

THE EXORCIST

William Peter Blatty

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THE EXORCIST.

A Bantam book | published by arrangement with Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY

Harper & Row edition published May 1971

<i>2nd printing</i>	<i>May 1971</i>	<i>6th printing ..</i>	<i>September 1971</i>
<i>3rd printing</i>	<i>June 1971</i>	<i>7th printing</i>	<i>October 1971</i>
<i>4th printing</i>	<i>July 1971</i>	<i>8th printing ..</i>	<i>November 1971</i>
<i>5th printing</i>	<i>August 1971</i>	<i>9th printing ..</i>	<i>December 1971</i>
<i>10th printing</i>		<i>January 1972</i>	

Literary Guild edition published 1971

Bantam edition published July 1972

2nd printing

3rd printing

4th printing

Cover art by Frederick Cantor.

A condensation appeared in COSMOPOLITAN Magazine.

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Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

for Beth

Now when [Jesus] stepped ashore, there met him with a certain man who for a long time was possessed by a devil. ...Many times it had laid hold of him and he was bound with chains. ... but he would break the bonds asunder. ...And Jesus asked him, saying, "What is thy name?" And he said, "Legion. ..."

Luke 8:27-30

JAMES TORELLO: *Jackson was hung up on that meat hook. He was so heavy he bent it. He was on that thing three days before he croaked.*

FRANK BUCCIERI (giggling): *Jackie, you shoulda seen the guy. Like an elephant, he was, and when Jimmy hit him with that electric prod. ...*

TORELLO (excitedly): *He was floppin' around on that hook, Jackie. We tossed water on him to give the prod a better charge, and he's screamin'.* ...

Excerpt from FBI wiretap of Cosa Nostra telephone conversation relating to the murder of William Jackson

...There's no other explanation for some of the things the Communists did. Like the priest who had eight nails driven into his skull. ...And there were the seven little boys and their teacher. They were praying the Our Father when soldiers came upon them. One soldier whipped out his bayonet and sliced off the teacher's tongue. The other took chopsticks and drove them into the ears of the seven little boys. How do you treat cases like that?

Dr. Tom Dooley

Dachau

Auschwitz

Buchenwald

prologue

Northern Iraq

The blaze of sun wrung pops of sweat from the old man's brow, yet he cupped his hands around the glass of hot, sweet tea as if to warm them. He could not shake the premonition. It clung to his back like chill wet leaves.

The dig was over. The tell had been sifted, stratum by stratum, its entrails examined, tagged and shipped: The beads and pendants; glyptics; phalli; ground-stone mortars stained with ochre; burnished pots. Nothing exceptional. An Assyrian ivory toilet box. And man. The bones of man. The brittle remnants of cosmic torment that once made him wonder if matter was Lucifer upward-groping back to his God. And yet now he knew better. The fragrance of licorice plant and tamarisk tugged his gaze to poppied hills; to reeded plains; to the ragged, rock-strewn bolt of road that flung itself headlong into dread. Northwest was Mosul; east, Erbil; south was Baghdad and Kirkuk and the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. He shifted his legs underneath the table in front of the lonely roadside chaykhana and stared at the grass

stains on his boots and khaki pants. He sipped at his tea. The dig was over. What was beginning? He dusted the thought like a clay-fresh find but he could not tag it.

Someone wheezed from within the chaykhana: the withered proprietor shuffling toward him, kicking up dust in Russian-made shoes that he wore like slippers, groaning backs pressed under his heels. The dark of his shadow slipped over the table.

“Kaman chay, chawaga?”

The man in khaki shook his head, staring down at the laceless, crusted shoes caked thick with debris of the pain of living. The stuff of the cosmos, he softly reflected: matter; yet somehow finally spirit. Spirit and the shoes were to him but aspects of a stuff more fundamental, a stuff that was primal and totally other.

The shadow shifted. The Kurd stood waiting like an ancient debt. The old man in khaki looked up into eyes that were damply bleached as if the membrane of an eggshell had been pasted over the irises. Glaucoma. Once he could not have loved this man.

He slipped out his wallet and probed for a coin among its tattered, crumpled tenants: a few dinars; an Iraqi driver's license; a faded plastic calendar card that was twelve years out of date. It bore an inscription on the reverse: WHAT WE GIVE TO THE POOR IS WHAT WE TAKE WITH US WHEN WE DIE. The card had been printed by the Jesuit Missions. He paid for his tea and left a tip of fifty fils on a splintered table the color of sadness.

He walked to his jeep. The gentle, rippling click of key sliding into ignition was crisp in the silence. For a moment he waited, feeling at the stillness. Clustered on the summit of a

towering mound, the fractured rooftops of Erbil hovered far in the distance, poised in the clouds like a rubbed, mud-stained benediction. The leaves clutched tighter at the flesh of his back.

Something was waiting.

“Allah ma’ak, chawaga.”

Rotted teeth. The Kurd was grinning, waving farewell. The man in khaki groped for a warmth in the pit of his being and came up with a wave and a mustered smile. It dimmed as he looked away. He started the engine, turned in a narrow, eccentric U and headed toward Mosul. The Kurd stood watching, puzzled by a heart-dropping sense of loss as the jeep gathered speed. What was it that was gone? What was it he had felt in the stranger’s presence? Something like safety, he remembered; a sense of protection and deep well-being. Now it dwindled in the distance with the fast-moving jeep. He felt strangely alone.

The painstaking inventory was finished by ten after six. The Mosul curator of antiquities, an Arab with sagging cheeks, was carefully penning a final entry into the ledger on his desk. For a moment he paused, looking up at his friend, as he dipped his penpoint into an inkpot. The man in khaki seemed lost in thought. He was standing by a table, hands in his pockets, staring down at some dry, tagged whisper of the past. The curator observed him, curious, unmoving; then returned to the entry, writing in a firm, very small neat script. Then at last he sighed, setting down the pen as he noted the time. The train to Baghdad left at eight. He blotted the page and offered tea.

The man in khaki shook his head, his eyes still fixed upon something on the table. The Arab watched him, vaguely troubled. What was in the air? There was something in the air. He stood up and moved closer; then felt a vague prickling at the base of his neck as his friend at last moved, reaching down for an amulet and cradling it pensively in his hand. It was a green stone head of the demon Pazuzu, personification of the southwest wind. Its dominion was sickness and disease. The head was pierced. The amulet's owner had worn it as a shield.

"Evil against evil," breathed the curator, languidly fanning himself with a French scientific periodical, an olive-oil thumbprint smudged on the cover.

His friend did not move; he did not comment.

"Is there something wrong?"

No answer.

"Father?"

The man in khaki still appeared not to hear, absorbed in the amulet, the last of his finds. After a moment he set it down, then lifted a questioning look to the Arab. Had he said something?

"Nothing."

They murmured farewells.

At the door, the curator took the old man's hand with an extra firmness. "My heart has a wish, Father: that you would not go."

His friend answered softly in terms of tea; of time; of something to be done.

"No, no, no, I meant home."

The man in khaki fixed his gaze on a speck of boiled chick-pea nestled in a corner of the Arab's mouth; yet his eyes

were distant. "Home," he repeated. The word had the sound of an ending.

"The States," the Arab curator added, instantly wondering why he had.

The man in khaki looked in the dark of the other's concern. He had never found it difficult to love this man.

"Good-bye," he whispered; then quickly turned and stepped in the gathering gloom of the streets and a journey home whose length seemed somehow undetermined.

"I will see you in a year!" the curator called after him from the doorway. But the man in khaki never looked back. The Arab watched his dwindling form as he crossed a narrow street at an angle, almost colliding with a swiftly moving droshky. Its cab bore a corpulent old Arab woman, her face a shadow behind the black lace veil draped loosely over her like a shroud. He guessed she was rushing to some appointment. He soon lost sight of his hurrying friend.

The man in khaki walked, compelled. Shrugging loose of the city, he breached the outskirts, crossing the Tigris. Nearing the ruins, he slowed his pace, for with every step the inchoate presentiment took firmer, more horrible form. Yet he had to know. He would have to prepare. A wooden plank that bridged the Khosr, a muddy stream, creaked under his weight. And then he was there; he stood on the mound where once gleamed fifteen-gated Nineveh, feared nest of Assyrian hordes. Now the city lay sprawled in the bloody dust of its predestination. And yet he was here, the air was still thick with him, that Other who ravaged his dreams.

A Kurdish watchman, rounded a corner, unslung his rifle and began to run toward him, then abruptly stopped and

grinned with a wave of recognition and proceeded on his rounds.

The man in khaki prowled the ruins. The Temple of Nabu. The Temple of Ishtar. He sifted the vibrations. At the palace of Ashurbanipal he paused; then shifted a sidelong glance to a limestone statue hulking in situ: ragged wings; taloned feet; bulbous, jutting, stubby penis and a mouth stretched taut in feral grin. The demon Pazuzu.

Abruptly he sagged.

He knew.

It was coming.

He stared at the dust. Quickening shadows. He heard dim yappings of savage dog packs prowling the fringes of the city. The orb of the sun was beginning to fall below the rim of the world. He rolled his shirt sleeves down and buttoned them as a shivering breeze sprang up. Its source was southwest. He hastened toward Mosul and his train, his heart encased in the icy conviction that soon he would face an ancient enemy.

I: The Beginning

one

Like the brief doomed flare of exploding
suns that registers dimly on blind men's eyes, the beginning of
the horror passed almost unnoticed; in the shriek of what
followed, in fact, was forgotten and perhaps not connected to
the horror at all. It was difficult to judge.

The house was a rental. Brooding. Tight. A brick colonial
gripped by ivy in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C.
Across the street was a fringe of campus belonging to
Georgetown University; to the rear, a sheer embankment
plummeting steep, busy M Street and, beyond, the muddy
Potomac. Early on the morning of April 1, the house was

quiet. Chris MacNeil was propped in bed going over her lines for the next day's filming; Regan, her daughter, was sleeping down the hall; and asleep downstairs in a room off the pantry were the middle-aged housekeepers, Willie and Karl. At approximately 12:25 A.M., Chris glanced from her script with a frown of puzzlement. She heard rapping sounds. They were odd. Muffled. Profound. Rhythmically clustered. Alien code tapped out by a dead man.

Funny.

She listened for a moment; then dismissed it; but as the rappings persisted she could not concentrate. She slapped down the script on the bed.

Jesus, that bugs me!

She got up to investigate.

She went out to the hallway and looked around. It seemed to be coming from Regan's bedroom.

What is she doing?

She padded down the hall and the rappings grew suddenly louder, much faster, and as she pushed on the door and stepped into the room, they abruptly ceased.

What the heck's going on?

Her pretty eleven-year-old was asleep, cuddled tight to a large stuffed round-eyed panda. Pookey. Faded from years of smothering; years of smacking, warm, wet kisses.

Chris moved softly to her bedside and leaned over for a whisper. "Rags? You awake?"

Regular breathing. Heavy. Deep.

Chris shifted her glance around the room. Dim light from the hall fell pale and splintered on Regan's paintings; on Regan's sculptures; on more stuffed animals.

Okay, Rags. Old mother's ass is draggin'. Say it. "April Fool!"

And yet Chris knew it wasn't like her. The child had a shy and very diffident nature. Then who was the trickster? A somnolent mind imposing order on the rattlings of heating pipes or plumbing? Once, in the mountains of Bhutan, she had stared for hours at a Buddhist monk who was squatting on the ground in meditation. Finally, she thought she had seen him levitate. Perhaps. Recounting the story to someone, she invariably added "perhaps." And perhaps her mind, that untiring raconteur of illusion, had embellished the rappings.

Bullshit! I heard it!

Abruptly, she flicked a quick glance to the ceiling. There! Faint scratchings.

Rats in the attic, for pete's sake! Rats!

She sighed. *That's it. Big tails. Thump, thump.* She felt oddly relieved. And then noticed the cold. The room. It was icy.

She padded to the window. Checked it. Closed. She touched the radiator. Hot.

Oh, really?

Puzzled, she moved to the bedside and touched her hand to Regan's cheek. It was smooth as thought and lightly perspiring.

I must be sick!

She looked at her daughter, at the turned-up nose and freckled face, and on a quick, warm impulse leaned over the bed and kissed her cheek. "I sure do love you," she whispered, then returned to her room and her bed and her script.

For a while, Chris studied. The film was a musical comedy remake of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. A subplot had been

added dealing with campus insurrections. Chris was starring. She played a psychology teacher who sided with the rebels. And she hated it. *It's dumb! This scene is absolutely dumb!* Her mind, though untutored, never mistook slogans for the truth, and like a curious bluejay she would peck relentlessly through verbiage to find the glistening, hidden fact. And so the rebel cause, to her, was "dumb." It didn't make sense. *How come?* she now wondered. *Generation gap? That's a crock; I'm thirty-two. It's just plain dumb, that's all, it's...!*

Cool it. One more week.

They'd completed the interiors in Hollywood. All that remained were a few exterior scenes on the campus of Georgetown University, starting tomorrow. It was Easter vacation and the students were away.

She was getting drowsy. Heavy lids. She turned to a page that was curiously ragged. Bemused, she smiled. Her English director. When especially tense, he would tear, with quivering, fluttering hands, a narrow strip from the edge of the handiest page and then chew it, inch by inch, until it was all in a ball in his mouth.

Dear Burke.

She yawned, then glanced fondly at the side of her script. The pages looked gnawed. She remembered the rats. *The little bastards sure got rhythm.* She made a mental note to have Karl set raps for them in the morning.

Fingers relaxing. Script slipping loose. She let it drop. *Dumb. It's dumb.* A fumbling hand groping out to the light switch. *There.* She sighed. For a time she was motionless, almost asleep; and then kicked off her cover with a lazy leg. Too *freaking hot.* A mist of dew clung soft and gentle to the windowpanes.

Chris slept. And dreamed about death in the staggering particular, death as if death were still never yet heard of while something was ringing, she gasping, dissolving, slipping off into void, thinking over and over, *I am not going to be, I will die, I won't be, and forever and ever, oh, Papa, don't let them, oh, don't let them do it, don't let me be nothing forever and melting, unraveling, ringing, the ringing—*

The phone!

She leaped up with her heart pounding, hand to the phone and no weight in her stomach; a core with no weight and her telephone ringing.

She answered. The assistant director.

“In makeup at six, honey.”

“Right.”

“How ya feelin’?”

“If I go to the bathroom and it doesn't burn, then I figure I'm ahead.”

He chuckled. “I'll see you.”

“Right. And thanks.”

She hung up. And for moments sat motionless, thinking of the dream. A dream? More like thought in the half life of waking. That terrible clarity. Gleam of the skull. Non-being. Irreversible. She could not imagine it. *God, it can't be!*

She considered. And at last bowed her head. *But it is.*

She went to the bathroom, put on a robe, and padded quickly down to the kitchen, down to life in sputtering bacon.

“Ah, good morning, Mrs. MacNeil.”

Gray, drooping Willie, squeezing oranges, blue sacs beneath her eyes. A trace of accent. Swiss, like Karl's. She wiped her hands on a paper towel and started moving toward the stove.

“I’ll get it, Willie.” Chris, ever sensitive, had seen her weary look, and as Willie now grunted and turned back to the sink, the actress poured coffee, then moved to the breakfast nook. Sat down. And warmly smiled as she looked at her plate. A blush-red rose. Regan. That angel. Many a morning, when Chris was working, Regan would quietly slip out of bed, come down to the kitchen and place a flower, then grope her way crusty-eyed back to her sleep. Chris shook her head; rueful; recalling: she had almost named her Goneril. *Sure. Right on. Get ready for the worst.* Chris chuckled at the memory. Sipped at her coffee. As her gaze caught the rose again, her expression turned briefly sad, large green eyes grieving in a waiflike face. She’d recalled another flower. A son. Jamie. He had died long ago at the age of three, when Chris was very young and an unknown chorus girl on Broadway. She had sworn she would not give herself ever again as she had to Jamie; as she had to his father, Howard MacNeil. She glanced quickly from the rose, and as her dream of death misted upward from the coffee, she quickly lit a cigarette. Willie brought juice and Chris remembered the rats. “Where’s Karl?” she asked the servant.

“I am here, madam!”

Catting in lithe through a door off the pantry. Commanding. Deferential. Dynamic. Crouching. A fragment of Kleenex pressed tight to his chin where he nicked himself shaving. “Yes?” Thickly muscled, he breathed by the table. Glittering eyes. Hawk nose. Bald head.

“Hey, Karl, we’ve got rats in the attic. Better get us some traps.”

“There are rats?”

“I just said that.”

“But the attic is clean.”

“Well, okay, we’ve got *tidy* rats!”

“No rats.”

“Karl, I heard them last night,” Chris said patiently, controlling.

“Maybe plumbing,” Karl probed; “maybe boards.”

“Maybe *rats*! Will you buy the damn traps and quit arguing?”

“Yes, madam!” Bustling away. “I go now!”

“No not *now*, Karl! The stores are all closed!”

“They are closed!” chided Willie.

“I will see.”

He was gone.

Chris and Willie traded glances, and then Willie shook her head, turning back to the bacon. Chris sipped at her coffee. *Strange. Strange man.* Like Willie, hard-working; very loyal; discreet. And yet something about him made her vaguely uneasy. What was it? His subtle air of arrogance? Defiance? No. Something else. Something hard to pin down. The couple had been with her for almost six years, and yet Karl was a mask—a talking, breathing, untranslated hieroglyph running her errands on stilted legs. Behind the mask, thought something moved; she could hear his mechanism ticking like a conscience. She stubbed out her cigarette; heard the front door creaking open, then shut.

“They are closed,” muttered Willie.

Chris nibbled at bacon, then returned to her room, where she dressed in her costume sweater and skirt. She glanced in a mirror and solemnly stared at her short red hair, which looked perpetually tousled; at the burst of freckles on the small scrubbed face; then crossed her eyes and grinned idiotically.

Hi, little wonderful girl next door! Can I speak to your husband? Your lover? Your pimp? Oh, your pimp's in the poorhouse? Avon calling! She stuck out her tongue at herself. Then sagged. *Ah, Christ, what a life!* She picked up her wig box, slouched downstairs and walked out to the piquant, tree-lined street.

For a moment she paused outside the house and gulped at the morning. She looked to the right. Beside the house, a precipitous plunge of old stone steps fell away to M Street far below. A little beyond was the upper entry to the Car Barn, formerly used for the housing of streetcars: Mediterranean, tiled roof; rococo turrets; antique brick. She regarded it wistfully. *Fun. Fun street. Dammit, why don't I stay? Buy the house? Start to live?* From somewhere a bell began to toll. She glanced toward the sound. The tower clock on the Georgetown campus. The melancholy resonance echoed on the river; shivered; seeped through her tired heart. She walked toward her work; toward ghastly charade; toward the straw-stuffed, antic imitation of dust.

She entered the main front gates of the campus and her depression diminished; then grew even less as she looked at the row of trailer dressing rooms aligned along the driveway close to the southern perimeter wall; and by 8 A.M. and the day's first shot, she was almost herself. She started an argument over the script.

"Hey, Burke? Take a look at the damned thing, will ya?"

"Oh, you *do* have a script, I see! How nice!" Director Burke Dennings, taut and elfin, left eye twitching yet gleaming with mischief, surgically shaved a narrow strip from a page of her script with quivering fingers. "I believe I'll munch," he cackled.

They were standing on the esplanade that fronted the administration building and were knotted in the center of actors; lights; technicians; extras; grips. Here and there a few spectators dotted the lawn, mostly Jesuit faculty. Numbers of children. The cameraman, bored, picked up *Daily Variety* as Dennings put the paper in his mouth and giggled, his breath reeking faintly of the morning's first gin.

"Yes, I'm *terribly* glad you've been given a script."

A sly, frail man in his fifties, he spoke with a charmingly broad British accent so clipped and precise that it lofted even the crudest obscenities to elegance, and when he drank, he seemed always on the verge of guffaw; seemed constantly struggling to retain his composure.

"Now then, tell me, my baby. What is it? What's wrong?"

The scene in question called for the dean of the mythical college in the script to address a gathering of students in an effort to squelch a threatened "sit-in." Chris would then run up the steps to the esplanade, tear the bullhorn away from the dean and then point to the main administration building and shout, "Let's tear it down!"

"It just doesn't make sense," said Chris.

"Well, it's perfectly plain," lied Dennings.

"Why the heck should they tear down the building, Burke? What for?"

"Are you sending me up?"

"No, I'm asking 'what for?'"

"Because it's *there*, love!"

"In the script?"

"No, on the *grounds*!"

"Well, it doesn't make sense, Burke. She just wouldn't do that."

“She would.”

“Shall we summon the writer? I believe he’s in Paris!”

“Hiding?”

“*Fucking!*”

He’d clipped it off with impeccable diction, fox eyes glinting in a face like dough as the word rose crisp to Gothic spires. Chris fell weak to his shoulders, laughing. “Oh, Burke, you’re impossible, dammit!”

“Yes.” He said it like Caesar modestly confirming reports of his triple rejection of the crown. “Now then, shall we get on with it?”

Chris didn’t hear. She’d darted a furtive, embarrassed glance to a nearby Jesuit, checking to see if he’d heard the obscenity. Dark, rugged face. Like a boxer’s. Chipped. In his forties. Something sad about the eyes; something pained; and yet warm and reassuring as they fastened on hers. He’d heard. He was smiling. He glanced at his watch and moved away.

“I say, shall we get *on* with it!”

She turned, disconnected. “Yeah, sure, Burke; let’s do it.”

“Thank heaven.”

“No, wait!”

“Oh, good Christ!”

She complained about the tag of the scene. She felt that the high point was reached with her line as opposed to her running through the door of the building immediately afterward.

“It adds nothing,” said Chris. “It’s dumb.”

“Yes, it is, love, it is,” agreed Burke sincerely. “However, the cutter insists that we do it,” he continued, “so there we are. You see?”

“No, I don’t.”

“No, of course not. It’s stupid. You see, since the following scene”—he giggled—“begins with Jed coming *at* us through a door, the cutter feels certain of a nomination if the scene *preceding* ends with you moving off through a door.”

“That’s dumb.”

“Well, of course it is! It’s simply *cunting puking mad*! Now then, why don’t we shoot it and trust me to snip it from the final cut. It should make a rather tasty munch.”

Chris laughed. And agreed. Burke glanced toward the cutter, who was known to be a temperamental egotist given to time-wasting argumentation. He was busy with the cameraman. The director breathed a sigh of relief.

Waiting on the lawn at the base of the steps while the lights were warming, Chris looked toward Dennings as he flung an obscenity at a hapless grip and then visibly glowed. He seemed to revel in his eccentricity. Yet at a certain point in his drinking, Chris knew, he would suddenly explode into temper, and if it happened at three or four in the morning, he was likely to telephone people in power and viciously abuse them over trifling provocations. Chris remembered a studio chief whose offense had consisted in remarking mildly at a screening that the cuffs on Dennings’ shirt looked slightly frayed, prompting Dennings to awaken him at approximately 3 A.M. to describe him as a “*cunting boor*” whose father was “more than likely *mad!*” And on the following day, he would pretend to amnesia and subtly radiate with pleasure when those he’d offended described in detail what he had done. Although, if it suited him, he would remember. Chris thought with a smile of the night he’d destroyed his studio suite of offices in a gin-stoked, mindless rage, and how later, when confronted with an itemized bill and Polaroid photos detailing

the damage, he'd archly dismissed them as "Obvious fakes, the damage was far, *far* worse than that!" Chris did not believe that Dennings was either an alcoholic or a hopeless problem drinker, but rather that he drank because it was expected of him: he was living up to his legend.

Ah, well, she thought; I guess it's a kind of immortality.

She turned, looking over her shoulder for the Jesuit who had smiled. He was walking in the distance, despondent, head lowered, a lone black cloud in search of the rain.

She had never liked priests. So assured. So secure. And yet this one...

"All ready, Chris?" Dennings.

"Yeah, ready."

"All right, absolute quiet!" The assistant director.

"Roll the film," ordered Burke.

"Speed."

"Now *action!*"

Chris ran up the steps while extras cheered and Dennings watched her, wondering what was on her mind. She'd given up the arguments far too quickly. He turned a significant look to the dialogue coach, who padded up to him dutifully and proffered his open script like an aging altar boy the missal to his priest at solemn Mass.

They worked with intermittent sun. By four, the overcast of roiling clouds was thick in the sky, and the assistant director dismissed the company for the day.

Chris walked homeward. She was tired. At the corner of Thirty-sixth and O she signed an autograph for an aging Italian grocery clerk who had hailed her from the doorway of his shop. She wrote her name and "Warm Best Wishes" on a

brown paper bag. Waiting to cross, she glanced diagonally across the street to a Catholic church. Holy Something-or-other. Staffed by Jesuits. John F. Kennedy had married Jackie there, she had heard; had worshiped there. She tried to imagine it: John F. Kennedy among the votive lights and the pious, wrinkled women; John F. Kennedy bowed in prayer; *I believe...* a detente with the Russians; *I believe, I believe...* Apollo IV among the rattlings of the beads; *I believe... the resurrection and the life ever—*

That. That's it. That the grabber.

She watched as a beer truck lumbered by with a clink of quivering warm, wet promises.

She crossed. As she walked down O and passed the grade-school auditorium, a priest rushed by from behind her, hands in the pockets of a nylon windbreaker. Young. Very tense. In need of a shave. Up ahead, he took a right, turning into an easement that opened to a courtyard behind the church.

Chris paused by the easement, watching him, curious. He seemed to be heading for a white frame cottage. An old screen door creaked open and still another priest emerged. He looked glum; very nervous. He nodded curtly toward the young man, and with lowered eyes, he moved quickly toward a door that led into the church. Once again the cottage door was pushed open from within. Another priest. It looked—*Hey, it is! The one who was smiling when Burke said "fuck"!* Only now he looked grave as he silently greeted the new arrival, his arm around his shoulder in a gesture that was gentle and somehow parental. He led him inside and the screen door closed with a slow, faint squeak.

Chris stared at her shoes. She was puzzled. *What's the drill?* She wondered if Jesuits went to confession.

Faint rumble of thunder. She looked up at the sky. Would it rain? ...*the resurrection of the...*

Yeah. Yeah, sure. Next Tuesday. Flashes of lightning crackled in the distance. *Don't call us, kid, we'll call you.*

She tugged up her coat collar and slowly moved on. She hoped it would pour.

In a minute she was home. She made a dash for the bathroom. After that, she walked into the kitchen.

"Hi, Chris, how'd it go?"

Pretty blonde in her twenties sitting at the table. Sharon Spencer. Fresh. From Oregon. For the last three years, she'd been tutor to Regan and social secretary to Chris.

"Oh, the usual crock." Chris sauntered to the table and began to sift messages. "Anything exciting?"

"Do you want to have dinner next week at the White House?"

"Oh, I dunno, Marty; whadda *you* feel like doin'?"

"Eating candy and getting sick."

Chris chuckled. "Where's Rags, by the way?"

"Downstairs in the playroom."

"What doin'?"

"Sculpting. She's making a bird, I think. It's for you."

"Yeah, I need one," Chris murmured. She moved to the stove and poured a cup of hot coffee. "Were you kidding me about that dinner?" she asked.

"No, of course not," answered Sharon. "It's Thursday."

"Big party?"

"No, I gather it's just five or six people."

“No kidding!”

She was pleased but not really surprised. They courted her company: cab drivers; poets; professors; kings. What was it they liked about her? Life? Chris sat at the table. “How’d the lesson go?”

Sharon lit a cigarette, frowning. “Had a bad time with math again.”

“Oh? Gee, that’s funny.”

“I know; it’s her favorite subject,” said Sharon.

“Oh, well, this ‘new math.’ Christ, I couldn’t make change for the bus if—”

“Hi, Mom!”

She was bounding through the door, slim arms outstretched. Red ponytails. Soft, shining face full of freckles.

“Hi ya, stinkpot!” Beaming, Chris caught her in a bearhug, squeezing, then kissed the girl’s cheek with smacking ardor. She could not repress the full flood of her love. “Mmum-mmum-mmum!” More kisses. Then she held Regan out and probed her face with eager eyes. “What’djya do today? Anything exciting?”

“Oh, stuff.”

“So what *kinda* stuff?”

“Oh, lemme see.” She had her knees against her mother’s, swaying gently back and forth. “Well, of course, I studied.”

“Uh-huh.”

“An’ I painted.”

“What’djya paint?”

“Oh, well, flowers, ya know. Daisies? Only pink. An’ then— Oh, yeah! This *horse!*” She grew suddenly excited, eyes widening. “This man had a *horse*, ya know, down by the river? We were walking, see, Mom, and then along came this

horse, he was *beautiful*! Oh, Mom, ya should've seen him, and the man let me *sit* on him! *Really*! I mean, practically a minute!"

Chris twinkled at Sharon with secret amusement. "Himself?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow. On moving to Washington for the shooting of the film, the blonde secretary, who was now virtually part of the family, had lived in the house, occupying an extra bedroom upstairs. Until she'd met the "horseman" at a nearby stable. Sharon needed a place to be alone, Chris then decided, and had moved her to a suite in an expensive hotel and insisted on paying the bill.

"Himself." Sharon smiled in response to Chris.

"It was a *gray* horse!" added Regan. "Mother, can't we get a horse? I mean, *could* we?"

"We'll see, baby."

"When could I have one?"

"We'll see. Where's the bird you made?"

Regan looked blank for a moment; then turned around to Sharon and grinned, her mouth full of braces and shy rebuke. "You told." Then, "It was a surprise," she snickered to her mother.

"You mean...?"

"With the long funny nose, like you wanted!"

"Oh, Rags, that's sweet. Can I see it?"

"No, I still have to paint it. When's dinner, Mom?"

"Hungry?"

"I'm *starving*."

"Gee, it's not even five. When was lunch?" Chris asked Sharon.

"Oh, twelvish," Sharon answered.

"When are Willie and Karl coming back?"

She had given them the afternoon off.

"I think seven," said Sharon.

"Mom, can't we go to the Hot Shoppe?" Regan pleaded.
"Could we?"

Chris lifted her daughter's hand; smiled fondly; kissed it.
"Run upstairs and get dressed and we'll go."

"Oh, I *love* you!"

Regan ran from the room.

"Honey, wear the new dress!" Chris called out after her.

"How would you like to be eleven?" mused Sharon.

"That an offer?"

Chris reached for her mail, began listlessly sorting through
scrawled adulation.

"Would you take it?" asked Sharon.

"With the brain I've got now? All the memories?"

"Sure."

"No deal."

"Think it over."

"I'm thinking." Chris picked up a script with a covering
letter clipped neatly to the front of it. Jarris. Her agent.
"Thought I told them no scripts for a while."

"You should read it," said Sharon.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes, I read it this morning."

"Pretty good?"

"It's great."

"And I get to play a nun who discovers she's a lesbian,
right?"

"No, you get to play nothing."

"Shit, movies *are* getting better than ever. What the hell are
you talking about, Sharon? What's the grin for?"

"They want you to direct," Sharon exhaled coyly with the smoke from her cigarette.

"What!"

"Read the letter."

"My God, Shar, you're kidding!"

Chris pounced on the letter with eager eyes snapping up the words and hungry chunks: "...new script...a triptych...studio wants Sir Stephan Moore...accepting role provided--"

"I direct his segment!"

Chris flung up her arms, letting loose a hoarse, shrill cry of joy. Then with both her hands she cuddled the letter to her chest. "Oh, Steve, you angel, you remembered!" Filming in Africa. Drunk. In camp chairs. Watching the blood-hush end of day. *"Ah, the business is bunk! For the actor it's crap, Steve!" "Oh, I like it." "It's crap! Don't you know where it's at in this business? Directing!" "Ah, yes." "Then you've done something, something that's yours; I mean, something that lives!" "Well, then do it." "I've tried; they won't buy it." "Why not?" "Oh, come on, you know why: they don't think I can cut it."* Warm remembrance. Warm smile. Dear Steve...

"Mom, I can't find the dress!" Regan called from the landing.

"In the closet!" Chris answered.

"I looked!"

"I'll be up in a second! Chris called. For a moment she examined the script. Then gradually wilted. "So it's probably crap."

"Oh, come on, now. I really think it's good."

"Oh, you thought *Psycho* needed a laugh track."

Sharon laughed.

“Mommy?”

“I’m coming!”

Chris got up slowly. “Got a date, Shar?”

“Yes.”

Chris motioned at the mail. “You go on, then. We can catch all this stuff in the morning.”

Sharon got up.

“Oh, no, wait,” Chris amended, remembering something. “There’s a letter that’s got to go out tonight.”

“Oh, okay.” The secretary reached for her dictation pad.

“Moth-therrr!” A whine of impatience.

“Wait’ll I come down,” Chris told Sharon. She started to leave the kitchen, but stopped as Sharon eyed her watch.

“Gee, it’s time for me to meditate, Chris,” she said.

Chris looked at her narrowly with muted exasperation. In the last six months, she had watched her secretary suddenly turn “seeker after serenity.” It had started in Los Angeles with self-hypnosis, which then yielded to Buddhist chanting. During the last few weeks that Sharon was quartered in the room upstairs, the house had reeked of incense and lifeless dronings of “*Nam myoho renge kyo*” (“See, you just keep on chanting that, Chris, just that, and you get your wish, you get everything you want...”) were heard at unlikely and untimely hours, usually when Chris was studying her lines. “You can turn on TV,” Sharon had generously told her employer on one of these occasions. “It’s fine. I can chant when there’s all *kinds* of noise. It won’t bother me a bit.” Now it was transcendental meditation.

