

ONE

Leaning against the wall of ancient stone to catch his breath, Richard Hennessy felt like a Roman centurion hot from battle. Charlton Heston or Robert Taylor clad in gleaming armor in some 1950s Technicolor epic. Panting, he blinked the salt from his eyes, watching tears of perspiration fall from his brow and spatter the cream-colored rock at his feet. Tensing his muscles, he knelt to grasp the twenty-pound block with gloved hands. Straining like Samson in the sun, he rose on aching knees and wedged the last stone into place.

Finished.

Stepping back, he rested against the solid trunk of a century-old oak and dug into the breast pocket of his army shirt for a cigarette. Lighting a Lucky, he tossed the spent match aside with the cavalier gesture of a combat-weary Van Johnson.

Finished.

Gazing at the wall, he felt the stiffness gathering in his neck and shoulders. It had been a long day of brutish work. Laying the last tier had been a basic, repetitive, slavish job. An Old Testament labor robbing him of strength, draining him of thought. Absorbed with his task, his mind was free of memory, free of care. His world shrank to a few square feet, to the rhythmic lifting and placing of stone blocks that shimmered in the June sun like slabs of ice. Drugged with work, he forgot everything else – business, money, death, politics, sex, pollution, old age, taxes, loneliness, his soul. It was mind-numbing and addictive. He'd been at it a full week.

Waking at first light, he set to work, moving his quota of rock. Except for meals – a handful of baby carrots, a slice of cold beef, a wedge of Irish cheddar, or a white flesh nectarine – he worked without pause til past eight. At dusk, placid with fatigue, he fell into dreamless sleep – without pills or a drink. The next day he began again, his labor unchanged. It was a simple routine, one day blending into another, like Hemingway's old man heading out to sea again and again. For centuries billions had lived this way, toiling, digging, working, building, hacking at the earth for naked survival, laboring with the rise

and fall of the sun, passing through life with no more consciousness than cattle. It must have stunted even their dreams.

For Richard, this work had been a holiday, a welcome escape. On the first day he carried a transistor radio and listened to the hourly news reports, pausing to catch the market quotations. But he gave that up on Tuesday, not wanting the experience to be tainted by unemployment statistics and baseball scores. He wanted a respite, a clean break from everything. For hours at a time, especially when he worked on the section of wall cutting through the grove, Richard could even forget what country he was in. Amid the thick undergrowth, under a canopy of trees, he could have been building the Burma Road or digging a tank trap to defend Danzig. He cherished these hours laboring under the windswept trees more than a cruise to Rio or a week in Antibes.

What started as a backyard project had become an obsession, a challenge, an Olympic event. Richard began working on the wall one Saturday on a whim when a tennis game fell through. He planned to devote weekends to it, hoping to finish by the end of July. He laid out the foundation, ran plumb lines, arranged his supplies. The landscaping crew could have easily completed the job in a few days. But Richard was determined to build it himself. Coming home from the office, he changed into sun-faded fatigues and went to work, stacking block after block. One after another.

Then, suddenly on Sunday, he decided to take a full week off and work non-stop until the wall was finished. He made calls, canceled appointments, and postponed meetings to clear his schedule. He gave his housekeeper and his au pair the week off, so he could be alone. It was a working vacation, a campaign, a mission, a marathon. Building the wall was a massive task for one man. And the work was solid and physical. A test of will, a proof of strength. Better than a week in a spa.

All over America middle-aged executives took on jobs a collier would shun. Brokers, arbitragers, attorneys, and Congressmen cleared brush, split rails, dug wells, scraped barnacles. It was brute labor as joy. *Kraft Durch Freude*. The work was authentic, tactile, and lasting. It gave them something genuine, something real to point to. *I built that boat. I planted those trees. I made it myself. With my own hands.* It was not like an appointment or a sales pitch. They were happy men with a batch of cement.

Richard was building a wall against doubt, against age, against death. It was a testament of his endurance, his concentration, his vigor. Proof he wasn't old, wasn't sick, wasn't slipping. No one with a trace of Alzheimer's or arteriosclerosis could manage this feat. And no one with AIDS, he was convinced, would have the stamina for this job.

The radio newscasts on the first day unsettled him. Waiting out of habit for the business news, he had to endure reports of earthquakes, celebrity deaths, famines, and wars. The Gulf War euphoria, like a drug high or a sexual escapade, though intense, had worn off. In February the city fluttered with flags and yellow ribbons. But now, just four months later, there was new trouble in Iraq. Problems with North Korea. Bombs exploding in London and Belgrade. Stirrings in China. Strange messages flashing from the crumbling Soviet empire. In contrast, his wall seemed foolish, fragile, thin, and temporary. The local news was less reassuring. The litany of tavern shootings, child beatings, and gang rapes swelled in warm weather. As soon as June arrived, Third World terror erupted among the urban Calibans. Husbands battered wives. Mothers slew infants. Drug gangs shot up school buses. A headless woman had been found in a city

park, her torso branded with Satanic symbols. Children had carried off her shoes as souvenirs.

That first day he had eaten lunch in the house. Gourmet salads. Grilled salmon and organic vegetables. But dining in air-conditioned comfort behind his Monet surrounded by Danish highboys with their English china and silver tea services felt like cheating. And he never wanted to cheat himself of any experience.

So on Tuesday he packed fruit, crackers, a wedge of cheese, bottles of Perrier, and chewing gum in a small knapsack and spent the entire day in the yard. He ate lunch and dinner in the shadow of his wall. Out of sight of the twenty-room house, invisible to neighbors, he imagined himself exploring the Amazon, prospecting for treasure. If he felt childish, he reminded himself of the tax attorneys and cardiac surgeons who extolled the virtues of Outward Bound. Civilized man craved primitive hazards, trading wall-to-wall carpeting, French roast coffee, and paneled suites for mosquito-infested grasslands, flesh cutting rock, and throat-burning deserts because the suffering was real. Physical pain had texture, limits, depth – not like the psychic pain of audits, budget cuts, leverage buyouts, and credit denials.

Grinding out his cigarette, Richard reached for his canteen. It had been left in the sun. The water was warm and metallic. The pool with its well-stocked bar was less than fifty yards away. But Richard sipped the rust-flavored water, savoring its bitter taste, a ritual link to soldiers and explorers he read about as a child. So, too, with the Lucky Strikes. He was never much of a smoker. He puffed on cigarettes in college to look older and now occasionally celebrated New Year's Eve or a Big Deal with a thirty-dollar cigar.

But on Sunday he bought a pack for four-fifty at the Qwik Mart. In Madison they had cost twenty cents. Rationing his smokes like a GI, the pack had lasted six days. The mouth-burning cigarettes linked him to the heroes of his youth. Humphrey Bogart and John Hodiak. Alan Ladd and Kirk Douglas.

Richard collected his tools and peeled off the heavy work gloves. Hating calluses, he coated his palms with lotion every few hours. He touched the back of his neck, tender despite liberal amounts of Hawaiian sunscreen. He had gone through two bottles, covering himself to avoid sunburn, wrinkles, cancer. He wore sunglasses to screen out cataract-causing ultra-violet rays. The sun, experts warned him, could be deadly. As a boy, the family doctor had advocated healthy doses of sunshine as a source of vitamin D. A good tan was the emblem of health. Sunlamps were prescribed for dark Wisconsin winters. Magazines showed goggled soldiers and sailors getting treatments in underground bunkers and submarines. Now his dermatologist told him that skin had "memory." Like the psyche, it retained and magnified old injuries. Even childhood sunburns could be dangerous, the damage stored until cancer levels were reached. "Remember Reagan's nose," Dr. Smithkin advised. "With the steady erosion of the ozone layer, skin cancer will increase in the future. It pays to be pasty."

Richard patted his wall. It was an achievement he would talk about for years. Every block had been laid by hand. His hand. When he first touched the cream-colored blocks in the May sunlight, he knew they would only truly belong to him if he did the work himself. They deserved special handling, a personal commitment. After all, these were no common bricks. They had been pulled from an ancient road in Italy and brought to America by immigrants. Roman slaves had squared them with crude chisels before the birth of Christ. For over a century they had formed the façade of St. Mary's on Fifth Street. Now the stones were his. He acquired them in September when the church was slated for

demolition. The aging Italians were eager to leave their African neighborhood for a clean, energy-efficient A-frame in the suburbs. The church would not be missed. A nightclub next door wanted the lot. "Safe parking this side of the river," the owner told Richard, "is a better draw than nude dancers and free Korbel." Armed guards and metal detectors at the door had been mandatory for years.

Walking around the soot-stained church in October, Richard made notes and scribbled green checks. He wanted the stones to guard his northern property line. A Roman bulwark. A royal defense. The wall, however, was purely a decorative screen camouflaging a ditch.

Everyone with North Shore property was installing drainage systems to stem erosion. Standing water, consultants warned, weakened their land. Ominous pools had formed between many of the houses. Lawns sank. Garden ornaments listed and toppled. Swimming pools cracked. Docks buckled, threatening to collapse. The bluffs were crumbling, sliding into the lake. A neighbor to the north lost twenty feet during a single storm. Slabs of earth washed away, leaving muddy coves. State engineers conducted surveys, detailing the inevitable "spreading action" of the Great Lakes. Private contractors followed, making costly recommendations.

