, and dangerous enough, but he was sane.

"Greatness of soul, it's inside you, like something alive, and it grows and grows, trying to get out, trying to force its way through your pores—and—" He gulped scotch. "When all this started, we talked about you. I always liked to think about you, because we were both from Winnebago County, and we turned out so different. We talked about you all the time. And I said I don't live any worse than Harker does. And my strong opinions are a lot more popular than Harker's are. So what is it? What is it about Harker? All he's got I haven't got is a nickname, I said.

You know what he said?"

For the last three or four minutes my eyes had been riveted to the closed, bone-white door and away from madness, so it took me a moment to hear the silence, and to remember what McKnight had actually asked me and to realize that not only was he talking to me, but that he expected me to answer.

"No," I said quietly. "I don't know what he said."

"He said you had authority. That's what he said."

"Authority?"

"He said you were writing the goddamned book in this state, and that's why you were untouchable, that's why you were always in control, why nobody could get to you, because you had authority in Capital City, and we were letting you write the goddamned book for the whole of Wapsipinicon. He said what we had to do, we had to take it away from you. We had to write it ourselves, undermine your authority, not let you always know what was going on. And that's all we did, Harker, me and Freeman. We didn't do anything to hurt anybody. It was just politics, that's all. We were just trying to get some authority. Get reelected. I don't know how it got to be like this—all out of hand like this. Out of control."

"Maybe Freeman was wrong," I said.

"Wrong about what?" Freeman asked. He was closing the door behind him. "The last time I was wrong was, I forget, maybe 1944 on a high-school history exam." He was smiling.

"Maybe I don't have authority," I said.

"Maybe not," he said, walking across the room to the coffee table between me and McKnight. The fake front page I sent them lay spread out next to the hotel's salmon-pink stationery.

"But you," he said, "and you alone, wrote this."

McKnight was ignoring us, gulping down the last of his drink. I was beginning to understand it did not matter much if he was there or not. Freeman took the empty glass from hand to bar.

"Thanks," McKnight said. He focused on me for the first time in a while. "You got the boy's name?" he asked, pathetically. I nodded.

"You said you wanted to talk," he said, waving an unsteady finger at the coffee table. "In that note there." He stopped. His eyes were gone again. "At least your friends aren't assholes," he said. "Like mine. They don't go off with your wives and—"

"Here you are, Senator," Freeman said.

"Thanks, Slick."

"I take it," I said to Freeman, "you're the one I'm to talk to about this."

"I'm the only one here," he smiled. "To talk to, I mean."

"Does he even know what kind of trouble he's in?" I asked. "What this can do to his—your—campaign hopes?"

"I don't think so," Freeman said, laughing short and quick.

"I know I don't have authority," McKnight said. He lifted and drank of and dropped to the floor his glass. It broke on the gleaming hardwood. "And greatness of soul doesn't matter."

"Come on, Senator," Freeman said. "Time for our after-lunch constitutional."

He helped McKnight up from the chair. The wine robe came loose, and McKnight held it closed against his nakedness with a stubby, unclean hand. Freeman walked him to the closed door, and as he opened it, McKnight said: "Don't like Jews much. Sneaky people. That's why they are rich. Brains instead of souls. And they got long schlongs, they call 'em."

I waited while Freeman got McKnight bedded and sleeping in the second room. When he came back, he didn't smile as much, but he was more relaxed and, paradoxically, more businesslike.

"Assuming what you say about having the boy's name is true," he said on his way to the bar. "Assuming you could actually get this page on the stands." This time, he made himself a drink, too, a dry martini. "What do you want from us? To drop this silly Red baiting, is that it?"

"How often does he get like that?"

Freeman took off his suit coat, part of a blue, three-piece ensemble, and dropped it over the chair McKnight had been sitting in. Then he came around the coffee table and sat down on the sofa next to me, spreading out the front page our way so we both could read the bogus head.

"Does it matter?" he said.

"Some," I said. "He's a sick man. He should be attended to professionally."

"He probably doesn't drink any more than I do, certainly no more than you, if you average it out over, say, a year. Besides, he's right, he has greatness of soul."

It was my turn to laugh, and I did.

"How do you get him to stand up on a platform steady and speak without slurring? I suspected he was drunk at the Memorial Auditorium, but that was nothing like this."

"It hits him differently at different times. These kinds of bouts are more rare than the others. The others seem to help him. And don't think

I'm being ironic when I praise him. You've seen him at his worst. I've seen him at his best, his most brilliant."

"You're as crazy as he is," I said.

"Maybe. But he's going to be our president one day, so you might as well get used to it."

"Not like that he's not," I said. It seemed to me almost insane to even talk seriously about it. But here we were. "No matter how far right the country swings. He won't make it through the next campaign like that. And that's not even taking the Democrats into consideration."

Freeman smiled. He wasn't condescending. He was assured. "I didn't know we were going to discuss metro politics. The Democrats will lose."

"Let me guess," I said. "Their boy doesn't have greatness of soul?"