“You really think that kind of stuff is going to do you any good, Shar?” Chris asked tonelessly.

“It gives me peace of mind,” responded Sharon.

“Right,” Chris said dryly. She turned away and said good-night. She said nothing about the letter, and as she left the kitchen, she murmured, “*Nam myoho rengo kyo.*”

“Keep it up about fifteen or twenty minutes,” said Sharon. “Maybe for you it would work.”

Chris halted and considered a measured response. Then gave it up. She went upstairs to Regan's bedroom, moving immediately to the closet. Regan was standing in the middle of the room staring up at the ceiling.

“What doin’?” Chris asked her, hunting for the dress. It was a pale-blue cotton. She bought it the week before, and remembered hanging it in the closet.

“Funny noises,” said Regan.

“I know. We’ve got friends.”

Regan looked at her. “Huh?”

“Squirrels, honey; squirrels in the attic.” Her daughter was squeamish and terrified of rats. Even mice upset her.

The hunt for the dress proved fruitless.

“See, Mom, it’s not there.”

“Yes, I see. Maybe Wille picked it up with the cleaning.”

“It’s gone.”

“Yeah, well, put on the navy. It’s pretty.”

They went to the Hot Shoppe. Chris ate a salad while Regan had soup, four rolls, fried chicken, a chocolate shake, and a helping and a half of blueberry pie with coffee ice cream. *Where does she put it*, Chris wondered fondly, *in her wrists?* The child was slender as a fleeting hope.

Chris lit a cigarette over her coffee and looked through the window on her right. The river was dark and currentless, waiting.

“I enjoyed my dinner, Mom.”

Chris turned to her, and as often happened, caught her breath and felt again that ache on seeing Howard's image in Regan's face. It was the angle of the light. She dropped her glance to Regan's plate.

"Going to leave that pie?" Chris asked her.

Regan lowered her eyes. "I ate some candy."

Chris stubbed out her cigarette and chuckled. "Let's go."

They were back before seven. Willie and Karl had already returned. Regan made a dash for the basement playroom, eager to finish the sculpture for her mother, Chris headed for the kitchen to pick up the script. She found Willie brewing coffee; coarse; open pot. She looked irritable and sullen.

"Hi, Willie, how'd it go? Have a real nice time?"

"Do not ask." She added an eggshell and a pinch of salt to the bubbling contents of the pot. They had gone to a movie, Willie explained. She had wanted to see the Beatles, but Karl had insisted on an art-house film about Mozart. "Terrible," she simmered as she lowered the flame. "That *dumbhead*!"

"Sorry 'bout that." Chris tucked the script underneath her arm. "Oh, Willie, have you seen that dress that I got for Rags last week? The blue cotton?"

"Yes, I see it in her closet. This morning."

"Where'd you put it?"

"It is there."

"You didn't maybe pick it up by mistake with the cleaning?"

"It is there."

"With the cleaning?"

"In the closet."

"No, it isn't. I looked."

About to speak, Willie tightened her lips and scowled at the coffee. Karl had walked in.

“Good evening, madam.” He went to the sink for a glass of water.

“Did you set those traps?” asked Chris.

“No rats.”

“Did you *set* them?”

“I set them, of course, but the attic is clean.”

“Tell me, how was the movie, Karl?”

“Exciting.” His back, like his face, was a resolute blank.

Chris started from the kitchen humming a song made famous by the Beatles. But then she turned. *Just one more shot!*

“Did you have any trouble getting the traps, Karl?”

“No; no trouble.”

“At six in the morning?”

“All-night market.”

Jesus!

Chris took a long and luxurious bath, and when she went to the closet in her bedroom for her robe, she discovered Regan's missing dress. It lay crumpled in a heap on the floor of the closet.

Chris picked it up. *What's it doing in here?*

The tags were still on it. For a moment, Chris thought back. Then remembered that the day that she'd purchased the dress, she had also bought two or three items for herself. *Must've put 'em all together.*

Chris carried the dress into Regan's bedroom, put it on a hanger, and slipped it on the rack. She glanced at Regan's wardrobe. *Nice. Nice clothes. Yeah, Rags, look here, not there at the daddy who never writes.*

As she turned from the closet, she stubbed her toe against the base of a bureau. *Oh, Jesus, that smarts!* As she lifted her foot and massaged her toe, she noticed that the bureau was out of position by about three feet. *No wonder I bumped it. Willie must have vacuumed.*

She went down to the study with the script from her agent.

Unlike the massive double living room with its large bay windows and view, the study had a feeling of whispered density; of secrets between rich uncles. Raised brick fireplace; oak paneling; crisscrossed beams of a wood that implied it had once been a drawbridge. The room's few hints of a time that was present were the added bar, a few bright pillows, and a leopardskin rug that belonged to Chris and was spread on the pinewood floor by the fire where she now stretched out with her head and shoulders propped on the front of a downy sofa.

She took another look at the letter from her agent. *Faith, Hope and Charity*: three distinct segments, each with a different cast and director. Hers would be *Hope*. She liked the idea. And she liked the title. Possibly dull, she thought; but refined. *They'll probably change it to something like "Rock Around the Virtues."*

The doorbell chimed. Burke Dennings. A lonely man, he dropped by often. Chris smiled ruefully, shaking her head as she heard him rasp an obscenity at Karl, whom he seemed to detest and continually baited.

"Yes, hullo, where's a drink!" he demanded crossly, entering the room and moving to the bar with eyes averted, hands in the pockets of his wrinkled raincoat.

He sat on the bar stool. Irritable. Shifty-eyed. Vaguely disappointed.

“On the prowl again?” Chris asked.

“What the hell do you mean?” he sniffed.

“You’ve got that funny look.” She had seen it before when they’d worked on a picture together in Lausanne. On their first night there, at a staid hotel overlooking Lake Geneva, Chris had difficulty sleeping. At 5 A.M., she flounced out of bed and decided to dress and go down to the lobby in search of either coffee or some company. Waiting for an elevator out in the hall, she glanced through a window and saw the director walking stiffly along the lakeside, hands deep in the pockets of his coat against the glacial winter cold. By the time she reached the lobby, he was entering the hotel. “Not a hooker in sight!” he snapped bitterly, passing her with eyes cast down; and then entered the elevator and went up to bed. When she’d laughingly mentioned the incident later, the director had grown furious and accused her of promulgating “gross hallucinations” that people were “likely to believe just because you’re a star!” He had also referred to her as “simply cuntin’ *mad*”, but then pointed out soothingly, in an effort to assuage her feelings, that “perhaps” she had seen someone after all, and had simply mistaken him for Dennings. “After all,” he’d pointed out at the time, “my great-great-grandmother happens to have been Swiss.”

Chris moved behind the bar now and reminded him of the incident.

“Oh, now, don’t be so silly!” snapped Dennings. “It so happens that I’ve spent the entire evening at a bloody *tea*, a faculty *tea*!”

Chris leaned on the bar. “You were just at a tea?”

“Oh, yes, go ahead; smirk!”

“You got smashed at a tea,” she said dryly, “with some Jesuits.”

“No, the Jesuits were sober.”

“They don’t drink?”

“Are you out of your cunting *mind*?” he shouted. “They *swilled*! Never seen such capacities in all my *life*!”

“Hey, come on, hold it down, Burke! Regan!”

“Yes, Regan,” Dennings whispered. “Where the hell is my *drink*?”

“Will you tell me what you were doing at a faculty tea?”

“Bloody public relations; something *you* should be doing.”

Chris handed him a gin on the rocks.

“God, the way we’ve been mucking their grounds,” the director muttered; pious; the glass to his lips. “Oh, yes, go ahead, laugh! That’s all that you’re good for, laughing and showing a bit of bum.”

“I’m just smiling.”

“Well, *someone* had to make a good show.”

“And how many times did you say ‘fuck,’ Burke?”

“Darling, that’s crude,” he rebuked her gently. “Now tell me, how are you?”

She answered with a despondent shrug.

“Are you glum? Come on, tell me.”

“I dunno.”

“Tell your uncle.”

“Shit, I think I’ll have a drink,” she said, reaching for a glass.

“Yes, it’s good for the stomach. Now, then, what?”

She was slowly pouring vodka. “Ever think about dying?”

“I beg your—”

“Dying,” she interrupted. “Ever think about it, Burke? What it means? I mean, *really* what it means?”

Faintly edgy, he answered, “I don’t know. No, I don’t. I don’t think about it at all. I just *do* it. What the hell’d you bring it up for?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know,” she answered softly. She plopped ice into her glass; eyed it thoughtfully. “Yeah... yeah, I do,” she amended. “I sort of... well, I thought about it this morning... like a dream... waking up. I don’t know. I mean, it just sort of hit me... what it means. I mean, the end—*the end!*—like I’d never even heard of it before.” she shook her head. “Oh, Jesus, did that spook me! I felt like I was falling off the goddamn planet at a hundred million miles an hour.”

“Oh rubbish. Death’s a comfort,” Dennings sniffed.

“Not for *me* it isn’t, Charlie.”

“Well, you live through your children.”

“Oh, come off it! My children aren’t me.”

“Yes, thank heaven. One’s entirely enough.”

“I mean, think about it, Burke! Not existing—forever! It’s—”

“Oh, for heaven sakes! Show your bum at the faculty tea next week and perhaps those priests can give you comfort!”

He banged down his glass. “Let’s another.”

“You know, I didn’t know they drank?”

“Well, you’re stupid.”

His eyes had grown mean. Was he reaching the point of no return? Chris wondered. She had the feeling she had touched a nerve. Had she?

“Do they go to confession?” she asked him.

“How would *I* know!” he suddenly bellowed.

“Well weren’t you studying to be a—”

“*Where’s the bloody drink!*”

“Want some coffee?”

“Don’t be fatuous. I want another drink.”

“Have some coffee.”

“Come along, now. One for the road.”

“The Lincoln Highway?”

“That’s ugly, and I *loathe* an ugly drunk. Come along, dammit, fill it!”

He shoved his glass across the bar and she poured more gin.

“I guess maybe I should ask a couple of them over,” Chris murmured.

“Ask *who*?”

“Well, whoever.” She shrugged. “The big wheels; you know, priests.”

“They’ll never leave; they’re fucking plunderers,” he rasped, and gulped his gin.

Yeah, he’s starting to blow, thought Chris and quickly changed the subject: she explained about the script and her chance to direct.

“Oh, good,” Dennings muttered.

“It scares me.”

“Oh, twaddle. My baby, the difficult thing about directing is making it *seem* as if the damned thing were difficult. I hadn’t a *clue* my first time out, but here I am, you see. It’s child’s play.”

“Burke, to be honest with you, now that they’ve offered me my chance, I’m really not sure I could direct my grandmother across the street. I mean, all of that technical stuff.”

“Come along; leave all that to the editor, the cameraman and the script girl, darling. Get good ones and they’ll see you through. What’s important is handling the cast, and you’d be

marvelous, just *marvelous* at that. You could not only *tell* them how to move and read a line, my baby, you could *show* them. Just remember Paul Newman and *Rachel, Rachel* and don't be so hysterical."

She still looked doubtful. "Well, about this technical stuff," she worried. Drunk or sober, Dennings was the best director in the business. She wanted his advice.

"For instance," he asked her.

For almost an hour she probed to the barricade of minutiae. The data were easily found in texts, but reading tended to fray her patience. Instead, she read people. Naturally inquisitive, she juiced them; wrung them out. But books were unwringable. Books were glib. They said "therefore" and "clearly" when it wasn't clear at all, and their circumlocutions could never be challenged. They could never be stopped for a shrewdly disarming, "Hold it, I'm dumb. Could I have that again?" They could never be pinned; made to wriggle; dissected. Books were like Karl.

"Darling, all you really need is a brilliant cutter," the director cackled, rounding it off. "I mean someone who really knows his doors."

He'd grown charming and bubbly, and seemed to have passed the threatened danger point.

"Beg pardon, madam. You wish something?"

Karl stood attentively at the door to the study.

"Oh, hullo, Thorndike," Dennings giggled. "Or is it Heinrich? I can't keep it straight."

"It is Karl."

"Yes, of course it is. Damn. I'd forgotten. Tell me, Karl, was it public relations you told me you did for the Gestapo, or was it community relations? I believe there's a difference."

Karl spoke politely. "Neither one, sir. I am Swiss."

"Oh, yes, of course." The director guffawed. "And you never went bowling with Goebbels, I suppose."

Karl, impervious, turned to Chris.

"And never went flying with Rudolph *Hess!*"

"Madam wishes?"

"Oh, *I* don't know. Burke, you want coffee?"

"*Fuck it!*"

The director stood up abruptly and strode belligerently from the room and the house.

Chris shook her head, and then turned to Karl. "Unplug the phones," she ordered expressionlessly.

"Yes, madam. Anything else?"

"Oh, maybe some Sanka. Where's Rags?"

"Down in playroom. I call her?"

"Yeah, it's bedtime. Oh, no, wait a second, Karl. Never mind. I'd better go see the bird. Just get me the Sanka, please."

"Yes, madam."

"And for the umpty-eighth time, I apologize for Burke."

"I pay no attention."

"I know. That's what bugs him."

Chris walked to the entry hall of the house, pulled open the door to the basement staircase and started downstairs.

"Hi ya, stinky, whatchya doin' down there? Got the bird?"

"Oh, yes, come see! Come on down, it's all finished!"

The playroom was paneled and brightly decorated. Easels. Paintings. Phonograph. Tables for games and a table for sculpting. Red and white bunting left over from a party for the previous tenant's teen-aged son.

“Hey, that’s great!” exclaimed Chris as her daughter handed her the figure. It was not quite dry and looked something like a “worry bird,” painted orange, except for the beak, which was laterally striped in green and white. A tuft of feathers was glued to the head.

“Do you like it?” asked Regan.

“Oh, honey, I do, I really do. Got a name for it?”

“Uh-uh.”

“What’s a good one?”

“I dunno.” Regan shrugged.

“Let me see, let me see.” Chris tapped fingertips to teeth. “I don’t know. Whaddya think? Whaddya think about ‘Dumbbird’? Huh? Just ‘Dumbbird.’”

Regan was snickering, hand to her mouth to conceal the braces. Nodding.

“‘Dumbbird’ by a landslide! I’ll leave it here to dry and then I’ll put him in my room.”

Chris was setting down the bird when she noticed the Ouija board. Close. One the table. She’d forgotten she had it. Almost as curious about herself as she was about others, she’d originally bought it as a possible means of exposing clues to her subconscious. It hadn’t worked. She’d used it a time or two with Shron, and once with Dennings, who had skillfully steered the plastic planchette (“Are *you* the one who’s moving it, ducky?”) so that all of the “messages” were obscene, and then afterward blamed it on the “fucking *spirits!*”

“You playin’ with the Ouija board?”

“Yep.”

“You know how?”

“Oh, well, sure. Here, I’ll show you.” She was moving to sit by the board.

“Well, I think you need *two* people, honey.”

“No ya don’t, Mom; I do it all the time.”

Chris was pulling up a chair. “Well, let’s both play, okay?”

Hesitation. “Well, okay.” She had her fingertips positioned in the white planchette and as Chris reached out to position hers, the planchette made a swift, sudden move to the position on the board marked NO.

Chris smiled at her slyly. “Mother, I’d rather do it myself? Is that it? You don’t want me to play?”

“No, I *do*! Captain *Howdy* said ‘no.’”

“Captain who?”

“Captain Howdy.”

“Honey, who’s Captain Howdy?”

“Oh, ya know. I make questions and he does the answers.”

“Oh?”

“Oh, he’s nice.”

Chris tried not to frown as she felt a dim and sudden concern. The child had loved her father deeply, yet never had reacted visibly to her parents’ divorce. And Chris didn’t like it. Maybe she cried in her room; she didn’t know. But Chris was fearful she was repressing and that her emotions might one day erupt in some harmful form. A fantasy playmate. It didn’t sound healthy. Why “Howdy”? For Howard? Her father? *Pretty close.*

“So how come you couldn’t even come up with a name for a dum-dum bird, and then you hit me with something like ‘Captain Howdy’? Why do you call him “Captain Howdy”?”

“Cause that’s his *name*, of course,” Regan snickered.

“Says who?”

“Well, *him*.”

“Of course.”

“Of *course*.”

“And what else does he say to you?”

“Stuff.”

“What stuff?”

Regan shrugged. “Just stuff.”

“For instance.”

“I’ll show you. I’ll ask him some questions.”

“You do that.”

Her fingertips on the planchette, Regan stared at the board with eyes drawn tight in concentration. “Captain Howdy, don’t you think my mom is pretty?”

A second...five...ten...twenty...

“Captain Howdy?”

More seconds. Chris was surprised. She’d expected her daughter to slide the planchette to the section marked YES. *Oh, for pete’s sake, what now? An unconscious hostility? Oh, that’s crazy.*

“Captain Howdy, that’s *really* not very *polite*,” chided Regan.

“Honey, maybe he’s sleeping.”

“Do you think?”

“I think *you* should be sleeping.”

“Already?”

“C’mon, babe! Up to bed!” Chris stood up.

“He’s a poop,” muttered Regan, then followed her mother up the stairs.

Chris tucked her into bed and then sat on the bedside.

“Honey, Sunday’s no work. You want to do somethin’?”

“What?”

When they’d first come to Washington, Chris had made an effort to find playmates for Regan. She’d uncovered only one,

a twelve-year-old girl named Judy. But Judy's family was away for Easter, and Chris was concerned now that Regan might be lonely.

"Oh, well, *I* don't know," Chris replied. "Somethin'. You want to go see the sights? Hey, the cherry blossoms, maybe! That's right, they're out early! You want to go see 'em?"

"Oh, *yeah*, Mom!"

"And tomorrow night a movie! How's that?"

"Oh, I love you!"

Regan gave her a hug and Chris hugged her back with an extra fervor, whispering, "Oh, Rags, honey, I love *you*."

"You can bring Mr. Dennings if you like."

Chris pulled back for an appraisal.. "Mr. Dennings?"

"Well, I mean, it's okay."

Chris chuckled. "No, it isn't okay. Honey, why would I want to bring Mr. Dennings?"

"Well, you like him."

"Oh, well, sure I like him, honey; don't you?"

She made no answer.

"Baby, what's going on?" Chris prodded her daughter.

"You're going to marry him, Mommy, aren't you." It wasn't a question, but a sullen statement.

Chris exploded into a laugh. "Oh, my baby, of *course* not! What on earth are you *talking* about? Mr. Dennings? Where'd you get that idea?"

"But you like him."

"I like pizzas, but I wouldn't ever marry one! Honey, he's a friend, just a crazy old friend!"

"You don't like him like Daddy?"

“I *love* your daddy, honey; I’ll always love your daddy. Mr. Dennings comes by here a lot ’cause he’s lonely, that’s all; he’s a friend.”

“Well, I heard...”

“You heard what? Heard from who?”

Whirling slivers of doubt in her eyes; hesitation; then a shrug of dismissal. “I don’t know. I just thought.”

“Well, it’s silly, so forget it.”

“Okay.”

“Now go to sleep.”

“Can I read? I’m not sleepy.”

“Sure. Read your new book, hon, until you get tired.”

“Thanks, Mommy.”

“Good night, hon.”

“Good night.”

Chris blew her a kiss from the door and then closed it. She walked down the stairs. *Kids! Where do they get their ideas!* She wondered if Regan connected Dennings to her filing for divorce. *Oh, come on, that’s dumb.* Regan knew only that Chris had filed. Yet Howard had wanted it. Long separations. Erosion of ego as the husband of a star. He’d found someone else. Regan didn’t know that. *Oh, quit all this amateur psychoanalyzing and try to spend a little more time with her!*

Back to the study. The script. Chris Read. Halfway through, she saw Regan coming toward her.

“Hi, honey. What’s wrong?”

“There’s these real funny noises, Mom.”

“In your room?”

“It’s like knocking. I can’t go to sleep.”

Where the hell are those traps!

“Honey, sleep in my bedroom and I’ll see what it is.”

Chris led her to the bedroom and tucked her in.

“Can I watch TV for a while till I sleep?”

“Where’s your book?”

“I can’t find it. Can I watch?”

“Sure; okay.” Chris tuned in a channel on the bedroom portable. “Loud enough?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Try to sleep.”

Chris turned out the light and went down the hall. She climbed the narrow, carpeted stairs that led to the attic. She opened the door and felt for the light switch; found it; flicked it, stooping as she entered.

She glanced around. Cartons of clippings and correspondence on the pinewood floor. Nothing else, except the traps. Six of them. Baited. The room was spotless. Even the air smelled clean and cool. The attic was unheated. No pipes. No radiator. No little holes in the roof.

“There is nothing.”

Chris jumped from her skin. “*Oh, good Jesus!*” she gasped, turning quickly with her hand to a fluttering heart. “Jesus Christ, Karl, don’t *do* that!”

He was standing on the steps.

“Very sorry. But you see? It is clean.”

“Yeah, it’s clean. Thanks a lot.”

“Maybe cat better.”

“What?”

“To catch rats.”

Without waiting for an answer, he nodded and left.

For a moment, Chris stared at the doorway. Either Karl hadn’t any sense of humor whatever, or he had one so sly it escaped her detection. She couldn’t decide which one it was.

She considered the rappings again, then glanced at the angled roof. The street was shaded by various trees, most of them gnarled and intertwined with vines; and the branches of a mushrooming, massive basswood umbrellaed the entire front third of the house. Was it squirrels after all? *It must be. Or branches. Right. Could be branches.* The nights had been windy.

“Maybe cat better.”

Chris glanced at the doorway again. *Pretty smart-ass?* Abruptly she smiled, looking pertly mischievous.

She went downstairs to Regan’s bedroom, picked something up, brought it back to the attic, and then after a minute went back to her bedroom. Regan was sleeping. She returned her to her room, tucked her into her bed, then went back to her own bedroom, turned off the television set and went to sleep.

The house was quiet until morning.

Eating her breakfast, Chris told Karl in an offhand way that she thought she’d heard a trap springing shut during the night.

“Like to go and take a look?” Chris suggested, sipping coffee and pretending to be engrossed in the morning paper. Without any comment, he went up to investigate.

Chris passed him the hall on the second floor as he was returning, staring expressionlessly at the large stuffed mouse he was holding. He’d found it with its snout clamped tight in a trap.

As she walked toward her bedroom, Chris lifted an eyebrow at the mouse.

“Someone is funny,” Karl muttered as he passed her. He returned the stuffed animal to Regan’s bedroom.

“Sure a lot of things goin’ on,” Chris murmured, shaking her head as she entered her bedroom. She slipped off her robe and prepared to go to work. *Yeah, maybe cat better, old buddy. Much better.* Whenever she grinned, her entire face appeared to crinkle.

The filming went smoothly that day. Later in the morning, Sharon came by the set and during breaks between scenes, in her portable dressing room, she and Chris handled items of business: a letter to her agent (she would think about the script); “okay” to the White House; a wire to Howard reminding him to telephone on Regan’s birthday; a call to her business manager asking if she could afford to take off for a year; plans for a dinner party April twenty-third.

Early in the evening, Chris took Regan out to a movie, and the following day they drove around to points of interest in Chris’s Jaguar XKE. The Lincoln Memorial. The Capitol. The cherry blossom lagoon. A bite to eat. Then across the river to Arlington Cemetery and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Regan turned solemn, and later, at the grave of John F. Kennedy, seemed to grow distant and a little sad. She stared at the “eternal flame” for a time; then mutely reached for Chris’s hand. “Mom, why do people have to die?”

The question pierced her mother’s soul. *Oh, Rags, you too? You too? Oh, no!* And yet what could she tell her? Lies? She couldn’t. She looked at her daughter’s upturned face, eyes misting with tears, had she sensed her own thoughts? She had done it so often... so often before. “Honey, people get tired,” she answered Regan tenderly.

“Why does God let them?”

For a moment, Chris stared. She was puzzled. Disturbed. An atheist, she had never taught Regan religion. She thought it dishonest. "Who's been telling you about God?" she asked.

"Sharon."

"Oh." She would have to speak to her.

"Mom, why does God *let* us get tired?"

Looking down at those sensitive eyes and that pain, Chris surrendered; couldn't tell her what she believed. "Well, after a while God gets lonesome for us, Rags. He wants us back."

Regan folded herself into silence. She stayed quiet during the drive home, and her mood persisted all the rest of the day and through Monday.

On Tuesday, Regan's birthday, it seemed to break. Chris took her along to the filming, and when the shooting day was over, the cast and crew sang "Happy Birthday" and brought out a cake. Always a kind and gentle man when sober, Dennings had the lights rewarmed and filmed her as she cut it. He called it a "screen test," and afterwards promised to make her a star. She seemed quite gay.

But after dinner and the opening of presents, the mood seemed to fade. No word from Howard. Chris placed a call to him in Rome, and was told by a clerk at his hotel that he hadn't been there for several days and couldn't be reached. He was somewhere on a yacht.

Chris made excuses.

Regan nodded subdued, and shook her head to her mother's suggestion that they go to the Hot Shoppe for a shake. Without a word, she went downstairs to the basement playroom, where she remained until time for bed.

The following morning when Chris opened her eyes, she found Regan in bed with her, half awake.

“Well, what in the... What are you doing *here*?” Chris chuckled.

“My bed was shaking.”

“You nut.” Chris kissed her and pulled up her covers. “Go to sleep. It’s still early.”

What looked like morning was the beginning of endless night.

two

He stood at the edge of the lonely subway platform, listening for the rumble of a train that would still the ache that was always with him. Like his pulse. Heard only in silence. He shifted his bag to the other hand and stared down the tunnel. Points of light. They stretched into dark like guides to hopelessness.

A cough. He glanced to the left. The gray-stubbled derelict numb on the ground in a pool of his urine was sitting up. With yellowed eyes he stared at the priest with the chipped, sad face.

The priest looked away. He would come. He would whine. *Couldjya help an old altar boy, Father? Wouldjya?* The vomit-flaked hand pressing down on the shoulder. The fumbling for the medal. The reeking of the breath of a thousand confessions with the wine and the garlic and the

stale mortal sins belching out all together and smothering...
smothering...

The priest heard the derelict rising.

Don't come!

Heard a step.

Ah, my God, let me be!

"Hi ya, Faddah."

He winced. Sagged. Couldn't turn. He could not bear to search for Christ again in stench and hollow eyes; for the Christ of pus and bleeding excrement, the Christ who could not be. In absent gesture, he felt at his sleeve as if for an unseen band of mourning. He dimly remembered another Christ.

"Hey, *Faddah!*"

The hum of an incoming train. Then sounds of stumbling. He looked to the tramp. He was staggering. Fainting. With a blind, sudden rush, the priest was to him; caught him; dragged him to the bench against the wall.

"I'm a Cat'lic," the derelict mumbled. "I'm Cat'lic."

The priest eased him down; stretched him out; saw his train. He quickly pulled a dollar from his wallet and placed it in the pocket of the derelict's jacket. Then decided he would lose it. He plucked out the dollar and stuffed it into a urine-damp trouser pocket, then he picked up his bag and boarded the train.

He sat in a corner and pretended to sleep. At the end of the line he walked to Fordham University. The dollar had been meant for his cab.

When he reached the residence hall for visitors, he signed his name on the register. *Damien Karras*, he wrote. Then

examined it. Something was wrong. Wearily he remembered and added, *S.J.*

He took a room in Weigel Hall and, after an hour, was able to sleep.

The following day he attended a meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. As principal speaker, he delivered a paper entitled "Psychological Aspects of Spiritual Development." At the end of the day, he enjoyed a few drinks and a bite to eat with some other psychiatrists. They paid. He left them early. He would have to see his mother.

He walked to the crumbling brownstone apartment building on Manhattan's East Twenty-first Street. Pausing by the steps that led up to the door, he eyed the children on the stoop. Unkempt. Ill-clothed. No place to go. He remembered evictions: humiliations: walking home with a seventh-grade sweetheart and encountering his mother as she hopefully rummaged through a garbage can on the corner. He climbed the steps and opened the door as if it were a tender wound. An odor like cooking. Like rotted sweetness. He remembered the visits to Mrs. Choirelli and her tiny apartment with the eighteen cats. He gripped the banister and climbed, overcome by a sudden, draining weariness that he knew was caused by guilt. He should never have left her. Not alone.

Her greeting was joyful. A shout. A kiss. She rushed to make coffee. Dark. Stubby, gnarled legs. He sat in the kitchen and listened to her talk, the dingy walls and soiled floor seeping into his bones. The apartment was a hovel. Social Security. Each month, a few dollars from a brother.

She sat at the table. Mrs. This. Uncle That. Still in immigrant accents. He avoided those eyes that were wells of sorrow, eyes that spent days staring out of a window.

He should never have left her.

He wrote a few letters for her later. She could neither read nor write any English. Then he spent time repairing the tuner on a crackling, plastic radio. Her world. The news. Mayor Lindsey.

He went to the bathroom. Yellowing newspaper spread on the tile. Stains of rust in the tub and the sink. On the floor, an old corset. Seeds of vocation. From these he had fled into love. Now the love had grown cold. In the night, he heard it whistling through the chambers of his heart like a lost, crying wind.

At a quarter to eleven, he kissed her good-bye; promised to return just as soon as he could. He left with the radio turned to the news.

Once back in his room in Weigel Hall, he gave some thought to writing a letter to the Jesuit head of the Maryland province. He'd covered the ground with him once before: request for a transfer to the New York Province in order to be closer to his mother; request for a teaching post and relief from his duties. In requesting the latter, he'd cited as a reason "unfitness" for the work.

The Maryland Provincial had taken it up with him during the course of his annual inspection tour of Georgetown University, a function that closely paralleled that of an army inspector general in the granting of confidential hearings to those who had grievances or complaints. On the point of Damien Karras' mother, the Provincial had nodded and expressed his sympathy; but the question of the priest's "unfitness" he thought contradictory on its face. But Karras had pursued it:

“Well, it’s more than psychiatry, Tom. You know that. Some of their problems come down to vocation, to the meaning of their lives. Hell, it isn’t always sex that’s involved, it’s their faith, and I just can’t cut it, Tom, it’s too much. I need out. I’m having problems of my own. I mean, doubts.”

“What thinking man doesn’t, Damien?”

A harried man with many appointments, the Provincial had not pressed him for the reasons for his doubt. For which Karras was grateful. He knew that his answers would have sounded insane: *The need to rend food with the teeth and then defecate. My mother’s nine First Fridays. Stinking socks. Thalidomide babies. An item in the paper about a young altar boy waiting at a bus stop; set on by strangers; sprayed with kerosene; ignited.* No. Too emotional. Vague. Existential. More rooted in logic was the silence of God. In the world there was evil. And much of the evil resulted from doubt; from an honest confusion among men of good will. Would a reasonable God refuse to end it? Not reveal Himself? Not speak?

“Lord, give us a sign...”

The raising of Lazarus was dim in the distant past. No one now living had heard his laughter.

Why not a sign?

At various times the priest would long to have lived with Christ: to have seen; to have touched; to have probed His eyes. *Ah, my God, let me see You! Let me know! Come in dreams!*

The yearning consumed him.

He sat at the desk now with pen above paper. Perhaps it wasn’t time that had silenced the Provincial. Perhaps he understood that faith was finally a matter of love.

The Provincial had promised to consider the requests, but thus far nothing had been done. Karras wrote the letter and went to bed.

He sluggishly awakened at 5 A.M. and went to the chapel in Weigel Hall, secured a Host, then returned to his room and said Mass.

“*Et clamor meus ad te veniat,*” he prayed with murmured anguish. “Let my cry come unto Thee...”

He lifted the Host in consecration with an aching remembrance of the joy it once gave him; felt once again, as he did each morning, the pang of an unexpected glimpse from afar and unnoticed of a long-lost love.

He broke the Host above the chalice.

“Peace I leave you. My peace I give you...”

He tucked the Host inside his mouth and swallowed the papery taste of despair.

When the Mass was over, he polished the chalice and carefully placed it in his bag. He rushed for the seven-ten train back to Washington, carrying pain in a black valise.

three

Early on the morning of April 11, Chris made a telephone call to her doctor in Los Angeles and asked him for a referral to a local psychiatrist for Regan.

“Oh? What’s wrong?”

Chris explained. Beginning on the day after Regan’s birthday—and following Howard’s failure to call—she had noticed a sudden and dramatic change in her daughter’s behavior and disposition. Insomnia. Quarrelsome. Fits of temper. Kicked things. Threw things. Screamed. Wouldn’t eat. In addition, her energy seemed abnormal. She was constantly moving, touching, turning; tapping; running and jumping about. Doing poorly with schoolwork. Fantasy playmate. Eccentric attention-getting tactics.

“Such as what?” the physician inquired.

She started with the rappings. Since the night she'd investigated the attic, she'd heard them again on two occasions. In both of these instances, she'd noticed, Regan was present in the room; and the rappings would cease at the moment Chris entered. Secondly, she told him, Regan would "lose" things in the room; a dress; her toothbrush; books; her shoes. She complained about "somebody moving" her furniture. Finally, on the morning following the dinner at the White house, Chris saw Karl in Regan's bedroom pulling a bureau back into place from a spot that was halfway across the room. When Chris had inquired what he was doing, he repeated his former "Someone is funny," and refused to elaborate any further, but shortly thereafter Chris had found Regan in the kitchen complaining that someone had moved all her furniture during the night when she was sleeping.