Richard had his drains dug in April, as soon as the earth thawed. A cement trough ran the length of his property, carrying runoff water to the lake. Rather than disguise this gutter with privet hedges or banked flowerbeds like his neighbors, Richard envisioned a stone wall. Taking pictures of St. Mary's, he impatiently waited for the church to be pulled down so the stones could be broken free, steam cleaned, and delivered. Over the winter he filled legal pads with sketches while killing time in airport lounges, hotel lobbies, shareholder's meetings, Dublin pubs, even in a relic of an Amtrak bar car rocking through the Jersey pinelands. He imagined stone benches, fluted columns, even a gazebo. But tramping his muddy grounds in late March, he examined his carefully penciled designs and tore them up. Using a fountain pen, he made a fast outline on the back of an E. F. Hutton envelop. A simple wall topped with a few columns. Nothing more. Anything else would be tasteless, overblown, gauche. Southside Milwaukee Liberace kitsch. He wanted his wall to blend into the landscape with the subtle majesty of a mountain range. A symbol of quiet strength and masculinity.

Richard gathered the green Perrier bottles littering the ground like hand grenades. A day's supply was an armful. He walked to the end of the wall abutting a five-foot boulder and arranged them in a small pyramid. A carnival target for a future boy with a stone. A boy unborn. How long would they remain here, seen only by squirrels and birds? The boulder and its sheltering trees formed a natural fort. A child had played here decades before. Laying the foundation for the wall, Richard had unearthed a small tomahawk. For a moment he thought he had discovered an Indian artifact, dropped perhaps by an Iroquois brave crouching in the brush to watch British shore parties emerge from the *Felicity* that anchored in his cove in 1779. But the rotting handle held only a shred of gray rubber instead of sharpened slate. Underneath were other boyhood treasures – Depression-era bottle caps, a toy Packard, a rusty Junior G-man badge. Fragments of a lost childhood. Richard examined them carefully in the sunlight. Memories of his own boyhood swept over him, and he hastily reburied the relics.

He glanced at the small mound of fresh earth, then jogged along the wall, pausing to gather up bits of stone, a whiskbroom, a broken hammer, and toss them into the brush. Discoveries for future explorers. Smoothing the leftover mortar in a dented bucket, he

wrote the date with the point of a trowel – 6/21/91 – added his initials RH, drew a shamrock, then inserted the blade in the middle to set.

Excalibur!

Discovering a remaining Perrier bottle, he hurled it over the bluff and ran to the edge to watch it splash into the lake a hundred feet below. It bobbed comically back and forth like a miniature buoy, glinting in the sunlight until it filled with water and sank. God knows what debris lay at the bottom of Lake Michigan. Nearly a thousand ships – skiffs, canoes, yachts, cabin cruisers, ore barges, ferries, Polish freighters, Nigerian tankers. And the rest – old tires by the thousands, wrecked cars, soup cans, discarded televisions, the sludge of millions. Amid all this, the famed skeletons of Chicago mobsters standing on cement pedestals like giant trophies.

The amount of refuse he could generate in a single day while “roughing it” was amazing. An environmentalist once suggested that all the trash people produced in their lifetimes should be piled atop their graves. Only those with the shortest stacks would be allowed into heaven. Under these rules, Richard was doomed. His refuse heap would reach the moon. Nearly twenty junked cars, two crashed speedboats, half a dozen stereos, blemished furniture, Underwood typewriters, glassware, lighting fixtures, ropes of neckties, spools of film, cameras, dark room supplies, old projectors, knots of condoms, tons of paper, Jameson bottles, stacks of *Wall Street Journals* and *Time* magazines, columns of worn tires and scratched 78’s, rag mountains of clothes, water-stained books, cat toys, theatre programs, and pencil stubs. Mardi Gras tokens. St. Patrick’s Day plumage. Tattered shamrocks. Check stubs. Broken adding machines. Dial phones. Discarded mimeograph supplies. Eight track tapes. Thermofaxes. Telephone books. Volumes of outdated regulations. Boxes of calendars, business cards, notebooks, tax forms, memos, old telegrams, Faxes by the yard. Hundreds of ballpoint pens. Coke bottles by the ton. Beer bottles and wine bottles bearing labels in German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Japanese. A leisure suit bought in Vegas on a whim and never worn. Bashed in radios. Legal pads. Hundreds of shoes. Spark plugs and razor blades. Teddy bears and chewing gum. Enough to fill a stadium.

The wall, clean and cream-colored, blazed in the afternoon sun. He made mental notes where he would plant ivy. A few vines would soften its stark lines, helping it blend into the trees. Within a year or two the wall would look like something that had been standing for a thousand years. A Roman ruin. It would change the whole perspective of his property, giving visitors the impression they were overlooking the Mediterranean instead of Lake Michigan.

Future real estate brochures would feature pictures of the wall. But Richard had no plans of selling. Not after thirty-five years. Not after the tens of thousands he spent every few years on restorations and improvements. Just last fall the entire second floor had been remodeled. The house rang with workmen’s hammers and curses for weeks. Temporarily living in the poolside guest house, Richard pored over blueprints like an exiled monarch plotting a coup.

The house was one of the finest in Bayside. Richard kept photos in his briefcase. Aerial shots to show friends in the Hamptons and Nice. Calculating what this estate would cost on Long Island or the Riviera, they understood his decision to stay in Milwaukee. Modeled after a French chateau, the house’s blue slate mansard roof and cream brick

contrasted sharply with the dark stone and heavy timber of its Tudor neighbors. Chateau Hennessey stood out like a great white wedding cake against the wide blue lake.

Richard hungered for this house as soon as it came on the market. The 1920s Norman Hotel de Ville replica made tangible his imaginary link to the fabled Hennesseys – the Wild Geese of the great Irish Diaspora who fled the Emerald Isle and regained their lost nobility on French soil. His genealogist could discern only vague and fictitious traces to the benedaled Irish generals who dazzled the jaded aristocrats of Versailles with their knowledge of cognac and horses. But Richard fostered the illusion with frequent trips to Ireland and the South of France. His stationery, business card, and the signs on all his businesses mimicked the lettering of the liquor label. He never made open claims, but everyone assumed the connection. In fact, he disliked the taste of cognac. It reminded him of cough syrup. But every Christmas and St. Patrick's Day Richard sent a score of personalized Hennessey decanters to friends, clients, and celebrities. It was all a masquerade started by his father to camouflage their hooligan origins.

There was nothing royal about Patrick and Bridget Hennessey, evicted tenant farmers, who left Monaghan and landed in Five Points in '51 and raised a rude tribe of maids and muckers. Tough micks, they battled their way out of the slums through pimping and petty theft. The real money came during the beer wars of the Twenties. Flush with cash and thirsting for respectability, the Hennesseys sent their sons to Yale who made even more loot trading stock certificates, genuine and forged, in gangster gauche offices that sprang up like neon brothels amid the staid Anglo Saxon brokerage houses. Richard's grandfather fled New York to avoid a blizzard of indictments his Tammany friends could not fix. He settled in Chicago, banking and bootlegging, sending his son eighty miles north to run satellite operations in Milwaukee. Prohibition over, Hennessey and Son went into smokestack respectability, buying and building tool and die plants, printing shops, and factories. Richard could remember being led by his father into hot, throbbing buildings with dusty windows and choking soot where wretched men in blackened overalls shouted over the drum of heavy presses. Clutching a teddy bear, he tripped alongside his father, shaking with fear. The steel floor vibrated under his Buster Browns. Burning hearths sprinkled his blue blazer with sparks. But even then he understood these terrible places were important, almost sacred. They made money.

Looking at his house in the sunlight, Richard was convinced it was the most beautiful one on the bay. It stood out against his neighbors' gloomy castles and dour mansions, that collective expression of a generation – immigrant fantasies constructed by gentleman bootleggers, tool and die kings, and socially prominent gynecologists craving Old World dignity. Among the Rhine castles and English country houses were neo-classic temples. Draped with flags for the Fourth of July, they resembled miniature embassies. Transplanted Southerners had constructed columned *Gone with the Wind* plantation houses with sweeping verandas. There was also the Semmler home, a Bauhaus cube. A controversy in 1928, it was now a time-stained, age-cracked cement and glass oddity obscured by dying elms. Architecture students came each spring and dutifully took pictures.

Old people lived in most of the great houses, the energetic builders' impoverished grandchildren. Beset by inflation their trust funds could never anticipate, they kept to themselves. Every now and then the paramedics arrived in their blinking white truck, announcing that soon another house would go on the market. Young people with more money and more cars moved in. They gave parties and raised hell. The old folks felt

invaded and protested to the village board, adding shaky paragraphs to their customary tax complaint letters. They made plaintive calls to attorneys and the police, but rarely left their screened porches and overgrown gardens. The new residents tore up hedges, dug swimming pools, erected satellite dishes, had children, and generally went broke in five years. Their tenure was brief. Divorce and balloon payments sent them packing to downtown condos and suburban colonials. One couple went to prison, nabbed in a coke raid. Richard happened to be home the morning four squad cars swept into his neighbor's drive. Helmeted cops and self-important DEA agents in three-piece suits crashed through the front door, seizing George and Judy Cardoza in their hot tub. Half a dozen video boxes containing five kilos were found in their entertainment center. George's State Street real estate office held twenty more.