"No," Freeman said, "he doesn't. The other thing their boy doesn't have is exposure. But, let's get down to it. What do you want to kill the story about me picking up little boys in local bars?"

"I want my life back. Right here in Capital City."

"That I don't have to give you."

"Then I want you to drop me from McKnight's reelection plans. I want to be able to live and work without having my past always thrown up in my face. If not here, then wherever I go from here."

"That I can do. And I will do. But I can't help you here in town, it's just too late."

"South Carolina?"

"Oh," he laughed. "That state you can have. If you can find her, do you think she'll be happy to see you even after she ran home to daddy at the first sign of trouble? I don't know, Harker, I'd think about going back to the wife if I were you. Move down to Ravensport. Have some kids. Lead a decent, respectable life."

"Just what I need," I said, "Matrimonial advice from a queer political hack who works for a madman with delusions of grandeur. Look, do we have a deal or are you staring at tomorrow's headline?"

Slick made us another drink while he thought it over. He came back to the couch, and he handed me my glass, and he folded up the newsprint carefully and slipped it in his front shirt pocket under his blue vest.

"It's not that I think you could pull it off. I doubt even John Tuckerman would run the risk of using such salacious copy. I want you to understand that—"

"Oh, you have no idea how much he hates McKnight," I said.

"—But you were just our market test to see if we could sell our

message here in Wapsipinicon. Now we know, and we don't need to keep attacking you in particular. Any old commie will do. So, deal?"

Why not, I thought. I had no intention of trying to get the article run anyway, not to the glory of and in the newspaper owned by the man who wouldn't think twice about selling me down the river to protect his family's investments. The Old Man could stuff his bottom line, I was moving on.

"If this crap about me starts up again anywhere, anytime," I warned, "I'll turn the pictures—not just that one of you two holding hands and about to play kissy face—but all of them, over to some Democrat."

"Believe me, it won't start up again for you. And even if you did give them to some Democrat, maybe by that time, it won't matter if I'm gay," Slick said. So he, too, I thought, was a dreamer, indeed as crazy as his boss. He extended a hand. "But you have a deal. The Senator and I will be leaving town tonight. A pleasure. Here's hoping we never meet again."

FROM THE PORTICO of Longfellow Hall I watched my wife climb out of a car driven by the broad-shouldered bozo I'd seen her with last month down in Ravensport. She pecked his cheek and tromped off toward the campus administration building. She saw me coming long before I reached her.

She stopped, pushed her near-black hair out of her face and behind her ears, and put her hands in the pockets of her coat. She was wearing a lot less makeup these days, and she reminded me of her mother the first time I took her class. Here on campus, I suppose, she could hardly help but remind me of her mother, though Kathy was much taller.

"So," I said. "I hear you decided to go back to school."

"I hear you quit your job," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Still drinking?"

"Yes," I said.

"How can you afford the liquor?"

"I'm freelancing," I said. "And freeloading if I have to."

"My lawyer refused to believe I wasn't demanding alimony, but I told him, one, you'd never pay it, and two, I'd never ask you for it."

When I didn't respond, she said, "I have to register." She seemed dazed I was there. "Do you want to talk, is that it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Down on this end of Eightieth there's a new place called The Submarine. The kids like it, but this time of morning it shouldn't be too crowded.

You could get breakfast there, and I—I'll join you when I've finished."

"I'll meet you down there," I said. "Will it be long?"

"However long it is," she responded, now impatient and half-attentive, "you'll be sitting there, wiggling your legs, looking at the door, and planning to leave." She pulled her hands from her pockets, dismissed me with a slight twist toward the buildings behind me: "Unless, of course, you've changed."

"I haven't changed," I said.

I WAITED HALF AN HOUR at The Submarine. When Kathy finally walked in, a local hipster bid her good morning on her way over to the table I occupied like a Russian in Berlin.

"So what is it you want?" she asked, uneasy, sitting down carefully across from me, gazing around at the cool and the callow.

"To say good-bye, I guess. I'm moving on."

"From Capital City? I don't believe it!"

"Couple months," I said. "Soon as I have the dough to buy a second-hand heap."

She sat quietly, watching her coffee.

"It's that woman, isn't it?" she asked finally.

"Her name's Sharon," I said.

"I don't care what her name is."

She tumbled back into silence.

"Look," she said finally. "I know I did a lot of stupid things. But you get confused, you know? Like wrecking the apartment. That was stupid."

A couple of girls, years younger than Kathy, had come into the place. She asked me to hold up for a moment and joined them. They seemed pleased to see her. Watching her, I thought maybe this was a mistake. Before she came back over, the two girls began to sneak glances my way, looks both curious and cold. I was, after all, an outsider.

"Tell me about your classes," I said, hoping to ease the tension. She bought it. She said she was taking philosophy as well as literature courses and had signed up for a class in metaphysics. She had gotten interested in metaphysics over the winter in Ravensport when she started seeing Dave, who I assumed was her buff tennis partner and gallant chauffeur.