This was the incident, Chris explained, that had finally crystallized her suspicions. It was clearly her daughter who was doing it all.

"You mean somnambulism? She's doing it in her sleep?"

"No, Marc, she's doing it when she's awake. To get attention."

Chris mentioned the matter of the shaking bed, which had happened twice more and was always filled by Regan's insistence that she sleep with her mother.

"Well, that could be physical." the internist ventured.

"No, Marc, I didn't say the bed *is* shaking. I said that she *says* that it's shaking."

"Do you know that it *isn't* shaking?"

"No."

"Well, it might be clonic spasms," he murmured.

"*Who?*"

“Any temperature?”

“No. Listen, what do you think?” she asked. “Should I take her to a shrink or what?”

“Chris, you mentioned her schoolwork. How is she doing with her math?”

“Why’d you ask?”

“How’s she doing?” he persisted.

“Just rotten. I mean, *suddenly* rotten.”

He grunted.

“Why’d you ask?” she repeated.

“Well, it’s part of the syndrome.”

“Of what?”

“Nothing serious. I’d rather not guess about it over the phone. Got a pencil?”

He wanted to give her the name of a Washington internist.

“Marc, can’t you come out here and check her yourself?” Jamie. A lingering infection. Chris’s doctor at that time had prescribed a new, broad-spectrum antibiotic. Refilling a prescription at a local drugstore, the pharmacist was wary. “I don’t want to alarm you, ma’am, but this... Well, it’s quite new on the market, and they’ve found that in Georgia it’s been causing aplastic anemia in...” Jamie. Jamie. Dead. And ever since, Chris had never trusted doctors. Only Marc. And that had taken years. “Marc, *can’t* you?” Chris pleaded.

“No, I can’t, but don’t worry. This man is brilliant. The best. Now get a pencil.”

Hesitation. Then, “Okay.”

She wrote down the name.

“Have him look her over and then tell him to call me,” the internist advised. “And forget the psychiatrist for now.”

“Are you sure?”

He delivered a blistering statement regarding the readiness of the general public to recognize psychosomatic illness, while failing to recognize the reverse: that illness of the body was often the cause of seeming illness of the mind.

“Now what would you say,” he proposed as an instance, “if you were my internist, God forbid, and I told you I had headaches, recurring nightmares, nausea, insomnia and blurring of the vision; and also that I generally felt unglued and was worried to death about my job? Would you say I was neurotic?”

“I’m a bad one to ask, Marc; I *know* that you’re crazy.”

“Those symptoms I gave you are the same as for brain tumor, Chris. Check the body. That’s first. Then we’ll see.”

Chris telephoned the internist and made an appointment for that afternoon. Her time was her own now. The filming was over, at least for her. Burke Dennings continued, loosely supervising the work of the “second unit,” a generally less expensive crew that was filming scenes of lesser importance, mostly helicopter shots of various exteriors around the city; also stunt work; scenes without any of the principal actors. But he wanted each foot of film to be perfect.

The doctor was in Arlington. Samuel Klein. While Regan sat crossly in an examining room, Klein seated her mother in his office and took a brief case history. She told him the trouble. He listened; nodded; made copious notes. When she mentioned the skating of the bed, he appeared to frown. But Chris continued:

“Marc seemed to think it was kind of significant that Regan’s doing poorly with her math. Now why was that?”

“You mean her schoolwork?”

“Yes, schoolwork, but math in particular, though. What’s it mean?”

“Well, let’s wait until I’ve looked at her, Mrs. MacNeil.”

He then excused himself and gave Regan a complete examination that included taking samples of her urine and her blood. The urine was for testing of her liver and kidney functions; the blood for a number of checks: diabetes; thyroid function; red-cell blood count looking for possible anemia, white-cell blood count looking for exotic diseases of the blood.

After he finished, he sat for a while and talked to Regan, observing her demeanor, and then returned to Chris and started writing a prescription.

“She appears to have a hyperkinetic behavior disorder.”

“A what?”

“A disorder of the nerves. At least we think it is. We don’t know yet exactly how it works, but it’s often seen in early adolescence. She shows all the symptoms: the hyperactivity; the temper; her performance in math.”

“Yeah. the math. Why the math?”

“It affects concentration.” He ripped the prescription from the small blue pad and handed it over. “Now this is for Ritalin.”

“What?”

“Methylphenidate.”

“Oh.”

“Ten milligrams, twice a day. I’d recommend one at eight A.M., and the other at two in the afternoon.”

She was eyeing the prescription.

“What is it? A tranquilizer?”

“A stimulant.”

“*Stimulant?* She’s higher’n a kite right *now*.”

“Her condition isn’t quite what it seems,” explained Klein. “It’s a form of overcompensation. An overreaction to depression.”

“Depression?”

Klein nodded.

“Depression...” Chris murmured. She was thoughtful.

“Well, you mentioned her father,” said Klein.

Chris looked up. “Do you think I should take her to see a psychiatrist?”

“Ohm no. I’d wait and see what happens with the Ritalin. I think that’s the answer. Wait two or three weeks.”

“So you think it’s all nerves.”

“I suspect so.”

“And those lies she’s been telling? This’ll stop it?”

His answer puzzled her. He asked her if she’d ever known Regan to swear or use obscenities.

“Never,” Chris answered.

“Well, you see, that’s quite similar to things like her lying—uncharacteristic, from what you tell me, but in certain disorders of the nerves it can—”

“Wait a minute,” Chris interrupted, perplexed. “Where’d you ever get the notion she uses obscenities? I mean, is that what you were saying or did I misunderstand?”

For a moment, he eyed her rather curiously; considered; then cautiously ventured, “Yes, I’d say that she uses obscenities. Weren’t you aware of it?”

“I’m *still* not aware of it! What are you talking about?”

“Well, she let loose quite a string while I was examining her, Mrs. MacNeil.”

“You’re kidding! Like what?”

He looked evasive. “Well, I’d say her vocabulary’s rather extensive.”

“Well, what, for instance? I mean, give me an example!”

He shrugged.

“You mean ‘shit?’ Or ‘fuck?’”

He relaxed. “Yes, she used those words,” he said.

“And what else did she say? Specifically.”

“Well, specifically, Mrs. MacNeil, she advised me to keep my goddam fingers away from her cunt.”

Chris gasped with shock. “She used *those* words?”

“Well, it isn’t unusual, Mrs. MacNeil, and I really wouldn’t worry about it at all. It’s part of the syndrome.”

She was shaking her head, looking down at her shoes. “It’s just hard to believe.”

“Look, I doubt that she even understood what she was saying,” he soothed.

“Yeah, I guess,” murmured Chris. “Maybe not.”

“Try the Ritalin,” he advised her, “and we’ll see what develops. And I’d like to take a look at her again in two weeks.”

He consulted a calendar pad on his desk. “Let’s see; let’s make it Wednesday the twenty-seventh. Would that be convenient?” he asked, glancing up.

“Yeah, sure,” she murmured, getting up from the chair. She crumpled the prescription in a pocket of her coat. “The twenty-seventh would be fine.”

“I’m quite a big fan of yours,” Klein said, smiling, as he opened the door leading into the hall.

She paused in the doorway, preoccupied, a fingertip pressed to her lip. She glanced to the doctor.

“You don’t think a psychiatrist, huh?”

“I don’t know. But the best explanation is always the simplest one. Let’s wait. Let’s wait and see.” He smiled encouragingly. “In the meantime, try not to worry.”

“How?”

She left him.

As they drove back home, Regan asked her what the doctor had said.

“That you’re nervous.”

Chris had decided not to talk about her language. *Burke. She picked it up from Burke.*

But she did speak to Sharon about it later, asking if she’d ever heard Regan use that kind of obscenity.

“Why, no,” replied Sharon. “I mean, not even lately. But you know, I think her art teacher made a remark.” A special tutor who came to the house.

“You mean recently?” Chris asked.

“Yes, it was just last week. But you know *her*. I just figured maybe Regan said ‘damn’ or ‘crap’. You know, something like that.”

“By the way, have you been talking to her much about religion, Shar?”

Sharon flushed.

“Well, a little; that’s all. I mean, it’s hard to avoid. You see, she asks so many questions, and—well...” She gave a helpless little shrug. “It’s just hard. I mean, how do I answer without telling what I think is a great big lie?”

“Give her multiple choice.”

In the days that preceded her scheduled dinner party, Chirs was extremely diligent in seeing that Regan took her dosage

of Ritalin. By the night of the party, however, she had failed to observe any noticeable improvement. There were subtle signs, in fact, of a gradual deterioration: increased forgetfulness; untidiness; and one complaint of nausea. As for attention-getting tactics, although the familiar ones failed to recur, there appeared to be a new one: reports of a foul, unpleasant “smell” in Regan’s bedroom. At Regan’s insistence, Chris took a whiff one day and smelled nothing.

“You don’t?”

“You mean, you smell it right now?” Chris had asked her.

“Well, sure!”

“What’s it smell like?”

She’d wrinkled her nose. “Well, like something burny.”

“Yeah?” Chris had sniffed.

“Don’t you smell it?”

“Well, yes, hon,” she’d lied. “Just a little. Let’s open up the window for a while, get some air in.”

In fact, she’d smelled nothing, but had made up her mind that she would temporize, at least until the appointment with the doctor. She was also preoccupied with a number of other concerns. One was arrangements for the dinner party. Another had to do with the script. Although she was very enthusiastic about the prospect of directing, a natural caution had prevented her from making a prompt decision. In the meantime, her agent was calling her daily. She told him she’d given the script to Dennings for an opinion, and hoped he was reading and not consuming it.

The third, and the most important, of Chris’s concerns was the failure of two financial ventures: a purchase of convertible debentures through the use of prepaid interest; and an investment in an oil-drilling project in southern Libya. Both

had been entered upon for the sheltering of income that would be subject to enormous taxation. But something even worse had developed: the wells had come up dry and rocketing interest rates had prompted a sell-off in bonds.

These were the problems that her gloomy business manager flew into town to discuss. He arrived on Thursday. Chris had him charting and explaining through Friday. At last, she decided on a course of action that the manager thought wise. He nodded approval. But he frowned when she brought up the subject of buying a Ferrari.

“You mean, a new one?”

“Why not? You know, I drove one in a picture once. If we write to the factory, maybe, and remind them, it could be they’d give us a deal. Don’t you think?”

He didn’t. And cautioned that he thought a new car was improvident.

“Ben, I made eight hundred *thou* last year and you’re saying I can’t get a freaking *car*! Don’t you think that’s ridiculous? Where did it go?”

He reminded her that most of her money was in shelters. Then he listed the various drains on her gross: federal income tax; projected federal income tax; her state tax; tax on her real estate holdings; ten percent commission to her agent; five to him; five to her publicist; one and a quarter taken out as donation to the Motion Picture Welfare Fund; an outlay for wardrobe in tune with the fashion; salaries to Willie and Karl and Sharon and the caretaker of the Los Angeles home; various travel costs; and, finally, her monthly expenses.

“Will you do another picture this year?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Do I have to?”

“Yes, I think you’d better.”

She cupped her face in both her hands and eyed him moodily. "What about a Honda?"

He made no reply.

Later that evening, Chris tried to put all of her worries aside; tried to keep herself busy with making preparations for the next night's party.

"Let's serve the curry buffet instead of sit-down," she told Willie and Karl. "We can set up a table at the end of the living room. Right?"

"Very good, madam," Karl answered quickly.

"So what do you think, Willie? A fresh fruit salad for dessert?"

"Yes, excellent!" said Karl.

"Thanks, Willie."

She'd invited an interesting mixture. In addition to Burke ("Show up sober, dammit!") and the youngish director of the second unit, she expected a senator (and wife); an Apollo astronaut (and wife); two Jesuits from Georgetown; her next-door neighbors; and Mary Jo Perrin and Ellen Cleary.

Mary Jo Perrin was a plump and gray-headed Washington seeress whom Chris had met at the White House dinner and liked immensely. She'd expected to find her austere and forbidding, but "You're not like that at *all*!" she'd been able to tell her. Bubbly-warm and unpretentious.

Ellen Cleary was a middle-aged State Department secretary who'd worked in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow when Chris toured Russia. She had gone to considerable effort and trouble to rescue Chris from a number of difficulties and encumbrances encountered in the course of her travels, not the least of which had been caused by the redheaded actress'

outspokenness. Chris had remembered her with affection over the years, and had looked her up on coming to Washington.

“Hey, Shar,” she asked, “which priests are coming?”

“I’m not sure yet. I invited the president and the dean of the college, but I think that the president’s sending an alternate. His secretary called me late this morning and said that he might have to go out of town.”

“Who’s he sending?” Chris asked with guarded interest.

“Let me see.” Sharon rummaged through scraps of notes. “Yes, here it is, Chris. His assistant—Father Joseph Dyer.”

“You mean from the campus?”

“Well, I’m not sure.”

“Oh, okay.”

She seemed disappointed.

“Keep an eye on Burke tomorrow night,” she instructed.

“I will.”

“Where’s Rags?”

“Downstairs.”

“You know, maybe you should start to keep your typewriter there; don’t you think? I mean, that way you can watch her when you’re typing. Okay? I don’t like her being alone so much.”

“Good idea.”

“Okay, later. Go home. Meditate. Play with horses.”

The planning and preparations at an end, Chris again found herself turning worried thoughts toward Regan. She tried to watch television. Could not concentrate. Felt uneasy. There was a strangeness in the house. Like settling stillness. Weighted dust.

By midnight, all in the house were asleep.

There were no disturbances. That night.

four

She greeted her guests in a lime-green hostess costume with long, belled sleeves and pants. Her shoes were comfortable. They reelected her hope for the evening.

The first to arrive was Mary Jo Perrin, who came with Robert, her teen-aged son. The last was pink-faced Father Dyer. He was young and diminutive, with fey eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles. At the door, he apologized for his lateness. "Couldn't find the right necktie," he told Chris expressionlessly. For a moment, she stared at him blankly, then burst into laughter. Her day-long depression began to lift.

The drinks did their work. By a quarter to ten, they were scattered about the living room eating their dinners in vibrant knots of conversation.

Chris filled her plate from the steaming buffet and scanned the room for Mary Jo Perrin. There. On a sofa with Father Wagner, the Jesuit dean. Chris had spoken to him briefly. He had a bald, freckled scalp and a dry, soft manner. Chris drifted to the sofa and folded to the floor in front of the coffee table as the seeress chuckled with mirth.

“Oh, come on, Mary Jo!” the dean said, smiling as he lifted a forkful of curry to his mouth.

“Yeah, come on, Mary Jo,” echoed Chris.

“Oh, hi! Great curry!” said the dean.

“Not too hot?”

“Not at all; it’s just right. Mary Jo has been telling me there used to be a Jesuit who was also a medium.”

“And he doesn’t believe me!” chuckled the seeress.

“Ah, *distinguo*,” corrected the dean. “I just said it was *hard* to believe.”

“You mean *medium* medium?” asked Chris.

“Why, of course,” said Mary Jo. “Why, he even used to levitate!”

“Oh, I do it every morning,” said the Jesuit quietly.

“You mean he held séances?” Chris asked Mrs. Perrin.

“Well, yes,” she answered. “He was very, very famous in the nineteenth century. In fact, he was probably the only spiritualist of his time who wasn’t ever clearly convicted of fraud.”

“As I said, he wasn’t a Jesuit,” commented the dean.

“Oh, my, but *was* he!” She laughed. “When he turned twenty-two, he joined the Jesuits and promised not to work anymore as a medium, but they threw him out of France”—she laughed even harder—“right after a séance that he held at the Tuileries. Do you know what he *did*? In the middle of

the séance he told the empress she was about to be touched by the hands of a spirit child who was about to fully materialize, and when they suddenly turned all of the lights on” —she guffawed— “they suddenly caught him sitting with his naked *foot* on the empress’ *arm*! Now, can you imagine?”

The Jesuit was smiling as he set down his plate.

“Don’t come looking for discounts anymore on indulgences, Mary Jo.”

“Oh, come on, every family’s got *one* black sheep.”

“We were pushing our quota with the Medici popes.”

“Y’know, I had an experience once,” began Chris.

But the dean interrupted. “Are you making this a matter of confession?”

Chris smiled and said, “No, I’m not a Catholic.”

“Oh, well, neither are the Jesuits.” Mrs. Perrin chuckled.

“Dominican slander,” retorted the dean. Then to Chris he said, “I’m sorry, my dear. You were saying?”

“Well, just that I thought I saw somebody levitate once. In Bhutan.”

She recounted the story.

“Do you think that’s possible?” she ended. “I mean, really, seriously.”

“Who knows?” He shrugged. “Who knows what gravity is. Or matter, when it comes to that.”

“Would you like my opinion?” interjected Mrs. Perrin.

The dean said, “No, Mary Jo; I’ve taken a vow of poverty.”

“So have I,” Chris muttered.

“What was that?” asked the dean, leaning forward.

“Oh, nothing. Say, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. Do you know that little cottage that’s back of the church over there?” She pointed in the general direction.

“Holy Trinity?” he asked.

“Yes, right. Well, what goes on in there?”

“Oh, well, that’s where they say Black Mass,” said Mrs. Perrin.

“Black *who*?”

“Black Mass.”

“What’s that?”

“She’s kidding,” said the dean.

“Yes, I know,” said Chris, “but I’m dumb. I mean, what’s a Black Mass?”

“Oh, basically, it’s a travesty on the Catholic Mass,” explained the dean. “It’s connected to witchcraft. Devil worship.”

“Really? You mean, there really *is* such a thing?”

“I really couldn’t say. Although I heard a statistic once about something like possibly fifty thousand Black Masses being said every year in the city of Paris.”

“You mean *now*?” marveled Chris.

“It’s just something I heard.”

“Yes, of course, from the Jesuit secret service,” twitted Mrs. Perrin.

“Not at all. I hear voices,” responded the dean.

“You know, back in L.A.,” mentioned Chris, “you hear an awful lot of stories about witch cults being around. I’ve often wondered if it’s true.”

“Well, as I said, I wouldn’t know,” said the dean. “But I’ll tell you who might—Joe Dyer. Where’s Joe?”

The dean looked around.

“Oh, over there,” he said, nodding toward the other priest who was standing at the buffet with his back to them. He was heaping a second helping onto his plate. “Hey, Joe?”

The young priest turned, his face impassive. “You called, great dean?”

The other Jesuit beckoned with his fingers.

“All right, just a second,” answered Dyer, and resumed his attack on the curry and salad.

“That’s the only leprechaun in the priesthood,” said the dean with an edge of fondness. He sipped at his wine. “They had a couple of cases of desecration in Holy Trinity last week, and Joe said something about one of them reminding him of some things they used to do at Black Mass, so I expect he knows something about the subject.”

“What happened at the church?” asked Mary Jo Perrin.

“Oh, it’s really too disgusting,” said the dean.

“Come on, we’re all through with our dinners.”

“No, please. It’s too much,” he demurred.

“Oh, come on!”

“You mean you can’t read my mind, Mary Jo?” he asked her.

“Oh, I could,” she responded, “but I really don’t think that I’m worthy to *enter* that Holy of Holies!” She chuckled.

“Well, it really is sick,” began the dean.

He described the desecrations. In the first of the incidents, the elderly sacristan of the church had discovered a mound of human excrement on the altar cloth directly before the tabernacle.

“Oh, that really *is sick*,” Mrs. Perrin grimaced.

“Well, the other’s even worse,” remarked the dean; then employed indirection and one or two euphemisms to explain how a massive phallus sculpted in clay had been found glued firmly to a statue of Christ on the left side altar.

“Sick enough?” he concluded.

Chris noticed that Mary Jo seemed genuinely disturbed as she said, "Oh, that's enough, now. I'm sorry that I asked. Let's change the subject, please."

"No, I'm fascinated," said Chris.

"Yes, of course. I'm a fascinating human."

It was Father Dyer. He was hovering over her with his plate. "Listen, give me a minute, and then I'll be back. I think I've got something going over there with the astronaut."

"Like what?" asked the dean.

Father Dyer raised his eyebrows in deadpan surmise. "Would you believe," he asked, "first missionary on the moon?"

They burst into laughter.

"You're just the right size," said Mrs. Perrin. "They could stow you in the nose cone."

"No, not *me*," he corrected her solemnly, and then turned to the dean to explain: "I've been trying to fix it up for Emory."

"That's our disciplinarian on campus," Dyer explained in an aside to the women. "Nobody's up there and that's what he likes, you see; he sort of likes things quiet."

"And so who would he convert?" Mrs. Perrin asked.

"What do you mean?" Dyer frowned at her earnestly. "He'd convert the astronauts. That's it. I mean, that's what he likes: You know, one or two people. No groups. Just a couple."

With deadpan gaze, Dyer glanced toward the astronaut.

"Excuse me," he said and walked away.

"I like him," said Mrs. Perrin.

"Me too," Chris agreed. Then, she turned to the dean. "You haven't told me what goes on in that cottage," she reminded

him. "Big secret? Who's that priest I keep seeing there? You know, sort of dark? Do you know the one I mean?"

"Father Karras," said the dean in a lowered tone; with a trace of regret.

"What's he do?"

"He's a counselor." He put down his wineglass and turned it by the stem. "Had a pretty rough knock last night, poor guy."

"Oh, what?" asked Chris with a sudden concern.

"Well, his mother passed away."

Chris felt a melting sensation of grief that she couldn't explain. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said.

"He seems to be taking it pretty hard," resumed the Jesuit. "She was living by herself, and I guess she was dead a couple of days before they found her."

"Oh, how awful," Mrs. Perrin murmured.

"Who found her?" Chris asked solemnly.

"The superintendent of her apartment building. I guess they wouldn't have found her even now except... Well, the next-door neighbors complained about her radio going all the time."

"That's sad," Chris murmured.

"Excuse me, please, madam."

She looked up at Karl. He held a tray filled with glasses and liqueurs.

"Sure, set it down here, Karl; that'll be fine."

Chris liked to serve the liqueurs to her guests herself. It added an intimacy, she felt, that might otherwise be lacking.

"Well, let's see now, I'll start with you," she told the dean and Mrs. Perrin; and served them. Then she moved about the room, taking orders and fetching for each of her guests, and

by the time she had made the rounds, the various clusters had shifted to new combinations, except for Dyer and the astronaut, who seemed to be getting thicker. “No, I’m really not a priest,” Chris heard Dyer say solemnly, his arm on the astronaut’s chuckle-heaved shoulder. “I’m actually a terribly avant-garde rabbi.” And not long after, she overheard Dyer inquiring of the astronaut: “What is space?” and when the astronaut shrugged and said he really didn’t know, Father Dyer had fixed him with an earnest frown and said, “You should.”

Chris was standing with Ellen Clary afterward, reminiscing about Moscow, when she heard a familiar strident voice ringing angrily through from the kitchen.

Oh, Jesus! Burke!

He was shrieking obscenities at someone.

Chris excused herself and went quickly to the kitchen, where Dennings was railing viciously at Karl while Sharon made futile attempts to hush him.

“Burke!” exclaimed Chris. “Knock it off!”

The director ignored her, continued to rage, the corners of his mouth flecked foamy with saliva, while Karl leaned mutely against the sink with folded arms and stolid expression, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Dennings.

“Karl!” Chris snapped. “Will you get out of here? Get *out!* Can’t you see how he *is?*”

But the Swiss would not budge until Chris began actually to shove him toward the door.

“Naa-zi *pig!*” Dennings screamed at his back. And then he turned genially to Chris and rubbed his hands together. “What’s dessert?” he asked mildly.

“Dessert!” Chris thumped at her brow with the heel of her hand.

“Well, I’m hungry,” he whined.

Chris turned to Sharon. “Feed him! I’ve got to get Regan up to bed. And, Burke, for *chrissakes*,” she asked the director, “will you behave yourself! There are priests out there!” She pointed.

He creased his brow as his eyes grew intense with a sudden and apparently genuine interest. “Oh, you noticed that too?” he asked without guile.

Chris left the kitchen and went down to check Regan in the basement playroom, where her daughter had spent the entire day. She found her playing with the Ouija board. She seemed sullen; abstracted; remote. *Well, at least she isn’t feisty*, Chris reflected, and hopeful of diverting her, she brought her to the living room and began to introduce her to her guests.

“Oh, isn’t she darling!” said the wife of the senator.

Regan was strangely well behaved, except for a moment with Mrs. Perrin when she would neither speak nor accept her hand. But the seeress made a joke of it.

“Knows I’m a fake.” She winked at Chris. But then, with a curious air of scrutiny, she reached forward and gripped Regan’s hand with a gentle pressure, as if checking her pulse. Regan quickly shook her off and glared malevolently.

“Oh, dear, dear, dear, she must be tired,” Mrs. Perrin said casually; yet she continued to watch Regan with a probing fixity, an anxiety unexplained.

“She’s been feeling kind of sick,” Chris murmured in apology. She looked down at Regan. “Haven’t you, honey?”

Regan did not answer. She kept her eyes on the floor.

There was no one left for Regan to meet except the senator and Robert, Mrs. Perrin's son, and Chris thought it best to pass them up. She took Regan up to bed and tucked her in.

"Do you think you can sleep?" Chris asked.

"I don't know," she answered dreamily. She'd turned on her side and was staring at the wall with a distant expression.

"Would you like me to read to you for a while?"

A shake of the head.

"Okay, then. Try to sleep."

She leaned over and kissed her, and then walked to the door and flicked the light switch.

"Night, my baby."

Chris was almost out the door when Regan called out to her very softly:

"Mother, what's wrong with me?"

So haunted. The tone so despairing. So disproportionate to her condition. For a moment the mother felt shaken and confused. But quickly she righted herself.

"Well, it's just like I said, hon; it's nerves. All you need is those pills for a couple of weeks and I know you'll be feeling just fine. Now then, try to go to sleep, hon, okay?"

No response. Chris waited.

"Okay?" she repeated.

"Okay," whispered Regan.

Chris abruptly noticed goose pimples rising on her forearm. She rubbed it. *Good Christ, it gets cold in this room. Where's the draft coming in from?*

She moved to the window and checked along the edges. Found nothing. Turned to Regan. "You warm enough, baby?"

No answer.

Chris moved to the bedside. "Regan? You asleep?" she whispered.

Eyes closed. Deep breathing.

Chris tiptoed from the room.

From the hall she heard singing, and as she walked down the stairs, she saw with pleasure that the young Father Dyer was playing the piano near the living-room picture window and was leading a group that had gathered around him in cheerful song. As she entered the living room, they had just finished "'Till We Meet Again."

Chris started forward to join the group, but was quickly intercepted by the senator and his wife, who had their coats across their arms. They seemed edgy.

"Are you leaving so soon?" Chris asked.

"Oh, I'm really so sorry, and my dear, we've had a *marvelous* evening," the senator effused. "But poor Martha's got a headache."

"Oh, I *am* so sorry, but I do feel terrible," moaned the senator's wife. "Will you excuse us, Chris? It's been such a lovely party."

"I'm really sorry you have to go," said Chris.

She accompanied them to the door and she could hear Father Dyer in the background asking, "Does anyone else know the words to 'I'll Bet You're Sorry Now, Tokyo Rose'?"

She bade them good night. On her way back to the living room, Sharon stepped quietly out from the study.

"Where's Burke?" Chris asked her.

"In there," Sharon answered with a nod toward the study. "He's sleeping it off. Say, what did the senator say to you? Anything?"

"What do you mean?" asked Chris. "They just left."

“Well, I guess it’s as well.”

“Sharon, what do you mean?”

“Oh, Burke,” sighed Sharon. In a guarded tone, she described an encounter between the senator and the director. Dennings had remarked to him, in passing, said Sharon, that there appeared to be an “alien pubic hair floating round in my gin.” Then he’d turned to the senator and added in a tone that was vaguely accusatory, “Never seen it before in my life! Have *you*?”

Chris giggled as Sharon went on to describe how the senator’s embarrassed reaction had triggered one of Dennings’ quixotic rages, in which he’d expressed his “boundless gratitude” for the existence of politicians, since without them “one couldn’t distinguish who the *statesmen* were, you see.”

When the senator had moved away in a huff, the director turned to Sharon and said proudly, “There, you see? I didn’t curse. Now then, don’t you think I handled that rather demurely?”

Chris couldn’t help laughing. “Oh, well, let him sleep. But you’d better stay in there in case he wakes up. Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” Sharon entered the study.

In the living room, Mary Jo Perrin sat alone and thoughtful in a corner chair. She looked edgy; disturbed. Chris started to join her, but changed her mind when one of the neighbors drifted over to the corner.

Chris headed for the piano instead. Dyer broke off his playing of chords and looked up to greet her. “Yes, young lady, and what can we do for you today? We’re running a special on novenas.”

Chris chuckled with the others. "I thought I'd get the scoop on what goes on at Black Mass," she said. "Father Wagner said you were the expert."

The group at the piano fell silent with interest.

"No, not really," said Dyer, lightly touching some chords. "Why'd you mention Black Mass?" he asked her soberly.

"Oh, well, some of us were talking before about—well... about those things that they found at Holy Trinity, and—"

"Oh, you mean the desecrations?" Dyer interrupted.

"Hey, somebody give us a clue what's going on," demanded the astronaut.

"Me too," said Ellen Cleary. "I'm lost."

"Well, they found some desecrations at the church down the street," explained Dyer.

"Well, like what?" asked the astronaut.

"Forget it," Father Dyer advised him, "Let's just say obscenities, okay?"

"Father Wagner says you told him it was like at Black Mass," prompted Chris, "and I wondered what went on at those things?"

"Oh, I really don't know all that much," he protested. "In fact, most of what I know is what I've heard from another Jeb."

"What's a Jeb?" Chris asked.

"Short for Jesuit. Father Karras is the expert on all this stuff."

Chris was suddenly alert. "Oh, the dark priest at Holy Trinity?"

"You know him?" asked Dyer.

"No, I just heard him mentioned, that's all."

“Well, I think he did a paper on it once. You know, just from the psychiatric side.”

“Whaddya mean?” asked Chris.

“Whaddya *mean*, whaddya mean?”

“Are you telling me he’s a psychiatrist?”

“Oh, well, sure. Gee, I’m sorry. I just assumed that you knew.”

“Listen, somebody *tell* me something!” the astronaut demanded impatiently. “What *does* go on at Black Mass?”

“Let’s just say perversions.” Dyer shrugged. “Obscenities. Blasphemies. It’s an evil parody of the Mass, where instead of God they worshiped Satan and sometimes offered human sacrifice.

Ellen Cleary shook her head and walked away. “This is getting too creepy for me.” She smiled thinly.

Chris paid her no notice. The dean joined the group unobtrusively. “But how can you *know* that?” she asked the young Jesuit. “Even if there was such a thing as Black Mass, who’s to say what went on there?”

“Well, I guess they got most of it,” answered Dyer, “From the people who were caught and then confessed.”

“Oh, come on,” said the dean. “Those confessions were worthless, Joe. They were tortured.”

“No, only the snotty ones,” Dyer said blandly.

There was a ripple of vaguely nervous laughter. The dean eyed his watch. “Well, I really should be going,” he said to Chris. “I’ve got the six-o’clock Mass in Dahlgren Chapel.”

“I’ve got the banjo Mass.” Dyer beamed. Then his eyes shifted to a point in the room behind Chris, and he sobered abruptly. “Well, now, I think we have a visitor, Mrs. MacNeil,” he cautioned, motioning with his head.

Chris turned. And gasped on seeing Regan in her nightgown, urinating gushingly onto the rug. Staring fixedly at the astronaut, she intoned in a lifeless voice, "You're going to die up there."

"*Oh, my God!*" cried Chris in pain, rushing to her daughter. "Oh, God, oh, my baby, oh, come on, come with me!"

She took Regan by the arms and led her quickly away with tremulous apology over her shoulder to the ashen astronaut: "Oh, I'm so sorry! She's been sick, she must be walking in her sleep! She didn't know what she was saying!"

"Gee, maybe we should go," she heard Dyer say to someone.

"No, no, stay," Chris protested, turning around for a moment. "Please, stay! It's okay! I'll be back in just a minute!"

Chris paused by the kitchen, instructing Willie to see to the rug before the stain became indelible, and then she walked Regan upstairs to her bathroom, bathed her and changed her nightgown. "Honey, why did you *say* that?" Chris asked her repeatedly, but Regan appeared not to understand and mumbled non sequiturs. Her eyes were vacant and clouded.

Chris tucked her into bed, and almost immediately Regan appeared to fall asleep. For a time Chris waited, listening to her breathing. Then left the room.

At the bottom of the stairs, she encountered Sharon and the young director of the second unit assisting Dennings out of the study. They had called a cab and were going to shepherd him back to his suite at the Sheraton-Park.

"Take it easy," Chris advised as they left the house with Dennings between them.

Barely conscious, the director said, “Fuck it,” and slipped into fog and the waiting cab.

Chris returned to the living room, where the guests who still remained expressed their sympathy as she gave them a brief account of Regan’s illness. When she mentioned the rappings and the other “attention-getting” phenomena, Mrs. Perrin stared at her intently. Once Chris looked at her, expecting her to comment, but she said nothing and Chris continued.

“Does she walk in her sleep quite a bit?” asked Dyer.

“No, tonight’s the first time. Or at least, the first time I know of, so I guess it’s this hyperactivity thing. Don’t you think?”