The descendants of bootleggers, labor bullies, and high society abortionists were appalled and satisfied. The old folks were glad to see the Cardozas go. They were loud, brash, and vulgar. Their BMWs had gold wheel covers and foam dice. Their whorey teenage daughters rode Harleys and sported tattoos. Richard was sad to see them leave. George traveled a great deal, and a lonely Judy was a steady bed partner. Mahmoud Mansur, an Iranian, picked up the house for six hundred and fifty thousand at an IRS auction and moved in. He was fifty and quiet. The old folks welcomed him, mistaking him for some kind of Frenchman.

Richard liked his young neighbors. They blocked his driveway. They never returned the tools they borrowed. They blasted the summer nights with rock music. But the young sex-charged couples with cash brought life to the old houses. Their newly decorated homes were refreshing to visit, far less depressing than the dried plants and faded sofas cluttering the shadowy living rooms inhabited by the old folks. Lonely widows continually invited him over for tea. They wanted company. They called Richard, panicked by blown fuses and leaking pipes. Surviving on fixed incomes, they dreaded plumber estimates more than doctor bills. As he worked on their wires and pipes, they griped about the noise, the traffic, those awful motorcycles, and especially Leeza Nezgod who was spotted swimming topless with her teenage stepson. They wanted Richard to "do something" and "talk to them." On every occasion, Richard defended the newcomers, diplomatically siding with them on every issue even though they rarely invited him to any of their expensively catered parties. He wanted to maintain a distinguishable gulf between himself and the dowagers fussing over teapots and quilts. Richard always made it a point to talk about his latest business ventures, not to impress them, but to make sure the old ladies understood that he was not retired.

Walking toward the house, Richard collected the rest of his tools and locked them in a small garden shed hidden by shrubs before taking a last look at his wall.

Finished.

He had accomplished his task with two days to spare. The rest of the weekend was suddenly and unexpectedly open. The prospect was unsettling, troubling. He felt like an athlete who had won a solo marathon or a pilot landing on an empty airfield after breaking a speed record. Alone and afraid. Immediately, there was the inevitable let down, the sudden pull of empty, gnawing depression. It was like after finishing with a woman or closing a business deal. The rush of elation, accomplishment, excitement, and release crashed into haunting loneliness and confusion. *What next? What next?* He was swept with inexplicable anxiety. At moments like this he felt an almost out of body experience,

as if he were watching himself from above, seeing himself estranged from his environment, lost, alone, and vulnerable. His lip trembled. His eyes teared. Suddenly, so suddenly, all his money, his businesses and buildings, his connections brought him no security or comfort.

Why?

Richard normally went through life like a man on an escalator, soaring upward, getting stronger and richer every day. Life was endless progress of plans, parties, adventures, appointments, goals, achievements, friends, money, trips, fun, women, workouts, and good health. He lived with confidence and bearing, flying to foreign countries and negotiating deals in foreign languages. He had shared drinks with mobsters and made men. He met with stars and senators with ease. He argued cases and took on critics with poise. Then, without warning, he was stricken with overwhelming gloom, fear, loss, and loneliness. It might come over him behind the wheel of his car, at his desk, or at home. And abruptly everything that gave him comfort, security, and identity melted away, leaving him in panic. The panic of an actor forgetting his lines, a driver skidding on ice. A disabling loss of control and direction. *What next? What next?*

Seeking a diversion, he turned to Kim, his three-year-old Siamese lying on a chaise lounge. Utterly feline, she spent her summer afternoons basking by the pool, napping and grooming herself, aloof and self-absorbed as an Übermodel. She ignored Richard until she wanted food or affection, then she would jump into his lap or twist around his ankles, chattering and whining. At night she slept beside him, climbing onto his shoulder to nuzzle his cheek. She resented female visitors. Jealous, she spat and hissed at his lovers. Alessandra detested her. The first night she spent at Richard's house, Kim slipped into the bedroom while they slept and dragged her beaded cocktail dress downstairs, leaving it by the kitchen door. In retaliation, Alessandra locked up her teddy bears. His veterinarian explained he had taken her too young, "She wasn't fully weaned. She never bonded with other cats. The house is her territory. She sees other females as a threat." She recommended kitty daycare.

This Kim was his sixth Kim, a link to the Siamese kitten his mother gave him for Christmas when he was five. He could remember his mother setting the red and white box in front of him and his surprise when the box began to move. His mother lifted the lid, and a toy-like kitten with sky-blue eyes gazed up at him. They stared at each other in mutual wonder.

His mother placed the kitten on the floor before him. "Did you ever see a kitty with blue eyes? She's from Siam. That's near China. She's a magic cat. If you listen to her, she will talk to you in Chinese."

Richard listened as the kitten walked around the Christmas tree making high chattering noises. "See," his mother smiled, "she's talking to you in her secret language."

All winter he rushed home from kindergarten to play with Kim in the great living room, giving her teddy bears to wrestle, listening to her strange chatter as she slinked around furniture. He crawled after her, and they often spent cold January afternoons behind the sofa near the heat register playing with puppets and string. His mother joined their games. When Kim took a nap, they put on winter coats and went into the back yard to make snow angels. Waving his arms up and down in the fresh snow, he gazed skyward as his breath steamed like a locomotive.

Months later, in the summer, after his mother left, the cat was his lone friend. His sibling and only solace. He slept with her, played with her, sat by the window waiting with her, wept with her, and listened to her sing-song chatter, wondering if she knew when their mother was coming back.

Since then he had owned a Siamese named Kim who had to resemble that first Siamese who stared at him under a Christmas tree in 1935. How could he explain to anyone that she was the only living link to his mother, who in his mind always remained twenty-four, blonde, beautiful, and missing. Each time his cat died or had to be put to sleep, he made frantic calls to breeders, fretting like an adoptive parent over stacks of photos sent from Chicago and California until he found one with the right markings. He agonized each time. Making calls, making trips. Examining and selecting until he found the right one. Flying to San Francisco or Boston to bring her home. She had to be perfect.

To his neighbors, this obsession was wholly understandable. Animal worship was central to lives of Baysiders. Nearly each house on Chatsworth Lane was presided over by a Persian, a Maltese, a Russian blue, or an Akita. Just as they rarely called their children “kids,” Baysiders referred to their animal companions by breed or name. No one talked about “dogs” or “cats.” And no one dared call a pet Fido or Fluffy. The animals of Chatsworth Lane often had last names, some of them hyphenated. The Bernsteins had a Bichon named Jean-Claude St. Subber. His dog show trophies were displayed in a glass case along with Sid Bernstein’s law degree and his wife’s Olympic bronze medal. Their deadbeat children, dropouts and disappointments both, were not represented at all.

The animals on Chatsworth Lane enjoyed pampered lives. Surgically neutered, they dwelled mostly indoors, carrying out their instinctual passion for hunting by playing hide-and-seek in air-conditioned parlors. In winter they swam in heated pools. Outside, they tentatively gamboled through manicured lawns and ornamental gardens, separated from other animals. Their owners shielded them from wild creatures – a rabbit or squirrel – that might have fleas or viruses. Kim lived in fear of the big black crows that strutted across the lawn and squawked in the trees. Terrified of aerial assault, she would drop her dignified hauteur and race into the house when they flew overhead. Richard installed an electric pet door that opened when a sensor detected the chip in her collar. Inside she had teddy bears to play with. The au pair lined them up on a window seat each morning. Often when Richard returned home he found Kim sleeping on the sofa, the casualties of her sham battle strewn throughout the house. A squad of teddy bears would be tossed about the dining room. Others had been carried off and left in upstairs bedrooms, the bar, the laundry room. Waking, she would whine at the window seat until they were put back in place to await her next campaign.

All the Bayside pets were spoiled neurotics. Having no concepts of mortgages and property taxes, they assumed possession of the great houses, leaving their territorial scents on sofas and stereos. They lived here all the time. Their owners, those hulking two-legged creatures that changed their skins and altered their scents and came and went at odd hours, were tolerated as useful servants. They brought food, took them for walks, supplied toys, and delivered fresh litter. Other humans trimmed their lawns, cleaned their pools, repaired their roofs. The pets bore no relation to their wild cousins who froze and starved beyond their picture windows.

Baysiders, who regularly whined about their HMO’s and their grandmothers’ nursing home bills, spared no expense for their pets. The pricey Bayside Animal Hospital, worthy of a La Jolla cosmetic surgeon, offered the latest diagnostic and therapeutic

advances. While their caregivers sipped cappuccino, read *Architectural Digest*, and listened to NPR, their dogs and cats were given state of the art ultrasound, endoscopic, and CAT-scan examinations. Laser surgery corrected canine cataracts, high-pitched energy waves pulverized feline kidney stones, and acupuncture therapy aided recuperation following hip replacement surgery. And when nothing more could be done, when age or terminal disease rendered them ill, infirm, wasted, suffering, they were – with so much more humanity and dignity than would ever be granted their owners – gently euthanized. Sedated then given lethal injections, they passed away, often in the arms of their sobbing owners, wrapped in a favorite blanket and surrounded by chew toys.