I asked her abruptly: "Why did you leave like that?"

"Why do we have to talk about it?" she asked. "Get the truth out, is that the idea? Get to the bottom of things? It's what you do for a living, right? So you can justify your cheating and your lies."

“It’s better than pretentious academic babble,” I said.

She reddened instantly, like her father. “What is it you want?” she spat each word.

“I want to know about the phone call,” I said.

“That? It wasn’t that! I can assure you. Oh, the hell with it! The man said he was a friend of yours, and he thought I should know about *her*. I told him I did know about *her*. That’s all there was to it.”

“How did his voice sound? High-pitched? Whiny?”

“No. Why? What difference does it make?”

“I’m asking, that’s all.”

“Oh, all right. Okay. It was sharp. Savvy. A fast-talking boy from the big city. New York, I’d guess.”

“Slick Freeman,” I said to myself, matter-of-factly.

“He didn’t leave a name,” she said.

“He’s a troubleshooter for McKnight. He once suggested that you and I move to Ravensport and have children.”

“Now that’s the Randall Harker I know,” she said. “The bitter one. Don’t go flattering yourself that that phone call made any difference. That it caused something to snap or anything like that. He told me some things I didn’t know about *that* woman—that she was the former mistress of some old millionaire she worked for—and he said you were wasting your time and that I should not give up on you—but I told him none of it mattered. And it didn’t. By that time, I just didn’t give a damn.”

“What then? What was it?”

She huffed. She frowned. She sipped her coffee. She clattered her fingernails on the cup. “If you simply have to know,” she said, “it was in fact the day the senator attacked you. The same day this fellow called me on the phone about your latest . . . lover. When Mother telephoned later that night about the news on the radio, the two calls, back to back, seemed . . . it all seemed, well, *dirty* is the word I come up with.

“During the war I always thought of you as hard-nosed and bitter but basically honest. That’s why I didn’t leave you when you joined the party and turned your back on our marriage. I was intellectually weak, I thought, and you were tough-minded. Eventually, the war would end, I told myself, and things would get back to normal. In this country. In this city. Between us. Even after the war, I thought sooner or later I’d find the energy to work things out with you. Then, somewhere along the line, I realized it was you, not me, who needed to change.

“And I kept waiting. Oh, god, you can waste so much time waiting for

somebody to change. To straighten up. So when you were—what?—*exposed* by the senator and, what's his name, you just told me, his fast-talking sidekick—” She paused, as if she wanted to get this right. Then she said, “When the call came, I guess, at last I admitted to myself that you had given up trying to be the man I thought I married a long time ago; I realized that I had known for years you had been—what?—dishonest, foul, sullied, *polluted*, and that for years I had simply refused to face it.”

She gulped her coffee and set the cup back on the table. “I just didn't want to be a part of the grime any longer,” she said. “Now, I'm finished. With this conversation. With you. With the whole thing.” She looked away.

“And that's the truth,” she said.

THEY WOULD CALL IT the McKnight Era, when war became police action and identity a media pose, and I saw it born on the television set I bought to take Guthrie's place in the months before I left Capital City. I got hooked by the cathode-ray tube and its *Lone Rangers* and *Cisco Kids*, its *Cavalcades of Sports* and *Meet the Presses*, its *Honeymooners* and *Ellery Queens*. In early June, CBS's *Evening News* covered a speech McKnight made in Kentucky announcing that he had in his hand a list of a hundred card-carrying communists now employed by the federal government, some highly placed in the US State Department. You could not capture in words what the series of electronically transmitted dots captured of McKnight, and I wondered if maybe Freeman was right and McKnight did own a kind of greatness, wicked as it was.

After the *Evening News*, during the Friday night fights that followed, I found myself whistling along with the Gillette jingle and worrying about how rotten our social and political culture had grown. But what thinking man, drink in hand, had not been troubled by that during his life? Only now I felt estranged from even this dirty world. When you are estranged, you exist right now, for this day alone or for that. Any future, much less a secure one, seems hardly possible. I don't know, maybe the price of the future was corruption, the purchase of life by the selling of soul, and mine went cheap, with a shabby little blackmail that let me function a little longer in a society I'd come to despise.

Over a martini or two, I tried out a wry grin on my grim view, absently watching two pugilists fight it out on-screen for my enjoyment. My old commie pals would accuse me of going existential, but goddamn it, you can only wait so long for the revolution without degenerating into some kind of bankrupt millenarianism. No, I was no longer really a part of this

town—I was *déclassé*, solitary, too much a man of my times to stay in the working class I had once hoped to join. Sitting there in the flickering light of the television, I could even imagine myself in an actual revolution, not on the barricades, but in a fancy apartment in some skyscraper in some big city east of the Mississippi, drink in hand, looking wistfully down onto the streets at the explosions, the gunfire, the tear gas, and I would smile and root for the proletariat, salute them with my half-empty cocktail glass, and watch them. Amused. Interested. But not part of the action.