“Oh, I really wouldn’t know,” said the priest. “I’ve heard sleepwalking’s common at puberty, except that—” Here he shrugged and broke off. “I don’t know. Guess you’d better ask your doctor.”

Throughout the remainder of the discussion, Mrs. Perrin sat quietly, watching the dance of flames in the living-room fireplace. Almost as subdued, Chris noticed, was the astronaut, who was scheduled for a flight to the moon within the year. He stared at his drink with a now-and-then grunt meant to signify interest and attention. As if by tacit understanding, no one made reference to what Regan had said to him.

“Well, I do have that Mass,” said the dean at last, rising to leave.

It triggered a general departure. They all stood up and expressed their thanks for dinner and the evening.

At the door, Father Dyer took Chris’s hand and probed her eyes earnestly. “Do you think there’s a part in one of your

movies for a very short priest who can play the piano?" he asked.

"Well, if there isn't" —Chris laughed— "then I'll have one written in for you, Father."

"I was thinking of my brother," he told her solemnly.

"Oh, you!" she laughed again, and bade him a fond and warm good night.

The last to leave were Mary Jo Perrin and her son. Chris held them at the door with idle chatter. She had the feeling that Mary Jo had something on her mind, but was holding it back. To delay her departure, Chris asked her opinion on Regan's continued use of the Ouija board and her Captain Howdy fixation. "Do you think there's any harm in it?" she asked.

Expecting an airily perfunctory dismissal, Chris was surprised when Mrs. Perrin frowned and looked down at the doorstep. She seemed to be thinking, and still in this posture, she stepped outside and joined her son, who was waiting on the stoop.

When at last she lifted her head, her eyes were in shadow.

"I would take it away from her," she said quietly.

She handed ignition keys to her son. "Bobby, start up the motor," she instructed. "It's cold."

He took the keys, told Chris that he'd loved her in all her films, and then walked shyly away toward an old, battered Mustang parked down the street.

Mrs. Perrin's eyes were still in shadow.

"I don't know what you think of me," she said, speaking slowly. "Many people associate me with spiritualism. But that's wrong. Yes, I think I have a gift," she continued quietly. "But it isn't occult. In fact, to me it seems natural; perfectly

natural. Being a Catholic, I believe that we all have a foot in two worlds. The one that we're conscious of is time. But now and then a freak like me gets a flash from the *other* foot; and that one, I think... is in eternity. Well, eternity has no time. There the future is the present. So now and again when I feel that other foot, I believe that I get to see the future. Who knows? Maybe not. Maybe all of it's coincidence." She shrugged. "But I think I do. And if that's so, why, I still say it's natural, you see. But now the occult..." She paused, picking words. "The occult is something different. I've stayed away from that. I think dabbling with that can be dangerous. And that includes fooling around with a Ouija board."

Until now, Chris had thought her a woman of eminent sense. And yet something in her manner now was deeply disturbing. She felt a creeping foreboding that she tried to dispel.

"Oh, come on, Mary Jo." Chris smiled. "Don't you know how those Ouija boards work? It isn't anything at all but a person's subconscious, that's all."

"Yes, perhaps," she answered quietly. "Perhaps. It could all be suggestion. But in story after story that I've heard about séances, Ouija boards, *all* of that, they always seem to point to the opening of a door of some sort. Oh, not to the spirit world, perhaps; you don't believe in that. Perhaps, then, a door in what you call the subconscious. I don't know. All I know is that things seem to happen. And, my dear, there are lunatic asylums all over the world filled with people who dabbled in the occult."

"Are you kidding?"

There was momentary silence. Then again the soft voice began droning out of darkness. "There was a family in

Bavaria, Chris, in nineteen twenty-one. I don't remember the name, but they were a family of eleven. You could check it in the newspapers, I suppose. Just a short time following an attempt at a séance, they went out of their minds. All of them. All eleven. They went on a burning spree in their house, and when they'd finished with the furniture, they started on the three-month-old baby of one of the younger daughters. And that is when the neighbors broke in and stopped them.

"The entire family," she ended, "was put in an asylum."

"Oh, boy!" breathed Chris as she thought of Captain Howdy. He had now assumed a menacing coloration. Mental illness. Was that it? Something. "I *knew* I should take her to see a psychiatrist!"

"Oh, for heaven sakes," said Mrs. Perrin, stepping into the light, "you never mind about me; you just listen to your doctor." There was attempted reassurance in her voice that was not convincing. "I'm great at the future"—Mrs. Perrin smiled—"but in the present I'm absolutely helpless." She was fumbling in her purse. "Now then, where are my glasses? There, you see? I've mislaid them. Oh, here they are right here." She had found them in a pocket of her coat. "Lovely home," she remarked as she put on the glasses and glanced up at the upper façade of the house. "Gives a feeling of warmth."

"God almighty, I'm relieved! For a second there, I thought you were going to tell me it's haunted!"

Mrs. Perrin glanced down at her. "Why would I tell you a thing like that?"

Chris was thinking of a friend, a noted actress in Beverly Hills who had sold her home because of her insistence that it was inhabited by a poltergeist. "I don't know." She grinned wanly. "On account of who you are, I guess. I was kidding."

"It's a very fine house," Mrs. Perrin reassured her in an even tone. "I've been here before, you know; many times."

"Have you really?"

"Yes, an admiral had it; a friend of mine. I get a letter from him now and then. They've shipped him to sea again, poor dear. I don't know if it's really him that I miss or this house." She smiled. "But then maybe you'll invite me back."

"Mary Jo, I'd *love* to have you back. I mean it. You're a fascinating person."

"Well, at least I'm the *nerviest* person you know."

"Oh, come on. Listen, call me. Please. Will you call me next week?"

"Yes, I would like to hear how your daughter's coming on."

"Got the number?"

"Yes, at home in my book."

What was off? wondered Chris. There was something in her tone that was slightly off-center.

"Well, good night," said Mrs. Perrin, "and thanks again for a marvelous evening." And before Chris could answer her, she was walking rapidly down the street.

For a moment, Chris watched her; and then closed the front door. A heavy lassitude overcame her. *Quite a night*, she thought; *some night... some night...*

She went to the living room and stood over Willie, who was kneeling by the urine stain. She was brushing up the nap of the rug.

"White vinegar I put on," muttered Willie. "Twice."

"Comin' out?"

"Maybe now," answered Willie. "I do not know. We will see."

“No, you can’t really tell until the damned thing dries.”

Yeah, that’s brilliant there, punchy. That’s really a brilliant observation. Judas priest, kid, go to bed!

“C’mon, leave it alone for now, Willie. Get to sleep.”

“No, I finish.”

“Okay, then. And thanks. Good night.”

“Good night, madam.”

Chris started up the stairs with weary steps. “Great curry, there, Willie. Everybody loved it.”

“Yes, thank you, madam.”

Chris looked in on Regan and found her still asleep. Then she remembered the Ouija board. Should she hide it? Throw it away? *Boy, Perrin’s really dingy when it comes to that stuff.* Yet Chris was aware that the fantasy playmate was morbid and unhealthy. *Yeah, maybe I should chuck it.*

Still, Chris was hesitant. Standing by the bedside and looking at Regan. She remembered an incident when her daughter was only three: the night that Howard had decided she was much too old to continue to sleep with her baby bottle, on which she had grown dependent. He’d taken it away from her that night, and Regan had screamed until four in the morning, then acted hysterical for days. And now Chris feared a similar reaction. *Better wait until I talk it all out with a shrink.* Moreover, the Ritalin, she reflected, hadn’t had a chance to take effect.

At the last, she decided to wait and see.

Chris retired to her room, settled wearily into bed, and almost instantly fell asleep. Then awakened to fearful, hysterical screaming at the rim of her consciousness.

“Mother, come *here*, come *here*, I’m afraid!”

“Yes, I’m coming, all right, hon, I’m coming!”

Chris raced down the hall to Regan’s bedroom. Whimpering. Crying. Sounds like bedsprings.

“Oh, my baby, what’s wrong?” Chris exclaimed as she reached out and flicked on the lights.

Good Christ almighty!

Regan lay taut on her back, face stained with tears and contorted with terror as she gripped at the sides of her narrow bed.

“Mother, why is it *shaking?*” she cried. “Make it *stop!* Oh, I’m *scared!* Make it *stop!* Mother, please make it *stop!*”

The mattress of the bed was quivering violently back and forth.

II: The Edge

*... In our sleep, pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop
upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will,
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God. ...*

Aeschylus

one

They brought her to an ending in a crowded cemetery where the gravestones cried for breath.

The Mass had been lonely as her life. Her brothers from Brooklyn. The grocer on the corner who'd extended her credit. Watching them lower her in to the dark of a world without windows, Damien Karras sobbed with a grief he had long misplaced.

"Ah, Dimmy, Dimmy..."

An uncle with an arm around his shoulder.

"Never mind, she's in heaven now, Dimmy, she's happy."

Oh, God, let it be! Ah, God! Ah, please! Oh, God, please be!

They waited in the car while he lingered by the grave. He could not bear the thought of her being alone.

Driving to Pennsylvania Station, he listened to his uncles speak of their illnesses in broken, immigrant accents.

“...emphysema...gotta quit smokin’...I ohmos’ died las’ year, you know that?”

Spasms of rage fought to break from his lips, but he pressed them back and felt ashamed. He looked out the window: they were passing by the Home Relief Station where on Saturday mornings in the dead of winter she would pick up the milk and the sacks of potatoes while he lay in his bed; the Central Park Zoo, where she left him in summer while she begged by the fountain in front of the Plaza. Passing the hotel, Karras burst into sobs, and then choked back the memories, wiped at the wetness of stinging regrets. He wondered why love had waited for this distance, waited for the moment when he need not touch, when the limits of contact and human surrender had dwindled to the size of a printed Mass card tucked in his wallet: *In Memoriam*...

He knew. This grief was old.

He arrived at Georgetown in time for dinner, but had no appetite. He paced inside his cottage. Jesuit friends came by with condolences. Stayed briefly. Promised prayers.

Shortly after ten, Joe Dyer appeared with a bottle of Scotch. He displayed it proudly: “Chivas Regal!”

“Where’d you get the money for it—out of the poor-box?”

“Don’t be an asshole that would be breaking my vow of poverty.”

“Where did you get it then?”

“I stole it.”

Karras smiled and shook his head as he fetched a glass and a pewter coffee mug. He rinsed them out in his tiny bathroom sink and said, "I believe you."

"Greater faith I have never seen."

Karras felt a stab of familiar pain. He shook it off and returned to Dyer, who was sitting on his cot breaking open the seal. He sat beside him.

"Would you like to absolve me now or later?"

"Just pour," said Karras, "and we'll absolve each other."

Dyer poured deep into glass and cup. "College presidents shouldn't drink," he murmured. "It sets a bad example. I figure I relieved him of a terrible temptation."

Karras swallowed Scotch, but not the story. He knew the president's ways too well. A man of tact and sensitivity, he always gave through indirection. Dyer had come, he knew, as a friend, but also as the president's personal emissary. So when Dyer made a passing comment about Karras possibly needing "a rest," the Jesuit psychiatrist took it as hopeful omen of the future and felt a momentary flood of relief.

Dyer was good for him; made him laugh; talked about the party and Chris MacNeil; purveyed new anecdotes about the Jesuit Prefect of Discipline. He drank very little, but continually replenished Karras' glass, and when he thought he was numb enough for sleep, he got up from the cot and made Karras stretch out, while he sat at the desk and continued to talk until Karras' eyes were closed and his comments were mumbled grunts.

Dyer stood up and undid the laces of Karras' shoes. He slipped them off.

"Gonna steal my shoes now?" Karras muttered thickly.

“No, I tell fortunes by reading the creases. Now shut up and go to sleep.”

“You’re a Jesuit cat burglar.”

Dyer laughed lightly and covered him with a coat that he took from a closet. “Listen, someone’s got to worry about the bills around this place. All you other guys do is rattle beads and pray for the hippies down on M Street.”

Karras made no answer. His breathing was regular and deep. Dyer moved quietly to the door and flicked out the light.

“Stealing is a sin,” muttered Karras in the darkness.

“*Mea culpa*,” Dyer said softly.

For a time he waited, then at last decided that Karras was asleep. He left the cottage.

In the middle of the night, Karras awakened in tears. He had dreamed of his mother. Standing at a window high in Manhattan, he’d seen her emerging from a subway kiosk across the street. She stood at the curb with a brown paper shopping bag, searching for him. He waved. She didn’t see him. She wandered the street. Buses. Trucks. Unfriendly crowds. She was growing frightened. She returned to the subway and began to descend. Karras grew frantic, ran to the street and began to weep as he called her name; as he could not find her; as he pictured her helpless and bewildered in the maze of tunnels beneath the ground.

He waited for his sobbing to subside, and then fumbled for the Scotch. He sat on the cot and drank in darkness. This was like childhood, this grief.

He remembered a telephone call from his uncle:

“Dimmy, da edema’s affected her brain. She won’t let a doctor come anywhere near her. Jus’ keeps screamin’ things. Even talks ta da goddam radio. I figure she’s got ta go ta

Bellevue, Dimmy. A regular hospital won't put up wit' dat. I jus' figure a coupla months an' she's good as new; den we take her out again. Okay? Lissen, Dimmy, I tell you: we awready done it. Dey give her a shot an' den take her in da ambulance dis mornin'. We didn' wanna bodda you, excep' dere is a hearin' and you gotta sign da papers. Now... What?... Private hospital? Who's got da money, Dimmy? You?"

He didn't remember falling asleep.

He awakened in torpor, with memory of loss draining blood from his stomach. He reeled to the bathroom; showered; shaved; dressed in a cassock. It was five-thirty-five. He unlocked the door to Holy Trinity, put on his vestments, and offered up Mass at the left side altar.

"Memento etiam..." he prayed with bleak despair. *"Remember thy servant, Mary Karras...."*

In the tabernacle door he saw the face of the nurse at Bellevue Receiving; heard again the screams from the isolation room.

"You her son?"

"Yes, I'm Damien Karras."

"Well, I wouldn't go in there. She's pitchin' a fit."

He'd looked through the port at the windowless room with the naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling; padded walls; stark; no furniture save for the cot on which she raved.

"...grant her, we pray Thee, a place of refreshment, light and peace...."

As she met his gaze, she'd grown suddenly silent; moved to the port with a baffled look.

"Why you do this, Dimmy? Why?"

The eyes had been meeker than a lamb's

“*Agnus Dei...*” he murmured as he bowed and struck his breast. “Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, grant her rest....”

As he closed his eyes and held the Host, he saw his mother in the hearing room, her hands clasped gentle in her lap, her expression docile and confused as the judge explained to her the Bellevue psychiatrist’s report.

“*Do you understand that, Mary?*”

She nodded; wouldn’t open her mouth; they had taken her dentures.

“*Well, what do you say about that, Mary?*”

She’d proudly answered him:

“*My boy, he speak for me.*”

An anguished moan escaped from Karras as he bowed his head above the Host. He stuck his breast as if it were time and murmured, “*Domine, no sum dignus...* I am not worthy... say but the word and my soul shall be healed.”

Against all reason, against all knowledge, he prayed there was Someone to hear his prayer.

He did not think so.

After the Mass, he returned to the cottage and tried to sleep. Without success.

Later in the morning, a youngish priest that he’d never seen came by unexpectedly. He knocked and looked in the door.

“You busy? Can I see you for a while?”

In the eyes, the restless burden; in the voice, the tugging plea.

For a moment, Karras hated him.

“Come in,” he said gently. And inwardly raged at this portion of his being that rendered him helpless; that he could

not control; that lay coiled within him like a length of rope, always ready to fling itself unbidden at the cry of someone else's need. It gave him no peace. Not even in sleep. At the edge of his dreams, there was often a sound like a faint, brief cry of someone in distress. It was almost inaudible in the distance. Always the same. And for minutes after waking, he would feel the anxiety of some duty unfulfilled.

The young priest fumbled; faltered; seemed shy. Karras led him patiently. Offered cigarettes. Instant coffee. Then forced a look of interest as the moody young visitor gradually unfolded a familiar problem: the terrible loneliness of priests.

Of all the anxieties that Karras encountered among the community, this one had lately become the most prevalent. Cut off from their families as well as from women, many of the Jesuits were also fearful of expressing affection for fellow priests; of forming deep and loving friendships.

"Like I'd like to put my arm around another guy's shoulder, but right away I'm scared he's going to think I'm queer. I mean, you hear all these theories about so many latents attracted to the priesthood. So I just don't do it. I won't even go to somebody's room just to listen to records; or talk; or smoke. It's not that I'm afraid of *him*; I'm just worried about *him* getting worried about *me*."

Karras felt the weight easing slowly from the other and onto him. He let it come; let the young priest talk. He knew he would return again and again; find relief from aloneness; make Karras his friend; and when he'd realize he had done so without fear and suspicion, perhaps he would go on to make friends among the others.

The psychiatrist grew weary; found himself drifting into private sorrow. He glanced at the plaque that someone had

given him the previous Christmas. MY BROTHER HURTS. I SHARE HIS PAIN. I MEET GOD IN HIM, he read. A failed encounter. He blamed himself. He had mapped the streets of his brother's torment, yet never walked them; or so he believed. He thought that the pain which he felt was his own.

At last the visitor looked at his watch. It was time for lunch in the campus refectory. He rose and started to leave. Then paused to glance at a current novel on Karras' desk.

"Have you read it?" asked Karras.

The other shook his head. "No, I haven't. Should I?"

"I don't know. I just finished it and I'm not at all sure that I really understand it," Karras lied. He picked up the book and handed it over. "Want to take it along? You know, I'd really like to hear someone else's opinion."

"Well, sure," said the Jesuit, examining the copy on the flap of the dust jacket. "I'll try to get it back to you in a couple of days."

His mood seemed brighter.

As the screen door creaked with his departure, Karras felt momentary peace. He picked up his breviary and stepped out to the courtyard, where he slowly paced and said his Office.

In the afternoon, he had still another visitor, the elderly pastor of Holy Trinity, who took a chair by the desk and offered condolences on the passing of Karras' mother.

"Said a couple of Masses for her, Damien. And one for you," he wheezed with the barest trace of a brogue.

"That was thoughtful of you, Father. Thank you very much."

"How old was she?"

"Seventy."

"A good old age."

Karras fixed his gaze on an altar card that the pastor had carried in with him. One of the three employed in the Mass, it was covered in plastic and inscribed with a portion of the prayer that were said by the priest. The psychiatrist wondered what he was doing with it.

“Well, Damien, we’ve had another one of those things here today. In the church, y’know. Another desecration.”

A statue of the Virgin at the back of the church had been painted like a harlot, the pastor told him. Then he handed the altar car to Karras. “And this one the morning after you’d gone, y’know, to New York. Was it Saturday? Saturday. Yes. Well, take a look at that. I just had a talk with a sergeant of police, and—well... well, look at this card, would you, Damien?”

As Karras examined it, the pastor explained that someone had slipped in a typewritten sheet between the original card and its cover. The ersatz text, though containing some strikeovers and various typographical errors, was in basically fluent and intelligible Latin and described in vivid, erotic detail an imagined homosexual encounter involving the Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene.

“That’s enough, now, you don’t have to read it all,” said the pastor, snapping back the card as if fearing that it might be an occasion of sin. “Now that’s excellent Latin; I mean, it’s got style, a *church* Latin style. Well, the sergeant says he talked to some fellow, a psychologist, and he says that the person’s been doin’ this all—well, he could be a priest, y’know, a very sick priest. Do you think?”

The psychiatrist considered for a while. Then nodded. “Yes. Yes, it could. Acting out a rebellion, perhaps, in a state

of complete somnambulism. I don't know. It could be. Maybe so."

"Can you think of any candidates, Damien?"

"I don't get you."

"Well, now, sooner or later they come and see you, wouldn't you say? I mean, the sick ones, if there are any, from the campus. Do y'know of any *like* that? I mean, with that kind of illness, y'know."

"No, I don't."

"No, I didn't think you'd tell me."

"Well, I wouldn't know anyway, Father. Somnambulism is a way of resolving any number of possible conflict situations, and the usual form of resolution is symbolic. So I really wouldn't know. And if it is a somnambulist, he's probably got a complete posterior amnesia about what he's done, so that even *he* wouldn't have a clue."

"What if *you* were to tell him?" the pastor asked cagily. He plucked at an earlobe, a habitual gesture, Karras had noticed, whenever he thought he was being wily.

"I really don't know," repeated the psychiatrist.

"No. No, I really didn't think that you'd tell me." He rose and moved for the door. "Y'know what you're like, you people? Like priests!" he complained.

As Karras laughed gently, the pastor returned and dropped the altar card on his desk. "I suppose you should study this thing," he mumbled. "Something might come to you."

The pastor moved for the door.

"Did they check it for fingerprints?" asked Karras.

The pastor stopped and turned slightly. "Oh, I doubt it. After all, it's not a criminal we're after, now, is it? More likely it's only a demented parishioner. What do you think of that,

Damien? Do you think that it could be someone in the parish? You know, I think so. It wasn't a priest at all, it was someone among the parishioners." He was pulling at his earlobe again. "Don't you think?"

"I really wouldn't know," he said again.

"No, I didn't think you'd tell me."

Later that day, Father Karras was relieved of his duties as counselor and assigned to the Georgetown University Medical School as lecturer in psychiatry. His orders were to "rest."

two

Regan lay on her back on Klein's examining table, arms and legs bowed outward. Taking her foot in both his hands, the doctor flexed it toward her ankle. For moments he held it there in tension, then suddenly released it. The foot relaxed into normal position.

He repeated the procedure several times but without any variance in the result. He seemed dissatisfied. When Regan abruptly sat up and spat in his face, he instructed a nurse to remain in the room and returned to his office to talk to Chris.

It was April 26. He'd been out of the city both Sunday and Monday and Chris hadn't reached him until this morning to relate the happening at the party and the subsequent shaking of the bed.

"It was actually moving?"

"It was moving."

"How long?"

"I don't know. Maybe ten, maybe fifteen seconds. I mean, that's all I saw. Then she sort of wet stiff and wet the bed. Or maybe she'd wet it before. I don't know. But then all of a sudden she was dead asleep and never woke up till the next afternoon."

Dr. Klein entered thoughtfully.

"Well, what is it?" Chirs asked in an anxious tone.

When she'd first arrived, he'd reported his suspicion that the shaking of the bed had been caused by a seizure of clonic contractions, an alternating tensing and relaxing of the muscles. The chronic form of such a condition, he'd told her, was clonus, and usually indicated a lesion in the brain.

"Well, the test was negative," he told her, and described the procedure, explaining that in clonus the alternate flexing and releasing of the foot would have triggered a run of clonic contractions. As he sat at his desk, he still seemed worried, however. "Has she ever had a fall?"

"Like on the head?" Chris asked.

"Well, yes."

"No, not that I know of."

"Childhood diseases?"

"Just the usual. Measles and mumps and chicken pox."

"Sleepwalking history?"

"Not until now."

"What do you mean? She was walking in her sleep at the party?"

"Well, yes. She still doesn't know what she did that night. And there's other stuff, too, that she doesn't remember."

"Lately?"

Sunday. Regan still sleeping. An overseas telephone call from Howard.

"How's Rags?"

"Thanks a lot for the call on her birthday."

"I was stuck on a yacht. Now for chrissakes lay off me. I called her the minute I was back in the hotel."

"Oh, sure."

"She didn't tell you?"

"You talked to her?"

"Yes. That's why I thought I'd better call you. What the hell's going on with her?"

"What are you getting at?"

"She just called me a 'cocksucker' and hung up the phone."

Recounting the incident to Dr. Klein, Chris explained that when Regan had finally awakened, she had no memory whatever of either the telephone call or of what had happened on the night of the dinner.

"Then perhaps she wasn't lying about the moving of the furniture," Klein hypothesized.

"I don't get you."

"Well, she moved it herself, no doubt, but perhaps while in one of those states where she didn't really know what she was doing. It's known as automatism. Like a trance state. The patient doesn't know or remember what he's doing."

"But something just occurred to me, doc, you know that? There's a great big heavy bureau in her room made out of teakwood. It must weigh half a ton. I mean, how could she have moved that?"

"Extraordinary strength is pretty common in pathology."

"Oh, really? How come?"

The doctor shrugged. "No one knows."

"Now, besides what you've told me," he continued, "have you noticed any other bizarre behavior?"

"Well, she'd gotten real sloppy."

"Bizzare," he repeated.

"For her, that's bizarre. Oh, now wait! There's this! You remember that Ouija board she's been playing with? Captain Howdy?"

"The fantasy playmate." The internist nodded.

"Well, now she can hear him," Chris revealed.

The doctor leaned forward, folding his arms atop the desk. As Chris continued, his eyes were alert and had narrowed to dart points of speculation.

"Yesterday morning," said Chris, "I could hear her talking to Howdy in her bedroom. I mean, she'd talk, and then seem to wait, as if she were playing with the Ouija board. When I peeked inside the room, though, there wasn't any Ouija board there; just Rags; and she was nodding her head, doc, just like she was agreeing with what he was saying."

"Did she see him?"

"I don't think so. She sort of had her head to the side, the way she does when she listens to records."

The doctor nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Yes, I see. Any other phenomena like that? Does she see things? Smell things?"

"Smell," Chris remembered. "She keeps smelling something bad in her bedroom."

"Something burning?"

"Hey, that's right!" Chris exclaimed. "How'd you know that?"

“It’s sometimes the symptom of a type of disturbance in the chemioelectrical activity of the brain. In the case of your daughter, in the temporal lobe, you see.” He put a hand to the front of his skull. “Up here, in the forward part of the brain. Now it’s rare but it does cause bizarre hallucinations and usually just before a convulsion. I suppose that’s why it’s taken for schizophrenia so often; but it isn’t schizophrenia. It’s produced by a lesion in the temporal lobe. Now the test for clonus isn’t conclusive, Mrs. MacNeil, so I think I’d like to give her an EEG.”

“What’s that?”

“Electroencephalograph. It will show us the pattern of her brain waves. That’s usually a pretty good indication of abnormal functioning.”

“But you think that’s it, huh? Temporal lobe?”

“Well, she does have the syndrome, Mrs. MacNeil. For example, the untidiness; the pugnacity; behavior that’s socially embarrassing; the automatism, as well. And of course, the seizures that made the bed shake. Usually, that’s followed by either wetting the bed or vomiting, or both, and then sleeping very deeply.”

“You want to test her right now?” asked Chris.

“Yes, I think we should do it immediately, but she’s going to need sedation. If she moves or jerks it will void the results, so may I give her, say, twenty-five milligrams of Librium?”

“Jesus, do what you have to,” she told him, shaken.

She accompanied him to the examining room, and when Regan saw him readying the hypodermic, she screamed and filled the air with a torrent of obscenities.

“Oh, honey, it’s to *help* you!” Chris pleaded in distress. She held Regan still while Dr. Klein gave the injection.

“I’ll be back,” the doctor said, nodding, and while a nurse wheeled the EEG apparatus into the room, he left to attend to another patient. When he returned a short time later, the Librium still had not taken effect.

Klein seemed surprised. “That was quite a strong dose,” he remarked to Chris.

He injected another twenty-five milligrams; left; came back; found Regan tractable and docile.

“What are you doing?” Chris asked him as Klein applied the saline-tipped electrodes to Regan’s scalp.

“We put four on each side,” he explained. “That enables us to take a brain-wave reading from the left and right side of the brain and then compare them.”

“Why compare them?”

“Well, deviations could be significant. For example, I had a patient who used to hallucinate,” said Klein. “He’d see things, he’d hear things, things that weren’t actually there, of course. Well, I found a discrepancy in comparing the left and right readings of his brain waves and discovered that actually the man was hallucinating on just one side of his head.”

“That’s wild.”

“The left eye and ear functioned normally; only the right side had visions and heard things.

“Well, all right, now, let’s see.” He had turned the machine on. He pointed to the waves on the fluorescent screen. “Now that’s both sides together,” he explained. “What I’m looking for now are spiky waves” —he patterned in the air with his index finger— “especially waves of very high amplitude coming at four to eight per second. That’s temporal lobe,” he told her.

He studied the pattern of the brain wave carefully, but discovered no dysrhythmia. No spikes. No flattened domes. And when he switched to comparison readings, the results were also negative.

Klein frowned. He couldn't understand it. He repeated the procedure. And found no change.

He brought in a nurse to attend to Regan and returned to his office with her mother.

"So what's the story?" Chris inquired/

The doctor sat pensively on the edge of his desk. "Well, the EEG would have proved that she had it, but the lack of dysrhythmia doesn't prove to me conclusively that she doesn't. It might be hysteria, but the pattern before and after her convulsion was much too striking."

Chris furrowed her brow. "You know, you keep on saying that, doc—'convulsion.' What exactly is the name of this disease?"

"Well, it isn't a disease," he said quietly.

"Well, what do you call it? I mean, specifically."

"You know it as epilepsy, Mrs. MacNeil."

"Oh, my God!"

Chris sank to a chair.

"Now, let's hold it," soothed Klein. "I can see that like most of the general public your impression of epilepsy is exaggerated and probably largely mythical."

"Isn't it hereditary?" Chris said, wincing.

"That's one of the myths," Klein told her calmly. "At least, most doctors seem to think so. Look, practically anyone can be made to convulse. You see, most of us are born with a pretty high threshold of resistance to convulsions; some with a

low one; so the difference between you and an epileptic is a matter of degree. That's all. Just degree. It is not a disease."

"Then what is it—a freaking hallucination?"

"A disorder: a controllable disorder. And there are many, many types of it, Mrs. MacNeil. For example, you're sitting here now and for a second you seem to go blank, let's say, and you miss a little bit of what I'm saying. Well, now that's a kind of epilepsy, Mrs. MacNeil. That's right. It's a true epileptic attack."

"Yeah, well, that isn't Regan," Chris rebutted. "And how come it's happening just all of a sudden?"

"Look, we still aren't sure that's what she's got, and I grant you that maybe you were right in the first place; very possibly it's psychosomatic. However, I doubt it. And to answer your question, any number of changes in the function of the brain can trigger a convulsion in the epileptic: worry; fatigue; emotional stress; a particular note on a musical instrument. I once had a patient, for instance, who never used to have a seizure except on a bus when he was a block away from home. Well, we finally discovered what was causing it: flickering light from a white slat fence reflected in the window of the bus. Now at another time of day, or if the bus had been going at a different speed, he wouldn't have convulsed, you see. He had a lesion, a scar in the brain that was caused by some childhood disease. In the case of your daughter, the scar would be forward—up front in the temporal lobe—and when it's hit by a particular electrical impulse of a certain wavelength and periodicity, it triggers a sudden burst of abnormal reactions from deep within a focus in the lobe. Do you see?"

“I guess,” Chris sighed, dejected. “But I’ll tell you the truth, doc, I don’t understand how her whole personality could be changed.”

“In the temporal lobe, that’s extremely common, and can last for days or even weeks. It isn’t rare to find destructive and even criminal behavior. There’s such a big change, in fact, that two or three hundred years ago people with temporal lobe disorders were often considered to be possessed by a devil.”

“They were *what*?”

“Taken over by the mind of a demon. You know, something like a superstitious version of split personality.”

Chris closed her eyes and lowered her forehead onto a fist. “Listen, tell me something good,” she murmured.

“Well, now, don’t be alarmed. If it *is* a lesion, in a way she’s fortunate. Then all we have to do is remove the scar.”

“Oh, swell.”

“Or it could be just pressure on the brain. Look, I’d like to have some X rays taken of her skull. There’s a radiologist here in the building, and perhaps I can get him to take you right away. Shall I call him?”

“God, yes; go ahead; let’s do it.”

Klein called and set it up. They would take her immediately, they told him.

He hung up the phone and began writing a prescription. “Room twenty-one on the second floor. Then I’ll probably call you tomorrow or Thursday. I’d like a neurologist in on this. In the meantime, I’m taking her off the Ritalin. Let’s try her on Librium for a while.”

He ripped the prescription sheet from the pad and handed it over. “I’d try to stay close to her, Mrs. MacNeil. In these

walking trance states, if that's what it is, it's always possible for her to hurt herself. Is your bedroom close to hers?"

"Yeah, it is."

"That's fine. Ground floor?"

"No, second."

"Big windows in her bedroom?"

"Well, one. What's the deal?"

"Well, I'd try to keep it close, maybe even put a lock on it. In a trance state, she might go through it. I once had a--"

"—Patient," Chris finished with a trace of a wry, weary smile.

He grinned. "I guess I do have a lot of them, don't I?"

"A couple."

She propped her face on her hand and leaned thoughtfully forward. "You know, I thought of something else just now."

"And what was that?"

"Well, like after a fit, you were saying, she'd right away fall dead asleep. Like on Saturday night. I mean, didn't you say that?"

"Well, yes." Klein nodded. "That's right."

"Well, then, how come those other times she said that her bed was shaking, she was always wide awake?"

"You didn't tell me that."

"Well, it's so. She looked just fine. She'd just come to my room and then ask to get in bed with me."

"Bed wetting? Vomiting?"

Chris shook her head. "She was fine."

Klein frowned and gently chewed on his lip for a moment. "Well, let's look at those X rays," he finally told her.

Feeling drained and numb, Chris shepherded Regan to the radiologist; stayed by her side while the X rays were taken;

took her home. She'd been strangely mute since the second injection, and Chris made an effort now to engage her.

"Want to play some Monopoly or somethin'?"