Then their embalmed or cremated remains were taken to Ravencrest a half-mile away. The iron gates of the pet cemetery bore silhouettes of a cat and terrier bowing in prayer. Beyond, trimmed lawns rolled to a sweeping view of the lake. Baysiders bestowed their religious affiliations onto their pets so that Persians and poodles sought their eternal rest beneath statues of St. Francis, Presbyterian crosses, and black marble slabs emblazoned with the Star of David. Newer monuments bore inscriptions in Arabic and Korean. Flowers were brought often. Sad children left drawings and stuffed animals. One grave even bore an American flag. King, a German shepherd, was a World War II veteran, having served K-9 duty in the South Pacific. Hit by Japanese shrapnel, he pulled two wounded Marines to safety before collapsing from loss of blood. Rescued by medics, he survived the war and worked for the Bayside Police. Shot by a burglary suspect in 1948, he was given a funeral covered by *The March of Time* and *Life*. Children, who had never heard of Patton or Eisenhower, remembered King and wrote essays about him for Memorial Day. Republican parents used the occasion to remind them that it was Franklin Roosevelt who stripped army dogs of their battlefield decorations.

All this was rather pagan, almost Egyptian. Yet even Bayside clerics fell under its spell. His own minister had stayed up nights nursing her cat through chemotherapy. Last summer a local rabbi postponed his annual trip to Israel until his dachshund recovered from spinal surgery.

Money and animals were the only things Baysiders had in common. Richard recalled the tense summer of 1967 when the first black families moved in. Riots had erupted in the inner city, and the old folks, middle aged even then, felt violated. But the tension was eased the moment they saw Earlene Johnson walking her poodle and Booker Wilson brushing his collie. Within two days, neighbors were bringing over brownies and their own pets, who carried out intraspecies greetings under the watchful eyes of their embarrassed owners. It all reaffirmed Richard's view Bayside was the most democratic neighborhood in the city. It did not matter whether you were male or female, young or old, Jew or Gentile, gay or straight – just as long as you earned at least five hundred thousand a year, voted Republican, and loved pets more than children.

Richard knelt and stroked Kim's head. She purred slightly, lifting her chin so he could scratch her neck. Loneliness still pulled at him. Gazing into Kim's diamond blue eyes, his mother came to mind. Her face floated in his memory like the star from some long ago film. A chill emptiness ran through him. He wanted, needed someone tonight. It was Friday, and he could party all weekend. Phone numbers, addresses, and nightclubs came to mind. He maintained a mental Rolodex of potential partners constantly updated and ready for use. There were plenty of unhappily married North Shore wives and frustrated yacht club divorcees just a call away. They, too, had their moments of vulnerability. If needed, he could make a fast trip to Vegas or New York. *Why not?*

Richard's womanizing was driven less by lust than loneliness, a need for reassurance and acceptance far more than sex. What he sought was escape, a momentary oasis from anxiety and emptiness. Entering a woman always felt more like surrender than conquest. And often an encounter never had to go beyond a drink or a shared joke to shake his mood and make him feel whole again. More than once in a hotel in Paris or a bar in Pittsburgh he slipped C-notes under a napkin to a hooker looking for a date, paying them to simply sit next to him, only needing their well-worn jokes and catty gossip to fill the emptiness. Until the next time.

His mind returned to the wall. Years from now, he thought, I will remember this week. More than any vacation this week had restored and revitalized him. But whom would it impress? It was, after all, only a glorified backyard project. What woman would lie next to him and care? Would Alessandra when she returned from Brasilia? And who was she with now?

Ignoring the pain in his knees, Richard broke into a short run to shake his mood. Reaching the pool terrace, he turned and glanced at the wall. It added to the view of the lake. From the pool the horizon was captivating. Visitors expecting a private beach below, however, would be disappointed if they walked to the edge of the bluff. Instead of gazing upon a white strand of raked sand, they would see a muddy cliff scored by gullies leading to a dirty stone shore littered with driftwood and the shiny remains of thousands of dead fish. It was late June and silvery alewives gave up the ghost and washed onshore in bloated waves.

I'll tackle the beach next, Richard thought. His spirits lifted as he envisioned a new project. He could build a boathouse. A trim blue and white chalet with Irish tricolors, a loft bar, and a rooftop deck for sunbathing. He could moor a motorboat down there. A trim blue Sundancer to cut across the bay to the yacht club so he could go sailing without fighting the summer traffic on Lake Drive. Boulders could buttress the shore. Something could be done about the fish. Nets perhaps. Someone at the yacht club or some professor would know. A few phone calls would fix it. And sand. Tons of white sand imported from Florida or Kuwait could be poured along the shore to create a real beach. He could add a cabana and erect striped awnings or tents. He thought of Alessandra and her friends, topless in tiny thongs, sipping drinks and gazing at his yacht anchored offshore. *Why not?*

He glanced at his watch. Three o'clock. The rest of the afternoon and the whole of the evening lay before him, open and free. It was Friday, and he could celebrate all weekend. He imagined himself showing the wall to Alessandra. But perhaps she would not understand, unable to comprehend why he would shun his air-conditioned office to toil in the hot sun like a coolie. Manual work of any kind was anathema to people from the Third World. No Arab sheik or Hong Kong trader could fathom why Churchill or Jefferson relaxed by laying bricks. Would a girl who'd never done laundry or even loaded a dishwasher before coming to America appreciate his sense of accomplishment? Would building the wall demonstrate his vigor and ingenuity or render him petty and eccentric in her eyes?

He knew what would impress Alessandra. A weekend in San Francisco. She loved the Mark Hopkins and dining with friends on Russian Hill. Delighted with trips and gifts, Alessandra became excited, uninhibited, outright whorey. The demure Latin lady sipped brandy and became tipsy, whispering dirty little suggestions in bargirl English. Her long hair, flawlessly smooth and gleaming black, cascaded over her bust. The smooth

exotic face was pointed as a kitten's. Her silk dresses, skin-tight, were slit to the hip. She was slim but well-busted – a *Playboy* dream girl.

Not like American girls today. Young women now had hard, boyish bodies with tattoos and pierced nipples like Amazon warriors. They pumped iron in gyms and read *The Wall Street Journal* while treading on the Stairmasters they kept next to their computers. A tough breed. Their mothers had given them hard-edged names like Brit, Shannon, Dakota, or Morgan. They snorted coke and downed burning shots of 151 rum without wincing. Half-empty condom boxes shamelessly cluttered their nightstands. Muscular sex partners, they went about the business of sleeping with men the way they managed leverage buyouts. Mounting him like an exercise bike, they ground against him, eyes closed, as if he were not even in the room. Seeking orgasm, they twisted, they sweated, they swore like sailors. No little girl euphemisms for them. Climaxing, they cried out “Jesus Fuck!” and pounded his chest with strong tiny fists. Afterwards, they jumped off, washed, and donned jeans. Fighting off the urge to eat or smoke after sex, they went into action, firing off FAX's and making sales calls. Often they would not look up from their computers but merely wave casually as he dressed and left.

But at sixty-two what else could he want? Young women, he assumed, feared their peers could be infected with AIDS or posed the threat of love and marriage. Men past fifty were safer. A boon for the middle-aged. Separated from their divorced fathers, young women craved paternal guidance. They longed for the pillow talk of stock tips and insider betrayal.

So different from the yacht clubs wives he knew in the Fifties. Sober, they shunned Richard as a playboy, a bad influence on their husbands. Drunk, they called him late at night. Their ice cubes rattling in the background, they made boozy fantasy confessions about pool men and paperboys. They wanted his bachelor insights, wanted to know if a rumored liaison with a friend was true, and if so, what she did in bed, and especially if she gave head.

For the last year it had been Alessandra. She was twenty-six and divorced from her physician husband, a dishonor to her father, a retired general. In the past decade Richard had favored exotic women – Iranians, Africans, Jews, even an English girl. When they left, invariably for a younger partner, he could comfort himself thinking it was because of his race and not his age.

The poolside telephone rang. Calls had interrupted him all week. Toiling like Sisyphus, he was pestered by attorneys and brokers hailing him from plush offices in Sears Tower or the World Trade Center. Other calls came from Denver and Dublin. Invisible wires linked him to the world. In the future, *Time* predicted, all wires would be eliminated. Computers and satellites would enable everyone to call anyone with a small mobile phone. Vacationing executives shooting whitewater rapids would get wrong numbers. Creditors would dun explorers climbing Everest.

“Yes?,” he answered, trying to concentrate. Still disoriented from his labor, he wondered which Hennessy the caller wanted. Was it his broker, his hairdresser, a deacon, or Kim's vet? Like an old-fashioned radio actor, he had a repertoire of voices ready for the caller expecting to be connected to the Hollywood investor, the Milwaukee yachtsman, the Irish philanthropist, the Presbyterian playboy.

“Mr. Hennessy?”

“Yes.”

“Richie, ole man!” The voice boomed, rasping with salesman’s confidence. “How’s it going, guy?”

Damn!

“You coming out to see Johnny tonight? He’s gonna be one hot act. You gotta see this! I’m takin’ him to Vegas next month. It’s a *oppa-tunity* for a smart man. Ground floor *oppa-tunity*. Ground floor.”