Regan shook her head and then stared at her mother with unfocused eyes that seemed to be retracted into infinite remoteness. "I'm feeling sleepy," Regan said in a voice that belonged to the eyes. Then, turning, she climbed up the stairs to her bedroom.

Must be the Librium, Chris reflected as she watched her. Then at last she sighed and went into the kitchen. She poured some coffee and sat down at the breakfast nook table with Sharon.

"How'd it go?"

"Oh, Christ!"

Chris fluttered the prescription slip onto the table. "Better call and get that filled," she said, and then explained what the doctor had told her. "If I'm busy or out, keep a real good eye on her, would you, Shar? He—" Dawning. Sudden. "That reminds me."

She got up from the table and went up to Regan's bedroom, found her under the covers and apparently asleep.

Chris moved to the window and tightened the latch. She stared below. The window, facing out from the side of the house, directly overlooked the precipitous public staircase that plunged to M Street far below.

Boy, I'd better call a locksmith right away.

Chris returned to the kitchen and added the chore to the list from which Sharon sat working, gave Willie the dinner menu, and returned a call from her agent.

"What about the script?" he wanted to know.

“Yeah, it’s great, Ed; let’s do it,” she told him. “When’s it go?”

“Well, your segment’s in July, so you’ll have to start preparing right away.”

“You mean now?”

“I mean now. This isn’t acting, Chris. You’re involved in a lot of the preproduction. You’ve got to work with the set designer, the costume designer, the makeup artist, the producer. And you’ll have to pick a cameraman and a cutter and block out your shots. C’mon, Chris, you know the drill.”

“Oh, shit.”

“You’ve got a problem?”

“Yeah, I do; I’ve got a problem.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Well, Regan’s pretty sick.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. What’s wrong?”

“They don’t know yet. I’m waiting for some tests. Listen, Ed, I can’t leave her.”

“So who says to leave her?”

“No, you don’t understand, Ed. I need to be at home with her. She needs my attention. Look, I just can’t explain it, Ed, it’s too complicated, so why don’t we just hold off for a while?”

“We can’t. They want to try for the Music Hall over Christmas, Chris, and I think that they’re pushing it *now*.”

“Oh, for chrissakes, Ed, they can wait two weeks. Now come on!”

“Look, you’ve bugged me that you want to direct, and now all of a—”

“Right, Ed, I know,” she interrupted. “Look, I want it; I really want it bad, but you’ll just have to tell ’em that I need some more time!”

“And if I do, we’re going to blow it. Now that’s my opinion. Look, they don’t want you anyway, that’s not news. They’re just doing this for Moore, and I think if they go back to him now and say she isn’t too sure she wants to do it yet, *he’ll* have an out. Now come on, Chris, talk sense. Look, you do what you want. I don’t care. There’s no money in this thing unless it hits. But if you want it, I’m telling you: I ask for a delay and I think we’re going to blow it. Now then, what should I tell them?”

“Ahh, boy,” sighed Chris.

“It’s not easy. I know.”

“No, it isn’t. Well, listen...”

She thought. Then shook her head. “Ed, they’ll just have to wait,” she said wearily.

“Your decision.”

“Okay, Ed. Let me know.”

“I will. I’ll be calling. Take it easy.”

“You too, Ed. Good-bye.”

She hung up the phone in a state of depression and lit up a cigarette. “I talked to Howard, by the way, did I tell you?” she said to Sharon.

“Oh, when? Did you tell him what’s happening with Rags?”

“I told him. I told him he ought to come see her.”

“Is he coming?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” Chris answered.

“You’d think he’d make the effort.”

“Yeah, I know.” Chris sighed. “But you’ve got to understand his hang-up, Shar. That’s it. I know that’s it.”

“What’s it?”

“Oh, the whole ‘Mr. Chris MacNeil’ thing. Rags was a part of it. She was in and he was out. Always me and Rags together on the magazine covers; me and Rags in the layouts; mother and daughter, pixie twins.” She tipped ash from her cigarette with a moody finger. “Ah, nuts, who knows. It’s all mixed up. But it’s hard to get hacked with him, Shar; I just can’t.”

She reached out for a book by Sharon’s elbow. “So what are you reading?”

“What do you mean? Oh, *that*. That’s for you. I forgot. Mrs. Perrin dropped it by.”

“She was here?”

“Yes, this morning. Said she’s sorry she missed you and she’s going out of town, but she’ll call you as soon as she’s back.”

Chris nodded and glanced at the title of the book: *A Study of Devil Worship and Related Occult Phenomena*. She opened it and found a penned note from Mary Jo Perrin:

Dear Chris: I happened by the Georgetown University Library and picked this up for you. It has some chapters about Black Mass. You should read it *all*, however; I think you’ll find the other sections particularly interesting. See you soon.

Mary Jo

“Sweet lady,” said Chris.

“Yes, she is,” agreed Sharon.

Chris riffled through the pages of the book. “What’s the scoop on Black Mass? Pretty hairy?”

“I don’t know,” answered Sharon. “I haven’t read it.”

“No good for serenity?”

Sharon stretched and yawned. “Oh, that stuff turns me off.”

“What happened to your Jesus complex?”

“Oh, come on.”

Chris slid the book across the table to Sharon. “Here, read it and tell me what happens.”

“And get nightmares?”

“What do you think you get paid for?”

“Throwing up.”

“I can do that myself,” Chris muttered as she picked up the evening paper. “All you have to do is stick your business manager’s advice down your throat and you’re vomiting blood for a week.” Irritably, she put the paper aside. “Would you turn on the radio, Shar? Get the news.”

Sharon had dinner at the house with Chris, and then left for a date. She forgot the book. Chris saw it on the table and thought about reading it, but finally she felt too weary. She left it on the table and walked upstairs.

She looked in on Regan, who still seemed to be asleep under the covers, and apparently sleeping through. She checked the window again. Leaving the room, Chris made sure to leave the door wide open and then did the same with her own before getting into bed. She watched part of a movie on television. Then slept.

The following morning, the book about devil worship had vanished from the table.

No one noticed.

three

The consulting neurologist pinned up the X rays again and searched for indentations that would look as if the skull had been pounded like copper with a tiny hammer. Dr. Klein stood behind him with folded arms. They had both looked for lesions and collections of fluid; for a possible shifting of the pineal gland. Now they probed for Lückenshadt Skull, the telltale depressions that would indicate chronic intracranial pressure.

They did not find it. The date was Thursday, April 28.

The consulting neurologist removed his glasses and carefully tucked them into the left breast pocket of his jacket. "There's just nothing there, Sam. Nothing I can see."

Klein frowned at the floor with a shake of the head. "Doesn't figure."

"Want to run another series?"

“I don’t think so. I’ll try an LP.”

“Good idea.”

“In the meantime, I’d like you to see her.”

“How’s today?”

“Well, I’m—” Telephone buzzer. “Excuse me.” He picked up the telephone. “Yes?”

“Mrs. MacNeil on the phone. Says it’s urgent.”

“What line?”

“She’s on twelve.”

He punched the extension button. “Dr. Klein, Mrs. MacNeil. What’s the trouble?”

Her voice was distraught and on the brim of hysteria. “Oh, God, doc it’s Regan! Can you come right away?”

“Well, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, doc, I just can’t describe it! Oh, for God’s sake, come over! Come now!”

“Right away!”

He disconnected and buzzed his receptionist. “Susan, tell Dresner to take my appointments.” He hung up the phone and started taking off his jacket. “That’s her. You want to come? It’s only just across the bridge.”

“I’ve got an hour.”

“Let’s go.”

They were there within minutes, and at the door, where Sharon greeted them, they heard moans and screams of terror from Regan’s bedroom. She looked frightened. “I’m Sharon Spencer,” she said. “Come on. She’s upstairs.”

She led them to the door of Regan’s bedroom, where she cracked it open and called in, “Doctors, Chris!”

Chris immediately came to the door, her face contorted in a vise of fear. “Oh, my God, come on in!” she quavered. “Come on in and take a look at what she’s doing!”

“This is Dr.—”

In the middle of the introduction, Klein broke off as he stared at Regan. Shrieking hysterically, she was flailing her arms as her body seemed to fling itself up horizontally into the air above her bed and then slammed down savagely onto the mattress. It was happening rapidly and repeatedly.

“Oh, Mother, make him *stop!*” she was screeching “*Stop* him. He’s trying to kill me! *Stop* him! *Stooopppppp hiiiiimmmmmmmmm, Motherrrrrrrrrrrrrr!*”

“Oh, my baby!” Chris whimpered as she jerked up a fist to her mouth and bit it. She turned a beseeching look to Klein. “Doc, what is it? What’s happening?”

He shook his head, his gaze fixed on Regan as the odd phenomenon continued. She would lift about a foot each time and then fall with a wrenching of her breath, as if unseen hands had picked her up and thrown her down.

Chris shaded her eyes with a trembling hand. “Oh, Jesus, Jesus!” she said hoarsely. “Doc, what *is* it?”

The up and down movements ceased abruptly and the girl twisted feverishly from side to side with her eyes rolled upward into their sockets so that only the whites were exposed.

“Oh, he’s burning me... *burning* me!” Regan was moaning. “Oh, I’m burning! I’m burning!...”

Her legs began rapidly crossing and uncrossing.

The doctors moved closer, one on either side of the bed. Still twisting and jerking, Regan arched her head back,

disclosing a swollen, bulging throat. She began to mutter something incomprehensible in an oddly guttural tone.

“...nowonmai... nowonmai...”

Klein reached down to check her pulse.

“Now, let’s see what the trouble is, dear,” he said gently.

And abruptly was reeling, stunned and staggering, across the room from the force of a vicious backward swing of Regan’s arm as the girl sat up, her face contorted with a hideous rage.

“The sow is *mine!*” she bellowed in a coarse and powerful voice. “She is *mine!* Keep away from her! She is *mine!*”

A yelping laugh gushed up from her throat, and then she fell on her back as if someone had pushed her. She pulled up her nightgown, exposing her genitals. “*Fuck me! Fuck me!*” she screamed at the doctors, and with both her hands began masturbating frantically.

Moments later, Chris ran from the room with a stifled sob when Regan put her fingers to her mouth and licked them.

As Klein approached the bedside, Regan seemed to hug herself, her hands caressing her arms.

“Ah, yes, my pearl...” she crooned in that strangely coarsened voice. Her eyes were closed as if in ecstasy. “My child... my flower... my pearl...”

Then again she was twisting from side to side, moaning meaningless syllables over and over. And abruptly sat up with eyes staring wide with helpless terror.

She mewed like a cat.

Then barked.

Then neighed.

And then, bending at the waist, started whirling her torso around in rapid, strenuous circles. She gasped for breath. “Oh,

stop him!” she wept. “Please, *stop* him! It hurts! Make him *stop!* I can’t *breathe!*”

Klein had seen enough. He fetched his medical bag to the window and quickly began to prepare an injection.

The neurologist remained beside the bed and saw Regan fall backward as if from a shove. Her eyes rolled upward into their sockets again, and rolling from side to side, she began to mutter rapidly in guttural tones. The neurologist leaned closer and tried to make it out. Then he saw Klein gently beckoning. He moved to him.

“I’m giving her Librium,” Klein told him guardedly, holding the syringe to the light of the window. “But you’re going to have to hold her.”

The neurologist nodded. He seemed preoccupied. He inclined his head to the side as if listening to the muttering from the bed.

“What’s she saying?” Klein whispered.

“I don’t know. Just gibberish. Nonsense syllables.” Yet his own explanation seemed to leave him unsatisfied. “She *says* it as if it means something, though. It’s got cadence.”

Klein nodded toward the bed and they approached quietly from either side. As they came, she went rigid, as if in the stiffening grip of tetany, and the doctors looked at each other significantly. Then looked again to Regan as she started to arch her body upward into an impossible position, bending it backward like a bow until the brow of her head had touched her feet. She was screaming in pain.

The doctors eyed each other with questioning surmise. Then Klein gave a signal to the neurologist. But before the consultant could seize her, Regan fell limp in a faint and wet the bed.

Klein leaned over and rolled up her eyelid. Checked her pulse. "She'll be out for a while," he murmured. "I think she convulsed. Don't you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, let's take some insurance," said Klein.

Defly he administered the injection.

"Well, what do you think?" Klein asked the consultant as he pressed a circle of sterile tape against the puncture.

"Temporal lobe. Sure, maybe schizophrenia's a possibility, Sam, but the onset's much too sudden. She hasn't any history of it, right?"

"No, she hasn't."

"Neurasthenia?"

Klein shook his head.

"Then hysteria, maybe," offered the consultant.

"I've thought of that."

"Sure. But she'd have to be a freak to get her body twisted up like she did voluntarily, now, wouldn't you say?" He shook his head. "No, I think it's pathological, Sam—her strength; the paranoia; the hallucinations. Schizophrenia, okay; those symptoms it covers. But temporal lobe would also cover the convulsions. There's one thing that bothers me, though..." He trailed off with a puzzled frown.

"What's that?"

"Well, I'm really not sure but I thought I heard signs of dissociation: 'my pearl'... 'my child'... 'my flower'... 'the sow.' I had the feeling she was talking about herself. Was that your impression too, or am I reading something into it?"

Klein stroked his lip as he mulled the question. "Well, frankly, at the time it never occurred to me, but then now that

you point it out..." He grunted thoughtfully. "Could be. Yes. Yes, it could."

Then he shrugged off the notion. "Well, I'll do an LP right now while she's out and then maybe we'll know something."

The neurologist nodded.

Klein poked around in his medical bag, found a pill and tucked it in his pocket. "Can you stay?"

The neurologist checked his watch. "Maybe half an hour."

"Let's talk to the mother."

They left the room and entered the hallway.

Chris and Sharon were leaning, heads lowered, against the balustrade by the staircase. As the doctors approached them, Chris wiped her nose with a balled, moist handkerchief. Her eyes were red from crying.

"She's sleeping," Klein told her.

"Thank God," Chris sighed.

"And she's heavily sedated. She'll probably sleep right through until tomorrow."

"That's good," Chris said weakly. "Doc, I'm sorry about being such a baby."

"You're doing just fine," he assured her. "It's a frightening ordeal. By the way, this is Dr. David."

"Hello," said Chris with a bleak smile.

"Dr. David's a neurologist."

"What do you think?" she asked them both.

"Well, we still think it's temporal lobe," Klein answered, "and—"

"Jesus, what the hell are you *talking* about!" Chris erupted. "She's been acting like a psycho, like a split personality! What do you—"

Abruptly she pulled herself together and lowered her forehead into a hand.

"Guess I'm all up-tight." She exhaled wearily. "I'm sorry." She lifted a haggard look to Klein. "You were saying?"

It was David who responded. "There haven't been more than a hundred authenticated cases of split personality, Mrs. MacNeil. It's a rare condition. Now I know the temptation is to leap to psychiatry, but any responsible psychiatrist would exhaust the somatic possibilities first. That's the safest procedure."

"Okay, so what's next?" Chris sighed.

"A lumbar tap," answered David.

"A spinal?"

He nodded. "What we missed in the X rays and the EEG could turn up there. At the least, it would exhaust certain other possibilities. I'd like to do it now, right here, while she's sleeping. I'll give her a local, of course, but it's the movement I'm trying to eliminate."

"How could she jump off the bed like that?" Chris asked, her face squinting up in anxiety.

"Well, I think we discussed that before," said Klein. "Pathological states can induce abnormal strength and accelerated motor performance."

"But you don't know why," said Chris.

"Well, it seems to have something to do with motivation," commented David. "But that's all we know."

"Well, now, what about the spinal?" Klein asked Chris. "May we?"

She exhaled, sagging, staring at the floor.

"Go ahead," she murmured. "Do whatever you have to. Just make her well."

“We’ll try,” said Klein. “May I use your phone?”

“Sure, come on. In the study.”

“Oh, incidentally,” said Klein as she turned to lead them, “she needs to have her bedding changed.”

“I’ll do it,” said Sharon. She moved toward Regan’s bedroom.

“Can I make you some coffee?” asked Chris as the doctors followed down the stairs. “I gave the housekeepers the afternoon off, so it’ll have to be instant.”

They declined.

“I see you haven’t fixed that window yet,” noted Klein.

“No, we called,” Chris told him. “They’re coming out tomorrow with shutters you can lock.”

He nodded approval.

They entered the study, where Klein called his office and instructed an assistant to deliver the necessary equipment and medication to the house.

“And set up the lab for a spinal workup,” Klein instructed. “I’ll run it myself right after the tap.”

When he’d finished the call, he turned to Chris and asked what had happened since last he saw Regan.

“Well, Tuesday” —Chris pondered— “there was nothing at all. She went straight up to bed and slept right through until late the next morning, then—”

“Oh, no, no, wait,” she amended. “No, she didn’t. That’s right. Willie mentioned that she’d heard her in the kitchen awfully early. I remember feeling glad that she’d gotten her appetite back. But she went back to bed then, I guess, because she stayed there the rest of the day.”

“She was sleeping?” Klein asked her.

“No, I think she was reading,” Chris answered. “Well, I started feeling a little better about it all. I mean, it looked as if the Librium was just what she needed. She was sort of far away, I noticed, and that bothered me a little, but still it was a pretty big improvement. Well, last night, again, nothing,” Chris continued. “Then this morning it started.”

She inhaled deeply.

“Boy, did it start!” She shook her head.

She’d been sitting in the kitchen, Chris told the doctors, when Regan ran screaming down the stairs and to her mother, cowering defensively behind her chair as she clutched Chris’s arms and explained in a terrified voice that Captain Howdy was chasing her; had been pinching her; punching her; shoving her; mouthing obscenities; threatening to kill her. “There he is!” she had shrieked at last, pointing to the kitchen door. Then she’d fallen to the floor, her body jerking in spasms as she gasped and wept that Howdy was kicking her. Then suddenly, Chris recounted, Regan had stood in the middle of the kitchen with arms extended and had begun to spin rapidly “like a top,” continuing the movements for several minutes, until she had fallen to the floor in exhaustion.

“And then all of a sudden,” Chris finished distressfully, “I saw there was... *hate* in her eyes, this *hate*, and she told me...”

She was choking up.

“She called me a... Oh, Jesus!”

She burst into sobs, and shielded her eyes as she wept convulsively.

Klein moved quietly to the bar; poured a glass of water from the tap. He walked toward Chris.

“Oh, shit, where’s a cigarette?” Chris sighed tremulously as she wiped at her eyes with the back of a finger.

Klein gave her the water and a small green pill. “Try this instead,” he advised.

“That a tranquilizer?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll have a double.”

“One’s enough.”

“Big spender,” Chris murmured with a wan smile.

She swallowed the pill and then handed the empty glass to the doctor. “Thanks,” she said softly, and rested her brow on quivering fingertips. She shook her head gently. “Yeah, then it started,” she picked up moodily. “All of that other stuff. It was like she was someone else.”

“Like Captain Howdy, perhaps?” asked David.

Chris looked up at him in puzzlement. He was staring so intently. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Just a question.”

She turned to the fireplace with absent, haunted eyes. “I don’t know,” she said dully. “Just somebody else.”

There was a moment of silence. Then David stood up and explained he had to leave for another appointment, and after some reassuring statements, said good-bye.

Klein walked him to the door. “You’ll check the sugar?” David asked him.

“No, I’m the Rosslyn village idiot.”

David smiled thinly. “I’m a little up-tight about this myself,” he said. He looked away in thought. “Strange case.”

For a moment he stroked his chin and seemed to brood. Then he looked up at Klein. “Let me know what you find.”

“You’ll be home?”

“Yes, I will. Give a call.” He waved a good-bye and left.

A short time later, after the arrival of the equipment, Klein anesthetized Regan’s spinal area with Novocain, and as Chris and Sharon watched, extracted the spinal fluid, keeping watch on the manometer. “Pressure’s normal,” he murmured.

When he’d finished, he went to the window to see if the fluid was clear or hazy.

It was clear.

He carefully stowed the tubes of fluid in his bag.

“I doubt that she will,” Klein told the women, “but in case she awakens in the middle of the night and creates a disturbance, you might want a nurse here to give her sedation.”

“Can’t I do it myself?” Chris asked worriedly.

“Why not a nurse?”

She did not want to mention her deep distrust of doctors and nurses. “I’d rather do it myself,” she said simply. “Couldn’t I?”

“Well, injections are tricky,” he answered. “An air bubble’s very dangerous.”

“Oh, I know how to do it,” interjected Sharon. “My mother ran a nursing home up in Oregon.”

“Gee, would you do that, Shar? Would you stay here tonight?” Chris asked her.

“Well, beyond tonight,” interjected Klein. “She may need intravenous feeding, depending on how she comes along.”

“Could you teach me how to do it?” Chris asked him anxiously.

He nodded. “Yes, I guess I could.”

He wrote a prescription for soluble Thorazine and disposable syringes. He gave it to Chris. "Have this filled right away."

Chris handed it to Sharon. "Honey, do that for me, would you? Just call and they'll send it. I'd like to go with the doctor while he makes those tests... Do you mind?" she asked him.

He noted the tightness around her eyes; the look of confusion and of helplessness. He nodded.

"I know how you feel." He smiled at her gently. "I feel the same way when I talk to mechanics about my car."

They left the house at precisely 6:18 P.M.

In his laboratory in the Rosslyn medical building, Klein ran a number of tests. First he analyzed protein content.

Normal.

Then a count of blood cells.

"Too many red," Klein explained, "means bleeding. And too many white would mean infection."

He was looking in particular for a fungus infection that was often the cause of chronic bizarre behavior. And again drew a blank.

At the last, Klein tested the fluid's sugar content.

"How come?" Chris asked him intently.

"Well, now the spinal sugar," he told her, "should measure two-thirds of the amount of blood sugar. Anything significantly under that ratio would mean a disease in which the bacteria eat the sugar in the spinal fluid. And if so, it could account for her symptoms."

But he failed to find it.

Chris shook her head and folded her arms. "Here we are again, folks," she murmured bleakly.

For a while Klein brooded. Then at last he turned and looked at Chris. “Do you keep any drugs in your house?” he asked her.

“Huh?”

“Amphetamines? LSD?”

“Gee, no. Look, I’d tell you. No, there’s nothing like that.”

He nodded and stared at his shoes, then looked up and said, “Well—I guess that it’s time we consulted a psychiatrist, Mrs. MacNeil.”

She was back in the house at exactly 7:21 P.M., and at the door she called, “Sharon?”

Sharon wasn’t there.

Chris went upstairs to Regan’s bedroom. Still heavily asleep. Not a ruffle in her covers. Chris noticed that the window was open wide. An odor of urine. *Sharon must’ve opened it to air out the room*, she thought. She closed it. *Where did she go?*

Chris returned downstairs just as Willie came in.

“Hi ya, Willie. Any fun today?”

“Shopping. Movies.”

“Where’s Karl?”

Willie made a gesture of dismissal. “He lets me see the Beatles this time. By myself.”

“Good work.”

Willie held up her finger in a V. The time was 7:35.

At 8:01, while Chris was in the study talking to her agent on the phone, Sharon walked through the door with several packages, and then flopped in a chair and waited.

“Where’ve you been?” asked Chris when she’d finished.

“Oh, didn’t he tell you?”

“Oh, didn’t *who* tell me?”

“Burke. Isn’t he here? Where is he?”

“He was here?”

“You mean he wasn’t when you got home?”

“Listen, start all over,” said Chris.

“Oh, that nut,” Sharon chided with a headshake. “I couldn’t get the druggist to deliver, so when Burke came around, I thought, fine, he can stay here with Regan while I go get the Thorazine.” She shrugged. “I should have known.”

“Yeah, you should’ve. And so what did you buy?”

“Well, since I thought I had the time, I went and bought a rubber drawsheet for her bed.” She displayed it.

“Did you eat?”

“No, I thought I’d fix a sandwich. Would you like one?”

“Good idea. Let’s go and eat.”

“What happened with the tests?” Sharon asked as they walked slowly to the kitchen.

“Not a thing. All negative. I’m going to have to get her a shrink,” Chris answered dully.

After sandwiches and coffee, Sharon showed Chris how to give an injection.

“The two main things,” she explained, “are to make sure that there aren’t any air bubbles, and then you make sure that you haven’t hit a vein. See, you aspirate a little, like this” —she was demonstrating— “and see if there’s blood in the syringe.”

For a time, Chris practiced the procedure on a grapefruit, and seemed to grow proficient. Then at 9:28, the front doorbell rang. Willie answered. It was Karl. As he passed

through the kitchen, en route to his room, he nodded a good evening and remarked he'd forgotten to take his key.

"I can't believe it," Chris said to Sharon. "That's the first time he's ever admitted a mistake."

They passed the evening watching television in the study.

At 11:46, Chris answered the phone. The young director of the second unit. He sounded grave.

"Have you heard the news yet, Chris?"

"No, what?"

"Well, it's bad."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Burke's dead."

He'd been drunk. He had stumbled. He had fallen down the steep flight of steps beside the house, fallen far to the bottom, where a passing pedestrian on M Street watched as he tumbled into night without end. A broken neck. This bloody, crumpled scene, his last.

As the telephone fell from Chris's fingers, she was silently weeping, standing unsteadily. Sharon ran and caught her, supported her, hung up the phone and led her to the sofa.

"Burke's dead," Chris sobbed.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Sharon. "What happened?"

But Chris could not speak yet. She wept.

Then, later, they talked. For hours. They talked. Chris drank. Reminiscenced about Dennings. Now laughed. Now cried. "Ah, my God," she kept sighing. "Poor Burke... poor Burke..."

Her dream of death kept coming back to her.

At a little past five in the morning, Chris was standing moodily behind the bar, her elbows propped, head lowered,

eyes sad. She was waiting for Sharon to return from the kitchen with a tray of ice.

She heard her coming.

“I still can’t believe it,” Sharon was sighing as she entered the study.

Chris looked up and froze.

Gliding spiderlike, rapidly, close behind Sharon, her body arched backward in a bow with her head almost touching her feet, was Regan, her tongue flicking quickly in and out of her mouth while she hissed sibilantly like a serpent.

“Sharon?” Chris said numbly, still staring at Regan.

Sharon stopped. So did Regan. Sharon turned and saw nothing. And then screamed as she felt Regan’s tongue snaking out at her ankle.

Chris whitened. “Call that doctor and get him out of bed! Get him *now*!”

Wherever Sharon moved, Regan would follow.

four

Friday, April 29. While Chris waited in the hall outside the bedroom, Dr. Klein and a noted neuropsychiatrist were examining Regan.

The doctors observed for half an hour. Flinging. Whirling. Tearing at the hair. She occasionally grimaced and pressed her hands against her ears as if blotting out sudden, deadening noise. She bellowed obscenities. Screamed in pain. Then at last she flung herself face downward onto the bed and tucked her legs up under her stomach. She moaned incoherently.

The psychiatrist motioned Klein away from the bed.

“Let’s get her tranquillized,” he whispered. “Maybe I can talk to her.”

The internist nodded and prepared an injection of fifty milligrams of Thorazine. When the doctor approached the

bed, however, Regan seemed to sense them and quickly turned over, and as the neuropsychiatrist attempted to hold her, she began to shriek in malevolent fury. Bit him. Fought him. Held him off. It was only when Karl was called in to assist that they managed to keep her sufficiently rigid for Klein to administer the injection.

The dosage proved inadequate. Another fifty milligrams were injected. They waited.

Regan grew tractable. Then dreamy. Then stared at the doctors in sudden bewilderment. "Where's Mom? I want my Mom!" she wept.

At a nod from the neuropsychiatrist, Klein left the room to go and get Chris.

"Your mother will be here in just a second, dear," the psychiatrist told Regan. He sat on the bed and stroked her head. "There, there, it's all right, dear, I'm a doctor."

"*I want Mom!*" wept Regan.

"She's coming. Do you hurt, dear?"

She nodded, the tears streaming down.

"Where?"

"Just every place!" sobbed Regan. "I feel all achy!"

"Oh, my baby!"

"*Mom!*"

Chris ran to the bed and hugged her. Kissed her. Comforted and soothed. Then Chris herself began to weep. "Oh, Rags, you're back! It's really you!"

"Oh, Mom, he hurt me!" Regan sniffled. "Make him stop hurting me! Please? Okay?"

Chris looked puzzled for a moment, then glanced to the doctors with a pleading question in her eyes.

"She's heavily sedated," the psychiatrist said gently.

“You mean...?”

He cut her off. “We’ll see.” Then he turned to Regan. “Can you tell me what’s wrong, dear?”

“I don’t *know*,” she answered. “I don’t know why he does it to me.” Tears rolled down from her eyes. “He was always my friend before!”

“Who’s that?”

“Captain Howdy! And then it’s like somebody else is inside me! Making me do things!”

“Captain Howdy?”

“I don’t know!”

“A person?”

She nodded.

“Who?”

“I don’t *know*!”

“Well, all right, then; let’s try something, Regan. A game.” He was reaching in his pocket for a shining bauble attached to a silvery length of chain. “Have you ever seen movies where someone gets hypnotized?”

She nodded.

“Well, I’m a hypnotist. Oh, yes! I hypnotize people all the time. That’s, of course, if they let me. Now I think if I hypnotize you, Regan, it will help you get well. Yes, that person inside you will come right out. Would you like to be hypnotized? See, your mother’s right here, right beside you.”

Regan looked questioningly to Chris.

“Go ahead, honey, do it,” Chris urged her. “Try it.”

Regan turned to the psychiatrist and nodded. “Okay,” she said softly. “But only a little.”

The psychiatrist smiled and glanced abruptly to the sound of pottery breaking behind him. A delicate vase had fallen to

the floor from the top of a bureau where Dr. Klein was now resting his forearm. He looked at his arm and then down at the shards with an air of puzzlement; then stooped to pick them up.

“Never mind, doc, Willie’ll get it,” Chris told him.

“Would you close those shutters for me, Sam?” the psychiatrist asked him. “And pull the drapes?”

When the room was dark, the psychiatrist gripped the chain in his fingertips and began to swing the bauble back and forth with an easy movement. He shone a penlight on it. It glowed. He began to intone the hypnotic ritual. “Now watch this, Regan, keep watching, and soon you’ll feel your eyelids growing heavier and heavier...”

Within a very short time, she seemed to be in a trance.

“Extremely suggestible,” the psychiatrist murmured. Then he spoke to the girl. “Are you comfortable, Regan?”

“Yes.” Her voice was soft and whispery.

“How old are you, Regan?”

“Twelve.”

“Is there someone inside you?”

“Sometimes.”

“When?”

“Different times.”

“It’s a person?”

“Yes.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Captain Howdy?”

“I don’t know.”

“A man?”

“I don’t know.”

“But he’s there.”

“Yes, sometimes.”

“Now?”

“I don’t know.”

“If I ask him to tell me, will you let him answer?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid!”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know!”

“If he talks to me, Regan, I think he will leave you. Do you want him to leave you?”

“Yes.”

“Let him speak, then. Will you let him speak?”

A pause. Then, “Yes.”

“I am speaking to the person inside of Regan now,” the psychiatrist said firmly. “If you are there, you *too* are hypnotized and must answer all my questions.” For a moment, he paused to allow the suggestion to enter her bloodstream. Then he repeated it: “If you are there, then *you* are hypnotized and must answer all my questions. Come forward and answer, now: Are you there?”

Silence. Then something curious happened: Regan’s breath turned suddenly foul. It was thick, like a current. The psychiatrist smelled it from two feet away. He shone the penlight on Regan’s face.

Chris stifled a gasp. Her daughter’s features were contorting into a malevolent mask: lips pulling tautly into opposite directions, tumefied tongue lolling wolfish from her mouth.

“Oh, my God!” breathed Chris.

“Are you the person in Regan?” the psychiatrist asked.

She nodded.

“Who are you?”

“Nowonmai,” she answered gutturally.

“That’s your name?”

She nodded.

“You’re a man?”

She said, “Say.”

“Did you answer?”

“Say.”

“If that’s ‘yes,’ nod your head.”

She nodded.

“Are you speaking in a foreign language?”

“Say.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Dog.”

“You say that you come from a dog?”

“Dogmorfmcion,” Regan replied.

The psychiatrist thought for a moment, then attempted another approach. “When I ask you questions now, you will answer by moving your head: a nod for ‘yes,’ and a shake for ‘no,’ Do you understand that?”

Regan nodded.

“Did your answers have meaning?” he asked her. *Yes.*

“Are you someone whom Regan has known?” *No.*

“That she knows of?” *No.*

“Are you someone she’s invented?” *No.*

“You’re real?” *Yes.*

“Part of Regan?” *No.*

“Were you ever part of Regan?” *No.*

“Do you like her?” *No.*

“Dislike her?” *Yes.*

“Do you hate her?” *Yes.*

“Over something she’s done?” *Yes.*

“Do you blame her for her parents’ divorce?” *No.*

“Has it something to do with her parents?” *No.*

“With a friend?” *No.*

“But you hate her?” *Yes.*

“Are you punishing Regan?” *Yes.*

“You wish to harm her?” *Yes.*

“To kill her?” *Yes.*

“If she died, wouldn’t you die too?” *No.*

The answer seemed to disquiet him and he lowered his eyes in thought. The bed springs squeaked as he shifted his weight. In the smothering stillness, Regan’s breathing rasped as from a rotted, putrid bellows. Here. Yet far. Distantly sinister.

The psychiatrist lifted his glance again to that hideous, twisted face. His eyes gleamed sharply with speculation.