Richard had been dodging Sammy Mann all week. But now standing poolside, Richard’s ego was flattered. He felt like a Hollywood producer debating whether or not to grant an audience.

“Still there, Richie?”

“Yes.” He hated being called “Richie,” but on occasion Sammy Mann had proved useful. Despite his shiny suits and oily comb-over, he knew people who knew people, and these tenuous connections rendered Sammy, however distasteful, worthy of consideration.

“Sure you won’t take in the show? I can’t believe Koenig is taking a pass on this.”

“He is in Atlanta until the first.”

“Sure. Sure. Osman might stop by. I sent him a FAX.”

Unlikely. Recently divorced, Osman was probably on his way to Lake Geneva for a weekend with his former accountant, now lover.

“As I stated last week, the manager hires the acts. I only look at the books. On a quarterly basis,” he added, hoping to distance himself further.

“Sure, sure, man. I unnerstand. You’re a bottom-line guy. Red ink. Black ink. Numbers on the page, lights on the board. That’s why I am talking to you. I’m talking investment here. You got vision. A manager don’t. You see the potential down the road. Managers don’t care, see. One bum show – even it’s from a blizzard or a power failure – and you’re out. Myopia. Deadliest disease in America. Short vision. No interest in the long range. Johnny’s got potential. Just needs some backing to make it big, not just in Vegas but on the road and in commercials. I see big potential right there. Plus conventions, product demonstrations, that kind of thing. Ya see my point, Richie?”

“I might be willing to take a look.”

“Johnny goes on at six, eight, ten, and midnight. I’m tossing in two extra shows at no charge. As a favor. Johnny needs more than a week to polish his act, get into the groove. Give us a month run. Same rate as this week. He does well in Vegas, and I will give you a piece of him. See, we remember our friends. Just askin’ three weeks more.”

“Wilson books the acts.” He was already tiring of Sammy Mann’s desperate confidence. There was fear behind the hype. Willy Loman desperation. Anxiety laced his voice like phlegm.

“Of course, of course, but you could make a call. See that it happens. Look, Johnny is no bum steer. No promises now. Just come see him tonight.”

Richard relented. Out of pity, out of guilt, out of charity, out of curiosity, he found it hard to say No to such types. Besides, the aloneness was still tugging at him. Work, even an unpleasant chore, was an excuse to go somewhere, to talk to someone, to engage in something, to fill the emptiness. To be busy. He looked at the pool, the empty yard, the wide-open expanse of the Lake behind him. Memory pulled at him, and sadness, like a flash of angina, swept over him.

“I’ll be out later. Just to take a look. Just a look,” he promised.

“Thank you, Richie. Johnny and I don’t forget our friends. Six months from now he will be playing Vegas. A guy with your connections could do nice for himself. You know, I’ve been knocking around this business twenty-five years, fronting bands and strippers. I got everything riding on Johnny. This is the real deal for me. I appreciate it. And we’ll do right by you. See ya later.”

Richard hung up. The honesty pitch. The last card someone like Sammy had to play. Normally, he would be disinclined to visit the Whisky A Go-Go. Osman, one of his partners, had bought the club a year ago, hoping to turn a bargain into a fast profit. But one buyer after another melted away, stalling for time and complaining about the price. And so they were stuck with the aging club, a dump with a host of problems and ever-thinning profits.

The Whiskey A Go-Go was depressing at any price. In its heyday in ’65 it was a popular discothèque on a major highway. Now bypassed by the Interstate, the county road had become a neglected frontage lane, and the club had degenerated into a truck stop topless bar. Punk bands played on Saturday nights. College kids, suburban bikers, and husbands ducking downtown spots where they might be recognized flirted with the chesty bargirls or hooked up with an over-the-hill stripper for a parking lot romance. But tonight it could be fun. And it was work. He could check the place out and have something to report when he went back to the office on Monday. *Why not?*

First, he needed a hot shower to cleanse himself, then a refreshing swim. Ducking inside the bath house, he caught his reflection in the mirror. Despite the shock of still blond hair and clear blue eyes, the face looking back at him was not young. In his rumpled Banana Republic shirt, he looked more like a sun-burnt Rommel than a recruit. Dust and perspiration highlighted the lines around the eyes and across the brow. It was still a handsome, engaging face. Even weather beaten, it implied power and virility. The neck was reddened but not sinewed, and there was no hint of a double chin. He brushed his hair so it fell across his eyes to capture the boyish Robert Redford look he labored to project. He peeled off his shirt. He looked younger nude. Daily workouts kept him in shape. His flat stomach was sectioned by a hundred sit-ups; the hard male breasts squared by fifty pushups. His legs were rock hard, and his arms firm from thirty minutes on the treadmill and fifteen more pumping iron. He was in good shape, great shape for any man past sixty.

Now, of course, there was sadness. With his shirt off at sixty, he was ripped, hard, a burnished specimen. Some of the thirty-something blondes, with that first blush of age-fear would be turned on. He could read their minds. “If he can look that good at sixty, I have good years left. I still have hope.” But in five years? In eight? What when he was seventy?

Seventy. It had a Biblical finality. Seventy. Old age and death. Seventy. Senility and cancer. Seventy. Sexless nights and days of listless discomfort. Seventy. At seventy you were on a sinking ship, trying to buy time, watching the young take over.

It seemed unfair, especially unfair that he should get old. He had always been young. He had been the youngest boy in the neighborhood, the smallest cousin in family photos, the spoiled kid brother to his older step-sisters. He had been the Son in Hennessey & Son. He had been too young for the draft. Just seventeen when he started college, he was a boy among the vets in their twenties going to Madison on the GI Bill. He was a minor surrounded by men five and ten years older who had fought in battles he’d only seen in newsreels. They had gone places and seen things. And they had tales to tell.

Anzio. Normandy. Bataan. Convoy duty and Neapolitan whorehouses. Richard sipped Cokes and listened to their whisky-fueled stories. His classmates had jumped from burning B17's and driven tanks across North Africa while he studied geometry and played softball. Above all, they shared lurid adventures. They had banged hookers in Siam and screwed strippers in Soho, traded Hershey bars and Lucky Strikes for alley sex with Fascist widows and Japanese college girls. In contrast, Richard's wartime experiences had been limited to bond drives, high school debates about the Second Front, and anxious petting with panting sweater girls who squirmed and moaned but held their skirts down with both hands as they necked. On spring breaks he went overseas with his dad, touring their beachheads and bringing back souvenirs. The vets taught him to drink and gave him his first cigar. They slipped him into Milwaukee nightclubs with fake discharge papers, got him drunk and sobered him up. And they got him laid.

Richard remembered the shabby roadhouse outside Madison. A hangover from Prohibition, it had been commandeered by the vets who erected a banner over the peeling porch: FIFTY-TWO TWENTY CLUB: Civilians Welcome! Inside, tough truckers shot pool in a haze of cigarette smoke as the jukebox pumped out swing and bop tunes. A bosomy Jane Russell in white platform heels hefted pitchers of cold Schlitz. In a back room on a water-stained sofa, she lifted her checkered skirt, handed him a Trojan, and spread her legs in exchange for a ten-dollar bill. She puffed a Chesterfield for the entire minute he took to climax. As soon as he withdrew, she jumped up and trotted behind the bar to fetch more beer. Afterwards, his pals handed him a shot of Old Crow, demanding to know, "How was she?"

Flushed with embarrassment, he choked out a bashful lie, "Great."

On his own he went back on Wednesday afternoons after class and slipped her twenties for more leisurely trysts on her smoke breaks. She chatted about her ex-husband, a former Marine who ran a gas station in Kenosha, and her four-year old who always needed shoes and ran up doctor's bills with sore throats and stomach aches. Sitting at the bar, chewing gum or smoking cigarettes, she was glamorous but as boring as a housewife in a checkout line. Yet she still held for him the thrill and mystery of first-time sex. He gave her cards, flowers, a gold bracelet. She accepted these with practiced smiles and neatly folded his twenties and slipped them into her stocking top. After a few shots, she would nod to the bartender, cast a glance around the bar, then tilt her head toward the back room. Again and again on sagging couch she opened her legs and embraced him with an almost maternal hugs. As soon as he finished, she would give him a hostess smile and tell him her next week's schedule.

But with all these introductions he remained young. He had passed through the war watching movies and playing touch football, his Andy Hardy social life barely hindered by gas rationing. Not knowing how long the war would last, his father had bought him a yellow 1941 Buick convertible before he was old enough to drive. Untouched, the great car stood on blocks in the garage to be waxed and polished until he turned sixteen.

In high school the war dominated the papers and radio reports. Teachers gave speeches, and kids organized paper drives after class. Geography was suddenly important. Everyone studied maps and learned new unpronounceable names. *Guadalcanal* and *Tassafaronga*. *Kolombangara* and *Kwajalein*. Strangely, Richard felt apart from it all. Urgent war bulletins were just lists of strange names he had to listen to while waiting for

Gangbusters and *The Green Hornet*. German-Irish, he bore no animus toward his mother's people and had no loyalty to his father's oppressors.

*Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love.*

It was all a tumult in the clouds, a war fought on distant islands. At home it was about money.