“Is there something she can do that would make you leave her?” *Yes.*

“Can you tell me what it is?” *Yes.*

“Will you tell me?” *No.*

“But—”

Abruptly the psychiatrist gasped in startled pain as he realized with horrified incredulity that Regan was squeezing his scrotum with a hand that had gripped him like an iron talon. Eyes wide-staring, he struggled to free himself. He couldn’t. “Sam! Sam, help me!” he croaked.

Agony. Bedlam.

Chris looking up and then leaping for the light switch.

Klein running forward.

Regan with her head back, cackling demonically, then howling like a wolf.

Chris slapped at the light switch. Turned. Saw grainy, flickering film of a slow-motion nightmare: Regan and the doctors writhing on the bed in a tangle of shifting arms and legs, in a melee of grimaces, gasps and curses, and the howling and the yelping and the hideous laughter, with Regan oinking, Regan neighing, violently quivering from side to side as Chris watched helplessly while her daughter's eyes rolled upward into their sockets and she wrenched up a keening shriek of terror torn raw and bloody from the base of her spine.

Regan crumpled and fell unconscious. Something unspeakable left the room.

For a breathless moment, no one moved. Then slowly and carefully, the doctor untangled themselves; stood up. They stared at Regan. After a time, the expressionless Klein took Regan's pulse. Satisfied, he slowly pulled up her blanket and nodded to the others. They left the room and went down to the study.

For a time, no one spoke. Chris was on the sofa. Klein and the psychiatrist sat near her in facing chairs. The psychiatrist was pensive, pinching at his lip as he stared at the coffee table; then he sighed and looked up at Chris. She turned her burned-out gaze to his. "What the hell's going on?" she asked in a mournful, haggard whisper.

"Did you recognize the language she was speaking?" he asked her.

Chris shook her head.

"Have you any religion?"

"No."

“Your daughter?”

“No.”

And now the psychiatrist asked her a lengthy series of questions relating to Regan’s psychological history. When at last he had finished, he seemed disturbed.

“What is it?” Chris asked him, white-knuckled fingers clenching and unclenching on a balled-up handkerchief. “What has she got?”

“Well, it’s somewhat confusing,” the psychiatrist evaded. “And frankly, it would be quite irresponsible of me to attempt a diagnosis after so brief an examination.”

“Well, you must have some idea,” she insisted.

The psychiatrist sighed, fingering his brow. “Well, I know you’re quite anxious, so I will mention one or two tentative impressions.”

Chris leaned forward, nodding tensely. Fingers in her lap started fumbling with the handkerchief, telling the stitches in the hem as if they were wrinkled linen rosary beads.

“To begin with,” he told her, “it’s highly improbable that she’s faking.”

Klein was nodding in agreement. “We think so for a *number* of reasons,” the psychiatrist continued. “For example, the abnormal and painful contortions; and most dramatically, I suppose, from the change in her features when we were talking to the so-called person she thinks is inside her. You see, a psychic effect like that is unlikely unless she *believed* in this person. Do you follow?”

“I think I do,” Chris answered, squinting her eyes in puzzlement. “But one thing I don’t understand is where this person *comes* from. I mean, you keep hearing about ‘split personality’ but I’ve never really known any explanation.”

“Well, neither does anyone else, Mrs. MacNeil. We use concepts like ‘consciousness’—‘mind’—‘personality,’ but we don’t really know yet what these things are.” He was shaking his head. “Not really. Not at all. So when I start talking about something like multiple or split personality, all we have are some theories that raise more questions than they give answers. Freud thought that certain ideas and feelings are somehow repressed by the conscious mind, but remain alive in a person’s subconscious; remain quite strong, in fact, and continue to seek expression through various psychiatric symptoms. Now when this repressed, or let’s call it dissociated material—the word ‘dissociation; implying a splitting off from the mainstream of consciousness—well, when this type of material is sufficiently strong, or where the subject’s personality is disorganized and weak, the result can be schizophrenic psychosis. Now that isn’t the same,” he cautioned, “as *dual* personality. But where the dissociated material is strong enough to somehow come glued together, to somehow organize in the individual’s subconscious—why, then it’s been known, at times, to function independently as a separate personality; to take over the bodily functions.”

He took a breath. Chris listened intently and he went on. “That’s one theory. There are several others, some of them involving the notion of escape into unawareness; escape from some conflict or emotional problem. Getting back to Regan, she hasn’t any history of schizophrenia and the EEG didn’t show up the brain-wave pattern that normally accompanies it. So I tend to reject schizophrenia. Which leaves us the general field of hysteria.”

“I gave last week,” Chris murmured bleakly.

The worried psychiatrist smiled thinly. "Hysteria," he continued, "is a form of neurosis in which emotional disturbances are converted into bodily disorders. Now, in certain of its forms, there's dissociation. In psychasthenia, for example, the individual loses consciousness of his actions, but he sees himself act and attributes his actions to someone else. His idea of the second personality is vague, however, and Regan's seems specific. So we come to what Freud used to call the 'conversion' form of hysteria. It grows from unconscious feelings of guilt and the need to be punished. Dissociation is the paramount feature here, even multiple personality. And the syndrome might also include epileptoid-like convulsions; hallucinations; abnormal motor excitement."

"Gee, that does sound a lot like Regan," Chris ventured moodily. "Don't you think? I mean, except for the guilt part. What would she have to feel guilty *about*?"

"Well, a cliché answer," the psychiatrist responded, "might be the divorce. Children often feel *they* are the ones rejected and assume the full responsibility for the departure of one of their parents. In the case of your daughter, there's reason to believe that that *could* be the case. Here I'm thinking of the brooding and the deep depression over the notion of people dying: thanatophobia. In children, you'll find it accompanied by guilt formation that's related to family stress, very often fear of the loss of a parent. It produces rage and intense frustration. In addition, the guilt in this type of hysteria needn't be known to the conscious mind. It could even be the guilt that relates to nothing in particular," he concluded.

Chris gave her head a shake. "I'm confused," she murmured. "I mean, where does this new personality come in?"

"Well, again, it's a guess," he replied, "just a guess—but assuming that it *is* conversion hysteria stemming from guilt, then the second personality is simply the agent who handles the punishing. If Regan herself were to do it, you see, that would mean she would *recognize* her guilt. But she wants to escape that recognition. Therefore, a second personality."

"And that's what you think she's got?"

"As I said, I don't know," replied the psychiatrist, still evasive. He seemed to be choosing his words as he would moss-covered stones to cross a stream. "It's extremely unusual for a child of Regan's age to be able to pull together and organize the components of a new personality. And certain—well, other things are puzzling. Her performance with the Ouija board, for example, would indicate extreme suggestibility; and yet apparently I never really hypnotized her." He shrugged. "Well, perhaps she resisted. But the really striking thing," he noted, "is the new personality's apparent precocity. It isn't a twelve-year-old at all. It's much, much older. And then there's the language she was speaking..." He stared at the rug in front of the fireplace, thoughtfully tugging at his lower lip. "There's a similar state, of course, but we don't know much about it: a form of somnambulism where the subject suddenly manifests knowledge or skills that he's never learned—and where the intention of the second personality is the destruction of the first. However..."

The word trailed away. Abruptly the psychiatrist looked up at Chris. "Well, it's terribly complicated," he told her, "and I've oversimplified outrageously."

“So what’s the bottom line?” Chris asked.

“At the moment,” he told her, “a blank. She needs an intensive examination by a team of experts, two or three weeks of really concentrated study in a clinical atmosphere; say, the Barringer Clinic in Dayton.”

Chris looked away.

“It’s a problem?”

“No. No problem.” She sighed. “I just lost *Hope*, that’s all.”

“Didn’t get you.”

“It’s an inside tragedy.”

The psychiatrist telephoned the Barringer Clinic from Chris’s study. They agreed to take Regan the following day.

The doctors left.

Chris swallowed pain with remembrance of Dennings, with remembrance of death and the worm and the void and unspeakable loneliness and stillness, darkness, underneath the sod, with nothing moving, no, no motion... Briefly, she wept. *Too much... too much...* Then she put it away and began to pack.

She was standing in her bedroom selecting a camouflaging wig to wear in Dayton when Karl appeared. There was someone to see her, he told her.

“Who?”

“Detective.”

“And he wants to see *me*?”

He nodded. Then he handed her a business card. She looked it over blankly. WILLIAM F. KINDERMAN, it announced, LIEUTENANT OF DETECTIVES; and tucked in the lower-left-hand corner like a poor relation: *Homicide Division*. It was printed

in an ornate, raided Tudor typeface that might have been selected by a dealer in antiques.

She looked up from the card with a sniffing suspicion. “Has he got something with him that might be a script? Like a big manila envelope or something?”

There was no one in the world, Chris had come to discover, who didn’t have a novel or a script or a notion for one or both tucked away in a drawer or a mental sock. She seemed to attract them as priests did drunks.

But Karl shook his head. Chris immediately grew curious and walked down the stairs. Burke? Was it something to do with Burke?

He was sagging in the entry hall, the brim of his limp and crumple hat clutched tight with short fat fingers freshly manicured. Plump. In his middle fifties. Jowly cheeks that gleamed of soap. Yet rumpled trousers, cuffed and baggy, mocked the sedulous care that he gave his body. A gray tweed coat hung loose and old-fashioned, and his moist brown eyes, which dropped at the corners, seemed to be staring at times gone by. He wheezed asthmatically as he waited.

Chris approached. The detective extended his hand with a wary and somewhat fatherly manner, and spoke in a hoarse, emphysematous whisper. “I’d know that face in *any* lineup, Miss MacNeil.”

“Am I *in* one?” Chris asked him earnestly as she took his hand.

“Oh, my goodness, oh, no,” he said, brushing at the notion with his hand as if swatting at a fly. He’d closed his eyes and inclined his head; the other hand rested lightly on his paunch. Chris was expecting *God forbid!* “No, it’s strictly routine,” he

assured her, "routine. Look, you're busy? Tomorrow. I'll come again tomorrow."

He was turning away as if to leave, but Chris said anxiously, "What is it? Burke? Burke Dennings?"

The detective's drooping, careless ease had somehow tightened the springs of her tension.

"A shame. What a shame," the detective breathed with lowered eyes and a shake of the head.

"Was he *killed*?" Chris asked with a look of shock. "I mean, is that why you're here? He was killed? Is that it?"

"No, no, no, it's routine," he repeated, "routine. You know, a man so important, we just couldn't pass it. We couldn't," he pleaded with a helpless look. "At least one or two questions. Did he fall? Was he pushed?" As he asked, he was listing from side to side with his head and his hand. Then he shrugged and huskily whispered, "Who knows?"

"Was he *robbed*?"

"No, not robbed, Miss MacNeil, never robbed, but then who needs a motive in times like these?" His hands were constantly in motion, like a flabby glove informed by the fingers of a yawning puppeteer. "Why, today, for a murderer, Miss MacNeil, a motive is only an encumbrance; in fact, a deterrent." He shook his head. "These drugs, these drugs," he bemoaned. "These drugs. This LSD."

He looked at Chris as he tapped his chest with the tips of his fingers. "Believe me, I'm a father, and then I see what's going on, it breaks my heart. You've got children?"

"Yes, one."

"A son?"

"A daughter."

"Well..."

“Listen, come on in the study,” Chris interrupted anxiously, turning about to lead the way. She was losing all patience.

“Miss MacNeil, could I trouble you for something?”

She turned with the dim and weary expectation that he wanted her autograph for his children. It was never for themselves. It was always for their children. “Yeah, sure.” she said.

“My stomach.” He gestured with a trace of a grimace. “Do you keep any Calso water, maybe? If it’s trouble. Never mind; I don’t want to be trouble.”

“No, no trouble at all,” she sighed. “Grab a chair in the study.” She pointed, then turned and headed for the kitchen. “I think there’s a bottle in the fridge.”

“No, I’ll come to the kitchen,” he told her, following. “I hate to be a bother.”

“No bother.”

“No, really, you’re busy, I’ll come. You’ve got children?” he asked as they walked. “No, that’s right; yes, a daughter; you told me; that’s right. Just the one.”

“Just the one.”

“And how old?”

“She just turned twelve.”

“Then you don’t have to worry,” he breathed. “No, not yet. Later on, though, watch out.” He was shaking his head. Chris noticed that his walk was a modified waddle. “When you see all the sickness day in and day out,” he continued. “Unbelievable. Incredible. Crazy. You know, I looked at my wife just a couple of days ago—or weeks ago—I forget. I said, Mary, the world—the *entire world*—is having a massive nervous breakdown. All. The whole world.” He gestured globally.

They had entered the kitchen, where Karl was polishing the interior of the oven. He neither turned nor acknowledged their presence.

“This is really so embarrassing,” the detective wheezed hoarsely as Chris was opening the refrigerator door. Yet his gaze was on Karl, brushing swiftly and questioningly over his back and his arms and his neck like a small, dark bird skimming over a lake. “I meet a famous motion-picture star,” he continued, “and I ask for some Calso water. Ah, boy.”

Chris had found the bottle and now was looking for an opener. “Ice?” she asked.

“No, plain; plain is fine.”

She was opening the bottle.

“You know that film you made called *Angel*?” he said. “I saw that film six times.”

“If you were looking for the killer,” she murmured as she poured out the bubbling Calso, “arrest the producer and the cutter.”

“Oh, no, no, it was excellent—really—I loved it!”

“Sit down.” She was nodding at the table.

“Oh, thank you.” He sat. “No, the film was just lovely,” he insisted. “So touching. But just one thing,” he ventured, “one little tiny, minuscule point. Oh, thank you.”

She’d set down the glass of Calso and sat on the other side of the table, hands clasped before her.

“One minor flaw,” he resumed apologetically. “Only minor. And please believe me, I’m only a layman. You know? I’m just audience. What do I know? However, it seemed to me—to a layman—that the musical score was getting in the way of certain scenes. It was too intrusive.” He was earnest now; caught up. “It kept on reminding me that this was a

movie. You know? Like so many of these fancy camera angles lately. So distracting. Incidentally, the score, Miss MacNeil—did he steal that perhaps from Mendelssohn?”

Chris drummed her fingertips lightly on the table. Strange detective. And why was he constantly glancing to Karl?

“I wouldn’t know,” she said, “but I’m glad you like the picture. Better drink that,” she told him, nodding to the Calso. “It tends to get flat.”

“Yes, of course. I’m so garrulous. You’re busy. Forgive me.” He lifted the glass as if in toast and drained its contents, his little finger arching demurely away from the others. “Ah, good, that’s good,” he exhaled, contented, as he put aside the glass, his eye falling lightly on Regan’s sculpture of the bird. It was now the centerpiece of the table, its beak floating mockingly and at length above the salt and pepper shakers. “Quaint.” He smiled. “Nice.” He looked up. “The artist?”

“My daughter,” Chris told him.

“Very nice.”

“Look, I hate to be—”

“Yes, yes, I know, I’m a nuisance. Well, look, just a question or two and we’re done. In fact, only one question and then I’ll be going.” He was glancing at his wristwatch as if he were anxious to get away to some appointment. “Since poor Mr. Dennings,” he labored breathily, “had completed his filming in this area, we wondered if he might have been visiting someone on the night of the accident. Now other than yourself, of course, did he have any friends in this area?”

“Oh, he was *here* that night,” Chris told him.

“Oh?” His eyebrows sickled upward. “Near the time of the accident?”

“When did it happen?” she asked him.

“Seven-o-five,” he told her.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well, that settles it, then.” He nodded, turning in his chair as if preparatory to rising. “He was drunk, he was leaving, he fell down the steps. Yes, that settles it. Definitely. Listen, though, just for the sake of the record, can you tell me approximately what time he left the house?”

He was pawing at truth like a weary bachelor pinching vegetables at market. How did he ever make lieutenant? Chris wondered. “I don’t know,” she replied. “I didn’t see him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, he came and left while I was out. I was over at a doctor’s office in Rosslyn.”

“Ah, I see.” He nodded. “Of course. But then how do you know he was here?”

“Oh, well, Sharon said—”

“Sharon?” he interrupted.

“Sharon Spencer. She’s my secretary. She was here when Burke dropped by. She—”

“He came to see *her*?” he asked.

“No, me.”

“Yes, of course. Yes, forgive me for interrupting.”

“My daughter was sick and Sharon left him here while she went to pick up some prescriptions. By the time I got home, though, Burke was gone.”

“And what time was that, please?”

“Seven-fifteen or so, seven thirty.”

“And what time had you left?”

“Maybe six-fifteenish.”

“What time had Miss Spencer left?”

“I don’t know.”

“And between the time Miss Spencer left and the time you returned, who was here in the house with Mr. Dennings besides your daughter?”

“No one.”

“No one? He left her alone?”

She nodded.

“No servants?”

“No, Willie and Karl were—”

“Who are they?”

Chris abruptly felt the earth shift under her feet. The nuzzling interview, she realized, was suddenly steely interrogation. “Well, Karl’s right there.” She motioned with her head, her glance fixed dully on the servant’s back. Still polishing the oven... “And Willie’s his wife,” she resumed. “They’re my housekeepers.” Polishing... “They’d taken the afternoon off and when I got home, they weren’t back yet. Willie...” Chris paused.

“Willie what?”

“Oh, well, nothing.” She shrugged as she tugged her gaze away from the manservant’s brawny back. The oven was clean, she had noticed. Why was Karl still polishing?

She reached for a cigarette. Kinderman lit it.

“So then only your daughter would know when Dennings left the house.”

“It was really an accident?”

“Oh, of course. It’s routine, Miss MacNeil, it’s routine. Mr. Dennings wasn’t robbed and he had no enemies, none that we know of, that is, in the District.”

Chris darted a momentary glance to Karl but then shifted it quickly back to Kinderman. Had he noticed? Apparently not. He was fingering the sculpture.

“It’s got a name, this kind of bird; I can’t think of it. Something.” He noticed Chris staring and looked vaguely embarrassed. “Forgive me, you’re busy. Well, a minute and we’re done. Now your daughter, she would know when Mr. Dennings left?”

“No, she wouldn’t. She was heavily sedated.”

“Ah, dear me, a shame, a shame.” His droopy eyelids seeped concern. “It’s serious?”

“Yes, I’m afraid it is.”

“May I ask...?” he probed with a delicate gesture.

“We still don’t know.”

“Watch out for drafts,” he cautioned firmly.

Chris looked blank.

“A draft in the winter when a house is hot is a magic carpet for bacteria. My mother used to say that. Maybe that’s folk myth. Maybe.” He shrugged. “But a myth, to speak plainly, to me is like a menu in a fancy French restaurant: glamorous, complicated camouflage for a fact you wouldn’t otherwise swallow, like maybe lima beans,” he said earnestly.

Chris relaxed. The shaggy dog padding fuddled through cornfields had returned.

“That’s hers, that’s her room”—he was thumbing toward the ceiling—“with that great big window looking out on those steps?”

Chris nodded.

“Keep the window closed and she’ll get better.”

“Well, it’s always closed and it’s always shuttered.” Chris said as he dipped a pudgy hand in the inside pocket of his jacket.

“She’ll get better,” he repeated sententiously. “Just remember, ‘An ounce of prevention...’”

Chris drummed her fingertips on the tabletop again.

"You're busy. Well, we're finished. Just a note for the record—routine—we're all done."

From the pocket of the jacket he'd extracted a crumpled mimeographed program of a high-school production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and now groped in the pockets of his coat, where he netted a toothmarked yellow stub of a number 2 pencil, whose point had the look of having been sharpened with the blade of a scissors. He pressed the program flat on the table, brushing out the wrinkles. "Now just a name or two," he puffed. "That's Spencer with a *c*?"

"Yes, *c*."

"A *c*," he repeated, writing the name in a margin of the program. "And the housekeepers? John and Willie...?"

"*Karl* and Willie Engstrom."

"Karl. That's right, it's Karl. Karl Engstrom." He scribbled the names in a dark, thick script. "Now the times I remember," he told her huskily, turning the program around in search of white space. "Times I— Oh. Oh, no, wait. I forgot. Yes, the housekeepers. You said they got home at what time?"

"I didn't say. Karl, what time did you get in last night?" Chris called to him.

The Swiss turned around, his face inscrutable. "Exactly nine-thirty, madam."

"Yeah, that's right, you'd forgotten your key. I remember I looked at the clock in the kitchen when you rang the doorbell."

"You saw a good film?" the detective asked Karl. "I never go by reviews," he explained to Chris in a breathy aside. "It's what the *people* think, the *audience*."

"Paul Scofield in *Lear*," Karl informed the detective.

“Ah, I saw that; that’s excellent. Excellent. Marvelous.”

“Yes, at the Crest,” Karl continued. “The six-o’clock showing. Then immediately after I take the bus from in front of the theater and—”

“Please, that’s not necessary,” the detective protested with a gesture. “*Please.*”

“I don’t mind.”

“If you insist.”

“I get off at Wisconsin Avenue and M Street. Nine-twenty, perhaps. And then I walk to the house.”

“Look, you didn’t have to tell me,” the detective told him, “but anyway, that you, it was way considerate. You liked the film?”

“It was excellent.”

“Yes, I thought so too. Exceptional. Well, now...” He turned back to Chris and to scribbling on the program. “I’ve wasted your time, but I have a job.” He shrugged. “Well, only a moment and finished. Tragic...tragic...” he breathed as he jotted down fragments in margins. “Such a talent. And a man who knew people, I’m sure: how to handle them. With so many elements who could make him look good or maybe make him look bad—like the cameraman, the sound man, the composer, whatever. ...Please correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems to me nowadays a director of importance has also to be almost a Dale Carnegie. Am I wrong?”

“Oh, well, Burke had a temper,” Chris sighed.

The detective repositioned the program. “Ah, well, maybe so with the big shots. People his size.” Once again he was scribbling. “But the key is the little people, the menials, the people who handle the minor details that if they didn’t handle *right* would be *major* details. Don’t you think?”

Chris glanced at her fingernails and ruefully shook her head. "When Burke let fly, he never discriminated," she murmured with a weak, wry smile. "No, sir. It was only when he drank, though."

"Finished. We're finished." Kinderman was dotting a final *i*. "Oh, no, wait," he abruptly remembered. "Mrs. Engstrom. They went and came together?" He was gesturing toward Karl.

"No, she went to see a Beatles film," Chris answered just as Karl was turning to reply. "She got in a few minutes after I did."

"Why did I ask that? It wasn't important." He shrugged as he folded up the program and tucked it away in the pocket of his jacket along with the pencil. "Well, that's that. When I'm back in the office, no doubt I'll remember something I *should* have asked. With me, that always happens. Oh, well, I could call you," he puffed, standing up.

Chris rose along with him.

"Well, I'm going out of town for a couple of weeks," she said.

"It can wait," he assured her. "It can wait." He was staring at the sculpture with a smiling fondness. "Cute. So cute," he said. He'd leaned over and picked it up and was rubbing his thumb along its beak.

Chris bent over to pick up a thread on the kitchen floor.

"Have you got a good doctor?" the detective asked her. "I mean for your daughter."

He replaced the figure and began to leave. Glumly Chris followed, winding the thread around her thumb.

“Well, I’ve sure got enough of them,” she murmured. “Anyway, I’m checking her into a clinic that’s supposed to be great at doing what you do, only with viruses.”

“Let’s hope they’re a great deal better. It’s out of town, this clinic?”

“Yes, it is.”

“It’s a good one?”

“We’ll see.”

“Keep her out of the draft.”

They had reached the front door of the house. He put a hand on the doorknob. “Well, I would say that it’s been a pleasure, but under the circumstances...” He bowed his head and shook it. “I’m sorry. Really. I’m terribly sorry.”

Chris flooded her arms and looked down at the rug. She nodded briefly.

Kinderman opened the door and stepped outside. As he turned to Chris, he was putting on his hat. “Well, good luck with your daughter.”

“Thanks.” She smiled wanly. “Good luck with the world.”

He nodded with a gentle warmth and sadness, then waddled away. Chris watched as he listed toward a waiting squad car parked near the corner in front of a fire hydrant. He flung up a hand to his hat as a shearing wind sprang sharp from the south. The hem of his coat flapped. Chris closed the door.

When he’d entered the passenger side of the squad car, Kinderman turned and looked back at the house. He thought he saw movement at Regan’s window, a quick, lithe figure flashing to the side and out of view. He wasn’t sure. He’d seen it peripherally as he’d turned. But he noted that the shutters

were open. Odd. For a moment he waited. No one appeared. With a puzzled frown, the detective turned and opened the glove compartment, extracting a small brown envelope and a penknife. Unclasping the smallest of the blades of the knife, he held his thumb inside the envelope and surgically scraped paint from Regan's sculpture from under his thumbnail. When he had finished and was sealing the envelope, he nodded to the detective-sergeant behind the wheel. They pulled away.

As they drove down Prospect Street, Kinderman pocketed the envelope. "Take it easy," he cautioned the sergeant, glancing at the traffic building up ahead. "This is business, not pleasure." He rubbed at his eyes with weary fingers. "Ah, what a life," he sighed. "What a life."

Later that evening, while Dr. Klein was injecting Regan with fifty milligrams of Sparine to assure her tranquillity on the journey to Dayton, Lieutenant Kinderman stood brooding in his office, palms pressed flat atop his desk as he pored over fragments of baffling data. The narrow beam of an ancient desk lamp flared on a clutter of scattered reports. There was no other light. He believed that it helped him narrow the focus of concentration.

Kinderman's breathing labored heavy in the darkness as his glance flittered, now there. Then he took a deep breath and shut his eyes. *Mental Clearance Sale!* he instructed himself, as he did whenever he wished to tidy his brain for a fresh point of view: *Absolutely Everything Must Go!*

When he opened his eyes, he examined the pathologist's report on Dennings:

...tearing of the spinal cord with fractured skull and neck, plus numerous contusions, lacerations and abrasions; stretching of the neck skin; ecchymosis of the neck skin; shearing of platysma, sternomastoid, splenius, trapezius and various smaller muscles of the neck, with fracture of the spine and of the vertebrae and shearing of both the anterior and posterior spinous ligaments...

He looked out a window at the dark of the city. The Capitol dome light glowed. The Congress was working late. He shut his eyes again, recalling his conversation with the District pathologist at eleven-fifty-five on the night of Dennings' death.

"It could have happened in the fall?"

"No, it's very unlikely. The sternomastoids and the trapezius muscles alone are enough to prevent it. Then you've also got the various articulations of the cervical spine to be overcome as well as the ligaments holding the bones together."

"Speaking plainly, however, is it possible?"

"Well, of course, he was drunk and these muscles were doubtless somewhat relaxed. Perhaps if the force of the initial impact were sufficiently powerful and—"

"Falling maybe twenty or thirty feet before he hit?"

"Yes, that, and if immediately after impact his head got stuck in something; in other words, if there were immediate interference with the normal rotation of the head and body as a unit, well maybe—I say just maybe—you could get this result."

"Could another human being have done it?"

"Yes, but he'd have to be an exceptionally powerful man."

Kinderman had checked Karl Engstrom's story regarding his whereabouts at the time of Dennings' death. The show

times matched, as did the schedule that night of a D.C. Transit bus. Moreover, the driver of the bus that Karl had claimed he had boarded by the theater went off duty at Wisconsin and M, where Karl had stated he alighted at approximately twenty minutes after nine. A change of drivers had taken place, and the off-duty driver had logged the time of his arrival at the transfer point: precisely nine-eighteen.

Yet on Kinderman's desk was a record of a felony charge against Engstrom on August 27, 1963, alleging he had stolen a quantity of narcotics over a period of months from the home of a doctor in Beverly Hills where he and Willie were then employed.

...born April 20, 1921, in Zurich, Switzerland. Married to Willie nee Braun September 7, 1941. Daughter, Elvira, born New York City, January 11, 1943, current address unknown. Defendant...

The remainder the detective found baffling:

The doctor, whose testimony was *sine qua non* for successful prosecution, abruptly—and without any explanation—dropped the charges.

Why had he done so?

The Engstroms were hired by Chris MacNeil only two months later, which meant that the doctor had given them a favorable reference.

Why would he do so?

Engstrom had certainly pilfered the drugs, and yet a medical examination at the time of the charge had failed to yield the slightest sign that the man was an addict, or even a user.

Why not?

With his eyes still closed, the detective softly recited Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky": "'Twas brillig and the slithy toves..." Another of his mind-clearing tricks.

When he'd finished reciting, he opened his eyes and fixed his gaze on the Capitol rotunda, trying to keep his mind a blank. But as usual, he found the task impossible. Sighing, he glanced at the police psychologist's report on the recent desecrations at Holy Trinity: "... statue... *phallus*... *human excrement*... *Damien Karras*," he had underscored in red. He breathed in the silence and then reached for a scholarly work on witchcraft, turning to a page he had marked with a paper clip:

Black Mass... a form of devil worship, the ritual, in the main, consisting of (1) exhortation (the "sermon") to performance of evil among the community, (2) coition with the demon (reputedly painful, the demon's penis invariably described as "icy cold"), and (3) a variety of desecrations that were largely sexual in nature. For example, communion Hosts of unusual size were prepared (compounded of flour, feces, menstrual blood and pus), which then were slit and used as artificial vaginas with which the priests would ferociously copulate while raving that they were ravishing the Virgin Mother of God or that they were sodomizing Christ. In another instance of such practice, a statue of Christ was inserted deep in a girl's vagina while into her anus was inserted the Host, which the priest then crushed as he shouted blasphemies and sodomized the girl. Life-sized images of Christ and the Virgin Mary also played a frequent role in the ritual. The image of the Virgin, for example—usually painted to give her a dissolute, sluttish appearance—was equipped with breasts which the cultists sucked and also a vagina into which the penis might be inserted. The statues of Christ were equipped with a phallus for fellatio by both the men and the women, and also for insertion into the vagina of the women and the anus of the men. Occasionally, rather than an image, a human figure was bound to a cross and made to function in place of the statue, and upon the discharge of his semen it was collected in a blasphemously consecrated chalice and used

in the making of the communion host, which was destined to be consecrated on an altar covered with excrement. This—

Kinderman flipped the pages to an underlined paragraph dealing with ritualistic murder. He read it slowly, nibbling at the pad of an index finger, and when he had finished he frowned at the page and shook his head. He lifted a brooding glance to the lamp. He flicked it out. He left his office and drove to the morgue.

The young attendant at the desk was munching at a ham and cheese sandwich on rye, and brushed the crumbs from the crossword puzzle as Kinderman approached him.

“Dennings,” the detective whispered hoarsely.

The attendant nodded, filling in a five-letter horizontal, then rose with his sandwich and moved down the hall. Kinderman followed him, hat in hand, followed faint scent of caraway seed and mustard to rows of refrigerated lockers, to the dreamless cabinet used for the filing of sightless eyes.

They halted at locker 32. The expressionless attendant slid it out. He bit at his sandwich, and a fragment of mayonnaise-speckled crust fell lightly to the shroud.

For a moment, Kinderman stared down; then slowly and gently, he pulled back the sheet to expose what he’d seen and yet could not accept.

Burke Dennings’ head was turned completely around, facing backward.

five

Cupped in the warm, green hollow of the campus, Damien Karras jogged alone around an oval, loamy track in khaki shorts and a cotton T-shirt drenched with the cling of healing sweat. Up ahead, on a hillock, the lime-white dome of the astronomical observatory pulsed with the beat of his stride; behind him, the medical school fell away with churned-up shards of earth and care.

Since release from his duties, he came here daily, lapping the miles and chasing sleep. He had almost caught it; almost eased the clutch of grief that gripped at his heart like a deep tattoo. It held him gentler now.

Twenty laps...

Much gentler.

More! Two more!

Much gentler...

Powerful leg muscles blooded and stinging, rippling with a long and leonine grace, Karras thumped around a turn when he noticed someone sitting on a bench to the side where he'd laid out his towel, sweater and pants: a middle-aged man in a floppy overcoat and pulpy, crushed felt hat. He seemed to be watching him. Was he? Yes... head turning as Karras passed.

The priest accelerated, digging at the final lap with pounding strides that jarred the earth, then he slowed to a panting, gulping walk as he passed the bench without a glance, both hands pressed light to his throbbing sides. The heave of his rock-muscle chest and shoulders stretched his T-shirt, distorting the stenciled word *PHILOSOPHERS* inscribed across the front in once-black letters now faded to a hint by repeated washings.

The man in the overcoat stood up and began to approach him.

"Father Karras?" Lieutenant Kinderman called hoarsely.

The priest turned around and nodded briefly, squinting into sunlight, waiting for Kinderman to reach him, then beckoned him along as once again he began to move. "Do you mind? I'll cramp," he panted.

"Yes, of course," the detective answered, nodding with a wincing lack of enthusiasm as he tucked his hands into his pockets. The walk from the parking lot had tired him.

"Have—have we met?" asked the Jesuit.

"No, Father. No, but they said that you looked like a boxer; some priest at the residence hall; I forget." He was tugging out his wallet. "So bad with names."

"And yours?"

“William Kinderman, Father.” He flashed his identification. “Homicide.”

“Really?” Karras scanned the badge and identification card with a shining, boyish interest. Flushed and perspiring, his face had an eager look of innocence as he turned to the waddling detective. “What’s this about?”