The war revived his father. He made a second fortune in the patriotic pursuits of heat treating, grinding, welding, and stamping. Hennessey & Son doubled in size with government contracts. And, of course, there was more cash to be made in counterfeit ration stamps, bootleg gas cards, and smuggled tires. The war produced hysteria, a money fever, a second Prohibition. And once it was clear that the longed-for invasion of Britain would not take place, the Irish tossed their lot in with the Allies. Like the Milwaukee Germans who put away their swastikas and Bund uniforms, they got down to the very American business of making money. They even did business with the English. His dad shipped truck engines to New York for Lend Lease, then tipped off cousins who had Irishmen on the docks who filled oil pans with shellac and radiators with sea water.

Richard knew little of his father's darker connections or private affairs. He never questioned the source of the new tires that appeared on Hennessey trucks or the stockpiles of copper wire and drums of gasoline that came and went from their garage. And he never asked his father why he left the Church or remarried after his mother left.

Richard began working for his father in college. Hennessey executives, heavy, middle-aged men, were exhausted from wartime production. Richard became their front man, their buyer, their sales rep. He bought. He sold. On spring break his freshman year, he managed a land deal for veterans' housing. The next Christmas he made a fast killing in the TV market, selling bulky sets to Southside taverns for three hundred dollars apiece.

That summer he went to Germany, still broke and bomb-battered from the war. New York dealers supplied lists of things to look for. He traded cases of Scotch for a surplus staff car. Richard attached shamrocks to the metal swastika pennants on the fenders, filled his tank with stolen army gas, and rolled through the ruins of Munich and Dusseldorf, exchanging cartons of Luckies and Camels for porcelain, paintings, wedding rings, and first editions. He shipped home crates of artwork, rugs, and crystal. He sold whiskey to bar owners and demonstrated Milwaukee-built machinery to manufacturers rebuilding plants with Marshall Plan money. And all along the way he was entertained by a chain of women. Older and sophisticated, they were a marked contrast to the Madison bobby soxers who sipped malts and only petted above the waist. These women were experienced and openly sexual. They came to his hotel rooms wearing pre-war lingerie and GI nylons under tattered fur coats. Richard fell in love with SS widows with their Marlene Dietrich voices. Making love in a bomb-shattered house was like something out of *War and Peace*. He was young, clean, innocent, and rich. He spoke enough high school German to get by and bore no hatred. For him the war had been like a football game. If anyone should be sorry, he felt, it had to be the Americans for the bombing. Apologetic, Richard passed out chocolate bars and cigarettes, giving girls' parents canned hams or a jeepload of building supplies to patch up what the Eighth Air Force had done. He was getting laid and getting rich. He was trying to get into the Russian Zone when the news came about his father's plane crash in Ireland. Among the dead were Nazis with doctored

passports. The cargo compartment contained stolen paintings and satchels stuffed with American, Swiss, and British currency. Nevertheless, his father's body was flown home in a tricolor-draped casket. Congressmen sent sympathy cards. His Jewish widow was bereft. Investors lit candles at St. Joseph's. The wake, held at Fitzgerald's, drew two hundred people. Summoned home, Richard became a full partner at twenty.

Today only the youngest of his father's friends were still alive – feeble, stroke-weakened old gentlemen who wintered in Florida and returned north only for shareholders' meetings, aided by doting son-in-laws carrying oxygen tanks. Now Richard was surrounded by younger men. Osman was forty. Koenig just thirty-six. Often – far too often – he was the oldest man in the room.

The hot shower revived him. He was in excellent health. A weekend at the Mayo Clinic in March had established that. His blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol levels were all lower than normal. Blood samples revealed the proper ratio of white and red cells. Doctors complimented him on his lung capacity, his muscle tone, his vigor.

But he was still past sixty.

Stepping from the shower, he slipped on a bathing suit and walked to the pool. Past sixty. Heading to seventy. But younger, he reminded himself than Paul Newman. Younger than Roger Moore. For a moment Steve McQueen came to mind. Richard dismissed the memory of the dead star like a bad investment and dove into the pool.

The water was cool, refreshing. He swam in powerful strokes. Waves slapped the marble lip of the pool, wetting the blue Celtic designs. Floating on his back, he noticed the sky darkening in the West. A storm was brewing inland. A distant siren wailed. Black clouds loomed on the horizon. In the suburbs mothers would be pulling children from inflatable wading pools, fearing lightning. To the East, over the lake, the sun dazzled with California brightness. The sudden shifts in Milwaukee weather intrigued friends from Vegas and Nice. Within ten minutes the temperature on a blistering August afternoon could drop twenty degrees, a cloudless April sky might darken and snow would fall then melt in sudden sunlight.

Treading water, he felt the waves settle into a gentle rolling undulation. For a moment he thought of climbing onto the blue raft for a quick nap. The pool so was restful, so hypnotizing. No doubt he'd be found dead in it someday.

Gatsby.

The telephone rang.

Climbing from the water, he grabbed a towel and answered.

“Richard, do you have the inventory audit?”

“Kleinsdorf faxed it this morning. Do you want it?”

“I could use a copy. I want to bang out the monthly report this weekend. Fax it to me.”

“I'll bring it tonight,” he said, seizing the opportunity to meet with his manager. He enjoyed the company of Phil Royce who oversaw Hennessey's, his favorite operation. It was his oldest, most profitable club, built in the Sixties on the site of his father's old warehouse, which in the Twenties marshaled half the booze shipments coming into the city from Canada. Riverboats unloaded whisky packed in piano cases and salt barrels. Attorneys and brokers now danced on the floor where mobsters once toted tommy guns and paid off cops and alderman with wads of cash. Richard felt safe having his club in

Royce's hands. He knew the business intimately, having started as a bartender in college. He was a bright, ambitious kid who drew customers and knew how to manage the staff. His sharp wit and sense of humor made him popular. His ambition was infectious, and Richard felt energized in his presence. Even a brief conversation on the phone could boost his spirits.

Royce was someone he had spotted, promoted, brought along. Osman and Koenig were equally impressed, and all shared the view that in a few years Royce could buy in as a full partner.

"Sure, it's no trouble?"

"Not at all. I'm stopping at the office tonight to clear my desk, and I'll drop by the club later." He was inventing errands, reasons for visiting his own business. Although he owned Hennessy's, he didn't want his employees to assume that he stopped in to spy on them or worse, because he was lonely. "In fact, I may swing by the Whisky tonight and check on Johnny Frisco."

"Oh, God. So the fat man got to you. That guy has been bugging me all week to get you to call him back. You know, he even claims he can make me a star. I can't do Elvis, but I'd make a great Johnny Mathis. *Chances are. . .* See you later, man."

Richard hung up the phone. Violet clouds boiled in the western sky. Toweling off, he grabbed a purple and gold robe from the bath house and walked into the house. He held open the door and snapped his fingers several times. Kim gazed at him, hesitated, rose, yawned and stretched, and trotted to the door. She paused, making him hold open the door before she leisurely crossed the threshold, stopping to brush against his ankle. She followed him through the living room and hopped atop the raised hearth and snaked around the silver urns containing the ashes of her predecessors.

The study was shadowy, cool. Miniature trees softened the office ambience. Under their branches red and green lights of computers, FAX machines, and answering machines pulsed with messages. Satellites and cables linked this room to the world. Decisions made in London and Tokyo were reflected in the glowing numerals. Fortunes made and lost. Seated behind the massive desk, Richard punched numbers on his telephone and waited for the mechanical female voice. "Welcome to Fidelity. Please enter your account number." He punched more numbers. There was a click, a pause, then the voice returned. "As of June 21st, your Magellan balance is one million-five-hundred-and-fifty-eight dollars and twenty-seven cents. Your share balance is. . ."

Up twelve thousand in a week. His confidence bolstered, he picked up the audit report. Glancing at the gold clock on the desk, he slipped the papers into an envelope and headed to the living room. Money, money. The whole world is money. It was Biblical. Sins of the fathers. The inheritance of wealth and debt. Lives blessed and doomed in the womb because of a father's bank balance, a mother's trust fund.

After his father died, a Chicago lawyer called to settle a few items. There were bills for a room at the Edgewater, taxes and receipts on a Gold Coast apartment building, and the key to a LaSalle Street safe deposit box. In the tomb-dark vault, Richard opened the oversized tin box to find the legacy his father had inherited from his father and never touched. Eighty thousand dollars in oversized gold certificates and a scuffed, dog-eared leather notebook documenting its source. Names of judges on the take, coded lists of 1920s transactions in needled beer, fusel gin, numbers, call girls, and coke.

Guilt must have overcome his father, who struggled to find dignity in pin stripes and government contracts. So in 1948, Richard likewise closed the lid on his

grandfather's loot and never looked at it again. He paid for the bank box year after year, automatically and without thought. A hereditary obligation. The collectible banknotes remained untouched into the 1990s like prehistoric insects trapped in amber or a windjammer locked in arctic ice. They were historical relics, untouched evidence of a gone age. All that money. All those names. Sixty years ago that notebook would have been a blackmailer's mother lode. Made public, the news would fill the Chicago papers for days and undo a dozen political careers. No doubt, all those judges, bootleggers, and pushers were long vanished from the streets of the Loop and the cribs of Cicero. Now that notebook was as incriminating as a Civil War desertion list, a Roman tablet. The sins of ancestors were easily forgiven. It was only fitting that in his will, the contents of the box would go to the Presbyterian church.

Richard looked at the desk calendar, tapping the blank open page.

Solstice.

He left the study for the long parlor. With its high vaulted ceiling, the room was too large to be comfortable. Hung with paintings and furnished with antiques, it resembled a hotel lobby. But it served its purpose. It impressed visitors. They stood stiffly and reverently before the gold-framed impressionists, thick blue and cream Persian carpets, lacquered tables, and massive chandeliers. Over the years Richard noticed that only Europeans and neo-colonialist Asians seemed at ease in this room. A Soviet refugee once remarked he felt at home here. It reminded him of his father's office in the Kremlin. Invariably, most guests shifted uneasily, eager to be invited to the more comfortable, more familiar sunken recreation room with its entertainment center and bar. Only one American had actually preferred the parlor. In the Seventies Liberace came home to Milwaukee and accepted Richard's invitation to a cocktail party. Clad in sweeping cape, he strolled through the front doors, accepted a glass of champagne, and sat regally on the inlaid opium couch Richard had bought in Hong Kong.

Richard walked into the living room. Over the years decorators arranged to have photographs appear in magazines and newspaper supplements. It was a room he rarely entered alone. He could look at it with a sense of detachment as if gazing at a theatre set. A living room, any room, was after all, a stage. Over the years scenes had been played out here. Scenes with investors, lovers, friends. People born in Paris, New York, Rio, Racine, Dusseldorf, Dublin, and Des Moines had stood here. Some were now dead. Some who had been rich were now poor. Great beauties had faded. A drunk and deadbeat car dealer found sobriety and Jesus and became a Florida state senator. Deals worth millions had been made in this room. Assignations had been planned and on several occasions consummated after other guests left. Through trick of memory he could populate the room with women from three decades. A stunning blonde in boots and miniskirt. A redhead, topless, on her knees in her Seventies maxi-skirt. A drunken neighbor in jeans and country club windbreaker. Girls and women, now all older, some married, some matronized, some dead, were frozen in his memory. It was a room of erotic ghosts. Memories of mad embraces and heated whispers. But ghosts all the same.

Over the years he had amassed more money, more property, more financial security, more power. There were people in Dublin and Dubai an ambassador couldn't reach who took his calls. But with the acquisition of money came the diminution of time. It was running out. He knew too many of the dead. This room, this city, the world was populated by ghosts. He wondered if their spirits haunted the places they occupied in life. And what of the living? Would any of those women, wherever they were now, remember

this room tonight, remember him? Did they, while watching television alone or beside a sleeping spouse, recall him with favor? Did they long for that lost embrace, a stolen kiss, a smile? Or did all those electric connections, so vital and fiery in the moment, fade away as unremembered as a drink or a cigarette?

A week of isolation had made him moody, lonely, and introspective. He felt isolated, estranged, and uneasy in his own home.

He checked the recreation room. Everything was set for tonight. The bar was amply stocked with liquor, ale, and wine. Chilled Perrier bottles were waiting, as was a row of cream-labeled Jameson bottles. Alessandra's favorite Sinatra CD's rested on the granite counter, along with her Brazilian videos. Boozy and homesick, she loved to curl up in Richard's arms and watch the mawkish melodramas and tapes of soap operas that made her cry in high school.

He climbed the stairs to his bedroom. On the landing he stopped. A beam of sunlight slanted through the beveled blue windows and splashed the cream walls with stars. The Three Questions came to mind. They were always beneath the surface, lingering behind lovers and clients, haunting him during airport delays and business meetings. At times they hit him with sudden violence like a volley of bullets. Other times they unfolded slowly one by one:

Why?

Why did she leave?

Why did she leave me?

He jogged up the rest of the steps, vigorously shaking his head to clear his mind. He walked through the upstairs lounge to his bedroom. He let his robe fall to the thick blue carpet and lay naked on the massive bed. He closed his eyes. The French doors leading to the balcony were open to the breeze. He loved to doze to the sound of rustling leaves. Drifting into semi-consciousness, his mind swam with sexual images. Ladies in furs, wives in jeans, girls in tube tops, bargirls, nurses, and stewes. Women met in bars, clubs, airports, churches, lounges, and parties. Each woman was a mystery. Alessandra came to mind. The skin-tight black dresses, her long black hair, the whorish whispers. Thinking of her, Richard felt himself grow hard, flushed with desire. Alessandra. When pouting she resembled dreamy Forties pinups. But she was still in Brasilia. Thousands of miles away.

And he needed her tonight, needed the connection and release, and the soothing exhaustion that followed, the sense of calm when, even briefly, he was joined with a woman, with the universe, and nothing else mattered. And afterwards there was that brief floating intimacy, where two souls had met and merged despite a history of separation. It was ultimately a religious communion.

Richard stretched, rolling onto his stomach. His limbs ached, but he savored the tightness, the hardness of his muscles. Kim pounced onto the bed with a soft cry. She walked along his thigh as if he were nothing more than a fallen tree trunk, then padded across his back. Richard winced, knowing what to expect. As usual, she bent over his face, bringing her mouth to his ear. He bit his lip, waiting. As usual, she let out a penetrating meow in his ear to announce her presence, then noisily and busily settled on the pillow, nuzzling the back of his neck. Her body was warm. She was better than a heating pad. Purring, she vibrated like a tiny motor. But he knew if he moved or snored, she would sink her claws into his flesh. Her rhythmic purring eased him to sleep. He

dozed. He dreamed. A woman came to mind, then another, and another. His eyes fluttered and he fell into the void with the swirl of drapes and the low roar of leaves in the wind.

He woke thirty minutes later and glanced at the clock. It was getting late. He snapped a cassette into the bedside stereo.

Vivaldi.

He showered again, his soapy hands massaging the hard muscles in his arms and thighs. Toweling off, he admired his tan in the mirror. His face blazed with health, with just the reddish hint of sunburn. He flipped his hair into place then marched into the mammoth closet, surveying the racks of suits and jackets. He selected a Navy-blue blazer with gold buttons, a white shirt, and cream slacks. He carefully folded a Hermes tie. Slipping it into the jacket pocket, his fingers encountered a foiled condom. Taking it as an omen, he smiled. *Why not?*

Dressed, he studied himself in the full-length mirror. He fondled the thin gold chain around his neck that held the Celtic cross he bought in a Waterford shop for his fortieth birthday. Just the right touch. He detested the large jewelry of middle-aged men, gross chains with heavy Burgomaster medallions. This necklace offered just a hint of elegance, a discreet symbol.

He was convinced there would be someone tonight. He needed it. He had labored in isolation and celibacy all week. Why not a hard, fast connection to put himself right? Tomorrow we may die.

Death was beginning to obsess him. It floated around him daily. In college, surrounded by combat veterans, he felt young and invulnerable. Death occurred in places like the Solomons or along the Siegfried Line, not in Madison, Wisconsin – at least not to eighteen-year-olds who went on Coke dates with girls who tried to look like Dinah Shore. Then a few years later, a classmate was killed in Korea, his gleaming Saber cartwheeling fire over the Sea of Japan. Then there were the friends and associates killed in car accidents and boating mishaps. Death was fast and far away. And it took explosions and massive crashes to kill the people he knew. Only old people got diseases, had operations, and lingered painfully.

But now death was closing in. Friends, clients, even his own internist, had suffered heart attacks and endured the horrors of surgery. And the cancer cases made him shudder. He tried to dismiss them, deny them, but they haunted him, troubling his thoughts, invading his dreams. Poor Herb Kugelman. Only forty-one. A lean tennis player who never drank or smoked. Just after Labor Day, Richard ran into him at the health club. Back from a New York sales conference, Herb looked fit and happy. They talked about the market, a new hotel, the skating rink at Rockefeller Center, the recent dips in gold and oil prices. Herb fleetingly pressed his fingertips to the base of his rib cage, interrupting his habitual complaint about Manhattan traffic, to mention, “You know since I came home I wake up with the worst heartburn. Roloids won’t do it.” The twinge must have passed because Herb quickly changed the subject to his new car and the ABC fall lineup. Herb’s brother was a TV producer on the Coast and filled him in with the latest Hollywood gossip about stars and shows.

Three weeks later, Sid Greenberg dropped by Richard’s office to deliver blueprints, then, in a hushed voice, asked, “Did you hear about Herb?”

“No, what happened?”

“Did he tell you he was sick?”

“He said something about his stomach.”

“He thought it might be angina. His father had bypass two years ago. Herb has all the stress tests with his cardiologist. Nothing. They take X-rays and find cancer. The esophagus. His brother told him to come to LA. Knows a top man at Cedars. Herb gets checked out by a gastroenterologist. She was not encouraging. It’s in his liver, but Herb won’t give up and is going to have the operation. It takes two surgeons. They have to take out his esophagus and almost the whole stomach. They stick tubes in and then connect what’s left to your throat so you can swallow. Then after they hack him up, it’s chemo. Real rigorous.” Sid choked up. “Last night I prayed to God in Hebrew. On my way in this morning I stopped at St. Eugene’s and lit a candle for him. Poor bastard.”