“Hey, you know something, Father?” Kinderman answered, inspecting the Jesuit’s rugged features. “It’s true, you *do* look like a boxer. Excuse me; that scar, you know, there by your eye?” He was pointing. “Like Brando, it looks like, in *Waterfront*, just *exactly* Marlon Brando. They gave him a scar”—he was illustrating, pulling at the corner of his eye—“that made his eye look a little bit closed, just a little, made him look a little dreamy all the time, always sad. Well, that’s you,” he said, pointing. “You’re Brando. People tell you that, Father?”

“No, they don’t.”

“Ever box?”

“Oh, a little.”

“You’re from here in the District?”

“New York.”

“Golden Gloves. Am I right?”

“You just made captain.” Karras smiled. “Now what can I do for you?”

“Walk a little slower, please. Emphysema.” The detective was gesturing at his throat.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Karras slowed his pace.

“Never mind. Do you smoke?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Well, now tell me the problem.”

“Of course; I’m digressing. Incidentally, you’re busy?” the detective inquired. “I’m not interrupting?”

“Interrupting what?” asked Karras, bemused.

“Well, mental prayer, perhaps.”

“You *will* make captain.” Karras smiled cryptically.

“Pardon me, I missed something?”

Karras shook his head; but the smile lingered. “I doubt that you ever miss a thing,” he remarked. His sidelong glance toward KInderman was sly and warmly twinkling.

Kinderman halted and mounted a massive and hopeless effort at looking befuddled, but glancing at the Jesuit’s crinkling eyes, he lowered his head and chuckled ruefully. “Ah, well. Of course...of course...a psychiatrist. Who am I kidding?” He shrugged. “Look, it’s habit with me, Father. Forgive me. *Schmaltz*—that’s the Kinderman method; pure *schmaltz*. Well, I’ll stop and tell you straight what it’s all about.”

“The desecrations,” Karras said, nodding.

“So I wasted my *schmaltz*,” the detective said quietly.

“Sorry.”

“Never mind, Father; that I deserved. Yes, the things in the church,” he confirmed. “Correct. Only maybe something else besides, something serious.”

“Murder?”

“Yes. Kick me again, I enjoy it.”

“Well, Homicide Division.” The Jesuit shrugged.

“Never mind, never mind, Marlon Brando; never mind. People tell you for a priest you’re a little bit smart-ass?”

“*Mea culpa*,” Karras murmured. Though he was smiling, he felt a regret that perhaps he’d diminished the man’s self-esteem. He hadn’t meant to. And now he felt glad of a

chance to express a sincere perplexity. “I don’t get it, though,” he added, taking care that he wrinkled his brow. “What’s the connection?”

“Look, Father, could we keep this between us? Confidential? Like a matter of confession, so to speak?”

“Of course.” He was eyeing the detective earnestly. “What is it?”

“You know that director who was doing the film here, Father? Burke Dennings?”

“Well, I’ve seen him.”

“You’ve seen him.” The detective nodded. “You’re also familiar with how he died?”

“Well, the papers...” Karras shrugged again.

“That’s just part of it.”

“Oh?”

“Only part of it. Part. Just a part. Listen, what do you know on the subject of witchcraft?”

“What?”

“Listen, patience; I’m leading up to something. Now witchcraft, please—you’re familiar?”

“A little.”

“From the witching end, not the hunting.”

“Oh, I once did a paper on it.” Karras smiled. “The psychiatric end.”

“Oh, really? Wonderful! Great! That’s a bonus. A plus. You could help me a lot, a lot more than I thought. Listen, Father. Now witchcraft...”

He reached up and gripped at the Jesuit’s arm as they rounded a turn and approached the bench. “Now me, I’m a layman and, plainly speaking, not well educated. Not formally. No. But I read. Look, I know what they say about

self-made men, that they're horrible examples of unskilled labor. But me, I'll speak plainly, I'm not ashamed. Not at all, I'm—" Abruptly he arrested the flow, looked down and shook his head. "*Schmaltz*. It's habit. I can't stop the *schmaltz*. Look, forgive me; you're busy."

"Yes, I'm praying."

The Jesuit's soft delivery had been dry and expressionless. Kinderman halted for a moment and eyed him. "You're serious? No."

The detective faced forward again and they walked. "Look, I'll come to the point: the desecrations. They remind you of anything to do with witchcraft?"

"Maybe. Some rituals used in Black Mass."

"A-plus. And now Dennings—you read how he died?"

"In a fall."

"Well, I'll tell you, and—*please—confidential!*"

"Of course."

The detective looked suddenly pained as he realized that Karras had no intention of stopping at the bench. "Do you mind?" he asked wistfully.

"What?"

"Could we stop? Maybe sit?"

"Oh, sure." They began to move back toward the bench.

"You won't cramp?"

"No, I'm fine now."

"You're sure?"

"I'm fine."

"All right, all right, if you insist."

"You were saying?"

"In a second, please, just one second."

Kinderman settled his aching bulk on the bench with a sigh of content. “Ah, better, that’s better,” he said as the Jesuit picked up his towel and wiped his perspiring face. “Middle age. What a life.”

“Burke Dennings?”

“Burke Dennings, Burke Dennings, Burke Dennings...” The detective was nodding down at his shoes. Then glanced up at Karras. The priest was wiping the back of his neck. “Burke Dennings, good Father, was found at the bottom of that long flight of steps at exactly five minutes after seven with his head turned completely around and backward.”

Peppery shouts drifted muffled from the baseball diamond where the varsity team held practice. Karras stopped wiping and held the lieutenant’s steady gaze. “It didn’t happen in the fall?” he said at last.

“Sure, it’s possible.” Kinderman shrugged. “But...”

“Unlikely,” Karras brooded.

“And so what comes to mind in the context of witchcraft?”

The Jesuit sat down slowly, looking pensive. “Well,” he said finally, “supposedly demons broke the necks of witches that way. At least, that’s the myth.”

“A myth?”

“Oh, largely,” he said, turning to Kinderman. “Although people did die that way, I suppose: likely members of a coven who either defected or gave away secrets. That’s just a guess. But I know it was a trademark of demonic assassins.”

Kinderman nodded. “Exactly. Exactly. I remembered the connection from a murder in London. That’s *now*. I mean, lately, just four or five years ago, Father. I remembered that I read it in the papers.”

“Yes, I read it too, but I think it turned out to be some sort of hoax. Am I wrong?”

“No, that’s right, Father, absolutely right. But in this case, at least, you can see some connection, maybe, with that and the things in the church. Maybe somebody crazy, Father, maybe someone with a spite against the Church. Some unconscious rebellion, perhaps...”

“Sick priest,” murmured Karras. “That’s it?”

“Listen, you’re the psychiatrist, Father; you tell me.”

“Well, of course, the desecrations are clearly pathological,” Karras said thoughtfully, slipping on his sweater. “And if Dennings was murdered—well, I’d guess that the killer’s pathological too.”

“And perhaps had some knowledge of witchcraft?”

“Could be.”

“Could be,” the detective grunted. “So who fits the bill, also lives in the neighborhood, and also has access in the night to the church?”

“Sick priest,” Karras said, reaching out moodily beside him to a pair of sun-bleached khaki pants.

“Listen, Father, this is hard for you—please!—I understand. But for priests on the campus here, you’re the psychiatrist, Father, so—”

“No, I’ve had a change of assignment.”

“Oh, really? In the middle of the year?”

“That’s the Order.” Karras shrugged as he pulled on the pants.

“Still, you’d know who was sick at the time and who wasn’t correct? I mean, *this* kind of sickness. You’d *know* that.”

“No, not necessarily, Lieutenant. Not at all. It would only be an accident, in fact if I did. You see, I’m not a psychoanalyst. All I do is counsel. Anyway,” he commented, buttoning his trousers, “I really know of no one who fits the description.”

“Ah, yes; doctor’s ethics. If you knew, you wouldn’t tell.”

“No, I probably wouldn’t.”

“Incidentally—and I mention it only in passing—this ethic is lately considered illegal. Not to bother you with trivia, but lately a psychiatrist in sunny California, no less, was put in jail for not telling the police what he knew about a patient.”

“That a threat?”

“Don’t talk paranoid. I mention it in passing.”

“I could always tell the judge it was a matter of confession,” said the Jesuit, grinning wryly as he stood to tuck his shirt in. “Plainly speaking,” he added.

The detective glanced up at him, faintly gloomy. “Want to go into business, Father?” he said. Then looked away dismally. “‘Father’...what ‘Father’?” he asked rhetorically. “You’re a Jew; I could tell when I met you.”

The Jesuit chuckled.

“Yes, laugh,” said Kinderman. “Laugh.” But then he smiled, looking impishly pleased with himself. He turned with beaming eyes. “That reminds me. The entrance examination to be a policeman, Father? When I took it, one question went something like: ‘What are rabies and what would you do for them?’ Know what some dumbhead put down for an answer? *Emis?* ‘Rabies,’ he said, ‘are Jew priests, and I would do anything that I could for them.’ Honest!” He’d raised up a hand as in oath.

Karras laughed. "Come on, I'll walk you to your car. Are you parked in the lot?"

The detective looked up at him, reluctant to move. "Then we're finished?"

The priest put a foot on the bench, leaning over, an arm resting heavily on his knee. "Look, I'm really not covering up," he said. "Really. If I knew of a priest like the one you're looking for, the least I would do is to tell you that there was such a man without giving you his name. Then I guess I'd report it to the Provincial. But I don't know of anyone who even comes close."

"Ah, well," the detective sighed. "I never thought it was a priest in the first place. Not really." He nodded toward the parking lot. "Yes, I'm over there."

They started walking.

"What I really suspect," the detective continued, "if I said it out loud you would call me a nut. I don't know. I don't know." He was shaking his head. "All these clubs and these cults where they kill for no reason. It makes you start thinking peculiar things. To keep up with the times, these days, you have to be a little bit crazy."

Karras nodded.

"What's that thing on your shirt?" the detective asked him, motioning his head toward the Jesuit's chest.

"What thing?"

"On the T-shirt," the detective clarified. "The writing. 'Philosophers.'"

"Oh, I taught a few courses one year," said Karras, "at Woodstock Seminary in Maryland. I played on the lower-class baseball team. They were called the Philosophers."

"Ah, and the upper-class team?"

“Theologians.”

Kinderman smiled and shook his head. “Theologians three, Philosophers two,” he mused.

“Philosophers three, Theologians two.”

“Of course.”

“Of course.”

“Strange things,” the detective brooded. “Strange. Listen, Father,” he began on a reticent tack. “Listen, *doctor*...Am I crazy, or could there be maybe a witch coven here in the District right now? Right today?”

“Oh, come on,” said Karras.

“Then there could.”

“Didn’t get that.”

“Now I’ll be the doctor,” the detective announced to him, punching at the air with an index finger. “You didn’t say no, but instead you were smart-ass again. That’s defensive, good Father, defensive. You’re afraid you’ll look gullible, maybe; a superstitious priest in front of Kinderman the mastermind, the rationalist”—he was tapping the finger at his temple—“the genius beside you, here, the walking Age of Reason. Right? Am I right?”

The Jesuit stared at him now with mounting surmise and respect. “Why, that’s very astute,” he remarked.

“Well, all right, then,” Kinderman grunted. “So I’ll ask you again: could there maybe be witch covens here in the District?”

“Well, I really wouldn’t know,” answered Karras thoughtfully, arms folded across his chest. “But in parts of Europe they say Black Mass.”

“Today?”

“Today.”

“You mean just like the old days, Father? Look, I read about those things, incidentally, with the sex and the statues and who knows whatever. Not meaning to disgust you, by the way, but they did all those things? It’s for real?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your opinion, then Father Defensive.”

The Jesuit chuckled. “All right, then; I think it’s for real. Or at least I suspect so. But most of my reasoning’s based on pathology. Sure, Black Mass. But anyone doing those things is a very disturbed human being, and disturbed in a very special way. There’s a clinical name for that kind of disturbance, in fact; it’s called satanism—means people who can’t have any sexual pleasure unless it’s connected to a blasphemous action. Well, it’s not that uncommon, not even today, and Black Mass was just used as the justification.”

“Again, please forgive me, but the things with the statues of Jesus and Mary?”

“What about them?”

“They’re true?”

“Well, I think this might interest you as a policeman.” His scholarly interest aroused and stirring, Karras’ manner grew quietly animated. “The records of the Paris police still carry the case of a couple of monks from a nearby monastery—let’s see...” He scratched his head as he tried to recall. “Yes, the one at Crépy, I believe. Well, whatever.” He shrugged. “Close by. At any rate, the monks came into an inn and got rather belligerent about wanting a bed for three. Well, the third they were carrying: a life-size statue of the Blessed Mother.”

“Ah, boy, that’s shocking,” breathed the detective. “Shocking.”

“But true. And a fair indication that what you’ve been reading is based on fact.”

“Well, the sex, maybe so, maybe so. I can see. That’s a whole other story altogether. Never mind. But the ritual murders now, Father? That’s true? Now come on! Using blood from the newborn babies?” The detective was alluding to something else he had read in the book on witchcraft, describing how the unfrocked priest at Black Mass would at times slit the wrist of a newborn infant so that the blood poured into a chalice and later was consecrated and consumed in the form of communion. “That’s just like the stories they used to tell about the Jews,” the detective continued. “How they stole Christian babies and drank their blood. Look, forgive me, but *your* people told all those stories.”

“If we did, forgive *me*.”

“You’re absolved, you’re absolved.”

Something dark, something sad, passed across the priest’s eyes, like the shadow of pain briefly remembered. He quickly fixed his eyes on the path just ahead.

“Well, I really don’t know about ritual murder,” said Karras. “I don’t. But a midwife in Switzerland once confessed to the murder of thirty or forty babies for use at Black Mass. Oh, well, maybe she was tortured,” he amended. “Who knows? But she certainly told a convincing story. She said she’d hide a long, thin needle up her sleeve, so that when she was delivering the baby, she’d slip out the needle and stick it through the crown of the baby’s head, and then hide the needle again. No marks,” he said, glancing at Kinderman. “The baby looked stillborn. You’ve heard of the prejudice European Catholics used to have against midwives? Well, that’s how it started.”

“That’s frightening.”

“This century hasn’t got the lock on insanity. Anyway—”

“Wait a minute, wait now, forgive me. These stories—they were told by some people who were tortured, correct? So they’re basically not so reliable. They signed the confessions and later, the *machers*, they filled in the blanks. I mean, then there was nothing like habeas corpus, no writs of ‘Let My People Go,’ so to speak. Am I right? Am I right?”

“Yes, you’re right, but then too, many of the confessions were voluntary.”

“So who would volunteer such things?”

“Well, possibly people who were mentally disturbed.”

“Aha! *Another* reliable source!”

“Well, of course you’re quite right, Lieutenant. I’m just playing devil’s advocate. But one thing that sometimes we tend to forget is that people psychotic enough to confess to such things might conceivably be psychotic enough to have done them. For example, the myths about werewolves. So, fine, they’re ridiculous: no one can turn himself into a wolf. But what if a man were so disturbed that he not only thought that he was a werewolf, but also acted like one?”

“Terrible. What is this—theory now, Father, or fact?”

“Well, there’s William Stumpf, for example. Or Peter. I can’t remember. Anyway, a German in the sixteenth century who thought he was a werewolf. He murdered perhaps twenty or thirty young children.”

“You mean, he confessed it?”

“Well, yes, but I think the confession was valid.”

“How so?”

“When they caught him, he was eating the brains of his two young daughters-in-law.”

From the practice field, crisp in the thin, clear April sunlight, came echoes of chatter and ball against bat. "*C'mon, Mullins, let's shag it, let's go get the lead out!*"

They had come to the parking lot, priest and detective. They walked now in silence.

When they came to the squad car, Kinderman absently reached out toward the handle of the door. For a moment he paused, then lifted a moody look to Karras.

"So what am I looking for, Father?" he asked him.

"A madman," said Damien Karras softly. "Perhaps someone on drugs."

The detective thought it over, then silently nodded. He turned to the priest. "Want a ride?" he asked, opening the door of the squad car.

"Oh, thanks, but it's just a short walk."

"Never mind that; enjoy!" Kinderman gestured impatiently, motioning Karras to get into the car. "You can tell all your friends you went riding in a police car."

The Jesuit grinned and slipped into the back.

"Very good, very good," the detective breathed hoarsely, then squirmed in beside him and closed the door. "No walk is short," he commented. "None."

With Karras guiding, they drove toward the modern Jesuit residence hall on Prospect Street, where the priest had taken new quarters. To remain in the cottage, he'd felt, might encourage the men he had concealed to continue to seek his professional help.

"You like movies, Father Karras?"

"Very much."

"You saw *Lear*?"

"Can't afford it."

“I saw it. I get passes.”

“That’s nice.”

“I get passes for the very best shows. Mrs. K., she gets tired, though; never likes to go.”

“That’s too bad.”

“It’s too bad; yes, I hate to go alone. You know, I love to talk film; to discuss; to critique.” He was staring out the window, gaze averted to the side and away from the priest.

Karras nodded silently, looking down at his large and very powerful hands. They were clasped between his legs. A moment passed. Then Kinderman hesitantly turned with a wistful look. “Would you like to see a film with me sometime, Father? It’s free....I get passes,” he added quickly.

The priest looked at him, grinning. “As Elwood P. Dowd used to say in *Harvey*, Lieutenant: When?”

“Oh, I’ll call you, I’ll call you!” The detective beamed eagerly.

They’d come to the residence hall and parked. Karras put a hand on the door and clicked it open. “Please do. Look, I’m sorry that I wasn’t much help.”

“Never mind, you were help.” Kinderman waved limply. Karras was climbing out of the car. “In fact, for a Jew who’s trying to pass, you’re a very nice man.”

Karras turned, closed the door and leaned into the window with a faint, warm smile. “Do people ever tell you you look like Paul Newman?”

“Always. And believe me, inside this body, Mr. Newman is struggling to get out. Too crowded. Inside,” he said, “is also Clark Gable.”

Karras waved with a grin and started away.

“Father, wait!”

Karras turned. The detective was squeezing out of the car.

"Listen, Father, I forget," he puffed, approaching. "Slipped my mind. You know, that card with the dirty writing on it? The one that was found in the church?"

"You mean the altar card?"

"Whatever. It's still around?"

"Yes, I've got it in my room. I was checking the Latin. You want it?"

"Yesm maybe it shows something. Maybe."

"Just a second, I'll get it."

While Kinderman waited outside by the squad car, the Jesuit went to his ground-floor room facing out on Prospect Street and found the card. He came outside again and gave it to Kinderman.

"Maybe some fingerprints," Kinderman wheezed as he looked it over. Then, "No, wait, you've been handling it," he seemed to realize quickly. "Good thinking. Before you, the Jewish Mr. Moto." He was fumbling at the card's clear plastic sheath. "Ah, no, wait, it comes *out*, it comes *out*, it comes *out*!" Then he glanced up at Karras with incipient dismay. "You've been handling the inside as well, Kirk Douglas?"

Karras grinned ruefully, nodding his head.

"Never mind, maybe still he could find something else. Incidentally, you studied this?"

"Yes, I did."

"Your conclusion?"

Karras shrugged. "Doesn't look like the work of a prankster. At first, I thought maybe a student. But I doubt it. Whoever did *that* thing is pretty deeply disturbed."

"As you said."

“And the Latin...” Karras brooded. “It’s not just flawless, Lieutenant, it’s—well, it’s got a definite style that’s very individual. It’s as if whoever did it’s used to *thinking* in Latin.”

“Do priests?”

“Oh, come on, now!”

“Just answer the question, please, Father Paranoia.”

“Well, yes; at a point in their training, they do. At least, Jesuits and some of the other orders. At Woodstock Seminary, certain philosophy courses were taught in Latin.”

“How so?”

“For precision of thought. It’s like law.”

“Ah, I see.”

Karras suddenly looked earnest; grave. “Look, Lieutenant, can I tell you who I *really* think did it?”

The detective leaned closer. “No, who?”

“Dominicans. Go pick on them.”

Karras smiled, waved good-bye and walked away.

“I lied!” the detective called after him sullenly. “You look like Sal Mineo!”

Kinderman watched as the priest gave another little wave and entered the residence hall, then he turned and got into the squad car. He wheezed, sitting motionless, staring at the floorboard. “He hums, he hums, that man,” he murmured. “Just like a tuning fork under the water.” For a moment longer he held the look; and then turned and told the driver, “All right, back to headquarters. Hurry. Break laws.”

They pulled away.

Karras’ new room was simply furnished: a single bed, a comfortable chair, a desk and bookshelves built into the wall.

On the desk was an early photo of his mother, and in silent rebuke on the wall by his bed hung a metal crucifix.

The narrow room was world enough for him. He cared little for possessions; only that those he had be clean.

He showered, scrubbing briskly, then slipped on khaki pants and a T-shirt and ambled to dinner in the priests' reflector, where he spotted pink-cheeked Dyer sitting alone at a table in a corner. He moved to join him.

"Hi, Damien," said Dyer. The young priest was wearing a faded Snoopy sweatshirt.

Karras bowed his head as he stood by a chair and murmured a rapid grace. Then he blessed himself, sat and greeted his friend.

"How's the loafer?" asked Dyer as Karras spread a napkin on his lap.

"Who's a loafer? I'm working."

"One lecture a week?"

"It's the quality that counts," said Karras. "What's dinner?"

"Can't you smell it?"

"Oh, shit, is it dog day?" Knackwurst and sauerkraut.

"It's the quantity that counts," replied Dyer serenely.

Karras shook his head and reached out for the aluminum pitcher of milk.

"I wouldn't do that," murmured Dyer without expression as he buttered a slice of whole wheat bread. "See the bubbles? Saltpeter."

"I need it," said Karras. As he tipped up his glass to fill it with milk, he could hear someone joining them at the table.

"Well, I finally read that book," said the newcomer brightly.

Karras glanced up and felt aching dismay, felt the soft crushing weight, press of lead, press of bone, as he recognized the priest who had come to him recently for counseling, the one who could not make friends.

“Oh, and what did you think of it?” Karras asked. He set down the pitcher as if it were the booklet for a broken novena.

The young priest talked, and half an hour later, Dyer was table-hopping, spiking the refectory with laughter. Karras checked his watch. “Want to pick up a jacket?” he asked the young priest. “We can go across the street and take a look at the sunset.”

Soon they were leaning against a railing at the top of the steps down to M Street. End of day. The burnished rays of the setting sun flamed glory at the clouds of the western sky and shattered in rippling, crimson dapples on the darkening waters of the river. Once Karras met God in this sight. Long ago. Like a lover forsaken, he still kept the rendezvous.

“Sure a sight,” said the younger man.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Karras. “I try to get out here every night.”

The campus clock boomed out the hour. It was 7:00 P.M.

At 7:23, Lieutenant Kinderman pondered a spectrographic analysis showing that the paint from Regan’s sculpture matched a scraping of paint from the desecrated statue of the Virgin Mary.

And at 8:47, in a slum in the northeast section of the city, an impassive Karl Engstrom emerged from a rat-infested tenement house, walked three blocks south to a bus stop, waited alone for a minute, expressionless, then crumpled, sobbing, against a lamppost.

Lieutenant Kinderman, at the time, was at the movies.

SIX

On Wednesday, May 11, they were back in the house. They put Regan to bed, installed a lock on the shutters and stripped all the mirrors from her bedroom and bathroom.

“...fewer and fewer lucid moments, and now there’s a total blacking out of her consciousness during the fits, I’m afraid. That’s new and would seem to eliminate genuine hysteria. In the meantime, a symptom or two in the area of what we call parapsychic phenomena have...”

Dr. Klein came by, and Chris attended with Sharon as he drilled them in proper procedures for administering Sustagen feedings to Regan during her periods of coma. He inserted the nasogastric tubing. “First...”

Chris forced herself to watch and yet not see her daughter's face; to grip at the words that the doctor was saying and push away others she'd heard at the clinic. They seeped through her consciousness like fog through the branches of a willow tree.

"Now you stated 'No religion' here, Mrs. MacNeil. Is that right? No religious education at all?"

"Oh, well, maybe just 'God.' You know, general. Why?"

"Well, for one thing, the content of much of her raving—when it isn't that gibberish she's been spouting—is religiously oriented. Now where do you think she might get that?"

"Well, give me a for instance."

"Oh, 'Jesus and Mary, sixty-nine,' for ex—"

Klein had guided the tubing into Regan's stomach. "First you check to see if fluid's gotten into the lung," he instructed, pinching on the tube in order to clamp off the flow of Sustagen. "If it..."

"...syndrome of a type of disorder that you rarely ever see anymore, except among primitive cultures. We call it somnambuliform possession. Quite frankly, we don't know much about it except that it starts with some conflict or guilt that eventually leads to the patient's delusion that his body's been invaded by an alien intelligence; a spirit, if you will. In times gone by, when belief in the devil was fairly strong, the possessing entity was usually a demon. In relatively modern cases, however, it's mostly the spirit of someone dead, often someone the patient has known or seen and is able unconsciously to mimic, like the voice and the mannerisms, even the features of the face, at times. They..."

After the gloomy Dr. Klein had left the house, Chris phoned her agent in Beverly Hills and announced to him

lifelessly that she wouldn't be directing the segment. Then she called Mrs. Perrin. She was out. Chris hung up the phone with a mountain feeling of desperation. Someone. She would have to have help from...

"...Cases where it's spirits of the dead are more easy to deal with; you don't find the rages in most of those cases, or the hyperactivity and motor excitement. However, in the other main type of somnambuliform possession, the new personality's always malevolent, always hostile toward the first. Its primary aim, in fact, is to damage, torture and sometimes even kill it."

A set of restraining straps was delivered to the house and Chris stood watching, wan and spent, while Karl affixed them to Regan's bed and then to her wrists. Then as Chris moved a pillow in an effort to center it under Regan's head, the Swiss straightened up and looked pityingly at the child's ravaged face. "She is going to be well?" he asked. A hint of some emotion had tinged his words; they were lightly italicized with concern.

But Chris could not answer. As Karl was addressing her, she'd picked up an object that had been tucked under Regan's pillow. "Who put this crucifix here?" she demanded.

"The syndrome is only the manifestation of some conflict, of some guilt, so we try to get at it, find out what it is. Well, the best procedure in a case like this is hypnotherapy; however, we can't seem to put her under. So then we took a shot at narcosynthesis—that's a treatment that uses narcotics—but, frankly, that looks like another dead end."

"So what's next?"

“Mostly time, I’m afraid, mostly time. We’ll just have to keep trying and hope for a change. In the meantime, she’s going to have to be hospitalized for a...”

Chris found Sharon in the kitchen setting up her typewriter on the table. She had just brought it up from the basement playroom. Willie sliced carrots at the sink for a stew.

“Was it you who put the crucifix under her pillow, Shar?” Chris asked with the strain of tension.

“What do you mean?” asked Sharon, fuddled.

“You didn’t?”

“Chris, I don’t even know what you’re talking about. Look, I told you. I told you on the plane, all I’ve ever said to Rags is ‘God made the world’ and maybe things about—”

“Fine, Sharon, fine, I believe you, but—”

“Me, I don’t put it,” growled Willie defensively.

“*Somebody* put it there, dammit!” Chris erupted, then wheeled on Karl as he entered the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. “Look, I’ll ask you again,” she gritted in a tone that verged on shrillness: “Did *you* put that crucifix under her pillow?”

“No, madam,” he answered levelly. He was folding ice cubes into a face towel. “No. No cross.”

“*That fucking cross didn’t just walk up there, damn you! One of you is lying!*” She was shrieking with a rage that stunned the room. “*Now you tell me who put it there, who—*” Abruptly she slumped to a chair and began to sob into trembling hands. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I don’t know what I’m doing!” she wept. “Oh, my God, I don’t know what I’m doing!”

Willie and Karl watched silently as Sharon came up beside her and kneaded her neck with a comforting hand. “Hey, okay. It’s okay.”

Chris wiped at her face with the back of a sleeve. “Yeah, I guess whoever did it”—she sniffled—“was only trying to help.”

“Look, I’m telling you again and you’d better believe it, I’m not about to put her in a gotham asylum!”

“It’s—”

“I don’t care what you call it! I’m not letting her out of my sight!”

“Well, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, sorry! Christ! Eighty-eight doctors and all you can tell me with all of your bullshit is...”

Chris smoked a cigarette, tamped it out nervously and went upstairs to look in on Regan. She opened the door. In the gloom of the bedroom, she made out a figure by Regan’s bedside, sitting in a straight-backed wooden chair. Karl. What was he doing? she wondered.

As Chris moved closer, he did not look up, but kept his gaze on the child’s face. He had his arm outstretched and was touching it. What was in his hand? As Chris reached the bedside, she saw what it was: the improvised ice pack he had fashioned in the kitchen. Karl was cooling Regan’s forehead.

Chris was touched, stood watching with surprise, and when Karl did not move or acknowledge her presence, she turned and quietly left the room.

She went to the kitchen, drank black coffee and smoked another cigarette. Then on an impulse she went to the study. Maybe...maybe...

“...an outside chance, since possession is loosely related to hysteria insofar as the origin of the syndrome is almost always autosuggestive. Your daughter must have known about possession, believed in possession, and known about some of its symptoms, so that now her unconscious is producing the syndrome. If that can be established, you might take a stab at a form of cure that’s autosuggestive. I think of it as shock treatment in these cases, though most other therapists wouldn’t agree, I suppose. Oh, well—as I said, it’s a very outside chance, and since you’re opposed to your daughter being hospitalized, I’ll—”

“Name it, for God’s sake! What is it?!”

“Have you ever heard of exorcism, Mrs. MacNeil?”

The books in the study were part of the furnishings and Chris was unfamiliar with them. Now she was scanning the titles, searching, searching....

“...stylized ritual now out of date in which rabbis and priests tried to drive out the spirit. It’s only the Catholics who haven’t discarded it yet, but they keep it pretty much in the closet as sort of an embarrassment, I think. But to someone who thinks that he’s really possessed, I would say that the ritual’s rather impressive. It used to work, in fact, although not for the reason they thought, of course; it was purely the force of suggestion. The victim’s belief in possession helped cause it, or at least the appearance of the syndrome, and in just the same way his belief in the power of the exorcism can make it disappear. It’s—ah, you’re frowning. Well, perhaps I should tell you about the Australian aborigines. They’re convinced that if some wizard thinks a ‘death ray’ at them from a distance, why they’re definitely going to die, you see. And the fact is that they do! They just lie down and slowly die!

And the only thing that saves them, at times, is a similar form of suggestion: a counteracting 'ray' by another wizard!"

"Are you telling me to take her to a witch doctor?"

"Yes, I suppose that I'm saying just that: as a desperate measure, perhaps to a priest. That's a rather bizarre little piece of advice, I know, even dangerous, in fact, unless we can definitely ascertain whether Regan knew anything at all about possession, and particularly exorcism, before this all came on. Do you think she might have read it?"

"No, I don't."

"Seen a movie about it sometime? Something on television?"

"No."

"Read the gospels, perhaps? The New Testament?"

"Why?"

"There are quite a few accounts of possession in them; of exorcisms by Christ. The descriptions of the symptoms, in fact, are the same as in possession today. If you—"

"Look, it's no good. Never mind, just forget it! That's all I need is to have her father hear that I called in a bunch of..."

Chris's index fingernail clicked slowly from binding to binding. Nothing. No Bible. No New Testament. Not a—

Hold it!

Her eyes darted quickly back to a title on the bottom shelf. The volume on witchcraft that Mary Jo Perrin had sent her. Chris plucked it out from the shelf and turned to the table of contents, running her thumbnail down the...

There!

The title of a chapter pulsed like a heartthrob: "States of Possession."

Chris closed the book and her eyes at the same time, wondering, wondering,...

Maybe...just maybe...

She opened her eyes and walked slowly to the kitchen. Sharon was typing. Chris held up the book. "Did you read this, Shar?"

Sharon kept typing, never glancing up. "Read what?" she answered.

"This book on witchcraft."

"No."

"Did you put it in the study?"

"No. Never touched it."

"Where's Willie?"

"At the market."

Chris nodded, considering. Then went back upstairs to Regan's bedroom. She showed Karl the book. "Did you put this in the study, Karl? On the bookshelf?"

"No, madam."

"Maybe Willie," Chris murmured as she stared at the book. Soft thrills of surmise rippled through her. Were the doctors at Barringer Clinic right? Was this it? Had Regan plucked her disorder through autosuggestion from the pages of this book? Would she find her symptoms listed here? Something specific that Regan was doing?

Chris sat at the table, opened to the chapter on possession and began to search, to search, to read:

Immediately derivative of the prevalent belief in demons was the phenomenon known as possession, a state in which many individuals believed that their physical and mental functions had been invaded and were being controlled by either a demon (most common in the period under discussion) or the spirit of someone dead. There is no period of history or

quarter of the globe where this phenomenon has not been reported, and in fairly constant terms, and yet it is still to be adequately explained. Since Traugott Oesterreich's definitive study, first published in 1921, very little has been added to the body of knowledge, the advances of psychiatry notwithstanding.

Not fully explained? Chris frowned. She'd had a different impression from the doctors.

What is known is the following: that various people, at various times, have undergone massive transformations so complete that those around them feel they are dealing with another person. Not only the voice, the mannerisms, facial expressions and characteristic movements are altered, but the subject himself now thinks of himself as totally distinct from the original person and as having a name—whether human or demonic—and separate history of its own....

The symptoms. Where were the symptoms? Chris wondered impatiently.