Richard could only rock forward in his executive chair and nod. He did not want hear the details. Three months later at a Christmas party, he turned from the bar and nearly walked past a doddering old man until he realized it was Herb. He had withered into a diseased pallor. Standing near a chair, he held a plastic cup with trembling hands like a priest bearing a chalice. He was not wearing a shirt and tie but a loose pullover and khaki slacks. Instead of his customary English wingtips, he wore white gym shoes tightened by a Velcro strap. Evidently suits, ties, belts, and shoelaces were now too much for him. He was wearing the clothes worn by those who could no longer dress themselves. He looked like a befuddled nursing home resident. His pale bald pate was bone-white with odd indentations at the temples. Without eyebrows or lashes, he resembled an egg-headed alien from *The Outer Limits*.

Richard wanted to grip his arm but shunned contact. Kugelman was a ghost, a skeletal messenger from the grave. He was looking in Richard’s direction, but his glassy eyes were as empty as an infant’s. Herb blinked a few times, tried to raise the plastic cup to his lips, then absently shuffled to the men’s room.

On Valentine’s Day Richard stood in a long line to toss a spade of earth onto Kugelman’s coffin. Dead at forty-one. Young enough to be his own son.

And more recently, poor, poor Suzy Brackett. Scandalous in her day, she was noted for her low-cut dresses, her dance floor antics, her sloop trysts, her brief but torrid affairs when her husband was overseas. She was sharp, witty, earthy, and sensual. Richard never slept with her but enjoyed her humor, her energy. And given her cleavage, it seemed especially unfair that she should develop breast cancer. Mutilated by surgeons, she was irradiated and dosed with chemicals. Richard recalled his last visit at St. Mary’s. Suzy lay wrapped in sheets, her naked skull turbaned in a towel. There were more towels on the pillow, with soiled ones piled on the floor. The room smelled of vomit. She lay panting heavily, convulsing, and heaving, bathed in sweat. Her blank, black eyes, as dead as a shark’s, stared unseeing. He patted her thigh, recoiling at its bony thinness. In the hallway, Richard could hear a doctor informing Suzy’s daughters of their mother’s “improvement.”

Half a dozen of Richard’s friends had gone the same way, entering the ground floor of Columbia for outpatient tests, then to the second floor for diagnosis, then in a few weeks to the operating rooms on the third floor. Surgeons glossed over the rigor of their eviscerating procedures, never telling patients what life would be like after the knife. Then after “recovering” they were sent to the chemo floors on four and five. All the while the doctors reassuringly spoke of “progress.” Those who survived were shipped home only to be brought back to the nursing home or hospice floors, then the elevator ride down

to the basement morgue. It was a clean, caring efficient slaughterhouse. A friendly Auschwitz. Why, Richard wondered, did people put themselves through all this when they knew the end? Were they in denial, were they gambling that they would be the ones to beat the odds? Could they be that afraid of the inevitable?

No, no. Better the Luger. One fast pull, and he would be blasted from this planet to the afterlife. Clean and fast. With a cancer diagnosis, how could anyone, even God, consider that suicide?

He banished his cancer fears with his latest Mayo Clinic report, his exercise, his vitamin regimen, his wall.

The bedside phone rang.

“Yes?”

“It’s Mike Stein, Rich. Sorry to bother you on a Friday night, but I thought I should call. I just got back from Trenton. I have some news.”

“Go on.”

“As expected, the state has taken a condemnation position. This may not happen immediately, however. But the word is out. I doubt Tellson-Budden will be able to sell any additional properties. They pulled their advertising out of the New York papers. Legal actions separate from those of the homeowners have clouded the picture somewhat. A few of the buyers have settled out of court for an immediate return of their down payment plus five thousand. The banks have greenlighted those funds. No wrong doing has been admitted. But some of the Royal Gardens investors are taking a strong stand. They want a lot more than their money back and a few thousand. No word of a lawsuit yet, but it’s early.”

Richard took a deep breath. The year before he had put two hundred thousand into a New Jersey condominium project. A New York broker had practically begged him to invest. He promised a fast twenty percent return. The project manager was short of cash. A tough winter and a wet spring had hindered construction, and he was running out of funds to meet overtime payroll to make his deadlines. Unwilling to approach creditors for more capital, he offered an extra two points to outside investors. Richard looked at the brochures, talked with his broker, made a few calls to his Eastern contacts, then sent a check. A month later the weather cleared and interest rates dropped. An ad campaign proved successful, and units began selling. Eager buyers moved into Royal Gardens as soon as the decorators were finished. Construction crews started work on adjacent buildings and dug foundations for the pool and recreation center.

One morning a bulldozer unearthed shards of rusted steel. Further digging revealed the remains of a 55 gallon drum. Another was uncovered. Then another, and another, until over a hundred were found, corroded and leaking. State inspectors collected samples for analysis. Traces of benzene were found. An Ocean County realtor mailed Richard clippings detailing the investigation and a demonstration of angry residents. Tellson-Budden told him nothing. More articles appeared in South Jersey newspapers. When the contractor failed to return his calls, Richard contacted a lawyer in Toms River.

“Tellson-Budden has not handled this well at all, Rich. Their response has been less than professional. In fact, they are victims, too. They purchased the land in good faith from a British holding company. At some point in the Sixties it was bought by a London investor. There were plans to build a jetport here. Nothing came of it, and the

land has been undeveloped for twenty years. The waste, from what they can tell, was probably dumped during the war.

“Was the Navy base involved?”

“Lakehurst? Who knows? From what I hear the drums are badly corroded and don’t bear any serial numbers or markings that can be traced. It could have been from Fort Dix or more likely some temporary shop that was demolished after the war. The area was probably used as a landfill. Fifty years ago it was a pretty remote location.”

“Who owned the land then?”

“The county. Some farmers went into default on their taxes during the Depression. By the war it was overgrown scrubland. I doubt anyone authorized the dumping. It was just trees and a few dirt roads. Frankly, I don’t think there is any way to trace the source of the contamination.”

“How dangerous are these chemicals?”

“The state has not released the full report. But these days toxic waste is a touchy subject. Remember Love Canal? Well one of the environmental reporters who covered that story for the *Times* has a beach house in Harvey Cedars. So it could get a lot of play in the press.”

“How healthy is Tellson-Budden?”

“They are playing it close to the vest, of course. Hard to get any real numbers. They have insurance, other investments, a pretty solid portfolio in Texas and Nevada. I don’t foresee them going under because of this.”

“So?”

“Bottom line? Your money is tied up. It’s going to be a wait. We just want to let the dust settle. Look, you did them a favor. It’s only what, two hundred thousand? They can easily cut you a check and have one less headache. I’ll keep in touch. If anything, Tellson-Budden has a big project going in Delaware. They might give you a piece as a favor. You could come out ahead if you can get Tellson on the phone. He feels badly about this. Lean on them in Delaware. I think you are in a good position. I will keep in touch. I’m working hard on this.”

“Thank you for your assistance,” Richard said quietly and hung up.

No doubt Mike Stein was working hard, spending his Friday evening running up billable hours with phone calls and Faxes. Attorneys and engineers made Richard feel helpless and confused. They diagnosed problems he could not detect and charged him outrageously whether their costly efforts worked or not. Dissatisfied with their work, he could only consult another attorney or hire another engineer who would agree to correct a colleague’s errors – for a substantial fee. Two hundred thousand was not a trifling sum. But, if nothing else, his accountant, as always, would find a benefit in any profit or loss.

He wanted to leave before the telephone rang again. He was in no mood for more problems. He switched on the answering machine then picked up the keys for his Corvette. He thought of taking the Cadillac, but it was too conservative, too bankerish for tonight. The Corvette, low, lean, snug was the American Dream car. *Route 66* and California blondes.

Kim sat purring on the bed, staring at him with blue, knowing eyes. “I’ll be back,” he promised, stroking her neck. He bent over and kissed the top of her head. She purred louder, rubbing against him. For a moment he thought of staying home, having a drink, and dozing to an old movie with her in his lap. It was tempting but the image had touches of senility about it. No, tonight the hunt, the venture, the spree. He went downstairs,

slipped the inventory report into a jacket pocket, checked Kim's food dish, refreshed her water bowl with chilled Evian, then headed for the garage.

He paused in the tool bay and tapped the security code into the console. In his absence lights and radios would turn off and on in random patterns. Delicate sensors would detect any movement on his grounds or pressure against the window panes. Laser beams and cameras would sweep the grounds. A technician had adjusted the settings so Kim could move from room to room without triggering alarms and alerting the private security men who patrolled Bayside in unmarked vans.

The Corvette gleamed under the fluorescent lights. Poised between the Mercedes and Cadillac, it resembled a jetfighter. Just climbing into the cockpit made him feel twenty years younger.

Chatsworth Lane was quiet. It was less a street than a crescent driveway linked at both ends to Lake Drive. Settling behind the wheel, Richard snapped in his favorite Sinatra cassette and rolled past the already darkened houses. Not even the police chief could convince the budget-minded old folks to keep a few lights burning for security purposes. By six-thirty, they had folded their flags and retreated for the evening.