... In the Malay Archipelago, where possession is even today an everyday, common occurrence, the possessing spirit of someone dead often causes the possessed to mimic its gestures, voice and mannerisms so strikingly, that relatives of the deceased will burst into tears. But aside from so-called quasi-possession—those cases that are ultimately reducible to fraud, paranoia and hysteria—the problem has always lain with interpreting the phenomena, the oldest interpretation being the spiritist, an impression that is likely to be strengthened by the fact that the intruding personality may have accomplishments quite foreign to the first. In the demoniacal form of possession, for example, the “demon” may speak in languages unknown to the first personality, or...

There! Something! Regan's gibberish! An attempt at a language? She read on quickly.

... or manifest various parapsychic phenomena, telekinesis for example: the movement of objects without application of material force.

The rappings? The flinging up and down on the bed?

...In cases of possession by the dead, there are manifestations such as Oeterreich's account of a monk who, abruptly, while possessed, became a gifted and brilliant dancer although he had never, before his possession, had occasion to dance so much as a step. So impressive, at times, are these manifestations that Jung, the psychiatrist, after studying a case at first hand, could offer only partial explanation for what he was certain could "not have been fraud"...

Worrisome. The tone of this was worrisome.

...and William James, the greatest psychologist that America has ever produced, resorted to positing "the plausibility of the spiritualist interpretation of the phenomenon" after closely studying the so-called "Watseka Wonder," a teenaged girl in Watseka, Illinois, who became indistinguishable in personality from a girl named Mary Roff who had died in a state insane asylum twelve years prior to the possession...

Frowning, Chris did not hear the doorbell chime; did not hear Sharon stop typing to rise and go answer it.

The demoniacal form of possession is usually thought to have had its origin in early Christianity; yes in fact both possession and exorcism pre-date the time of Christ. The ancient Egyptians as well as the earliest civilizations of the Tigris and the Euphrates believed that physical and spiritual disorders were caused by invasion of the body by demons. The following, for example, is the formula for exorcism against maladies of children in ancient Egypt: "Go hence, thou who comest in darkness, whose nose is turned backwards, whose face is upside down. Hast thou come to kiss this child? I will not let thee..."

“Chris?”

She kept reading, absorbed. “Shar, I’m busy.”

“There’s a homicide detective wants to see you.”

“Oh, Christ, Sharon, tell him to—”

She stopped.

“No, no, hold it.” Chris frowned, still staring at the book.

“No. Tell him to come in. Let him in.”

Sound of walking.

Sound of waiting.

What am I waiting for? Chris wondered. She sat on expectancy that was known yet undefined, like the vivid dream one can never remember.

He came in with Sharon, his hat brim brumple in his hand, wheezing and listing and deferential. “So sorry. You’re busy, you’re busy, I’m a bother.”

“How’s the world?”

“Very bad, very bad. How’s your daughter?”

“No change.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, I’m terribly sorry.” He was hulking by the table now, his eyelids dripping concern. “Look, I wouldn’t even bother; your daughter; it’s a worry. God knows, when my Ruthie was down with the—no no no no, it was Sheila, my little—”

“Please sit down,” Chris cut in.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” he exhaled, gratefully settling his bulk in a chair across the table from Sharon, who had now returned to her typing of letters.

“I’m sorry; you were saying?” Chris asked the detective.

“Well, my daughter, she—ah, never mind.” He dismissed it. “You’re busy. I get started, I’ll tell my life story, you could maybe make a film of it. Really! It’s incredible! If you only

knew *half* of the things used to happen in my crazy family, you know, like my—ah, well, you’re—One! I’ll tell *one*! Like my mother every Friday she made us gefilte fish, right? Only all week long, the whole week, no one gets to take a bath on account of my mother had the *carp* in the bathtub, it’s swimming back and forth, back and forth, the whole week, because my mother said this cleaned out the *poison* in its system! You’re prepared? Because it... Ah, that’s enough now; enough.” He sighed wearily, motioning his hand in a gesture of dismissal. “But now and then a laugh just to keep us from crying.”

Chris watched him expressionlessly, waiting....

“Ah, you’re reading.” He was glancing at the book on witchcraft. “For a film?” he inquired.

“Just reading.”

“It’s good?”

“I just started.”

“Witchcraft,” he murmured, his head angled, reading the title at the top of the pages.

“What’s doin’?” Chris asked him.

“Yes, I’m sorry. You’re busy. You’re busy. I’ll finish. As I said, I wouldn’t bother you, except...”

“Except what?”

He looked suddenly grave and clasped his hands on the table. “Well, Mr. Dennings, Mrs. MacNeil...”

“Well...”

“*Darn* it,” snapped Sharon with irritation as she ripped out a letter from the platen of the typewriter. She balled it up and tossed it at a wastepaper basket near Kinderman. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she apologized as she saw that her outburst had interrupted them.

Chris and Kinderman were staring.

"You're Miss Fenster?" Kinderman asked her.

"Spencer," said Sharon, pulling back her chair in order to rise and retrieve the letter.

"Never mind, never mind," said Kinderman as he reached to the floor near his foot and picked up the crumpled page.

"Thanks," said Sharon.

"Nothing. Excuse me—you're the secretary?"

"Sharon, this is..."

"Kinderman," the detective reminded her. "William Kinderman."

"Right. This is Sharon Spencer."

"A pleasure," Kinderman told the blonde, who now folded her arms on the typewriter, eyeing him curiously. "Perhaps you can help," he added. "On the night of Mr. Dennings' demise, you went out to a drugstore and left him alone in the house, correct?"

"Well, no; Regan was here."

"That's my daughter," Chris clarified.

Kinderman continued to question Sharon. "He came to see Mrs. MacNeil?"

"Yes, that's right."

"He expected her shortly?"

"Well, I told him I expected her back pretty soon."

"Very good. And you left at what time. You remember?"

"Let's see. I was watching the news, so I guess—oh, no, wait—yes, that's right. I remember being bothered because the pharmacist said the delivery boy had gone home. I remember I said, 'Oh, come on, now,' or something about its only being six-thirty. Then Burke came alone just ten, maybe twenty minutes after that."

“So a median,” concluded the detective, “would have put him here at six-forty-five.”

“And so what’s this all about?” asked Chris, the nebulous tension in her mounting.

“Well, it raises a question, Mrs. MacNeil,” wheezed Kinderman, turning his head to gaze at her. “To arrive in the house at say quarter to seven and leave only twenty minutes later...”

“Oh, well, that was Burke,” said Chris. “Just like him.”

“Was it also like Mr. Dennings,” asked Kinderman, “to frequent the bars on M Street?”

“No.”

“No, I thought not. I made a little check. And was it also not his custom to travel by taxi? He wouldn’t call a cab from the house when he left?”

“Yes, he would.”

“Then one wonders—not so?—how he came to be walking on the platform at the top of the steps. And one wonders why taxicab companies do not show a record of calls from this house on that night,” added Kinderman, “except for the one that picked up your Miss Spencer here at precisely six-forty-seven.”

“I don’t know,” answered Chris, her voice drained of color... and waiting...

“You knew all along!” gasped Sharon at Kinderman, perplexed.

“Yes, forgive me,” the detective told her. “However, the matter has now grown serious.”

Chris breathed shallowly, fixing the detective with a steady gaze. “In what way?” she asked. Her voice came thin from her throat.

He leaned over hands still clasped on the table, the page of typescript balled between them. "The report of the pathologist, Mrs. MacNeil, seems to show that the chance that he died accidentally is still very possible. However..."

"Are you saying he was murdered?" Chris tensed.

"The position—now I know this is painful—"

"Go ahead."

"The position of Dennings' head and a certain shearing of the muscles of the neck would—"

"Oh, God!" Chris winced.

"Yes, it's painful. I'm sorry; I'm terribly sorry. But you see, this condition—we can skip the details—but it never could happen, you see, unless Mr. Dennings had fallen some distance before he hit the steps; for example, some twenty or thirty feet before he went rolling down to the bottom. So a clear possibility, plainly speaking, is maybe... Well, first let me ask you..."

He'd turned now to a frowning Sharon. "When you left, he was where, Mr. Dennings? With the child?"

"No, down here in the study. He was fixing a drink."

"Might your daughter remember"—turned to Chris—"if perhaps Mr. Dennings was in her room that night?"

Has she ever been alone with him?

"Why do you ask?"

"Might your daughter remember?"

"No, I told you before, she was heavily sedated and—"

"Yes, yes, you told me; that's true; I recall it; but perhaps she awakened—not so?—and..."

"No chance. And—"

"She was also sedated," he interrupted, "when last we spoke?"

“Oh, well, yes; as a matter of fact she was,” Chris recalled. “So what?”

“I thought I saw her at her window that day.”

“You’re mistaken.”

He shrugged. “It could be, it could be; I’m not sure.”

“Listen, why are you asking all this?” Chris demanded.

“Well, a clear possibility, as I was saying, is maybe the deceased was so drunk that he stumbled and fell from the window in your daughter’s bedroom.”

Chris shook her head. “No way. No chance. In the first place, the window was always closed, and in the second place, Burke was *always* drunk, but he never got sloppy, never sloppy at all. That right, Shar?”

“Right.”

“Burke used to *direct* when he was smashed. Now how could he stumble and fall out a window?”

“Were you maybe expecting someone else here that night?” he asked her.

“No.”

“Have you friends who drop by without calling?”

“Just Burke,” Chris answered. “Why?”

The detective lowered his head and shook it, frowning at the crumpled paper in his hands. “Strange... so baffling.” He exhaled wearily. “Baffling.” Then he lifted his glance to Chris. “The deceased comes to visit, stays only twenty minutes without even seeing you, and leaves all alone here a very sick girl. And speaking plainly, Mrs. MacNeil, as you say, it’s not likely he would fall from a window. Besides that, a fall wouldn’t do to his neck what we found except maybe a chance in a thousand.” He nodded with his head at the book on witchcraft. “You’ve read in that book about ritual murder?”

Some prescience chilling her, Chris shook her head.

"Maybe not in that book," he said. "However—forgive me; I mention this only so maybe you'll think just a little bit harder—poor Mr. Dennings was discovered with his neck wrenched around in the style of ritual murder by so-called demons, Mrs. MacNeil."

Chris went white.

"Some lunatic killed Mr. Dennings," the detective continued, eyeing Chris fixedly. "At first, I never told you to spare you the hurt. And besides, it could technically still be an accident. But me, I don't think so. My hunch. My opinion. I believe he was killed by a powerful man: point one. And the fracturing of his skull—point two—plus the various things I have mentioned, would make it very probable—probable, not certain—the deceased was killed and then afterward pushed from your daughter's window. But no one was here except your daughter. So how could this be? It could be one way: if someone came calling between the time Miss Spencer left and the time you returned. Not so? Maybe so. Now I ask you again, please: who might have come?"

"Judas priest, just a second!" Chris whispered hoarsely, still in shock.

"Yes, I'm sorry. It's painful. And perhaps I'm all wrong—I'll admit. But you'll think now? Who? Tell me who might have come?"

Chris had her head down, frowning in thought. Then she looked up at Kinderman. "No. No, there's no one."

"Maybe you then, Miss Spencer?" he asked her. "Someone comes here to see you?"

"Oh, no, no one," said Sharon, her eyes very wide.

Chris turned to her. "Does the horseman know where you work?"

"The horseman?" asked Kinderman.

"Her boyfriend," Chris explained.

The blonde shook her head. "He's never come here. Besides, he was in Boston that night. Some convention."

"He's a salesman?"

"A lawyer."

The detective turned again to Chris. "The servants? They have visitors?"

"Never. Not at all."

"You expected a package that day? Some delivery?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"Mr. Dennings was—not to speak ill of the dead, may he rest in peace—well, call it irascible: capable, doubtless, of provoking an argument; an anger; in this case as rage from perhaps a delivery man who came by to drop a package. So were you expecting something? Like dry cleaning, maybe? Groceries? Liquor? A package?"

"I really wouldn't know," Chris told him. "Karl handles all of that."

"Oh, I see."

"Want to ask him?"

The detective sighed and leaned back from the table, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his coat. He stared glumly at the witchcraft book. "Never mind, never mind; it's remote. You've got a daughter very sick, and—well, never mind." He made a gesture of dismissal and rose from the chair. "Very nice to have met you, Miss Spencer."

"Same here." Sharon nodded remotely.

“Baffling,” said Kinderman with a headshake. “Strange.” He was focused on some inner thought. Then he looked at Chris as she rose from her chair. “Well, I’m sorry. I’ve bothered you for nothing. Forgive me.”

“Here, I’ll walk you to the door,” Chris told him, thoughtful.

“Don’t bother.”

“No bother.”

“If you insist. Incidentally,” he said as they moved from the kitchen, “just a chance in a million, I know, but your daughter—you could possibly ask her if she say Mr. Dennings in her room that night?”

Chris walked with folded arms. “Look, he wouldn’t have had a reason to be up there in the first place.”

“I know that; I realize; that’s true; but if certain British doctors never asked, ‘What’s this fungus?’ we wouldn’t today have penicillin. Right? Please ask. You’ll ask?”

“When she’s well enough, yes; I’ll ask.”

“Couldn’t hurt. In the meantime...” They’d come to the front door and Kinderman faltered, embarrassed. He put fingertips to mouth in a hesitant gesture. “Look, I really hate to ask you; however...”

Chris tensed for some new shock, the prescience tingling again in her bloodstream. “What?”

“For my daughter... you could maybe give an autograph?” He’d reddened, and Chris almost laughed with relief; at herself; at despair and the human condition.

“Oh, of course. Where’s a pencil?” she said.

“Right here!” he responded instantly, whipping out the stub of a chewed-up pencil from the pocket of his coat while he dipped his other hand in a pocket of his jacket and slipped out

a calling card. “She would love it,” he said as he handed them both to Chris.

“What’s her name?” Chris asked, pressing the card against the door and poising the pencil stub to write. There followed a weighty hesitation, she heard only wheezing. She glanced around. In Kinderman’s eyes she saw some massive, terrible struggle.

“I lied,” he said finally, his eyes at once desperate and defiant. “It’s for me.”

He fixed his gaze on the card and blushed. “Write ‘William—William Kinderman’—it’s spelled on the back.”

Chris eyed him with a wan and unexpected affection, checked the spelling of his name and wrote, *William F. Kinderman, I love you!* And sighed her name. Then she gave him the card, which he tucked in his pocket without reading the inscription.

“You’re a very nice man.”

He seemed to blush harder. “No, I’m not. I’m a bother.” He was opening the door. “Never mind what I said here today. It’s upsetting. Forget it. Keep your mind on your daughter. Your *daughter*.”

Chris nodded, her despondency surging up again as Kinderman stepped outside onto the stoop and donned his hat.

“But you’ll ask her?” he reminded as he turned.

“I will,” Chris whispered. “I promise. I will.”

“Well, good-bye. And take care.”

Once more Chris nodded; then added, “You too.”

She closed the door softly. Then instantly opened it again as he knocked.

“What a nuisance. I’m a nuisance. I forgot my pencil.” He grimaced in apology.

Chris eyed the stub in her hand, smiled faintly and gave it to Kinderman.

“And another thing...” He hesitated. “It’s pointless, I know—it’s a bother, it’s dumb—but I know I won’t sleep thinking maybe there’s a lunatic loose or a doper if every little point I don’t cover, whatever. Do you think I could—no, no, it’s dumb, it’s a—yes; yes, I should. Could I maybe have a word with Mr. Engstrom, do you think? The deliveries... the question of deliveries. I really should...”

“Sure, come on in,” Chris said wearily.

“No, you’re busy. Enough. I can talk to him here. This is fine. Here is fine.”

He had leaned against a railing.

“If you insist.” Chris smiled thinly. “He’s with Regan. I’ll send him right down.”

“I’m obliged.”

Quickly Chris closed the door. A minute later, Karl opened it. He stepped down to the stoop with his hand on the doorknob, holding the door slightly ajar. Standing tall and erect, he looked at Kinderman with eyes that were clear and cool. “Yes?” he asked without expression.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Kinderan greeted him, steely gaze locked tight on Karl’s. “If you give up the right to remain silent,” he intoned rapidly in a flat, deadly cadence, “anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak with an attorney and to have the attorney present during questioning. If you so desire, and cannot afford one, an attorney will be appointed for you without charge prior to questioning. Do you understand each of these rights I’ve explained to you?”

Birds twittered softly in the branches of the elder tree, and the traffic sounds of M Street came up to them muted like the humming of bees from a distant meadow. Karl's gaze never wavered as he answered, "Yes."

"Do you wish to give up the right to remain silent?"

"Yes."

"Do you wish to give up the right to speak to an attorney and have him present during questioning?"

"Yes."

"Did you previously state that on April twenty-eighth, the night of the death of Mr. Dennings, you attended a film that was showing at the Crest?"

"Yes."

"And what time did you enter the theater?"

"I do not remember."

"You stated previously you attended the six-o'clock showing. Does that help you to remember?"

"Yes. Yes, six-o'clock show. I remember."

"And you saw the picture—the *film*—from the beginning?"

"I did."

"And you left at the film's conclusion?"

"I did."

"Not before?"

"No, I see entire film."

"And leaving the theater, you boarded the D.C. Transit bus in front of the theater, debarking at M Street and Wisconsin Avenue at approximately nine-twenty P.M.?"

"Yes."

"And walked home?"

"I walk home."

“And were back in this residence at approximately nine-thirty P.M.?”

“I am back here *exactly* nine-thirty,” Karl answered.

“You’re sure.”

“Yes, I look at my watch. I am positive.”

“And you saw the whole film to the very end?”

“Yes, I said that.”

“Your answers are being electronically recorded, Mr. Engstrom. I want you to be absolutely positive.”

“I am positive.”

“You’re aware of the altercation between an usher and a drunken patron that happened in the last five minutes of the film?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me the cause of it?”

“The man, he was drunk and was making disturbance.”

“And what did they do with him finally?”

“Out. They throw him out.”

“There was no such disturbance. Are you also aware that during the course of the six o’clock showing a technical breakdown lasting approximately fifteen minutes caused an interruption in the showing of the film?”

“I am not.”

“You recall that the audience booed?”

“No, nothing. No breakdown.”

“You’re sure?”

“There was nothing.”

“There was, as reflected in the log of the projectionist, showing that the film ended not at eight-forty that night, but at approximately eight-fifty-five, which would mean that the earliest bus from the theater would put you at M Street and

Wisconsin not at nine-twenty, but nine-forty-five, and that therefore the earliest you could be at the house was approximately five before ten, not nine-thirty, as testified also by Mrs. MacNeil. Would you care now to comment on this puzzling discrepancy?"

Not for a moment had Karl lost his poise and he held it now as he answered, "No."

The detective stared at him mutely for a moment, then sighed and looked down as he turned off the monitor control that was tucked in the lining of his coat. He held his gaze down for a moment, then looked up at Karl. "Mr. Engstrom..." he began in a tone that was weary with understanding. "A serious crime may have been committed. You are under suspicion. Mr. Dennings abused you, I have learned from other sources. And apparently you've lied about your whereabouts at the time of his demise. Now it sometimes happens—we're human; why not?—that a man who is married is sometimes someplace where he says that he is not. You will notice I arranged we are talking in private? Away from the others? Away from your wife? I'm not now recording. It's off. You can trust me. If it happens you were out with a woman not your wife on that night, you can tell me, I'll have it checked out, you'll be out of this trouble and your wife, she won't know. Now then tell me, where were you at the time Dennings died?"

For a moment something flickered in the depths of Karl's eyes; and then was smothered.

"At movies!" he insisted through narrowed lips.

The detective eyed him steadily, silent and unmoving, no sound but his wheezing as the seconds ticked heavily, heavily....

“You are going to arrest me?” Karl asked the silence at last in a voice that subtly wavered.

The detective made no answer but continued to eye him, unblinking, and when Karl seemed again about to speak, the detective abruptly pushed away from the railing, moving toward the squad car with hands in his pockets. He walked unhurriedly, viewing his surroundings to the left and the right like an interested visitor to the city.

From the stoop, Karl watched, his features stolid and impassive as Kinderman opened the door of the squad car, reached inside to a box of Kleenex fixed to the dashboard, extracted a tissue and blew his nose while staring idly across the river as if considering where to have lunch. Then he entered the car without glancing back.

As the car pulled away and rounded the corner of Thirty-fifth, Karl looked at the hand that was not on the doorknob and saw it was trembling.

When she heard the front door being closed, Chris was brooding at the bar in the study, pouring out a vodka over ice. Footsteps. Karl going up the stairs. She picked up her vodka and moved slowly back toward the kitchen, stirring her drink with an index finger; picking her way with absent eyes. Something... something was horribly wrong. Like light from a room leaking under the door, a glow of dread seeped into the darkened hall of her mind. What lay behind the door? What was it?

Don't look!

She entered the kitchen, sat at the table and sipped at her drink.

“I believe he was killed by a powerful man...”

She dropped her glance to the book on witchcraft.

Something...

Footsteps. Sharon returning from Regan's bedroom. Entering. Sitting at the table by the typewriter. Cranking fresh stationery into the roller.

Something...

"Pretty creepy," Sharon murmured, fingertips resting on the keyboard and eyes on her steno notes to the side.

No answer. Uneasiness hung in the room. Chris sipped absently at her drink.

Sharon probed at the silence in a strained, low voice. "They've got an awful lot of hippie joints down around M Street and Wisconsin. Pot-heads. Occultists. The police called them 'hellhounds.'" She paused as if waiting for comment, her eyes still fixed upon the notes; then continued: "I wonder if Burke might have—"

"Oh, *Christ*, Shar! Forget about it, will you!" Chris erupted. "I've got all I can think about with Rags! Do you mind?" She had her eyes shut. She clenched the book.

Sharon returned instantly to the keys of the typewriter, clicking off words at furious tempo for a minute, then abruptly bolted up from her chair and out of the kitchen. "I'm going for a walk!" she said icily.

"Stay the hell away from M Street!" Chris rumbled at her moodily, her gaze on the book over folded arms.

"I will!"

"And N!"

Chris heard the front door being opened, then closed. She sighed. Felt a pang of regret. But the flurry had siphoned off tension. Not all. Still the glow in the hall. Very faint.

Shut it out!

Chris took a deep breath and tried to focus on the book. She found her place; grew impatient; started hastily flipping through pages, skimming, searching for descriptions of Regan's symptoms. "...demonic possession... syndrome... case of an eight-year-old girl... abnormal... four strong men to restrain him from..."

Turning a page, Chris stared—and froze.

Sounds. Willie coming in with groceries.

"Willie? ...Willie?" Chris asked tonelessly.

"Yes, madam," Willie answered, setting down her bags. Without looking up, Chris held up the book. "Was it you put this book in the study, Willie?"

Willie glanced at the book and nodded, then turned around and began to slip items from the bags.

"Willie, where did you find it?"

"Up in bedroom," Willie answered, putting bacon in the meat compartment of the refrigerator.

"*Which* bedroom, Willie?"

"Miss Regan. I find it under bed when I am cleaning."

"*When* did you find it?" Chris asked, her gaze still locked to the pages of the book.

"After all go to hospital, madam; when I vacuum in Regan bedroom."

You're sure?"

"I am sure, madam. Yes. I am sure."

Chris did not move, did not blink, did not breathe as the headlong image of an open window in Regan's bedroom the night of Dennings' accident rushed at her memory, talons extended, like a bird of prey who knew her name; as she recognized a sight that was numbingly familiar; as she stared at the facing page of the book.

A narrow strip had been surgically shaved from the length of its edge.

Chris jerked her head up at the sounds of commotion in Regan's bedroom.

Rappings, rapid, with a nightmarish resonance; massive, like a sledgehammer pounding in a tomb!

Regan screaming in anguish; in terror; imploring!

Karl! Karl bellowing angrily at Regan!

Chris bolted from the kitchen

God almighty, what's happening?

Frenzied, Chris raced for the stairs, toward the bedroom, heard a blow, someone reeling, someone crashing like a boulder to the floor with her daughter crying, "*No! Oh, no, don't! Oh, no, please!*" and Karl bellowing—No! No, not Karl! Someone else! A thundering bass that was threatening, raging!

Chris plunged down the hall and burst into the bedroom, gasped, stood rooted in paralyzing shock as the rappings boomed massively, shivering through walls; as Karl lay unconscious on the floor near the bureau; as Regan, her legs propped up and spread wide on a bed that was violently bouncing and shaking, clutched the bone-white crucifix in raw-knuckled hands, the bone-white crucifix poised at her vagina, the bone-white crucifix she stared at with terror, eyes bulging in a face that was bloodied from the nose, the nasogastric tubing ripped out.

"Oh, please! Oh, no, *please!*" she was shrinking as her hands brought the crucifix closer; as she seemed to be straining to push it away.

"You'll do as I *tell* you, filth! You'll *do* it!"

The threatening bellow, the words, came from *Regan*, her voice coarse and guttural, bristling with venom, while in an instantaneous flash her expression and features were hideously transmuted into those of the feral, demonic personality that had appeared in the course of hypnosis. And now faces and voices, as Chris watch stunned, interchanged with rapidity:

“No!”

“You’ll do it!”

“Please!”

“You *will*, you bitch, or I’ll kill you!”

“Please!”

“Yes, you’re going to let Jesus *fuck* you, *fuck* you, f—”

Regan now, eyes wide and staring, flinching from the rush of some hideous finality, mouth agape shrieking at the dread of some ending. Then abruptly the demonic face once more possessed her, now filler her, the room choking suddenly with a stench in the nostrils, with an icy cold that seeped from the walls as the rappings ended and Regan’s piercing cry of terror turned to a guttural, yelping laugh of malevolent spite and rage triumphant while she thrust down the crucifix into her vagina and began to masturbate ferociously, roaring in the deep, coarse, deafening voice, “Now you’re *mine*, now you’re *mine*, you stinking cow! You bitch! Let Jesus *fuck* you, *fuck* you!”

Chris stood rooted to the ground in horror, frozen, her hands pressing tight against her cheeks as again the demonic, loud laugh cackled joyously, as Regan’s vagina gushed blood onto sheets with her hymen, the tissues ripped. Abruptly, with a shriek clawing raw from her throat, Chris rushed at the bed, grasped blindly at the crucifix, was still screaming as Regan

flared up at her in fury, features contorted infernally, reached out a hand, clutching Chris's hair, and yanked her head down, pressing her face hard against her vagina, smearing it with blood while she frantically undulated her pelvis.

"Aahhh, little pig mother!" Regan crooned with a guttural, rasping, throaty eroticism. "*Lick me, lick me, lick me!* Aahhhhh!" Then the hand that was holding Chris's head down jerked it upward while the other arm smashed her a blow across the chest that sent Chris reeling across the room and crashing to a wall with stunning force while Regan laughed with a bellowing spite.

Chris crumpled to the floor in a daze of horror, in a swirling of images, sounds in the room, as her vision spun madly, blurring, unfocused, her ears ringing loud with chaotic distortions as she tried to raise herself, was too weak, faltered, then looked toward the still-blurred bed, toward Regan with her back to her, thrusting the crucifix gently and sensually into her vagina, then out, then in, with that deep, bass voice crooning, "Ahh, there's my sow, yes, my sweet honey piglet, my piglet, my—"

The words were cut off as Chris started crawling painfully toward the bed with her face smeared with blood, with her eyes still unfocused, limbs aching, past Karl. Then she cringed, shrinking back in incredulous terror as she thought she saw hazily, in a swimming fog, her daughter's head turning slowly around on a motionless torso, rotating monstrously, inexorably, until at last it seemed facing backward.

"Do you know what she *did*, your cunting daughter?" giggled an elfin, familiar voice.

Chris blinked at the mad-staring, grinning face, at the cracked, parched lips and foxlike eyes.

She screamed until she fainted.

III: The Abyss

They said, “What sign can you give us to see, so that we may believe you?”

John 6: 30–31

... A [Vietnam] brigade commander once ran a contest to rack up his unit's 10,000th kill; the prize was a week of luxury in the colonel's own quarters. ...

Newsweek, 1969

You do not believe although you have seen. ...

John 6: 36–37

one

She was standing on the Key Bridge walkway, arms atop the parapet, fidgeting, waiting, while homeward-bound traffic stuttered thickly behind her, while drivers with everyday cares honked horns and bumpers nudged bumpers with scraping indifference. She had reached Mary Jo; told her lies.

“Regan’s fine. By the way, I’ve been thinking of another little dinner party. What was the name of that Jesuit psychiatrist again? I thought maybe I’d include him in the...”

Laughter floating up from below her: a blue-jeaned young couple in a rented canoe. With a quick, nervous gesture, she

flicked ash from her cigarette and glanced up the walkway of the bridge toward the District. Someone hurrying toward her: khaki pants and blue sweater; not a priest; not him. She looked down at the river again, at her helplessness swirling in the wake of the bright-red canoe. She could make out the name on its side: *Caprice*.

Footsteps. The man in the sweater coming closer, slowing down as he reached her. Peripherally, she saw him rest a forearm on the top of the parapet and quickly she averted her head toward Virginia.

“Keep movin’, creep,” she rumbled at him huskily, flipping her cigarette into the river, “or, I swear to Christ, I’ll yell for a cop!”

“Miss MacNeil? I’m Father Karras.”

She started, reddened, jerked swiftly around. The chipped, rugged face. “Oh, my God! Oh, I’m— *Jesus!*”

She was tugging at her sunglasses, flustered, and immediately pushing them back as the sad, dark eyes probed hers.

“I should have told you that I wouldn’t be in uniform. Sorry.”

His voice was cradling, stripping her of burden, as his powerful hands clasped gently together. They were large and yet sensitive: veined Michelangelos. Chris felt her gaze somehow drawn to them instantly.

“I thought it would be much less conspicuous,” he continued. “You seemed so concerned about keeping this quiet.”

“Guess I should have been concerned about not making such an ass of myself,” she retorted, quickly fumbling through her purse. “I just thought you were—”

“Human?” he interjected with a smile.

“I knew *that* when I saw you one day on the campus,” she said, as she searched now in the pockets of her suit. “That’s why I called. You seemed human.” She looked up and saw him staring at her hands. “Got a cigarette, Father?”

He reached into the pocket of his shirt. “Can you go a nonfilter?”

“Right now I’d smoke rope.”

He tapped out a Camel from the packet. “On my allowance, I frequently do.”

“Vow of poverty,” she murmured as she slipped out the cigarette, smiling tightly.

“A vow of poverty has uses,” he commented, reaching in his pocket for matches.

“Like what?”

“Makes rope taste better.” Again, a half smile as he watched her hand holding the cigarette. It trembled. He was the cigarette wavering in quick, erratic jumps, and without pausing, he took it from her fingers and put it up to his mouth. He lit it, his hands cupped around the match. He puffed. Gave the cigarette back to Chris, his eyes on the cars passing over the bridge. “Lots easier. Breeze from the traffic,” he told her.

“Thanks, Father.”

Chris looked at him appraisingly, with gratitude, even with hope. She knew what he’d done. She watched as he lit up a Camel for himself. He forgot to cup his hands. As he exhaled, they watched leaned an elbow on the parapet.

“Where are you from, Father Karras? Originally.”

“New York.”

“Me too. Wouldn’t ever go back, though. Would you?”

Karras fought down the rise in his throat. “No, I wouldn’t.” He forced a smile. “But I don’t have to make those decisions.”

“God, I’m dumb. You’re a priest. You have to go where they send you.”

“That’s right.”

“How’d a shrink ever get to be a priest?” she asked.

He was anxious to know what the urgent problem was that she’d mentioned when she telephoned. She was feeling her way, he sensed—toward what? He must not prod. It would come... it would come.

“It’s the other way around,” he corrected her gently. “The Society—”

“Who?”

“The Society of Jesus. Jesuit is short for that.”

“Oh, I see.”

“The Society sent me through medical school and through psychiatric training.”

“Where?”

“Oh, well, Harvard; Johns Hopkins; Bellevue.”

He was suddenly aware that he wanted to impress her. Why? he wondered; and immediately saw the answer in the slums of his boyhood; in the balconies of theaters on the Lower East Side. Little Dimmy with a movie star.

“Not bad,” she said appraisingly, nodding her head.

“We don’t take vows of *mental* poverty.”

She sensed an irritation; shrugged; turned front, facing out to the river. “Look, it’s just that I don’t know you, and...” She dragged on the cigarette, long and deep, and then exhaled, crushing out the butt on the parapet. “You’re a friend of Father Dyer’s, that right?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Pretty close?”

“Pretty close.”

“Did he talk about the party?”

“At your house?”

“At my house.”

“Yes, he said you seemed human.”

She missed it; or ignored it. “Did he talk about my daughter?”

“No, I didn’t know you had one.”

“She’s twelve. He didn’t mention her?”

“No.”

“He didn’t tell you what she did?”

“He never mentioned her.”

“Priests keep a pretty tight mouth then; that right?”

“That depends,” answered Karras.

“On what?”

“On the priest.”

At the fringe of his awareness drifted a warning about women with neurotic attractions to priests who desired, unconsciously and under the guise of some other problem, to seduce the unattainable.

“Look, I mean like confession. You’re not allowed to talk about it, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And outside of confession?” she asked him. “I mean, what if some...” Her hands were now agitated; fluttering. “I’m curious. I... No. No, I’d really like to know. I mean, what if a person, let’s say, was a criminal, like maybe a murderer or something, you know? If he came to you for help, would you have to turn him in?”

Was she seeking instruction? Was she clearing off doubts in the way of conversion? There were people, Karras knew, who approached salvation as if it were pg 235